

**Annamarie Jagose: *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002)**

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1 When reading theory we come into contact with assumptions upon which texts are based, indeed most theory relies on the "self-evidence" of certain beliefs to generate knowledge. In texts such as these, generally what is more interesting than the actual content is the way that the content is assembled - the organizing assumptions in a process which aims not to make assumptions. *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence* is a text which does not take much for granted, its interventions dissolve the camouflage coating that distracts ideologically-softened minds. In her inimical urbane style Annamarie Jagose pulls apart the "narrative mechanisms of numerical order or chronological progression" (ix) to examine the mechanics of narratives that form separate and hierarchically rendered temporal switches figuring female homosexuality in belated relation to heterosexuality and to male homosexuality.

2 Through her interpretation of a handful of texts (Anne Lister's diaries, *Little Dorrit*, *The Bostonians*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *Rebecca* and "pulp sexology" are each designated their own chapter with helpful subheadings assisting the digestion of her meaty thoughts), Jagose demonstrates how a narrative establishes a cast of qualitatively assigned variables which are sexualized through both the temporal mechanics of the text, and through critical response. *Inconsequence* picks up on the momentum Jagose set in motion in her *Lesbian Utopics* (1994) and *Queer Theory* (1996). Its epistemological crispness and artful honing of diverse influences that rigorously address the normative clamp on our existence contributes to the interpretative sophistication which produces the most exciting theory of our time. This is the lifeblood of queer theory, with its particular theoretical twists and turns that productively counter the all-too-common extinguishing of complexities and paradoxes effected by the simple laziness of causal thinking.

3 Jagose confronts the remedial motivation within lesbian theory founded on the belief that the historical invisibility of the lesbian demands her contemporary restitution to the ranks of the visible. Indeed, if the lesbian was invisible, to what advantage is it to submit to this system of delineating that visibility was so desirable, if it was this system that produced this injustice in the first place? Given that this system, this recombination of disparate powers and influences, is invested in stipulating that "here is a lesbian," (most often in the guise of connotative practices that point to the void, etc) and "here is a non-lesbian," (most often this

goes without saying), is it not surmisable that these loaded appellations also seem to be at the service of this mode of organizing power? Hence Jagose's strategy is to enquire into the way in which these powers, and their snaky forms in narrative, engender the characteristics that become empirically emphasized and ordered into the imperfect and mutually exclusive categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality, never to quite adequately contain the resistances they produce. It is not merely that a field of representations is qualitatively circulated in which the lesbian is figured as that most incomprehensible of figures. It is that in attaching this representation of secondariness and derivation to the lesbian, a sequence is brought about that in itself refers to the lesbian without needing to attend to her messy specifications.

4 Two of the theoretical tenets underpinning Jagose's work are firstly that a period of time is not a blank *tabula rasa* on which discursive imprints are left but itself a construction to be investigated, and secondly that the deconstruction of historical discourses that were available to the author of a text at the time the text was written should not be confused with the productive textual economies and persuasions of our own time. The intention is to not retrospectively recuperate for ideologically-suspicious contemporary purposes the plotting of points and axis that could belong to different maps and lead to different destinations. It is also important here to note that within certain strands of queer literary criticism, (and also given the time frame that the discussed texts were written ) that to invoke the late nineteenth century is to call into play a host of coordinates that provide some of the most important foundational premises within this field. This temporal bracket, set upon by Foucault and famously elaborated by Sedgwick, invites the historicizing urge that levers temporal representations of desire from their suturing to identarian forms. This constructed time frame speaks of the influential narratives that were generated from Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly the case history, its pathologising momentum and its sequestering of desire as that which is recalled, through memory, retrospection, and in language that promotes the production of the ascendancy of the Oedipal family. Sexology - one of Jagose's particular bugbears - also found its cultivation within this temporal soil, crystallizing "sexuality as a sequential effect" (24). Furthermore, incurring legislative force from Wilde's trial onwards, the encasing of desire with identity and the personification of the legitimate - as prior and precedent - and the illegitimate - as derivative and secondary - solidified into new cultural identifications.

5 Accordingly, the *fin-de-siecle* 4period functions itself as a before-and-after stopgap in Jagose's text, as with many queer theoreticians who would nominate homosexuality's birth as dating from this time. Jagose wields this temporal panacea to redress that taxonomically

inappropriate criticism which, for example, preemptively claims the early nineteenth century diaries of Anne Lister as lesbian artifacts. Likewise she identifies where literary criticism dresses up *Little Dorrit's* 1857 Miss Wade from the lesbian emperor's periphrastic wardrobe to ill-fit her with the new clothes of contemporary representation. Put more succinctly, it is essential to Jagose's strategy that we don't impose our own, (still incoherent) identifications on to a retrospective temporal linearity that searches for an origin in some fantasized past. Similarly, with regard to her chapter on *The Bostonians*, Jagose once again mobilizes the historicized figure in favour of the contemporaneous recuperation of the lesbian-in-character: "Considering *The Bostonians* through its privileged figure of marriage enables a reading structured less by the retrospectively reified categories of modern sexual identification than by the historically specific, late nineteenth century forms that licensed sexuality as culturally visible" (68).

6 Discernible yet fleeting in the first three chapters of *Inconsequence*, Jagose's particular allegiance to the more opaque concepts of narrative theory is not always as clear as her rigorous deconstruction of, for example, sexology and psychoanalysis. Nevertheless the influence of narrative theory as an interpretive device is cranked up in the final three chapters. The point here is that the form (compositional techniques) will say something regardless of the content (plot). What is being said through form and how can it possibly intersect with representations of sexuality? This theoretical stance is not to be mistaken for the oversimplified equation of non-linear narratives with the "queering of" identity that we relate to the late twentieth century. Indeed Jagose reads *Mrs Dalloway* against the trend that praises its non-realist techniques as resisting the "tyranny of sequence" that indeed produces the realist tradition as so indebted to the narrative of heterosexuality. Drawing comparisons between the Freudian homosexual subject, who is either unable to adequately recall the past, or, on recalling, becomes interpellated through a sequential Oedipal hijinx, and Woolf's similar representational economy, Jagose illustrates how memory writes the fraught homosexual subject into existence: "For Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, as for Freud, the remembering homosexual subject is invariably recast as the homosexual subject of memory. Increasingly, homosexuality is confined to the mnemonic register, its surfacing in the present a temporary glitch in that future-directed temporality that is, as the novel's closure attests, contracted to heterosexuality" (82). Thus Jagose insists that Woolf's narrative, conferred with the authority of memory - which being a temporal thing and having such attributions of the homosexual historically imported to it - functions as a site from which sexually-identified indicators can be interpreted to suggest tensions other than those that arise from a non-narrative reading.

7        This is an important point for *Inconsequence*, indeed for any work that strategically resists the premise that the effects of sexual registration are always subject oriented - and the closing chapters insistently bring sequence and medium in to focus. In her impressively tight Chapter Five, Jagose examines the attempts to establish sexual registration through sequence both within du Maurier's *Rebecca*, its cinematic adaptation, and Susan Hill's 1993 "sequel" *Mrs de Winter*, and across these intertextually related mediums. She argues that despite, and perhaps even because of the fact that homosexuality is nowhere mentioned in du Maurier's *Rebecca*, the temporal disjunctions that are created through the narrative's backward and foreward movement resist an easy identification with the developmental teleology that figures Oedipal heterosexuality. Moving to Hitchcock's adaptation, Jagose claims that the destabilising devices of point-of-view editing and spectator-identification techniques, combined with homosexuality's familiar rendering through illusion, connotation and coding, continue to insinuate its periphrastic persistence. And she convincingly dispenses with the bland and unnecessary *Mrs de Winter* for its failed attempt to recuperate the sexual unrest demonstrated over the cultural anxiety of *Rebecca*. In the final chapter we are treated to a photographic sequence manufactured by pulp sexology in its mission to visibly represent the problem that it seeks to identify as lesbianism. Jagose draws on Foucault and Barthes to comment on the diffusion of sexual knowledge through the scientific/pornographic with the imperative to represent as uncoded that which is accessible through the photographic lens. By stripping the effects of sequence back to its licensing mechanics, *Inconsequence* reveals how lesbianism comes to figure as the derivation by which all sexuality is generated.

8        Sequence is one of those arenas that I find both challenging and threatening for its conceptual proximity to mathematics and the possibilities that might be on offer to literary theorists capable of excavating the tricky knowledges marooned behind those other ivory towers. Jagose works over two sequential paradigms, the chronological/hierarchical and the retrospective narration of present and past. I wonder what else could be gained from investigating other sequential logics such as simultaneously rendered sequences and sequences co-existing within a text. Nevertheless, Jagose's incisive deconstruction, and exquisitely detailed footnotes, are invaluable to learn from - to witness how she does what she does - makes *Inconsequence* an important tool for any contemporary theorist.