

The films of Barbara Hammer Counter-currencies of a lesbian iconography

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from *Jump Cut*, no. 24-25, March 1981, pp. 31-32

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Initially the lesbian body has no meaning. The presumption of difference is a cultural artifact, composed of signs and images that have been bartered for the meaning of a lesbian's experience and the use of her body. The currency for the most part has belonged to men, as has the exchange. The body named carried the burden of a language not its own and a shameful silence imposed by those who signified its meaning. Lesbian voices remained smothered by the many levels of meta-discourse, translation, explanation, diagnosis, and condemnation. Lesbian bodies remained stilled by the force of another discourse, which extracted, displayed, and ridiculed the unfathomable difference of lesbian desire. With the proliferation of psychoanalytic categories, the lesbian became a specimen of medical curiosity. Her crime against nature was translated into a new text of aberration and illness, but the intention of the text remained the same: denial and negation of the lesbian body.

The symbolic burial of the lesbian body has assumed many different forms, each with its own mode of cultural liquidation. This social oppression is transhistorical under patriarchy, but not ahistorical. It changes historically to fit the variety of father-tongues and the predominant modes of patriarchal hegemony belonging to various periods. Yet withstanding the immensity of repressive regimes, the "crime" of lesbianism remained restive and uncontained. It was cultured and nurtured in underground terrain belonging to women, protected by their mutual bonds of secrecy. For centuries lesbians in the underground of patriarchal society participated in their own signification. But the sign of the oppressor contained and contaminated both the means and meaning of the exchange between them. Depoliticized as an unusual personal event between women, lesbian

sexuality and its cultural expression remained a private affair.

With the politicization of lesbianism, the oppressive split between public and private spheres in a lesbian woman's life has been challenged. The lesbian body enters the public sphere under a new currency of signs which abrasively refuse misreading and invisibility. A cultural reconstruction of the lesbian body is in the making in the counter-currencies of exchange that belong to lesbian feminist culture. These counter-currencies provide the basis for a new lesbian feminist aesthetic which reflects the transition in a lesbian's life. In her personal revealing to others, her movement from invisibility to visibility, her passage from shame to self respect, her freedom from sexual straight-jacketing to more imaginative ways of relating to herself and other women, in her discovery of woman-bonded eroticism and love, a lesbian woman struggles daily against the confines of male hegemony. She is a woman consciously engaged in the process of creative healing through separation⁽¹⁾. She is healing the fragmentation of her life and body by separating herself from the definitions, boundaries and images forced upon her in the form of compulsory heterosexuality, patriarchal marriage, sacrificial motherhood, and benign daughterhood. This separation, both personal and universal to every lesbian feminist, is the key to the perception and sensitivity that characterizes a new lesbian aesthetic.

The pilot image of the new counter-currencies is the lesbian body, renamed and revealed by a new set of meanings and inscriptions created by women and belonging to women, as does the body itself. The meanings generated by the counter-currency of lesbian culture are acts of symbolic sabotage, designed to block the lies and extortions carried by the old currency, and also a creative exploration of lesbian experience in ways that will redefine the public and private contours of a lesbian woman's life. It is a body reconstructed that refuses to be punished for its sexuality, and a politic reconceived that has named the intentions of those who will to punish.

Much of the work of lesbian-identified filmmakers⁽²⁾ reflects the influence and further articulation of the new lesbian aesthetic. In one sense, the theme of revealing and re-seeing lesbian experience is a subject matter ideally fit for cinematic media. But difficulty arises in the effort to reveal difference and alterity where the dullness of habitual ways of seeing arrests our visual and erotic imagination. The work of lesbian filmmaker Barbara Hammer provides an excellent case study of a woman artist struggling to redefine the medium in a form and content commensurate with the requirements of a new lesbian film aesthetic. Central to her work is the development of a new iconography for the lesbian body, an iconography designed to carry the spectator into forbidden and revelatory terrain. The task is a delicate one, since the difference in sensibility and visualization can all too easily fade into

slogans and formulae of ideological alienation or lead into the last frontier of marketable counter-realities. So far Barbara has skirted the two aesthetic disasters with the agility and talent of a true craftswoman. Understanding her work's reception and revolutionary potential involves a detailed analysis of various themes common to her completed works and an appreciation of how these themes fit into the context of a lesbian film aesthetic.⁽³⁾ Any other treatment of her work would miss the historic and cultural specificity of the new filmic iconography and its influence on the lives of lesbian women and others sufficiently empathetic to disband their cultural disbelief.

HEROIC INTROVERSION

As with most experimental and avant-garde filmmaking in this country, feminist filmmaking has confronted the problems of minimal funding and small but appreciative audiences. An aesthetic of frugality has developed around subject matter easily accessible to feminist filmmakers — personal life and political documentation. In the case of Barbara Hammer, neither the operatic confessionals of personal life nor the "talking heads" of political documentary caught her visionary attention. It was the body, its biography and desire, and inner psychic space that incited her imagination. Her exploration turned inwards, in an attempt to disrobe herself of the false imagery of patriarchal femininity and to put in its place the heroic imagery of lesbian personal truth.

It is this kind of radical sincerity that is the hallmark of a new lesbian film aesthetic — a sincerity that places personal lesbian experience in higher esteem than the pretended truth of objective documentaries.⁽⁴⁾ In Barbara's work this sincerity is at once particular and universal, an effect that results from her iconic and symbolic use of the lesbian body, usually her own, and her poetic documentation of personal experience. The images enable us to escape the specificity of confessional work, where a particular character names a particular truth. Instead we are invited to partake in the odyssey of one lesbian body expressing a universality common to life in a lesbian body. The effect is political rather than atomistic. The piercing nature of her images force the viewer to move beyond habitual ways of seeing, feeling and desiring, and to explore the possibility of another form of life, unencumbered by misrepresentation and misunderstanding. If we are at times jarred by the explicit and primitive beauty of Barbara's images, these may be only the initial steps in learning how to reject the duplicity and deceit of a safe but invisible life. Barbara's films clearly represent a lesbian body in the making.

Barbara attributes her unique cinematic style in part to filmmaker Maya Deren. Barbara had this to say of her first experience of Maya's work:

"I hadn't seen film that I identified with until I saw Maya Deren's *MESHES IN THE AFTERNOON*, and then I felt I had discovered the mother of American experimental film. She was working in a genre not often seen. It was like reading a poem in cinema, rather than a story or novel, which is what comes out of Hollywood. She was a great symbolist, who for the first time looked at the complexities of the female psyche, discovered the many inner selves of the feminine personality, and tried to project them into images."[\(5\)](#)

Barbara's eager adoption of the personal poetic genre came at a time in her life when her own inner psyche was beginning to disown the emblems and symbols of "straight" life.[\(6\)](#) Her discovery of lesbianism became an inward journey, with images of splitting, splintering, and shedding finding easy entrance into her early films. The sense of having discovered something more universal than herself transformed this experience into a poetic and timeless event. As she says,

"The time in my dreams seems to be a time that can jump back and forth into past and future, time that is not chronologically sequential but emotionally, or symbolically, sequential, much like the illuminated moments held together by emotional integrity. One scene may be totally unrelated to another but in fact is emotionally related and so time related, if we can enlarge the word 'time' to encompass a feeling image that connects with other feeling images and is a particular way of experiencing the world."[\(7\)](#)

Although Barbara's work falls into the strong tradition of psychodrama still prevalent among California filmmakers,[\(8\)](#) her work retains unique qualities that set her apart from others belonging to the psychodramatic tradition. Most notably her use of lesbian iconography is distinctly her own. The development of this iconography in her work is interesting to follow, as the process of heroic introversion, the process of turning away and turning out to the world, is precisely a search for the iconic self as represented through the lesbian body. This body must somehow transcribe its cultural devaluation and denial into a new affirmation of self and sexuality. It is not surprising that Barbara's first films are reactive and angry — a composition that belongs to the initial stages of separation from patriarchy. This process reaches a sense of resolution in Barbara's early trilogy of films, *I WAS/I AM*, *X*, and *PSYCHOSYNTHESIS*, where the transition from anger directed outwards is reconceived as a synthesis of selves collaged in the symbolism of Jungian archetypes.[\(9\)](#)

The first film of the trilogy, *I WAS/I AM*, is almost entirely reactive. The anger remains adolescent and retaliatory. Barbara's use of the personal poetic genre, though experimental and tentative, becomes a

device for exploring the psychic underside, the reality which is breaking away from the pain and oppression of the pseudo-reality lived on the surface. I WAS/I AM combines the pain of Barbara's mother's dying, the struggle of her being a film student who is the only woman in her class, and a true incident of her being hit by a sniper's BB and then denied treatment at the medical center because she was a woman — who might complain if treatment left a scar. The overall surrealistic effect, shot in black and white and collaged against the normal sense of space and time, is promising but amateurish.

The second film, X, conveys a bitterness that is metallic and brilliant. The soundtrack is a series of simple proclamations:

"This is my exhibitionism. This is my comfort. This is my anger. This is my transportation. This is my pain. This is my mother. These are the children I'm happy not to have. This is my childhood. This is my pain."

One stunning scene has Barbara masturbating just behind a typical ranch-style picture window, richly framed by houseplants and the reflected colors of the lawn from the outside. Passively the spectators on the sidewalk, the mother and the children she-is-happy-not-to-have, stare empty-eyed at the spectacle of exotic exhibitionism. Barbara's emphasis is on taking back the self, renaming her self, re-claiming her emotions as her own, and projecting, defining and containing her new self in a medium that is becoming part of her own self-creation. As Barbara describes it,

"In many ways the trilogy films are the most satisfying films I've ever made. I'm vulnerable in them. I did them without questioning. I became frightened of my own images, but with a leap of faith committed myself to them. Even today when I look at these early films I feel terribly vulnerable."

The final film of the trilogy, PSYCHOSYNTHESIS, visually the most polished of the three, organizes and condenses the psychic anger and misery of the first two films. It is a film rich in feminine landscaping and metaphors, in a fluid style, fast-flowing with overlaps, dissolves, and superimposed images. It is a journey into the inner psyche, projected in the four images of an infant, a witch, an athlete, and a filmmaker. It's an exploration of conflict. The film is aggressive and flaunting, in the haunting laughter that underlines the grotesque images portraying her parents' expectations and in the ground-war offensive as Barbara's camera shoots the costumes of her many selves hanging on a clothesline. These images project the splinters of a fragmented psyche caught in a chaotic phase of life. Suddenly at the end of the film, we are transported into an altogether new tranquility and peace. The soundtrack falls into silence. The camera zooms in on the bark of a tree, which is gently peeled back, and then reveals a pink

rosette stone half hidden in the dark green foliage of the forest floor. The final images constitute being delivered to nature. The metaphors of peeling and revealing characterize a new inner serenity; the personal frenzy has modulated into an inquiry into self and its place in the natural world. Barbara in the personage of filmmaker becomes the synthesizing agent.

The early trilogy films express an anger and retaliation which is missing from Barbara's later work. *SUPERDYKE* and *MENSES* are humorous, even satirical overturnings of patriarchal expectations and taboos. *DOUBLE STRENGTH*, *WOMEN I LOVE*, *AVAILABLE SPACE* and *MOON GODDESS* are lyrical portrayals of the personal, intimate moments in Barbara's life, sometimes using rituals to formalize content and at other times simply delighting in the play of color and emotions that spill over the bodies of women loving women. I asked Barbara about her reaction to the criticism of escapism often leveled against her work. The absence of women on the line, on strike, or in the kitchen is seen by her critics as a denial of confrontation and struggle, as an apolitical pacification of the conflicts in lesbian daily life, in short as an utopian cop-out. She responded,

"My films are often called visionary, but I am not a visionary. I am living my lesbian life. I'm not waiting. My life today is my vision. By documenting what others would call visionary, what I would call "actionary," I hope to spark the imagination of the audience. It is a way of keeping us alive and giving us strength to see what is possible. To live a lesbian life, to make it real, to validate it in film, is a revolutionary act."

To which I will only add, any revolution without poetry is a revolution foresworn to a narrowly-defined materialist doctrine of scarcity and neglectful of the inner resources that strengthen and enrich a many-sided sensibility.

The lesbian body that pervades Barbara's work has also been criticized by some for its impersonal and egoistic nature. Her poetic documentation of personal experience focuses on the sexuality and sensuality of the body to the exclusion of a stronger and more intimate development of character and personal nurturing. This I perceive is one of the perils of Barbara's iconic use of the lesbian body. The separation of universalizing iconic imagery from the soap-opera vignettes of personal life may result in an abstraction that mimics the male separation of sexuality from intimacy, but Barbara's imagery is meant to bracket a different kind of meaning. By abstracting the lesbian body from its pact with personal life, the images enable us to explore in a fresh manner new boundaries of sexual intimacy and sensual experience. The grids used to create a new meaning for such a body are many. In Barbara's early work the metaphors of Jungian archetypes

seem to predominate; in her later work more original ideas of nature, taboo and the goddess motif take over. In all cases a new layer of meaning and value is being translated into lesbian experience. And with it flow the symbolic counter-currencies belonging to new chains of metaphor and resemblance. Heroic introversion becomes a transvaluation of the lesbian body.

EROTIC COUNTER-REALITIES

From a patriarchal viewpoint the lesbian is doubly insurrectionary. Her desire to share her body sexually and exclusively with women breaks two taboos of patriarchal heterosexuality — that of saying no to a man and no to all men. Although this double social insurrection is the source of radical hope for the new lesbian culture, it has also defined the lesbian as an easy target for patriarchal malice. Whether in the cultural form of "the witch" or the macho-projection of "the butch," the images forced-upon us belong to a patriarchal iconography which in effect denies the active presence of women to one another or "the possibility of life between us."[\(10\)](#) As Mary Daly suggested in *Beyond God the Father*, strong images of women wholly present to each other are perceived by the male eye as the threat of abandonment:

"For those who are thus threatened, the presence of women to each other is experienced as an absence. Such women are no longer empty receptacles to be used as 'the Other,' and are no longer internalizing the projections that cut off the flow of being. Men who need such projection screens experience the power of absence of such 'objects' and are thrown into the situation of perceiving nothingness."[\(11\)](#)

The heterosexual male's anxiety over this absence is reflected in male pornography about lesbians. In such films, the lesbian is either powerless or totally perverse.[\(12\)](#) In the first case, she is safely framed within a context of male domination — a master organizes and thereby permits her activities solely to stimulate the male-identified audience.[\(13\)](#) In the second case, she is criminal, inhumane, diseased, and perverse, with an otherness that deserves punishment or annihilation.[\(14\)](#) The male eye sees a woman loving another woman simply as a woman without a man, either a victim to be pitied or a criminal to be punished or ridiculed.

It is no wonder then that men are often antagonistic to lesbian-identified films, designed in form and content to transcend the false image of woman as an "object" to be seen, touched, and sexually consummated only in the presence of a male. Barbara discusses men's reactions to her films:

"Men in general find my films narcissistic and self-indulgent, while women tend to see my images as self-expressive. The difference is important. I feel it's essential

for me to be a lesbian egoist. I want to celebrate the lesbian femininity which has been kept invisible for all these centuries. Feminist egoism includes a compassion for others; it involves looking into the self to feel empathy with other women. Feminist egoism is a way of seeing others, of feeling compassion, nurturing, communicating, and sharing intimacy with others. I think what women find in my films is a mutuality of feeling. Women often come up to me after a film performance and say that they've had the same feelings or that my images have touched an experience close to them. It's then that I feel an intimate moment — a highly personal truth — has made a full circle, that I have communicated."

The lesbian body in Barbara's films is evocative and erotic, not at all pornographic. The difference comes in the way the bodies of women are displayed in contexts of love and care and the gentle, nonaggressive relations of the camera to the women being filmed. The only other film I have seen that comes close to the explicit authentic eroticism of Barbara's work is Constance Beeson's *HOLDING*, a film in which two women lovers are filmed making love without direction from the filmmaker. Beeson's use of the distant "objective" camera, however, fails to collapse the voyeuristic alienation between the spectator and the event. In *HOLDING* a static camera dominates, the actions become mechanical and mute, the collages kitschy, and the eroticism reduced to "getting the orgasm." Barbara's sense of the erotic is much more inclusive. There is no sense of exploiting the bodies of other women in Barbara's films. The camera does not command, intrude or dominate. Nor does it proselytize. Barbara's sensitivity to the lesbian body is exploratory and playful. She is not saying this is the only possible way of life; rather this is one possibility that could explode into many.

WOMEN I LOVE brings to full strength the maturing skills of Barbara's talents. It is a poetic album of lovers, each distinct and exotic, defined by the fleeting colors, the nuances of light, and the secrets of intimate moments left unspoken by the passing camera. The multiplication of surprise in fantasies and memories interwoven with emblematic tokens of lesbian eroticism is almost perfect, except for the last portrayal where the intensity of the relationship somehow collapses. Throughout the film the camera is again stroking, erotically aggressive and playful in an endearing way. In the background the soundtrack chants the sounds of nature.

Two of Barbara's more outstanding lovemaking scenes occur in *DYKETACTICS* and *WOMEN I LOVE*. They are characterized by the presence of Barbara herself as a participant, not as *voyeuse*. This gives the camera itself an altogether different role. Instead of being used to gaze upon the spectacle, it seems to be part of the action, used to

capture a loving intimacy by connecting with it and completing its fleeting and primitive pleasure. Unlike the distant, objective camera in *HOLDING*, which still maintains control over its subject matter while appearing to be unobtrusive, Barbara's camera is subjective. It participates as does the filmmaker in an orchestrated event between two bodies and a camera. She describes her attitude toward erotic art:

"The problem for me is how to take the camera to bed without objectifying the erotic experience, how to make the camera a sexual additive, how to make it an extension of my personality. How can I break through the conventional patterns of perception to capture my sense of intimacy, put that feeling evoked in me into images, and externalize the internal feeling that is truth in its deepest sense?"

One of Barbara's most beautiful films on personal relationships is *DOUBLE STRENGTH*, a film she made in 1978 with trapeze artist Terry Sendgraff. Like Gloria Churchman in *MOON GODDESS*, Barbara's lover becomes the maternal muse, this time a body both sensuous and sinuous, shot swinging in the nude from various angles and in various compositions. The result is at times entrancing. The poetry of Barbara's images carries us through the duration of a relationship: its intensely erotic beginnings, its sense of serenity, its playfulness and comedy, and its closure — the alienation, pain, anger, and loss of contact. The death of the body, a theme tenderly interwoven into the ageless strength and agility of Terry Sendgraff's body, becomes the death of a relationship, a closing out, a blanking out, a leaving of the body behind. The body becomes a source of life. Its movement, grace, pain and happiness are contrasted with the inertness of things and the stillness of photos that merely document the brief passage of light.

There is, of course, an interesting aesthetic and philosophical problem involved in the film genre of poetic body-biography. This is the problem of how to document one's personal life so as to capture the more universalizing moments without destroying the authenticity or simplicity of feeling and gesture. We are accustomed to men obsessed with phallic introversion. We are accustomed to men filming the female body. We find it unexpected that women would turn the camera on themselves and their love-making. It is perhaps for this reason that the camera's presence is felt to be a problem, a problem of capturing the fleeting moment of authentic lesbian eroticism while refusing to dovetail with narcissism or dramatic exhibitionism.

The camera's intrusion into any event cannot be denied. Its intrusion changes the event. Glimpses into personal life seem to be transformed into filmic performances, which sever the image from the reality of the intimacy being expressed. Barbara, aware of this danger and yet wanting to make the camera the eye of her personal experience, dismisses the difficulty by saying that most of her filmed relationships

have been with artists, who felt comfortable with the medium.

There is still something puzzling about this. It seems to take a different kind of courage to turn the camera on the intimate and vulnerable moments of one's love life than to write a poem about it. Such courage, even with a pair of artists, can be easily flawed by the blindness of self-indulgence, as if every aspect of such a relationship would be of interest to the audience. The cinematic value of such acts can be easily eclipsed by the fact that one is breaking taboos of silence and darkness.

SUPERDYKE MEETS MADAME X, a film made together with video-artist Max Almy, is flawed in this way. The audience is obliged to witness. Too much is being done for the sake of the media used, a combination of film and video. Barbara's desire to use her body and personal life to provide a universal expression of the lesbian body, an idea that finds its counterpart in the French *l'écriture féminine*,⁽¹⁵⁾ gives way to the technical interests of the two artists. Our interest as a general audience begins to flag. It feels like a bluff.

Both *DOUBLE STRENGTH* and *MOON GODDESS*, also films made with lovers who were artists, are not so apparently flawed, although the tension still remains. The happy side of this tension hints of a more revolutionary aspect in Barbara's filmmaking — her interest in overcoming the sensual and erotic alienation that exists between women.

BODY RITUAL AND TABOO

An important part of the social production of gender and its erotic expression are the cultural grids of myth, ritual, taboo, and coercion that belong to the sex-economy and to accepted ways of making experience intelligible and consistent. To challenge these symbolic structures and the social modes of coercion that have always kept "woman" in her place is central to the new lesbian cultural movement. In its place a new kind of mythic and collective imagery will be developed, and with it, the body's rituals and rites of passage will change in meaning.

In Barbara's films the presence of patriarchy has been negated, at least to a large extent. The normal forms of coercion that impinge on our womanly existence, the excessive energy given over to defense and caution, and the terror of being different are no longer there. The rituals that punctuate a woman's heterosexual biography and her rites of passage through patriarchy have vanished. The taboos that have separated and alienated women one from another are no longer operative. The myth of the God-figure and Phallus have been erased. The habits ingrained through repetition, history, and convention have lost their way. In their place, the search for new rituals and mythologies becomes part of the reconstitution of self in the world.

To invert the cultural negations and denials attached to the lesbian body seems the first task at hand. There are two obvious possibilities. The body that has been historically defiled and abhorred can become purified, sanctified, and turned into an object of worship. Or the body that has become denigrated as unnatural and sick can be "naturalized" and normalized to fit more intimately into the rhythms of Nature. Goddess imagery and symbols of Mother Nature become respectively sources of new ritual and rule. Both of these tendencies are present in Barbara's films. The intention is to fill the void left by the negation of patriarchy, and further, to grasp onto a meaning that is surely our win. As Jeffner Allen writes,

"Exploration of goddess mythology is helpful in understanding the situation of myself and other women. It is I who explore the records of the goddess with my own eyes, speak about it with my own voice, and listen to others speak about it with my own ears — that is, insofar as I can call anything my 'own' while in the midst of patriarchal culture. In all these ways, myths of the goddess may contribute to my taking of power from men and my development of power within the many aspects of my life. What seems most important of all: exploration of the myths concerning the goddesses need not have anything at all to do with Goddess worship."[\(16\)](#)

It is in this sense that goddess imagery and ritual and the transference of mythic sense of nature can be used to reconceive the lesbian body. Symbolically the two can be creatively merged without reproducing the errors of patriarchal religion and its authoritarian hold on the body. The translation of the metaphors of illness and healing into spiritual and sensual metaphors becomes a way of mending the mind/body dualism that has fostered and rigidified the interests of patriarchy. This must be said with an air of caution, since the dangers of this kind of signification are obvious enough.

In Barbara's later work the sense of ritual is employed to break the fix of patriarchal mythology. These rituals are used to dislodge institutionalized habits of perception that focus on the differences separating women and to create alternative habitats and rituals for the female body. When effectively used, the sense of ritual can carry our perception and sensibility beyond the mundane and into an imaginary, timeless and connected universe. The sense of vision makes return a difficult maneuver. We sense that there is more to life than it actually offers. The sense of ritual is, however, precarious, since it all too easily gives way to unreflective and dogmatic modes of repetition, complacent with their timelessness and certainty. There is, however, a feeling of serenity and completeness attached to ritual which makes it seductive and pleasing. This experience begins to emerge in the last part of

Barbara's film SUPERDYKE, in which a group of naked women traverse a meadow, linked hand in hand. The images are of individual women, striking in their diversity of size, shape and age, but unified by the commonality of rituals and shared experience.

In MOON GODDESS (17) rituals are used to externalize a metaphysic of feeling. The relationship between Barbara and design artist Gloria Churchman is sensually inscribed in their odyssey into Death Valley. The film opens in an arid, hostile desert which is transformed into warmth, fluidity, color and life by the artistic quest of the women. The basic elements of nature, earth, water, fire, and emancipating space, become the material stuff for this artistic quest. Their aesthetic transformation of the natural world is gentle, feminine, and non-aggressive. Close-ups of Gloria Churchman's weathered and experienced face, a beautiful shot of her naked body kneeling before the empty expanse, a sequence showing her triumphant bare-breasted climb up a rocky hillside are used to give a sense of the power and sensual beauty in a woman's body. Her hands caress the earth, skillfully making patterns out of what is there. The filmmaker herself is seen as a follower, breaking out of the darkness, symbolized by a blindfold, and joining in the ritualistic play with her maternal muse.

Another challenge to the ordinary ways of seeing is Barbara's satire and humor. Two of her most delightful films, always a great success with lesbian audiences, are SUPERDYKE and MENSES, both of which demystify society's taboos and stereotypes through humor. MENSES is an immediate, collective, and playful treatment of taboo. It deals with menstruation, not in cultish solemnity, but with a group of women, each acting out her favorite fantasy of the monthly event. Barbara describes the filming as follows:

"Each woman planned her own interpretation of rage, chagrin, humor, pathos — whatever menses meant to her within the overall satiric and painted nature of film. Each woman was part of me. It was not necessary that my particular body and face be screen present. They acted out for me for themselves, a personal expression of bodily female function." (18)

SUPERDYKE, in contrast, is about a troop of shield-bearing Amazons rampaging through San Francisco, attacking City Hall, Macy's Department Store, the Erotic Art Museum, a playground, and a coffeehouse, before returning triumphantly to the country. These films are fun — a collective laugh at the staid institutions and taboos meant to contain and incapacitate women.

Taboos are not only dealt with lightly however. As Freud suggested in *Totem and Taboo*, taboo is most intimately connected with touching. Barbara's films sometimes reflect a radical inversion of attitudes

toward the forbidden. The masturbation scene in X, the intimacy of MULTIPLE ORGASMS, the numerous images of vaginal openings, clitori, and oral pleasure are meant to convey the overwhelming message that women have the power to touch themselves and other women who are drawn to them. Of DYKETACTICS, a collage of 110 images in four minutes, Barbara comments,

"Every image has touch in it. It is this tactile quality, a sensuality with sex and not sex without sensuality, that is essential to any lesbian aesthetic."

Likewise, Barbara's relationship to filming is visceral, tactile, and sensual:

"When I am making a film my body tells me how to shoot or how to edit. I work with a kinesthetic feeling rather than an a-priori plan when it comes to the way I want to express myself with the camera. The person I love is a woman, with a form similar to my own. If I am filming her, the reflection that comes back to me is another reflection of my own form."

LESBIAN NATURES

Just as the spiritual side of lesbianism is one mode of counter-currency present in the new lesbian cultural movement, so the material side seeks its exuberance and legitimation in the world of nature. It is here that Barbara is most at home. Images of nature proliferate in her work, most with the effect of fitting the lesbian body into a libidinal flow of life, in its coming and going. There is no beyond, except the beyond of lesbian experience that retires from the battle against nature and builds an existence connected and at peace with its participation in nature. It is this naturalization of the lesbian body that is perhaps the most difficult task for a new lesbian iconography. The lesbian body refuses to be punished for its sexuality; the punishment is perceived as unnatural. The lesbian body refuses to be punished for its sexual disobedience to the patriarchy; obedience is presumed to be unnatural. The metaphors of nature can thus be effectively used to convey an insight into the strangeness of homosexual life and its historical predication on violence and hatred against women. The shift in perspective, however, is difficult to achieve. This is because of the role that nature has symbolized in mythologies and ideologies oppressive to the interests of all women.[\(19\)](#)

There is a tendency to deny the special oppression of women by perceiving the relation between the sexes as a natural relation. Biological reproduction seems to "naturalize" the social meaning of heterosexuality. It is this naturalization of a social imbalance of power that is radically challenged by the lesbian cultural movement. The

iconography of *the lesbian body* celebrates both difference and identity, plurality and isolation, nurturing and autonomy. Its liberating influence, as a countervailing force to the confining iconography of the patriarchy, should be contrasted with Monique Wittig's recent criticism of what she perceives to be the new cultism:

"A materialist feminist approach shows that what we take for the cause or origin of oppression is only the *mark* imposed by the oppressor: the myth of woman plus its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women. Thus, the mark does not pre-exist oppression ... As Andrea Dworkin emphasizes, many lesbians recently 'have increasingly tried to transform the very ideology that has enslaved us into a dynamic, religious, psychologically compelling celebration of female biological potentials.' Thus, some avenues of the feminist and lesbian movement lead us back to the myth of women which was created by men especially for us, and with it we sink back into a natural group."[\(20\)](#)

The challenge of the new lesbian aesthetic is to recognize what Wittig has called *the mark*, to see it for what it is, and to celebrate its strengths while exorcising its flaws. This can be done without ontologizing a cultural artifact.[\(21\)](#) For lesbian feminists this entails a struggle to redefine how the female body has been seen and how the lesbian body has not been seen. Male iconography of the female body has given selective attention and glorification to aspects of the female body designed to fit the needs of heterosexual males. Seeing what is feminine is done against the empowering iconography of "the phallus."[\(22\)](#)

It is only in opposition to the male phallus and patriarchal mind that women have been defined as part of nature. Our task in history has been to nurture and give to life. The cultural text of woman's nature and anatomical destiny was sufficient to answer our needs. Woman's body assumed the status of resource, much as the rest of nature, to be exploited and used as part of another, patriarchal, historical drama. The lesbian woman did not fit. As such, she assumed all varieties of artificiality, morbidity, and evil. Our mutual presence to one another would not be seen.

In a larger sense, the task of a new lesbian aesthetic is to help in the liberation of female sexuality from *the marks* that have defined it.[\(23\)](#) To break through the male iconography of the lesbian body is to de-objectify "the natural." This dialectical movement of consciousness is part of the dialectic of any materialist revolution, here as described by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*:

"The definite conditions under which they [definite

individuals] produce, thus corresponds, as long as the contradiction has not yet appeared, to the reality of their conditioned nature, their one-sidedness, the one-sidedness which only becomes evident when the contradiction enters on the scene and thus only exists in later individuals. Then this condition appears as an accidental fetter, and the consciousness that is a fetter is imputed to the earlier age as well."[\(24\)](#)

For the lesbian feminist struggle the recognition that images as well as words are just as much material objects as weapons and private property, used in the institutions that contain and enslave us, is an important part in redefining the materialist substratum of revolutionary praxis. To remove *the marks*, to reweave the semantics of seeing and thinking, becomes part of overcoming the one-sidedness of our "natural being and liberating our possibilities. It leads to a politics of bodily insurrection.

Care, however, must be taken in glorifying what is natural in the impulses and dispositions of the lesbian body. "The natural" is an oppositional term that is a countervalue against something else. Often what we take to be nature is only "natural" in its apparent immediacy. It stands in contrast to what is artifactual and mediated. This would hold true of the patriarchal signification of the female body, in which cultural mediation and production of the sex division of the erotic is masked by the mythology of "naturalized" heterosexual eroticism. In developing a new lesbian iconography, one runs the risk of replicating the same static dualism. The artifactual production of the existing lesbian body is denied and its natural impunity glorified. Difference assumes the necessity of nature. The sources of lesbian oppression remain obscured by the spiritualization and naturalization of her body. The breaking of taboo is rendered a metaphysical exercise — a burial for lesbians only.

The problems at hand in the creation of a new lesbian iconography are challenging. The lesbian body is already a victim of violence and oppression. The problem becomes one of how to create a new iconography for the lesbian body without glorifying the injuries of sexual oppression or obscuring the damage already done. Violence against lesbians is exercised in all classes of society. Differences exist to be sure. These differences are both obscured and highlighted by the image of a lesbian body which seems to belong to no special class, race or culture. In emphasizing the naturalness or the goodness of such a body, the universality of lesbian oppression becomes visible, while its specific forms are only dimly seen. Clearly, the future dialectic of a new lesbian aesthetic rests in this unresolved tension between identity and difference.

Notes

- [1.](#) For analysis of the theme of separation and separatism as part of the definition of feminism, see Marilyn Frye, "Some Thoughts on Separatism and Power," *Sinister Wisdom*, 6, Summer 1978.
- [2.](#) There are at least three.
- [3.](#) The role of the feminist film critic thus becomes one of recognizing establishing "the validity of collective subjective reaction and its use as a reliable measuring tool, no more biased than existing standards and perhaps more to the point." Michelle Citron, 'Feminist Criticism: What It Is Now; What It Must Become,' *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 6, Fall 1972.
- [4.](#) The feminist cultural movement has of course appropriated the documentary form for its own use, as can be seen in the documentaries that populated the culture in the 70s, during the CR phase of the movement. (See Julia Lesage, "Aesthetics of Feminist Documentary Film," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Fall 1978). The difference I am interested in pertains to the contrast between documented lesbian daily life, as in *IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILDREN*, and Barbara's highly personal expressive style, which in its most personal form validates a shared subjective sense of lesbian intimacy and loving. Such films do not really require "objective interviews" or "talking heads" to substantiate a personal truth that speaks immediately to every lesbian's experience.
- [5.](#) This quote from Barbara and others used in this article, unless referenced otherwise, were taken from taped interviews with Barbara during last year's St. Louis Women's Film Festival, March 1979, sponsored by the Women's Programming Board on the Washington University campus.
- [6.](#) In 1968 Barbara gave up her career in psychology and her marriage. She left with her lesbian lover for a motorcycle trip through Africa and returned to the United States in 1972, carried by her commitment to begin a film career. She enrolled in the film and production program at San Francisco State. She has 20 films in current distribution, available from Goddess Films (P.O. Box 2446, Berkeley, CA 94702) and Iris Films (P.O. Box 5353, Berkeley, CA 97405).
- [7.](#) Barbara Hammer, "Use of Time in Women's Cinema," *Heresies* (special issue: Lesbian Art and Artists), Fall 1979, p. 86.
- [8.](#) This tradition includes James Broughton, Sidney Peterson, Curtis Harrington, Gunvor Nelson, Dorothy Wiley, Freude Bartlett and others. Striking similarities can also be seen between the work of Kenneth Anger and Barbara's films, which share in common a fascination for costume, myth, and ritual. In male homosexual film, the work of Gregory Markopoulos, like Barbara's, focuses on the themes of

homosexual love, nature, and mythology. What distinguishes Barbara from this context of California-style filmmaking is her obsession with the iconography and biography of the lesbian body.

[9.](#) For analysis of film along these lines see Diane Nelson, "Imagery of the Archetypal Feminine in the Works of Six Women Filmmakers," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Fall 1978.

[10.](#) Adrienne Rich, "Notes on Honor and Lying," *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 194.

[11.](#) Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), pp. 41-2.

[12.](#) Caroline Sheldon, "Lesbians and Film: Some Thoughts," *Gays and Film*, ed. Richard Dyer (London: BFI, 1977); see also Dyer, "Stereotyping," *ibid.*

[13.](#) Example, *EMMANUELLE*, 1974, Fr. (Jaecklin).

[14.](#) Examples, *THE CONFORMIST*, 1969, It. (Bertolucci); *THE SILENCE*, 1962, Swed. (Bergman); *THE BITTER TEARS OF PETRA VON KANT*, 1972, Ger. (Fassbinder).

[15.](#) Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body* (New York: Avon, 1975); Wittig, *Les Guérillères* (New York: Avon, 1973); A. Leclerc, *Parole de Femme* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1974).

[16.](#) Jeffner Allen, *Why Women Don't Need the Goddess* (unpublished manuscript in letter form) by Allen and Zita.

[17.](#) Barbara is also interested in breaking the rituals of spectatorship. Her personal performance, anti-gallery showings involve audience participation and a variety of projection arrangements. At her film performance in St. Louis, *MOON GODDESS* was shown on a five-foot balloon suspended from the ceiling. The theatre-in-the-round effect created many double perspectives which the audience could view while moving around the room. Barbara has also used the audience to participate in the soundtrack of her films. Her film performances usually involve post-screening discussion as part of the collective event. All of this helps her audiences create an appreciation for film that differs from its normal commodification as entertainment with popcorn.

[18.](#) Hammer, "Use of Time," p. 89.

[19.](#) For an excellent discussion on "Back to Nature" themes in advertising, see Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements* (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1978), esp. pp. 122-137.

[20.](#) Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman," paper presented at

"Second Sex — Thirty Years Later: A Commemorative Conference on Feminist Theory," Sept. 1979, New York University.

[21.](#) The problem of redefining "woman" belongs to a more general feminist aesthetics and philosophy. For a philosophical treatment of this, see Joyce Trebilcot, "Conceiving Women: Notes on the Logic of Feminism," *Sinister Wisdom*, No. 11, pp. 43-50.

[22.](#) For discussion on the symbolic value of the "phallus", see Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).

[23.](#) For discussion on these points, see Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen*, 16, No. 3 (Autumn 1975); and Christine Gledhill, "Recent Developments in Feminist Criticism," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Fall 1978.

[24.](#) Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishing, 1947). p. 71.

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