**Go Fish: Resisting Silence and Invisibility and Coming Out as a Lesbian in a Post-Affirmation Era**

M. DOLORES HERRERO GRANADO  
Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana  
Universidad de Zaragoza  
50009 Zaragoza

**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to disclose and analyse the themes, techniques and devices whereby in Go Fish lesbian messages, so often silenced and made invisible in a heterosexist society, are disclosed and therefore 'communicated' to a wide film audience. In order to carry out this analysis, some of the most relevant Lesbian literary theories that have attempted to account for the doubly silenced voices of Lesbians in a patriarchal society, and for their 'invisibility' as part of the social construction of a supposed Lesbian identity, will be applied to the interpretation of the film.

**RESUMEN**

El propósito de este artículo es revelar y analizar los temas, técnicas y recursos por medio de los cuales en la película Go Fish mensajes lesbianos, tan a menudo silenciados y relegados a la invisibilidad en una sociedad heterosexista, son puestos de manifiesto, y, por consiguiente, 'comunicados', a una amplia audiencia. Con el fin de llevar a cabo este análisis, se aplicarán al estudio e interpretación de la película algunas de las teorías críticas lesbianas más relevantes, en tanto en cuanto han intentado reafirmar o dar voz a las voces doblemente silenciadas de las lesbianas en una sociedad patriarcal, a la vez que han denunciado la visibilidad de éstas como parte fundamental de la construcción social de una supuesta identidad lesbiana.

**KEY WORDS** (PALABRAS CLAVE): Lesbian and Gay Studies; Coming Out; Post-Affirmation Politics; New Queer Cinema; Women's Studies: Cultural Feminism; Essentialism vs. Constructionism; Eclecticism.
There could be no semiotics if there were no sign. The lack we felt as we began this early naming process was not the lack of the phallus but the singular and significant lack of any representations. The image did not exist, the picture was not made, the word scarcely heard in discourse nor seen in text.


As I explained in a previous article (1997: 201-4), films dealing with homosexuality have usually been rooted in the gay/lesbian culture of their times, a culture which, in turn, has always had some kind of connection with the coexistent gay/lesbian movements of the moment. As a matter of fact, it was mainly because these movements created a public climate of self-confidence for lesbian/gay cultural production that these films were not segregated and secluded as home movies in the closet or condemned to being mere veiled articulations of lesbian/gay feelings and perceptions, but rather became the open and deliberate expression of those feelings and perceptions. This does not mean, however, that these films are the embodiment of an authentic homosexual experience devoid of any kind of social contamination. Like all cultural production, lesbian/gay films exist only in and through the conditions and terms of thought available to them. These provisions limit what can be said but also make saying possible; they both form and deform all expression.

Lesbian/gay film has used for its own ends many of the images and structures of mainstream cinema, such as the use of traditional romance and adventure narrative structures but, on top of that, there is always a tension, a divergence of interests, between the film traditions and the deviant position of the sub-cultures, a tension which may be either mitigated or intensified, depending on the aims and signs of the times. In New You See It (1991: 211), Richard Dyer pays particular attention to the evolution undergone by the lesbian/gay films made in the last three decades. In general terms, whereas, according to Dyer, many films made in the 70s reached significant, but still small, audiences, most of the movies produced from the 80s onwards have enjoyed a high degree of popularity. Moreover, the analysis of their recurrent elements and themes leads Dyer, in turn, to classify these films into different groups. The films made in the 70s, deeply grounded in the iconography and rhetoric of the lesbian/gay movements of the moment, illustrate, in Dyer’s opinion, three different forms of politics, and can accordingly be divided into institutional, confrontational and affirmation movies.

Institutional films mainly attempted to establish powerful lesbian/gay organisations and promote change through existing mechanisms of reform. Indeed, the desire for high public visibility for homosexuals led the new lesbian and gay movements to make use of mass media film to make their voices heard. Confrontational films, by far the least numerous, emerged out of the libertarian impulses of late sixties politics, and aimed at showing lesbian/gay oppression as a manifestation of the cruelty and lack of freedom in society, which was ultimately built. In their third and most numerous. Although there is also verbal reference to oppression in affirmation movies, their overall mood is, unlike the bitter tone generally adopted by most institutional and confrontational films, joyful and positive, and their main characters are, on the whole, quite proud of being lesbian or gay. As Richard Dyer goes on to explain (228-31), it was the development and consolidation of the gay and lesbian women’s liberation movements that accounts for the emergence of affirmation politics. The starting-point is generally taken to be the riot at the Stonewall bar in New York on 28

Cuadernos de Filología Inglesa, 7.1, 1998, pp. 17-26
June 1969, when patrons, lesbian and gay, resisted police arrest during what was a routine raid. Resistance triggered off a not that lasted two or three days, during which the first Gay Liberation meetings were held. The movement gathered strength and spread rapidly throughout the States and Canada, Europe, Japan, Australasia and even parts of South America. Although the Stonewall riot was, over and above everything, a rebellion, it can nonetheless be asserted that it was in the slogans coined right at the very beginning of the movement, 'Gay is Good', 'Gay is Proud', 'Out of the Closets! Onto the Streets!' that lay the seeds of the affirmation politics that were to take over previous confrontation tactics. The militancy, the feeling of fighting against something was still present in the affirmation movies made in the 70s, but there was also the feeling of fighting for something, the sense of liberation at adopting so far despised homosexual identities and upholding these identities as something positive.

One of the most controversial issues in the movies made in the 70s was the representation of the so-called 'coming-out process'. This was mainly due to the fact that, no doubt, coming out was strongly related to another problem, namely, that of the nature of lesbian/gay identity itself. To put it in a different way, lesbian/gay identity could be presented either as a fixed, pre-given identity which then got recognised and expressed, or as something the individual discovered and developed into in the process of establishing relationships. Although a readiness to speak in favour of plural/ shifting sexual identities can be said to characterise contemporary thought, gay and lesbian films often represent the realisation of homosexual feeling in different ways: while coming out in many gay male films tends more towards the idea of the already fixed identity, most lesbian films represent it more flexibly, that is, they tend to see sexual identity as itself created (or recreated) in the process of forming relationships. One plausible explanation for this difference between lesbian and gay male films could be found in the very conventional views of the construction of gender sexuality differences. As R. Dyer explains, in a patriarchal society,

men are socialised into determining their own sexuality and also into thinking in terms of separate categories, and are therefore more liable to try to decide whether they 'are' one thing or another. [However, for their part, he continues] Women are socialised more in terms of relationships and responses and have to struggle against their socialisation to determine their own sexuality (255).

Most affirmation lesbian movies of the 70s were produced in the spirit of 'cultural feminism', as this trend was first critically termed by the Redstockings in 1975 (Echols 1984: 67). The main aim of cultural feminism was, over and above everything, to explore traditional aspects of femininity in order to give them new and subversive meanings and interpretations. Whereas Radicalesbians took possession of the notion of lesbianism as the rejection of men and patriarchal assumptions, cultural feminism focused on what the patriarchal system had labelled 'feminine', and detected alternatives to the destructive values that patriarchal society enforces. Therefore, although cultural feminism emerged from radical feminism, it also marks, in Gayle Kimball's opinion, a definite break from it: radical feminists "advocated entirely eradicating gender-linked roles of men and women", and were consequently reluctant to promulgate a women's culture, which is by definition based on notions of the specificity and distinctness of gendered identities (1981: 3). In their opinion, these notions do not

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Cuadernos de Filología Inglesa, 7.1, 1998, pp. 17-26
arise but are "imposed on women through oppressive social conditions or prejudice" and therefore "should not be made part of our definition of women's art and thus be further perpetuated" (Ecker 1985: 16).

On the other hand, cultural feminists, who shared many of the ideas forwarded by the advocates of the so-called écriture féminine, indulged themselves in the search, discovery and redefinition of specifically feminine aesthetics. They defended their position by arguing that their formulations were not biologically determinist, since they considered modes of feeling and expression that arose out of women's actual situation in the world. They claimed that this distinction, not only frees the definition of femininity from the hands of patriarchy, but also rediscoveros female traditions long silenced or denigrated by history/ his story, and/or invents new forms in this traditional space of the feminine. Consequently, cultural feminist art mainly draws upon the female unconscious, nature (as cultural feminists see it), women's closeness to nature gives rise to their spirituality. It is obvious, however, that the attachment of cultural feminism to procreative imagery raises the risk of falling back into a patriarchal and heterosexist division of the world, thus binding women to their 'natural' function of reproducing for men. Moreover, the spiritualisation and naturalisation of lesbianism may in turn obscure the reality of lesbian oppression and of the class, race and cultural differences between lesbians. Yet, cultural feminism can conversely have a subversive potential in lesbian films: the insistent association of lesbianism with nature goes against the dominant tendency in Western thought to consider homosexuality the epitome of abnormality and the 'unnatural'. As can be easily deduced, it was this critical aspect that most lesbian films of the 70s chiefly emphasised.

As stated before, although quite a number of films made in the spirit of affirmation politics since 1970 have enjoyed a certain degree of popularity, it was only in the 1980s that mainstream entertainment cinema actually began to accommodate a certain number of lesbian/gay-themed films, produced by and addressed — though not exclusively — to lesbian/gay people. In Mandy Merck's opinion, one of the main reasons why art cinema has eventually agreed to make room for what Ruby Rich came to label as Wew Queer Cinema" (Rich 1992) is that this is, in one way or another, a space permitted to affect "an attitude of high seriousness in matters sexual" (1986: 166). The impact of the new criticism could be seen, among other things, in the increasing number of women who actually became directors of films within art cinema, previously very much a male realm. It is striking how many of these films, though perhaps speaking from a heterosexual or ambiguous position, provide affirmative images of lesbianism, often seen as an alternative to relations between the sexes, or else as a study of women bonding together, thus dissolving distinctions between friends and lovers. Although, like most affirmation films made in the 70s, these movies still draw upon much cultural feminist ideas and imagery, they nonetheless claim that the lesbian identity is not a fixed culturally perceived and constructed one. In other words, these films have moved on from the ideas forwarded by affirmation movies, while at the same time questioning many of the images and assumptions upheld by those films. Hence the term post-affirmation movies coined by Richard Dyer to label them (274).

What chiefly characterises post-affirmation movies, among which Go Fish might be included, is, then, their eclectic approach. They combine an awareness of structure, construction...
partake of many of the conventions and devices which characterise commercial and art cinema) with a sense of commitment and urgency. In other words, socio-political issues also play a fundamental role in post-affirmation films. On the one hand, such films systematically try to assert the goodness of a lesbian lifestyle by showing smiling faces, harmonious sisterhoods, and happy endings. Go Fish includes all these elements: lesbian friends keep very close links between them, and the love story between Max and Ely follows the traditional romance pattern. On the other hand, post-affirmation movies also offer narratives of intra-lesbian conflict, thus disclosing what lesbians are in fact like, because tensions, contradictions, self-hate and oppression, to say nothing of common human iniquities, are also part of the lesbian identity. Daria has sexual intercourse with a man, which provokes the fury and indignation of many lesbians, who regard her as a traitor; Max and Ely go to see a film by a gay director who does not seem to offer a very positive image of homosexuals. This annoys Max, while Ely replies that homosexuals also have the right to dislike themselves and show their negative side.

In contrast with many post-affirmation gay films, whose main emphasis lies on the figure of gays as individuals, lesbian films are, on the whole, no less personal, but much less individualistic. The personal becomes the intimacy shared by women, and the lesbian self finds its ultimate expression in, to take Rich's famous phrase, the 'lesbian continuum' (1980), that is, in the communal experience of interpersonal subjectivity and friendship with other women. This emphasis on the personal as collective rather than individuated is conveyed, among other things, by the recurrent use of scenes of women talking about their own sexual lives and those of their friends while lying on the floor with their heads forming a circle or a chain (by the way, this combination of circles and lines could in turn be said to integrate, and thus subtly illustrate the two poles of the binary opposition circular/fluid/feminine versus linear/cartesian/masculine, on which cultural feminists had often based their arguments). The importance of the lesbian community is also emphasised by the use of images which symbolise feelings of merging and blurring as aspects of a specifically female aesthetic, such as a glass into which two different liquids are poured only to become one single substance in the end; and, last but not least, by the use of rapid, often subliminal editing, interweaving images so fast that they subtly fuse in the mind's eye, and also by the use of much hand-held camera work, which thus suggests an apparent lack of finish and precision, a technique which can ultimately be seen as pointing to feelings of spontaneity and immediacy.

Very much in the spirit of post-affirmation politics, the opening scenes of Go Fish present a positive image of a lesbian lifestyle and urge lesbians to vindicate their right to exist and have a visible place in history, while at the same time disclosing the anxiety and problematic side of difference. In the classroom, Kia, the teacher, who, significantly enough, happens to be a black woman (race and class issues also play a prominent part in contemporary lesbian films), asks her students to name as many lesbian women as they can. What is at first for them a cause of mere amusement and laughter turns out to be a very solemn matter. As Kia tries to explain, so far most lesbian lives and relationships have existed only on paper; nobody has ever cared about their real lives and problems. This indifference has somehow deprived them of a real existence, and converted them into oddities, invisible and powerless beings. In other words, they have been erased from history. It is only when one realises the meaning and power of the historical process that one feels the urgent need to be part of it in order to change it. If lesbians want to make their voices heard, they must begin

Cuadernos de Filología Inglesa, 7, 1, 1998, pp. 17-26
by have an identity, a name, that is, a place in history. They must publicly proclaim their lesbian condition. As Yvonne Rainer asserts:

I [...] call myself a lesbian, present myself as a lesbian, and represent myself as a lesbian. This is not to say it is the last word in my self-definition. Lesbian defines not only sexual identity but also the social ‘calling’, or resistance, made necessary by present social inequalities (1994: 15).

What follows next is Max's fantasising her unfulfilled wish for the love of a woman, a recurrent theme in lesbian films and fiction. While Max's voice tells us the story she is apparently trying to write, the camera shows us what Max and the four other lesbian friends about whom the film is going to be about do when they get up on an ordinary morning. These women are Kia, the teacher with whom Max shares the flat, and whose relationship with Evy, her chicana girlfriend, clearly echoes Sappho's story, and with Daria and Ely, who share another flat. This interlacing of images has a unifying effect: Max's story becomes more than one individual writer's story of a woman's desire for an area of floor"). Her name is also, more than one individual writer's story of one of those women. The story also tackles other important issues, such as the problem of identity and ‘coming out’. In the story, Max, presumably a born lesbian, fantasises about seducing a heterosexual woman who, if it hadn't been for the fat man who prevented her from catching the bus, would have awakened and turned into a lesbian in the process of having a relationship with her. The importance of names and of claiming one's lesbian identity is brought to the fore through Max's insistence on repeating her name: her name is not Mati (no doubt the film is playing on the different meanings that these homophones have: Mati: proper noun; common noun [unpolished surface], adjective [dull colour]; mat: common noun [a piece of fabric used as a covering for an area of floor]). Her name is Max, a wild, maximum name, like her, who is free from any heterosexual constraints. Not in vain did she change the name her mother gave her: she is not Camille, she is Max.

Something worth analysing as well is the recurrent juxtaposition of elements and symbols that both corroborate and question a cultural feminist position. The systematic use of verbal allusions to kissing and caressing, of scenes that celebrate the sense of touch, such as hands holding hands and objects or the stroking of naked bodies, and the parallelism that at one point in the film is established between the act of cooking and that of making love, seem to enforce the cultural feminist assumption that links woman with nature, physicality and emotions. Not in vain is the sense of touch that which most directly links the body with the world, traditionally considere, specifically characteristic of ‘feminine’ values and, for this reason, specially treasured in women's cultures. Similarly, the scene that shows water dripping on a woman's hand might be interpreted as an illustration of the cultural feminist tenet that claims that woman is close to nature and thus receptive to its spiritual, purifying power.

On the other hand, the hands that interface and finally part against the sky might be said to suggest that this natural utopia, this perfect integration and fusion of physical and spiritual homosexual love is, after all, very difficult to achieve in a heterosexist world. However free they may feel when they are on their own, the public and castratory sphere is out there; however hard lesbians
may try to assert their own sexuality, society is always going to hinder all their advances. However, strong their affinities with nature and the natural may be, they are members of society, and the cultural establishment is always going to constrain their wishes. Moreover, the recurrent use of a top spinning on a chessboard could be said to put essentialism, one of the main cultural feminist assumptions, to the test. Leaving apart the sexual connotations that the game of chess may have, the instability of the top, together with the coexistence and alternation of black and white (by the way, this is a black-and-white film), again points to the problem of the construction of identity and the anxiety that this inevitably brings about: are you? aren’t you? were you born a woman or did you become one? where do you place yourself? can you really control your life?

To put an end to this analysis, there is one more scene I would like to discuss in order to emphasise the same idea: the rejection of essentialism in favour of constructionist views. Max, towards whom Ely starts feeling a strong attraction, accuses Ely of looking rather hippy and old-fashioned. Ely decides to change her look by doing something she hasn’t done since she was ten years old: she allows her friends to cut her hair. What might be taken as a trivial and insignificant event turns out to be an emblematic illustration of the problematic nature of the self and of the construction of subjectivity. The alternation black/white in between scenes clearly contributes to distancing the spectator from what she is actually seen, thus bringing to the fore the artificiality of filmic discourse. Furthermore, Ely is shown from different angles (front, back, right and left), and each image provides only a partial, and therefore imperfect, picture of herself. The dialogue between Max and Ely in the scene that follows only reinforces this constructionist impression. They talk about the fallacy of appearances ("when I first saw you I didn’t think you were a lesbian", says Ely to Max); about the dilemma of whether to wear the clothes and hair cut which reveal who you are and what you are, or simply to wear garments that make you feel attractive and fashionable; and about the Fastidiousness of the well-known stereotypes of ‘butch-femme’, which insist on classifying lesbians under one of those two labels exclusively. It doesn’t matter whether you cut your hair or not, whether you look ‘butch’ or ‘feminine’; appearances are a trap, either way. They can never define the self, because the self is not a monoïthic and pre-fixed entity, but rather a construct, and thereby plural, shifting and problematic.

What seems to be emphasised in Go Fish is the need to reject heterosexist notions of either- or-ness in favour of sexual sameness. As Toni A. H. McNaron explains (1993: 294-6), patriarchy is constructed on systems of opposition, and thus on the belief that difference is the stuff of sexual excitement. This is why lesbians have been traditionally represented as acting out masculine/feminine role behaviours within relationships. It has been within the systematic growth of lesbian-feminist analysis of culture and psychology that real-life lesbians have come to understand these adopted modes of personal representation, and only within this context have they been able to counteract the traditional and paradoxical view that lesbians want to be men.

Judging from what has been said, it seems clear that Go Fish was done in the spirit of post-affirmation politics. Although this film makes use of many ideas and images forwarded by cultural feminism, it also attempts to transcend and question them by favouring constructionist views. Following Monique Wittig’s opinion (1993: 103-9), the need to go beyond the dominant order of meaning which naturalises gender and sexual orientation into biological categories is clearly suggested in Go Fish. Since ‘woman’ and ‘man’ are not natural categories but two social classes, historically produced by cultural, racial, class and generational differences, not biology, women, and lesbians in

Cuadernos de Filología Inglesa, 7.1, 1998, pp. 17-26
particular, must deny and deconstruct the logic of the repressive order of heterosexism by asserting their own lesbian identity within the very patriarchal structures of power, that is, by making themselves visible so that their voices can be heard and their messages can be communicated to a wide and not exclusively homosexual audience. Although, as Yvonne Rainer affirms, most lesbians live "outside the safe house, on the edge, in the social margin" (1994: 15), this apparently relegated marginal position can and must be conversely turned into a site of constant inquiry and resistance from which to undermine and appropriate the dominant centre. Not only does it imply the long overdue incorporation of lesbians into the realm of culture and of film studies in particular, it also poses a unique theoretical attack against the hegemony of traditional heterobinarism, which has for so long been the prevailing paradigm for thinking about identity, subjectivity and representation. It is within and against the very heterosexist structures of power that the attack must be launched for, to take Kia's words again, it is only by being part of culture, society, and history that culture, society, and history can possibly be changed.

NOTES

1. So emblematic and popular were these slogans among the lesbian gay communities that 'Out of the Closets' was the title chosen for two of the first books on the movement (Jay and Young 1972; Humphreys 1972).

2. Yet, as Tamsin Wilton argues (1995: 6-10), one cannot ignore the fact that the arrival on the scene and ever-increasing acceptability, even success, of the New Queer Cinema did not offer lesbians, on the whole, as much access to systems of production and distribution as gays. Moreover, A. Lebow, to cite but one lesbian critic, also notes that, in spite of the increasing number of lesbian films and videos, lesbian work has significantly tended to be considered in passing, if not at all ignored, by many critics (1993: 19). Unfortunately, and despite all positive changes, gender inequalities are also at work within the realm of queer.
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Cuadernos de Filología Inglesa, 7.1, 1998, pp. 17-26

