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**TITLE:**

**“Whose sexuality is it anyway? Women’s experiences of viewing lesbians on screen”**

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**“Whose sexuality is it anyway? Women’s experiences of viewing lesbians on screen”**

**Abstract:**

While critical analyses of media representations of lesbians continue to grow, less attention is paid to audience responses to those representations. This paper explores women’s experiences of viewing lesbians on screen, analysing qualitative data from focus groups with audiences of a women-only film season screened in a UK cinema: “Lesbians on Screen: How far Have We Come?” We consider how the internalisation of the “male gaze” complicates some women’s viewing of lesbian characters and how women attempt to challenge and resist that gaze through their viewing practices and strategies. We discuss audience creativity in re-signifying representations of women, as well as other strategies including choosing to view privately or in women-only spaces. These acts of resistance disrupt the dominance of the male gaze, patriarchal cinema spaces and reception of images on screen. By examining women’s reflections on the experience of being in a women-only audience, a unique cinema space that “felt free” of conventional constraints of heteronormativity and patriarchy, this paper also examines how the gendered cinema space affects audience experiences.

**Key Words:** gender, sexuality, cinema, lesbian, women-only

## Introduction

Without question, there are more - and increasingly more diverse - representations of lesbians on our television and cinema screens than ever before. The nature and quality of those representations is the subject of much academic work, vitally so. But scholarly attention to audience responses to the representations has not kept pace with these developments. This paper addresses this gap by exploring women's experiences of viewing lesbians on screen. A significant aspect of cultural portrayals of women has been the knotty problem of sexual objectification and "the male gaze". Nowhere has this been more intense than in portrayals of lesbians on screen, given the social and cultural context in which a version of lesbian sexuality is appropriated by masculinist institutionalised heterosexuality. We explore how the internalisation of the male gaze complicates some women's viewing of lesbian characters and how women attempt to challenge and resist the male gaze through their viewing practices. By examining women's reflections on the experience of being in a women-only audience, a unique cinema space which felt free of conventional constraints of heteronormativity and patriarchy, this paper also examines how the gendered cinema space affects audience experiences.

This paper considers existing research on these themes and contributes analysis of qualitative data from focus groups with audiences of the film season, "Lesbians on Screen: How Far Have We Come?" Created by the first author and Jacky Collins<sup>i</sup>, the season was hosted at an independent cinema in the UK and was open to women only. In a contemporary climate which purportedly values "gender-inclusivity" and "equality", and in which some commentators challenge the category "women", claims to women-only space are hotly contested, as we discuss.

In the first section we discuss existing research about representations of lesbians on screen, audience studies and the politics of "women-only". We describe the film season,

selection of films and the methods and approach used in the corresponding research project. In the findings section, we explore audience experiences of viewing representations of lesbians on screen. Drawing on focus group data, we discuss audience creativity in re-signifying representations of women, as well as other strategies including choosing to view privately or in women-only spaces. These acts of resistance disrupt the dominance of the male gaze, patriarchal cinema spaces and reception of images on screen.

### **Gender, Sexuality and the Screen**

Recent public debate has focused on the dearth of good, varied roles for women actors. This is reflected in, and accounts for, wage inequalities; the 10 highest-paid female film actors earn only about half of the wages of the highest-paid male actors who made \$431 million (Ramin Setoodeh, 2015). Off-screen things are just as bad. Female US television directors worked on 16% of the episodes produced, women made 7% of the top-grossing films last year (Setoodeh, 2015) and only 7% of directors, 13% of writers, and 20% of producers are women (Gena Davis Institute website). The number of films that fail the famous Bechdel test shows that those female actors who make it to our screens are expected to be concerned primarily with men.<sup>ii</sup> Given this backdrop of unrelenting sexism in film and TV, it is easy to grasp that depictions of lesbians are even more scarce, conform to heterosexist ideas about sexuality and pander to some heteronormative appropriations of lesbian sexuality. GLAAD found that only 1.75% of films released by the major studios in 2014 featured lesbian characters<sup>iii</sup> (GLAAD, 2015a). They also found that only half of the films that included LGBT characters passed The Vito Russo Test (their correlative of the Bechdel test), which measures the nature of LGBT character representation.<sup>iv</sup> GLAAD found that LGBT characters fare a little better on U.S. television but

that lesbians are still outnumbered 2:1 by gay men on cable primetime television. There is roughly equal representation between lesbians and gay men in streaming content (e.g. Amazon, Netflix) (GLAAD 2015b). The caution of lesbian actors or television personalities about “coming out” (e.g. Ellen DeGeneres, Jodie Foster, Ellen Page) suggests that being a lesbian on screen is risky for your career. It was largely as a corrective to this bleak picture, that the “Lesbians on Screen” film season was created.

### **Lesbians in the Cultural Landscape**

Cultural representations of lesbians have a fraught history and a contentious present. Barbara Creed (1995) traces medical, religious and artistic myths that have constructed ideas about lesbians from the early days of Christianity to the 1990s, when (femme, “lipstick”) lesbianism arguably became *chic*. Such myths are more often manufactured not by lesbians themselves but by male figures of authority that have had a public voice rarely accorded to women, particularly lesbians.

In the popular imagination, the term “lesbians on screen” resonates as a synonym for pornography directed at a heterosexual male audience, due to the history of that genre’s appropriation of a version of lesbian sexuality. Evidence for the predominance of men’s fantasising about “lesbians” is found in research confirming that “having sex with two women” is a “statistically typical” fantasy for men (enjoyed by 84.5% of men and ranked no. 3 of 55 fantasies) and “watching two women make love” is a “common” fantasy (enjoyed by 82.1% of men and ranked no. 6) (Christian C. Joyal, Amelie Cossette, Vanessa Lapierre 2015: 334; 335). While these fantasies are not about lesbians, in the sense of women who may identify as such, they signify the sexual pleasure men commonly gain from two women being together in a sexual

scenario, with the man either as participant or as voyeur. Furthermore, Joyal et al found that “lesbians” was one of the main themes on the ten most visited pornographic internet sites (2015: 333). It is no surprise, then, that these sexual fantasies are echoed in mainstream media images; they are part of the cultural landscape.

These contexts are the backdrop for the existing problematic representations of lesbians. GLAAD’s research shows we have a long way to go in terms of diversity among representations of lesbians; it is not enough for lesbians simply to be on the screen if only to conform to stereotypes. Existing representations are critiqued for lack of diversity, representing white, middle class “femme” characters. Janet McCabe and Kim Akass’ collection (2006) noted these tendencies in *The L Word* (2004-9) for example. Others have critiqued the tendency to have lesbian characters fit otherwise heteronormative patterns; the femme lesbian herself is, of course, one part of that pattern where the character conforms to normative standards of femininity. The commercial success of *The Kids Are All Right* (dir. Lisa Cholodenko, 2010) demonstrates there is tolerance of lesbians as long as they fit normative standards of behaviour in ways aside from their sexuality (see Tammie M. Kennedy (2014) on the intersection of whiteness and homonormativity in this film). Critics have observed other cinematic tropes of the lesbian such as vampirism, thwarted masculinity and forms of “deviance” such as crime and violence (Lynda Hart, 1994; Creed, 1995; Bram Djikstra, 1986). More recently, as media representations of lesbians and other minorities increase, a concomitant concern has arisen around the commercial commodification of a minority group, not merely as one more means by which to oil the capitalist machine but also as a means to construct group identities for LGBTQ people through the very process of marketing to them as a group (Katherine Sender, 2004).

## **Audience Studies of Women and Lesbian Audiences**

Scholarly analyses of the representation of LGBTQ characters on screen are plentiful. Less plentiful are qualitative empirical studies examining audience responses to representations of LGBTQ characters on screen. Such audience studies can afford an important insight into how audiences *use* such representations within their lives. As Henry Jenkins (1992) demonstrates, the consumption of visual texts is often far from passive; instead audiences may “poach” a visual text, to re-signify it for their own ends. The political nature of the act of re-signification is highlighted when undertaken by disenfranchised groups and is strengthened through the formation of communities, be they in real life or online, John Fiske suggesting that “excorporation is the process by which the subordinate make their own culture out of the resources and commodities provided by the dominant system” (2011: 13). Since social stratifications such as gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity shape how communities interpret products (Stanley Fish 1976), how communities use products has the potential to be empowering. Indeed, Rebecca Kern suggests that the formation of communities of marginalized viewers is “a cultural form of activism” (Kern, 2014: 448). Our study examines the ways in which women actively engage with depictions of lesbians, through shared strategies of resignification and resistance.

The question of whether or not women view film and television differently to men, through the lens of a “female gaze” (Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment, 1988), has remained on the critical agenda since Laura Mulvey introduced the woman on the cinema screen as there “to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*”, encoding the gaze of the spectator as male and heterosexual (Laura Mulvey, 1975: 11 (emphasis in original)). Despite Mulvey’s later re-appraisal of her argument (1981), the concept of the “male gaze” continues to be a point of

reference for much theoretical work, either to build upon or adapt Mulvey's psychoanalytic approach or to counter it with more materialist, cultural studies approaches. Like the present study, there are qualitative audience studies stemming from the latter approaches that focus exclusively on women and how they view particular aspects of cinema, television or video, (Jackie Stacey, 1994; Ann Gray 1992; Andrea Lee Press, 1991). Our study extends the debates on women's viewing practices to consider the specific experiences of women viewing lesbians on screen. It also extends work by Press (1991) and David Morley (1986) that examined the gendered nature of domestic space in video and television viewing, respectively, by offering empirical research on women's perceptions of the gendered nature of cinema space.

Like the present study, existing audience studies that examine the representations of LGBTQ characters on screen tend to be qualitative and small scale. Existing studies have included straight-identified participants as well as LGBTQ-identified audience members and a range of gender identifications (Jackson and Gilberston, 2009; Kern, 2012; Kern, 2014; Dhaenens 2012). Kern (2012: 245) states that “[q]ueer media ethnographies are largely an unexplored area of research” and that existing studies tend to focus on gay male viewers, such as work by Miguel Malagrecia (2007) and Mark McClelland (2000).<sup>v</sup> We chose a small-scale qualitative approach to explore in more detail women's experiences of viewing lesbians on screen. Alexander Dhoest and Nele Simons (2012) examined mixed-gender LGB audience responses to LGB representations, drawing on 761 online survey responses with 60 follow-up in-depth interviews. A notable contrast between their study and ours is that they “hardly found evidence of subversive queer readings of mainstream media”, with just one (male) respondent reporting this (2012: 273). In our focus groups, the majority of lesbian respondents reported this as a significant aspect of their viewing practices, as we discuss below, supporting the long

history of “fantasising” lesbians where few portrayals exist (Clare Whatling, 1997). A further significant contrast between the findings of Dhoest and Simons’ study and our own was that they found “despite their more limited representation women were happier [than men] with media coverage of LGBs as they felt they are less subjected to stereotyping” (2012: 274). In our study, as we show below, women reported being very conscious of the persistence of stereotyping and lamented the paucity of diverse representations.

### **The Politics of Women-only Space**

Given that the “Lesbians on Screen” season was screened for women-only audiences, we briefly outline the political impetus for and debates about women-only space. Women-only space is motivated, in part, from an awareness of the detrimental effects of living in a patriarchal society. The gendered norms of mixed-gender environments, the “microaggressions” (Derald Sue, 2010) of “everyday sexism” (Laura Bates, 2014; [www.everydaysexism.com](http://www.everydaysexism.com)) as well as the more gross manifestations of patriarchy (such as sexual violence) result in changed behaviour and interaction in women-only and mixed gender environments. Christopher Karpowitz, Tali Mendelberg, and Lee Shaker (2012: 534-5) examine “the volume of voice and the patterns of silence” and find that “women speak substantially less than men in most mixed-gender combinations”. This “self-silencing” (Dana Jack, and Diana Dill, 1992) is not new; Mary Beard (2015) argues, using examples from Greek and Roman classics, that women and their voices were not only excluded from the ancient public world but that public speaking and oratory “were exclusive practices and skills that defined masculinity as a gender” (2015:812). There are plenty of contemporary instances of silencing women, for example in online space (Emma Jane, 2014a & b; Author citation 2, forthcoming).

Women-only space that is free of these ways of silencing women is often, implicitly or explicitly, linked with “safe space” (see The Roestone Collective, 2014; Author Citation 1, 2015). “Safe spaces” have been the subject of recent debate. Author citation 1 (2015) show that questions of safety are often implicit in women’s experiences of women-only space, providing not only safety *from* harms but also ‘safety *to* express one’s full personhood”. This sense of safety provides cognitive safety as well as freedom to experience and express emotions. Claims to women-only space have long been contested and nowadays are sometimes met with astonishment that such spaces are “still” needed, the underlying assumption being that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have progressed to a state of equality that renders single-sex activities anachronistic. Within the feminist movement, such claims have been critiqued as part of a challenge of the very category “woman”, provoked, in part, by developing recognition of trans and genderqueer people’s experiences of gender. In the midst of these debates (to which we cannot do justice in this paper, but see, for example, Finn Mackay, 2015; Kath Browne, 2009; Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook, 2009) contemporary research and debate lacks an analysis of the *experiences* of women-only space; the debate too often stops on the threshold of such space, rather than entering and exploring it (Author citation 1, 2015). Instead of debating the politics of women-only space, this paper explores how experiences of women-only space can facilitate a different embodied audience experience for viewing lesbians on screen.

### **Researching Women-only Audiences of “Lesbians on Screen”**

The film season was designed to explore the changes and continuities in representations of lesbians on screen. It comprised five films, one from each decade from the 1960s to the

noughties. The films were shown over a two-month period at an independent, volunteer-run community cinema and arts venue in the UK. The screenings were open to all women and were advertised through a range of public, professional and personal networks. Although we did not request it, the cinema staff decided to make the entire building, including the bar, projection room and theatre, women-only for these nights. The cinema's policy of not turning anyone away because of lack of funds was in place. Audiences of about twenty women attended each screening, with many "returners" as well as new faces as the word spread. Each film was briefly introduced by Author 1 or Collins and followed by an informal post-screening discussion in the cinema bar.

The research was conducted alongside the film season. Audience members were invited to join focus groups at three points in the season (some came to more than one) - one midway through (5 participants), the second shortly after the season (9 participants) and the third, specifically for volunteer staff from the arts centre, a couple of months after the season (3 participants). Focus groups lasted 60 to 90 minutes and included questions about their views of the films shown; other film and TV representations of lesbians; changes over time in representations of lesbians on screen; experiences of different audience spaces.<sup>vi</sup> Questions generated rich discussion. For example, 'Is any representation better than no representation?'; 'Do you have views about the objectification of women, perhaps especially around sex scenes?' Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire about their demographic status. Of the 12 focus group participants, seven identified as lesbian, three as heterosexual, one as bisexual and one chose not to identify her sexuality. Their ages ranged from early twenties to late fifties. They were all white and the majority had some form of further or higher education. As the season and research project were open to self-identifying women, we did not collect demographic data about

participants' gender; the focus groups were comprised of women, some of whom may have been trans women, identifying as trans or as women.

Well-established in social research and media research (David Morgan, 1997; Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone, 1996), focus group methodology is deemed to be particularly useful for revealing group norms, values and dynamics and is seen to work most effectively when comprised of people with shared cultural norms and/or experiences. The sample group for this research was relatively homogenous, particularly in terms of ethnicity, but also the social connections between members. Some researchers recommend avoiding having friends in focus groups (eg David Stewart and Prem Shamdasani, 2014) because it compromises anonymity and can interfere with the dynamics of the group. However, the small, close-knit, nature of lesbian communities typical of most localities makes this difficult to avoid, especially when the target sample group is narrowed further by recruiting through a social/leisure activity (attending a film series). In our sample group, several women were known to each other and to the researchers socially and/or professionally, making us "insider researchers". Jodie Taylor summarises the advantages of the "insider" researcher: "deeper levels of understanding afforded by prior knowledge; knowing the lingo...; quicker establishment of rapport and trust between researcher and participants" (2011:6). Challenges for the "insider" researcher include avoiding "taking-for-granted" shared knowledge and norms, negotiating ethical responsibilities as a researcher and as a friend, and balancing familiarity with curiosity. Our sense is that the pre-existing social connections between us and some of our participants, as well as between participants, enabled a certain "ease" of conversation; there was much shared humour, as well as discussion about more serious observations, reflections and memories. This ease did not preclude - or perhaps enabled - expression of contrasting opinions and experiences.

Clearly, women who comprised our audiences and focus groups were broadly supportive of women-only cinema space, some enthusiastically so. Not all women share that view: a small number of women informed us that they would not attend *because* of the women-only policy of the season. Our data reflect the views of a self-selecting sample and so cannot be considered to be representative of wider audiences. However, researching women-only lesbian-centred public cinema space is rare, if not unique, in audience studies and offers a valuable contribution to existing research in feminist and lesbian media studies. This qualitative study does not claim representativeness; rather it offers insight into an under-researched viewing community's experience of gendered cinema spaces and their viewing practices.

Inevitably, the season could not comprehensively represent film portrayals of lesbians. Rather, films were selected for their potential to provoke discussion about lesbian "types" seen on screen over the decades, from butches to femmes, vampires to housewives. The season began with *The Killing of Sister George* (dir. Robert Aldrich, UK 1968), scandalous in its day and not a box office success, though now considered a lesbian classic due its early portrayal of lesbians on screen. It depicts a dysfunctional butch/femme relationship. *Vampyros Lesbos* (dir. Jesús Franco, Spain 1973) offers a psychedelic exploration of lesbian desire and the lesbian vampire stereotype that arguably approximates pornography being directed at heterosexual men. *Lianna* (dir. John Sayles, USA 1983) follows the "coming out" story of a woman, married, with a family, who falls in love with her college professor. *Bound* (dir. The Wachowski Brothers, USA, 1996) is a lesbian crime caper, where the butch-femme couple emerge victorious. *Ghosted* (dir. Monika Treut, Germany, 2009), is a mystery that follows the story of a German photographer mourning the death of her Taiwanese partner. The question in the season's title, "How Far Have

We Come?” invited reflection on the progress, or otherwise, with regard to representations of lesbians over these decades.

### **Viewing Lesbians on Screen: Audience Experiences**

This section presents analysis of focus group data to highlight how women negotiate portrayals of lesbians on screen. We look first at their strategy of fantasising to resignify the limited portrayals they encounter. Then we consider how their internalisation of the “male gaze” impacts on their viewing experiences, how the women-only cinema space interrupted this and provided an opportunity for a different experience and a greater awareness of the impacts of gender norms.

#### ***Fantasising in “a complete desert”***

Do you ever *make* lesbian characters? 'Cos I do that with characters – if it doesn't give them a backstory, in my head they're probably lesbian and that helps me watch programmes that haven't got it in. An attractive woman where you don't see the partner or she refers to a partner and you never get the gender or you mishear the gender....

(Tracey<sup>vii</sup>, lesbian, 20s)

Do you ever just watch it and pretend that two of them are going out with each other?

(Jane, lesbian, 30s)

Yes! (chorus from the group)

A key strategy, deployed by most lesbians in our focus groups, was fantasising in order to create lesbian characters and storylines to make up for the paucity of representations. This strategy, Clare Whatling (1997) observes, has been deployed by lesbian audiences throughout cinema history; our respondents suggested that lack of visibility and the need for identification leads to lesbians being “desperate” (Fiona, lesbian, 50s) for representations. In the wake of near-invisibility, fantasising is used alongside tolerance of problematic representations that do exist. Likening *The Killing of Sister George* to reading *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Kate (lesbian, 50s) appreciated that *something* existed “in a complete desert of heterosexual norms”, despite their rather miserable depictions of lesbian lives.<sup>viii</sup>

Alongside a general appreciation of recent increased visibility of lesbians on screen, the lack of diversity continues to be a concern. The predominance of women characters fulfilling heteronormative standards of gender frustrates the desire for a representation to identify with. Jane, disappointed with assimilationist representations, comments on the heteronormative, or homonormative, portrayal of lesbians:

A lot of modern TV and films do represent lesbians as being just part of the mainstream and just like everyone else [...]. They usually represent fairly feminine women, don't usually represent women who have lesbian or queer fashion tastes; they're not actually representing what a lot of lesbians look like and the lifestyle changes. You'd be hard-pressed to find a representation of what most of my friends look like.

The excitement when representation does come close to perceptions of reality is palpable in Nadine's (lesbian, 20s) description of a moment when she was able to recognise a version of herself. Speaking of *Sugar Rush* (2005-6), she states it was her

favourite ever TV show to this day [about a] fifteen-year-old queer virgin and that was exactly my life... [the character was] madly crushing her best friend and so was I. ... [It was] new and original and nothing I'd ever seen before.

Nadine's excitement at the show suggests a welcome shift; as a member of a younger generation, she grew up with at least some visibility on mainstream television (albeit that *Sugar Rush* was screened significantly after the watershed). However, the fact that this show stands out "to this day", suggests it is still a rarity, almost ten years on, to experience such moments of identification. In this "desert" women adopt active strategies to fill the gaps. When watching *Lip Service* (2010-12), Cathy (bisexual, 20s) would "nit-pick little parts of different characters to form a whole "'cos there's never been a character I identify with". These strategies are examples of Fiske's (2011:13) "making do" with aspects of existing popular culture. While the concept of identification in film theory has a complex history (see Stacey 1994), our participants seek a representation that offers an opportunity to identify in the most fundamental of ways: "looking for yourself" and external recognition that "we exist" (Kate).

Fantatising lesbians on screen is not only an individual, but also a shared strategy of subversion. Humour is part of this subversion. Kate describes the resignification of the characters in *Cagney and Lacey* (1981-1988) in her lesbian friendship network in the 1980s:

They were so obviously lesbians. They weren't but of course we know they were; that's why all we watched it. ... Every lesbian had a dog called Cagney .... All the dogs were called Cagney and all the cats were called things like Dusty and Billie Jean, Martina<sup>ix</sup>.

This extradiegetic life of "Cagney" extends from a way of reading the show into a way of identifying as a lesbian and celebrating the fun, politics and power of lesbian readings. An "interpretive community" is created through such textual "poaching". Collective engagement and

resistance was also generated by the shared experience of watching the season's films and discussing them. When Nadine reflected on her ambivalence about watching heteronormative portrayals - "when the women are running around with no clothes on for the entire movie ... and the men with clothes on. I'm annoyed but then I'm also kind of turned on!" - the laughter from the group indicated a knowing recognition. There was a shared sense of attempting to resist heteronormative objectifying representations while also experiencing one's sexuality and sexual desires. Similarly, Sarah (lesbian, 20s) reflected on differences in watching *Bound* in a predominantly lesbian audience as part of the season compared to a heterosexual audience. In the mainly lesbian audience, she was "laughing at the stereotypes" and commented that her straight companion did not understand the jokes. *Bound*'s knowing and playful representations of lesbians brought out a shared sense of humour in the women-only cinema space and offered a way for lesbians to own on-screen portrayals of lesbians.

While women have used this strategy of fantasising to re-signify representations, producers have exploited this desire, without addressing the absence of lesbians on screen. Sarah observed this in relation to *Rizzoli and Isles* (2010-):

I get quite angry at all the subtexts in *Rizzoli and Isles* [...]. There's just so much subtext in it but they're just not together [...]. I get the impression that they know that they've got quite a big lesbian audience so they just start putting more subtext in. [...] I find that annoying because it's like drawing the lesbians in and then not actually showing them lesbians.

The audience is teased but, ultimately, not fulfilled; their fantasising to create lesbian characters has been commodified, adopted and adapted to the show's own commercial ends, presumably as a deliberate marketing strategy to ensure the series appeals to a variety of audiences. Lesbian-

focused shows practice this too; Candace L. Moore describes *The L Word* as providing a “bivalent lure”, for lesbian and straight viewers alike (2007:5 ). To be a commercial success rather than a niche hit, products need to speak to more than lesbians or gay men, an audience often deemed too small a demographic on their own. One consequence of this is that portrayals of lesbians tend to fulfil heterosexual imaginings of lesbians, as we discuss below.

### ***Women looking and being looked at***

How do women experience and resist patriarchal pressures as they view images of lesbians on screen? The knowledge that, in the context of wider objectification of women’s sexuality, lesbians’ sexuality has been appropriated for heterosexual male fantasy, complicated women’s viewing of lesbians on screen and their experiences of audience spaces. The internalised male gaze impacted on women’s self-consciousness as embodied audience members, supporting Tamsin Wilton’s recognition that “As a lesbian sitting in a cinema, I bring personal and social narratives of oppression – both material and ideological – along with me” (1995: 159). When a sex scene between two women is on screen, Fiona identifies this self-consciousness:

It’s not so much then what’s going on in the film; it’s about how the person next to you perceives you as a woman, it kind of brings up all that kind of stuff.

Viewing the film is interrupted by an awareness of the gendered space; objectification of women in the visual arts leads a woman to “continually watch herself” (John Berger, 1972: 46). Participants reflected on the differences between watching sexual portrayals

of lesbians in women-only and in mixed audiences. Janet (30s, heterosexual) compared a mixed-gender audience experience (of “a Scandinavian film”) with the women-only experience (of “the vampire film” in the “Lesbians on Screen” season):

It was a film, maybe a Scandinavian film with two women and it was awful ...  
But I think that film felt titillating and in a way perhaps my experience of that was different because there were lots of guys in that space [...]. With the vampire film I didn't think in any way my response to it was in any way being observed. And you do observe people at the cinema, whether or not it's dark, you're aware of people around you.

These articulations of self-consciousness as audience members are corroborated in relation to (self-) silencing in post-film discussions, demonstrating the power of internalised objectification:

I feel just like having men around the building would have brought that self-consciousness [...] about how am I gonna talk about my sexuality, or maybe I'm just not because there's a man in the room and God knows what's going on in his head. (Karen, 30s, heterosexual)

Creating audiences comprised only of other women can be part of the resistance strategies in response to this guardedness. Tracey reflected on how watching lesbian films in women-only settings in friends' homes provided a release from the complication Janet alluded to (above), enabling women to enjoy depictions of lesbians which the (internalised) male gaze prohibits:

It wasn't kind of like a rude night or anything but we "allowed" ourselves to be turned on by what was on the screen because we were *really* safe with each other, like a very, very close group. So that was great, being able to watch a film and find it like, and not in the horrible blokey way, but just like, "oh that was lush" or "she's lush", "oh isn't this nice that we're all here and drink, food, lovely company, lovely people on film". ... But it's just a women-only thing for me, just knowing that someone isn't getting a, sorry that was gonna be a bit crude then, but [knowing]... that someone isn't doing "oh phwoar" cos you like, you hear it all the time.

This awareness of men's potential responses, including physiological responses, informed some of our audience's decisions not to view representations of lesbian sex in mixed-gender audiences:

If I know that there's explicit sex between the women in the film I don't want to go and see it at the cinema in a public showing [...]. If it's going to be explicitly sexual, I don't have any problem about seeing that. I want to control where and when I see it. I don't want to sit in a screening with straight men. (Kate)

Here the force of the heteronormative male gaze makes the physical space of the cinema too uncomfortable and some women take control by adopting a "no-go" strategy. This is a striking indictment of the public cinema space as genuinely public; instead of being neutral, cinemas, like any other spaces reflect and project the existing "power geometry" (Doreen Massey 1994: 149) of a place that impacts negatively upon marginalised groups, as demonstrated by Massey, Gill Valentine (1993) and Rachel Pain (1991).

An overtly-stated feminist consciousness is foremost for some women and their awareness of sexual objectification of women overtakes any possible pleasure. Trisha states that “the feminist in me just takes over”, and Fiona that:

Viewing sexualities, sex on screen I think I still have discomfort, think it does hark back to the 80s. I still find it quite hard to just go with it and not think I’m objectifying and all that kind of stuff and getting into the whole debate around feminist erotica and .... what’s alright to enjoy and what’s not alright.

Each is troubled by whether and how they can take ownership of viewing women on screen alongside an awareness of objectification of women and of the “sex wars” that emerged in the late 70s- 80s between radical and liberal feminist approaches (Freedman and Thorne, 1984). By contrast, Cathy (bisexual, 20s), states: “I think you’ve just got to think ‘sod it’ and have your own gaze. Men can as well but it’s not going to spoil my enjoyment”. In each of these responses we see a rejection of the way men are encouraged to look at women on screen, and a search for an alternative viewing approach. For Trisha and Fiona, there is ambivalence in how to view women on screen and retain a sense of their own identities. As Miriam Hansen has expressed: “The notion of ambivalence is crucial to a theory of female spectatorship, precisely because the cinema, while enforcing patriarchal hierarchies in its organization of the look, also offers women an institutional opportunity to violate the taboo on female scopophilia” (1991: 277). Our participants strive to find different ways to navigate this ambivalence.

These responses demonstrate that everyday social stratifications do not dissolve at the cinema door. Rather, they frequently find their correlative in onscreen depictions as well as in the dynamics of the physical cinema space itself. This study fleshes out Wilton’s (1995) autoethnography on lesbian spectatorship as well as offering insight into women’s experiences of

spectatorship more generally. Viewing does not take place in a temporal or spatial vacuum but in a material, heteronormative environment. Some women bring a history of experiences with the male gaze, both on and off screen, and of critical analyses of portrayals of women, sex and lesbians. Their viewing of a particular film is bound up with their history of (their reflections on) viewing experiences, and their viewing strategies, conscious or other, as well as of their wider experiences of negotiating a path through a patriarchal society.

### ***Women-only cinema experiences – “It Felt Free”***

Michelle (30s, heterosexual): it just feels *so* different, the place [cinema] is totally reconfigured depending on who’s there and I’ve *never* seen the space as it was during those discussions.

Janet (30s heterosexual): it wasn’t to do with where the furniture was.

Michelle: No! No. It was just *doing* something. Something different was happening. It felt very different. ...

Janet: It felt free for those two nights that I was at it.

Some participants found it hard to pinpoint what was different about the women-only cinema space but this dialogue indicates that the difference was palpable and liberating.

Participants also alluded to the way in which “safe” space enabled a different way of being:

I guess I did feel quite safe and also felt like I could do stuff that I don’t do anymore [examples of certain roles in the community arts organisation]... It was the women-only space that made me feel that. (Karen, 30s, heterosexual)

In addition to (self) -silencing in mixed-gender environments, the *content* of women's interactions changes in single-sex spaces that feel safe. Women reflected on the different nature of conversations in this women-only cinema space, referring to the post-film discussions:

They were far more personal conversations than I've heard after films at the cinema. ... I actually think the content of some of the conversations – I've never heard women who are strangers with some of the other women in that group have those sorts of conversation in a mixed gender environment ... it just felt like people were being very honest and open about things, um [describes woman's account of experiencing domestic violence] And I think it, like, for me and my relationship with that space, it's nice to fill that space with other conversations and to have provided that safe environment for that to have happened. (Janet)

Environments which (attempt to) suspend patriarchal norms, practices and voices can facilitate the development of feminist consciousness (Jo Reger, 2004). Michelle reflected on how, despite an awareness of gendered spaces and their impact, *experiencing* women-only space highlighted how much she had accommodated heteronormative norms by not taking on "men's tasks". Realisation and enhanced awareness of spaces and adaptive behaviours emerges only from *experiencing* women-only space:

It wasn't until my first shift on this film season suddenly I was like, "oh wow, this is what a women's space is", and I was also really annoyed with myself because I realised all the shifts I'd done on the bar I'd never bothered to find out how to change the barrel because whenever you work behind the bar and it's busy some bloke goes "oh I'll do it", and lifts it. And it never crossed my

mind..... I thought “oh my God, I’ve just let that happen”, and I’ve not gone, “no it’s ok, I’ll do it, just show me how”. So that was the kind of moment when I thought ok, the way that I’ve interacted with this space has actually not been gender-neutral like I thought it had.

Michelle’s recognition of her own participation in the gendering of space is a key moment that potentially disrupts the entrenched patterns. Janet noted that the experience of running the women-only cinema space and taking on roles normally reserved for men, was revelatory, with potentially longer-term impacts:

I think just the fact that there was a group of us that kind of got together and staffed it and that meant we ended up having space and time to chat and feel competent and ... I think it’s quite important for us as women who volunteer ... actually just do stuff together and talk about well shall we do some other stuff together? And keep it rolling.

A sense of empowerment and energy emerges in Janet’s statement that she feels “competent”. Experiencing women-only space can have an effect not only on consciousness but also actions; the world comes to be seen slightly differently and behaviours and actions adapt to this new awareness. It is embodied, material experiences of these environments that seem so significant; simply imagining is unlikely to have the same effect. Having the physical experience of women-only space seems, for some, to bring a jolt of recognition of “the ‘wallpaper’ of sexism; the backdrop which becomes unremarkable because of its routine familiarity” (Author citation 1, 2015). Caroline Criado-Perez likens patriarchy to *The Matrix* (1999): because we are “living in it” we do not see it until “something happens” to illuminate it (2015: 15). Michelle notes that in recent meetings:

it's become something that's kind of accepted now, even by the men, that we have a problem about women, ... you'll see it's in the last three sets of minutes, somebody's said at some point, "we need more women's voices here". And that's something that I guess I knew but it was only really through actually having the experiences of being there when it was women-only that I felt like I could, like I had a kind of foundation to say that from.

Raised awareness can have ripple effects.

Our research found that women remain generally dissatisfied with representations of lesbians on screen and want to see some version of themselves in order to have their existence acknowledged. In the absence of such depictions they use resistive strategies, such as fantasising, re-signifying and viewing privately with women only. The embodied experience of this women-only screening season raised their awareness of the power of the male gaze and of their adaptive behaviours and opened up possibilities for change.

## **Conclusion**

This paper provides empirical, qualitative analysis that aims to contribute to the small body of scholarship that has listened to women's voices about their experience of gendered cinema spaces and depictions of lesbians. Although gender is a well-researched topic in media studies - in terms of analysis of characters and narratives, as well as the contributions of those on and off the screen - to date, scholarship has rarely explored how women, particularly lesbians, experience both depictions of lesbians and the gendered cinema space. This paper therefore makes a significant contribution to what we hope will be a growing stream of work examining

the gendered experiences of audiences who negotiate, interact with, and resignify depictions of lesbians on screen. This research highlights the value of a multimodal approach which examines women's articulation of their embodied experiences of viewing lesbian representations in women-only viewing space. It is their accounts of their experiences which reveal the pervasive distraction of the (internalised) male gaze, the significance of the embodied experience of cinema spaces and their strategies for resisting and subverting the power of patriarchal heteronormativity on and off screen. The film season provided a unique space to provoke reflections on the gendered aspects of viewing lesbians on screen, as it was the first time each of our participants had experienced a public women-only cinema space. While the study's sample group is small and not representative of wider populations of women who view lesbians on screen, analysis of qualitative data from women audiences reveals some rich insights about a hitherto rather neglected topic - gendered experiences of cinema spaces in the context of sexuality.

The title of the film season asked "how far have we come?" and it is worth returning to this question. The diverse age range of our research participants allowed reflection over time of the changing cultural depictions of lesbians. However, despite significant social, cultural and legal changes about sexuality (for example, within the lifetime of some of the participants male homosexuality has been decriminalised and same-sex marriage has been instituted), it is notable that women of all ages expressed ambivalence about viewing lesbians on screen because of the tendency towards sexually objectifying portrayals. They also expressed ambivalence about viewing lesbians on screen in mixed- gender audiences because the embodied cinema space is not free from the sexual objectification that is often depicted on screen. Their resistive strategies - to view films in domestic, private, women-only spaces such as their own homes - which are aided by more variety of ways in which we can consume film and television (e.g. DVD,

streaming), provide a retreat for them but leaves the public cinema space largely untouched. Despite some increased visibility for LGBTQ characters and a more diverse range of women characters on the screen, the public cinema space continues to be gendered and heteronormative. Women retreat to the safety of private viewing experiences to enjoy depictions of lesbians on screen, due to the paucity of such depictions on mainstream film and to the co-option of lesbian sexuality through heteronormative depictions. Viewing online or at home offers different opportunities for intimacy and engagement with on-screen portrayals and taking part in online forums offers a different form of community-building. Yet, the red velvet seats of the cinema are still to be reclaimed.

### **Acknowledgements**

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<sup>i</sup> Jacky Collins, Department of Arts, Northumbria University teaches and researches about crime and sexuality in film, TV and fiction. We would like to acknowledge her valuable contributions to the season and the focus groups.

<sup>ii</sup> To pass the Bechdel test, which originates from a conversation between a lesbian couple in Alison Bechdel's comic book *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1985:22) a film must have at least two women characters who talk to each other about something other than a man <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/The-Rule-cleaned-up.jpg>

<sup>iii</sup> GLAAD is an organisation that monitors representation of LGBT people in the media. It reported that 17.5% of films featured characters that identified as LGBT and that of these more inclusive films only 10% featured lesbian characters.

<sup>iv</sup> To pass the Vito Russo test a film must contain an LGBT character who is not solely defined by their sexual or gender identity and is integral to the plot.

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<sup>v</sup> Ellen Seiter notes that the term “ethnography” is used differently in media studies than in anthropology and sociology, stating that in media studies “Most of the time “ethnographic” has been used very loosely to indicate any research that uses qualitative interviewing techniques” (2004: 462).

<sup>vi</sup> Examining differences between viewing practices across different platforms is beyond the scope of this paper but for an audience study on this, see Harsh Taneja, James G. Webster, Edward C. Malthouse and Thomas B. Ksiazek (2012).

<sup>vii</sup> Names have been changed to protect participants’ anonymity.

<sup>viii</sup> Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness* was published in 1928 and was censored for its representation of lesbianism.

<sup>ix</sup> Referring to prominent lesbian figures, the singer Dusty Springfield, and the tennis players, Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova.

### **Biographies:**

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