Worshipping (Wo)men, Liturgical Representation and Feminist Film Theory: an Alien/s Identification?

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A theological student told a story about a friend of his, a young mother, who was trying to explain to her little daughter that, because God was neither male nor female, it was all right to call God 'Mother'. The little girl looked quizzically about, clearly trying to grapple with this new, and weighty theological concept, before she turned to her mother and said, 'But that's silly, God's a man's name!'

Clearly something of this naivety, if not innocence, lies behind some of the responses to the 'constellation of Christa images' that have appeared in recent years. The representations of Christa (Christ in female form) have raised questions about the gendered nature of Christ, the universal liturgical signifier, and the relationship of liturgical subjects to religious representation in iconography and liturgy. They have also raised important questions about the place and status of women as worshippers: Are women confined only to worship as (wo)men, or is there a place from which they may worship with integrity as women? Is that place a discrete 'womanspace', a radical alternative space, or may women and men find a common liturgical language?

Bosnian Christa: 'A Serious Case of Blasphemy'? Perhaps the most famous Christa, Edwina Sandys's sculpture in the Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York, has been the subject of enthusiastic theologians and art historians and the focus of hatred and charges of blasphemy. More recently Margaret Argyle's Bosnian Christa has attracted a similar range of reaction.

Originally created out of the artist's sense of compulsion to respond personally to the horrific stories of rape against Bosnian women, the piece is an embroidery of mixed textiles measuring 48 by 29 inches. The 18 inch red figure of Christa is barely distinguishable, contoured in trapunto quilting on a red background, superimposed on a cross of brown stitching, and framed in black and red velvet. The effect is to depict the figure of a crucified woman inside a vulva. Prior to creating Bosnian Christa Argyle was not a feminist, and had previously been 'disgusted' when she had encountered Christa for the first time a year before. But as she worked through her anger at the obscenity of rape, and the obscenity of the cross, she began to recognize 'a God who knows the sufferings of women because she has suffered them herself', and at a personal level she made theological connections: 'I'd never previously seen any connection between women's suffering and God before — I'd never seen any connection between my little sufferings and God before'.

After its creation around Easter 1993 Bosnian Christa came to the attention of the North West Ecumenical Decade Group (an informal group of women organized to promote the aims of the World Council of Churches 'Ecumenical Decade: Churches in Solidarity with Women 1988-1998'), who requested to use the piece as a focus in their service to mark the mid-point of the decade. The service, 'Coming Out of the Shadows: Women Overcoming Violence', was held in Manchester Cathedral, 24 October 1993, and included an introduction of Bosnian Christa by Argyle, in which she recounted how she had come to make the piece, and followed by a prayer specially written by her.

Vulnerable God, whose pain is borne by Bosnian women: we do not understand.
Suffering God, we wait, like Mary at the tomb, in love, afraid, hardly daring to believe Resurrection can be possible.
We seek courage and faith (Baptist Times, 16 Dec. 1993).

Later in the liturgy, following a reading of the Magnificat and during the singing of the response 'Halle, Halle, Hallelujah', Bosnian Christa was brought from the shadows of a Cathedral pillar, walked across the alter and shown to both sides of the congregation, before being placed on an easel next to some candles.

2 For the artist's account of the work's creation and reaction to it, see Margaret Argyle 'Bosnian Christa', in Cutting Edge: the Theological Journal of Sheffield Chaplaincy for Higher Education, 11 March 1995, 5-10; Julie Clague, 'Interview with Margaret Argyle' in Feminist Theology, 10 (1995), 57-68. I am very grateful to Margaret Argyle and Alison Peacock (a member of the group organizing the service in which Bosnian Christa became public) for generously making available reference material and for their helpful comments.

3 Argyle, 'Bosnian Christa', 7.
Bosnian Christa
by
Margaret Argyle

_Bosnian Christa_ is a panel (48" x 29") of mixed textiles (black wool, deep red crushed velvet with a scarlet background). The Christa figure is executed in trapunto quilting and the cross in varied shades of brown broken stitches.
Following the event two Manchester based members of the Church of England’s General Synod, May Ashworth J.P., and Philip Gore (also a member of the Church Society), raised objects to the Diocesan Synod. Neither had attended the service yet both questioned whether the Dean and Chapter had sanctioned a liturgy which referred to God as ‘Mother’ and ‘Daughter’, and whether they had given permission for the display of a crucifixion representing the body of a woman. The response by the Cathedral Chapter, that they did not vet or sanction services arranged by those ‘within the family of the Church’, failed to satisfy, and the story broke to the media on 22 November 1993, one month after the service.4

Reactions polarized along predictable lines. Gore was quoted as describing the service as a ‘tasteless display of feminist triumphalism, denying the Trinity’ adding that ‘some church members believe that the service had lesbian overtones’ (Baptist Times, 16 Dec. 1993), and calling for a ban on such ‘heretical rituals’ (Manchester Evening News, 23 Nov. 1993); while Ashworth was quoted as condemning the service as blasphemous, altering ‘the history of our salvation’ (Daily Telegraph, 23 Nov. 1993), and objecting to references to the Almighty as ‘mother and daughter’. ‘Jesus was a man and he told us to call God, Father’ (Manchester Evening News, 23 Nov. 1993). Making specific reference to Bosnian Christa, Revd David Streater of the Church Society accused the Cathedral Chapter of avoiding the central issue which he saw as ‘Whether or not they approve of what happened in the Cathedral with the presentation of a female Christ and worship offered to God as she. A serious case of blasphemy has taken place’ (Church of England Newspaper, 26 Nov. 1993).

Interestingly, almost all the negative responses were from people who had not been at the service, while those of the 450 women and men who had attended were more sympathetic. Some found the service deepened their understanding of women’s suffering. ‘This embroidery helped us to understand that Christ is as much to be found in the suffering of women as of men’ (Revd Keith Argyle and others ‘Letters to the Editor’, Church Times, 3 Dec. 1993). Others found Bosnian Christa cathartic. ‘In a way it was shocking, but, like the service, [Bosnian Christa] was also profoundly moving and very powerful. I believe that Christ goes

on suffering in and through the rape of the women in Bosnia, whether they are Muslim or Christian... The service brought great healing to many' (Revd Jean Mayland, 'Letters to the Editor', *Church Times*, 3 Dec. 1993). ‘The imagery of a Christ who is totally present in the depths of our own personal suffering, was and is unspeakably real’ (Mary Whalley, ‘Feedback’, *Baptist Times*, 13 Jan. 1994). Even some who had been at the service and had not been entirely happy found it helpful. ‘I left the cathedral profoundly saddened. I grieved, because it took an occasion such as this for the depth of pain experienced by many women to be expressed and recognised in the Church. I grieved because I found the image Christa... offensive, but at least I understood the anguish out of which such an image came to be created’ (Anne Lewis, ‘Letters to the Editor’, *Church Times*, 10 Dec. 1993).

How, then, are these diverging responses to be understood? My interest in this essay is specifically the place and status of women as liturgical subjects, the products of liturgy as ideological discourse, constructed in relation to religious representation, and instancing the operation of liturgy as ideological discourse, a technology of the self. As such it is my perspective that *film theory provides a framework in which to consider the construction of liturgical subjects in their relationship to religious iconography and liturgy, which is always already inscribed by ideology.* Methodologically this is to treat cinema and liturgy as parallel signifying operations in the construction of individuals as spectating or worshipping subjects.

Because of the influence of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan on film theory it is appropriate here to begin theorizing female spectatorship with his controversial statements about female sexuality, and to map this onto his debt to Sigmund Freud and Joan Riviere. In trying to understand the mechanisms of female spectatorship, many feminist film theorists have responded to this psychoanalytic frame of reference. With reference to the film cycle *Alien/s,* I will consider two diverging feminist responses to the problems of female spectatorship which illuminate the liturgical parallel, namely the possibility of women worshipping as women, in this case in relation to Margaret Argyle’s *Bosnian Christa.*

**Womanliness as Masquerade**

Given such statements as, ‘There is no such thing as *The woman*,’ it is hardly surprising that feminist writers differ about Lacan’s value for a feminist project. Some, however, have put him to work,

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more as cultural critic than personal therapist. On this model, Lacan, and the Freud whom he rereads, are seen as providing a description of patriarchy with which feminists can engage in renegotiating sexual identity. It is within this perspective that I want to proceed.

In terms of female sexuality Freud was a late arriver. His Introductory Lectures (1916–17) assume that the sexual identity of boys and girls is formed in parallel, and he describes only the relation of the boy to his parents, assuming that, 'with the necessary changes', things happen 'in just the same way' for little girls. In ‘The dissolution of the Oedipus complex’ (1924) the question of how girls resolve their Oedipus complex, and how their love-object shifts from their mother to their father, problematize this assumption, and Freud eventually gives sustained attention to the issue in ‘Female sexuality’ (1931). In the boy’s case, his pre-oedipal desire for his mother as love-object is disrupted by the arrival of the father, and the implicit threat of castration. The boy’s narcissism motivates him to surrender desire for his mother and switch to his same-sex parent. On the other hand, the girl is pre-oedipally related to her same-sex parent. The question Freud addresses is precisely, ‘How, when and why does she detach herself from her mother?’, and his answer is rooted in the sexual ambiguity of infancy and what he sees as the innate bisexuality of human beings.

Freud tendentiously asserts that the innate human disposition to bisexuality is more apparent in women than in men. This, he argues, is because women have two sexual zones, while men have only one. Freud suspects that the girl’s surrender of her original genital zone — the clitoris — in favour of the vagina is somehow linked with the exchange of her original object — her mother for her father, and, although he is unable to make the connection clear, he locates it in the context of the castration complex. Thus, when the girl realises her inferiority is due to her ‘lack’ she is faced with three lines of development: firstly, she experiences a general revulsion from sexuality, in which she gives up her phallic (clitoral) activity, secondly, she develops a defiant self-assertiveness to her threatened masculinity, in which she clings to the hope of getting a penis at some future point; or thirdly, she takes her father as her love-object, thereby finding a way to complete the feminine form of the Oedipus complex. Her successful completion of the complex

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7 Freud’s 1925 paper, ‘Some psychical consequences of the anatomical distinction between the sexes’, was germinal for his thought on girls and the Oedipus complex.
results both in her ‘castration’, the yielding of her ‘masculine’ (phallic) clitoral masturbation and the adoption of her new leading genital zone, and her depreciation of femaleness in general and her mother in particular, who is blamed for not giving her a proper penis.

Freud’s naive phallocentrism is to be criticised for its dependence on an ocularocentrism which assumes the male body as the sexual paradigm, and relegates the female body to mutant (alien). Despite this difficulty Lacan adopts Freud’s phallocentrism, arguing in ‘The signification of the phallus’ (1958) that, within the economy of male desire, the phallus is a veiled signifier accessible only in the desire of the Other. In his view, that the desire of the mother is for the phallus, and that the boy child therefore wishes to be the phallus to satisfy his mother’s desire, Lacan draws attention to the fact that both the subject and the Other desire to be the cause of each other’s desire. In this way the phallus is the signifier of the lack in the Other, and ‘can play its role only when veiled’.8

In articulating the economy of male desire it is the veiled phallus which, for Lacan, distinguishes the relations between the sexes according to a ‘to be’ and a ‘to have’. The fact that the mother wants to be the phallus, while the father is understood to have it characterizes relationships between women and men, ‘including the act of copulation itself, into the comedy’.9 The man, in fact, only appears to have the phallus, and this appearance is the result of his performance of his ‘masculinity’ in a way which both protects and masks his lack. At the same time, the woman’s desire to be the phallus plunges her into a paradox where, in order that she might become the signifier of her Other’s desire (that is, to become the desired Woman), she rejects ‘an essential part of femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade’. In other words, ‘It is for that which she is not [The Woman] that she wishes to be desired as well as loved. But she finds the signifier of her own desire [the phallus] in the body of him to whom she addresses her demand for love.’10

The point of interest here is the concept of the ‘masquerade’, and Lacan’s use of the term masks his debt to Joan Riviere’s work on masquerade.11 Riviere attempts to show how women, in seeking the phallus, put on a mask of womanliness in order to avoid male recrimination. Her analysis is based on the example of a successful

9 Ibid., 289.
10 Ibid., 290.
woman intellectual who, despite her acknowledged abilities, compulsively sought reassurance, which expressed itself in seeking the attention of men. Riviere notes that the men sought were 'unmistakable father-figures', and suggests that the successful public exhibition of her intellectual ability signified (at least to the woman) her possession of the father's penis, she having castrated him. This woman was then caught in an unconscious attempt to ward off the anxiety she felt as she was seized by the dread of the retribution the father might exact. Riviere's startling conclusion is that 'womanliness' should be understood as a characteristic or an attribute which can be 'assumed and worn as a mask'.

The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing. The capacity for womanliness was there in this woman ... but owing to her conflicts it did not represent her main development and was used far more as a device for avoiding anxiety than as a primary mode of sexual enjoyment.12

Riviere implicates the assumption of womanliness in the inferiority the girl feels on recognising her 'lack' as she moves through the Oedipus and castration complexes. Following Freud, Riviere sees that a viable response is that of defiant self-assertiveness and a depreciation of femaleness (in general and her mother in particular), but, again with Freud, she recognises the ambiguity of this situation: the woman seeking masculinity, identifies as a man, but assumes womanliness in order to protect her previously assumed masculinity. As far as Lacan is concerned, the important point is that here the assumption of womanliness is a masquerade of authentic womanliness, but in its turn authentic womanliness is itself only ever a masquerade.

Drawing on Riviere, Lacan locates the operation of the masquerade as play within the Symbolic Order. There, lacking a penis, she becomes the veiled phallus, the signifier of the desire of her Other — the desired woman for her man. He 'having' the phallus, she having 'become' the phallus neither in reality possessing the phallus, both are revealed as participants in Symbolic 'play'. But, as Luce Irigary points out, this is a dangerous game where 'the masquerade ... is what women do ... in order to participate in man's desire, but at the cost of giving up theirs'.13 In short, the masquerade is a 'game' in which woman is alienated from herself and located in an economy of male desire. At the same time, the womanliness with which she masquerades her

12 Riviere, 'Womanliness as a masquerade', 38.
masculinity is a Symbolic construction of womanliness which she assumes (as protection) to declare herself a woman, but which, because of its Symbolic construction, fails to represent her as woman.

Once again this situates woman within an economy of male desire, structured around relationships of (phallic) power privileging male identity, but which denies woman access to her own identity. The result is that the woman in the play of masquerade does not exist, and the Real woman is left alienated from herself and from the man. Lacan concludes that, 'in the case of the speaking being the relation between the sexes does not take place', consequently, Woman is excluded from the Symbolic and from language, and as a result reduced to the role of silent spectator. An obvious question arises: If, within the economy of male desire and (phallic) power, Woman does not exist and woman is reduced to being a silent spectator, is it possible for women to spectate with integrity as a woman, or is she condemned only to spectate as (wo)men? This is one of the questions which feminist film theorists have addressed in their response to the Freud-Lacan psychoanalytic frame.

Theorizing Female Spectatorship: Gender Mobility or Erotic Identification?

Feminist film theory in the 1980s has been dominated by a concern about female spectatorship. This concern was initiated by Laura Mulvey's germinal study of woman as image in relation to the 'male gaze'. As both film theorist and filmmaker Mulvey attempts to theorize female spectatorship around the voyeuristic male gaze, arguing that cinema is the mimetic analogue of voyeurism. On the specifics of the cinematic sexual subject, Mulvey situates woman within the economy of male desire and privileged (phallic) power, arguing that, in the active/male, passive/female binaries, woman connotes a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' which positions her as the element of spectacle in narrative cinema. Thus, she functions as erotic object both for the characters within the film, and the spectators in the cinema. This active/passive split further privileges the male in cinema, who in the terms of heterosexual divisions of labour, is positioned as the bearer of the look, a move made possible because film is structured around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator identifies. As such

15 For a summary of feminist film theory see Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams, 'Feminist film criticism: an introduction' in Doane, Mellencamp and Williams (eds), Re-Visions: essays in feminist film criticism (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984); and Maggie Humm, Feminism and film (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).
16 See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', in Screen, 16:3 (1975), 6–18.
woman becomes icon, held on display for the male gaze — a move which questions the very possibility of female spectatorship. Mulvey’s deconstructive strategy is to engage in a radical alternative cinema which frees the gaze of both the camera and the audience.

Mulvey’s later reflections follow Freud’s argument that infant girls are required to relinquish phallic activity and the female object. In consequence, Mulvey argues, women learn a fluidity of movement between masculine and feminine narrative identifications, and the result is that women learn the habit of trans-sex identification to the extent that it becomes second nature. In this way, Mulvey displaces the idea that, at least for women, spectator positions are fixed and determined. However, she risks positioning women in a relationship of ambiguity to their gender, leaving them oscillating between poles on the feminine/masculine binary. At best women must continue to spectate from a position assigned by men. The complexity of the pleasure women derive from film is, for Mulvey, nostalgic for an age of (masculine/phallic) ‘action’ now repressed by the demands of assuming ‘correct femininity’; action which finds expression in a metaphor of masculinity, but which ultimately fails to escape the masculinization of female spectators.

An alternative psychoanalytic perspective to Mulvey is that of Mary Anne Doane, whose view is that femininity self-referentially comments upon its own status as image. Drawing on Luce Irigaray, and her ideas about female specificity theorized in terms of spatial proximity, Doane argues that there is a spatial configuration to the spectatorial desire which negates the distance required by voyeurism. This maps with Irigaray’s position about the constant relation of the woman’s body to itself, an autoerotic embrace of the vulva’s two lips. Consequently, the female spectator can only problematically be considered voyeur. This emphasis on proximity informs attempts to theorize female spectatorship and Doane finds a tendency to view the female spectator as ‘the site of an oscillation between a feminine position and a masculine position, invoking the metaphor of the transvestite’, the female can at least pretend she is other. While such pretence may be understandable, in that ‘everyone wants to

20 Luce Irigaray, This sex which is not one, 1985.
be elsewhere than in the feminine position’, it is not quite so understandable why she might want to flaunt her femininity, and to ‘foreground the masquerade’. ‘Masquerade is not as recuperable as transvestism precisely because it constitutes an acknowledgement that it is femininity itself which is constructed as mask — as the decorative layer which conceals a non-identity’. Here Doane parts company with Riviere’s conception of masquerade as pathological. For Doane masquerade, as an excess or flaunting of femininity, has the potential to distance the image, to defamiliarize female iconography, and through its contradictions to indicate what is problematic with any concept of femininity in a patriarchal context.

The problem with this is that such distance creates the conditions for voyeurism of a particularly female kind. Doane acknowledges that in consequence the female spectator is offered two positions: the masochism of over-identification or the narcissism of becoming one’s own object of desire. But she concludes that the elaboration of femininity as closeness, as present-to-itself, does not define essence but delineates the place to which woman is culturally assigned. Given cinema’s overreliance on voyeurism, fetishism and identification with masculine ego ideals, Doane acknowledges the temptation to yield the possibility of (authentic) female spectatorship. However, she maintains that masquerade has the potential ‘to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by the woman’.

One group of films which has attracted attention from feminist film theorists has been the Alien/s cycle. Much of this attention has, with justification, focused on the contrasting representations of ‘mother’, for example in Alien (Ridley Scott, 1979) the spacecraft’s on-board computer is called ‘mother’ while the mother alien is referred to as the ‘Bitch’. With Aliens (James Cameron, 1986) it is possible to view the film as a performance of some of the themes raised by Mulvey and Doane. A product of the (one-time) husband and wife collaboration between James Cameron (director and story) and Gale Anne Hurd (producer), Aliens continues the story of flight officer Ripley (Sigourney Weaver). This time she returns to planet LV426 as consultant for ‘The

22 Doane, ‘Film and the masquerade’, 25.
23 Ibid., 32.
Company and there meets her Nemesis in what becomes the battle of all mothers.

For the return to LV426 Ripley joins a squad of colonial marines whose task is to investigate why all contact has been lost with the colony on the planet. The mixed-sex group of marines treat Ripley with suspicion and contempt.

*Put Vasquez*  [Of Ripley] Who's Snow White?

*Cpl Ferro*  She's supposed to be some kinda consultant. *Apparently* she saw an alien once.

*Pvt Hudson*  Woogie for her! I'm impressed.

Although the marines complain about the corps, they clearly revel in their macho-military-masculine construction, which is most visible in Private Vasquez (Jenette Goldstein), who narcissistically eyes her own muscles. Her physical performance has little competition from her male colleagues, prompting the remark from Private Hudson (Bill Paxton): 'Hey Vasquez, have you ever been mistaken for a man', and her caustic response: 'No! Have you?' Ripley's initial reluctance at being included on the mission temporarily gives way during the final preparations, and she offers to drive one of the power loaders, a hydraulic metal 'suit' used for lifting and moving heavy industrial equipment. Her offer is treated with sneering disbelief. Clearly in the minds of her colleagues there are questions about her right to be part of this macho-military team. However, the demonstration of her ability with the loader serves both to qualify her as a useful team member, and to display her competence as an exponent of the militarized discourse; she may look like 'Snow White' but Ripley is a masculine woman, and her masculization is made more complete when Corporal Hicks (Michael Biehn) introduces her to his 'personal friend', an M41A 'pulse' rifle. As the narrative develops Ripley finds and adopts the only colonist survivor, a little girl called 'Newt' (Carrie Henn). The two bond in a mother-daughter relationship which leads Ripley into the titanic clash: surrogate mother versus alien mother Bitch in a face out to protect their respective 'off-spring'. To defend her ward in this fight to the death Ripley dons her armour suit, the same hydraulic loader which earlier symbolized her skill as an exponent of the masculinized-military discourse, and engages the revenge seeking Bitch as a fully masculinized-mother.

The 'mother' thematic is clear, as is the example of Ripley as a strong leading lady (a point which appears to have escaped critical attention25). However, Ripley's performance remains ambiguous,

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for although she is a strong female character, refusing to give up when the men around her panic and despair, and providing tenacious leadership against the odds, nevertheless the position from which she operates is assigned to her by men, her ability to defeat the Bitch is contingent on her ability to master the weaponry of macho-military technology. Ripley's instincts may be maternal, but her performance is patriarchal, and she is the 'patriarchalized heroine'. In this way Ripley performs on screen the themes Mulvey and Doane discuss in regard to female spectators. As with Mulvey's spectating women, Ripley's movement between masculine and feminine identifications is fluid to the extent that the spectator is barely aware of her 'trans-sex identification'. Her oscillation persists and she is unable to assume 'correct femininity' by the necessary repression of the masculine/phallic action upon which her survival, and that of Newt, depends.

Against Doane, however, Ripley does not flaunt her femininity, she makes no masquerade at being other. In consequence she remains proximate to herself, in the place to which she, as woman, is culturally assigned.

The intriguing point about this concerns the nature of the identifications taking place between Ripley's women spectators and her ambiguous performance of gender: Ripley as masculinized mother has been adopted by some as a female role model. So Rebecca Bell-Metereau finds Ripley to be 'a subtle hurrah for the human race, and for womankind at that'; producer Gale Anne Hurd enthuses, 'I really appreciate the way audiences respond. They buy it. We don't get people, even rednecks, leaving the theatre saying, “that was stupid. No woman would do that'", and Ari Korpivaara of Ms magazine claims, 'Ripley, nurturer and adventurer, is a role model for all of us humans' (cited by Rushing in Martin and Ostwalt (1995), 104). Nor was Ripley's potency as positive female role model lost to the women's sanitary products company Lil-lets, who sponsored the British Independent Television film season 'Leading Ladies' screened in 1992 of which Aliens was a part. Indeed, the juxtaposition of advertisements for women's bodycare products within the screening suggests the possibility of linking spectating pleasure with the narcissistic pleasure of the masquerade, and with it an identification which imbricates narcissistic and homoerotic pleasures.

The difficulty with the positions set out by Mulvey and Doane is that neither is able to create a 'womanspace' from which the female spectator may view with integrity. While she may be mobile

26 The term is drawn from Janice Hocker Rushing, whose observations are similar to my own. See 'Evolution of "The new frontier" in Alien and Aliens'; Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Screening the sacred: religion, myth and ideology in popular American film (Boulder, Col: Westview Press, 1995), 115.
(Mulvey) or mask (Doane), she is nowhere herself; she is only ever a spectator with reference to the male (just as Ripley is only a strong lead with reference to the male), and she remains the inheritor of Lacan's legacy. Jackie Stacey attempts to account for the complexity of women's identification with female film stars in a position mediating between the woman as 'effect of discourse' and the 'real' woman in the audience.\textsuperscript{27} In her cultural studies approach she argues that 'feminist film criticism needs to develop a theorization of how identities are fixed through particular social and historical discourses and representational practices, outside, as well as inside, the cinema'.\textsuperscript{28} Central to Stacey's mediation is a realization that, despite the fact feminist psychoanalytic film theory effectively closes 'womanspace', real women do find pleasure in, and make their own identification with, cinematic images of women. Stacey's argument is that to understand this requires 'eroticizing identification' in a way which explores 'the ways in which female identification contains forms of desire which include, though not exclusively, homoerotic pleasure'.\textsuperscript{29}

Stacey makes use of Elizabeth Cowie's view of fantasy as a psychoanalytic structure in which fantasy is the \emph{mise-en-scene} of desire, the 'staging of desire';\textsuperscript{30} Cowie challenges the analysis of desire that fixes the spectator as subject for the enunciation of desire implicated as a masculine problem. Important in Cowie's study is Freud's analysis of fantasy, 'A child is being beaten' (1919). In this paper Freud outlines three phases of fantasy, with each phase involving a different subject position. Significant for Cowie's view of female spectatorship is the third phase, where the child witnessing the beating reasons that the other child is being punished for the forbidden desires of the witnessing child. For Cowie, this represents an interchangeability between the subject and the other, in an economy of desire.

From this theoretical position, Stacey conducts a qualitative inquiry of 'real' women about the nature of their identification with female Hollywood stars of the 1940s and 1950s.\textsuperscript{31} Three points of interest emerge from her interpretations. Firstly, the recurring theme of homoerotic pleasure. Her respondents speak freely of their love and devotion to their favoured star.

\[ Of \text{Doris Day} \] My sisters all thought I was mad going silly on a woman, but I just thought she was wonderful.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 31–2.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 29.
[Of Deanna Durbin] My feeling for her was no passing fancy. The love was to last a lifetime.

[Of Rita Hayworth] I couldn’t take my eyes off her, she was the most perfect woman I had ever seen ... I was stunned and amazed that any human being could be that lovely.

However, awareness of homoeroticism often qualifies the responses with expressions of heterosexual identity, and confirmation of marital status and reproductive roles. Secondly, allied to this homoerotic pleasure is a type of religious language used to convey the respondent’s attachment to her star.

Stars were fabulous creatures to be worshipped from afar.

Joan Crawford could evoke such pathos, and suffer such martyrdom making you live each part.

Stacey notes that star worship involves a self denial found in forms of religious devotion. This raises the third point, the spectator’s ambivalent identification with her star. While, on the one hand, the star is often viewed as a screen ‘goddess’ and there is little suggestion about the possibility of ‘closing the gap’, none the less, the fan continues to draw inspiration from her star.

Although I wished to look like a different star each week depending on what film I saw, I think my favourite was Rita Hayworth, I always imagined if I could look like her I could toss my red hair into the wind ... and meet the man of my dreams.

I liked seeing strong, capable and independent types of female characters mostly because I wished to be like them.

Against the flow of feminist psychoanalytic film theory represented in Mulvey and Doane, Stacey’s point is that there is an ‘eroticizing identification’ in women’s spectating pleasure. In large part Stacey overcomes the difficulties associated with the positions of Mulvey and Doane, not by creating a ‘womanspace’ but by articulating an interchangeability in the identification between the subject and the other; an eroticizing identification this time in an economy of female desire. However, her solution remains problematic in that, while it overcomes the fixation of the spectator as subject for the enunciation of desire inherent in Lacan, and while she utilizes Lacan’s notion of phantasy as ‘the support of desire’, she draws support from Freud’s theory of female bisexuality and the repression of masculine/phallic activity.

Responding to the psychoanalytic frame of Freud-Lacan feminist film theory arrives at two possibilities for theorizing a female spectatorship which has integrity for women as women. On the one hand, there is the theoretical approach which argues women gain spectating pleasure through either a learned ability of
identification mobility (Mulvey) or masquerade (Doane). Dependent on Freud’s views of bisexuality, this approach presents women in an ambiguous relation to their own gender, oscillating between the poles on the feminine/masculine binary. On the other hand, the empirical approach of Stacey argues that women gain spectating pleasure through eroticized identification. Although it does overcome the oscillation between poles, ultimately this view also depends on Freud’s theory of bisexuality, this time acknowledging the object rather than the nature of the desire. To a certain extent Stacey represents a development of Mulvey’s revised position, although, given the nature of the social construction of gender, this raises the question of how ‘real’ women can be enabled to repress masculine/phallic activity outside of a ‘womanspace’ or without the creation of representations of resistance. Arguably women’s liturgy and the representations of female Christs, or Christas, represent a possible ‘womanspace’ and representations of resistance, and have as such attracted vehement criticism from both men and women.

**Bosnian Christa and Fluidity in Gender Identification**

My concern in this essay is with the operations of religious iconography and liturgy as signifying practice inscribed by ideology, as they parallel the signifying practice of cinema. Leaving aside questions about the nature of religious language and issues of theological purity, the divergent responses to Argyle’s *Bosnian Christa* detailed at the beginning of this essay are illuminated by two issues raised within feminist film theory: the operation of homoerotic pleasure and the spectator-worshipper’s identification with representation.

Given the wider context of Anglican ecclesiastical politics, and the stage which the campaign for women’s ordination had at that time reached, it is likely that Gore’s charge that the service had ‘lesbian overtones’ represents a reactionary protest against women priests. If so, he would seem to be suggesting a political rather than erotic lesbianism in so far as the celebration of women in the service is the celebration of mutually supportive female relationships. Such ‘erotic’ elements as there are in the liturgy are directed at God as male (‘Monarch and shepherd and lover’) and female (‘she is the desire of all your days’, ‘always you will seek her, forever desire her’), or at the (male) Christ (‘Lord Jesus Christ, Lover of all’).

What is perhaps more disturbing in the reactions typified by Gore is a double-handed gender blindness, illuminated by Stacey’s views on erotic identification: a gender blindness unable to

32 The General Synod of the Church of England had taken the decision to ordain women as priests in November 1992.
33 ‘Coming out of the shadows: women overcoming violence’, Order of Service.
distinguish reality from metaphor at the same time as it is unable to recognize its own erotic desire, therefore displacing it onto others. In terms of the play of erotic desire between the universal and the particular of religious representation, Christ can be considered as the signifier of the universal (in Lacanian terms, the phallus). While there can be no doubting the specificity of the historical Jesus as a Jewish male of a certain (if unknown) description, the Christ of faith is the product of interpretation. He is imaged as black or oriental, as lamb or fish, as Pantokrator or peasant, as baby or man, as with or without a beard, and even as with or without genitals. In each case meanings are negotiated dialectically between the worshipper and the representation of Christ; and in each case Christ is the Other from whom the worshipper gains meaning. Throughout the period of the Church the primary negotiators of liturgical meanings have been male priests and theologians. They have used devotional language to describe their relationship to Christ, but a pervasive gender blindness has enabled them to avoid the issue of homoeroticism. They may be male priests and theologians but their attitude to the gender of Christ as the universal liturgical signifier is ambivalent: for devotional purposes he transcends gender, but for ecclesiastical-political purposes he is most definitely male: a curious bisexuality. This suggests that, like Mulvey’s female spectator for whom trans-sex identification is ‘second nature’, certain religious men have also learned a fluidity of movement between masculine and feminine narrative identification.

Unlike Christ, Christa signifies the particular. The very act of imagining a woman on the cross draws attention to the particularity of her womanliness (masquerade) foregrounding the issue of gender, and facing male priests, theologians, and worshippers with their relationship to a very gendered Christ and the erotic identifications of that relationship. In their ocularocentricism, they view the invariably naked body of Christa, and recognise her lack. In a way paralleling Mulvey’s argument about the iconography of (cinematic) women, Christa becomes the veiled phallus, the signifier of male desire, and thus confronts them with their own erotic desire. This in turn positions male priests, theologians, and worshippers as voyeurs, which Mulvey argues is cinematically linked to punishment. In consequence the charge of ‘lesbian overtones’ becomes recognizable as transference rather than acknowledgement of male erotic desire, and suggests a desire to punish those (women) responsible for the voyeuristic image.

This, of course, is not to deny there may be elements of Stacey’s homoerotic pleasure in the identification of women spectator/

worshippers. While this was not to the fore in either the ‘Coming out of the shadows’ liturgy or the responses of those supporting the service and *Bosnian Christa*, its echo can be heard. What is interesting is the way this homoerotic identification disrupts the seamlessness of women’s learned ‘trans-sex identification’ through Christa’s womanly masquerade. This identification with Christa has been given at least two interpretations. Mary Grey has noted the way Sandys’ Christa ‘struck an authentic chord among many women’, and quotes Edwina Hunter’s response as an example:

When I look at Christa I see *me*. That is me on the Cross... the sunken, wasted, emaciated centre of the Christa’s body, is the emaciated birth centre of my body rendered incapable of giving birth to the creativity and spirit within me.³⁵

This kind of identification correlates with that noted by Susan Thistelthwaite,³⁶ and with that of Argyle. However, while Christa serves as a Christological icon in which women can identify a reflection of their own their suffering, it is a problematic identification given the social collusion which institutionalizes women’s suffering. As Grey notes: ‘If the central symbol of Christianity contains with it a message which keeps women impaled on that cross, with societal approval, what message of resurrected hope and redemption can it bring?’³⁷ Grey’s strategy is to attempt to redeem Christianity’s central symbol, the cross; in other words to resist the dominating models of atonement and to reread the cross by a relational paradigm more sympathetic to a feminist, ‘womanspace’ perspective. The relational model which emerges is that of Christ’s ‘at-one-ment’.

³⁶ Thistelthwaite quotes an anonymous poem about a woman’s identification with Christa:

O God,
through the image of a woman
crucified on the cross
I understand at last...
For the first time
I felt your suffering presence with me
in that event
I have known you as a vulnerable baby,
as a brother, and as a father.
Now I know you as a woman.
You were there with me
as the violated girl
caught in helpless suffering.

More recently, Grey has conceded the healing potential in Christa for women. Finding feminized images of Christ in religious art history she concludes,

Of all the theological inferences two stand out clearly — that Christ identifies with the suffering of women, and that the gender of Christ is fluid and flexible. He is a man in such a way as not to block out representation as a woman.38

Grey’s argument is that Christa liberates not by condoning, ‘but by being present with and sharing in the brokenness’.39 But, with reference to Indian and Shona Christology, she also draws attention to the fluidity of gender in Christ/a. The point here is that Christa embodies a fluidity of gender within the Christ(o/ a)logical icon, and performs, in a self-referential way, what Mulvey describes as women’s learned ability of gender identification (fluidity) mobility, s/he acts as a mirror reflecting back women’s learned response. By this process Christa masquerades femininity, disrupting the seamlessness of women’s learned ‘trans-sex identification’, releasing the healing potential of Christa implicit in (her/his) fluidity of gender. In this way Christa provides an opportunity for homoerotic identification with the Christ(o/ a)logical icon. However, while fluidity of gender in Christa performs the learned response of women worshippers, the same gender fluidity poses a challenge to the presumed stability of masculine gender identification. For this reason the ecclesiastical-political ideology, which masks the economy of male (phallic) desire, acts to delegitimise polyvalent gender identification, with the result that women worshippers, for the most part and until recently, have been denied access to an authentic representation within the universal liturgical signifier, and compelled to worship only as (wo)men.

It seems, then, that gender fluidity within Christa might provide an important liturgical representation, one whose gender fluidity may allow liturgical subjects to renegotiate their gendered relationships, and also to deepen their understanding of their own gendered experience. The incorporation of Christa’s gendered particularity into the universal liturgical signifier may create the possibility for women worshippers to find in the universal liturgical signifier a non-phallic Other of the same. In this way, Christa may begin to deconstruct the phallic-Symbolic ideology and to liberate women worshippers from the mask of womanliness, creating a new space in which bisexuality and gender fluidity are returned legitimated. In Christa at least some Christian women may have a liturgical representation through which they can become their own liturgical subjects, worshippers in their own rite.

38 Grey, ‘Who do you say that I am?’, 193.
39 Ibid., 195.