


Contextualizing Gender
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Lecture - 15
Technologies of Gender in Teresa de Lauretis


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Teresa de Lauretis

- Italian-born American gender theorist and film semiotician.
- Her critical interests include materialist semiotics, film theory, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and queer studies.
- Fluent in English and Italian, she writes in both languages and believes that language is at the heart of social construction.
 - She was born in 1938 in Bologna, Italy and later relocated to the United States where she became Professor Emerita at the University of California.
 - Her writings have been translated into 14 other languages.




Teresa de Lauretis



Good morning, dear friends and welcome to this module. Today we would look at the work of Teresa de Lauretis. Teresa de Lauretis is an Italian born American gender theorist and film semiotician. Her critical interests include materialist semiotics, film theory, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and queer studies. She is equally fluent in English and Italian and is able to write in both languages. Her work has been translated into 14 other languages.

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- de Lauretis was the first to use the term “queer theory” during a lecture given in February 1990 at the University of California.
 - She organized the first queer theory conference in 1990; the term started to become legitimized in academia in the early 1990s.
 - In 1991 she edited a special issue of the feminist cultural studies journal *differences* entitled “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities”.
 - She had heard the term queer being claimed by activist groups in New York in the late 1980s, and decided to use it in academia for deliberately provocative purposes, and to challenge the discriminative gender norms.
- de Lauretis suggests that the word queer should indicate at least three interrelated critical projects:
 - Contesting heterosexuality as a norm, heterogeneity present within lesbian and gay studies, plurality related with race.



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She was the first to use the term “queer theory” during a lecture given in February 1990 at the University of California. She had also organized the first queer theory conference in 1990, the term started to become legitimized in academia in the early 1990s after Teresa de Lauretis popularized it.


She had heard the term queer being claimed by activist groups in New York in the late 1980s, and then she decided to use it in academia for deliberately provocative purposes and in order to challenge the discriminative gender norms. She had also suggested that the word queer should indicate at least three interrelated critical projects.

Listing these three critical projects she suggests that first of all heterosexuality should not be the benchmark for all sexual formations. Secondly, she suggests that our attentiveness to gender should be capable of interrogating the frequent assumption that lesbian and gay studies formulate a single and homogeneous subject.

Thirdly, she had suggested that the idea of race crucially shapes sexual subjectivities in multiple ways.

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- However, she gave up the expression just three years later, as she felt that the queer theory had been appropriated by those dominant forces and institutions that the theory was originally intended to resist.
- She is the author of ten books. Her famous works include *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (1984), *Technologies of Gender* (1987), *The Practice of Love* (1994), *Figures of Resistance* (2007), and *Freud's Drive* (2008).
- A symposium on her work was held at Swarthmore College on November 5-7, 2015.
- She is currently working toward a theory of reading and spectatorship based on figurality and the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and translation.



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However, very soon she had to give up the expression, after about three years she felt that the queer theory has been appropriated by those same dominant forces and institutions that the theory was originally intended to resist. She is the author of ten books. And her famous works include *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* which was published in 1984, *Technologies of Gender* which was published in 1987.

This is an essay collection and is primarily known for the first essay with the same title. A symposium on her work was held at Swarthmore College in November 2015. She is currently working toward a theory of reading and spectatorship based on figurality and the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and translation.

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Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction (1987)

- This collection of essays addresses the question of gender in poststructuralist theoretical discourse, postmodern fiction, and women's cinema.
- The book is popularly known for its first essay "Technologies of Gender". It examines the construction of gender both as representation and as self-representation in relation to several kinds of texts -- fictional, cinematic or critical.
- Her discussion of texts provides the occasion to articulate a theoretical problem about feminism and discuss the limitations of "sexual difference".



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The essay collection of Teresa de Lauretis published in 1987 addresses the question of gender in poststructuralist theoretical discourse, postmodern fiction and, women's cinema. This book is popularly known for its first essay which examines the construction of gender, both as representation and as self-representation in relation to several kind of texts; fictional, cinematic, as well as critical.

Her discussion of texts provides the occasion to articulate a theoretical problem about feminism and discuss the limitations of the concept of "sexual difference" used by earlier feminist critics.

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- She examines the feminist perspective in relation to specific works of literature, criticism and film.
- De Lauretis looks at a novel or a film through theory -- as a magnifying glass-- taking a particular issue/assumption in theoretical discourse, in order to refocus the reading around questions of gender representation.
- The essay poses the question of “how to theorize gender beyond the limits of sexual difference and the constraints that such a notion has come to impose on feminist critical thought.” (Lauretis, 1987, p. ix).
- The essay takes its title and its conceptual premise from Foucault's theory of sexuality as a "technology of sex".



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She has examined the feminist perspective in relation to specific works of literature, criticism as well as films. She looks at a novel or a film through theory as if she is applying a magnifying glass to this work to take up a particular issue or assumption within theoretical discourse, so that we are able to refocus the reading around questions of gender representation.


The essay poses the question of how to theorize gender beyond the limits of sexual difference and the constraints that such a notion has come to impose on feminist critical thought. The essay takes its title and its conceptual premise from Foucault's theory of Sexuality as a “technology of sex”.

She proposes that gender too is the product of various social technologies. Not only academic criticism, but more broadly of all social and cultural practices. She begins the essay by pointing out that the feminist writings of 1960s and 70s considered the notion of gender as sexual difference this was central to understanding subjectivity, textuality, writing as well as spectatorship.

Teresa de Lauretis is critical of this approach she has suggested that the notion of gender should not be equated with sexual difference only or with its derivative notions like women's culture, feminine writing, mothering and femininity, otherwise it becomes a limitation to the feminist critical thought.

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- Often, this difference is promoted as a difference of woman from man, binding it to the terms of Western patriarchy itself.
- Points out two major limitations in this approach.
- The first limitation of this approach -- of critiquing patriarchy bound within the terms of sexual difference -- as de Lauretis has pointed out -- is that it constrains the feminist critical thought within the conceptual frame of a universal sex opposition :
 “Woman as the difference from man, both universalized; or woman as difference *tout court* and hence equally universalized”.
- This also makes it difficult to distinguish the difference “among women or differences within women”.



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Often, this difference is promoted as a difference of women from men, binding it to the terms of western patriarchy itself. She has pointed out two major limitations in this approach. The first limitation in this approach of critiquing patriarchy bound within the terms of sexual difference is that it constrains the feminist critical thought within the conceptual frame of a universal sex opposition.

That is “woman as the difference from man, both universalized; or woman as difference *tout court* and hence equally universalized”. This also makes it difficult to distinguish the difference “among women or differences within women”. In this context de Lauretis has given an example if the differences among women who wear the veil as in certain cultures or women who wear the mask or women who masquerade.

Now, she has used these three terms with very specific references. The word veil has cultural and religious connotations. When she uses the word mask figuratively, a grin or a lie it is a reference to a poem by a famous black poet Paul Dunbar. Similarly, when she says that women who masquerade, then the term masquerade is a reference to Joan Riviere who has talked about women who have same sex tendencies, but masquerade their femininity to avoid social anxiety.


So, Teresa de Lauretis says that if we follow the conventional analogy then perhaps, we will not be able to differentiate amongst the women who wear the veil, wear the mask or women who masquerade. So, gender differences cannot be understood as sexual

differences only otherwise there would be no difference at all amongst these types of women.

Womanhood in this case will be rendered as different embodiments of some archetypal essence which is not inclusive of any unique character or will be limited to some stereotypical notions of femininity. The second major limitation of the approach of sexual difference according to de Lauretis is that it limits the epistemological potential of feminist thought.

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- The second major limitation of the approach of “sexual difference” according to de Lauretis is that it limits the “epistemological potential” of feminist thought.
- A female subject is not only constituted in gender, but also across languages and cultural representations, including race and class.
 - Also, a subject, for De Lauretis, is not unified; rather multiple, and hence cannot be reduced to sexual difference alone. She says that the mutual containment of gender and sexual difference with each other needs to be “unraveled and deconstructed” (p. 2).
- Citing Foucault’s theory of sexuality as a “technology of sex” for explaining her perspective, she comments, “Gender, both as representation and self-representation, is the product of various technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life”.



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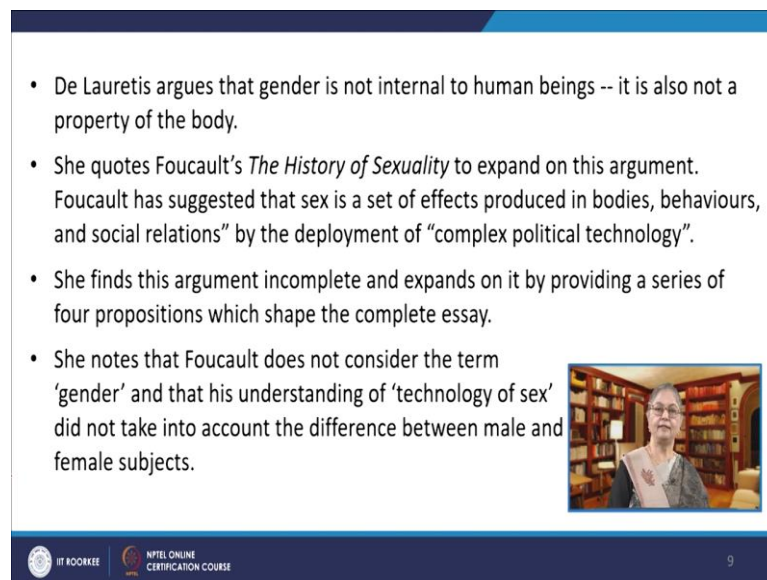
A female subject is not only constituted in gender, but is also constituted across languages and cultural representations, including race and class. So, also a subject according to de Lauretis is not unified. The subject is always multiple and hence cannot be reduced to sexual difference only.

She says that the mutual containment of gender and sexual difference with each other needs to be unraveled and deconstructed. Citing Foucault’s theory of sexuality as a “technology of sex” for explaining her perspective she comments; I quote, “gender both as representation and self-representation, is the product of various technologies such as cinema and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies and critical practices as well as practices of daily life” unquote.

In volume one of *History of Sexuality*; Foucault has said that the new technology of sex “requires the social body as a whole and virtually all its individuals to place themselves under surveillance”. He says that the bourgeois family “was the first to commit itself to sexual erethism” (Refer Time: 10:08) and it employed a whole series of different maneuvers.

These maneuvers were adopted with the objective of disciplining the body and regulating the populations. Body and soul were the subordinated to sex as the bourgeois created its own sexuality and formed a specific body based on it, a class body with its own rules and regulations and obsessions regarding health, hygiene, pedigree and race.

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- De Lauretis argues that gender is not internal to human beings -- it is also not a property of the body.
- She quotes Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* to expand on this argument. Foucault has suggested that sex is a set of effects produced in bodies, behaviours, and social relations" by the deployment of "complex political technology".
- She finds this argument incomplete and expands on it by providing a series of four propositions which shape the complete essay.
- She notes that Foucault does not consider the term 'gender' and that his understanding of 'technology of sex' did not take into account the difference between male and female subjects.


De Lauretis argues that gender is not internal to human beings, it is also not a property of the body. She quotes Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* to expand further on this argument. Foucault has suggested that sex is a set of effects produced in bodies, behaviours and social relations by the deployment of "complex political technology".

De Lauretis finds that this argument is incomplete and expands on it completes it by providing a series of four propositions which shape the complete essay. She notes that Foucault does not consider the term gender and that his understanding of 'technology of sex' did not take into account the difference between male and female subjects.

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Four Propositions of De Lauretis

- In the essay, “The Technology of Gender”, De Lauretis makes four propositions on her consideration of gender:
 1. Gender is a representation.
 2. The representation of gender is its construction.
Its construction goes on in public and private spaces, in media, also in ideology.
 3. The construction of gender goes on today through various technologies (of gender) and institutional discourses.
 4. The construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction by any discourse; feminist or otherwise.



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So, what are her four propositions? The first proposition is that gender is a representation. Second is that the representation of gender is its construction. Its construction goes on in public and private spaces, in media also in ideology. The construction of gender goes on today through various technologies of gender and institutional discourses.

Lastly the construction of gender is also effected by its deconstruction by any discourse feminist or otherwise.

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1. Gender as Representation

- De Lauretis begins this section by looking at how the term ‘gender’ has been historically employed in the English language.
 - One of the dictionary meanings of gender is given as a “classification of sex”.
 - It is also used as “a representation of a relation; that of belonging to a class, a group, a category”.
- The term ‘relation’ here is one of belonging and thus it assigns to an individual a position within class, as well as, other social relations.
- She explains the conceptual structure of “sex-gender system” that she has borrowed from feminist social scientists.
- Here sex is distinguished from gender.
- Sex is closer to a state of nature and gender is understood in terms of social relations.



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The first proposition of de Lauretis is of gender as representation. She begins this section by looking at how the term 'gender' has been historically employed in the English language. One of the dictionary meanings of gender is given as a "classification of sex". It is also used as a representation of a relation; that of belonging to a class, a group, or a category.

The term 'relation' here is one of belonging and thus it assigns to an individual a position within class, as well as other social relations. She also explains the conceptual structure of "sex-gender system" that she has borrowed from feminist social scientists. How sex is distinguished from gender? Sex is closer to a state of nature and gender is understood in terms of social relations.


A sex-gender system is always intimately interconnected with political and economic factors in each society. It is also used as a semiotic apparatus. And what do we mean by a semiotic apparatus? It is a system of representation which assigns meaning like identity, value, prestige, status in kinship and social hierarchy etc to individuals within the society.

In the system, for someone to be represented as male or female also implies the assumptions associated with the categorization. "The construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation".

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2. The Representation of Gender *is* its Construction

- de Lauretis considers the concept of gender in correlation with Althusser's approach on 'ideology'.
 - Althusser defined ideology as a relation of individuals to conditions that govern their existence.
- She underscores the fact that Althusser does not equate ideology with gender, as gender is usually located in the private sphere of reproduction and family rather than in the public sphere of superstructural where ideology belongs.
- She focuses on Althusser's statement that "all ideology has the function of constituting concrete individuals as subjects".
- She intends to replace the term ideology with gender.



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The second proposition which de Lauretis has put forward is that the representation of gender is its construction. She considers the concept of gender at this stage in correlation with Althusser's approach on ideology. Althusser has defined ideology as a relation of individuals to conditions that govern their existence. She underscores the fact that Althusser does not equate ideology with gender, as gender is usually located in the private sphere of reproduction and family rather than in the public sphere of super structural where ideology belongs.

She focuses on Althusser's statement that "all ideology has the function of constituting concrete individuals as subjects". She intends to replace the term ideology with gender in this particular statement. When we replace the term ideology with gender in this sentence, it will imply that gender has the function of constituting concrete individuals as men and women.

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- The shift from "subjects" to "men and women" marks the conceptual distance between two orders of discourse; from political theory to 'reality'.
- If gender exists in 'reality' and not in political theory, it shows that the ideology of gender can be validated by discourses that can acquire power or control over the field of social meaning.
- De Lauretis notes that the understanding of gender as an instance of ideology is not explored by Althusser.
- Rather, Marxist feminist thinkers like Michele Barrett have explored this dimension, establishing a clear relation between ideology and the relations of productions.



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The shift from "subjects" to "men and women" marks the conceptual distance between two orders of discourse; from political theory to 'reality'. If gender exists in 'reality' and not in political theory, it shows that the ideology of gender can be validated by discourses that can acquire power or control over the field of social meaning.


De Lauretis notes that the understanding of gender as an instance of ideology has not been explored by Althusser. Rather Marxist feminist thinkers like Michele Barrett have explored this dimension fully establishing a clear relation between ideology and the

relations of production. Michele Barrett has argued that the ideology of gender has played an important part in the historical construction of the capitalist division of labor and in the reproduction of labor power.

Private domains and the public spheres are not separate. Private domains for example, domestic spheres of the family, sexuality and effectivity on one hand; and the public spheres of work and productivity on the other hand cannot be studied in isolation. Rather we can envision several sets of social relations which are interconnected for example, relations of work, class, race and sex gender.

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- de Lauretis contends that private domains and public spheres cannot be studied in isolation. There are several interconnected sets of social relations - of work, class, race, and sex/gender.
- Not only men and women are positioned differently in these relations, women are affected differently in different contexts and situations.
- The "doubled" perspective of contemporary feminist analysis helps to deconstruct male-dominant structures of a patriarchal social order -- within this doubled perspective, it is possible to see the working of the ideology of gender.
- The subjective representation of gender or self-representation affects its social construction. It opens a possibility of agency and self-determination at the subjective level of political and everyday practices.
- Concludes that "construction of gender is the product and the process of both representation and self-representation".



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Thus, we find that not only men and women are positioned differently in these relations, women are also affected differently in different contexts and situations. This doubled perspective of contemporary feminist analysis helps to deconstruct male dominant structures of a patriarchal social order within this doubled perspective, it is possible to see the workings of the ideology of gender.


The subjective representation of gender or self representation affects its social construction. It opens a possibility of agency and self determination at the subjective level of political and everyday practices Teresa de Lauretis concludes that "construction of gender is the product and the process of both representation and self-representation".

In the next section de Lauretis has emphasized Althusser's concept of 'interpellation'. By interpellation we mean a process whereby a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as his or her own representation. And therefore, it becomes for that individual real even though it may be perhaps or it is in fact, imaginary.

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3. Technology of Gender

- In this section, de Lauretis emphasizes Louis Althusser's concept of 'interpellation', a process whereby "a social representation is accepted and absorbed by an individual as her (or his) own representation, and so becomes, for that individual, real, even though it is in fact imaginary. (De Lauretis, 1987, p. 12)
- Foucault reflects on sexuality being constructed by the culture in accordance with the "political aims" of the dominant social class in *History of Sexuality*. He stresses on the paradoxical nature of this restriction. Instead of constraining sexuality, these restrictions produce sexual perversions.
- Foucault uses the notion of a "technology of sex".
 - He defines it as a "a set of techniques for maximizing life" that has been used by the bourgeoisie in order to ensure their hegemony, as an aspect of panoptic discipline.




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In this section titled as Technology of Gender, de Lauretis has also referred to Foucault while emphasizing on Althusser's concept of 'interpellation'. Foucault has reflected on sexuality being constructed by the culture in accordance with the political aims of the dominant social classes. He stresses on the paradoxical nature of this restriction that is instead of constraining sexuality these restrictions produce sexual perversions.

Foucault has used the notion of a technology of sex. He defines it as a set of techniques for maximizing life that has been used by the bourgeois in order to ensure their hegemony as an aspect of panoptic discipline.

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- de Lauretis focuses on the socialization of the female body -- and female stars in narrative cinema. Feminist film theorists have been analysing the cinematic techniques to understand spectator's gaze.
- "Cinematic apparatus" is an example of a technology of gender used to understand the construction of gender representation in any given technology.
- In the medium of cinema, the intentionality of technology is virtually foregrounded on the screen
 - The exploration of female spectatorship in cinemas, analyse the various modalities of film viewing for women.
- Anne Balsamo's *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (1996).




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De Lauretis has focused on the socialization of the female body and female stars in narrative cinema. Feminist film theorists have been analyzing the cinematic techniques to understand the spectator's gaze. "Cinematic apparatus" is an example of a technology of gender used to understand the construction of gender representation in any given technology. In the medium of cinema, the intentionality of technology is virtually foregrounded on the screen.

The exploration of female spectator in cinemas analyze the various modalities of film viewing for women. *Anne Balsamo's Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* explore it further. Anne Balsamo is a critic whom we will be taking up in one of the next modules.

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- According to Lauretis, Foucault's theory can not analyze cinema as a technology of gender because sexuality is not understood as gendered.
- It does not take into account male and female forms of gender. It just focuses on the male gender. Sexuality in female is perceived as projection or property of the male in patriarchal frame of mind.
- She argues that Foucault's theories are male centred as they deny gender.
- Lauretis wants the critics to eschew male centred frames of reference as they reproduce the concepts of gender and sexuality in terms of male sexuality.
- She argues that although power produces knowledge and meanings, it is important to distinguish between the positive and negative impacts of such power productions.



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Lauretis says that Foucault's theory cannot analyze cinema as a technology of gender because according to his opinion sexuality is not gendered. It does not take into account male and female forms of gender, it just focuses on the male gender. Sexuality in female is perceived as projection or property of the male in a patriarchal frame of mind. Thus, she argues that Foucault's theories are male centred as they deny gender. Lauretis wants the critics to assume male centred frames of reference as they reproduce the concepts of gender and sexuality in terms of male sexuality only.

She argues that although power produces knowledge and meanings, it is important to distinguish between the positive and negative impacts of such power production. Lauretis reasons that philosophers like Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard can identify with women and femininity "only by denying sexual difference and gender as components of subjectivity in real women.

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4. Gender and Deconstruction

- LaRetis, uses the expression “space-off”, to represent the invisible space in a discourse that although is not visible in the theoretical frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible.
- The movement of gender as ideological representation is a movement “back and forth between the representation of gender (in its male-centred frame of reference) and what that representation leaves out or, more pointedly, makes unrepresentable” (p.26).
- There is a need for feminist theory to continue its radical critique of dominant discourses on gender.




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In the discussion of our fourth proposition LaRetis uses the expression “space-off”, to represent the invisible space in a discourse that although is not visible in the theoretical frame, but is continually inferable from what the frame makes visible and from what the frame has hidden. The movement of gender as ideological representation is a movement “back and forth” between the representation of gender in its male centered frame of reference and what that representation leaves out or more pointedly makes unrepresentable.

So, there is a need for feminist theory to continue its radical critique of dominant discourses on gender.

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- Comments on the predominant disregard that male intellectuals have for feminist theorizing, in spite of occasional gestures in the direction of "women's struggles" or the granting of political status to the women's movement.
- She agrees with Rosi Bradoitti's criticism of the old mental habits of philosophers "of translating women into metaphor" thinking the masculine as synonymous with universal."
- Comments that this habit is older, and harder to break than the Cartesian subject.
- The inability of the philosophers to identify femineity with real women makes woman as subject into de-centered and de-sexualised objects.



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She also comments on the predominant disregard that male intellectuals have for feminist theorizing. In spite of occasional gestures in the direction of "women's struggles" or the granting of political status to the women's movement, she agrees with Rosi Bradoitti's criticism of the old mental habits of philosophers "of translating women into metaphors" thinking the masculine as synonymous with universal.

She also comments that this habit is older and is perhaps harder to break than the cartesian subject. The inability of these philosophers to identify femineity with real women makes woman as subject into de centered and desexualised objects. Teresa de Lauretis comments that the subject of feminism is en-gendered.

The fact that a social subject is produced or constituted as a woman or as a man says that gender was inscribed or implanted in each subject since its inception. From the very beginning of subjectivity even before the appreciation of sexual difference as such. Feminism thus has to negotiate with these contradictions to establish equal rights and gender freedoms.


She points that the notion of gender is not so bound up with sexual difference instead gender can be subsumed in sexual differences as an effect of language. Gender is a representation and the representation of gender is its construction. According to her, all of western art and high culture is the "engraving of the history of that construction".

The construction of gender goes on not only in and through different public and social organizations. For example, media, family or workplace or as Louis Althusser has termed ideological state apparatuses, but also less; obviously, in the academy even in Avant-grade artistic practices and radical theories.

De Lauretis thus has moved beyond Foucault's theory of sexuality and shown its incompleteness.

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- De Lauretis discusses the idea of gender and thinks of it as a product and a process of a number of social technologies.
- Moving beyond Foucault's theory of sexuality, de Lauretis reconceptualizes gender and exposes the incompleteness and inadequacy of hegemonic discourses.
- By viewing the potential of gender as something that can be 'constructed', she is foreseeing the concept of gender fluidity which becomes relevant in the 21st century.
- A gender fluid individual is flexible in regard to the sex with which they identify. Gender fluidity claims that gender is non-binary, not all humans fit squarely into the dyad of male/female.



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De Lauretis has discussed the idea of gender and thinks of it as a product and a process of a number of social technologies. By viewing the potential of gender as something that can be constructed, she is able to foresee the concept of gender fluidity which becomes relevant in the 21st century.

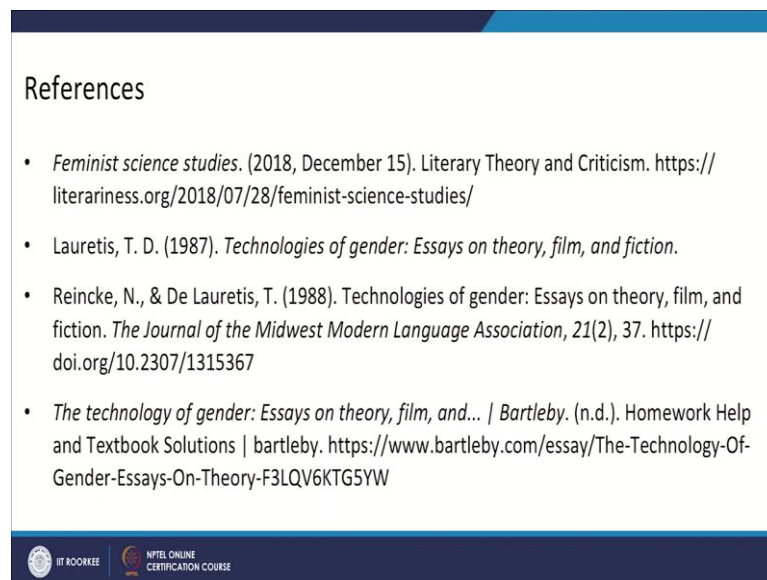
A gender fluid individual is flexible in regard to the sex with which they identify. Gender fluidity claims that gender is non binary, not all human beings can fit squarely into the diet of male and female. De Lauretis alerts us to plurality in gender also to the fact that the emphasis on sexual differences only, by feminism and post feminism has proved to be limiting.

She also highlights the significance of media particularly films and during the times of new media and cyber space technologies, her ideas have become particularly significant. She wants us to use techniques from various critical fields in order to understand how

nebulous the concept of gender is and how it has been used to valorize some structures within cultures and societies.

If one has a space to think beyond established gender spectrum, it shifts the focus towards the experience of gender rather than thinking of it as linguistic or social or cultural category. The importance of socio economic and linguistic performance of the term gender has been taken up by post structuralist philosophers of gender like Judith Butler who developed the concept of gender performativity. These approaches reconstruct the social constructs of masculinity and femininity that shape our expectations of behaviour and gender performance. Thank you.

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