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Seek and she shall find : gayzing at the lesbian lead in mainstream American film

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SEEK AND SHE SHALL FIND:
GAYZING AT THE *LESBIAN* LEAD IN MAINSTREAM AMERICAN FILM

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of
Theatre Arts
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Kristin Lee Nielsen
August 2004

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Karl Toepfer".

Dr. Karl Toepfer

A handwritten signature in a bold, stylized cursive script, reading "Kimberly Massey".

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Dr. David Kahn

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Pamela C Stark".

ABSTRACT

SEEK AND SHE SHALL FIND:
GAYZING AT THE *LESBIAN* LEAD IN MAINSTREAM AMERICAN FILM

by Kristin Lee Nielsen

The representation of lesbians in mainstream American film has had a difficult history as lesbians have been under-represented and misrepresented. Lesbian representation hinges on the concept of visibility and understanding the power of the *lesbian spectator*. The *lesbian spectator* can read against the intentions established on the narrative level and has the power to appropriate what she “gayzes” on the screen.

This thesis explores the distinctive relationship between the *lesbian spectator* (lesbian representation) and the image of lesbianism (representation of lesbians). From her perspective and through the use of performance analysis, the representation of lesbianism and the tension between narrative and performance values were examined to elicit a better understanding of the encoded and sub-textual signifiers in performance. Four films, *Basic Instinct*, *Bound*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and *The Color Purple*, were evaluated by looking at the coding of lesbian identity within the representational practices of filmmaking.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

The representation of “lesbians” in mainstream American film has had a difficult history. If one were to take a synoptic and chronologic look at mainstream American film, in which a lead or supporting female character is either defined specifically or inferred as lesbian, it would reveal a through line of this troublesome past, “Gay [lesbian] viewers may search for a positive depiction of their lives, the diversity of their lives, but that search will be in vain” (Carrithers, 66).

Historically, lesbians in mainstream American film have been under-represented and misrepresented. For example, lesbians are often characterized as marginal members of society, “Suggestions of lesbianism in the Hollywood cinema are encoded precisely in such ways as to encourage particular readings: as social deviance, sexual titillation/threat, and boundary against which ‘normal’ women’s sexuality and social role are defined” (Weiss, 55). These stereotypes thus serve as reminders to all spectators not to stray from “normal” heterosexual behavior as well as an embodiment of a myriad of other misconceptions, “...cinematic identification not only functions to affirm heterosexual norms, but also finds its most basic condition of possibility in the heterosexual division of the universe” (Mayne (1991), 127). Furthermore, lesbian subject-matter is often completely lost or ambiguously hidden in the filmic translation from the original novel or screenplay or summarily eradicated from the film by killing the character, “...lesbian desire in the novels has been taken out of their screen versions

because it is too radical, almost a final frontier, where a lesbian identity is seen as the ultimate mark of women's alterity, our radical otherness" (Kabir, 114).

To this end, these stereotypes of the "lesbian" in mainstream American film are demonstrated as: a vampire in *Dracula's Daughter* (Hillyer: 1936); suicidal in *The Children's Hour* (Wyler: 1961); a loveless dead-ended career women in *Boys on the Side* (Ross: 1995) and *Silkwood* (Nichols: 1983); as convicts and extortionists in *Bound* (Wachowski: 1996); met by untimely fatalistic destruction and death in *The Fox* (Rydell: 1968) and *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven: 1992); defeated by "heterosexuality" through the "love triangle" in *Three of Hearts* (Bogayevicz: 1993), *Personal Best* (Towne: 1982), *The Fox* and *Henry and June* (Kaufman: 1990); forced to redefine as bisexual by the end of the film in *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Herman-Wurmfeld: 2001) and *Personal Best*; portrayed as predatory in *The Hunger*, *Dracula's Daughter*, and *Black Widow* (Rafelson: 1987); and full of murderous intent in *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Avnet: 1991), *The Color Purple* (Spielberg: 1985), *Basic Instinct*, and *Bound*. The following commentary from a film critique of *Henry and June* sums it up, "Uma Thurman's June will go down (as it were) in lesbian cinema history as the latest and brightest in a long line of neurotic, pathetic, manipulative, alcoholic dyke characters whom we love quite as madly as we hate" (Olson, par. 7).

In spite of this oppressive trend in mainstream American film, the *lesbian spectator* who is often unaccompanied in her interpretation of film has the ability to transcend and possess or appropriate what she "gayzes" on the screen often

confounding the predetermined intentions of the film. The manner in which she does this is unique as her inherent ability, defined and fueled by her sexual desire for women, gives rise to her underestimated and underlying conditions of power. Therefore, the relationship between the *lesbian spectator* (lesbian representation) and the image of lesbianism (representation of lesbians) is symbiotic because it affirms the lesbian's power as spectator and attenuates the power of the image.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

To better understand the diversity of the *lesbian spectator*, one must understand who she is and note that only part of who she is is defined by her sexual identity. However, before the *lesbian spectator* can be analyzed, the difficult issue of defining lesbianism must be addressed, “In spite of the widespread use of the term ‘lesbian’ in the social sciences, there is actually little agreement as to what a lesbian is, or whether the term ‘lesbian’ is universally used” (Eliason and Morgan, 48). Lesbianism is not just the sexual expression between two women, but can also exist without any sexual elements. (Cass, 116). Lesbianism can be understood as any combination of the following: “(1) a subjective feeling of being different from heterosexual women due to emotional or sexual desires for women; (2) an understanding that those feelings could be labeled as ‘lesbian’; (3) assuming a lesbian identity; (4) seeking the company of lesbians; and (5) engaging in a lesbian relationship, emotional or sexual” (Eliason, 4).

There is something intrinsically risky in trying to classify such a diverse and changeable spectator. As Andrea Weiss states in her book *Violets and Vampires*, “there is a danger in using the ‘lesbian spectator’, or even worse, ‘lesbian identity’, which assumes a coherent, unified position of identification among all lesbians despite wide cultural, racial, class, and generational differences. Moreover, there is the danger of imposing the term on women who wouldn’t have used it themselves” (Weiss, 3). To address this issue in film, the

use of “strategic ambiguity” has been applied which results in an almost if not total erasure of the lesbian identity and her sexual desires for women. Rockler describes this technique as an extension of Adrienne Rich’s “lesbian continuum,” which “posits that heterosexual women and lesbians are consubstantial because their woman-identified experiences are similar.” (Rockler, 2) and “all women, regardless of whether they define themselves as lesbian, can resist compulsory heterosexuality and be empowered through woman-identified experiences that often are ambiguous emotionally and sexually, and fall along a lesbian continuum” (Rockler, 7). Rich defines the “lesbian continuum” as follows:

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 sexual 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...we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical definitions of lesbianism. (Rich, 52)

Holmlund suggests that merging female friendship and lesbian sexuality in a role that can be ambiguously read as lesbian or heterosexual films can appeal to both heterosexual and lesbian and gay audiences alike”(Holmlund (1991), 145).

Judith Mayne, in *Cinema and Spectatorship* (1993), theorizes about what spectatorship means in terms of identity. She describes the lesbian audience as politically charged and marginal. Although the discourse compares politicized

audiences and critical spectatorship, her analysis fails to give us a clear insight into what is read by the *lesbian spectator* and what pleasures she derives from film. Mayne in her earlier work suggests that "the constitution of gays and lesbians as an audience presents a threat is suggested by the obsessive assumption made by right-wing groups that audiences are all heterosexual, with the attendant fear that anything other than blanket condemnation of homosexuality will upset the subject/object dichotomy, that is, will make homosexuality something other than the object of heterosexual scorn" (Mayne (1993), 160).

Three different theoretical camps have been used to evaluate lesbian representation in mainstream American film: feminist theory, lesbian theory, and film theory. The difficulty with utilizing feminist theory alone is that the feminist battle is one of object versus subject as established by the Lacanian paradigm (Silverman, 149), which "places the male in the subject position, the female as the other, the object of desire" and more specifically women versus patriarchy, whereas the lesbian struggle is one of lesbianism versus heterosexuality (Carlson, 532). Moreover, Chua discusses the challenging issue of lesbian visibility and states that the "problem which lesbians ...experience in relation to the larger feminist movement is the invisibility of the specifically lesbian sexuality and sexual desires" (Chua, 21). Theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis (1990, 1993, 1996) and Sue-Ellen Case (1995) complicate the issue of lesbian spectatorship by returning the discourse to the debate of object versus subject,

which is increasingly problematic as this construct is dependent on the male gaze. Furthermore, their discussions do not appear to advance the scholarship as they are often ensnared in seemingly endless debates and rebuttals to Laura Mulvey's ground breaking article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Rather than the inherent power of the spectator, these discussions are primarily locked in psychoanalysis and focused on the gender of the spectator, the power of the male, and the non-existence of the female spectator. Mulvey states, "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female." Mulvey continues,

An active / passive heterosexual division of labour has similarly controlled narrative structure. According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. Hence the split between spectacle and narrative supports the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen. The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralise the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. (Mulvey, 12)

Much of the theoretical discourse regarding the spectator has stagnated because of the unyielding debates focused on the gender of the spectator rather than the inherent power of the spectator. This rhetoric has entangled the discussion and has shrouded the potential existence of other spectators or diverse spectators that are not created in the image of or in response to the male spectator. Laura Mulvey's assertion about the spectator limits the spectator's ability to surpass the narrative's exposition; "The character in the story can make

things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator..." (Mulvey, 12).

Other theorists hold a belief that lesbian spectatorship exists and operates most effectively in the absence of the male gaze and although feminist agenda may exist within the *lesbian spectator*, it may not be her primary concern, "feminist theory should be separated from lesbian theory because, whilst the main feminist political agenda is to challenge patriarchy, the primary lesbian political agenda is to challenge heterosexuality" (Calhoun as cited in Chua, 18). Therefore, on this level of examination, these ideologies are grossly incongruous.

Furthermore, using lesbian theory alone is insufficient as much of the discourse focuses on the debate of: Who is actually a lesbian? Is it genetic or a choice? Does abuse make you a lesbian? Are you politically or non-politically motivated to be a lesbian? These debates do not attempt to address lesbian representation and therefore are useful only in determining lesbian identity (Esterberg, 1997; Card, 1994; Eliason, 1996).

When used alone, film theory including feminist film theory presents an even greater problem for evaluating lesbian representation. In much of mainstream film theory, lesbianism is nearly invisible, "...existing feminist film discourse on female spectatorship, lesbian desire does not exist and, hence, the lesbian gaze is also nonexistent" (Chua, 19). Feminist film theory historically has focused on the "issues of representation and spectatorship [which] are central" to their criticism. (Smelik, 353). Additionally, feminist theorists' "call for positive

images of women in cinema” evolved out of their objection to the incessant use of negative images of women and its effect on the female spectator. (Smelik, 353). However, this discourse has failed to elucidate the direct issues of representation and visibility of lesbianism and the understanding of the *lesbian spectator*.

The lesbian film study discourse that does exist tends to focus on historical documentation or analyses focused strictly on the narrative. Moreover, lesbian film study has been defined, theoretically, as being “...at a curious intersection between feminist film theory and queer theory. While the genesis of queer theory is complex, much of the work in queer film theory appears to be a response, explicit or not, to feminist film theory” (Mayne (2000), xviii). Film scholarship to date lacks an examination of how the power of the *lesbian spectator* can reinforce or subvert the objectives of the narrative. Lesbian film theorists expounding on feminist film theory have noted, “the extent to which sexual difference really meant heterosexuality, so have lesbian commentators on queer theory noted how often queer really means gay male” (Mayne (2000), xviii). Therefore, the *lesbian spectator’s* response to cinema is summarily removed from theoretical dialog. In addition, Smelik has noted that more recently, “there has been a move away from a binary understanding of sexual difference to multiple perspectives, identities and possible spectatorships. This opening up has resulted in an increasing concern with the question of...hybrid sexualities” (Smelik, 353). Furthermore, feminist film theory does not support

subversive readings by the *lesbian spectator* as she can, “only be discerned in the production of a specifically lesbian ‘desire’ through the workings of the specifically lesbian text read in a specifically lesbian context” (Graham, 6).

This prompts the question of who is holding the power, the spectator or the image: “...the spectator is the buyer, the buyer is the spectator. To possess a woman’s sexuality is to possess the woman; to possess the image of a woman’s sexuality is, however mass-produced the image, also in some way to possess, to maintain a degree of control over, woman in general” (Kuhn, 11). Furthermore, Pellegrini asserts that, “Images do not speak once for all. We cannot control for all the different and sometimes even contradictory messages one and the same image or text may open itself to and produce” (Pellegrini, 91)

However, there appears to be an enormous reluctance to liken the *lesbian spectator* with other spectators and, “the few lesbian images offered by the cinema were created for heterosexual male viewers, to appeal to male voyeurism about lesbians and articulate and soothe male sexual anxieties about female autonomy or independence from men” (Weiss, 4).

On the narrative level, the image is controlled by the director or society and results in a narrow and monolithic representation that does not accommodate other ways of being or seeing, “Typically, media characterizations use popular stereotypes as a code which they know will be readily understood by the audience, thus further reinforcing the presumption of verisimilitude while remaining ‘officially’ innocent of dealing with a sensitive subject” (Gross, 27).

The incessant focus on the narrative is limiting as it ignores any power possessed by the spectator or performers, “the notion of a ‘negative’ representation is difficult precisely because the meanings are not fixed within the text but generated between text and audience” (Freer, 62).

In understanding the *lesbian spectator*, it is crucial to understand that her identity, sexual desire, and inherent way of looking, constructs her power to appropriate and thus her own personalized gaze. Lesbianism crosses all cultural, economical, racial, educational, and class boundaries. However, this diversity amongst lesbians does not necessarily form a rift, rather it is their identity as “lesbian” that establishes their unity whereby their viewing expectations and experiences are similar. Although the *lesbian spectator’s* relationship “to the cinema has always been complex...it resembles a love-hate affair which involves anticipation, seduction, pleasure, disappointment, rage, and betrayal” (Weiss, 4). Anna Clark, in her discussion of the construction of Lesbian identity chronicles an early 19th century woman’s quest for her own [lesbian] identity through an examination of 18th century literature (Clark, 23). This search for identity parallels the *lesbian spectator’s* as it facilitates subversion of the dictated readings of the narratives, one from literature, the other from film, allowing each individual to appropriate a reading of her own.

By demonstrating that a comprehensive definition of the *lesbian spectator* is one of mutability, variability, and volatility, we can begin to understand how problems of lesbian perception exist in mainstream American film, which further

lead to the misunderstanding of the power of the *lesbian spectator*, “There is a specific desiring gaze of the lesbian viewer...we do look and we do voyeur, as women desiring another woman” (Chua, 21). Mainstream American films are encoded to encourage particular readings of the role of the lesbian where, “visual exchanges between same-sex characters in mainstream film typically are nonsexual” (Straayer, 13). These readings promote a myriad of misconceptions and largely do not recognize and/or consider the gaze of the *lesbian spectator*. Therefore, by creating a model of power for the *lesbian spectator* that demonstrates her way of “gayzing” is as important as what she is seeing, the *lesbian spectator* can claim and assert her own power as the spectator. “Gayzing” gives her immense power even when the film fails to give her due regard. Thus, what has previously been invisible becomes visible to the *lesbian spectator*, “...the failure of the adequacy of representation makes the given visible-as-hegemonic, and the invisible valuable” (Reinelt, 88)

Not unlike other spectators, the *lesbian spectator* has the power to transgress dictated, stereotypical readings of films. However, the difference is that she views them in a distinctly lesbian way, which can either reinforce or subvert the objectives of the narrative. Moreover, “the challenge for the lesbian viewer is to eroticize these looks. She brings her desire to the heterosexual raw material and representational system of the text. Occasionally she collaborates with texts to excavate subtexts and uncover ambivalence in the patriarchal ‘order’” (Straayer, 13). The *lesbian spectator’s gayz, defined and incited by her*

sexual desire for women, does not reaffirm male masculinity but rather establishes her individual identity *and* clearly distinguishes her from other spectators. In affirming their identity and *gayzing* power, “lesbians have been hooked on the concept of subtext for years, when we longed for some hint of our desire for women, and had few images of ourselves as anything other than perverts. So we supplied oppositional readings wherever we could, by reimagining and reinventing meanings for ourselves” (Kabir, 2008).

Mayne describes lesbian spectatorship as, “...not confined to ‘finding the lesbians’ in the film or insisting that the only way the film makes sense is in lesbian terms, even though those strategies are part of lesbian film culture. Rather, lesbian spectatorship is concerned with that space between visibility and invisibility” (Mayne (2000), xviii).

CHAPTER 3 – METHOD

3.1 *Scope of Work*

Through the use of performance analysis, the representation of lesbianism and the tension between narrative and performance values in mainstream American film were examined to elicit a better understanding of the encoded and sub-textual signifiers in performance. Film analysis based solely on the narrative focuses on representation and does not account for how representation is interpreted. Therefore, by decontextualizing performance from the narrative, the signs of performance, which can be in tension with or subvert the objectives of the narrative, are revealed. The following mainstream American films were selected for review:

- *Basic Instinct* (dir: Verhoeven: 1992)
Released in US March 20, 1992
Total US Gross \$117,727,224
- *Bound* (dir: Wachowski: 1996)
Released in US October 4, 1996
Total US Gross \$3,783,498
- *The Color Purple* (dir: Spielberg: 1985)
Released in US December 18, 1985
Total US Gross \$80,258,532
- *Fried Green Tomatoes* (dir: Avnet: 1991)
Released in US December 27, 1991
Total US Gross \$81,204,830

The analyses presented were conducted from the point-of-view of the *lesbian spectator*, which accounts for her differentiating way of decoding images herein

referred to as the *gayz*. The *lesbian spectator* was defined as a female who reads narrative and aesthetic qualities of a film that strengthen her sexual desires for women.

From the *lesbian spectator's* perspective, the films were examined by looking at the coding of lesbian identity within the representational practices that include physicality, desirability, mutability of identity, narrative representation, and believability. These categories will assist in establishing the distinctive relationship between the *lesbian spectator* (lesbian representation) and the image of lesbianism (representation of lesbians) in mainstream American film. In addition, performance codes were examined, both explicitly and implicitly, including: acting, characterization, character interaction, physiognomy, costuming, and cinematography.

Each film was reviewed in its entirety and select scenes were captured and digitally converted to individual screen shots to serve as visual representations of the film. The use of screen shots as a method and basis of visual comparison, allows for the discussion and evaluation of the performance and narrative values.

3.2 *Definition of Terms*

To keep the discussion focused and tangible throughout the thesis, certain criteria were used to select the films. The working set of films can be characterized by the following common denotations: The first qualifier, “Mainstream”, is understood as the “prevailing current or direction of activity or influence” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000). This term is widely used and conceptualized by scholars, filmmakers, and moviegoers alike and it is generally understood by all; however a strict definition by which all cinema must adhere does not appear to be effectively defined. The second qualifier, “American,” specifically speaks to the production and release of the film into the North American market by North American Production companies. The third qualifier, “Film,” will be defined as feature length for primary release in theatres not video. The fourth qualifier, “Leads,” refers to the main (for this thesis, female) characters in the selected films.

The following list of terms concisely defined in the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2000) was used to avoid confusing and misleading connotations:

Butch - Exhibiting stereotypically or exaggeratedly masculine traits or appearance. Used especially of lesbians and gay men.

Courtship - To try to gain the love or affections of, especially to seek to marry.

Femme - Exhibiting stereotypical or exaggerated feminine traits. Used especially of lesbians and gay men.

Gaze - To look steadily, intently, and with fixed attention.

Heterosexual - Sexually oriented to persons of the opposite sex.

Homosexual - Of, relating to, or having a sexual orientation to persons of the same sex.

Representation - Something that represents, as an image or likeness of something.

Spectator - An observer of an event.

Stereotypical - One that is regarded as embodying or conforming to a set image or type.

Voyeur - a person who derives sexual gratification from observing the naked bodies or sexual acts of others, especially from a secret vantage point.

CHAPTER 4 – FILM ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 *Pathology vs. Normality*

The representation of lesbians as vampires and social deviants has been a longstanding theme in mainstream American film, "...and [lesbians] have almost always been depicted as predatory, dangerous, and pathological. This representational history is as banal as it is pervasive" (Hart, x). Within the narrative, these portrayals of lesbians represent the titillation and threat of violent, sexually aggressive women. The lesbian vampire is simultaneously symbolic of death and is an object of desire, which allows her to move from the supernatural into the sexual realm. Similarly, the social deviant is concurrently symbolic of abjection yet also remains an object of desire. Most notable in the films *Bound* (Wachowski: 1996) and *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven: 1992), is the overt use of sexuality when representing the lesbian. Though the label of lesbian inherently connotes the female as a sexual entity, focusing on this single facet of lesbianism denigrates her and allows her to exist only on physical and sexual planes. Moreover, the use of explicit sexual scenes without further development of the characters serves to further entrench the stereotype of lesbians as only sexual beings in the minds of the spectator. Further disparaging occurs when the lesbian is characterized as a social deviant, which yields a connotation of the lesbian as pathological.

Lesbianism is explicitly used as titillation in the films *Basic Instinct* and *Bound*, which suggests that lesbian sexual power and socially aggressive behavior are interrelated. Somehow filmmakers believe that aggressive behaviorisms are more acceptable when embodied in the lesbian, who is already stereotyped by many groups as unnatural, pathological, and sub-human. The image of the lesbian as a "sexual outlaw" (Weiss, 84) is far more palpable than representing her as an equal to her heterosexual counterpart. To characterize the lesbian with "positive" or more realistic images, something other than murderers and convicts, would force the spectator to reckon with their own discomfort or homophobia. Yet, when the non-lesbian spectator views the aberrant and deviant representation of the lesbian they do not have to think of the lesbian as being equal to or "normal" like themselves and therefore the discomfort is transient since this constructed creature does not exist in reality. This representation communicates to the non-lesbian spectator that they are "normal" and the lesbian is not which reinforces the stereotypes and misconceptions.

Predominantly and historically, particular representations of lesbians have been created to appeal to the heterosexual male fantasy and are both attractive and threatening to the male spectator. The lesbian social deviant exudes active sexual desires, which are titillating to the male spectator. However, the representation of the lesbian social deviant can threaten the heterosexual males' dominant social position, which is then quelled by the ultimate destruction, and or

capture of her. This symbolic resolution reaffirms the heterosexual male spectators' masculinity, however, "The very frequency with which lesbian sexuality consistently reappears...on the Hollywood screen, only to be immediately denied existence in 'the real', intimates that the male subject's fear of emasculation cannot be eradicated by the killing off of individual lesbians: such a terror is deeply entrenched within the masculine psycho-system" (Hoogland, 473).

As will be discussed below, the films *Bound* and *Basic Instinct* both contain negative and stereotypical portrayals of lesbianism, which include implications and indictment of lesbians as social deviants. However, the *lesbian spectator* interprets these narrative representations of the lesbian and facilely *gayzes* in spite of these prescribed intentions or the filmmakers indifference towards her, thereby *gayzing* upon images that are simultaneously interesting, intriguing, exciting, and disturbing.

4.1.1 *Basic Instinct*

The narrative in the film *Basic Instinct* tells a story of a murder-mystery writer, Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone), who is suspected of perpetrating the heinous crimes described in her books. While investigating Catherine, detective Nick Curran (Michael Douglas) has a sexual affair with her. Catherine's *modus operandi* in researching the protagonist for her novels is to become sexually involved with her research subjects and subsequently leave them upon

completion of the novel. Her books and her attractions are limited to people who have murdered and/or have demonstrated violent behavior.

In the scene shown in Figure 1, the spectator is a voyeur of repeated shots of nudity. The long shot shows Catherine, naked and dressing, in a series of images (Figure 1, shots 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 10). Though the *lesbian spectator* can gaze upon the nude figure, she is constantly reminded that this footage is intended for the male voyeuristic gaze as evidenced in Figure 1, shots 2, 8, 9 and 11. The inter-splicing of the heterosexual male point of view objectifies the female and reminds the *lesbian spectator* that she is not the intended audience for this scene. Throughout the film, the intended spectator is reinforced repeatedly as seen in Figures 2 through 5. The male gaze is cinematically interlaced in the sequence of shots thus changing the point of view, which directly comments on all subsequent scenes of physical or sexual expression between the two women. Thus, it can be concluded that the heterosexual male is the intended spectator, not the lesbian. This concept is further discussed by Straayer, "...one way to interfere with female bonding is to insert references to men and heterosexuality between women characters... to be more effective, the interference needs to be visual in order to physically separate the women's bodies and interrupt their glances" (Straayer, 18).

Lesbianism is utilized in this film as a plot device, which adds to the pathology of Sharon Stone's character. In Figure 2, Roxy (Leilani Sarelle), Catherine's lover, is introduced as she is seen descending the stairs. Her

costuming is mostly feminine attire with shoulder length blond hair, make-up, earrings, brocaded vest, slim fitting black slacks, and narrow shoe boots. There is something aggressive, tough, and sexual about this relatively feminine clad woman. Roxy's cleavage is exposed in Figure 2, shots 3 and 5, which connotes a sultry seductiveness. Her postured gaze elicits an aggressive attitude that reads as masculine (Figure 2, shots 1,2,4,5,7,9,11,13, and 14). This is particularly evident in Figure 2, shot 13, where Roxy's stance is read as possessive and territorial, as she blocks the stairs to her lover's bedroom. This narrow and stereotypical representation of the lesbian, as mannish-defender, territory-marking, and man-hating, results in a one-dimensional, confrontational bully attitude and typifies the overall misrepresentations of lesbians in the film, "...as they portray women as sexually threatening and killing men...[as] part of the same resolutely heterosexual package" (Holmlund (1994), 33).

This stereotypical representation is further demonstrated through the Roxy character in Figures 4 and 5. In Figure 4, the narrative suggests that Roxy is jealous of the sexual relations between Nick and Catherine. Roxy appears with a feminine hairstyle, leather jacket, and black, cleavage-exposing blouse. The lighting in the shot washes the room in red toned lighting, which connotes rage, lust, and confrontation. Roxy emerges out of the shadows to challenge Nick while he is in a state of undress and weak from his sexual escapades with Catherine, Roxy's lover. Nick attempts to provoke and disparage Roxy by referring to his sexual relations with Catherine as the "fuck of the century" Roxy

and Nick then engage in a heated argument. What is narratively revealed in this scene is the representation of the lesbian as an enraged, voyeuristic, jealous female incapable of sexually satisfying her female lover. The reduced lighting that casts dark shadows in the shots encourages the images to sear with metaphors of the lesbian as one who lurks amongst the shadows and attacks her victims by cloak of night and enforces the representation as pathological. This scene is suggestive of the battle between homosexuality and heterosexuality, “given an even fight between a heterosexual man and a lesbian, the man will win out every time, thereby restoring the ‘natural’ order” (Weiss, 101). The battle is also demonstrated in Figure 5, which is the morning after the scene depicted in Figure 4. Figure 5, shots 1, 2, and 3, depict a conflict between Roxy and Catherine. Nick enters the scene in Figure 5, shot 3, personifying the threat of heterosexuality. In the next nine shots, the tension between heterosexuality and homosexuality mounts, ultimately yielding the heterosexual victor. The heterosexual male, after observing the two women (Figure 5, shot 5), proceeds to stare down his competitor knowing victory is imminent. The lesbian stares back in challenge yet relinquishes her gaze and leaves her lover alone with her adversary (Figure 5, shots 5, 8, and 9). This omnipresent theme of heterosexuality versus homosexuality is a hegemonic device utilized to institutionalize the wrongs of straying from the “norm.”

In Figure 6, Roxy and Catherine are seen dancing in the nightclub through the eyes of the Nick. The scene communicates the contrived representation of

lesbian sexuality. The sexual tension between the two women is non-existent and the kisses are continually hidden behind the head or hand of Catherine with contrived blocking (Figure 6, shots 4, 5, and 6 and Figure 3, shots 10, 11, and 17). This hedging of lesbian sexuality reads as discomfort and homophobia on the part of the actresses and the filmmaker. However, the intentionally amplified and blatant groping of Catherine's gluteus maximus by Nick, (Figure 6, shot 25) and close-up on Nick and Catherine (Figure 6, shot 19) reveals the acceptance of heterosexual sexual expression. This point is further demonstrated in the opening scene of the film (not pictured) with a woman, totally naked, undulating on top of a man.

In Figure 3, the spectator, once again, views the incessant misrepresentation of the lesbian. First, in Figure 3, shot 1, Roxy appears with the tough attitude, masculine walk, and is costumed in black (which historically represents bad or evil) and challenges Nick in Figure 3, shots 1, 2, and 3. The subsequent shots appear to be a superficial attempt to demonstrate the true nature of Roxy and Catherine's relationship and thus heterosexuality is temporarily defeated. However, with discerning clarity, this scene is exposed to be a device by which the heterosexual male is incited to conquer the homosexual element. The overt display of groping and challenging looks between Roxy and Nick, in consecutive two shots, do not ward off the heterosexual male character but actually serve as titillation and invitation (Figure 3, shots 14, 15, and 16). This film and other films like this rely on what Straayer describes as, "...titillating

the male viewer with lesbian insinuations...however, female characters must remain available to male viewers” (Straayer, 19).

In Figures 6 and 7, the scenes take place in what might be considered as an omni-sexual club as all genders and sexualities seem to be represented. It is in these scenes that the dual between homosexuality and heterosexuality chronologically begins in the film. The tale of lesbianism as witnessed and challenged by the heterosexual male punctuates both of these scenes.

The use of raw sexuality in this film, both heterosexual and homosexual is ubiquitous; however, with all the sexual contact, content and innuendo, the film lacks sexual tension and sensual seductiveness between the women. Violent and sexually aggressive scenes permeate the film yet the representations are cliché and calculated. The clichéd or stereotypical representations of lesbianism as deviant are demonstrated in Figure 7, shot 3 where Catherine is seen snorting a line of coke in a darkened bathroom stall. These questionable representations are particularly evident in scenes that contain lesbian sexual content. One example of this is seen when lesbian sexuality is communicated to the spectator by the groping of breasts and man-handling of women (Figure 3, shots 14, 15, and 16). The depiction of these women hugging and caressing one another in the midst of one male onlooker and one male participant (Figure 7) visually reads like characters from a pornographic film, created by men for male fantasy, and does not accurately or realistically represent lesbians or lesbian sexuality, “Whoever lays hands on her girlfriend merely gives another twist to a

longstanding cultural myth, and does so with only one purpose in mind—to present an enticing spectacle to the benefit of an all-male audience” (Hoogland, 473).

4.1.2 Bound

In the opening scene of the film, we observe a woman, (Gina Gershon), whom we come to know as Corky, costumed in a classic leather motorcycle jacket, white t-shirt, and multiple earrings in one ear (Figure 8). Her hair is short, disheveled, but styled and decisively placed behind her ears, yet a few strands remain to fall across her eyes and face, which gives an allure to her eyes. Her body language is strong and decidedly masculine in its movements. In the same scene we encounter another woman, Violet, (Jennifer Tilly), who is costumed in a tight-fitting black dress, which falls mid-thigh in length. The dress is covered by a long fitted leather jacket and she is wearing high heels and black stockings. Violet's hair is short, curly and styled elegantly. She is wearing black designer sunglasses as she enters the scene. Her body language communicates sensuality and femininity. The scene, shot in reverse angle, contains no dialog and exists as a series of looks and observations on the part of the characters. In contrast to what was observed in *Basic Instinct*, the looks exchanged are not punctuated with images of the male point of view. Instead, the voyeurism is left to the desiring gaze of the spectator, whoever that may be. This point of view allows the *lesbian spectator* to more readily access the images on the screen,

"lesbians can either invent their own narratives that allow the lesbianism to be enacted or can become engaged with the film through an attraction to one of the characters" (Weiss, 83). This is not to say that images, which are intended for non-lesbian spectators, cannot be "gayzed" upon by the lesbian, but rather, "Lesbians can also find erotic elements in scenes which do not feature direct displays of sexuality" (Weiss, 104) and she has more interest in doing so when she is not continually observing images of men desiring women.

The opening scene of the film establishes two diametrically opposed females, Corky more typically masculine or (butch) and Violet more typically female or (femme). The juxtaposition of masculine (butch) and feminine (femme) is a classic way in which lesbian relationships are portrayed in mainstream American film. This fixed and limited representation allows the non-lesbian spectator to believe that she understands the inner-workings of the relationship by placing the butch in the role that is traditionally embodied by the heterosexual male. However, this is inherently problematic because the non-lesbian spectator cannot begin to comprehend the complex structure of the lesbian relationship from such a simplistic construct that merely mimics heterosexuality.

Paradoxically, Chua states that this construct of the butch/femme threatens to "destabilize the institution of heterosexuality because the two participants are not of different sexes" (Chua, 21). It is also representative of those who seek to portray lesbianism from a position of ignorance. The lesbian is not fixed, her identity changes and is mutable and so are her desires, yet what remains

constant for the lesbian is the passion of women desiring women both sexually and emotionally.

In Figure 8, we observe the characters entranced in the repartee of “the look.” The women pose and posture, fully aware that they are simultaneously being looked at and doing the looking, thus the dance begins (Figure 8, shots 4, 6-12, and 23-24). In Figure 8, shots 17-21, unlike *Basic Instinct*, the scene is commented on by the lesbian *gayz*. What is interesting in the scene is that even though the heterosexual male spectator may still enjoy this imagery, the *lesbian spectator* does not feel the scourge of his presence. She is allowed to find the characters alluring even within the butch/femme construct. In Figure 8, shot 24, when Violet casts her final glance, she not only acknowledges that she has been gazed upon by Corky but also by the *lesbian spectator*.

The narrative of the film depicts these two women as social deviants, Corky, an ex-con, arrested for propagation of wealth, and Violet as a gangster's girl-toy. Corky is further illustrated as a social deviant and stereotypically lesbian, by costuming her in specific attire and narrowly defining her character parameters. She is thereby depicted as a labrys tattooed, truck driving, tank-top wearing, menial laborer (Figure 9, shot 1 and Figure 10, shots 1-4). Another disquieting portrayal of the lesbian is seen in Figure 11. In this scene, Corky goes to a butch lesbian bar and states, “I’m just here to get laid.” Knowing the spectator for whom this film is intended (most likely the heterosexual male) the *lesbian spectator* reads this statement as another heterosexual construct of

lesbianism. From this position, it can then be assumed that this is how heterosexuals believe a masculine, socially deviant, lesbian would talk about women sexually. The image of a woman in Figure 11, shots 4-8 and 15-17, is costumed in a black-leather, zipper-front bra. Her costuming equates lesbianism with sadomasochism, which is the "master-slave scenario of sex-as-power...where women are subjected to sexual violence, mastery is constructed as operating on the side of the masculine" (Kuhn, 46). Since Corky represents the masculine or butch identity, this scene further inculcates that her behavior and sexual desires are deviant and abnormal and further perpetuates the unsavory connotations that are associated with lesbianism. Paradoxically, the *lesbian spectator* who on the one hand is excited to see lesbian representation on the screen that is detectibly more honest and less influenced by the male gaze, is on the other hand equally disturbed by the social stereotypes the images represent, "Such homophobic lesbian images are used most frequently to validate the superiority and desirability of heterosexuality" (Hollinger, 10).

In Figure 9, the sexual dance continues as Violet arrives at Corky's door to acknowledge that she had been gazing upon her as well. This scene is full of sexual tension and is communicated through longing looks (Figure 9, shots 3, 4, 15, and 17) and close physical proximity (Figure 9, shots 2, 4, 11, 13, 15, and 17). In Figure 9, shot 9, Corky symbolically reveals her attraction towards Violet by cleansing herself before reemerging in the scene.

The sexual tension begins to mount in the film beginning in Figure 12 and climaxing in Figure 14. The narrative in Figure 12 is a ruse by which the sultry seductress Violet gets Corky into her apartment. Violet appears in Figure 12, shots 2-5, as a “damsel in distress” and in Figure 12, shots 1-21, the butch, menial laborer, Corky, is here to rescue her. The scene continues to show Corky as the hero in Violet’s fabricated dilemma (Figure 12, shot 16). What is simmering in the subtext of the scene is increasing sexual tension; the use of camera angles from the point of view of the *lesbian spectator* allows her to view the affects of the sexual advances and desire on Corky as Violet’s legs enter the shot. In a tight shot, increased arousal between the two women is inappropriately accompanied by a symbolic release of fluids from the pipe (Figure 12, shot 15). The *lesbian spectator* understands this to be a phallic contrivance emulating male orgasmic release as Corky’s hand is precisely placed on the pipe in such a manner to indicate this reference and additionally the fluid releases from the top and flows abundantly through her fingers. The *lesbian spectator* expects the use of such devices as mainstream American filmmakers choose not to communicate sexual references in more visually interesting and gender appropriate ways. This phallic representation speaks visually to the heterosexual male spectator, who is the likely intended spectator.

As the scene continues, the sexual exchange of touch sends the acknowledgement of Corky’s sexual advances back to Violet and the use of close proximity signals to Corky that Violet is ready and willing (Figure 12, shot

18). The signals of sexual desire punctuate the scene. The scene, though contrived, is exciting to the *lesbian spectator* but she is taken out of the moment as she questions the sexuality of the actors and their characters. Perhaps this is of little importance to most spectators as heterosexuality is projected as the prevailing sexuality. However, to the *lesbian spectator*, this query speaks to the believability of the performances. Although the sexuality of the actresses remains undisclosed to the *lesbian spectator*, experience has informed her that due to the homophobic environment under which, mainstream American films are created, that the sexual and sensual scenes in the film will be compromised. The *lesbian spectator* expects the scenes to be wrought with displays of discomfort from the actresses as well as male-contrived portrayals of lesbian intimacy. Therefore, the *lesbian spectator* views the sexual scenes in Figures 13 and 14 with great apprehension and skepticism. The other pending disappointment the *lesbian spectator* may experience is that the ultimate resolution of the plot will result in Tilly's character being a straight woman experimenting with lesbianism which is a common plot device utilized in mainstream American film. Though the scene may be initially pleasurable to the *lesbian spectator*, the fact that the lesbian was utilized for heterosexual pleasure will be quite disheartening but unfortunately not surprising.

The *lesbian spectator* apprehensively holds on as the plot careens toward sexual explosion. The use of touch is applied as characters act on their sexual desires (Figure 13, shots 4, 5, 11, 12, and 14-29). The actors repeatedly employ

the use of longing looks, with lips apart, to communicate sexual yearning. As the *lesbian spectator* “gayzes” upon the scene she becomes the voyeur and “participant” in this scene as many of the shots are shown from her point of view. In contrast to the hedging of lesbian sexuality in *Basic Instinct*, in this film the lesbian sexuality is embraced boldly. However, the butch/femme construct continues to reemerge as seen in Figure 13, shot 19, which reads to the *lesbian spectator* as an emulation of penile oral sex. A lesbian’s sexual desire for women is very different than a heterosexual male’s image of what he wants a lesbian to be and rarely coincides with what lesbians actually find sexually stimulating or appealing and therefore the “porn style” imagery does not necessarily appeal to the *lesbian spectator*. Somehow, the use of the butch validated the use of this phallic image in the minds of the filmmaker but contrary to popular belief, “the butch adopts fetishes with masculine connotations because they are ‘most strongly pre-coded to convey, both to the subject and to others, the cultural meaning of sexual (genital) activity and yearning toward women,’ not as some theorists have suggested, because they ‘stand in for the missing penis’” (De Lauretis as quoted in Hollinger, 5). By containing the sexuality within the known parameters of heterosexual sex and blurring the “distinction between heterosexuality and lesbianism” (Hollinger, 11) the open portrayal of lesbianism may not pose a “significant threat to the heterosexist, patriarchal status quo” (Hollinger, 11).

In Figure 14, the sexual climax of the film shows the expression of lesbian desire. The scene in its pulsating, sexual rhythm is cinematically shot from the point of view of the spectator. The camera swoops in and arc shot and spirals around the two women who are actively sexually engaged, revealing moments of ecstasy. Though nudity is used in this scene, it is handled artistically and the spiraling camera movements act as a metaphor for pending climax. As the intensity of the sexual experience increases the crane shot pulls up and away from its subjects and views them from above symbolic of the height of pleasure experienced by the characters.

What is missing in this scene is any emotional connection between the two women. The scene is quickly reduced to just a sexual act and any beauty in the cinematography is lost to the *lesbian spectator*. Perhaps this is just a casual encounter as suggested by Violet's dialog "I needed that" or perhaps it is that she has finally been satisfied as her heterosexual encounters have left her unsated. Either way it speaks to the believability of the performance which is seemingly unconvincing. This is not to say that lesbians cannot and do not have casual emotionless sexual encounters but the *lesbian spectator* desires to *gayz* upon a connection between the two women especially if she is to invest emotional energy into their fate as the film continues. Without a convincing connection between the two women this connection the characters are one dimensional.

Figure 15 reveals this resolution of the plot. The scene depicts the familiar bond the women have established after having duped Chicago's notorious Mafia.

In the final dialog of the scene Corky says, "You know what the difference between you and me is?" Violet responds "no," Corky says "me neither," that they are the same. Violet is like Corky (the ex-con) because she just shot a gangster (her boyfriend) in cold blood and has therefore proven that she is a lesbian by this same murder. The *lesbian spectator* may have derived pleasure from this film by vicariously experiencing the heroic destruction of the mafia, and the resolution that the women end up together. Furthermore, some may view this ending as a victory because the lesbian characters not only eluded their usual predetermined death and destruction but also in fact became the heroines of the film. Yet, what remains frightening about this understanding of the film's resolution is that it ignores the fact that this ending is acceptable and justifiable because the women defeated the mob, which is viewed by many as one of the most despicable groups in society (because of their unconscionable acts of violence, murder, and criminal activity) and therefore having the social deviant destroy the mob is deceptively seen as a victory and a "positive" and acceptable depiction of lesbianism. Additionally, the *gayz* of the *lesbian spectator* was left unrequited as she desired to witness a more sensual and spiritual connection between the two women, one which bonded them more completely not just sexually or circumstantially. This is a failure on multiple fronts in the making of the film which stemmed from poor performances which lacked an inner dialog on the part of the actors, stilted and banal writing in the screenplay, and unsophisticated character development. Improvements in some of these facets

of filmmaking conceivably would have improved the overall ability for the *lesbian spectator* to *gayz* upon the film more readily and derive greater pleasure from the narrative but more specifically from the relationship between the two leading female characters. However, modifications would not have resolved what is intrinsically wrong with the film and that is the disturbing, pervasive, and conjecturable representation of the lesbian as social deviant and the position it takes regarding lesbians and their identity.

4.2 *Visibility vs. Invisibility*

Lesbian representation in mainstream American film hinges on the concept of visibility yet it is, “a problematic term and just as feminist film theory inspired by psychoanalysis insisted on questioning what is meant by the term woman, so contemporary inquiries into lesbian representation ask similar questions of the term lesbian. Questioning ‘visibility’ is not the same as rejecting it” (Mayne (2000), xxi). Rudimentarily, visibility is “the capability of being easily observed” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000). Lesbian representation in mainstream American film is not “capab[le] of being easily observed” as it is repeatedly removed, avoided, or sanitized to such a degree that it becomes unrecognizable.

“There is a desire to find the erased presence in mainstream culture, while simultaneously inventing new languages of visibility.” However, *lesbian*

spectators have searched in vain to find what could be deemed as “positive” representations of themselves in mainstream American film (Mayne (2000), xxi). Though “positive,” acceptable and realistic, representations of lesbians could ostensibly be the quintessential desire of the *lesbian spectator*, this representation is contingent upon visibility. Fundamentally, without visibility there is no “positive” or “negative” representation there is only absence and with absence there is nonexistence and neutralization. Wilton states, “...it is somewhat of political and theoretical truism that lesbian oppression is preeminently marked by invisibility, and invisibility is somewhat potent problematic in the context of the moving image” (Wilton, 2). On this subject Halberstam states, “...invisibility, in fact, can often do much more damage than visibility” (Halberstam, 3).

Due to historic and current invisibility or marginalization of lesbian representation, the *lesbian spectator* has been denied narrative visibility in mainstream American film that would enable her to vicariously experience and derive pleasure from without having to subvert the narrative to meet that end. However, a conundrum exists, “... when groups or perspectives do attain visibility, the manner of that representation will itself reflect the biases and interests of those elites who define the public agenda. And these elites are (mostly) white, (mostly) middle-aged, (mostly) male, (mostly) middle and upper-middle class, and entirely heterosexual (at least in public)” (Gross 21).

The procedure of extracting lesbian sexuality from the center of the narrative and rendering it inoperable is a mechanism by which filmmakers and studios can forgo offending the greater movie going public or spectator. This homophobic climate, in which the motion picture industry presumes lesbianism and lesbian sexual desire to be too progressive and destructive, allows for the systematic removal or altering of the lesbian representation much in the same way that the film Production Code (also known as the Hays Code) of 1933 influenced classical cinema with its unyielding rule that, “sex perversion or any inference of it is forbidden” (Westbrook, 1). This dogmatic statement was part of a set of censoring rules or a “uniform standard of decency imposed by the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association upon the major Hollywood studios” and was applied to all studio-era films for a span of nearly twenty years (Wikipedia, 2003). In censoring the early Hollywood film *These Three*; the Hays Office directed the studio to, “remove from the finished production ‘all possible suggestions of lesbianism and any other matter which is likely to prove objectionable’” (Westbrook, 1).

Since that time, representation of lesbianism in mainstream American films has not significantly changed even though in 1952, the use of the Production Code was deemed a violation of the First Amendment. The Production Code appears to reign influential on contemporary films as if there is a current enforcement of this outmoded and unconstitutional doctrine controlling the industry.

A prime example of the erasure of lesbian identity and desire from mainstream American film is evidenced by films produced by the adaptation of the novel such as *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *The Color Purple*. Kabir states, "...the omission of lesbian desire in the transition from the text to the screen shows that mainstream cinema has been slow to acknowledge the impact of lesbian identity, preferring...to sidestep the issue by masking it with other concerns" (Kabir, 114).

4.2.1 *Fried Green Tomatoes*

The structure of the screenplay of film *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Avnet: 1991) is a story within a story. The performance and narrative analyses of this film focus strictly on the secondary story. The narrative in this section of the film imparts a tale of two female characters, Idgie (Mary Stuart Masterson) and Ruth (Mary-Louise Parker). The film, set during the depression in Whistle Stop, Alabama, chronicles the inception of their friendship, Ruth abandoning her abusive husband, their building a life together, their raising of Ruth's son, their running and ownership of the Whistle Stop Cafe, and their life together until Ruth's premature death.

The narrative of the film prior to the scene shown in Figure 16 reveals that Ruth has been sent by Idgie's mother to mentor Idgie, who has been living like a "wild woman of Borneo" since her brother Buddy died in a train accident many years earlier. Ruth, a lady and a God fearing woman, has come out of respect

for the family and concern for Idgie's welfare. Idgie, who resents that she now has a guardian who won't let her smoke, drink and swear, takes Ruth on dare-devil treks around town that include jumping out of trains, climbing into windows and stealing the keys to the car, thereby continuing to act out and challenge the limits of the relationship. Eventually, Idgie begins to enjoy the company of her new companion, which is evidenced in Figure 16. In this scene, the spectator observes the beginning of the adult relationship between Idgie and Ruth. Figure 16, shot 1, reveals the contrast between the two women. Ruth is costumed in a long flowing floral summer dress and a matching hat. Her hair is curled and loosely pinned at the base of her neck. Her hands are folded and rest gently in her lap. In contrast, Idgie is costumed in a man's cotton, mandarin-collared shirt that is blousy and rolled up at the sleeves. Her hair is unkempt, disheveled and falling out of a loose braid on the left-hand side of her head. Her shorts appear to be men's slacks, which have been cut off and rolled up and then cinched around the waist with a thick leather belt clad with a large square silver buckle. Idgie's grip on the wheel is angular and strong. The juxtaposition of these dichotomous women immediately establishes the construct of the butch (Idgie) and femme (Ruth) in the mind of the *lesbian spectator* as she *gayzes* upon the scene. Thus the invisible becomes visible to the *lesbian spectator*. Though the narrative is decidedly non-lesbian, the signifying practices in the film communicate a truly lesbian tale to the *lesbian spectator*. The construct of the butch/femme is further delineated in the performance where Ruth is poised again

with her hands folded in her lap and she is kneeling on the ground, which is suggestive of a proper lady (Figure 16, shots 5-7, 22, and 25-27). In contrast, Idgie's left leg is seen in such a manner as to indicate that she is not kneeling but rather sprawling (Figure 16, shot 3). In Figure 16, shots 21 and 23, Idgie is sitting open legged on the ground with her knees slightly bent. Idgie's movements are much less controlled and more free spirited than Ruth's and more suggestive of a "tomboyish" or more masculine energy (Figure 16, shots 8, 16, 17 and 28).

The narrative of the scene tells the spectator of another rebellious act that Idgie employs to shock Ruth and to show her something special that she can do. However, what this scene reveals to the *lesbian spectator* is a classic courtship ritual whereby the young suitor risks life and limb (or life-threatening bee-stings) to impress the woman of her desire and bring her some of the golden nectar. In this construct the young suitor is Idgie and she, being quite smitten with Ruth, seems unaware of and impervious to the dangers inherent in her quest for honey (Figure 16, shots 8-10, 12, 13, 16, and 17). As the camera zooms in through a series of reaction shots, Ruth conversely appears quite entranced by the spectacle (Figure 16, shots 11, 14, 15 and 18) and grows increasingly anxious and distressed about the fate of her charge and woman of intrigue (Figure 16, shots 18 and 19). After attaining the "love nectar," Idgie, the suitor, returns gleefully to the fair maiden and offers her a token of her affection (Figure 16, shot 19). The exchange of "the look" further demarcates the "lesbian" dimension of

the scene (Figure 16, shots 20-28) in which Idgie now plays coy as she says "is it bad what I did?" and waits for the woman of her desire to validate her act of heroism (Figure 16, shots 21 and 23). Ruth fulfills that need with her shy return glances and says "no...I heard that there were people who could charm bees...I just never met one" (Figure 16, shots 22, 25, and 26). Then, Ruth, in a series of mid shots, exudes sensual energy and with a gentle smile and a coy look away (Figure 16, shot 25) in response to Idgie's inquiring look (Figure 16, shot 24) says "you're just an old bee-charmer, Idgie Threadgoode, that's what you are " and with that comment Ruth casts a desiring gaze at Idgie (Figure 16, shot 26). The scene closes with the suitor offering the "love nectar" to be tasted by the woman of her desire. This symbolic action consummates the relationship and validates Idgie's heroism. Ultimately, this symbolizes Ruth acceptance of Idgie's affection.

Though no overt sexuality is present in the context of this scene, the *lesbian spectator* gazes beyond the film's narratively established "just friends" relationship of the two women and sees attraction. The connection between the women, which was missing in *Bound* seems to be somewhat existent here. The following excerpt, from the novel, substantially supports this particular reading of this scene:

Just think, Ruth, I never did it for anybody else before. Now nobody in the whole world knows I can do that but you. I just wanted for us to have a secret together, that's all. Ruth didn't respond. "I'm sorry, Ruth, please don't be mad at me." "Mad?" Ruth put her arms around Idgie and said, "oh Idgie, I'm not mad at you. It's just that I don't know what I'd do if anything ever happened to you. I really don't." Idgie's heart started pounding so hard it almost knocked her over. After they had eaten the chicken and

potato salad and all the biscuits and most of the honey, Ruth leaned back against the tree and Idgie put her head in her lap. "You know, Ruth, I'd kill for you. Anybody that would ever hurt you, I'd kill them in a minute and never think twice about it." "Oh Idgie that's a terrible thing to say." "No it isn't. I'd rather kill for love than hate." ...Ruth leaned down and whispered in her ear, "You're an old bee charmer, Idgie Threadgoode, that's what you are." Idgie smiled back at her and looked up into the clear blue sky that reflected in her eyes, and she was as happy as anybody who is in love in the summertime can be (Flagg, 86-87).

It's funny, most people can be around someone and then gradually begin to love them and never know exactly when it happened; but Ruth knew the very second it happened to her. When Idgie had grinned at her and tried to hand her that jar of honey, all these feelings that she had been trying to hold back came flooding through her, and it was at that second in time that she knew she loved Idgie with all her heart (Flagg, 88).

The narrative in Figure 17 tells of a birthday celebration for Ruth at one of Idgie's hangouts, The River Club. What the *lesbian spectator* gazes envisions as the depiction of a "date." Idgie is costumed in her finest, a men's chambray shirt, tie, suspenders and men's fitted slacks. Her hair is nicely groomed and neatly bound at the back. She has taken the woman of her desire to her favorite haunt where she will knowingly be witnessed by and be introducing Ruth to her closest friends. To the *lesbian spectator* this courtship ritual demarcates the intensity of Idgie and Ruth's relationship. In traditional courtships, there comes a time when the dating parties become significant enough to one another that the introduction to one's friends and family becomes important. This meeting serves as an opportunity for expression of the pride and commitment they feel towards one another. This ritual equally serves as an opportunity for families and friends to formulate opinions about the relationship which causes intense anxiety and

anticipation in the couple prior to the meeting (Rothmans, 1984, Bailey, 1988).

The blocking in this scene suggests that Idgie's close proximity and physical touching is intended to reveal her attraction to Ruth to all who witness her actions (Figure 17, shots 1 and 2). Idgie's body language throughout the scene communicates that she is comfortable and at ease. Her posture, with her right hand on her hip, is open, strong and confident. She exudes pride in presenting Ruth through her boisterous and playful display at the bar's entrance, which will knowingly draw attention from those present. This composition of the scene is cinematically similar to scenes in *Basic Instinct*, in that they are shot with a male onlooker but not necessarily from the male point of view (Figures 7 and 3). However, the scene in *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Figure 17) is distinctly different due to the absence of the interlaced male visage, which repeatedly commented from within the scene in *Basic Instinct*. Additionally, Idgie focuses her attention solely on Ruth, not the camera, and therefore does not identify or reinforce who the intended spectator is (e.g. the male spectator in *Basic Instinct*) thus allowing the *lesbian spectator* to freely interpret the narrative without the oppressive dictated readings. Similarly, Ruth is equally at ease in this setting as the narrative reveals that although she does not drink, Ruth joyfully accepts and enjoys the malt beverage. These actions add to the reading of this film as a lesbian courtship as Ruth gleefully states, "I don't know how to play poker, and I don't drink, but thank you anyway." As the *lesbian spectator* gazes on the scene she notes that a god fearing woman would not readily relinquish her

beliefs against the sins of drinking, gambling, and carousing unless she wished to spend time with the woman of her desire. To the *lesbian spectator*, Ruth's costuming is also indicative of a "date" as she is adorned with a becoming floral, tea-length dress, with a flounced collar that drapes charmingly over her shoulders. Her hair is loosely tied at the back of her head allowing soft, flowing, "Marcel" waves of hair to frame her smiling face. Her gestures indicate playfulness, yet are politely reserved, as indicative of a lady. Ruth welcomes the close proximity of Idgie and even reciprocates the engagement (Figure 17, shot 3). Ruth's body language reveals openness and pleasure at participating in this exchange and she is equally delighted to be accompanied by Idgie as well as to be introduced to Idgie's other "family".

This expression of close physical contact between the two women is exhibited throughout the film (Figure 18, shots 4-7 and Figure 19, shot 3). The physical contact does not read to the *lesbian spectator* as friendship but serves as a continual reminder of the depth of Ruth and Idgie's personal commitment to one another. The women are content in each others arms, which signifies a harmonious relationship. These two scenes are staged in public environments, which also connotes that they are proud of their relationship and are affirmed by sharing with the people around them. The relationship between Ruth and Idgie is further exemplified when Ruth gives birth to her son Buddy (Figure 20, shots 1-9). The narrative depicts the utter exhilaration that Idgie feels and shares in the joy with her immediate family. What the *lesbian spectator* observes is the very

clear signs of familial support of her relationship with Ruth. In Figure 20, shots 1-3, Idgie comes screaming into the dining room and typifies the role of the “father” by handing out cigars to her family members. It is not typical of a female “friend” to take on the traditional “paternal” role at the birth of an infant. However, Idgie assumes this parental/“paternal” role in their relationship, and from this position she announces the birth of her son and celebrates his arrival with cigars, drinks and merriment (Figure 20, shots 4-6). Further, she visits the mother of her child and holds her son adoringly (Figure 20, shots 7, 9). However, when the *lesbian spectator* gazes upon this scene she experiences a poignant revelation by the evidence of acceptance and approval Idgie and Ruth’s receive from Idgie’s family in response to their union and the birth of their son, Figure 20, shots 4-6 and especially in Figure 20, shot 8. Since the acceptance and validation of lesbian relationships is not common in American society, the *lesbian spectator* is particularly sensitive to the subtleties by which acceptance and rejection are represented. Therefore this moment is monumental in cinematic history, especially from the perspective of the *lesbian spectator*. This reading is further evidenced in the novel:

Momma looked at us and whispered, ‘Now children, your sister has a crush, and I don’t want one person to laugh at her. Is that understood?’

We said we wouldn’t, and in come Idgie, with her face all scrubbed and she had her hair all slicked down with some old grease that she’d found up there in the medicine cabinet. We tried not to laugh, but she was a sight to see. All Ruth asked her was if she cared for some more string beans, and she blushed so bad that her ears turned as red as a tomato. (Flagg, 81)

Sipsey razzed her. When she'd see Idgie by herself and say, 'That ol' love bug done bit Idgie'. (Flagg, 82)

After supper, Ruth went into the parlor with Momma and Poppa and closed the door. She sat across from them with her hands in her lap, and began, "I don't have any money, I really don't have anything but my clothes. But I can work. I want you both to know that I'll never leave again. I should never have left her four years ago, I know that now. But I'm going to try and make it up to her and never hurt her again. You have my word on that. (Flagg, 199)

Poppa, who was embarrassed at any sort of sentiment, shifted his chair. 'Well, I hope you're aware of what you're in for. Idgie's a handful, you know. (Flagg, 199)

...Poppa and I just want you to know that we think of you as one of the family now, and we couldn't be happier for our little girl to have such a sweet companion as you. (Flagg, 199)

The narrative of the story continues chronologically after the events in the Figure 17 and the spectator observes the rest of Idgie and Ruth's celebration from poker playing to a rousing game of baseball, neither of which had Ruth ever participated. After Ruth hits a home run, the two women leave the other guests and journey on to the local swimming hole (Figure 21). The narrative discloses that the women have been drinking but are quite sober in their conversation. To the *lesbian spectator* this is one of the most intimate moments of the film as it unveils Idgie and Ruth's true feelings for one another. The moonlit lighting of the scene creates and enhances the romantic ambiance. In absence of the dialog, the reverse angle shots expose a series of playful glances and subtle flirtations between Idgie and Ruth, and hence the "dance" begins. Both women are costumed in their undergarments at the swimming hole, in the late evening

moonlight which connotes a level of intimacy. As Ruth emerges out of the water, in a long shot (Figure 21, shot 1), Idgie is seen lying casually on her back (Figure 21, shot 2). Ruth coquettishly looks over at Idgie, showing her a winning poker hand. There is a frolicsome yet beckoning back and forth splashing of water which, in a gestured way signifies a fondness and desired closeness to one another (Figure 21, shots 12 and 13). Then begins a series of flirtatious “looks” and “looks away” as the women want to see if they can tell what each other is thinking yet at the same time they want to be seen by the other. This series of looks signifies to each woman a level of interest, which is not spoken by either Idgie or Ruth but rather communicated through their body language (Figure 21, shots 4-8, and 11). Ruth then leans in to give Idgie a kiss on the cheek, Idgie guardedly does not look at Ruth as if by doing so she would break the spell and ruin the moment or more dangerous yet, reveal her inner most heart (Figure 21, shots 14-19). The *lesbian spectator* can only imagine the look on Idgie’s face, as the scene shows Idgie’s back as she quietly watches Ruth glide back into the water (Figure 21, shot 19). However, the *lesbian spectator’s* *gayz* decodes that Idgie is deeply in love with Ruth and that it is not unrequited love but rather that Ruth indeed loves her back. This powerful subtext could perhaps be read similarly by the non-lesbian spectator. Where the two interpretations diverge is in the desired resolution of the scene and the relationship. The non-lesbian spectator sees the depth of devotion, commitment, and value added benefit their friendship holds for one another and understands

the loss each would experience by the departure of Ruth. Yet, the *lesbian spectator's* gayz, sees deep sexual and emotional desire between the characters and longs for their love to be consummated. She also desires for the narrative to reveal a detailed depiction of their lives together thus vicariously experiencing their requited romance and relationship. It is doubtful that the non-lesbian spectator longs for a depiction of the intimacies of a lesbian relationship to be revealed on screen and therefore the interpretations are markedly different.

A similar lesbian reading of the scene can be done in the presence of the dialog, which accompanies this scene as the following discloses: Ruth is quite boastful of her accomplishments this evening as she says to Idgie, "I hit a home run tonight... a straight beats three of a kind...poker isn't half bad" (Figure 21, shot 4). Ruth employs a kind of one-upsmanship to reveal to Idgie that she can not only visit Idgie's world but rather she can thrive in Idgie's world, thus the makings of a good match between them. The dialog in the scene goes on later as Idgie advises Ruth to, "stop worrying about what other people think...you're so good and honest that you gonna take care of everybody" and Ruth responds by saying "I know...and I'm gonna marry the man I supposed to." Idgie replies, "you're gettin' married?" Ruth replies, "soon as the summer's over..." (Figure 21, shots 8 and 9). Idgie is not only surprised by the news as revealed in her vocal inflection but her face reveals to the *lesbian spectator* the shock, the love loss, the heartache Idgie feels at this moment. The *lesbian spectator* is equally dumfounded at this revelation because all the signs were evident. The looks, the

gestures, the touches, the “tasting of the honey” but here it is, the cataclysmic moment in the film where the *lesbian spectator* is always disappointed. The ability to read beyond the narrative stops and hovers like the omnipresent dust cloud around the character Pigpen from Charles Shultz’s *Peanuts*. In that fraction of a second, between the phrases of speech, the *lesbian spectator’s* mind reels with questions for which there are no answers or perhaps to which there are too many answers. Yet, the primary question on her mind is why can’t the girl ever get the girl?...there is always a man. As the dialog continues Ruth goes on to say, “Oh! ..am I gonna miss you...” then Ruth leans over and gives Idgie a kiss on the cheek and says, “this is the best birthday I ever had.” The *lesbian spectator* is relieved, the suffocating dust cloud begins to clear and there is once again a ray of hopeful sunshine peeking through. She reads that Ruth clearly loves Idgie. This moment also discloses that the best time she has ever had in her entire life was spent in the company of Idgie, not her intended (Frank Bennett). The *lesbian spectator* comprehends Ruth being bound by some sense of obligation or duty and Ruth therefore chooses a path which does not follow her heart but the *lesbian spectator* longs for a different outcome. The *lesbian spectator* sees the complex emotions welling up in Idgie’s heart. The emotions of her love for Ruth, her desire to be with Ruth and spend every moment with her, the fear of being rejected by disclosing her love to Ruth, the sense of hopelessness that if she reveals her love that it would not matter as Ruth is already spoken for, and Idgie’s desire to just hold still long enough so that the

moment of being kissed by the woman of her desiring will last forever. The reading of this scene is reinforced by the follow excerpt from the novel:

[Idgie] "Why are you going to marry that man?
 [Ruth] I told you why?
 [Idgie] WHY?
 [Ruth] "Because I want to, that's why."
 [Idgie] You don't love him.
 [Ruth] Yes, I do.
 [Idgie] Oh no you don't. You love me... you know you do. You know you do! (Flagg, 90)

[Ruth]... "Stop it! Do you hear me!"

And before she knew what happened, she had slapped Idgie across the face with all her might.

Idgie looked at Ruth, speechless and stunned. They just stood there, looking at each other, and in that moment Ruth wished more than anything in the world that she could just grab her and hold her as tight as she could: but if she had, she knew she would never let go.

So Ruth did the hardest thing she had ever done in her life; she just turned around and left, and closed the door behind her. (Flagg, 91)

The scene in Figure 22 illustrates the depth of the relationship between Idgie and Ruth as Idgie is willing once again to risk life and limb. However, this time it is to save the woman of her desire from the oppressive male figure, Ruth's new husband Frank Bennett (Nick Searcy). Idgie, who is now older and less bohemian, is still costumed in men's attire. She is once again wearing a mandarin-collared, men's shirt, men's slacks, and suspenders. Her hair is short and styled, yet in comparison to the other women in the film, as well as Ruth who wear their hair long and pinned up, Idgie's hair is decidedly non-conforming. The

costume and hairstyle further delineate Idgie's less feminine representation. In performance, Idgie's aggressive physicality in Figure 22, shots 2,7-10, 16 and 25, significantly contrasts the lady-like physicality of the frail and genteel Ruth, who is wearing a long flowing dress with her hair neatly pinned up, as seen in Figure 22, shots 12, 14, 22, and 23. Through this scenario, the depth of the love that the two women feel for each other is evident as Idgie threatens, "if you ever touch her again, I'll kill you" (Figure 22). To the *lesbian spectator*, Idgie's actions to protect the one she loves go beyond the boundary of a typical female friendship and can be interpreted as a fight for her mate. The non-lesbian spectator certainly can view Idgie as Ruth's protector and savior from the oppressive male yet, what remains distinctly different is that once again the *lesbian spectator* has a desire to see the women live full and rich lives together and that this scene is a symbolic mating ritual. Whereas the non-lesbian spectator would perhaps hope that after being rescued that a nice girl like Ruth will find a good, honest, hardworking, and god-fearing man and live happily ever after. The concern for Ruth's welfare is the same but the hope for the expression of the character's love is grossly incongruous.

This butch/femme construct remains a central theme as the heroine fights the male oppressor to rescue the damsel in distress. It is perhaps important to note here, that although the butch/femme construct helps the *lesbian spectator* *gayz* against the intentions of the narrative and find the "love story", this illustration is just one of many lesbian relationship constructs in which the lesbian

might identify. Moreover, since representation of lesbianism in mainstream American film, as discussed previously, is limited and often unsavory, the *lesbian spectator* gains sustenance from almost any indication that can be decoded to be lesbian, regardless if the spectator self-identifies within the butch/femme representation.

In Figure 22, the *lesbian spectator* reads with the intention of the narrative, which describes a scene of an abuser who takes the position of “if I cannot have her than no one will,” when Idgie seeks to rescue Ruth from her tormentor’s arms. However, the *lesbian spectator’s gayz* takes this scene to another level when she reads that Frank personifies the threat of heterosexuality (Figure 22, shots 5, 18, 24, and 26; and Figure 23, shot 8). When Frank, the heterosexual male, observes that “his” woman, Ruth, whom he has been abusing in “captivity” through his perceived privilege and right as her husband, (which is evidenced by the physical bruising in Figure 23, shot 6) is being rescued and taken from him by Idgie, a lesbian, he grows increasingly violent and aggressive (Figure 22, shots 6-19). The following excerpt, from the novel, further justifies this particular reading of this scene:

Ruth couldn’t help but think that something inside of her had caused him to hate her; that somehow, no matter how hard she tried to suppress it, Frank felt the love inside she had for Idgie. It had slipped out somehow, in her voice, her touch; she didn’t know how, but she believed he must have known and that’s why he despised her so. So she had lived with that guilt and taken the beatings and the insults because she thought she deserved them. (Flagg, 195)

The heterosexual male (Frank), fearing that he will lose the battle, tries to possess the woman (Ruth), by physically carrying her up the stairs (Figure 22, shot 12). When the threats from the lesbian, (Idgie) and her friends escalate, he decides that if he cannot have Ruth then no one can and proceeds to kick his wife down the stairs, thus simultaneously relinquishing his possession of her and damaging “the goods” or in Ruth’s case, possibly killing their unborn child (Figure 22, shots 16,17 and 19). In the final show down of heterosexuality versus homosexuality, the *lesbian spectator* sees that the battle is left unresolved as each possess victory in their eyes (Figure 22, shot 26 for Frank and Figure 22, shot 27 for Idgie).

4.2.2 *The Color Purple*

The narrative of the film *The Color Purple* (Spielberg: 1985) chronicles the life of Celie (Whoopi Goldberg) a poor black woman living in a small Georgia town from 1909-1947 and shares with the spectator the pain, struggles, joys, and people in her life.

The reading of *The Color Purple* is not as readily interpreted with lesbian overtones as *Fried Green Tomatoes* because the oppressive force of the male has not been neutralized. In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the force of the oppressive male character comes into play well after the relationship between Idgie and Ruth is established and ultimately poses little threat to the relationship. Conversely, in *The Color Purple*, from the onset of the film, the narrative depicts

the young life of Celie, who is burdened by physical, verbal, and sexual abuse by her father. Celie is eventually wed to a domineering and abusive man Albert also known as Mister (Danny Glover).

In Figure 24, Shug (Margaret Avery) enters the scene with a thunderous crack of a lightning bolt illuminating the sky. In this scene, the narrative tells us that this woman, who is soaking wet and planted face down in the wagon, is Albert's true but unrequited love. Shug is ailing from over-consumption and disease; Mister brings her into his home to recuperate. In Figure 24, shot 3, Celie stands watching for an interminable amount of time before turning and scurrying up the stairs (Figure 24, shots 3-8). In Figure 24, shots 9-11, Celie, face covered in mud, ravages through the closet looking for the appropriate dress. When she sees that she cannot quickly remedy her appearance she gives up and rushes back down to her beckoning husband (Figure 24, shots 12-15).

The scene in Figure 24 has multiple interpretations, perhaps stemming from Celie's unclear motivations. The spectator observes Celie, the dutiful subservient wife costumed in mammy-like garb of the era with dreadlocks bound by a kerchief and long bustling skirt. It has previously been established that Celie's character lacks self-esteem, which is an omnipresent theme throughout the film. Perhaps Celie fears further humiliation from Mister in the presence of her competition, Shug. Or possibly, Celie is star struck and excited to meet the

famous and infamous Shug who turns men into babbling idiots and can light up a room when she sings.

Another reading, which the evidence of performance least supports is the budding of a lesbian attraction to Shug. The performance does not directly delineate a “lesbian” distinction to the *lesbian spectator* but rather adds to the ambiguity of her interpretation. Yet, the *lesbian spectator's* appropriative ability of her *gayz* works despite the power of the dictated readings of the film and thus a lesbian narrative unfolds. What is unmasked is that Celie has for years been forced to listen to the incessant stories from Mister about the sexy, beautiful, desirable, talented, and famous Shug, the woman of his desire. Due to Celie's abused past and present, her personal identity has been non-existent all these years. Mister has directly and indirectly defined her as not being as sexy, beautiful, desirable, and talented as Shug and most damagingly not being Shug. In Celie's mind she endured those stories all those years by creating a fantasy about Shug and thus began to develop feelings of attraction for her. In her mind she wants to know...

But I got a million questions to ast. What she wear? Is she the same old Shug, like in my picture? How her hair is? What kind of lipstick? Wig? She stout? She skinny? She sound well? Tired? Sick? ...Questions be running back and forth through my mind. Feel like snakes. (Walker,27)

This reading is evidenced in the novel when an announcement that Shug Avery was coming to town is obtained by Celie.

I walk round all day with the announcement burning a hole in my pocket. It [advertising flyer] Pink... Shug Avery standing upside a piano, elbow crook, hand on her hip, she wearing a hat like Indian Chiefs. Her mouth open showing all of her teef and don't nothing seem to be troubling her mind. Come one, come all it say. The Queen Honeybee is back in town.

Lord, I wants to go so bad. Not to dance. Not to drink. Not to play card. Not even to hear Shug Avery sing. I just be thankful to lay eyes on her. (Walker, 26)

So in this critical moment, this goddess of all things womanly, wonderful, and beautiful is here at her home. The *lesbian spectator* sees this amazed recognition in Celie as she scurries to primp and beautify herself for the “woman of her fantasies” and the object of her desire: Shug (Figure 24, shots 4-14). Celie is awestruck at the prospect of meeting this fantasy woman, as the voiceover says, “I don’t move at once, cause I can’t. I need to see her eyes. I feel like once I see her eyes my feets can let go the spot where they stuck.” To the *lesbian spectator* the anticipation is palpable (Figure 24, shots 17-19). Will the woman of her desire fulfill her expectations? Will she be as goddess-like as her dreams imagined? Will her rich fantasy life become a reality? The following excerpt from the novel supports this reading.

Used to be when he touch me I’d go all out of my head. Now when he touch me I just don’t want to be bothered. Once he git on top of me I think about how that’s where he always want to be...

Only time I feel something stirring down there is when I think bout Shug...The worst part is that I don’t think he notice. He git up there and enjoy himself just the same. No matter what I’m thinking. No matter what I feel. (Walker, 69)

Shug unquestionably smashes Celie's fantasy by repeating the same aspersion Celie has heard for years from her father, her husband, and now the object of her desire, "you sure is Ugly" (Figure 24, shot 20). The *lesbian spectator* is disheartened as she desires to see a love story unfold.

In a brief scene (not pictured) that takes place prior to the bathing scene (Figure 25) Mister puts a debilitated Shug into bed and the spectator observes Shug in a framed shot and is heard saying to Albert when he attempts to comfort her "I needs a man." What this message communicates to the spectator is that the lack of a strong male figure has caused the pain in her life and that a man of stronger character than Albert will cure all that ails her. This scene further suggests that without a man, life is not worth living and is filled with only pain and suffering. To the *lesbian spectator*, who finds this concept ludicrous, an image of who Shug really is begins to formulate in her mind. She sees Shug as troubled, lonely, intoxicated, and incoherent. The narrative wants the spectator to understand Shug to be heterosexual; thus this scene serves as a character exposition for Shug's identity, thereby establishing that any subsequent displays of Shug's desires for a woman would stem from her being loveless, alone, and her lacking a loving father. The *lesbian spectator's* *gayz* does not necessarily transcend this reading of heterosexuality but can equally understand Shug to be a woman who makes choices based on dictated expectations placed on her by her father and society. These expectations plague Shug throughout the film and

support a depiction of Shug as someone who has lost her way and thus opens the doors of possibility for Celie's desire not to go unrequited. From the novel:

What happened to her I ast?
 You don't want her here, just say so, he say. Won't do no good.
 But if that the way you feel...He don't finish.
 I want her here, I say, too quick. He look at me like maybe I'm
 planning something bad. (Walker, 50)

Celie's desire for Shug does not waver as easily, as evidenced in Figure 26. Celie has experienced through her life of living with Mister that "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach" or perhaps to avoid abuse, thus she employs this device to soften and woo Shug (Figure 26, shots 1-5) Celie also uses this method to spite Mister. The previous scene in the film depicted Mister's effort to woo Shug by making her breakfast as a "love offering." This attempt ended abruptly as evidenced in Figure 26, shot 10, when Shug threw his gift out of the bedroom door onto the wall of the landing. Throughout the film there is an incessant undercurrent of one-upmanship between Mister and Celie in the struggle to win Shug's desiring. Mister is so entranced with Shug that he is unaware of Celie's objectives and thus the narrative does not focus on the conflict between Mister and Celie over these attempts to possess her but rather on the attempts themselves. Celie's efforts are observed when she is seen cooking a feast and casts suggestive glances off screen indicating that it is for Shug that she is taking pleasure in this endeavor (Figure 26, shot 5). To the *lesbian spectator*, if Celie truly perceived Shug as a threat to her and her "relationship" with Mister then she would not be taking special measures to

please Shug. Additionally, Celie is preparing this meal of her own accord and not at the urging of Mister, which further supports the reading of Celie's desire to curry favor with Shug. Also, since the narrative does not focus on the oppressive force of Mister towards Celie's pursuit of Shug, the *lesbian spectator* is free to *gayz* upon the subtext of lesbian desire and thereby enjoy the romantic gesture Celie is demonstrating. After presenting the feast to the woman of her desire, Celie waits crouched in the corner of the landing to "see what color the wall is now" anticipating a similar response from Shug as Mister received from his previously unsuccessful attempt to woo Shug (Figure 26, shot 10-13). To her delight, Celie has prevailed over Mister and has successfully been given entree into the heart of Shug, as the empty tray speedily skims across the landing and halts directly in front of Celie. Celie's face lights up and the *lesbian spectator* reads this emotion in Celie as that of joy and excitement that she has pleased the woman of her desiring, thus setting the stage for more meaningful encounters.

The novel provides support to this reading:

I git the coffee and light her cigarette. She wearing a long white gown and her thin black hand stretching out of it to hold the white cigarette looks just right. Something bout it, maybe the little tender veins I see and the big ones I try not to, make me scared. I feel like something pushing me forward. If I don't watch out I'll have hold of her hand, tasting her fingers in my mouth. (Walker, 53)

In Figure 25, Celie tries to heal the wounded and woeful Shug. In this scene, what is revealed to the spectator is the bonding of two women because of shared troubles they have endured. Both women have suffered the anguish and

pain of paternal rejection, have had children who are being raised by someone else, and both are living lives not of their choosing. In Figure 25, shots 1 and 5, the spectator sees the compassionate face of Celie with her large comforting eyes.

To the *lesbian spectator's* gayz evidence of sexual tension from either woman is not necessary to have lesbian overtones. What is most abundantly communicated is the image of the nurturing female as evidenced by the brushing of the hair (Figure 25, shots 7-9). The non-lesbian spectator may see this as either a sisterly relationship or a mother/daughter relationship. However, to the *lesbian spectator*, Celie's gentle, loving, nurturing, and compassionate behavior toward Shug is illustrative of lesbianism. Celie exudes this instinct by looking at Shug with soft, comforting, devoted, and adoring eyes (Figure 25, shot 1). Celie gently brushes Shug's hair which can be understood as affiliative behavior, which includes touching, grooming, and hugging. To the *lesbian spectator*, this is more than mere anthropological behavior, it is a sensual gesture by which Celie avails her heart to another woman (Figure 25, shot 7-9). Celie further demonstrates this by listening intently, even in the face of Shug's harsh criticisms. Actively listening allows Celie to better understand and remedy the woman of her desire's pain (Figure 25, shots 3, 5, 7, and 8). The *lesbian spectator's* gayz reads signs of a desiring gaze from Celie, as subtle as they appear, because of *lesbian spectator's* desire to see her own experiences manifested on the screen. This desiring gaze is evident in the meek and gentle manner by which Celie cares for

Shug. Celie is careful not to look at the naked woman in the tub before her, else her interest be disclosed. Additionally, Celie hums to Shug as she tenderly brushes her hair, which has a calming and comforting effect on Shug. Celie embodies her desire in every gesture. The *lesbian spectator* understands and relates to the deep and powerful bond that is forming without the use of overt sexual overtones. From the novel:

First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man.

...I wash her body, it feel like I'm praying. My hands tremble and my breath short. (Walker, 51)

In Figure 27, Shug dances and sings to the delight and titillation of the male spectators in the club. Shug then sings a song to Celie called "Miss Celie's Blues" because as Shug says "she scratched out my head when I was ailing." Shug's performance of the song appears at first to be consistent with her prior performances (not pictured) as the singer, filled with alluring glances and sexual gestures, but on a closer look this performance is significantly toned down (Figure 27). Shug removes the pelvic thrusts in this song and her energy is read as compassionate and gentle (Figure 27, shots 17, 18 and 20) though still alluring enough to excite the other spectators and make Albert jealous (Figure 27, shot 3). This scene (Figure 27), could be interpreted as simply "just female bonding" but to the *lesbian spectator* who sees and feels a deeper connection between Shug and Celie than "just friends" reads this scene as an affirmation of their desires. This deep intense bonding is exhibited in Shug's performance at

Harpo's JukeJoint as she "serenades" Celie and can also be interpreted from the lyrics.

Sister you've been on my mind
 Oh, Sister, were two of a kind
 So, sister I'm keepin' my eye on you.
 I bet you think I don't know nothin' but singin' the blues
 Oh, sister have I got news for you
 An, somethin' I hope you think that you're somethin' too
 Oh, ...I've been up that lonesome road and I've seen a
 lot of suns goin' down
 Oh, but trust me no low life's gonna run me around
 So, let me tell you something sister remember your name
 No, twister gonna steal your stuff away
 My sister, we shore ain't got a whole lot of time
 So, shake your shimmy, sister
 Cause honey the Shug is feelin' fine

The lyrics of the song can be readily interpreted as a woman of experience giving advice to younger less worldly woman whereby she encourages her to believe in herself and not to take any nonsense from anyone, to some extent "sisterly" advice. The term "sister" most certainly refers to the "sisterhood" of black women. Additionally, as in many races, women who are close friends and share similar experiences often think of each other "like sisters". Furthermore, in the lesbian community, much like the black community, fellow lesbians are frequently referred to one another as "sisters". Therefore, the use of the word "sister" has a multifaceted meaning and thus for the *lesbian spectator* to interpret this term as lesbian is probable and consistent with previous readings.

Sister - a girl or woman who shares a common ancestry, allegiance, character, or purpose with another or others, specifically:

- A kinswoman.
- A woman fellow member, as of a sorority.
- A fellow woman.
- A close woman friend or companion.
- A fellow African-American woman or girl.
- A woman who advocates, fosters, or takes part in the feminist movement (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000)

The phrase "two of a kind" in the lyrics is in reference to their shared adversities as discussed above. Additionally, to the *lesbian spectator* Shug is communicating her shared attraction, which is further delineated by the next lyric, "So, sister I'm keepin' my eye on you."

In addition to the lyrics, the "serenade" of Celie is observed by onlookers who are witnesses to Shug's proclamation of desire for Celie (Figure 27, shots 3-10). Shug's intense focus is directed toward Celie and is not directed to anyone else in the audience. Cinematically it is as if they were the only two in the room (Figure 27, shots 14-20). Throughout the song, Shug moves closer to where Celie is sitting and reaches and touches Celie while continuing to sing (Figure 27, shot 17). As an audience member, this close proximity to the performer might provoke strong feelings of embarrassment at having become a spectacle. However, Celie, who is plagued by debilitating shyness as evidenced by the covering of her mouth (Figure 27, shots 12, 13, and 15-20), never takes her eyes off of Shug, which to the *lesbian spectator's* gayz reveals her attraction and desiring eyes for Shug (Figure 27, shots 2 and 11-20). Under her shy exterior,

Celie finds this performance exciting and titillating and believes this song to be a validation of her feelings for Shug.

Shug say, [to Sophia] Girl, you look like a good time, you do.

That when I notice how Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl, you look like a good time. Women always talk bout hair and health. How many babies living or dead, or got teef. Not bout how some woman they hugging on look like a good time.

All the men got their eyes glued to Shug's bosom. I got my eyes glued there too. I feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little button sort of perk up too. Shug, I say to her in my mind, Girl you looks like a real good time, the Good Lord knows you do. (Walker, 85)

Celie likes this attention and the momentary confidence she gained as a result of the woman of her desire returning her affection is visible as Celie declares to the onlookers with a glare and a stuck out tongue that she is the victor, the woman of Shug's desire (Figure 27, shots 22 and 23). The women who previously stood in judgment of this poor, mousy, inferior woman are now revealed to be jealous that the "star" has exuberantly shown her adoration and affection to Celie, further boosting Celie's self confidence and intensifying her feelings for Shug (Figure 27, shots 4, 5, 21, and 24).

As discussed previously, Celie's character shyness is symptomatic of the oppressive male force of her husband and father (Figure 27, shots 12, 13, and 15-20 and Figure 28, shots 2-6 and 19). In Figure 28, Celie tells Shug that Mister beats her when she goes away and when Shug asks her why he does that, Celie responds, "for not being you."

To the non-lesbian spectator the scene in Figure 28 reads as flagrant lesbianism and even Whoopi Goldberg admitted years later that she has "just managed to live down the lesbianism of *The Color Purple*" (Musto, 48). However, to the *lesbian spectator*, other than the physical act of two women kissing, this scene is not particularly lesbian. The scene is filled with signifiers that support the *lesbian spectator's* perspective. First of all, the scene seems awkward and lacks sexual excitement and tension and succumbs to some of the same pitfalls, though to a significantly lesser degree, as discussed previously about the film *Bound*. In the first sequence (Figure 28, shots 1-7) the physical contact between the women is childlike in that Shug can be perceived as the mother figure and Celie as the daughter figure. This behavior is also reminiscent of the opening scene of the film where we see Celie playing similarly with Nettie her sister (not pictured). The narrative progresses further in (Figure 28, shots 10-13) when Celie says she doesn't like Mister crawlin' on top of her and doin' his business and Shug tells her that that means she's still a virgin. Since Shug is sexual with Albert, Celie asks her, "you like to sleep with him" and Shug replies in (Figure 28, shot 14) "I have to admit I love it." This repartee once again establishes the heterosexuality of Shug and the sexual disinterest of Celie feels towards Mister. From the novel:

He say, Celie, tell me the truth. You don't like me cause I'm a man? I blow my nose, Take off they pants, I say, and men look like frogs to me. No matter how you kiss 'em, as far as I'm concern, frogs is what they stay. (Walker, 261)

The following scenes (Figure 28, shots 14-29) continue to illustrate Celie's naiveté and the peaking of her sexual interest in Shug, where again in (Figure 28, shots 15-20), plays coy with Shug's advances by turning her head to allow Shug to kiss her on four different parts of her face. Shug, having just admitted she loves having sex with Albert (Figure 28, shot 13) leans over and kisses Celie in (Figure 28, shots 14). The sequence shots in (Figure 28, shots 15-29) are not sexually charged but rather an exchange of intense looks and shy responses. This scene reads more like a mother/daughter relationship than lesbian to the *lesbian spectator*. In (Figure 28, shot 22) the spectator sees that Celie initiates the kiss but by the look of her face in (Figure 28, shot 23) she appears to be pleased with herself for having emulated that behavior rather than having made a sexual advance. The scene then closes with a series of close-ups on Celie, which the camera moves from Shug's lap to her shoulder (Figure 28, shots 27-29) and then out the window. The shoulder is not as sexually evocative as other body parts. Then scene then literally and cinematically goes out the window as the camera pans from their faces to Celie's hand on Shug's shoulder to wind chimes in the window and then the scene fades. This camera action suggests to the *lesbian spectator* that that was the extent of the sexual encounter. As for the film, the depth of their intimate relations ends in this scene. The following is an excerpt from the novel, which tells a different scenario for this scene, and unlike the film their relations do not end in this scene.

Nobody ever love me, I say. She say, I love you, Miss Celie. And then she haul off and kiss me on the mouth. Um, she say, like she

surprise. I kiss her back, say um too. Us kiss and kiss till us can't hardly kiss no more. Then us touch each other. I don't know nothing bout it, I say to Shug. Don't know much she say. Then I feels something real soft and wet on my breast, feel like one of my little lost babies mouth. Way after while, I act like a little lost baby too (Walker, 118).

Not all films can be *gayzed* upon in the same manner, and each film will vary in their level of accessibility and ease of being subverted. Some films have obstacles which impede the reading such as the noted inter-splicing of the male voyeur in *Basic Instinct* while other films such as *The Color Purple* which was devoid of overt lesbian narrative could be fully fanaticized about by through the *gayz*.

4.3 Film Analysis and Discussion Figures

Figure 1 *Basic Instinct...* Dressing Scene

Figure 2 *Basic Instinct...* Foyer Scene

Figure 3 *Basic Instinct...* Living Room Scene

Figure 4 *Basic Instinct...* Bathroom Scene

Figure 5 *Basic Instinct... Backyard Scene*

Figure 6 *Basic Instinct... Bar Scene*

Figure 7 *Basic Instinct...* Bar Bathroom Scene

Figure 8 Bound... Elevator Scene

Figure 9 Bound... Corky's Apartment Scene I

Figure 10 *Bound...* **Corky's Apartment Scene II**

Figure 11 Bound... Bar Scene

Figure 12 Bound... Violet's Apartment Scene

Figure 13 Bound... Sex Scene I

Figure 14 Bound... Sex Scene II

Figure 15 Bound... Closing Scene

Figure 16 *Fried Green Tomatoes... Bee Charming Scene*

Figure 17 *Fried Green Tomatoes... Bar Scene*

Figure 18 *Fried Green Tomatoes... Street Scene*

Figure 19 *Fried Green Tomatoes...* Funeral Scene

Figure 20 *Fried Green Tomatoes... Birth of Buddy Scene*

Figure 21 *Fried Green Tomatoes... Swimming Scene*

Figure 22 *Fried Green Tomatoes...* Rescuing Ruth Scene

Figure 23 *Fried Green Tomatoes...* Visiting Ruth

Figure 24 *The Color Purple...* Shug Arrives

Figure 25 *The Color Purple...* The Bonding...Celie Nursing Shug

Figure 26 *The Color Purple*... Breakfast for Shug

Figure 27 *The Color Purple...* Shug Serenading Celie

Figure 28 *The Color Purple...* Shug Seducing Celie

CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

The use of mainstream American film in this thesis has served, *inter alia*, two vital functions. First, it established a control group for analysis and second it served as a barometer of American social values. The broad scope of media initially considered for review included cable and network television and American and foreign film. Although the method of analysis used in this thesis is applicable to all four media, there are distinct and important differences between Mainstream American film and the other three media as discussed below.

Network and cable television are taking the lead in affecting the mindset of the masses. Network television has stepped OUT boldly with the advent of shows portraying leading characters defined as openly gay or lesbian; such shows include groundbreaking and controversial *Ellen* and the ongoing and highly successful *Will & Grace*. Moreover, cable television's accomplishments are even more progressive and aggressive with the four year running success of Showtime's *Queer as folk* and their recent 2004 addition of *The L Word*. In addition, Bravo's widely watched and discussed *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* has successfully spanned both mediums as it airs weekly on Cable and has made several network television appearances on NBC since its creation in 2003. These mediums are working independently, yet they are collectively presenting more realistic representations of the diversity of gay and lesbian lives into mainstream consciousness. Unlike mainstream American film, both network and

cable television have had numerous documented successes in portraying realistic and positive lesbian characters.

Of the two remaining groups, foreign film in its entirety yields an inexhaustible supply of films that present several limiting factors. Primarily, the ability to access and analyze a representative data set within the confines of a master's thesis would be infeasible. Additionally, the inherent nature of foreign films, which are generally devoid of overbearing Americanized Victorian values, avail themselves to the frequent and copious use of gay and lesbian subject matter. American social values and mores may be inadvertently commented on by their absence in foreign films yet it is uncertain whether they are directly influenced by foreign film.

Mainstream American film has a more direct influence on the social values and mores of American Society.

In a hundred years of movies, homosexuality has only rarely been depicted on the screen. When it did appear, it was there as something to laugh at—or something to pity—or even something to fear. These were fleeting images, but they were unforgettable, and they left a lasting legacy. Hollywood, that great maker of myths, taught straight people what to think about gay people ... and gay people what to think about themselves.
(Russo, xx)

Influencing the mainstream collective consciousness is a power that the filmmakers possess and utilize. Industry executives fight for a share of this prime real estate. With this power, a plethora of exciting things could potentially happen to forever alter the damaging mindset that hate and ignorance manifests. To undertake this heroic challenge, the filmmakers would need to put forth

messages and images that are realistic and honest about the gay and lesbian community and their lives. However, even with the most inspired efforts, the power and control over interpretation of the filmmakers' representation will ultimately lie in the minds of the spectator. However, without the production of these truthful and realistic representations, there is limited opportunity to inform and perhaps change popular opinion and perception.

This is not to say that there is no room for unrealistic representations in which over-dramatization, humor, farce, horror and other types of filmmaking are utilized.

Each of these films would have been much more welcome if Hollywood did not produce these characters with such numbing consistency," [Fowler, 2]

Yet, when a social group is repeatedly misrepresented or underrepresented it requires further understanding as to why. Is it to perpetuate stereotypes? Is it to snub social responsibility in the face? Is it to influence hate mongers and encourage hate crimes against homosexuals? Perhaps! Mainstream American film has the power to influence popular opinion and societal mores in both directions through its ability to teach, destroy, empower and disempower.

Stereotypes act like codes that give audiences a quick, common understanding of a person or group of people - usually relating to their class, ethnicity or race, gender, sexual orientation, social role or occupation.

But stereotypes can be problematic. They can:

- reduce a wide range of differences in people to simplistic categorizations

- transform assumptions about particular groups of people into "realities"
- be used to justify the position of those in power
- perpetuate social prejudice and inequality (Bedard, 1)

To desire positive lesbian representation is not necessarily a quest to find plots whereby the protagonist gets what she wants, though a noble pursuit, but rather a quest to find positive and realistic characterization of the lesbian in which she is free to experience the breadth of life experiences. This portrayal of the lesbian as an equal member of society who contributes to the greater good, but who may still be plagued by tragic circumstances as well as endowed with measurable successes, could have a profound affect on ideologies. "A stereotype is not negative, but in the absence of balancing images, it fosters the belief that all gay and lesbian people are like that" (Fowler, 2). The nexus is to represent lesbianism in some kind of "normative" or representative manner, which would demonstrate her similarities with other members of society. Lesbians experience the gauntlet of emotions; they love, they have fears and anger, they endure sorrow, they experience shame, weakness, guilt, strife, accomplishment, they find joy, and they exude compassion. This is not to say that all lesbians are upstanding members of society, on the contrary, they are as diverse as their heterosexual counterparts. They can equally be murderers as they are clergy, accountants as they are embezzlers, Republicans as they are Democrats. Finally, it is the characterization and representation that needs to be more "positive" not the circumstances which ultimately affect their lives.

Improvement of the portrayal of the lesbians by filmmakers will allow the *lesbian spectator* to feel more passionate about the fate of the characters and can therefore vicariously experience their lives without having to translate. This more preferable characterization would not be solely for the benefit of the *lesbian spectator* but presents the opportunity to affect the viewing community at large.

The proliferation of realistic representation can also have a global effect by setting the conditions as “normative” thereby affecting social change. The influence can be widespread in changing the perceptions of society as well as internal homophobia. This would greatly affect gay and lesbian youth who are twice as likely to attempt or commit suicide, be homeless as a result of being kicked out of their homes, or contract STDs or HIV/Aids as a result of prostituting themselves to survive (Townsley, 3).

Ending hate in today’s global community seems more imperative than ever. Understandably, it is not the sole responsibility of mainstream American film to address and resolve all social issues and perhaps this is an idealistic expectation from a medium that is wholly about storytelling. Yet, it is fascinating that such an advanced and forward thinking society can be so repressed in their ideologies about all facets of diversity. These exclusionary beliefs are fundamentally no different than the unsubstantiated hate that is currently plaguing our world. When ignorance and hate turns society against itself there is little hope of attaining greatness collectively.

The significance of this project is multi-faceted and therefore serves to contribute to knowledge in many different ways and sheds light on a chronic misrepresentation of the lesbian identity in mainstream American film. Inherent in this misrepresentation, as with any underrepresented or repressed culture, are the impressions that these negative images leave on society. Without proper representation, the ability for lesbians to have role models, civil rights, and a reason to live can be significantly hindered. It is often the heroine in the media lesbians look to when they need encouragement to be out to their families, friends, and employers. This belief is extremely pervasive throughout the lesbian community. Family and friends can not always serve as role models or supporters because of homophobia, thus media icons fulfill this role. Unlike other oppressed cultures, the lesbian culture is unique, in that it relies strongly on celebrities such as Melissa Etheridge, Ellen De Generes, Amanda Bearse, K.D. Lang, Candice Gingrich, and Chastity Bono for it to personally find acceptance within itself, community, families and society. However, this is not enough as the media icon cannot always serve as the sole role model because of the diversity and variability of the lesbian.

To understand the juxtaposition of representation of the lesbian community versus the controversial representation of lesbians as it is evidenced in mainstream American film, serves as a vehicle to raise consciousness.

For those individuals who live in areas where the gay community isn't always visible, representation in the media plays a tremendous part in how they view lesbians [and themselves]... "It is a process that involves educating and

informing those who have been presented with decades and centuries of stereotypes and misinformation (Javier, xx)

The desiring gaze of the *lesbian spectator* has largely gone unrecognized by filmmakers. Mainstream American films are encoded to encourage particular readings of the role of the lesbian. On the narrative level, mainstream American cinematic images are calculatedly controlled by homophobic, stereotypical, and narrow-minded perspectives, which results in representations that do not accommodate other ways of being or seeing. Therefore, the *lesbian spectator's* interpretations and desires are not validated. Such acknowledgement of the *lesbian spectator* would suggest that the lesbian exists and that she is therefore equal to her mainstream counterpart. This in turn relates to the film industry's incessant focus on the narrative, which becomes limiting as it ignores any power possessed by the spectator or performers much less the *lesbian spectator*.

Lesbians, an innately diverse group, should not be represented by their sexuality alone but equally by their gender, talents, intellect, desires, aspirations, and cultural identity. It is here, in this space of emotional volatility, individuality, and uniqueness, that common ground is forged between most lesbian spectators. Though diverse in their identity their desire to see themselves in film remains a powerful unifying expectation.

The relationship between the *lesbian spectator* and the image of lesbianism is the hinge pin which connects lesbian desires to the *lesbian spectator's* underestimated and underlying conditions of power. The ability of the *lesbian spectator* to possess or appropriate what she sees on the screen and

the manner in which she does this is unique. The conscious and subconscious desire to see images of herself and her experience portrayed cinematically engages her in an intimate relationship with the representational image and thereby impassions her to discern, critically and intelligibly, alternative images of lesbian representation to meet her desires. Thereby answering the question of who is holding the power, not the image but rather the spectator. The *lesbian spectator's* irrefutable desire holds the power to find meaning for herself regardless of the image.

Until the heterosexual community finds security in their difference, the perpetuation of lesbians as pathological, socially deviant, and porn-like in mainstream American film will endure. Fortunately, the *lesbian spectator* has the ability to see the obvious constructs of heterosexism and can choose to find differing and contrary connotations for herself on both the narrative and performance level.

In examining the representation of lesbianism in *Basic Instinct* and *Bound*, it is evident that the mainstream American film industry is not yet comfortable with what lesbianism represents. She can be used as a plot device that serves to strengthen the hold heterosexuality has on the spectator but beyond that she poses too much of a threat to "normative" ideologies.

In the comparison of the two films *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the role of the male and the respective power of the female are positioned differently. Although the male is seen as an oppressive and

destructive force in both films; there is a significant contrast in the power the female possesses to defeat that force. In *The Color Purple*, Celie and Shug are emotionally and physically destroyed by the male figures in their lives and in escaping this they find comfort in each other. In contrast, in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Ruth and Idgie first find love and comfort in each other and then must destroy the oppressive male to preserve their relationship and protect their child.

What remains interesting is that in *Fried Green Tomatoes* the *lesbian spectator was better* able to transgress the controlling influence of the narrative in the film whereas in *The Color Purple* she had to be more industrious to subvert the narrative. This phenomenon may have occurred because Fannie Flagg, *Fried Green Tomatoes*' author, adapted the screenplay with Carol Sogieski, and in this adaptation they seemed to preserve the essence and heart of the story even while minimizing the lesbian overtones. This was perhaps due to both their gender and Flagg's intimate knowledge of the characters and an unwillingness to relinquish their nature. Conversely, Alice Walker did not adapt *The Color Purple*; rather Menno Meyjes, who is also, coincidentally, a man, adapted the novel for the screen and translated the overt lesbian sexuality in the novel into a search for self discovery and freedom from oppression. Excerpts from both novels illustrate a clearly lesbian narrative, which is all but completely lost in the adaptations from novel to film.

It is also interesting to note that the analyses of the four selected films, when compared in tandem and collectively, reveal that each film, though

narratively divergent, bore similar markings and cohesive themes. Although the *lesbian spectator* may have derived pleasure and entertainment from viewing these films, a darker through-line permeates all four films and yields a troublesome echo in the *lesbian spectator's* consciousness, which drives her quest for more visibility and positive representation.

In *Basic Instinct*, Catherine is an “ice-pick” murderer; in *Bound*, Violet and Corky murder the mafia men; in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Idgie threatens to kill Frank Bennett and stands on trial for his murder; and in *The Color Purple*, Celie at the urging of Shug and Sophia, narrowly resists her urge to kill Mister. These ominous and menacing portrayals of lesbians brought to the edge of murderous rage underscores the issue.

When we are not ice-pick wielding killers or presidential assassins, we are stereotyped cardboard figures. Even more often, however, we are totally invisible (Fowler, 1).

Synoptically, lesbianism was used in these four films as a mechanism to reinforce that the intended spectator was not the lesbian but rather the male spectator derived for the male gaze and male titillation through the use of voyeurism, unnecessary nudity, and phallic references. Furthermore, the raging battle of homosexuality versus heterosexuality was evident both cinematically in *Bound* and *Basic instinct* and textually in the screen portrayals of the novels in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *The Color Purple*. Additionally, the portrayal of “lesbianism” was demonstrative of a pervasive homophobia through the hedging and erasure of the sexuality, the portrayal of lesbianism under the guise of

female bonding; the portrayal of lesbianism as characteristics of battered and abused females, as a plot device that is threatening to men, by using contrived representations as overtly masculine or overtly feminine, and the pervasive lack of emotion and sexual tension between women.

Certainly one way the *lesbian spectator* can resolve her issues with visibility and representation in mainstream American film is to stop supporting it and seek out alternative media sources. From art houses to cable television, representations of lesbianism are more readily visible and often portrayed with more appealing narratives and realistic circumstances. However, this remedy does not suffice for all. Even within major metropolises like Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, there are a limited number of art houses much less in smaller cities in the country. Therefore accessibility becomes problematic for the masses. Similarly, on cable television, representation of lesbianism is found primarily on premium cable channels that limit *lesbian spectator* viewership due to availability of cable and premium channel fees. Even alternative sections in the local video store vary greatly depending on the region of the country and proximity to major cities.

However, the fact remains that the *lesbian spectator* can and does seek out alternative representations to satisfy her quest to appreciably greater or lesser degrees. Until the time comes when the *lesbian spectator* no longer has to ask why, the *lesbian spectator* can take comfort in her knowledge that she has power to choose. She can choose to seek out alternative media sources and/or

she can choose to execute her power to appropriate and take a seat, carve out a niche of her own, right there in the middle of mainstream American theatres. The power and *gayz* is completely her own.

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