DURING THE LAST decade, feminist critics have developed an analysis of the constructions of sexual difference in dominant narrative cinema, drawing on psychoanalytic and post-structuralist theory. One of the main indictments of Hollywood film has been its passive positioning of the woman as sexual spectacle, as there 'to be looked at', and the active positioning of the male protagonist as bearer of the look. This pleasure has been identified as one of the central structures of dominant cinema, constructed in accordance with masculine desire. The question which has then arisen is that of the pleasure of the woman spectator. While this issue has hardly been addressed, the specifically homosexual pleasures of female spectatorship have been ignored completely. This article will attempt to suggest some of the theoretical reasons for this neglect.

Theories of Feminine Spectatorship: Masculinisation, Masochism or Marginality

Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ has been the springboard for much feminist film criticism during the last decade. Using psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey argued that the visual pleasures of Hollywood cinema are based on voyeuristic and fetishistic forms of looking. Because of the ways these looks are structured, the spectator necessarily identifies with the male protagonist in the narrative, and thus with his objectification of the female figure via the male gaze. The construction of woman as spectacle is built into the apparatus of dominant cinema, and the spectator position which is produced by the film narrative is necessarily a masculine one.

Mulvey maintained that visual pleasure in narrative film is built
around two contradictory processes: the first involves objectification of
the image and the second identification with it. The first process
depends upon 'direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed
for [the spectator's] enjoyment' and the spectator's look here is active
and feels powerful. This form of pleasure requires the separation of the
'erotico identity of the subject from the object on the screen'. This 'dis-
tance' between spectator and screen contributes to the voyeuristic
pleasure of looking in on a private world. The second form of pleasure
depends upon the opposite process, an identification with the image on
the screen 'developed through narcissism and the constitution of the
ego'. The process of identification in the cinema, Mulvey argued, like
the process of objectification, is structured by the narrative. It offers
the spectator the pleasurable identification with the main male protagonist,
and through him the power to indirectly possess the female character dis-
played as sexual object for his pleasure. The look of the male character
moves the narrative forward and identification with it thus implies a
sense of sharing in the power of his active look.

Two absences in Mulvey's argument have subsequently been address-
ed in film criticism. The first raises the question of the male figure as
erotic object, the second that of the feminine subject in the narrative,
and, more specifically in relation to this article, women's active desire
and the sexual aims of women in the audience in relationship to the
female protagonist on the screen. As David Rodowick points out:

her discussion of the female figure is restricted only to its function as
masculine object-choice. In this manner, the place of the masculine is
discussed as both the subject and object of the gaze: and the feminine is dis-
cussed only as an object which structures the masculine look according to its
active (voyeuristic) and passive (fetishistic) forms. So where is the place of the
feminine subject in this scenario?

There are several possible ways of filling this theoretical gap. One
would use a detailed textual analysis to demonstrate that different
gendered spectator positions are produced by the film text, contradicting
the unified masculine model of spectatorship. This would at least
provide some space for an account of the feminine subject in the film text
and in the cinema audience. The relationship of spectators to these
feminine and masculine positions would then need to be explored
further: do women necessarily take up a feminine and men a masculine
spectator position?

Alternatively, we could accept a theory of the masculinisation of the
spectator at a textual level, but argue that spectators bring different
subjectivities to the film according to sexual difference, and therefore
respond differently to the visual pleasures offered in the text. I want to
elaborate these two possibilities briefly, before moving on to discuss a
third which offers a more flexible or mobile model of spectatorship and
cinematic pleasure.

The first possibility is, then, arguing that the film text can be read and
enjoyed from different gendered positions. This problematises the monolithic model of Hollywood cinema as an ‘anthropomorphic male machine’ producing unified and masculinised spectators. It offers an explanation of women’s pleasure in narrative cinema based on different processes of spectatorship, according to sexual difference. What this ‘difference’ signifies, however, in terms of cinematic pleasure, is highly contestable.

Raymond Bellour has explored the way the look is organised to create filmic discourse through detailed analyses of the system of enunciation in Hitchcock’s work. The mechanisms for eliminating the threat of sexual difference represented by the figure of the woman, he argues, are built into the apparatus of the cinema. Woman’s desire only appears on the screen to be punished and controlled by assimilation to the desire of the male character. Bellour insists upon the masochistic nature of the woman spectator’s pleasure in Hollywood film.

I think that a woman can love, accept, and give positive value to these films only from her own masochism, and from a certain sadism that she can exercise in return on the masculine subject, within a system loaded with traps.

Bellour, then, provides an account of the feminine subject and women’s spectatorship which offers a different position from the masculine one set up by Mulvey. However, he fixes these positions within a rigid dichotomy which assumes a biologically determined equivalence between male/female and the masculine/feminine, sadistic/masochistic positions he believes to be set up by the cinematic apparatus. The apparatus here is seen as determining, controlling the meaning produced by a film text unproblematically.

... the resulting picture of the classical cinema is even more totalistic and deterministic than Mulvey’s. Bellour sees it as a logically consistent, complete and closed system.

The problem here is that Bellour’s analysis, like those of many structural functionalists, leaves no room for subjectivity. The spectator is presumed to be an already fully constituted subject and is fixed by the text to a predetermined gender identification. There is no space for subjectivity to be seen as a process in which identification and object choice may be shifting, contradictory or precarious.

A second challenge to the model of the masculinised spectator set up by Mulvey’s 1975 essay comes from the work of Mary Ann Doane. She draws on Freud’s account of asymmetry in the development of masculinity and femininity to argue that women’s pleasures are not motivated by fetishistic and voyeuristic drives.

For the female spectator there is a certain over-presence of the image—she is the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator’s
desire can be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism—the female look demands a becoming. It thus appears to negate the very distance or gap specified... as the essential precondition for voyeurism.  

Feminist critics have frequently challenged the assumption that fetishism functions for women in the same way that it is supposed to for men. Doane argues that the girl's understanding of the meaning of sexual difference occurs simultaneously with seeing the boy's genitals; the split between seeing and knowing, which enables the boy to disown the difference which is necessary for fetishism, does not occur in girls. It is in the distance between the look and the threat that the boy's relation to the knowledge of sexual difference is formulated. The boy, unlike the girl in Freud's description, is capable of a re-vision. This gap between the visible and the knowable, the very possibility of disowning what is seen, prepares the ground for fetishism.

This argument is useful in challenging the hegemony of the cinema apparatus and in offering an account of visual pleasure which is neither based on a phallic model, nor on the determinacy of the text. It allows for an account of women's potential resistance to the dominant masculine spectator position. However, it also sets women outside the problematic pleasures of looking in the cinema, as if women do not have to negotiate within patriarchal regimes. As Doane herself has pointed out:

The feminist theorist is thus confronted with something of a double bind: she can continue to analyse and interpret various instances of the repression of woman, of her radical absence in the discourses of men—a pose which necessitates remaining within that very problematic herself, repeating its terms; or she can attempt to delineate a feminine specificity, always risking a recapitulation of patriarchal constructions and a naturalization of 'woman'.

In fact, this is a very familiar problem in feminist theory: how to argue for a feminine specificity without falling into the trap of biological essentialism. If we do argue that women differ from men in their relation to visual constructions of femininity, then further questions are generated for feminist film theory: do all women have the same relationship to images of themselves? Is there only one feminine spectator position? How do we account for diversity, contradiction or resistance within this category of feminine spectatorship?

The problem here is one which arises in relation to all cultural systems in which women have been defined as 'other' within patriarchal discourses: how can we express the extent of women's oppression without denying femininity any room to manoeuvre (Mulvey, 1975), defining women as complete victims of patriarchy (Bellour, 1979), or as totally other to it (Doane 1982)? Within the theories discussed so far, the female spectator is offered only the three rather frustrating options of masculinisation, masochism or marginality.
Towards a More Contradictory Model of Spectatorship

A different avenue of exploration would require a more complex and contradictory model of the relay of looks on the screen and between the audience and the diegetic characters.

_It might be better, as Barthes suggests, neither to destroy difference nor to valorize it, but to multiply and disperse differences, to move towards a world where differences would not be synonymous with exclusion._

In her 1981 ‘Afterthoughts’ on visual pleasure, Mulvey addresses many of the problems raised so far. In an attempt to develop a more ‘mobile’ position for the female spectator in the cinema, she turns to Freud’s theories of the difficulties of attaining heterosexual femininity. Required, unlike men, to relinquish the phallic activity and female object of infancy, women are argued to oscillate between masculine and feminine identifications. To demonstrate this oscillation between positions, Mulvey cites Pearl Chavez’s ambivalence in _Duel in the Sun_, the splitting of her desire (to be Jesse’s ‘lady’ or Lewt’s tomboy lover), a splitting which also extends to the female spectator. Mulvey’s revision is important for two reasons: it displaces the notions of the fixity of spectator positions produced by the text, and it focuses on the gaps and contradictions within patriarchal signification, thus opening up crucial questions of resistance and diversity. However, Mulvey maintains that fantasies of action ‘can only find expression... through the metaphor of masculinity’. In order to identify with active desire, the female spectator must assume an (uncomfortably) masculine position:

...the female spectator’s phantasy of masculinisation is always to some extent at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes.

Oppressive Dichotomies

Psychoanalytic accounts which theorise identification and object choice within a framework of linked binary oppositions (masculinity/femininity: activity/passivity) necessarily masculinise female homosexuality. Mary Ann Doane’s reading of the first scene in the film _Caught_ demonstrates the limitations of this psychoanalytic binarism perfectly.

_The woman’s sexuality, as spectator, must undergo a constant process of transformation. She must look, as if she were a man with the phallic power of the gaze, at a woman who would attract that gaze, in order to be that woman. . . . The convolutions involved here are analogous to those described by Julia Kristeva as ‘the double or triple twists of what we commonly call female homosexuality’: ‘I am looking, as a man would, for a woman’; or else, ‘I submit myself, as if I were a man who thought he was a woman, to a woman who thinks she is a man.’_
Convolutions indeed. This insistence upon a gendered dualism of sexual desire maps homosexuality onto an assumed antithesis of masculinity and femininity. Such an assumption precludes a description of homosexual positionality without resorting to the manoeuvres cited by Doane. In arguing for a more complex model of cinematic spectatorship, I am suggesting that we need to separate gender identification from sexuality, too often conflated in the name of sexual difference.

In films where the woman is represented as sexual spectacle for the masculine gaze of the diegetic and the cinematic spectator, an identification with a masculine heterosexual desire is invited. The spectator's response can vary across a wide spectrum between outright acceptance and refusal. It has proved crucial for feminist film theorists to explore these variations. How might a woman's look at another woman, both within the diegesis and between spectator and character, compare with that of the male spectator?

This article considers the pleasures of two narrative films which develop around one woman's obsession with another woman, *All About Eve* (directed by Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950) and *Desperately Seeking Susan* (directed by Susan Seidelman, 1984). I shall argue that these films offer particular pleasures to the women in the audience which cannot simply be reduced to a masculine heterosexual equivalent. In so doing I am not claiming these films as 'lesbian films', but rather using them to examine certain possibilities of pleasure.

I want to explore the representation of forms of desire and identification in these films in order to consider their implications for the pleasures of female spectatorship. My focus is on the relations between women on the screen, and between these representations and the women in the audience. Interestingly, the fascinations which structure both narratives are precisely about difference—forms of otherness between women characters which are not merely reducible to sexual difference, so often seen as the sole producer of desire itself.

The Inscription of Active Feminine Desire

In *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa de Lauretis explores the function of the classic masculine Oedipal trajectory in dominant narrative. The subjects which motivate the narrative along the logic of the 'Oedipus', she argues, are necessarily masculine.

However varied the conditions of the presence of the narrative form in fictional genres, rituals or social discourses, its movement seems to be that of a passage, a transformation predicated on the figure of the hero, a mythical subject... the single figure of the hero who crosses the boundary and penetrates the other space. In so doing, the hero, the mythical subject, is constructed as a human being and as male; he is the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is what is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death.
De Lauretis then proceeds to outline the significance of this division between masculine and feminine within the textual narrative in terms of spectatorship.

Therefore, to say that narrative is the production of Oedipus is to say that each reader—male or female—is constrained and defined within the two positions of a sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; the female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other.21

As de Lauretis herself acknowledges later in the chapter, this analysis leaves little space for either the question of the feminine subject in the narrative, or the pleasures of desire and identification of the women in the audience. In order to explore these questions more concretely, I want to discuss two texts—one a Hollywood production of 1950, the other a recent US ‘independent’—whose central narrative concern is that of female desire. Both *All About Eve* and *Desperately Seeking Susan* have female protagonists whose desires and identifications move the narratives forward. In de Lauretis’s terms, these texts construct not only a feminine object of desire in the narrative, but also a feminine subject of that desire.

*All About Eve* is particularly well suited to an analysis of these questions, as it is precisely about the pleasures and dangers of spectatorship for women. One of its central themes is the construction and reproduction of feminine identities, and the activity of looking is highlighted as an important part of these processes. The narrative concerns two women, a Broadway star and her most adoring spectator, Eve. In its course, we witness the transformation of Eve Butler (Anne Baxter) from spectator to star herself. The pleasures of spectatorship are emphasised by Eve’s loyal attendance at every one of Margot Channing’s (Bette Davis) performances. Its dangers are also made explicit as an intense rivalry develops between them. Eve emerges as a greedy and ambitious competitor, and Margot steps down from stardom into marriage, finally enabling her protegée to replace her as ‘actress of the year’ in a part written originally for Margot.

Eve’s journey to stardom could be seen as the feminine equivalent to the masculine Oedipal trajectory described by de Lauretis above. Freud’s later descriptions of the feminine Oedipal journey contradict his previous symmetrical model wherein the girl’s first love object is her father, as the boy’s is his mother. In his later arguments, Freud also posited the mother as the girl’s first love object. Her path to heterosexuality is therefore difficult and complex, since it requires her not only to relinquish her first object, like the boy, but to transform both its gender (female to male) and the aim (active to passive) directed at it. Up to this point, active desire towards another woman is an experience of all women, and its re-enactment in *All About Eve* may constitute one of the pleasures of spectatorship for the female viewer.

Eve is constantly referred to as innocent and childlike in the first half of the film and her transformation involves a process of maturation, of
becoming a more confident adult. First she is passionately attached to Margot, but then she shifts her affection to Margot’s lover Bill, attempting unsuccessfully to seduce him. Twice in the film she is shown interrupting their intimacy: during their farewell at the airport and then during their fierce argument about Margot’s jealousy, shortly before Bill’s welcome-home party. Eve’s third object of desire, whom she actively pursues, is the married playwright, Lloyd Richards, husband to Margot’s best friend. In both cases the stability of the older heterosexual couples, Margot and Bill, Karen and Lloyd, are threatened by the presence of the younger woman who completes the Oedipal triangle. Eve is finally punished for her desires by the patriarchal power of the aptly named Addison de Wit, who proves to be one step ahead of her manipulations.

The binary opposition between masculinity and femininity offers a limited framework for the discussion of Eve’s fascination with Margot, which is articulated actively through an interplay of desire and identification during the film. In many ways, Margot is Eve’s idealised object of desire. She follows Margot from city to city, never missing any of her performances. Her devotion to her favourite Broadway star is stressed at the very start of the film.

Karen  But there are hundreds of plays on Broadway....
Eve  Not with Margot Channing in them!
Margot is moved by Eve’s representation of her ‘tragic’ past, and flattered by her adoration, so she decides to ‘adopt’ her.

**Margot (voice over)** We moved Eve’s few pitiful possessions into my apartment… Eve became my sister, mother, lawyer, friend, psychiatrist and cop. The honeymoon was on!

Eve acts upon her desire to become more like her ideal. She begins to wear Margot’s cast-off clothes, appearing in Margot’s bedroom one morning in her old black suit. Birdie, Margot’s personal assistant, responds suspiciously to Eve’s behaviour.

**Margot** She thinks only of me.

**Birdie** She thinks only about you – like she’s studying you – like you was a book, or a play, or a set of blueprints – how you walk, talk, eat, think, sleep.

**Margot** I’m sure that’s very flattering, Birdie, and I’m sure there’s nothing wrong with it.

The construction of Bette Davis as the desirable feminine ideal in this narrative has a double significance here. As well as being a ‘great star’ for Eve, she is clearly the same for the cinema audience. The film offers the fictional fulfilment of the spectator’s dreams as well as Eve’s, to be a star like Bette Davis, like Margot. Thus the identifications and desires of Eve, to some extent, narrativise a traditional pleasure of female spectatorship.

Margot is not only a star, she is also an extremely powerful woman who intimidates most of the male characters in the film. Her quick wit and disdain for conventional politeness, together with her flare for drama offstage as much as on, make her an attractive figure for Eve, an ‘idealistic dreamy-eyed kid’, as Bill describes her. It is this difference between the two women which motivates Eve, but which Eve also threatens. In trying to ‘become as much like her ideal as possible’, Eve almost replaces Margot in both her public and her private lives. She places a call to Bill on Margot’s behalf, and captures his attention when he is on his way upstairs to see Margot before his coming home party. Margot begins to feel dispensable.

**Margot** I could die right now and nobody would be confused. My inventory is all in shape and the merchandise all put away.

Yet even dressed in Margot’s costume, having taken her role in the evening’s performance, Eve cannot supplant her in the eyes of Bill, who rejects her attempt at seduction. The difference between the two women is repeatedly stressed and complete identification proves impossible.

*All About Eve* offers some unusual pleasures for a Hollywood film, since the active desire of a female character is articulated through looking
at the female star. It is by watching Margot perform on the stage that Eve becomes intoxicated with her idol. The significance of active looking in the articulation of feminine desire is foregrounded at various points in the narrative. In one scene, we see Eve’s devoted spectatorship in progress during one of Margot’s performances. Eve watches Margot from the wings of the stage, and Margot bows to the applause of her audience. In the next scene the roles are reversed, and Margot discovers Eve on the empty stage bowing to an imaginary audience. Eve is holding up Margot’s costume to sample the pleasures of stardom for herself. This process is then echoed in the closing scene of the film with Eve, now a Broadway star herself, and the newly introduced Phoebe, an adoring schoolgirl fan. The final shot shows Phoebe, having covertly donned Eve’s bejewelled evening cloak, holding Eve’s award and gazing at her reflection in the mirror. The reflected image, infinitely multiplied in the triptych of the glass, creates a spectacle of stardom that is the film’s final shot, suggesting a perpetual regeneration of intra-feminine fascinations through the pleasure of looking.

The Desire to be Desperate

Like All About Eve, Desperately Seeking Susan concerns a woman’s obsession with another woman. But instead of being punished for acting upon her desires, like Eve, Roberta (Rosanna Arquette) acts upon her desires, if in a rather more haphazard way, and eventually her initiatives are rewarded with the realisation of her desires. Despite her classic feminine behaviour, forgetful, clumsy, unpunctual and indecisive, she succeeds in her quest to find Susan (Madonna).

Even at the very beginning of the film, when suburban housewife Roberta is represented at her most dependent and childlike, her actions propel the narrative movement. Having developed her own fantasy narrative about Susan by reading the personal advertisements, Roberta acts upon her desire to be ‘desperate’ and becomes entangled in Susan’s life. She anonymously attends the romantic reunion of Susan and Jim, and then pursues Susan through the streets of Manhattan. When she loses sight of her quarry in a second-hand shop, she purchases the jacket which Susan has just exchanged. The key found in its pocket provides an excuse for direct contact, and Roberta uses the personals to initiate another meeting.

Not only is the narrative propelled structurally by Roberta’s desire, but almost all the spectator sees of Susan at the beginning of the film is revealed through Roberta’s fantasy. The narrativisation of her desires positions her as the central figure for spectator identification: through her desire we seek, and see, Susan. Thus, in the opening scenes, Susan is introduced by name when Roberta reads the personals aloud from under the dryer in the beauty salon. Immediately following Roberta’s declaration ‘I wish I was desperate’, there is a cut to the first shot of Susan.
The cuts from the Glass' party to Susan's arrival in New York City work to the same effect. Repelled by her husband's TV commercial for his bathroom wares, Roberta leaves her guests and moves towards the window, as the ad's voice-over promises 'At Gary's Oasis, all your fantasies can come true.' Confronted with her own image in the reflection, she pushes it away by opening the window and looking out longingly onto Manhattan's skyline. The ensuing series of cuts between Roberta and the bridge across the river to the city link her desiring gaze to Susan's arrival there via the same bridge.

At certain points within *Desperately Seeking Susan*, Roberta explicitly becomes the bearer of the look. The best illustration of this transgression of traditional gender positionalities occurs in the scene in which she first catches sight of Susan. The shot sequence begins with Jim seeing Susan and is immediately followed with Roberta seeing her. It is, however, Roberta's point of view which is offered for the spectator's identification. Her look is specified by the use of the pay-slot telescope through which Roberta, and the spectator, see Susan.

In accordance with classic narrative cinema, the object of fascination in *Desperately Seeking Susan* is a woman—typically, a woman coded as a sexual spectacle. As a star Madonna's image is saturated in sexuality. In many ways she represents the '80s 'assertive style' of heterosexual spectacle, inviting masculine consumption. This is certainly emphasised by shots of Susan which reference classic pornographic poses and camera angles; for example, the shot of Susan lying on Roberta's bed reading her diary, which shows Susan lying on her back, wearing only a vest and a pair of shorts over her suspenders and lacy tights. (Although one could argue that the very next shot, from Susan's point of view, showing Gary upside down, subverts the conventional pornographic codes.) My aim is not to deny these meanings in *Desperately Seeking Susan*, in order to claim it as a 'progressive text', but to point to cinematic pleasures which may be available to the spectator in addition to those previously analysed by feminist film theory. Indeed, I believe such a project can only attempt to work within the highly contradictory constructions of femininity in mainstream films.

Susan is represented as puzzling and enigmatic to the protagonist, and to the spectator. The desire propelling the narrative is partly a desire to become more like her, but also a desire to know her, and to solve the riddle of her femininity. The protagonist begins to fulfil this desire by following the stranger, gathering clues about her identity and her life, such as her jacket, which, in turn, produces three other clues, a key, a photograph and a telephone number. The construction of her femininity as a riddle is emphasised by the series of intrigues and misunderstandings surrounding Susan's identity. The film partly relies on typical devices drawn from the mystery genre in constructing the protagonist's, and thus the spectator's, knowledge of Susan through a series of clues and coincidences. Thus, in some ways, Susan is positioned as the classic feminine enigma; she is, however, investigated by another woman.
One line of analysis might simply see Roberta as taking up the position of the masculine protagonist in expressing a desire to be ‘desperate’, which, after all, can be seen as identifying with Jim’s position in relation to Susan, that of active desiring masculinity. Further legitimation for this reading could be seen in Jim’s response to Roberta’s advertisement to Susan in the personals. He automatically assumes it has been placed there by another man, perhaps a rival. How can we understand the construction of the female protagonist as the agent and articulator of desire for another woman in the narrative within existing psychoanalytic theories of sexual difference? The limitations of a dichotomy which offers only two significant categories for understanding the complex interplay of gender, sexual aim and object choice, is clearly demonstrated here.

**Difference and Desire between Women**

The difference which produces the narrative desire in *Desperately Seeking Susan* is not sexual difference, but the difference between two women in the film. It is the difference between suburban marriage and street credibility. Two sequences contrast the characters using smoking as a signifier of difference. The first occurs in Battery Park, where Roberta behaves awkwardly in the unfamiliar territory of public space. She is shown sitting on a park bench, knees tightly clenched, looking around nervously for Susan. Jim asks her for a light, to which she timidly replies that she does not smoke. The ensuing cut shows Susan, signalled by Jim’s shout of recognition. Susan is sitting on the boat rail, striking a match on the bottom of her raised boot to light a cigarette.

Smoking is used again to emphasise difference in a subsequent
sequence. This time, Roberta, having by now lost her memory and believing she may be Susan, lights a cigarette from Susan's box. Predictably, she choke on the smoke, with the unfamiliarity of an adolescent novice. The next cut shows us Susan, in prison for attempting to skip her cab fare, taking a light from the prison matron and blowing the smoke defiantly straight back into her face. The contrast in their smoking ability is only one signifier of the characters' very different femininities. Roberta is represented as young, inexperienced and asexual, while Susan's behaviour and appearance are coded as sexually confident and provocative. Rhyming sequences are used to emphasise their differences even after Roberta has taken on her new identity as Susan. She ends up in the same prison cell, but her childish acquiescence to authority contrasts with Susan's defiance of the law.

Susan transgresses conventional forms of feminine behaviour by appropriating public space for herself. She turns the public lavatory into her own private bathroom, drying her armpits with the hand blower, and changing her clothes in front of the mirror above the washbasins as if in her own bedroom. In the streets, Susan challenges the patronising offer of a free newspaper from a passerby by dropping the whole pile at his feet and taking only the top copy for herself. In contrast to Susan's supreme public confidence, Roberta is only capable in her own middle-class privacy. Arriving home after her day of city adventures, she manages to synchronise with a televised cooking show, catching up on its dinner preparations with confident dexterity in her familiar domestic environment.

As soon as Roberta becomes entangled in Susan's world, her respectable sexuality is thrown into question. First she is assumed to be having an affair, then she is arrested for suspected prostitution, and finally Gary
asks her if she is a lesbian. When the two photographs of Roberta, one as a bride and one as a suspected prostitute, are laid down side by side at the police station, her apparent transformation from virgin to whore shocks her husband. The ironic effect of these largely misplaced accusations about Roberta’s sexuality works partly in relation to Susan, who is represented as the epitome of opposition to acceptable bourgeois feminine sexuality. She avoids commitment, dependency or permanence in her relationships with men, and happily takes their money, while maintaining an intimate friendship with the woman who works at the Magic Box.

Roberta’s desire is finally rewarded when she meets Susan in an almost farcical chase scene at that club during the chaotic film finale. Gary finds Roberta, Des finds ‘Susan’ (Roberta), Jim finds Susan, the villain finds the jewels (the earrings which Susan innocently pocketed earlier in the film), Susan and Roberta catch the villain, and Susan and Roberta find each other . . . . The last shot of the film is a front-page photograph of the two women hand in hand, triumphantly waving their reward cheque in return for the recovery of the priceless Nefertiti earrings. In the end, both women find what they were searching for throughout the narrative: Roberta has found Susan, and Susan has found enough money to finance many future escapades.

Roberta’s desire to become more like her ideal—a more pleasingly coordinated, complete and attractive feminine image—is offered temporary narrative fulfilment. However, the pleasures of this feminine desire cannot be collapsed into simple identification, since difference and otherness are continuously played upon, even when Roberta ‘becomes’ her idealised object. Both Desperately Seeking Susan and All About Eve tempt the woman spectator with the fictional fulfilment of becoming an ideal feminine other, while denying complete transformation by insisting upon differences between women. The rigid distinction between either desire or identification, so characteristic of psychoanalytic film theory, fails to address the construction of desires which involve a specific interplay of both processes.

I would like to thank Sarah Franklin, Richard Dyer, Alison Light, Chris Healey and the Women Thesis Writers Group in Birmingham for their inspiration, support and helpful comments during the writing of this article.