CLARA BRADBURY-RANCE

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Preface

In 1998, the celebrated lesbian film scholar B. Ruby Rich wrote: 'I don't want to make the mistake of falling into that comfortable old victim box, complaining of absence in the midst of presence. We're not invisible anymore' (58). In 1999, Patricia White observed that lesbianism was by now 'an intelligible social identity, visible on the nation's television and movie screens' (6). And Julianne Pidduck signalled in 2003 the '"hypervisibility" of lesbian/gay/queer works' in North America (266). Two decades ago, then, it became possible to suggest that the lesbian had reached the realm of the visible.

Cultural visibility does not exist in isolation, of course, but rather arises out of the normalisation of anti-homophobia campaigns and the broadening of civil rights for LGB (more rarely TQ+) individuals, couples and families. Even in the era of Donald Trump's presidency – or perhaps as a response to it – diversity seems to have become the watchword of the cultural and other industries in the USA and beyond. Social media movements to end sexual harassment such as #metoo and #timesup have coincided with calls for further diversity across the sector.[1] In the twenty years since scholars started to speak of visibility as a possibility and probability, significant transformations have occurred in spheres from the military, to the Catholic Church, to marriage equality. Social visibility has been institutionalised, commodified and politically manoeuvred.

In autumn 2017, during the final stages of writing this book, I booked tickets for the London Film Festival and found that I was spoilt for choice. For romantic drama, the Billie Jean King biopic *Battle of the Sexes* (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2017); for social satire, Sally Potter's *The Party* (2017); and for the rumours of an unexpected genre twist, *Good Manners* (Marco Dutra and Juliana Rojas, 2017), whose blurb, as it turned out, withheld *another* twist, the centrality to the film's plot of lesbian desire. It may still be hard to imagine the lesbian version of the mainstream reality television show *Queer Eye* (David Collins, 2018–) coming into existence – a female journalist declares on Twitter that 'Queer Eye is fine but I would like a companion show with butch women helping straight women who want to feel comfortable being less performatively feminine' (Goldfield, 2018). It still seems unlikely that a lesbian film will match the reception of the gay romance *Call Me by Your Name* (Luca Guadagnino, 2017), which, unusually for an era of dizzying change and new release, played continually between October 2017 and March 2018 at the Curzon Soho cinema in central London (see Gant, 2018). However, the materialisation of at least three films with prominent lesbian narratives at the most important UK film event of the year speaks of unprecedented change. Lesbians on-screen in 2018–19 cross genres, tastes, moods, periods and audiences, including in *Disobedience* (Sebastián Lelio, 2017), *Vita and Virginia* (Chanya Button, 2018), *Colette* (Wash Westmoreland, 2018) and *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (Desiree Akhavan, 2018). We begin to see popular culture mainstreaming lesbianism in a way that might not have been imaginable even at the turn of the century.

The same decades that have heralded remarkable transformations in the inclusion of lesbianism in mainstream political, social and cultural fields have also witnessed a revolution in the academic study of sexuality, which has veered away from the labels associated with the identity politics of 1970s and 1980s liberation movements. Critical discourses have increasingly replaced identity categories such as lesbian with the more fluid notions of queer sexuality. Situated against this context, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* takes as its starting point three interlinking observations: firstly, that lesbianism is more visible on-screen now than it has ever been; secondly, that even so, the discussion of the lesbian's screen presence is beset by comparisons to older models of representation; and, thirdly, that queer theory has forcefully ignited the discussion of sexuality over the past three decades but has concurrently diminished the perceived relevance of lesbianism as a term of engagement.

In this book, I read contemporary cinema through the history of the woman's screen image, arguing that historically compromising gaze structures and processes of visual mediation might, even now, surprise us by enabling us to comprehend desire's complexity. I root the discussion in the various registers through which feminist film theory has striven to capture these conditions of representability; in particular, I consider how psychoanalytic film theory has crafted the language for moving beyond the testimony of the physical, guiding us through the contradictory intelligibilities of social and corporeal relations and psychological internal worlds. Instead of rejecting it on the grounds of its alleged sentencing of lesbianism to the non-place of sexuality, the book puts psychoanalysis into dialogue with films that explore precisely such anxieties. Because of sexist, homophobic and racist processes at work in mainstream cinema more broadly – even amidst the changes recounted above – the lesbian has historically been given visual form only in male (and often white, straight, cisgendered) fantasy. Lesbian self-representation has been alienated. Through an attendance to the ways in which these socio-historical contexts have become formal cinematic languages on-screen, what has emerged is a further challenge to the easy categorisation of lesbianism. Indeed, central to the book is the discursive and photographic legacy of those very systems of representation.

Instead of being chosen solely on the basis of their contribution to the visibility effect (for instance, breadth of distribution or garnering of mainstream awards), the films discussed in this book bring to the fore the paradoxical nature of this so-called visibility. I include male directors in the corpus, undoubtedly urging (and not without my own ambivalence) new mechanisms of subversive identification. Throughout, I identify and theorise the kinds of cinematic language through which the figure of the lesbian has continued to be made legible on the screen. In doing so, I argue that, rather than providing another identity category, queer is the charge or potential through which lesbianism is enabled to expand its borders. To take up queer theory's terminological challenge with a sense of productive provocation rather than alienation is to ask important questions. How do we maintain critical and political attachments whilst acknowledging their production of ambivalence? When should we mobilise the universal or the particular? How do we account for lesbian studies' discursive exclusions and, in particular, its whiteness?[2] This book will be observed as occupying a particular habitus that is indebted primarily to the narrative structures of classical Hollywood and its legacy. However, its corpus includes several co-productions, gesturing towards a new regime of the image that cites transhistorically and spreads transnationally. Such films help to construct conceptual configurations of lesbianism's visual possibilities, even as I indicate the frequent Americanisation of transnational sexual imaginaries. *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* builds a conceptual foundation from unexpected parallels, convergences and citations.

Developing from the context provided by the Introduction, Chapter 1 establishes a framework for thinking about the history of lesbianism in cinema through debates within feminist film theory. The chapter analyses *Mulholland Drive*, a film that intertwines the conventions of lesbian representation with cinema's own conditions of production. By virtue of its Hollywood setting, conventional thriller tropes and Technicolor aesthetic, the film looks back to the censorship practices of the mid-twentieth century's Motion Picture Production Code, a context the chapter explores through work on the parameters set for lesbian representation by classical Hollywood cinema and the (non-)place of the lesbian in the visual field. *Mulholland Drive* articulates a widespread cultural paradox: the juxtaposition of the lesbian's absence and her threatening over-presence. If the thriller relies on the doubling of the woman for its structuring anxieties and motivations, the lesbian amplifies this existing threat. Throughout this book, I explore the paradoxical demands for the lesbian to be read both as pathologically singular and as threateningly doubled. Acknowledging the perhaps uncomfortable parallels between contemporary cinema and classical Hollywood, this chapter stages the key feminist debates that underpin many of the book's ongoing theoretical interlocutions.

Chapter 2 argues that absence and presence are forced onto the same page in a reading of *Nathalie . . .* (Anne Fontaine, 2003) alongside its remake *Chloe* (Atom Egoyan, 2009). *Nathalie . . .* is a film about a woman's suspicion, and then re-staging, of her husband's affair. Structures of homoerotic looking complicate the plot's ostensible focus on heterosexual desire. The film creates a series of spaces in which two women's shared experience of sexual interaction with the same man creates a derivative voyeurism. A vicarious lesbian eroticism depends on what is *not* shown rather than what *is*. In contrast, the explicit consummation of desire that marks *Chloe*'s (arguably) radical adaptation is necessarily paired with explicit violence. Through the increased visibility of sex in the remake, it becomes in the original a structuring absence. Through a reading of this juxtaposition, and in dialogue with feminist work on visibility and representation, the chapter challenges the conception that increased visibility equals inevitable progress.

The momentum of the book thus shifts gears here from the sharpened lines of the lesbian figure in *Mulholland Drive* towards the generically indeterminate and ambiguously erotic desires of the subsequent films of the corpus.

Chapter 3 explores the impulse to equate sexual identity with liberation. In *Circumstance* (Maryam Keshavarz, 2011), spaces of cinema, fantasy and surveillance become sites of projected selfhood in the face of identity's seeming impossibility. The chapter argues that the spatialisation of cultural idealisation is intensely evoked by the film's narrative of adolescence in a non-Western, Islamic state that nevertheless is premised upon a familiarity with or desire for global queer and youth cultures. Queer functions spatially to trouble a fetish of identity through which it is itself constructed and desired. Against a compromised narrative of cultural oppression, the private domestic sphere in *Circumstance* becomes a threatening locus of sexual potential and then sinister surveillance. The woman's image is both the source of patriarchal anxiety and its solution, while representable homosexuality is aestheticised through whiteness. In this context, the chapter argues that *Circumstance* generates a smoothly exoticised idealisation of a Western elsewhere through which a fantasy of out lesbian sexuality is made visually possible.

Chapter 4 analyses the ambiguous intimacies generated by the competition that permeates desire in *Water Lilies* (Céline Sciamma, 2007) and *She Monkeys* (Lisa Aschan, 2011). The chapter argues that the films' adolescent sporting cultures produce a lesbian potential that is generated, but then immediately contained, by negotiations of control. The queerness of lesbian desire is evoked here as a series of affects outside of figurative norms. We are always left just out of reach of the consummation of desire that we cling to as narrative convention is resisted. While the internal process of coming *into* desire transpires through sensory abundance, mutual eroticism is marked and suspended by *not quite touching*. The chapter advances a reading of an affective mode of filmmaking that is saturated with desire but not defined by desire's labelling. While Chapters 2 and 3 unsettle the visibility imperative of discourses surrounding lesbian cinema, Chapter 4 disturbs the positivity of lesbian legibility by positing a queer affect that resides, contrary to expectation, in the spaces between bodily exhibitions of desire.

The analysis at the heart of Chapter 5 interrogates the status of the sex scene as the only available register through which to read lesbian cinema in popular discourse. A confusing clash of ideological standpoints frames the debate around *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013), which has been the subject of extensive media scrutiny ever since its Palme d'Or triumph at the Cannes Film Festival in 2013. It has been lauded as a universal love story, hailed as a significant political milestone and derided as a misogynistic appropriation of the female body by a male director. The film's infamously explicit sex scenes are asked by critics not only to be satisfactory images of the act itself, but also of lesbian identity more broadly: of the film's legibility as lesbian. The chapter explores instead how desire functions beyond the remit of visual evidence, considering how sex in *Blue Is the Warmest Colour*, unmediated by music or the dominance of close-ups that populate the rest of the film, creates a disjuncture between what is seen and how it is perceived. As this chapter argues, the film's disorganised diegesis throws us into a time and space out of sync with the linguistic logic through which its discursive sphere has registered.

Even in a changing context of social and cultural representation, still we see visual citations of earlier models and forms that complicate the lesbian's contemporary screen figuration. Gesturing back to and developing the context provided by Chapter 1, my reading of *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015) in Chapter 6 reveals the circularity of lesbianism's visual regimes. The protagonist commands the film's compass through an expansive gaze. Rather than directed exclusively at its object, desire is diffused across a sweeping affective repertory: misty windows, sheets of rain and saturations of city light; lingering musical themes; the revival of celluloid grain. *Carol*'s visual repertoire draws on twentieth-century visual conditions of marginality that continue to be provocative and seductive; alongside this cinematic heritage, however, it can also be read as a queer melodrama whose erotic register recalls the exhilarating ruptures of the New Queer Cinema. The chapter argues that lesbian potential is indebted to the suspended terms of mid-twentieth-century cinematic homoeroticism, breaching the logic of visibility's progression.

While *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* provides a close focus on the cinema, it also proceeds to do so in a context of television's dominance in the race towards lesbian visibility. The contemporary field of visual cultural studies has been shaped not only by television's accessibility but also by its scope. That medium's long-running narratives have transformed the visibility of the lesbian in the basic terms of minutes on-screen. While records of cinematic visibility can of course follow this criterion, the films analysed in this book are chosen for what I consider to be specifically cinematic features. New media platforms have made theatrical film viewing an increasingly rare experience. However, the context of digital technology in fact necessitates more than ever an attention to cinema's specificities. Temporally, films present a very particular relationship between part and whole, between ephemeral moment and overall scope. This is a condition of the feature film's capacity (and the relative scarcity of the moments that make it up) as well as a symptom of the theatrical context of viewing. Watching a film from start to finish with no planned interruption draws our attention to sequence and pace: the currency of time has a heightened value. Spatially, the cinema as a location intensifies the act of viewing, concentrating the screen's affective pleasures.

Rather than advancing a conventional history of the recent past of lesbian representation or an overview of the films that have made the lesbian visible, in *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* I analyse a series of films released in the past two decades alongside the invigorating theories of sexuality that problematise their legibility *as lesbian*. These films are united by an emphasis on the diegetic role of spectatorship and voyeurism in the construction of desire. They all include scenes of what I think of as intensified spectatorship, revealing the ways in which the cinematic apparatus links desire to the image. Central to this book's aim is the reconsideration, through queer theory, of theoretical arguments about the tensions between identification and desire. These lie at the very heart of debates over what constitutes lesbianism in the visual field. This book negotiates these theoretical tensions in order to mark out the ways in which we might simultaneously trouble and sustain lesbian cinema in the era of the visible.

Introduction: Looking after Lesbian Cinema

The unprecedented increase in lesbian representation in political, social and cultural spheres over the past two decades has coincided with a shift in theoretical consciousness. In a paradoxical feat of what could be called unhappy timing, the lesbian's delayed and uneasy path towards visibility has coincided with queer theory's dominance in the academic study of sexuality. The result has been a comparable *invisibility* in the very intellectual field that might have accounted for these representational transformations. *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* takes this up as a structuring problem. Queer theory has generated a new field of figurations, pushing at the limits of lesbian legibility. It has also generated the potential for nuanced and sensitive renderings of debates about sexuality on the screen. While timely, politically significant and intellectually exhilarating, such changes provide a provocation to the lesbian whose identification is often dismissed and disavowed as an anachronistic term of attachment. As one such lesbian, claiming my identity category even as I am invigorated by its disruption, I ask: what does it mean to write about lesbian cinema after queer theory?

As this project began to unfold, circa 2011, I found myself looking for a corpus that would chronicle the new visibility of lesbian cinema. What I did not anticipate was the question: 'but Clara, what *is* lesbian cinema?' Two women are aligned across time and space by a coloured filter reflecting and obscuring their image. A gaze is shared between two girls across discrete shots, spatially disconnected but aligned by framing. A woman reclines face-on in the background behind her lover who lies in profile in the foreground, their two sets of lips fused on the two-dimensional screen. Another tells explicit sexual stories to a companion who watches as intently as she listens. A young woman's fantasy of a stranger is signified through flashes of colour. A teenage girl's gaze isolates its object but is left unnoticed and unreturned. Another kisses the trace of lipstick left by a playful kiss on a window pane. Here is a series of cinematic moments that read, to me, as lesbian. But the word lesbian no longer seems to allow for their full description. It does not fully account for their complexity, excitement, anticipation, ambivalence and intractability. Twenty-first-century lesbian cinema emerges after the advent of queer theory; lesbian cinema chases after queer theory's theoretical provocations. Just as I want to celebrate lesbian visibility, I am instructed to trouble it, to find trouble in it, to see how it causes trouble. I am moved to consider the relationship between cultural visibility and theoretical legibility. Just as the lesbian is made progressively visible in one domain, in the other she becomes fixed as a figure of the past to get over, to be moved beyond. This trouble becomes both a launching site and the site of a defence, a paradox that eventually proves to be central to this book's rationale.

Troubling Visibility

Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory explores how the figure of the lesbian in contemporary cinema is marked by a paradoxical burden of visibility and invisibility produced at the convergence of queer and feminist discourses. There are relatively few scholarly monographs in film studies written under what Valerie Traub calls the 'sign of the lesbian' (2015: 7). Existing contributions to the field indicate a prior invisibility, historically interrupted only by invocations of pathologisation, isolation and tragedy. They chronicle both the pains and pleasures of fantasy identifications; persistent tropes, codes and conventions; sideways glances and peripheral characterisations. We hear of the lesbian's marginal presence in classical Hollywood and early cinema (Corber, 2011; Horak, 2016; White, 1999), the pathological figurations to which she is insistently reduced (Hart, 1994; Coffman, 2006; Cairns, 2006; Weiss, 1992), and her inception as the product of a spectator's fantasy and of the cinema itself (Kabir, 1998; Whatling, 1997). Recurring scholarly interventions figure the lesbian either as 'overwritten by cliché' (Love, 2004: 121), or as condemned to fall entirely 'outside sexuality's visual field' (Jagose, 2002: 2). She is lost in the slippage between, on the one hand, the inherent negativity of the female as absence to male presence and, on the other, the difficulty of homosexual difference.

The figure of the lesbian I speak of here is not a precursor to, but rather created by, her cinematic image. She functions through repetition, through tropes, through stereotypes. And yet to issue a corrective to invisible pasts in the form of the promise of visible futures is, paradoxically, to issue a new set of threats. As Zeena Feldman writes of the 'politics of visibility', 'being seen can gesture misrecognition' (2017: 2). We might not recognise what others are now allowed to see of us, or what we now see of ourselves. As Peggy Phelan warns, the route to visibility must be acknowledged as a process of naming and fixing, even if it is to be politically championed (1993: 1). Annamarie Jagose contests therefore the 'efficacy of assuming visibility as the standard measure for sexual legitimacy' (2002: 231), while Amy Villarejo argues that 'the demand to make lesbians visible, whether as ammunition for anti-homophobic campaigns or as figures for identification, renders lesbian static, makes lesbian into (an) image, and forestalls any examination of lesbian within context' (2003: 6–7). Even as we recognise the undoubtable 'cultural interventions that visibility politics have made' (Beirne, 2008: 26), we catch sight of the trouble with visibility: it fixes just as it names; it dismisses some as it champions others; it distracts; it normalises; it fossilises. Palatability can sacrifice politics. To make visible is to refine the spectrum of who and what is shown.

The long-awaited *making visible* of the lesbian on the cinema screen has followed a course of monumental representational change. Now more than ever, everything is marked by the ways in which it can be turned into an image. New photographic technologies have transformed the availability, immediacy and regularity of video production and distribution. Digital – and increasingly mobile – platforms have widened the remit and spectrum of what is made and seen. Mainstream conventions in film and television, as well as in other visual media such as video games and web series, have shifted towards an increase in the sexually (and violently) explicit. In 2000, Judith Mayne conceded a simultaneous desire to 'affirm visibility and [to] question it' (xxi). Since 2000, this process of affirming and questioning visibility has become even more charged. The paradoxical positioning of the lesbian in film has always meant reading between the lines, against the grain. Such metaphors serve us well. Now, subversive erotic identifications are met by the possibility of looking for lesbians on-screen – and finding them. The process of what Mayne calls 'finding the lesbians' might now confront, surprise or alarm us in ways we hadn't previously imagined (Ibid.: xviii). Especially in this context of visual and social change, we might disavow the pleasurable evidence of the sex scene in favour of an otherwise frustrating ambiguity. We might champion the refusal of identity's naming even as we long for out role models. We might be committed to films that forsake their commitments to us. We might discover identifications in heteronormative spaces. We might be overwhelmed by affect before we engage with politics. We might discover that our intellectual pleasures counteract our aesthetic pleasures. We might find anticipation sexy. We might divert calls for seriousness. We might be excited by the need to look, and to look again. We might want to find a new way to describe any or all of these 'mights'. We might want to call them queer.

An edited collection on 'queer film and video' published in 1991 by the collective reading group Bad Object Choices, containing essays by Mayne, Cindy Patton, Stuart Marshall, Richard Fung, Kobena Mercer and Teresa de Lauretis, asked: *How Do I Look?* This question – and its implicit extensions (how do I look *in* film / how do I look *at* film) still define processes of viewing, enforcements of type and recognition, structures of visibility and invisibility, and mechanisms of identification. As film and video become queerer and queerer, however, we return to another question, the 'where' that accompanies the 'how'. In 1999, Patricia White introduced her book *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* by asking: 'when representation is forbidden, *where* do we look?' (16, emphasis added). Perhaps what is radical, twenty years on, is to repeat the question: when representation is granted, *where do we look*?

A Brief History of Complicated Erasures

The lesbian's era of visibility has coincided with more general transformations in production and distribution across screen media, including rising numbers of international co-productions and new digital platforms for transnational dissemination. However, even in this context of change and opportunity, the conversation continues to be shaped by the requirements of conceptual and historical ground clearing. Invisibility is entrenched in the existing discursive field surrounding the history of lesbian representation. Rather than the recipient of a clean break between a historical invisibility and a contemporary visibility, the lesbian is marked by a discourse that foregrounds the relationship between the two. As Traub writes of the 'knowledge problem' that defines the lesbian as term and category, 'it is crucial to insist [. . .] *not* that "the lesbian" actually *has been* invisible, impossible, inconsequential, or apparitional, but that this figure's representational status has hinged on a dialectic between visibility and invisibility, possibility and impossibility, signification and insignificance' (2015: 286). In other words, the lesbian stands in for an anxiety rather than for herself.

What is most evident in many early figurations, spanning genres from the romance to the thriller, is the persistent framing of lesbianism in the singular, whether as pathetically doomed to loneliness (*The Children's Hour*, William Wyler, 1961) or as sinisterly and even parodically seductive (*The Killing of Sister George*, Robert Aldrich, 1966). In some of the most enduring figurations of lesbianism in twentieth-century cinema, the seductive protagonist is coded as embodying a stable or essential lesbian sexuality while her heterosexual counterpart is primed to undergo a process of transformation. In the mid-1980s, *Desert Hearts* (Donna Deitch, 1985) signalled a new optimism. Ten years later, however, Jackie Stacey expressed surprise that Deitch's film did *not* make way for 'a long line of popular lesbian romance films with "happy endings"' (1995: 92).

The 1990s is prominent as a significant turning point – a decade of change by the end of which we were to understand that lesbianism *had been made visible* both on the cinema screen and in the academy – Andrea Weiss's *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema*, the first full-length monograph solely dedicated to lesbian cinema, was published in 1992. Even by this point, however, as the lesbian in the social and political realm had been increasingly normalised and her difference reduced, earlier tropes continued to mark contemporary cultural productions. In a survey of films doing the festival circuit in 1995, Rhona Berenstein noted that 'lesbians are not born, they're seduced' (1996: 125). At least that's the impression Berenstein got from the majority of the lesbian films on offer in which women 'need to be coaxed into their lesbianism' by a more experienced 'dyke' character (Ibid.). In cult films such as *Claire of the Moon* (Nicole Conn, 1992) and *When Night Is Falling* (Patricia Rozema, 1995), the ostensibly straight female lead is seduced into her lesbian desire by a more experienced and already-out lesbian figure. In a similar vein but under the guise of another genre, the later years of the decade set in motion the production – though far more rarely theatrical distribution – of coming-of-age narratives such as *Show Me Love* (Lukas Moodysson, 1998); *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (Maria Maggenti, 1995), repeated by Maria Maggenti with a twist a decade later in *Puccini for Beginners* (2006); and, in a genius parody, *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Jamie Babbit, 1999).[1]

Rather than manifesting a decisive break with the twentieth century's systems of (non-)representation, the twenty-first century's increased turn to visibility has been the result of a staggered series of smaller steps. Television heralded change for the 2000s, where the medium's long-form narrative format might (unlike Berenstein's line-up) screen lesbian relationships 'well out of the closet' (Berenstein, 1996: 125). *The L Word* (Ilene Chaiken, 2004–9) unequivocally marketed itself on a newly enabled 'commodification of lesbianism as a category of identity' (Wiegman, 1994: 3). The show instituted a new era of visibility, taking on a *Sex and the City* (Darren Star, 1998–2004) remit and commodifying the middle-class Los Angeles 'lipstick lesbian' ('Same Sex, Different City' was its tag line). The show also provided, in its almost exclusively female directorial and writing team, credits for directors whose films have otherwise struggled to receive international distribution.[2] Even so, Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick spoke the mind of many of the show's viewers after its second season: 'I will be relieved', Sedgwick wrote, 'when the writers decide they have sufficiently interpolated straight viewers and can leave behind the lachrymose plot of Jenny's Choice' (2006: xxiv). 'Jenny's Choice' – the ingénue's discovery of a lesbian desire that turns her world upside down – characterised several outputs of the early 2000s, including *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Charles Herman-Wurmfeld, 2001), *Imagine Me and You* (Ol Parker, 2005), *Room in Rome* (Julio Medem, 2010) and *Kiss Me* (Alexandra-Therese Keining, 2011). The ready-established lesbian couple did however increasingly appear in films such as *Producing Adults* (Aleksi Salmenperä, 2004) and *Break My Fall* (Kanchi Wichmann, 2011), while a renewal (or maturing) of Clea DuVall and Natasha Lyonne's formative *But I'm a Cheerleader* partnership took a reassuringly undramatic form in DuVall's directorial debut *The Intervention* (2016). The lesbian couple reached something of a disgruntled apotheosis in 2010, when the 'family values movie' *The Kids Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko) was in the top ten films released in its opening weekend in the UK box office (see Colleen Benn, et al., 2010, British Film Institute, 2018).[3] Lisa Cholodenko's film exemplifies the move towards what I have argued elsewhere is a postfeminist lesbian cinema (see Bradbury-Rance, 2013).[4]

In the aftermath of a wave of equality laws privileging the couple form for homosexuals as well as heterosexuals, the lesbian's cultural visibility seems to engender the fixing of her theoretical legibility. The lesbian is increasingly equated with 'the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' – namely, everything queer is not, according to David Halperin's definition (1997: 62).[5] The paragraphs above reveal just one version of lesbian screen visibility. A parallel trajectory, also beginning in the early 1990s, indicates the possibility of an alternative. The New Queer Cinema was a moniker charted and coined by B. Ruby Rich to capture a series of films that were 'fresh, edgy, low-budget, inventive, unapologetic, sexy, and stylistically daring' (2013: xxiv). While the movement most notably made the names of male directors like Todd Haynes, Isaac Julien and Gregg Araki (see Pramaggiore, 1997; Pick, 2004), it also opened up marginal spaces for lesbian films such as Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), Rose Troche's *Go Fish* (1994) and Cholodenko's *High Art* (1998). These simultaneously resisted both the overinvestment in the happy ending and the disappointment of the failed lesbian romance. José Esteban Muñoz argues that 'being ordinary and being married' are 'desires that automatically rein themselves in, never daring to see or imagine the not-yet-conscious' (2009: 21). The New Queer Cinema radically refused to rein itself in.

If there is a certain lag in the field of the theatrically distributed feature film, it has been overemphasised by contrast with the small (and smaller) screen (see Griffin, 2016; Beirne, 2014; Monaghan, 2016). What Stuart Richards has called a 'New Queer Cinema Renaissance' (2016) can be observed in films such as *Weekend* (Andrew Haigh, 2011), *Stranger by the Lake* (Alain Guiraudie, 2013) and the wide oeuvre of Xavier Dolan, including *Laurence Anyways* (2012) and *Tom at the Farm* (2013). Of the (few) lesbian films on Richards's list, Desiree Akhavan's *Appropriate Behaviour* (2014) was pre-empted by its director's self-publicised web series *The Slope* (2010–12) and Dee Rees's *Pariah* (2011) was followed up first by a film premiered on HBO (*Bessie*, 2015) and then the Netflix-distributed *Mudbound* (2017). Meanwhile, Jill Soloway followed up her indie film *Afternoon Delight* (2001) with the series *Transparent* (2014–) which piloted on Amazon Prime rather than on broadcast television, and publicity provided by sites such as YouTube helped to pave the way for, or even fund, works such as Campbell X's *Stud Life* (2012) (see Mayer, 2016: 176). Arguably, the primary site of potential for queer productions that resist the mainstream commodification of lesbianism has stepped in the twenty-first century into the digital realm. The move towards the era of the visible has been neither linear nor consistent.

Lesbian Invisibility in Queer Times

We can see that two trajectories, running in parallel, constitute the 'progress' narrative that has attached to the lesbian's journey from invisibility to visibility over the past few decades. One has seen the overwhelming visibility of lesbianism as an identity category and the emergence of distribution spaces (albeit often virtual ones) for self-identifying lesbian filmmakers. The other has seen the increasing prevalence of *queer* recognition at film festivals that, in correspondence with the academic context, serves to institute a new kind of invisibility in which the lesbian is subsumed under broader queer representational categories. When *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* (Abdellatif Kechiche, 2013) won the prestigious Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2013, it made history. The award had never before been won by a film with a lesbian narrative. Nor had the Queer Palm, instituted in 2010 at the same festival, until it was awarded in 2015 to *Carol* (Todd Haynes, 2015). Yet, both of these triumphs also expose the precarious nature of such success. Unlike the Academy Awards, which predominantly celebrate mainstream Anglo-American films made within the studio system, with a single category devoted to 'foreign language' films, Cannes sets the tone for the reception of an international corpus of films that become recognised as high art (see Perriam and Waldron, 2016).[6] Whilst the Queer Palm is independently sponsored and does not appear in the Cannes official list of awards, its selection from amongst the best (broadly understood) 'queer' films in the festival's official programme provides a simple demonstration of lesbian visibility in one of the most significant institutions of prestige in the international art house film circuit. Between 2011 and 2018, ninety-two films were candidates for the award. Of those, across seven years, just twenty-four were directed by women.[7] And of those, none has won the award, while a tiny minority of the nominated films (whether directed by men or by women) have lesbian narratives.[8]

The parallel histories of queer and lesbian cinema have converged and diverged. A web search for scholarly articles on 'lesbian film' and 'queer film' reveals an equivalent rise in the usage of both terms between the years of 1990 and 2000. However, from the year 2000 onwards, searches in five-year periods indicate a steady drop in results for 'lesbian film' and a striking rise in results for 'queer film'.[9] When she coined the term 'Queer Theory' as the title of a conference in 1991, de Lauretis proffered a possible solution to the 'politically correct phrase "lesbian and gay"' in which 'differences are implied but then simply taken for granted or even covered over by the word "and"' (1991: v–vi). 'Queer Theory' was thus 'arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them – or at the very least problematize them' (Ibid.). However, the taking-for-granted-ness of the word 'and' seems to have migrated along with the terminological shift. What we can now observe is a trajectory whereby lesbianism has been theorised, problematised and then dissolved in queer theory's new intellectual paradigm. Nick Rees-Roberts employs the word 'queer' in the title of his book *French Queer Cinema* with the understanding that it will be read as 'convenient shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities' (2008: 3–4). He states in the same introduction, however, that his corpus will 'focus primarily on gay male sexuality (due to the lack of "out" lesbian filmmakers and of lesbian self-representation)' (2008: 3–4). Edited collections on queer cinema often follow a similar kind of flattening out of gender difference, or otherwise assign lesbian films to one distinct chapter whose naming as such marks it as other from the rest of queer's apparently simpler significations (see for instance Griffiths, 2006; Dawson, 2017; Peele, 2007). The majority of collections on 'queer' or 'gay' cinema exclude lesbians both as contributors and as objects of study, rendering insecure the equation of political progress with screen visibility. A presumed incompatibility between lesbianism and queerness sees lesbianism either marginalised within, veiled by or distinguished as other from queerness (for rare exceptions, see Benshoff and Griffin, 2006; Stacey and Street, 2007; Perriam, 2013). Rather than necessarily a direct exclusion on the part of these authors and editors, this tendency demonstrates the overwhelming use of queer as an umbrella term that in fact serves a series of paradoxically conflicting options: to make lesbianism redundant, to designate her otherness, or to disguise her absence. To explore representational visibility on-screen alongside discursive visibility in scholarship is thus to observe a longstanding anxiety about the processes of conflation through which 'the very name "lesbian" disappear[s] under the rubric "queer"' (Garber, 2009: 67). Even this linguistically equalising term is revealed to subsume the lesbian into a discursive field that excludes her.

And yet. For Sedgwick, queer refers to 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically' (1993: 8). For Sara Ahmed it describes those 'specific sexual practices' that, for her, intrinsically involve 'a personal and social commitment to living in an oblique world, or in a world that has an oblique angle in relation to that which is given' (2006: 161). These spatial metaphors are not only exceptionally exciting but also theoretically productive for the paradoxical process of locating lesbian legibility on the contemporary screen. Gaps and overlaps, oblique angles: these are the spaces of lesbian cinema in the twenty-first century.

Long before the blooming of queer theory in the academy, lesbian was a term subjected to the onus of clarifying self-definition. Tamsin Wilton, for example, exposes the need to preface 'any exploration of lesbian issues with [. . .] the catechism of undecidability: the formula of question and response which problematizes the definition of "lesbian"' (1995: 3–4). Traub begins an article on lesbian film with that very formula, asking, 'What is a lesbian?' (1995: 115). Crucially, she immediately refuses to answer, arguing that to do so would '*fix* that which is fundamentally unstable' (Ibid., see also Tasker, 1994). This anti-definition could itself now be described as queer. And yet, lesbianism is more often than not positioned as queer's outdated precursor. The 'feminist-as-lesbian' is a figure named by Victoria Hesford as she who is legible 'as a *shorthand notation* for women's liberation' (2013: 16–17, see also Jagose, 1994). A possible reversal of Hesford's construction – the lesbian-as-feminist – might also function to accommodate lesbianism's burden of signification, for the term 'lesbian' is asked not only to indicate the figure of the lesbian woman but also the progressive politics signalled by that figure (see also Villarejo, 2003: 6–7).[10] In the early second-wave feminist movement, lesbianism was, in Hesford's words, 'something closer to what we now call *queer* – a practice of subverting existing social identities and of anticipating future forms of social and sexual life' (2013: 239, original emphasis). Such equations are rendered increasingly unstable. The figure of the lesbian has come to signify not only the liberatory politics of the feminist movement but also its exclusions. The two terms together – lesbian + feminist – hold within them a quality that, in Elizabeth Freeman's words, 'seems to somehow inexorably hearken back to essentialized bodies, normative visions of women's sexuality, and single-issue identity politics that exclude people of color, the working class, and the transgendered' (2010: 62). When women's liberation itself increasingly becomes a shorthand for trans-exclusionary platforms, lesbianism is moved further away from the conceptually queer potential of its past.

What we see is that, in short, lesbianism becomes 'unrecognizable across domains' (Wiegman, 2012: 130). The struggle is to find a way to accommodate, in Susan Stryker's terms, the 'diverse particularities of our embodied lives' (2007: 67). Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover state that 'queer film theory is always a feminist project for us' (2016: 11). Here, queer always = feminism (see also Marinucci, 2016 [2010]). In the bid for inclusion and intersectionality, the single-issue presumption that haunts lesbianism's claim is systematically pitted against queer theory's less troubled intersectional advances. Nevertheless, Robyn Wiegman suggests that the reduction of lesbianism to an identity category disavowed by queer theory, and the consequent resistances to it by those who claim queer instead as their term of attachment, rely on 'making the lesbian solid enough to perform their own self-fashioning reclamations – indeed it is their proximity to and intimacy with her that makes their divergence from her possible' (2012: 130–1). The combined histories of queer and lesbian as terms of attachment and political motivation have run not only in parallel but through mutual constitution.

When We See It

Queer has been defined theoretically as '*whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant' (Halperin, 1997: 62); as that which is 'not yet conscious' (Muñoz, 2009: 21); as the very status of 'unthinkability' (Butler, 2002: 18). These definitions provide a methodological challenge for the *finding* of queerness in visual representation. As I have outlined above, lesbianism's history of radical political utopianism suggests that the lesbian is no more straightforwardly legible. In lesbian feminist writing on the subject, cinema must variously bear the burden of 'social responsibility' (de Lauretis, 1994: 114); must be 'passionately linked to the lesbian community, both in the sense of political struggle and in the banalities of daily life' (Becker, et al., 1995: 42); must remove itself from 'the discourse of the gendered subject [assumed] within a heterosexist authority system' (Hammer, 1993: 71). Villarejo locates the 'lesbian people, lesbian places, lesbian things' (2003: 22) of her book *Lesbian Rule: Cultural Criticism and the Value of Desire* in a documentary film corpus, in which 'lesbian is right there, staring at you, haranguing you, imploring you, or telling you stories' (Ibid.: 15). Documentary is Villarejo's chosen site of lesbian potential, construction and rhetoric in a project that, she writes, stands 'as an elegy to' the term lesbian, if that term is (but, she says, probably isn't) 'in its final hours, slowly to be overtaken by the term *queer*' (Ibid.: 7). For Lee Wallace, who focuses on the relationship between sexual identities and cinematic form while leaving behind the psychoanalytic bases of earlier monographs on lesbian film, lesbianism 'disclose[s] itself within the visual field' (2009: 81). Instead of sexuality being implanted *into* film, it is constituted in Wallace's theorisation *by* film, in which the *mise en scène* is more than just 'the suturing medium of the diegesis' (Ibid.: 55). Cinema's visual codes and how they are directed, shot, edited and interpreted are paramount to the creation of meaning. Mayne reflects in the introduction to *Framed: Lesbians, Feminists, and Media Culture* that someone analysing the state of interest in lesbian cinema in a couple of decades may well 'wonder at the choices, perhaps finding quaint the continuing preoccupation with Hollywood, or the fascination with Garbo and Dietrich, or the desire to make such lists in the first place' (2000: xxi). Still, a corpus must be found. In their book *Queer Cinema in the World* (2016: 15), Galt and Schoonover insist on a 'radical openness' to finding queerness in cinema where they might not expect it. *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* maintains a similar approach to lesbianism in the cinema.

To exemplify the opportunities and dangers of this critical task, I want to pause here on a particular example. At the end of 2016, I watch Park Chan-Wook's *The Handmaiden* at the London Film Festival. It is 11 a.m. on a Saturday morning, and the enormous festival screen on London's Embankment holds a full house. Laughter and heady sighs resound audibly in the hall. Park's film was premiered earlier in the same year in competition at Cannes Film Festival: at the beginning of the next, it will be screened again in London at BFI Flare: London LGBT Film Festival (which by 2018 has become London *LGBTQ+* Film Festival, having begun life as London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival). The film appears in the popular press in several critics' top-twenty lists for the year 2017 (see *The Guardian*, 2017; *Time Out*, 2017; *The Independent*, 2017; *Wired*, 2017). *The Handmaiden* is an adaptation of the widely acclaimed and loved neo-Gothic novel *Fingersmith* (2002) by the lesbian writer Sarah Waters, who publicly endorses the film. In cinematic form it becomes a spectacle of erotic looking. It is a literary adaptation that is visually ravishing; a Cannes prize goes to the production designer Seong-hie Ryu for her exquisite set pieces. The film easily becomes a recognisable element in its director's oeuvre: it is a vengeance film to accompany *Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance* (2002), *Old Boy* (2003) and *Lady Vengeance* (2005), as befits Park's auteurist motives. It owes an obvious debt to classical Hollywood cinema's systems of the image, and is compared with classics such as *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940), *The Spiral Staircase* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), *Les Diaboliques* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1955) and *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963). It has a male director, though the sex scene that is rapturously described in review after review is reportedly shot only by a female cameraperson, a female soundperson and the two actresses. Presumably to absolve him from accusations of voyeurism, Park is absent from the scene's filming. In the UK, the film receives an 18 rating, for 'strong sex' (2013); it is also exceptionally violent.

I love *The Handmaiden*. I find it sexy, stylish and compulsively watchable. What the film has in common with the principal case studies of this book is a gesturing to the precariousness of the image in a visual field that insistently cites the past. Its contemporary production context enables the mainstreaming of its explicit sex scenes. Yet, its complex narrative unsettles our attachments. We fail to know what the visible image has really offered to us. Its chronology threatens to make lesbianism impossible: a misremembering, a figment of the imagination or a misrecognition. *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* highlights the reworking of several genres – from the thriller to the domestic melodrama – to consider how they mediate, and produce, lesbianism. It observes how the cinematic apparatus itself masquerades, performs, conceals and, even then, highlights desire. If the possibility of visibility yields a burden of evidence, then looking backwards can yield vicarious and divergent eroticisms.

Sex, Desire, Eroticism, Affect

This book is indebted to a conceptual debate between two theories of desire that remain outside the trajectory of queer theory's dominance in the study of sexuality: de Lauretis's Freudian reading of the specificity of lesbian desire (1994) and Stacey's reading of homoerotic identification and the multiplicity of women's spectatorship practices (1994). While they both position themselves in opposition to past manifestations of psychoanalytic feminist film theory that failed to account for lesbian desire, a tension arises in the contrasting distinctions these scholars make between sexuality and eroticism. Taking from Freudian psychoanalysis the desiring potential of sexed subjects, de Lauretis's work on lesbian desire is known for its focus on lesbian specificity and for its theorisation of what Freud himself 'could not imagine but others can – a lesbian subjectivity' (1994: xiv). In contrast to Laura Mulvey's early refusal of lesbian desire outside of the female spectator's masculine identification, de Lauretis posits a lesbian cinema 'constituted in relation to a *sexual* difference from socially dominant, institutionalized, heterosexual forms' (Ibid.: xii, original emphasis). It is this emphasis on the *sexed* and *desiring* nature of subjectivity that underpins de Lauretis's project. Her primary reservation is the risk of conflating desire and identification and thereby de-sexualising lesbianism.

Stacey, on the other hand, looks at processes of desire that move away from the specificities of 'lesbian subjectivity'. Nevertheless, her intervention focuses not on 'de-eroticising desire, but rather eroticising identification' (1994: 29). Her work urges us to consider those multiple processes of identification that are yielded by sometimes-fixed identities. The choice of the word 'homoerotic' (Ibid.: 28) – a psychic category rather than a social one – allows her to recuperate desire within cinematic identification not only for lesbian women but for all women, where homoeroticism is an aspect (one of many, she argues) of the pleasures that cinema can afford female spectators, multiplied beyond those restricted to masculine versus feminine positions. Brought into popularity in the years after the 1994 publication of both Stacey's *Star Gazing* and de Lauretis's *The Practice of Love*, the term queer has since been mobilised to cut through the dichotomies that threaten to cloud their debate. My use of queer throughout this book is informed, if not by her use of the word itself, then by Stacey's analysis of those ambiguous modulations of eroticism and desire. Moreover, my reading of both of these theoretical texts in dialogue with queer theory provokes the impetus for this book's intervention, in which homoeroticism is reconfigured as the queer potentiality of lesbianism.

The debate between de Lauretis and Stacey that I have briefly charted here evokes a central concern of the book with how to understand sexuality's representability without sex. As Mandy Merck writes, it is 'the love scene' that, of all possible visual options, holds a 'particularly symbolic function: the ability to represent "lesbian experience"' (1993: 167). Michel Foucault famously announced that the nineteenth century was the period in which the delineation of behaviours made way for the categorisation of identities, so that 'the homosexual was now a species' (1998 [1984]: 43). Yet in contemporary cinema, it seems, the lesbian must still be evidenced by the behaviours that were her identity's precursor. Sexual specificity determines lesbian legibility; sex becomes the visual evidence through which sexuality registers. As Ann Cvetkovich argues, however: sometimes, in some contexts, 'what counts as (homo)sexuality is unpredictable and requires new vocabularies; affect may be present when overt forms of sexuality are not' (2007: 463). In *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory*, whilst attending to the 'vital re-centring of the body' that has been characteristic of feminist theory's turn to affect (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012: 116), I use queer as an elaboration (rather than replacement) of lesbianism that captures what is not only before speech but also before (sexual) touch (see also Koivunen, 2010). In the face of contemporary visibility's paradoxical imperatives, I gesture to an embodied dynamic not defined by a directional relationship between subject and object (or between the lesbian and the one whom she will seduce), but a mood of sexual potential. Desire is not limited to the familiar 'genres' of encounter (Berlant, 2008: 4) that unfold in dialogue, character, or the satisfaction of a shot/countershot sequence. Affects spread across a film's timeframe. Repetitive visual motifs leave traces of desire on the screen.

In the introduction to a special issue of *Women's Studies Quarterly* on 'queer method', Heather Love champions queer scholarship for the ways in which it has 'dealt with untidy issues like desire, sexual practice, affect, sensation, and the body' (2016: 346). To employ such a 'knowledge project' (Ibid.) as a method for reading lesbian cinema in queer times calls for us to dwell on unruliness and untidiness: not merely to resist identity and identification but to find them in uncomfortable places. Acknowledging or observing cinematic strategy can, as Caroline Bainbridge writes of Susan Streitfeld's *Female Perversions* (1996), 'disrup[t] and challeng[e] the spectator's desire for identification, repeatedly seeking to alienate us from the potential for pleasure' (2008: 55). Conversely, our seeking and finding of pleasure in unlikely places can be precisely what alienates us from ourselves. Just as the New Queer Cinema reinscribed pleasure through resistance to domestic normativity and the mainstreaming of homosexual desire, so reading lesbian cinema as queer might entail an alienation from the very pleasures that we have fought to see represented.

I argue in *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* that lesbianism is a term to which 'it remains politically necessary to lay claim', precisely because it lays its 'claim on us prior to our full knowing' (Butler, 1993: 20). 'Lesbian' and 'queer': these terms do not fulfil their imaginatively political potential equally, nor do they perform the same theoretical function. To write definitively about lesbian film under the banner of queer theory reduces queer's potential to move beyond the norms of difference; yet to write instead about queer film, without specifying lesbian difference, loses sight of the ways in which social and cultural structures of normativity and marginality have structured the terms of lesbian representation. The lesbianism I claim is highbrow and lowbrow; it is friendship and fun; it marks emotional and sexual intimacies. It is sometimes attached to my feminism (though not always). The lesbianism I claim is politics and pleasure. To claim an identity category is different from exploring the historical trajectory of that category and its affiliations; even if I do both, the former supports the motivation for this book while the latter defines its content.

Given new understandings of the limits of the sexual encounter on the cinema screen, what is the relationship between the explicitly seen and the marginally sensed? How do cinematic spatial and temporal disorientations map on to the claiming of a defined visibility? How does contemporary lesbian cinema hinge on an interplay between the singular and coupled figuration of the lesbian, and how does it both generate and anticipate anxiety in response to the blurring of the two? In order to answer these questions, *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* brings together a set of films that all negotiate the ubiquitously linear path that is presumed to consummate the story of lesbian sexuality. The films analysed in this book produce complex, insistent and ambivalent links and networks of sex, desire and eroticism. They emerge sometimes as symptoms of generic citation and sometimes of generic indeterminacy. No matter the age of the protagonist, all of the films analysed present not desire's confirmation but its precariousness. Through the lesbian's historical cultural invisibility and the law's refusal to mark her as it has the gay man, figurations of lesbianism in terms of 'immaturity' or 'incompleteness' are used to pathologise her through the discourse of the passing phase (Roof, 1991: 5). Yet these same terms might, in another context, be read queerly, as in Jack Halberstam's suggestion that the reclamation of a queer adolescence 'challenges the conventional binary formulation of a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood' (2005: 153). Here, the very same words we use to describe queer's refusal to fix sexuality become those we use to contemplate the lesbian's historical relation to absence. Even as they promise to emancipate us, shifting terminologies have the potential to reinscribe problematic mechanisms. I am reluctant to call this a book about the *queering of lesbian cinema*. Instead, I argue, the productive relationship between queer theory and lesbian film is based on the queerly paradoxical structure of lesbianism itself: a latent potentiality for queerness based on the history of the compromised image.

Just as Judith Butler famously observes that feminist debates over gender evoke a 'sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism', I have countered a similar response to the indeterminacy of sexuality (1999 [1990]: xxix). Following Butler, the stimulus of *Lesbian Cinema after Queer Theory* is the notion that, if such trouble occurs in the queering of lesbianism, 'trouble need not carry such a negative valence' (Ibid.), but rather set out a mode of relation between the two that is mutual rather than either synonymous or substitutive. The danger, in a context of progress ushered in by visibility, is that, in asking the lesbian to do the performative work of queer, we retreat into a heterosexist ideology of lesbianism as a 'phase'. Taking this 'phasing' as its provocative risk, this book asks a series of questions about the conditions of lesbian legibility in a corpus of films that, rather than exemplifying the period's newfound visibility, trouble the visible itself.