

A Gay Socialist Journal

GAY LEFT

Number 9

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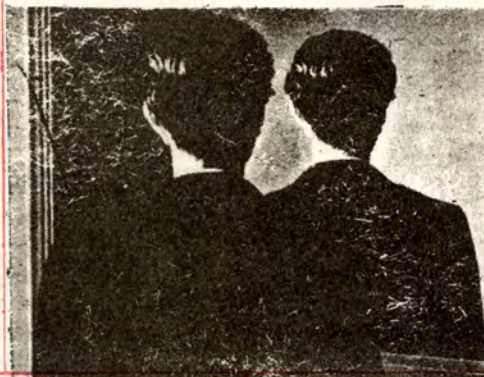
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SELF AND SELF-IMAGE



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Self and Self-Image

THE COLLECTIVE STATEMENT

Keith Birch, Derek Cohen, Emmanuel Cooper,
Philip Derbyshire, Simon Watney, Jeffrey Weeks,
Tom Woodhouse, Nigel Young.



This editorial stems from discussions that have taken place within the Collective of 8 gay men over the last few months around the central theme of self and self-image. As we talked we found that very broad patterns emerged, which in themselves raise questions which tend to be over-looked in traditional Left discourse: how 'masculinity' is formed and experienced, the difficulties of reconciling sexual practice with political theory, and for us as gay men, the ubiquity of self-oppression as a fundamental aspect of our lives, which are themselves experienced through and through as sexual. Thus we have tried to construct this Editorial around those themes, deriving our analysis from personal statements which we wrote for this purpose.

In Gay Left 8 we wrote: "it would be too easy to fall back into a strident Left orthodoxy, that would make Women and Gays mere auxiliary troops in some romanticized attack on state power ... The dialectic has to be maintained between the personal and the political, between the struggle for new ways to relate to each other now, and the building of organisations that would effectively challenge the whole oppressive order". Since that time the first effects of Thatcherism have made themselves felt, and the Left has found itself disarmed in the face of massive attacks on the gains won by working people over the last thirty years. There has been a tendency to turn away from considerations of subjectivity, of how we live and experience our lives, and a reconstitution of traditional Left campaigns that ignore whole realms of lived experience.

It seems that some ten years' work concerning the relationships between personal and public politics is being threatened by a renewed emphasis on purely economic struggles, and an elitist style of political leadership which is unable to acknowledge that most socialists today are outside the organised Parties. The Communist Party of Great Britain for example is currently attempting to re-locate itself in terms of shop-floor membership. Whilst we don't deny the importance of such moves, we feel that there is a real risk of forgetting the issues of *how* we communicate, and of lowering political sights to narrow wage demands and job defence programmes which exclude and deny the specific oppression of women and gays.

At the same time the Socialist Workers Party — particularly in its newspaper — is adopting a narrow class line on Women's issues, for example, restrictions on abortion are seen solely in terms of their effects on working class women, and gay politics are seen as no more than a matter of civil rights. This is characteristic of a general inflexibility on the Left around all issues of sexual politics, the reaction against which may well explain the popular appeal of recent writings by E.P. Thompson, Sheila Rowbotham, and others. These call into question many of the shibboleths of the Left, questioning aspects of organisation and strategy which the Parties themselves seem unable to comprehend, let alone respond to.

As a part of this reassessment we propose to limit our objectives in this Editorial to an examination of our self-image as a group of gay men at a very particular historical moment. We do this from a conviction that unless we can understand the processes that form us as individuals, the political forces that impinge upon us, and the contradictions that are bequeathed to us from living in a damaged and damaging culture, then we are doomed, as socialists, to planning mythic strategies for phantom armies, no longer connecting to the felt needs of ourselves or other people.

Internalisation of Oppression

The ultimate success of all forms of oppression is our self oppression. Self oppression is achieved when the gay person has adopted and internalized straight people's definition of what is good and bad. Self oppression is saying: "When you come down to it, we *are* abnormal". Or doing what you most need and want to do, but with a sense of shame and loathing.

Gay Liberation Front Manifesto 1971

The concept of self-oppression emerged from the Gay Liberation Front as a leading explanatory idea, carrying with it a whole retinue of moral imperatives and distinctions. As a first expression of an important insight it was very influential, but in order to make use of it today, the baggage of moralism and implicit assumptions has to be rejected. If that can be achieved the concept is useful in describing a constant feature of our lives. It may be that the gains of the Gay movement and the liberalisation of the late sixties and early seventies have reduced the stigma that attaches to a self-identification as gay, but we still have to live our lives in a society where the norms of masculinity, femininity and heterosexuality are deeply ingrained and continue to affect our feelings and actions.

"With straight men in many situations I can be 'gay' yes, but not the same verging on camp queen that I am with gay men or women. With straight men the tendency is to show the side that fucks not the side that is fucked."

Self-oppression is the result of the negative images of homosexuality available to us in our culture, encouraging us to think of ourselves as failed heterosexuals. Ideologically homosexuality is still usually defined as a psychological category, at one level only to do with sexual aim and goal, but at another level a general and determining feature of an individual's being. So whilst at first it may only be our sexual desires that are denied, that denial permeates our entire existence, more or less consciously.

"I don't make many approaches to people because of a general lack of confidence over my looks and sexual performance."

"Though I feel attractive, fulfilling sexual stereotypes, I still feel insecure. I deal with this insecurity by seeking and

demanding endless approval, usually by putting myself down and then expecting my friends to say 'no, you really are attractive, witty, capable'."

We can still see the evidence of this in the subcultures developed over the last generation. The problem in understanding these subcultures is whether we are appropriating established power mechanisms, (for example in the development of 'macho' style among gay men) or whether we are attempting to create something entirely new.

"By wearing a white T-shirt, black motorcycle jacket, faded blue jeans and short cropped hair I present a very masculine image. Nothing fey or gay here . . . the real thing. I do not want to look effeminate or queer. I gain strength from the gayness of other men."

"It seems to me that the 'masculinity' of my image is as much a symptom of insecurity, not only about sexuality itself, but in a much broader sense: I cling to a manifestation of power to offset the impotence I often feel."

As political gays we feel a contradiction between the need for and commitment to building alternative ways of relating to each other, and the ways we have already established to validate ourselves and to achieve some form of satisfaction and fulfillment in our lives.

"In my head is the ideal of equality, and sexual freedom . . . I want (in my head) sex which is gentle and devoid of performance qualities, but I seek out sex which is genital oriented . . . I exalt the value of sex and friendship on the one hand and somehow deny it by my thoughts and actions on the other."

"I have always been attracted to traditionally male images — motorcyclists, cowboys in particular. Yet my political awareness about role playing, and a fear of being overtaken by too complete and stereotypical an image has meant that my efforts to portray a male image have been modified."

Inherent in the concept of self-oppression is a voluntaristic stance, which suggests that we can transform ourselves by simple acts of will. Our experience as gay men over the last ten years militates against such a rudimentary conception.

"Sex for me is still a novelty. My attitude towards sex has changed very little despite my involvement over five years with gay liberation and its interaction with feminism."

Our relation to our own desire is far more complex. The ways our emotions are organised are rooted in capitalist society: we can change our perceptions of our situation, but not necessarily our deepest needs and desires. We can no more wish away our desire for particular types of sexual experience, our attraction to particular individuals, than we could wish away our homosexuality itself. However, that recognition does little to assuage the guilt and anxiety that can be mobilised in pursuit of 'ideal' non-exploitative relationships, or in condemnation of those pressing desires we feel in conflict with them.

"When an image of masculinity is appropriated by and dominates the gay subculture, I have found it a problem — in terms of my early GLF ideas, regarding my own concepts of myself, what it means to people. Wearing leather actually made me feel good in a number of ways, — more secure, the sexual responses from other gays ... more confident."

"Some of these sexual delights disturb me ... I notice that when I wank, which is whenever I sleep on my own and my fantasies are too violent, I withdraw and feel depressed when I've come. I don't think it's liberating to want to be pissed on, to want to be beaten, to want to go through pain and degradation."

The voluntaristic stance is particularly inappropriate when reaction is gaining momentum. Our room for manoeuvre is materially constrained by what happens on the streets.

"Partly the masculinity I cultivate is a response to the fear of physical violence against me for being seen to be gay. In the ghetto I found I was becoming much less butch in appearance, almost to the degree that I felt more confident about being gay and being seen to be gay."

"Violence is something that scares me and I am aware of the physical violence that many gay men experience on the streets. One of the ways I protect myself from this is by looking a bit 'heavy'. A leather jacket, boots, can afford some measure of protection . . ."

Homosexuality is still marginalised and gay people are still threatened: we have evolved ways of surviving our ostracism and of defending our vulnerability. Our personal contradictions, the fractures that criss cross our psyches as we seek to navigate between external oppression, the lingering residue of our socialisation and our visions of a socialist society, let alone our need to achieve some sort of satisfaction in our lives now: all should be less a subject for moral stricture and more a domain for sympathetic analysis.

"In an imperfect society it is absurd to expect the existence of perfect human beings."



POWER

"I like 'pretty' guys: I am put off by leather and uniforms".

"... by wearing a white T-shirt and a black motor-cycle jacket, faded blue jeans and short cropped hair I know I present a very 'masculine' image ... I want to attract men who are not as powerful as me."

"Being a nice middle-class man, my relationships are dominated by intellectual and emotional power struggles, not by physical domination."

"I perhaps gain power from never expressing my emotions, leaving them [lovers] to make decisions, being terribly nice and supportive when they have their crises, while trying to hide my own."

"I am attracted to men who seem in some way rugged or strong . . . I feel that the way to attract such men is to be like them."

These five voices begin to suggest the sheer complexity involved in any attempt to confront the issue of gay male sexuality and power. All historical concepts of masculinity and femininity have been reflected in terms of personal

appearances. What is 'masculine' in one era may seem 'feminine' in another. But such shifts in fashion rarely question underlying power relations. Power is rarely simply functional. In most circumstances it is both coercive and productive. Power always presupposes motivation, a reason or value which precedes action. We do, after all, make use of or reject specific forms of power — political, sexual, emotional, intellectual, and so on. At the same time it is not just the case that one person's image of power may not coincide with another's. The range of available images of Power is limited, and within that range the same image may possess conflicting meanings, as is apparent from the introductory quotations. By wearing leather for instance one man may be trying to attract someone similar, and another may be trying to attract someone very different, whilst a third may be put off altogether by the same image. In other words appearances do not have simple fixed meanings. As Guy Hocquenghem pointed out in *Gay Left* 6, wearing leather does not make a man a criminal ...

The early Gay Movement held that ALL versions and significations of gender are basically oppressive and therefore sexist. Gay people were supposed to somehow neutralize their appearance and de-sex themselves. Some people have found compromise solutions:

"I aspire to a kind of aggressive androgyny which is a way out from the culturally given extremes of gender which both repel and attract me. . ."

The felt need in our society for firm gender roles and the clearly defined power relations which they represent confronts us with the major problems of gay identity. For gay men these focus on the relations between our gayness and our masculinity:

"The image I have grown to cultivate is one of an ambiguous masculinity, an almost ironic butchness: Levis, Leather, jacket, boots, all give the appearance of an active masculinity that I don't feel I possess."

This is the source of the initial attraction of all forms of sexual self-presentation which seem to resolve the problem by resorting to extremes of power relations:

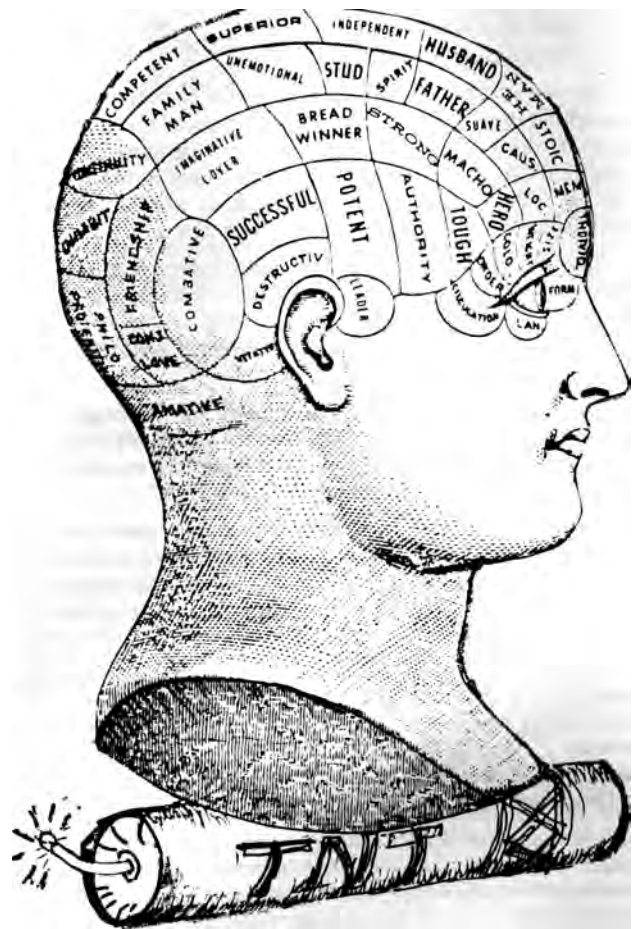
"It [sodomasochism] offers an attractive solution to a series of problems: it isolates sex from everyday life etc."

At the same time gay sexuality IS cut off from most areas of our ordinary working lives, as is shown in Ron Peck and Paul Hallam's film "Nighthawks", and it would indeed be surprising if our subcultures did not reflect this division. The problem remains that gender operates in all societies as one of the most fundamental systems of social control, control which is legitimated in a multitude of ways in the name of some supposedly 'natural' sexuality. The widespread adherence to conventionally masculine gender-role appearances which have nothing to do with specific sexual practices explains why we have developed further codes such as handkerchiefs, keys, etc. These devices derive from our vulnerability in the face of the massive moral and institutional edifice of heterosexuality. This to some extent calls into question the value of any analysis based on a narrow concept of stereotyping. For it is we as gays who are stereotyped in the first place by an anti-gay society, and much of our culture is concerned with enriching and nuancing these stereotypes according to our changing needs, desires, and experience.

It is pious moralising to attack gay people for 'failing' to establish a totally independent and coherent culture and identity. It is hardly remarkable that our modes of culture, sexuality and self-presentation should be various, even to the extent of incorporating the figures — patriarchal, violent, humiliating — of our own oppression:

"I don't feel guilty about sex or having it with all sorts of people. But I do sometimes think that some of my sexual practices are self-destructive and yet I can't stop myself enjoying these practices."

In the parodies and pastiches of the gay subculture we should recognize not some innate paucity of gay social relations, but rather the constrictions and limitations in ways that all women and men are constructed under capitalism.



SEXUALISATION

The last two hundred years have seen what could be described as the sexualisation of the individual identity in the western world. Sexuality has become a central focus for the individual's sense of self and the basis of that very individuality.

The categorisation of homosexuality has been a central feature of this process, basing a social identity on a sexual orientation. The definition of the homosexual has been constructed and shaped by a variety of forces and institutions which have attempted to regulate its character and expression. But as 'homosexuals' were defined more and more on the basis of sexuality, subcultures have slowly developed as focuses for homosexual identities, both within the confines of these definitions and in opposition to them.

A growing awareness of being homosexual in this society can lead to many different subjective responses. They can be the ground on which a whole notion of difference may be experienced. The result is not just a sense of sexual difference but one that concerns the whole range of assumptions and values.

"It seems that I have always defined myself against the norms of whichever group that I have attached myself to, that difference, a self-definition that I am not such and such, which I have imputed to be a general feature of my friends, peer group and comrades."

This growing awareness can also lead to a denial of difference, an assertion that it is only sex, only the gender of the sexual partner, that is at odds with social norms. Some people may lead lives of greater conformity as a proof of their sameness. This degree of self-consciousness regarding our sexuality can lead to a wider sexualisation of our social activities and experiences.

"I often find myself looking round in all sorts of places to see if there are other gay people there and perhaps make signs of recognition to them. It often makes me feel better in an 'alien', heterosexual environment to know there are other gays around."

The exclusion of an open homosexuality from most social institutions has led inevitably to the development of a gay subculture which has focused on the desire to make social and sexual contacts. Sex in this context is the primary means by which we can express ourselves and it confirms our distinct identity.

It is still the case that many gay men make their early contacts through cottaging or chance pick-ups. This involves becoming aware of sexual signals and codes which allow us to identify and make contact with others; it may be merely by our presence in 'sexual' locations or by the whole range of our actions, language, clothes and other signifiers.



"My first sexual experiences were in cottages and although I didn't have a notion of my gayness I responded to men masturbating in the toilet and also to the casual strollers who seemed to spend an unusual amount of time looking at the fauna surrounding the cottage."

For many gay men image and fashion take on a more important and self-conscious role, often in the projection of certain sexual types. An elaborate vocabulary of codes and signs is used to indicate aspects of our gayness which may also imply particular sexual preferences.

"I seek out men who are going to be good at sex. Sometimes at Bangs disco I stare at men who are classic stereotypes: tall, slim, moustaches, beards, check-shirts and keys, because I know, or think, that they will be good at sex."

"I am still surprised by the fact that my image conveys my interest in all sorts of sexual activity which I am not interested in."

"Having a beard or wearing a leather jacket has a noticeable effect on people's sexual responses that was both exciting and worrying. Exciting because it's nice to feel attractive, worrying because of perhaps getting into it too much, using it all the time and being able to hide behind it."

This wider sexualisation can lead to stresses and conflicts for us as individuals operating in such contexts. People who do not fit into the dominant stereotypes can feel isolated and anxious. Sometimes the importance of sex as a confirmation of ourselves can become obsessive and can lead to a compulsive and consuming search for sexual partners. The gay scene can exacerbate this search whilst discouraging attempts to make wider contacts and build collective support.

"Having sex with other men in some ways feels less important than having them attracted to me."

"In San Francisco where sex was easy to obtain, it lost much of its centrality. It reduced drastically the compulsion to pick up which underlies gay life in London, or which I feel. The fact that gay life is still so closeted in London focuses an urgency on encounters in bars etc."

"Sex is some form of expression of personal power for

me. It is three things: Consolation, it shows you can still do it; Confirmation, cementing friendships etc; Affirmation, making me three steps higher."

Sex can be an affirmation of ourselves and an important confirming part of relationships. It can also be used to avoid emotional involvements. We can live out some aspects of our fantasies in sexual contacts.

"My sexual practices don't scare me because I'm aware of the limits that I want to go to. I like 'hot' verbals but I don't really want to realise the excessive areas of my fantasies."

"I am confused by sado-masochism because, like monogamy, it offers an attractive solution to a series of problems; it simplifies sex, it isolates sex from everyday life when integrating sex into my life is time consuming and emotionally draining."

There have been major changes in the images that we as gay men have of ourselves and that we present to the world. The gradual development of the macho style in the late 70's raises issues of the determination of cultural codes and our changing conceptions of ourselves as gay men. The transposing of the dominant image of masculinity into the gay subculture is in some ways an assertion of a positive identity as 'male'. Also, macho might well be seen as one way of negotiating the problem of aging in a youth orientated culture.

We have to be careful though not to collapse all aspects of gay life and the gay subculture into sex. There is a danger of reading this into all social contacts.

"I increasingly question my earlier belief that one can change radically through assimilation of political ideas. My involvement with feminists and lesbians has not changed my need and desire to see men as sexual objects."

"Sexually I want adventure and experiment but I also want emotional contact and this somehow justifies the sexual exchange."

Though based on a shared sexuality, the gay world contains all levels of social interaction, friendship and support. Much of the impetus of the Gay Movement in the last decade has been to challenge the limitations imposed on the gay subculture. One vital aspect of this has been the effort to construct and work through different types of relationships.



Relationships

"We are obsessed by them when we do have them and obsessed by not having them when we don't."

Relationship is a word used to describe all sorts of connections between people, but within the last decade or so, (perhaps mostly amongst the young professional middle class), it has become a substitute for such words and concepts as affair, marriage and partnership. As gay socialists we use it to underline a sense of, or attempt at, equality between lovers involved in a sexual and emotional involvement.

In our discussion we talked about our own individual needs and what we wanted out of our relationships. There was a sense in which we viewed our relationships as somehow a pool of emotional support, from which we can draw from time to time.

"to have one relationship which satisfies me emotionally, intellectually and from which I get warm affirmative gentle sex."

We all have a notion of relationships which has been formed by the interaction between the given social/cultural model, the critique of relationships offered by the women's and gay movements, and by our personal experiences. Out of the response of the women's and gay movements to the heterosexual standard of marriage have come a whole series of ideas about ideal relationships, with a strong antipathy to monogamy. Groups of people within the early gay movement experimented with multiple relationships and sexual relationships within a communal living situation. There were attempts to construct a gay alternative to compulsive monogamy. We saw ourselves as needing a whole series of relationships to satisfy our sexual and emotional needs. Exclusive couples were seen as oppressive because of the difficulties of relating to the individual members of a couple without having to respond to the 'other half'. These problems are still with us today.

"Coupledom for me is both stultifying, against what I believe and makes other people feel isolated and lonely if they're not in a couple — I think it's reactionary too — though I recognise other people's emotional needs are different from mine".

In the colder reality of the late seventies maintaining a primary relationship alongside a series of other relationships seems an attractive solution. For us, who choose this, the central problem is maintaining equality within a primary relationship constantly beset by difficulties of jealousy and trust stemming from the threat of other relationships which are potentially primary.



"What I do is play a balancing game . . . I can retreat from the domination of my main relationship into a series of other types and if my main relationship is going OK I enjoy the other relationships all the more — but they are no substitute."

These ways of dealing with relationships come out of an acceptance that people need to have relationships which somehow contribute to making them into 'whole' human beings. We all feel that we need some form of constant extoln/sexual support, even though it seems that our 'wholeness' is illusory. Holding narrow concepts of relationships can only contribute to feelings of inadequacy and 'unwholeness' when we do not achieve our ideals.

However, despite our 'realist' statements, many of us revealed the deep rooted hold that romance has on us.

"Then one new relationship started that developed such an intensity ... "

"Tends to make me fantasize about an ideal lover . . if I get depressed the absence of this perfect being gets out of proportion."



" . . . somehow are less to do with sex than with an intense desire to dissolve into the other, sex becomes symbolic, mythic . . . "

"Romance is the nearest we can get to realising some aspects of our sexual and emotional fantasies and in many ways relationships are concerned with controlling, channeling, and prolonging the intensity of the romantic moment."

Words like romance, love or relationships and all the other words handed down to us by society are loaded. We cannot, on the other hand, provide new words, we can only describe our experiences to an extent and suggest problems and offer tentative solutions.

"What we want is the possibility of deciding for ourselves the sorts of relationships which seem most appropriate to us as gay people, rather than trying to relate to, or fit in with the values or particular forms of relationships which society has defined as normal and natural."

What type of relationships those are must be the choice of each individual, all we can try to do is to explain where that choice might have come from and the variety of choices that can be made. Which brings us back to the opening quote.

"We are obsessed by them when we do have them, and obsessed by not having them when we don't."





Gay Politics in New Zealand

by Lindsay Turner

I'm often amused, and sometimes faintly irritated, by people's concepts of gay life in New Zealand. Most people know something about the country in general: that it's down there in the South Pacific, just a bit to the right of Australia, and that it persists in trying to sell us lamb and cheese at prices that the EEC says are too low. But when I mention a gay bar in Auckland, or a lesbian group in Wellington, I tend to get astonished reactions. "Oh, really?" I'm asked, in tones that suggest surprise that I'd ever seen anything more erotic than a merino ewe before coming to London, "I didn't think they had things like that there." And astonishment is indeed great when I inform them that New Zealand has not only a commercial gay scene but a National Gay Rights Coalition with 35 member groups.

Not that I'm claiming NZ gay life to be perfect; no one would suggest that about a country in which 300 people on a gay pride march is something of a record. But lesbians and gay men there live lives not too different from their counterparts in British towns and cities outside London. In fact, there's a good case for arguing that Auckland is a lot livelier than, say, Edinburgh or Leeds. But there *are* distinct differences between the gay scenes in the two countries, differences that are attributable to the subtle but important variations in the ways of life. And before I write specifically about the position of gays in NZ and the development of the movement there, I want to mention some of the peculiarities of everyday existence.

It's often dangerous to talk about a "national character". This is particularly true of a country like NZ, which has a population composed largely of British immigrants and the descendants of immigrants, with a substantial (10%) Maori minority. Just how different *is* the average New Zealander's character from that of the average Briton? Not very, I think. But there *are* features of NZ society in general that are quite distinct from their British counterparts. NZ is a country with only 150 years of European settlement, and for most of the 19th century was very much a "pioneer" society. It still retains some of the features of such societies: egalitarianism, practicality, and hospitality, for example. The class system is less rigid, so that accent or schooling are often not reliable guides to social background.

There's also a high degree of respect for the rights of ordinary people, a suspicion of privilege and elitism, and the feeling that people's worth depends on what they contribute to the community. There's a strong tradition of social innovation, with NZ being the second territory (after Wyoming) to grant women the vote, in 1893. (I don't think

it coincidental that both places were pioneer societies in which the conventional Victorian views of women as helpless and hysterical were contradicted by people's practical experience of women's part in building communities out of virtually nothing.) And, today, opinion polls show large majorities of the population in favour of such principles as abortion on demand and legal equality for gays.

It's a small country

Unfortunately, there's a negative side to all this, that seems to be increasingly dominant. I mean the conformity and insularity that are the bane of small communities everywhere. New Zealanders hate to stick out in a crowd, and they hate others to stick out too. This means that it requires a great deal of courage to stand up for any unpopular cause at all, or even to act in ways that violate the mortgage-and-two-and-a-half-kids norm. It also means that the country is very susceptible to the kind of rightwinger who *appears* to represent consensus opinion, as the Prime Minister very well knows: he expresses his populism perfectly in the NZ idiom, "a fair go for the average bloke". It also means that determined pressure groups can force legislation against the trend of public opinion, which is why there is still no homosexual law reform and why Parliament regularly *tightens* the law on abortion in response to Catholic pressure.

More specifically, the sparse population of NZ (it has only three million people in an area larger than Britain) means that lesbians and gay men face some extra problems. Real anonymity, for example, of the kind easy in a city like London, is virtually impossible to achieve. Even if it's not as true as is sometimes claimed that aversion to rugby and a liking for the arts is enough to get a man labelled as a poofster, small-town pressures against eccentricity, and especially violation of gender role, are very strong. And even if you move to a larger town at the other end of the country, you're still likely to run into an old school friend or your uncle Bert at embarrassing moments.

Likewise, the small size of the average town means that commercial gay scenes have little chance to develop. Auckland, with a population of 800,000, is reasonably well served with bars, clubs, and saunas, but even Wellington and Christchurch, the next largest cities, have no more than mediocre commercial facilities, and most of the others have nothing at all. The situation is further exacerbated by continual depletion of the homosexual population, since lesbians and gay men in large numbers leave the country for Sydney (rapidly fulfilling its ambition to become the San Francisco of the South Pacific), the US, or Europe.

Legal problems are much the same as anywhere else. Although male homosexuality is still completely illegal, the law is not normally enforced except where minors are involved. Its existence, though, is a convenient excuse for periodic police crackdowns on saunas and cruising places. It was also used to justify the exclusion of sexual orientation from the provisions of the 1977 Human Rights Act. Very often, lesbians and gay men are particularly victimised by repressive legislation that is not specifically aimed at them.

Lesbian mothers, for example, are among the worst sufferers from a law which reduces social security payments to single parents during the first three months after the breakup of a marriage — a law that the government freely admitted was designed to force families to stay together. And censorship of lesbian and gay material has reached the point where *In Touch*, probably the most innocuous American glossy gay men's magazine, has been banned by the Indecent Publications Tribunal. Even the Spartacus Gay Guide was seized by a customs officer on similar grounds, though heavy coverage of the incident in the news media led to a hasty reclassification as "not indecent".

Cultural changes

The differences between New Zealand and Britain that I've mentioned so far are essentially differences within a common Anglo-Saxon culture. More significant are those attributable to the non-European culture of the Maori minority, though these differences are reflected in political theory rather than everyday life for most European and many Maori gays. Like the blacks in Britain and the US, the Maoris are victims of racist economic exploitation. It has turned them in only a couple of decades from an essentially communal rural people into a typical urban working class. But, since they are the original inhabitants of the country, and had a centuries-old social system of their own before the whites arrived, their cultural position is distinctly different from that of the blacks in the UK.

The strong movement among both rural and urban Maoris to preserve Maoritanga (traditional culture) has been one of the most important political developments in NZ during the last ten years. Maori culture was — and to some extent still is — based on communal ownership of land and extended kinship, and not on private property and the nuclear family unit. This has had a strong influence on the development of socialist and feminist theory in NZ, for it means that there is a living tradition of non-capitalist values that many countries lack. As yet, these values get little more than lip-service from the established political parties, but there's no doubt that they will become more and more important to feminism in particular as increasing numbers of Polynesian women become involved in the women's movement.

There is still little available information about homosexuality in traditional Maori society, though the evidence is that it was tolerated if not entirely accepted. (The closely-related Samoans still sometimes practise an institutional form of transvestism by bringing up a son as a daughter if there are no female children in a family; and homosexuality, among adolescents at least, is regarded as quite normal.) But more and more Maoris live in nuclear, rather than extended, families and, as is common in working-class communities, acceptance of traditional gender roles is strong. Consequently there are in Auckland and Wellington large numbers of Polynesian transvestites of both sexes who live in a subculture that is in many ways separate from that of white lesbians and gay men. It does however, raise racial and class questions about transvestism that the NZ movement is trying to deal with both theoretically and practically — though Polynesian involvement in the gay movement itself has always been minimal.

The early days of the movement

It was, however, a Maori feminist who was largely responsible for starting the first gay liberation group in NZ, in March 1972. Although lesbians, in particular, had talked about the idea for some time before this, it required a major violation of gay rights to get things going. A violation that was obligingly provided by that perennial source of harassment,

the US Immigration Service. Ngahua Volkerling, who was Vice-President of the Auckland University Students' Association, had applied for a US Student Leader Grant, which was refused when she stated that the reason for her application was her wish to study the Native American and Gay Liberation movements at first hand. She asked for the support of other lesbians and gay men in Auckland in her protest at the US Embassy's action, and within three months gay liberation groups had been formed not only in Auckland but in Wellington and Christchurch as well.

In the period 1972-75, the gay movement in New Zealand went through the classic problems of its counterparts in Britain and North America: expansion with a countercultural bang, followed by a collapse at the centre due to a lack of real depth in organisation and commitment. There were also the usual problems of male domination and disagreements over tactics between radicals and liberals. The only real difference from overseas groups was that potential splits were papered over more often, simply because the number of people taking any given political line at any given time was, in absolute terms, usually tiny.

Even so, there were some serious disagreements. Radicals clashed with conservatives, for example, over the degree to which the movement should try to establish its respectability by denouncing such actions as the painting of slogans on buildings. There was also the problem of the NZ Homosexual Law Reform Society, which at least initially regarded the whole gay liberation movement as liable to upset its painstakingly constructed appellation of "responsible protest". The Society had been formed in 1968, in the wake of the law reform in England and Wales, its aim being to achieve a broadly similar change in NZ law. In its early years, it did perform a valuable service in educating public opinion and in attacking some of the grosser myths about homosexuality. But since 1972 it has increasingly become an anachronism. It still refuses to broaden its aims (e.g. to support 16 as the age of consent) for fear of losing the support of the doctors, bishops and professors who make up its lengthy list of vice-presidents. Nevertheless, its membership in the National Gay Rights Coalition means that it is often inveigled into support of actions that go far beyond the scope of its official aims. For this reason, gay liberationists are no longer as hostile to it as they once were, though they still mistrust an organisation composed mainly of heterosexual liberals and closet gays.

The turning point

In retrospect, 1975 seems to have been the turning point for the NZ gay movement. There were several reasons for this. Most gay and lesbian groups were fragmented and disillusioned. Financial problems had caused the Auckland group to collapse completely. Wellington had only a token organisation as a result of factional in-fighting. In most of the smaller towns, groups which had been successful in providing the kind of social facilities that did not exist commercially, found it hard to encourage people to make the political step of coming out publicly. But political events outside the movement forced activists to realise that attacks on gays were increasing rather than lessening, and that liberation would not come about of its own accord.

The first political setback was the defeat of the Crimes Amendment Bill, which would have legalised homosexual acts between men over 20. The movement in general supported the bill, even though it was on the whole a regressive rather than enlightened piece of legislation. Although it legalised acts between consenting adults, it increased penalties for other homosexual activity, and explicitly widened the definition of a brothel to cover homosexual prostitution. But, as it turned out, Parliament rejected even this meagre concession to gay rights. After months of submissions to Select Committees and earnest meetings with MPs, many activists were smugly confident that the bill was certain to pass. Instead, the debate on it was notable mainly for the non-stop regurgitation of the same misrepresentations of gay life that the activists had tried to refute. It demonstrated once and for all that easy assumptions that the path to progress lay in "educating" politicians were just wishful thinking.

The second major shock for gay liberationists, as for everyone else on the left, was the National Party's landslide election victory in November 1975, on a platform very similar to that of the British Conservatives in 1979: union-bashing, immigration curbs, and attacks on social security beneficiaries all figured prominently. Until the National Party victory, many gay activists had at least subconsciously been relying on the socially progressive policies of a Labour Government. Quite why they had been doing so is anyone's guess. The NZ Labour Party is, in general, even more right-wing than Britain's, since it lacks an organised Tribune left. The only left opposition to the parliamentary party's reformism comes from the unions, who are, of course, more usually concerned with economic rather than social issues.

The reactionary nature of the Labour Party leadership had in fact been only too apparent during the debate on homosexual law reform. One prominent Labour MP supported the general intention of the bill, but proposed an amendment aimed at curbing the "excesses" of gay liberationists. The amendment would have made anyone "who wilfully says, writes, or does anything to any person under the age of 20 years that leads or is intended to lead or is likely to lead that person to believe that homosexual behaviour is normal" guilty of an offence punishable by two years' imprisonment. This astonishing proposal, instead of being rejected out of hand by the Government, was allowed to find its way on to the order paper. It was only after a widespread civil liberties campaign that the Prime Minister decided that the Labour Party was making itself look ridiculous by allowing one of its MPs to put forward such a nonsensical piece of legislation.



A national organisation

But Labour Party inadequacies were one thing; the election of a consciously reactionary government dedicated to such policies as the strengthening of the family unit and the protection of the unborn child was quite another. It was apparent that gays would be under attack as they had not been during the previous three years. During 1976, most of the lesbian and gay groups reformed or reorganised, and a major Gay Liberation National Conference was planned for October of that year. At this conference, a group of Christchurch activists suggested that a National Organisation be set up. It was hoped that this would solve some of the problems of communication, duplication of effort, and conflicting tactics that had often weakened the effectiveness of action on gay rights.

The idea of a national organisation had been proposed several times before, but always as a centrally-run organisation with local branches — along the lines of CHE in England. This idea had been consistently rejected, partly because it was feared that the city where the head office was sited would dominate the organisation, and partly because internal travel in NZ is often difficult, especially between the two islands — which would inevitably reduce efficiency. The new proposal, however, was for a federal structure, in which

each group would be autonomous, subject only to the condition that it abide by the aims of the national organisation. Representatives of most of the gay groups in NZ met in Wellington in January 1977 to work out the structure of the organisation, which came into being as the National Gay Rights Coalition several months later.

This was the revitalising point of the NZ gay movement. The NGRC now has 24 full members, all of which are lesbian and gay men's political groups, social groups, or counselling services, and 11 associate members, ranging from the Socialist Action League (the NZ section of the Fourth International) and the ecologically-based Values Party, to Hedesthia, an organisation for transvestites and transsexuals. The structure of the NGRC is relatively complex, but it is designed to allow the maximum amount of participation by member groups in both planning and action. All major activities, such as Gay Pride Week, campaigns during parliamentary elections, and international solidarity campaigns such as that on Iran, are now co-ordinated nationally. The results have generally been successful, particularly in gaining access to the news media: any important gay event is now likely to get adequate coverage in the metropolitan newspapers and often on TV as well.

Of course, there are still many problems to be solved. The most important of them, inevitably, is the participation of women. Lesbian separatism has become a major current in NZ feminism during the past four years, and the members of several lesbian groups will have no contact with men or organisations that include them. (The collective which produces the lesbian-feminist magazine, *Circle*, for example, asks that women keep all copies of the magazine out of the hands

of men so that the energy that went into producing it stays in the women's community.) But there are still significant numbers of women who are prepared to work with the NGRC provided that their issues are given sufficient importance. Consequently, the Coalition is making the education of gay men about sexism one of its immediate priorities. Indeed, many of the most active men in the NGRC subscribe to a radical feminist analysis of society, rather than the Marxist models that dominated the ideology of the movement in the period 1973-76. At the time of writing, this policy of support for lesbian issues seems to be successful in gaining the trust of women: three recently-formed women's groups have applied to join the Coalition, and an NGRC-sponsored lesbian weekend was attended by large numbers of women representing most political viewpoints.

The other main problem facing the NGRC is the common one of a leadership whose politics are noticeably more radical than those of the majority of the members. In August of this year, the NGRC caused a great deal of debate among gays both within and outside the movement by actively torpedoing a homosexual law reform bill that fell short of full equality for gay men. Warren Freer, a Labour MP and the longest-serving member of the House, had proposed to introduce a bill along the lines of the one that was defeated in 1975. That is, it would have set the age of consent for gay men at

20 — though another MP had guaranteed to move an amendment to reduce this to 18. The NGRC executive asked the member groups which of three stances it should take: supporting the bill, supporting it but pointing out its inadequacies, or opposing it completely. A large majority of the groups wanted the NGRC to have nothing to do with the bill. They argued that the experience of England and Wales showed that such a reform was likely to lead to more, rather than less, police harassment, and that to support it would be a sellout of gay men who were under the age of consent. Such was the publicity given to the NGRC's objections to the bill, that Warren Freer eventually withdrew it altogether.

Needless to say, the NGRC's action was extremely controversial. Most of the groups endorsed it, and the Executive launched a campaign to ensure that all lesbians and gay men understood the reasons for this stand. (In this it has generally been successful. Even the usually conservative commercial magazine *Out!* has publicly supported the NGRC policy.) But some groups — notably the Homosexual Law Reform Society and the Auckland Gay Rights Activists — have been severely critical of the decision, to the point where there were suggestions of a motion of no-confidence in the executive.

Political confidence

But whatever the effect of the controversy on the Coalition, the decision to oppose the reform bill shows an astonishing growth in political confidence since 1975. Then, the movement was glad to accept whatever politicians were willing to give it. But in 1979 the policy has been to reject reformist window-dressing and concentrate on gaining mass public support that will eventually result in real and significant changes being made. This is perhaps where the real strength of the NZ gay movement lies. Despite the many problems it faces, it has not made the same mistakes as its North American counterparts — concentrating almost exclusively

on reform legislation at the expense of gaining mass public backing, and then finding (in Miami and several other places) that their gains can easily be swept away by right-wingers adept at organising large numbers of people.

I'm not suggesting that the NZ gay movement has all the answers. It's still largely a fragile and fragmented collection of groups that would be vulnerable to a concerted repressive attack. But what it has done is to show that it is possible, even in an isolated country with a conservative government, for gays to go on the attack. It seems to me that the gay community of a country in which bars can be counted on the fingers is showing real strength in looking beyond superficial gains. London has a comfortable collection of pubs and clubs and discos. Does it yet have a gay organisation with the self-confidence to reject out of hand any meagre concessions that our politicians might decide to make to us?



John Tobin

"THE PLAY'S THE THING . . .

Ophelia by Hormone Imbalance and *Who Knows?* by Gay Sweatshop

Reviewed by Philip Derbyshire

Hormone Imbalance started life as a group of lesbians who came together to do review-type performances in the Gay Times Festival and Gay Pride Week in 1979. With *'Ophelia'*, written by Melissa Murray there was a move away from fragmented or loosely linked scenes to a much more ambitious reworking of *Hamlet*, with an all-woman cast which although it dealt with lesbianism also tried to raise more general questions about sexual and class power, fidelity and love.

Elsinore is transposed to a mythical future where Gertrude reigns (Claudius having disappeared in transposition), though her power is threatened by rebellion in the North of her queendom, and by the machiavellian schemings of a chillingly unpompous Polonius. Much of the action is centred on Polonius' attempts to marry his daughter Ophelia to the arrogant, swaggering egotist Hamlet, Gertrude's son. Ophelia moves by degrees from a position of acceptance of the status quo, through her growing involvement with her servant-maid, to a rejection of Elsinore and what it stands for and to throwing in her lot with that of the rebels. Even so, the contradictions of her position as daughter of the ruling house amongst the revolutionaries, and the new power inequality between Ophelia and her lover do not allow for 'happy endings', and the denouement of the play is Ophelia's choice to undertake to assassinate Polonius, Gertrude et al as proof of her fealty: she is pre-empted by Gertrude who has chosen to liberate herself by poisoning the men of her household, and then committing suicide. An ambiguity remains at the end of the play: would Ophelia have carried out her task, and if so for what motives? That ambiguity resounds as the keynote of the play.

Such a terse summary scarcely does credit to the richness of the play, and to the vigour and fullness of the language, much of it highly polished blank verse, streaked through and through with wit and humour, and with judicious comments on the original play. When Ophelia picks up a fragment of *Hamlet's* journal and reads out 'To be or not to be' with a wry expression on her face, her following aperçus on the nature of *Hamlet's* masculinist, posturing egomania are a delight and trenchant criticism in their own right.

Who Knows? whilst less ambitious than *Ophelia*, nevertheless manages to make so many points about the difficulties of coming out, the problems of monogamy, the structuring of adolescent sexuality, 'the generation gap', racism, how unemployment affects women etc etc, all in the space of an hour, that one leaves breathless and astonished.

The play begins with the accidental coming out of a former head girl of a typical secondary school. Her picture is seen in a national paper, after she had been on a gay demonstration, and is shown with glee to a small group of friends who all knew her — to disastrous effect. Gathered together after a disco, they hold a mock trial of Claire, brutally impelled by the straight gay-baiting Colin. During this (and it's a fine set piece allowing comment on roles, stereotyping and differential gender expectations), one of the boys, Robin comes out with dignity and courage, appalling Colin, but bringing Robin much closer to his straight 'best friend'. The rest of the play is really a series of confrontations between gay life and the straight world and its restrictions and expectations, including a very funny scene when Den, Robin's mate, meets Robin's lover, who also happens to be black. The potential mawkishness and tokenism of that scene is redeemed by a wry humour, and the excellent acting of the protagonists. The play ends with a mixed straight and gay group going off to see Tom Robinson, whilst the embittered Colin who has been trashed physically by both Robin and Claire prepares to redeem his masculinity with a flick-knife. That threat hangs in the air, as 'Glad to be Gay' plays over the sound system.

'Who Knows?' was presented at the Royal Court Youth Theatre, for audiences of school pupils, who, at least whilst I was there seemed to react with enthusiasm to the out and sexually upfront content of the play. Sweatshop hope to tour with the play, and it would be a shame if such a finely honed production (directed by Philip Timmins, and whose cast are 'unknowns' who no longer deserve anonymity) did not play to larger audiences. In much the same way, one can but hope that *Ophelia* does not sink into obscurity.

Right to Rebel

AMBER HOLLIBAUGH INTERVIEW

by Philip Derbyshire

Amber Hollibaugh is a socialist lesbian living and working in San Francisco. At the demonstration on May 21 1979 she gave a speech defending the rights of gay people to protest at the lenient sentence (six years) given to Dan White, convicted murderer of the mayor of San Francisco and Harvey Milk, the out gay supervisor of district 5 of the city. She is at present being indicted for "incitement to riot" because of this speech, and if guilty faces a longer prison sentence than White.

The interview is in two parts, the first part dealing with her own politicisation and coming out, and the second with the development of gay San Francisco over the last five years and the implications of the victory against the Briggs initiative to bar all homosexuals (and anyone who tried to legitimate homosexuality) from California schools.

PART ONE

I came from a small town in California (Carmichael). I hated it and wanted out, but not into marriage. I heard about the Civil Rights movement, was exhilarated by it and wanted to get involved. This was 1964. I was naive in my outrage at the Southern community's reaction to Civil Rights, but that naive anger is as good a way into struggle as any. I felt that we all had to do something otherwise nothing would change.

I discovered a real sense of community through that involvement: people were trying to kill us, which brings you together! The Black community in the South had already built networks of care and concern, and by being involved on the margins of that we whites learned that survival was a matter of taking responsibility for each other.

We worked hard and organised, but there were problems, especially for a white woman in a Black community. So many racial myths centre on that and I began to feel that we put the Black community in even more danger because of that heterosexual racism. We brought down the wrath of god: we were staying with Black families, frequently lovers of Black men, and certainly their friends, which was horrific in the eyes of the surrounding white community. The violence was incredible, people trying to shoot you all the time, houses you were staying in getting firebombed. The last straw for me was that the man of the family I was staying with refused to sit down to supper if I was there: he said that he couldn't sit at the same table as white folks, it wasn't done. I freaked: this man would come in from working fourteen hours working on some white man's plantation, and he couldn't eat his meal in peace. My being there was doing him no good at all.

So I left Mississippi, went up to New York and worked with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee there until Whites were expelled as the Black Movement grew into a consciousness of its own need for autonomy and the ideas of Black Power began to grow. That was extremely painful, a traumatic experience where I was forced to confront the fact of being white. Up until then I'd sort of thought that if we could just come to love each other it would be OK. But now people that I loved were telling me to fuck off, that it was no good me spending six months in the South — they had to be there all the time. I was white and could pull out of the struggle at any time.

Most Blacks had started out as naive as me, but the toll of the struggle was a growing cynicism, a defensiveness that chimed with the growth of a new Black nationalism. I didn't understand that, many of us failed to understand it at all and grew embittered. Those who survived that experience remained politicised, and I was hooked. In the society I'd come from I'd been taught that nothing mattered, nothing was worth fighting for, but through that struggle I'd come to

know people who believed in something, and who were prepared to act on that belief: the right of people to be equal ... which was an extraordinary thought in a racist society. The struggle gave me so much, and even though I didn't know where to go I couldn't give up political involvement.

The sixties struggles

Then for the first time, whites rebelled in the sixties. In Berkeley, Ca., sparked by the struggle for SNCC to have the right to raise money on the university campus, the Free Speech Movement was born. It escalated rapidly, involving straight students from all backgrounds and was fuelled by the resentments of being in an alienating university. The ideas of the Beat Movement fed into it too, and soon the Anti-War Movement span out of that explosion.

Again my first involvement in FSM and the Anti-War Movement was from a naive perspective. I thought killing was wrong, but was horrified when people tried to stop troop trains. But within the Movement politics was serious: people had theories, could articulate strategies and tactics, and were often explicitly Marxist. I started to learn about class, found out what imperialism was, and felt a real commitment to building a movement that would control our government, which lied to us, killed people in our name without taking the trouble to ask us what we thought. It was an exciting time, in which I began for the first time to understand what was happening.

But I was also working class: I wasn't a college drop-out, and my parents weren't supporting me. I had to work but kept losing jobs because I was a red, a commie, and McCarthyism hadn't run its course. So I began to work as a hooker, and led this weird double life ... over here I was political, over there I sold my body. Slowly I began to understand the power of men over women too.

Someone in the CP had explained to me that you didn't have to get married ... a shocking idea to me, cos I thought you only didn't get married if no one asked you. The idea slowly dawned though that I could be an independent woman. But then there was the whole deal about how women were supposed to relate to men in the Left. I was a hooker for a living but I was also prostituting myself to the men in the Left, for power and for education. The way you got both in the Left then, if you were like me not so articulate, a poor farm kid, was by sleeping with the men who had them. You fucked for a book. They didn't even go with me: I wasn't some guy's girlfriend, just some guy's fuck. And there was a push in the Left then on all women to sleep around. Those straight men got a lot! Part of the 'new world' we were building was men and women together: you were free with your body unrepressed — basically you had to sleep with anyone who asked you. Otherwise you were called frigid, peculiar, or got kicked out of the movement.

Then there was the division of labour within the movement. Men argued and debated with each other, theorised, and women went out and organised: we went door to door and asked housewives what they thought of the war: 'Hi, you don't know me but I'd like to talk to you about the War in Vietnam.' The reason women were so good later at organising our own communities was because we'd learned the skills in the sixties, whilst the men were arguing with each other.

Slowly I grew to hate men, even whilst I had to sleep with them, all of them, communally etc. I didn't want any part of it but I didn't know how to get out of it. So I went through with it, and it's a dull meaningless memory now. I was lucky. Some women were destroyed.

Women came first

Eventually I got pregnant by a draft dodger. I got an abortion but got so sick that I had to leave with him and go up to Canada, where we got married so that we could stay together and he could look after me. That was one of the bitterest times. I became all the things I never wanted to be. I'd lost my connection with the Left, and I was trying to be married. I managed it for nine months, and was miserable. But you couldn't talk about it with anyone. I had no sexual know-

Cops attack protesters outside San Francisco's City Hall



ledge. I kept asking myself "What's wrong with me?" I couldn't make it with men: I could fuck for money, but I could have no emotional life with men. I didn't know myself to be a dyke. It was just barren.

So, I left my husband, organised a strike at McGill University in Montreal, and began to reclaim my political self. This was about the time (1966) that women's caucuses first began in the Left. I didn't want to know. I'd made a decision that I would never sleep with a man again: I was going for power, for leadership. I was going to be a heavy. Whilst I was married I'd read Marx, Engels, Lenin, the lot. I came out of that at least a thinker if not an intellectual: I was as smart as any man on the left, and by God, I was going for the big time. And then these women started caucuses!

I didn't want to go to them, but I was persuaded, even though I was not impressed. I hated being a woman, which was a lot of what stopped me from seeing I was a lesbian. I hated what women did: I hated their dependence, their tears. The biggest compliment to me was that I thought like a man. Talking-with women made me feel bad, and I didn't want to identify with them. I wanted to identify around men's appreciation of my 'masculine' part.

Through the caucuses I began to think about my own contradictions: outside organisations I was a nice person, but inside I was a killer. Then at a conference I was one of eight women who gave a paper on Juliette Mitchell's 'Women: the longest revolution'. At the end of an eight hour conversation with one of the other women — pow! I left the room with her and we were together for five years. I fell in love, and moved in with her. I came out then and before the Women's Movement that's how a lot of women came out. We didn't say—we were gay, we said we were in love. We said that women were forming new relationships and we were a part of that. Women came first.

Slowly many women, leftists and socialists, came to the realisation that we had to leave the left to create a women's movement. It was painful for me. I'd fallen in love with a woman but I had to leave the Left. It was my revolution but here I was organising women, with no relation to Marxism seemingly or to any other struggles (the anti-War movement was at its height). I felt alone and only being with this woman made it possible. During that period I had to face my own self-hatred, my own oppression of women, but through

that I could open up to the possibility of women in my life. Only the strength of the beginning of feminism was enough to confront women as tough as me with how misshapen we'd become: we were committed to the Left but we were cold. The brand of socialism we had was not enough. It didn't change anyone.

We had to face what women had become. I'd fought for power and now I realised that it was useless. I was torn ... did we have the right to organise separately? Mitchell's article was crucial, it gave us a theory. And the love of a woman was crucial too, a love not based on power. Lesbianism is about that.

This woman didn't want me for the power I had, for my status, but for who I was. And she didn't lie about the rotten qualities I had too. There was a quality of honesty which I'd never known before, and which women had in their gift. Heterosexuality was all about lies, if you were honest in a relationship you lost the relationship. Both of us could be honest, not have to play games. She'd been wounded, had only been tolerated in the Left by men because she was brilliant. Tolerated, never liked, and I loved her. Neither of us had had someone love us who'd seen us as we were. I began to open up to being soft in a relationship, she didn't hold it against me. Being caring, nurturing, sensual was not something I finished up having to pay for. We made a commitment to each other for life.

But, but. Our relationship was in the closet. The women's movement had begun by now (1967) but it hated lesbians. We were suspected and we had to keep the illusion of separate bedrooms. The women's movement despite its militancy was terrified of sexuality. Everyone was being dykebaited.

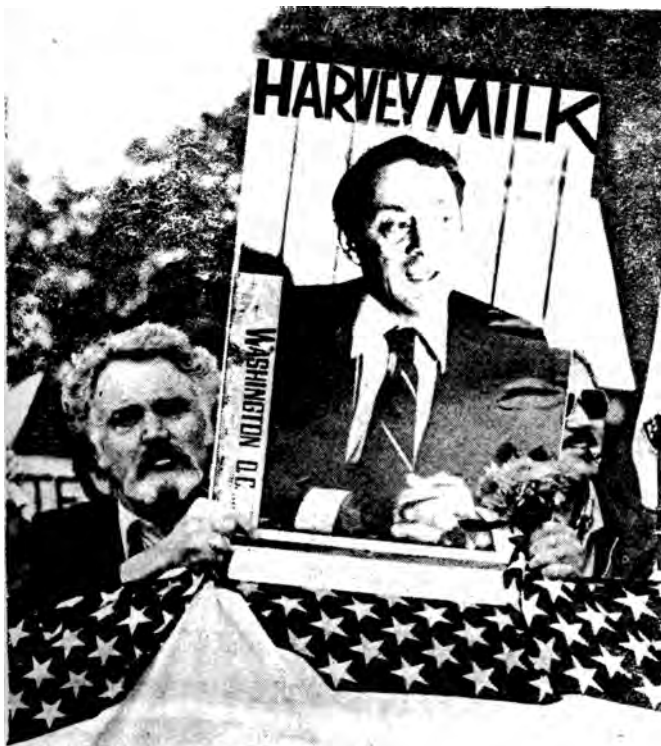
We weren't gay, not even to each other. We talked about being in love: what it meant for women to love each other, and we talked about celibacy — we were real big on that! Our relationship was classically closet. An enormous emotional intensity, a primary commitment and very little sexuality. You can't have it in isolation. But what *we* needed from another woman was not primarily sexual: ultimately it was a validation of our femaleness, only secondarily sexual, primarily emotional.

Out of the closet

It was a rich time, discovering what it was to be women, in our relationship and as part of a wider movement. We wrote papers, organised conferences, and went through the rage from what men had done to us. It wasn't hard to be without men, e.g. SDS leaders who spread clap through the women's community. We were exploring an internal women's life that had been invalidated before. Sometimes we discovered how damaged we'd been and there was a sadness for parts of yourself that couldn't be brought back to life. We feared that men were so damaged that relations with them were impossible. Radical feminism had emerged by now, but in Canada we maintained an unapologetic marxism which, however was not protective of the male Left. We kept race and class consciousness whilst developing our feminism.

But as dykes ... we couldn't be out. The first glimmers of understanding what it was to be in the closet came through the very success of creating a women's culture. We were women together, but I couldn't be with the woman I loved in the way I wanted to be. We'd be invited to parties, but most of the women were straight, and you were meant to dance with men. I wouldn't and stayed in the kitchen and got nasty. Any man could walk up to her and say "Hey honey, you wanna fuck" and walk off with her, but if I looked at her with any emotion people treated me as though I was an animal. So we stopped going to parties! We didn't have what you might call a political consciousness of the situation!

Our relationship got more neurotic: we couldn't talk to anyone about it. I finally had begun to realise that I was gay. I read (surreptitiously) *The Ladder* from the Daughters of Bilitis. Finally I said, "We're Lesbians, we live together, it's obscene that we should have to hide." Her reply was that no, never, she was not a lesbian, being a lesbian destroys you. If you have to come out you do it alone. This was heavy. To be out as gay meant I lost the woman I loved. To keep her I couldn't be who I was. It was intolerable. The few lesbians in the Toronto movement had discovered each other, quietly, 'I won't tell on you if you don't tell on me' style, and in 1970 we decided to do a forum on lesbianism and feminism. In it we were all going to come out. I was to come out first, since I was part of the leadership, with the hope that it would somehow calm people down enough for the rest. (My girlfriend of course was freaking out: if I came out then who was she?) So we did it. I came out, and nobody else did. Oh, they admitted to fantasising about women and so on ... These were stone dykes! Freak out. Within three weeks my girlfriend and I had split, I left Canada, the women's movement ... for what. To be a lesbian, and I knew nothing from lesbian.



A political lesbian

It was the pits. I'd left the Left for the Women's movement, now I was leaving that for a Lesbian Movement that I wasn't sure existed. I was back in the States, with the craziness of the early seventies, Weathermen and so on. And I'd lost the woman I still loved. Our relationship had been so important, even if it wasn't gay. To be gay you have to be able to look at your partner, know what you're doing and be glad. We couldn't do that. We weren't proud enough to call ourselves Lesbian.

I was confused, I had a political commitment before I had a real understanding. I had to go through all the vulnerability of discovering lesbianism whilst still being a politico. And I'd lost the woman who'd been my political partner as well as my lover. It was like being deaf and dumb.

I'd maintained some involvement with mainstream left politics, working with the Black Panther Party and doing draft-counselling, but it wasn't an easy glide back into the US. I was a lesbian and I didn't want to face it: lesbianism was harder for me to accept than anything in my life. There's something very lonely about gay self-acceptance — or leastwise there was in that period. Coming out — we were defiant, proud, angry — we wore a lot of lavender, but the self-hate is so deep that it takes you years to work through it and there's no social movement that removes you from that pain. You love the same sex which is horrible in heterosexual society. No one can make that easier. For me it's taken years. I hated being gay: I knew I couldn't change it. I knew I wasn't straight, I was gay, but I didn't like it ... hell, I don't like being oppressed. Being gay is not something that you learn. At least if you're black you're raised in a culture that explains to you what racism is and how to deal with it. If you're gay first they try to tell you that it's really not true, then they spend years trying to change you. You just have to hate yourself more than straight folks do. Everything that comes at you tells you it's sick, wrong, perverted, demented. You never get reinforced. And what's this puny little movement. Circle-dancing deals with all this? That every straight man wants to kill me cos I'm a dyke. Nothing deals with this.

I wasn't happy. I felt outside the Lesbian movement: I was working class. I wasn't comfortable with middle class assumptions that gay was good. I felt that gay was right, I was defiant but I had an enormous amount of self-hate. I was socially conscious, I felt I had a right to be gay, but in bed, alone at night I did not like being a lesbian. I kept saying "I can't help it", and felt that I was going to be alone, without a stable relationship. Even being a communist you feel normal, being a lesbian though ... through and through you're abnormal, or that's what they tell you and what you believe.

I left Boston, came to San Francisco. I knew if I was going to find an answer it was going to be here. San Francisco has a diversity: there are working class lesbian bars, something I'd not known. There are so many different ways here to work out who you are within the definition "gay". There are all races, ages, types of lesbian, and there's a strong women's movement here too. I was also coming home. And I've been here seven years. San Francisco allows you to be a whole lot of things without hating yourself. I feel that I've worked through that self-hatred. I've accepted my lesbianism and also feel that I have some control: my lesbianism isn't some alien thing apart from me. I feel I've reconnected to who I am as a marxist, a lesbian and a feminist. Ultimately, "the revolution will have come when I can go to a party and be all the things I am". Contradictions are there but I feel I am more whole. San Francisco gives that to many gay people. It gives you a community to work through who you are and who you want to be.

PART TWO

When I came to San Francisco in 1972, the lesbian community was pretty submerged. It thrived in the space between the gay male community and the Black community. But there was a space: San Francisco has always had large communities of Black, Chinese, and Latino peoples, a thriving women's movement and a large Left focussed more around working class struggles than around the War.

The gay male community centred on Polk Street was seedy, flashy and almost a parody. The Castro was a quiet, residential district. I was removed from it, having a more or less separatist position, although feminism in that form was beginning to fall apart from class contradictions, and I was beginning to feel uncomfortable with that brand of feminism. My lovers were coming out of the bars, not from the movement. There was a contradiction in that I hadn't come to lesbianism as a political alternative. I feel my own history as somewhere between old and new dyke lifestyles. Old dykes were lesbian in isolation — they figured out that they loved women and that was that. New dykes came out on the upsurge of feminism. A third group to which I belong, connects to both parts: we were dykes before the Lesbian movement, but were political as well.

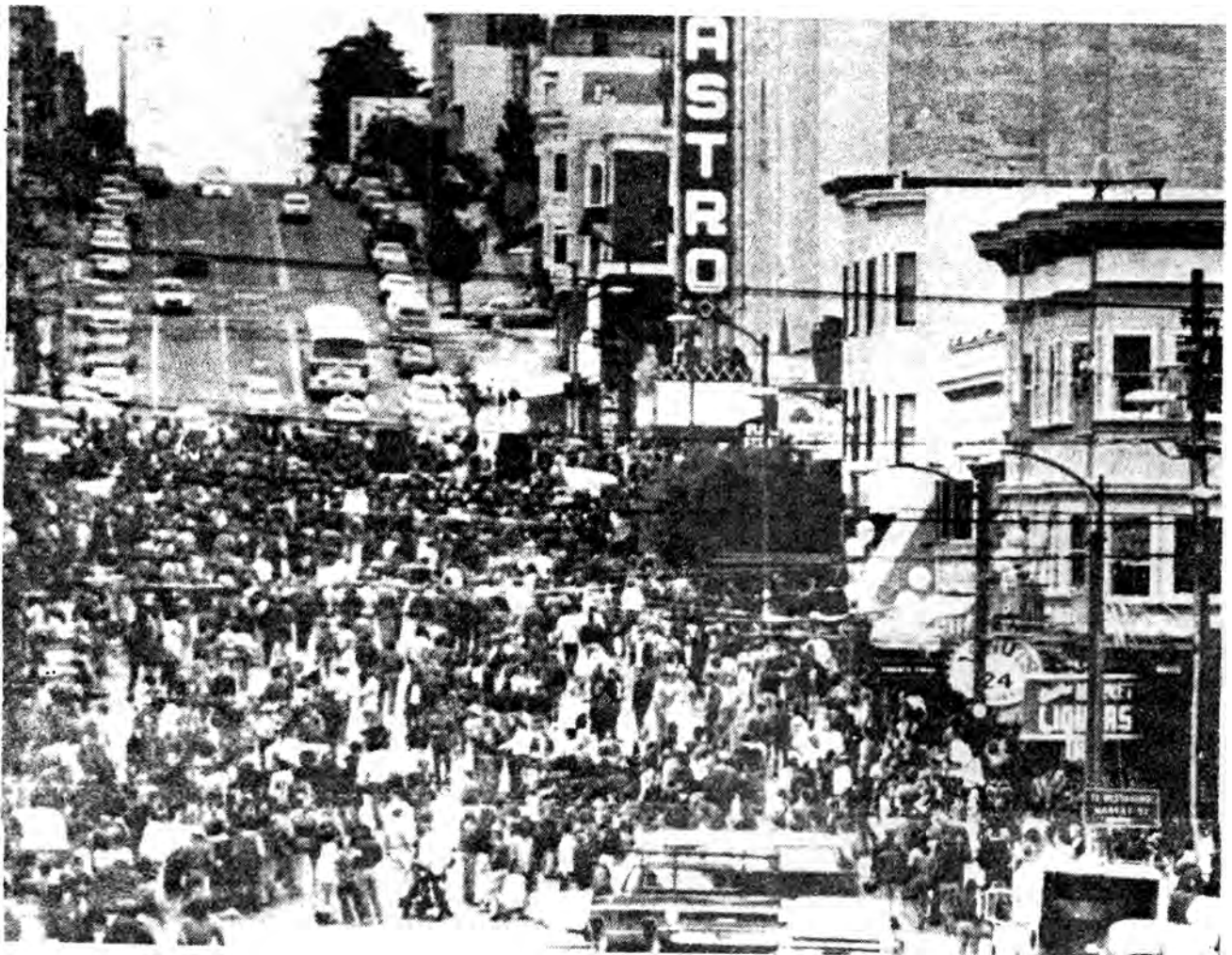
Working together

My political confusions began to resolve themselves when I began to work in the gay caucus in the organising committee for the July 4th Anti-Bicentennial in '75/'76. I chose to work in the gay caucus as opposed to the women's caucus, a moderately scandalous choice. I was the only woman with eleven gay men, mostly political white gay men. My experience with them was good. It gave me a sense that there were men committed to struggles against sexism: men who were as moved by feminism in their own way as I had been. Not because they were guilty about being men, about being

oppressors, but who were moved by the idea of a new way to be men. I hadn't met men like them before: I'd met gentle straight men but wasn't convinced. I hadn't met men before who passionately identified with parts of feminism as their own. I got a real sense of feminism reaching out beyond women, and touching and changing men and how they wanted to be, and impelling them to work against sexism. Feminism was bridging gaps between lesbians and gay men, and I began to spend more time in the Castro, and though the faggot lifestyle there was alien, it wasn't threatening.

Then the attacks started, and lesbians and gay men started to come together. First Richard Hillsboro was murdered and the Bryant thing started. There was a changing wind in the country. Harvey Milk was elected but he was virtually the only out gay official, proud to be a faggot and a progressive. As the repression increased there was an explosion of gay life that was more positive. People fled to San Francisco trying to figure out what being gay was all about, but with a consciousness that homosexuality was being threatened. The city wasn't mecca, and we had consciously to see that we were being attacked and that unless we fought back we weren't going to survive. Lesbians knew that before gay men, and Lesbian School Workers formed as an organisation knowing where the attacks would come. The Lesbian community by now was the biggest in the US and it was a deeply politically conscious community.

And Bay Area Gay Liberation existed which was a socialist primarily faggot organisation that set the tone of struggle, maintaining links between the gay male community and the Third World communities. There was a model for coming together, and taking up sexism and racism. The Castro area exploded, and is now the gay capital of the US. It reflects a new way of being out, proud, defiant, very sexual and cruisy for gay men. For men it's very butch, and raises a finger at all the straight stereotypes. As the street evolved lesbians were often unsure about how they fitted in, but at least we weren't hassled: it was OK to be gay and hence OK to be dykes. It isn't enough but it's not tiny.



The political fight

The change was the Briggs initiative. It was an explicitly political struggle. The gay left gave a lead, didn't trail behind. The liberal strategy was exposed for what it was - a cop out. They argued that gay people should go back in the closet, and straight people should do the advertising and so on; that being gay wasn't really different, only a matter of sexual choice.

The whole strategy was overturned and issues of homophobia were debated. Before that every campaign that had been fought in the US had adopted that liberal strategy and we'd lost every time ... in Eugene, in Dade County, in Minneapolis. Everyone knows that being gay is different. If we were afraid to confront our own fears we couldn't face others'. And we had no answers; if someone asked "Don't you want to recruit children?" we'd say "NO, we don't want anyone to be gay": but of course we did. We wanted other people to be gay because we were glad to be gay. We had to confront the repressive notion of recruitment but we couldn't dodge the real issue. Bryant and Briggs said if we can take them on in California and win, we can win everywhere. We knew then that if we lost, we lost everywhere. It was frightening, a statewide confrontation. California is huge, a rural farm state. Farmers vote here, agribusiness controls things here. Doing publicity meant going to small farm towns, facing very conservative working people. We figured that even if we lost, if we told the truth we'd convince enough people that we could fight back some time and win.

In the face of the repression we became very gay to each other: we didn't know if we'd make it, and the only people you could trust were other gay people. It changed Castro: we were being filmed, photographed, interviewed, asked questions all the time, and we had to think, to come to see each other and the street, the community as survival. You couldn't trust straights, no movie stars flocked to our banner, no active liberal support would run the risk of being called dyke or faggot. All the other campaigns had lost cos they'd relied on getting the liberal vote out and it hadn't come through: they hadn't gone into working class communities and tried to change people's minds. We went to the farmers, to the union locals, to the schools to the hospitals, the childcare units, all the places we hadn't been before and we came out and forced people to think.

Gay people who'd never been political before took amazing risks ... everybody took three steps further out. If you weren't out you came out: if you were out to three people you came out to three more and so on. It changed our community because we began to respect each other: we were

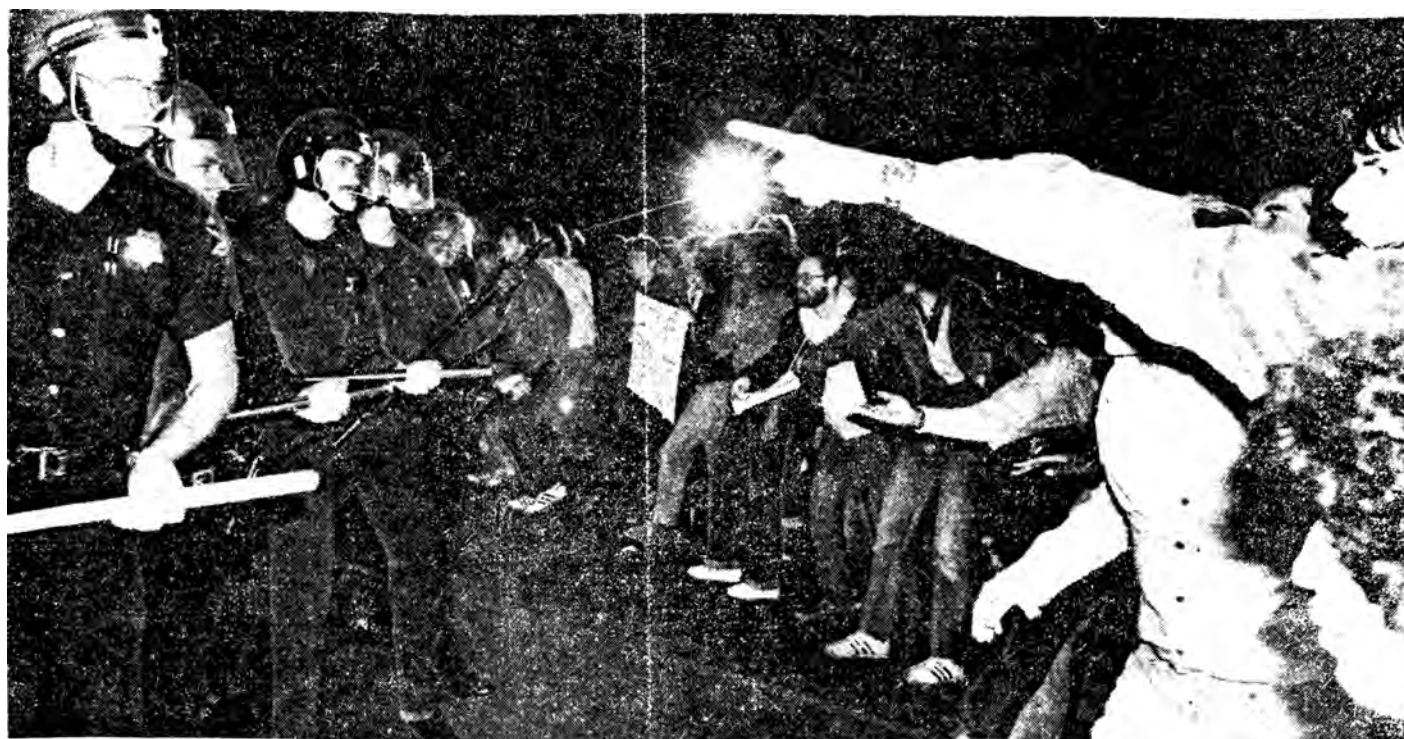
militant, fought and defended each other. The specific people who Briggs named, his accusations blew up in his face. For example. Larry Benner, a schoolteacher in Healsbury, a tiny town. Larry's fifty, a schoolteacher of thirty years standing, a communist and also a well known and respected member of the town. When Briggs attacked him, Larry was well grounded in the community, very out, was proud of being gay and got a lot of support and Briggs was discredited there. And it was the same everywhere. Gay people started taking care of their own people, their own community, saying, "We've had enough. We're gay, we have a right to be gay, and if you can't take it that's your problem."

And we won, won in every single area of the state where we went and did work. We won because we came out, and the community was politicised. A huge number of gay organisations sprang up, it was a real flowering of the movement. Lesbians and gay men worked together and created a renaissance of gay life in San Francisco. 2,000 people stood in line for a film benefit for the NO on 6 campaign. Everyone took literature and used it. If you used traditional political methods you didn't understand the significance of what was happening. People went out where they had to confront homophobia in their own lives — not going to meetings. Telling your mother, talking to the busdriver on the way to work ... No one knows how many people did things and told no one, took no credit, just acted in their own lives. We won and we created a self-conscious community in San Francisco, lesbians and gay men with a different level of respect for each other.

Then Harvey was killed.

He was important, a faggot, proud and a socialist. For Harvey to be killed by a man who was the epitome of a homophobe — white working class ex-cop, family man and a Christian was too much. In San Francisco, where it was wonderful to be gay, where you came because you couldn't be gay anywhere else, what did they do — they murdered one of us. We were none of us safe. The murder forced people to confront the ugliness of homophobia. Under our noses Harvey was killed by someone who felt he was safe to do that in San Francisco. And ultimately he was proven correct — he got six and a half years.

That action, on top of the sense of community -that we'd built during Briggs, galvanised the community. It was dramatic, if unstated. If they could get Harvey then we were next. 40,000 people marched on the night of his murder, two hours after his death, they marched to City Hall to mourn him. Everyone knew it could be them. When Dan White was found guilty with such a light sentence, it was intolerable.





Gay councillor Harvey Milk. His assassin gets three years jail.



The day after the riot was amazing. If you catch a bus, normally you're nervous if you look gay, wondering who's going to jump you, who's going to sneer. The first thing next day I got on the bus, went to the back and there's these two black kids, sitting there. One said "Are you a dyke?" I said "Yeah, so what?" and this kid said "Hey you people are OK, you know how to kick ass. I didn't know dykes and faggots could do that." For a couple of weeks gay people knew each other and just grinned at each other. And other people responded.

Even people who felt unsure about the kind of violence, somewhere they thought we were right, were proud we hadn't taken it one more time. We had the right to be that angry, we felt we had the right, and feeling that makes being gay a whole different thing. We don't have to die to be gay, they don't have the right to kill us. The gay community too often doesn't resist, and doesn't respect the gay people who do. Sometimes we are our own worse censors. But not this time. 15,000 rioting queers at City Hall: we didn't burn down our own ghetto, we went to where the power was and

we burned it. Which was why they were terrified and why we weren't murdered. If we'd stayed in the Castro they'd have machine-gunned us. But they didn't want a massacre on their property, it's a different thing from killing people in their own ghetto separate where no one sees it, and it can be forgotten. Gay people moved from the Castro and said "You can't keep us home, just let us be gay there: we're coming here because you're here straight San Francisco."

The violent reaction we had to that violence also changed the community. People said "Fuck that! they can't do this ... we're gay but we're not going back. We're going to be gayer than ever before, we're going to be queerer, more militant, we're going to take self-defence lessons. WE're gonna kick ass! You can't push us anymore."

"We're going to be gay everywhere, we're not going back." It was the first riot by white folks. It was a revolutionary act by 15,000 gay people. It transformed the expectations externally about what the gay community is like, and it's transformed us: we have a different sense of how we're gay in this town. Not only gayer in the Castro, but gayer everywhere. And that's a nice place to start from.

The Charming Passivity of Guy Hocquenghem

by John de Wit

This article continues the debate on the work of Hocquenghem begun in *Gay Left* No. 7 (review of *Homosexual Desire* by Philip Derbyshire).

This article deals with Guy Hocquenghem's theories of homosexuality.¹ These theories can be seen as an application of the schema developed by the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari in their controversial hook *L'Anti-Oedipe*.² The concretisation of this theory in Hocquenghem also illustrates some of the problems in it. This paper has two parts. In the first part I will try to explain some aspects of the theory of Hocquenghem, and talk about: his views on the slogan "the personal is political" and his views on sodomy and on "the

subject"; the practical consequences of his views, especially the relation between the feminist movement and the gay liberation movement; the relation between the struggle of the proletariat and the struggle for sexual emancipation; and his anarchist political views that turns him right against the contemporary banalisation of homosexuality. In the second part, some criticism will be given. Hocquenghem will be criticised for his petty bourgeois idealism, for his elitism; also some criticisms from others will be reproduced.

1. A survey of the theory

This survey must necessarily be schematic, because some changes have been taking place during the evolution of Hocquenghem's theory. (Two recent works by Hocquenghem are not yet to hand.)

Personal life is political

According to Hocquenghem, our society neglects the free course of desire, which directs itself in a non-limitative and non-exclusive manner to various organs. Our society has chosen one organ, the Phallus, and placed it as a despotic signifier above all other organs. The Phallus fulfills the role of money in capitalist society: a universal point of reference for all activities. Similarly, all pleasure is measured according to phallic pleasure: here is the myth of the perfect orgasm. From this point of view Hocquenghem denounces the theories of Wilhelm Reich and the bio-energetic approach of Masters and Johnson, precisely because of their inherent ideal of the perfect orgasm.

The relationships that are connected with this supremacy of the Phallus are hierarchised relationships of competition. Our society is a struggle between different possessors of the Phallus. One can only own the Phallus through recognition by others: so one's situation is constantly threatened because other people can steal one's Phallus.

Whereas the Phallus is extremely social, the anus is extremely privatised. According to Hocquenghem, the first thing that was privatised in western society was defecation: people went to the toilet in a special place, a place where no one else was allowed. The anus became viewed as a functional organ, an organ that is to secrete excrements. It became deprived of all its lust-functions.

Freud claims that in the anal phase conceptions of activity and passivity are learned (by holding up and secreting afterwards); also the distinction between public and private life is learned, because of the separate place where the defecation has to take place: the child learns that it cannot defecate anywhere or anyhow; it has to discipline its desires in this field: it has to train its muscles. This creation of a difference between something public and something private is the cornerstone for the creation of "the subject". From this point of view anality has not to be sublimated, but every sublimation is anal: the anus does not enter in any social relation: it organises the social on the canvas of the private individual.

The anus can be viewed as the source of energy from which the social sexual system and its oppressive components are generated. If one would use the anus in another than a sublimated way, this would destroy the difference between the sexes: looked at from behind, we are all of the same sex. By sodomy the difference between the private and the public bursts out. De facto, by homosexual sodomite behaviour, the

essence of man is destroyed: one directs his desire to different things, no more to different essentialised persons.³

What is now Hocquenghem's vision of the subject? According to Hocquenghem, the 'gay' as a unity does not exist.⁴ He claims that this concept is the product of a disciplinarisation and also a restriction of desire (this disciplinarisation starts with the training of the secretive muscles in the anal phase). For a long time it has been thought that the individual subject formed a unity with some basic needs (it was a free and creative subject, responsible for its deeds; it possessed a certain potential, a set of possibilities that it could realise or not). According to Hocquenghem, this is a myth: for him only 'desire' exists, that flows endlessly in all directions, that is directed to ever changing organs, but that can never form a unity.

Identity is always changing. This is a plea for narcissism as a revolutionary strategy. One can compare his conception of human identity with a person sitting in a train: it is impossible for somebody sitting in a train to perceive everything that passes (houses, trees, cows, stations ...); neither can one perceive from all possible focusses (one must necessarily sit on one singular place, which restricts one's point of view): thus perception must be very fragmentary, it forms no unity, it changes endlessly and is very fortuitous. The same goes for sexuality according to Hocquenghem. There is no clear outlined homosexual identity: by believing this one neglects the symbolic meaning of anal sexual contacts, namely the abolition of the privatisation of the anus by redefining its lust function. People who believe in an homosexual identity do also believe in the basic myth of psychoanalysis (namely: the unity of the subject, determined by oedipalisation): they have an oedipalised view on homosexuality.

Hocquenghem is against a view of sexuality that is focussed on persons. He claims that it is a mistake of psychoanalysis and of contemporary thought to standardise a sexuality with an exclusive sexual choice (directed to one 'person') and a choice of a 'person'. In sexual matters, one doesn't opt for a person, but for an organ or a thing. Bourgeois romanticism suffuses sexual experiences with a sauce of love ("we are honest, we love each other as much as we can, we feel ourselves responsible for each other ...").

Hocquenghem believes the richest form of experience of sexuality to be in "cruising" because of its non-exclusivity: one directs one's desire immediately to the object of one's desire without exclusion of other objects; sexuality here is not personalised: one can fall in love with somebody's face, clothes etc. Besides, cruising is a form of inter class sexuality: one meets persons of all possible layers of the population and one is not directed to people of one's own social rank (as in the 'nouvelle homosexualite'). In Hocquenghem's view the so-called bourgeois family is a clear impoverishment of the sexual desire because it disciplines it.⁵ Women's Liberation has developed in the wrong way, especially because it is too moralistic. Hocquenghem believes this is a dangerous evolution.

Relationship with the struggle of the working class

Except from wild cat strikes, Hocquenghem believes there is no relation between the problem of the liberation of sexuality and the struggle of the working class. This struggle is a struggle of the masses that proceeds in an organised way (by representation through political parties: "the molar field" of Guattari); the struggle for the liberation of homosexuality is a struggle against civilisation: in fact the whole value pattern of a society is questioned (honesty, responsibility, gossip ...). this value pattern should be seen as a weapon of the power-holders to reduce a structural problem into an individual set of problems.

Many people in leftist movements embrace the values prevailing in society, and in Hocquenghem's view militancy is a disciplining of desire: one can explain the rise of homosexual movements and ecologist movements through the fall of the 'serious' militancy after May '68.⁸ Hocquenghem deplores that the spontaneous *elan* that broke out in May '68 was so quickly fixed into a marxist jargon, by which it can be accepted by traditional society. According to



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Hocquenghem Marx narrowed the conception of production of Charles Fourier: in Fourier's view the concept of production is not merely economic, but also implies the production of one's desire; it can be seen at the same level as the concept of 'desir' in Deleuze and Guattari.⁹

In later interviews Hocquenghem claims that capitalism is the best system to live in for gay people. He likes the americanisation of desire and sees it as a good solution for the problem of homosexuality. So there is no socialism, but just New York!

Hocquenghem's view on the evolution of feminism

Hocquenghem is radically opposed to some tendencies in feminism concerning rape. Some feminist groups demand a criminalization of rape; they have directed most of their action to this topic: e.g. by bringing rapists to trial. Their reasoning in doing so is as follows: rape is a typical expression of male domination over women: the male looks at the female simply as an object to 'fuck'. Hocquenghem objects to any punishment at all — as do Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari — because he does not agree with the ideology that lies behind it (when a subject cannot be viewed as an identity, what one does at one moment need not be a consequence of what one has done before).

They explain their point of view as follows: ⁶ that the reasoning on which these feminists base their claim for more severe punishments is in itself phallogocratic, since it implies that there are some bodily organs that are more important than others, i.e. the sexual organs. On account of this approach they fall in the same trap they want to avoid. According to Hocquenghem rape should be viewed as a normal fight. But in fact Hocquenghem and his group are opposed to every form of punishment because punishment would imply that man is a unity; on the contrary, every fight should be seen as a car accident: purely fortuitous. Women's Liberation shows an evolution in a moralistic and anti-sexist direction (completely the adverse of the gay liberation movement). Besides this, in Hocquenghem's view, these punishments have no utility: they do not correct the rapist (criminological research can prove this: the longer the punishment, the more recidivism); these punishments do not solve the problem, they just individualise it. People who are brought to trial mostly belong to the lower layers of the population.

Function of a gay liberation movement

All that has been written above does not mean that work for the emancipation of homosexuality is not necessary. In Hocquenghem's view, it depends on the situation. When the pressure of the heterosexual label is overwhelming, then it can be necessary to focus on homosexual identity as a negation of every sexual identity. Hocquenghem sets three tasks for the gay liberation movements: to abolish the difference between private and public life; to abolish and destroy 'civilisation', and to be wild, rough and "sexist"; to contribute to the collapse of the whole imaginary affective apparatus of this civilisation.

Hocquenghem's thinking lies perfectly in the tradition of Charles Fourier: the struggle of the gay liberation movement should confront normal men with the fact that their form of experience of sexuality is an impoverished variant, because it is directed to persons and made exclusive. In these days however, Hocquenghem believes that the gay movement is dead as a movement: it has dispersed into very different movements and groups (sado-masochistic groups, groups of effeminists, transvestites etc).

Hocquenghem wants to warn the gay liberation movements about two things in particular: first, a possible evolution of moralisation, as we can see at work in feminist groups; secondly, what might be called the 'nouvelle homosexualité': homosexuality may be accepted within the categories of our civilisation; it would then be a personalised, romanticised form of love between men of the same societal layers. Hocquenghem fears at most a certain banalisation of homosexuality: the liberated homosexual with the white pants, the moustache and the dispatch-case, with his own

house and his affection on account; stereotyped within disciplined patterns.¹⁰

2. SOME CRITICISMS OF HOCQUENGHEM

Some of the criticisms given here are directed against Deleuze and Guattari: they are dealt with at full length because they also affect the works of Hocquenghem, because he uses their model in his theoretical approach.

Criticism by Jeffrey Weeks ¹¹

In the English translation of 'Le desir homosexuel' (*Homosexual Desire*), Weeks gives a few remarks on the theory of Hocquenghem specifically: Hocquenghem does not talk at all about lesbianism; his theories do not explain why some oedipalised people are homosexuals, while others are not; his theories do not explain why there has been any change in the forms that repression of homosexuality takes (from pure extermination in the concentration camps to so-called repressive tolerance); research has proven that sodomy is still a big taboo even amongst homosexuals (in Germany, only one-third of the homosexual population declares to practise it); Hocquenghem has a very hydraulic conception of the libido (as illustrated when he deals with the anti-homosexual paranoia and when he deals with sublimation).

Criticism by Jean Baudrillard ¹²

Baudrillard rejects the 'production-principle' which is central for the theory of desire of Deleuze and Guattari. Desire has to produce experiences: as much as possible, as intensive as possible and as varied as possible. In exactly the same manner capital should flow as fast as possible and as much capital as possible should be accumulated. In the view of Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari have aseptified psychoanalytic theory: they have thrown away its most annoying rubbish (the Oedipus complex) to illustrate the flowing productivity of desire as such. Deleuze and Guattari still believe in a kind of use value (that does not exist, according to Baudrillard, but that functions as an alibi for the exchange value): namely pleasure; they still believe that as much pleasure as possible should be produced.

Criticism by Robert Caste ¹³

Castel warns against the myth of recuperation. He stresses that most psychoanalysts believe that the original discovery by Freud of libido as polymorphous was a revolutionary one, but that this discovery is recuperated by bad society. He claims that a purging of desire from the oedipal framework does not mean that the social implications of the frame of reference for analysing people or society (through 'schizo-analysis') has changed, it has purely diluted: from this point of view, Deleuze and Guattari are the logical evolution after Lacan and Freud. He also denounces the elitist character of these theories: they are a means of cultural integration, because so many things are supposed to be known and also because of the esoteric style of most of the texts.

Other possible criticisms

Every plea for rejection of every restriction of desire through some normative standards is untenable, because it leads to a pressing forward of certain normative standards by the most powerful, so it leads to fascism. This is the classical problem of anarchism. The idea that everyone should freely live one's desire at all moments is an elitist idea in two fields: it can only be applied to a restricted group of persons because a society needs to fulfil certain basic needs and one must work for them. One might reply that it is "the old theory of the schoolteacher that does not allow a person to go into the streets during recreation: 'if everyone would do so school would become a chaos'; but everyone does not go into the streets!" It would also exclude whole categories of people from sexual gratification.

Hocquenghem's theory is completely fatalistic because desire can change at all moments, because there is no unity in the subject, because there exists no borderline between reality and phantasy, it is useless to talk in terms of responsibility of an act. If someone murders you when you were cruising

(as happened to Pasolini) you have to consider this as 'bad luck': you have to perceive this as you perceive a car accident. The murder happened by accident, by a specific constellation of the desire, that changes continuously.

I don't say that Hocquenghem is wrong when he defends his view on "the subject": on the contrary, I believe he is right. I just want to stress that theories as those of Hocquenghem are not workable for a society like ours. Hocquenghem seems to me philosophically idealist. The expression of your 'true' desire is a revolutionary act ipso facto. Hocquenghem does not differentiate between situational and positional contexts (and it may be true that different societal positions are the expression of the despotism of the phallic signifier that dominates our society, but this theoretical statement does not change anything in our problem: these different positions do exist and one has to take them into account when building a theoretical framework). In some rightist groups one also expresses freely one's desire at decadent parties, but this has nothing of a revolutionary act. And, although one has to admire Hocquenghem for the work he undertakes for the liberation of homosexuals, it has become very easy for him: every word that he pronounces in this domain will be reproduced by 'Le Nouvel Observateur' and by the whole "clique mondaine" of the elitist university of Vincennes, as a 'great revolutionary action'. But it is very different if the son of a mentally handicapped farmer falls in love with some phallographic working class guy. It also makes a big difference if one is being tortured as a Chilean prisoner!

NOTES

1. Hocquenghem is a lecturer in philosophy at the university of Vincennes, near Paris. He is one of the founders of FHAR, a leftist movement for the liberation of homosexuality, founded in 1971. He has written, among other works: *Le désir homosexuel*, 1972, Paris, Editions Universitaires, 125p. (English translation, *Homosexual Desire*, London, Allison & Busby, 1978); *L'Après-mai des faunes*, 1974, Paris, Grasset, 204p. *Co-ire. Album systématique de l'enfance*, 1976, Fontenay-sous-Bois, Recherches N° 22, 146p (in collaboration with René Scherer); *La dérive homosexuelle*, 1977, Paris, Editions Universitaires, 158p. *Comment nous appelez-vous déjà? Ces hommes que l'on dit homosexuels*, 1977, Paris, Calmann-Levy, 237p (in collaboration with Jean-Louis Bory).

Hocquenghem recently wrote: *La beauté du métis*, 1979, Paris, Ramsay, 176p. *Race d'Ép*, 1979, Paris (in collaboration with Lionel Soukaz). I don't deal with these two last works, because I haven't received them yet. I will deal with them in a follow-up to this article.

Neither do I deal with Hocquenghem's 'historical' work. Indeed, he recently published a history of the birth of the concept of homosexuality, on which he also made a film in collaboration with Lionel Soukaz. See: 'La naissance de l'homosexualité' in *Liberation*, 8, 11 September 1978 (translated in German: 'Die Geburt der Homosexualität' in *Him Applaus*, 1979, the months of April, May and June).

The best introduction to his theory is published in German: W.W. Werner, 'Ueber das homosexuelle Verlangen, bei Guy Hocquenghem, bei mir, bei alien Mannern' in D. Kamper, *Ueber die Wunsche. Ein Versuch zur Archaeologie der Subjektivitat*, 1977, Munchen, pp.82-97.

The theory of homosexuality of Guy Hocquenghem contains a lot of contradictions: it forms no unity itself. Just to set up two of them: (1) On the one hand it is a kind of fatalistic theory of desire: desire flows in all directions and there is no unity in man. No one can be held responsible for his deeds because he is another man after committing his deed. On the other hand homosexuality is a kind of free choice the individual makes or not. At a specific moment one chooses to accept the lust-principle and this implies one becomes a homosexual. See g. Hocquenghem, 'Das schwule Paar, das Bich wirklich liebt, existiert vielleicht sechs Monate' in *Him Applaus*, February 1979, pp.10-13.

A second contradiction: when he gives the ideal example of liberated sexuality, he points at the young Torless from the novel by Musil, although this person is imbued with the philosophy of Schopenhauer, who analyses and sublimates sexuality, and who doesn't live it physically. So Torless can never be an example of a sexuality that flows in all directions, simply because he is an example of the contrary.

2. G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe. Tome I: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*, 1972, Paris, Minuit, 494p. In *L'Anti-Oedipe*, Deleuze-Guattari claim desire has no structure: desire does not direct itself towards an ideal object which would only exist in one's phantasy (in Freud's terminology this object is the Phallus); and where real objects would only implicate a defect. For here one introduces a platonic rest (namely the existence of an Idea, a reality, which would be the absolute good object [the Phallus] and the existence of a dull reality, which would only be a lacklustre reflection of the Idea). There is no characteristic structure in desire, because a human essence does not exist: everything is production. However, the fact that the Oedipus-complex has been elaborated for years and has now been consolidated by the structural establishment of psychoanalysis, caused it to refine itself continuously and to develop into a very theology that's hard to refute: the psychoanalysts usually have their reply to the critics of the Oedipus-complex ready. Deleuze-Guattari claim the Oedipus complex is a structuring of a certain problem, and other structures could just as well be invented. One could say, 'desire' in the philosophy of Deleuze-Guattari is what 'elan vital' is in the philosophy of Henri Bergson.

3. Especially: G. Hocquenghem, *Le désir homosexuel*, pp.57-78; *La dérive homosexuelle*, pp.38-57.

4. This is not quite correct. Hocquenghem distinguishes between two kinds of homosexuality: the oedipalised homosexuality, which is an homosexual identity; and the 'gay' which is the desire that flows creatively in all directions and which is of course no identity.

5. Especially G. Hocquenghem, *Le désir homosexuel*, pp.78-99.

6. M. Ronat, 'Enfermement psychiatrie prison. Dialogue avec Michel Foucault et David Cooper' in *Change*, 1977, No. 32-33, pp.76-110. G. Hocquenghem, 'V-I-O-L' in *Liberation*, 29.3.1977.

7. About the distinction between the molar and the molecular: F. Guattari, 'Psychoanalyse et politique', in G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *Politique et psychoanalyse*, 1977, Paris, Des Mots Perdus.

8. G. Hocquenghem, 'Suversion et decadence du male d'après-Mai' in *Autrement* 12, February 1978, pp.157-164.

9. G. Hocquenghem, *Le désir homosexuel*, pp.101-117; *L'après-mai des faunes*, pp.65-73.

10. G. Hocquenghem, *L'après-mai des faunes*, pp.187-204.

11. J. Weeks, 'Preface' in G. Hocquenghem, *Homosexual desire*, 1978, London, pp.9-35.

12. One can find Baudrillard's vision on sexuality in J. Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe*, 1972, Paris, pp.95-113; *L'échange symbolique et la mort*, 1976, Paris, pp.145-189. His criticisms on Deleuze and Guattari are published in J. Baudrillard, *Oublier Foucault*, 1977, Paris, 88pp.

13. R. Castel, *Le psychanalyse. L'ordre psychanalytique et le pouvoir*, 1973, Paris, 440pp.

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Some ten years ago I embarked — with more enthusiasm than prudence — upon a PhD thesis ringingly entitled *Literature and the Homosexual Cult, 1890-1920*. Blowing the dust off it now and turning its (unfinished) pages — occasionally with a frisson of unexpected pleasure at a neatly turned phrase, more often with a shudder of embarrassment at a resoundingly empty one — what strikes me most is how many of its basic questions remain unanswered. Invited some months ago by the *Gay Left* collective to "write us something on the lesbian in literature" I recognized uneasily even as I accepted that some of those questions would have to be asked again with little reason to suppose that, this time, the answers would be any easier to find.

First, and always, who is she, this lesbian in literature? And do we mean the lesbian *in* it or the lesbian who writes it? Or both? Will I know her when I see her? Will she look like me, feel and think like me? What did she know herself as? 'How' did she know herself, how express herself? Does she count as a 'real' lesbian if she has been created by a male author, or by a heterosexual woman? Could she recognize herself from today's descriptions of her?

The process of discovering or deciding who lesbians were and what lesbianism is or has been is very similar to all the other 'uncoverings' with which feminist history concerns itself. It presents the same problems. Briefly, that there are too few facts; that there are the Right Facts selected and presented by the Wrong People; and that there are Wrong Facts, (that is, not facts at all) misguidedly presented for the best of reasons by the (almost) Right People.

So, this lesbian. Who and what is she?

She has been many things, and most of them created by men. It is rare indeed that we can turn to an Aphra Behn and listen to a woman's voice telling us in ardent, guilt-free verse what it was like to love and make love to women in the last years of the seventeenth century. We are more likely to hear that we are a manifestation of Beautiful Evil, loved and feared by generations of writers and artists throughout Western Europe from Baudelaire to Balzac, Moreau to Beardsley. Or that we are the daemonic evil which so haunted Strindberg that he returned to attack it again and again because a beautiful red-haired actress who 'stole' his wife became a symbol for him and many others of all that, was degenerate and obscene in late nineteenth century Europe. For men like him we are cruel, rapacious, sexually insatiable but emotionally cold, and cleverer than any woman has a right to be: we are, in fact, the complete and fearful opposite of everything which marks the Real Woman.

Sometimes we are the objects of passionate admiration for men who prefer their women tough (but ultimately vanquishable) — and that's as true of Diderot's nuns (*La Religieuse*, 1780) as it is of Ian Fleming's lesbian interrogators (*From Russia With Love*), as true of De Sade's sapphic tormentors as it is of George Macbeth's secret agent, Cadbury (*The Seven Witches*, 1978). And sometimes we are the object of compassionate affection from men who feel that their sexuality, like ours, is 'flawed'. So Swinburne, 'marred' by his need of flagellation, produces lovingly his doomed creation, *Lesbia Brandon* (written between 1864 and 1867, but not published until 1952), setting her in symbolic landscapes of sterile beauty amid heat and light which parch rather than nourish and consigning her to a series of abortive relationships which bring only pain and humiliation.

On the rare occasions when we are happy it is only because we have been transported to a different century (as when Pierre Louys takes us to ancient Greece in *Aphrodite* or the *Chansons de Bilitis* and makes us represent the grace and easy sensuality of pre-Christian morality. It is, needless to say, ancient Greece seen through the eyes of very worldly Parisians for whom a little dash of lesbianism added spice to a jaded world.) And sometimes we are happy because we are truly in Utopia (or 'no place'), as we are when Theophile Gautier makes one of us the hero of *Mademoiselle du Maupin* (1835), setting her down somewhere, somewhere, in the woods and *chateaux* of a fairy-tale, pre-Revolution France with more than a touch of the Forest of Arden about it



Lesbians in

by Alison

There he leaves her to weave her irresistible spells over women and men alike, crediting her and us with all the magic of the androgyne.

Support or attack

For men uncertain of their own heterosexuality, we are disquieting and to be attacked as Henry James attacks us in *The Bostonians* (1886), heaping his ponderous doubts upon the head of Verena Tarrant, a feminist and strong-minded. She represents, for James, the dangerous ascendancy of the feminine in public life, with its inalienable qualities of "nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting", its "false delicacy and exaggerated solitudes and coddled sensibilities" leading inevitably to "the reign of mediocrity". Condemned so roundly, is it consolation to find that for those men who welcomed the new feminism we were the vanguard heralding the new age, our dilemmas and anguished battles watched with sympathy. (I still find George Gissing's 1893 novel, *The Odd Women*, remarkable for its support from an unexpected quarter.)

Often where we might have looked for support we find only attack. We learn the hard way that defenders of sexual freedom are often only really interested in male freedoms. We realize ruefully, for example, that to D.H. Lawrence we are part of the spiritual corruption against which he inveighs. Our lesbianism is an eternal affront to him and he can never forgive it. With undisguised pleasure he kills one half of the lesbian couple in *The Fox* to clear the male's path to the woman who is 'rightfully' his and ends the novella in a swirl of purple praise glorifying The Male Principle. (And somehow, even though I know, thanks to Emile Delavenay's 1971 *D.H. Lawrence and Edward Carpenter* and Paul Delaney's 1979 *D.H. Lawrence's Nightmare*, that Lawrence had his own pressing difficulties with homosexuality, I find it difficult to forgive him.) Mercifully he usually stops short at murder, and is content with the jibes and sneers at lesbianism which characterize *The Rainbow* (1915). (When, by the way, will somebody tackle the fascinating subject of the love-hate relationship between Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield, recognizing that the major tensions sprang from the unwillingness of each of them to recognize their homosexuality?)

Not everybody jibes and sneers. Many a heterosexual male author looks with Tender Pity (or something like that) at two victims of male lust briefly seeking peace and solace in each other's arms. (Zola's numerous studies of lesbian liaisons often came dangerously close to that — Nana and *Pot-Bouille*, for example.) And always there seems to be the



Left to right:
Vita Sackville-West,
Virginia Woolf,
Radclyffe Hall

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implicit thought that if man's brutality to women can have such charming side effects who would seek to check it?

Some male authors, it's true, love us as themselves, for the simple reason that we *are* themselves — or the men they love. (Yes, that *is* what I said: I'm thinking, for instance, of Proust's Albertine and all those enchanting girls who fill the budding groves of *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, every one of them, if Proust's biographer, George Painter, is to be believed, in origin an enchanting youth.)

And still we can be more. Murderous (as in classics, like Balzac's *La Fille Aux Yeux d'Or*, or as in pulp, like innumerable detective novels, but especially those by Dorothy Sayers who had it in for us, probably because she was a fag-hag as evidenced by her creation of Lord Peter Wimsey. (Alternatively, and the theory I prefer, she was herself homosexual and created Wimsey as an alter ego.) Or we can provide the material for High Comedy, as with Compton Mackenzie's *romans a clef* based on the ex-patriate lesbian colonies in Capri and Anacapri (*Extraordinary Women*, 1928, and *Vestal Fire*, 1927). From E.F. Benson's 1920s' six-volume saga of English shabby-genteel life come the bitcheries and betises of Lucia and Mapp and "dear Irene", fresh from the Slade and esconced in happy domesticity with her six-foot tall parlour maid who doubles as model when her mistress does *Studies From the Life*. This is comedy with the added sting which one has come to expect from a gay brother.

But what we are most often, of course, is a frisky interlude in a pornographic tale, the soft-focus lull before the storm of the hero's revived sexual powers bursts upon us. And now that more women are feeling able to take sexual initiatives, we're seeing the growth of women writers who use lesbians in the same way. Is Erica Jong's account of a lesbian relationship in *How To Save Your Own Life* (1977), for instance, very much more than a ritual and now obligatory encounter with a make-shift before she returns to the Real Thing? Perhaps that's unfair: let us rather say that for women whose sexual emotions are centred upon men, other women can never be more than a temporary refuge, an occasional pleasure. Even Colette — deeply though it hurts to say so when I love her so much — often seems to see lesbian relationships in that light.

Recognition?

Is there, indeed, any reason why we should expect that women authors will have recognized lesbians more clearly, depicted them more objectively than male writers have done? Certainly we owe some of the most unpleasant lesbians

in fiction to women's pens. Clare Hartill (note the name), the central character of Clemence Dane's 1917 novel, *Regiment of Women*, is a monster of egotism: callous, manipulative, incapable of giving or receiving love, she uses her profession of schoolteacher first to ensnare then to reject her besotted pupils. She causes the suicide of one girl upon whose emotions she has played expertly and brings to breakdown a devoted young teacher, Alwynne, who all but misses her true destiny of mart, marriage and maternity, such is the strength of Clare's almost irresistible attractions. Only the intervention of Alwynne's aunt (good but not clever), averts disaster. Clare (clever but not good) is incredulously defeated. (The fictional Clare, by the way, bears a remarkably strong resemblance to a woman whose case history is cited as *A Terrible Warning To Parents* in *Sex And The Young* (1926), written by that intransigently anti-lesbian proponent of birth control, Marie Stopes, and there are also Clare Hartills in abundance to be found in many of the non-fiction works of the period which claim to document the lesbian temperament. Such a confusion of fact and fiction raises some pertinent questions. Objective fact or beastly anti-gay propaganda? Clemence Dane (or Winifred Ashton, to give her her real name) clearly had something to work out of her system, for her 1919 novel, *Legend*, again involved a spoilt, capricious woman, the centre of an unhealthy circle of hero-worshipping women. Even more influential was Geraldine, the swarthy, broad-shouldered lesbian of Rosamond Lehmann's once notorious novel, *Dusty Answer* (1927), who spreads chaos by wrestling in Ash Court and patrolling the corridors during her weekend visits to Girton. (Ah, it wasn't like that in my day, nor, as a Don in her seventies confided to me, in hers, neither.)

And the anti-lesbian tradition in fiction was already an old one. Eliza Lynn Linton, best-seller of an earlier generation, had made interminable attacks, notably in her 1880 novel, *The Rebel of the Family*, in which, unfortunately for her, Bell Blount, the lesbian anti-hero, is amongst the most attractive characters in the book. For fifty years Mrs. Linton fought a spirited battle against women's suffrage and all attempts to change the established sexual order. Such are life's ironies that we need not be surprised to learn that the emotional centre of her own life lay in her passionate friendships with younger and usually beautiful women.

Certainly those women who felt that their own lives were vulnerably unusual or unrepresentative had reason to attack loudly and clearly the more conspicuous 'unnaturalness' of homosexual women. (One thinks of George Eliot's anxieties about the hordes of adoring young women who surrounded her and her distinctly chary attitude to the older, more self-aware and probably lesbian Edith Simcox who for ten years regarded Eliot as "my Darling and my God". Eliot had fought one vast battle with mid-Victorian society over her failure to marry the man she lived with. A second struggle was too much. (K.A. Mackenzie charts the vagaries of the two women's friendship in *Edith Simcox and George Eliot*, Oxford, 1961.)

George Eliot's are not the only vested interests we have to reckon with in our attempt to find the lesbian in literature. Accounts by contemporaries and the endeavours of critics and biographers (past or present) ought to help us. Often they don't. Too many have good reasons for ignoring or obscuring lesbianism in their subjects. And autobiographies, consciously or not, help to confuse us. And we confuse ourselves by taking our own prejudices and assumptions to such scanty evidence as there is. We may not cry "Oh, but she can't be. She was married". But we may say, "Oh, but she can't be. She was *happily* married", as, indeed, were both Vita Sackville-West and the Princesse Edmond de Polignac -- to their homosexual husbands. We may spend so much time listening to Marie Corellie's claims that she wants a husband that we fail to notice that the endless best-sellers which made her fortune from the 1880s to the eve of the First World War contain headily voluptuous and keenly-felt descriptions of languorous female beauty and rather cursory accounts of male attractions. Having once noticed it, we find ourselves attaching rather more weight to the otherwise easily overlooked but devoted friendship which she shared with her companion, Bertha Vyer. And here we tend to find ourselves



caught in a double bind. On the one hand we are impatient with the idea that relationships matter only when they are sexualized. We know all too well that bonds between women have been ignored, trivialized and ridden over rough-shod precisely because they were 'only' friendships. On the other hand, we know equally firmly that those of our unions which are sexual will also be trivialized or dismissed because lesbian sex isn't 'real' sex. Paradoxically we find ourselves equally bound to assert the importance both of sex and of no sex.

Recognizing the paradox helps us, for example, to sympathize with the plight of poor Edith Somerville when confronted with Dame Ethel Smyth in particularly rumbustious mood. Edith Somerville and her cousin Violet Martin had enjoyed an unusually close personal and professional union. Writing as 'Somerville and Ross' they co-authored extremely popular novels and short stories, mainly set in Ireland and based on the lives of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy to which they themselves belonged. Their stories of "An Irish R.M. [Resident Magistrate]" (first published in 1899) are indubitably the best known but their output included historical novels and semi-autobiographical accounts of an art student's life in Paris and London. When Violet ('Ross') died in 1915, pre-deceasing Edith by some thirty-three years, Edith continued to write and, claiming that she was in spiritual communication with Violet, insisted that both their names should continue to appear on the title pages of new books. After a spirited tussle her publishers — Longmans — yielded gracefully. Clearly a woman to be reckoned with. But she was no match for Ethel Smyth who fell in love with her, and whisked her off on what was to be a honeymoon tour of Sicily, only to become distinctly huffy (and really rather rude) when she discovered that Edith was sexually completely inexperienced and had no idea of what was expected of her. Once it was explained, Edith remained (politely) unconvinced and firmly unco-operative. She was clearly distressed to realize that the life she had led so idyllically with Violet Martin was, in Ethel's eyes, open to only one interpretation.

But then Ethel Smyth was always unusual in her robust acceptance of her homosexuality. Forcibly she raised consciousnesses in all directions as she swept into, through and out of the lives of women as diverse as Mary Benson (the mother of E.F. Benson who caricatured Ethel as 'Edith Staines' in his 1893 novel, *Dodo*), Mrs. Pankhurst and Virginia Woolf. Unlike Dame Ethel, most people have sought to disguise either their own homosexuality or other people's. Perhaps the protected person is too precious to be allowed to suffer 'taint'. Think how long it has taken for Virginia Woolf's lesbianism to be acknowledged. Or perhaps, it is argued, important causes which she led will be undermined if

her possible homosexuality is disclosed. Think of all the little flurries of panic each time Christabel Pankhurst's sexuality is questioned and of all the sighs of relief when David Mitchell's recent biography came out on the side of the angels and declared firmly that she was not, repeat *not*, a lesbian. Oh for the refreshing and all too rare candour of Sybil Morrison, the octogenarian suffragette, who said in a recent television interview that if anyone had ever *asked* her, of course she would have *told* them she was a lesbian but, frankly, it had never occurred to her that anybody could be so *stupid* as not to realize.

How do we know?

Yet even when we're not lying through our teeth nor being wilfully stupid, we may often be excused for not realizing, and as we go further back into literary history the excuses grow. There are the women writing under men's names, the women writing as male characters, the women living and dressing as men. There are, too, good sound, common-sensical reasons for all those things and those are the ones we usually hear. In an age predisposed to dismiss women's writing it makes sense to use a man's name and once you've done that you might as well write of men's experiences. If you want to see the world you're safer in men's clothes. But is that really all there is to say of Emily Brontë's love poems addressed to women? Is there really no more to Eliza Lynn Linton's 'fictional' *Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland* (1885) with its careful analyses of love relationships with women which bear a marked resemblance to her own experiences with women? Does that explain the cross-dressing of George Sand and of the animal painter and diarist, Rosa Bonheur?

Sometimes, as with Bonheur, our incredulity is justified by secondary evidence. The official story says that she needed to wear men's clothes to attend, without fear of insult or assault, the sales of livestock and the assemblies of horse-copers where she found her subjects. For that reason and that reason alone the Paris Prefect's office gave her the Permit she needed for male attire. As it happens, however, we also know from another source that Bonheur submitted an account of herself as "a contrasexual" (lesbian) to Magnus Hirschfeld's Institute of Sexology in Berlin. Here hunch is validated by fact. But so often hunches remain just that. And indeed the camouflage is often excellent. George Sand, after all, had *two* men to her credit: Alfred de Musset and Chopin. The fact that both men were less than a hundred percent heterosexual is neither here nor there. They were men and she was a woman and, in theory at any rate, that means heterosexuality. It was a relief, nevertheless, when recently published researches showed us that what we had always known by the pricking of our thumbs was true; that she had had numerous sexual relationships with women including the Adah Isaacs Mencken whom Swinburne loved so hopelessly.

I say "it was a relief" to know because for many of us there is a great need to establish a sense of continuity with the past, to affirm for ourselves that we are part of it rather than an aberration from it. The need for some sense of a shared past is so great that some of the best modern writing on lesbian themes has been devoted to recreating one. It may come in the guise of non-fiction works such as Elizabeth Ma'or's *The Ladies of Llangollen* (1971) which relives the fifty year 'marriage' which united Lady Eleanor Butler and Miss Sarah Ponsonby from the time of their elopement in 1778 until the death of Lady Eleanor in 1828. More often it comes in the form of novels and short stories.

The theory

Few will take on as much as Radclyffe Hall attempted in her short story, *Miss Ogilvy Finds Herself* (1926) which is particularly interesting for its fictional use of contemporary theories about the genesis of homosexuality. She wrote the piece as a trial run for certain of the themes which she later intended to expand in *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), defined by her as "a serious study in congenital sexual inversion" and the quasi-scientific language, familiar to us from Ulrichs, Carpenter, Havelock Ellis and other predominantly nineteenth century sexual theorists, gives us the clue. Miss Ogilvy, a misfit with no apportioned part to play in the modern, ruthlessly heterosexual world, has had her one brief hour of glory during the First World War. There her 'masculine'

qualities of quick judgment, leadership and physical courage made her (like Stephen Gordon later in *The Well of Loneliness*) a valued member of a Front Line ambulance unit: desperate ills demand desperate remedies and in a period of 'unnatural' chaos, 'unnatural' women such as Miss Ogilvy can be gratefully accommodated.

But Europe's return to 'normality' leaves Miss Ogilvy once more a redundant and embarrassing anomaly, chafing at her uselessness, humiliated by her pitiable irrelevance and wretchedly aware that the qualities which made her valuable in war now make her risible and more than a little indecent to 'ordinary' people. Using a mixture of fantasy, time-travel and retrospective reincarnation, Radclyffe Hall takes her character back to a prehistoric world where she discovers that she — and her sexual temperament — are a vital link in the chain of human evolution. Despite some deplorable and unintentionally ludicrous passages — including a "Me Tarzan, you Jane" episode when the metamorphosed Miss Ogilvy first meets her female soulmate — we can see ideas thronging in from all sides to feed and shape this short story. Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) and *Intermediate Types Among Primitive Folk* (1914) are there, as is the pre-destinarian belief of many nineteenth century sexologists in 'the *real* homosexual', plus, of course, a strong dose of the contemporary concern with matters psychical (Radclyffe Hall and her lover, Una Troubridge, were for many years hard-working members of the Society for Psychical Research).

Locating itself more precisely in history, Isabel Miller's *Patience and Sarah* (1969) recreates the pioneering battle for autonomy and freedom fought by one of America's early nineteenth century primitive painters and her lover. "To Miss Willson and Miss Brundidge who, quite a while ago, lived something like it," this book is lovingly dedicated" reads the author's prefatory inscription. "Lived something like it" is the key to a work which fulfils abundantly one of literature's functions — to create, through the extending power of the imagination, characters and events which convince us of their psychological truth and value. It is also the key to our often quietly desperate need to know, or to believe we know, that we ourselves are simply following on, sexually and emotionally, rather than blazing trails.

Closer to home, Barbara Hanrahan's *The Albatross Muff* (1977) takes the grimmest basic facts of Victorian women's lives — loveless marriages of convenience, unrecognized syphilitic infection, death in childbirth — and sets them against a softening, but basically powerless, background of intensely erotic female love relationships. She avoids an over-simplifying polarization whereby male sexuality equals Evil and female sexuality equals Good. Instead she is at pains to show that no Alternative (in this case, lesbian love relationships) can fully escape the flaws and cruelties of the Norm (male-centred sexuality) from which it flees. Those women in the book who theoretically condemn male power yet continue to accept their sense of personal worth from the men who confer it can form only half-hearted and ultimately treacherous links with other women. Inevitably, the woman most betrayed is Edith, the only 'real' lesbian amongst them.

Past and present fuse in Michele Roberts' first novel, *A Piece of the Night* (1978) where she uses a love relationship (broken eventually by marriage) between two late Victorian women as the sub-plot which runs round and through her main and very modernly lesbian characters. Her account of the older women's relationship is elusive, fragmented, tantalizingly incomplete. Necessarily so. How can it be otherwise when so many of the concepts and values which meant most to them are all but lost to us? How can it be otherwise when half the language in which we define and explain ourselves today was uncoined then? Take away from us the words 'role-model', 'gender identity', 'stereotype' and then see how far we get in our attempts to understand Radclyffe Hall's life-long pursuit of gentlemanliness, Colette's fascination with the hermaphroditic, George Eliot's fears of her imperfect womanliness and Vernon Lee's battle to accept and express the 'man' in her.

Conversely, take ourselves back into a world of pre-Freudian biography, letters, journals, poetry and novels and

we find ourselves floundering. There, women "fall in love" with each other, "lose their hearts" to each other and accept a "marriage" relation between them. We struggle with the perfervid "sentimental friendships" which express themselves in language of deepest purple, with echoes of *The Song of Songs* and the Ceremony for the Solemnization of Matrimony. "Those whom God has joined together let no man put asunder", writes one half of 'Michael Field', the aunt-and-niece writing team made up of Katharine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1861-1913), whilst Florence Nightingale writes almost daily to her "Goddess-baby" (Miss Rachel Williams, one of her nurses) and to her "Dearest ever Dearest", Miss Pringle, her "pearl". We watch as women "mother" each other with a degree of erotic passion which would leave Oedipus gasping. ("I have my love close to me ... Looking across at Sim's little bed I realize she is a goddess, hidden in her hair — Venus. Yet I cannot reach her ... I grow wilder for pleasure and madder against the ugly Madchen" [the nurse] writes Edith Cooper from her German hospital bed when scarlet fever and hospital decorum conspired to keep her briefly from Katharine. We grow accustomed to finding the phrase "maternal affections" used to describe physically passionate relationships. Little wonder that in Radclyffe Hall's magnificent and quite unjustly neglected novel, *The Unlit Lamp* (published in 1921 but set in late Victorian England onwards) the luckless Joan Ogden should be ardently courted by her mother and conscientiously mothered by Elizabeth, her (chaste) lover.

It's not only the difference in language which jolts us. We also find ourselves looking at the lovingly entwined and sensuously preoccupied female couples in the photographs which Clementina, Lady Hawarden, dared to exhibit in the 1860s. (See for yourself in Graham Ovenden's *Clementina, Lady Hawarden*, 1974.) And, as we look at the 1916 *Life and Letters of Maggie Benson* (written by Arthur Benson, brother of E.F., son of Mary) we find ourselves wondering how many of today's biographies would dare to include the





photograph in which Nettie Gourlay stands behind Maggie, her chin resting soulfully on Maggie's shoulder, her eyes closed in some undefined, but definitely guessable, near-ecstatic state. How, basically, did they get away with it?

Innocence or invisibility

Perhaps, you say, there was nothing to get away with? Perhaps. When we are very young and gullible we believe those critics and social historians who tell us breezily that linguistic conventions change; that sentiments which seem to us extravagant were once part of common currency; that verbal and physical expressions of affection — often intense — between people of the same sex were then freely given and received. That, in short, we have suffered Freud and thereby

lost our innocence. As we grow older, read more and think harder we know those critics lied. We realize that our pre-Freudians suffered quite as much from anguished introspection over the wayward nature of their affections as any aspiring analysts might do. We discover how upset the reviewer in *The Times* became over Tennyson's "unhealthily" passionate grief for Arthur Hallam whom *In Memoriam* (1850) commemorates. We learn that the guardians of children's literature deplored the "un-English" degree of osculation (too many kisses) amongst the schoolboys of Dean Farrar's *Eric, or Little by Little* (1858). We discover that the mid-Victorian resurgence of classical Greek studies was attacked in some quarters because critics believed that eager students were drawn less by the great texts' promise of literary perfection than by the hope of homosexual passion. We recognize, in fact, that it was a century bedevilled by sexual uncertainty and doubt.

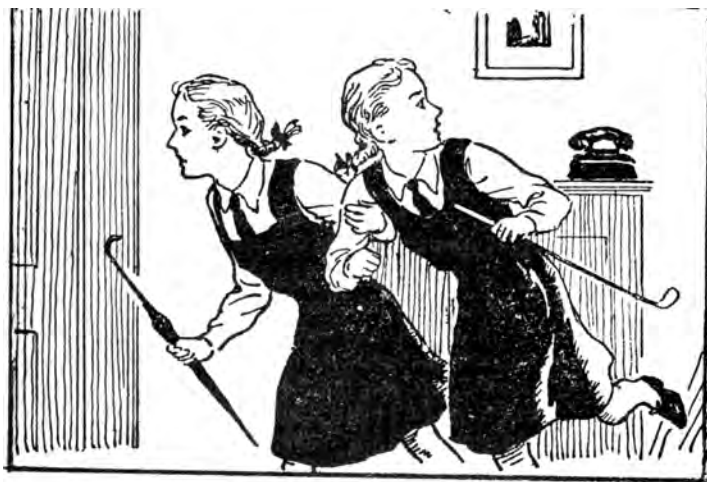
So how, then, did the Maggie Bensons and the Nettie Gourlays survive? Partly, perhaps, by taking advantage of the period's own contradictions. Theirs, after all, was an age in which, according to Acton's notorious dictum, "decent women have no sexual feelings". Or, to put it another way, provided you know that you're a decent woman, whatever you're feeling can't be sexual. All very reminiscent of the tireless campaigner against masturbation who, so Havelock Ellis enchantingly tells us, was appalled to discover late in life that the pleasantly soothing practices with which she lulled herself to sleep each night were part of the very evil she condemned. (This poignant anecdote comes in the introduction to the section on auto-eroticism in volume 1 of *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, revised edition of 1920.)

Possibly by such redeeming ignorance many lesbians escaped the weight of guilt which knowledge would have brought. But others almost certainly found themselves intolerably burdened by the menacing half-knowledge conveyed by the period's vague talk of "morbid sentimentality" and "neurasthenically intense" relations between girls and women. Some suicides in particular arouse our suspicions: Amy Levy, the young poet and protegee of Wilde who killed herself in the late 1880s; Charlotte Mew who took her own life in 1928. And it's impossible to know now to what extent Maggie Benson's own eventual descent into 'madness' was linked with her struggle to reconcile her homosexuality with her Christianity. No easy task for the daughter of an Archbishop of Canterbury.



And when we tire or despair of goading the past into yielding up its secrets, there is always the future which, in terms of literature, we are free to do with as we will. Already lesbians have claimed large chunks of it as in Marge Piercy's lesbian-feminist vision of a non-sexist, non-racist utopia in *Woman on the Edge of Time* or Zoe Fairbairns' *Benefits* (1979) where lesbians provide the force which spearheads radical political change in an ailing twenty-first century Britain. Positive images, created by women who are themselves openly lesbian or genuinely at one with lesbians: and not before time, either. But, as Marge Piercy herself said in a recent *Gay News* interview, we don't want "comics for lesbians", nor do we want another set of equally distorting albeit vainglorious clichés to replace the fiercely hostile ones fashioned by our enemies.

So now, some pages and several hundred years from my original starting point, I find myself asking: this lesbian in literature — who will she be?



The Flesh Made Word

A review of *Faggots* by Larry Kramer and
Dancer from the Dance by Andrew Holleran.

Reviewed by Philip Derbyshire

The relations between an oppressed group and the cultural products that articulate the experience of that group are complex and contradictory. The uses and meanings of those products, both within the oppressed group and the society within which that group is subordinate, are equally contradictory and often confused. The issue is made more complex with gay culture in that it is only recently that a conscious understanding that we are oppressed has become current, and that prior to that, our culture was almost exclusively articulated within the terms of sickness, abnormality, adjustment, that is within the discourse of a dominant heterosexuality that assigned homosexuals a particular and subsidiary place.

Equally, however, the cultural products of an oppressed group do not remain uninfluenced by formal innovations or thematic concerns that have their origin within wider social and artistic developments: the mere fact of production within a particular social context, and with specific problems is no guarantee that the product will remain bounded by the limits of that context and problematic. To that extent, to talk about, say, gay literature, whilst it might be useful in pointing to some similarity of theme and concern, is not to talk about an absolutely demarcated field, is not indeed, to equate articulation with a total determination by sexual disposition.

In the same way that there is no black literature, i.e. a body of texts whose essence corresponds to an imagined exclusive property of (culturally various) black people, so there is no gay literature i.e. a literature which typifies and articulate the *essential* experience of being gay. What, instead, there is, is literary exposition of differing responses to the fact of homosexuality, situated within historically shifting homosexual subcultures, and generated to satisfy differing needs within those sub-cultures.

These brief remarks, which I hope to develop in another article, are by way of a rebuff to the extraordinary moral invective that attends discussion of books and films in the wake of the Gay Liberation Movement. For instance, Ron Peck's and Paul Hallam's film was savaged for not providing a "positive" image of gay people, for 'pandering' to straight visions of homosexuals and so on. Instead of an immanent critique (incidentally excellently provided in a review by Marion Shapiro to appear in *Screen*) "Nighthawks" was judged by an external standard of political rectitude which, in its insistence on optimism in the face of oppression, occludes discussion of actual contradictions within our lives, and relegates cultural production to the realm of a facile propagandism.

When *Faggots* was published in the States this year, a similar storm was generated as the book was slagged for misrepresentation, caricature, reactionary politics and partiality. However many of these criticisms might be valid (and there is some truth in all of the charges), the point is missed both that *Faggots* is a best-seller, an important fact for any marxist looking at a cultural product, and that *Faggots* might illuminate the material conditions that made it possible and expose the ideological forms through which those conditions are seen. Again moralism substituted for analysis, and the polemic by gay organisations was merely the obverse of the uncritical paeans to *Dancer from the Dance* in *Gay News* when it appeared in this country a few months ago.



Significant departures

It seems to me that both these books mark significant departures from 'traditional' gay male novels, whilst uneasily maintaining continuities of theme and vantage point with that tradition. A similar contradiction can be seen in *Ruby-fruit Jungle* where lesbianism is affirmed, but within a tradition of individual solution and victory. Molly has much in common with Mark Twain's heroes, indeed with a whole series of American archetypes, not least the loner cowboy. And yet it is in that break that the importance of the novels lies, and not in either their attempted typification of the 'gay' experience, nor in their particular stylistic treatments.

On the first count they obviously are partial (but in this sense *all* gay novels are partial, are genre fiction), and on the second mostly they are uninventive. *Faggots* is written in a style that owes much to Burroughs, Joyce and the structure of film scripts, though it is possible that the style conveys the fragmented, frenzied consciousness of poppers, angel dust, dope, speed and the other psychic props of the milieu described. *Dancer* moves easily within the tradition of romantic writing, the decadent prose of Huysman and the late nineteenth century: languorous and overwritten melancholy, a pervasive odour of doom and decay. But again there may be a unity of theme and style, of the inevitable tragedy of the protagonist and the prose of a declining class. What is more important though is the pervasive element of pastiche in those styles, the ambivalent reappropriation of other forms.

The signal difference within these texts, though, is the presence of the gay world. In previous gay male novels, even recent accounts as by Patricia Nell Warren, the gay male world is peripheral, a place of sojourn until one finds a lover. The social roots of our lifestyle are obscured and invalidated.

In *Faggots* and *Dancer* on the other hand the gay male world is present, multifarious and a constant, constructing environment. Granted, the stances taken toward this world are hardly uniform and rarely affirmative. But the move from literary representations of homosexuality as a *psychological* property with the thematic emphasis on coming to terms (and possibly living happily ever after) with it, to one in which gay men are plural, engaged with each other, creating, choosing, changing partners, are *social*, seems to me to be of emphatic importance, a measure of the shift that has been achieved by the movement, and by the spontaneous actions of gay people. It marks the entry of homosexuality into society, and thereby creates the possibility of deprivatising the experiences of homosexuals.

That break though cannot be explored fully within the forms that Kramer and Halloran have chosen. In *Faggots* the protagonist Fred Lemish (seemingly an authorial persona who engages in a typically American autobiographical spiral: Kramer is writing about the gay world, which includes Lemish writing a filmscript around his own experience in the gay world) grows sickened with the slick world of New York discos, bars, baths, boutiques, beaches, and with his inability to find love in that world. He undergoes a mystical affirmation of his own self and retreats, separates himself from other gay men.

In *Dancer* Malone the paragon of beauty who is devoured by his futile pursuit of love apparently commits suicide. Whatever contradictions the gay world may contain are not transcended, rather they are avoided by individual choices to leave it. Here is the continuity with the self-oppressive novels of the sixties and fifties. The homosexual is still individualised, cannot construct a common identity with other gays and is sickened and appalled by the extravagances of the Other.

The paths that lead to that renunciation of common interest are etched across the novels. The gay world is presented as cut off, spectacular, sexually obsessed and most importantly monadic. It is as though there exist no other connections between individual gay men than sex and the quest for 'love'. No relations of friendship (though there is praise of those you dance with, the companion in *Dancer*), work, politics. No occupation other than dancing, cruising and having sex. In such a world it is unsurprising that 'love' becomes reified and fetishised: it has to make up for all other absent relations. The place of 'love' is pivotal: it acts as a spur to action, to involvement in the world, but its absence is used to criticise that world. From the viewpoint of the novels, its absence in an innate feature of gay male society, rather than a product of the particular constraints under which that world is constructed. Thus, contradictorily, the very judgement that the books would use in a reactionary way to undermine the world that they maintain an ambivalence towards, rounds on itself and begins to raise questions about how that world is formed, by what interests, and how it can be changed. The authors cannot take that route; rather it is we as gay socialists who must supply the words to describe the processes that Kramer and Halloran leave in silence.

That the world of *Faggots* exists is undeniable, as is the possibility that a vision of that world may be one that inspires gay men to come out and end their isolation. For, above all, sex itself is explicit in both novels, out and obvious. No hinting at what men do in bed together, no coy kisses and then three dots. The ambivalence towards sex, alternately glorified, then seen as an all-devouring monster, the anxieties as the sex-love dyad fractures and the uncertain response to the possibility of pleasure filled leisure, cannot disguise the efflorescence of sexuality in the gay world nor exclude the possibility of more affirmative responses to that efflorescence.

Faggots and *Dancer* are both products of the new subcultures of self-defined and self conscious homosexuals, are certainly transitional and contradictory within the development of those subcultures, but yet merit attention as much as for what they say as for their silences, for what they obscure as well as reveal. Simple affirmation or repudiation are worthless, betraying in the very ease of judgement an undialectical view of the relations between literature and sexual politics.

Out! Out! Out!

A review of 'Outrageous' and 'Word is Out'
by Richard Dyer

Outrageous! and *Word is Out* are both very warming films. My immediate reaction to them, and that of most people I've spoken to, is one of feeling good. Here at last were films with gay characters in them that one could happily sink into, without having to sit there on tenterhooks waiting for the anti-gay jibes; here were films you could send people to, especially non-gay people, without having to making all sorts of previous warnings. A lot of the pleasure that many people have got from both films must be due not so much to their intrinsic delightfulness as to the context of other films dealing with gays.

If *Outrageous!* and *Word is Out* are warming, gay films generally are depressing. This feeling of depression takes two forms, both of which can be evoked by the same film. If you listen to gays talking about, say, *The Killing of Sister George* or *Fox* or *Les biches* or *Nighthawks*, they nearly all find the films depressing, though the reasons for the depression divide between those who see the films as yet more put-downs of gays and those who see them as statements of how god-awful gay life is. In this context, we are grateful for small mercies, anything that's reasonably positive, and *Outrageous!* and *Word is Out* seem to me to do more good than harm politically, for the time being. If, as many people have pointed out, they heroise (*Outrageous!*) or glamorise (*Word is Out*) — a promotion of 'gays are wonderful' as distorted in its way as 'gays are evil/sick' — then, all the same, I'm happy to have a few such glowing statements for a change, just to be going on with. Again, if, as Ray Olson points out in his article on recent gay films in *Jump Out* number 20, *Word is Out* (and *Outrageous!*, though Olson does not discuss it) celebrates homosexuality rather than analysing homophobia, nonetheless it does celebrate it, and we are going to go on needing celebration as well as analysis for the foreseeable future. (Olson's belief that we are past that stage now seems both premature, and also to lose sight of the degeneration into bureaucracy and repressiveness that political movements give way to when they drop the moment of celebration from their strategy.)

Realism and pleasantness — the problems

Nonetheless, there are problems with both *Outrageous!* and *Word is Out*, and these have to do with both their pleasantness and also with their 'realism'. The applicability of this latter term — by which I wish to indicate the convention the films work within, rather than to assert their definitive relation to reality — is obvious enough as far as *Word is Out* is concerned. Documentary just is a realist form, and the 'talking heads' kind of documentary has acquired a particular authority in the context of the emphasis in sexual political movements on 'consciousness raising' — speaking out one's experience, telling it like it is, giving the oppressed a voice and hence, bringing the word out. (Just how far *Word is Out* is comparable to consciousness raising is discussed below.)

The realism of *Outrageous!* may be less obvious, since it is clearly a fiction film and even a slightly fantastical one at that, with our small town hairdresser queen becoming a star in 'New York, New York'. (I'm not sure if what is fantastic is this progression itself, or the fact that Craig Russell is so charismatic that it is hard quite to believe in him as a nobody.) The style of the film is nonetheless realist, above all-in the use of the type of grainy film stock associated with naturalism in the cinema and a soundtrack which does not filter out, as Hollywood classically did, the bumps and rustlings that the ordinary tape recorder picks up. The acting — and especially Hollis McLaren's (Lisa) — has the characteristic improvisatory feel of post-Method performance style, and the film is shot mostly on location. Even the drag routines, in themselves a most blatantly illusionistic sort of performance, are still within the film's overall realism, because they are signalled as shows — indeed, most of the drag sequences have the look of cinema verite night-club footage.

The reason why these films' combination of pleasantness and realism is a problem lies in the kind of position we are invited to adopt in relation to their representation of gayness. Because the films are pleasant, we want to believe that how they show gayness is true, or at least possible. And because they are realist, lo and behold, what we want to believe could be so we are assured is so. This makes both films doubly difficult to argue with, to resist, and yet there is much about both that we need to contest.

In the case of *Outrageous!*, the big problem seems to me to centre on the question of gender. There are problems with the essentially individualistic perspective of the film (though there is also some sense of a gay community in the film), and the film's equation of gayness and madness, both seen as healthier and saner than straight (in all senses) society, seems simplistic and somehow anachronistic, an easy late sixties ideology for the difficulties of our late seventies situation. But, because more obvious, these are less of a problem than the way the film deploys categories of 'femininity' and 'masculinity', particularly as the mesh with male homosexuality.

At first sight, *Outrageous!* seems rather progressive in this regard. On the one hand, our hero is an effeminate homosexual man and, on the other, once the film gets to New York, there is an almost self-conscious refusal to conflate male homosexuality and 'femininity'. The first man Robin/Craig Russell meets in New York is a bearded taxi driver, and we are as surprised (or meant to be) as Robin is to discover that this 'masculine' looking man is gay. The films upturns a stereotype (a well-known ploy of realist film) and this is all the more interesting in the light of mainstream contemporary cinema, where gayness is used primarily to reinforce rather than confuse notions of gender identity. Thus 'buddy' films of the *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* variety tend to throw up a simpering queen so as to dissociate the male couple at the film's centre from that sort of behaviour, while the more recent 'liberated women' films, such as *Julia*, *An Unmarried Woman* and *Girlfriends* carefully assure us that there is no taint of lesbianism about their female protagonists (— *Julia* does this almost programmatically). *Outrageous!* is prepared to say both that it's O.K. to be a queen and that masculinity and gayness can go together.

Masculinity and femininity

There is however a price to pay for these assertions, and this is, first, an unquestioning acceptance of the categories of masculinity and femininity as they stand, and secondly, a definite polarisation of the two, with the 'feminine' coming off worse. The male gay world of *Outrageous!* consists almost entirely of camp queens into drag and macho guys into leather and denim. (The possibility of an alternative male gay style, clearly gay but neither denying nor exaggerating biological difference, is perhaps glimpsed in the Toronto gay bars we see.) The film shows the male gay world as reproducing, even increasing, the gender polarisation of the straight world, and with 'femininity' as distinctly the downgraded end, Robin as hero notwithstanding. Actual women in the film are either mad and pathetic (Lisa) or predatory/bitchy lesbians, and the image of woman enacted in drag is just as dubious.

The film — dazzled perhaps by Craig Russell's fabulous impersonations — not only does not confront the highly ambivalent phenomenon of drag in gay culture, but even refuses the ambivalence. Robin talks of the women he impersonates at one point, and says how wonderful they were, how they had guts, how they knew how to enjoy themselves. Thus we are asked to treat the image of woman he and the film offer us in the drag sequences as a representation of what these women were really like, and this effectively scotches any argument that might see drag as attacking female roles rather than women. (It's a difficult argument at the best of times.)

In principle, Robin's/Russell's impersonations celebrate rather than attack his chosen line-up of stars, but this too is problematic. His impersonations don't mock the stars in question — and his Peggy Lee and Ella Fitzgerald are clearly a straightforward tribute to their musical gifts, as is his Bette



Midler to her pep and bezzazz. Yet his choice of stars elsewhere is revealing. His Barbara Streisand emphasises her neurotic egocentricity, while his Bette Davis and Judy Garland, key icons of male gay culture if ever there were any, are significant for the precise reference they make. It is the Bette Davis of *All About Eve*, not *Now, Voyager* or *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, and *All About Eve* is the film in which she plays an aging, bitchy actress who finally acknowledges her inner emptiness for lack of a man.

Again, it is not the Judy Garland of *The Wizard of Oz* and *Meet Me in St. Louis* but of *A Star is Born* and the later period of her career as a stage performer, in which her body appeared, no doubt was, ravaged by pills, alcohol and marriages and she seemed to perform with all her nerve ends exposed. In other words, what Robin's/Russell's drag act predominantly constructs is an image of woman as neurotic. His women are resilient in their neurosis, and admirable for that, but this is still a bleak view of the destiny of femininity. If his women are 'wonderful', they are also a mess.

The final blow *Outrageous!* deals to femininity, and especially to 'feminine' men, is sexual. In the male gay world of the film, to be feminine is to be discounted sexually. There is a small scene about a quarter of a way in, where Robin has picked up a man after his first successful public drag appearance. In terms of furthering the plot, the prime imperative of mainstream feature films, this scene is superfluous, but it has a crucial point to make. By revealing that the (narcissistically butch) man is a hustler and in the exchange between them, the scene implies that Robin could not possibly get sex except by paying for it.

Later, it is made clear that the taxi driver who becomes his agent spends his spare time scoring with other macho guys. The visual presentation of Robin emphasises his lack of sex appeal — when not in drag, he's either shown in shapeless old clothes (the resort of those who have been taught to hate their bodies) or, in the party scene, in a white jump-suit that is too tight for him and makes him look podgily unattractive. In *Outrageous!*, to be sexually validated is to be macho, however much of a star you may be in other regards.

Changing attitudes

Outrageous! makes use of the traditional 'masculine': 'feminine' gender opposition but the kind of attitudes, values

and style that constitute those categories remain unchanged. Two things are altered, however. First, the possibility that the gender categories can include gayness is allowed, rather than, as hitherto, being crucially defined by their exclusion of it. Second, we are asked to take up the position of femininity by identification with Robin (and perhaps Lisa, though the film rather loses sight of her two-thirds of the way through), and to place masculinity as the object of desire — an exact reversal of the traditional heterosexual fiction film.

Yet, as I've said, these reworkings of gender in relation to gayness and desire do not fundamentally alter the definition of what 'femininity' and 'masculinity' are; and they remain ultimately defined in terms of each other, that is to say, in terms of the subordination of femininity to masculinity. All of this is an undoubted tendency of contemporary male gay culture, and to that extent *Outrageous!* is merely part of the tendency. But this brings us back to the problem of its realism — or rather, its particular form of realism which, despite the fictional narrative, wants to be taken as an unmediated grasping of reality, the way things are. This is a problem because, even if the masculinisation of gay culture is a real tendency, it is only a tendency.

Outrageous!'s realism however tends to freeze and solidify this dynamic of gay culture, so that instead of showing it as a way that things are *in process*, it has the effect of presenting it as *the way things are*. (We need films that analyse why this masculinisation is taking place, to the degree that it is, what it signifies and also what other directions and potentials there are for gay culture. An unreflexive realism could not deal with these themes, but these lie beyond the scope *Outrageous!* quite legitimately set itself.) Into the bargain, *Outrageous!* asks us to *like* this narrowly particular possibility of gay culture, and to find pleasure in identifying with a hero who is also a sexual no-no.

Realism and pleasure

The problems of *Word is Out* have been analysed elsewhere. Cobbett Steinberg in *Cineaste* vol VIII, no 4 points out how this cross-section of gay experience nonetheless misses out on group activity and promiscuity, concentrating instead on the couple and sex as romance, and Ray Olson, in the *Jump Cut* article already mentioned, stresses the film's lack of any analytical perspective. As both point out, despite being divided into three sections, the film is overall somewhat incoherent, and at over two hours it often courts boredom. These points are so well made by Steinberg and Olson that I will concentrate here on the question of realism and pleasure.

There are points in *Word is Out* when the film does seem to want to counteract the tendency of most realism to present itself as unmediated and transparent. This is most obvious in the sequence with the slightly outrageously 'faggoty' actor who sits in front of a large mirror in which is reflected the cameraperson. When the shot zooms in on the actor, we can see the cameraperson turning the zoom handle to effect this shot. Thus we are reminded that we are seeing a filmed interview, rather than talking directly to the person (the illusion of transparency). This also occurs once in the interview with Pam and Rusty (the couple who both have children from previous marriages).

Elsewhere the way that self images are socially constructed is signalled by cutting in of earlier snaps of the interviewee and, at one point, pin-ups of stars as gender ideals (though this never goes as far as Jan Oxenburgh's brilliant short film *Home Movie*). Sometimes the film delays information about its subjects — we don't at first learn that Pam and Rusty, or the older male couple Harry and John, are connected, or that the man who speaks of his experience of aversion therapy is a successful local politician — and this again foregrounds the way that the film is constructing these people for us in much the same way as a feature film constructs fictional characters.

Cobbett Steinberg points out that 'the black lesbian activist in the film was obviously included to fulfil three ... requirements: black, female, radical' and this is probably true, but very near the beginning the film-makers do use footage of this woman raising the question of her represen-

tativeness and there is a similar questioning of the film's procedures in Elsa, the elderly woman poet's, discussion with a group of women about what use they are going to make of her in the film.

Reflexive realism

There is a sense then in which *Word is Out* moves towards a reflexive realism, an awareness of itself as a film, as partly constructing rather than purely revealing the persons it offers us. Yet discussions of the film clearly show that that is not how the film works for audiences. Apart from more general considerations — it's too long, it makes things seem too rosy etc. — what most people comment upon is the people they liked in the film and the people they didn't. In other words, we tend in practice to treat the film as if utterly transparent as if we make a direct contact with these people and respond to them in the same conditions as we do to people in real life.

Paradoxically perhaps, the cinematic strategies outlined above, which may be meant as reflexive devices, actually encourage this response. Showing the camera in mirrors can be taken as a further sign of authenticity — i.e. "this is not someone playing a part, but really the person talking about her/him self"; delaying information about the person concentrates on the person in isolation from her/his embeddedness in social reality; the snapshots can be taken as emphasising the unique personal history of the speaker (though the shots of stars necessarily point outward to a wider social reality); and even the two women who address the way they are being used by the film emphasise a desire not to be representative but simply to be 'themselves'.

What all of this points to is the ideology of individualism, the notion of the individual as somehow outside of and even predating society and history. We are enjoined not to see these people as representative but rather as unique individuals, and hence this is predominantly how people respond to the film. If they are representative of anything, it is of uniqueness and individuality — that is, they represent the degree to which gays, like everyone else, represent nothing but themselves. Moreover, because the film remains predominantly unreflexively realist, it suggests that individuality constitutes reality.

Political practice

This is not necessarily how we *use* the film in (political) practice. There must be a strong sense of shared experience, of responding to various interviewees with "yes, that's how it was for me, too" or "so I'm not the only one who felt it like that", of feeling that for once part of oneself was up there on the screen. In this way, the film is perhaps akin to consciousness raising and especially when it is used as a basis for group discussion (whether formalised or simply in the way it gets people talking together afterwards).

Yet the film never goes so far towards being like consciousness raising as similar films that have come out of the women's movement. In an article on 'the Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film' (*Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Fall 1978), Julia Lesage discusses these films (which include *Janie's Jane*, *The Woman's Film*, *Three Lives*, *We're Alive*, *Self Health* and *Rape*; British equivalents would include *Women of the Rhondda*, *Women Against the Bill*, *An Egg is not a Chicken*, and *Women in Focus*) and notes a number of characteristics that make them the filmic equivalent of the political strategy of consciousness raising. Few of these characteristics really seem to hold true for *Word is Out*.

The feminist documentaries are addressed to women viewers, whereas it is unclear to whom *Word is Out* is addressed. Secondly, in the feminist documentaries, there is a clear identity between film-maker(s) and subject(s), the film-maker's political point-of-view is identified with that of her subjects. This is only partly so with *Word is Out*. The film lacks what professional media ideologues call 'balance', in that it unambiguously promotes the speakers' right to speak for themselves about what it is to be gay — no 'experts' are wheeled on to 'explain' us (away); in the sequence in which Elsa discusses the film with some of the women making the film, she returns their questions to them, and this helps us to place them as lesbian. Yet for the most part, in so far as the

film-makers intervene at all, it is as interviewers, sympathetic and friendly yet clearly placed differently from the interviewees — them, the film-makers, looking at, investigating, them, the gays (us).



A third characteristic of feminist documentary that Lesage notes is what she calls 'a shift in iconography', whereby the narrow traditional modes of representing women in the cinema are upset by showing both a wider range of women and also by looking at familiar aspects of women's lives 'in a new, uncolonised way'. Domesticity, for example, a real aspect of women's lives, is represented in patriarchal culture, but always in terms of what it means for that culture rather than, as in feminist discourse, for what it means for women, as oppression *and* resistance, subordination *and* subculture. The feminist documentaries are part of a process of re-seeing women's lives.

There is cinematic re-seeing in *Word is Out*, but it is not of the same kind as that Lesage points to. We see a wider range of gays than we get in mainstream, heterosexist cinema, but we don't see them in identifiably gay settings. The visual style of the film is a combination of all-American (e.g. scenes of lesbian family barbecues; groups of women in lumberjack jackets felling trees) and glossy magazine (above all, the soft, glamorising colour stock and the use of flowers and fabrics to give a light, pretty look). This is a play on iconography, for we are seeing overtly gay people in situations and settings deeply redolent of straightness; but this has nothing to do with decolonising gay space. (Cf. Cobbett Steinberg's discussion of the film's *avoidance* of gay 'promiscuity' rather than engaging with or *redefining* the experience of gay sexual encounters.)

The film thus makes one move — "gays are human too" — but then settles for the dominant ideology's definition of what it is to be human, which in this context is to opt into the American dream, a dubious proposition. (At the same time, it is disappointing that it does not give us more of the one interviewee who has consciously opted for the American dream, the gay businessman; the film prefers the vaguely 'alternative' life-styles, which are implicated in bourgeois ideology as is the businessman's.)

Privatised experience

A final characteristic that I'd like to pick out from Lesage's article is her reference to a common narrative structure to the women's autobiographical accounts in the films, namely, 'a women struggling to deal with the public world'. *Word is Out* tends to cut across the unfolding of individual stories, and one would think that its emphasis on coming out would be a paradigm of 'struggling to deal with the public world'. Yet what coming out means in this film is accepting one's gayness, meeting other gays and falling in love and/or living with them.

In other words, coming out remains a privatised experience. We do see marches and rallies, but the struggle to achieve these is nowhere recounted or shown, they just take off from the private self-acceptance of gayness — the sexual political equivalent of workerist spontaneism. Above all, there is no acknowledgement of the struggle with non-gay society — once you're out, in the film's narrative, troubles melt like lemon drops (as Judy said of Oz).

The view that gayness is purely private, that gays are just like everyone else and everyone else is O.K. and that coming out is just a matter of accepting yourself in a familiar enough package, and one that is as entitled to a hearing as any other within the spectrum of gay politics (though the conspiracy theorist in me can't help feeling that this view is far more likely to get air space, funding etc.). Yet, because of the pleasurable realism with which it is presented, this particular political position comes across as not just a position but reality itself.

Of course, one can reject it — even the most overwhelmingly realist film can be disbelieved, and in this respect we live in an age of marked cinematic sophistication (or cynicism). But this is where *Word is Out* is even more of a problem than *Outrageous!* The latter one can dismiss as 'only a story'; but *Word is Out* allows us to dismiss its position in its own terms, as 'only about these twenty-six people'. But then that is precisely what the film's position is, secured by its talking heads realism — a return of everything to the individual and her/his experience as the fount of reality.

Outrageous! and *Word is Out* are enjoyable, warming films that make you feel good about being gay. They are almost certainly necessary at this point of (political) time. But they are not models for where gay cinema needs to go, and not only for their specific politics but for their form. This is not a question as I am appear to have been saying, of pleasure and realism always being inappropriate artistic strategies. On the contrary, giving pleasure, addressing the real — these are the proper political aims of art. The question is how you do it.

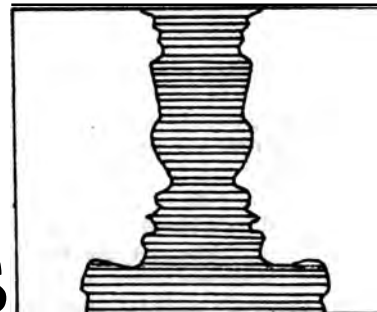
The danger, as far as realism is concerned, is to treat the relation between film and reality as unmediated or direct.

There must be, as Sylvia Harvey puts it in her book *May 68 and Film Culture*, a 'productive tension between means of representation' (whose conventions and inner logic are necessarily ideologically determinant) 'and that social reality which the means of representation strive to analyse and account for'. Paradoxically, the most 'real' film is constantly aware of its difficult relation to reality — it problematises its own realism.

Equally, pleasure has a vital political/aesthetic role in recharging our energies, both by giving us time away from struggle but also, more importantly, in suggesting where the struggle might lead, in giving us a utopian vision. But such a vision must maintain a gap between what we want to achieve and where we are at here and now. *Word is Out* and *Outrageous!* are utopian in their sense of what it could be like to be gay, but this proper utopian impulse is conflated with the films' realism to suggest that we've already achieved this utopia.

This inevitably means utopia in the terms set by bourgeois patriarchal society — hence the retention of gender categories in *Outrageous!* and the privatisation of sexuality in *Word is Out*. The gap between what could be/should be and what is is narrowed, and the leap beyond gender and privatisation that the sexual political movements were poised to take is stymied. However useful in the short term, in the long term these films invite us to want what we've already got, to want what we don't really want at all.

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Bent

A Play by Martin Sherman

Reviewed by Barry Davis

Martin Sherman's play "Bent" was first presented at the Royal Court Theatre in May 1979. Subsequently it was put on at the Criterion Theatre in Piccadilly Circus. In it Max, a dissolute 'fixer', and Rudi, his dancer boyfriend are arrested because of Max's momentary involvement with the boy lover of a prominent SA figure. For it is the Berlin -of 1934 in the wake of the Roehm purge. En route to a concentration camp, Max is forced to participate in the brutal murder of Rudi and forewarned by Horst, an experienced Pink Triangle, and fearing his fate as a homosexual, 'proves' his heterosexuality by having intercourse with the still-warm corpse of an adolescent girl. For this he is 'rewarded' with a Star of David, supposedly a preferable fate. In the camp Max helps Horst to work with him, moving stones, and Horst, the avowed homosexual, breaks through Max's defences, teaching him gentleness and showing love, enabling the 'closeted' Max to find a dignity and self-esteem he has denied himself in the past. When a German officer discovers that Max has tried to help the ailing Horst, he gets him killed. Horst's death makes Max realise what he has lost and releases his long-suppressed feelings. He casts off his Jewish uniform, puts on Horst's Pink Triangle, defiantly displays it to the guards and immolates himself against the electrified barbed wire fence.

The contemporary situation

Much of what Sherman is trying to say is meant to relate to the contemporary situation of gays as well as being an attempt at an historical reconstruction of the situation for Homosexuals in Germany in 1934 and after. In a discussion with Nicholas de Jongh, reported in *The Guardian*, Sherman alluded to the sado-masochistic elements that he sees as a predominant element in the contemporary American (and doubtless British) gay sub-culture. Clearly in this play he is trying to transpose to the Germany of the 'thirties his often perceptive observations of the gay experience today. Nicholas de Jongh pushed further this idea of the contemporaneity of

the play when he argued that it was his belief that our society now treated gays like the Nazis treated their opponents and those of whom they disapproved.

In his view criticism, for instance of the Jewish aspects of the play, was basically irrelevant, since the central power of the metaphor was alone able to bring home the issue to audiences. For it was only such a stunning comparison that could adequately convey the suffering of gay people in our society, which still remained hidden from the consciousness of most people. Thus any form of information was justified, however much some might consider it as shocking and crude propaganda. Ian McKellen, who was Max in the play, appeared to go even further by suggesting that Britain, or even more Northern Ireland, might be considered a "concentration camp for gays". These views found more or less general endorsement in an editorial published in *Gay News* No. 167. The implication of all this seems to be that the continuing oppression of gays necessitates a 'political' rather than an aesthetic view of the play. But any sensible criticism must take into account both aspects, the method of presentation as well as the quality, consistency and clarity and veracity of what is being said, since the play remains theatre rather than reality.

Some inept attempts to protect Sherman from criticism came in *Gay News* (No. 167). Alison Hennegan and Keith Howes, interviewing the playwright, stated that "ironically" most of the critics of the play "have been either Jewish or Gay or both" and the accompanying editorial exhorting the attendance of gays at the play, underlined that "irony" ... "since Martin Sherman is himself Jewish". Peter Bennett, the paper's own drama critic, in obvious disagreement with the editorial, and with the comments in the interview, wrote a sharp letter which was published in the following issue. Keith Howes in answer to Bennett, and in an attempt to clarify his position wrote that most of the "good notices" of the play "came from critics not not iceably Jewish or gay". He meant good notices in the specific sense of those which did not "attempt to trivialise or denigrate the play solely on the grounds of its equation of Nazi persecution and homosexual suffering".

I am not myself sure what "noticeably Jewish" means. Perhaps he intended to mean explicitly or avowedly. Of such the most appropriate example is perhaps that of David Nathan in the *Jewish Chronicle* of May 11th 1979. There was little symptomatic of "hysterical fear" as anticipated in the *Gay News* Editorial. The review was not adulatory yet it did not diminish Sherman's efforts: "There is no doubt about the play's integrity, its passionate shout for justice ..." Nonetheless the play was judged to have failed in its purpose — "What should have been tragedy is merely horror". Hardly the Jewish angst momentarily stirred in its aspic, as was implied by Howes. Of all the reviews so far, there has been little hysterical fear, except "ironically" in *Gay News*.

The Jewish identity

I believe that Sherman has obscured so much of our understanding by involving us in the metaphor of the Jewish identity. To take on such an identity voluntarily was unlikely in any case, except of course in theatrical or literary contrivance (as in Frisch's *Andorra*) or when it was clear that this was a gesture and not reality (as when the King of Denmark and many of his subjects donned the yellow star in defiance of the German anti-Jewish measures in 1943). Moreover of all prisoners in the camp 'hierarchy' it was the Jews rather than homosexuals who generally occupied the lowest position, though in some camps and for specific periods, such as Buchenwald from 1938-1942, homosexuals were the lowest "caste".

One of their greatest weaknesses was that unlike other groups of prisoners they failed to organise to protect their interests and status, where this might have helped their survival. They were more often picked upon for sadistic brutalities by the guards, and compared to other categories of prisoners their survival rate was amongst the lowest, though again with the Jews far lower. 1 Further, Sherman takes the point of 'gay liberation', for such was the understanding of



many of the audiences, as the casting off of the "Jewish gaberdine", and I find this misplaced and inept.

There is then a reasoned basis for any criticism of the "Jewish" aspect of the play. There should not, as Howes himself contends, be a Jewish 'copyright' on suffering, but neither should there be a mercantilism of compassion, and therein lies the tendency of this play. Whatever Sherman's intentions, he appears to diminish the suffering of one persecuted group to highlight the suffering of the other. Much has been made in his defence that being both Jewish and gay, he writes with a "Jewish sensibility" as well as a "gay sensibility". I am not sure that being something automatically entails possession of a particular sensibility, or indeed of what exactly in this context Sherman's Jewish sensibility consists. Whether the two "sensibilities" are balanced in his mind I cannot say; they certainly are not in this play.

It sets out, I think, to be a gay play, not a Jewish one, though it was made into something more general — an attempt to efface the human spirit and human feeling — emphasised by McKellen's particular reading of and performance in the play. The television series "Holocaust" did spread a certain awareness of the events of this period, though it did a profound disservice to the actual facts of suffering of the Jews and of others, perhaps in the interest of commercial viability, perhaps to make some naïve political points. Many argued that it was considerably useful. Yet perhaps it created more heat than light, sensation and shock rather than enlightenment. "Bent" appears to me to do something similar, though the mitigating excuse here appears to be gay liberation, a sobering reflection.

Historical authenticity

Martin Sherman is naturally keen to demonstrate the historical authenticity of his play. Apart from what we are told from the stage, much of it in the breathless history of the SA and the SS provided by Greta, a transvestite nightclub owner,

we were given a leaflet with the background of modern German history, and a bibliography for further reading. Sherman has alluded to the influence of Bruno Bettelheim on his view of the period, particularly relating to life in the camps. Bettelheim, a writer and practising psychoanalyst, is a Viennese Jew imprisoned early on by the Nazis. He was then released and managed to flee to the United States, where he now lives, thus avoiding the later excesses of the Final Solution.

Yet though many of the singular incidents in the play are probably based on some particular event furnished by Bettelheim himself or perhaps from the files of the Wiener library in London, the particulars do not seem to add up to a convincing whole, and as argued above, singular truths are not always sufficient to sustain a general argument. Sherman seems to argue that suffering can produce love, can ennoble an individual, and seems to imply that the suicide at the end of the play is in some sense a fulfilment of that love, a sort of martyrdom. Yet it all depends on the type and the extent of the suffering, and of course the character of the individual. I would feel, and this is confirmed by my reading of Bettelheim, that most people were diminished and depersonalised by their suffering, their feelings blunted. The love that blossomed was the exception, and here there is an obvious distinction between this and sexual release. Most of those who died were victims, not martyrs, since they were rarely given any freedom to choose anything.

They sought of course to survive, and could do so for longer rather than shorter periods, depending on personality and external pressures. Bettelheim quotes one survivor, Paul Celan, who committed suicide about five years after his liberation from the camps. He wrote in his poem "Shadows":

They dug and heard no more,
they did not grow wise, nor contrive any song,
or any kind of language.
They dug.²

Max certainly seems to develop a deeper understanding as a result of his experiences in the camp. Both he and Horst were not coarsened by their struggle for survival, and somehow their dignity was enhanced. Indeed a sort of emotional strength develops as the counterpoint to the physical decline. There was no sense of the self-denial of what Max has to do when he "goes down on" the German officer to get the medicine for his ailing lover. It is as though nothing physical matters any more, since their entire relationship is without any form of physical contact, indeed its sexual consummation is purely verbal. Yet was not Horst's disgust meant to be mingled with relief and ultimately forgiveness, but forgiveness for what when the act seemed so trivial. There is in any case little horror left for us for the rest of the play when so much has been expended in the contrived shocks earlier on.



Horst and Max almost become more refined, Max develops his awareness, tutored by Horst, and his unthinking anti-semitism dissolves in the realisation that the Jews are fellow-victims. But not before the author has us get the point in Greta's hollywoodesque — "you're just like the Jews, unloved Baby, unloved". The Jews, however, continue to retain their anti-gay attitudes, even in the camps, a deeper prejudice no doubt.

There is the one "good Jew", whom Horst has met, a kindly old Rabbi, doubtless with a long white beard. Sherman does of course allow that some gays are positively evil. Max is able to temper Horst's naivety (the one failing of the good nurse) with the realistic assertion that some Nazis were gay — "You don't like that, do you?" We have of course already been clearly informed by the omniscient Greta that the SA was a bastion of gays.

The characterisation

So much of this play is presented in terms of cliché and caricature. There is the shallow characterisation of the Nazis (and some of the dialogue) that could have been taken from the war films of the 'forties and 'fifties (or indeed the 'sixties and 'seventies), and a rather lame and all too familiar pastiche of "decadent Berlin". There was a mannered though compelling performance from Ian McKellen as Max, and a moving performance from Tom Bell as Horst, the righteous and right-on gay. Richard Gale gave us a masterful cameo of Max's closetted uncle Freddie, still preoccupied with picking up the odd "fluff" and displaying an obsessional triviality in the face of mounting catastrophe.

Yet there was much stylistic confusion in the play. At times it was naturalistic, at times "epic" and at others symbolic. There is of course nothing wrong with mixing styles if it enhances and clarifies the basic message of the play, but here it tends to stress the overburdening of the play with its many different messages — about gayness, about love, about violence and about sacrifice — as it hiccups from one style to another. The abrupt change is meant to shock, to open the audience to a new sort of awareness that the author is trying to promote. But the feeling for me was rather one of strain, never quite able to be released, and which oscillated from melodrama to farce.

Whenever it is used the reiteration of the Nazi experience produces a sort of Pavlovian horror response which can then be harnessed to something the progenitor wishes, and in this case it is gay suffering. An increasingly disturbing response, however, is one of a certain intrigue and even admiration, and this is something of which Sherman is well aware, for particularly with regard to gay people there is today a sort of mindless *camperie* associated with the Third Reich. In some ways he tries to deal with all of this in his play, for example in Rudi's remark — "I know violence is very chic, but it hurts". But again he only skims the surface.

Martin Sherman has tackled a large and an important subject. Clearly there is much to be done to make people



Horst (torn Belt) Max (Ian McKellen, right)

aware of the sufferings of homosexuals under National Socialism, which one German author (W.S. Schlegel) has called "The Great Tabu". But Sherman I think tries to encompass too much. Had he tried to say less, he might have done so more effectively. The German section of Gay Sweatshop's "As Times Go By" managed better with a play in the same context, but more limited with a more specific and narrow message for gay people. It may be a pity that there is such a limited appeal, but plays can rarely work well for everyone. But just as propaganda might be necessary, it will lose its effectiveness if it does not do justice to the truth, and if it distorts it, for dramatic or didactic effect, it then becomes absurd.

FOOTNOTES

1. R. Lautmann et al, 'Der rosa Winkel in den national-sozialistischen Konzentrationslagern', in R. Lautmann (ed), *Gesellschaft und Homosexualität* (Frankfurt-am-Main 1977).
2. B. Bettelheim, *Survival and Other Essays* (London 1979), pp. 98-9.



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Celtic Twilight

by Glenn McKee

Two issues ago we began a discussion around sexual politics in Ireland. This is a further contribution to that debate taking up some of the questions raised in Tom Woodhouse's article *Lost Freedoms* in Gay Left 8.

Tom Woodhouse's article attempts to "clarify some points about the history of Ireland which are rarely discussed and little understood." It does make some very interesting comments on Gaelic Ireland, such as the homoerotic elements in the Tain. At a more general level Tom Woodhouse attempts to depict Irish Celtic society as an almost ideal society within mediaeval and later culture, with freedoms undreamt of in the rest of patriarchal Romanised Europe. In particular, the position of women is his barometer. Tom Woodhouse also implies in the article, that his vision of Irish history is linked to his nationalism.

Certainly Irish society presents features in this period which are unique and fascinating, some of which are not even found in other Celtic societies. In the article Tom Woodhouse appears to regard Irish society down to the 17th century as one, static, solid unpolluted Celtic block. The non-Christian society of the Tain, which might well refer to a period hundreds of years before the historical period, has little to do with the operation of Irish society in the 16th century. In the Tain a barbarous and militaristic society is shown, interestingly with a very aggressive queen, Medb, dominating the political situation. However, the society outlined in this epic is not corroborated by the evidence of other early historical sources.

From the 5th century, Irish society became increasingly Christianised. Tom Woodhouse attempts to devalue Irish Celtic Christianity as proceeding along "very unRomish lines". Irish Christianity was by no means cut off from the rest of Europe. In the middle ages the extremely ascetic Columbanus played a vital role in founding new monasteries on the Continent. Irish society down to the 17th century was open to many influences and changes. Muirchetach O'Brien attempted to move toward a continental style centralised kingship. More broadly, the Viking and 'Norman' onslaughts had serious effects on Irish society.

Against Tom Woodhouse, it can be argued that there was no straight conflict between Celtic and Anglo-Norman values, rather a mutual interaction, with English conceptions of lordship fusing with Irish conceptions of succession. To Tom Woodhouse, nearly every aspect of Irish Celtic society is acceptable, or rather ideal when compared with the results of English influence on Ireland. Many features found in English society at the time are to be found in Ireland. Both countries had aristocracies both with a privileged place in society. Celtic society was intensely aristocratic and conservative. In the Gill History of Ireland, O'Corrain noted that "Irish literature ... (was) ... aristocratic to the core". There was little interest in ordinary people in such literature.

Lineage was very important in such a patrilineal society. Great care and effort was taken to preserve the genealogies of all the leading families. Most offices and functions were hereditary. One family tended to specialise in one field, for example law or genealogy. Therefore no one, including women, could select freely and 'art or science' to practice. It was of great importance to this society for each family to continue the line. In the early tract called the Timna Chathair Mair, Cetach is given a secondary role in this militaristic society even though he is a "warlike leader whose deeds are mighty" and the King's eldest son because he himself had no sons to carry on the glorious line.

In certain respects Irish society in the mediaeval period did enjoy more 'sexual freedom' than the rest of Christian Europe'. However this applied only in a superficial way to

the upper part of society. In the 12th century the anti-Irish Gerald of Wales pays tribute to the exemplary chastity of the run of Irish priests. In the Irish law tract, the Senchus Mar, it is stated that the son of a king by a slave-woman, a cumal, cannot succeed to the kingship. It also notes that a father can repudiate a son for 'depravity or criminality'.

A 'sexually free' society does not mean a society in which women are free. An examination of the position of women in the law tract reveals that in certain circumstances women had some legal rights, but these were very much hedged around by conditions. A woman's position depended on her relationship to her husband and her property (and it should be noted that a woman did not cut her connection to the 'paternal' family on marriage). The best way for a woman to guarantee her position and status was to have sons. The Senchus Mar notes that every woman must have a legal guardian: father, husband, sons or the Church. Indeed, some Irish historians have seen the Church as having a liberating effect in that it gave women a certain amount of influence, independence and control of property. The Senchus Mar also explicitly states that it is wrong for a single woman to be in the household of any man, not having a husband to protect her.

At a broader level, looking at the political scene, women played very little part in politics. The Annals of Innisfallen, for example, mention few women in comparison to the huge number of men on every page. It notes the death in 795 of a Leinster King and his Queen. In 1259 the Annals note the death of the Abbess of Ceil Eoin, but presumably on the grounds of her descent from a noble family. The only other types of reference to women are those royal wives stolen by other Kings.

In a short reference to the tenurial system in Gaelic Ireland, Tom Woodhouse also seriously misinterprets the evidence. It is a partial judgement merely to state that Irish Celtic society was based on common rather than individual ownership of land. Land was 'owned' by the 'clan', which was a family unit based on a common great-grandfather. It did not include all the people of a particular locality. During the period in question, the clan changed in size to include only the descendants of a common grandfather. The clan could also be represented by one person. This small unit was, according to the legal texts, the basis of the Irish social structure. Therefore at a purely local level a noble or royal clan would control most of the land and economic resources. In this intensely hierarchised society the unfree 'peasant' clan at the bottom of the social pyramid was almost completely in the economic control of the local rulers.

The arguments that Tom Woodhouse puts forward concerning the position of women, sexual freedom and 'ownership of land' are unsubstantiated and thus a distorted vision of "Irish Celtic society" emerges. It is unfortunate that such a vision of an essentially aristocratic, Christian and conservative society, far from ideal, should inform a contemporary nationalism.



"The liberation of homosexuals
can only be the work
of homosexuals themselves."

— Kurt Hiller, 1921 —

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Gay Watching

HOMOSEXUALITY IN PERSPECTIVE

by William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson
Little Brown, 1979

Reviewed by Dennis Altman

One of the few remaining growth industries in the present climate of economic recession is that of sexual research and counselling. Indeed if I were to be very cynical I would suggest that the present stress on sexuality is part of an updated 'bread and circuses' approach by our rulers to buying off protest, rather as Marcuse foreshadowed in his concept of 'repressive desublimation'.

In this the Americans, as one might expect, lead the field. And the dominant figures here are the dual research team of William Masters and Virginia Johnson, whose institute at St. Louis, Missouri, has replaced the Kinsey Institute in Bloomington, Indiana, as the mecca of sex research. (It is interesting that both institutes are found in the American heartland; Masters and Johnson are on record as saying they went to St. Louis to dispel the doubts that would be created were they working on the more liberal east or west coasts.)

In their earlier works, particularly *Human Sexual Response* and *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, Masters and Johnson pioneered a number of then revolutionary concepts, most notably the multiorgasmic and clitoral nature of female sexuality. Now they have turned their laboratory and clinical techniques to homosexuality; not, they stress, because they want to find either 'causes' or 'cures', but because it is a legitimate and relevant part of sex research. Indeed, as they conclude:

"14 years of laboratory and clinical investigation of human homosexual function and dysfunction have provided broad-based support for the Institute's major premise that from a functional point of view homosexuality and heterosexuality have far more similarities than differences. Yet today, many decades after cultural dictum originally introduced the concept that important functional differences do exist between the two sexual preferences, the overwhelming pressure of public opprobrium still blindly reinforces this false assumption. The general public as well as many segments of the scientific community remain convinced that there are marked functional disparities between homosexual and heterosexual men and women."

Homosexuality in Perspective is essentially a report of these fourteen years research and counselling, and despite being written in a style that is both obtuse and convoluted Masters and Johnson appear to adopt this style deliberately as if to stress their commitment to the 'health care profession and to put off any reader who might be seeking salacious enjoyment — the book does contain certain very important findings.

There is, of course, a very basic problem with all of Masters and Johnson's findings, as with most so-called scientific sexual research, and that is their sample. Essentially their data comes either from people who agreed to spend considerable time having sex under laboratory conditions or who came to the institute in search of help for some sort of sexual problem. Neither is likely to be a very representative group. Indeed the moralistic objections often made against promiscuous homosexual cruising, objections that Masters and Johnson imply they share, seem to me even more applicable to those people who are willing to have sex with an assigned partner under the glare of lights, wires and closely observing sex researchers. However it is good to know that science has provided at least some people with an excuse to act out their fantasies.

I suspect that Masters and Johnson's evidence is thus less useful than the evidence collected through a mail survey of

over 5,000 homosexual women and men, and reported in Jay and Young's recent book *The Gay Report*. But the undoubted scientific, not to say heterosexual, reputation of Masters and Johnson will undoubtedly mean that their findings will be accepted where those of Jay and Young will be ignored.

And of these findings, two in particular stand out: first, that homosexuals are by and large more accomplished and have more pleasure in sex than heterosexuals; second that there is very strong evidence for basic human pansexuality.

As to the first point, Masters and Johnson are emphatic; both among their male and their female couples they find more relaxation, more involvement, more 'exchange of pleasure at all levels of sexual excitation', more communication. This is particularly marked when compared with the experience of women in heterosexual intercourse, the point that so enraged male commentators when it was made by Shere Hite. Homosexuals, both women and men, were even found to have a 'more active and diverse fantasy patterning than their heterosexual counterparts'.

Now this is an especially striking phenomenon when one considers that the homosexuals Masters and Johnson looked at engaged in a very restricted range of sexual activity. Most noticeably very little notice is taken of anal intercourse, which is presented here as of very minor significance to male homosexuals. Now this is completely contradicted both by Jay and Young's findings, and by the evidence from doctors at VD clinics, who do see a very large sample of sexually active people. Moreover Masters and Johnson seem on very shaky grounds when they talk about anal intercourse, completely ignoring, for example, the specific pleasures engendered by stimulation of the prostate that is, of course, only experienced by men.



But Masters and Johnson are really quite naive when it comes to the details of homosexual sex; perhaps they might profitably spend a couple of nights in a St. Louis gay sauna. Thus they argue that homosexual sex is essentially of a 'my turn, your turn' nature as compared with the 'our turn' nature of heterosexual coitus, which ignores the mutual orgasmic potential — this being the sort of language they employ — of mutual cunnilingus and fellatio. More crudely, what is '69ing' if not an 'our turn' activity?

Be that as it may, Masters and Johnson have provided, as Martin Duberman wrote in *The New Republic*, 'The most substantial case for gay chauvinism ever made'. As one of the most effective ways of oppressing homosexuals has been to suggest that somehow we are deprived of the ultimate sexual experience — what, if not this, is the classic remark that 'all a lesbian needs is a good man'? — they should be given credit for this.

Their evidence for the innate potential of all people to be stimulated both homo- and heterosexually comes in two basic forms: their discussion of 'ambisexuals' and their discussion of fantasies. Now 'ambisexual' is a term coined by Masters and Johnson to mean 'a man or woman who unreservedly enjoys, solicits, or responds to overt sexual opportunity with equal ease and interest regardless of the sex of the partners, and who, as a sexually mature individual, has never evidenced interest in a continuing relationship'.

I am not sure why Masters and Johnson want to telescope two quite different characteristics, namely sexual interest in both women and men *and* disinterest in binding relationships, into one type, unless it is because they have some sort of gut dislike of people who fit this type. There are, after all, many people who fit the first part of this description but not the second, and vice versa. In fact, I found the discussion of ambisexuals the most unsatisfactory in the book, for it is too replete with moralistic assumptions to be very useful, and requires considerable stretching of the data to support the definition. (Thus one woman had a few months' "marriage of convenience" during which time she "maintained an open lesbian relationship". This would seem incompatible with the claim that ambisexuals "have never evidenced interest in a continuing relationship".) Combined with the evidence on fantasies, however, it does add up to strong support for the bisexual potential of all of us.

Thus fantasies involving both sexes were found among all groups studied, which Masters and Johnson seem perplexed to explain. However, given their strong discounting of a *genetic* basis for homosexuality and their scepticism of a *hormonal* cause, it seems to me clearly further evidence for the Freudian-derived argument that we could all be bisexual were we less restricted by social pressures.

Given this it does not seem to me at all surprising that Masters and Johnson were able, as they put it, to 'convert' or 'revert' homosexuals to heterosexuality. Indeed, given the



rigid screening procedures they used before accepting people for such procedures, their failure rate of about a third is, as they admit, too high.

One may well question whether because someone is under social pressure to 'become' heterosexual this is sufficient reason to attempt the transformation. Would Masters and Johnson change the skin pigmentation of a Negro who was experiencing similar social pressures? And should clinicians seek to influence such people to fight rather than accept such social pressures? I myself have never doubted that the right sort of social engineering can cause people to respond in all sorts of ways sexually; this is, after all, the implication of the Freudian belief in an inherent pansexuality that is restricted by society. But because it can be done is not in itself sufficient justification for doing it.

Like most of their American counterparts, Masters and Johnson are blinded to such ethical problems by their all-pervasive behaviourism. There is a certain irony to the fact that despite this their book provides enormous ammunition for some of the more radical tenets of gay liberation.





Fighting Fascism

GAY ACTIVIST ALLIANCE PUBLICATIONS

Reviewed by Philip Derbyshire

Gay Activists Alliance have produced two publications, their Anti Fascist Handbook and the submission they made to the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure. Both are available from London Gay Activists Alliance, 5 Caledonian Road, London N1 priced 70p and 30p respectively.

Much of left activity in recent years was centred around the fight against fascism, and the Anti-Nazi League was one of the most significant mass organisations of that period, phenomenal in its growth, and in its loss of impetus. One of the contributory factors to its decline was the lack of discussion of what fascism was, and its insistence on a strategy of rationalistic revelation. The point consistently was to show that the National Front (NF) were Nazis, an alien growth on the body politic, who were duping the majority of their members. That type of political tactic both mystified the actual political form of contemporary fascism, and made the appeal that fascism had inexplicable.

The contribution of feminists and radical gay men was to argue against the simplicity of the dominant anti-fascist strategy, and to demand a more rigorous analysis of how fascism mobilised not only through economic resentments but through the exploitation of unconscious anxieties.

The *Anti-Fascist Handbook* suffers from contradictions engendered by its situation in those debates. On the one hand it is an agitational pamphlet aimed at gay people in order to get them involved in the struggle against the NF. On the other it is, is an attempt to make an intervention in the discussion of what fascism is. So that the first section takes up the revelatory line, exposes the NF policy on gays, and links that with the NF's historical modelling on the Nazi Party. There is also a discussion of the sexual politics of the Nazis. The third section gives useful info on how to fight the fascists and suggestions for propaganda and activist work. Both sections are worthwhile, even if it is stretching the term fascist to include organisations like the National Festival of Light (NFOL) and Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC).

It is in the second section where the contradictions are most acute, with several different accounts of what fascism is, and how it organises the politics of sexuality. Dave Landau's piece argues that the Nazis militarised society, smashed the family and proscribed homosexuality because it threatened the mystic 'fraternity' that was a fundamental mode of emotional organisation of the Nazi state. His piece is next to an article that argues that the fascists strengthened the family, and which sees fascism as a timeless essence with no differences between contemporary Britain and '30s Germany.

Whilst it is not incumbent to produce a unified 'line' in such a publication, it might be helpful to the reader, if articles which have opposing theoretical positions do not just flow into each other without some indication of their difference.

The historical material is fascinating but errs on the side of too much detail and a weakness of overall coherence. Again, there are inaccuracies: were women really pushed out of the labour force in Nazi Germany as Tony Deane suggests, or pulled into industrial production perforce as men went off to the front?

Overall, the pamphlet is a worthwhile attempt to gather together information and analysis on fascism, even if sometimes it becomes intensely confusing; but it might have been more sensible to clarify the aims of the pamphlet, as agitation or as theory instead of blending the two.

The Submission to the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure is a well argued lucid account of the way the law discriminates against gay people. We all know it does but it is eye-opening to realise the extent, and entrenchment of that discrimination in both sentencing, rules of evidence, and police and court practice. The submission also draws out the ways in which children are discriminated against and oppressed especially around questions of sexuality and makes a strong case for the abolition of the Age of Consent laws which function less to protect children than to oppress them. The submission marks another stage in the demystification of the legal constraints around sexuality, and like the recent *Law and Sexuality* is a very valuable resource.



GAY LEFT BOOK

The Gay Left book is now ready for the press and will be published in the second half of 1980.

The book is a collection of original articles which break new ground in the analysis of gay oppression. There are articles on sexuality and femininity under capitalism, the lesbian subculture, developments in the male gay subculture, gays at work, autonomy and socialist organisations, the contradictions of gay culture and much, much more.

This book is an important intervention in socialist, gay and feminist debate. It will be published by Allison and Busby, 6A Noel Street, London W1.



Letters

The sexual politics of childhood

Dear Gay Left,

I have put together a few thoughts, some of them critical, in response to your leader "Happy Families — Paedophilia Examined" (GL 7) which, as you will see, stimulated me greatly. I submit these in the hope that they cohere sufficiently to be of some value to the ongoing debate. Possibly the best way to begin is by summarizing what I felt to be the salient points contained in your discussion. 1) Since there is so great a disparity of experience, needs, desires, physical potentialities etc. between adults and children it is unlikely that paedophile relations, like other child/adult relations in society, express anything other than unequal relations. 2) The problem then, given that we accept the validity of the paedophile category, is to change attitudes to sexuality in general so that these disparities might in some way be eroded and replaced by a climate for mutual consent. Naturally this development requires some ability on the part of the child to "recognize some of the significance in social and sexual terms of her/his actions." — which you see as not emerging before puberty.

So the \$64 question is — how do we go about transforming social mores? And it is precisely your proposals in this respect that I find unsatisfactory and in need of some scrutiny.

I'll start with the question of "disparity of experience". No one can deny that these disparities exist or that in attending closely to them they assist us in articulating the particular problem of sexual relations under capitalism, and also reveal to us how such relations are historically generated. However once these issues have been made intelligible in this way and we next address ourselves to the search for solutions and to the task of establishing a politics aimed at change, then it seems to me crucial that we widen rather than narrow the scope of the debate to include other equally significant aspects of lived experience. That is to say we must guard against setting about solutions which are wholly dictated by the terms in which the problem has been clarified or has been observed to generate.

This your discussion fails to do. Throughout the basic socially constructed category of "childhood" is kept at the centre of the solution seeking debate; issues of "consent" and "mutual agreement" thus emerge — to my mind artefactually — as the most compelling outcomes for any ideal paedophile relation. Not that these outcomes are in themselves undesirable but what I fail to see is how, in attaining them in the manner you suggest, they *avoid* being an "adult-centred" solution.

How is giving children more of what adults already have (autonomy) not adult-centred? (Can the feminist struggle, similarly, be reduced to giving women more of what men already have?) Moreover how is this strategy likely to produce any *real* change.

Change, as I see it, is far more likely to accrue by comprehensively acknowledging and drawing out into the open the many "dialogues" between children and adults that already exist and which are constantly on the go. This, it seems, is a far more 'disturbing' strategy — for capitalists and socialists alike. But this is exactly how the power balance can effectively be redressed. If only we could harness a little more than the cerebellum to the problem — widening rather than narrowing the range of debating tools — then perhaps it might become finally apparent that in actual lived experience the respective worlds of the child and adult do coincide and in ways which do not preclude but necessitate certain powers

on the part of the child. Concerning sexual relations — how is paedophilia possible at all if it is not that, say at the level of representation, children and adults are capable of getting in touch with each others sexual feelings? This, clearly, does not presuppose that adults and children have the *same* feelings or that adult sexual categories need be *projected* (what?) onto children.

Children even infants — possess remarkable capacities (powers if you like) for instigating and participating in early social relations which tend to be masked by ideological apparatuses, not least by the ideology of Child Psychology. The first step in valorising these powers is taken by spelling out the correlations and continuities within existing child/adult relations. This is a kind of democratising process in which the conditions of existence for power imbalances are undermined thus making possible alternative modes of social relations. It is well to note that this strategy itself implies a fundamental change in the way in which we think about children — who need to be regarded less as mechanistic, aggregative, purely passive objects of socialisation. Any sexual politics aimed, as in the present case, at changing social relations between adults and children must also involve a politics of changing how we think about these relations. No demystification is otherwise possible.

Trevor Lubbe



Sexuality and Fascism

Dear Gay Left,

I would like to reply to Colm Clifford's review of the Big Flame pamphlet *Sexuality and Fascism*. Firstly, Colm fails to explain that the pamphlet is only documents, the speeches given at a Day School on Sexuality and Fascism in November 1978. These "contributions to discussion" were only that, and by not mentioning this, Colm gives a very false impression of the aim of the pamphlet.

Secondly, and this is more important, he doesn't grasp in his review the central point of the three speeches: they were united in the belief that fascism, past and present, attempts to subjugate all sexuality to the service of the state, with the intention of creating so-called Master Race children. As such any other kind of sexual expression is severely stamped on. Abortion for white "Master Race" women becomes a crime while for black women, almost compulsory.

Women's Liberation in any sphere of life — at home, at work, in relationships, is seen as a threat. Sexual relations between men or between women are considered beyond the control of the state and not harnessed to the purposes of the Fuhrer so they too, when fascism is in power, are treated in the most vicious and brutal way possible. I think one Nazi leader actually said that decapitation was not good enough for gays!

Colm shows his failure to appreciate this general understanding of fascism by his token treatment of the documents on women. For example, "From my perspective as a gay male, both sections on women are interesting and informative". He doesn't seem to see the threat posed to *all* worthwhile sexuality by fascism.

One of the documents, "Men and Fascism" breaks almost new ground, daring to suggest that we men must look to changing ourselves if we intend to contribute to making fascism irrelevant.

Co1m, with some justification, heavily criticises the discussion of how it is homosexual men are often mixed up with fascist organisations. He is not happy with the analysis that a trend amongst all men to see men as superior beings and women as nothing (masculinism) fits neatly into the fast fascist scheme of things, especially at a time when male gangs try to conquer the streets to enable a fascist takeover. Nor is he happy with the document's conviction that the saving grace of today's male gay movement is its sensitivity to feminism.

Well, neither am I, but it *is* a start, trying to face up to a real problem. It's little wonder that this pamphlet should immediately sell out and need to be reprinted.* At the moment, the crisis in the National Front is taking a viciously anti-gay form, attacking Martin Webster on the grounds of his *sexual orientation* while attacking the failure of the NF's election strategy, which he masterminded.

What should be the reaction of the Left to this? Let's be honest, we are grossly unprepared. The Anti Nazi League's propaganda, for example, was of the shock-horror variety, casting gays in the role of *victims*. We need to be taking these issues up in a positive way that affirms gay sexuality as *good*, not as something which present society 'tolerates', arid, fascist society wouldn't.

In solidarity,
Keith Venables

* Available from bookshops, 25p.

LOST IN THE MUSIC?

Dear Gay Left,

Richard Dyer's "In Defence of Disco" must be the most boring and lengthy piece of theoreticist self-justification that I've read for a long time. He admits that he's always liked 'the wrong music', so why must we be subjected to his endless reams of quasi-marxian terminology so that he can explain a reactionary culture away.

To start with, those who criticise disco do not single it out for special treatment. It is merely that disco is the epitome of a popular commercial culture that fails to meet two vital political criteria:

- i) a real origin among ordinary people as their cultural response to their lifestyles that is accessible and participatory,
- ii) a message which is progressive and *not* perpetuative of reactionary, oppressive or exploitative behaviour.

Most disco fails on the second count, but all fails on the second. Disco, unlike reggae, early rock, mod, ska, punk — all the various waves of youth culture we've seen since the 1950's — has no basis as a *product* of youth. The complex social processes which produced youth cultures *have not* shaped disco. It's basically commercialised soul music, produced for maximum possible profit by the multinational entertainment monopolies. Disco doesn't even involve the minimum participation entailed in a performer(s)-audience dialectic: a song will sound the same where and whenever it's put on. In fact the basic characteristic of disco is its inaccessibility. The artist is a chic superhero, s/he is ultra feminine/macho, an always elusive, unattainable stereotype an epitome of commercial 'perfection'.

As for the musical structure, it is highly engineered, carefully and deliberately designed to sound sensuous, erotic — without ever being pornographic: in a word titillating. True enough, disco isn't 'phallocentric' — a 'whole body eroticism' might sound a little less macho, but it's just as capitalistic when produced for profit.

Most of the disco artists express little more than a useless, perpetuative and sexist message of 'look good, get yourself a fuck — I want your body.'

Other cultures can be criticised on either criterion. But rarely (in comparison) are bands guilty of both a redundant message and an inaccessible musical structure. Surely, if we're involved in politics, we should be actively promoting the most progressive cultures around, not the most reactionary.

Punk has now become commercialised, sometimes chic and often bourgeois. But its roots were (and still are) in the right place — with the kids, not the monopolies. The musical structure of punk is very simple, it allows virtually anyone to start a band and start expressing themselves. Cultures are supposed to be participatory. Involvement was the ethos of punk.

"If it's easy and cheap go and do it!"
go and join a hand"

'Desperate Bikes'

Punk clothing rebelled against the sexist and oppressive concept of beauty. Its message was rebellious, anti-materialist, often left-wing. Punk is the youth culture which has produced Rock Against Racism, Rock Against Sexism and developed the alternative production and distribution structure of companies like Rough Trade.

As a mass youth movement, punk has long since reached its peak. But new wave continues with a plethora of small bands like Scritti Politti and Gang of Four, who are using less structured and more accessible forms to express radical political ideas. The Raincoats were a young feminist band. Even the now pretty commercial X-Ray Spex sing about the pressures on youth — Germ Free Adolescence tells how unattainable the clean images of the media are.

Reggae is another progressive culture, an organic and still largely uncommercialised response to oppression. Its musical form is simple but allows scope for virtuosity as well as for participation — participation like providing dub tracks on the B-sides of singles so that you don't even need to play an instrument to be able to express yourself. Much reggae is sexist. But at least the *accessibility* of the culture may allow us space to change this.

And with these two progressive cultures around, Richard Dyer is into disco! A gay socialist is defending sexist, capitalist music!

Richard says that the adoption of disco by gay men is 'subverting' it — putting it to an end not envisioned by the capitalists who produced it. This entails that homosexuality is automatically or inherently progressive. It *isn't*. Redefining society's concept of sexuality would be revolutionary. But it's obvious that gay culture is not in any way revolutionary when its predominant feature is the meat-market of the commercial disco. The gay disco is *no* better than the straight one: both are reactionary and offensive.

'Disco's eroticism allows us to rediscover our bodies' says Richard. But punk did that in a far better way two years ago — ATV's "Love lies limp" is just one example. Punk was often about a non-discriminating sexuality — anyone or everyone, beautiful or ugly, male or female. Miles ahead of leather-clad, male gay culture 'machodom'. Disco's 'rediscovery' is merely a technically produced narcissism — 'I'M so beautiful — fuck ME.'

No, disco is definitely not progressive in any sense, let alone a gay one. How many gay disco tracks are there that express our feelings, our problems. None. Disco's made for passive consumption, ingestion by unthinking recipients, not for the involvement of gays, or anyone else.

As gays and socialists, we ought to be applying our politics to our culture — developing a life-style that fits our politics and draws others into our struggle. Not spend our energies trying to defend a part of being gay that most of us haven't yet started to question, let alone change.

John Munford

What's Left

GAY SOCIALIST CONFERENCE

Gay Left is planning a gay socialist conference hopefully in the Spring of 1980. The purpose of the conference will be for gay socialists to assess and respond to the situations we find ourselves in under the new Thatcher regime. We would welcome any papers, thoughts, ideas and suggestions for the conference. Please write with s.a.e. to Gay Socialist Conference, c/o Gay Left, 38 Chalcot Road, London NW1.

GAY CALENDAR

"What do revolting dykes, Jeremy Thorpe and an elephant riding a bike ringing a bell have in common? They are all in 'A Gay Calendar for 1980', published by Homosexual Posters. The other nine months cover some of the events and issues that have faced or are still facing us as gays — gay pride, gay anger (over the Dan White acquittal), gays at work, child sexuality, cottaging, aversion therapy, gays in the concentration camps, gay theatre. There are two songs, an information sheet and glowing colours throughout! 'A Gay Calendar for 1980' is A3-sized and costs £1.50 from bookshops or £1.75 (inc. p&p) from Homosexual Posters, 145 Railton Road, London SE24 OLT."

Open Gaze Bookshop sells many titles of interest to gay women and men with an emphasis on non-fiction. Recent expansion has included non-gay left analyses of society. The shop operates within the Information Centre, 60 Broughton Street, Edinburgh EH1 3SA.

A Gay Humanist Group has been set up in the United Kingdom as a direct result of a private prosecution brought against Gay News for blasphemous libel by Mary Whitehouse. When the case came to trial, Whitehouse was shaken by the strong feelings ordinary Britons expressed *against* the prosecution, and on several occasions she claimed that criticism of her action was being co-ordinated by vociferous members of the "homosexual/humanist lobby".

Anyone requiring more information about the Gay Humanist Group should write to the GHG at 45 Telford Avenue, London SW2, enclosing a stamp.

Masques: Revue des Homosexualites
Masques is an ambitious and extremely well produced new French magazine of gay sexual politics, produced by a collective of lesbians and gay men. The first two issues have contained articles, interviews, and theoretical pieces on a wide range of international topics concerning history, sexuality, and ideology. Masques costs 20F for a single issue. An annual subscription (for 4 issues) costs 100F, including postage and packaging. Masques may be obtained c/o Librairie ANIMA, 3 rue Ravignan, 75019 Paris, France.

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THE COLLECTIVE

This issue was put together by Keith Birch, Derek Cohen, Emmanuel Cooper, Philip Derbyshire, Simon Watney, Jeffrey Weeks, Tom Woodhouse, Nigel Young.

BACK ISSUES

Gay Left No 3
Women in Gay Left, Gays and Class, IS Gay Group, Gay Workers' Movement and usual reviews etc.

Gay Left No 5
Why Marxism, Images of Homosexuality in Film, Lesbian Invisibility, Gays and Fascism, Gay Theatre Past and Present, Politics & Ideology, Gay History, Future of the Gay Movement.

Gay Left No 6
(Gays) In the Balance, The State Repression and Sexuality, Looking At Pornography, Working Class Lesbians, Gays at Work, Motherhood, Fighting Fascism.

Gay Left No 7
Paedophilia Examined, Gay Art, Greece, Northern Ireland, Camp, Tom Robinson, Gay Sweatshop, Nighthawks, Chemical Castration, Reviews.

Gay Left No 8
Personal Politics, In Defence of Disco, Childhood Sexuality and Paedophilia, and Living With Indecency.

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