Conversion, Aversion, or Perversion? Tropes of Recovery in *Female Perversions*

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"Perversions are never what they seem to be." This statement is inscribed on the pillow from which the central character, Eve (brilliantly acted by Tilda Swinton), rises in the opening sequence of Susan Streitfeld's 1996 film *Female Perversions*. Inspired by Louise J. Kaplan's 1991 book by the same name, Streitfeld fearlessly takes up the vicissitudes of gender, sex and perversion. For Kaplan, "perversions [...] are as much pathologies of gender role identity as they are pathologies of sexuality"(14), and Streitfeld's intervention is to stage their confounding in the figure of Eve. I plan to look first at Kaplan's project in *Female Perversions*, and then offer an alternate theory of women and perversion — via Teresa de Lauretis' *The Practice of Love* — in order to locate Kaplan's work within a particular context. Streitfeld's *Female Perversions* both follows and departs from Kaplan's in ways which complicate the latter. At its most compelling, Streitfeld's film performs a kind of "symptomatic" reading of Kaplan's text, one which exposes its gaps, limits and overdeterminations. What Streitfeld does with Kaplan I hope to do with Streitfeld: what, precisely, overdetermines her film? Streitfeld's film exemplifies the very problem which this issue of *Tessera* takes up: what, exactly, is the status of the relay between "feminism" and "self-help"?

Kaplan's text turns on a particular argument about women and masquerade, one which bears an uncanny resemblance to that which Joan Riviere puts forth in her 1929 "Womanliness as a Masquerade." Kaplan suggests that "in the female perversions a display of a stereotypical femininity acts as the disguise for what a woman experiences as a forbidden masculine striving"(173). Unfortunately, Kaplan's weighty study (over five hundred pages of case studies, anecdotal evidence, explanations and explications) can be distilled into the two most contested words in the Freudian lexicon: penis envy. A woman's desire for the phallus — its signifiers — is Kaplan's guarantee against what she refers to as the "myth of primary femininity." That

women want what men have is, for Kaplan, an argument against those who "would assign women some biologically determined, innate femininity"(189). Kaplan fails to recognize that the very "myth of primary femininity" which she impugns she herself reproduces: if women have no "innate femininity" then how is it that "striving" is a property of masculinity? Moreover, Kaplan clearly sees no need to call into question the very notion of "penis envy" as such, nor, by extension, the category of perversion. In fact, Kaplan's entire discussion of women and perversion is overdetermined by the explanatory force of penis envy as that which both conditions and limits her discourse. Most disturbing, perhaps, is that the exemplary subject of female perversion in Freud — the female invert — is absent in Kaplan; rather, the category of female perversion is displaced entirely onto heterosexual women. In Kaplan, the subject of lesbian desire is not only insufficiently accounted for — as it is in Freud — but erased and effaced altogether.

Teresa de Lauretis' *The Practice of Love* similarly articulates a theory of women and perversion, one which also operates within the terms of psychoanalytic theory, but to radically different effect than Kaplan's. Re-reading Freud's theory of the perversions, de Lauretis argues for "a model of perverse desire based on Freud's notion of disavowal and an unorthodox reading of fetishism"(257). If Kaplan forecloses on the possibility of theorizing the subject of a female desire that is not explicitly heterosexual, then de Lauretis' project is precisely the recuperation of psychoanalytic theory for thinking such a possibility. For de Lauretis, the aim and object of female — specifically lesbian — desire is not the phallus, but, rather, the "fantasmatic female body":

> The castration complex rewrites in the symbolic as lack of a penis what is a primary narcissistic loss of body-image, a lack of being that threatens the imaginary matrix of the body-ego. On the disavowal of *this* lack depend what I call perverse desire and the formation of a fetishlike object or sign that both lures and signifies the subject's desire, at once displacing and resignifying the wished-for female body (xviii).

I offer de Lauretis simply as a counterpoint, and a position from which to critique Kaplan.

I want now to consider Streitfeld's *Female Perversions* apropos of Kaplan's. The citation from Kaplan's text which appears before the credit sequence signals Streitfeld's debt to Kaplan, and, not surprisingly, a desire to follow Kaplan's example. Streitfeld's film does indeed live up to Kaplan's example, and, inevitably, exceeds it. Eve's very name invokes the original scene of female perversion: the biblical Eve donned her best fig leaf in order to persuade Adam to transgress the original prohibition. In the film, we see Eve begin to prepare for her interview with the governor (she's vying for a judgeship) by reclaiming her lucky suit from the dry cleaners. The morning of the interview, Eve, preoccupied with her extravagant preening ritual, only belatedly notices that her sister Madelyn has "borrowed" the coveted suit to wear to her own dissertation defence. Eve must wear another suit (one with a loose thread) and she blames Madelyn for what she perceives is an interview gone awry. This central narrative thread is a careful replication of Kaplan's thesis. Eve performs her femininity — to excess — in order to "disguise" her "masculine striving." Early in the film Eve delivers a summation in a courtroom and our gaze is focalized through the various men who watch her — or more precisely parts of her — as she speaks. The camera cuts from a part of Eve's body to the face of one of the men in the room, and then back to a different part of her body. Eve alternates between placing one hand seductively on her hip, and clenching her hands into fists for emphasis as she speaks about the need for "control" and "domination." She wins the case. In terms of Kaplan, Eve's "perversion" — her desire to be an arbiter of the law, a distributor of justice — is "disguised" by the fantasy of seduction that she performs before the exemplary figure of the law: the courtroom. In a sense, Eve fucks (with) the law in order to prevent being fucked by the law.

Streitfeld's film exceeds Kaplan's text in interesting and important ways. A central scene in the film is one in which a young woman on the brink of adolescence, Ed, is subject to a lesson in femininity from her flashy aunt. A resistant subject at best, Ed picks at the skin around her nails while her aunt performs a kind of dance-of-the-seven-veils. "You can learn to be feminine too — it doesn't come naturally — you have to work at it" Ed's aunt informs her, while swaying to music. Eve observes Ed's rite of passage between gulps of a potent drink. Ed's mother, Emma, who is a bridal dressmaker and thus highly symbolic in Kaplan's *parlance,* returns home depressed from a

date for which she left in a state of sheer elation. Emma joins in the dance, her eyes shut, and moaning, as Ed's aunt continues to instruct Ed: "Watch closely — if you do this well all men will want you — it's all about power — you've got to make him believe you've got what he desires — you've got to be everybody's dream — everything to everyone — you've got to erase yourself — you've got to become generic." "Archetypal," supplies Emma. This scene gestures toward Kaplan's figure of the "woman as masquerade," but it also works the productive tension of Judith Butler's recasting of woman-as-masquerade in terms of the "performativity" of all gender, not simply femininity. Butler asks "what precisely is masked by masquerade."

> Is masquerade the consequence of a feminine desire that must be negated, and, thus, made into a lack that, nevertheless, must appear in some way? Is masquerade the consequence of a denial *of* this lack for the purpose of appearing to be the Phallus? Does masquerade construct femininity as the reflection of the Phallus in order to disguise bisexual possibilities that otherwise might disrupt the seamless construction of a heterosexualized femininity? Does masquerade, as [Joan] Riviere suggests, transform aggression and the fear of reprisal into seduction and flirtation? Does it serve primarily to conceal or repress a pregiven femininity, a feminine desire which would establish an insubordinate alterity to the masculine subject and expose the necessary failure of masculinity? Or is masquerade the means by which femininity itself is *first* established, the exclusionary practice of identity formation in which the masculine is effectively excluded and instated as outside the boundaries of a feminine gendered position? (48)

I cite Butler at length because she — better than I — articulates the very questions which Kaplan fails to consider, questions which have been around as long as Joan Riviere's "Womanliness as a Masquerade." Butler's (now well-known) intervention is to suggest that nothing lies behind the masquerade; gender has no referent, but is rather an effect of "the repeated stylization of the body" (33).

Streitfeld's film takes up the question of gender identity, but rather than insist on Kaplan's trope of woman-as-masquerade, Streitfeld seems, at times, less interested in the latent content of gender

performance — the perversion behind the performance — than in the performativity of gender itself. Moments before Eve pulls up to a red light, an elderly woman approaches a bench upon which is emblazoned the slogan "In perversion there is no freedom, only a rigid conformity to a gender stereotype." The woman sits down and proceeds to apply her lipstick just as Eve, now at the light, reapplies her own lipstick while glancing in the rearview mirror. The scene evokes a sense of continuity and inheritance: the iterability of gender, of femininity, in this instance, is a practice of history. What is most compelling about the film, though, is precisely the separation of gender from perversion, a recognition of their very non-identity. Streitfeld's film works on gender, and, in turn, demotes perversion to a state of interminable affect. Perversion is not a determination of gender in the film (as it is in Kaplan's text), but, rather, an effect. The best of the film stages a kind of Lacanian/Žižekean "Che vuoi?" in which we see Eve repeatedly fail to be interpellated as a gendered subject into ideology. Most memorable is the scene in which Eve, arriving at work after an argument with her sister Madelyn, is greeted by a male colleague with "Hey, that's not the right attitude!" A startled and bewildered Eve responds "It's not?" The scene is wonderful for its dramatization of what Slavoj Žižek, following Jacques Lacan, refers to as the hysteric's question: "Why am I what you're telling me that I am?" (113). Eve, in another moment of failed interpellation, leaves the dry cleaners in a state of utter distraction. Upon getting into her car a man to whom she has just given money remarks, "Hey, lady, can you do something for me? Stay as beautiful as you are right now." The expression on Eve's face indicates that she is not entirely certain he is speaking to her, and she stands looking confused for a few moments before getting into her car. We see the interpellative process in slow motion: we bear witness to the moment between Eve's "hailing" (in Althusser's sense) and her insertion into an ideological field as a gendered subject.

"Perversions are never what they seem to be." In Streitfeld's *Female Perversions*, perversion is never quite itself. Sometimes it appears in its negative form: hysteria. De Lauretis, for example, rereads Freud's theory of the perversions for their negativity, while Freud himself explicitly positions perversions in relation to neuroses: "*neuroses are, so to say, the negative of the perversions*" (80). The film shifts the focus — and by extension the locus — of its critique often enough that, it too, asks the hysteric's question: "Why am I what you're telling

me that I am?" How else to explain the specious narrative turn — a narrative conversion of sorts — that occurs after Eve's interview? The interview with the governor begins to unravel when he asks first about her family, and subsequently about why she has never married. Eve berates herself in the parking lot after the interview: "What a stupid idiot I am! Why didn't I say I was engaged?" And, "I'm going to kill her! [Madelyn]." What follows is an intense encounter between the two sisters which ends when Madelyn drives off in Eve's car, leaving Eve to collapse, exhausted, on Madelyn's bathroom floor. This is the scene of Eve's breakdown, one which is triggered by the questions she must answer — and cannot — about her family. When Madelyn returns, she and Eve reminisce about the past, and especially about their relationship with their father. They watch together what each has viewed separately: a home movie of the entire family relaxing in the backyard, captured when the sisters are young girls. It is the scene of Oedipal structuring and psychic formation. The movie is projected onto the wall in Madelyn's room, upon which hangs a large photograph of a Latina woman with, what Ed has told Eve, are live iguanas on her head. A kind of palimpsest, this figure of maternal forbearance and power (also a problematic figure of the "exotic") comes to efface the faded and dated Oedipal scenario (the film within the film). Earlier in the film, Eve laughs derisively as she reads Madelyn's dissertation, which, Emma tells Eve, is about "a group of women in Mexico who have all the power. They're all fat. That's what happens in a matriarchy."

No longer scornful, the various objects and artifacts which are strewn across Madelyn's room — signifiers of an "other" scene of psychic structuring — come to haunt and intrigue Eve. It is this subtle shift in the film which I would like to mark. The film is at certain moments playful and irreverent with what might be called self-help, or recovery discourse. When Eve goes to her female lover — a psychiatrist — she settles herself on the couch, and looks pleadingly at her lover, who tells her that she is a "deeply compulsive, neurotic, codependent woman, who probably loves too much, or too little." A melodramatic Eve responds, "I'm so glad someone understands me!" Later, as Eve aggressively seduces her, she tells her that she has no use for psychology because "nothing's concrete. I prefer the law. Black and white. Obey the rules. Guilty or not guilty." (Incidentally, this moment resonates with a previous one in which Eve, spurned by her

male lover, apologizes to him as he walks out of the room, utterly indifferent to her presence: "I know I shouldn't expect to be able to change the rules. You go ahead. I'll be fine.") The film loses this irreverence after Eve's breakdown, a scene of enormous loss: a loss of paternal law. A kind of rhetoric of recovery comes to fill in the narrative gap or lack which is opened up by this loss. In the final moments of the film, Eve leaves Madelyn's place early in the morning, only to return to claim the picture of the Latina woman from Madelyn's wall. This figure of the maternal (now invested as a kind of fetish-object, in de Lauretis' sense) comes to replace the Oedipal law of the father. Upon leaving the house this second time, Eve sees Ed walking off in the distance, and follows her. She is led to a kind of ceremonial and burial site: Ed has scattered her mother's naked mannequins around and staged an eerie graveyard scene. In a rare moment of compassion, Eve cradles Ed's head in her lap, and slowly rocks her while Ed cries. The film ends with this image, one which is rather heavy-handed in its deployment of recovery rhetoric. The same Eve who has nothing but laughter and scorn for arm-chair psychology, here, we are to believe, is desperate to recover her inner child? The very figures which are sent up earlier in the film, and form the basis of the trenchant critique of gender identity, become the terms upon which the film achieves its — rather disingenuous — narrative resolution. Indeed, perversions are never what they seem to be. Why must the loss of paternal law, a crack in the symbolic order, be recuperated as a "recovery" of the (lost) maternal? I'll give de Lauretis the last word: "perverse desire is sustained on fantasy scenarios that restage the loss and recovery of a fantasmatic female body."

> Even when they take the form of a return to the mother — and thus may appear as ineffectual political nostalgia for a non-Oedipal, prepatriarchal world, or as a regressive retreat from the "realities" of sexual conflict [...] to a nurturing, anodyne, maternal body — the fetishized scenarios of an empowered and exclusive femininity have less to do with mothering or with the mother's body as such than with restaging the subject's own loss and recovery of the female body (265).

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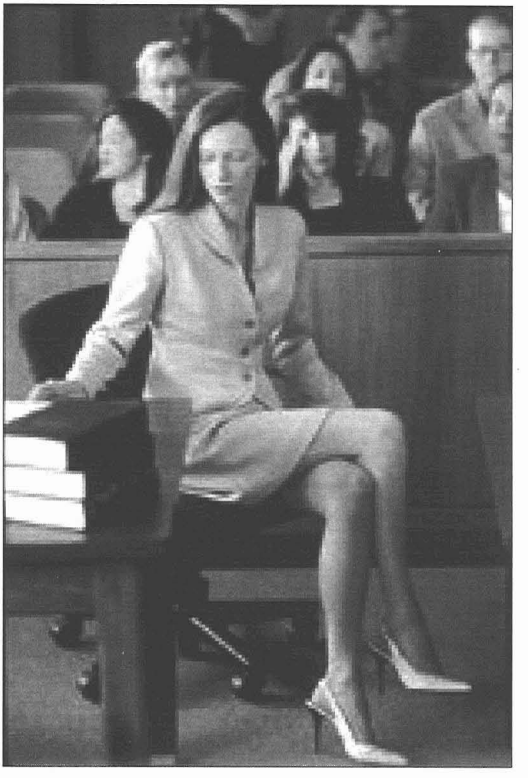

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