

CHAPTER ONE

Lesbian Desire in Film: Coming to Terms

This monograph investigates the traces and spaces of lesbian desire in a large corpus of films directed by both male and female directors, mainly from France but also from French-speaking parts of Belgium, Canada, Switzerland and Africa (Senegal). The absence of reference to other francophone countries is a correlate of the absence within them, at least so far, of directors who have treated inter-female desire. Spanning the period 1936–2002, the corpus numbers eighty-nine texts. A fair number of these are mainstream films that have achieved high critical acclaim and/or high viewing figures – to cite just a few examples: Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Quai des orfèvres* (1947), Louis Malle's *Milou en mai* (1989), Claude Chabrol's *La Cérémonie* (1995), André Téchiné's *Les Voleurs* (1995) and François Ozon's *Huit femmes* (2001). As such, they have contributed to hegemonic constructions of (female) homosexuality in an episteme wherein sexed and gendered identity, including sexual orientation, has become a pre-eminent factor in the constitution of subjectivity. While such constructions have a French-language specificity and have been produced in distinct socio-political and cultural contexts, the present study will, in its annotated filmography and elsewhere where appropriate, provide points of comparison with relevant anglophone films and their own distinct discursive contexts.

To my knowledge, there are only five book-length studies devoted exclusively to encodings of lesbian desire in cinema: listed chronologically, these are Andrea Weiss's *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema* (1992), Tamsin Wilton's *Immortal, Invisible: Lesbians and the Moving Image* (1995), Clare Whatling's *Screen Dreams: Fantasizing Lesbians in Film* (1997), Shameem Kabir's *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film* (1998) and Patricia White's *UnInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (1999). Yet all of these texts refer largely to anglophone films. Studies which include but are not devoted to lesbianism in film are only slightly more numerous: Richard Dyer's *Now you See It: Studies on*

Lesbian and Gay Film (1990), Judith Roof's *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (1991), Lynda Hart's *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (1994), Ellis Hanson's *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (1999), Judith Mayne's *Framed: Lesbians, Feminists and Media Culture* (2000) and Alex Hughes' and James Williams' edited volume *Gender and French Cinema* (2001). In the French-language critical forum, there is an almost complete dearth of sustained attention to lesbian and gay sexuality, and *a fortiori* to lesbian sexuality specifically, in cinema. Bertrand Philbert's *L'Homosexualité à l'écran* (1984), now more than twenty years old, seems to have been followed by a resounding critical silence. Carrie Tarr's and Brigitte Rollet's *Cinema and the Second Sex: Women's Filmmaking in France in the 1980s and 1990s* (2001) is an excellent and groundbreaking study with respect to French women's filmmaking in general, but offers only a two-page section treating lesbianism exclusively.

So, as yet there has been no book-length study dedicated to lesbian desire in French and francophone cinema. My book seeks to fill this gap. It does not aim to provide highly technical cinematic analyses of a psychoanalytic, structuralist or semiotic bent. Crucially, it is *not* primarily a contribution to French cinema scholarship, but rather is a contribution to lesbian/gay/queer cultural studies *within a French-language cinematic context*.

Aside from the obvious,¹ the punning title of this chapter signals my intention to present some of the key terms and underlying concepts which will inform the textual exegeses of the subsequent chapters. Throughout this study every effort will be made to avoid logico-linguistic solecisms like 'lesbian film' or, indeed, 'French/francophone lesbian film'. To anthropomorphise a cultural artefact by ascribing it a human and nationalised sexual identity is patently absurd. However, these solecisms do serve as a useful form of shorthand, and I will occasionally have recourse to them in order to avoid a hypertrophe of admittedly clumsy circumlocutions such as 'lesbian-themed text' or 'lesbian-connoted text'. Evidently, the meanings I ascribe to the word 'lesbian' and its cognate 'lesbianism' need to be transparent from the outset. My definition of these terms has not changed since 2002:

The sine qua non of lesbianism is, I aver, *erotic* attraction between women. On the whole, then, my study deploys the word 'lesbian' to mean a woman/female human being who may not necessarily have had genital contact with, but whose erotic preference is for, other women/female human beings – at least in the (diegetic or actual) present, for I do not conceptualize sexual preference as a necessarily immutable, and certainly not as a congenital, property. I am thus closer to the constructionist than the essentialist position in the debate that has long raged in discourse on (particularly homo)sexuality.² Concomitantly, by 'lesbian-themed text', I designate a text

inscribing sexual (and perhaps also, but not necessarily, affective) attraction between women/female human beings. (Cairns 2002a: 11)

One final point on terminology: the adjective 'gay' will, on the whole, be used to include homosexual women as well as homosexual men.

To go back a step, the reader may ask why this study distances itself from highly psychoanalytic, structuralist or semiotic interpretations. The answer lies in its author's acute reservations about the credibility of canonical film theorisations of 'woman' on screen, particularly in their (arguably outdated) psychoanalytic avatars: the *a priori* masculinised gaze, the oedipally-enclaved rhetorical tropes of fetishism and voyeurism, sadism and narcissism, transvestism and masquerade. Puzzling indeed is the tenacity of this psychoanalytic grip on a post-oedipal family era wherein – at least in Western, postmodern intellectual circles, which, like it or not, constitute *the* circuit of our discursive existence – other factors such as gender, sexual orientation, class, race, physical ability and so on can no longer be ignored as equally compelling factors in spectatorial responses. Yet it would be naïve to ignore such theories, and rather than dismissing them wholesale or else cravenly deferring to them, I will take inspiration from the theoretical magpie Jacques Lacan by occasionally performing strategic raids upon discrete theoretical regimes (without implying acceptance of those regimes in their totality) *where* such raids serve to illuminate the raw material of the filmic text and its audience reception(s). The justification for such a strategy is the conceptual inadequacy of any of these pre-existing theoretical corpuses adequately to account for a previously unexplored territory: that of lesbian-connoted French-language film.

The 'coming to terms' initiated above extends beyond single words such as 'lesbian' and 'lesbianism' to an analysis at the level of the cinematic collocation: it engages with plural terms designating salient discursive nodes that inform more recent and less blinkered discourses on film and sexuality. These include lesbian spectatorship; resisting reading and its various avatars such as reading against the grain, appropriating readings and lesbian interventions; space for the lesbian imagination; the cinematic lesbian continuum; and directorial intentionality versus audience reception.

First, then, what is meant by 'lesbian spectatorship'? In her *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film*, Shameem Kabir rightly states that 'the cinematic apparatus addresses the spectator in definable ways, and the spectator as a social subject receives this address according to our own social and cultural specificities' (Kabir 1998: 184). Her succeeding observation puts the case cogently: 'there is no fixed unitary position of spectatorship,

where response is uniform and where subjectivity is stable. We spectate across gender, across race and sexuality, class and culture, age and ability, and our different geopolitical and other positionings result in diverse spectating responses' (Kabir 1998: 185). Tamsin Wilton also privileges the importance of the lesbian spectator's social positioning over psychoanalytic paradigms:

Arguing for a more complete escape from the Freudian/Lacanian paradigm, my piece suggests that text-deterministic notions of identification are inadequate to account for lesbian viewing pleasure. I propose the notion of the cinematic contract, by which the spectator tacitly agrees to make use of a variety of engagement strategies in order to 'make sense of' the film in question. My suggestion is that such engagement strategies derive less from the unconscious and more from the social location of the spectator, and that hence sociology rather than psychology is the exemplary paradigm for thinking about lesbians and the moving image. (Wilton 1995: 16)

Wilton appositely points to the fundamental schism identified by Jackie Stacey between, on the one hand, 'film studies which generally understand spectatorship as a product of textual address and meaning as being production-led and, on the other, cultural studies which generally understand spectatorship as a process of negotiation between product and consumer and meaning as consumption-led' (Wilton 1995: 145).³ I concur wholly in Wilton's subsequent reflections:

It seems clear to me that there is little evidence to suggest that film is in any significant way different from other cultural products. To say that film is polysemic and that its many possible meanings are contingent and, moreover, located at the meniscus between film as product (located within the social and economic relations of production) and viewer as consumer (similarly located within specific social and economic relations of consumption) is only to claim that film is no more and no less intrinsically meaning-full than painting, poetry, novels or any other cultural product. I take for granted here that the sense of a film is made by the spectator – whom we may understand for our purposes as both receptive and engaged, and as bringing to the process of spectating a temporally and culturally specific set of signs, meanings, codes and languages. (Wilton 1995: 145–6)

In the specific context of the present study, that 'sense of a film' made by the spectator can be compliant with dominant modes of spectating – namely, confined to the surface heterosexual meanings – or it can 'resist' those surface meanings. The term 'resisting reading' denotes an interpretive strategy charged with teasing out lesbian traces from ostensibly heteronormative

filmic narratives, sequences or images. In so doing, that strategy resists the dominant viewing/reading grain, hence the further term 'reading against the grain', which may, in its turn, be designated by the close synonym 'subtexting'. The latter term was first coined by Claire Johnston as a strategy serving a counter-cinema resistance to Hollywood practices, but it may be appropriated to indicate the detection, systematic or otherwise, of lesbian potentialities within the images, editing and narratives of mainstream film.⁴ As Kabir puts it, the 'position of the lesbian spectator of mainstream film is one where we are usually denied any direct representation of lesbian desire. We have seen that a strategy open to us is to supply a resistant position of spectatorship and read in the desire at the margins of the film. This is to subtext' (Kabir 1998: 185). Resisting readings and subtexting imply lesbian 'interventions' into texts which are at least *prima facie* about straight desire – the act of 'appropriating' for oneself the construction of meaning, even in the face of contrary textual evidence.

This is where I begin to draw the line, to resist intellectually. As Clare Whatling concedes, 'to be sure, in reading lesbian desire into films which offer little narrative opening for the lesbian viewer, one is guilty of committing a certain amount of semantic violence on the text' (Whatling 1997: 58). And as her subtle analysis conveys:

there is a danger that appropriative reading merely sustains, as it were by default, the reproduction of the status quo . . . does pleasuring in images, despite their foundation in sexism, heterosexism, racism, even in readings that attempt to counter these elements, merely give credence to the oppressor? Who really triumphs here, the text or the audience? (Whatling 1997: 22)

I insist on a *principled* approach to what has variously been termed resisting reading, reading against the grain, subtexting or making lesbian interventions. I unconditionally oppose the doing of semantic violence to a text, filmic or otherwise. As for the 'space for the lesbian imagination', the lesbian spectator in private is obviously free to let her imagination do what it wants with the basic raw materials of the filmic text. However, where there is no textual evidence to support the veracity of these fantasy scenarios, she is *not* authorised to impose them as legitimate public exegeses.

A further note of caution should be sounded: spaces for the lesbian imagination can easily be commercially exploited and recuperated by the homogenising dream-machine of the mainstream screen. Two anglophone examples are *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Madonna's *Justify My Love*. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, first released as an American movie in 1992, became a highly lucrative television series running from 1997 to 2003. Its

producers literally cashed in on the (at least then) lack of American television space for the lesbian imagination. Season five of seven introduced a lesbian dynamic when the witches Willow and Tara fell for each other. Predictably for mainstream drama in which lesbian love is usually doomed, things turned sour: Willow became addicted to magic, Tara turned against her when she realised Willow had been altering her memory, and Tara was eventually killed off. Admittedly, a 'happy' lesbian ending is suggested when, by the end of the seventh and final series, Willow has got over her grief and is now with a young woman called Kennedy. That's OK, then, particularly as all three lesbian characters conform to conventional canons of feminine beauty and can thus also pull in a large heterosexual male audience.

For her part, pop phenomenon Madonna cashed in on the largely untapped queer market with *Justify My Love* (1990). In fairness, it should be acknowledged that during this video performance, straight, queer and lesbian scenarios all get a look in: Madonna gets it on not only with unequivocally masculine men, but with also with one extremely androgynous man whose identification as such (that is, as a man) is by no means immediately obvious, *and* with women, whilst ancillary scenes featuring gender-ambiguous couples and straight buggery (man inside woman) complement the sexual cornucopia. But the 'lesbian' scene is hardly immune from criticism. When, in symmetry with the nominally male desire-object mentioned above, the highly androgynous-looking Amanda Cazalet is on top of Madonna, kissing her slowly and sensuously, they are being viewed by a male voyeur. Thus, potentially dissident desire is framed and contained by the classic male gaze. Independently of *Justify My Love*, Madonna also staged a highly mediated kiss with pop singer Britney Spears, which contributed to mainstream constructions of 'lipstick' lesbianism as a harmless, titillating and non-threatening form of erotic dalliance. In the French context, the singer Saya also exploited the commercial dearth in spaces for the lesbian imagination in her ostensibly lesbian love-song 'Une femme avec une femme'.⁵

Is commercial exploitation of lesbianism really a cause for complaint? The obverse argument would be that anything that renders more visible, acceptable and even aspirational a hitherto practically invisible and/or stigmatised sexual identity should prompt applause rather than cavil. While I have some sympathy for this argument, the airbrushed quality of these highly packaged lesbian ciphers makes one wonder to what extent the average mainstream viewer will link them to extra-diegetic, real-life lesbians. And there's the rub: lesbian thrills can become aspirational consumer options *if* their protagonists look just like canonically pretty, straight girls. For if they did not, they might alienate the boys – and it is the boys

who still, by and large, control every aspect of image-production, be it in film, video or television, from inception, creation, distribution and marketing down to consumption.

Beginning with resisting reading and ending on the possible exploitation of lesbian-encoded spaces in popular media, the foregoing discussion has emphasised the dangers of unfettered voluntarism. A fitting coda to this emphasis is Julia Erhart's warning: '[p]recisely because of the vague way popular, mainstream cinema has always represented lesbianism, writing that decisively claims an ambiguous character or film as "lesbian" lays itself open to charges of voluntarism, that is, to the accusation that it is too interpretation-dependent and not sufficiently empirical' (Erhart, 1997: 93). These dangers notwithstanding, my argument will be that what ultimately makes a film 'lesbian' is not directorial intention but audience reception.⁶ Although hardly yet a doxa, this is scarcely a new idea; as Erhart observes, and as I will reiterate in Chapter 4, the value of subtexting or reading against the grain was one of the matters of interest to the editors of the 'Lesbian and Film' section of *Jump Cut*, which appeared in 1981 (Erhart 1997: 86). So what does my position add to the idea? Nothing more and nothing less than the following two conditions. First, the acknowledgement that the same film will not 'be' lesbian for all spectators, since many will receive it differently from a lesbian audience (indeed, a singular ontological status cannot be ascribed to *any* film). Second, an insistence on the need for the variously named lesbian practices of resisting reading, reading against the grain, subtexting, making lesbian interventions or locating spaces for the lesbian imagination to be *principled*: for them not to traduce the integrity of the text, and, when they purport to be generally acceptable exegeses as opposed to products of their author's personal fantasies, for them to be based on palpable textual evidence.

These conditions established, we can begin to talk about lesbianising gaze theory. The convention of the male gaze was first systematically theorised in 1975 by Laura Mulvey's now classic article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in which she postulated women in cinema as connoting *to-be-looked-at-ness* (Mulvey 1975). Put simply, Mulvey's thesis was that women are the object of the male gaze, consonant with psychoanalytic binaries associating man with the active and woman with the passive, man with desire and woman with lack. Since woman lacked the ability to desire, she could not be the subject of a desiring gaze *a fortiori* because the object of the cinematic gaze was traditionally another woman – and lesbian desire was even more of an absence in classical narrative cinema than was heterosexual female desire. I entirely refute the supposedly ahistorical necessity of

this male gaze and instead assert its historical contingency, along with the possibility of female-specific and lesbo-specific scopophilia. When in 1981 Mulvey revisited her argument, in 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"' inspired by *Duel in the Sun*, she asserted:

I still stand by my 'Visual Pleasure', but would now like to pursue [the] other two lines of thought. First [the 'women in the audience' issue], whether the female spectator is carried along, as it were by the scruff of the text, or whether her pleasure can be more deep-rooted and complex. Second [the 'melodrama' issue], how the text and its attendant identifications are affected by a *female* character occupying the center of the narrative arena. (Mulvey 1981: 69)

Clearly, Mulvey's second line of thought does not concern us here, since it pertains only to melodrama and to the western, neither of which is germane to our corpus. As for the first line of thought, Mulvey's conclusion is again problematic:

Three elements can be drawn together: Freud's concept of 'masculinity' in women, the identification triggered by the logic of a narrative grammar, and the ego's desire to phantasize itself in a certain, active, manner. All three suggest that, as desire is given cultural materiality in a text, for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second Nature*. However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes. (Mulvey 1981: 72)

The blindspot in Mulvey's argument is its docile acceptance of Freud's gendered binarisms and of the doxa that desire can only be masculine because only the masculine is active. This reduces the means by which women's viewing pleasure may become 'more deep-rooted and complex' to trans-sex identification. The weakness of Mulvey's second essay lies in its continuing enslavement to a conceptual paradigm in which the feminine and the active are mutually exclusive.

A year later, Mary Ann Doane came very close to Mulvey in arguing that women's viewing pleasure was dependent on female transvestism or masquerade. Doane's new contribution was the postulate of distance. She asserts that '[f]or the female spectator there is a certain over-presence of the image – she is the image' (Doane 1982: 78). As Weiss helpfully summarises:

[t]his female spectator position lacks sufficient distance from either voyeurism or fetishism, the two forms of looking on which visual pleasure is based, according to contemporary theory. The notion of a feminine 'over-presence'

draws on the Freudian argument that women do not go through the castration scenario which demands the construction of a distance between men and the female image. To simplify a complex argument, Doane finds that the theoretical female spectator's pleasure in the cinema can take the form of masochism in over-identification with the image, or of narcissism in becoming one's own object of desire, or it may be possible, by re-inserting the necessary distance, for the woman's gaze to master the image. This distance can be achieved through two kinds of transformation which Doane identifies as transvestism and masquerade. Female transvestism involves adopting the masculine spectatorial position; female masquerade involves an excess of femininity, the use of femininity as a mask, which simulates the distance necessary for the pleasure of looking. (Weiss 1992: 39)

My question is: *why* should visual pleasure be based on voyeurism or fetishism? It is flagrantly obvious that 'visual pleasure' here is defined in exclusively masculine (heterosexual) terms. According to Doane, one can take pleasure in the cinema as a woman *without* distance, but this means masochism or narcissism; for her, both are antithetical to 'mastering the gaze', which can only be done by inserting distance. What does 'mastering the gaze' mean, other than distancing oneself from its object the better supposedly to dominate it? The circularity of the argument leads to a conceptual impasse outside the restrictive premises of its masculine positioning. More importantly, why should distancing be deemed superior? The very language used – *mastering* – is suspectly over-determined. And even if one provisionally accepts the hypothesis that the pleasure of looking *does* depend on distance from the object of one's gaze, it is still the case that a woman watching a female screen-image may be distant from that image in terms of race, class, physical appearance, ability or disability, and so on. As Weiss goes on to say:

In privileging the Oedipal complex, the psychoanalytic framework polarizes 'difference' along the lines of gender; it denies racial, class and sexual factors which play such significant roles in identity formation. Whether or not one accepts the psychoanalytic model, alone it cannot account for the different cultural positioning of lesbians at once outside of and negotiating within the dominant patriarchal modes of identification. Since the psychoanalytical approach can only see lesbian desire as a function of assuming a masculine heterosexual position, other, nonpsychoanalytic models of identification must be called upon, which can account for the distance that makes possible the pleasure the female image offers the lesbian spectator. (Weiss 1992: 40)

In her last sentence, Weiss herself defers to the dogma that distance from the female image is necessary in order to take pleasure in it. It seems to me

obvious that, as literary responses have long shown, and *pace* Doane ('the woman who identifies with a female character must adopt a passive or masochistic position': Doane 1982: 80), pleasure from identification with a diegetic character is by no means necessarily narcissistic and/or masochistic. First, this is because identification is rarely complete, since it is usually with some rather than all aspects of a persona; second, and more to the theoretical point, identification with a person, be they 'real' or on-screen, does not have to be narcissistic because it does not mean seeing oneself in her/him, but rather the opposite – if anything, effacing one's self in a movement of union with another; third, identification with a female image is masochistic only if that female image is passive and subordinated, which is hardly always the case outside the Hollywood cinema, which Mulvey's and Doane's schemas largely invoked. Finally, since I do not agree that distance is necessary for actively desiring visual pleasure, I will not waste time on pondering what strike me, admittedly with the benefit of over twenty years' hindsight, as the strained theoretical conceits of Doane's trans-vestism and masquerade.

In contrast, one very welcome distance was that taken by Judith Roof vis-à-vis psychoanalytic obscurantism, when she formulated what should have been a truism but was in fact, within that locked grid, an iconoclasm: 'While *gender* is one term, *desire* is another. No gender owns the look; no gender owns desire for woman or for man' (Roof 1991: 50). The celebrated French director Agnès Varda has, however, rightly stressed the need for women to become agentic owners of *their own* gaze:

La femme ne doit pas être définie par qui la regarde, par le regard des hommes . . . Le premier geste féministe c'est de dire, bon, OK, on me regarde, mais *moi* je regarde . . . Le monde n'est pas défini par comment on me regarde, mais comment *je* regarde.⁷

[Woman should not be defined by who is looking at her, by the gaze of men. . . . The first step for feminists is to say, right, OK, I'm being looked at, but I too am looking . . . The world isn't defined by how I'm looked at, but how *I* look at the world.]

Varda's stress on the individual woman's gaze ('comment *je* regarde' ['how *I* look at the world']) rather than some essential and collective feminine gaze is vital. Equally, as Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman have suggested in an anglophone context, there is no essential model of the so-called lesbian gaze, for individual lesbian spectators 'bring different cultural competences' to lesbian spectating (Evans and Gamman 1995: 35). In a wider, non-heteronormative purview, Ellis Hanson implies the opacity

and plurality of what has misleadingly been conceptualised as a single, unified queer gaze:

Queer theorists have already discovered that the heterocentric and exceedingly rigid structure of the look in Mulvey's analysis – patriarchal masculinity leering at objectified femininity – writes homosexuality out of existence. How do women desire women in and through film? How do men desire men? Is a lesbian gaze a male gaze in drag? What about the gay male identification with the fetishized diva of classic cinema, all those glamorous gestures of Bette Davis and Judy Garland that virtually constitute the contemporary queer rhetoric of camp? (Hanson 1999: 13)

In the same spirit, and much as I applaud the overall quality of the essay in which it is located, I am unable to endorse Valerie Traub's assertion:

In the context of theorizing a gaze unbounded by rigid gender polarities, the figure of the 'lesbian' is, it seems to me, a privileged site of inquiry. As both subject and object of desire, she embodies the potential desiring modality of all viewing subjects, her body displacing the binary economy enforced by heterosexual ideology. (Traub 1991: 311)

It is true that 'the figure of the "lesbian"' may be 'a privileged site of inquiry' in that, within a cinematic economy which historically objectivises women, she as a woman can be the traditional object of the gaze yet can also, as a lesbian outside that economy, be the subject of the gaze. However, it is not true that she 'embodies the potential desiring modality of *all* viewing subjects' (my emphasis). Where is the gay male viewing subject in this scenario? Yet despite the need to take account of the gay male gaze, I would be wary of conflating it with a lesbianised gaze in some hypothetical united front against hetero-male scopophilia. For all their gayness, gay men are acculturated as *men* first and foremost.⁸ A telling example of the dangers of such conflation occurs in Bertrand Philbert's *L'Homosexualité à l'écran* (1984). As its title indicates, this book purports to be a study of homosexuality on screen generally, but in fact concentrates overwhelmingly on cinematic mediations of *male* homosexuality. Curiously, Philbert briefly cites Claude Chabrol's *Marie-Chantal contre Docteur Kha* (1965) in a chapter on lesbianism in cinema. The fact that a gay male author can assume lesbianism on the basis of one woman (Olga) taking off another's (Marie-Chantal's) stockings, with, moreover, venal rather than sexual motives, is revealing. It suggests the influence even on gay men of the hetero-male voyeuristic model of lesbianism. My analysis does not seek to swap one dominant term for another: masculine owner of the gaze for lesbian owner of the gaze. Such absolutes are

ontologically untenable, for they presuppose a false homogeneity of the individually and multiply identified members of the crudely designated 'masculine' and 'lesbian' constituencies. If an epithet needs to precede the substantive 'gaze' at all, I would, provisionally and strategically, advance as an agentic (and perhaps utopian) ideal the neologism 'autosexual', which signifies the power of the viewing subject to realise its own sexual desires without imprisoning them within the existing, limited categories of straight, gay, lesbian, bi- or even transsexual.⁹

So far, my reflections have been of a largely transnational nature. What of the specificities of French/francophone cinematic and reception contexts? Virtually the only systematic analysis of lesbian film production in France is Fabienne Worth's article of 1993. Worth rightly situated such production within the context of 'France as the locus of an unshakable modernist ethos in which art is perceived as autonomous and universal, its value being confirmed and maintained by policies that exclude minority cultural expressions' (Worth 1993: 55–6). Although excellent for its time, Worth's article obviously requires some reassessment in the light of certain social, legal and cultural developments in France since 1993. In no particular order of importance, these include the introduction in 1999 of *le Pacs* (*Pacte civil de solidarité*: a partnership contract open to gay as well as straight couples, which confers a number of rights relating, *inter alia*, to taxation, housing and inheritance); the subsequent, growing demands for a *bona fide* gay marriage (which *le Pacs* most certainly is not) and for lesbian and gay access to parenthood; partly as cause and partly as effect of the debates provoked by the former three phenomena, a gradual problematisation of the French Republican model, which is supposed to cater for all citizens equally and thus to obviate the need for separate communities, be they based on ethnicity, sexuality or gender; the growing success of the lesbian film festival Cineffable, and the fact that it is now (but only since 2003, its fifteenth year) subsidised by the *Mairie de Paris* at whose helm has been the out gay mayor Bertrand Delanoë since 2001; and finally, an increase, if not quite a swell, in the number of lesbian/gay/queer-themed films aimed at mainstream French audiences.

All these developments notwithstanding, it is still broadly true that mainstream French cinema privileges depoliticised 'art' and tends to downgrade movies premised on identity politics. Of course there are exceptions, but films treating homosexuality, be it male or female, will often follow a comedic formula (for instance, top hits *Gazon maudit* of 1995 and *Le Placard* of 2000). The conceits of invisibility and of spectrality adopted by many scholars to denote the status of lesbian desire in anglophone literature and film such as

those of Castle,¹⁰ Fuss (Fuss 1991: 3 and 6), Hart (Hart 1994: ix), Weiss¹¹ and White (White 1999) could arguably be adjudged even more apt for their French (if not necessarily francophone) counterparts. Yet even if this argument is accepted, the number of films in my corpus – around eighty-nine – is not negligible; and while by no means all foreground lesbian desire, all contain at the very least potent traces of it. Whether or not this is sufficient to justify in a French context Terry Castle's observation that 'one might think of lesbianism as the "repressed idea" at the heart of patriarchal culture' (Castle 1993: 61–2) is a moot point. Less tendentious, perhaps, is the invoking of a cinematic lesbian continuum within French cinema. For readers unfamiliar with this concept, it is worth citing Adrienne Rich's discursive inauguration of it in 1981:

I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support; if we can also hear in it such associations as marriage resistance . . . we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology that have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of 'lesbianism'. (Rich 1980; reproduced 1983: 192)

To my knowledge, Chris Holmlund in 1991 was the first theorist to apply Rich's model of the lesbian continuum to cinematic texts. Whilst the model of the lesbian continuum has obvious flaws, chief among which is its desexualisation of lesbianism, as a model it is no less applicable to cinematic representations of inter-female relationships than it is to such representations in other media. It may well have a special pertinence to French film, for, as we shall see from the sheer length of Chapter 4 below on lesbian liminality, the majority of films in our corpus mediate borderline cases where deep feeling and sensual connection between women may not qualify as *bona fide* lesbianism, but could aptly be located within a Richian lesbian continuum.

The same may not be true for francophone as opposed to French cinema. The proportion of films in the corpus deriving from non-metropolitan France is very small – around nineteen out of eighty-nine, that is, less than twenty-two per cent. (If other francophone films with even a tangentially lesbian-themed dimension have slipped through my questing net, I will be delighted, but surprised.) However, despite this small francophone corpus, within most of the films concerned, particularly those from Belgium and Canada (that is, the majority), the lesbianism of the chief protagonist is in

no doubt. Evidently, francophone as opposed to French cinematic and reception contexts cannot be homogenised. The one film from francophone Africa (*Karmen Gei*, 2001) is obviously exceptional, for Senegal is a non-Western, predominantly Muslim country which severely reproves homosexuality. The one film from Switzerland (*Messidor*, 1978) was produced in a small Western country with a very small national cinema and little tradition of sexual politics. Belgium and Canada may be compared favourably with France in both the legal and civic rights granted to lesbians and gays and in the funding of the largely independently made films from these constituencies. First, France lags behind in terms of legal recognition of lesbian and gay partnerships: since 1999 it has had *le Pacs*, but this law confers nowhere near the same rights as marriage. Symptomatically, only one film in the entire corpus of eighty-nine texts conveys aspiration to lesbian marriage. In Catherine Corsini's *La Nouvelle Ève* (1999), Solveig remarks that with the socialists there is hope for the legalisation of gay marriage, and claims she would enter into such a marriage with her partner, Louise. This film's uniqueness in privileging lesbian marriage is matched by its quasi-uniqueness in another respect: bar the obvious exception of the Senegalese *Karmen Gei*, it is one of only two films in the corpus of eighty-nine (the other two being Jean Rollin's *Le Viol du vampire* of 1967 and François Ozon's *Huit femmes* of 2001) to feature a black woman. The obvious inference – that black women are generally more traditionalist even when of non-traditional sexual identification – should not be taken at face value, and demands sociological investigation outside the scope of the present study. Returning to the social fact of France's limitation to *le Pacs*, it is noteworthy that Belgium, despite its enduring Catholic contours, has bettered that by going the whole hog and legalising lesbian and gay marriage (February 2003),¹² as Quebec has since done (March 2004).¹³ Second, on the issue of lesbian parenthood, France is again less liberal, explicitly limiting artificial insemination to straight couples,¹⁴ whereas the Belgian state provides artificial insemination for lesbians, and Canada's federal government is about to make it illegal to bar lesbians access to artificial insemination.¹⁵ Second, the official Belgian lesbian and gay film festival held annually in January receives subsidies from the *Communauté française de Belgique* (as does Pinkscreens, the Alternative Gender Festival, albeit on a far smaller scale);¹⁶ and the International Festival of Lesbian & Gay Film in Montreal is also granted a certain amount of financial aid from the city and province.¹⁷

In conclusion, I shall briefly outline the content of both the corpus and of the chapters to follow. By far the largest proportion of texts within the corpus are feature films, but it also includes documentary films, some

shorts and one or two video documentaries. It does not include films made for French television which were not subsequently released in cinemas, for to do so would be to widen too far the scope of my analyses and thus to dilute their critical scrutiny. Second, a good quarter of the films in the overall corpus are based on pre-existing literary texts.¹⁸ Although it is not part of my remit to analyse their adaptation for the screen, a few words are in order about the medium specificity, about the cinematographic iconography of lesbianism. What can be achieved by the medium of film as opposed to the medium of literature? Or, to put it another way, what can a director do visually on the screen that cannot be done verbally on the page? One obvious difference between the two forms is that images conjured up by a written text are constituted cumulatively, word after word, whereas a filmic image presents all its constituents instantly and simultaneously, and may well be accompanied by a soundtrack. Kabir's observations are eminently worth citing:

To move from a verbal text to a visual screen medium involves a necessary modification of materials, a reshaping of them according to the demands of different media. The first rule is compression (Peary and Shatzkin, 1977: 5–6).¹⁹ With the aim of refiguring a large text into economically functional visual units, entire sequences and characters are left out, the timeframe can change, the plot can be altered and dialogue is often condensed in key places. These are established conventions in the compression of literary texts into workable screen versions, so the omission of lesbian desire can be achieved easily for the purposes of cutting down the larger scope of a novel into a smaller screen version. (Kabir 1998: 113–14)

Suffice it to say that 'the omission of lesbian desire' may well have occurred in other French/francophone films based on literary texts, but that no such films are treated here, for self-evident reasons. The point is worth making if only to flag up the varying gradations of censorship to which the lesbian subject may have been subject; but that is another story (a brief introduction to which is made in Chapter 5).

Finally, a few words about the structure of this study. This first chapter has attempted to introduce the topic and to situate it theoretically and culturally. Chapters 2 and 3 will examine the two most predominant lesbian paradigms immanent in the corpus: criminality and pathology (although it should be noted that there may be synchronicity of the two within a single film). Chapter 4 will examine borderline inscriptions of lesbianism: lesbian liminality. Chapter 5 will focus on more apparently lesbo-affirmative *mises en scènes* of lesbian desire, but not without problematising them where necessary. The concluding chapter will provide a chronological and synthesising overview,

tracing shifts in French-language cinematic mediations of lesbianism over the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and identifying any national specificities (metropolitan French, French Belgian, French Canadian, French Swiss, French African). Within each chapter and within each chapter's discrete sub-sections, discussion of the films will be conducted in largely chronological order, a methodology designed to reveal any significant representational evolutions. Where appropriate, however, chronological structuring may be subordinated to an initial, conceptually-driven organisation.

Notes

1. Namely, parodic resignation faced with an unpalatable reality: here, the presence since at least the 1930s of lesbian desire in French, if not in francophone, film.
2. Edward Stein provides a helpful and accessible definition of the terms 'essentialism' and 'constructionism' in the context of sexual orientation: 'Essentialists hold that a person's sexual orientation is a culture-independent, objective and intrinsic property while social constructionists think it is culture-dependent, relational and, perhaps, not objective' (Stein 1992: 325).
3. Wilton's reference is to Stacey 1994.
4. Johnston 1976: 217.
5. Lyrics written by José Cano; French adaptation by Pierre Grosz.
6. But see Holmlund 1991: 148, 161.
7. Interview with Varda in Marie Mandy's documentary film on women film directors' approaches to desire, *Filmer le désir (voyage à travers le cinéma des femmes)* (2001).
8. Castle's parenthetical comment in the following is noteworthy: '[b]y its very nature (and in this respect it differs significantly from male homosexuality) lesbianism poses an ineluctable challenge to the political, economic, and sexual authority of men over women' (Castle 1993: 62).
9. The term 'autosexual' was coined by a teenaged girl attracted to her own sex in the unattributed English documentary screened during the 12.00–14.00 showing at Le Trianon during the 2003 'Quand les lesbiennes se font du cinéma' Cineffable festival.
10. 'The lesbian remains a kind of "ghost effect" in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot – even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent, at the center of the screen . . . Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian – even when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us? In part because she has been "ghosted" – or made to seem invisible – by culture itself. It would be putting it mildly to say that the lesbian represents a threat to patriarchal protocol: Western civilization has for centuries been haunted by a fear of "women without men" – of women indifferent or resistant to male desire' (Castle 1993: 2 and 4–5).

11. 'Lesbian images in the cinema have been and continue to be virtually invisible. Hollywood cinema, especially, needs to repress lesbianism in order to give free rein to its endless variations on heterosexual romance. Each lesbian image that has managed to surface – the lesbian vampire, the sadistic or neurotic repressed woman, the pre-oedipal 'mother/daughter' lesbian relationship, the lesbian as sexual challenge or titillation to men – has helped determine the boundaries of possible representation, and has insured the invisibility of many other kinds of lesbian images. And yet, this invisibility can foster visibility as well. Each instance of invisibility seems to leave a trace, if only a trace of its absence or repression, which is also a kind of image. These faint traces and coded signs are especially visible to lesbian spectators. Lesbians, moreover, have looked to the cinema, and especially to these traces and signs, to create ways of being lesbian, to form and affirm their identity as individuals and as a group' (Weiss 1992: 1).
12. '[L]e texte accorde aux couples homosexuels les mêmes droits qu'aux couples hétérosexuels, qu'il s'agisse des droits sociaux, fiscaux ou de ceux liés au patrimoine et à l'héritage. Idem en cas de divorce. Seules exceptions: l'adoption et la filiation. Ainsi dans le cas d'un couple lesbien, la mère biologique sera considérée comme l'unique parent de l'enfant. Le texte prévoit, en outre, qu'un couple homosexuel ne pourra pas adopter d'enfant' ('Infos: Revue de Presse', *Lesbia Magazine*, April 2003, p. 17). ['The law grants homosexual and heterosexual couples the same rights, be they social, fiscal or linked to inheritance. The same applies in the case of divorce. The only exceptions are adoption and filiation. So in the case of a lesbian couple, the biological mother will be considered as the child's sole parent. In addition, the law does not allow a homosexual couple to adopt children.']
13. Just as this book was being completed, the whole of Canada looked set to legalise lesbian and gay marriage if the Senate ratified the bill approved on 28 June 2005 by the Ottawa House of Commons. Nine of the thirteen Canadian provinces and territories had already authorised lesbian and gay marriage.
14. Article L 152–2 of the Code de Santé Publique stipulates that AMP (assistance médicale à la procréation [medically assisted procreation]) is available only to a man and a woman who are either married or can prove that they have lived together as a couple for at least two years. It thus excludes single people, lesbian and gay couples, and even a couple formed by a gay man and a lesbian woman both of whom want a child, since this type of couple cannot (usually) offer proof of two years' cohabitation. For further information, see 'Rapport n°1407 sur l'application de la loi de bioéthique du 29/7/94' by Alain Claeys et Claude Huriet.
15. 'Ottawa – Le gouvernement fédéral s'apprête à écrire noir sur blanc dans ses lois qu'il est illégal d'empêcher les lesbiennes d'avoir recours aux nouvelles techniques de reproduction, y compris l'insémination artificielle' (Hélène Buzzetti, 'Feu vert aux lesbiennes pour l'insémination artificielle', *Le Devoir*, 24 April 2003). ['Ottawa: The federal government is getting ready to make it

absolutely clear that it is illegal to prevent lesbians from having recourse to new techniques of reproduction, including artificial insemination.']

16. Marie Vermeiren, in private correspondence with the author, 15 December 2003.
17. I am grateful to Durham Modern Languages Series for permission to reproduce here certain comments on lesbian and gay rights in France, Belgium and Canada from my chapter in Günther and Michallat (eds) 2006.
18. Corpus: Limur, Jean de, *La Garçonne* (1936), Audry, Jacqueline, *Olivia* (1951), Audry, Jacqueline, *Huis clos* (1954), Henri-Georges Clouzot, *Les Diaboliques* (1954), Audry, Jacqueline, *La Garçonne* (1957), Albicocco, Jean-Gabriel, *La Fille aux yeux d'or* (1961), Franju, Georges, *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1962), Rivette, Jacques, *Suzanne Simonin, La Religieuse de Diderot* (1965), Buñuel, Luis, *Belle de Jour* (1967), Casaril, Guy, *Emilienne et Nicole* (1970), Casaril, Guy, *Le Rempart des Béguines* (1972), Kaplan, Nelly, *Néa* (1976), Baratier, Jacques, *L'Araignée de satin* (1984), Fleury, Joy, *Tristesse et beauté* (1985), Granier-Deferre, Pierre, *Cours privé* (1987), Lipinska, Christine, *Le Cahier volé* (1992), Chabrol, Claude, *La Cérémonie* (1995), Akerman, Chantal, *La Captive* (2000), Despentes, Virginie, *Baise-moi* (2000), Ozon, François, *Huit femmes* (2002).
19. Peary and Shatzkin 1977: 'Introduction'.