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Women I Love. Double Strength Lesbian cinema and romantic love

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Barbara Hammer and her work have contributed significantly to the growing field of lesbian cinema. Yet as much as there is a need for more lesbian filmmakers and films, so is there the need for a lesbian feminist criticism that continually demands more of each work. Without a challenging forum on lesbian art, the work will lack vitality, urgency, and clarity.

Both intentionally and naively, Barbara Hammer rejects the major developments of film history, aesthetics, and theory on the basis of the patriarchal values they reflect. She instead opts for what she would like to be an intuitive, feminine, and emotional approach to film, with an emphasis on subjective content rather than on structure and form. Yet ironically, while Barbara rejects film theory as masculine and "left brained," for some reason she does not reject traditional oppressive notions of romantic love⁽¹⁾, on which her films' content is based.

Within the literary tradition of Romanticism, the validity of emotion and subjective experience overshadows formal concerns. "Good" Romantic poetry according to Wordsworth was defined as the spontaneous overflow of feeling. Nature imagery became the primary poetic subject, and woman, the traditional Muse, was usually objectified as a passive flower.⁽²⁾

In Barbara Hammer's *WOMEN I LOVE*, a series of lesbian relationships is depicted by natural environments. In the style of Judy Chicago's central core imagery, each lover is compared with a colorful flower, or a fruit or vegetable peeling open from its core in animated pixilation. It's become fashionable for women's bodies to be represented by pieces of fruit, not too differently from how it once was fashionable (and still is) to compare women with pieces of meat. Basically though, these images are more tiresome to me than they are

objectifying.

Using double-exposure, out-of-date stock, and what Barbara names country vegetable garden living without cultural distractions, the relationships are portrayed with a strong sense of the romantic. The lovers' identities are never presented; rather the women are objectified and idealized. The film form tells us much about "lesbian lifestyle." But this information is rooted in the weaknesses of both the film and the lifestyle. The relationships are clearly delineated (with black leader), yet the traces of one relationship's failure are repeated in the next. Rather than progression, Barbara sets up a system of displacements. This is the basic problem of a lesbian lifestyle based on romantic love and its consequence, serial monogamy. Likewise, the film is linear, lacking both visual depth and the understanding of the past that would enable it to move forward.

Far more successful is Barbara Hammer's newer film, *DOUBLE STRENGTH*. The film intelligently explores new sound-image and image-image relations as it acknowledges and confronts the old problems of woman-to-woman relationships (specifically one between the filmmaker and a trapeze artist). The film parallels the different stages of the relationship, offering abstract views on the rewards of a longterm love while the actual communication between the two women is in process of breaking down. All the audio and visual clues for the demise are strong: busy signals and voices that say the number is disconnected, still photographs expressing rage, dissonant chords, a pulsating black-and-white face of one lover as a shocking backdrop for the movements of the other. Yet each time I've seen the film, audiences have stated that they missed all these signs, had no idea that the relationship was deteriorating. This response can be attributed to the film's inability to break down the romanticism that permeates it.

In *DOUBLE STRENGTH*, the lovers' idealization of each other is both moving and disturbing. The voice-over narration in the beginning of the film is filled with story-book fantasies of love and the "you-complete — me/I-complete-you" syndrome. Toward the end of the voice-over narration, we find that the relationship in real time is only two months old. Yet so much attention is given to this section (and because it is so visually engrossing), we come to mistake the early fantasy for the actual relationship. Then the relationship's decline, when perceived at all, is perceived as the other, tragic side of the same romantic picture.

Not only during the Romantic period of the 19th century but throughout all Western culture, the male artist has called upon and romanticized the female Muse. From Plato to Jung to Stan Brakhage, the Muse has played the role of servant and angel in men's imaginations. Set off against the artist as the Other, the anima, the traditional Muse is passive, distanced, and cloaked in fantasy. Barbara Hammer is not alone in adopting the masculine romanticized view of

woman. Even Emily Dickinson, unaware of a female/ lesbian tradition but in shrewd recognition of the literary and artistic significance of her love for women, identified with the male romantic view:

"We remind Susan⁽³⁾ we love her. Unimportant fact, though Dante didn't think so, nor Swift, nor Mirabeau."

Yet it is improbable that Susan Dickinson became for Emily what the traditional female Muse, Beatrice, Stella, or Sophie, signifies for men, although such an assumption raises new questions about women and creative process. Women's lives, specifically lesbians' lives, are too interwoven for the kind of objectification male writers and artists enjoy. It is time that lesbians/ women stopped shaping our visions of ourselves on men's literary and artistic conventions.

Notes:

1. By this I refer not (directly) to a political analysis of romantic love and its role in the institutions of the family and heterosexuality, but to the literary traditions of romantic love and Romanticism, so eloquently espoused by such poets as Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, and Coleridge.

2. Especially true in the "Lucy Poems" of Wordsworth, who, incidentally, borrowed freely and verbatim from the diaries of his loving sister Dorothy, his servant and his Muse, who devoted her life to serving his genius.

3. Susan Gilbert Dickinson, Emily's brother's wife, was the subject and recipient of many of Emily's love poems and love letters. This quotation is from one such letter.