

## LESBIAN BODIES: TRIBADES, TOMBOYS AND TARTS

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Femme, vampiric, muscled, tattooed, pregnant, effete, foppish, amazonian – the lesbian body comes in a myriad of shapes and sizes. Images of the lesbian body in cultural discourse and the popular imagination abound. Various popular magazines and newspapers have announced that it is now chic to be a lesbian – ‘in’, fashionable, popular, desirable. The ‘Saturday Extra’ section of the Melbourne *Age* recently ran a cover story entitled ‘Wicked Women’, in which lesbians were described as ‘glamorous gorgeous and glad to be gay’. On the front cover of the August 1993 edition of *Vanity Fair* we find an image of femme super-model Cindy Crawford shaving imaginary whiskers from the boyish, smiling lathered face of k.d. lang, the out-lesbian country and western singer. ‘Oh, to be a lesbian, now that spring is here’, seems to be the latest media hype. Fashion aside, is there a quintessential stereotype, or stereotypes, of the lesbian body?

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Unlike man’s body, the female body is frequently depicted within patriarchal cultural discourses as fluid, unstable, chameleon-like. Michèle Montrelay has argued that in western discourse, woman signifies ‘the ruin of representation’ (Montrelay 1978: 89). Julia Kristeva distinguishes between two kinds of bodies: the symbolic and the imaginary or abject body. In *Powers of Horror*, she argues that the female body is quintessentially the abject body because of

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its procreative functions. Unlike the male body, the proper female body is penetrable, changes shape, swells, gives birth, contracts, lactates, bleeds. Woman's body reminds man of his 'debt to nature' and as such threatens to collapse the boundary between human and animal, civilized and uncivilized (Kristeva 1982: 102). Bakhtin argued that the essentially grotesque body was that of the pregnant, birth-giving woman (1984: 339). When man is rendered grotesque, his body is usually feminized (Creed 1993: 122): it is penetrated, changes shape, swells, bleeds, is cut open, grows hair and fangs. Insofar as woman's body signifies the human potential to return to a more primitive state of being, her image is accordingly manipulated, shaped, altered, stereotyped to point to the dangers that threaten civilization from all sides. If it is the female body in general – rather than specifically the lesbian body – which signifies the other, how, then, does the lesbian body differ from the body of the so-called 'normal' woman?

There are at least three stereotypes of the lesbian body which are so threatening they cannot easily be applied to the body of the non-lesbian. These stereotypes are: the lesbian body as active and masculinized; the animalistic lesbian body; the narcissistic lesbian body. Born from a deep-seated fear of female sexuality, these stereotypes refer explicitly to the lesbian body, and arise from the nature of the threat lesbianism offers to patriarchal heterosexual culture.

The central image used to control representations of the potentially lesbian body – to draw back the female body from entering the dark realm of lesbian desire – is that of the tomboy. The narrative of the tomboy functions as a liminal journey of discovery in which feminine sexuality is put into crisis and finally recuperated into the dominant patriarchal order – although not without first offering the female spectator a series of contradictory messages which may well work against their overtly ideological purpose of guiding the young girl into taking up her proper destiny. In other words, the well-known musical comedy, *Calamity Jane*, which starred Doris Day as the quintessential tomboy in love with another woman, could be recategorized most appropriately, in view of its subversive subtextual messages about the lure of lesbianism, as a 'lesbian western', that ground-breaking subgenre of films so ardently championed by Hollywood.

#### THE MASCULINIZED LESBIAN BODY

There is one popular stereotype about the nature of lesbianism which does posit a recognizable lesbian body. This view, which has been dominant in different historical periods and is still prevalent today, is that the lesbian is really a man trapped in a woman's body. The persistent desire to see the lesbian body as a pseudo male body certainly does not begin with Freud's theory of penis envy. We find evidence of the masculinized lesbian body in a number of pre-Freudian historical and cultural contexts: Amazonian society in which the Amazon is seen as a masculinized, single-breasted, man-hating warrior; cross-cultural woman-marriage (Cavin 1985: 129–37) whereby women don men's

clothes and marry other women; female transvestism or cross-dressing; and the history of tribadism and female sodomy. It is the last category I wish to discuss in some detail.

In earlier centuries, prior to the invention (Katz 1990: 7–34) in the mid-nineteenth century of the homosexual and heterosexual as a person with a specific identity and lifestyle, women and men who engaged in same-sex relations – presumed to consist primarily of sodomy – were described as sodomites. Sodomites – heterosexual and homosexual – were ‘guilty’ of carrying out a specific act, not of being a certain kind of person with readily identifiable characteristics. Specifically, women were thought to take part in sodomy with other women in one of two ways: through clitoral penetration of the anus or with the use of diabolical instruments. In general terms, however, the term sodomite was used to refer to anyone engaged in unorthodox practices.

[...]

By the the time of the Renaissance it was believed that in some cases women with extremely large clitorises could commit acts of penetration – vaginal and anal – with another woman. One woman, accused of such acts, was said to possess a clitoris that ‘equalled the length of half a finger and in its stiffness was not unlike a boy’s member’. The woman was accused of ‘exposing her clitoris outside the vulva and trying not only licentious sport with other women . . . but even stroking and rubbing them’ (Laqueur 1990: 137).

In *Making Sex*, Laqueur traces the way in which our views of sex and sexual difference have changed, along with cultural and social changes, over the centuries. Prior to the eighteenth century, thinking about the body was dominated by the ‘one-sex model’:

In the one-sex model, dominant in anatomical thinking for two thousand years, woman was understood as man inverted: the uterus was the female scrotum, the ovaries were testicles, the vulva was a foreskin, and *the vagina was a penis*. (Laqueur 1990: 236; emphasis in original)

There was only one archetypal body: on the male body the organs had descended, in the female body, due to a lack of bodily heat, they remained bottled up inside. By virtue of her coldness, woman was, at best, a potential man, at worst, a failed one. By the late eighteenth century the one-sex model had given way to a new model – the two-sex model in which men and women no longer correspond but are radically different. In the one-sex model, a number of vital female organs had no names of their own – the ovaries were female ‘testicles’ while the vagina did not have a name at all before 1700. The clitoris did not even appear in this model.

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After the official discovery of the clitoris, the notion of the lesbian body as a pseudo male body becomes more credible because the clitoris is seen as a male

penis which, it was also believed, ejaculated semen. What are the implications of this for the lesbian? In normal man – woman sex, the woman was the one rubbed against, that is, she assumed the passive role – despite her smaller ‘penis’. But in cases where the clitoris is deemed too large (a complaint never directed at the penis) and the woman therefore is capable of adopting the active rubbing position in sex with another woman, she stands in violation of the sumptuary laws (Laqueur 1990: 136). Some women are therefore potentially capable of performing sodomitic acts on the bodies of other women. The woman who assumed a male role in sex with another woman was deemed a ‘tribade’. The lesbian/tribade is a pseudo man, her body an inferior male body. In cases which were brought before the law, the offender, if found guilty, was usually burned as a tribade. In such cases the size of the female penis was crucial.

In 1601 Marie de Marcis was accused of sodomy. She declared publicly that she was a man, altered her name to Marlin and announced her intention to marry the woman she loved. At her trial (women could be tried for sodomy in French law) she was sentenced to be burned alive, but a sympathetic doctor intervened and demonstrated she was really a ‘man’ because when her genitals were rubbed a penis emerged which also ejaculated semen. She was decreed a man and escaped execution, although she was forbidden to have sex with women (and men) or dress as a man until she was 25 (Laqueur 1990: 136–7). In another case, in Holland in the early seventeenth century, Henrike Schuria, who donned men’s clothes and joined the army, was caught having sex with another woman. Her clitoris was measured and found to equal the length of half a finger. She was found guilty of tribadism and sentenced to the stake, but the judge intervened and ordered she be sent into exile after enduring a clitoridectomy (Laqueur 1990: 137; van der Meer 1990: 191).

It is relevant to point out that laws against sodomy not only varied according to place and time, but that they were not universally applied. In England at the time there were no laws against sodomy or cross-dressing – only dressing outside one’s class was illegal. Nonetheless there is still a strong stigma attached to lesbianism. In Renaissance England, Ben Jonson accused a female critic of literary tribadism in order to denigrate her. He accuses her of raping the Muse:

What though with Tribade lust she force a Muse,  
And in an Epiceone fury can write newes  
Equall with that, which for the best newes goes ...  
(Jones and Stallybrass 1991: 103)

In eighteenth-century Holland, however, a wave of sodomy trials took place in which women figured prominently and were referred to as committing ‘sodomitical filthiness’ (van der Meer 1990: 190). In France, after the rediscovery of the clitoris, the hermaphrodite was classified as a woman with a large clitoris who could legally be tried for engaging in acts of sodomy with other women (Jones and Stallybrass 1991: 90). Women were, of course, also punished for

committing other sexual acts with women, such as mutual masturbation, but these were not seen in the same light as sodomy which was a far more serious offence.

In the cases discussed above, the solution to the female body which threatens to confuse gender boundaries is either legal ('she really is a man') or surgical ('cut her back to size') or lethal ('burn the witch'). In all three instances the offending body challenges gender boundaries in terms of the active/passive dualism, a dichotomy which is crucial to the definition of gender in patriarchal culture. Marie de Marcis was not judged a woman with a large clitoris but a man. There is a clear distinction here between penis and clitoris in which the former grants its possessor the status of manhood and all of its attendant rights. Henrike Schuria was not lucky enough to be deemed a man; rather, she was judged a freakish woman and forced to have the offending organ cut out. As Laqueur points out: 'Getting a certifiable penis is getting a phallus, in Lacanian terms, but getting a large clitoris is not' (1990: 140-1).

The tribade is the woman who assumes a male role in sexual intercourse with another woman – either because she is the one 'on top' or because she has a large clitoris and can engage in penetration. She threatens because she is active, desiring, hot. Theo van der Meer argues that the tribade does not really fit into the world of romantic, but asexual female friendships, nor into the tradition of female transvestism. Van de Meer claims that perhaps the tribades, with their overtly sexual desires, 'may represent the more – if not the most – important and direct predecessors of the modern lesbian' (1990: 209). I have used the word tribade for the early modern period, because, not only did the term 'lesbian' not exist in the eighteenth century, but 'lesbian' also conveys the idea of a sexual identity which was not really invented for the female homosexual until the mid-nineteenth century. According to Barbara Walker (1983: 536), in Christian Europe, lesbianism was 'a crime without a name'. The sixteenth-century definition of the tribade as a pseudo male has much in common with Freud's later definition of the homosexual woman as one suffering from unresolved penis-envy. Both definitions adopt male anatomy as the defining norm. The difference is that Freud's model of sexual difference is based on the two-sex theory; in this, woman is not an ill-formed man, she is the 'other' – a creature who has already (in male eyes) been castrated. The lesbian body of Freudian theory is one that attempts to overcome its 'castration' by assuming a masculine role in life and/or masculine appearance through clothing, gesture, substitution.

In the one-sex model, the tribade is guilty of assuming the male role which she is seen as perfectly capable of doing because she is already potentially a man; in the two-sex model the lesbian is deemed ultimately as incapable of even assuming a pseudo-male position because, like all women, she signifies an irremediable lack. Her genitals are not in danger of falling through her body and transforming her from male to female, nor does she possess a clitoris that might be taken seriously enough by a judge or medical doctor to suggest she

might adopt an active, rubbing role in sex – she signifies only castration and lack. Her lack, however, can be overcome artificially by the use of a dildo – a popular male fantasy about lesbian practices. It is worth noting that the phallic woman, the woman with a penis, who is central to the Freudian theory of fetishism, has much in common with the image of the sodomitic tribade. The phallic woman, who straps on a dildo and sodomizes the male, is a popular figure in pornography specifically designed for the burgeoning male masochist market. Perhaps the phallic woman of male fantasy is not just a Freudian fetish but also represents male desire for an active, virile woman – a lesbian!

Freud attributes lesbianism not to woman's own specifically female desires but to her desire to be a man. The lesbian is the woman who either has never relinquished, or seeks to recover, her repressed phallic sexuality. She refuses to relinquish her pre-Oedipal or phallic love for the mother and develops a masculinity complex. She may also become a lesbian out of a desire for revenge. In his single study of lesbianism, Freud (1920) argues that the woman becomes a lesbian to enact revenge on her father who she feels betrayed her because he made the mother, her rival, pregnant. He states that 'she changed into a man, and took her mother in place of her father as the object of her love' (1920: 384). He notes the 'masculine' physique of his client and states that only inverts assume the mental characteristics of the opposite sex. Freud likens the female homosexual to the male heterosexual – both desire the feminine woman. In his footnotes to the Dora case history Freud refers to Dora's 'homosexual (gynaecophilic) love for Frau K.' as the 'strongest unconscious current in her mental life' (1905a: 162) and to her aggressive identification with masculinity. Although Freud does not appear to see lesbianism as pathological (he does not prescribe any form of therapy) his emphasis on vaginal – not clitoral – orgasm as offering the only true source of sexual pleasure for women makes it clear that he regarded lesbian sexual practices as inferior and immature. On her journey into proper womanhood, the girl gives up the pleasures of clitoral orgasm for vaginal orgasm. In his discussion of proper femininity and masculinity, Freud writes: 'Maleness combines [the factors of] subject, activity and possession of the penis; femaleness takes [those of] object and passivity. The vagina is now valued as a place of shelter for the penis; it enters into the heritage of the womb' (Freud 1923: 312).

In the Freudian model of sexual difference, the vagina – no longer an inverted penis – is now 'a place of shelter for the penis'. It passively awaits the male member, husband, master of the house. The clitoris loses its earlier active prowess and becomes 'like pine shavings' waiting to be 'kindled' in order to make the home warm, friendly: 'to set a log of harder wood on fire' (Freud 1905b: 143). The woman who refuses to see her sexual organs as mere wood chips, designed to make the man's life more comfortable, is in danger of becoming a lesbian – an active, phallic woman, an intellectual virago with a fire of her own.

Freud's theory regarding the shift of pleasure from the clitoris to the vagina

has no basis in fact. He seems bent on ascribing a specific role to the vagina as a means of convincing women that they should assume a passive position within the family and society. Not only Freud, however, feared the active woman. Bram Dijkstra points out that at the time there were a number of popular beliefs in circulation about the dangers of the active, masculine woman who threatened to destroy the fragile boundary which kept the sexes different and separate. He cites the work of Bernard Talmey who believed that masturbation made women into lesbians and led to abnormal conditions such as 'hypertrophy of the clitoris' which caused the clitoris to expand and become erect: 'The female masturbator becomes excessively prudish, despises and hates the opposite sex, and forms passionate attachments for other women' (Dijkstra 1986: 153). The lesbian body is a particularly pernicious and depraved version of the female body in general; it is susceptible to auto-eroticism, clitoral pleasure and self-actualization.

Freud's narrative of woman's sexual journey from clitoral pubescence into mature vaginal bliss is a bit like the transformation fairy tales in which the ugly duckling matures into a beautiful swan and marries the handsome cygnet. Literary and filmic narratives replay this scenario of female fulfilment through the figure of the tomboy. The tomboy's journey is astonishingly similar to that of the clitoris. During the early stage, the tomboy/clitoris behaves like a 'little man' enjoying boy's games, pursuing active sports, refusing to wear dresses or engage in feminine pursuits; on crossing into womanhood the youthful adventurer relinquishes her earlier tomfoolery, gives up boyish adventures, dons feminine clothes, grows her hair long and sets out to capture a man whose job it is to 'tame' her as if she were a wild animal.

We see this narrative played out in *Calamity Jane* where the heroine (Doris Day) relinquishes her men's clothing, foul language, guns and horse for a dress, feminine demeanour, sweet talk and a man. She also gives up the woman, Alice, with whom she has set up house and whom she clearly loves. Katherine Hepburn in *Sylvia Scarlett* adopts the name of Sylvester, dons boy's clothes and masquerades as a youth until she falls in love and exchanges her masculine appearance for a feminine one. *Queen Christina* depicts the lesbian queen (Greta Garbo) in the first part of the narrative wearing men's clothes and long riding boots, striding about the palace accompanied by two great danes and muttering to her manservant that all men are fools and she will never marry. Predictably, she falls in love, throws off her mannish trappings, gives up the Lady Ebba and redirects her erotic desires towards the Spanish ambassador, one of the 'fools' she vowed she would never marry. In *Marnie*, the journey into womanhood is presented in the context of a psychological crisis. Marnie, played by Tippi Hedren, is sexually frigid, a thief who steals from her male employers. She loves only her mother and her horse, Forio. Before she can begin her transformation into proper womanhood, and learn to desire the man she has been forced to marry, she has to shoot her horse, which has a broken leg, and give up her criminal activities. Her horse/virile ways are replaced by

his. Passivity and propriety are essential preconditions for the transition from active, virile femininity into passive, feminine conformity.

The liminal journey of the tomboy – one of the few rites of passage stories available to women in the cinema – is a narrative about the forging of the proper female identity. It is paralleled by Freud's anatomical narrative about the journey of the clitoris which is, at base, a narrative about culture. The tomboy who refuses to travel Freud's path, who clings to her active, virile pleasures, who rejects the man and keeps her horse is stigmatized as the lesbian. She is a threatening figure on two counts. First, her image undermines patriarchal gender boundaries that separate the sexes. Second, she pushes to its extreme the definition of the active heterosexual woman – she represents the other side of the heterosexual woman, her lost phallic past, the autonomy she surrenders in order to enter the heritage of the Freudian womb. In this context, it is the lesbian – not woman in general – who signifies the 'ruin of representation'.

#### ANIMALISTIC LESBIAN BODY

The stereotype that associates lesbianism with bestiality also pushes representation to its limits. As discussed earlier, woman is, in the popular (male) imagination, associated more with the world of abject nature because of her procreative and birth-giving functions. In religious discourse, her sinful nature makes her a natural companion of the serpent. The embodiment of mother nature, woman represents the fertile womb, the Freudian hearth of domestic bliss. Whereas woman's function is to replicate that of the natural world, man's function is to control and cultivate that world for his own uses. Like the animal world, woman has an insatiable sexual appetite that must be controlled by man. Modern pornography depicts woman's link with nature in images of women posed in the 'doggy' position or engaged in sex with animals – particularly horses and dogs.

In the first part of the twentieth century, woman was particularly aligned with nature because of a widely held belief in a pseudo-scientific theory known as the theory of 'devolution'. According to this belief, while man was in general constantly evolving, some men and all women were in danger of devolving to lower animal forms. Dijkstra presents a fascinating study of the representation of devolution in *fin-de-siècle* art. He points out that whereas 'half-bestial creatures [such] as satyrs and centaurs' were used to depict such men, often caricatured as semitic or negroid, 'there was no need to find a symbolic form to represent [woman's] bestial nature' as 'women, being female, were, as a matter of course, already directly representative of degeneration' (Dijkstra 1986: 275). Hence many paintings of the period depicted women frolicking with satyrs and cavorting with animals in the dark recesses of the woods. If women in general were associated with the animal world, the lesbian was an animal. Dijkstra also refers to the work of Havelock Ellis to support his argument. Drawing on Darwin's view that animals could become sexually excited by the smell of women, Havelock Ellis argued that 'the animal is taught to give gratification by



cunnilinctus. In some cases there is really sexual intercourse between the animal and the woman'. Apparently, Ellis drew connections between lesbianism in young girls and 'later predilection for encounters with animals' (Dijkstra 1986: 297). The association of homosexuality with bestiality, however, extends much further back than Victorian England. One of the most widely read books of the medieval period, said to be as popular as the Bible, was the *Physiologus*, also known as 'the medieval bestiary'. It consisted of a collection of stories, many without any accuracy whatsoever, about animal behaviour and its relationship to human behaviour. It was widely translated, and its influence felt for centuries. According to Boswell it was a 'manual of piety, a primer of zoology, and a form of entertainment' (1980: 141).

The *Physiologus*, which incorporated the *Epistle of Barnabas* from the first century AD, advanced various arguments about animal behaviour that were used to decry homosexual behaviour. It claimed that he who ate the meat of hare would become 'a boy-molester' because 'the hare grows a new anal opening each year, so that however many years he has lived, he has that many anuses' (Boswell 1980: 137-8). Those who ate the meat of the hyena would, like the hyena, change their gender from male to female every year. So women could develop male sexual organs and vice versa. Those who ate the weasel would become like those women who engage in oral sex and who conceive and give birth orally. The abject practices of the hare, weasel and hyena were associated with homosexual practices, abnormal birth and sex changes. In this context, homosexual acts were seen as unclean and animalistic.

Desire transforms the body; abject desire makes the body abject. This belief is similar to the view that women gave birth to monsters because of the kinds of desires they experienced during pregnancy (Huet 1993: 13). Desire can also affect the sexual organs. The story of the hyena was used to explain gender changes for both male and female. The image of a hare with multiple anuses constructs the body from the perspective of the feminized creature, the one being penetrated. It also suggests a fantasy about passivity and an excess of pleasure. No doubt the medieval story of the hare was applied primarily to the male sodomite, but given that the female homosexual was also seen as a sodomite, she would have been associated with the monstrous, transforming body of the hare.

A recent film, *Face Of A Hare* (Liliana Ginanneschi), which explored an unusual friendship between two women, draws on associations between woman, the hare and repressed lesbian desire. The narrative tells the story of two women who have lost their daughters. One woman, a derelict, who lives on the streets, takes up a maternal role in relation to the younger woman in that she appears to possess knowledge about the meaning of life that the younger woman needs. In this way, the film constructs three mother - daughter relationships. Men have no place in the story. In the pre-credit sequence, we are told the story of the 'Moon and the Hare' in which the moon, referred to as 'she', punishes the hare for delivering a false message to men about the

meaning of life. The moon hit the hare on the snout with a stick and flattened its nose forever. We are then told that the younger woman, Elena, who visibly resembles a hare, also felt 'flattened like the hare'. The hare, with its flattened/castrated nose, is associated with woman. The two women are also symbolically castrated in that both have lost their daughters. They form an unusual and close friendship – brought together by their mutual experience of loss and their feelings of despair. But a growing bond of friendship helps to ease their pain. At one point the older woman announces she is Marlene Dietrich, a star whose screen persona has always signified lesbian desire, and shortly after seizes the younger woman in an embrace and begins to dance with her. The women form a couple but, as in virtually all male friendship films, one of the couple dies.

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Another popular image of the lesbian as non-human creature appeared in stories of the female vampire. A seductive creature of the night, the lesbian vampire – still a popular monster of the horror film – not only attacked young girls but also men whose blood she drank in order to assume their masculine virility. Like an animal, the lesbian vampire was prey to her own sexual lusts and primitive desires.

The tomboy, the girl whose sexual identity is androgynous, is almost always associated with animals, particularly the horse and dog. The image of the lesbian as part of the natural world – as distinct from the civilized – might repel some, but it is also immensely appealing.

#### NARCISSISTIC LESBIAN BODY

A popular convention of *fin-de-siècle* painting, the cinema and fashion photography is the image of two women, posed in such a way as to suggest one is a mirror-image of the other. We see the image of the lesbian as narcissist in films about lesbianism. After the two women in *Les Biches* begin a relationship they start to imitate each other in dress and appearance; the women in *Persona* also wear identical clothes and beach hats, making it almost impossible to tell them apart; in *Single White Female* the mentally disturbed girl, in love with her flatmate, deliberately vampirizes her appearance and behaviour until they look like identical twins. In lesbian vampire horror films, such as *Vampyres*, the female friends are also depicted as identical, even the blood that smears their lips seems to trickle from identical mouths and fangs.

Contemporary fashion images in magazines and shop windows also exploit the idea of female narcissism, using models dressed in similar clothes and similar poses – sometimes caught together in an embrace – to sell their products. More overt forms of lesbian behaviour (butch-femme displays) are now also used, particularly as many younger lesbians, who have rejected the lesbian refusal of fashion associated with the 1970s, opt to explore fashion possibilities. Whether or not the general buying public reads lesbianism into these advertisements is another matter. In her discussion of lesbian consumer-

ism, Danae Clark points out that advertisers, as a matter of conscious policy, now attempt to appeal to the gay community through what they describe as 'code behaviour' that only gays would understand: 'If heterosexual consumers do not notice these subtexts or subcultural codes, then advertisers are able to reach the homosexual market along with the heterosexual market without ever revealing their aim' (Clark 1991: 183). However, images that exploit the notion of the feminine/lesbian narcissism draw on a much older tradition than that represented in the contemporary fashion industry. If this tradition suggests that woman is, by her very nature, vain, the lesbian couple represents, by definition, feminine narcissism and auto-eroticism *par excellence*.

In a chapter entitled, 'The Lesbian Glass', Dijkstra (1986) discusses the popular belief, championed by Havelock Ellis, that women are vain, narcissists capable of completely losing themselves in self-admiration. Turn-of-the-century medical writers pointed to the supposed connection between masturbation in women, narcissism and lesbianism. Masturbation increased the size of the clitoris; the woman with a large clitoris was likely to become a lesbian and to engage in those 'excesses' called 'lesbian love' (Gilman 1985: 89). According to Dijkstra, women were painted kissing themselves in mirrors – vain, self-absorbed, completely uninterested in men: 'Woman's desire to embrace her own reflection, her "kiss in the glass", became the turn of the century's emblem of her enmity towards man' (ibid.: 150). Dijkstra cites the eponymous heroine of the film, *Lulu*, played by Louise Brooks, the notorious *femme fatale* whose beauty attracts both men and women, is depicted as a completely self-absorbed narcissist. At one point she says: 'When I look at myself in the mirror I wish I were a man ... my own husband.'

[...]

Like masturbation, lesbianism was seen as inextricably linked to self-absorption and narcissism. Men were shut out from this world – hence they understood the threat offered by the lesbian couple. (According to popular male mythology, what the lesbian really needs is a good fuck, that is, a phallic intrusion to break up the threatening duo.) The representation of the lesbian couple as mirror-images of each other constructs the lesbian body as a reflection or an echo. Such an image is dangerous to society and culture because it suggests there is no way forward – only regression and circularity are possible.

Representations of the lesbian as female narcissist in painting, film and fashion images almost always depict the lesbian as conventionally feminine. This is the key area in which popular fantasies about the nature of lesbianism do not draw on the cliché of the lesbian as a thwarted man. The narcissistic *femme lesbian*, however, almost always adopts an ambiguous position in relation to the gaze of the camera/spectator. She is on display, her pose actively designed to lure the gaze; the crucial difference is, however, that the spectator is shut out from her world. He may look but not enter. Images of the lesbian double are designed to appeal to the voyeuristic desires of the male spectator.

In the first two stereotypes discussed, the lesbian body is constructed in terms of the heterosexual model of sex which involves penetration; there was no attempt to define the nature of lesbian pleasure from the point of view of the feminine. The threat offered by the image of the lesbian-as-double is not specifically related to the notion of sexual penetration. Instead, the threat is associated more with auto-eroticism and exclusion.

Representations of the lesbian double – circulated in fashion magazines, film and pornography – draw attention to the nature of the image itself, its association with the feminine, and the technologies that enable duplication and repetition. The lesbian double threatens because it suggests a perfectly sealed world of female desire from which man is excluded, not simply because he is a man, but also because of the power of the technology to exclude the voyeuristic spectator. But exclusion is also part of the nature of voyeuristic pleasure which demands that a distance between the object and the subject who is looking should always be preserved. Photographic technology, with its powers of duplication, reinforces a fear that, like the image itself, the lesbian couple-as-double will reduplicate and multiply.

#### THE LESBIAN BODY/COMMUNITY

The body is both so important in itself and yet so clearly a sign or symbol referring to things outside itself in our culture. So far I have discussed the representation of the lesbian body in terms of male fantasies and patriarchal stereotypes. Historically and culturally, the lesbian body – although indistinguishable in reality from the female body itself – has been represented as a body in extreme: the pseudo-male, animalistic and narcissistic body. Although all of these deviant tendencies are present in the female body, it is the ideological function of the lesbian body to warn the 'normal' woman about the dangers of undoing or rejecting her own bodily socialization. This is why the culture points with most hypocritical concern at the mannish lesbian, the butch lesbian, while deliberately ignoring the femme lesbian, the woman whose body in no way presents itself to the straight world as different or deviant. To function properly as ideological litmus paper, the lesbian body must be instantly recognizable. In one sense, the femme lesbian is potentially as threatening – although not as immediately confronting – as the stereotyped butch because she signifies the possibility that all women are potential lesbians. Like the abject, the stereotyped mannish/animalistic/auto-erotic lesbian body hovers around the borders of gender socialization, luring other women to its side, tempting them with the promise of deviant pleasures.

Within the lesbian community itself, however, a different battle has taken place around the definition of the lesbian body. This battle has nothing to do with the size of the clitoris, animals or self-reflecting mirrors. Preoccupied with the construction of the properly socialized feminine body, lesbian-feminism of the 1970s became obsessed with appearance, arguing that the true lesbian should reject all forms of clothing that might associate her image with that of

the heterosexual woman and ultimately with patriarchal capitalism. The proper lesbian had short hair, wore sandshoes, jeans or boiler suit, flannel shirt and rejected all forms of make-up. In appearance she hovered somewhere between the look of the butch lesbian, who wore men's clothes and parodied men's behaviour and gestures, and the tomboy. She was a dyke – not a butch – whose aim was to capture an androgynous uniformed look. Lesbians who rejected this model were given a difficult time. In debates that raged in Melbourne in the mid-1970s, some of us who refused the lesbian uniform were labelled 'heterosexual lesbians', an interesting concept that constructs a lesbian as an impossibility – a figure perhaps more in tune with the queer world of the 1990s.

From the 1970s onwards, the lesbian community has adopted a series of fashion styles ranging from flannel shirts to the leather and lipstick lesbians of the 1990s. A recent film, *Framing Lesbian Fashion* (Karen Everett, 1991), pays tribute to the flannel lesbians while celebrating the changing styles of recent years. The film is structured around a series of inter-titles which point to the key changes in style which have involved flannel, leather, corporate drag, tattooing and body piercing. There are a series of interviews with lesbians who have lived through these changes, as well as a lesbian fashion show. The opening credits are accompanied by the words 'I like to shop, shop, shop, shop – shop until I drop'. The film concludes with a tribute to the lesbians of the 1970s who set out to liberate themselves from the patriarchal stereotypes of feminine dress and appearance. The problem was that they also imposed a fairly rigid code of dress on themselves and anyone who wanted to join the lesbian community. There was certainly no place for femme or older style butch lesbians. Only with the butch-femme renaissance of the 1980s did butch and femme lesbians come out of the closet and begin to assert their own needs to express themselves without fear of retribution. Today, with the liberating influence of queer theory and practice (often quite separate entities), almost any form of dress is acceptable.

The film makes one thing very clear: most women enjoyed wearing the different 'uniforms' such as flannel, leather, lipstick because it gave them a sense of belonging to a community, the gang, the wider lesbian body. They speak of having a sense of family and shared identity via their common forms of dress. The need to construct a sense of community, through dress and appearance, suggests quite clearly that there is no such thing as an essential lesbian body – lesbians themselves have to create this body in order to feel they belong to the larger lesbian community, recognizable to its members not through essentialized bodily forms but through representation, gesture and play. The 1990s lesbian is most interested in playing with appearance and with sex roles. Women interviewed in *Framing Lesbian Fashion* were very clear about the element of parody in their dress styles. One woman who cross-dressed even wore a large dildo in her leather pants ('packing it') to simulate the penis – the male penis as well as the one that male fantasy has attributed throughout the centuries to the lesbian and her tribade forebears. Unlike

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BARBARA CREED

Calamity Jane, whose outfit would have caused a sensation at *Club Q*, the 1990s lesbian refuses to exchange her whip and leathers for home, hearth and the seal of social approval. She has a body that is going places.

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