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Ambiguous Intimacy as Queer Potential: Touch, Desire and Adolescence in *She Monkeys*

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Abstract: This article analyses the ambiguous intimacies generated by the competition that permeates desire in Lisa Aschan's *She Monkeys* (2011). The article argues that in a new corpus of films about adolescence, the queerness of lesbian desire is evoked as a series of affects outside of figurative norms. Desire meets and is confused with other affects such as envy and disgust, all of which attach, sometimes simultaneously, to objects that do not always seem to recognise or permit them. Slow and languid scenes reveal desire's potential but rarely its achievement. The article explores the erotic potential of those intimacies that reside in the spaces between bodies, asking what happens to that potential when it is generated but immediately contained by the negotiations of control. In dialogue with psychoanalytic work on the ambivalent relations between desire, envy, attachment and idealisation, the article advances a reading of an affective mode of filmmaking that is saturated with desire but not defined by desire's labelling.

Keywords: queer, lesbian, adolescence, affect, psychoanalysis, sports film, desire

This article explores the conceptual space between lesbianism and queerness exemplified by Lisa Aschan's *She Monkeys*' (2011) erratic visibility, acknowledging the political and theoretical tensions that arise in the slippage between those terms and their connotations. In *She Monkeys*, a film about adolescent girls and competition, the desire for sporting success veils an ambivalent desire for the love object, with potentially violent results. In this article, I explore the erotic potential of those ambiguous intimacies that reside in the spaces between bodies, asking what happens to that potential when it is generated but immediately contained by the negotiations of control.

The friendship between two adolescent girls in *She Monkeys* unfolds through a murky tension between infatuation and narcissism. Emma (Mathilda Paradeiser) and Cassandra (Linda Molin) are rivals for a coveted place on an equestrian vaulting team, in which challenging gymnastic movement is performed precariously on a moving horse.¹ From an early scene in which

newcomer Emma contemplates the performance of star gymnast Cassandra, to a final reversal in which a wounded Cassandra must watch her protégé in the limelight, the desire for sporting and sexual triumph is sustained by competition. Desire meets and is confused with other affects such as envy and disgust, all of which attach, sometimes simultaneously, to objects that do not always seem to recognise or permit them. The film's languid scenes reveal desire's potential but rarely its achievement. Its long shots of wide-open Scandinavian landscapes and brawling musical score set the scene for Western showdowns rather than close-up sporting montages. The film's director, Lisa Aschan, has remarked that she 'wanted every scene to be a duel' (in Swash, 2012), and the film stages the girls' relationship as a series of competitive encounters in which interactions are amplified in their intensity but precarious in their intimacy.² Eroticism is found here in the intertwining of identification, idealisation and desire. Heightened in these registers because of its uncertain execution in the diegesis, it is always left in anticipation of a narrative guarantee by what Annamarie Jagose calls the 'structuring mechanisms of lesbian invisibility' (2002: 2).

She Monkeys is one of a series of transnational, female-directed films released within a ten-year period in which we see a mode of filmmaking that is saturated by desire but not defined by desire's labelling. In *Thirteen* (Hardwicke, 2003), girls urge each other to push boundaries on the surface of the skin. In *Mosquita y Mari* (Guerrero, 2012), a close friendship is eroticised in moments of *almost* touching. In *The Falling* (Morley, 2015), eroticism cuts across coded practices, as dispersed affects rather than object oriented desires pass between adolescent schoolgirls through the "fainting spell" that inexplicably swells into an episode of mass psychogenic illness. In *Water Lilies* (Sciamma, 2007), the spectacle of athletic performance – in this case synchronised swimming – meets the comedy of adolescent inadequacy and the muted disappointment of unrequitedness. In her expansive reading of *Water Lilies*, Emma

Wilson writes that Sciamma's film 'has its own sensorium and this is tightly aligned with the perspective, the point of view, the corporeal sensation and affective state of its protagonist Marie' (2014: 212). Coming into desire is described here by Wilson as a process that transpires through sensory abundance. Katharina Lindner, in her reading of *She Monkeys*, considers the film's 'sense-ibilities' through a theorisation of queer processes of cinematic embodiment (2017: 122). Lindner highlights the apparent clash of registers that are brought together by the film's queer tactility. Both writers powerfully re-centre the body by theorising desire through affect. Whilst I make the claim that the queerness of lesbian desire can be evoked as a series of affects outside of figurative norms, the theorisation of interiorised identifications generated by such affects also call to be read through psychoanalytic language that moves beyond the testimony of the physical. Thus, I consider the potentially fraught and uncomfortable notions of ambivalence, attachment and envy that have been investigated by queer theorists such as Lauren Berlant (2012b) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2007). The article engages the affective ambiguities that occur when tactility is compromised while other sensory monitors, such as the gaze, are intensified. Here we find the queer affects produced by moments and movements in-between touch.

To call *She Monkeys* a lesbian film is to risk desexualising the category, allowing it to contain within it the 'mere' eroticism not overtly consummated by sex (see de Lauretis, 1994: 120). The notion of homoeroticism has been configured theoretically as a psychic precursor to the social lesbian legibility that can now be found in an era of the visible. The concept has been accused of marginalising lesbian *sexuality*, in particular, in the debates over identification and desire between Jackie Stacey (1987, 1994) and Teresa de Lauretis (1991, 1994). However, I want to reconfigure homoeroticism here as the queer potentiality of lesbianism. Queerness allows itself to see beyond the present, to imagine what José Muñoz calls the 'not-yet-

conscious' of desire that, rather than defining itself through visibility, has yet to be configured (2009: 21). Rather than employing the term "queer" merely to replace "lesbian" in the description or categorisation of directional or intentional desires that follow between singular subject and singular object, I nudge the discussion towards a dual terminology that shakes up those very directions and intentions. An erotics of friendship need not supersede or dissolve an erotics of lesbianism, the need for whose "sexiness" remains politically charged but so often theoretically overdetermined. In *She Monkeys*, intense gazes are abundant but frequently unreturned; touches are insistent in their brief moment of contact but then found to be all too fleeting. Slowness and interruption build up a throughline of possibility that is erotically, if frustratingly, charged with suspense. The film thus exhibits a homoerotic, or we might now see queer, affect.

In the next two sections, I explore how the discipline of the sports genre is made unruly and unpredictable by its juxtaposition with undercurrents of childishness and animalism that resist narrative impulses towards growth and seriousness. By gesturing towards the sports genre but infusing it with the capriciousness of adolescence, the world of *She Monkeys* tempers discipline with play. We cannot depend on the consistency of either one, any more than we can force an uncomplicated reading of the film through the tropes of lesbian cinema: desire and attachment are stubbornly infused with frustration and disappointment. In both cases, physicality produces not result but potential. Thereby troubling the notion of seriousness as a requisite of a triad of possible generic affiliations – sports, teen, lesbian – the body in *She Monkeys* is a site not only of discipline but of play; not only of sexuality but of violence; and not only of attachment but of ambivalence.

Bodies in Motion

The sports film often thrives on the closeted eroticism of the changing room, and this functions in different ways for team and individual sports environments: the pleasures for lesbian viewers of *A League of Their Own* (Marshall, 1992), *Bend It Like Beckham* (Chadha, 2002) and *Whip It* (Barrymore, 2009) are induced by vicarious modes of spectatorship (see Whatling, 1997; Lindner, 2011a). The competitiveness that characterises these films about team sports does not just dilute, but rather has the potential to augment, the homoeroticism that is also a feature of those spaces. The quintessential lesbian sports film *Personal Best* (Towne, 1982), on the other hand, is structured around the inevitability of competition between two female lovers competing against one another as sprinters. The romance between Tori (Patrice Donnelly) and Chris (Mariel Hemingway) begins with an arm wrestle in a now famous scene of foreplay whose sweaty, erotic potential seems to predominate, in critical recollection, over later sex scenes (see Ellsworth, 1998; Straayer, 1984 and Williams, 1986). In some ways, this coheres with heteronormative wishful thinking. *Personal Best's* trailer makes no reference to the romance at the heart of the film. Yet, reading such a marketing strategy against the grain, we can see that what the film's trailer foregrounds is the competition between the two women, which, as suggested by this arm wrestling scene, is what in turn provides the eroticism that does not need to be accounted for by sex.

She Monkeys merges these competitive tropes of the sports film with the gendered performance of balletic movement (see Lindner 2011b). In the voyeuristic opening scene, we watch the vaulting team rehearse. The heavy breaths of the balancing young gymnasts are synchronised with the pounding hooves of the horse as it circles the barn. Two girls, with identical postures in uniforms of grey and red, hold on to one another so that their bodies become entangled and seem to create a single shifting figure. Emma stares from the sidelines as Cassandra stands atop

the horse with her partner's hand on her waist and her own arms outstretched. Janet Wolff writes of classical ballet that it has emphasised 'in its commitment to line, weightlessness, lift and extension an ethereal presence rather than a real corporeality' (1997: 95). Cassandra's figure in the opening scene captures this same weightlessness – literally lifted by the moving horse, and by the camera, which disengages the performer from the ground below her. This ethereality – the body made so light and delicate as to be lifted into the air – codes the movements in this film as feminine, just like those of synchronised swimming, the only Olympic sport to be restricted to one gender in competition. Moreover, dance mirrors the controversial “phasing” of lesbian desire. The dancers are never rooted to the floor, just as the film can never be grounded in the reliable physicality of sexual consummation (see also Lindner, 2017).

Negotiating the interplay between the ethereal and the corporeal, *She Monkeys* meditates on the ambivalence that is produced through the unattainability underpinning the fascination with the star. In another early scene, shortly after the girls have met, we witness their first proper exchange. Cassandra pushes Emma's thighs into the splits: “Focus!” she shouts. In the next frame, as they proceed with their exercises, Emma is the other girl's slightly belated mirror, her body moving only in accordance with Cassandra's command. This silent regime will continue throughout the film. From the start, Emma and Cassandra's friendship is forged through instruction and discipline, first physical and then emotional. The narrative proceeds tentatively from scenes of competition and aggression to those of suspended affection – and then back again. The anticipation of touch is just as tentative; the bodily control associated with gymnastic feats requires a hold that is given then withdrawn.

Seriousness

The cultural and social projects of gay and lesbian liberation movements could be articulated as the desire for desires to be taken seriously. Like *Water Lilies*, its most obvious filmic companion, *She Monkeys* diverts this call for seriousness, refusing to offer a discernible movement from the closet to outness, a coming-of-age narrative to cling to with the optimism of romantic satisfaction or identity formation.³ In the face of the legal, social and cultural invisibility that has historically defined her (non-)representation, the precariousness and unpredictability of *She Monkeys*' homoerotic drive threatens to re-figure the lesbian in terms of the 'immaturity' or 'incompleteness' that have so frequently been used to reduce her to the discourse of the passing phase (Roof, 1991: 5). Yet, as this section will claim, these same terms might, in another context, be read queerly, as unfixing desires that refuse to endorse normative ideologies of development.

The significant tension that defines my interest in this film is brought about through this almost simultaneous generation and control of potential, be it sexual or sporting. While *Personal Best* presents an almost constant spectacle of physical prowess, *She Monkeys*, like *Water Lilies*, puts its isolated scenes of athletic performance into tension with everyday activities. Demonstrations of muscular physicality find space alongside interludes of mundane adolescent summer play. Indeed, in *She Monkeys*, any pleasure in touch is aligned with childishness. Seeking to champion the failure that 'allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development', Jack Halberstam argues that success is tied up in the regime of growth towards a 'serious' adulthood (2011: 3).⁴ In *She Monkeys*' dusty, brawling *mise en scène*, figuratively colourful interludes come from Emma's little sister Sara (Isabella Lindquist). Sara is clownish and endearing. She is dismissed from her swimming class for wearing just bikini bottoms and for leaving her undeveloped chest bare; the necessity for concealment secures the body as a staging of inappropriateness (indicating that there is

something to conceal). She is subsequently intent on wearing clothes for older girls, insists on wearing a fake tattoo on her arm and misunderstands the affection of her babysitter. Such encounters unsettle not just the biological imperative towards reproductive maturity but also the social imperative to grow into maturity as seriousness. Sara stands for childish, undisciplined discoveries of tactile pleasure.

Emma and Cassandra's relationship, meanwhile, is infused with the 'punishing norms' that deliver us in Halberstam's words 'from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods' (2011: 3).⁵ Yet, unpredictability lurks even in their highly-disciplined interactions. Speech is often entirely abandoned in favour of other sensory expressions; desires remain unspoken. Like *Attenberg* (Tsangari, 2010), in which two friends' devotion to nature programmes instils in them a bizarre tendency to use their bodies to create animalistic shapes and noises, the tactile but pre- or anti-verbal is a way of surmounting desire's excess, of writing it on the body. In *She Monkeys*, the family dog subjected to Emma's formidable training whistle demonstrates yet another domain of control. The metaphorical monkeys of the film's peculiar title are, on the other hand, routinely classed as erratic; playful smiles guard misread signs of anxiety and fear and precursors to violence.⁶ They share Halberstam's 'wondrous anarchy of childhood' (2011: 3), a space and time the film opens up to tease and resist the disciplining and reining in of desire by the narrative's central premise.

Juxtaposing the animal, the child and the adolescent, *She Monkeys* removes us from everyday cycles of obedience and hierarchy; rejecting the classroom as the primary space of adolescence, the film's summertime setting extends instead a temporal and spatial dreaminess. Here, the cinematic conditions of adolescent life are reduced to an irrational, emotionally realist but socially fantastical 'sensorium' (Wilson, 2014: 212): desires are in high definition whilst

everything else fades into irrelevance. A contemporary cinematic *bildungsroman* like *Boyhood* (Linklater, 2014) reliably includes at least one scene from every annual cycle of its measured twelve-year scope. In that film, we witness the protagonist's early childhood, adolescence and approach to adulthood; the promise of the narrative's endpoint is confirmed by the regularity and linearity of progress towards it. What makes *She Monkeys* remarkable is a refusal to allow the resolution to structure the film's narrative journey. In her essay 'Lesbian Minor Cinema', Patricia White reads two films, *Flat is Beautiful* (Benning, 1998) and *Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 60s in Brussels* (Akerman, 1994), that allow for 'representations of the juvenile that mark the marginalization of lesbian in relation to a series of terms including gay, women, feminist, queer' (2008: 415). White reads as full of potential what could otherwise be read as failure: lesbians have 'deployed the *minor* in a range of culturally successful ways', she writes (425). Like 'minor', 'queer' is another term that, for White, 'inflects rather than opposes the dominant' (411-412). Through the usage of these two terms in alignment, White does not pit the lesbian against queer (and 'gay, women, feminist'), but rather gestures at lesbianism's queer potential. Thus, she lays out the grounds for a mutual, rather than merely substitutive, relationship between the two terms. Queerness here rejects both the 'phase' *and* the coming out narrative, refusing 'predictive narratives in favour of an unrealized potential' (411). Not 'predictable', but 'predictive'. White's choice of term here is critical. Not only do we see a refusal of the singular moment of identity enunciation, but also a refusal to predict it. Unruliness and unpredictability: these are the terms that, for Halberstam and White respectively, unite queerness and childishness. These are also the terms that I think most befit the queer characterisation of *She Monkeys*. The film finishes in the lingering uncertainty of either romantic or sporting triumph. Where adolescence meets competition, a space emerges that holds off potential, resists heteronormativity, heightens the "phasing" of desire as a provocative risk.

Nothing but a Mirage

Lifted above the ground and the rest of the team, Cassandra is set up, from the voyeuristic opening scene, as Emma's singular object of desire. Ethereal and seemingly weightless as a dancer, her body is lifted into air not only by the requisites of the sport in which she participates but by the film's framing of her. Created partly *by* desire, moreover, she is a 'mirage, a shaky anchor' (Berlant, 2012b: 6). The illusion referenced here by Berlant's metaphor for desire's form becomes, on the screen, optical. It is only Emma's voyeurism that constructs Cassandra as a desired object. Produced by the cinematic sequencing of Emma's gaze, Cassandra does not exist *outside of* Emma's desire for her. This object of desire is established through a spectacle of physical prowess, but also through the star's isolation within the team and her unattainability: she is an object of voyeurism but not of touch.

Insistently playing with the (shaky) anchoring of desire in the body and in the gaze, the film explores the tensions that arise when the voyeuristic idealisations are not satisfied corporeally or, when they are, are infused with painful affects. If we must all discover that our object of desire is really nothing but a mirage, *She Monkeys* explores precisely the frustration that is thus produced. Berlant writes of desire that it

describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it. This gap produces a number of further convolutions. Desire visits you as an impact from the outside, and yet, inducing an encounter with your affects, makes you feel as though it comes from within you; this means that your objects are not objective, but things and scenes that you have converted into propping up your world, and so what seems objective and autonomous in them is partly what your desire has created and therefore is a mirage, a shaky anchor. Your style of addressing those objects gives shape to the drama with which they allow you to reencounter yourself. By contrast, love is the embracing dream in which desire is reciprocated: rather than being isolating, love provides an image of an expanded self, the normative version of which is the two-as-one intimacy of the couple form.

(2012b: 6)

My discussion of the film's regime of competition has begun to demonstrate the affective and theoretical 'convolutions' that are produced by *desire's* dissatisfying refusal to be represented *as love*. What follows in this article's second half examines this refusal in dialogue with works that theorise envy, attachment and the ambivalent pathways to development that characterise the phasing of queer/lesbian adolescence.

She Monkeys affectively occupies the space of what Berlant calls that 'cloud of possibility'. The film presents as contradictory, frustrating and painful those needs that accompany desire and its 'promises'. Emma's entry into the vaulting team is the entry into a world of desire. Yet, this is a 'sensorium' – to re-quote Wilson's term (2014: 212) – not just of desire, but of frustration and ambivalence. Cassandra and Emma by turns tease, trick and physically hurt each other. Their interactions are abundantly physical from the start, and yet outbursts of feeling fall flat, as if muted by what Catherine Wheatley observes in the film's 'pale half-light that makes everything spectral' (2012: online). A sole utterance of the words 'I love you' remains unanswered, taking place in the shallow water of a beach at dusk. The barn in which they train, and thus its world of discipline, is evoked by this sandy beachscape. The importance of space in the representation of desire and sexuality not only means the coding of *particular* spaces, but also the cinematic rendering of those spaces as erotic through the structuring of the *mise en scène*. The sand of the barn, for instance, is not inherently erotic, but evokes a motif of colour and texture whose repetition across space and time generates an affective charge. Like our suspense in a Hitchcockian thriller even after the main denouement, our immersion in desire's spatialisation lingers beyond the unfolding of what are presumed to be the necessary narrative details. The mystical half-light shrouds this scene in a disorienting dreaminess. The fairytale ambience of the Swedish coast meets what Fiona Handyside calls the beach's potential for 'radical and transformative encounters' (2014: 5). But this particular beach scene provides,

rather than the pleasure of encounter, the pain of it: the verbal promise of romance ('I love you') is met with the induction of physical repulsion, as Cassandra pulls away from the vulnerability of her words to place a slimy jellyfish in Emma's hands. The animalistic unpredictability discussed in the last section permeates even a prospectively romantic scene such as this. The desire for, and fear of, intimacy is countered by the pain that always threatens to have been held within it.

Cassandra's touch has strictly been one of discipline until the arrival on the beach of Jens (Adam Lundgren), one of two boys invited for a double date that is provoked by Emma's playful banter and derailed first by Cassandra's indifference and then by her sabotage. When Emma's liaison with Jens promises – or threatens – to become sexual, Cassandra instructs Emma to humiliate the boy, stealing his clothes and abandoning him. His brief appearance serves only to reveal the potential for jealousy to provide the evidence of desire. Running from the beach to a roadside bus shelter, the girls sit side by side and hold hands, the frenzied aftermath of Jens' humiliation inducing more proximity. It is the first time the girls' hands have touched on-screen outside of the regimes of sport. As if to announce the inappropriateness of this moment of undisciplined contact, the scene quickly departs from the potential of intimacy to the bluntness of transaction, as Cassandra hands over half of the cash that she has retrieved from Jens's wallet. The potential for Emma's heterosexual liaison has been both enabled by Cassandra and curtailed by her. To paraphrase Berlant, Cassandra has become the prop for Emma's world (2012b: 6).

Yet, Cassandra cannot maintain the affirming role that makes this world a pleasurable one in which to reside; her professions of love turn all too quickly to punishment. *She Monkeys* makes desire precarious. Toying with its protagonist's potential defences, it asks – do we have the

capability not only to generate but to sustain desire. The film depicts first Emma's excessive idealisation of Cassandra, who is exalted as a singular figure of excellence in the frame. Emma will thus defend against the possibility of envy through a voyeuristic enhancement of Cassandra's position: how could she be compared with one so radiant?⁷ Even a desiring gaze signals a painful gap between voyeur and spectacle, between subject and object of desire. And yet, of course, idealisation all too easily tips over into envy. Cassandra becomes in Melanie Klein's terms a "persecutor", and on to her is projected the subject's envious and critical attitude' (1987: 217-8). Finally, Emma's voyeuristic desire transitions into the sense that Cassandra has something she wants; she thus finds the 'envious impulse' to 'take away' or 'spoil' what Cassandra has – her success, her role in the team (212). Envy becomes a ward against excessive feeling. This is the attitude that puts the violent phantasies of Kleinian theories of child development onto the screen in the form of painful affects of competition.⁸

Such a relationship seems surely impossible to retain. Just as Berlant warns, the drama of desire is performed as a mutual encounter but revealed to be an isolating dream which has preoccupied many on-screen narratives of adolescence (2012b: 6). In *Heavenly Creatures* (Jackson, 1994), the jealous and competitive relationship between teenage girls is given shape in a dream world through which Pauline (Melanie Lynskey) and Juliet (Kate Winslet) share their erotic and violent fantasies. *Highly Strung* (Laloy, 2009) turns the school arena into a stage of obsessive competition and artistic sabotage whilst *Breathe* (Laurent, 2014) is about the unsustainability of competitive friendship without violence. For Sedgwick, the 'Kleinian infant experiences a greed whose aggressive and envious component is already perceived as posing a terrible threat both to her desired objects and to herself' (2007: 633). This infantile experience gets played out again and again in adult relationships and, as Sedgwick tells us, through affect; in *She Monkeys*, as I argue, this affect is what creates the foundation of the film. But if, also for

Sedgwick, 'the resulting primary anxiety is an affect so toxic that it probably ought to be called, not anxiety, but dread' (633), how does the film weather the storm of this affective toxicity and still leave room for desire?

Disappointing Evidence

Even as *She Monkeys* rests on the intensification of touch as the film progresses, the critical task here is to avoid submitting to either the promise, or disappointment, of sex as the evidence of desire. We are always left just out of reach of the consummation that we cling to as narrative convention is resisted. The film eschews altogether the necessity for narrative climax in the form of sexual climax. Midway through the film, and in a transitional point of the narrative, we witness an embrace that we might habitually presume will lead to sex. Spending the evening together, without parents, at Emma's house, the girls lean into each other's arms. The scene's prelude combines the humour of Sara's childishness with the tension of Emma and Cassandra's competitiveness; the force of discipline and the seeking of tactility; the flippancy of giggles and the anticipation of arousal. A precarious moment with a shot-gun is a false alarm but hints at violent potential. Sport, dance, play and threat all take their place. The girls' embrace in an unexpected slow dance is but a temporary tender punctuation in a scene of childish play; swiftly, they leave each other's romantic hold to wrestle in a fit of giggles so feverish that Emma wets herself. Desire in this moment is made grotesque just as it is made explicit. Following this first breakdown of bodily control, Emma must then endure another: as if on demand, she throws up at the precise moment that Cassandra asks her if she feels sick. Just as in training she was the belated mirror of Cassandra's poise, here her physical breakdown is instructed by Cassandra. In the slow movements that follow, there is something ritualistic about the way in which Cassandra takes Emma's clothes from her, silently preparing her for sleep; the dark and brown chiaroscuro lighting evokes the religious solemnity of a Caravaggio

painting. With equal gravity, the anticipation of touch, gaze and speech is followed by withdrawal rather than relief. When Emma's breathing quickens, her stomach stirs with Cassandra's touch in close-up before the camera pulls out to reveal the whole of her body. She is presided over by Cassandra as if in the replication of another renaissance motif: the pietà. When they kiss, their faces are obscured. They move together and, as they kiss, the shadows they cast immerse them. Then, Emma suddenly and wordlessly stops responding to Cassandra's touch. The affective relief of tenderness is thwarted as she tortures Cassandra with a flattening of erotic affect through stillness and silence. As Berlant writes, '[a]n object gives you optimism, then it rains on your parade' (2012b: 13). Desire provides both pleasure and pain in its possibility and immediate disappointment (brought together here into the same frame). Yet, as Berlant continues, 'that is never the end of the story' (13). 'Never the end of the story': this is precisely the affective register within which *She Monkeys*' narrative lingers.

Emma and Cassandra have initiated a friendship that combines the mutual competitiveness of teammates with the desire for physical prowess. Cassandra has helped to train Emma's physical flexibility. She has used the negotiations of bodily discipline to exert power over Emma, as well as to engineer physical proximity. Choreographing and then dismantling the meeting with the boys on the beach, she has also inaugurated Emma's sexualisation. Emma now yearns to reverse the imperative transformation initiated by desire. Her shattering of erotic potential in this scene is payback for Cassandra's control over the friendship, and for her introduction to desire's disorienting world. Emma's withdrawal of touch and of voice here (still and silent as she is romanced) is as powerful as Cassandra's initial insistence of it (to do the splits, to "Focus!"). To consummate the visual and aural pairing of desire and control, the immediately succeeding scene returns to the training room, with the sound of the crack of the whip alongside the interpolations "Cassandra" and then "Emma". Intimacy and control become intertwined

through editing, through the aural interruption of physical potential. The sound of the whip, which occurs at infrequent but clearly defined moments in the film, also brings us back into the realm of the gymnastic performance. Once again, *She Monkeys* negotiates this tension between the ethereal and the corporeal. Stagings of desirability as spectacle and to-be-looked-at-ness become insubstantial, while moments in which the characters are brought into the corporeal presence of the other are infused either with extreme discipline and control, as in the first training scene, or abjection, as in the scene above in which it is only losing control of one's bladder and then one's stomach that creates a space for desire as care.

Desire and Attachment

Desire itself is, in Berlant's words, a 'state of attachment' (2012b). As Cassandra incarnates for Emma both the rebuke and reward of the friend who must also be tutor, parent, child and lover, she thus becomes invested with the potential – and then disappointment – of Emma's demands for attachment. The film thus manifests the pushes and pulls, the strategies that compensate for overwhelming need. The 'excessive submissiveness' of the ambivalent subject described by John Bowlby is a way of avoiding having to process painful affect, having 'to feel and resolve the pain of separation and loss' (in Holmes, 1993: 79). As an object of desire, Cassandra becomes over-determined as the potential caregiver and role model. Knowing she might fail Emma, might always be unreachable, Emma clings to her image – and then rejects it – in order to control the way in which she produces her care. Simultaneously, Emma makes herself unreachable for her little sister Sara, who wears her desire for intimacy on her frequently bare skin and in her literal reaching for physical comfort. In contrast, touch is intertwined for the older girls with a power relationship in which intimacy is offered, but always taken away again. Here we see the film's presentation of the relationship between eroticism and the potential for physical intimacy. The latter does not disappear when the former is withdrawn;

indeed, rivalry and dissatisfaction are actually productive of erotic potential (even if clung to in the form of what Berlant [2012a] calls our ‘cruel optimism’).

The dreaminess of the pace of *She Monkeys* gestures at violent climaxes but pulls back before they reach the generic demands of a thriller. In a late scene of violent revenge against unwanted desire, which renders her unable to compete, Emma strikes Cassandra in the knee. Yet, the film ends with a shot largely reminiscent of the one with which it begins, once again muting the erotic register of the relationship between Emma and Cassandra. At the film’s conclusion, which returns to the training room as site of competition and desire, Cassandra now looks on alone, bandaged and with crutches. Isolated in her voyeurism, she takes Emma’s place as sideliners, whilst Emma is uniformly figured as part of the team from which Cassandra has been ousted. However, rather than the tension and satisfaction of the duel and its victory, this final scene provides instead a discomfitingly unremarkable substitution. Such a star-reversal brings to mind the ‘intra-feminine fascinations’ in *All About Eve* (Mankiewicz, 1950) and *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Seideman, 1985) as theorised by Stacey (1987: 57). Emma is framed exactly as Cassandra was in the original scene, in close-up from waist to head with arms outstretched and the appearance of detachment from the horse, the ground and the other girls who make up the joint effort of the team.

Queer potential must reside here in the in-between: forced – or we might say *allowed* – to remain *as potential* by the film’s unhurried narrative tempo. In Berlant’s terms, identity ‘teaches you to renounce your desire’s excess and ambivalence so that you can be intelligible under the discipline of norms that make hierarchies of social value seem natural by rooting them in the pseudo-natural structure of hetero-sexualized sexual difference’ (2012b: 52). What comes first: the renunciation of excess, or of ambivalence? Or do they always come together:

one (excess) producing not overwhelming pleasure, but rather the other (ambivalence)? It is precisely desire's 'excess and ambivalence' from which conventional teen films such as *Bring It On* (Reed, 2000) and *Mean Girls* (Waters, 2004) ultimately seek to protect their protagonists in the name of that naturalisation of social hierarchies. In such films, envy and idealisation come into tension at points of narrative climax but are swept aside for the sake of closure. The 'phase' – as the antithesis of the kind of identity formation that Berlant writes is triumphantly promised by heterosexuality – is inherent to the cultural positioning of lesbianism, in which in Judith Roof's words it is 'unfixed, mediated, and [...] impossible to sustain' (1991: 26). We might argue that desire's excess is precisely what makes it unsustainable in these heterosexist terms.

She Monkeys provokes the frustration and even banality of closure's refusal. The queer affects that take the place of articulated desires are unfulfilled moments in long summers of childish unproductivity. Within the film's running time (which, of course, is all we know) the girls do not live happily ever after, nor do they consummate their relationship with the sexual act we are trained to read as inevitable. Beginning as a literalised mirage of the spectacle of the gymnastic performer suspended and made weightless by the camera, Emma's desire for Cassandra's star to become substantialised is frustrated and ultimately leads to banal conclusions (despite violent gestures). *She Monkeys* actively compresses the feelings of seriousness and pleasure that we might want to have guaranteed under the new terms of a sanctioned lesbian visibility. Despite hints of sex and violence, the film's mood is typically as flat, muted and unremarkable as its beige colour palette. Emma is left in her final scene fully occupying the affective female space of competition, aspiration and desire but separated from her object of desire/love. Such spatial negotiations provide on the one hand frustration and, on the other, enduring potential.

I have argued that the arena of competition – literalised in a quasi-sporting film like *She Monkeys* but evident across many cultural narratives of girlhood – amplifies the intensity of interactions whilst making intimacy painfully precarious. Intense physicality might yield sex, or violence – or a reconciled flatness. Unable to depend on the consistency of either playfulness or seriousness, we are forced to reckon with the body's simultaneous sexuality and violence, attachment and ambivalence. Where jealousy provides the provocation for flirtation; where desire is demonstrated through disciplinary transaction; where control is confused with care; the terms of sexual visibility become unpredictable and even unruly. Yet, on screen, surface affects might still characterise a queer spatialisation of lesbian desire. To name these as queer is to enable, rather than to flatten out, the paradoxes inherent in the representation of sexuality, unsettling rather than bolstering its coherence in the visible image. Queer affects are defined here not only by cinema's traditionally erotic structures of gaze and spectacle, but also by their disruption. *Mise en scène* might privilege the interrelationships between friendship and desire, even where no lesbian figure is discernible. Queer affect is enabled and made apparent by the opening up of the senses, by the excessive physicality of sporting worlds; it is induced by desire's state of attachment but not confined to it.

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Filmography

- All About Eve* (1950) [Film] Directed by Joseph Mankiewicz. USA: 20th Century Fox.
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- Attenberg* (2010) [Film] Directed by Tsangari, Athina Rachel. Greece: Artificial Eye
- Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) [Film] Directed by Gurinder Chadha. UK: Lions Gate.
- Boyhood* (2014) [Film] Directed by Richard Linklater. USA: Universal Pictures.
- Breathe* (2014) [Film] Directed by Mélanie Laurent. France: No UK distribution.
- Bring It On* (2000) [Film] Directed by Peyton Reed. Entertainment Film.
- Desperately Seeing Susan* (1985) [Film] Directed by Susan Seidelman. USA: 20th Century Fox.
- The Falling* (2015) [Film] Directed by Carol Morley. UK: Metrodome.
- Flat Is Beautiful* (1998) [Film] Directed by Sadie Benning. USA: IMA.
- Girlhood* (2014) [Film] Directed by Céline Sciamma. France: Studio Canal.
- Heavenly Creatures* (1994) [Film] Directed by Peter Jackson. New Zealand, Germany: Peccadillo Pictures.
- Highly Strung* (2009) [Film] Directed by Sophie Laloy. France: Peccadillo Pictures.
- A League of Their Own* (1992) [Film] Directed by Penny Marshall. USA: Columbia Pictures.
- Mean Girls* (2004) [Film] Directed by Mark Waters. USA: Paramount.
- Mosquita y Mari* (2012) [Film] Directed by Aurora Guerrero. USA: No UK distribution.
- Personal Best* (1982) [Film] Directed by Robert Towne. USA: Columbia-EMI-Warner
- Portrait of a Young Girl at the End of the 60s in Brussels* (1994) [TV] Directed by Chantal Akerman. France: Arte TV.
- She Monkeys* (2011) [Film] Directed by Lisa Aschan. Sweden: Peccadillo Pictures.
- Thirteen* (2003) [Film] Directed by Catherine Hardwicke. USA: Universal Pictures.
- Tomboy* (2011) [Film] Directed by Céline Sciamma. France: Peccadillo Pictures.
- Water Lilies* (2007) [Film] Directed by Céline Sciamma. France: No UK distribution.
- Whip It* (2009) [Film] Directed by Drew Barrymore. USA: Lions Gate.

¹ According to the website for the British equestrian vaulting team, vaulting is ‘a form of gymnastics on the back of a moving horse [...] Through choreographed movements, it incorporates beauty and brilliance, power and strength, elegance and precision, all in harmony with the horse’ (2015: online). There is a petition for vaulting to be included in the Olympics. It is a very gendered sport in which, in the UK for instance, only women compete as part of ‘Team GBR’.

² *She Monkeys* is regarded by Rosie Swash in this interview with Aschan (2012) as ‘dispassionate’, in contrast to the ‘UniLad’s wet dream [of] nubile Swedish girls experiment[ing] with their sexuality’ that she says the synopsis could indicate. Indeed, this is part of the wider discourse that the film speaks to, gesturing to but dismissing desire as uncomplicatedly direct and sexualised.

³ After *Water Lilies*, Sciamma made *Tomboy* (2011) and then *Girlhood* (2014). Together, these three films were retrospectively – and, I think, erroneously – dubbed a “coming-of-age trilogy” by many reviewers (see for instance Lenarduzzi, 2015).

⁴ For Karl Schoonover, writing about slow cinema, ‘[q]ueerness often looks a lot like wasted time, wasted lives, wasted productivity. Queers luxuriate while others work. Queers seem always to have time to waste’ (2012: 73). In contrast, Susan Driver sees queerness, in films about queer adolescence, as ‘portrayed as an active verb, a doing, a growing, and a maturing into agency’ (2007: 249). These conceptual tensions between wasting and productivity, maturing and lingering in immaturity, are all key features of the discussion in a now-seminal roundtable on queer temporality (Dinshaw et al., 2007).

⁵ Halberstam’s invocation of childhood sits uneasily alongside Lee Edelman’s provocative assertion that ‘*queerness* names the side of those *not* “fighting for the children,” the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism’ (2004: 3). Original emphases. Along different theoretical pathways, scholars have increasingly begun to theorise a ‘queer child’ (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004).

⁶ Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009: 90) explores the conceptual alignment of children and animals in literature, writing that '[a]s a recipient of the child's attentions – its often bent devotions – and a living screen for the child's self-projections – its mysterious bad-dog postures of sexual expression – the dog is a figure for the child beside itself, engaged in a growing quite aside from growing up'. Several films have explored this through the literal beside-ness of a speaking animal who projects the child's expression back to her/him: see, for instance, *Animals* (Forés, 2012).

⁷ In 'A Study of Envy and Gratitude', Klein writes: 'comparison with it [the object, in this case Cassandra] becomes impossible' and 'envy is counteracted' (1987: 217).

⁸ Sedgwick writes that 'Klein's psychoanalysis, by contrast to Freud's, is based in affect and offers a compelling account of the developments and transformations of affective life' (2007: 628). Sedgwick reads Klein alongside Silvan Tomkins, for the sake of finding some queer/feminist critical distance from 'some of the damaging assumptions that have shaped psychoanalysis in (what I think of as) its Oedipal mode: the defining centrality of dualistic gender difference; the primacy of genital morphology and desire; the determinative nature of childhood experience and the linear teleology toward a sharply distinct state of maturity; and especially the logic of zero-sum games and the excluded middle term, where passive is the opposite of active and desire is the opposite of identification, and where one person's getting more love means a priori that another is getting less' (630-1). Many of these are precisely the assumptions that this article strives to re-explore through a queer lens.