

Desire Cloaked in a Trenchcoat

Jill Dolan

“Desire Cloaked in a Trenchcoat” is maybe a corny image to inform an investigation of pornography, performance, and spectators. But the man sitting alone in a darkened theatre masturbating under his coat while staring at the screen is an image engraved on our collective imagination. Male arousal by pictures is an accepted part of dominant cultural discourse.

The provocative relationship between sexuality and representation is revealed perhaps most blatantly in pornography. Pornography is an important locus for feminist critical thought because it provides a site for the intersection of feminist sexual politics and the politics of representation.

Whether you are for or against pornography, or straddle the anticensorship fence with “First Amendment” painted on it, pornography has to be dealt with as representation. As Susanne Kappeler points out in *The Pornography of Representation*, “Representation is not so much the means of representing an object through imitation (that is, matching contents) as a means of self-representation through authorship: The expression of subjectivity” (1986:53). Antiporn feminists condemning pornography as both image and educator of male violence against women look for a match of contents by equating pornography and reality.¹ But pornography is more than simple mimesis. As representation, it helps to construct subject positions that maintain the strict gender divisions on which the culture operates.

The subject/object relations delineated by pornography are also paradigmatic of those structured by representation in general. Feminist film and performance critics argue that representation is addressed to the gaze of the male spectator. He is invited to identify with the active male protagonist portrayed in the narrative through voyeuristic and fetishistic viewing conventions. The male spectator shares in the pleasure of the hero’s quest to fulfill his desire for the story’s passively situated female (see de Lauretis 1984, Kaplan 1983, Mulvey 1975).

If all representation is structured by male desire, then sexuality is as integral a part of constructing spectator subjectivity in a Shakespeare production at Stratford as it is in live sex shows in Times Square. Any representation can be seen as essentially pornographic, since the structure of gendered relationships through which it operates is based on granting men subjectivity while denying it to women.

Kantian aesthetics propose that the only way to contemplate a work of art is through a certain detachment from reality. Disengagement allows the art work a separate, “objective” existence and hides the fact of its authorship within a particular historical moment governed by cultural and economic considerations. Kappeler argues after Kant that the principles of aesthetic distance and disinterestedness motivate pornography as well as art. She suggests that in the peep shows where men masturbate while watching women perform behind glass windows, the goal is not actually to fuck women. Rather, the goal is what she calls the “feeling of life, the pleasure of the subject” derived from aesthetic distance (1986:49–62). Kappeler says that the pornographic representation is even preferable, because it allows the total assertion of a man’s subjectivity. Since there is no intersubjective action, the image of the woman behind the glass becomes a screen for the projection of a fantasy over which the male viewer has total control.

In “Bar Wars,” written for *Esquire* in November 1986, Bob Greene provides a succinct example of the intersection of sexuality, pornography, and spectatorship on the representational economy. A bar called B.T.’s in Dearborn, Michigan, which usually presents topless female dancing entertainment, also offers what it calls “Rambo Wet Panty Nights.” Black plastic Uzi submachine water guns are handed out to the customers. Then a woman—sometimes a regular B.T.’s dancer, sometimes an “amateur” volunteer—mounts the stage dressed in a skimpy T-shirt and underwear and stands covering her eyes and face while the men shoot their water guns at her vagina. Six or seven women perform each evening, and cash prizes are given to the women who do the “best” job of being shot at according to the bar owner’s subjective judgments. Greene doesn’t describe the critical standards applied (1986:61–62).

This performative exchange is a cultural feminist’s nightmare of the conflation of sexuality and violence. But aside from this neat match of contents, it’s an overt example of representation proceeding according to a pornographic model. The bar is packed with men drawn by a chance to become Rambo in the flesh. The elements of a prior representation, then, are mapped onto the performance at the bar. Sylvester Stallone and his Rambo movies are missing, but they’re implied in the narrative.

In the Rambo films, as in most Vietnam films, the enemy—or the Other—is an Asian race. In the paramilitary ambience of B.T.’s bar, the woman on stage becomes the alien enemy, the Other defined by her difference.² The floor manager at B.T.’s encourages the men with guns to think of the woman on stage as Vietnam, or Libya, or even Nicaragua. It’s a neat way of eroticizing imperialism and keeping sexuality imperialist.

The men with the Uzis are implicitly identifying with Rambo as they aim, and they experience visual pleasure by projecting their subjective fantasies onto the passive women. One man tells Greene, “I got her. She’s hot; I know she likes it. She likes it, and she knows that I know she likes it” (1986:62). But if the woman’s eyes were covered, how could this man possibly think the performer was acknowledging and enjoying a spray from his gun, except by fantasizing because he wants it that way?

What do the performers at B.T.’s think about allowing their bodies to be used as substitutes for Third World nations, and becoming screens for projections of male fantasy? One woman tells Greene that “It’s a power game.” Unlike most, she doesn’t cover her eyes when she performs: “I try to look out into the audience and make eye contact with as many of the men with guns as I can. A lot of times, they’ll turn away. If a woman looks

them in the eye, they'll turn away (1986:62). At issue here is the struggle for subjectivity. These men can't face the intersubjectivity of the woman's gaze. They must maintain the disengagement of desire inspired by the safe aesthetic distance of the representation.

Greene's article, of course, is governed by the exigencies of his own male gaze, and he doesn't mention whether there are women spectators in the bar. But theoretically, where could a woman place herself in relation to this display? How could she position herself in front of a peep show window? The image of a woman sitting in a darkened theatre wearing a trenchcoat is incongruous at best.

Whether or not female spectators can be placed in positions of power that might allow for the objectification of male performers or that might allow for the liberation of both gender classes from the oppressions of the representational gaze is an issue hotly debated in feminist theory. As Kappeler and others have pointed out, simply trading gender positions isn't as easy as it sounds. While women in representation usually signify their gender class, the culturally sanctioned power of male subjectivity makes a similar signification very difficult. Women cannot simply express their subjectivity by objectifying men. A nude male in an objectified position remains an individual man, not necessarily a representative of the male gender class.

For example, Richard Schechner, while pondering these issues, described the activity at several sex clubs in Montreal in which males danced for females as examples of women adopting the male gaze. Schechner says the male dancers

[. . .] stripped until fully naked. They played with their cocks and displayed the rest of their bodies in a way very parallel to what women do in strip clubs. [. . .] As a new male entered the stage, the dancer who was on stage went from table to table, and danced directly in front of women. The male dancer brought with him a little step stool so that his genitals were face level to the female spectator(s). The women tipped him. There was a lot of flirtation, kissing, and some genital playing (Schechner 1987).

While this situation seems to reverse the traditional paradigm, male sexuality is still active, privileged, and displayed. The women spectators want the male performer to desire them. Similar conditions are implied by female dancers in clubs for male spectators. The female dancers aren't performing their own sexuality—their display implies penile satisfaction, their open legs and wet vaginas imply the possibility of penetration. In both situations, the desire of women spectators or performers is subordinate to male desire.

According to the psychoanalytical model, since male desire drives representation, a female spectator is given two options. She can identify with the active male and symbolically participate in the female performer's objectification, or she can identify with the narrative's objectified female and position herself as an object.

I do not mean to propose a universalism when I use the term "female spectator." For the materialist feminist, women are differentiated along class, race, and sexual orientation lines that make it impossible for them to respond to any image as a unit. Part of the problem with the psychoanalytical model of spectatorship is just this tendency to pose universal "male" and "female" spectators who respond only according to gender. Part of

my project here is to suggest that sexuality is as large a part of spectator response as gender, and that by altering the assumed sexuality of spectators, the representational exchange can also be changed.

Mary Ann Doane in *The Desire to Desire* writes, "There is a certain naiveté assigned to women in relation to systems of signification, a tendency to deny the process of representation, to collapse the opposition between the sign (the image) and the real" (1987:1). Women remain part of Lacan's Imaginary realm, completely marginal to the signifying process. Since she cannot separate herself from the image, the female spectator cannot experience the mirror phase through which she might see herself reflected as a separate subject. Because Doane's psychoanalytic reading considers desire as a form of disengagement "crucial to the assumption of the position of the speaking subject" (1987:11), a woman cannot hope to articulate her desire in the representational space.

Since she can assume neither disengagement nor aesthetic distance from the image, she is denied the scopophilic pleasure of voyeurism. Fetishism—which also operates particularly in the cinematic apparatus to provide visual pleasure—is also unavailable to the female spectator, since her ordinary lack dictates that she already has nothing to lose.

Woman as a psychic subject, then, is unarticulated in representation. Doane goes on to propose that women as social subjects are constructed merely as passive consumers invited to buy the idealized, male-generated image of the female body as a commodity displayed in the representational frame.

If the female spectator chooses to accept this passively constructed consumer position, Doane writes, "The mirror/window takes on then the aspect of a trap whereby her subjectivity becomes synonymous with her objectification" (1987:33). Buying the idealized image of herself, she turns herself into a commodity to then be sold, as the performer already has. The positions of the female performer and the female spectator are collapsed into one—they become prostitutes who buy and sell their own image in a male-generated visual economy. They are goods in the representational marketplace, commodities in an exchange by means of which they are both objectified.³

The women performing at B.T.'s, for example, are sheer spectacle in a representational exchange constructed for the male gaze. Some of the women admit they do it for the money, prostituting their subjectivity to the demands of the representational space. The owner of B.T.'s, of course, doesn't see it in so mercenary a light. He romanticizes the women's involvement, speculating that they are willing to perform because they come from disturbed backgrounds and need attention—a variation on *A Chorus Line*'s "What I Did for Love."

The idea that specularized, objectified women do it for the love of the male gaze is a concept perpetuated by dominant cultural discourse. In "Confessions of a Feminist Porno Star," printed in a feminist anthology of personal narratives called *Sex Work*, Nina Hartley acquiesces to this view. She says she is an exhibitionist, a woman who is aroused by being looked at. But she also feels she has some control over the production of her image. "In choosing my roles and characterizations carefully," she writes, "I strive to show, always, women who thoroughly enjoy sex and are forceful, self-satisfying and guilt-free without also being neurotic, unhappy, or somehow unfulfilled" (1987:142). Hartley proposes that she can subvert the representational apparatus by adjusting the content of its images and giving the positive, active roles to women.

This is a kind of liberal feminist, matching-contents argument that has been used to justify generating feminist erotica. Some feminists think that if women controlled the means of producing pornography, its representations would be different. But the genderized component of heterosexuality, with its inevitable constant of male desire, problematizes positioning women as the producers or subjects of heterosexual pornography. Heterosexual feminist erotica, such as the magazine *Eidos*, and much feminist performance art indicates that disarming male desire in the representational space requires “feminizing” the represented males or avoiding sexuality as an integral issue. These attempts are for the most part either unsuccessful—since the erect male penis is still a power-filled image even if it’s displayed in a feminine, “natural” context—or banal, as sexuality gives way to the obfuscating realm of spirituality (see Dolan 1987:157–61).

Debi Sundahl, in her *Sex Work* essay called “Stripper,” acknowledges the subject/object problem inherent in heterosexual representation. Initially, she says,

The hardest part of the job was dealing with my feminist principles concerning the objectification of women. Dancing nude is the epitome of woman as sex object. As the weeks passed, I found I liked being a sex object, because the context was appropriate. [. . .] I perform to turn you on, and if I fail, I feel I’ve done a poor job. Women who work in the sex industry are not responsible for, nor do they in any way perpetuate, the sexual oppression of women. In fact, to any enlightened observer, our very existence provides a distinction and a choice as to when a woman should be treated like a sex object and when she should not be. At the theatre, yes; on the street, no (1987:176).

I find this a provocative statement. Sundahl suggests that subject positions on stage can be separated from those assumed in life. But she also suggests that bowing to the demands of objectification in theatre is the only role a woman can play in the heterosexual representational space. Implicit in her argument is the idea that representation is driven by a kind of sexuality in which objectification is constantly assumed. But is all sexuality motivated by objectification? And if not, what might happen to representation if the sexual desire motivating it were different?

There’s a twist to Sundahl’s story. She is a lesbian; she publishes *On Our Backs*, a lesbian porn magazine; and she started a women-only strip show at Baybrick’s, a now-defunct lesbian bar in San Francisco. Sundahl herself makes a distinction between her performance spaces, pointing out that the different cultural mandates of the heterosexual and lesbian contexts make the terms of the performative exchange very different, even if the images used or roles played are the same. Describing the show at Baybrick’s, for example, Sundahl writes, “The dancers loved performing for the all-female audiences because they had more freedom of expression. They were not limited to ultrafeminine acts only; they could be butch and dress in masculine attire” (1987:178). In other words, if they wanted to, the performers could assume the subject position rather than objectifying themselves. The butch/femme role play allowed the performers to seduce each other and the lesbian spectators through the constant of lesbian sexuality.

This context allows lesbian desire to circulate as the motivating representational term. The subject/object relations that trap women performers and spectators as commodities in a heterosexual context dissolve. The

lesbian subject, according to Monique Witting (1980, 1981) and others, has free range across a gender continuum and, to paraphrase Sue-Ellen Case, her role-playing through a “strategy of appearances” (1987) disrupts the dominant cultural discourse representation mandates. Witting says lesbians are “not women” and not men according to the way these gender roles are culturally constructed (1980:110). Since they are already outside a strictly dichotomized gender context, they are free to pick and choose from both extremes. There are no prostitutes on the lesbian representational economy because the goods have gotten together (see Irigaray 1981).

In *Upwardly Mobile Home*, a production by the lesbian performance troupe Split Britches, Peggy Shaw has a monolog describing her character’s trip to see the fat lady at the circus. She says the lights and the posters promised her entertainment, but she got much, much more. When she entered the fat lady’s tent, Shaw says, “She knew I had come to see her being fat. She looked at me and I looked at her. I loved that fat lady.” Rather than the fight for subjectivity that takes place in B.T.’s heterosexual bar, Shaw’s exchange with the fat woman seems paradigmatic of the lesbian viewing experience. The recognition of mutual subjectivity allows the gaze to be shared in a direct way. Shaw tells *Upwardly Mobile Home* spectators, “You have paid to see me”—but the visual economy is now under lesbian control.

Lesbians are appropriating the subject position of the male gaze by beginning to articulate the exchange of desire between women. Lesbian subjectivity creates a new economy of desire. To borrow from Irigaray once again, lesbians “go to the ‘market’ alone, to profit from their own value, to talk to each other, to desire each other, without the control of the selling-buying-consuming subjects” (1981:110). Rather than gazing through the representational window at their commodification as women, lesbians are generating and buying their own desire on a different representational economy. Perhaps the lesbian subject can offer a model for women spectators that will appropriate the male gaze. The aim is not to look like men, but to look at all.

Epilog

Since reading Teresa de Lauretis’s article on lesbian representation (1988), I’ve been rethinking the issue of desire, and with it, the whole of what Case calls the “psychosemiotic” theoretical endeavor (1988). When I attempt to wrench myself from the psychosemiotic subject considerations that have governed my work on the spectator, and that hinge on the question of desire in representation, I come up with the notion of spectatorial communities. This is where de Lauretis, too, seems to arrive in her exploration of how to represent lesbian differences, how not to reify the lesbian spectator as some new, unbroken, unified idol.

The hint of utopianism that creeps into my thoughts when I write about changing the entrenched gender dynamics of representation comes from my conception of lesbian subjectivit(ies) as one of the most challenging, fruitful areas in this field of investigation. According to the psychosemiotic feminist critical model, of which my argument here makes use, male desire is the variable in the representational exchange that upsets the balance of power, reinforces the gender dichotomy in art and culture, and proscribes heterosexuality as compulsory (see Rich 1983). Male desire is not at all a factor in representations created by lesbians. As a result, the area of lesbian subjectivity seems a place to begin to envision new possibilities for representation.

Shifting my emphasis from the psychological construction of the individual spectator, however, brings me perhaps to a less utopian notion of lesbian spectatorial communities, separated and differentiated by class, race, and ideology. As de Lauretis chastises, changing the shape of desire from heterosexual to lesbian won't get the entire crisis of representation off our backs. There is no universal lesbian spectator to whom each lesbian representation will provide the embodiment of the same lesbian desire. Sexuality, and desire, and lesbian subjects are more complicated than that.

Although I might concede the utopianism of my writing on lesbian desire and am currently working to think within the contradictions, I can't concede or condone what some see as the necessity to "universalize" this model to heterosexual women and men. For instance, Linda Walsh Jenkins mistakenly suggests that "most of the leading [feminist theorists] in the middle '80s are lesbian," and complains that "the heterosexual female position has not been given much attention or articulation" (Chinoy and Jenkins 1987:373). Jenkins fails to acknowledge that heterosexual women are in a more visible, privileged position in the culture than lesbians, and have in fact been given a great deal of attention. The history of theatre and performance studies, as well as its criticism and theory, cloaks its heterosexuality in a universal guise that leaves lesbian subjects invisible in its discourse. I am, as Witting suggests, shifting the axis of categorization (1983).

Placing the lesbian subject at the center of the debate, rescued from the invisible margins, illuminates aspects of the arguments about representation that were clouded or unexamined. But my argument also has a personal and political component that aims toward the liberation of a sexual minority. Heterosexual readers unsettled by their absence from this debate might have to confront their own homophobia, just as I, as a white reader grappling with work by racial and ethnic minorities, am forced to examine my own racism. As the postmodernists insist, the center is constantly shifting. The shock might be finding yourself on the margins.

Notes

1. Antiporn feminism is very much in line with the cultural feminist politic which maintains that the biological differences between men and women are the basis of their psychological and social differences. This stance translates into often prescriptive dichotomies that describe men's behavior as violent, women's as pacifist. Andrea Dworkin is the most vocal and visible antiporn cultural feminist—her book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1979) is the bible of the movement. See Dolan (1987) for a further explication of antiporn feminism in terms of feminist performance and criticism.
2. For example, this link between the eroticization of imperialism and sexual imperialism is drawn in Stanley Kubrick's Vietnam film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). When the American soldiers get to Vietnam in Kubrick's film, they are immediately initiated into an economy based on the exchange of Vietnamese prostitutes for American dollars. The soldiers' options in the war context are sex or fighting, and the two inevitably blur. The slow motion, orgasmic quality of blood capsules bursting all over soldiers falling in battle is unmistakably sexual. After a series of more or less faceless skirmishes with the Asian enemy, the film climaxes with the face-to-face murder of a sniper who, not accidentally, is a woman. Aggression toward an entire country is signified by what ends up as sexual aggression toward one alien woman, the dark territory incarnate. Substituting a woman for the alien Asian enemy cannot be coincidental. In Kubrick's film, Vietnam is signified by a woman.
3. Gayle Rubin, in "The Traffic in Women" (1978) argues that women have been use-value in a male economy at least since the kinship systems studied by Levi-Strauss. Luce Irigaray, in "When the Goods Get Together" (1981), suggests that

if women refused to “go to market,” they could fundamentally disrupt the dominant culture’s structure.

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