MADAME X OF THE CHINA SEAS

A STUDY OF ULRIKE OTTINGER'S FILM BY PATRICIA WHITE

Madame X, a harsh, pitiless beauty, the cruel, uncrowned ruler of the China Seas, launched an appeal to all women willing to exchange an everyday existence of almost unbearable boredom, though safe and easy, for a world of uncertainty and danger, but also full of love and adventure.

THESE ARE THE FIRST WORDS of Ulrike Ottinger's lesbian pirate film, *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler*, before the credits, spoken over the exquisite image of the junk *Orlando*'s figurehead, exact replica of the pirate queen (both played by co-producer and costume designer Tabea Blumenschein), shot against a deep blue sky. The promise sounds much like that of cinema itself – the guarantee of pleasure is the beautiful, cruel woman. Here, however, that woman speaks this contradictory, gender specific appeal. Feminism's promise to transform our everyday existence, too, is contradictory; it does not engage 'all women' in the same way or with the same agenda. Ottinger's film, in taking up the appeals of both cinema and feminism, both 'collective fantasies', both 'public spheres', addresses the spectator not only as *female* (a claim Teresa de Lauretis makes for women's films such as *Born in Flames* and *Jeanne Dielman*)[1], but also, I will try to demonstrate, as *marginal*.

Such a spectator might be 'willing' to agree with one of the film's characters: 'This is something – this is *extreme* – the *Outlaw* – the

[1] See Teresa de Lauretis, 'Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema', *New German Critique* 34, Winter 1985, pp 154-175.

Misfits – This is what I was looking for!' exclaims Betty Brillo.[2] The excess encapsulated by her remark is not foreign to Ottinger's cinema, is indeed its defining characteristic. Her films feature elaborate costumes, painterly shot composition, anti-realist performances, and eclectic and abundant musical and sound quotations. Ottinger manipulates a visual and aural 'collage' technique drawing on sources from the Shangri-La's to Yma Sumac, Gustave Moreau to Man Ray, Oscar Wilde to Virginia Woolf to produce a feminist surrealism, or what might be called queer cinema. However, I wish to go beyond the notion that Ottinger's style appeals to a marginal audience through some subcultural 'sensibility' or 'gay aesthetics'. Rather, instances such as Madame X's invocation to her crew, a collage which overdetermines the figure of the pirate queen, and the test of the fool Belcampo's gender identity function to foreground the *construction* of the film's address.

[2] Ulrike Ottinger's screenplay, *Madame X: Eine Absolute Herrscherin*, Basel/ Frankfurt, Stroemfeld/ Roter Stern, 1979, contains not only narration of this kind, but a mass of material, both written and visual, relating to the film.

[3] Teresa de Lauretis, op cit, p 163.

Orlando: Ottinger as Madame X's lost lover, reading Virginia Woolf.

Teresa de Lauretis has recommended that we 're-think women's cinema and aesthetic forms . . . in terms of address – who is making films for whom, who is looking and speaking, how, where, and to whom', in the context of her claim that 'feminism has not only invented new strategies of created new texts, but more importantly it has conceived a new social subject, women: as speakers, readers, spectators, users and makers of cultural forms, shapers of cultural processes.'[3] *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* was produced within and in reference to the current wave of feminism. It dramatises the relation of women as social subjects to woman as supported and produced by the cinematic apparatus. As yet another remake of the Hollywood *Madame X*, it acknowledges a long history of female spectatorship. The pirate genre provides the context for a feminist adventure in which social gender roles are transformed by role-playing and inversion, thematised as both sexual inversion and car-

nival. Ottinger's citations and disruptions of classical cinematic codes take women's visual pleasure, even fetishism, for granted, displacing the presumably masculine spectator. And, as I shall attempt to demonstrate through an analysis of the 'love scene', the film also reworks the relation of woman as image to the apparatus. Lesbianism foregrounds the difference of women from woman, insisting on spectatorial desire as well as identification. My final brief discussion of feminist film theory suggests that the impasse regarding female spectatorship is related to the blind spot of lesbianism.

The 'China Seas' upon which the junk *Orlando* sails is a thinly-disguised Lake Constance where Ottinger shot the film in 1977. It was funded by ZDF, German television, and the low budget is at least partially responsible for the innovative sound mixing. Ottinger continued to use post-sync sound, however, on her next, better-funded feature, *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* (Ticket of No Return, 1979). Many of the actresses in *Madame X* worked with Ottinger in later films, and film-makers Cynthia Beatt and Yvonne Rainer appear in the film. Criticised or ignored upon its release, Ottinger's first feature has a cult following and is beginning to be critically re-evaluated.[4]

The film's first movement is the collection of a motley crew of women from 'various nations and all walks of life' who join Madame X (mistress of 'satanic sea art') and her faithful servant Hoi-Sin on board the *Orlando*. The voice-over introduces each exemplary character, who receives the following message, delivered in German or English, often via an actual communication system (newspaper, analysis session, car telephone): 'Chinese Orlando – stop – to all women – stop – offer world – stop – full of gold – stop – love – stop – adventure at sea – stop – call Chinese Orlando – call Chinese Orlando – stop.'[5] The telegram 'stops' insist on the danger of the proposition, the prohibition of the wish. Yet each character 'makes her decision and her judgment in a flash' and sets off for the ship. The community (of women) is constructed by the look of astonishment on the face of each woman when she reaches the ship. We are refused the reverse shot; the first image of the next woman in the chain stands in its place. The crew are summoned by a call 'to all women', but their consent implies something like Monique Wittig's definition of homosexuality: 'the desire for something else that is not connoted. This desire is resistance to the norm.'[6]

Each character is 'representative', overdetermined by costumes, names, activities, props and music. 'Flora Tannenbaum', German forestry expert and Goethe admirer, is seen breakfasting outdoors dressed in hunter's green. A dachshund delivers the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* in which she reads Madame X's message; she shoulders her rifle and marches off to military music. 'Blow-up', an Italian cover-girl, instructs her chauffeur to change direction as Satie's 'La Diva de l'empire' plays on the soundtrack. 'Betty Brillo' is disenchanted by 'all that American Hausfrauen-dream' and 'Noa-Noa', a native of Tai-Pi, has been rejected by her husband for infringing a taboo. Australian bush-pilot 'Omega

[4] Marc Silberman, 'Surreal Images: Interview with Ulrike Ottinger', *Jump Cut* 29, 1984, p 56. See also Miriam Hansen, 'Visual Pleasure, Fetishism and the Problem of Feminine/Feminist Discourse: Ulrike Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return*', *New German Critique* 31, Winter 1984, pp 95-108.

[5] The voice-over remains unidentified; the call is delivered by Yvonne Rainer. Due to lack of space, I am unable to discuss the number and kinds of relationships the film posits between the woman's body and the woman's voice, without, however, granting her speech. See Kaja Silverman, 'Dis-Embodying the Female Voice', in Mary Ann Doane *et al*, eds, *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, American Film Institute Monograph Series 3, Frederick, MD, University Publications of America, 1984, pp 131-149.

[6] Monique Wittig, 'Paradigm', in George Stambolian and Elaine Marks, eds, *Homosexualities and French Literature*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1979, p 114.

Centauri' would rather be an astronaut; 'Josephine de Collage', international artist on roller skates, is 'bored to death by the academic cultural round'; and psychology graduate 'Carla Freud-Goldmund' arrives at the ship in a rickshaw pulled by her Chinese analysand, as a heart beats on the soundtrack.

So the 'characters' are not realistic. Nor are they allegorical. They serve as so many figures in a *mise-en-scène* of female bodies which work through specific possibilities and scenarios of desire within the background fantasy of the pirate ship, the women's movement, lesbian utopia. Seduction, jealousy and mutiny culminate in the successive deaths of all but one, the 'primitive' Noa-Noa. Madame X herself 'survives', as does Belcampo, the hermaphroditic manicurist whom the crew rescue en route.

The classical fool aboard the Ship of Fools, Belcampo is subjected to a 'personality test', the object of which is the determination of his/her gender. 'The decision – a Man – would doubtless have meant being thrown overboard.' But Belcampo passes the test by 'jamming' the apparatus. (To Carla Freud-Goldmund's questions Belcampo replies with flash-forwards, flashbacks, and false fragments of the film. The sequence ends with aggression against the analyst, to the crew's cheers.) Then the women direct their course to the pleasure yacht *Holliday*, at the hands of whose 'unsubtle' crew Belcampo had suffered exactly that threatened fate. The women 'massacre' Lady Divine and the other pleasure-seekers on board the yacht to the soundtrack of a 'B' horror flick and divide the spoils.

In the film's final sequence the crew of the *Orlando* is reassembled onshore not by an explicit invocation but by the ritual of carnival. The women are resurrected, via costume change, as new versions of their former personae. The sadistic Carla Freud-Goldmund returns as a bike dyke in leather; Hoi-Sin, who had finally committed ritual suicide, comes back as the femme, 'Leader of the Pack' on the soundtrack. The imperialist Flora Tannenbaum now wears black face and jailbird stripes and sweeps the sidewalk. 'All the discontent within them was unified into one over-riding power and they set sail one day with a favorable wind behind.'

The staging of regeneration is, on one level, resonant of Woolf's *Orlando*, in which the eponymous hero/ine is both transsexual and transhistorical. A flashback presents the director herself as Madame X's lost lover Orlando, narcissistically reading Woolf's novel – the inscription of the author as 'Wunschbild der Verganenheit' ('ideal of the past', to use Ottinger's term). On another level, the film's ending points to an indefinite number of possible re-visions. Put another way, *Madame X* recommends not the 'destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon' as Laura Mulvey proposed in 1975[7], but the radical reconstruction of a number of possible cinematic pleasures for women. Teresa de Lauretis suggests:

Cinema could be made to re-present the play of contradictory percepts and

[7] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, Vol 16 no 3, p 7.

meanings usually elided in representation, and so to enact the contradictions of women as social subjects, to perform the terms of the specific division of the female subject in language, in imaging, in the social.[8]

It is within such a problematic that I would like to situate Ottinger's film as an exemplary 're-make.' For not only does it simultaneously embrace and reject the terms of the cinematic production of femininity, it does so in reference to a specific Hollywood text – or rather set of texts, for *Madame X*, the melodrama of the unknown mother, was filmed in six Hollywood versions, spanning from the silent screen to the made-for-TV movie. She was played by Dorothy Donnelly (1916), Pauline Frederick (1920), Ruth Chatterton (1929), Gladys George (1937), Lana Turner (1966), and Tuesday Weld (1981). Feminist film theory has rhetorically proclaimed the historical absence of 'woman *as* woman' from Hollywood cinema (and even from cinema audiences). 'Madame X' can be seen as a synecdoche for the critical proposition of woman's absence from history, while insisting on her (almost uncanny) return. Ottinger articulates the contradictions of this representation with the social field of feminism, and 'meanings usually elided in representation' are central to this lesbian re-make of what must already be considered a fetish-text.

But it is not so much the maternal melodrama as the frame of the pirate film which allows Ottinger's *Madame X* to re-write gender within genre. The film is not merely an *inversion* of a dominant genre (although inversion may be its theme), for it enacts not 'women on top'[9] but a homosocial world (including male homosexuality, represented by Belcampo and the Russian sailor he rescues). Women's exile is both utopian premise and cause for rebellion. From 'real' Chinese women pirates pictured in the screenplay, to *Anne of the Indies* and *La Fiancée du pirate*, two key texts in early feminist film culture[10]; from classical camp like *The Pirate* and *China Seas* to gay films such as Anger's *Fireworks*, Fassbinder's *Querelle*, Shroeter's *Weisse Reise*, and Ottinger's own short *Infatuation of the Blue Sailors*, the implication of ships and sexual identity has a connotatively rich cultural and cinematic lineage.

The freaks on board the *Orlando* (Ottinger takes up the theme in her 1981 feature *Freak Orlando*), whose photos are snapped by Lady Divine aboard her spectator-ship the *Holliday*, have affinities with the Ship of Fools as well as Hollywood. Ottinger sums up her method: 'I use traditional cinema's cliches for my own purposes.'[11] The pirate captain's prosthesis becomes the remarkable studded leather glove through which Madame X 'speaks'. Her dismembered right hand functions as a joke on castration, circulates in Belcampo's antics and is re-embodied later in the film. The conventional parrot appears here as a character, although a mute one.

The film cites Hollywood conventions yet ignores the construction of narrative space by dialogue and classical editing. This selective appropriation extends to the choice of genre. Critics have seen the strong

[8] Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984, p 69.

[9] See Natalie Zemon-Davis, 'Women on Top', in her *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1986, pp 124-152.

[10] See Claire Johnston, 'Femininity and the Masquerade: *Anne of the Indies*', in Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, eds, *Jacques Tourneur*, London, British Film Institute, 1975, pp 36-44. 'It is hardly surprising that [Tourneur] should have chosen a pirate film aimed at children's audiences to represent such an extraordinary masquerade, for children's literature is rich in bi-sexual phantasy', pp 37-8.

[11] Marc Silberman, 'Surreal Images', op cit, p 56.

Madame X: pirate captain and figurehead, complete with phallic leather glove.

generic expectations attached to certain films as enabling ideological rupture. Ottinger goes this critical claim one better, actually bringing to life signifiers of femininity repressed in the classical tradition (notably the ship's figurehead) with resounding implications for narrativity, closure and identification. The refusal of dialogue emphasises women's oppression, while the film incorporates quotations from Hollywood films, by synchronising snatches of music and sound effects with characters' gestures and with larger fragments of the film.

Discussing *Madame X*'s reception, Ottinger commented: 'Some women have accused me of sexism and leather fetishism. I do not see it this way. I do not think women should now turn into grey mice.'[12] The question of what women *should* turn into touches on the theme of metamorphosis in the film as well as on de Lauretis's assertion that 'women's cinema has been engaged in the transformation of vision.'[13] Laura Mulvey's claim that 'women . . . cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret'[14] is the only gaze specifically allocated to women in her classic essay. Drawing on classical cinema, Ottinger's *Madame X* exploits the radical potential of this 'sentimental regret', thereby taking up Claire Johnston's challenge: 'in order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film.'[15]

Character positions within the film are used to establish not only the geography of the junk, but also narrative space itself. Madame X's point of view is established as a high-angle shot. Hoi-Sin is depicted in the background to the side of her mistress; in close-up she looks left. The figurehead is shot in low-angle profile. Noa-Noa takes up the figurehead's position twice, gesturing and pointing towards Belcampo's raft and later towards the yacht. Her identification with the figurehead is one indication of how 'woman' as guarantor of cinema is distributed across a number of positions in this film with its plethora of female characters, each connoting, in her own way, 'to-be-looked-at-ness'.

Taking up these already established character positions, the film's love scene makes use of conventional filmic construction to represent the unrepresentable. The following analysis will help to demonstrate how the cinematic apparatus is made strange in order to 'embody the working through of desire'.

The women find Madame X's gaze intolerable and draw lots to determine who will attempt to appease her. Noa-Noa loses (wins?). Here is the shot breakdown of the seduction:

1	**Madame X, wearing a huge hat decorated with mirrors, in low angle, medium close up (the same as an earlier shot which denotes her unapproachability); a lion on soundtrack.**

[12] Roswitha Mueller, 'Interview with Ulrike Ottinger', *Discourse* 4, Winter 1981/1982, p 120. Ottinger's sentiments are shared by Kaja Silverman who suggests that 'the sartorial reticence of North American feminism . . . is the symptom of what might almost be called "The Great Feminine Renunciation" ' in 'Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse', in Tania Modleski, ed, *Studies in Entertainment*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987, p 149.

[13] Teresa de Lauretis, 'Aesthetic and Feminist Theory', op cit, p 159.

[14] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', op cit, p 18.

[15] Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema,' in Claire Johnston, ed, *Notes on Women's Cinema*, London, SEFT, 1975, p 28.

2	Noa-Noa in high angle, long shot, wearing 'ritual headdress'; arranges and dances within a circle of leeks; drum music.
3	Madame X as in shot 1, glove drawn back defensively silent.
4	Noa-Noa as in shot 2; drums beat faster.
5	Jump cut to Noa-Noa, long shot, bearing tray of 'exotic fruits' climbs steps towards camera; plucked strings and percussion instruments.
6	Hoi-Sin in close-up, shielded behind mast; looks left; percussion continues.
7	Noa-Noa creeps up to Madame X's feet in medium shot; camera reframes to include Madame X's face; she thrusts her glove several times at Noa-Noa who cowers but timidly persists, standing to offer Madame X a cauliflower; the movements of the glove are accompanied by roars, grunts, and growls; no music.
8	Hoi-Sin as in shot 6; raises her eyebrows as growls become more frequent, softer.
9	Madame X and Noa-Noa as in shot 7; Madame X accepts a bunch of bananas from Noa-Noa and sits at her side; camera reframes as Noa-Noa makes more offerings; silent until end of shot, Polynesian music fades in.
10	Hoi-Sin as in shot 8; narrows eyes, pinches lips, does an exaggerated double take; music continues.
11	Madame X's extended silver-heeled foot, medium shot; camera tilts up her leg; she pulls Noa-Noa toward her by her shell necklace; camera reframes to include their faces; they caress each other tentatively; camera tilts down to Noa-Noa's hand on Madame X's leg; music continues.
12	Hoi-Sin as in shot 10; blinks, rolls eyes, and looks away; music continues.
13	Madame X and Noa-Noa as in shot 11; Madame X runs her studded glove through Noa-Noa's hair, they continue to caress each other awkwardly; loud purring, music continues.

14	**Hoi-Sin as in shot 12; looks down sadly; music continues.**
15	**Madame X and Noa-Noa as in shot 13, camera moves to frame Madame X's pump and Noa-Noa's bare feet as Noa-Noa runs her hand down Madame X's leg; music fades, loud purring.**
16	**Madame X framed against sky as in shot 1, claps once; no music.**

With the exception of the jump cut in shot 5, the editing is classical. And although the mast logically obstructs Hoi-Sin's gaze at the lovers, the point of view construction is naturalistic in effect. The scene takes place in pantomime; the decisive action occurs on the soundtrack as the roars and growls dubbed to Madame X's thrusts and parries are tamed to the purring of a kitten. The mixing of musical themes in Hollywood romance is parodied. Noa-Noa's charms are associated here and during her subsequent flirtation with Blow-up with Polynesian music; and purring returns as the couple's theme. Exaggerated make-up and mugging, absurd fetishes (the long, thin chains Noa-Noa wears from her waist to her wrists, vegetables, and purring), contrasts between hat and headdress, leather and grass skirt, and replacement of explicitness by the eroticism of texture and sound combine as hilarious musical comedy reworked to suit a love triangle among women. The humour of the off-screen growls which prick our curiosity as we watch the watcher, as well as adherence to the one-foot-on-the-ground rule suggest the pleasurable effects of Hollywood censorship. The refusal of the kiss (denied Belcampo and the sailor as well) simulates suspense, yet goes further to indicate

Noa Noa: the stereotypical primitive, the survivor, the 'girl'.

the ultimate incompatibility of the apparatus with the representation of homosexuality.

The crew, said to represent 'women from all walks of life', are actually highly coded cinematic stereotypes. A consideration of Noa-Noa as 'woman of colour', or of the exoticism of Hoi-Sin, Madame X and the venture itself, must attend to this insistence on the stereotype. Noa-Noa is the object of desire in this love story. She is presented as spectacle differently from the others. Her breasts are bare and her dance is performed for Madame X's gaze. Her primitivism is emphasised by her interest in the pirate queen's metallic ornaments and by her selection of a huge tortoise in the division of the booty from the *Holliday*. She expresses herself entirely through pantomime.

Structurally, too, Noa-Noa is set off from the other women; drawing last in the otherwise silent lottery scene, her timid approach is accompanied by music. She is the last to join the crew, approaching the ship alone in her canoe. Like Belcampo, she comes from the sea. Most importantly, she survives the journey, and with Madame X and Belcampo assembles the resurrected crew at the end. Her privileged position is assumed at the expense of Hoi-Sin, who was 'in place' at the beginning of the journey. It is suggested that the women encoded as non-white survive one cycle of the Ship of Fools' passage as Madame X's servant/lover. Hoi-Sin is an 'ordinary' crew member in the next round. Perhaps next time the character in black face will take Noa-Noa's place?

Thus relations of domination are explicitly thematised and erotically invested. Madame X, as 'oriental despot', is more powerful than Hoi-Sin as Chinese cook. Ottinger's orientalism is at the same time 'Germanic', an appropriation of the (generally male homosexual) traditions of aestheticism and decadence for lesbian representation, and a provocative masquerade. She allows the feminine, the ornate and the East to be aligned, impenetrable and parodic, yet pleasurably textured. The 'primitive' represented by Noa-Noa deploys a different set of imperialist codes. Her specificity, in contrast to the relative interchangeability of the other women, can also be understood in terms of the production of difference within other, more conventionally narrative lesbian texts.[16] Noa-Noa is the film's major concession to narrativity itself. With the exception of the victimised Russian sailor whose similar position as object of desire should not be overlooked, the entire cast is coded feminine. Noa-Noa, however, is the 'girl'.

Because Blow-up is presented as a spectacle of Hollywood femininity coded 'cultural' in contrast to Noa-Noa as 'natural' beauty, the romance between the blonde, glamorous diva and the 'exotic' is in some sense transgressive. Blow-up will later direct her third attempt at mutiny against the ship's figurehead, displacing the struggle with the terms of her imaging from the heroine to the image-making machine, reciprocally made in woman's image. Blow-up trips a mechanism and is strangled by the *imago*; her body is taken up in the arms of Omega Centauri who, quite literally, longs for the stars. In turn, Omega is killed

[16] Butch/femme or marked differences in age and experience structure lesbian films from *Daughters of Darkness* to *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. Jackie Stacey's 'Desperately Seeking Difference,' *Screen*, Winter 1987, vol 28 no 1, pp 48-61, discusses the narrative implications of one woman's identification with and desire for another in *All About Eve* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*.

for having discovered the switch that animates the figurehead, exposing the apparatus.

Madade X's identification with this animated figurehead puts cinema on the side of women's self-presentation; the apparatus does not merely secure an image of woman as 'not-man'. An exact replica of Madame X, the figurehead fits the image, produces the illusion perfectly. The image (woman) animates the mechanised, or enchanted, leather-clad female body which stands in for the apparatus (the title of the film appears across the first image of the figurehead). For the figurehead itself is given as image of woman 'made to speak', reciting 'Gold, Liebe, Abenteuer' when Madame X wishes to give 'convincing proof of her absolute power and authority'. It is both the pirate queen's narcissistic projection (the double *à la* Dorian Gray, a figure Ottinger later returned to in *The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press*, 1984), and a fantasmatic representation of her omnipotence which crushes Blow-up's rebellion.

Yet the fact that the figurehead in turn produces Madame X in its own image prevents any simple reading of women's reappropriation of the means of representing 'woman'. Madame X's robotic movements and mechanical sounds indicate that she is not altogether human: her severed hand is restored like a spare part. The synchronisation of sound effects associates her body with the register of sound mixing. One in particular refers unmistakably to the MGM lion, whose roar authorised the unfolding of decades of Hollywood stories. Finally, Madame X's gaze is one of the major organising principles of the film.

The figurehead is the conventional female emblem of piracy, and of

sailing in general, gendering the ship itself. It is significant to *Madame X*'s narrative structure that the translation from male genre to female utopia maintains this marking of the journey. On the one hand the film's 'moral' can be read off, as Ottinger suggests in interviews, as the inability of the women's movement to do away with 'figureheads' of power: on the other, 'power' itself is granted the various affirmative connotations it has within contemporary lesbian feminism. As an antidote to 'Mister X', the anonymous yet coherent 'invisible guest' of classical cinema, Madame X herself is split between the conditions of production of her femininity. The pirate queen is caught between her projected image (the figurehead) and the film which takes her name. She is no more than a *figurehead* of absolute authority, for 'Madame' brings the 'X' into an uneasy relation with patriarchal naming.

In saying that a film whose visual and symbolic space is organized in this manner ***addresses its spectator as a woman,*** *regardless of the gender of its viewers, I mean that the film defines all points of identification (with character, image, camera) as female, feminine or feminist. However, this is not as simple or self-evident a notion as the established film-theoretical view of cinematic identification, namely, that identification with the look is masculine and identification with the image is feminine. It is not self-evident precisely because such a view . . . is now accepted: that the camera (technology), the look (voyeurism), and the scopic drive itself partake of the phallic and thus somehow are entities or figures of a masculine nature.*[17]

What might indeed be self-evident in this context is that any elaboration of *lesbian* spectatorship must displace the 'established film-theoretical view'. Ottinger's text allows us to do this in the direction of de Lauretis's re-vision.

The figure of Belcampo offers a condensation of the film's address to the marginal subject. For if the crew respond 'naturally' *as women* to Madame X's call (recognising themselves in the address and their desire in the promise), the interpellation of Belcampo, as unnatural 'woman', is more problematic. Classically, the fool's discourse frustrates sexual identification. In the 'personality test' sequence, two discursive models are opposed: psychoanalysis and its imposition of order (represented by Carla Freud-Goldmund who administers the test), and carnival as ritualised disorder. Psychoanalysis's negotiation of sexual difference is staged, and Belcampo negotiates for his/her life on the stakes of femininity itself. It is important to realise, however, that Belcampo's sexual indeterminacy is not posited as some post-gendered answer to patriarchal oppression.[18] Belcampo is accepted as a 'woman' by the onlooking crew at the end of the sequence; moreover, the question of his/her suitability to the enterprise is resolved by their approval. Belcampo's 'case' attempts to make sense of the non-sense of gender. S/he makes explicit the film's trope of female impersonation that might be considered germane to lesbian identity. Finally, 'his' romance with the Russian sailor, whom 'he' rescues and attempts to shield from Madame

[17] Teresa de Lauretis, 'Aesthetic and Feminist Theory', op cit, p 161.

[18] Such a utopian idea, Ottinger implies, would be premature for feminism.

X's wrath, introduces yet another 'invert' trajectory to the lesbian narrative, hinting at the alliance between gay men and lesbians which Ottinger's representational strategies reflect.

The test sequence opposes a 'realistic' *mise-en-scène*, in which Carla quizzes Belcampo and times his/her answers with a stop-watch, to extra-diegetic images and sounds which Belcampo enunciates. A third 'space' is represented by the reaction shots of the other characters which dominate the end of the sequence.

Belcampo's first 'answer', given as flashback, is in response to the question: 'Are you an important personality?' We see the exact *reverse* of the shot immediately preceding Belcampo's rescue, where the women were represented as 'eating' a meal prepared by Hoi-Sin with a close-up of a large fish violently attacked by chopsticks, as seagulls screeched on the soundtrack. This time the fish is reconstituted. The jangle of a tambourine marks the beginning of this shot, which is followed by a detail of Carla clicking her stop-watch. Belcampo's carnival defies the linear unfolding of the film and the logic of question and answer, fleshing out the film's fantasy of regeneration as enacted in the final scene. The trick shot foregrounds the apparatus. Attempting inversion among the inverts, Belcampo draws Madame X herself into his/her discourse, breaking down the established hierarchy, if only momentarily. Carla asks if Belcampo feels strongly attracted to members of his/her own sex: s/he is literally unable to comprehend the question. Carla repeats it and we see, instead of Belcampo, Madame X throwing back her head with a resounding lip-synched laugh. Our understanding of the question coincides with hers in the only appropriate answer – defiant but affirmative laughter. As Blow-up and Betty Brillo caress each other in the following shot, gazing seductively at the camera, Carla asks in voice-over: 'Have you always wanted to be a woman?' Although her question seems to decide the very issue the test is designed to resolve, assuming the 'you' addressed is not already a woman, the connoted desire for 'resistance to the norm' (implying both the advantages of being a woman and the option of refusing to become woman) is unmistakable here as in the film as a whole.

Three questions bear directly on spectatorship. Carla asks Belcampo, 'Do you see around you things, or creatures of fable, that others do not see?' The 'response' is an image of Madame X, as if standing in for the film, a fabulous hallucination. Later in the sequence Belcampo is asked whether s/he enjoys adventure stories. This prompts Belcampo to transgress the spatial boundary set up even in this 'transgressive' sequence. S/he leaves the analytic space for the 'outside world' (the diegetic spectators' realm) and takes Omega Centauri's water pistol, returning to squirt the analyst. We are reminded of Mulvey's description: 'In contrast to woman as icon, the active male figure... demands a three-dimensional space.... He is a figure in a landscape.'[19] The conventions of spectatorship again inform Carla's last question: 'Do you like to see love scenes at the movies?' At this point both Carla and Belcampo lose

[19] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', op cit, pp 12-13.

discursive agency (Carla's mouth is taped shut) and we see a rapid montage of the crew participating in general disorder. On the soundtrack Betty Brillo sings the words from her opening speech as the film's romantic theme: 'Jesus, Babyfolks! This is *extreme*. . . . ' The preferred response to Carla's question is '*this* is what I was looking for!'

Mary Russo, in her article on carnival (of) theory, cautions: 'In liminal states . . . temporary loss of boundaries tends to redefine social frames, and such topsy-turvy or time-out is inevitably set right and on course.'[20] Within the social frame of Madame X's 'absolute authority', however, setting right and 'on course' means continuing the women's journey with the figurehead in the bow. Having rescued the damsel in distress, the women direct the junk 'south-south-west' (the figurehead mouths the words) to revenge 'her' injustice. Carnival is recovered for the marginal. Belcampo's 'sexual difference' is not a simple critique of the rigidity of gender, but serves to shift the terms of its elaboration within the course of the lesbian adventure tale.

Here is the film's invocation once more:

Madame X, a harsh, pitiless beauty, the cruel uncrowned ruler of the China Seas, launched an appeal to all women willing to exchange an everyday existence of almost unbearable boredom, though safe and easy, for a world of uncertainty and danger, but also full of love and adventure.

To what degree does *Madame X* the film offer to spectators the booty promised by Madame X to all willing women? Isn't there a contradiction in the fact that a film which purports to call on all women is excessively long, 'boring', has no synchronous dialogue, too many heroines and a 'hero' in drag? One can certainly refuse to take part in what Ottinger has described as the film's 'initiation stories'; one might regard 'a comedy about the women's movement' as unfunny.[21] As an all-too-willing spectator, I believe I have struck gold.

Feminist film theory has argued that if 'cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire'[22], female spectators pledge themselves at their own risk, for very uncertain pleasures. *Madame X*, which posits a female gaze ('Madame X's gaze was so fearsome that the women trembled'), a female world (of playfully evoked erotic domination and submission), and a female object (like 'mainstream' cinema, Ottinger's film attaches desire to women's gaze at woman), is a dangerous enterprise. 'Love' is certainly on offer at the movies, is even considered a specific (albeit masochistic) appeal to the women in the audience. Yet 'love' is tied into a very precise ideological project concerned with endlessly reproducing the heterosexual couple. Women enjoy 'adventure' films surreptitiously, wearing, to quote another of Mulvey's tailor-made metaphors, 'borrowed transvestite clothes'.[23] Both assumptions – the impossibility of the female spectator's desire on the one hand; her 'trans-sex identification' on the other, have left lesbians in the dark.

[20] Mary Russo, 'Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory', in Teresa de Lauretis, ed, *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986, p 215.

[21] Roswitha Mueller, 'Interview with Ulrike Ottinger', op cit, p 121. 'This, if you wish, is also my feminist point of view, the freedom for women to go out and experience on their own. This freedom, of course, also includes the possibility to fail. These ideas are contained in the notion of adventure of freedom, the freedom to try out things, and the freedom to fail.'

[22] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', op cit, pp 12-13.

[23] Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', *Framework* 15/16/17, 1981, p 15.

In her 1981 'Afterthoughts' Laura Mulvey returned to 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' to face up to the female spectator. 'Narrative cinema' was re-evaluated in the light of the author's 'own love of Hollywood melodrama'[24], but 'visual pleasure' remained unaddressed. Mary Ann Doane would write that same year: 'One assumption behind the positing of a female spectator (that is, one who does not assume a masculine position with respect to the reflected image of her own body) is that it is no longer necessary to invest the look with desire in quite the same way.'[25] Assuming that it is necessary to 'posit' the female spectator differently, I would like to redress this disavowal of female fetishism through a brief discussion of the implications of the figure of the transvestite.[26]

Mulvey describes her earlier position: 'at the time, I was interested in the . . . "masculinisation" of the spectator position regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real live movie-goer.'[27] Lesbianism, although nowhere mentioned explicitly, would seem to coincide so exactly with 'masculinisation' in these arguments as to constitute an *impossible* deviance. In any case, it is *not* 'deviance' but 'actual sex' to which Mulvey returns in the figure of the transvestite. She writes: 'as desire is given cultural materiality in a text, for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second Nature.* However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes.'[28] This nature, secondary or not (as indeed the little girl's heterosexuality can be said to be *second* nature in the Freudian account upon which Mulvey draws), sounds suspiciously essentialist. For why must *transvestite* clothes be 'borrowed'? This process would be more accurately described as masquerade, a metaphor Doane opposes to transvestism in her essay 'Film and the Masquerade'.[29] It is the question of desire which leaves her restless with Mulvey's use of the term.

Doane argues that 'the transvestite wears clothes which signify a different sexuality, a sexuality which, for the woman, allows a mastery over the image and the very possibility of attaching the gaze to desire.'[30] Yet the 'different sexuality' in question is evidently not homosexuality. In fact, the 'very possibility' of *any* desire of one's own is eradicated by the next sentence: 'Clothes make the man, as they say.' Doane dismisses this supposedly facile 'masculinisation': 'sexual mobility would seem to be a distinguishing feature of femininity in its cultural construction. Hence, transvestism would be fully recuperable.' Lesbians must take issue with this assumption of mobility which, if true at all, has only been made possible by feminist mobilisation. Transvestism, unlike the masquerade, is not a psychoanalytic concept. Yet nor does their use of the term imply the social practice of transvestism, which clearly does not 'make the man'. The 'metaphor' seems to be a thinly-veiled reference to an impossible, reprehensible, or at best recuperable deviance on the part of the female spectator. Masquerade is to be considered as less 'recuperable [than] transvestism precisely because it constitutes an acknowledge-

[24] ibid p 12.

[25] Mary Ann Doane, '*Caught* and *Rebecca*: The Inscription of Femininity as Absence', *Enclitic*, vol 5 no 2/vol 6 no 1, Fall 1981/Spring 1982, p 76.

[26] Miriam Hansen has also discussed this choice of metaphor; see her 'Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship', *Cinema Journal*, vol 25 no 4, Summer 1986, p 8. Jackie Stacey, op cit, addresses a similar omission in feminist film theory: 'While this issue [of the woman spectator's pleasure] has hardly been addressed, the specifically homosexual pleasures of female spectatorship have been ignored completely', p 48.

[27] Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts', op cit, p 12.

[28] ibid, p 13.

[29] Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator', *Screen*, September-October 1982, vol 23 no 3-4, pp 74-87.

[30] ibid, p 81.

ment that it is femininity itself which is constructed as mask – as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity.'[31] But the false opposition between masquerade and transvestism impoverishes even the 'straight' story, discovering a new essential femininity in the 'non-identity' behind the mask, defined as nothing more than a screen for male desire.

Masquerade (as 'hyperbolisation of the accountrements of femininity'[32]) and symptomatic transvestism are of course not irrelevant to the consideration of women and cinema. Nor to Ottinger's film, which draws on the genre loosely termed 'spectacle', specifically de Mille's *Madam Satan* in which a costume party aboard a blimp ends in disaster. These figures for spectatorship beg the question of the 'real live movie-goer' and her visual pleasure. As Ottinger's characters 'lay aside their petticoats to try their luck at new trouser roles'[33], they become figures of spectatorial desire. And if Belcampo (who is of course not an hermaphrodite but a male transvestite) permits 'trans-sex identification' in 'his' adventure story, 'deviance' is made explicit.

Doane writes, 'It is quite tempting to foreclose entirely the possibility of female spectatorship. . . .'[34] I would suggest that we succumb to other temptations. We can continue to gaze 'with sentimental regret' at the classical Hollywood construction of femininity without becoming 'grey mice'. My reading of *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* argues that the film's address displaces two assumptions – that feminism finds its audience 'naturally', and that the female spectator is destined to miss the boat. Gold, love and adventure lie just beyond the horizon.

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[31] ibid, p 82.

[32] ibid.

[33] *Hosenrollen*. See Ulrike Ottinger, *Madame X: Eine Absolute Herrscherin*, op cit, p 4.

[34] Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade', op cit, p 87.