

Lesbian bodies in the age of (post) mechanical reproduction.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Lesbian Bodies in the Age Of (Post)Mechanical Reproduction

Cathy Griggers

What signs mark the presence of a lesbian body?

Writing the lesbian body has become more common of late, making reading it all the more difficult. Less hidden, and so more cryptic than ever, the lesbian body increasingly appears as an actual variability set within the decors of everyday discourses. Signs of her presence appear on the cover of *ELLE*, for example, or in popular film and paperback detective mysteries as both the sleuth and *femme fatale*, in texts that range from Mary Wing's overt lesbian thriller *She Came Too Late* (1987) to the conflicted, symptomatic lesbian sub-plot in Bob Rafelson's *Black Widow* (1986). She appeared disguised as a vampire in Tony Scott's *The Hunger* (1983), and masquerading as the latest American outlaw hero in *Thelma and Louise* (1991). On television, she's making her appearance on the evening soap *L.A. Law*, and she virtually made MTV via Madonna's *Justify Your Love* music video. When MTV censored the video, she appeared on ABC's *Nightline* instead, under the guise of "news." Elsewhere, in the latest lesbian mail-order video from *Femme Fatale*—a discursive site where the lesbian imaginary meets the sex industry—you can find her on all fours and dressed in leather or feathers, or leather and feathers, typically wearing a phallic silicone simulacrum. Recently, she's appeared in the trappings of San Francisco's lesbian bar culture passing as a collection of art photographs in Della Grace's *Love Bites* (1991). Meanwhile, PBS will be broadcasting in the spring of '92 a BBC production depicting the torrid affair between Violet Trefusis and Vita Sackville-West into the living rooms of millions of devoted PBS viewers. And Susie Bright, author of *Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World* (1990), is making virtual sexual reality with her *Virtual Sex World Reader* to be published in Spring of 1992 by Cleis Press. Lesbian computer nerds are waiting for Bright to assist in the world's first lesbian virtual sex program, that is, the first virtual reality program designed by a lesbian. Same-sex sex between women is already a menu option on the popular on-line *Virtual Valerie*, along with a menu for a variety of sex toy applications. Let's face it; lesbian bodies in postmodernity are going broadcast, they're going techno-culture, and they're going mainstream.

In the process of mainstreaming, in which minoritarian and majority significations intermingle, the lesbian body of signs is exposed as an

essentially dis-organized body.¹ The lesbian is as fantasmatic a construct as the woman. There are women, and there are lesbian bodies—each body crossed by multiplicitous signifying regimes and by different histories, different technologies of representation and reproduction, and different social experiences of being lesbian determined by ethnicity, class, gender identity and sexual practices. In other words, as lesbian bodies become more visible in mainstream culture, the differences amongst these bodies also become more apparent. There is a freedom and a loss inscribed in this current cultural state of being lesbian. On the one hand, lesbians are given greater exemption from a categorical call that would delimit them from the cultural spaces of the anytime, anywhere. On the other hand, the call of identity politics becomes increasingly problematized.

The problem of identity is always a problem of signification in regard to historically-specific social relations. Various attempts have been made to locate a lesbian identity, most inculcated in the grand nominalizing imperative bequeathed us by the Victorian taxonomies of “sexual” science. Should we define the lesbian by a specific sexual practice, or by the lack thereof? By a history of actual, or virtual, relations? Can she be identified once and for all by the presence of a public, broadcast kiss, by an act of self-proclamation, or by an act of community outing? Should we know her by the absence of the penis, or by the presence of a silicone simulacrum? Surely this material delimitation may go too far—for shouldn’t we wonder whether or not a lesbian text, for all that, can be written across the body of...



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