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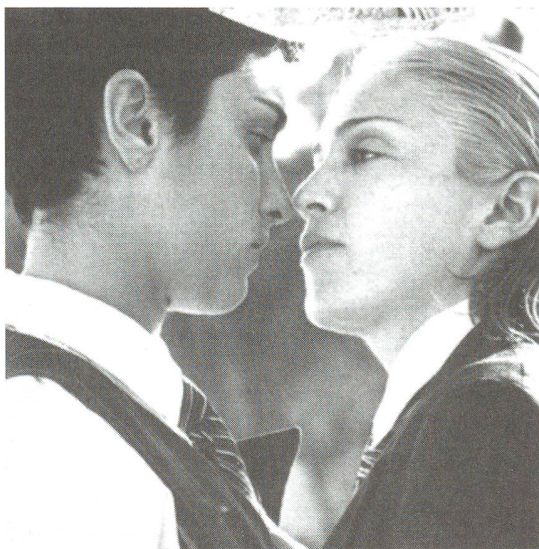
# Feminist Theory or Queer Theory?

von Misha Kavka

**Last semester I taught a lecture on Anglo-American film entitled «Feminist and Queer Theory at the Movies». To tell the truth, I had some difficulty with the title, since I had wanted to call it «Feminist and Queer Theory Go to the Movies» but found that conjugating the verb gave me trouble. For should it be singular or plural, «theory goes» or «theories go»? Is feminist theory one thing, separate from queer theory, or is there some kind of broad but singular theory which encompasses both feminist and queer approaches?**

In the title of the lecture I ended up taking the easy way out, by suppressing the verb and using a compound adjective with a singular noun, but the question is still open to debate: What is the relationship between feminist theory and queer theory? In terms of their objects, aims and concerns, are they one thing or two?

Though there is a strong historical connection between second-wave feminism and gay/lesbian liberation as political movements, since both began in the late 1960s, spurred by the social utopianism of 1968, it could be said that feminism has inclined more to the aim of social transformation, seeking radical changes in the patriarchal order. Gay/lesbian movements, on the other hand, have had less to say about the social order at large,



Madonna as a queer icon

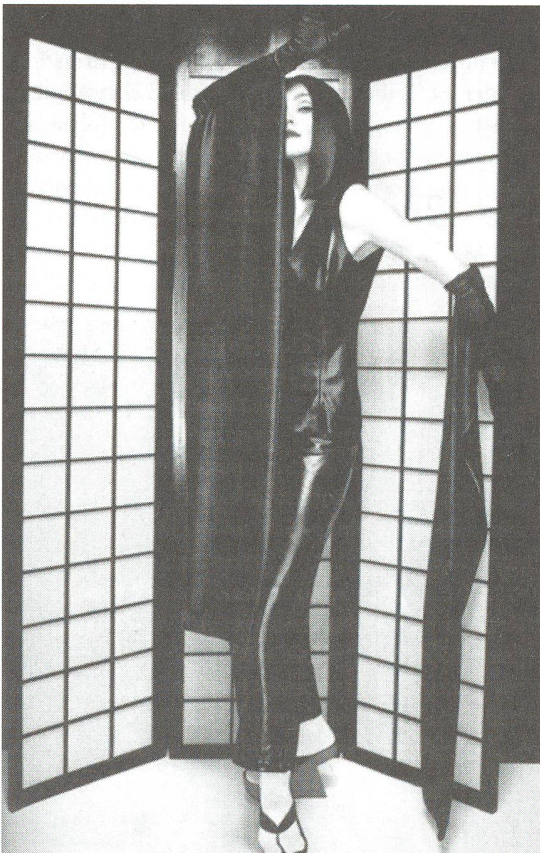
concentrating more on their place in it. Gay/lesbian movements, too, have taken longer than feminism to enter the «discursive zone» of politics, that is, to take shape as a rhetorical genre or discipline labeled «gay/lesbian criticism» or «gay/lesbian studies». Whereas feminist criticism began to appear in the form of popular books and to make incursions into Anglo-American universities in the early 1970s<sup>1</sup>, gay/lesbian cultural criticism appeared on bookshelves a decade later,<sup>2</sup> while «queer studies» began to enter university courses only in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Once «queer studies» found its niche, however, queer theory exploded with an intellectual and critical energy that began to make feminist theory look tired and outdated by comparison.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, there is a difference between feminist theory and queer theory, though where to draw the line is debatable. To begin with, gay male theorists do not necessarily see any connection between their work and feminist theory, though both theoretical streams rely heavily on post-structuralist models of thought introduced in the writings of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Thus, Ellis Hanson defines queer theory as work which «submits the various social codes and rhetoric of sexuality to a close reading and rigorous analysis that reveal their incoherence, instability, and artificiality, such that sexual pleasure or desire ... becomes ... a performative effect of language, politics and the endless perversity and paradox of symbolic ... meaning.»<sup>4</sup>

Of course, this same definition could be applied to post-structuralist feminism, which also understands language, politics and the symbolic order as producing a limited range of gendered subjectivities which are then seen to be «natural». And yet, there has been a shift from Hanson's definition to my feminist paraphrase: He stresses sexuality whereas I used the term gender. Herein lies what is now considered to be the difference between feminist theory and queer theory: The first deals with gender, the second with sex and sexuality. This alignment, however, is odd, given that in the 1980s feminists were furiously theorizing femininity in terms of «sexual difference», fighting about pornography, and trying to decide whether feminism was pro-sex, anti-sex, or neither.<sup>5</sup>

In 1990, however, Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble*,<sup>6</sup> which reinvigorated feminist theory by claiming that gender is a performed rather than an essential identity, and around the same time the term «queer» resurfaced to differentiate homosexuality from the norm on the grounds of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual practice. And that,





Madonna as a feminist icon

as they say, was that. Feminist theory had been re-grounded as the study of gender, and queer theory took over the zone of sexuality.

But theories change and so do the relations between them. For one thing, the term «sexual difference» is beginning to reappear in the work of feminist theorists, even of Judith Butler herself.<sup>7</sup> For another, gender is becoming important for queer theorists interested in «transgender» identities, a term which denotes subjects «who cross gender boundaries in some way, whether through identification, actions or dress.»<sup>8</sup> Sex and gender, therefore, won't stay put. To this I would add that feminist theory has not yet absorbed all of the lessons of queer theory, particularly in terms of theorizing sexual pleasure and desire for political purposes (in this sense the pop star Madonna could be seen as a cross-over figure between feminism and queer theory). The mobility of the terms sex, sexuality and gender – let alone pleasure and desire – does not mean, of course, that feminist and queer theory are the same «theory», since that would make nonsense of the distinction in the first place. But my overview does suggest these theories are inescapably bound into a shared history, an implicit dialogue and even a shared future. For now, I'll stick to calling it «feminist and queer theory».

#### ANMERKUNGEN

- <sup>1</sup> See for example Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1970); Alice Walker founded the first Women's Studies course at Sarah Lawrence College in 1972.
- <sup>2</sup> See for example Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).
- <sup>3</sup> See the first «queer studies» anthology, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- <sup>4</sup> Ellis Hanson, «Introduction», *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film*, ed. Ellis Hanson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 4.
- <sup>5</sup> See *The Woman in Question*, eds. Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (London: Verso Books, 1990); see also *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings*, eds. Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- <sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).
- <sup>7</sup> See Judith Butler, «The End of Sexual Difference?», *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, eds. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 414–34.
- <sup>8</sup> Jay Prosser, «No Place Like Home: The Transgendered Narrative of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*», *Modern Fiction Studies* 41:3–4 (Fall/Winter, 1995). 484.

#### AUTORIN

Misha Kavka ist Lektorin am Englischen Seminar der Universität Zürich. Sie hat 1995 an der Cornell University (USA) ihr Doktorat in Englischer Literatur erworben. Ab Juli 2001 wird sie in Neuseeland an der University of Auckland am Film, TV and Media Studies Department tätig sein.