

## The Same Difference

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The winter 1987 issue of *Screen* is entitled 'Deconstructing "Difference" '. What would it mean to deconstruct 'difference'? Given, that is, that deconstruction charts the operation of something called *différance*—which is already defined as deconstructed difference. Why does *Screen* need to do it all over again?

We soon discover, however, that neither 'deconstructing' nor 'difference' are being used in a technical deconstructive sense. In 'Difference and Its Discontents', the introduction to the issue, Mandy Merck makes it clear that by 'difference' is meant 'the theory of sexual difference'.<sup>1</sup> The theory of sexual difference, she suggests, requires deconstruction, in the name of sameness.

But is there such a thing as 'the theory of sexual difference'?

Apparently so, for the complaint against 'the theory of sexual difference' is precisely that it is a homogeneous theory. But, paradoxically, what is wrong with this homogeneous theory is that it always promotes heterogeneity. It neglects sameness in its desire for otherness: otherness always defined as 'the same difference' of heterosexuality.

Merck argues that what she calls 'the "difference" school' is 'largely unable to theorize homosexuality' (p. 6). As proof she cites the lack of lesbian representation in the *Oxford Literary Review's* 'Sexual Difference' conference, and the absence of homosexuality altogether in the exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*.<sup>2</sup> While there is no doubt that homosexuality was under—represented in both cases, it does not necessarily follow that this was the

result of a deficiency in theory. For it is not so much that the so-called difference school has been unable to theorize homosexuality as that its theorization of homosexuality has produced certain theoretical problems. These in turn produce difficulties at the level of political strategy. However, Merck's own arguments demonstrate that such problems cannot be solved by attacking difference as such.

For difference has already been deconstructed,<sup>3</sup> even if such deconstruction has been no less under—represented in the pages of *Screen* for the last twenty years than homosexuality itself. The awkward dilemma that arises is that in the first instance at least 'deconstructing "difference"' 'actually makes the representation of homosexuality more problematical. It is not necessarily a question of homosexuality being repressed but rather that difference theory makes categories such as homosexuality, no less than heterosexuality or bisexuality, more difficult to sustain. That was the reason why the *Oxford Literary Review's* conference was called simply 'Sexual Difference'. The point was that the instability or seeming dissolution of the terms through which sexual politics operates poses a political problem. It would be fair to add that this difficulty was not in the event adequately addressed by the conference, and more often simply produced expressions of anxiety, or even, disturbingly, of homophobia.

In this context it seems extraordinary that *Screen* still finds it necessary in 1987 to present a theoretical critique of sexual difference theory as a 'typology of dualism' (p. 5). Has *Screen*, perhaps, had to revive it because a certain theorization of homosexuality needs such a hypostatisation for its own self—definition, even if that self—definition presents itself in antithesis to it? Merck suggests that this curious theoretical time—warp is the result of the influence of Mulvey's 1975 essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative

Cinema’—despite the fact that many, including Mulvey herself, have since argued that it assumes too rigid a dualism of sexual division.<sup>44</sup> Of course it is possible to read both Freud and Lacan as implying a binary opposition masculine-feminine in a theory of sexuality organized around the terms phallus-castration. But, as Merck acknowledges, such a reading has also been disputed throughout the whole history of psychoanalysis, and especially since the seventies by critiques which either offer revisions of Freud and Lacan (Irigaray, Cixous, Montrelay, Heath, Kristeva) or re-readings of them so as to show the instability of such oppositions in their texts (Derrida, Rose).<sup>55</sup>

Merck goes on to suggest that despite the many critiques of sexuality as a binary opposition, from the perspective of lesbian and gay politics sexual difference still looks as if it is ‘conceived within a dualism’ (p. 5). But does homosexuality in fact make trouble for ‘the surprisingly stable opposites of “difference”’ (p. 9) as she claims? It is impossible to answer this question without asking another: what are the ‘opposites of “difference”’? Does difference in fact have opposites at all—or are there only differences in difference? Here we encounter the real problem in Merck’s argument, in as much as it repeats the very assumptions that she denounces: she complains that difference theory always presupposes the same difference (heterosexuality), but she in turn assumes difference theory to be always the same: ‘the theory of sexual difference’, ‘sexual difference theory’, ‘difference theorists’, ‘the “difference” school’, are all lumped together as one unchanging theory, one undifferentiated ‘school’. This is, apparently, because from the perspective of gay and lesbian politics all difference theory seems to be predicated on a psychoanalytic account of difference that assumes a stable and untroubled

masculine/feminine opposition. However not all difference theory is psychoanalytic—deconstruction, for instance.

In many areas of what Merck describes as ‘difference theory’ a distinction is made between differences and opposites. This is because such theories are predicated on Saussure’s account of difference which denied that individual words possess intrinsic meaning, arguing instead that they only take on meaning by being distinguishable from other words: ‘in language there are only differences without positive terms’, or, as Derrida puts it: ‘difference inscribes itself without any decidable poles, without any independent, irreversible terms’.<sup>6</sup>

Although Merck follows Dugald Williamson in his Foucauldian critique of Lacan’s stress on the function of language in psychoanalysis,<sup>7</sup> the rigid opposition masculine/feminine that she seeks to trouble can only be disturbed by showing that these terms are not in fact the positive terms of sexual identity. Lacan recognized that Freud’s emphasis on the interchangeability of positionality in sexual fantasy shows that sexual difference operates in exactly the same way as linguistic difference: there are not just two poles masculine/feminine but an undecidable set of terms through which the subject circulates. As D.N. Rodowick points out in his analysis of ‘A Child is being Beaten’, the subject takes up multiple positions of identification, whether successively or simultaneously, ‘in which transactions between the masculine and feminine positions are both variable and necessary’, and beyond even that where:

The very question of desire seems to require the transgression of the positionalities defined as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ by constructing a sedimentary structure in which variable positions of identification and places of

enunciation are overlaid.<sup>8</sup>

Thus sexuality, as both Freud and Lacan have argued, is not fixed but rather extremely mobile at the level of fantasy and only restricted or stabilized at all through social and cultural pressure with respect to object choice. But if there is no untroubled dualism of heterosexuality in psychoanalytic theory, the corollary follows that this also has to mean that there is no untroubled homosexuality either, indeed that there is no 'pure', stable or intrinsic homosexuality any more than there is 'pure', stable or intrinsic heterosexuality. No more than an unwavering masculine/feminine binary, there is no undisturbed heterosexual/homosexual binary.

Such a theory of undecidability means that, like language or the psyche itself, sexuality does not work by the rational logic of non-contradiction in which an entity cannot both be A and not A at the same time, a point which has escaped Williamson in his critique of Lacan. He demonstrates that the Lacanian theory of the Imaginary and Symbolic 'conflates two discontinuous ideas of difference' (p. 18) and claims that this contradiction represents a major problem for Lacanian psychoanalysis. It certainly would if psychoanalysis operated, as Williamson does, according to the formal protocols of rational logic. Not using psychoanalytic concepts himself Williamson forgets that the crucial innovation of psychoanalysis is that it offers a theory of unresolved conflict.

For Lacan, as for Freud, the psyche is constituted by antagonistic forces. There are no negatives or contradictions in the unconscious: the subject has to live its incompatible differences simultaneously, and that is why there is never accession to a full, self-present consciousness, nor, for that matter, assumption of a stable sexual identity.

Subjectivity really is constituted by discontinuous ideas of difference: that is the whole problem—not for Lacanian psychoanalysis but for the psyche, and for us. The fact that according to Freud and Lacan the psyche operates according to the same structures as linguistic difference—double, contradictory, and undecidable—is either a measure of the primary role that language plays in psychic life or, as Derrida argues, demonstrates that the psyche itself is already an effect of linguistic difference. If the connection between subjectivity, language and sexuality were severed, however, as Williamson suggests it should be, then there would be no option but to return to the realm of a rational logic of non-contradiction and thus of fixed polarities in which difference means opposition—in which case there would be no incompatibility, no unconscious, no gap between representation and biology and nothing but an essentialist sexuality of a male/female dualism.

Merck's suspicion of the linguistic account of difference means that she finds it impossible to get out of the structure of the very oppositions which she criticizes. She suggests that the heterosexual binary of masculine/feminine needs to be deconstructed—but it is open to question whether this so-called 'deconstruction' is likely to meet with any more success when all that happens is that Merck puts another binary, heterosexual/homosexual, in its place. Why challenge a binary opposition because it is restricted within a typology of dualism if you are only going to substitute another? Nor does Merck's 'deconstruction' of difference in the name of a sameness defined in opposition to otherness give any more promise of escaping the topology of binarisms.

For same and other, identity and difference, homosexuality and heterosexuality, homogeneity and heterogeneity, are all conceptual categories that work in the same

way as the male/female dualism. It is true that culturally and politically the opposition will work as a hierarchy in which one term will be valorized over the other. But the simple reversal of this hierarchy only remains within its terms and does not challenge it—in fact it only perpetuates it. It is for this reason that Derrida makes the at first startling suggestion that ‘phallogentrism and homosexuality can go, so to speak, hand in hand’.<sup>9</sup> If binary oppositions in effect depend on and reinforce each other then phallogentrism may indeed be a homosexual enterprise, both determined by and organized around the having or not having of the phallus. ‘No genitally similar object can be legitimately eroticized’ (p. 6) Merck complains, clearly not too keen to advocate constructions of sexuality ‘without pre-given “content”’ (p. 3).

But this contradiction, in which on the one hand she shows an inclination towards a theory of sexuality predicated on a biological genitality (whether it be the same or different) while on the other hand she criticizes sexual difference theory for being too rigid in its dualisms suggests that a more interesting argument is being broached: sexual difference theory is too different but at the same time there are not enough differences. It is this apparent contradiction that unsettles the binary structure that Merck wishes to shift, both overturning it and at the same time displacing it.

This becomes clearest in the paragraph in which we are told that the counter-assertion to ‘the same difference’ of heterosexuality in the Sexual Difference conference and the Difference: On Sexuality and Representation exhibition took the form of an article and an exhibition both entitled—‘The Same Difference’ (p. 6). Is this second ‘same difference’ supposed to be the same difference or a different same difference to the first? Apparently it is

impossible to tell: the 'same difference' is the term both of a complaint against heterosexuality and also the characterization of what is being advocated against it. Merck writes that it 'can be read to criticize the hypostatization of heterosexual difference in contemporary theory or [my emphasis] to claim an equivalent ratio of difference, and desire, for homosexuality' (p. 6). It wants a difference, but then it also wants an equivalent difference (the same difference?). So 'the same difference' is not necessarily always 'the same old same' difference (p. 9), even if it is the same difference. But if that is the case is it still the same difference—or is it really different?

Alternatively, perhaps the same differences really are the same, that is, the same difference of heterosexuality is the same as the same difference of homosexuality. But how can heterosexuality, that is sexuality for the other, be the same as homosexuality, sexuality for the same? Can the other be the same or the same be the other? They certainly need each other: after all, the same cannot be the same on its own, it has to be defined against the other in order to be the same. It is only the other that makes the same the same. But then the same cannot be the same except by being the other for the other, while, on the other hand, 'the other cannot be the other—of the same—except by being the same (as itself)'.<sup>10</sup> In order to be the same, the same must also be other; it must differ from itself.

If this suggests a problem for sameness at least Merck allows for a different option: it might be possible to revive Monique Plaza's attempt to separate sexual difference from identity. Identity is beset with the same problems as sameness, in that it cannot be thought except as differing from the different, and therefore difference is what enables identity to be itself.<sup>11</sup> But Plaza's attempt to separate sexual difference from such labyrinths does not



succeed in evading them: she suggests that by detaching the hierarchy of male/not-male from the self/other distinction then woman could become ‘“other than not-male” rather than “other and not male”’ (p. 7). However, as the terms themselves indicate, this revision does not manage to avoid either the male/not-male or the self/other categories as such. What Plaza’s argument suggests instead is a certain internal differentiation in the notion of the other, which can be either—and therefore both—not male and other than not-male. The other therefore differs from itself: just as for Merck’s ‘the same difference’. Perhaps it is not altogether by chance that both arguments end up by repeating nothing less than the structure of the unconscious itself; in Samuel Weber’s description:

If the unconscious means anything whatsoever, it is that the relation between self and others, inner and outer, cannot be grasped as an interval between polar opposites but rather as an irreducible dislocation of the subject in which the other inhabits the self as its condition of possibility.<sup>12</sup>

In view of this insistent logic of an internal difference in all attempts to define sexuality in terms of sameness or otherness it is intriguing that Merck approvingly cites Aimee Rankin’s criticism that ‘difference theory’ ‘displays more deference than difference’ (p. 9)—for the deconstruction of difference involves almost exactly that. In Derrida’s description:

The verb ‘to differ’ [différer] seems to differ from itself. On the one hand it indicates difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility; on the other, it expresses the interposition of delay, the interval of a spacing and temporalizing that puts off until ‘later’ what is presently

denied, the possible that is presently impossible. Sometimes the different and sometimes the deferred correspond [in French] to the verb 'to differ.' This correlation, however, is not simply one between act and object, cause and effect, or primordial and secondary.

In the one case 'to differ' signifies nonidentity; in the other case it signifies the order of the same.... We provisionally give the name *différance* to this sameness which is not identical: by the silent writing of its a, it has the desired advantage of referring to differing, both as spacing/temporalizing and as the movement that structures every dissociation.<sup>13</sup>

'*Différance* is the name for the spatio-temporal differed—and—deferred economy of this sameness which is not identical', the very structure that Merck's own argument has led to.<sup>14</sup> Derrida names it *différance* in order to bring attention to the way in which difference differs from itself: heard, *différence/différance* sound the same, but when written they are different from each other and no longer identical. *Différance* does not offer an alternative to the conceptuality of binary oppositions (for that would itself form another binary opposition) but instead both enables and confounds them:

The same, precisely, is *différance* (with an a) as the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to another. Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same.<sup>15</sup>

*Différance* thus describes the operating conditions of the strange logic of binary oppositions in which they always exceed themselves, in which opposite terms will always be defined as different from each other, but by that very token as also the same: 'it is an operation that both sows confusion between opposites and stands between the opposites "at once"'.<sup>16</sup> The economy of *différance*, in short, produces the effects of undecidable difference between same and other, identity and difference, and all other binary oppositions that we have been charting.

As Derrida demonstrates, exactly the same structure can be found at work in the texts of Freud. At this point we may recall Freud's curious habit of making distinctions based on a male/female polarity that he then seems to disavow. Inevitably this has led to hotly contested arguments about whether Freud or Lacan's work is implicated in biologism or patriarchy or is set against them, and the argument could go on for ever as long as each side claims one kind of statement as Freud's authentic position—which can then be promptly denied by an appropriate citation supporting the other view. But to read Freud as either promulgating a fixed opposition, or attempting to redeem him by showing how elsewhere he disowns it is to miss the point. His texts argue both, simultaneously:

All the oppositions that furrow Freudian thought relate each of his concepts one to another as moments of a detour in the economy of *différance*. One is but the other different and deferred, one differing and deferring the other. One is the other in *différance*, one is the *différance* of the other. This is why every apparently rigorous and irreducible opposition (for example the opposition of the secondary to primary) comes to be qualified, at one moment or another, as a 'theoretical fiction'.<sup>17</sup>

Such a contradiction remains unthinkable according to the normal protocols of logic, but it is precisely the moves of such procedures that deconstruction, and indeed psychoanalysis, trace.

This structure may also account for the curious necessity remarked upon earlier for Merck to rerun the critique of sexuality as a dualism: the deconstruction of such an argument shows how it is constructed by means of certain ambivalent forms of inclusions and exclusions which have the effect of making it rely upon elements that it can neither fully assimilate nor control. For homosexuality to define itself it must begin by differentiating itself from what it is not, even though this means that it will never entirely succeed in separating itself from it: each term of the opposition appears as the *différance* of the other. In Weber's description this process enacts

a movement of conflictual decomposition and recomposition in which that which is posited sets itself apart: that is, both demarcates itself from an other to which it is opposed; and de-marks itself by prescribing yet another, third term, which inexorably replaces and displaces the other two.<sup>18</sup>

This is the story of how sameness, in opposing itself to difference, becomes 'the same difference'.

From this perspective homosexuality can scarcely be regarded as a disavowal of difference, as Merck claims (pp. 5-6), for 'the same, precisely, is *différance*': heterosexuality and homosexuality are distinguished as the same, but different, difference, each the supplementary double of the other. Homosexuality's cultural repression is perhaps a marker of just how close that difference is.<sup>19</sup> This account of

the constitution of sexuality poses a political problem, however, for it seems to stand in antithesis to the general oppositional and self-defining strategies of gay politics. Yet the political problem is also that culturally and institutionally homosexuality and heterosexuality are marked as, simply, different. At this point gay politics comes up against the same difficulty as that of feminism, with which Merck concludes:

in some cases the objectives of feminist politics go against sexual differences, in other cases they do not, and the problem is to find out which is which.<sup>20</sup>

The trick, however, is not to get caught within the binary terms of an either/or choice, of a bewildered ‘which is which?’. The political strategy must be to assert sexual difference whilst simultaneously, paradoxically, showing that difference to be the same.

(1987)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mandy Merck, ‘Introduction—Difference and Its Discontents’, *Screen*, vol. 28 no 1, Winter 1987, pp. 2-9. Further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Merck, p. 6. See *Sexual Difference*, *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 8 nos 1-2, 1986, and *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> On January 27, 1968 to be precise. See Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp. 129-60, also, in a slightly modified form, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 1-27.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16 no 3, Autumn 1975, pp. 6-18. The critiques of Mulvey's article are discussed by Merck, pp. 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* [1974], trans. Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985; Hélène Cixous, *La Jeune née*, Paris, UGE, 10/18, 1975; Michèle Montrelay, *L'Ombre et le nom. Sur la féminité*, Paris, Minuit, 1977; Stephen Heath, 'Difference', *Screen*, vol. 19 no 3, Autumn 1978, pp. 51-112; Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* [1980], trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982; Jacques Derrida, 'The Purveyor of Truth', trans. Willis Domingo, James Hulbert, Moshe Ron, and Marie-Rose Logan, *Yale French Studies*, vol. 52, 1975, pp. 31-113; Jacqueline Rose, 'Introduction II' to Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne, *Feminine Sexuality*, London, Macmillan, 1982, pp. 27-57.

<sup>6</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, London, Fontana, 1974, p. 120; Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 210.

<sup>7</sup> Dugald Williamson, 'Language and Sexual Difference', *Screen*, vol. 28 no 1, Winter 1987, pp. 10-25. Further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>8</sup> D.N. Rodowick, 'The Difficulty of Difference', *Wide Angle*, vol. 5 no 1, pp. 11, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald, 'Choreographies', *Diacritics*, vol. 12 no 2, 1982, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 128.

<sup>11</sup> Merck, op. cit., p. 7, citing Monique Plaza, "Phallomorphic Power" and the Psychology of "Woman", *Ideology and Consciousness*, no 4, 1978, pp. 4-36. For a succinct account of the complexities involved in the concepts of identity and difference, see Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J.M. Harding, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 36-39.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 32-3.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, pp. 129-30.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, p. 212.

<sup>17</sup> Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> Weber, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jonathan Dollimore, 'Homophobia and Sexual Difference', *Sexual Difference*, ed. Robert J.C. Young, *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 8 nos 1-2, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Merck, op. cit., p. 9, citing Parveen Adams in 'm/f: Interview 1984', *m/f*, nos 11-12, 1986, p. 14.



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