Book Review
Susan Potter. 2019. Queer Timing: The Emergence of Lesbian Sexuality in Early Cinema. *Urbana: University of Illinois Press.*

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As the question of queer representation in media increasingly moves to the forefront of mainstream discourse on popular culture, scholars need new historiographies to examine queer legibility in cinema and cinema history. The urge in popular discourse to view history as linear and progressive is palpable. Over the last year, the prevalence of the phrase, "it's 2019," in social media posts decrying the lack of diversity in media seemed to signify that we should by now have reached some imagined goal towards which history has been slowly marching, wherein the mistakes and inequities of the past are meant to have been left behind already. After all, it's now 2020. History has now progressed more than ever before…or has it?

In *Queer Timing: The Emergence of Lesbian Sexuality in Early Cinema* (2019), Susan Potter problematizes the expected linear historical progression toward the now, and proposes new queer temporalities, while examining the ways in which queer female erotic possibilities can be made legible in early cinema and pre-cinematic spectacle. To do so, Potter draws on feminist film theory, queer theory, studies of the history of sexuality, and counter-historiography. In discussing the temporal dimensions of queerness and advocating a rejection of linear futurism, Carolyn Dinshaw asserts, "No historian believes that time moves punctually forward, for example, emptily, evenly, and always progressively toward a single goal" (Dinshaw 2012,

18). Potter also supports Valerie Traub's diagnosis of a tendency in queer studies to over-simplify historical and chronological time, and Valerie Rohy's contribution to this "rethinking of queer temporality by demonstrating that the normative or non-normative effects of different orders of time…are always 'contextual and contingent'" (Potter 2019, 14). Potter acknowledges the importance of queer scholarship and lesbian spectatorship as a point from which to conduct queer critical analysis. Yet, she argues that scholars must work to suspend their frame of reference as sexual moderns, with knowledge of the histories of sexuality and cinema, in order to have a more complicated understanding of lesbian legibility in early cinema spectatorship during a time when the term *lesbian* was only beginning to emerge as the "go-to sexual term that signifies an erotic attraction between women" (7). As such, her methodology is self-consciously contradictory:

> In not requiring that we set aside our identities and identifications in order to read the past properly, and yet requiring the suspension of present-day sexual knowledges, the method advocated by *Queer Timing* is a deliberately queer and paradoxical formulation. (12)

Potter positions her work as post-Foucauldian, engaging in a recuperative project of queer history, complicating the concept of a reverse discourse by drawing on queer theorizations of time and "revis-

ing and complicating the historical timelines of the emergence of sexuality, and the centrality of sexual identity as the means by which modern erotic life is ordered" (6). Rather than supporting a particular theory of queer temporality, Potter advocates a multivalent conception of time and history.

Queer Timing is a project focused on queering historical time. Potter problematizes the inclination to view history retrospectively and linearly, and instead approaches the past within its own context. She analyzes early cinema lesbian legibility through ephemeral evidence of uneven, incoherent emergences of new concepts of sexuality, without projecting onto history a linear progression toward modern sexual identities and legibility. Potter asks readers suspend this understanding of modern lesbian sexuality as the natural endpoint of queer sexuality emergences at the *fin de siècle*. She proposes instead to attempt to understand the potential legibility of queer and alternative sexualities through concepts that would have been available to contemporary spectators. Cinema audiences of the late 19th and early 20th centuries would have been exposed to varying, incoherent public understandings of alternative sexualities, rooted in the discourses of sexology and psychoanalysis. These concepts of pathologized homosexuality, sexual inversion, sapphic relations, and romantic friendships were known to audiences through the popularity of sexology as a scientific study (Potter 2019, 29). Public discourse had not yet cohered into a hetero/homosexual binary of social identities. To position lesbian sexuality as an opposition to heterosexuality, Potter argues, is to project modern concepts of sexual binaries onto a cultural-historical context in which alternative sexualities were emerging unevenly across class and geographical contexts.

Part I, "Queer Historiography: Suspending Sexual Knowlege," is comprised of two chapters which examine the development of lesbian legibility, and "reconsider the historical narrative of the emergence and consolidation of lesbian representation" (Potter 2019, 17). In chapter one, "Troubling Sexual History: The Anachronistic Lesbian of *Pandora's Box*," Potter explores the representation of the pathological and erotic figure of the Countess Geschwitz, and the potential disparate interpretations of the character in the film *Pandora's Box*

(1929), versus its theatrical predecessor. Geschwitz is a relatively minor character in the Louise Brooks star vehicle, one of several caught up in Brooks' character's orbit of sexual attraction. She is primarily notable for being the film's lesbian character. Burdened by the context of her inception, a *fin de siècle* theatrical production, the Countess represented the perversion and decadence of the aristocracy, articulated with the signifiers of "earlier sexological and class-inflected discourses of sexual inversion…and erotic deviancy" (28). In the film adaptation, she is still presented through the lens of sexual inversion, but she can also be understood in the context of the sexual freedoms of the Weimar Republic and Freudian notions of homosexual desire "founded on same-sex object choice" (30). The Countess is an anachronistic figure, both backward and perverse, and progressively modern. Potter contextualizes the film audience's potential to read the character as queer through the popularity of sexology, Freudian discourse, and the film's censorship in areas outside of Germany, noting that if the character were not legibly queer to at least some of her contemporary audience, there would have been no motivation for censorship. However, she also notes that the character's masculine fashion may have been intelligible as a lesbian signifier to some but would also have been read as self-conscious and playful mode of masculine dress which was popular in mainstream fashion at the time (35). In contextualizing the way that the character can be understood as intelligibly queer through the sexualities of its own eras, Potter presents a case study for the larger framework that she proposes. In resisting the use of current sexual knowledge to understand lesbian representation in *Pandora's Box*, Potter outlines a way of understanding lesbian legibility that is anachronistic instead of retrospectively chronological. The next chapter expands on the historical narrative of the emergence of lesbian representation by considering the apparent lack of lesbian representation in early cinema. In chapter two, "Traces, Specks, and Glimmers: Regulating Same-sex Attractions," Potter examines early cinema as pre-narrative spectacle, in which the visual pleasure of looking at female figures in motion is eroticized by the framing of the spectacle with the male gaze, and the nascent attempts to discipline erotic voyeurism (40). Potter positions

the disrupted moments of same-sex voyeurism in early cinema spectacle as functioning to eroticize sexual difference by establishing a hierarchy of visual pleasure, while demonstrating an expansion of sexual knowledge and discourse.

In Part II, "Bodies: Style, Genre, and Sexual Legibility," Potter argues that the development of narrative style relied on character to elucidate motivation and propel narrative progression and clarity. Early narratives were primarily propelled by heterosexual motivation. Yet, by visually positioning the female body as sexualized by the hetero-erotic male gaze, female-female pairings are positioned as chaste. It is through this hetero-sexualizing of male-female pairings, and the pathologizing of alternatives, Potter argues, that the possibility of alternative sexualities becomes legible. In the establishment of heterosexuality as normative, its "opposite" is created in any non-hetero possible reading (Potter 2019, 97–98). Put plainly, in order to make heterosexuality the legible normative reading, the possibility of an alternative is created.

Potter views the legibility of lesbian possibilities in early cinema as inextricably tied to the discursive labour of Hollywood cinema to render cross-sex pairings as always charged with heterosexual erotic potential. This normative practice of rendering male-female pairings as inherently erotic and heterosexual creates the possibility of sexual alternative readings. With heterosexuality positioned as normative, and the "look" imbued with hetero-erotic potential, Potter argues that queer readings are made possible when cinematic strategies of looking and visual pleasure are employed with character pairings that are same-sex (Potter 2019, 92–93). In chapter four, "Mobilizing Genre: *The Wild Party*'s Sexual Kinesthetics," Potter revises Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the visual pleasure of female bodies on the screen acting to arrest and freeze the narrative in moments of erotic contemplation. She instead argues that the multiple female bodies on the screen in the bedroom scene of *The Wild Party* acts as a narrative device, "advancing the film's heterosexual and homosocial twinned story lines, even as it all makes the scene available to homosexual interpretation" (97). Potter also introduces the development of the Hollywood star system in relation to the sexually provocative *It*-girl

of the silent and early sound era, Clara Bow. Bow's on-and-off-screen flapper persona exudes modern female sexuality through her kinetic performances and scandalous publicity. Her "heterosexual excesses are typically disciplined by narratives that recuperate her to the institution of marriage" (82). Yet, Potter complicates this conservative project of containing the flapper through marriage by examining the visual pleasures of the multiplication of female bodies in motion on the screen, in a genre primarily consumed by women, resulting in a reading of the narratives of the flapper genre that embraces visual pleasure and resists sexual binaries (83). This reading acknowledges the importance of audience spectatorship in understandings of lesbian sexualities in early film.

Part III, "Bonds: Spectatorship and Queer Subjectivities," chapters five and six, expands on the development of socially acceptable female spectatorship through the proto-cinematic spectacle of Loie Fuller's electric light dances, and through the Hollywood star system. Fuller's *danse serpentine* performances represented new conditions of viewing and modes of spectatorship for women, legitimizing spectacle for the middle-class woman, and diversifying audiences. This introduction of the female spectator to the visual pleasures of the moving female body, depersonalized by the darkened viewing space and disembodied by Fuller's flowing reams of fabric costume created a new paradoxical spectatorship that was at once respectable, chaste, and homoerotic (Potter 2019, 116–118). This introduction of female spectatorship and visual pleasure created new queer possibilities in proto-cinematic spectacle. The female body-in-motion is the site of visual pleasure in Fuller's dances, but by legitimizing the music hall performance for middle and upper-class women, Fuller contributed to a mode of female spectatorship and popular entertainment which created new possibilities of identification and desire. Alternatively, Hollywood's discursive labour to heterosexualize visual pleasure can function to create the possibility of cross-sex identification with a primarily female audience, as Potter exemplifies with the stardom and female fandom of Rudolph Valentino. In her final chapter, "Valentino's Lesbianism: Stardom, Spectatorship, and Queer Recognition," Potter elucidates the strat-

egies used to mobilize a primarily female audience by focusing on female desire and identification. With his disparate image, masculine and heterosexual, feminine and passively sexual, beloved by women, yet surrounded by women with same-sex associations, Valentino is positioned as a site of same-sex oriented female spectatorship. Potter uses Valentino's public promotion, private life, and filmic representation to illustrate how his heterogenous image creates a multitude of possible identifications and erotics. Potter argues that through his feminization and similitude with his "deviant" female counterparts and associates, his female audience could experience both cross-sex identification with Valentino and a kind of same-sex desire of him (125). For Potter, Valentino represents the development of culturally and historically specific modes of spectatorship that go beyond the spectacle, and "would not be possible without the advent of modern sexuality" (148). Potter concludes that, in tracing the non-linear, looping timelines in which same-sex desire has been made legible and illegible, she has developed a counter-history of the emergence of lesbian sexuality in cinema that cannot be untethered from its ties to the discourse of heterosexuality. She stresses the importance of attempting to understand historically shifting sexualities through "queer forms of sexual knowledge… that we may no longer recognize" (151).

Queer Timing represents an exceptional example of film scholarship and early cinema history grounded in queer theory. It provides a necessary queer complication to historiographical understandings of early cinema and spectatorship, in relation to the emergence and intelligibility of new queer sexualities in the early 20th century. While introducing new perspectives on methodology used to interrogate these histories, Potter invites further investigation and complication, rather than providing a singular analysis. Rather than arguing for her own singular perspective, she expands the project of queer theory by problematizing its methods and creating a multiplicative approach to queer analysis and historiography.

While *Queer Timing*'s primary aim is the complication and, indeed, queering of theoretical understandings of temporality in relation to the emergence of queer female representation in early cinema, her style of prose sometimes runs the risk of "complicating" her theory into unintelligibility. Potter's sentence structure is, at times, unnecessarily opaque and, in her own words, "cryptic," necessitating even a reader well-versed in the theoretical concepts she employs to examine her prose carefully to apprehend their meaning (Potter 2019, ix). The cryptic thought experiments that she requires of her readers might prove alienating to scholars whose research lies in tangentially related fields, let alone to any reader who is pursuing a personal interest in the history of queer representation. Pushing scholarship to interrogate and problematize its own assumptions is a worthy project, arguably necessary to any field. But, when the work in doing so precludes any expansion of the field by making its critiques nearly inaccessible to those outside of it, scholarship runs the risk of becoming an echo chamber, wherein it confronts only scholars who are already immersed in essentially the same project, without attempting to bring new perspectives to broader cultural understandings. *Queer Timing* makes a strong case for its proposed revisions to the methodology, but misses a unique opportunity to contribute to broader cultural discourse on representation by assuming its reader is already engaged in the same scholarship as its author, and allowing little space for introducing alternative temporalities and perspectives on queer representation in cinema to a new audience.

References

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