

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

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### 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 aplicaran 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 invisibilidad 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**.

B. Hammer 1994: 71.

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 **also** 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 *Now 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 1970s, deeply **grounded** in the iconography and **rhetoric** of the **lesbian/gay** movements of the times, 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** on which **society** was **ultimately built**. In the **third** place, **affirmation movies**, which were chiefly **concerned** with **affirming** the **worth** of **lesbian/gay** existence, were by far the 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 so-called **Gay** and **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

June 1969, when patrons, lesbian and gay, resisted police **arrest during** what was a routine raid. Resistance triggered off a riot 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**.<sup>1</sup> 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** **Radical** lesbians 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

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 arise 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 rediscovers 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 (nature as something that can be directly known, without the interference of cultural perception), and forms of women's spirituality (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 runs 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 some room for what Ruby Rich came to label as New 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 category but a 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 and play (they

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 movies. On the one hand, such films systematically try to assert the goodness of a lesbian life-style 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 lineal/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 life-style 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 serious 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

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** fictional story; Max's story might perfectly **have been the** story of **all** them, the **literary manifestation** of the feelings **and experiences** of all and **each** 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** considered. **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 interlace **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**, that is, an **unconventional 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 **s/he** 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** '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 monolithic **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-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**

particular, must **defy** 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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