Feminine Beauty and the Male Gaze in The L-Word[1]

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As Eve Sedgwick observes in "The L-Word: Novelty in Normalcy," Showtime's cable television show, The L-Word, creates a lesbian ecology—"[a] visible world in which lesbians exist, go on existing, exist in forms beyond the solitary and the couple, sustain and develop relations among themselves of difference and commonality" (The Chronicle Review, B10). She goes on to note, however, that in order to meet this "obvious and modest representational need," the show must also seemingly enact a Faustian bargain in that the lesbians characters represented on the show must simultaneously appeal to the gaze of straight and/or male audiences—a packaging strategy that has created highly ambivalent responses among lesbian viewers of the show. For example, while fending off criticism of the show in her LesbiaNation article, "The L-Word: Paragon Paradox," Shona Black queries, "Have we not reached a point where we can admit and celebrate the fact that women can be just as shallow as men, that lesbians appreciate some eye-candy just as much as the next guy?" Conversely, Winnie McCroy, in her review of The L-Word appearing in New York Blade, "L is for Invisible," writes:

> If lesbians have to choose between remaining invisible to the mainstream, or being represented by Showtime's clipped and plucked lesbians, I choose invisibility. After all, real lesbians will still remain invisible, at least until our lives become more than a marketing tool or cottage industry or pud fodder for Joe Sixpack.

Indeed, the actresses in The L-Word are, for the most part, young, thin, and artfully coiffed. They conform to male standards of female beauty, and, most significantly, they are notably feminine in their self-presentation. The character of Shane (played by Katherine Moennig), perhaps comes closest to deviating from a strictly feminine presentation through boyish posturing and clothing, but this deviation does not seem particularly threatening to fixed gender roles in that she resembles the type of young, hip, pseudo-androgynous woman one sees figured prominently in Calvin Klein ads. Even the soft-butch carpenter, Candace (played by Ion Overman), also a knockout by male standards, has long hair and is seen wearing slinky, low-cut dresses. This emphasis on femininity has not gone unnoticed, and as pointed out by Malinda Lo in "It's All About the Hair: Butch Identity and Drag on The L-Word," there is no "hair diversity" on the show. Lo writes:

> [I]f we are committed to fighting discrimination and stereotypes about women in general—not only lesbians—it is not enough to have a show full of slender, beautiful, femme-y women who just happen to be lesbians. We really need to have a few butch haircuts too.

The intent of this paper is certainly not to validate or privilege one particular mode of lesbian self-presentation, style, or identity over another, but instead to analyze and question the possible implications and effects of how lesbians are visually packaged and presented throughout the first season of The L-Word. It is also perhaps important, at this point, to acknowledge the subversive and destabilizing potential of the feminine lesbian and, furthermore, to also acknowledge that inasmuch as there should be room for fluidity within the gender binary, there certainly could and should be similar fluidity of identity constructions around terms such as butch and femme. That said, however, in a visual analysis of lesbian representation on The L-Word, some troubling questions arise: Is there such a thing as a lesbian gaze, for example, and if so, is it (or should it be) synonymous with the straight male gaze? What's up with all the frilly lingerie? And are there really no butches in West Hollywood?

Viewing and voyeurism play a significant role during the first season of The L-Word and, indeed, the show seemingly attempts to distinguish between negative vs. positive modes of representation and viewing through framing the episodes with opening credit vignettes remotely linked to the main plots and depicting abject circumstances such as the exploitation of young women via lesbian pornography, lesbian self-denial and self-hatred, and homophobic discrimination or violence, among others. "We've come a long way, baby," the strategy of the opening credit vignettes seems to suggest. The enclosure of the episodes within these framing vignettes potentially does very interesting things: create a protective fold for a lesbian third space, for example, or provocatively implicate and involve the viewer as an active participant through the act of his/her viewing. At the same time, these cinematic gestures are simultaneously undermined by the fact that, visually speaking, the lesbian characters on the show have been coutured, coiffed, and co-opted in such a way as to invite and accommodate the phallocentric male gaze, as characterized by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). As a result, the vignettes ultimately seem to function as a signal that the episodes contained within are "the real deal"—thus intensifying the audience's voyeuristic relationship to these episodes via the implication that they are being allowed a titillating glimpse into a fictional "inner sanctum," so to speak, while also simultaneously reifying the fantasy that, at root, lesbianism functions performatively as a source of (male) visual pleasure. Indeed, with the recent installation of hidden spy cams in Shane and Jenny's apartment during the second season, this sense of performance and simulacra is even more eerily amplified. As acerbically noted by Scribe Grrl, who writes the hilarious episode recaps on AfterEllen.com, "We already know about the 'male gaze'—do they really have to explore it by making it a fucking character?"

Perhaps even more disturbing, the accommodation of this phallocentric male gaze is handled in such a way as to encourage the concomitant implication that the lesbians represented in the show are sexually available to men—men who, in true form to male pornographic fantasy, are routinely "invited" (an "invitation" that is thereby extended, by proxy, to the male television viewer) to "participate" in scenes of lesbian sex either as voyeurs, disruptive witnesses, or actual participants. Over and over again throughout the show, male figures are repeatedly insinuated into scenes of lesbian sex, creating a series of bizarre triangulations or threesomes. Jenny and Marina's lovemaking sessions throughout the entire first season, for example, are constantly disrupted by the arrival of Jenny's fiancé, Tim. Similarly, Shane and Sherry Jaffee are constantly interrupted by the arrival of Sherry Jaffee's husband. Thus, not only is lesbian sex rendered vulnerable and available to the male voyeur, but it is constantly interrupted, disrupted, or controlled through the insertion of these male voyeurs and/or would-be participants. Lesbian sex is relentlessly reduced either to a performance enacted for the pleasure of a male audience, or a threesome that requires the addition of a male character for "completion."

In The L-Word's opening representation of lesbian sex, for example, the character of Jenny (played by Mia Kirshner), at this stage a heterosexual, engaged woman, spies through the slats of her fence to voyeuristically watch two lesbians getting it on in her next-door neighbor's pool. The audience is thus implicated in a voyeuristic observation of lesbian sex, rendering the act of viewing as both titillating and taboo. Lesbian sex is triangulated from the outset, performed for sets of viewers; the camera cinematographically forces us to spy on the lovers through Jenny's point of view, and to also spy on Jenny spying on the lesbian lovers. Her presence insulates the audience from lesbian sex; we witness it as a performance on Jenny's behalf, reifying a gaze which is heterosexual, and which, elsewhere in the show, is clearly male. Fascinated and turned on by what she has seen, Jenny later describes the scene to her fiancé, Tim (played by Eric Mabius), and together they use the scene as fantasy fodder with which to fuel their own love-making.

In a similar fashion, the character of Slim Daddy (played by Snoop Dogg), the hip-hop artist who is producing and directing Kit's music video, repeatedly attempts to control and author Bette's lesbianism to conform to his male fantasies. After first meeting Bette, Slim Daddy lasciviously announces that he finds the fact that Bette is gay "sexy." He then goes on to leer at Bette and her sister Kit (played by Pam Grier) when they greet each other with a hug. In fact, inspired by Bette's lesbianism, he rewrites Kit's music video to include suggestive dance moves in which her back-up singers, clad in black leather, dry-hump her while she sings. He continues on in this manner by describing various fantasies in which Bette is coupled with other women—including not only Tina (played by Laurel Holloman), who is introduced to Slim Daddy as Bette's long-term partner, but also Candace, who has just been introduced to Bette at one of Kit's shows. Significantly, Bette does eventually wind up in an affair with Candace. Because they are framed by the camera lens at the time of their first meeting with Slim Daddy on Bette's left and Candace sitting just to her right, the viewer initially perceives them as a threesome, visually speaking, and Slim Daddy's presence continues to insinuate itself throughout their subsequent affair as the original author for the fantasy of their coupling.

In The L-Word, the participative role of male figures in lesbian sex scenes is not limited to passive voyeurism or the authoring of male fantasy, however. In a particularly strained narrative twist, for example, long-term lesbian partners Bette and Tina, who have been unsuccessfully trying to find a sperm donor, meet a young man at an event where Bette gives a lecture. Because both women agree that the man is cute, and because Tina is ovulating, the couple decide to take him home with them for a threesome, in the hopes that Tina will become impregnated. When the young man realizes that they're hoping to parlay the sexual encounter into a successful impregnation for Tina, though, he becomes offended and leaves. Thus, Bette and Tina, who represent the stable, long-term lesbian relationship throughout the first season of the show (indeed, they are on the verge of starting a family), are portrayed as sexually available to handsome young men in exchange for sperm. Moreover, the young man's presence is catalytic: even though their sex life is elsewhere portrayed as uninspiredly vanilla, with shades of lesbian bed death, they have passionate sex atop a grinding rock-and-roll soundtrack immediately following his departure.

Another symbolically resonant instance in which a male figure is invited to participate in lesbian sex occurs in a scene where Alice and Lisa, The Male Lesbian (played by Devon Gummersall) are making love. In this particular scene, Lisa, The Male Lesbian, introduces the presence of a third member, so to speak, into their love-making by pulling out a dildo and asking Alice for permission to use it on her. Alice renders lesbian sex as ancillary or performative, however, when she reshifts the dynamic of the threesome by requesting that Lisa make himself present in the love-making not as a male lesbian, but as a physical male. "You've got to be kidding," Alice crisply states. "You're a man." She rejects Lisa's offer of lesbian sex in favor of what she refers to as "the real thing." When Lisa, The Male Lesbian, proves recalcitrant, however, Alice coerces him into their lovemaking as a man, and not a lesbian, by initiating fellatio. Afterwards, Lisa, The Male Lesbian, feels violated by Alice's successful insinuation of a third male participant (i.e., Lisa, The Male Lesbian's penis) into their lesbian lovemaking, and breaks things off with Alice.

Another visually significant element of note in The L-Word is the occasionally bizarre and fetishistic costuming of the characters in frilly lingerie. When Sherry Jaffe first has sex with Shane, for example, she is costumed in a black lace brassiere, black thong, black thigh-high stockings with lace garters, and high heels. In a second sex scene between the characters, the camera closes in on a shot of Sherry's foot, drawing the viewer's gaze to the four-inch spike stilettos and black fishnets that she wears. Likewise, when Jenny and Marina are interrupted by Tim in Jenny's writing-studio, the viewer discovers Marina clad in a black lace brassiere and Jenny in a state of dishabille: her black tights down around her ankles, still wearing a black lace bra, with one strap provocatively sliding off her shoulder.

It is significant to note that this particular type of costuming is highly reminiscent of the cover art of lesbian pulp novels from the 1950's and 1960's. These illustrations frequently incorporated highly feminine undergarments, often in disarray, worn by women in stagey-looking provocative poses, with lurid-sounding titles in dramatic lettering. Such illustrations were designed to signify the taboo and perverse nature of lesbianism while simultaneously attracting potential readers to their suggestive images. While many novels were written by men under female pseudonyms and exclusively catered to the prurient interests of male readers, a number of these novels were, in fact, written by and for lesbians. Despite obligatory nods to the sensationalized formulas of the pulp genre, these novels were widely acknowledged as affirming and empowering to their devoted lesbian readership. Lesbian author Ann Bannon, author of the Beebo Brinker series, has observed that because of slippages between content and "packaging," such covers were often a huge disappointment to their authors. In the forward to Strange Sisters: The Art of Lesbian Pulp Fiction 1949-1969, Bannon writes:

> In fact, over the years as my own books were published, I looked in astonishment at the choices the editors and art directors had made. The books arrived in plain brown packets, for the very good reason that they were deliberately evocative of shady sex. With only small adjustments, and sometimes none at all, the young women I was looking at could easily have walked off those pulp covers and onto the pages of Harper's Bazaar to sell the "New Look." Many could have graced the ladies' undies section of the Sears, Roebuck catalog just as they were. In their various transformations, they bore scant

> resemblance to the girls I had written about . . . [m]y Beebo was tall, strong, handsome—and blue-jeaned . . . she would be tall and handsome . . . (11).

Instead, Beebo was represented as:

> [A] skinny, scared, adolescent girl with a page boy bob, wearing brown broughams and white bobby socks—a fusty fashion disaster, even by the teenage standards of that time. The figure stood under a street light in what passed for Greenwich Village, adopting the famous—even then—"debutante slouch," and looking for all the world like a kid who had come to make it as a fashion model, but who needed an industrial-strength makeover (11).

Tellingly, Bannon concludes:

> If I were young today, I would be tempted to pass judgment a bit unkindly on the covers of pulp fiction novels from the 1950s and 1960s. What were they thinking, those editors, artists, and authors, of that faraway era? This is false and misleading advertising. Were times really so bad that they couldn't strive for some semblance of honesty? (14)

The L-Word betrays a similar tension between content and "packaging." Even as its characters wrestle with real-world lesbian issues, they do so garbed, coiffed, and made-up in the guise of feminine, heterosexual women—thereby not only defusing any potential threat or disruption of the heterosexual status quo, but also reifying the representation of all women as existing under the purview of the scopophilic male gaze. Like the phenomenon of the "frilly lesbian" in popular women's magazines, as critiqued by Sherrie Inness in The Lesbian Menace, the representation of lesbians in The L-Word is calculated to reassure a heterosexual viewing audience that lesbians are, indeed, just like them. Inness writes, "Viewers are given a fantasy image of lesbians, which is as unrealistic as the image that all lesbians are ugly. Also, using models who look stereotypically heterosexual pretending to be lesbians provides titillation without threat as there is an implicit understanding that these are not 'real' lesbians" (65-66).

Along similar lines, this fantasy image of lesbians is further underscored by a notable paucity of visibly butch characters in the show. In this sense, The L-Word regresses to cinematic conventions governing lesbian representation throughout the 1980's, in which, as noted by Judith Halberstam, "the butch character is played as a shadow of her former self" (217). Halberstam, writing of the subversive potential of the butch lesbian in Female Masculinities, notes that, "[. . .] when and where female masculinity conjoins with possibly queer identities, it is far less likely to meet with approval. [. . .]female masculinity seems to be at its most threatening when coupled with lesbian desire [. . .] (28). Furthermore, regarding 1980's lesbian cinema, Halberstam states:

> The shades of butch are still readable (Patrice Donnelly as a jock, Mary Stuart Masterson as a rough-and-tumble southern dyke), but their embodiments are definitely feminized. Wherever a novel has been turned into a film (Fried Green Tomatoes, Desert of the

> Heart), the characters in the novels who were coded as butch have been noticeably softened into femmey butches or soft butches (217).

Halberstam goes on to assert that "the butch is a type of lesbian as well as a lesbian stereotype" (217). This erasure of the butch from 1980's lesbian cinema, Halberstam argues, seriously undermines lesbian visibility within these films—rendering lesbian erotic relationships as ambiguously submerged, or virtually indistinguishable from platonic friendship and thus invisible (as in the case of Fried Green Tomatoes) (220-221). It seems reasonable to argue that the similar lack of diversity in The L-Word, or this "softening" of lesbian representation into a lesbian community that seems (dubiously) constructed almost exclusively of feminine-presenting lesbians, also clearly functions as a means by which a visually identifiable lesbian identity is likewise rendered ambiguous, submerged, invisible, and ultimately non-threatening to heterosexual and/or male viewers.

Thus, in the end, while The L-Word teases and titillates, it does not quite "deliver." Just as it erases the word "lesbian" in the title, the show declines to produce visual images which might prove disquieting to a heterosexual and/or male audience, opting instead to pander to it. While media releases at the start of the first season celebrated the so-called "new" lesbians portrayed in the show ("[t]here are no plaid flannel shirts or fat, hairy women in sight," exultantly gushed reviewer Jacqueline Cutler in "The L Word Breaks Lesbian Ground"), perhaps one old stereotype has merely been replaced by another, even older, stereotype. In terms of packaging and visual representation, The L-Word's feminine lesbian appears to resurrect a male-constructed fantasy image of lesbians—one depicted in the cover art of 1950's lesbian pulp novels and in male pornography. "NOT YOUR MOTHER'S LESBIANS," the cover of New York Magazine pronounced in bold-face lettering on a modesty banner strung across the midriffs of naked cast members clad only in strappy high heels. Undoubtedly, they're not our mother's lesbians . . . whatever that means. But are they really ours, either?

Notes

[1] While this essay addresses lesbian portrayals in the first season of The L-Word only, subsequent seasons of the series have continued to showcase women actors who adhere to the standards set for feminine beauty, fashion, and in large measure feminine behavior. Masculine lesbians do appear in seasons two and three, but are eventually shown as uncomfortable with the inconsistency they feel to exist between their female bodies and the masculinity they perform.

Ivan Aycock, for example, who first appears in the season one finale as a lesbian drag king courting Bette Porter's sister, Kit, is shown as fully transgendered in season two, preparing to bind his breasts before setting out to work in his garage/body shop. In that season, however, Ivan seems to be trying to pass as a man rather than as a masculine lesbian; it is not even clear whether his other girlfriend, a showgirl who declares that lesbian hangouts are "not [my] scene," is aware of his physical sex. The entry of Moira/Max, a masculine transgendered lesbian in a relationship with Jenny in season 3, was initially very promising. As Max's hormonal treatment progresses, however, he becomes jealous, insensitive to Jenny's needs, and controlling. Since neither Ivan nor Max wishes to occupy a female body, when taken together the two characters imply that the term "lesbian masculinity" is oxymoronic; women who engage in masculine behavior seek to be men, or seek to be recognized as men rather than as lesbians. Thus even when it offers us masculine lesbian characters, The L-Word continues to undermine the concept of lesbian masculinity while perpetuating feminine stereotypes.

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