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*Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood  
Cinema* (review)

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hensive overview. The essays by Gaiduk and Chen Jian provide instructive introductions to the policies of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, but the volume lacks a comparable essay on the role of the United States, which was the most prominent of any external power. The essays by Mark Lawrence on the Bao Dai Solution and Richard Mason on U.S. reluctance to accept Indonesian nonalignment underscore the difficulties of applying containment in the midst of decolonization; but apart from these discussions, U.S. objectives and policies are left obscure. Finally, a couple of the essays do not "fit." Those by Anne Foster on the Netherlands' adjustment to losing Indonesia and Martin Thomas on the shortcomings of British intelligence—while fascinating and important in their own right—add little to our understanding of Southeast Asian developments.

Overall, however, *Connecting Histories* substantially enhances the scholarship on a critical region at a formative moment.



Robert J. Corber, *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 225 pp. \$23.95.

*Reviewed by Andrea Weiss, City College of New York*

Robert J. Corber's study draws on and synthesizes the growing body of work in lesbian and gay film studies, extending that work in one significant way: by arguing that the homophobic discourse around female homosexuality in the United States shifted during the Cold War to focus on the slippery image of the femme lesbian rather than the more easily identified gender-transgressive butch. In the cultural hysteria of that era, the femme was considered the more dangerous figure because, similar to the Communist, she could pass as "normal." This enabled her to seduce other women and convert them to "the life," destroy the institution of marriage, subvert all-American values, and threaten to undermine the national fabric, all without arousing suspicion.

The argument is interesting, and Corber threads it through a rereading of several beloved Hollywood classics that we might not have considered under the rubric of "Cold War movies," although they subscribe to Cold War ideologies pertaining to gender and sexuality. Many viewers might not immediately consider these films in terms of their lesbian representation, either. Because of the tight reign of the Motion Picture Production Code, roughly from 1934 to 1961, the narrow parameters of what could be represented on screen meant that the various constructions of lesbianism in these films flew, and continue to fly, below the radar for many viewers—which makes Corber's reading of them all the more interesting.

Corber devotes entire chapters to the films *All About Eve* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1950), *The Children's Hour* (William Wyler, 1962), and *Marnie* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1964), all films that already have been discussed in terms of their "queerness," first by gay film critic Vito Russo in his pioneering book *The Celluloid Closet* (1989), again by this reviewer in my *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in the Cinema* (1992), and in

greater detail by Patricia White in her *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (1999), not to mention quite a few others since then. However, by focusing on the dangerous femme of the Cold War era, Corber looks at scenes we have known and loved for decades, forcing us to consider them in a new light. At the end of *All About Eve*, when a young fan slips into Eve's dressing room much the way Eve (Anne Baxter) had first slipped into Margo's (Bette Davis), the girl dresses in Eve's cloak, holds up Eve's award and takes a bow, and we see her image in the three-way dressing room mirror multiplied ad infinitum. Corber reads in this scene "the fear that the feminine woman who makes a lesbian object choice will reproduce herself almost endlessly by converting other women to lesbianism" (p. 40).

The pleasure of revisiting such scenes and considering them in terms of Cold War ideologies is diminished, however, by the somewhat clumsy writing style of the book. Readers' eyes are apt to glaze over after one too many sentences such as "*Marnie* interrogates the construction of female subjectivity in relation to patriarchal social and economic arrangements" (p. 21), not to mention the many repetitions, such as numerous references to Joan Crawford as "a kind of female Horatio Alger." The problems, however, are not just stylistic. In the introduction, Corber explains the untidy coexistence of older and newer discourses on lesbianism (inverted gender identity being the older; aberrant object choice being the newer) by stating, "Movies continued to draw on an older model of sexuality that linked gender and sexual nonconformity, even as they underwrote the Cold War construction of the lesbian" (p. 5). A few pages later: "Despite the emergence of object choice as an overriding principle of social and sexual difference, the older model of lesbianism did not wholly disappear" (p. 18). In the very next paragraph he repeats, "Thus even as Cold War homophobia validated the new model of sexuality, it continued to incorporate the older model, which associated lesbianism with masculinity" (p. 19). Did he think we were not paying close enough attention in the previous paragraph? Referring to *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1941), Corber claims that Joan Crawford as Mildred Pierce "has already disrupted the reproduction of normative gender and sexual identities" (p. 107) even though we just learned in the previous paragraph that "she has already disrupted the structures of desire and identification on which the reproduction of normative gender and sexual identities depends" (p. 107). One wonders whether he gave himself the peculiar challenge of trying to write an entire book while confining himself to only a limited pool of available words.

Despite these flaws, *Cold War Femme* brings several new insights into the fields of cinema studies and Cold War studies. Corber's reading of the contradictory star personas of Doris Day, Joan Crawford, and Bette Davis, which, in different ways for each of them, at once challenged and confirmed Cold War sexual mores, is enlightening and nuanced. Corber moves fluidly from text to context and back to text again, and he seems equally adept at historical and filmic analysis. He draws attention to the figure of the femme, whose history and representation have been often eclipsed, both in homophobic discourse and even in lesbian/gay scholarship, by the more visible figure of the butch. Unfortunately, his stilted writing style may cause readers to abandon the book before gleaning its contributions to the field.