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Lucy R. LIPPARD, author, historian, activist, New York.

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These drawings from 1963 to 1973

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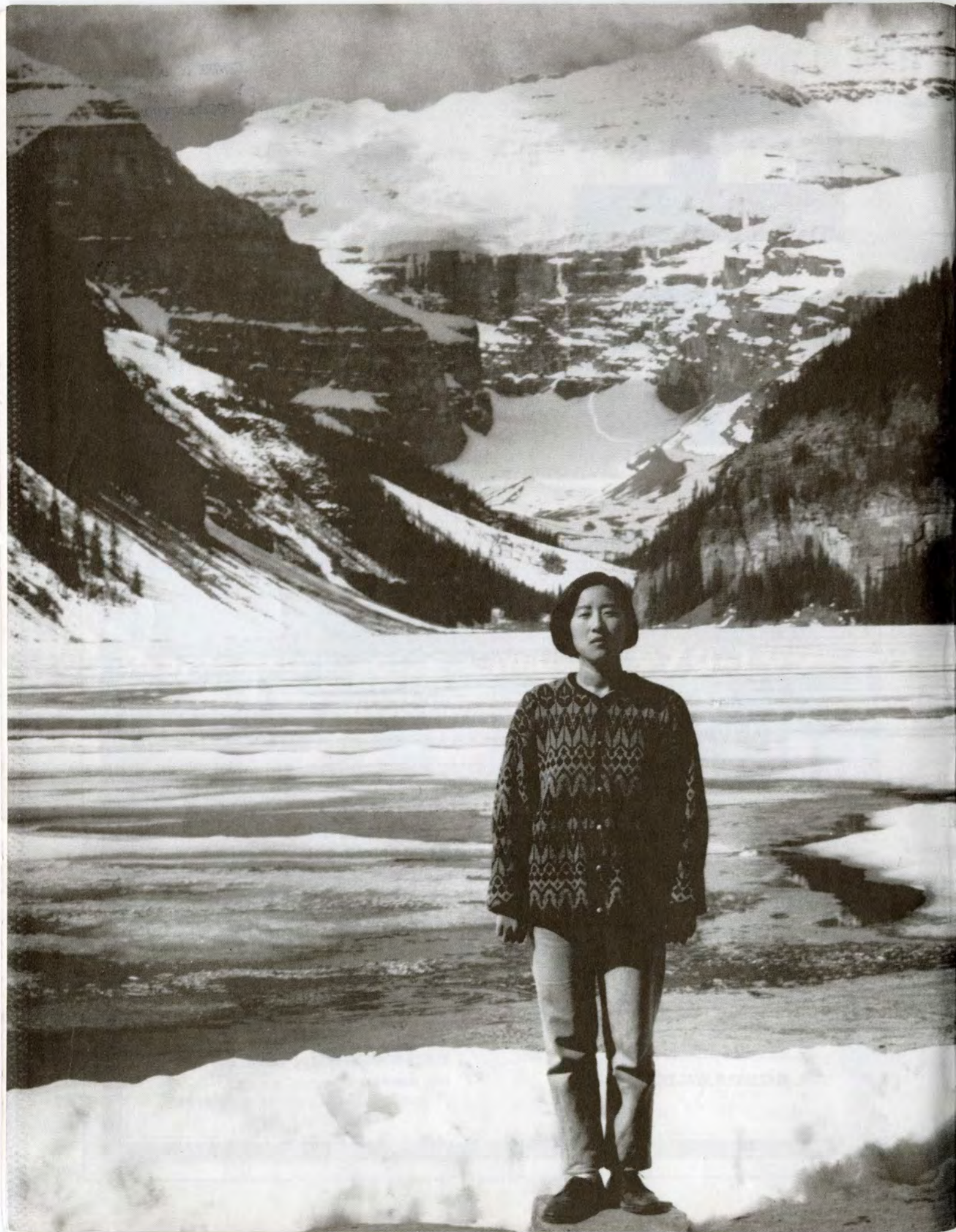
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We interrupt  
our regular  
programming  
to introduce a  
special  
issue  
of  
FUSE:

# AgitPOP CULTURE

THIS IS THE FLIP SIDE OF FUSE that never gets played, the cultural mainstream that we all love to hate, hate to love or just can't get out of our heads.

For the editorial board, this special issue was generated by these questions:

How do we, as cultural producers, critique mass culture from our own locations?

How do we create independent, grassroots—or "popular"—cultures that are reflective of our own realities?

How does mass culture appropriate elements of popular culture and what is the result?

How can "subcultures" manipulate mass-cultural icons to subvert or reclaim to their meanings? (agit pop)

These questions developed through editorial discussions over the past year where we grappled with the complex and multiple meanings of "pop culture."

We hope you find the issue provocative and informative, and we look forward to your response.

THE EDITORIAL BOARD



STILLS FROM "WOMEN MAKING PORNOGRAPHY FOR WOMEN," THE SHIRLEY SHOW

*Shannon + Shirley*

# EJACULATORY TELEVISION

THE TALK SHOW AND THE POSTMODERN SUBJECT

*by Shannon Bell*

**THE SHIRLEY SHOW**, to quote Shirley, from her pre-show pep talk for panelists, is "modelled on American talk shows like *Oprah* and *Donahue* with a slight difference," which is that Shirley plays a "lower-keyed" role. The viewing audience is a national audience of 600,000. To quote Shirley, the show's aim is to make sure, if there are two opposing points of view, that both receive "fair representation." What Shirley absented from her pep talk is that the show goes out of its way to produce opposing views; to reproduce old either/or issues and recreate for/against subject positions. The show on which I appeared was titled "Women Making Pornography for Women"; it aired on January 22 and showed again in summer 1991.

In the following weeks *Shirley* did a show on sex therapists and their clients, and one on strippers. I was asked to be on both of these shows. I am a good performer—performance being a defining feature of postmodernism; I have worked on it. I was asked to be on the sexual therapy show because I had mentioned in passing that I didn't know how to masturbate until the age of 28 when my therapist suggested I read *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality*. (I mistakenly purchased *The Report on Male Sexuality*, but it seemed to work).

I was asked to be on the stripping show because of my academic work on representations of the prostitute body. The first invitation I declined because I hadn't really been to a sex therapist; I did consider going on the show, though, because they were having a terrible time, not surprisingly in our performance society, finding anyone willing to go on national TV and admit to sexual problems, even past problems. As for the show on strippers, I was leaving for New York the night it was being taped; I would have gone on as the academic expert on stripping (the Shirley show likes lending legitimation/delegitimation to an issue by the presence of talking experts). I would have enjoyed the label/title "Stripping Expert" flashing with my name and under my video image. I have earned this label, not for the reason the Shirley staff supposed, but because I have sat as a patron in a number of heterosexual female and gay male strip clubs (one het male strip club) and I have paid for cunt shots (at O'Farrell Theatre in San Francisco—the women working there produce *On Our Backs*, an explicit lesbian sex magazine). Since I had to leave town, I suggested that Gwendolyn, Toronto performance artist and stripper, fill the role of the expert on stripping; after all, Gwendolyn has written and performed two excellent plays about stripping and prostitution—*Merchants of Love* (1989) and *Hardcore* (1990)—and made a short film—*Prowling by Night* (1990). In these works Gwendolyn critiques the sex industry along with feminist responses and police harassment, and she strips. I, on the other hand, am merely doing a doctoral dissertation "Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body" in which I recover the prostitute body in Plato's texts and trace the inscription on the prostitute body in four discourses—ancient, modern, contemporary feminist, and postmodern prostitute discourses. Now I ask who is the stripping expert here? The show's assistant producer responded to my suggestion with "She is a stripper, isn't she, and thus biased." I said, "Hey, I'm biased too. I support strippers rights and I've made money off my body (pictures)." Doesn't matter; I am an academic expert. Fault the Shirley show for being modernist, for putting people into categories from which to speak from and for imagining experts free of "bias."

My performance on the Shirley show was exactly how I had prepared for it, perhaps a bit better (they do a damn good make-up job). I am a pornographic woman, I selected this title to go under my name. "Shannon Bell/Pornographic Woman" periodically flashed across the screen. I use this title and occupy this space very consciously. Phallic pornography has silenced women; academia has silenced women (and the scars of the latter can be every bit as painful as the scars of the former). Let me tell you: if you are a pornographic woman

who writes about female ejaculation and shows pictures of herself ejaculating in both academic and pornographic contexts, it decontextualizes both spheres. This is what postmodernity is about: decontextualization, overlapping, deterritorialization, the fragmentation of subject positions. I am a postmodern subject: an exhibitionist, an intellectual, a work-out queen, a daughter, an educator, a butch-femme, a one-man lover, a cook, a female-ejaculator, a feminist, and, yes, a Marxist. And I occupy all these positions happily. Maybe I won't get a real academic job; but from what I can observe, the ability to ejaculate doesn't interfere with teaching political theory, in fact, it seems to me to be an asset. And to quote one of my favorite sex radicals, Jane (Sky Gilbert's alter ego), "You could do everything right and you could still get hit on the head by a zeppelin, well you could."

The operating principle behind the Shirley show is this: produce a controversy; have people in their slots. "We are all in our places with bright smiling faces": Producer of Adult Films (Candida Royalle), Pornographic Woman (Shannon Bell), Canadians Concerned About Violence in Entertainment (Rose Dyson), Former Vice-Chair Ontario Film Board (Elizabeth Gomes), Law/Pornography Expert (Dany Lacombe), Sexual Therapist (Frank Sommers). Each person is then expected to speak from her/his position.

I went on the show with four objectives: One, to be transgressive, that is to transgress the boundaries of the text, in this case the Shirley show and my title. The easiest way to be transgressive on a visual medium is visually. I was careful to combine six dress genres: short butch hair, heavy hint of Betty Davis make-up, man's 1950s suit jacket with yellow-green bo-bo buttons, red nail polish, snap-up leather pants (which were custom-made for a male stripper who didn't pick them up so I got a good deal), and 1930s style suede heels. How you use your body is important in transgression: I was careful to make large masculine movements in my chair, lean into the anti-pornography representative's space, interrupt people and smile, and also to actively listen. I made sure to insert a couple of John Wayne poses (I always thought John's way of being was kind of pornographic) with one hand behind my head, the other on my knee, and my pumped foot placed on my other knee; slouching, elbows on chair arms—the male genre of occupying maximum space. I also tried to have the camera shoot me in such a way that my eyes were always noticeably mismatched. Okay, so semiotically speaking, what does this do? The visual presentation rewrites the words "Shannon Bell/Pornographic Woman" that were there for the purpose of framing and containing my text: me and the clip from the



film *nice girls don't do it*. The viewers are presented with two conflicting images: I have been in a film in which I ejaculate repeatedly (thus there must be masturbation and cunt shots), use a dildo, wear leather, and have sex with a woman; I am pornographic by phallic, and a number of feminist, standards; yet, my visual presence mismatches the traditional connotations and images associated with this label. The meaning of "pornographic" is on the way to being deconstructed.

One of the first things I chose to say is "I wrote the text, I star in the film, the shots are of me." I claimed the space of active speaking subject (rather than pornographic object). The next thing I did was introduce the name of the filmmaker Kath Daymond and very carefully construct what Kath Daymond as the filmmaker did: I said: "When I say 'filmmaker' I mean she shot the film, she edited the film, she put the final product together." What I immediately did is claim this as *our* product. No profiteering men around.

My second objective was to redefine the word "porno-

graphic" to deconstruct its traditional meaning and to claim this space. The reason I think it is important for an academic to work in and claim this space as her own is that women are separated into the bad girls who produce the images and the good girls who critique them. Sex workers since the mid'80s have been using performance as a means of critiquing the pornography, prostitution, and stripping industries and have also been producing works that examine sexualities (Gwendolyn in Toronto, Annie Sprinke in New York, and Scarlet Harlot in San Francisco). These and other women have been putting their bodies on the line for a long time. I watched Gwendolyn yank her clothes (very unerotically and ungracefully) off in *Hardcore* and do a critique of the sex industry and people's responses to it, nude, in the medium of theatre. It takes courage to transpose what is acceptable in a "low" genre to another, "higher" genre; the action both threatens the new medium and redefines the medium in which it originated.

My third objective was to talk about multiple feminisms and multiple sexualities. During the 1970s and most of the 1980s there were three and then four kinds of feminism: liberal, radical, socialist, and later, pervert. But now it's the 1990s, a new postmodern moment for feminism: there are many feminisms (both named and unnamed); there is no one reality, no one site of oppression or transgression; bringing reality down to one (or two or three) truth(s) absents more than it discovers or tells. Women collectively and individually occupy diverse subject positions. Shirley and the anti-pornography feminists tried to deprive Candida and me of our feminist identity and reserve the space for themselves; they failed. I more or less got the multiple feminist subject(s) position across. The rest of the panel, except for Dany Lacombe, seemed to have a unitary concept of sexuality: heterosexual coupledness. How staid. As if what the world really needs is more videos that help "normal" heterosexuals have good sex in pairs.

My final objective was to override the superficially imposed polarization of pornographic/anti-pornographic woman that the Shirley show structurally tried to create. This is a feature of the talk show format rather than a characteristic specific to the Shirley show. As I stated in my closing statement: "It is important for women to reclaim their sexuality. It is important to have many feminist representations and Women Against Pornography have done a lot of good. We should always remember that; I remember that and it would appear that I wouldn't. They really have critiqued visual images of women in dominant pornography and opened it up so we could think of and produce other images." Candida Royalle (Producer of Adult Films), who owns Femme Distribution and makes feminist erotica (Candida starred in mainstream pornography for quite a number of years), started a group for women who had worked in the industry and were interested in critiquing mainstream porno; counted among this group are Annie Sprinkle and Veronica Vera (PONY leaders). I found this out not on the Shirley show but when I visited Candida's studio in New York the following week. On the show Candida was too busy defending her current work against the anti-pornography feminists' charges of it being "the same old smut" and her a "female pimp" to mention the work she has done critiquing pornography from the inside. Nor did Rose Dyson (Canadian Concerned About Violence in the Media) get a moment to discuss the film script she and others have written on images of the female body beginning with representations in Greek drama; Rose was too absorbed by her limiting role of anti-pornography critic.

In a time when female sexuality and gay sexuality has become dominated by danger and pain, producing images of

pleasure and power (female ejaculation is both of these) is like giving a gift. The week after the Shirley show, in New York, I saw two bodygifts. The first was the Aperture exhibition (the photos are published in the journal *Aperture*, 121) *The Body in Question* at the Burden Gallery. Among the bodies are nude photos of children and adolescents by artists such as Sally Mann, Eric Fischl, Susan Copen Oken, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jock Sturges, Alice Sims, Abigail Heyman, and Allen Ginsberg; many of these artists have found themselves in serious trouble for "obscenity." Two photos stand out in my mind: One is Robert Mapplethorpe's photo of a gorgeous female child standing looking at the viewer. The child is so powerful and present; the second is Allen Ginsberg's mirror photo of himself taking a photo of himself: a gorgeous nude Ginsberg in his late '60s. This image is flanked by two photos Ginsberg had taken of nude teenage boys. The second bodygift was a performance piece by Annie Sprinkle, a wonderful slutgoddess, who currently, among many other activities, runs a slutgoddess workshop for women who want to experience both poles of what is now an almost unquestionable, unconscious dichotomization of the female. Annie was hosting the first night of a four-night benefit for Performance Space 122 (a really hot performance space in the East Village). Annie showed photos of herself with some sexual friends. She started out by saying "I want to show you some pictures of me and my friends." She began easy, showing identical twins that she slept with who could only be told apart by presence and absence of pubic hair, followed by some orgy scenes and bondage. Then the genre changed. The slides started to include people whom many of the audience would not consider "worthy" sexual beings. The dignity, love, and desire with which Annie talked of each friend altered my concept of sex radical. Among her friends were a young man who was paraplegic—Annie said Bob really couldn't do that much, he couldn't feed himself even, but one thing he could do really well was eat pussy; a midget; a burn survivor—Annie talked about how sexual it was to lick his scars; a veteran with a missing hand lost in Vietnam—Annie talked about how she loved this in her pussy; several gay lovers, many of whom recently died of AIDS, and one, Marco, who was a long-term lover and friend—Annie talked about how after Marco was diagnosed they couldn't do any fucking and sucking and they got into spiritual sexuality and rhythmic breathing. Sexual representations that transgress and undercut dominant presentations are gifts. It is precisely when boundaries are transgressed that play and pleasure happen.

Shannon Bell is completing her doctoral dissertation, "Writing and (Re)Writing the Prostitute Body," in Political Science at York University. Her writing, focussing on the representation of female sexuality, has appeared in the cultural publications *Rites and Our Times*.

Those readers interested in female ejaculation can read about it in Shannon Bell's essay in *The Hysterical Male*, Arthur and Marilouise Kroger, eds. (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1991) and/or preview *nice girls don't do it* (1989/90) at Canadian Filmmakers Distribution Centre, Toronto.

REMEMBER:

"The postmodern penis [is] a hyper-inflated clitoris, a run-away outlaw clit - like Pinocchio's nose."

FROM THE HYSTERICAL MALE



nice girls don't do it

a film by k daymond

FEMINISM

SEXUALITY

REPRESENTATION

Canada

1989/90

16 mm

b & w

13 minutes

Hippocrates believed it served a reproductive function. Aristotle identified it as pleasure-creative. And Freud contributed to its pathologization. The medical profession continues to dismiss it as "urinary incontinence". It is female ejaculation and nice girls don't do it - or do they? Employing elements of several genres without conforming to any particular one, "nice girls don't do it" deconstructs conventional meanings attached to female and male sexuality and destabilizes meanings around specific visual representations of the female body. The film's refusal to fit comfortably into pre-determined categories or to position itself as an authoritative text serves as an invitation to its spectators to fill in the gaps created by and within the film itself - to query, challenge, investigate, object, corroborate; perhaps to inveigh against. Ultimately, "nice girls don't do it" is a celebration which aims to create a space for other voices to speak about a part of female experience long-shrouded in silence and ignominy.

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# WORD TO THE BROTHER

BY DEBORAH ODHIAMBO

**RAP MUSIC** is one of the most vital vocal forums for the silenced voice of the oppressed African-American. Armed with a fierce political consciousness, unparalleled in any other popular music form in North America today, it acts as a revolutionary tool challenging the status quo as it demands social and political justice. Taking their cue from important African-American leaders, influential writers and political activists, rap musicians discuss many crucial issues, most of which stem from the deathly oppressive grip of white race supremacy. (Let's call it what it is.) The term "racism" on its own allows the dominant white culture to continue to refuse to acknowledge and accept responsibility for white supremacy; there can be no real effort for conscientious action, needed for change and eventual progress. Now remember this: No acknowledgement, no responsibility. No responsibility, no action. No action, no progress. Got that? Good.) NOW BACK TO THE P.G.

QUEEN LATIFAH

**BROTHERS I TURN TO YOU.** Because rap holds such a firm commitment to the struggle for equality and freedom from oppression that I hold it, or rather the men in control of it, accountable for an existing inconsistency. Sexism. More directly, male oppression. Sexism is not a problem confined solely to the rap world although that's what mainstream media (if that's all you're exposed to) wants you to think. Sexism and violence against women is a major problem in our North American society. Mass media thrives on the exploitation of social inequalities that exist between men and women. In presenting stereotypical images of men as subject and women as object, all forms of pop culture continue to denigrate women while perpetuating and upholding the myth of women as subordinate beings. Don't believe me? Check out a few beer ads. Pay attention to some of those lyrics on your favorite AC/DC or Led Zeppelin album. It's all the rage in comedy. Hey, Andrew Dice Clay, what's so funny? 2 Live Crew? I'm not laughing!

Over the last four to five years, I have watched rap move towards a tendency to depict women as less than equal. This phenomenon has mushroomed to the point where groups like 2 Live Crew, NWA, Digital Underground, Third Base, Mellow Man Ace, Bell Biv DeVoe, and rappers Big Daddy Kane, Ice-Cube, and Schooly D believe it de rigueur to include on their rapping roster lyrics depicting stereotyped images of women as lying, "gold digging," good for nothing "ho's" and "bitches." Most of these groups believe that it has nothing to do with women. It's all part and parcel of being a homeboy. You know, acting tough, talking tough, stroking inflated self-made egos, flouting some imagined male prowess. It's just boys being boys. But hey, this is a real problem. Men must no longer refuse to acknowledge and accept responsibility for their role in our oppression, as women.

Most artists believe that it's up to women to clear up the negativity and project the positive images that they demand. However, there remain many obstacles. Most women refuse to acknowledge their oppression. Many, in fact, internalize it and work in effect to perpetuate their own subordination. Opportunities for individual or collective resistance are often neglected. In a recent article in *Mother Jones*,

M.C. LYTE



M.C. Lyte, a dynamic female rapper, addressed this issue. Lisa Kennedy asked her to comment on male rap lyrics and their use of the term "bitch." M.C. Lyte responded:

**When they say, "Hey bitch come here," and all of the girls run to the stage, then that's who they're talking to. You teach people how to treat you. If you allow someone to call you a bitch and you answer, then that's exactly what you're saying—you're saying, it's okay to call me a bitch, and you can continue to call me that. So it's a matter of women taking a stand and telling them they're not going for it. Women are buying these albums and the tickets to these shows, which tell N.W.A. and Too Short it's okay to be like that because we're going to support you. Now if they wouldn't buy their records or go to their shows . . . then we wouldn't be stuck with the word.**

WE AS WOMEN OF AFRICAN DESCENT must first recognize and identify the ways in which we are oppressed and then begin to organize around that oppression and activate motions toward change. By voicing our discontent with the way things stand, we can begin to inform others of the way things should be. African-American men (most notably rappers) must acknowledge the ways in which they uphold and perpetuate the oppression of their sisters. Once they acknowledge this and admit responsibility, then there can be some viable action, and progress.

There remains another obstacle to change. Since its inception the rap industry has existed almost exclusively as staked out male territory. Like most other businesses, it is owned and controlled by men. Gaining any real access to this occupation on one's own terms remains severely limited for many women. Those that speak out risk having the door shut in their faces. The few women that have actually muscled their way into the business find that they have to rely strongly on their male counterparts for any artistic support. Men not only write, produce, and advise female rappers, popular male rappers will often make guest appearances on women's

records to help women boost record sales. Men will also feature female rappers on their albums and at their concerts, thereby "introducing the women to a larger audience." The ties that bind are strong. This is pretty much a posse system with the brothers "lending" their support to the sisters. But really, on a business level, this is not an egalitarian set-up with each helping the other. In order for women to achieve any level of success they must depend solely on a group of men who could make or break their careers. Salt and Peppa, a female duo, received much of their initial success by way of male artistic support. Their first two albums were written and produced by men. Queen Latifah, a woman who I admire for her strength, independence, and commitment to the cause, had to rely initially on support publicity generated from her posse and its members De La Soul, A Tribe Called Quest, and the J. Beez.

But, each posse has its own agenda. Roxanne Shante belongs to a posse that includes big Daddy Kane, Marley Marl, and Biz Markie. If you know your rap, these guys are not exactly known for positive depictions of women. They uphold stereotyped images of objectified women. Since Roxanne Shante receives a lot of artistic support from them, her rap lyrics have tended to perpetuate and reinforce negative stereotypes of women. Queen Latifah's posse, on the other hand, are very aware of the oppression African-American women face by virtue of their race and gender. The J. Beez have a women-positive tune called "Black Woman." Tribe Called Quest addresses violence against women in their rap "Description of a Fool." Because they hold more enlightened views on women, Queen Latifah and Monie Love have been able to keep to a Black Feminist agenda from the start of their careers. Roxanne Shante is now assuming creative control over her work and has come out with a women-positive song called "Independent Woman." To date, it's one of the best raps that urges young African-American women to gain self-knowledge, self-respect, and self-affirmation. Being as politically conscious as it is, rap is the perfect forum for young up-and-coming African-American women rappers to challenge their male peers to change their negative depiction of women. Strong, independent, dynamic women such as Monie Love, Isis, and M.C. Lyte present alternative, positive images for girls and young women out there in the listening audience.

Despite the fact that women rappers are beginning to take it upon themselves to project women-positive images, there still remains a cloak of silence. Dominique DiPrima states that African-American men and women are tired of being polarized by other people's (the dominant white culture, that is),

issues and opinions. Rap is under attack from the media, police, and courts. All this external pressure makes it harder for women rappers to criticize blatantly sexist groups such as 2 Live Crew. We'll defend their right to speak though we may not like it. By presenting a unified front, DiPrima believes that we prefer to deal with this problem in-house and behind the scenes.

Unification within any political movement for social change is essential. African-American men and women both agree that dealing with white race supremacy and its inherent policy of political, economic, and social injustice is an important issue on the Black agenda. African-American women, in addition to suffering oppression, discrimination, and exclusion by virtue of race, also suffer these under male dominance. For us, it is not a question of deciding which of the two oppressions is more important. Some politically-conscious male rap groups such as Public Enemy, B.D.P., and the X-Clan seem to believe that women of African descent who speak out against gender oppression somehow forget to speak out against their own race oppression. Recently a London-based magazine reported that the X-clan had held a conference at London's Africa Centre. When they called the sisters back to the fold many were upset by the insinuation and countered that "women had never left any mythical fold in the first place, and if anyone needed to find their way home, it sure wasn't the sisters!" In fact, in the United States, a group of young African-American women affiliated with the Revolutionary Communist Party has been working on making young male rappers more aware of how their lyrics simply glorify "the naked and cruel power over women." In pointing out existing inconsistencies in rap lyrics that run rampant with references to "bitches" and "ho's," they ask, "How are we gonna unite all of those who hate the system when the music puts down half the frontline fighters?" My question exactly. Come on, get it together, we've all got to keep collectively on the footpath to freedom. As Queen Latifah's Afrocentric, community-based philosophy states: Quest for One Tribe, One Destiny. Simple as that. So, remember this: No acknowledgement, no responsibility. No responsibility, no action. No action, no progress.

**"IF YOU'RE DISSING THE SISTERS,  
YOU AIN'T FIGHTING THE POWER."  
PEACE SALAAM ALAIKUM**

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IMAGE FROM A SENSE OF PRIDE: THE STORY OF GAY GAMES II

# GAY SHORTS & SPORTS

by Christopher Eamon

THE RECENT ACQUISITION OF A BATHING SUIT marks my re-entry into the world of athletics. A re-entry which, although seemingly natural, can only be regarded as somewhat of a revolution since the dominant convention has been that the realm of sport is one of masculinity, an arena into which "sissies" neither venture, nor have any desire to.

Fashioned in black and white striped lycra, the bathing suit clings fast to the body, hugging its contours. Stripes accentuate muscular thighs and buttocks, curving at the crotch. It fits like a second skin. It duplicates the surface of these body parts and reiterates their superficial meaning. They are surface signs of mythic masculinity.

Gaining entry into the orthodox masculine order, by way of a both figurative and literal building up of these signs is,

after all, one of the main reasons men go to the gym. And, in recent years, gay men have been venturing there in droves. It would be naive to interpret this as the mere continuation of a momentum which began with the fitness boom in the early eighties. Despite the increased interest in athletic activity generally, it is probable that gay boys continue to avoid high school gym classes. Yet the fact that older homosexuals are returning from exile to take part in the ritualistic building of masculine signs is a phenomenon which requires a closer look.

It could be said that gay men are rushing to gymnasia in order to reclaim their masculinity, or to fit in. Reclamation of masculinity is only a part of gay experience, and only one side of what Brian Pronger calls the paradox of male homosexuality.<sup>1</sup> For him,

the gay paradox arises out of the gay man's desire for the mythically masculine, coupled with a simultaneous undermining of the masculine. A disruption of the masculine is concurrent with his very desire for it. According to the gender myth, it is not masculine for a man to find the masculine erotically desirable. Thus, by being gay in the mythically straight world of athletics, one could never be said to fit in.

What are we seeing then, in this sprint *en masse* to local YMCAs? Is it a cultural revolution, a way of affirming the gay body and taking it out of a space which has been historically one of denial, one in which the gay body have been inscribed in a web of discourse woven by outsiders, notably the medical and psychiatric professions?

It may be suggested that by participating in athletics, gay men are not only affirming the body through physical exertion, but that they are also, no less, reclaiming it as their own and thus wrenching it from the discourses spun around and through it by others. This type of physical activity could thus be termed a sort of self-authorship, self-making, or rather, a make-over.

All of this would be true except for the fact that in most cases, the physical activity—swimming, weight-lifting, aerobics, etc.—is only a means to an end, that end being the building up of masculine signs. Going to the gym, in itself, properly speaking, could not be termed an affirmation of the body, because the body in question is to be fashioned after a pre-existing model, a model which is already loaded. The *eidōs*, form, or the end in view of the make-over is the mythologized body of masculine strength, hence of power and domination.

Whether or not a gay man believes he is really gaining entry into the orthodoxy by accumulating orthodox masculine signs, the fact is that, like my bathing suit, the result of the physical activity can only be a surface effect. Here, in Pronger's terminology, ironic homosexual intuition plays a role. At some level, for him, the gay man is aware of his ironic disposition toward these superficial signs of masculinity. The gay man is aware that, in reality, he is only seeming or appearing to be masculine, in all of masculinity's mythically understood determinations. He is a false representation. Underneath it all, the gay athlete is *really* someone else. What he really is may be closely scrutinized. However, the way reality is exchanged for appearance here undermines orthodox masculinity and is, thus, extremely powerful.

Irony is power, the power to destroy superficiality, in this case, orthodox masculinity. It is a refusal to play by orthodox rules, declaring oneself to be above those rules. This is the

triumph of paradox, the victory of irony: being a fine, strong athlete doesn't mean you are straight.<sup>2</sup>

The power of irony may in fact undermine orthodox masculinity, yet it may also undermine the relationship of the gay man to his own body. His own body is in flux: a position somewhere between its appearance for others and its intuited being for himself. Irony may be powerful, but the gay athlete's position is, nonetheless, determined from without. Irony is only ironic in relation to an outside world. Irony only gains meaning contextually. If the gay man's mode of being is paradoxical to its very core, resulting in limitless ironic shifting, this too could be considered an estrangement of sorts. He is a divided subject, regardless of the degree to which he is reflectively aware of his paradoxical position.

It may seem then that the power of irony arising out of an awareness of paradox must be a prime location for the power of being gay. But awareness in itself does not destroy superficiality. The responsibility which bears upon the gay athlete's shoulders is to actively assert the irony in a given situation. What we end up with, in terms of responsibility, is therefore the imperative to be ironic. To be ironic does not mean to take nothing seriously. Rather, it requires that one have a lucid understanding of irony in terms of myths surrounding athletics and masculinity generally.

With irony under our straps, it is an engagement in physical activity which reveals itself as the greatest possibility for a reunion of gay bodies with gay selves. What rescues me from that vertiginous play of appearance and reality which my new bathing suit presents is the potential for a moment of authentic, unitary experience.<sup>3</sup> The hypothesis is that, within the actual moment of physical exertion, divisive and fragmentary subjective experience slips away and gives way to the experience of being in union with one's own body, outside of ideology. Any re-entry into the athletic arena, then, grants two possibilities: first, of active affirmation of the irony of a situation; and secondly, of an allowance for gay men to access an otherwise out-of-bounds experience. Attracted by the double articulation of irony and authentic experience in sports, gay men actively recuperate in gymnasia enthusiastically.

Christopher Eamon is a writer living in Toronto.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Brian Pronger. *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*. (Toronto: Summerhill; New York: St. Martin's, 1990) pp. 69-79.

2. *ibid.* p. 262.

3. Pronger elucidates his view of the "authenticity" of sexual acts in the section "Eros" (pp. 42-47). This experience, however, would seem to apply to other physical activities as well.

# African **P** **O** **W** **E** **R** **al**

BY ROZENA MAART

## IN DEFIANCE OF THE COLONIALISM OF THE WRITTEN WORD

Their spears were long, their tongues were too. They never walked in twos. And they talked with all that body could convey and all together they said what they had to say—nothing altered, nothing left unsaid. Everything said all at once. No pauses were there. No interruptions to the flow of their tongue—their spokenness—since in firmness, strength and power they existed for one another in oralness: to support, holding their bodies as pillars when the land beneath them had been ravaged by the storm and the land that they had toiled destroyed by insects. And it was not a Biblical tale nor fate nor too late to take the remains and create something useful for in later months it could serve their communities well. And a new product for communal consumption emerged. And through oralness the others heard, their hands moving, their tongues joyously sprouting the recent invention and the recipe was shared not compared and the children they sat and learnt from their people that what was to be, was not. For with perseverance and defiance a newness emerged. And they clapped and they danced, and the older women and men watched—not in silence but with age, which meant that they talked and talked and talked about the ways, the days, the sayings, and the troubled wind did not mince their words, could not blow it away for it knew—that there simply was no force stronger than that which an African woman's mouth determined. And with vigor and with swiftness the elders moved, touched the land, spoke a tongue of knowledge, their

voices digging deep into the earth, moving its destined place and extracting it, caressing it with their words, toiling and tugging, moistening the lips from which their creativity sparked. And the day was marked, two weeks later when the children observed the growth: the land forsaken by the rain, drenched by the sun and loathed by the moon had once again been resurrected, not by a holy spirit of a god unknown but by the words spoken in many tongues, in mother tongues, in tongues joined by blood, by the birth of civilization, tongues joined to defy the law of the earth and to create what later earth dwellers were to forsake—Blackness for its power, Blackness for its might.

We are all quiet. It's 8 o'clock and time for bed. The story is now complete but we know that all is not lost, that tomorrow there will be more. All of us grandchildren charge somewhat reluctantly to the backyard where our plastic mugs await the running water and our toothbrushes thrush the breadcrumbs out and under while the water swashes them away. Down the drain they go. We brush and laugh at our tongues circling the toothpaste. We stretch this flesh of worthiness, try touching our noses, our ears, then stretch our tongues to meet the unlimited air—our imagination, oh yes, it's there. Salivating sweetness speaks of our aspirations to further the length of our tongues, a tool through which we learn of our power. We treasure it loudly and proudly. And the loud gargled bubbles reverberate below our pulsating palates. And even tomorrow mamma will be

going to school with me to tell my teacher that Hottentots were not savages, that the naming of our ancestors "Hot-ten-tot" in itself is yet again named by colonialists who were shocked by the rapidness of our speech. And undecipherable to the European settler-colonial's ears, they named a peopling based on what their ears heard—tongues rapidly clicking ancestral pride, ancestral life. Mamma's tongue is sharp too and in firmness she has learnt through other tongues never to be silent for it only brings pain. Never to be silent for racism, for colonialism, for domination never rains—it pours. She holds no shame and claims that a history of oralness is alive, and although apartheid and racism have several aims to maim, they're all the same, but us, it's our mouths that attest to time, to colonialism and to their shame—for silent as they had hoped racism and its violence would keep us, our oral flames always burn the shackles of their chains.

And in writtenness settler-colonials came. Put and kept indigenous peoples away. Held them in reserves. Learnt how to legitimize, with and through the written form, racism; how to construct written policies that would invalidate indigenousness; learnt to formulate in writing how to keep indigenous people silent. Silent and in pain. Silent, taking our oral power away.

Here in Toronto my work has taken on many different forms—the goal, the same. For other places out of Africa I have been, seen Blackness, connected to its presence, related to its pain. And no matter where I am, Black and African I'll always be, but silent I'll never be. And within Multicultural Canada, so endorsed by Trudeau in 1971, to be Black always means to exist at the backdrop of the white experience. To talk, to laugh, to gesture, to oralize, to politicize—to exist in the presence of, and by the judgement of, whiteness. Within the context of female activism, this means a series of explanations, references, and justifications, all of which relate to white women's whiteness and Black women as recipients of their racism, who therefore have the burden of bringing it to the attention of the agent. It is most times their lack of understanding of their role as agents of white domination that I as a Black woman find most

infuriating. And shocked they are, for their racism is crushed, trod on by my heavy presence, cursed by the lips from which African motherhood had blessed with abundance. Speaking, sprouting never doubting. In this context where multiculturalism sets the precedent for your existence, yet does not inform its agents of your history, this policy assumes that your history is one of compliance, acceptance, and acquiescence—of whiteness. And if you don't, it means having to transgress the unspokenness of your being. For being means having to submit or omit the true meaning of who you are. And so you speak with difference. Difference that brings aching, arched bodies to the forefront of your pain. Your words, sometimes they don't reveal the

pain, for when in pain it often means that they have won. Won in the hurting of your being. So you speak with defiance. Speak an informed tongue. And often it services white women, teaches them, when I open my mouth, about their racism—how it operates, how they as agents of white domination do their work for the institution. And sometimes they take notes. Write down the contents of my oralness and then produce their many textbooks on Race Relations, avoiding the real "R" word. And often their pencils drop. And horrified they are. Horrified at my loud voice. At my voice accented with power which they through their whiteness translate and call "British," since in order for their simple,

ignorant, subservient-to-white-domination minds to understand the power of my voice, they can only equate power either with their heritage as British or where this direct heritage line is not British, with their experience as individuals who form part of white domination along the continuum of white dominance. The genuflecting WASP is to the furthest right of this continuum and the secondary agents of white domination occupy positions of lesser power from right to left, where they constantly have to acquiesce to be a full and accepted member of white dominance. So when you speak with power, with grammar unknown to the cloned, with swiftness, swiftness with which your Black community has ordained your soul, and translate the spokenness without the interruptions that insecurity about



your identity affords these white folks, without the bent back, trembling-with-fear lips, docile posture that racism had ensured it would deliver if the agents of white domination genuflected to its cause—disappointed they are, for it has failed them. Disappointed at themselves, at their inability to be white. They stand with gaping mouths. Arms at their side. Knees together, not exhibiting any sign of an ability to move. No agility. Their bones are jointless, for joined as it appears to be, it is but merely a biological function with a social construction. Since trained to exhibit themselves like statues, flaunting their historical silhouette overpowering whiteness in silence, all is not quiet, not quite the bowful bow the statues that rule the dominated expect. Anglo rigidity filling all the spaces. Soldiered for the conveyor belt. Their tightlipped shock. Their sedated glazes surveying the room with unease. They pause. Roll their eyes if they dare. Look toward the sky, their invisible whiteness—it's not there. And my stare, how it tells them who they are. They reflect in my iris—for my pupil, it's too dark for them to see. Too deep with darkness for them to understand the exhibitionism of their drenched, soaked-with-racism souls.

And it happens all the time. Oh, how I hate writing letters to complain, to voice my objections to the many facets of racism. Just the mere act of reverting to the written form of dealing with an oppressor. Not being able to verbalize and oralize and deal with them right up front, to let them witness the oral tradition—a tradition they continually attempt to silence. And even when I'm doing public speaking, speaking about my work or just speaking for speaking, speaking for change. And this time, I read from my poetry-and-essay collection *Talk About It!* at a university. Throughout, I had made references to my family, neighbourhood, and community within which I was raised. I spoke about the reassurance we as Black children got from our parents, which also meant everybody in the neighbourhood. I spoke about that love, that caring that nourished us. About how we were allowed to break all the rules but not mamma's rules. How we spat long spats on the bridge, how it fell on them white boys faces that beat us up; how we made fires and burnt the land that was to be taken away from us—the land from which we were forcibly removed; how we were trained to deal with nosy white folks when we saw them in the business district and they inquired in their usual arrogance about our hair, our noses, or why "coloured" boys walked like "that." And mamma would show us how to look at them and never look at the ground 'cause we built it and we ain't lose anything there. And so, as I was talking, telling stories to accompany

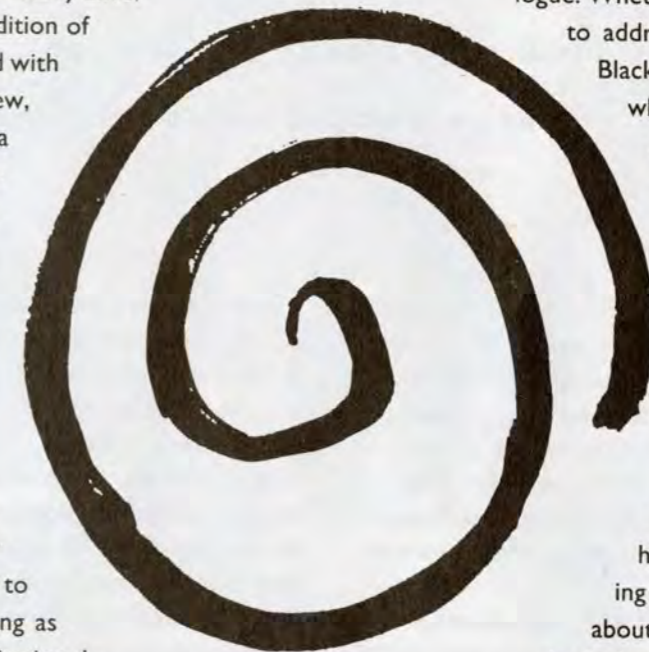
the poems and making introductory comments about the poems, a white man raised himself from the chair and said that I had not mentioned whether I had been detained in South Africa, beaten by the police or whether my family had suffered physical abuse at the hands of the apartheid regime. I told him that what on earth made him think that Black people wanted to talk about their pain to white folks; to tell them about how the system had gotten us down, how their racism had carved Africa into bits and pieces, how we fought and struggled to keep ourselves whole. "Why the hell would I want to talk to you about racism imposed upon me, upon my people by a system you still perpetuate?" I said. He responded by saying that he thought it would provide a more "representative" reflection of my life experiences. Can you believe this garbage? "Representative," meaning that I had to mention whiteness, its debilitating presence, that I could not talk about myself without mentioning white domination and my presence within it, that my point of reference had to include their presence in our lives, and therefore before we expressed our strength, which he felt uncomfortable with, I had to express my hurt, my pain, my shame. Let me tell you what his problem was: my oralness, the defiance expressed in my poetry, the strength with which I praised my community saddened the poor pitiful soul. He started questioning the presence of racism; looked at me, heard my loud Black voice, and pitifully asked himself why centuries of white domination had now failed him; why a system he actively, faithfully worked for had lied—there's this Black woman standing in front of him, and is she loud. He came to hear pain but instead he heard power. When he stood up with his one hand in his pocket, the other sweeping his blond hair over his ears, he really thought that he was going to seduce me with his whiteness; that I would in turn submit, satisfy him, titillate him, arouse him with the details about the beatings, the police detentions, and the horror with which Black people's lives are filled. Maybe he never ejaculated that day, never saw the coming of his whiteness. Maybe his anti-climax questioned his white masculinity because the foreplay, the act, and the afterplay of the African verbal tradition, displayed right in front of him, had pricked his precious whiteness. Pricked it till he could no longer sit and had to erectly stand, make his erect presence known, and thrust his masculine whiteness with such "authority"—but alas, the essence of his presence was belittled by my mouth.

And I write with oralness in a world that attempts to silence it at every opportunity. For writing is structured, writing has form, and you, you have to follow the norm. But

what the norm is, is never discussed and white women and men; they are the editors 99 per cent of the time, and believe me, that's the norm. And this time, I write a review of a Black woman's book. And one of the editors for this arts journal rings me and tells me some changes have been made and I should let them know whether I approve of these changes. I look at these changes and realize that all that has been done is a shortening of my sentences. I am angered when I read my review, since it has been chopped, chewed, slithered, cut away, reduced, simplified, and damnit, I take it very, very personally. For me, writing about Blackness, which this book dealt with, is about struggle, about Africanness, about voicing our Blackness, about keeping our history alive, about keeping it alive in a tradition of how it has been kept alive. And with oralness I did write this review, write it in spoken form, in a form which gives power to Africanness and its spokenness. I voice my disapproval about these changes to one of the editors, who sighs and sighs and who certainly did not expect me to disapprove. She then informs me that a Black woman would get back to me about them. I had never known this women's journal to have any Black women working as editors, yet without any hesitation I welcomed, then stopped and realized what was happening. When in doubt with one Black woman, get another to act on your behalf. It's this kind of divide and rule that is most times part of the plan of dealing with Black women. Whilst the contents of our dialogue as two Black women did disturb me greatly, I proceeded, with hesitancy. It is clear to me that what needs to be addressed is the whole issue of education—that it is white dominated; that the way in which students are taught analyses, interpretation and writing skills is at the backdrop of the white Anglo experience. There is silence from her side of the telephone line. She does not openly discuss where she had learnt her own writing and editing skills and what does that reflect. Her silence is met by my eagerness to address this as two Black women who are located in different positions

within the writing and publishing process. I recognize that there is an abundance of mixed emotions and conflicting agendas when Black women are merely one person on a white dominated editorial board. We want to pursue our identities yet at the same time we are left with having to address what the rest of the "collective" is saying. Yes, I am saying that as Black people we are constantly having to avert our agendas to that of the dominant and place our concerns within this context. What this leads to is the probability of becoming an unwilling agent of white dominance—having to address ourselves to what our white working group is saying, be this through language, speech, writing, or solving issues around dialogue. Whether we like it or not, we have to address the construction of our Black identities and the processes which have led to our Black consciousness. Thus, being critical of our processed-by-white-domination-identity when we engage as Black women learning from each other's writing, we do so without a pretext about what writing is supposed to look like, but leave room for the unsaid, the unspoken, and for the words that have been thwarted, since writing is about identity, writing is about our respective realities, writing is about our histories, writing is the documentation of our survival—as the dominant and the dominated, as agents of compliance and resistance, as men and women whose lives are constructed by the forces dominating the earth. And for me, writing from a background and continent with a history like Africa means verbalizing and writing in one sentence, one phrase, never separating issues from one another, never presenting them in a form which, with pauses, conveys insecurity, uncertainty, but with oralness that flows and speaks of power, of might, of a mouthy glory.

**Rozena Maart is a Black South African feminist scholar-cum-activist. She works, speaks, and writes in the areas of Black Consciousness and violence against women. *Talk About It!* is published by Williams-Wallace.**



# Bad Sisters

## Punk Culture and Feminism

*Recollections of an Absent Exchange*

BY KATHLEEN PERRIE ADAMS

SISTER, CULTURE, VOICE, FREEDOM—these words, maybe, say as much about our tearing into one another, about teeth-bloodied shoulders, about racing and upstaging one another, as they do about our guiding upward fallen bodies or averting the father's gaze. The difficulties belonging to this unwelcome possibility threaten to cave in the "us" that so many sentences, so many pronouncements, so many salvage operations, depend upon. But then, maybe, somewhere in that garden there always was a swamp.

In 1979 Island Records released The Slits' first album *Cut*. The year before, Siouxsie and the Banshees put out *The Scream*. In 1976 Patti Smith's *Horses* arrived and did more or less what it had been expected to do—change the course of the history of women in popular music.

Dirty looks and laughter from the back of the bus: public reminders that one should disappear. The diet at home often consisted of the same slop—"No wonder boys don't ask you out!" "You'd look so nice if you'd just . . ." Later the aggression and the spectacle were entered as proof positive of politically suspicious "male identification" or its adjunct: a compensatory hyper-femininity. Why did this feel much the same as being called a slut and effectively told to disappear? Don't they know we are all born "in trouble." It doesn't matter if you give good head or stand at the head of the class: no amount of invisibility, no untarnished "reputation," can save you from the trouble you are: it *belongs* to you. You are, by coincidence and history, an unmarked placeholder.

But inscribing ourselves in culture, making ourselves historical, means more than recovering or acknowledging the previously

hidden. It has meant and will continue to mean resisting the notion that oversight or obliteration can be easily corrected—individually at the level of personal experience. It demands that we rework those traditions, not of our own making, traditions into which we have blundered or stolen.

And what but trouble could we make of these? Trouble not only for the immediate beneficiaries of existent power structures, but for ourselves as well. For we soon found the "our" of the remaking itself unwieldy, a designation burying differences, tightening like a choke chain around the throat of suspicious sentiments: about sex, about success, about culture and its relation to political commitment.

From late '76 until about early '79 a small and vital punk scene flourished in Toronto. Around the same time a group of feminist activists began to organize protests against pornography and violence under the name Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW). Of the few bands first identified with the punk movement two were girl-bands—the Curse and the B-Girls—while a number of others included female members—the Poles, the Concords, the Androids, Martha and the Muffins. Punk, it was understood by members of WAVAW, was male and misogynist. WAVAW was all women: it was not misogynist, it was moral. At that time the notion of One-Big-Woman ruled. Sub-culture remained irrelevant to feminism and the concepts of class, race, and misandry had yet to appear within the precincts of those of raised consciousness.

For WAVAW "safe streets" came to mean helping the authorities clean-up Yonge Street. It meant ignoring attempts from within



THE SLITS (FROM ALBUM)

its ranks to organize a prostitutes' union. It meant shifting political energies away from struggles with the reactionary right (Anita Bryant, Ken Campbell, etcetera) into realist critiques of the media and censorship advocacy. In short, it meant supporting an ideology which could only define women's freedom negatively and without the necessary understanding of fantasy, of fiction, or of mediation's potentially creative force.

For punk girls other options seemed available, and more immediately gratifying: donning leather, playing with amplification and electricity, writing "protest" songs, confronting harassers, ganging together and looking out for one another, hanging out and making scenes, kissing in public, taking back the night . . . nightly.

In the years before punk splintered into a hundred sub-genres it was a wildly uncertain project filled with contradictions, scepticism, and a certain unrealistic fearlessness. For girls this meant using and abusing standards of beauty, of seriousness, of acceptability. Body shows and dirty boots, wrecked hair and ripped clothes sent out mixed signals about a confused sexuality, one that routinely intersected with an alternately isolating and invigorating asociality.

Punk sex drew upon both a fascination with things fallen and a Warholian ennui. It scorned notions of romance and held itself aloof from sexual liberation movements whose definitions of sexuality and emancipation did not, then, seem able to account for things immediate to punk—boredom, pessimism, and violence. It pursued an androgyne that derived from Patti and Iggy and shared their preoccupations with self-abasement, charisma, and gender indeterminacy. Its campy exaggerations and confrontational commitment to things modern and urban set it apart from the prevailing Eddie Bauer lesbian-feminist aesthetic and its asexual androgyne.

In the years before feminism discovered its internal fissures and began to open up to self-criticism—successfully mutating and magnifying its claims in the process—it relied heavily upon the concept of victimization as a means for analyzing inequality and ending ethical confusions.

Feminist sex aspired towards a protective equilibrium which subordinated pleasure and passion. Depending heavily upon reductive understandings of identity—binary notions of gender and metaphoric constructions of sexual orientation ("woman-identified woman")—the sexual ideal developed euphemistically and seemed inclined to re-create restrictive assumptions about what properly belonged to women's sexuality (maternity, maturity, and collective agreement about the universal repulsiveness of going down on a man).

For girls in punk, underground and delinquent notions of sex and sound, style and gender, combined with and drew upon feminist ideology to enact an opposition to the sexism and nauseating homogeneity of the commercialized mass culture most of us had been raised on. The creative potential of such convergences were at once profoundly empowering and profoundly alienating. The

inventiveness generated from within our mixed heritage positioned us outside the safety zone of feminist orthodoxy. It seemed that feminism was embarrassed by, not only our passion for boy-things, but our efforts to identify violence as something belonging to and engaging the self, and not just the alien other.

From the point of view of many punk girls, feminism's relation to popular culture seemed to lack a bodily dimension; everything was rendered in terms of spectator relations or signs of oppression. Rebellious acts—in dancing, in fucking, in playing music—demanded a passion for experimentation that seemed relevant to feminism primarily as objects of study or occasions for censure.

Music, live music and danced music especially, allowed punk girls experiences that could break the body, freeing it from obscene, obsolescent models. The heaviness of Siouxsie, the Stooges, or Killing Joke, for instance, encouraged the body's self-annihilating submission, dispersing significance and suspending judgement, allowing, in the process, corporeal weight to return and impure thought to emerge. Patti, the Dolls, the Buzzcocks, and the Cramps frenzied to similar ends. An excitement somewhat less destructive, this fullness of feeling could also satisfy cravings for transport and contact. Tough and graceful, athletic and out-of-control, the dances of punk subculture simultaneously permitted both a self-involvement and a sense of collectivity that radically departed from the routines of heterosexual courtship.

Heroic despair and the cultivation of the fantasy of the self's demise informed the private experiences of music and allowed girl listeners a partial escape from the gendered bodily regimes of service, responsibility, ambitiousness, routine, romance, and family life. Identifications with the figures of the exile, the dandy, the suicide, the un-dead helped warp gendered identities, providing girl listeners with new options and new headaches. But while dissolution in the sounds and voices of Nico, Joy Division, or the Velvet Underground, could rescue the girl from certain of the disciplines of gender, this divestment was only ever partial because it relied largely upon an aesthetic experience of identity icons.

Punk's dependency upon the image was, in those days, cause for suspicion in certain quarters. Its preoccupation with style, as much as its characteristic style of sound—rough, ragged, and loud—marked its supposed incompatibility with feminism. Its ironic and often grotesque "failed" femininity as well as its leather, its swagger, and its spitting, were entered as proof of contamination by sexist stereotypes and male aggression.

Feminism's iconophobia obscured the subtle interplay of image and practice in its pursuit of that (feminine) body, that order of experience which lay outside the realms of historical production. Refusal to recognize the value of the self as sign and suspicion about the necessity of the visual register of culture, meant feminism inherited leftism's artless and potentially repressive code of authenticity as well as its impoverished notions of everyday life. Identity



THE B GIRLS (FROM ALBUM)

without ambivalence and gender-grounded culture were aspirations that ignored existent antagonisms between women as well as the ongoing effects of unchosen inheritances and unseen influences.

"Jouissance" and "femininity" were cornerstones of mid-'80s feminist theory which tended to apply them to, and thus validate, situations in which things emerged from the (woman's) body—babies, poems of personal experience, hysterical laughter, menstrual blood. The two were treated as inextricable and so "jouissance" seemed irrelevant to those situations in which things lashed or pressed themselves into a welcoming body—bass lines and barre chords, fists, tongues, or the lust-looks of the other. Excess in excess of the feminine never really caught on; abjection as well as power remained suspect.

A few years later "difference," along with "appropriation" and "masquerade," introduced a more complex understanding of representation, facilitating the emergence of a body of thought that could take contradictions into account and provide a refuge from essentialist absolutism. Feminism then began to appreciate the iconoclastic power of the image, the necessity of subversion.

But like almost everything "post-modern" (pre-"New World Order") such concepts could be readily translated into quick answers and environments of luxury in perfect array. Interpretation allowed everything to be placed at a manageable distance. Making an object of the passions, the defiance, and the experiments of others, was one way of sidestepping the muck of enactment.

While the place of women within popular music did not transform as quickly or as fully as the first years of punk seemed to promise, the energies of this first wave have not yet been fully stilled. Even though much of this energy seemed to have dissipated in the period immediately following its initial outburst, changes in the structure of the music industry and movement around existent stereotypes allow it to be periodically recalled in the continued effort to open new spaces for women and extend their enfranchisement.

At first feminism "exiled" punk; then, after a period of embarrassment and dismissal, it began to celebrate and seek alignment with it. As one of the subject positions "in the margins" it possessed a charisma that was seen to be instructive and potentially politically efficacious.

Sub-culture and fandom showed feminism a way of working with existent attachments, with their appropriative practices, demonstrating how inherited materials could be opened up to the possibility of unexpected and historically specific re-use. Recognizing that no image could remain entirely univocal or absolutely insoluble and, faced with energetic resistance to the tendency to set experience and image against one another, feminism began refiguring its concepts of identity and ethical integrity, as well as its aesthetics and style.

Girls within punk were particularly concerned with unburdening themselves of the victim icon: an image which was, from their perspective, intimately tied to middle-class versions of femininity.

At first punk girls "assumed" feminism; then, after a period of frustration at the incomprehension and the indifference, after encountering ideological dogmatism and subsequent cultural colonization, backs were turned. Unfortunately this brought that experience into line with the tradition of intergenerational Oedipal rebellion and risked becoming absorbed in the post-feminist stream where contradictions are quickly declared unmanageable and unproductive and all too easily washed away. Escape from the "victim scenario" with its implicit renunciation of categorical gender oppositions often mobilized a rhetoric of individual self-assertion that tended towards an obscuring of actual historical differences: in capacities, resources, confidence, and opportunity.

Conversely feminism is at times severely limited by an inability to inspect and attend to those conditions of possibility which extend beyond the categories of gender. This fixation, ironically enough, comes to function in much the same way as gender neutrality. For frequently in its assimilationist (i.e., liberal) strain, feminism blends the ideology of individualism with the reassertion of the primacy of gender difference in a way that denies that any of its privileges are inherited—as opposed to achieved. Crucial questions about power are thus obscured by its refusal to take the trouble of conceptualizing and refiguring its own historical specificity or reformulating itself in reference to its unintended effects.

Alternatively the strain of feminism that involves the idealization of women's traditional experience threatens to leave the links between micro-politics (strategies for survival, pillow-talk, and unseen influence) and official history (archives, artifacts, and public policy) unarticulated.

In feminism's post-modern moment iconophobia is overcome and Madonna surfaces as the sign of a better tomorrow; there is an embrace of the spectacle as another dimension of feminism's public works, but the relations between sign and social practice are only occasionally experimented with or theorized.

Everything can today be thought of or said to be an economy: desire, disease, the image, education, insignificance, rhetoric, design. . . . But this means only that practices constitute and are read against particular horizons that express the dynamic relations of time and space, and the individual's social being. It means that social practices produce exchangeable significances. From the perspective of popular sub-culture, as opposed to a commodified mass culture, it is the "economic" in this general rather than in the restricted sense which is primary. Its creativity is an irreducible incitement that risks the vagaries of chance and not knowing, with discovery rather than profit as its privileged interest.

Economy without end—commodity trading, futures trading, free trade zones—an evil empire as hard to locate as it is to understand. Closer to home—pencilled notes and unpaid bills, the shadow of Saturday morning cartoons and the garbage of an industrialized sexuality, read and half-read books, scratchy records and piles of wellworn clothes—materials for creating spaces and scenes that provide refuge from one's invisibility within that

incomprehensible complexity served up as if it were the rational ground of all action. As is said, money talks but, paradoxically, unanswered desires for utility, for meaning, for pleasure, as well as a recognizable scene for political struggle, seem to be most effectively expressed within the impoverished realms of resistance. Their tones may not be measured or harmonious, but outsiders often speak quite clearly.

Existing in the margins of the record industry's official channels of distribution, without money or technical resources, punk developed not only an aesthetic, but also a mode of production that affirmed the value of the immediate, the ironic, and the local. By the mid-eighties the creative spirit of '77 had begun to fragment the mass market. With the development of independent industries and the commercial appropriations of a style fully underway, however, the terrors of assimilation set in. And so it came to appear prophetic that the Pearl Street address of Toronto's first punk club, the Crash 'n Burn, soon after its closing became the headquarters of the Ontario Liberal Party. . . .

At such moments resentment rules. Integrity becomes a question of position irrespective of intention or effect; self and Other are subject to brutal and divisive discriminations as visible delinquencies cease to speak with their former force. Radical subversion and autodidactic political incorrectness become increasingly hard to distinguish, thus making the question of their difference crucial for anyone serious about contesting the status quo.

Dominant culture attempts to silence negativity and imagination by absorbing differences and denying the relevance of position, context, or effect; by declaring everything *pure surface*. Sub-culture mirrors and consolidates such denials when it obscures questions about the relation of the individual act or achievement to the collective resources it draws upon. It also fails to redefine the interdependence of symbolic and material orders in a way that can successfully imagine redistribution. Moreover, if absolute outsidedness—invisibility in relation to dominant aesthetics, institutions, and social relations—becomes *the goal*, the only desirable subject position would seem to be the one afforded by anonymity. Its bodily version might thus be most clearly expressed in the act of suicide; its collective manifestation, in the sub-cultural recreation of the dysfunctional family within the clique that cannot share its secrets, accept part-relations, or identify its own principles and pleasures—the things it *stands for*.

The inability to imagine an ethical exercise of power and the demonization of any or all stratification results in a kind of political paralysis that resembles the logic of anorexia's refusal to appear. A refusal that moves from an oppressive objectification to the tragedy of invisibility, from one victimization to another.

But subculture is neither merely or always the symptom or the shadow of the world of mass culture. Rather, its inventiveness is popular; it involves a localized performativity, it demands participation. A sub-culture's opposition and its appropriations feed off the existent, but its passions are its own. It is never reducible to its dependency or its

hostilities; it is made of impulsive affinities and habitual pleasures as well as critical interventions and their resultant mutations.

Within punk subculture anti-bourgeois sentiments merged with an ironic affection for discarded artifacts of a disposable mass culture, while numerous historical instances of youthful rebellion fed its fantasies and self-aggrandizements. Enlivening social antagonisms in its subversive and re-creative relation to the rock music industry, punk gained definition as a cultural phenomenon rather than simply as a musical style. It used the culture of post-war, industrial, mass mediated societies as its raw material, but not without first exposing it to the influence of terroristic impulses and the temptations of nihilism and cynicism. Responses which seem reasonable enough when viewed in relation to disingenuous promises of freedom, equality, opportunity, and pleasure; promises which are routinely offered up alongside the culture's denial that deep-rooted social antagonisms are anything more than technically remediable kinks in a system of infinite growth.

Punk's "message" was nevertheless widely assimilated as style in those realms from which it had antagonistically emerged: the music industry and the world of fashion. In the case of the music industry at least, this assimilation facilitated a process of decentralization that reduced its capacity to define culture—even if its capacity to extract profit remained more or less intact. Such realignments in turn required the transformation of the purity of punk's initial impulses and the re-organization of its cultural politics.

The continued relevance of economic capital and access to means of production, as well as the contradictions that beset attempts to transform existent power structures, suggests that resistance at the level of representation runs the double danger of being either too modest in its ambitions or potentially arbitrary in its enactments of opposition. Even though crucial differences in their respective over-estimations of the power of the sign are obvious and even though the cultural difference between feminism and the sub-culture of punk girls remains, both are faced with the challenge of realizing the possibility of some sort of post-modern materialism.

Imagining the intersection of a recognizable ideology and a particular sub-culture indicates some of the difficulties engendered in developing a politics of the everyday. The intersection of feminism and punk, in particular, suggests that perhaps at this point in history feminism functions most effectively as an institutionally articulated politic rather than as a direct stimulus or substitute for locally enacted cultural practices. For while realizing the possibility of becoming a visible tradition, a public manifestation of collective ideals, is one thing; the reconstruction of existent conditions, the transformation of familiar impulses and affects, is another. And so to say that purification proves inadequate to the tasks of cultural transformation is, in one sense, to simply reiterate a "self-evident fact." In the context of this discussion, however, it is also meant to

encourage within feminism a fuller exploration of the practical possibilities of experiment and mutation.

Sub-cultures are like labyrinths. Each has chambers filled with sensation, and with conspiracy, with exhalation, with ordeals and obsessions. To share in these experiences, either with those you find already lost and wandering there or with those you lead in, involves sacrificing the ease of absence and entering into the disease of performative communication.

Sub-cultures are political but seldom reducible to any single ideological formation. They involve a set of cultural practices intent on transforming the everyday life of a specific local context. And because popular culture, even at its most subterranean, shares some of the circuitry—economic, interactive, institutional—of that which it resists, it is always responsive to more than one impulse.

A sub-culture is not itself a whole; it is not entirely political, nor should it be. It works from within what is immediately at hand in order to disorganize the local levels of the existing hegemony. As the intersection of politics and aesthetics, it must operate on at least two fronts and thus bears a relation to ideology which is likely to be appropriative and partial.

And so while mass culture is organized around advertised rather than invented options—options which subordinate whole realms of desire (for meaning, for value, justice, pleasure) to the already given answers of an alternatively benevolent or pitiless nature—a sub-culture insists upon posing questions that will refashion what is given and re-envision what could be.

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THE CURSE (FROM ALBUM)



# Movies

## A WHEELCHAIR VIEW

by Sandra Carpenter

TO FIND A THEME OR AN ASPECT OF DISABILITY PORTRAYED in movies is difficult. The examples of evil wicked characters are too numerous, and most of them are too silly. The examples of courageous, saint-like characters bravely struggling to overcome life's odds are too sickening to think about. And the examples of characters and story lines which end up saying something of substance about living with disability are few and unevenly scattered through time. In horrors, thrillers, or films like David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*, images of disabled people are typically characterized as evil or threatening. The outward image of disability, a twisted or maimed body, is a staple of movies that want to show an inner, twisted, or maimed soul. *Wait until Dark* and *Manhunter* portray disabled people as victims, another deeply negative image. In the case of both of these films, I should add, the blind "victims" are women.

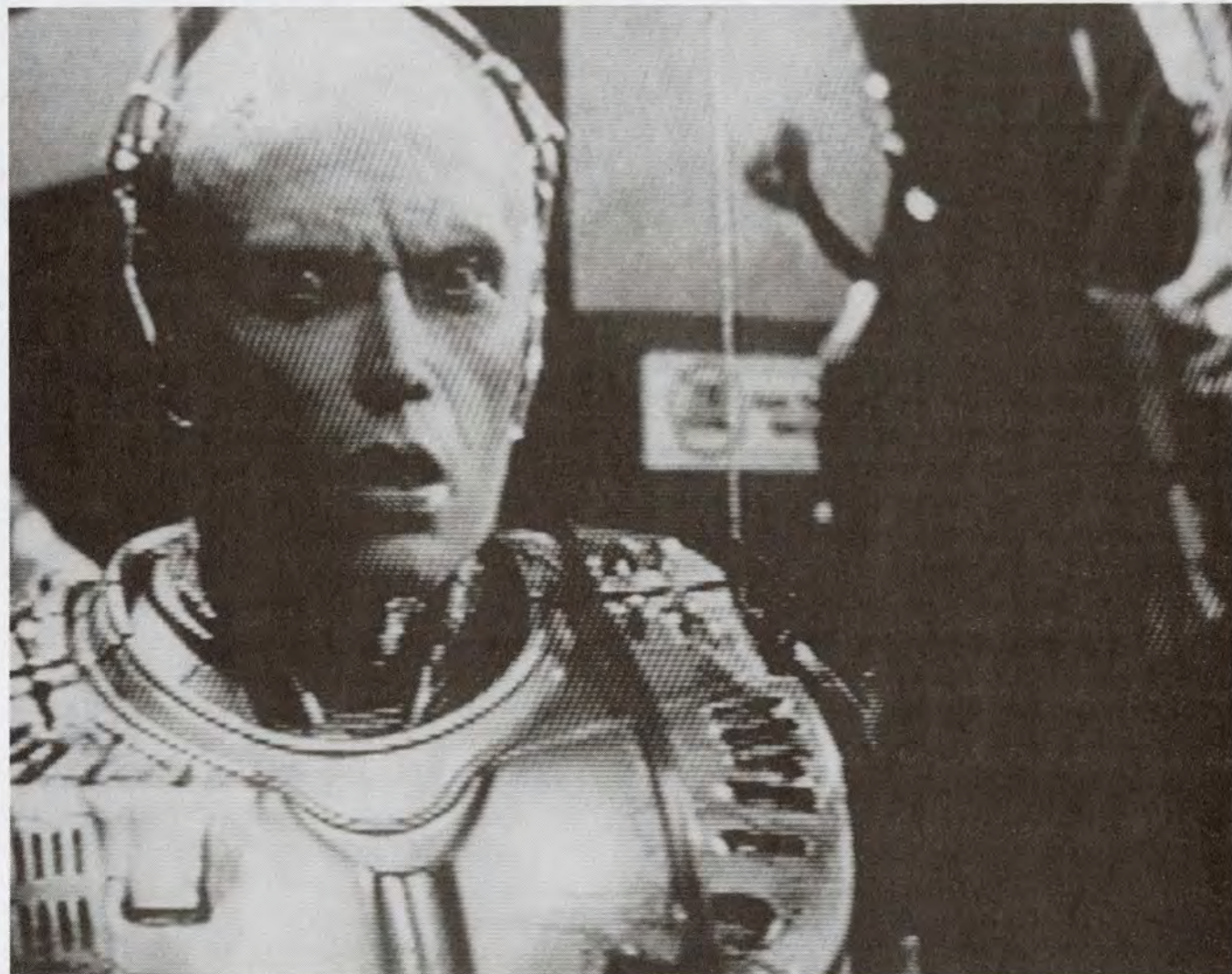
Science Fiction films sometimes use disability as a symbol of how ingenuity will compensate for the horrors of the hostile future world, by weaving characters with disabilities into the plot. They are often entirely incidental to the plot which in and of itself is positive. For example, how many people remember that Max from *Mad Max* wore a leg brace? In addition to that, there was a paraplegic character in the camp who swung himself around on the end of a crane. He had a friend who seemed to be intellectually disabled and the two of them did all of the mechanical repairs for the camp. These were positive images of disability, even though no one remembers them. They were an integral part of the community and were not portrayed as in need of support or in any way as a burden to anyone around them. These incidental portrayals of disability become positive images. Unfortunately, the sequel, *Mad Max: Beyond the Thunderdome*, regressed to stereotypical uses of disability through the character of Master Blade, a dwarf who rode on the shoulders of an intellectually disabled giant. Thus, most movies show people with disabilities as one-dimensional saints or sinners.



MY LEFT FOOT, 1989

Jim Sheridan's *My Left Foot* is a remarkable exception. It is the best movie about a disabled person that I have ever seen. The character, Christy Brown, was not dealt with in a vacuum, but placed squarely within the context of his time in working class Ireland. In fact, it was more about that time in Ireland than it was about Christy Brown. However, even with movies which have responsible portrayals of people with disabilities, they somehow are always reduced, in popular descriptions, to "victim" movies, if only by the way in which they are described or promoted. The other night at a social gathering I mentioned to a friend, who is also disabled, that I thought *My Left Foot* was probably the best "gimp" (a word only we can use, by the way) movie ever made. "Oh no!" she replied, "*Gaby—A True Story* is the best." So I looked it up and here is what my movie guide said: "Painfully well-intentioned, finely acted, but inordinately depressing true-life





ROBO COP II, 1990

tale about a brave cerebral palsy victim dealing with her lifelong handicap." With two and a half stars, and with this kind of write-up, it certainly doesn't sound like anything other than the typically negative portrayal of disability. It would have been nice if the movie guide had at least referred to her as a woman, rather than use words like "victim" and "handicap," which we don't even say any more. I would not have had much interest in seeing this film based on its write-up. Such write-ups show very clearly the nature of critical attention that is paid to disability subject matter: superficial, disinterested, and lacking in awareness of the person behind the disability. But then we didn't even have sex until Jon Voight had it with Jane Fonda in *Coming Home* in 1978.

How far have we come? Recently we've seen *Robo Cop II*, *Darkman*, *Wild at Heart*, and *Hardware*. *Robo Cop II* presented the best incidental portrayal of disability, apart from *Robo*

himself, a bionically restored human. There is an interesting, if unintended, comment on access in this movie: a person in a wheelchair sits atop the stairs, in one scene, unable to get into the auditorium of a supposedly "state-of-the-art" building because the architects and engineers had ignored access. *Darkman* is merely another tired re-make of the Beauty and the Beast theme, at the expense of the disability of facial disfigurement. *Wild at Heart* features a sadistic murderer; the first shot of her prominently features the shadow of her cane and leg brace before we even see her, a shot which cinematically rehearses the perception of disabled people as defined entirely by their disability. And then there is, of course, *Hardware*. *Hardware* is full of mutant and damaged characters just trying to salvage what they can from a dying world. Even the hero has a bionic hand, which is never referred to—and

he makes love with it too! This is another one of the positive incidental portrayals of disability.

Have the images of disability changed in movies? Although it has been uneven, I would have to say "yes." This has occurred in two primary ways. First of all, there are more and more real disabled people in Science Fiction movies, usually employed to suggest the consequences of radiation. Actual disabled people become the image of mutants in the Sci-Fi reality of the future. This is new; whereas old Science Fiction movies depended upon costumes and make-up, the new movies use the "real thing." Typically people with disabilities do not figure as central to the plot and, as a result, are always the first to get killed off. Current Science Fiction movies also incorporate the idea that in the future it will be quite common to be partially bionic: people have metal hands, feet, and hoses protruding in and out of various parts of the body. Sometimes these "bionically improved" characters are villains but they are just as likely to be the heroes. They become cast in the new reality as "normal" but the other disabled characters remain stereotyped. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly in terms of projecting positive images of people with disabilities, there is the increasing use of visibly disabled people in movies who are totally incidental to the scenario. You might see someone wheeling by in the background, or like the man at the top of the stairs in a wheelchair in *Robo Cop II*.

In these two ways, using real people instead of makeup and showing disabled people incidental to the story, movies continue to reflect the perspectives that popular culture holds toward people with disabilities. There are many other movies dealing with disability or simply with disabled people that I have missed or forgotten. After all, as the scene in *Robo Cop II* ironically points out, there are a lot of theatres inaccessible to people in wheelchairs. Thirteen years ago there were more accessible movie theatres in Toronto. Closures of Toronto's University and Towne Cinemas put a major dent in my movie-going habits. The Downtown blockbusters are now released by the Sheridan, which is completely inaccessible by wheelchair. The Sheridan is not without financial resources and so there is no excuse for its lack of access. I guess they are waiting for someone to file a Human Rights complaint against them. However, if nothing else, whether we are mutants, bionic, or merely backdrops, disabled people are slowly becoming a visible presence—in the movies and in the world.

**Sandra Carpenter lives in Toronto and part-time in Prince Edward County. She is currently working as a policy analyst on disability issues for the Ontario government.**

#### A SHORT LIST OF MOVIES WITH DISABLED PEOPLE:

- Hunchback of Notre Dame, 1923, 1937
- Moby Dick, 1930, 1956
- Heidi, 1937
- Moulin Rouge, 1952
- Peter Pan, 1953
- Pollyanna, 1969
- What Ever Happened to Baby Jane, 1962
- Patch of Blue, 1965
- Wait Until Dark, 1967
- Deliverance, 1972
- The Other Side of the Mountain, 1975
- One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, 1975
- Looking for Mr. Goodbar, 1977
- Star Wars, 1977
- The Other Side of the Mountain II, 1977
- The Deer Hunter, 1978
- Coming Home, 1978
- Best Boy, 1979
- Elephant Man, 1980
- Mad Max, 1980
- Whose Life is it Anyway?, 1981
- Terry Fox Story, 1983
- All of Me, 1984
- Mask, 1985
- Mad Max: Beyond the Thunderdome, 1985
- Children of a Lesser God, 1986
- Manhunter, 1986
- Robo Cop, 1987
- Gaby—A True Story, 1987
- Rainman, 1988
- See No Evil, Hear No Evil, 1989
- Batman, 1989
- Born on the Fourth of July, 1989
- My Left Foot, 1989
- Robo Cop II, 1990
- Darkman, 1990
- Wild at Heart, 1990

## Homosexual 'dazed' to find murder victim, court told

A homosexual has testified in court he was "dazed" and frightened to find a man lying dead on his living room floor after an all-night sex-and-drug party.

Gary Abrahms said he picked up homosexuals in the George St. area to party with at his Richmond St. W. apartment.

That's how he met Michael John Flannigan and James David Hughes, Abrahms told an Ontario Court, general division, jury yesterday.

He was testifying at the second-degree murder trial of Hughes, 29, of Sherbourne St., who is accused of killing 27-year-old Flannigan by stabbing him.

Abrahms and Hughes were drinking beer and taking LSD in the early hours of Oct. 26, 1989,

when Flannigan — a man he'd met the weekend before — phoned and asked to come over, the witness said.

Flannigan arrived with marijuana about 90 minutes later and the three nude men continued to party until Flannigan fell asleep on the living room floor, Abrahms testified.

He and Hughes went to sleep in the bedroom and the next thing he knew Hughes was shaking him and "was very agitated," the jury was told.

The witness said he went into the living room and found Flannigan lying dead on the floor in a pool of blood.

The trial is continuing before Mr. Justice David Watt.

## Transvestite sought for questioning in doctor's murder

By John Duncanson and Nick Pron  
TORONTO STAR

A 23-year-old transvestite who was ordered out of the country two months ago is being sought by police for questioning over the murder of Dr. Carolyn Warrick, sources say.

The man, a native of Chicago, was detained by Canadian immigration officials in early October after he was caught working as a male prostitute in downtown Toronto in an area near Warrick's Bay St. building, the sources said.

One immigration official said the man was in the country illegally and because he was working as a prostitute and making money he had "overstayed his welcome."

The man was held in custody at a Mississauga detention centre until his deportation order on Nov. 28.

But immigration authorities say they can only assume the man, described in a report as someone who dressed in women's clothing and assumed feminine behavior, actually returned to the United States.

They also admit the transvestite, known to use several aliases, could have easily slipped back into Canada, returning to his old haunts on the "track" — the area near Bay and Grosvenor Sts. where male prostitutes solicit business.

Warrick was robbed and beaten to death in the underground garage of her highrise building on Jan. 27 after struggling with her attacker. An autopsy showed she died of massive blows to the head and neck. Police described the random slaying as one of the most brutal murders in recent memory.

Warrick's condominium is just blocks from Toronto's male prostitution strip — a magnet for young, often violent men.

Although sources say police know about the U.S. man, homicide detectives yesterday refused to comment on any aspect of the case.

The man was released from the Airport Rd. holding centre on the condition he return to the U.S. through Detroit, but officials admit he wasn't escorted to the border.

He was allowed to leave by plane or bus — officials won't reveal which one — but was not accompanied by immigration officers, nor met by U.S. authorities.

"He wasn't seen as a threat," said one official, referring to the "unescorted" deportation order.

People with no record of violence are allowed to leave on their own, an official said.

Although police have not called the man a suspect, the thin-built drifter with dirty-blond hair down to his shoulders had been spotted near the crime scene on the night of the murder.

At least 25 "look-alikes" had been questioned before police were notified that the transvestite "closely resembled" the composite sketch.

Days after police released the sketch, they received one tip that someone who looked like the scruffy drifter had been sighted in the Detroit area.

That city's north end has been likened to a "war zone" where there has been a rash of murders and violent robberies involving male prostitutes and transvestites, said a vice squad officer for the Detroit police.

She said police are often hampered in their investigations because many of the transvestites used phony names.

On Super Bowl night, when Warrick was murdered, many male prostitutes were working near her Bay St. condominium.



Sketch

# Ruined Representations:

## READING GAY LIFE IN THE POPULAR PRESS

BY TOM FOLLAND

"I WOULD LIKE TO INSIST ON THE MATERIAL OPPRESSION OF INDIVIDUALS BY DISCOURSES"

MONIQUE WITTIG, *THE STRAIGHT MIND*<sup>1</sup>

THE NOTORIOUSLY HOMOPHOBIC COLUMNIST FOR THE *TORONTO SUN*, Dr. Gifford-Jones, whose professional status confers upon him an authority and knowledge that he nonetheless continues to disprove, recently advised his readers: "Today there's relatively little chance of teenagers becoming infected with the AIDS virus [sic] if they're heterosexual and not using illicit injectable drugs."<sup>2</sup> Having shelved any further reason to be concerned with AIDS, he goes on to lament what he sees as a very troubling fact: young people, according to a survey he quotes, know more about it than they do about other sexually transmitted diseases. He devotes the rest of his column to a very anti-sex litany of the evils of sexual intercourse amongst teenagers, ending with an exhortation to use condoms if they must have sex.

There are a number of assumptions propagated here beneath Gifford-Jones' authoritarian and seemingly straightforward declaration. Prime among them is the very heterosexist, classist, and racist assumption that AIDS is a disease of identity. In this picture, you get AIDS, not from what you do, i.e. fuck without a condom or a dental dam, or share needles without bleaching them, but from who you are: gay, bisexual, Haitian, African, prostitute, drug user. (Lesbians do not even figure, since in the heterosexual world that imagines and legislates such cursed identities, lesbians are as removed from sexuality as mothers.) Gifford-Jones reiterates a very tired and dangerous platform, one that fans the flames

of ignorance while giving the green light to engage in unsafe sexual practices to those who do not consider themselves listed amongst such identities.

Equally remarkable, or equally appalling, is the ease with which he dismisses or assumes invisible an audience that might actually be more concerned with AIDS than STDs, an audience he is eager, or anxious, to erase in the beginning of his column when he states that "there's relatively little chance of teenagers becoming infected . . ." What if you feel you might be at risk? What if teenagers reading this particular column, as he says he hopes they will, decide that they *are* included within the categories he states are at risk for AIDS? Well, "Dr. Gifford-Jones" and just about every other newspaper, tabloid, TV or radio program and report, do not give two shits. You are assumed invisible, illegitimate, or not worthy of inclusion within the symbolic space of "public audience," the idea to which every popular cultural form panders.

This particular idea of the public is as dubiously based in reality as we queers are steeped in the sanctioned contempt that demarcates our exclusion from popular address. Included within the litany of "special interest groups" that the right has recently been denouncing in its media as propagators of the tyranny of "political correctness," we want to overtake the institutions long held by rich, white, heterosexual men (and those that uphold their interests). Their fear is that when we queers, and other non-members of the public, hold (some

of) the power they long have clung to, we will, in the bizarre and reactionary rhetoric of "reverse discrimination," do unto them what they have long done unto us: exert political, legal, social, cultural, and representational violence. Hence their naive fear, since they are only too familiar with that particular practice of power.

In a footnote to his essay "Mourning and Militancy," Douglas Crimp writes:

It seems to me particularly telling that throughout the epidemic the dominant media has routinely featured stories about anxieties provoked by AIDS—the anxieties of health care workers and cops exposed to needle sticks, of parents whose children attend school with an HIV-infected child, of straight women who once upon a time had a bisexual lover. . . . But I have never once seen a story about the millions of gay men who have lived with these anxieties since 1981.<sup>3</sup>

It is telling of a long and continuing association of gay sexuality with immorality, disease, deviancy, and violence. We well know how we figure within popular representations; the "queer paradigm" Cindy Patton has described is by now the unconditional and unconscious association of AIDS with gay sexuality—as responsible for and ensuring the AIDS epidemic. Preceding AIDS, and concurrent with it, there has always been a secrecy associated with gay sex, a "type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology."<sup>4</sup> A secrecy that, in most popular accounts, is a very violent one.

The *Toronto Star* is a "family" newspaper. That is to say, it addresses itself to the thoroughly imaginary fantasy of, what might otherwise be described as the institution of the family, a social unit bereft of enduring conflict and change, and one whose only concerns are daily addressed in the newspaper's "Food and Life" section: gardening, stretching the family budget, new and exciting menu ideas, home repair, and bad teenagers. Positioned between the reactionary and corporate *Globe & Mail* and the tabloid, colloquial, and working class *Toronto Sun*, the *Toronto Star* enjoys a reputation of purported neutrality or middle ground, appealing more to the interests of the ordinary, "everyday person." Part of this logic of ordinariness is the need to define and position the unordinary, that which must be relegated outside of family practice and sexual normalcy. Toward the end of the front section of the *Toronto Star* are routinely documented scenarios of domestic violence—recent headlines include "285-pound man jailed for punching woman" and "Wife wanted man out, strangling trial told"—and other titillating tales of

crimes and punishments, of what might happen when one transcends the tranquillity and happy quiet of the dominant notion of the family the *Toronto Star* vigorously, one might even say violently, endorses. Another aspect of this imperative to define and delineate the unordinary is the circumscription of sexuality. This past winter there was a headline that caught my eye. Having clipped out features and articles on AIDS for some time and usually flipping through this section, I was taken aback by the caption to a story that read "Homosexual 'dazed' to find murder victim, court told."<sup>5</sup> What struck me was the decidedly '50s rhetoric of the headline, a headline that harks back to the film noir days of social renegades and familial deviancy. The story began as such: "A homosexual has testified in court that he was 'dazed' and frightened to find a man lying dead on his living room floor after an all night sex-and-drug party." He reportedly came out of his bedroom to find "Flannigan [a man he had picked up earlier] lying dead on the floor in a pool of blood." What gives this story its charge, its "newsworthiness" is the implicit assumption that blood, violence, and death are *de rigueur* accoutrements of gay sex.

When the Hollywood film *Cruising*, a film that portrayed a violent gay psychopath (sound familiar?), was released in the early '80s, the makers saw fit to preface it with a statement declaring that the film was not meant to be representative of gay life in general. But of course it was since it could only intensify an already entrenched association of gay sexuality with violent intentions. Given the ways we are represented in popular media—belligerent militants demanding our rights to self-gratification, "carriers" of AIDS to an innocent public, participants in the dark and seedy underworld of gay "subculture," all part of a social violence intrinsically tied to our sexuality—it should not be surprising that there are not, as Crimp notes above, sympathetic stories about gay men with AIDS. If our sex is so violent why should we be spared the condemnation ceded to unlawful criminals and willful deviants?

The popular equation between gay sex and violence is consistent in the *Toronto Star's* reportage. Here is another headline from this past winter: "Axe killing exposes husband's secret gay life."<sup>6</sup> As if the inference were not explicit enough, beneath a photograph of the husband and wife is this statement: "Persa Gligor knew of husband Joseph's sexual escapades and interfered when his last encounter became too violent, police suspect." [emphasis added] The police also "suspect" that, as the article details, "the killer was one of the man's many sexual partners and say they are looking for a

## Axe killing exposes husband's secret gay life

KITCHENER (CP) — A man who led a secret homosexual life and his wife were savagely hacked to death with an axe and hatchet last month, police revealed yesterday. The police suspect that the killer was one of the man's many sexual partners and say they are looking for a dangerous psychopath with a fetish for violent gay sex. They are warning homosexuals in the region to avoid relationships with strangers. The bodies of Joseph and Persa Gligor were found in the basement of their Kitchener home Jan. 2. Joseph Gligor had been bound with rope. At the time, police would say only that the 61-year-old man and 60-year-old woman had been bludgeoned to death. Now a psychologist, brought in to help police, describes the killings as a "ghastly" frenzy of violence. Gligor was a regular patron in the city's gay bars and was known to pick up men on

downtown streets he cruised at night, police said. But co-workers at the J.M. Schneider meat-packing plant, where Gligor had worked as a bacon-slicer since the early 1970s, were unaware of his double life. A plant manager last month called the short, heavy-set Gligor "a delightful person who really loved to chat." The psychologist, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said evidence at the crime scene suggested that the murderer had sado-masochistic gay sex with Gligor before he killed the man and his wife. The killer then stole several inexpensive items. Staff-Sgt. Ken Carmount of Waterloo Regional Police said Persa Gligor made a brief and alarming phone call to a family member on the night of the killings. She said she was "concerned" about a third person in the house and a "fracas" had broken out, Carmount said. The family member did

not call police or go to the house. The bodies were discovered next morning. Police said it appears that Persa Gligor knew of her husband's sexual escapades. They suspect she interfered when the fatal encounter became too violent. Mary Gligor, daughter of the slain couple, said her parents, originally from Yugoslavia, had few friends. "My mother didn't speak much English," she said. Unlike Gligor's co-workers, patrons of the city's gay bars knew all about his secret life. "He came in here a few times a week — always solo," said Tom Reidel, owner of Circles, a downtown bar. He said Gligor, who looked much younger than his age, "was known for hitchhiking (cruising for men). He wasn't a bad guy. It makes you wonder what kind of sick person is on the loose." Bar patrons, he said, were surprised to learn Gligor was married.



MURDERED COUPLE: Persa Gligor knew of husband Joseph's gay sexual escapades and interfered when his last encounter became too violent, police suspect.

dangerous psychopath with a fetish for violent gay sex." Maybe these police officers had sat through one too many screenings of *Cruising* or were fresh from *The Silence of the Lambs*. The article goes on to quote a psychologist who said "evidence at the crime scene suggested that the murderer had sado-masochistic gay sex with Gligor before he killed the man and his wife." What evidence was there? Whips, leather chaps, manacles? Even so, when have these items of sexual pleasure—as opposed to handguns and switchblades—led to death? The straight mind imagines sado-masochistic sex as violent (and intrinsically gay), not as the consensual and harmless ritual acting out of the theatrics of power and submission, as opposed to the unconsensual and truly violent act of predominantly heterosexual rape and child abuse by men. To closely study this "news" is to study the truly bizarre and homophobic projection of how straight people imagine (and often obsess themselves with) the reality of same sex relations. Suspicions, suggestions, conjectures: in this piecemeal account of what might have actually happened there was not a grain of evidence that would suggest the man's sexuality was in any way related to his and his wife's murder. The report was predicated upon a prior knowledge of the man's frequenting of gay bars, his "secret gay life."

Is there any way for homosexuality to escape being inscribed within a paradigm of violence? Or, alternatively, is there any reason for homosexuality to be persistently linked to violence when it is obvious that the practice of heterosexuality lends itself much more to violent interactions? Not according to the *Toronto Star*. I might be belabouring an obvious point, but it is important to underscore the fact that straight men's sexuality is never considered relevant to their arguably more frequent acts of sexual violence. As the *Toronto Star* bears witness, nearly every day a man beats his wife or kills her. Will we ever see stories, features, opinion columns

on the precarious, unstable, and violence prone nature of heterosexual relationships? Why is rape and the sexual abuse of children never considered a problem of male heterosexuality, when every account of crime or violence that includes a gay man has gay sexuality figured as absolutely and unconditionally central, even when it is utterly irrelevant to the situation? "Transvestite sought for questioning in doctor's murder,"<sup>7</sup> announces the headline of yet another story which, this time, has the police (hilariously) undercover and descending into the sordid underworld of Toronto's Club Colby's and Church and Jarvis Streets. The account of this particular escapade ends with this probably unintended piece of irony: "Employees at the club on St. Joseph Street also said undercover police had been to the bar the day after the murder and had made frequent returns[!]. But they noted the officers were always easy to spot."

It is, of course, the *Toronto Star's* mandate to uphold the fiction of happy heterosexuality with its attendant conventions of white, middle class sexism, classism, racism, and homophobia, or grimacing "tolerance" toward these issues. This is not the system under investigation. That scrutiny is reserved for, amongst others, gay men.

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### ENDNOTES

1. In Russell Ferguson et al., eds. *Out There* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991), p. 53.
2. *The Sunday Sun*, February 17, 1991, p. C15.
3. Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," in *Out There*, p. 244.
4. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 43.
5. *Toronto Star*, January 22, 1991, p. A16.
6. *Toronto Star*, February 21, 1991, p. A18.
7. *Toronto Star*, February 21, 1991, p. A6.





Robt. F. ...

# the Phallic Gaze of the

# SUN

by Kym Bird

THE SUN, SIGN OF THE FATHER, passes on in its name the authority of the male and his standard, his aesthetic, his vision. It passes on to its readership images of men and women which make the gap between us seem immutable and our sexuality an unchangeable, universal fact. The phallic gaze of *The Sun* is the hero worshipping the hero, the working man enamoured with his own reflection. Sunshine girls and sunshine boys shed light, indeed, on the ways in which men see and women are seen both now and in the past. But there are great gaps in this narrow aesthetic orbit wherein lays the beauty of everyone who is not represented and every other part of those who are. These myths need to be extinguished, neutered; these images born to be shattered and gathered into new forms, new pictures, new ways of imagining ourselves and our bodies, in *The Sun* and in the world.



JUST WHO ARE YOU AND WHERE DO YOU COME FROM I ask myself as I catch your breasts out of the corner of my eye? Who are your mothers and fathers? Are you me? Are you part of me? What are you doing here sprawled out on these pages? If I met you at a party you'd probably say how excited you were; how the photographer came into your lunch room and all the girls began to chirp like birds. He chose you. Your boyfriend always said you had wonderful thighs! These are pretty deep questions—you'd say that you read Margaret Atwood in high school last year and you weren't going to fall for a boy that was going to use you for an ashtray. Your boy is different. This is the nineties, you'd say, and women have

changed. "My mother told me a man has to respect you. So I work out at the Y and have interests of my own: skiing in the winter, sun tanning in the summer, and big blonde men."

She laughs. "And in two years time I'm going to marry anyway so my mother won't have to worry any more. And I'll have children and I'll bring them up and I'll be responsible for them. I'll love my children and my husband and I'll care for all of them. Oh, and of course he'll take care of me. I'll only have to work part-time you see. Now I work in an office but I couldn't make a career of it. Those computer screens kill my eyes. The work is so repetitive and boring and my boss is always making comments about how my clothes fit. Oh, he likes them and all, and it's actually kind of flattering, but it makes me kinda feel like dead meat too. My boyfriend says he doesn't want me working there any longer than I have to, but now were saving for the wedding."

My mother told me a man has to respect you. My mother put it differently: "Kym," she said, "will you keep your legs closed!" All my life she's been telling me I was going to make some man a wonderful wife one day. So I guess we come from similar places.

In the European nude I see the shadow of your mother. Her naked stylized body—always different, always the same subjection to current standards of fashion (Hollander: 87). The mother body effaced and erased in the dialectic of clothing and nakedness, clothing with nakedness that bares and buries a figure cut from one cloth, dyed-in-the-wool; Venus' body, an unclothed costume tailored to a generalized vision of beauty (88). "Those who are not judged beautiful are

not beautiful. Those who are, are given the prize [and] the prize is to be owned by a judge"—for a day or maybe she'll wind up proudly in the annual Sunshine Calendar, pinned to the wall with the promise to hang for a full 30 days (Berger:52). Or perhaps she'll find a place in the card deck, immortal sunshine currency—passed from one fat hand to the next, neatly fingered by every player. Has she not always been the card, the eccentric, the kook, the lunatic woman that adorns his deck, that decks his hand, that dresses up his suit and suits his double victory?

"Still incomplete is that enumeration and, of course, the interpretation" of the other mothers, the mistresses (Irigaray: 27). Like our dear deep-throated Linda Lovelace—"a dumb mouth from which the teeth have been pulled": prisoner sex/slave whose pornographic pleasure was all a sham, a trick (Angela Carter). Or Bo Derek whose husband also managed her clean, healthy, joyous, soft sex. And you, my sunshine woman, slightly pornographic woman? Your flesh is carved out of history. You are trapped, licked before you start; always already seduced, submitting; transformed into a commodity in this pap porn, this repetitive, reductive, one-sided use of the genre—a genre of immense social importance in these sexually repressive times.

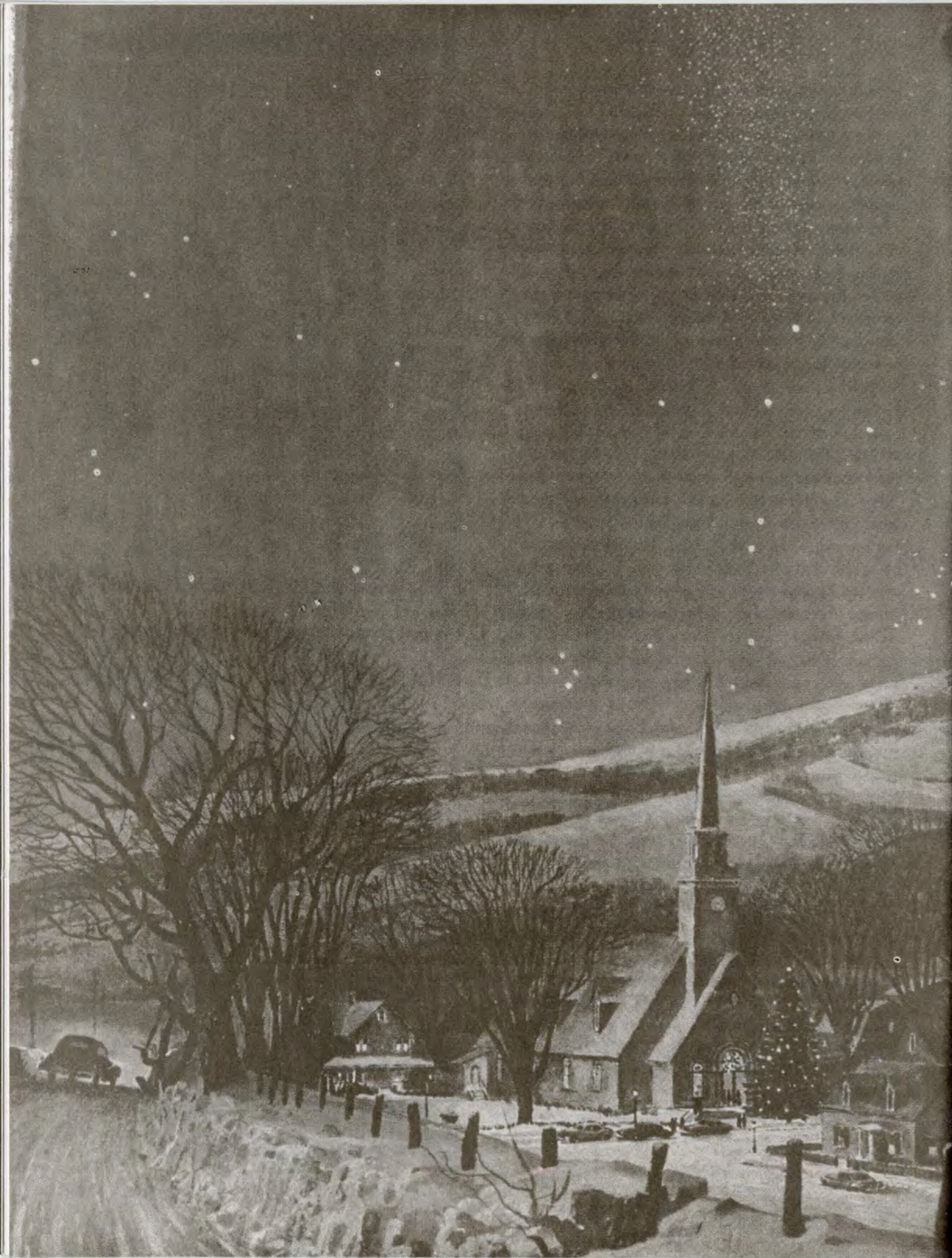
And this is my Adam—sunshine boy for all seasons; my High School sweetheart. Well, where do you come from? No, I don't want a date, just to know who your fathers are? "My fathers? You mean my heroes, like Wayne Gretzky or som'thin'?" Why do I imagine you bullying me? "My father told me never feel up a girl in a white shirt with dirty hands and you know what, I only got caught once—by her old boyfriend. She's my ideal woman: big tits, blonde hair (I also like red, but no freckles); she can stop a truck at a wink; she's a knockout but she only has eyes for me. She's slim but not bone rack; she's got hips but nothing to sink a battleship with, she's just shapely. I like her best in high pumps and black nylon stockings with lines up the back and a mini skirt. You know, the kind of girl you'd like to call "Bubbles," but she's smarter. Actually I don't know if I like 'em real dumb so I can out-think 'em or real smart so I can ask 'em for advice. But I treat my women with respect: I wine 'em and dine 'em and put 'em to bed." He laughs. "Listen, I'm simple: I like music, cars, and good-lookin' women with a sense of humour, who know how to cook; women who are susceptible to romantic comments so I can steal their hearts as well as their bodies.

"Seriously though, I'm planning on making big bucks in real estate and then I think her and I'll get married. You gotta take the plunge sometime and I know I'm only 23 but I've always









THE RISE & FALL OF DAVID LYNCH

There is no place like **Home**

by Andrew J. Paterson

IN 1990 AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS POPULARITY, filmmaker/TV producer David Lynch, hailed by many to be the most creative director working within the boundaries of the commercial American cinema, appeared to be harnessing all of his talents into a cultural and financial empire.

Film critics, trade papers, and cinephiles alike praised him for his manipulation of audience expectations and preconceptions, for encouraging actors to transcend the limitations of their previous performances, and for transgressing the boundaries of taste and correctness while managing to remain accessible to viewers whose only criteria is that the product be entertaining.

With the coming and going of his TV series, *Twin Peaks* (of which he is co-executive producer but only occasional director), David Lynch has achieved household name status. *Twin Peaks* itself became a mega spin-off industry, significantly pumping up the careers of everyone involved in its success.

As contemporary commercial cinema's premier showman, he eclipsed De Palma, Cronenberg, et al in his ability to make shocking films and "take chances" while working within the film industry. He is hailed for being able to create and then interconnect more spectacular set-pieces than anybody else since Hitchcock. Like Hitchcock, Lynch is admired for his vividly perverse imagination, his direct pipeline to the subconscious, and his control over every aspect of every frame (it is noted that Lynch is also a painter). In short, the name David Lynch has become synonymous with all that is weird, wonderful, and disturbing in film.

There are a lot of TV viewers now familiar with Lynch who don't go to movies at all—let alone have seen *Wild at Heart*, *Blue Velvet*, or *Eraserhead*. With *Twin Peaks* Lynch truly achieved a

duality of audiences. Some saw it as a combination prime-time soap/murder mystery; while some saw it as a campy post-modernist infiltration of the prime-time TV medium. Some took it all at face value while others saw complex levels of irony. Lynch is an elusive story-teller who engages viewers in their own duplicities while covering up his tracks. "Irony" for Lynch is a double standard which gives him the option as a director to speak in contradictory voices: one naïve, the other cynically perverse. Ironically, it lets him off the hook while he employs it to hook his audience.

Hipness is attitude transcending accountability. Lynch is a prime exponent of hipness. He flaunts his knowledge of popular culture, particularly movies, and his work is filled with quotations and visual puns that reflect this. In *Twin Peaks* film noir character names appear from *Laura*, *Double Indemnity*, and *Vertigo*. The shot of the dismembered ear from *Blue Velvet*, for example, conjures up a similar image from Buñuel. Lynch does the same thing with '50s rock and roll in his sound-tracks. (I must digress to admit my own ability to spot references incriminates my viewing and listening habits.) Lynch's hipness is an external manifestation of a subjectivity which resists any attempt at systematic analysis and, like irony, seems to situate his work beyond criticism. He is only one of many who employ this strategy (Sandra Bernhard through her comedy routines and through sheer attitude is another) but he is certainly one of the most successful. The success of hipness depends on impressing audiences. Those who are critical remain unimpressed or who just don't get it risk being designated as unhip by the artist and his publicity machine (not to mention peer pressure). Lynch bombards audiences in a manner not unlike all too many stand-up comedians. He defies

audiences to deny his formally dazzling and apparently hermetic structures. Unfortunately the hermeticism is primarily surface. Lynch's logical systems are transparently traditionalist.

Throughout his oeuvre Lynch maintains a double standard towards both narrative and psychology. *Wild at Heart*, *Twin Peaks* and *Blue Velvet* all purportedly depict the perverse underbellies of small neo-'50s normalities. He presents these visually in garish hyper-realities as if the settings were actually postcards (the films of Douglas Sirk and the paintings of Eric Fischl come to mind). These technicolour tableaux are so transparently constructed they immediately register as explodable clichés. Lynch implies, via the clichédness itself, that such narratives are only convenient trajectories which are necessary to link the dazzling set pieces together. He employs generic narratives derived from the road movie, the film noir, and the prime time soap opera. (*Twin Peaks* combined the latter two by fetishizing Laura's corpse in order to link the whole town full of suspects with their dirty little secrets—the fetishizing of the corpse allowed for an infinite number of flashbacks). Lynch winks at his audience as he flaunts these narrative transparencies, but in fact he is at least as dependent upon narrative closure as were his noir and melodrama antecedents. Directors working in these genres were restrained by the boundaries of a far more rigid moral code in the '40s and '50s and were often victims of tacked-on happy endings imposed by studio producers. Like them Lynch is drawn to depicting either the alienation from or the corrosion within the nuclear family but his "tacked on" endings (right out of *The Wizard of Oz* in *Wild at Heart*) are not compromises but clearly his own choices. Fragile family units (absent fathers and predatory mothers run rampant through his films) are either "cured" or restored by male protagonists who have proven themselves willing to assume the mantle of positive fatherhood. Again Lynch appears to have his cake and eat it too. Is there no place like home?

FOR A DIRECTOR TOUTED FOR HIS DIRECT PIPELINE to his subconscious, Lynch places an inordinate amount of emphasis on generic Freudianism and its role in character definition. In *Wild at Heart* a flashback informs us that Peanut (Laura Dern) was raped at thirteen by her uncle. From that time Peanut internalized this violation, and thus, her inevitable encounter with the grotesque Bobby Peru (Willem Dafoe) evokes the fear and the distorted eroticism of that memory. Lynch seems to be complicit with the now-famous Freudian confusion between incest and fantasy. Instead of critiquing narrative conventions of classic cinema, he hones and thus accepts them. The quasi-Oedipal nature of so many of heterosexual relationships of the films noirs of the '40s and '50s leads the director to consider incest to be a sort of narrative inevitability—what was latent has now become blatant.

Sailor's (Nicholas Cage) involvement in the fire which killed Peanut's father is revealed as the cause of the wicked witch stepmother-to-be's desire for revenge against him. Lynch introduces predatory mothers (in *Eraserhead* as well as *Wild at Heart*) but does not explore any possible attraction that his young male

protagonists might have for these women. They are presented as being hideous monsters who must either be killed or rendered significantly impotent in order for the male protagonists to assume maturity and fatherhood. Similarly, Lynch places his male protagonists in jeopardy by involving them in intensely loaded relationships with exotically criminal father figures, but shies away from any hint of homoerotic attraction. These irredeemable career criminals wind up only serving as catalysts for the protagonist's eventual imprisonment and subsequent redemption, although these catalysts are certainly granted their star turns. They, along with the predatory women, are part of the unspeakable disease which must be cured in order for a happy ending to prevail.

Like his characters Lynch keeps secrets well and, in his case, power over others is located in the ability to sustain mystery. In interviews Lynch has described his childhood as "filled with beatific moments but also with traumatic horror." For Lynch the universe is binary and he is fascinated by doubleness and the co-existence of opposites within the same persons or constructs. When a *Rolling Stone* interviewer inquired about the "disease" that plagues some of his female characters (both *Blue Velvet*'s Dorothy and *Twin Peaks*'s Laura Palmer have pronounced appetites for heterosexual masochism involving older men), Lynch resisted any attempt to be pinned down to specifics: "... just the word *disease* used in that way—it's so beautiful just to leave it abstract. Once it becomes specific, it's no longer true to a lot of people."

Lynch seems to resist acknowledging the not-so-latent masochism of his protagonists. To do so, he would first of all have to admit there is such a thing as a male masochist and focus on the role of the contract in consensual "sodomasochist" relationships, and he would have to acknowledge the existence of pre-Oedipal bisexuality. It is in the self-interest of the mystery/suspense specialist to prolong the tension for as long as possible in order to captivate the masochism of willing audiences. In order for Lynch to keep his secrets (such as why he so insistently places women in coercive positions), he needs to preserve his own "innocence" in the same manner that it benefits entrepreneurs to have absolute faith in their own products. He depicts Big Daddy misogyny as something wild, weird, and thus, wonderful, and has a vested interest in keeping it that way. Lynch's psychology never gets beyond a kind of postcard Freudianism designed to shock and entertain.

Lynch seems locked into a nostalgia for an era when women were either mothers or reformable whores, when sexual and racial otherness was unequivocally tainted by its association with criminality. Throughout *Twin Peaks* the character of Josie was constantly tainted with implied criminality; the fact that she is Asian was linked to the fact that she must be importing something nefarious. The opening scene of *Wild at Heart* explicitly depicts Sailor's violent murder of a black pimp for which he is initially charged with manslaughter. Sleazy detective Harry Dean Stanton is sacrificed by a voodoo posse which includes a black man. Sailor's conversion to adult responsibility



is prompted by his being beaten by a street gang whose members just happen to be black, Asian, and Hispanic. Sailor addresses them as "faggots." The resulting multi-cultural assault convinces Sailor that there is no place like home after all, because home is safe.

LYNCH'S REINFORCEMENT OF CONVENTIONAL heterosexuality, combined with his fear of sexual and racial minorities, locates him at the centre of an insidious right-wing retro chic which designates offended feminists, gays, and persons of colour as being humourless and hypersensitive (or "Busybodies and Crybabies" as recent *Time* magazine cover story preferred to put it). In the all too necessary backlash against the religious right we tend to forget the libertarian right, which equates feminism with puritanism and profits from the profligation of regressive clichés under the convenient umbrella of "entertainment."

The romanticism of David Lynch, as a director who pushes everything to its limit and transgresses the codes of acceptable narrative, suggests that, by virtue of his relative extremity, he may in fact be breaking down cultural barriers instead of reinforcing them. This notion of "transgression" (one of the most worn-out cultural catchwords of the past decade), has long been a highly convenient justification for works which have simply not been very thoroughly thought out.

In this post-MTV era, where "surrealism" and "transgressiveness" have been thoroughly absorbed by mass media consciousness, the innovations of the surrealists have been matter-of-factly appropriated by the rapid editing and anti-continuity formulas of both music videos and advertising in general. It is worth noting that the discontinuity of image advocated and practised by the surrealists was all too frequently exercised at the expense of female images. The banishment of Jean Cocteau from the surrealist movement due to his homosexuality reveals a repressive hierarchy imposed on dream images by the practitioners of surrealism.

It is also worth noting here stylistic resemblances between the films of Kenneth Anger (whom I consider to be a prime influence on MTV) and much of Lynch's work.

SO WHY WAS *WILD AT HEART* SUCH A BOMB IN NORTH AMERICA? and why did *Twin Peaks* fail to sustain audiences after its initial impact? In the beginning *Twin Peaks* was so pervasive that *Wild at Heart* got lost in its shadow. Do singular, obvious narratives pale in comparison to multiple, subplotted soap operas? *Wild at Heart*'s characters lacked the tension of previous films (in *Blue Velvet* Dennis Hoppers villain was at least on equal footing with Kyle McLachlan's hero).

Is Lynch's current demise simply result of revealing all his tricks too early and thus eliminating the possibilities of both mystery and suspense?

Murder mysteries and crime dramas have been with us for a long time and their mass appeal can scarcely be denied. But the mystery as *McGuffin* is also time worn. (A *McGuffin* is Hitchcock's term applied where the specifics of a film's plot are a red herring on which to hook suspense.)

After the murderer's identity was revealed, *Twin Peaks* began to visually resemble any number of other mini-series as the mystery's backlog of signifying clues became irrelevant to the unfocused storylines. When Dad was revealed to be Laura's killer the *McGuffin* of the murder mystery was exhausted with a typically incestuous solution. It was not exactly the most earth-shattering revelation in televised history.

As much as Lynch's virtuosity and his mastery of the visual seduce me into thinking otherwise, I am tempted to conclude that he is more a kindred spirit of Andrew Mice Clay than of Luis Buñuel. It's only a matter of time now before Lynch proves himself to be a *McGuffin* whose downfall can only be viewed as a narrative inevitability.

Andrew J. Paterson is a Toronto writer, actor, and video artist.



With startling suddenness his mouth came down on hers. She struggled to free herself but she was like a sparrow trying to free itself from an eagle.\*



He merely held her more tightly, forcing her lips apart by the pressure of his own.\*



Feeling her surrender, he loosened his grip on her, but only in order to gather her more closely to his body.\*



'I want to be with you for the rest of my life,' she said simply.\*

\* Linday, Rachel, *Man of Ice*, Harlequin Books.

OUR COSTUMES WOULD  
BE ONLY THE MANAGER  
A PEEP SHOW, YOUNG  
LADY!... HOWEVER,  
ALL IS NOT  
LOST!



## The Comic Mirror

### THE COMIC MIRROR

BY JENNIFER FISHER

## DOMESTIC SURVEILLANCE IN *MARY WORTH*

For some time I have been intrigued by representations of women artists in the popular media. Portrayals of artists and art on TV soaps, newspaper comics, and so on, are sites where fascinating mediations of the art discourse can be observed. For one familiar with contemporary art discourses these images have a quality of being "patently wrong," yet are based on recognizable features and structures.<sup>1</sup>

The conventions of popular media uphold various, even contradictory, stereotypes. In television soaps, both day and night (*The Young and the Restless* and *Dallas*), artists have been upheld as signifiers of elite culture, wealth, or class, while syndicated newspaper comic, such as *Mary Worth*, have disclaimed the artist as fool, subversive, and underminer of status quo.

The sites of feminist struggle in representation are not absolute, but can be located between the transitory alignment of structures of power and lived experience, between mediated image of the artist and the reader herself. In this article, I will consider some conventions of *Mary Worth* as they articulate with my own reading as a process of recognition.

Feminism's development through essentialist, subcultural and separatist textual approaches has ultimately allowed a practice which becomes a "play on the contradictions that inform patriarchy itself."<sup>2</sup> And for me the key word is "play," in the sense that we can choose the way we interact with media representations as they shift and change in a shimmering dance. The sense of "play" is particularly significant because it enables movement between the representations seemingly imposed by a one-way communication process, and the presence we choose to express within our social formation (the art community).

I wish to focus on the fictional portrayal of a woman artist, "Jenny," in the *Mary Worth* comic strip.<sup>3</sup> As the scenario which, in soap opera, formula was interspersed with many

other simultaneous dramas, gradually unfolded, a peculiar recognition occurred: not only did Jenny and I share the same name, but we both considered ourselves artists and had more than a passing interest in reading our horoscopes. My sympathy for Jenny's preoccupations triggered my sense of identification with her. In effect, I began to see myself reflected in the representation, despite the discouraging narrative. Over some time, my viewing of the portrayal of Jenny took on the quality of a hall of distorting mirrors at an amusement park—where we view the amusing and the outrageous distortions of who we believe ourselves to be. Yet, such a text occurs at a site, not where our permission has been given to participate in a carnivalesque inversion of reality, but in the appropriation of syndicated newspaper cartoons which frame content, in this case a woman artist, in relation to particular conventions.

Within the fictive *Mary Worth* universe, a community is presented as enacting roles which constantly re-establish a particular moral hierarchy. In effect, it presents an ideology of domestic surveillance where *Mary Worth*, the well known central character, metonymically enacts and polices the "conscience" of American Capitalism. Her tweed suits, decorated apartment, and manners exude the normalized tastes of an upper-middle class, middle-aged matron. Indeed, the surname "Worth" is a synonym for the word "value." Hence, *Mary Worth's* constant mission throughout the strip, like an Ann-Landers-of-Mercy, is to intervene into people's domestic lives, ascertain their "problems"—usually the result of straying from a conservative value system—and reinstate the hierarchy.

In the scenario illustrated here, *Mary Worth* and her friend Sybil Hull express "shock and distaste" at Jenny's fashion designs which they deem too risqué. Jenny's constructions of taste are clearly a confrontation to those of *Mary Worth*. Yet, Sybil Hull's husband decides to encourage Jenny by hiring her

to decorate the den of their home in the wealthy New York suburb of Greenwich. When Mr. Hull gives Jenny a 100-dollar retainer fee, she is clearly amazed by the bill she holds in her hands. Later, Mary Worth suggests that Jenny use the money "to buy something suitable to wear." Jenny replies that she has already designed a proper "Gemini decorator uniform . . . a harlequin leotard with white cap and sandals." Horrified, Mary then takes Jenny, wearing the harlequin uniform, out shopping to get a more "appropriate" outfit. As they return from the shopping trip, Kevin, the apartment security guard (the straight, patronizing, potential love interest), admires Jenny's new suit, accented with a rather castrated tie around her neck.

This scenario in *Mary Worth*, in effect, reveals the corporate elite's relationship with the other. Its disturbing narrative trivializes and ridicules Jenny's concerns and sets her alone in relationship to a conservative social formation. Displacement is Jenny's affective state; she is separate from others of her style, age, and interests, and positioned as a vulnerable, singular, sitting duck. She is passively swept away by Mary Worth to invest in "suitable clothing" in a shopping spree at "Betty's Fashions for the Business Woman." Middle-class idioms of disciplinary scolding and affirmation—"young lady," "something suitable to wear," "don't want . . . the neighbours to think," "you look super"—permeate the dialogue. The outcome presents Jenny transformed via fashion into a "pure object" worthy of Kevin's admiration. His role as "security guard" is somewhat ominous here because it is bourgeois domestic security that is being guarded. In the last frame of this sequence we see her from Kevin's point-of-view as the image of respectability.

Jenny's fashion sense and its expression are the site where the conflict occurs between her values and those of Mary Worth. Her portrayal reveals a smoothing over of contradictions and assertion of one taste over another in a convention of ridicule. Roland Barthes' rhetorical form of identification describes the displacement of the other with that of a clown as a way of reducing difference.<sup>4</sup>

If he comes face to face with him [her] he blinds himself, ignores and denies him [her], or else transforms him [her] into himself . . . any otherness is reduced to sameness . . . The Other becomes pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he [she] no longer threatens the security of the home.<sup>5</sup>

Jenny's attire, speech, economic marginality, and distaste threaten the security of Mary Worth's domestic hierarchy. Her marginal artistic and astrological preoccupations leave her clearly "astray" in the workings of her social milieu. Yet while deviant, Jenny remains in awe of Mr. Hull's money and dependent on Mary Worth's good will. It is not the money and

comfort afforded by the corporate elite that Jenny does not tolerate, but its language. She prefers her own language—the Gemini decorator uniform.

In this "uniform," the cartoonists have created a potent metaphor which displaces the fashion of artistic, punk, or street subcultures with that of an actual Harlequin. The use of this convention of displacement to ridicule reveals a particular agenda which disempowers Jenny as other. It is the quality of the distortion which is important and which I recognized as connoting my own social formation. Jenny-as-clown functions to assert the morality of bourgeois domesticity over those of single women, artists, horoscope readers. Within this domestic ideology there is no place for contradiction.

In this sense, analyzing the quality of the distortion itself is useful. To understand the positions designated in framing you is in itself empowering. To see and name your representation allows conscious response and action. The representation itself, in turn, becomes material to be subverted, manoeuvred to another site, or otherwise reinvested with, in this case, a feminist point of view. My reading refuses to accept the moral of this depressingly familiar story of a female artist and her body as a site where patriarchally informed agendas literally strip her of her desire for self-determination.

Ultimately, deconstruction of such representations of women may be regarded as a strategic practice.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely in the spaces between actual experience and its representation that we can observe the distorting quality of the media-mirror itself. Any pleasure for the feminist reader exists in reading against the grain, in refusing a complicit reception, in claiming space within our own social formations and ways of reading popular texts.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. Ann Bremmer, "Money, Love, and Laughter: Art on the Soaps," *Dialogue* 10:4, (July/August 1987).
2. Arlene Raven, *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology* (Ann Arbor/London: U.M.I. Research Press, 1988).
3. *Mary Worth* has appeared regularly in the *Montreal Gazette* for most of my life, but was recently discontinued. The strips illustrated appeared in October 1985.
4. Barthes described rhetoric as a set of fixed, regulated, insistent figures, according to which the varied forms of the mythical signifier arrange themselves . . . like the Zodiacal Signs of the bourgeois universe. The rhetorical forms he introduces include: The Inoculation, The Privation of History, Identification, Tautology, Neither-Norism, The Quantification of Quality, and The Statement of Fact.
5. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. (London/Toronto/Sydney/New York: Granda, 1976), p. 150-152.
6. Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 8.





STILL FROM THE VIDEO LIKE A PRAYER

## Madonna

# HAVING IT BOTH WAYS

BY JACK WATERS

Madonna is in me.  
I am in Madonna.  
Madonna is me.  
I am Madonna.  
By the act of consuming Madonna, I become Madonna.  
I eat Madonna, I eat myself.

—ANCIENT HAIKU

Madonna, Madonna, Madonna, Madonna, Madonna,  
Madonna, Madonna, Madonna, Madonna, Madonna,  
Madonna!

—MTV MADONNATHON

I LOVE MADONNA. I HATE HER. As a gay person of color I'm pretty ambivalent. The clout she wields, evident in the enormous influence she has over millions of impressionable fans she has around the World, gives her a level of control granted to few women in the entertainment industry. It is, as I believe she recognizes, a position of some responsibility. Her current status as Major Cultural Icon results from the considerable marketing ability she has effected on the business. She is obviously quite intelligent and has a grasp on the zeitgeist in as far as what is commercially viable at any given moment. This is assuming (which I so much want to be true) that she authors, or at least takes a major part in, the creation of the videos we see and recognize as hers.

Madonna's marketing skill is in her ability to focus on areas that touch the nerve-endings of Western society: Sex (specifically the areas of sexual identity involving passive/aggressive relations) and Race (particularly the Black/White dichotomy).

She seduces us by underscoring the intricate relationships between these cultural obsessions as they pertain to the inextricably connected preoccupation with Wealth and Power.

Is the overall result of her playing with these subjects one of enlightenment, or do the audio-visual messages Madonna puts out further confuse the volatile emotions elicited in the culture which receives them? The problems which these cultural obsessions create (sexual violence, racial conflict, economic inequity) are too grave to be taken lightly. One would hope, against all too reasonable doubt, that this is why Madonna's more recent activities have been put into the context of "News" by the media.

She is a genius at skirting the edge of the status quo's revulsion/attraction borderline. As far as the traditionally taboo subjects of religion, sex, and politics go, these are daring and uncharted waters for a pop performer in whose genre viability depends on mass appeal. Or at least it would seem so at first glance. In this era of conservatism she has been remarkably successful in manipulating the complex network formed by these topical issues yielding maximum benefit (Justify My Bank Account?).

While one is compelled to respect a woman who has leveraged command in an arena so dominated by white heterosexual males, shouldn't admiration be tempered by the fact that she got there playing up to the stereotypical sex role so frequently demanded of female performers? Or has she, as will be later attested, succeeded in restoring female sexual power to women?

The directness with which she so bluntly expressed her opinions on the *Nightline* interview (so crucial to the *Justify My*

Love coup) was impressive. For a pop entertainer to address an issue like AIDS on a national news program, as opposed to, for example, an activist like Matilde Krim, is interesting enough for the question it raises on media priorities. That she was able to voice her views, radical by average standards, criticizing the role of parents in not providing proper sex education by citing current stats on AIDS' effect on the nation's youth, for example, and to be undamaged commercially—to profit from it in fact—seems ironic. It certainly raises questions of intent. As commendable as her influence on AIDS awareness and the money which she's raised for the cause may be, the combination of politics and commercial entertainment is still problematic. The importance of statements made on female independence, AIDS awareness, and sexual liberation is diluted by the suspicion that the whole thing was an elaborately engineered publicity stunt. But, I admired the way she handled the interview. She maintained control over the direction of the conversation by not getting swept up in the sensational line of questioning and glibly acknowledged the publicity and profit MTV's "censorship" of the tape would bring.

Warhol remarked that part of his talent in turning a profit lay in developing the ideas that he became bored with, since these were usually the very things which later became most popular. If that is any index of a means to success, Madonna might be a week ahead of her time in assessing the viability of using directly gay sexual images (though the image of lesbian sex is certainly a key fetish among many heterosexual men). I am, of course, referring to content in the *Justify My Love* video, and the well-publicized pseudo-affair with Sandra Bernhard. Someone once remarked to me that she is totally up on contemporary trends in modern philosophy and that the results of this homework is reflected in the videos she produces (the *Village Voice*, in fact recently referred to the influence of George Bataille in her *Express Yourself* video). Madonna, an intellectual? Why not? Why should someone

who's surface representation is almost entirely sexual be presumed an idiot? This is a cultural stereotype which, while benefiting from, Madonna at once contradicts. Like Warhol (who, though gay, made a schtick of his self-professed asexuality), Madonna's success has depended on not laying all her cards on the table while assuming a candid posture. Wily? Manipulative? Dishonest? Aren't these qualities typically associated with the scheming female? If so, whose problem is it and does her (ab)use of these attributes deliver us from the miasma of our stereotyped sex-role trap or are we emerged deeper still?

Clearly, a part of me is seduced by the glamour. The videotapes are a major contribution to the allure. They are crucial to the mythology which Madonna has created around herself and intentionally hint at complexity and depth. It is curious that while she seems to have such control over the authorship of the music videos, such participation in the film parts she has taken is nil. In fact, it is a completely different personality submerged in the characters of the female stereotypes projected in the

Hollywood vehicles. One can derive from these film roles that in contrast to the powerhouse behind the Madonna videos is a woman so desperate for success in the film industry, she'll compromise the ideals of female independence and sexual liberation she's professed in various statements. Had she gotten to play Evita Peron in the discarded film project of the Broadway musical, this might not have been so much the case. Though she still would have been playing somebody's wife, Evita seems somewhat more substantial than a *Breathless* Mahoney. Had the film been a success (and how could she not have been great in a part so tailor-made for her?), she might have garnered more clout in selecting better roles for herself. The present Hollywood Madonna neutralizes the rock video Madonna, and imitates the early Madonna; the boy-toy Madonna on her climb to rock stardom.

The Madonna issue was a volatile topic at a panel on



STILL FROM THE VIDEO LA ISLA BONITA

STILL FROM THE VIDEO VOGUE

Lesbians in the Media at last June's *International Gay And Lesbian Film Festival* in San Francisco. One of the white lesbian panelists referred to her as a potential symbol of female sexual empowerment because she, while maintaining an image of control and self-determination, is projecting images of raw, unabashed female sexuality. Her point, I think, was that this imagery should help women, particularly lesbians, feel more comfortable with feeling sexual about the kind of femme energy which Madonna projects.

This is one example of the ways Madonna manages to have it both ways—appearing at once strong and aggressive while maintaining the traditionally female image of being unthreateningly feline and ever available to men. With all her lesbian/bisexual posturing she has yet to make a definitive statement identifying herself as anything other than the boy-toy for which she first became famous. I am beginning to tire of making special concessions to entertainment figures, for whom the mere hint of an admission to sexual divergence is considered an advance in consciousness. A clearer stance is needed rather than reinforcing the same stereotypes. Otherwise the lingering perception will be that the increasingly visible, valuable, and vital gay audience is being tapped more directly.

It would seem a testament to her potency in the national consciousness that the topic came so dangerously close to dominating the discussion. Particularly outspoken, as well as outraged, were the lesbians of color who felt that as a heterosexual white woman Madonna could never be a role model for them. Madonna, like many white music stars, capitalizes on the aura of black and latino sensibility that she surrounds herself with. In an MTV interview she stated that "before people saw my image people assumed I was a black singer." She said that after seeing her in the early videos, audiences responded to her as a white performer, which dramatically increased her popularity. Crossover Dreams in reverse. While black performers like Michael and Janet



Jackson, Whitney Houston, and others envelop themselves in a white ambiance in order to attract a larger following, white musicians have traditionally gained more success with a black sound and attitude than most black performers ever could. This is still a failing of the music industry. Like Sandra Bernhard (who parodied her own obsession with wanting to be black in *Without You I'm Nothing*), Madonna achieves an Afro/Latin identification by placing herself against a background of black/Hispanic talent: the dancers, singers, musicians, and other characters which appear in her videos. There is of course the defense that she's creating jobs for non-whites in an industry

where opportunities are still inequitably scarce. However, are the benefits she reaps as a major entertainer by taking advantage of the psycho-sexual dynamics that creates a privileged (yet at the same time-bound) position as a white woman in this society an equal trade-off?

Much of her material has dealt with racial themes: *Like A Prayer*, *La Isla Bonita*, and *Vogue* (an idea co-opted wholesale from a segment of the gay black community) are three. While emulating the ethnicity of the subjects,

she remains the iconic manifestation of the White (Bitch) Goddess exemplified in her *Blond Ambition* persona. Given the gains she has achieved by riding controversy (side saddle and astride) it is not unfair to suggest that she not take advantage of the privileges which being white in this society affords, or to insist that she, and others like her in the entertainment industry, do more—yes more!—for the communities (women, gay/lesbian, third world descendent) from which they benefit so much.

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*We are not just good friends*

*the lesbian subtext in female buddy movies*

BY INA RIMPAU

THERE HAVE BEEN FEMALE BUDDY MOVIES — films in which two women have their primary relationship with each other—since there have been movies. Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm*, several of Dorothy Arzner's films, which include subtle lesbian references and overt critiques of heterosexuality, and *How to Marry a Millionaire*: all depict female bonding of varying degrees of intensity.

In the late '70s/early '80s, in the wake of a number of male buddy films, there came a spate of "new" female buddy movies which purported to depict "modern" women's friendships, which continue today with the recent release of *Thelma and Louise*. The difficulty filmmakers, both independent and Hollywood, women and men, have in portraying women's friendships is part of a general ignorance of, and reluctance to deal seriously with, bonding between women. Most critical reviews of female buddy movies have no analysis of the heterosexist codes within which they operate. I suspect that it is lesbophobia on the part of filmmakers which is keeping them from portraying the complexities of woman-bonding.

*Girlfriends* (1978), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) and *Beaches* (1988) cover a 10-year span in their makings, and vary greatly in production values, cinematography, and narrative structure. *Girlfriends* was independently produced and widely distributed; both *Desperately Seeking Susan* and *Beaches* were commercial productions.

*GIRLFRIENDS* was produced and directed by Claudia Weill in 1978. The main character, Susan, and her roommate, Ann, are shown to be intimately familiar with each other. Within the first fifteen minutes of the movie, Ann's relationship with a man, later her husband, is twice an occasion for them to embrace.

After Ann's marriage, Susan picks up a hitchhiker, Ceil, who moves in with Susan. When Ceil comes on to Susan, she explains to Ceil that she and Ann had not been lovers. This is considered proof that Susan is not a lesbian. Ceil is eventually asked to leave.

Susan flirts with a married man, who stands her up. Amazingly, Susan and Eric (what the HELL does she see in this jerk?), with whom she had earlier had an unsatisfactory one-night stand, are shown in bed together and running around naked. To me, this is the most obtrusively constructed part of the film. Eric has done *nothing* to endear himself with either Susan or the viewer; the only reason I can see for her fucking him is that he's available, unlike the married man, whom she genuinely likes. One time-honoured way to diffuse the lesbian threat is to show women under suspicion being actively heterosexual, propagating the myth that everyone is *really* heterosexual, and consequently reinforcing the viewer's homo/lesbophobia.

By the movie's end, Ann and Susan have reluctantly accepted that their friendship comes second to their relationships with men.

Rebecca A. Bailin titles her review of *Girlfriends*, "No Celebration of Female Bonding." She compares the film's awkward handling of lesbianism to liberal feminism's reluctance to deal honestly with the subject:

**Susan isn't freaked or repulsed by Ceil's sexual overtures; she simply says no. Straight feminism accepts lesbianism but doesn't see it as significantly different or representing a real alternative. Nor do straight feminists acknowledge the effect of gay life on heterofeminist realities. There was nothing about Ceil that made her distinctly lesbian. There was nothing about the life she led that said anything particularly positive to Susan.**<sup>1</sup>



GIRLFRIENDS 1978

Claudia Weill, the director of *Girlfriends*:

**When Susan is so upset with Anne's marriage one can wonder whether she's in love with her. The scene with Ceil gives Susan the opportunity to see if it is so.**<sup>2</sup>

Wrong, Claudia. When Susan turns down Ceil she is stating that she doesn't want to sleep with Ceil. This says nothing about her feelings for Anne. Lesbianism, thus, is limited to a sexual activity, the idea of which either "turns a woman on," or doesn't; sexual identity is a fixed, immutable category.

Bailin further comments on the party scene where Susan is apparently repulsed by the sight of two women kissing:

**The subtlety of the scene itself is insidious. The couple is not clear. . . . [T]hey could easily be two women. The scene allows a person to project his/her homophobia onto it and yet remain unaware of it.**<sup>3</sup>

The message of *Girlfriends* is clear: living with men is limiting in a way that living with women is not. *Girlfriends'* public and critical acclaim is in large part due to its resignedly accepting the "inevitability" of heterosexual women's disappointment with female friendships.

IN *DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN*, directed by Susan Seidelman in 1985, Roberta, the seeker in the movie, vicariously lives romance and adventure, following, for months,

the personal ads through which Susan (played by Madonna) and a lover, Jim, make contact. Roberta watches their reunion through a peeposcope, having come to satisfy her curiosity about Susan. Susan goes on a shoplifting spree, dogged by the fascinated Roberta. At home, Roberta makes herself up to look as much like Susan as possible, and arranges to meet her.

A heterosexist reading of her actions would say that Roberta is trying to become Susan; I would posit that she is trying to seduce her. I realize these are not mutually exclusive interpretations. I see Roberta as camouflaging herself to look as if she is part of Susan's world, in order to appear less threatening to Susan. In any case, the lesbian viewer's anticipation at seeing the two women together is foiled.

At night in the seedy East Village, Roberta is chased by a thug. The cops tell Gary, Roberta's husband, that Roberta was picked up for soliciting. Gary is informed by his sister that "Four out of five prostitutes are lesbians." For suburbanites, lesbianism is on a continuum of sexual "depravity" with prostitution. Roberta is revealed to be sexually out of control.

*Desperately Seeking Susan* offers intriguing possibilities for a lesbian reading. Roberta's fascination and pursuit of Susan look a lot like infatuation, something none of the literature I found commented on (*Variety*: *Films in Review*, *Stills*).



Susan, the Madonna character, is a sexual free spirit. She gooses her friend Crystal as they leave the Magic Club, but her heterosexual credentials are insured by showing her fucking Jim on a pinball machine near the end of the film.

It is insidious that a woman's (Roberta) pursuit of a woman (Susan) leads to a "good man" (Des). We saw in *Girlfriends* how the love of a woman prepared a woman for a relationship with a man. The primacy of heterosexual relationships is not questioned or challenged.

BEACHES was directed in 1988 by Garry Marshall. Ten-year-old Hilary meets ten-year-old Cece under a Coney Island boardwalk. Hilary, enthralled, sits in on Cece's audition, where she gives a precocious rendition of "All of Me." At Hilary's hotel, the girls swear eternal friendship. Hilary returns to her upper-class home on the West Coast, and Cece to her lower-middle-class one in the Bronx.

Over the next several years, the girls keep in touch by writing. Hilary studies law at Stanford, while Cece pursues a career as a singer. We see a grown-up Cece singing to an almost empty jazz club. A figure the viewer realizes is Hil enters, and approaches Cece at the bar, saying: "I've waited so long for this moment" and Cece brusquely replies, "If this is what I think it is, you're not my type, OK kid? So scram." The "you're not my type" line is an excuse; Cece's rudeness makes it clear that it is what she perceives as a come-on from a woman that is so disturbing to her. Hil clears up the misunderstanding and tells Cece she's "escaped" from home.

Over the years, both women marry on opposite coasts and are under pressure to take on limited women's roles—either "career woman" or "mother-and-housewife"—that fit neither of them. Rather than discussing the destructiveness of these roles, they fight with each other. Eventually, both women's marriages fail. Hil and Cece temporarily move in together when Hil discloses her pregnancy. When Hil's daughter Victoria is about six years old, Hil dies of a degenerative heart condition. Cece takes Victoria to live with her, and sings the film's title song, "You Were My Hero," her tribute to Hil, with a rapt Victoria backstage. Victoria maintains Cece's connection with Hil beyond death.

IT IS A CLASSIC FEMALE BUDDY FILM DEVICE to separate the two main characters for either the duration of the film or for most of their adult lives (*Girlfriends*, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, and *Beaches*; also *Julia*, and *Rich and Famous*). Often, the very real threat of a lesbian involvement can only be diffused by placing entire continents between women who love each other.

A striking feature common to the three female buddy films

I've discussed, and also present in *Julia* and *Rich and Famous*, is the explicit lesbian putdown in *all* the films. The viewer is not to be left in any doubt about the non-sexual nature of the women's friendships. I want to discuss the film *Julia* in some detail here because it was widely hailed as a harbinger of the "new" female buddy film, and there has been much critical writing on it.

*Julia*, made in 1978 and starring Jane Fonda as Lillian Hellman and Vanessa Redgrave as Julia, is based on a story in Lillian Hellman's book of memoirs, *Pentimento*. She describes her lifelong friendship with Julia, who came from a very privileged background and became a socialist and a Resistance fighter during World War II, and who probably died at the hands of Nazis. The film *Julia* describes the friendship in lyrical, aesthetically-pleasing terms, showing the young Lillian and Julia waltzing together, and as adults, riding their bicycles through Oxford. On one of their hikes, Julia describes a man who is in love with her. Lillian, who has been gazing raptly at Julia, says "I love you, Julia," and puts her arms around her friend's neck. The two women sit, companionably entwined, in front of a campfire. Another scene shows them lolling in front of a fireplace, wearing lace nightgowns. The "obligatory anti-lesbian" scene is where a drunken male acquaintance

indelicate suggests that Hellman and Julia have been sexually involved. For this insult Jane Fonda delivers a knockout punch that expresses more anger than she showed at the Nazi threat.<sup>5</sup>

In *Julia* the lesbophobia is particularly irksome because Lillian Hellman, on whose memoir the film is based, makes it clear that there was an erotic component to her friendship with her friend Julia.<sup>6</sup> Pam Rosenthal discusses the lesbian putdown in *Julia*:

In male bonding films, men work out their ubiquitous (though unacknowledged) homoeroticism through mutual action and interaction. And the audience is, as it were, deputized—as honorary buddies we get to share in all of the jokes so long as nobody gives away the secret. In *Julia*, sublimation takes the form of contradicting, repressing, and negating the reality [my emphasis] we've all been spying on. The images of the sexy little girls and the sexless noble woman coexist as so many one-dimensional and contradictory images of women coexist, as a discipline to "stay in one's place" and as a potential source of blackmail if one doesn't. The (male) camera eye is in on the secret and participates in the disciplinary threat, whereas it was polite, circumspect, and comradely in a male bonding situation.<sup>7</sup>

The majority of female buddy films do not describe the reality of women's relationships with each other. The necessity to keep women inside the heterosexual fold precludes this. Men do not



have to be shown to be uncompromisingly heterosexual, as they are regarded as autonomous beings in a way that women are not. I suspect that time and again, women have to be shown "choosing" heterosexuality, because emotionally and sexually the appeal of heterosexuality is actually very limited.

It looks like we will not get complex, honest portrayals of women's friendships until filmmakers are willing to deal openly and guiltlessly with the issue of lesbianism. Many heterosexual women have yet to understand that the oppression of lesbians is a fundamental part of the oppression of *all* women. I am not saying here that all deep friendships between women must invariably lead to lesbian relationships. I am saying that I look forward to a time when the sexual components of our friendships are accepted and acknowledged, even if they are not acted upon. Even to leave it to the imagination of the viewer whether women friends are lovers, would be an improvement over the anti-lesbian statements made in the films discussed here. I would like to see more filmmakers and critics critique compulsory heterosexuality and question the assumption that it is a natural and/or a desirable development.

"We are not just good friends" is a slogan of the lesbian and gay liberation movement. It challenges the reader to look at *all* types of configurations of people, and not make assumptions based on heterosexist myths. We are so much more than "good friends" to one another. It's high time we saw it reflected in the movies.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. *Jump Cut* 20 (May 1979), p. 3.
2. Lucy Fischer. *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 238.
3. Bailin, p. 3.
4. Claudette Charbonneau and Lucy Winer, "Lesbians in 'Nice Films,'" in *Jump Cut* 24-25 (March 1981), p. 26.
5. Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 89.
6. *Pentimento*, p. 94-95.
7. *Jump Cut* 19 (December 1978), p. 3.

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### DESPERATELY SEEKING SUSAN

USA 1985. Directed by Susan Seidelman. Produced by Sarah Pillsbury and Midge Sanford. Starring Rosanna Arquette and Madonna.

### GIRLFRIENDS

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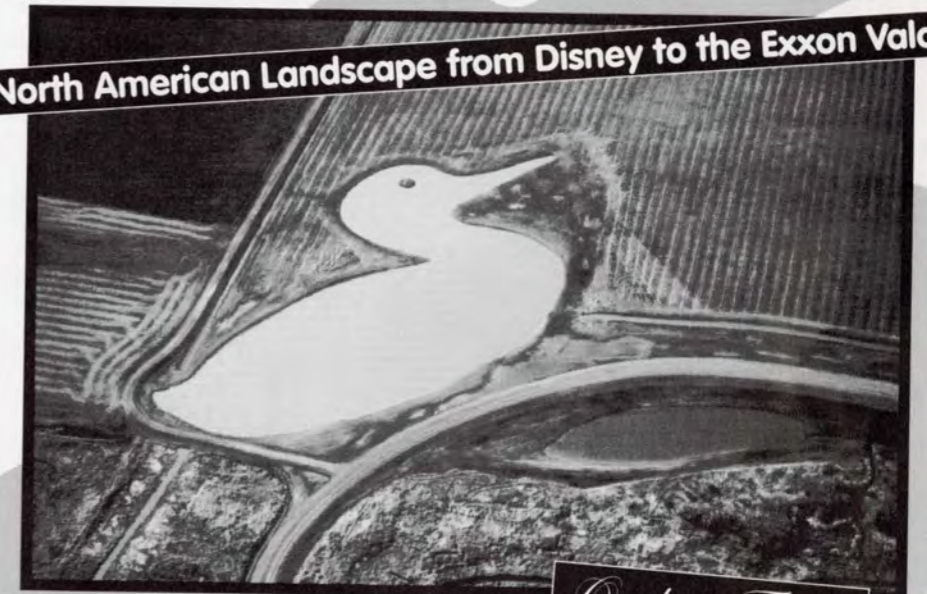
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by Alexander Wilson

Looking closely at postwar trends in zoo design, parks policy, gardening, education, tourism, resource extraction technologies, and science and nature programs on TV, Alexander Wilson traces the responses of Canadian, U.S. and aboriginal cultures to the land and its shifting meanings. He examines the environments we have built on this continent, as we continue to discover, exploit, protect, restore, and re-enchanted a natural world in convulsion.

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