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Making Sex Public:
Cinema and the Liberal Social Body
by

Damon Ross Young

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Film and Media Studies

and the Designated Emphasis

in

Critical Theory

in the Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Linda Williams, Chair

Professor D.A. Miller

Professor Wendy Brown

Professor Kaja Silverman

Fall 2013

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Abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Media Studies

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During and after the 1960s, representations of sex proliferated on French and American screens and became increasingly explicit. By bringing sexual images into the public sphere of representation, cinema, in a literal sense, made images of sex more public. Cinema also began to figure forms of sexuality which were no longer associated strictly with domesticity nor limited to heterosexual relations between loving couples. This transformation in the relation between sex and publicity, I argue, brought a new political focus to sexuality and both occasioned and evidenced a broad cultural conjoining of sexual and political imaginaries. *Making Sex Public* explores the deeper significance of this transformation in the ways French and US visual culture imagined and represented sex, in a historical span beginning with the Brigitte Bardot vehicle *Et Dieu créa... la femme* [*And God Created Woman*] (France, Roger Vadim, 1956) and ending with *Shortbus* (US, John Cameron Mitchell, 2006).

Through readings of a generically diverse range of films that brought the body and its pleasures into view in important new ways, I develop three main arguments about this chapter in the history of sexual representation in the West. First, I show how cinema produced images of a pleasure now understood as a quantifiable property of an individual subject. In films which celebrated sex as both a private property and a public good, representations of sexuality converged with liberal concepts of freedom, equality, and autonomy, fashioning a newly sexualized version of the liberal subject. Second, I show how a countervailing discourse brought sex and the body into view as a site of radical contradiction in the liberal premise of equality. Feminist artists and film-makers developed new figures of bodily difference that rendered the body a site of political critique and even political impasse. Meanwhile, new figures of queerness alternately integrated queerness into a liberal imaginary or invested it as what could not be so integrated. Throughout these readings, I show how a fundamental tension characterized the way sex came into public view, between sex as emancipatory vs. sex as unfreedom, sex as individual property vs. sex as scene of relationality, sex as public good vs. sex as antisocial, sex as equality vs. sex as instrumentalization. Spanning these oppositions I argue, finally, that the elaborate cinematic discourse on sexuality that plays such a prominent role in post-'60s French and US cinema renders sex a problem not of the *subject* but of the *social*. In some cases, this "on scene" cinema perversely fulfills Michel Foucault's call for an experience of "bodies and pleasures" that would be liberated from a discourse of desire. Ultimately, however, I suggest that the untethering of sex from desire leads not to liberation but to an ethos of transparency that renders even pleasure a site of neoliberal rationalization.

**Making Sex Public:
Cinema and the Liberal Social Body**

by Damon Ross Young

Table of Contents

| | | |
|---|---|-----|
| Introduction. | Cinema, Liberalism and the Publicity of Sex | 1 |
| <u>PART ONE: Autonomy and Relationality</u> | | |
| Preamble. | Sexual Solipsism | 15 |
| Chapter 1. | <i>Babarella's</i> Civilizing Pleasures | 18 |
| Chapter 2. | <i>Visage/Con</i> : Facing the Body in 1975, or Breillat's Vaginal Vision | 47 |
| <u>PART TWO: Exceptionally Queer</u> | | |
| Preamble. | The Antisocial vs. the Liberal Queer | 81 |
| Chapter 3. | <i>Word is Out</i> (1978) and the Queer Public Sphere | 86 |
| Chapter 4. | <i>Cruising</i> (1980) and the Fraternal Social Contract | 109 |
| Chapter 5. | Through the Window from <i>Psycho</i> (1960) to <i>Shortbus</i> (2006): Cinema and the Liberal Sexual Subject | 137 |
| Conclusion | | 163 |
| Works Cited | | 170 |

Acknowledgments

The process of writing a dissertation, as everyone who has written one (or witnessed such writing) can ruefully attest, is more arduous than it rightfully should be. It is not only that the project is larger than any the author has typically undertaken before and involves a more sustained intellectual labor; it is that that labor becomes invested with and complicated by a host of gratuitous anxieties so profound they come to feel existential: the desire to please the Other (parents, advisors, an imagined — and at this stage imaginary — readership; this one may actually be existential), anxieties about eventually finding a job, who we are in the world, why we are doing this, what the value of academic study is; these generic and widely shared anxieties are experienced as deeply personal and specific, sometimes paralyzing, humiliating, certainly humbling. It's amazing any relationship (whether intimate or professional) survives that process and all the weight it is made to bear. My partner Michael Forrey has spent far too many hours of his life listening to me talk about the contents of this dissertation and all the stuff surrounding it. If this was a birthing process, we shared the labor pains. I thank him first and foremost.

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Late in the game, my mother, Edna Ross, gave me a photo of Nelson Mandela with a quotation: "It always seems impossible until it is done." Mandela is right about this as about so many other things. And so is my mother, who always knows just what (and what not) to ask. In a casual conversation a week before I finished, my father, Laurie Young, told me the problem with my thesis is that I cannot account for the particular significance of film in general and these films specifically to our cultural understanding of sexuality. What's the empirical basis for my claims? He always goes right to the heart of the matter; this methodological problem remains unresolved in the manuscript. My brother Adam, who is not interested in such things, feigned interest by Skype from Australia, the latest in a series of acts of unconditional support that began the moment he realized I was gay in a homophobic world and transformed himself overnight into the world's most fearsome straight gay ally.

Though this is "just a dissertation," I dedicate it as such to my grandmothers Sabina Slater and Thelma Young, who both wanted to go to college, but who, being women, and (in Sabina's case) being Jewish in Poland in the 1930s, were unable to. They might have preferred me to be a different kind of doctor, but they also both understood the value of critical thinking, and taught me to value it too.

INTRODUCTION: cinema, liberalism, and the publicity of sex

[T]he erotic is film's very own theme, its essence. First, because [the erotic] is always a bodily experience, at least *in part*, and is therefore visible. Secondly, it is only in erotic relationships that we find an ultimate possibility of *mute understanding*.

—Béla Balázs, *Visible Man or the Culture of Film*

What is new here, and fairly daring, is that sex is the only focus of attention.

—François Truffaut on *Et Dieu...créa la femme*, *Bus Stop*, *Elena and her Men*, and *Baby Doll* (in 1956)

“Tell me what your desire is, and I’ll tell you what you are *as a subject*.”¹ Since the publication of Foucault’s groundbreaking *Histoire de la sexualité 1: la volonté de savoir* in 1976, scholars in the critical humanities have become accustomed to thinking of sexuality as an apparatus of subjectivity, which is to say: a *subjectivation* that is also a means of subjection, categorization, surveillance, and control.² It is no accident that Foucault pairs sexuality with knowledge in the title of the first volume of his study: sexuality emerges in that study as a system of “power-knowledge” that produces subjects through an “incitement to discourse.” “Since Christianity,” writes Foucault, “the Western world has never ceased saying: ‘To know who you are, know what your sexuality is’... In Christian societies, *Sex* has been the central object of examination, surveillance, avowal and transformation into discourse.”³ The Christian confessional tradition, which in Foucault’s account finds its culmination in the twentieth century science of psychoanalysis, is one which produced sexuality “not [as] the problem of a relationship to other people but the problem of the relationship of oneself to oneself,” and thus as a problem of “deciphering who one is.”⁴ But that “self”-knowledge is mobilized and constructed in relation to a network of disciplinary institutions; in the imperative command to “tell me what your desire is,” we can hear at once the voice of the priest, the psychoanalyst, and the policeman.

All of this (sometimes public) talk about sex produces it as a dimension of opaque, *private* subjectivity. From within a different critical rubric, sexuality appears, as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner remind us, as the “endlessly cited *elsewhere* of political public discourse” — an “elsewhere” whose proper place, in the liberal public sphere, is characteristically off scene, out of view.⁵ In the liberal tradition (and not only in that tradition), sexuality concerns what is “proper” to the subject, hence (like property itself) private, not public. This distinction directly bears on the question of the visible. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt writes that “[t]he distinction between the private and public realms... equals the distinction between *things that should be shown* and *things that should*

¹ Michel Foucault, “The Gay Science,” *Critical Inquiry* 37.3 (Spring 2011): 385-403, p. 390.

² Published in English as *History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, London: Allen Lane, 1979.

³ Foucault, “Power and Sex,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, p. 111, my italics.

⁴ Foucault, “Sexuality and Solitude,” in *Ethics*, p. 182; “Technologies of the Self,” in *Ethics*, p. 223.

⁵ Lauren Berlant & Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (Winter 1998): 547-566, p. 553.

be hidden." She adds the further observation that "from the beginning of history to our own time it has always been the *bodily part of human existence* that needed to be hidden in privacy."⁶

Foucault wrote the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* during a period in which the separation of the "bodily part of human existence" from the domain of "things open to sight" was undergoing a radical revision. The visual culture of the 1960s and '70s, in the US and in parts of Europe, was characterized by what Elena Gorfinkel describes as an "unabashed proliferation of screen eroticism" which brought new dimensions of the "bodily part of human existence" very much into public view. The reasons for this proliferation have been variously detailed in a number of historical studies: in the US, Gorfinkel names the erosion throughout the '60s of the Production Code (which was finally replaced by the ratings system in 1968), the Supreme Court decision in favor of the sexually explicit Swedish film *I Am Curious (Yellow)* in 1969 among a series of ongoing legislative battles over the definition of "obscenity," and a variety of cultural factors that led throughout the '60s to a "sexualization of the larger public culture" in the US, with a parallel series of developments in Western Europe.⁷

The rhetoric of sexual liberation and indeed "sexual revolution" that accompanied the cultural developments Gorfinkel describes was bound up in a conviction by "liberals" (in the colloquial sense) that sex is not something that should be hidden from view, sequestered in the domain of "things that should be hidden" as Arendt put it, but rather boldly displayed through the technologies, notably

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 72, my italics. Joan Landes also connects the definition of "public" to the visible when she defines it as "that which pertains to the people as a whole, the community, the common good, things *open to sight*, and those things that are accessible and shared by all." Landes, "Introduction," *Feminism: the Public and the Private*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 2, my italics.

⁷ Elena Gorfinkel, "Wet Dreams: Erotic Film Festivals of the Early 1970s and the Utopian Sexual Public Sphere," *Framework* 47, 2, Fall 2006, p. 61. In a section titled "Sexual Liberalism" of *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), John d'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman importantly situate this development of the '60s in the context of a longer twentieth century shift towards a greater publicity of sex. In the '60s "the slow movement, evident since World War I, toward the inclusion of the erotic in the public sphere, suddenly rushed ahead, as sex became a daily staple of American popular culture" (341). Factors they identify in the consolidation of what they call "sexual liberalism" include "the declining economic role of the modern family" (303), the growing availability of contraception, the rise of a mass culture dependent on the ever-increasing circulation of commodities and on advertising, and the increasing "autonomy and mobility of youth" through the consolidation of a consumer economy (277). John Levi Martin reminds us that the "sexual revolution" of the '60s followed an earlier "sexual revolution" in the 1920s (see "Structuring the Sexual Revolution," *Theory and Society*, 25:1 (Feb 1996): 105-151). On cinematic sex in the '60s, see also Linda Williams, *Screening Sex*; Eric Schaefer, "Gauging a Revolution: 16mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature," in Linda Williams, ed., *Porn Studies*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, 370-400; Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett, eds., *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*. On the "sexualization of the larger public culture" in this period see also Steven Seidman, *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980*. For a brief moment, it even seemed possible that Hollywood, inspired by the massive financial success of *Deep Throat* (1972), would begin to assimilate explicit sex; cf Jon Lewis *Hollywood vs. Hardcore*. Even a year before *Deep Throat* caused a sensation, the gay pornographic film *Boys in the Sand* (1971) was advertised in the *New York Times* and reviewed in *Variety*, signaling a short-lived legitimization even of hardcore pornography as a part of public culture.

cinema, that mediate contemporary forms of publicity.⁸ Linda Williams has referred to these developments as the coming “on/scene” of sex. Reminding us that the Latin meaning of obscene is literally “off-stage,” designating that which should be kept “out of public view” (OED), she uses the term “on/scene” to describe “the gesture by which a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and pleasures that have heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene.”⁹ In cinematic terms, this meant, in the ‘60s and ‘70s, a new documentary realism of sex: sex acts that during the reign of the Production Code could only be obliquely alluded to through codified ellipses could now be fleshed out in actual images: sex in cinema across genres moved, to put it in a linguistic register, from the realm of connotation to the realm of denotation.¹⁰

What are we to make of this proliferation of sexual images and narratives, this ushering “on scene” of dimensions of bodily experience that had previously been sequestered from direct public view? Certainly, one way of approaching the phenomenon would be in the terms of Foucault's argument; from this perspective, we would see the “unabashed proliferation of screen eroticism” as an intensification of the general “incitement to discourse” that produces sexuality as a site of subjective truth (and surveillance), now in an increasingly visual register. This coming on scene presumably leaves intact a “repressive hypothesis” that sees sexuality as a repressed “stubborn drive” in need of a liberation that the “proliferation of screen eroticism” ostensibly delivers. And certainly, the increasing sexual explicitness in cinema since the ‘60s is sometimes narrated in progressivist terms that might rouse our Foucaultian suspicions about the ruses of power that lurk behind (and function through) such claims of “liberation.” But in the readings that follow, I contest the argument that late liberal sexuality, as it adopts a posture of being “open to sight,” does so primarily in relation to a concept of repression. (One implication of my argument is that psychoanalysis may no longer be the paradigmatic “science of the subject,” as Foucault took it to be, for a culture in which sexuality does not belong to the category of things that “should be hidden.”¹¹) I am not arguing, of course, that repression has been overcome — to do so would be to subscribe to the very repressive hypothesis whose determining role in the production of contemporary discourses of sex I am contesting. Rather, the films I analyze suggest that the repressed subject, the confessional subject, the deep and discursive and psychoanalytic subject, is not what is at stake in the “unabashed proliferation of screen eroticism” that characterizes Western visual culture since the ‘60s. What cinema brings into view is

⁸ For a wide-ranging series of primary sources excerpting texts that contributed to the discourses I refer to, see Jeffrey Escoffier, ed. *Sexual Revolution*, New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003. For a cultural history, see David Allyn, *Make Love, not War: The Sexual Revolution: An Unfettered History*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 2000.

⁹ Linda Williams, “Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies On/Scene: An Introduction”, in *Porn Studies*, p. 3.

¹⁰ For a case study — that is more than just a case study — of cinematic mechanisms of sexual connotation, see D.A. Miller, “Anal Rope,” in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, New York: Routledge, 1991, 118-141. The figure of “the closet” references the specific situation of homosexuality within a homophobic culture. But similar mechanisms of connotation, allusion and elision can be said to characterize *all* sexual representation during the Production Code era—at least in American cinema.

¹¹ This does not mean that psychoanalysis is no longer useful to the project of *analyzing* this development. On the contrary, I believe the kind of post-psychoanalytic subject polemically fashioned in many of the films I discuss is a subject particularly well fitted to the ideologies of late liberal capitalism; psychoanalysis provides one of the only possible means of critique of this subject.

not sexuality as a domain of individuating truth or depth, nor as a modality of nosological categorization or a disciplining power-knowledge. Rather, sex comes on scene as a figure of what I call the *liberal social body*.

In the chapters that follow, I develop this hypothesis through readings of a range of French and American films that thematize, problematize and visualize sex and the body in radically contrasting ways. In each case, I show how sex emerges as a problematic not of the confessional subject but of the (liberal democratic) social. The “sexualization of the larger public culture” to which Gorfinkel refers was one that played out across all genres of cinema; my analysis thus traverses a range of cinematic genres and forms, including sexploitation (*Et Dieu créa... la femme*, 1956), popular science fiction (*Barbarella*, 1968), highbrow art cinema (*Une Vraie Jeune Fille*, 1976), activist documentary (*Réponse de Femmes*, 1975 and *Word is Out*, 1978), Hollywood genre film (*Cruising*, 1980) and “queer cinema” (*Shortbus*, 2006). From this list, which follows the chronological organization of the chapters, it will be clear that I move liberally (so to speak) between US and French cinematic contexts. In the period in question, those contexts would in fact be hard to extricate: *And God Created Woman*, a French film, had a lasting impact on US cinema; *Barbarella*, a French production with an American star (Jane Fonda), was released in French and English versions simultaneously; *Réponse de Femmes* was Agnès Varda’s response to her involvement in the American women’s liberation movement. The transformations in film language in this period (and especially in the cinematic treatment of sex) were forged precisely through a trans-Atlantic exchange, though there are also some important differences between the two contexts.¹²

liberty, equality, fraternity

But there is another connection between France and America that is important to my analysis. It is not only cinema that was invented in the US and in France (by Edison and the Lumière brothers respectively); those nations are also the self-proclaimed inventors of modern liberal democracy, sharing a revolutionary history that ushered in a new era of liberal governance. Their allegiance in this respect is monumentalized by the Statue of Liberty, a gift from France to the US in 1886, bearing a tablet on which is inscribed the date of the Declaration of Independence, 1776, which, like the French *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen* of 1789, asserts the principles of liberty and equality over which the modern state is to stand guard.

What I refer to throughout as “liberalism” references this common heritage and describes, in my usage, not any particular instantiation but rather the philosophical and political premises of a liberalism that, though it is a “porous doctrine subject to historical change and local variation,” nevertheless “takes its definitional shape from an ensemble of relatively abstract ontological and political claims,” which makes it possible to speak of liberalism “in a generic fashion, unnuanced by time or cultural inflection.”¹³ What I mean by liberalism here is broad enough to encompass the respectively different histories of American liberalism and what is more properly called French republicanism. (In France, the term *libéralisme* has an economic meaning better translated by “neoliberalism,” whereas the tradition inaugurated by the *Déclaration* is normally referred to as

¹² One such difference derives from the fact that the Production Code, which placed strict limitations on what could be “shown” in films produced in the US roughly between 1934-1960, had not formally operated in France, although since the US was such a crucial market, the Production Code could not help but exert a global influence.

¹³ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 141.

républicain.) Nevertheless, the common heritage is consequential; the Declarations are taken to symbolize no less than the performative “founding” of the political order of Western modernity, an order that rests on the principles expressed in the famous second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, which begins:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...¹⁴

Here Jefferson, adapting ideas from Hobbes and Locke, makes what historian Lynn Hunt takes to be the “giant step” of insisting on the “unalienable rights” of “all men” (*Inventing Human Rights*, 120). Hunt takes this and the French *Déclaration* to be watershed historical events because they occasioned the institution of new political regimes — a new form of government whose role was now understood to be protecting the natural, inalienable, and equal rights of citizens. They “helped effect a transfer of sovereignty, from George III... to a new republic in the American case, and from a monarchy claiming supreme authority to a nation and its representatives in the French one” (Hunt, 114). Thus, she concludes, “[i]n 1776 and 1789, declaring opened up whole new political vistas” (*ibid.*) — vistas whose horizons, for Hunt, remain our own, projecting a true, universal equality whose progressive realization, she argues, they set in motion.¹⁵

Hunt gives France and the US pride of place in her history of human rights, precisely because of these two declarations that she takes to be foundational of the modern political regime of liberal democracy, in which a representative government replaces a sovereign, securing the rights of citizens conceived of as formally equal, autonomous individuals.¹⁶ Government becomes illegitimate, as both declarations specify, when it fails to uphold those rights.¹⁷ The principles of negative liberty (i.e. liberty that does not encroach on anyone else’s rights, including and especially their right to

¹⁴ Reprinted in Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, p. 216 (‘Appendix’). Hunt does indeed take the Declaration of Independence to mark the first formal articulation in the political domain of the principle of human rights that she takes to be constitutive of modernity, and that is a central tenet of what I am calling “liberalism.” It is thus clear that I have a political, rather than economic, meaning in mind, though obviously the two are intricately connected.

¹⁵ I do not share Hunt’s progressivist faith in the power of these Declarations to produce an (eventual) universal freedom and equality. But the progressivist orientation is an important feature of accounts of liberalism like Hunt’s; it is also shared by Habermas and many Habermasians.

¹⁶ Interestingly, Hunt argues that the emergence of a political discourse of rights in the 18th century depends on a new notion of the *physical body as autonomous* that emerged through a range of new kinds of experiences, including changes in the way art was consumed, and culminating in a newly entrenched sense of “the separation and self-possession of individual bodies” (30). It is significant that Hunt emphasizes the *bodily* foundations of the concept of autonomy, since it is much more commonly assumed to be principle of will or rationality that transcends the body. That bodily autonomy comes into full focus in the films I discuss.

¹⁷ As the French *Déclaration* has it: “2. The purpose of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man... 6. The law is the expression of the general will [as opposed to the will of a sovereign]... All citizens being equal in its eyes are equally admissible to all public dignities, offices and employments... 16. Any society in which the guarantee of rights is not assured or the separation of powers not settled has no constitution” (reprinted in Hunt, 221-2).

property) and formal legal and political equality become enshrined in law as an implementation of the principles upheld in these two declarations. It is these principles, shared in the otherwise quite different French and American contexts, that I take to define the universalist orientation of the “liberalism” that constitutes, as Brown puts it (writing in 1995 in the US), “a contemporary cultural text we inhabit, a discourse whose terms are ‘ordinary’ to a very contemporary ‘us’” (*States*, 142).¹⁸

One legacy of the social movements of the ’50s through the ’70s was their radical expansion of the meaning of the term politics; they brought into view the fact that “the personal” (comprising lived experiences of racial, gendered and sexual identities) “is political.” “Politics” in Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics*, a work that helped launch feminism’s second wave, refers to “power-structured relationships” in general, as opposed to just “methods or tactics involved in managing a state or government.”¹⁹ I will keep both definitions of politics in play, but in the analyses that follow it will indeed often be politics in the more traditional sense of models of state formation and government that is in question. This is because I take it as axiomatic that the modes of political imagination and aspiration that inform both contemporary regimes of social normativity and political struggles against those regimes take their bearings—whether affirmatively or critically—from the philosophical and political premises of a liberalism that has in some sense “become one with modernity, rather than a position within it” (Brown, *States*, 138).²⁰ Although Foucault has taught us that power is diffuse and operates at the micro-level, the ways we imagine our conditions of social and political life do not for that reason escape being routed through fundamental assumptions about state form; in our liberal “modernity,” those assumptions constitute “a cartography of the ‘proper’ regulation of the relations among the state, the economy, and the population.”²¹

It is in the shared French-American context of a liberalism defined in these broad terms that cinema, as a technology of publicity, transforms the division between the “hidden from view” and the “open to sight.” In their contributions to that transformation, each of the films I examine takes up as a central problematic the relation of sex to the social. Each brings the sexualized body into view not, I have suggested, as a portal onto an individuating, subjective truth but rather in relation to a social sphere defined in liberal terms; sometimes as a problem, certainly, but not a *personal* one. In

¹⁸ This self-evident, contemporary liberalism, Brown writes, does not fully coincide with, but draws from, the various theoretical contributions of Locke, Tocqueville, Bentham, Constant, and Rawls. In a later text, Brown raises the question of whether or not this doctrine is in fact still so contemporary, or whether “neo-liberalism,” which begins to take root in the economic policies of the 1970s, constitutes an essential break with the principles that were formerly taken to found the modern liberal state. (Wendy Brown, “Neo-liberalism, or the end of liberal democracy,” in *Edgework*.) My analysis does not consider this later development; in attempting to understand how sexual representations and liberal discourses converge in the 1960s, it limits its analysis to liberalism in its pre-“neo-liberal,” or its “classical” form, though by the time we get to *Shortbus* (2006) and, as I shall argue, the eradication of the unconscious, perhaps we have reached a condition of full neoliberal rationalization of pleasure.

¹⁹ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000, p. 23.

²⁰ On the problematic conception of a “modernity” whose epicenter is Europe (and on the currently important role of arguments about sexual freedom to the rhetoric of this “modernity”), see Judith Butler, “Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time,” in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*, New York: Verso, 2009, 101-136.

²¹ Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2003, p. 4.

some cases, the body appears as the *carnal avatar* of the abstract liberal democratic subject (*Barbarella*, *Word is Out*, *Shortbus*); at others it is laid bare in a critical mode as a site of contradiction (between, say, the principle of universality and the fact of difference) within the premises of liberalism (*Réponse de Femmes*, *Une Vraie Jeune Fille*, *Cruising*). In all cases, what comes into view — whether affirmatively or critically — is a *liberal democratic body* that is at once an actual (physiological) body and a *social body*.

the democratic body

Writing from within a Habermasian framework, Seyla Benhabib has argued that “[q]uestions of justice [organized around modern notions of equality and consent] were from the beginning [of the modern political state] restricted to the ‘public sphere,’ whereas the private sphere was considered outside the realm of justice.”²² In the films I examine, that rule ceases to hold, not because the personal has been rendered political in some abstract sense, but because the political has been rendered concretely carnal. This in turn raises the question of whether carnality and what Benhabib calls justice are in fact compatible. The norms that have traditionally operated to keep the body out of view (defining it as private) are challenged and revised by cinema, but when sex and the body become public, in so doing do they also come under the sway of the principles that define the public as a realm of liberty and equality? Does the publicized body *absorb* the framework of liberty and equality and render it with a new carnal concreteness? Or does it *negate* that framework, demonstrating its incompatibility with more troubling forms of carnal contingency? (Does it function, then, as a materialist critique of the merely idealist nature of liberty and equality?)

The notion of an incompatibility between appetitive bodies and abstract notions of autonomy and equality belongs to a tradition of thinking about sex that I describe as both Kantian and Sadean. According to Kant’s views on sexuality (whose affinity with the discourse on sexuality developed within radical feminism I explore in chapter two), sexual appetite (*Geschlechts-Neigung*) is a “degradation of human nature” because it is an appetite that, uniquely among the appetites, takes other humans as its object, transforming them into things (mere means) instead of persons (ends in themselves).²³ The philosopher of the Enlightenment worries (in quite evocative terms) that “as soon as anyone becomes an object of another’s appetite, . . . that person is in fact a thing, whereby the other’s appetite is sated, and can be misused as such a thing by anybody” (LOE, 156). For this reason, sexual appetite is for Kant incommensurable with the criterion of universalizability and with the fundamental precept of enlightened political community, namely the imperative that enjoins us to “use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.”²⁴ Relations of instrumentalization (such as the one aimed at by

²² Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas,” in Joan Landes, ed., *Feminism: The Public and the Private*, 65-99 (p. 87).

²³ Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infeld (London: Methuen, 1979), pp. 163-4.

²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 80. In an interesting parallel, Marx describes what is wrong with the (also non-political) domain of civil society in strikingly similar terms: “Where the political state has attained to its full development, man leads . . . a double existence—celestial and terrestrial. He lives in the political community, where he regards himself as a communal being, and in civil society where he acts simply as a private individual, *treats other men as means*, degrades himself to the role of a *mere means*, and *becomes the plaything* of alien powers.” “On the Jewish Question,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, New York: Norton, 1978, p. 34, my italics.

Geschlechts-Neigung) cannot be universalized, and they are thus at odds with the requirements of practical reason, which must preserve a universal character, and of any enlightened form of social organization.²⁵

Sade's entire oeuvre can be considered an extended reflection on this Kantian principle: for Sade, as for Kant, sexuality *is* inequality, it inherently polarizes into two positions (in Sade these are the positions of *libertine* and *victim*; for Catharine MacKinnon, writing two centuries later, they are the positions of *man* and *woman*). *The 120 Days of Sodom* offers a vivid portrayal of what happens when the instrumentalizing appetite of *Geschlechts-Neigung* is transformed into a political principle. One imagines that, reading this work, Kant would find nothing to object to on philosophical grounds: it conforms to his own view of sexuality, and elaborately illustrates the reasons why, for Kant, sexual pleasures and desires are strictly incompatible with public life; why the appetitive body must be confined to the domain of things "hidden from sight," bracketed and relegated to what he elsewhere refers to as the "dustbin" of privacy.²⁶ While Kant differs from classical liberal thinkers in many respects,²⁷ his views accord with theirs in the distinction he draws between the natural domain of the body — inherently at odds with the principle of universalizability — and the public world which makes its way, through the progress of reason, towards an Enlightenment that must therefore necessarily keep the body hidden from view.

In several of the films we will consider, however, the body's claim on publicity (here understood as visibility, as coming "on scene") is made precisely *in the name of* those universal values that Kant takes to be irreconcilable with the body's appetites. In these cases, which bookend the project, comprising chapters one (on *Barbarella*, 1968) and five (on *Shortbus*, 2006), a troublingly appetitive and instrumentalizing *Geschlechts-Neigung* is replaced by pleasure which is not inherently relational, which is rather a property of the body itself, as a discrete and containable, autonomous entity. As John d'Emilio and Estelle Freedman have shown, the notion of pleasure as a property of the individual body (rather than sex as an appetite directed in an instrumentalizing way at the other) developed in the US throughout the twentieth century, as part of the rise of what they fittingly call "sexual liberalism." Changing cultural discourses on "pleasure" detached it from the socially mandated form of heterosexual marriage and gave it a life of its own, as an inherent property of the individual, and as an end in itself. In chapter one I discuss two French films — *Et Dieu créa la femme* and *Barbarella* — in which pleasure is detached not only from marriage but from the scene of heterosexual sex entirely. Isolated as an attribute of the autonomous individual, pleasure in these two films finds its figural form in the image of the woman's orgasm, now brought "on scene," I argue, as

²⁵ For Kant's articulation of the moral law in an explicitly political form, as an analysis of republicanism, see "Toward Perpetual Peace," in Gregor ed., *Practical Philosophy*, 311-352. The principle of universalizability is of course articulated in the form of the categorical imperative.

²⁶ In *Political Theory and Modernity* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), William Connolly reads Sade as offering a poignant critique of the idealization of "Nature" that takes place in the work of early liberal thinkers like Hobbes and republican thinkers like Rousseau. Connolly writes that Sade "uses the rhetoric of nature to extinguish the light Hobbes and Rousseau had seen reflected in it" (72). If those thinkers "can indulge the extravagant demand that nature glow with God's love or law for humanity, [Sade] will indulge the imperious wish that it authorize the link between pleasures of the self and cruelty to others" (78). Kant's view of nature probably corresponds more closely to Sade's than to Rousseau's.

²⁷ On Kant's relation to liberal political thought, see Katrin Flikschuh, *Kant and Modern Political Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

the hallmark of what I call a “liberal sexual subject,” one for whom pleasure is detached from relationality, and invested as the carnal faculty of the *public* values of liberty, equality, universality and autonomy. While in the earlier film, this “liberated” pleasure poses a threat to the established social order, by the time of *Barbarella*, it is imagined as the *sine qua non* of a perfected and universalized liberal democracy. At the same time that it liberates itself from relationality, pleasure also liberates itself from the unconscious; this figure of the liberal sexual subject, psychically transparent and embodying a universalized pleasure, will find its consummation in the later *Shortbus* (2006), discussed in the final chapter, suggesting its contemporary tenacity.

Yet even in *Barbarella*, the film which, I argue, brings the “liberal sexual subject” stridently into view, an air of tendentiousness hangs over the film’s insistence on pleasure’s detachability from the particular relational scenes that might occasion it. In chapter two I explore a series of feminist works for whom the image of female pleasure can *not* serve as an image of universality or autonomy. In the 1970s, a number of feminist artists and documentarians in France and the US explored the problematics of sexual difference — and the problems sexual difference poses to liberal principles — through mobilizing a figural tension between face and vagina. For these artists, the notion of a “liberal sexual subject” is a contradiction in terms. While some artists attempted to forge a specifically *female* autonomy through a reclaiming of vaginal and vulvic imagery, others (like Catherine Breillat, whose first film *Une Vraie Jeune Fille* is the focus of the chapter) explored the tension between face (embodied site of the abstract liberal subject) and vagina (emblem of the appetitive and material body) as an irresolvable aporia. The dialectics — or just unresolved tension — between autonomy and relationality, instrumentalizing appetite and autonomous pleasure, hierarchy and equality found intensified expression in the ‘60s and ‘70s through newly “on scene” images of women’s bodies and women’s pleasure, and it is these tensions that form the subject of Part One: “Autonomy and Relationality.”

the queer exception

“A democratic morality,” wrote Gayle Rubin in 1984, “should judge sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide.”²⁸ In this prescriptive statement (framed as a “should”), sex as an instrumentalizing appetite that transforms the other into a “thing for sexual use” has been replaced by a utilitarian calculus of *inherently benign* pleasures in which each agent is an “end in themselves.” Rubin’s essay formulates in a theoretical register the convergence of liberal discourses with sexual representations that I map, in part one, in the domain of visual culture. But in offering a theoretical framework for what I have been calling a “liberal sexual subject,” Rubin’s essay also raises the question of the specific relation of queerness to the elaboration of this subject. I take up this question in Part Two, “Exceptionally Queer.”

Rubin’s argument is presented as a challenge to what she calls “sex hierarchy”: not the hierarchical aim that for Kant is innate to sexual appetite, but rather the socially normative hierarchy that distinguishes what Rubin calls “the charmed circle” of “good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality” from “the outer limits: bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality” (166). Rubin, in other words, challenges the way normative discourses of sex function to produce a zone of *exception*. She questions the exceptional status — *outside* the “circle” — of specifically queer practices (enumerated as

²⁸ Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, p. 168.

“homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects, sadomasochistic”). Instead of this hierarchical, exceptional model, Rubin proposes a “democratic morality” that would *not* relegate certain practices to the “outer limits,” but would (mirroring the universality proclaimed in declarations of rights) judge all pleasures to be equal, would be universally inclusive. Rubin aims to abolish the category of what I thematize as the “queer exception.”

There is a problem, however, with Rubin’s proposition of a “democratic morality” in the aim of abolishing the category of the exception. The functioning of any democracy, as the work of Carl Schmitt famously demonstrates, *requires* such a zone of exception. The designation of an empirical *demos* rests on a criterion of “homogeneity,” however it is defined, as what grounds a substantive equality within the *polis*, and thus entails, in Chantal Mouffe’s words, “the moment of discrimination between ‘us’ and ‘them’,” which, for Schmitt, is inherent to “the political.”²⁹ It is for this reason that Schmitt takes “liberal democracy” to be an oxymoron; liberalism, as he sees it, posits an abstract equality whose universalism refuses the notion of anything outside it: like Kant’s moral law, it “postulates that every person is, as a person, automatically equal to every other person. The democratic conception, however, requires the possibility of distinguishing who belongs to the *demos* and who is exterior to it” (Mouffe, 39).

As Rubin saw clearly, that outside has often been characterized, implicitly or explicitly, as queer.³⁰ In *Barbarella*, discussed in chapter one, the queer outside is explicitly narrativized in the form of the rogue state Tau Ceti, outside the democratic federation of the Sun System, a land of sadomasochistic, Kantian “appetites,” reflected in the dictatorial regime that corresponds to the queer and polymorphous perversity of the population. *Barbarella*’s liberal pleasures, while detached from hetero-relationality, are also counterposed to sadomasochistic, non-liberal queerness. In the films I discuss in Part Two, queerness is brought into a new relation both with the category of the exception and with the paradigm of liberalism. In *Word is Out*, discussed in chapter three, the notion of a queer exception is refused, and the minoritarian queer subject is inserted — via the documentary portrait — into a general public sphere, making a claim on “the normal.” Greg Youmans has analyzed this film as an Ur-text of what he calls “gay liberalism,” a formulation whose contradictions I unpack. In *Shortbus*, discussed in chapter five, queerness — now in a much more explicitly carnal form — is again brought “on scene” in the name of the universal, and under the sign of liberal democracy. Unlike in *Barbarella*, the kinds of queer practices Rubin invokes (“homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects, sadomasochistic”) have been fully folded into the social body of the liberal democratic state. But here, the realm of the exception again haunts the scene as precisely what remains “off scene,” the terrorist threat to the Land of Liberty embodied by the void in the place of the former World Trade Center, and defined in sexual-corporeal terms as

²⁹ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, New York: Verso, 2000, p. 44; Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996 (in German, *Der Begriff des Politischen*, 1927).

³⁰ For a contemporary reading that makes a related point, see Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,” *Social Text* 72, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Fall 2002): 117-148. Puar and Rai argue that the figure of the “modern terrorist,” outside the state, is tied “to a much older figure, the racial and sexual monsters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (p. 117).

“impermeability.” Queerness has come into a new and strong alliance with liberalism, but the category of the exception has been relocated rather than eliminated.

Chapter four, on *Cruising* (1980), a film in which Al Pacino goes undercover in the New York gay leather scene just before the advent of AIDS, may appear anomalous in relation to *Word is Out* and *Shortbus*, films which both act to make queerness more public, to infuse representations of queerness with liberal values, to bring queer identities (*Word is Out*) and sexual acts (*Shortbus*) to the public sphere of representation, and to extend to them a liberal universality. But the singularity of *Cruising* is precisely that it is a film without precursors that leaves no inheritance. It is not coincidental that *Cruising* was both loathed by straight critics and picketed by gay and lesbian groups; no-one wanted to claim or recognize its violent vision of the liberal social body. In my view, it is *Cruising* that offers the most interesting take on the queer exception. In chapter four, I read that exception through Freud’s myth of the primal father as reinterpreted by political theorist Carole Pateman. The field of fraternal equality, Freud and Pateman tell us, is produced through the murder of the sovereign; that sovereign figure is himself the exception to the regime that is installed on the condition that both his existence and his murder be erased from the scene. Yet his sovereign right persists in and as the very force of law. *Cruising* in my reading is not a film that puts gay bodies on view; what it exposes is rather the obscene force of law — the omnipresent but unavowable exception on whose invisible operation the liberal social field is premised. *Cruising* exposes the “liberal social body” and its domain of formal equality as upheld only through the operation of an obscene and sovereign violence; it demonstrates in an explicit and troubling way that the liberal social body is itself a domain of queer exception.

the cinematic body

Each of the films I examine in *Making Sex Public* takes as a problematic the relation of sex to the social; each produces a vision of a “liberal social body”; each makes sex public in a new way; each thematizes the public itself as a sexualized site. Sexuality in these films emerges less as a problematic of subjectification, historically formed “at the juncture between Christian confession and medicine” (Foucault, “Gay Science,” 391) than as a carnality within a social field.

In its focus on corporeality, this project is both indebted to and departs from a body of work that effected what we can think of as an “embodied” turn within film studies in recent years. Christian Metz once famously wrote that the cinema addresses “a transcendental... subject,” one who is produced, God-like, at the “vanishing point” of the perspectival image.³¹ The turn to the body in film studies was often framed as a response to the “idealism” inherent to this formulation.³² Following a momentum that started with Jonathan Crary’s rejection of apparatus theory as based on an idealist misconception, film scholars of all stripes have attempted to flesh out (so to speak) the carnal dimensions of vision, emphasizing the proprioceptive, perceptual, and “haptic” dimensions of spectatorship, often through recourse to phenomenology or affect theory, and almost always accompanied by a dismissal of psychoanalytic film theory.

³¹ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 50; p. 49.

³² The case is made in a particularly polemical way by Steven Shaviro in *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), a book in which the terms “psychoanalysis” and “idealism” are used interchangeably.

My project, in spite of its corporeal emphasis, resists this tide. The emphasis on the proprioceptive and perceptual body that emerges in response to an “idealist,” psychoanalytic model of spectatorship remains mired within the framework of subjective experience; by replacing the psychic with the physiological, it reflects a *Zeitgeist*-like turn away from the psyche whose cultural elaboration I pursue throughout this study. But cinema approached from this angle remains a technology for organizing and modulating private experience. In my view, by contrast, the “cinematic body” is one that confronts us with the depth and complexity of the social.

For this reason, I treat cinema not as technology for organizing perceptual experience but as a technology for making-public, which is to say as a social technology. Cinema is a technology of publicity; it projects its images not only onto a screen but into a public sphere (one it also constructs or imagines). It brings the body into view as a *social body* not only in an allegorical sense (“figuring” or “representing” the social) but by *making* it public, acting in the social domain of visual culture. Cinema *is* a public medium; it publicizes; it circulates. In putting the private on view, cinema transforms the meaning and parameters of the public sphere. In these films in which (to cite Truffaut) “sex is the only focus of attention,” what comes into view is not what Bataille once called the erotic, defined as “the problematic part of ourselves,” but rather the body as a site of intensification of the problem of being-in-common.³³ De-individuated and de-specified, the pleasures on view here sometimes integrate the subject into a social field she seems to seamlessly inhabit. But what also comes into view is the social body as a site of contradiction.

A final word about method. The films I analyze in this study do not constitute a coherent movement or genre. They span two nations and five decades; some are documentaries; others are obscure works of experimental cinema; still others are popular fiction films. Nor are they all sexually explicit in the same way or to the same degree (the question of what they make public and what they leave private is in each case, of course, at the center of my analysis). Moreover, while some of the films tell stories in public about a sexuality that is still imagined as belonging to a domain of privacy (*Word is Out*, *Réponse de Femmes*, *Une Vraie Jeune Fille*), others imagine a sexuality whose very modes of pleasure-making have become saturated with publicness (*Barbarella*, *Cruising*, *Shortbus*).

What connects these generically disparate films, however, is that they all seek to figure pleasure and the body in new ways, and in so doing produce and express new modes of *cultural imagination* — *conscious and unconscious* — *about sexuality and sociality*, in, I argue, a specifically (though broadly defined) liberal context. Sometimes I read “with” the texts, drawing out the logic that informs the ways they explicitly imagine and figure the sexual body. At other times, I read “against” them, asking what we can learn from what they keep obscured from view, from what they are unable to think. Liberalism is a context but not an object of this study; while the analysis of liberalism is a project for political theory, what my readings show is rather how the cinematic “image-repertoire” of sex, to borrow a phrase from Barthes, becomes bound up in liberal concepts and categories for which it devises a new range of specifically *bodily* figures. The distinctively “liberal” cultural imaginaries that emerge around sexuality in this period connect the body and its pleasures to ideas of freedom, equality, autonomy, social harmony, but also fraternity, the social contract, and the public sphere in overlapping ways; for this reason, my use of these terms is often impressionistic, evoking messy and imprecise modes of cultural fantasy. Finally, as Gorfinkel reminds us, from the 1950s onwards, the becoming-public of sexuality in the West took place through a range of cultural forms, including (in no particular order) sex shops, cable television, novels, paintings, and magazine

³³ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, San Francisco: City Lights, 1986, p. 273.

culture. In this study, I approach film texts as rich cultural repositories of intersecting and contradictory meanings around the body, sexuality, and the social. I focus on moving image media because of their primary importance to what I am calling Western “cultural imaginaries” in the century of cinema, but also because a close reading of cinema texts in their visual and narrative richness offers analytic purchase on the nuanced, contradictory and complex functions of sexuality in a Western public culture whose borders are in the process of being redefined in the period in question. The cultural imaginaries I pursue through close analysis of key sites of their visual and narrative elaboration are not exhaustive or exclusive, but I hope the reader will recognize the ways they resonate across other forms of media and publicity and define, however loosely, the contours of our contemporary moment.

Part One:

Autonomy and Relationality

Preamble: sexual solipsism

Is sex solipsistic or relational? Leo Bersani opens a 1987 essay on the topic by proclaiming: “There is a big secret about sex: most people don’t like it.”¹ The reason for this secret aversion, he goes on to argue, is that sex, whether we like it or not, is bound up with power; there is an “indissociable” bond between “sexual pleasure and the exercise or loss of power.” It is by virtue of their very phenomenology that sexual acts tend to polarize “into relations of mastery and subordination,” a polarization that “may be grounded in the shifting experience that every human being has of his or her body’s capacity, or failure, to control and manipulate the world beyond the self” (23). No wonder the ego (that agency that lets its opinions be felt) does not “like” sex: the self-aggrandizement that seems indissociable from sexual experience is matched by the equally imminent possibility of “self-debasement” (27). In Bersani’s account, sex is (inevitably) an egoistic activity but it also a problem for the ego.

The work of Catharine MacKinnon, whose ideas Bersani scandalously draws from, suggests that the two poles — self-hyperbole and debasement — map onto, and are produced by, the social system of gender, which arrays the two sexes it constructs in a strictly hierarchical relation. For Bersani, the tension between hyperbole and shattering is also internal to the subject; “neither sex has exclusive rights to the practice of sex as self-hyperbole” (25). Nevertheless, the *structure* of inequality is somehow inevitable to sex, since the hyperbolizing of the self that corresponds to “the idea of being on top” is produced only through the subordination of another; what, after all, is a top without a bottom? So sex could not be a meeting or communion in equality of two or more self-hyperbolizing (or mutually recognizing) egos. As in Hegel’s account of lordship and bondage, the aggrandizing of one ego is produced at the cost of the subjection or debasement of the other. Sex thus emerges in Bersani’s account as a “war” (*ibid.*) (It is perhaps for this reason that in his later work, Bersani turns away from sexuality altogether in his attempts to adumbrate an ethics of non-violence.) The problem in sex seems to be the problem of “relationship”; it is “*the degeneration of the sexual into a relationship*,” he writes, “*that condemns sexuality to becoming a struggle for power*” (25, Bersani’s emphasis).

It seems, then, that there are no “liberal” relationships in this account, no relations of equality, since relationship and the struggle for dominance are synonymous. Yet if sex “degenerates” into a relationship, this means it must first be something else, and indeed if we continue to read Bersani, we find that at its origins, sexuality involves a *turning away* from relations. (In this fact inheres both its ethical potential and its risk.²) In *The Culture of Redemption*, Bersani argues that the ego is formed through and as the *reflexive* experience of sexual excitement and shattering, abstracted

¹ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum A Grave?,” in *Is the Rectum A Grave? And Other Essays*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 3-30.

² Bersani writes: “If sexuality is socially dysfunctional in that it brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart, it could also be thought of as our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence” (“Rectum,” 30).

from the object that occasioned it.³ This is his reading of what Freud called sublimation, the “deflection of the sexual instinct from an object-fixated activity to another, ‘higher’ aim,” where the “higher” aim in question is the “move from fragmented objects to totalities,” i.e. the production of a self-reflexive ego. Sublimation is this reflexive detachment from the object, the “burning away of the occasion [of excitement], or... the *dream of purely burning*” (“Erotic Assumption,” 37). Strikingly then, Bersani’s account of the sexual origins of the ego posits sexuality as inherently or originally “solipsistic.” The “originary sublimation” by virtue of which the ego is produced and that serves as the “initiating model of all sexual desire” is the burning away of the occasion, the “project of distilling” — or in other words, abstracting — “sexual excitement from all its contingent occasions.” Infantile sexuality in Bersani’s reading of Freud has no object; or rather, its object is the empty place of transcendence itself, “that which is objectless in the *jouissance* of any object relation” (37). In its essence, then, sexuality is not an object relation but the solipsistic production of a subject position through the distillation of shattering *jouissance* from the circumstances that occasion it.⁴

How do we reconcile these two accounts? It seems as if sexuality is at once inherently relational — in a fundamentally non-egalitarian sense — and also originally *non*-relational, at first an autoerotic and then a reflexive turning away from the occasion of sexual excitement, an originary indifference to the object. Bersani describes sexuality as solipsistic, narcissistic, and masochistic, all three terms dissociating it fundamentally from an object relation.⁵ At the same time, insofar as it is bound up with the “experience that every human being has of his or her body’s capacity, or failure, to control and manipulate the world beyond the self,” it cannot escape —indeed, it is the subjective experience of—a troubled and power-laden relation to that world, a dialectic of self-hyperbole at the cost of the other’s subjection and self-shattering. If this is a contradiction, I propose that it is one that is constitutive of the problem sexuality poses in modern culture. Which is to say, a certain dialectic — or perhaps simply an unresolved tension — between (sadistic or inegalitarian) relationality and (narcissistic or self-empowering) solipsism underwrites many contemporary discourses on and images of sexuality. The latter category also includes the idea, of particular interest in this context, of sexuality as a personal property, and an (illusory) experience of the autonomous self. Of course, “autonomy” is not a word Bersani uses to describe sexual solipsism. But because this term connects the idea of sexuality as something independent of relations — an auto-reflexivity — to a liberal discourse on sex (which is clearly not Bersani’s), and to the specifically liberal framework in which sex, in my account, comes into view or “on scene,” in the two chapters that comprise this section, I will explore its deeper resonances. It will be useful to hold Bersani’s account in mind as we consider how the idea of sexual pleasure as independent of the objects and situations that occasion it takes on

³ Leo Bersani, “Erotic Assumptions: Narcissism and Sublimation in Freud,” in *The Culture of Redemption*, Harvard University Press, 1990, 29-46.

⁴ In Bersani’s account, this is true both of reflexive/egoic sexuality (which he associates with “primary narcissism”) and of an earlier, pre-egoic and polymorphous infantile sexuality. About the latter (which is obviously chronologically prior), Bersani writes: “In the origins of sexuality, the breast is irrelevant to the pleasure caused by the sensation of warm milk flowing through the lips and into the digestive tract” (“Erotic Assumptions,” 36). The reflexive moment of primary narcissism, then, seems simply to provide a psychic structure — the ego — to a solipsism that was already inherent to sexual experience.

⁵ The third term, masochism, may seem to imply an object relation, but in Bersani’s account in *The Freudian Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) masochism is a reflexive shattering that pays no heed to its object.

a particularly liberal inflection in the 1960s, and becomes associated, for reasons I will explore, with the figure of the female orgasm.⁶ In chapter two, we will see how the problem of “relationship” returns to answer the affirmation of “autonomy,” and how that very tension is itself mapped onto the body as what Alice — the protagonist of Catherine Breillat’s 1976 film *Une Vraie Jeune Fille* — describes as the intolerability of having both a face and a vagina.

⁶ It may seem strange to say that “autonomy” could at once be “shattered”; here autonomy does not mean sovereignty, but rather discreteness and individuation, an independence from any contingent object that does not eliminate object relations but abstracts from them. This is not to say that it is ever free of relations, which means that autonomy does not negate relationality: the terms are not arrayed as mutually exclusive opposites. Consider, as an example of this kind of “autonomy,” a Habermasian model of communicative rationality which posits a public sphere (of communication — i.e. relationality) inhabited by subjects whose reason is precisely a faculty of subjective autonomy. Autonomy implies relationality, since, as philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy puts it, “the negation of a relation is still a relation.” But there is a fundamental tension between, on the one hand, an autonomy produced as what exceeds and transcends any contingent relation, and on the other, sex as itself an inherently polarized structure of relation. The second view of sex is Sadean; the first — though the claim will require some explaining — liberal. Both views find a newly intensified form of expression in the “on scene” period through the figure of the female orgasm.

Barbarella's Civilizing Pleasures

Pleasure is, so to speak, nature's vengeance. In pleasure men disavow
thought and escape civilization.

— Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

What do women want? If Freud did not know, the 28 year-old Roger Vadim thought, in 1956, that he might. That year, the young director managed to cobble together funding for his first feature film, *Et Dieu... créa la femme* (...And God Created Woman), a film that would catapult his then-wife Brigitte Bardot to international stardom as an icon of female “sexual autonomy,” in Simone de Beauvoir’s words — a formulation whose significance extends beyond the context in which Beauvoir intended it. Vadim’s first film, produced in France, also found commercial success in the USA, and was proclaimed to be a “first” in a number of senses by commentators on both sides of the Atlantic. François Truffaut appreciatively noted that *Et Dieu* was “the first French film by a young film-maker to win international acclaim,” thus opening doors that the soon-to-be New Wave directors (including Truffaut himself) would blaze through.¹ In a different register, Kenneth Turan and Stephen Zito, in *Sinema*, their 1973 study of adult film, describe *Et Dieu* as “perhaps [the] most significant,” as well as the earliest, of a number of European “art” films (an appellation specific to the American context) that demonstrated the revenue-generating potential of sexy films, and thus helped usher in a new and more permissive era of sexual representation, as well as teaching the emergent sexploitation producers in the US new ways to incorporate sexual content within a dramatic framework with “artistic” pretensions.² Chuck Stephens puts it even more emphatically, writing that *And God Created Woman* “smashed forever the prudish hulls of sexually prohibitive cinema.”³

Yet the viewer with salacious expectations will be disappointed to discover that Vadim’s film contains no explicit sex scenes. At its most explicit, it cuts from a passionate kiss between Bardot’s character, Juliette, and her husband Michel (Jean-Louis Trintignant) to their post-coital lounging in bed — an elision typical of Code-era treatments of sexuality (though this kiss is more passionate than the Production Code would allow). Moreover, while Bardot’s body is very much on display in the film, the film preserves existing conventions in avoiding all frontal nudity. No more of the body is on display than in earlier films. But the body seems to be on display in a different way, and it is this that impressed upon the film’s contemporary critics the sense that through its advent, some radically new horizon had opened for the cinema. The film — or Bardot’s performance within it — seems to produce a *sense* of sexual explicitness, without being actually explicit. And while Bardot is

¹ François Truffaut, *The Films in my Life*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978, p. 19. Vadim, on the other hand, is not normally listed among the New Wave directors, perhaps because his films are more about sex than about cinema.

² Kenneth Turan and Stephen F. Zito, *Sinema: American Pornographic Films and the People Who Make Them*, New York: Praeger, 1974, p. 48.

³ Criterion Collection DVD insert, also published at <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/80-and-god-created-woman>. Last accessed August 8, 2013.

obviously not the first actress in the history of cinema to whom an overt sexual charge accrues, what she brings to the screen just as obviously struck viewers as embodying some new principle or possibility. What was this possibility?

For Truffaut, the distinguishing quality of *Et Dieu*, and what makes it truly original, is the path-breaking “frankness” of its treatment of sex, the way it dispenses with the sentimental trappings and disingenuous conceits of earlier films:

All one [traditionally] has to do to save appearances and throw the idiotic censors off the track is to show someone in a white tunic in front of a hospital [thus providing a narrative pretext for showing nudity]. Vadim didn't want to hide behind such hypocritical procedures; he bet on realism and life, with no cynicism or provocation, and he won out with inventiveness and ideas. (312)

Truffaut groups *Et Dieu* with three other French and American films also from 1956: Elia Kazan's *Baby Doll* (with Carroll Baker), Joshua Logan's *Bus Stop* (with Marilyn Monroe), and Jean Renoir's *Elena and her Men* (with Ingrid Bergman). Arguing that these four films achieve something unprecedented in the history of cinema, he writes: “What is new here, and fairly daring, is that *sex is the only focus of attention*” (110, my italics). Plot and character development, argues Truffaut, are subordinated to the films' primary interest in presenting the portrait of a woman, and through that, of an actress. Truffaut emphasizes the lack of artifice, the “honesty” of that portrayal; in a later piece on Louis Malle's *Les Amants* (1958), another film which puts female orgasm prominently on display, he refers back to *Et Dieu* as “the first real effort to present love truthfully in a film.”⁴ Bardot is “for the first time... completely herself” (312). So it seems Truffaut sees *Et Dieu* as dispensing with artifice and offering a “truthful,” unmediated, “intimate,” and “completely honest” view of sex, here incarnated in the body of Brigitte Bardot, and only minimally refracted through the overlay of a character, Juliette. This carnality which Vadim's camera captures so frankly is “honest” but not, however, of the order of the human: Bardot “is directed affectionately, like a pet animal” (312), a theriomorphism whose significance we need to consider.

Truffaut saw in *Et Dieu créa... la femme* a new frankness, an unmediated and truthful view of sex as incarnated in the (“animal”) figure of Brigitte Bardot. Given the terms of this description, it may surprise us to learn that Bardot's portrayal was also hailed by feminist critics as a landmark achievement for women. Here, finally, was a female lead who claimed the sexual independence previously reserved for men and thereby refused to be a mere passive object for them — as Simone de Beauvoir herself put it in an essay on Bardot.⁵ Where Truffaut described Bardot as a “pet animal,” Beauvoir describes her rather as a “child-woman” who, lacking the attributes that signify adulthood, thus avoids the erotic liability of being the bearer of the rights and privileges that have made women too much like men to be desirable. “The [sense of an] age difference,” writes Beauvoir, “re-establishes between [women and men] the distance that seems necessary to desire” (8). For Beauvoir, equality erases a difference that is (at least for French men, she suggests) a necessary condition of eroticism. Yet while Bardot is child-like, she hardly embodies the innocence of children; Beauvoir describes her “lascivious” walk and her dancing prowess, adding that “a saint would sell his soul to the devil merely

⁴ Truffaut, “Louis Malle: *Les Amants*,” in *The Films in My Life*, p. 315.

⁵ The essay, translated from French (by an uncredited translator), was only ever published in English. It is reprinted as Simone de Beauvoir, *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome*, London: New English Library Ltd, 1962 (page numbers refer to this edition).

to watch her dance” (14). So she is like a child in that she lacks adult qualities, like a woman in that she represents sex.

Paradoxically, the fact that Bardot is perceived as a child-woman does not undermine her autonomy but rather *produces* it. Beauvoir writes that Bardot-as-Juliette “is no more conscious of her rights than she is of her duties. She follows her inclinations... She does as she pleases, and that is what is disturbing” (24). She becomes the very figure — new in the French context, argues Beauvoir — of an independent woman, of sexual equality, indeed of “emancipation” (58). So while Bardot is denied (or deliberately renounces) the status of an adult, of the subject of rights whose equality, according to Bardot, is an obstacle to eroticism, the result is not that she is reduced to mere objecthood, to being *en soi*, a mere thing in-itself. While she declines to take up the position of subject of rights (or remains blissfully indifferent to the claim she might make on that position), she establishes her equality in a different register, which is to say at the level of “desire and pleasure”:

To spurn jewels and cosmetics and high heels and girdles is to refuse to transform oneself into a remote idol. It is to assert that one is man’s fellow and equal, to recognize that between the woman and him there is mutual desire and pleasure. (30)

Presumably Bardot is not the first actress in the cinema to assert the “sexual autonomy” for which Beauvoir takes her to be a new kind of figure (58). But what distinguishes the star from earlier examples that might come to mind — say Garbo or Dietrich — is precisely the refusal of the artifice (“jewels and cosmetics and high heels”) that transforms women into “remote idol[s].” Like Truffaut, Beauvoir emphasizes Bardot’s naturalness and lack of artifice, her transparency or her spurning of the operations of fetishistic displacement. The result of this naturalness is that “the male is an object to her, just as she is to him” (28). This is what Beauvoir means by “sexual equality” (32); Bardot does not apologize for occupying the position of desiring subject, which she always remains. Beauvoir adds that this is precisely why French men disdain her, though the philosopher quips that American men are no doubt better equipped to deal with the kind of women’s “sexual autonomy” she takes Bardot to represent, and thus are less threatened by Bardot.

Beauvoir’s argument is a curious one. According to the philosophical mother of second-wave feminism, Bardot embodies “autonomy” and “equality” but precisely *not* in the way we might have expected, through becoming a political subject or a legal subject of equal rights. Bardot remains a “child-woman,” and thus abjures the autonomy that constitutes both the legal and the political subject within a liberal framework (which here includes French republicanism). Bardot’s autonomy is not expressed politically but rather *sexually* — this is an emancipation, an equality, and an autonomy whose figure *and* content are sexual. (We are thus reminded of Truffaut’s remark that “[w]hat is new here, and fairly daring, is that sex is the only focus of attention.”) It is precisely in that she refuses to let sex get away — to let it be discounted, disqualified or bracketed — that her autonomy inheres. Again comparing Bardot to Garbo, Beauvoir writes:

Garbo was called ‘The Divine’; Bardot, on the other hand, is of the earth earthy. Garbo’s visage had a kind of emptiness into which anything could be projected — nothing can be read into Bardot’s face. It is what it is... She corners [Frenchmen] and forces them to be honest with themselves. They are obliged to recognize the crudity of their desire, the object of which is very precise — that body, those thighs, that bottom, those breasts. (34)

Subverting “idealistic sublimation,” Bardot’s body confronts its beholder with its concrete materiality, and the “crude,” embodied desire it materially provokes. Her face has the “forthright presence of

reality” (34). This is precisely how it undoes those men who hope to invest it with some projected fantasy, to idealize it, “read” something in it, or apprehend it within the terms of a socio-symbolic system to which it remains entirely indifferent; it simply *insists*, produces a senseless but sensual response, the very incarnation of a sexuality that has no *sense*, that is non-conceptual and that resists sublimation, that belies the disingenuousness of reason and social custom alike.

Bardot’s body and the fall of the Republic

“That girl was made to ruin men [*Cette fille est faite pour perdre les hommes.*]” So says Carradine, the *patron* and possessor of every signifier of masculinity in the world of this French bourgeois town, to Antoine, his employee and the de facto patriarch of the family Juliette has married into. These two men together represent traditional, French masculinity — brusque and dominating, tall and broad, decisive and unapologetic — not to mention (and we shall see the significance of this last attribute) white. Towards the end of the film, Antoine asks Carradine, who has just nobly taken a bullet intended for Juliette, “Are you scared?” “Yes, for the first time in my life,” replies Carradine. Nothing in their world can unseat them, no other man, nothing at all except this girl who has so little interest in participating in that world. She snubs Carradine’s marriage proposal and later, when forced to marry Michel in order to avoid being sent back to the orphanage, shows as little interest in her role as wife (and future mother) as she does in work; she disdains the institution of the family; she fails to occupy the socio-symbolic role accorded to Woman in modern liberal-capitalist societies, but she doesn’t escape this role by making any claim on the abstract position of a legal or political subject. She remains, rather, all too concrete in her material being as “that body, those thighs, that bottom, those breasts.” What position, then, does she occupy, a position in which Beauvoir imagines her “autonomy” inheres — her being *pour soi* — wrought not through her elevation to the status of abstract subject but rather through her *refusal* of abstraction, her insistence on the transparency of embodiment?

Let us consider the scene that made a scandal out of *Et Dieu*, the single scene that perhaps formally justifies the claim for the path-breaking treatment of sexuality accorded the film by so many commentators, including Beauvoir and Truffaut. It is the film’s penultimate scene, the one where the drama, such as it is, comes to a head. As Truffaut also observed, the plot is not what is important in Vadim’s film, so a minimum of background information will suffice. After being overcome by passion while stranded on an island with her brother-in-law Antoine, thus making a cuckold of her husband Michel, Juliette has gone wandering in the streets and finds herself in the Whiskey Club where she attempts to drown her sorrows. She hears music playing downstairs and is drawn to it impulsively (Bardot/Juliette is a “creature of instinct... yielding blindly to her impulses.”⁶) Here, literally beneath the ordinary world, she discovers, along with a Caribbean jazz band rehearsing for a show, a realm of sensuality where everything is rhythm, movement, instinct — she is finally in her element. The socio-symbolic world she left upstairs is one that is always producing impossible situations for her precisely because she is a creature of impulse; she cannot correctly occupy the roles that world bestows upon her — wife, daughter, worker, citizen. She is a “creature of instinct,” not an agent of rational self-control (and self-denial or, in a different analytic register, superego; we might also say she is a Hobbesian subject who needs external constraints rather than a self-policing or Kantian one.) As we have seen, for the film’s distinguished French commentators, it is this indifference to convention chez Bardot that produces her power and even her autonomy; here, we

⁶ Beauvoir paraphrasing Vadim, *Brigitte Bardot*, pp. 18-19.

have to understand autonomy as meaning precisely a freedom *from* stultifying social convention. At the same time, this autonomy is somehow synonymous with sex as (in Beauvoir's phenomenological description) the concreteness of embodiment — the “thereness” of “that body, those thighs, that bottom, those breasts.”

The infamous scene in the Whiskey Club does away with dialogue (until its denouement) and presents Bardot as Beauvoir describes her, barefoot and always in motion, dancing, enjoying, being-as-embodiment:



Fig. 1: Juliette discovers the jazz band underneath the Whiskey Club

If the opposition the film has worked to construct between “creature[s] of instinct” and responsible citizens is one that is mapped onto (and produces) the split of sexual difference, here it becomes apparent that it is also distinctly racialized. Juliette has an immediate, wordless rapport with the Caribbean jazz musicians. Neither she nor they can find their place upstairs, in the public world of “rights” and “duties,” to return to Beauvoir’s terms. Their mutual exclusion from this world — let us call it the French nation — here finds its correlate in their cohabitation of a subterranean domain, a space apart where rhythm and sensuality trump duties and rights. Juliette connects rhythmically to this domain, communicating through movement and music. She begins to dance, the cha-cha-cha. She picks her skirt up, flicks her hair around, moves her body to the beat, plays the drums; we see her bare feet on the parquet. The musicians, though literally inside the nation, are both politically and spiritually (as well as racially) situated outside it. If, as Chantal Mouffe and others remind us, the social and political order that excludes them is constituted precisely through that exclusion, here they inhabit that exclusion positively, as an active indifference to the social order that holds together French society. Through their rhythmic, sensuous bond, which is also in some sense a solidarity of the excluded, we are also reminded that even if the historical exclusion of both women and people of color from the “universal” rights whose proclamation ushered in the era of liberal democracy has been legally reversed, the systems of signification that sustained and authorized those exclusions continue to operate at the cultural level. In the field of French representation in 1956, it seems that women and black men are no more rights-bearing citizens than they were in 1789. But — and here’s the crucial twist — in *Et Dieu...créa la femme* that exclusion from rights is not only negatively determined; it is inhabited as a threatening freedom.

Michel, Juliette’s husband, has now entered the room, buttoned up and immobile in a suit, a stiff counterpoint to the swaying, jiving musicians and to the splendidly lithesome Juliette.

Carradine, the businessman, would-be suitor, and surrogate patriarch, has also joined her audience. Juliette remains oblivious to both. Michel marches up to her and whispers: “I want to talk to you.” She stares at him briefly, then responds: “*Non*,” rebuking the filial demand, rejecting the terms of French bourgeois propriety that dictate that women at least pretend to indulge the desires of their husbands, dancing away, moving over instead to a black musician playing maracas with whom she enters into an unspoken pact of complicit obliviousness:



Fig. 2 Michel’s *regard jaloux*



Fig 3. Juliette’s filial rebuke

Refusing to submit to her husband’s demand that she “talk,” talk reason, that she assume her established position in relation to him and to the family, and thus to French society, Juliette instead dances in an increasingly frenzied manner, now jumping up on the table in perhaps the film’s most memorable image. “*Juliette, je t’en supplie*” — Juliette I beg you — murmurs Michel, unable to cope with this spectacle, this public refusal of his command, of language and propriety, this explosion of sensuality, rhythm, and of a sexuality unbounded by filial demand and without shame or privacy. And if I say “sexuality” it is because in the next extraordinary sequence of shots, as the camera pans up her body, Juliette’s dancing ecstasy mounts to an orgasmic crescendo. This is probably the closest the French cinema has come in 1956 to showing a woman’s orgasm on screen. It is not this, however, that is most shocking about Bardot’s dance but rather that the orgasmic experience it invokes takes place completely *outside the context of any sexual encounter, any figure of coupling*; not only outside the context of a socially sanctioned, bourgeois relationship but outside of any heterosexual scene at all.⁷ In some sense, Juliette’s “orgasm” is autoerotic, a term that is here correlated with what Beauvoir calls “autonomy,” which in this context means freedom from heterosexual determination; Juliette’s orgasm is produced by no man. But more than a solipsistic autoeroticism, it represents her ecstatic convergence with the domain of the sensual and the rhythmic, with carnality itself as a pulsating

⁷ Two years later, Malle’s *Les Amants* (1958) would again put the female orgasm on prominent display — now explicitly presented as orgasm. While Malle’s film surpasses Vadim’s in sexual explicitness, the orgasm in that case takes place in the context of heterosexual sex (it occurs as Jeanne Moreau’s character is receiving oral sex). The fact that it positions her as the recipient of pleasure — and in the context of an adulterous affair — shows that the film shares with *Et Dieu...créa la femme* an interest in female sexual pleasure as a form of rebuke of French social propriety. But Juliette’s “orgasm” in *Et Dieu* is more radical, according to the terms of my argument, because it is completely autonomous — produced by no man and no (heterosexual) relation.

materiality whose capacity for *jouissance* here pushes at the seams of the the social order of patriarchal French republicanism.⁸



Figs. 4-7 Juliette's retreat from interlocution into "orgasm"

Et Dieu, in other words, presents the spectacle of sex as the scandal of the social. To this extent, it is organized around a commonplace assumption about "the tensions between the claims of the individual and those of civilization."⁹ Female sexuality is here tethered to "the claims of the individual," in the form of a path-breaking figure of what Beauvoir calls "sexual autonomy" — untethered from the relationality of heterosexual coupling — but counterposed to "the claims of civilization." It is precisely that tension, between the desires of the individual and the claims of civilization, that narratives of the social contract (in the liberal and republican traditions alike) wrestle with. In one version of Freudianism — the one associated with the "repressive hypothesis" — it is this tension that produces the malady of the modern, or what Freud himself called, in an early essay, "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness" (1908).¹⁰ According to his thesis in that

⁸ It would be interesting to compare this scene with the somewhat analogous scene of Grace Chang dancing the "Calypso" in the Hong Kong film *Air Hostess* (Wen Yi, 1959). I thank Andrew Jones for pointing that out, and Alan Tansman for bringing to my attention the existence of another similar scene in the Japanese film *The H-Man* (Ichirô Honda, 1958). Both may have been inspired by *Et Dieu*.

⁹ Leo Bersani, "Can Sex Make Us Happy?," *Raritan* 21.4 (Spring 2002), p. 15.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, "'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness," *Standard Edition*, vol. 9, London: Hogarth Press, 1959.

essay, the repressive force of modern civilization leads to a widespread neurosis because it suppresses the claims of the individual; seen from this perspective, Juliette embodies uncontrollable, irrepressible eroticism, an eroticism and a pleasure on the side of the individual and antagonistic to society. *Et Dieu*, in the image of Bardot's tabletop orgasm, offers up a figure of the sovereign individual whose self-affirming pleasure, in its indifference to society, threatens civilization. Bardot's public orgasm is a repudiation of the French bourgeois social order, which is to say, of "civilization." Like Freud, who placed the term "civilized" (in the German title, *kulturelle*) in skeptical quote marks, Bardot's Juliette rejects "civilization" as hypocritical. The unshackling of her sexuality from the stultifying confines of heterosexual coupling does not promise to improve or redeem society but rather to destroy it; her power in the film is a negative or destructive one: *cette fille est faite pour perdre les hommes*. The autonomy it gives body to is one that dissolves sedimented social form; it is a communion with a register of existence that is dangerously mobile, unformalized, racialized, and free of determinable relational structures. As an expression of negation, Juliette's dancing body is a figure of sexuality and its pleasure principle as death drive.¹¹ No wonder Marcel attempts to stop the dance by firing his gun at Juliette. (This is also a displacement of his eclipsed phallic power: Juliette's dance that negates social form also refuses phallic control and is thus, for Michel, experienced as castrating.)

At the same time, the terms of sexual difference central to this figuration — and thematized in the film's title — mean that the opposition between sexuality and (French bourgeois) civilization is not here simply the *generalized* problem of the sovereign individual vs. society; rather, the opposition takes shape *as the very problem of sexual difference*. As the avatar of an embodiment that threatens the social, Juliette's femaleness is hardly coincidental. The association of women with embodiment is one with a long history in France and in Europe in general.¹² Rousseau wanted to keep women out of the public sphere precisely because as "the symbol of sex in the human species"¹³ they represented all the qualities counterposed to the public: the non-rational, the affective, the embodied, the immanent. This is of course Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex*: transcendence, or being *pour soi*, is what women lack; they are condemned, in a patriarchal order, to the *en soi*, immanence, which is also objecthood, embodiment.¹⁴

What is highly novel here, then, is Beauvoir's seemingly counterintuitive claim that Bardot, *through* her embodiment, is a figure of female "autonomy." According to the definition I have just advanced, the "Woman" whose creation the film's title thematizes is a symbol of just the opposite — of "sex objectified," of immanence, embodiment, objecthood, the *en soi*, and (thus) what Kant calls the pathological; the sensuously determined and *non*-autonomous. How could a "creature of instinct," as Beauvoir puts it, also represents "autonomy" and even "equality," not by transcending or

¹¹ This correlates with her rejection of what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurity": Beauvoir writes, "For [Bardot/Juliette], the future is still one of those adult inventions in which she has no confidence. 'I live as if I were going to die at any moment,' says Juliette." (25)

¹² See Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996, and *Parité!: Sexual Equality and the Crisis of Universality*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005; Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988; Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

¹³ Wendy Brown, "Where is the Sex in Political Theory?", *Women & Politics* 7.1 (1987), p. 11.

¹⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1952).

bracketing instinct but by embodying it? The opposition *Et Dieu* sets up between sexuality-figured-as-Woman and civilization is a venerable one in the tradition of French political thought. But on creating a visual image of the former, it somehow produces that very resistance to the demands of civilization as a new and powerful figure of autonomy. This autonomy can only be imagined as a destructive force of negation; it is not (yet) the autonomy of a community of equals, not an autonomy from which a political community could be built. But Beauvoir nevertheless sees, and seizes on, its potential.

Autonomy and equality are no longer strictly (if implicitly) male properties in *Et Dieu...créa la femme*. Strikingly, the Woman it invokes and (albeit fearfully) celebrates no longer conforms to the understanding of Woman that Brown tells us implicitly structures many theories of liberalism. In an essay on "Liberalism's Family Values," Brown shows how the political subject of liberalism is produced in relation to a (disavowed) structure of binary sexual difference; the constitutive divisions of this structure are implicitly or explicitly gendered; gender at once naturalizes these divisions and is produced within the terms of liberalism *by* them. The divisions Brown names include: equality/ difference; liberty/ necessity; autonomy/ dependence; rights/ relations; individual/ family; self-interest/ selflessness; public/ private; contract/ consent.¹⁵ Needless to say, liberalism designates the second term in each of these binaries as "feminine"; it depends on this distinction as well as the gendered dismissal of the second set of terms for the production of the first as characteristic of the liberal subject, a subject Brown reveals to be discursively produced as a masculine or masculinist subject. "[T]he second term [in each pair] is pushed out of the first in the latter's claim to primacy and power," writes Brown, and this labor of differentiation sustains "the production and reproduction of a masculinist liberal subject, a subject premised upon a sexual division of labor and activities... even as it is [in late modernity] detached from physiological correlates" (152).

Bardot/Juliette stages a form of being, embodied and sexualized being, that, with only one exception, *rejects* the second term in each of these constitutive, and constitutively gendered, binaries of liberalism. Juliette's dance, the very expression of gratuitous, unmotivated physicality, is not of the order of "necessity"; rather it is the expression of what Beauvoir calls "freedom." It rejects "dependence," but decisively expresses "autonomy," thus inverting Brown's point that "[a]utonomy and autarky [requirements of the liberal political subject] are directly at odds with sexual satisfaction."¹⁶ Here sexual satisfaction is not at odds with, but is rather the very means of expression of, autonomy and autarky. So too does this ecstatic expression of sensual pleasure reject relations in the sense of family and the duty towards its social forms; it exhibits no selflessness or self-sacrifice and, moreover, makes an insistent and stubborn claim on *public*, visual space, bringing into that space what should "properly" be confined to the private. Juliette's mambo thus *reverses* almost all the constitutive categories that together implicitly gender the liberal subject. Only contract/ consent and equality/ difference remain ambiguous in this regard. Juliette doesn't consent to anything (for Brown, the feminine correlate to contract), but she also decisively rejects the social contract with her orgasmic dance; she thus occupies neither pole of this binary, failing to enter into social relations either by virtue of consent or contract (and thus remaining, as I have been suggesting, a figure of antisocial negation). Juliette conforms to the conventional gendered binaries of liberalism in one way only: she continues to embody the principle of *difference* that, as Joan Scott has shown, has so

¹⁵ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 152. See ch. 6, "Liberalism's Family Values."

¹⁶ Wendy Brown, "Where is the Sex in Political Theory?," p. 16.

troubled the putative universalism of the republican and liberal traditions. Far from being the victim of this principle, however, Juliette refuses the opposition to “equality” it typically heralds; as we have seen with Beauvoir, she wields it as the weapon of her own assertion of sexual equality, embracing difference precisely in order to *produce* her own autonomy.¹⁷

Yet Juliette’s autonomy, which Beauvoir is careful to specify only as “*sexual* autonomy,” is just as clearly not the autonomy of men. I have argued that sexuality, in this climactic scene of Vadim’s first film, is detached in a historically novel way from relationality conventionally understood, which is to say from the system of familial and patriarchal bonds that sustains “civilization” in 1950s France. This detachment, I have suggested, also breaks with the liberal convention according to which “men are regarded as autarkic and obligated to nothing, [while] women are regarded as always already attached to men and obligated to children” (Brown, *States*, 148). Within those terms, women have historically been taken to make up the “nonautonomous” population that “generates, tends, and avows the bonds, relations, dependencies and connections that sustain and nourish human life” (157). The fear that Juliette provokes — the source of the terror in the faces of Michel, Antoine and Carradine, the real source of her daemonic power — is that she refashions Woman not as nurturer of bonds and their sedimented social forms but as a figure of the destruction of sedimented social form through the force of her *jouissance*. Juliette’s orgasmic dance is the very expression of her indifference to the world structured by those bonds; with her retreat from interlocution into orgasm she produces a posture (however deceiving) of *perfect sovereignty*. Bardot makes no claim on the position of a “political” subject but she also resolutely refuses the position represented by the second set of terms in the liberal system of binaries. By failing to inhabit *either* the first *or* the second set of terms, *either* the political *or* the private domain of family, Bardot/Juliette causes the entire order to shake. That shaking is expressed as the orgasmic dance that drives Juliette’s husband to shoot at her (unsuccessfully), catapults Bardot to stardom, and transforms Vadim’s otherwise mediocre film into one credited with introducing a series of “firsts” into the history of cinema.

spectacular autonomy

Yet the relationality Bardot/Juliette refuses at the social level is not abolished altogether so much as translated into another register. Insofar as it requires an audience, the perfect sovereignty Bardot seems to incarnate in her autoerotic dance on the tabletop is neither so sovereign nor so perfect as it appears. Juliette escapes from the roles of wife and mother — escapes from the gendered liberal categories of necessity, dependence, family, selflessness, privacy and consent — only by asserting the priority over all those categories of another that remains just as resolutely gendered: the *spectacular*. After all, Bardot is famous for nothing if not for her spectacular body, a body that if it *comes into its own* (as I have been arguing), does so only as spectacle. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in the formal construction of the scene, Juliette is never given a point of view shot. Nor are the musicians, whose bond with Bardot is thus rendered *formally* benign. The scandal of the scene, in narrative terms, is that Juliette performs for and with the musicians (who hail from outside the Republic) and repudiates the command of her white citizen husband. She performs her dismissal of the demands of the bourgeois white male gaze and establishes in its place a complicity with a de-nationalized black male gaze that is also strangely de-sexualized, sublimated into rhythm and music without obvious sexual intent. (The musicians’ lack of a point of view shot is correlated, at the level

¹⁷ Juliette’s sexuality is that of Bersani’s sublimation, the “burning away of the occasion,” the demise of the relational, and a freeing of sex from its narrative constraints.

of representation, to their apparent indifference to her sexual charms.) This means that the only gaze within the scene, and within the film, predictably enough, is the narrative enunciation which tethers itself to the white male narrative surrogate.¹⁸ That surrogate, in turn, is the avatar of the film spectator, who may of course, empirically speaking, be of any gender, but whose conventional coding as masculine is one gendered norm resolutely *not* challenged by the film.

Woman as spectacle trumps woman as nurturer of family bonds; while this trade-off hardly qualifies as feminist (Beauvoir's admiration for the film notwithstanding), it does at least demonstrate that the category of the *to-be-looked-at* (Mulvey's term), here wielded almost polemically or like a weapon, may not be as synonymous with disempowerment as Mulvey and many others writing in her wake at first assumed. It is Beauvoir, again, who specified the difference between Bardot's genre of to-be-looked-at-ness and that of the earlier figure of "the vamp" who for her part posed "no challenge" to men:

The attraction... exercised [by the vamp] was that of a passive thing. [Men] rushed knowingly into the magic trap; they went to their doom the way one throws oneself overboard. Freedom and full consciousness remained [men's] right and privilege. When Marlene displayed her silk-sheathed thighs as she sang with her hoarse voice and looked about her with sultry eyes, she was staging a ceremony, she was casting a spell. BB does not cast spells; she is on the go. Her flesh does not have that abundance that, in others, symbolizes passivity. Her clothes are not fetishes and when she strips she is not unveiling a mystery. She is showing her body, neither more nor less, and that body rarely settles into a state of immobility. (28-29)

In this passage, Beauvoir makes two key distinctions between Bardot and other (earlier) cinematic figures of female sexuality. First, earlier figures like Dietrich offered themselves as a "passive thing" (this is a questionable claim with regards to Dietrich); Bardot's flesh on the other hand does not symbolize passivity; it is mobile and "on the go." Second, earlier figures lend themselves to fetishism — this is a thought that will later be fleshed out (so to speak) by Mulvey. The body of the vamp is a "mystery" subject to a series of symbolic displacements; the eroticized star casts a spell. Bardot's body on the other hand, as seen by Beauvoir, is entirely honest; it is simply there, demystified. Its display is at once a refusal of fetishism and enchantment, and a refusal to be merely a "passive object"; on the contrary, Bardot the to-be-looked-at is "as much a hunter as she is a prey" (30).

At the same time, the "prosaic" (XX) quality of Bardot's eroticism cuts through the very artifice that sustains the illusion of cinematic narrative. "When BB dances her famous mambo, no one believes in Juliette. It is BB who is exhibiting herself. She is as alone on the screen as the striptease artist is alone on the stage" (46). So now Beauvoir analogizes Bardot to a striptease artist on the stage, one who, she writes, "offers herself directly to each spectator" (*ibid.*). In other words, if Bardot's guileless eroticism seems to circumvent any narrative alibi that might authorize or disguise it — if it is rendered a property of the unto- and for-itself — the result is that Bardot all the more directly "offers herself... to each spectator." Beauvoir seems not to notice — or at least is unable to resolve — the contradictions her account thus presents; that very inability exposes them as constitutive of the film's significance. Namely: Bardot's sensual pleasure at once expresses her

¹⁸ This is Mulvey's analysis of classical narrative cinema from "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," first published in *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

autonomy *and* is the performance of a “strip-tease artist” who “offers herself directly to each spectator.” In other words, Bardot both frees women’s sexual pleasure from the system of hetero-relationality that had previously defined and installs or sures up a different kind of hetero-relationality, one that pairs female display with male (visual) consumption. In freeing women from their association with the terms to which they had been condemned by the gendered binaries of liberalism — liberty/necessity; autonomy/dependence; rights/relations; individual/family; self-interest/ selflessness; public/private — *Et Dieu* replaces them all with one overarching binary that it very nearly transforms into an existential principle: looking/ display. *That* gendered binary *survives* the destruction of the bonds that structure bourgeois social order; it is both the agent of their destruction and all that remains in their wake, transcending its own narrative frame and functioning—in a way Mulvey would later help us to recognize—as a principle of the medium itself.

For her part, Beauvoir is not as troubled by all this as Mulvey will be. Bardot’s “direct” sexual offer to the spectator is after all “deceptive, for as the spectators watch her, they are fully aware that this beautiful young woman is famous, rich, adulated and completely inaccessible” (46). So the illusion of her availability is also a ruse of the medium whose operation Mulvey will take it to define. Bardot atop the table in the Whiskey Club — figuring a *jouissance* that destroys patriarchal control and the relational structures of French bourgeois sociality— is a new figure of autonomy that is, however, mired in a problem inherent to the medium: the problem of the asymmetry between looking and being looked at. Both this destructive autonomy and the gendered look that beholds it transcend the narrative frame of *Et Dieu*, paltry as that frame always was. But as a small concession to the French *petit bourgeois* world that shares its fate, at the end of the film, Vadim has Juliette meekly return to her husband and the family home. The film ends so quickly we barely have time to register the inadequacy of this false reconciliation; no-one, in any case—neither Antoine nor Carradine—is convinced. Nor is Beauvoir: after noting that Bardot is often positioned by the narrative as “a lost, pathetic child who needs a guide and protector,” she adds: “But the spectators do not believe in this victory of the man and of the social order so prudently suggested by the scenario — and that is why Vadim’s film... [does] not lapse into triviality” (20-21).

Women’s sexuality, here both object and medium of what Truffaut called an unprecedented cinematic “frankness,” is figured as a solipsistic drive that shatters both narrative and the social order, rendering both inept. For this reason — and here is my point about *Et Dieu créa la femme* — if Juliette/Bardot turns the Republican categories on their head, claiming autonomy and liberty as *correlates* of rather than *antitheses* to embodiment and sexuality, she nevertheless *upholds the long-standing tradition that takes these terms (embodiment and sexuality) to be antagonistic to the social*. Sexuality here, in 1956, reified as a woman in the apparent throes of orgasm, has become an unlikely but powerful figure for *autonomy* — albeit an autonomy that takes shape only through the corrosive *opposition to sociality* it also figures. At the same time, the symmetrical relationality from which that orgasm appears to deliver the Woman that God created is transformed into an inexorability of the medium itself. This last is a problem that it would remain for feminist film-makers to take up, as we will see in chapter two.

***Barbarella* and the pleasures of liberal democracy**

Twelve years later, in 1968, it was once again Vadim who brought woman’s orgasm to the international screen, but now far from signifying the ruination of the liberal social order — that order’s perpetual risk of collapse into sexualized dystopia, as we see in *Et Dieu* — they came (so to speak) for the first time to figure its utopian realization. *Barbarella*, a relative commercial failure

upon its release (unlike *Et Dieu*), was an adaptation from a French comic strip by Jean-Claude Forest serialized in *V-Magazine* in the early 1960s.¹⁹ The comic strip, whose heroine was in fact modeled on Brigitte Bardot, was controversial for its highly sexualized images and plot lines, which often involved the eponymous heroine's sexual encounters with a variety of futuristic space creatures. Its cinematic adaptation appears at first glance, like the comic book itself, to be merely another voyeuristic and objectifying view on women's bodies produced for the visual pleasure of (straight) men. Yet it is also a film of "firsts" — in this case, the first commercial, non-pornographic film to represent an American star, of any gender, in the throes of orgasm.²⁰ There is a neat if unnerving symmetry to the fact that the star in question — Jane Fonda — was, like Bardot in 1956, married to Vadim at the time of her star turn. Even more perversely, Vadim modeled Fonda's look in *Barbarella* on Bardot. (Remarking this resemblance, Pauline Kael accused Vadim of "turning each wife into a facsimile of the first and spreading her out for the camera."²¹) Kael is right that Fonda's *Barbarella* is an extension and development of Bardot's Juliette. As we will see, this is a correspondence that is more than just aesthetic.

Barbarella was received as a frivolous, unserious film. In her 1968 review, Kael, enumerating the film's inadequacies at the level of writing ("poor"), design ("tacky"), direction (the film "got away" from Vadim), and acting (generally "embarrassing" — though she praises Fonda's irony), conceded that "our expectations were at so low a level... [that] we can't really get worked up about the film's weaknesses" (*ibid.*) In more recent reappraisals, the film's "campy" style, universally noted, is taken to mitigate or defuse what has come to be seen as its potentially "dangerous and subversive" political charge.²² Jane Parks, for instance, observes that the film "immers[es] its protagonist in an excessively feminized and campy *mise-en-scène*" that mitigates the "threat" otherwise posed by her sexual independence. The general critical consensus seems to be that *Barbarella*'s boldness in portraying an astronaut heroine with no ties to a husband or family is both authorized and potentially annulled by (a) its ironic, campy style; (b) its titillating, sexploitation-like aesthetics; and/or (c) its generic status as science fiction fantasy. Emily Anderson, channeling both (b) and (c), argues that "[t]he fact that *Barbarella* shoots guns at 'bad guys' and hatches schemes with male revolutionaries is... *softened* by the fact that she has sex or is at least mostly naked in almost every scene of the film" and that "the science fiction context of the film *softens* the blow to viewers who do not want to consider the ways in which both *Barbarella* and Fonda are potentially politically radical" ("Treacherous Pin-ups," p. 323, my italics). For Anderson, both the sex and the science fiction "soften" the film's politics and thereby make it palatable to a mainstream audience (albeit one that at the time largely rejected it).

¹⁹ The comic strip, which first appeared in France in 1962, was subsequently translated into English and printed in the US publication *Evergreen Review*. For an example of another comic book adaptation starring a sexy female heroine, in this case played by Monica Viti, cf Joseph Losey's *Modesty Blaise* (1966).

²⁰ By 1968, there had been American actors' orgasms in the sexploitation genre — for example *The Alley Cats* (1966) — but not in any mainstream, commercial film.

²¹ Pauline Kael, "The Current Cinema," *New Yorker*, Nov. 2, 1968, p. 182.

²² Jane Parks, "Bringing *Barbarella* Down to Earth: The Astronaut and Feminine Sexuality in the 1960s," in Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett, eds. *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 261; Emily Anderson, "Treacherous Pin-ups, Politicized Prostitutes, and Activist Betrayals: Fonda's Body in Hollywood and Hanoi," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 25:4 (2008): 315-333, p. 323.

What is most significant about *Barbarella*, however, is just the opposite: far from using sex to distract from or “soften” its politics, Vadim’s film brings sexual pleasure and political agency into an extravagantly elaborated figural alliance. By the same token, the sci-fi fantasy staged in *Barbarella* is not a distraction; it is the means of delivering the “blow.” In her history of sex on screen in the US, Linda Williams shows how this film, and Fonda more generally, brought women’s pleasure into view in new ways, transforming the cinematic possibilities for representing it.²³ My argument is that these new images of women’s pleasure were the vehicle for a new way of imagining the relation of the body’s pleasures to the social and political world with which they were newly aligned. In *Barbarella*, a novel text in both regards, this reflection takes the form of a political parable that pits liberal democracy—as a domain of pleasure as an autonomous property of the subject — against authoritarian dictatorship, as a domain of relations defined as sadomasochistic, unequal, and perverse. Thus where Anderson argues that the film “almost always lead[s] [its heroine] to abandon the political in favor of sexual pleasure,” the salient point is rather that in the film sexual pleasure and the political are *brought directly together*, in the figure of a heroine who comes “on scene” as a new kind of liberal sexual subject. Far from using sex to veil or distract from its politics, *Barbarella* constructs a direct analogy between sexual pleasure as an autonomous property of the subject and the political system of liberal democracy.

This analogy is complicated, but not undone, by the overarching irony of the film’s style — what Anderson refers to as its “slapstick” quality and Parks as its “campiness.” The film’s vision of a liberal sexual subject, as I will show, is not separate from this process by which it satirizes, and thus maintains a critical distance from, the very vision of sexual and political emancipation it simultaneously advances. Indeed, the film’s style is so pervasively tongue in cheek that it offers us no internal clues for determining what is its true object of satire. When Vadim describes *Barbarella* in his autobiography as a “ruthless satire on the problems of our times,” the question remains which “problems of our times” he is referring to, and what exactly is being satirized: the stubborn elusiveness of peaceful human community? or the advent of a feminism that insisted on women’s sexual autonomy?²⁴ This is a significant indeterminacy, but I will argue that the irony that produces it is also crucial to the film’s production of a liberal sexual subject.

the loving union of the universe

Near the beginning of the film, *Barbarella* is contacted in her spaceship by the “President of Earth and rotating President of the Sun System.” The universe of 40,000 AD, it seems, has blossomed into a fully universalized liberal democracy; the Sun System is a federation of planets that have installed freedom and equality not only as international principles but as literally universal rights. In this liberal democratic utopia, the Presidency rotates, and the President serves the “general will” referred

²³ Cf Linda Williams, *Screening Sex*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, pp. 165-170.

²⁴ Roger Vadim, in his shockingly titled autobiography, *Bardot-Deneuve-Fonda*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986, p. 164.

to in article 6 of the *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen*.²⁵ Moreover, and in this way, the universe of 40,000 AD has successfully realized what Kant referred to as the “highest political good,” namely “perpetual peace.”²⁶ The greeting between humans is “Love!” and we learn that there has been no need for any army or police force for centuries.

The peace and security of this liberal democratic utopia is, however, in jeopardy. The President informs the naked Barbarella that a young scientist, Durand-Durand, has gone missing in the uncharted regions of the planet Tau Ceti along with his invention — the positronic ray, which the President tells Barbarella is a *weapon*. “A weapon?” she asks, confused. “Why would anybody want to invent a weapon?... The universe has been pacified for centuries.” But the President informs her this may not be the case on Tau Ceti. “You mean they could still be living in a primitive state of neurotic irresponsibility?” asks Barbarella. Nothing is known about Tau Ceti, but the President fears that the development of weapon power there might, in the hands of “primitives”, pose a threat to the “loving union of the universe.” It might even lead to “war,” a word Barbarella at first does not understand, but which he reminds her means “bloody conflict between entire tribes.” So war and psychological neurosis — which it has been the civilizational achievement of Earth and the Sun System to overcome — are analogous features of the “tribal” society on Tau Ceti, a society outside the otherwise-universal alliance, a state which must be disarmed so as to prevent in advance the violence its rogue status already foretells. We can recognize here, of course, a familiar imperialist narrative via which liberal democratic states or alliances have justified their violent incursion into other (non-liberal) states in the name of “peace” and “freedom.” In *Barbarella*, the “loving union of the universe” is presented as the *historical* achievement of an (imperialist) civilization that has overcome “neurotic irresponsibility,” threatened by its own “primitive” outside, the site of exception outside the union which threatens to destroy its now suddenly precarious foundations.

We will return to the problem posed by the exceptional regime of Tau Ceti, but for now let us note that if Juliette’s performance of pleasure in *Et Dieu* expressed an autonomy that refuses the constraints of monogamous marriage and the family, the eponymous heroine of *Barbarella* inhabits a utopian future realm in which these structures have become mere anachronisms. An idealized version of the cosmopolitan French republican subject, Barbarella’s *only* bond is to the “nation,” or rather to the universe itself which — transcending national boundaries — has here successfully become the

²⁵ The *Déclaration*, which has served as the basis for successive French constitutions, ordains: “2. The purpose of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man... 6. The law is the expression of the general will... All citizens being equal in its eyes are equally admissible to all public dignities, offices and employments... 16. Any society in which the guarantee of rights is not assured or the separation of powers not settled has no constitution.” Reprinted in Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Human Rights*, pp. 221-2.

²⁶ Mary J. Gregor, “Introduction” to *Toward Perpetual Peace*, in Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Gregor, p. 313. Cf also *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in which Kant proclaims that “morally practical reason pronounces in us its irresistible veto: There is to be no war, neither between you and me in a state of nature nor between us as states” (6:354). I do not mean to imply by this that Kant was unequivocally a “liberal” thinker, though I would argue that his philosophy of the subject is profoundly resonant with the subject presumed in much liberal political theory. (On this fraught question, see Katrin Flikschuh, “Is Kant A Liberal?,” her penetrating review of Allen D. Rosen, *Kant’s Theory of Justice*, in *Res Publica* 2.1 (1996): 101-110.) Though he was an apologist for the Prussian state (cf “What is Enlightenment?”), the political system Kant describes in *Toward Perpetual Peace* is a cosmopolitan, international, but essentially liberal democratic one. Cf also Flikschuh, *Kant and Modern Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

literalization of the French republican notion of universality. For *Barbarella*, as emblematic subject of this universe, there exist no complicating “personal” bonds, such to a husband, child, or other family members.²⁷ However, in doing away with those bonds, *Barbarella* has not (unlike *Juliette*) threatened the social order. She has rather *emancipated it* from the internal divisions that belie its presumption to universality; she hails from a futuristic liberal democracy whose universalism no longer founders on the split of sexual difference. Engels, Reich, Marcuse and Firestone are among the numerous theorists who have (with different emphases) insisted that true human emancipation will entail the abolition of the patriarchal family structure. Here it is liberalism (rather than communism) that has delivered that abolition, and *Barbarella* appears as a liberal subject defined by no bonds other than her (freely willed) commitment to the (universalized) nation itself. She has thus transcended the position according to which, in the words of Hegel, “Woman... has her substantial vocation in the family, and her ethical disposition consists in this piety.”²⁸ Overcoming the gendering of the liberal state analyzed by Brown and others, *Barbarella* is fashioned as a truly universal liberal subject.

Yet clearly neither sex nor sexual difference have been transcended or sublated in the *visual* world of *Barbarella*. While she may represent the universal subject of a cosmic liberal democracy, Fonda’s *Barbarella*, as her variety of spectacularly revealing outfits attests, remains resolutely gendered. Indeed the “visual pleasures” the film affords, in no small part through the proliferation of those outfits, seem to hyperbolize the structure Mulvey analyzed in her discussion of classical Hollywood cinema.²⁹ (As Williams puts it: “The peeling off, or decorous shedding, of already skimpy outfits constitutes the [film’s] primary visual pleasure” [p. 166].) Taking a leaf, so to speak, from the voyeuristic aesthetics of the comic book, the film’s title sequence — an extended, gravity-free striptease as *Barbarella*, free-floating in her spaceship, removes her space suit — sets the tone. It is thus tempting to dismiss *Barbarella* as merely one of many examples of the way that the coming “on scene” of sex in film merely reified the system of sexual difference according to which, as Mulvey puts it, “woman [functions] as image, man as bearer of the look.” Yet the system of gendered visual pleasures *Barbarella* puts in place fails in a number of significant respects to conform to the one Mulvey finds operating in classical narrative cinema. For one thing, female flesh is not the only kind offered up for the viewing pleasure of the spectator of *Barbarella*. And if more screen time is devoted to Fonda’s disrobing than to any male character’s, this is also because *Barbarella* is the protagonist of the film, the one whose action drives the plot and whose pleasure, far from “freez[ing] the flow of action,” as Mulvey suggests images of women do in classical narrative films, is rather the means by which that action develops. (This leads Parks to observe that “*Barbarella* the sex object... is also *Barbarella* the agent, and the technology she most successfully wields is that of her own body.”³⁰)

Even while granting its female characters narrative agency, the film revels in the spectacle of women as objects of visual pleasure. Yet as the film, to that extent, complacently reproduces gender

²⁷ Women have also been liberated from reproductive labor, a liberation that would be theorized two years later by Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, New York: William Morrow, 1970.

²⁸ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965, p. 114.

²⁹ Parks gets at the contradiction here, writing that “*Barbarella* offers its viewers a female astronaut who can reach the public eye only as a fetishized object of sexual display,” but that “*Barbarella*’s body is also a tool of personal pleasure and political power” (p. 254).

³⁰ Jane Parks, “Bringing *Barbarella* Down to Earth,” p. 263.

norms, it also displaces them onto another scene. That scene is one in which the gendered divide that names the object of visual pleasure *woman* (and takes the “gaze” — which, like Medusa, turns what it looks at into an object — to be *male*) is replaced by a *general sexualization of the entire visual sphere*. This does not just mean that both women and men are on display as embodied, sexualized beings in the visual landscape of *Barbarella* — though certainly male bodies abound, from the angel Pygar (John Phillip Law) who, throughout the film, wears nothing but a loin cloth, to the Catchman (Ugo Tognazzi) with his hairy chest, to the revolutionary leader (David Hemmings), notably named Dildano, with his bare limbs and prominent codpiece. It also means that the entire *mise-en-scène* is saturated with signifiers of sexuality — the spaceship’s entrance which open and closes like a sphincter; the sails of the ice craft which become tumescent and then deflate; the *liquid* technology the film constantly foregrounds — as well as the colors, textures and sounds of a heightened sensuality, such as the yellow and brown furry interiors of the spaceship, the varieties of furs and leathers and latexes worn not only by Barbarella but by everyone in the film; and the smooth jazz, with lyrics like “Down Down Down take me Down,” that one imagines an adolescent in the ‘60s might put on to transform his room into a psychedelic love den. Not only women, but the entire world of *Barbarella* is sexualized from beginning to end — including children, objects, and the environment itself, at the center of which is the so-called Matmos, the bubbling giant lake under the city of SoGo that feeds off the energy of its inhabitants and “makes one,” as the Great Tyrant (Anita Pallenberg) puts it, “want to play.” The world of *Barbarella* is one in which a heightened visual and sensory pleasure has infected every signifier and recruited every image.

Unlike the women in the films analyzed by Mulvey, Barbarella is neither punished (in Mulvey’s terms, for the threat of castration she, as woman, represents) nor consigned to a “no-man’s-land” beyond narrative time and space. Furthermore, unlike in *Et Dieu*, where Michel, Antoine and Carradine were the white male bearers of the gaze, the male look finds no surrogate within the diegesis of *Barbarella*; the character who comes closest to the male “hero” of the film is Pygar the angel who—as if to prove the point—is completely blind. And it is the Great Tyrant, in the dashing form of Anita Pallenberg, who has an instrument that allows her to see into every corner of Tau Ceti; so the gaze that surveys the film’s field of action is, within the narrative, quite literally a female one.³¹

In fact it is not sexual difference that cuts through the visual pleasures on offer in *Barbarella*, but rather a division within sexuality itself— a division, we could say, between Eros and the death drive, or better perhaps, borrowing Foucault’s terms from the *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, between *pleasure* and *desire*. (It is not only in this respect that I consider *Barbarella* the spiritual precursor to *Shortbus*, a film I discuss in chapter five.) This division *within* the field of sexuality, that is *not* the division of sexual difference, is also significantly rendered in explicitly political terms, reflecting the opposition between, on the one hand, the “Republic of Earth and the Sun System” as the effectively realized *telos* of a universalizing liberal democracy, and, on the other, Tau Ceti, the “primitive” rogue state, eluding official networks of knowledge, outside of universal history. Tau Ceti represents the unassimilated kernel that threatens to destroy the whole; the site of exception to a universalized system against which the field of universality defines the shape of its own totality.

³¹ Yet clearly this remains a male fantasy, whether Jean-Claude Forest’s, or Vadim’s. I am not denying that the film addresses itself in an important sense to a “male gaze”: it does. But there is something about the utopianism staged here that involves circumventing the usual way in which sexual difference determines looking positions; the imaginary of the “liberal sexual subject” is one that rhetorically reconfigures sexual difference, although not unproblematically, as we shall see in chapter 3.

What connects this political opposition to the “division within sexuality” which I am claiming structures the film’s geography of pleasure? Everything, as it turns out. Barbarella’s pleasures — unlike the pleasures to be found on Tau Ceti — are quite detached from any discourse of desire; they don’t depend on the determinations of any infantile fantasy of Oedipal triangulation; rather she happens upon them contingently, and enjoys them where she finds them. Indeed, her most intensely pleasurable experience is produced by a *machine* (the “Exsexive Machine”) designed to kill her by driving her beyond pleasure’s limit. Of course Barbarella does not die, because this is a limit, a beyond — a beyond the pleasure principle — that for her does not exist; for Barbarella, if not *in Barbarella*, there is nothing beyond the pleasure principle. Pleasure in the futuristic and utopian liberal democracy from which Barbarella arrives as ambassador is an attribute of an extensive surface, not an index of psychic depth — it can’t be plumbed for the truths it might reveal because it is self-same, referring to nothing beyond itself and concealing no dimension of latency.³² It is, however, connected explicitly to the futuristic utopia from which Barbarella hails, defined in precise political terms as a universalized liberal democracy.

autonomous pleasures, or sex without coitus

This observation helps us make sense of a strange contradiction in *Barbarella*’s forthright treatment of sex that several commentators, including Williams, have puzzled over. While the film puts Fonda’s body prominently on display — and, as I have further argued, sexualizes the entire *mise-en-scène* — the film, writes Williams, is nevertheless “strangely modest about the portrayal of sexual acts” (*Screening Sex*, 167). Indeed, *Barbarella* “elides all views of heterosexual coitus as pelvic thrusting—more chastely, in fact, than American films of the same era.” (169) At the same time, and paradoxically, the film “boldly portrays female orgasms *not* achieved through coitus” (167, my italics). So pleasure itself is *not* elided — indeed, it is transformed into a pervasive visual and narrative principle — yet as a principle that transcends the occasion to which it has hitherto been tethered in cinema, namely the scene of heterosexual coitus. This “strange” untethering (per Williams) is also as a highly significant one. Barbarella has only a few precursors as an orgasming heroine of narrative cinema. Her scandalous antecedents— Andrea in *Erotikon* (Gustav Machaty, 1929) and perhaps also Eva (Hedy Lamarr) in Machat’s later *Ekstase* (1933),³³ as well as Jeanne

³² It thus resembles the pleasure Foucault described in an interview with Jean Le Bitoux: “And so it seems to me that, by using the word *pleasure*, which in the end means nothing... — in treating pleasure ultimately as nothing other than an event... — don’t we have here, in trying to reflect a bit on this notion of pleasure, a means of avoiding the entire psychological and medical armature that was built into the traditional notions of desire?” (“The Gay Science,” pp. 389-390). He continues, by way of clarification: “I’m fundamentally not attached to the notion of pleasure, but I’m quite frankly hostile to the pre-Deleuzian, non-Deleuzian notion of desire” (390). Desire, unlike pleasure, is “first and foremost attached to a subject... Tell me what your desire is, and I’ll tell you what you are as a subject.” (*ibid.*) Pleasure, for Foucault, is de-subjectifying and thus does not lend itself to a nosology or a system of pathologization. Foucault’s pleasure is surely not a property of a liberal democratic subject, but in its rejection of psychology, depth and desire, it bears a striking parallel to the pleasure of the liberal sexual subject for whom Barbarella, I am arguing, was an early avatar.

³³ *Erotikon* did not screen in the US or in any English speaking country until its US premiere at the Telluride Film Festival in 2004. Machaty’s better-known *Ekstase* (1934), which also features a scandalous sex scene (and full nudity), was intended for US distribution but appeared only in a heavily truncated form (without the sex scenes) and was refused a seal of approval by the newly implemented Production Code, making mainstream distribution impossible until the 1950s.

(Jeanne Moreau) in *Les Amants* (Louis Malle, 1958) — all bring female sexual pleasure into view as a revelatory encounter with, and submission to, an authentically virile masculinity that had previously been absent from their lives. Female sexual pleasure is polemically brought into view in these films as the achievement of an authentically erotic heterosexual intercourse, outside the confines of marriage, depicted as an institution of merely formal (and unerotic) heterosexual bonds. The blame for the failure of women's sexual pleasure, in the Machaty films and *Les Amants* alike, falls on the insufficiently virile husbands who cannot make their wives come; these films connect their critique of bourgeois values and institutions to a parable of failed masculinity.

Barbarella is not a parable about failed masculinity; or rather, the solution that it offers to the narrative problem it stages (war, the eruption of violence) is *not* the restoration of masculine authenticity. True enough, the film abounds in figures of less-than-phallic masculinity. The ostensible “beefcake,” Pygar, is blind and unable to fly, he struck Kael as “quite sickly and slightly embarrassing” (*op. cit.*); the pro-democratic revolutionary, Dildano (David Hemmings), is emasculated not only through his bumbling incompetence and his comic name, but also through the way that in the sex scene with Barbarella, he becomes the passive recipient of pleasure rather than the agent of Barbarella's; unlike the louche suitor in *Erotikon*, it is not through the force of his virility that Dildano produces Barbarella's orgasm. Both Professor Ping (Marcel Marceau) and the President himself are presented as benign, doting old men. The villain, Durand-Durand (Milo O'Shea), is a campy, prematurely aged hysteric (“I could never have recognized you,” exclaims Barbarella, “I thought you were only 25 years old! What happened?!”) who concocts S/M devices as a displacement of the phallic power it is implied his own body fails to possess. Only the “hypermasculine hairy Catchman” (Parks, 264) seems to represent anything like conventional masculinity in *Barbarella*. And at first, it does seem as if this hyperbolically hirsute figure comes on the scene as what Barbarella has been looking for without knowing it, as what she needed all along: an authentically virile man to teach her about the pleasures of old-fashioned heterosexual sex. But just as the film elides the sex that Barbarella has with the Catchman (though it shows her in a posture of postcoital enjoyment), it quickly leaves him behind, making him as redundant as every other temporary agent of Barbarella's pleasure. Far from a privileged figure of masculine virility that would teach Barbarella that anatomy truly is destiny, both Barbarella and *Barbarella* forget about the Catchman almost as quickly as he has come (in both senses). This old-fashioned or “primitive” form of sex — heterosexual fucking — though it appears to Barbarella as an unexpectedly enjoyable novelty, is merely one pleasurable experience among many, and by no means the privileged one.

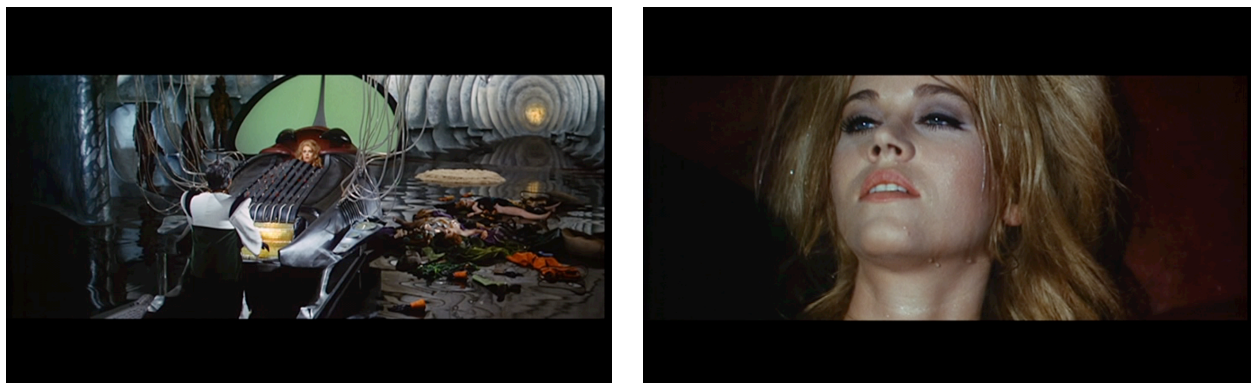
While the encounter with the Catchman, and Barbarella's subsequent sex with Pygar, are elided, the film does however give a lot of visual attention to Barbarella's sexual pleasure in two subsequent scenes; it is in these scenes that Fonda's becomes “the “first (American) face of female orgasm on the American screen” (Williams, 169). The first orgasm we see occurs during “exaltation transference” with Dildano. Although we have been led to believe that sex in 40,000 AD, de-biologized and non-penetrative, has been reduced to its functional role in fostering psychological bonds between individuals pre-screened as compatible, we learn in this scene that futuristic sex nevertheless works on the body and appears to occasion a distinctly sensual form of pleasure, one that is de-genitalized and spread across the entire body. Barbarella's orgasm is indicated by the spontaneous curling of her hair. After “coming,” she loses interest and forgets that Dildano has not yet reached climax; the relation between parties to the sexual act is here not the “war” Bersani writes of, nor the “intercourse” of Dworkin's famous analysis. It is a civil and contractual exchange between equals. After Barbarella politely resumes her position (touching hands), Dildano's pleasure becomes

so intense that his hand spontaneously catches alight, before his hair also curls and stands up on end, signaling that some futuristic, hyper-sensual but non-genital orgasm has been achieved.



Figs. 11-12: Non-genital orgasms: Barbarella's hair curls, and Dildano's finger catches alight

Here any specificity of anatomical configuration has been removed from the sexual equation, and sex no longer involves differentiated physical positions; total structural symmetry, which is to say equality, of the partners has been achieved. There is no penetration of bodies involved in this form of sexual pleasure which is rather an individual, seemingly idealized, though still sensual, affair. In Barbarella's next orgasm, coupling is done away with altogether. After escaping previous attempts to imprison her, Barbarella is found by Durand-Durand in one of the S/M-like halls of Sogo, and taken by him to his chamber, where he intends to torture her, for the sake of his own pleasure, with his various "devices." (That Durand-Durand's sadistic and non-reciprocal approach to pleasure marks him as a "*non-liberal sexual subject*" corresponds to the fact that he fled the Republic of Earth for the rogue state, Tau Ceti.) He forces Barbarella into a large machine that looks like a church organ, the "Exsexive Machine." Durand-Durand begins to play the organ, which covers the heroine's entire body, with only her face exposed. "When we reach the crescendo you will die," he tells her, "—of pleasure." Again, sexual-sensual pleasure is figured as non-genital, now literally spread across the surface of the body, as the organ stimulates Barbarella's entire organism. But Barbarella's limitless capacity for pleasure foils the evil scientist's murderous plan; rather than reach the moment of *petite mort* which would represent the limit point of pleasure — the point where it tips over into death — Barbarella proves herself scandalously devoid of such limits ("Have you no shame?!" exclaims her tyrannical oppressor).



Figs. 13-14: Barbarella in the Exsexive machine

In Williams' reading of this scene, she points out that *Barbarella* here gives body to the new sexological research of Masters and Johnson in the 1960s which showed that, in Mary Jane Sherfey's summation, "a woman could go on having orgasms indefinitely"³⁴:

In this scene a finite, masculine concept of sexual pleasure as climax and crescendo— the quintessentially French and male concept of orgasm as a kind of *petite mort* — comes up against the lessons of Kinsey, Masters and Johnson, and feminist sexological revisions of female sexual pleasure as potentially infinite. (*Screening Sex*, 168).

Williams quotes Barbara Seaman's feminist paraphrase of the results of those sexological researches: "*The more a woman does, the more she can, and the more she can, the more she wants to.*"³⁵ So according to this reading, *Barbarella* embodies "female sexual pleasure" in its distinctive difference from "male" pleasure understood as finite and limited. Even more: *Barbarella* represents a female sexual pleasure whose "female" quality equates to its limitlessness, its lack of limits, thus the impossibility of its transgression. Female pleasure, as described by Sherfey and Seaman and put on view in *Barbarella* is a pleasure that is not *jouissance*, where the latter term is bound up in transgression and death. This specifically female pleasure, though here shown to be spread across the body, was in the emergent feminist discourse of the 1960s associated with the clitoris, reclaimed as an organ of women's sexual independence and thus sexual autonomy. The vaginal orgasm, by contrast, depended on penetration, normatively (though of course not necessarily) heterosexual, but fundamentally *relational* in the sense Dworkin would later describe it, i.e. as problematically unequal. Clitoral orgasm seemed to save women from the subordination which heterosexual coitus might be taken (was taken by Dworkin) to phenomenologically represent, or to anatomically reify. The clitoral orgasm was a non-penetrative orgasm, thus an orgasm freed from intercourse, from any function in reproduction and from hetero-relationality in general; it was also, per Sherfey, Koedt, and other feminist writers, limitless and inexhaustible. Dispensing with the structure of "vaginal" or penetrative relationality, the reclaimed clitoral orgasm appeared as embodied analog of — even means to — an autonomy represented as sexual even as it transcended the meanings conventionally associated with sexual difference.

In *Barbarella* — which now begins to appear a less "unserious" film than we at first assumed — the trope of women's limitless capacity for orgasm was appropriated from contemporary literature and mapped onto a futuristic political parable. *Barbarella* cannot die of pleasure because hers is a sexuality freed from any limit to the pleasure principle, cut off decisively from death. At the same time, *Barbarella*'s limitless capacity for a non-penetrative pleasure, spread over the entire organism, radically unmoored from any particular relational scene or structure, is precisely what characterizes her as the subject of the utopian futuristic order of a perfectly realized liberal democracy. That *Barbarella*'s pleasure functions in this way is intimately connected with — is the very means of representing — the utopian political order for which she serves, in the film, as a literal ambassador. *Barbarella* narrativizes the fusion of sexuality — now transfigured as physiological pleasure dissociated from relationality or psychological desire — with the political system of liberalism.

³⁴ Mary Jane Sherfey, "A Theory on Female Sexuality," in Jeffrey Escoffier (ed.) *Sexual Revolution*, p. 91. Anne Koedt's influential pamphlet, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," was written in 1968, the same year *Barbarella* was made. Also cf Jane Gerhard's excellent history of the trope of the orgasm in second-wave feminism: *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920 to 1982*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

³⁵ Barbara Seaman, "Is Woman Insatiable?" in *Free and Female: The Sex Life of the Contemporary Woman*, New York: Fawcett, 1972, p. 133 (quoted in Williams, p. 167).

Pleasure freed from intercourse is pleasure as a property of the body and of the autonomous subject. More to the point, this pleasure is the property specifically of a subject who in the film inhabits — and indeed who embodies—the utopian order of a universalized liberal democracy.

Parks is thus compelling in all but the last claim when she writes that Barbarella:

embraces her own bodily pleasures...; evades compulsory heterosexuality and its institutions of monogamy and marriage; and... advocates political agendas that contradict those of the Western nation-state. (*op. cit.*, 260-1)

On the contrary, Barbarella's autonomization of pleasure is the precise means through which she becomes an *agent of* the (now universalized) "Western nation-state." Parks worries that the film "subordinates [Barbarella's] desires to those of the state she serves" (263), but it would be more correct to say that it effects the *perfect reconciliation of her desires with those of the state she serves*. *Barbarella* imagines the universalized liberal nation-state (or more precisely, federation) as expressive of the general will, a seamless function of political representation that has now come to also function at the level of bodily pleasure; in other words, Barbarella's sexual emancipation and the political "emancipation" through liberalism promises to deliver its subject from the tyranny of feudalism or dictatorship are made commensurate.

There is of course the seemingly paradoxical fact that Barbarella's peace-sustaining, democratic sexuality paradoxically appears in the context of the film's relentless interest in subjecting her to a never-ending series of resolutely *non-democratic* punishments. She is encircled and almost pecked to death by a horde of sharp-toothed, mechanical dolls; and then again later by birds, this time imprisoned by the Concierge in a conveniently transparent cage. Nor is Barbarella the only one whose fleshly travails are on display: Pygar too, whose blindness bears testament to previous episodes of torture, is surrounded and taunted with knives by a bloodthirsty and lecherous horde, and later strung up as if to be crucified. Of course, the film dissociates these "dumb sadistic episodes," as Kael calls them ("The Current Cinema," 182), from the guileless, liberal pleasures enjoyed by Barbarella and also at one point by Pygar. They take place on (and are therefore confined to) the military dictatorship Tau Ceti — but so does the film's action, in its entirety. The sadomasochistic and anti-egalitarian pleasures it casts as foreign, as external to the universal liberal democracy from which Barbarella hails and whose democratic pleasures it endorses, are the very ones that constitute its textual substance, and thus its primary point of interest. The film, in other words, constructs a narrative pretext that separates its own enunciative perspective from the sadistic forms of enjoyment that are in fact entirely products of its own imagination.

Parks sees these "sadistic" episodes as compromising the feminist potential that inheres in the film's granting narrative and political agency to its female protagonist. "Torture," she writes, "is a strategy deployed within the narrative to keep the sexual and technological prowess of the female astronaut in check" (268). Yet it is precisely *through* these episodes that Barbarella's pleasure principle is established as transcendent of context, as an autonomous property. In other words, is through her *indifference* to sadism — her ability to float above it, as it were, to abstract the pleasure from it — that Barbarella emerges, triumphantly, as a liberal sexual subject. As Parks also notes, Barbarella does not seem to be affected much by anything that happens to her: her "vulnerability is constructed as fleeting or superficial — as a quick-healing wound on the female body rather than a deep-rooted psychological trauma... Barbarella bleeds one moment and orgasms the next" (270). This is exactly right, though it does *not* follow, as Parks contends, that "[t]he film thus constructs a sadomasochistic sexuality for Barbarella, positioning her as both sadistic aggressor and docile masochist" (*ibid.*). Just

the opposite is the case: *Barbarella* is, quite clearly, neither a sadistic aggressor nor a docile masochist — and that is precisely the point. The sadist takes pleasure in the relational structure that accords him power at the expense of the subordination (willful or not) of the other. The masochist finds enjoyment in his submission to the will of the other, using will to go beyond the pleasure principle, beyond physiological impulse. (For example, the masochist willfully overcomes his body's impulsive retraction from pain; he finds enjoyment in this overcoming of physiological instinct.)³⁶ But *Barbarella's* pleasure, as I have been arguing, has nothing to do with self-overcoming, and is completely detached from any structure of relationality other than an egalitarian-democratic model of contract between equals. That pleasure is the faculty of her body's physiological relation to itself, a relation that transcends relational context and thus establishes her autonomy.

Logos and Eros unite

In the futuristic utopia imagined by *Barbarella*, the abolition of the patriarchal family that renders all sexual subjects equal has been effected not through Socialist revolution but, on the contrary, through the progressive self-corrective mechanisms of liberalism itself. Freed from its normative *social* form — the family — sexuality is no longer marshaled into sustaining a particular division of the public from the private, and the social form *of* the private, but is now a matter of the subject's pleasure alone. I have been arguing that this represents a fusion of sexual representations (the “making-public” of sex) with liberal concepts and categories, in a manner that produces the image of a reconfigured liberalism, which now no longer cordons sexuality off to the domain of the private or “off scene.” I have thus attempted to show how the proliferation of sexual figures as sex comes “on/scene” in the 1960s evidences more than just the sexist production of a “male gaze,” or an increasing cultural prurience. Obviously this was not a change that was effected only in the domain of visual culture, but I have tried to show that the emphasis on the representability of pleasure in film played a key role in its cultural consolidation.

Twelve years before the release of *Barbarella*, Herbert Marcuse made a serious philosophical attempt to reconcile the domains of sensuous pleasure with the principles of freedom and equality that I have taken to be important normative goals of liberal democracy (though Marcuse was himself obviously not a liberal).³⁷ Marcuse argues that in a philosophical tradition dating back to Plato, the “sensuous and appetitive” faculties of the individual, or Eros, have been pitched as antagonists to Logos, where “Logos is reason which subdues the instincts” (126). The subjugation of the sensuous and appetitive faculties is, “at least since Plato, regarded as a constitutive element of human reason, which is thus in its very function repressive” (110). But Marcuse argues that the repression of instincts (drives) is only necessary under conditions of scarcity, and is thus no longer necessary in a

³⁶ See my essay “*Gag the Fag*, or Tops and Bottoms, Persons and Things” for a longer reading of sadism and masochism through an analysis of violent pornography. *Barbarella* could only be said to be “masochistic” in the expanded and idiosyncratic sense Bersani uses that term to describe the non-relational ground of sexual experience.

³⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1966 (first edition 1955). Marcuse hardly saw himself as contributing to a “liberal” theory; his political orientation was, rather, Marxist. However, not only in his reliance on Kant, the values that drive his inquiry are the same ones that find expression in key liberal documents: freedom, equality, and the pursuit of “perpetual peace.” So I would argue there is an overlap here between what I have been calling “liberalism” and a divergent tradition of humanist Marxism that, like Marx himself, was critical of the abstraction embedded in liberal concepts of rights but nevertheless committed to the values those rights purportedly upheld.

technologically advanced world. (Here we see that Marcuse subscribes to a teleological narrative of civilization, and argues that the technological development that comes with advanced industrial capitalism furnishes the previously-lacking tools to fashion, for the first time in history, a truly equitable and peaceful social order.³⁸) In such a world, where necessity loosens its hold on us, Eros need no longer be repressed and can be reconciled with reason and with the humanist values civilization rightfully strives to uphold.

Imagining the emergence of what he calls a “non-repressive reality principle,” i.e. a social order in which material necessity (the “reality principle”) would not require the repression of libido, Marcuse writes, in a famous passage:

No longer used as a full-time instrument of labor, the body would be resexualized. The regression involved in this spread of the libido would first manifest itself in a reactivation of all erotogenic zones and, consequently, in a resurgence of pregenital polymorphous sexuality and in a decline of genital supremacy. The body in its entirety would become an object of cathexis, a thing to be enjoyed — an instrument of pleasure. This change in the value of and scope of libidinal relations would lead to a disintegration of the institutions in which the private interpersonal relations have been organized, particularly the monogamic and patriarchal family. (201)

The world Barbarella harks from, the sun system of 40000 AD, is one in which something like what Marcuse imagines has been achieved — not in the way he imagined, through the abolition of capitalism, but with the same results he anticipated, a fusion of (civilizing) Logos and (sexualizing) Eros, and the rendering redundant of the “monogamic and patriarchal family” through the re-activation of the body’s full potential for pleasure.

While Barbarella’s full-bodied orgasm evacuates Marcuse’s polemic of its associations with the critique of capital, it nevertheless figures — and translates into the realm of popular culture — his politico-philosophical proposition, now (to his dismay, no doubt) under the sign of capitalist liberal democracy. In so doing, it calls attention to another one of Marcuse’s claims, rarely remarked on, but in fact of crucial importance to his argument. In order to argue, *contra* Freud, that under conditions of technological advancement, freeing the instincts would effect the realization of civilizational goals rather than their demise, Marcuse takes “instincts,” or “drives” (for Freud, *Triebe*) to be entirely *libidinal*, thus, on the side of “Eros.” But of course, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud shocked his followers by positing the disconcerting existence of a (silent, invisible) *Todestrieb*, a death drive, a countervailing instinctual force that is precisely *not* libido.³⁹ Against Freud’s insistence on the duality and *irreducibility* of these two drives, libido and death drive, Eros and Thanatos, Marcuse argues that under the utopian conditions he projects, they would be united.

In the final chapter of his great utopian work, Marcuse discusses the fate of the death drive in a non-repressive civilization. What appears to be the death drive, Marcuse argues, is a manifestation of the “Nirvana principle,” the desire to return to a zero tension state. Thus, he writes, the real aim of

³⁸ This bears a parallel to Shulamith Firestone’s argument that technology could, and eventually would, be harnessed to modify nature so that women would no longer have to bear the burden of reproduction and child-rearing. It is this burden, according to Firestone, that lies at the root of their oppression; doing away with this natural or biological inequality using modern technologies is the only way to produce the conditions for true equality.

³⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, New York: Norton, 1975.

this drive is the termination not of life but of pain — the reduction of tension. And here is the crucial intervention: under conditions where “life approximates the state of gratification,” there would be no more need to escape the painful tension of life, and thus, no death drive:

As suffering and want recede, the Nirvana principle may become reconciled with the reality principle. The unconscious attraction that draws the instincts back to an “earlier state” would be effectively counteracted by the desirability of the attained state of life.

The “conservative nature” of the instincts would come to rest in a fulfilled present. (235)

The death drive would be taken up and transfigured as pleasure principle, in a civilization where life was enjoyable rather than a source of suffering. In other words, by satisfying the drive towards pleasure, conditions would be created under which there would *only* be pleasure — limitless pleasure — and no countervailing force. “Pleasure principle and Nirvana principle [would] then converge” (*ibid.*). Freud’s *Todestrieb* has been refashioned as not an ontological, biological or psychic principle, but rather as the product of historically remediable conditions of alienation.

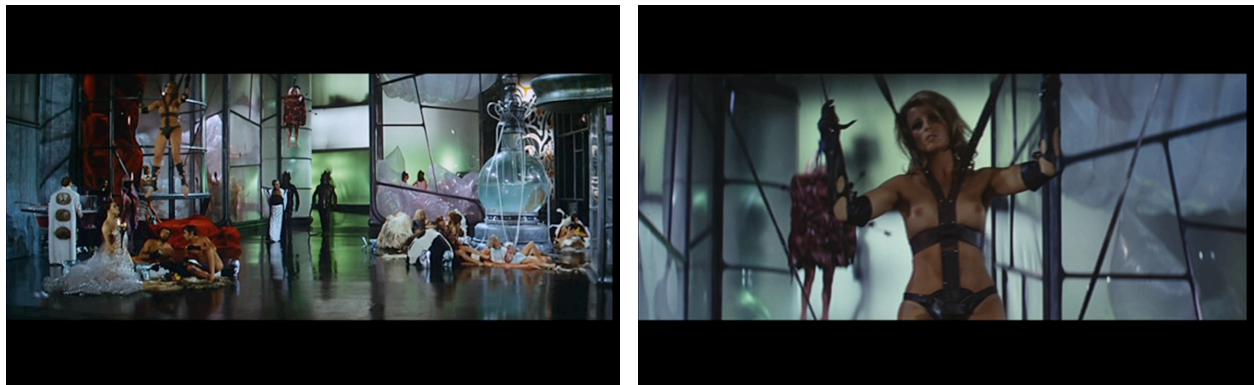
Barbarella appears as the subject of this redeemed civilization, one who embodies the principle of limitless pleasure, where the death drive has been transfigured as another iteration of the pleasure principle rather than its unspeakable beyond. In sacrificing the death drive, it turns out that what Marcuse is also willing to relinquish is the domain in which Freud tells us it insists — the unconscious. Barbarella, subject of (a) a liberal utopia and (b) a limitless pleasure principle with no beyond, is a figure of the subject liberated from the unconscious. Her unlimited capacity for pleasure is at once what occasions the possibility of a new world order — what literally equips her to be the political subject of this utopian order — and what designates her as a subject without any depth, a subject of pleasure but not desire (in the Foucauldian sense I described above). It is only in this way that, as Marcuse puts it, “reason and instinct could unite” (235)— only by saving instinct/drive from the unconscious, which is of course precisely not reasonable. Of the body and its pleasures, nothing remains obscured or “displace[d]... onto another scene.”⁴⁰ Barbarella, a new embodiment of a liberal sexual subject — one fashioned specifically through figures of female sexuality — thus reveals that the sexuality that subject redeems for civilization is precisely a sexuality that is all pleasure and no desire, a pleasure principle that has assimilated the death drive (like capitalism assimilates the signs of resistance to it) and that ostensibly (like Barbarella’s pleasure in the Exsexive machine, and like liberalism itself) has no limit — and no outside. The fantasy of the liberal sexual subject is the fantasy of a sexual-political subject who, resolving the antinomy between reason and instinct, has achieved this resolution by erasing drive and unconscious from the field of universality to which pleasure now *delivers* that subject and the world.

the queer exception

Yet the unconscious, the domain of desire, is *not* eradicated from the *mise-en-scène* of *Barbarella* (as it will be, I will later argue, in *Shortbus*); it remains omnipresent, bubbling away the whole time, literally below the surface, in the figure of the Matmos, that giant river of energy in liquid form that provides power and light to the city of SoGo. The Matmos, which, as the Concierge tells Barbarella, “feeds on negative psychic vibrations... [and] thrives on evil thoughts, deeds, and flesh,” is an

⁴⁰ This is Teresa de Lauretis’s description of the drive in “Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future,” in Damon Young & Joshua J. Weiner (eds.), *Queer Bonds*, GLQ 17.2-3 (2011), p. 259. It is worth noting, though, that in *Barbarella* that “other scene” is Tau Ceti, whose inhabitants are queer; the perverse drive is thus *segregated* from a newly united Logos and Eros, but not yet entirely eradicated.

embodiment of what Laplanche and Pontalis might call the dimension of sexuality as death drive, as the self-shattering of the subject, of proliferating partial objects, of polymorphous perversion.⁴¹ While the Sun system of 40,000 AD is imagined as a liberal utopia that has achieved world peace *through* sexual liberation and a consequent freedom from “neurotic irresponsibility,” Tau Ceti represents the dystopian inversion of liberal values — here a Great Tyrant rules a subjugated population by force, through the military might of her army of “Leathermen.” As the reference to “Leathermen” suggests, Tau Ceti— fueled by the energy of the Matmos — is portrayed as a planet where sexuality takes the forms of sadomasochism, homosexuality and polymorphous perversion (those things being lumped together). When the Great Tyrant first appears, she is in disguise as a lesbian prostitute who first kills two men who are threatening to rape Barbarella, before attempting to seduce the beautiful Earthling herself: “Do you want to come and play with me?” she asks. “For someone like you, I charge nothing.” The halls and rooms of SoGo are kitted out in the iconography of S/M, replete with naked bodies strung up in slings, leather harnesses, and sex slaves in cages. If Barbarella’s pleasure principle is a principle of equality in autonomy — and of pleasure detachable from desire — sex in SoGo, by contrast, is Sadean in structure; it depends inherently on a relational structure that eroticizes *inequality*. Sadomasochistic sex is here the embodied expression of a feudal, pre-liberal political system, where no rights or social contract exist, and where a sovereign rules despotically by force.



Figs. 8 and 9: Sadomasochistic SoGo

So it seems the film presents us with two counterposed social-political systems, figured as divergent sexual styles, and furthermore embodied in parallel, inverted mirror images of sexually liberated women. On the one hand, Barbarella’s sexuality, all pleasure principle and no death drive, typifies her as representative of a utopian society as the projected and perfected future of liberal democracy; on the other, the Great Tyrant’s lesbian and sadomasochistic sexuality is the correlate of a brutal dictatorship where human rights, equality and freedom have been decisively negated, and where slavery persists as a means of providing pleasure. Sexuality in Tau Ceti is instrumentalizing and hierarchical, characterized by a *lack* of what Gayle Rubin describes as an ethics of “*mutual*

⁴¹ In *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), Jean Laplanche recasts the duality between Eros and *Todestrieb* as two dimensions of sexuality — ego and the imaginary are on one side, and on the other, the decomposition or shattering of the ego, sexuality as perverse partial drives. So for these authors, the death drive is not outside sexuality, it is one of its two poles.

consideration.”⁴² So the liberal fantasy of formally equal and self-determining subjects, universally but freely agreeing to participate in the social contract, now corresponds to — and is realized through — a pleasure principle which incarnates autonomy as the body’s depthless and universalizable capacity for pleasure, but its perverse “beyond” is not so much overcome as relegated to a geographically distinct domain — the rogue state, the dictatorship outside the universal liberal federation. Counterposing the vision of perfected liberal democracy articulated through and as the pleasure principle, “primitive” society — tribal culture, military dictatorship or feudal monarchy — is expressed through a sexuality beyond the pleasure principle, concentrated in the hands of a sovereign; sadomasochistic, anti-humanist and perverse. Barbarella and the Great Tyrant are inverted mirror images, whose sexuality is mapped onto their similar bodies as a (historically new) imprinting of political allegory.⁴³ The racialized dimension of this bifurcation is also clear: Barbarella is the blonde, French and English-speaking subject of the democratic revolutions; the Great Tyrant, attended by an army of black Leathermen, speaks an incomprehensible, “tribal” language and lives in a “primitive” condition of pre-liberal anti-humanism.



Fig. 10: The Great Tyrant vs. Barbarella: inverted mirror images; politics as sexual style

In the end, it is Barbarella — the liberal sexual subject — who emerges as triumphant, though as it turns out, the queer Great Tyrant is also saved by Pygar, who tells her by way of explanation that “an angel has no memory” — unlike the unconscious, which records every experience, an angel is and remains a blank slate, free, then, of a specifically *psychic* life. The film can’t, it seems, give up on that psychic life entirely; the perverse unconscious is not finally eradicated, and is transported back to the Sun System at the end of the film along with Barbarella. What emerges in *Barbarella* is a liberal sexual subject freed from the “status” difference of the patriarchal family, possessor of a pleasure that is autonomous and able to abstract itself from any relational scene, but a subject who has achieved this “liberation” by externalizing non-egalitarian relationality, perversion, the drive, and queerness in the form of an inverted double, to whom she remains, at the end, stuck fast. As Barbarella flies back to the land of universal liberty and freedom from neurotic

⁴² Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex” — for Rubin this ethics corresponds to the “democratic morality” of sex she valorizes, which I discussed in the introduction.

⁴³ For another film which also uses science fiction to analogize sexual practices to forms of political organization, cf *Zardoz* (John Boorman, 1974), a film whose sexual-political semiotics merits its own analysis (and which bears parallels to *Barbarella*).

irresponsibility with the memory-less angel Pygar, she carries that double with her, the embodiment of everything that has had to be refused in order to save sexuality from the unconscious, the subject from the drive. The Great Tyrant and the rogue state she rules over illegitimately are the first of many figures we will encounter of the “queer exception” — still here (in 1968) quite literally marked as queer.⁴⁴



liberal ironies

As a final point of consideration, recall that Kael, in her review, while disparaging the film's production values and the acting of its cast members, nevertheless singled out Fonda for praise, writing that Fonda is “accomplished at a distinctive kind of double take” that installs an ironic distance from her material, but that does not negate pleasure: Fonda as Barbarella “registers comic disbelief that such naughty things can be happening to her, and then her disbelief changes into an even more comic delight” (“The Current Cinema,” p. 182). For Kael, Fonda's self-consciousness transcends the film's badness. As the critic describes it, Fonda's is a reflexivity that produces ironic distance without separating the reflexive subject from pleasure and “delight.” Here we might recall Michael Warner's Habermasian argument that there is a “special role for critical judgment in modern Western societies.”⁴⁵ Habermas posits a “role-detached, posttraditional self-consciousness” that he also “identifies with the normative content of [Western] modernity.” That modernity, for Habermas (and for Warner), is organized around the “norm of critical self-consciousness in an environment of equals.” He might have been describing Barbarella — or Fonda's performance, whose knowingness surely projects itself into an “environment of [equally self-conscious] equals.”

In this sense, Barbarella comes on scene (and just comes) as the Habermasian subject of “modernity” who, however, has reconciled sexual pleasure *with* that “norm of critical self-consciousness.” (For Habermas of course, sexual pleasure belongs to an entirely separate realm, one that is strictly distinct from the domain of critical self-consciousness.) In other words, her reflexivity — inherent to Fonda's performance, as Kael noted, and pervasive in the film's style — is integral to her status as a liberal subject; or to put it differently, the film's irony allows it to perform at the level of its own enunciation the “role-detached, posttraditional self-consciousness” that, within the film,

⁴⁴ The film bears a parallel in this sense to the theories of Wilhelm Reich, who believed that a liberated sexuality would leave not only the death drive but also homosexuality and other symptomatic forms of “perversion” behind.

⁴⁵ Michael Warner, “Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality,” in *Engendering Men*, Boone & Cadden (eds.), 1990, p. 205.

sexual pleasure (in detaching itself from its “traditional” relational structures, and making itself autonomous and entirely self-referential) represents. This means the film can’t be “pinned” to any of its own positions or operations, including its “sexist” voyeurism; the striptease with which it opens is at once a “striptease” in quotation marks. But, crucially, what *survives* this process of ironization, this ironic self-distancing — indeed what is produced through it — is a pleasure that is reconciled with, and installed as central to, a subjectivity explicitly characterized as liberal democratic, in the most utopian sense. Non-ironic (because merely physiological) pleasure and critical self-consciousness are united.

If here it becomes clear that camp—in that it is an aesthetic modality of critical self-consciousness — is quite compatible with Habermas’s model, what remains however undigested is the question of gender itself. The tensions between Habermas’s posttraditional, role-detached and critically self-conscious subject and the division of sexual difference is one that has been explored by Habermasian feminists including Joan Landes and Seyla Benhabib. The normative goal that emerges from their discussions is one that envisages “the extension of a postconventional and egalitarian morality into spheres of life [i.e. private life, sexual relations and the family] which were hitherto controlled by tradition, custom, rigid role expectations and outright inequalities.”⁴⁶ *Barbarella* effectively projects the achievement of this saturation of private space with public and egalitarian values into the year 40,000 A.D. Like Benhabib, it also associates this achievement with the progressive perfection of a liberal democratic system. In fact, it goes further than Benhabib in imagining *bodily pleasure itself*— no doubt what seems least amenable to rationalization (certainly, Horkheimer and Adorno thought so, as the epigraph attests) — as a domain of liberalization. But bodily pleasure, in *Barbarella*, remains resolutely gendered. The face of pleasure as detached from “role expectations,” from “inequalities” — the face of posttraditional, role-detached, autonomous pleasure — is a female face. This fact leads in turn to an observation of potentially broader consequence, namely that the sexualization of autonomy I have been describing comes on scene under the sign of the specifically *female* orgasm. It is hard to think, in fact, of an analogous (or any) cinematic treatment of a man’s face during orgasm, whereas in this chapter I have mentioned some of the many famous images of orgasming women that have proliferated in the twentieth century.

I conclude with the question of whether transparent liberal “pleasure,” unlike troublingly opaque “desire,” is coded female. Has film culture, in France or the US, produced representations of male pleasure detached from desire, of a pure self-reflexivity of male pleasure, pleasure reduced to its physiological self-sameness? (I cannot think of any.) The figure of arelational self-shattering, or of a merely pleasurable self-realization that detaches itself from traditional relational structures, seems to be resolutely female, making what I am calling the “liberal sexual subject” a female — or perhaps a feminine — subject. The irony that permeates *Barbarella*, which Vadim described as a “ruthless satire on the problems of our times,” is unmistakably shot through a sense of resistance to this feminization of the liberal public sphere to which it also lays claim as its image of utopia. The final irony of the film, then, is that it is the *resolutely female* face of orgasm that — raising itself up as avatar of the abstract and autonomous subject of liberalism — overcomes gender itself. The film-makers we will consider in the next chapter explore this paradox in all its aporetic density.

⁴⁶ Benhabib, “Models of Public Space,” p. 88.

Visaage/Con: Facing the Body in 1975, or Breillat's Vaginal Vision

C'est qu'on est dans une énorme contradiction, quand on est dans un corps de femme.

— Agnès Varda, *Réponse de Femmes* (1975)

Je ne peux pas admettre la proximité de mon visage et mon vagin: “I cannot accept the proximity of my face and my vagina.” So says Alice, the troubled teenaged protagonist of Catherine Breillat’s 1976 feature debut, *Une Vraie Jeune Fille*, a film which, deemed too controversial for release at the time of its completion, would not see the light of day until it finally premiered at the Rotterdam Film Festival some twenty-three years later, in 1999.¹ The conundrum that Alice here gives voice to — one that would preoccupy the film-maker for the rest of her career — emerges in the context of the radical feminist movement of the 1970s — movement in the sense of *shift*, impetus, new critical configuration — which was developing in a number of different perspectives on both sides of the Atlantic. Alice’s 14-year-old body, which she tells us is “well-developed for [its] age,” is, in the film, a figure of transition, a movement towards adulthood, autonomous personhood, and indeed citizenship, symbolized by the *face* — and here we might note in the light of recent events the particular significance of the face in France, a face which must not be covered, whose accessibility to public scrutiny is seen as a *condition* of citizenship.² The face, as we see in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, can dignify a whole ethical philosophy. For film theorist Béla Balázs, the face “is man in his most subjective manifestation”; in Jacques Aumont’s estimation, it is what “permit[s] me to access the humanity of other men.”³ And as then-prime minister François Fillon made clear in banning the niqab from public spaces in 2011, facial visibility is considered a *sine qua non* of republican belonging. A covered face, said Fillon, “is incompatible with the principles of liberty, equality and human dignity affirmed by the French Republic.”⁴

Yet at the same time that Alice’s body bears a face that grants her a status as subject-citizen — as the “autonomous individual” of French Republicanism (Scott, 127) — Alice’s body also finds itself hailed in a contradictory manner, one whose contours ‘70s feminism was beginning to make clear. While French individualism, like American liberalism, “achieves its universalist status by positing the sameness of all individuals” (Scott 12-13), Alice’s vagina is the bodily inscription of a sexual difference unassimilable to sameness. This was a point underscored in the 1970 manifesto of the

¹ For an account of the film’s beleaguered production and distribution history, see Frédéric Bonnaud, ‘Une Vraie Jeune Fille,’ Nov 30, 1999, at <http://www.lesinrocks.com/cine/cinema-article/t/29710/date/1999-11-30/article/une-vraie-jeune-fille-1/>.

² Cf Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

³ Béla Balázs, “The Face of Man,” in *Theory of Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone, New York: Dover, 1970, p. 60; Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au Cinéma*, Paris: Éditions de l’Étoile, 1992, pp. 51-2 (my translation).

⁴ Quoted in Angelique Chrisafis, “Full-face veils outlawed as France spells out controversial niqab ban,” *The Guardian*, March 3, 2011, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/03/niqab-ban-france-muslim-veil>

radical feminist group, Radicalesbians.⁵ “[W]omen and person,” they wrote, “are contradictory terms.” “Woman” is a term that is defined only relationally and that, moreover, has a specifically sexual meaning: “for a woman to be [autonomous] means she *can’t be* a woman... the essence of being a ‘woman’,” under conditions of patriarchy, “is to get fucked by men” (154). From the separatist point of view of the Radicalesbians, the only way to forge a true autonomy for women would be to retreat completely from heterosexual relations, and thus from the structure of hetero-relationality that produces the meaning of woman. From this point of view, the tension Alice experiences between face and sex is the contradiction between being a public, unmarked subject — the subject of (and with) a face — and having a body that consigns her to the category of beings who are “dehumanized as *sex objects*” (Radicalesbians, 154).⁶

Face and sex, though Alice finds their proximity unbearable, are nevertheless made constantly proximate in the montage and the camerawork of *Une Vraie Jeune Fille*, which oscillates from one to the other, as if trying to enframe the conundrum, to distill it into visual terms. And certainly the medium itself is *implicated* in the conundrum it also documents, in ways that were becoming increasingly clear in the 1970s. It is through this medium that Breillat attempts, throughout her career, to bring it into focus. One way in which she does so is by insisting on showing the sex organs in close-up. The cinematic close-up, as Deleuze observes in *Cinema 1*, is a technique that has been especially associated with the human face — a technique, as the philosopher puts it, of “faceification.” Commenting on the “fundamental link which unites the cinema, the face and the close-up,” Deleuze quotes Bergman: “Our work begins with the human face... The possibility of drawing near to the human face is the primary originality and the distinctive quality of the cinema.”⁷ This, and his reading of Balázs, lead Deleuze to assert that “there is no close-up *of* the face, the face is itself close-up, the close-up by itself face” (88).

For her part, Breillat tests this logic of “faceification” out against what is most determinedly, in Alice’s opinion, not face; namely, the vagina. Breillat takes the formal means the cinema invented for rendering the face in its most exquisite detail and applies them to the depiction of an organ which in her films, as we shall see, annuls the attributes associated with the face — individuation, subjectivity, autonomy, dignity. In a later film, *Romance* (1999) (the film that first brought her notoriety), Breillat reprises the scene from *Une Vraie Jeune Fille*. The protagonist of that film, Marie, expresses her conundrum in terms almost identical to Alice’s. Marie holds a mirror and lifts her gaze from her sex organs to her face. As in the earlier film, the two are rendered visually discontinuous: reflected in a mirror whose frame keeps the two body part distinct, we see first a close-up of Marie’s vulva, then, as she angles the mirror upwards, a close-up of her face. “Paul [her husband] is right,” she tells us in voiceover, “you can’t love this face if this cunt goes with it. This cunt doesn’t go with this face. [*On ne peut pas aimer ce visage s’il a ce con. Ce con ne peut pas appartenir a ce visage.*]”

⁵ Radicalesbians, “The Woman-Identified Woman,” in Linda Nicholson, ed., *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 153-157.

⁶ On several occasions when I have presented parts of this chapter, I have met with exasperation — even outright hostility — from an audience for whom statements such as this are either utterly incomprehensible or else simply reprehensible. I can only assume that the rustle of resistance that accompanies the very mention of “’70s feminism” suggests the ongoing salience of some of its arguments.

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 99.

Unlike in the earlier film, the heroine of *Romance* attributes the insight about this incommensurability not to herself but to her husband Paul, who we are told refuses to have sex with her (the significance of this fact will become clear later). Marie proceeds to recount a fantasy in which the division between face and sex is starkly spatialized. We see her stretched out on a bed, with her body literally divided in the middle by a wall. *Côté tête*, as Breillat puts it in the screenplay, “charming and well-raised young people, Paul among them, form loving and courteous couples.” On the other side of the wall, the lower half of Marie’s body lies alongside the lower halves of several other faceless women, all dressed in lingerie exposing their genitals. In voiceover, Marie recounts (my rough translation):

I often imagine a brothel in which the head would be separated from the body by a system resembling a guillotine before the blade falls. Of course, there would be no blade. I wear a silky red skirt that billows up and ruffles, and those ridiculous accessories that make men hard. Which proves that a hard-on doesn’t mean they love us. Paul is right, being a woman is fatally flawed [*être femme, c’est rédhitoire*]...⁸

Côté sexe, a group of grotesque, “ape-like” men with erect penises amble around and take turns penetrating the exposed bodies (the penetration is shown, not simulated — Breillat’s miming of a pornographic vernacular is precisely the point here). The voiceover continues: “...because a woman one gets hard for is a woman one wants to fuck. And to want to fuck a woman is to despise her [*la mépriser*].”

I suggested that Breillat puts bodies on view in such an explicit manner in order to confront — rather than retreat from, elide or cover over — the conundrum expressed by Alice (in 1976) and Marie (in 1999). But contrary to what many commentators on Breillat seem to believe, Breillat’s gaze

⁸ Catherine Breillat, *Romance: Scénario*, Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1999, p.

on the body is not a redemptive one.⁹ Her taste for cinematic “realism” draws little solace from André Bazin’s famous assertion that the “only the impassive lens... is able to present [the objective world] in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love.”¹⁰ What is brought into view in Breillat has no virginal purity, nor does it solicit my love. The “objective world” that cinema reveals is not benign but rather riven by an incommensurability between face and sex, one that makes “love,” as we shall see, a difficult and paradoxical proposition. Breillat’s realism is the realism of pornography, which she deploys in order to launch an assault both on the notion of the “subject” and on the inherited French understanding of what cinema is and does. (Breillat no doubt agrees with Balázs, however, that “the erotic is film’s very own theme, its essence.”¹¹) The film does not ennoble its spectator, offering the world “in its virginal purity” to my “love”; it confronts me with a spectacle whose intolerability is its very theme.

the female sex on view

Breillat is not the inventor of the vulvic close-up, but she was one of a number of artists and activists on both sides of the Atlantic who were engaged, in the 1970s, in the project of fashioning new

⁹ For this reason, I respectfully disagree with the argument set forth in David Vasse, *Catherine Breillat: un cinéma du rite et du transgression*, Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2004, a book which, like most studies of Breillat, assumes that the director’s aim is to forge a feminine autonomy, to craft through cinema an autarchic female subject. Of the Breillatian heroine, Vasse writes: “Le dépassement auquel elle se livre correspond à une confrontation littéralement renversante avec les maux qui l’accablent et la dévoient, *pour mieux parvenir à une fémininité qui serait presque un être-en-soi inaliénable*” (19; the italicized section reads, “...all the better to achieve a femininity that would be almost an inalienable being-in-itself”). Vasse considers that Breillat’s heroines achieve this inalienable independence by separating their bodies (overdetermined by men’s desires) from their minds, presumably the organ of a true autonomy: “À la base, la femme est clivée, divisée, déchirée entre son sexe, dont elle se sent dépossédée par et à cause du désir circonscrit de l’homme, et sa pensée, qu’elle seule peut dominer.” But the relevant division is not the one between *sexe* and *pensée* (thought) but rather between sex and face — which importantly remains a part of the body. Moreover, I will argue that autonomous self-determination is not the goal to which Breillat’s films aspire. Most critics seem only able to accept the “masochism” and sexual “surrender” in Breillat’s films on condition that they can redeem this disposition by investing it as a strategy for “autonomy.” Consider Liz Constable’s claim, in an essay nevertheless rich in insights, that: “Breillat’s film [*Romance*] suggests that [the controlled surrender to another], *unbecoming* as it might at first appear, is nevertheless often significant to the transformative process of *becoming* a sexual subject for women, and to the articulation of desire *without* masochism for women.” (“Unbecoming Sexual Desires for Women Becoming Sexual Subjects: Simone de Beauvoir and Catherine Breillat,” *MLN* 19.4 (2004): 672-695, p. 693.) What the viewer might mistake for “masochism” is rendered in Constable’s account a merely temporary and therapeutic “surrender” on the way to “desire *without* masochism.” The “alienation and estrangement from self” Breillat’s heroines appear to suffer is only contingently “*social* in origin” and is staged precisely in order to overcome it (675). Although I admire Constable’s careful account, I would submit that in Breillat, alienation and estrangement from self are not contingent and socially imposed obstacles to be overcome but conditions inherent to sexuality. *Pace* Vasse, the body is not overcome (this seems an odd claim, given how relentlessly it is displayed). And what Constable calls “masochism” serves, I suggest, no *therapeutic* purpose whatsoever.

¹⁰ André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. and ed. Hugh Gray, p. 15.

¹¹ Béla Balázs, *Visible Man or The Culture of Film* (1924), in *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory*, ed. Erica Carter, trans. Rodney Livingstone, New York: Berghahn Books, 2010, p. 87.

frames for its representation. If the “discovery and examination of female sexual difference” has been, as Linda Williams suggests, an (or *the*) animating project of hardcore pornography since its inception, in the ‘70s this examination was not the domain of heterosexual male pornographers alone; it was also invested as a vanguard feminist strategy.¹² The genital close-up became an important new focus of feminist art. Betty Tompkins’ *Fuck Paintings*, made between 1969 and 1974, were giant photorealist canvases showing extremely close views of genitals engaged in heterosexual coitus; enlarged in this way, and disconnected from any contextualizing image of the whole body of which they would form a part, the genitals became strange and unnerving forms.¹³ Karen LeCocq’s *Feather Cunt* (1971) is a sculptural representation, in pink feathers and red velvet, of a vagina. Anne Severson’s 1972 film *Near the Big Chakra*, which consists entirely of close-ups of vulvas, brought the trend to (experimental) film. Here it is not faces but genitals that are individuated, the distinctive look or even personality of each produced through silent observation, in a manner reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s *Screen Tests* (which for their part, of course, consist entirely of close-ups of faces); like Warhol’s works, B. Ruby Rich calls Severson’s film “structural.”¹⁴ Severson explained her rationale in an interview in *Film Quarterly*: “I realized I had never seen any woman’s vagina except in crotch shots in pornographic films and magazines or close-ups in birth films.”¹⁵ She saw this lack of visual familiarity with women’s genitals as symptomatic not of any personal aversion on her part but rather of a thoroughgoing cultural proscription.

Severson quickly discovered that the transgression of this representational taboo was liable to elicit violent affective responses. She reports that at numerous screenings, in the US and in Europe, men walked out, hurled abuse at her, or laughed nervously and made ribald jokes. When the film was screened as the closing film of the Ann Arbor Film Festival in 1972, “the event turned into a riot... Someone in the audience was so outraged by the film that he... climbed up and tackled the projectionist.” Meanwhile, “A woman stood at the door, and as people tried to walk out,... [swung] her long shoulder bag by the handle and hit them over the head”: a literal battle of the sexes, inspired by the sight of the vagina.¹⁶ That sight was so disturbing to one man at a screening in London that he apparently vomited in the theater (Rich, 70).

In putting a variety of women’s vulvas on view — displaying without commentary a range of shapes, apparent ages (including one baby, an inclusion that proved controversial) and ethnicities — *Near the Big Chakra* produces a visual pluralism of sex organs. But if it is in this sense a paean to diversity and benign variation, the paradox that arises as the procession of vulvas proceeds is that the greater their unfolding diversity, the stronger a categorical distinction is forged and asserts itself

¹² Certainly the vulvic close-up has been a long staple of the stag film, for example the “beaver” and “split beaver” subgenres. See Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Pleasure, Power, and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* pp. 96-7.

¹³ Tompkins’ work is perhaps unique among her contemporaries in that it shows the genitals *in relation*, which may explain why the work did not — unlike the other works mentioned here — find a receptive feminist audience at the time of its production.

¹⁴ B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, p. 70.

¹⁵ In Scott MacDonald, “Two Interviews: Demystifying the Female Body: Anne Severson — *Near the Big Chakra*, Yvonne Rainer — *Privilege*,” *Film Quarterly* 45, 1 (Autumn 1991), p. 21.

¹⁶ In MacDonald, p. 25. On the riot at Ann Arbor, see also Patrick Dunn, “Don’t Riot, It’s Just A Vagina,” Sept. 21, 2011, at <http://www.avclub.com/annarbor/articles/dont-riot-its-just-a-vagina,62031/>

across the range of its iterations. What emerges in this film, it seems to me, is what we might call a realism of sexual difference, as if womanliness — no mere construction of the imaginary, projection of a male gaze or effect of masquerade, were here reified as a — the *primary* — categorical distinction



Fig. 1 Karen LeCocq, *Feather Cunt* (1971)

at the level of the body, isolated and installed as the film's own formal principle. (I do not mean to denigrate the odd genius of this film — merely to point out that in its very structural premise, it necessarily repeats the very problem it sets out to solve.)

A similar interpretive conundrum beset Judy Chicago's enormous art installation *The Dinner Party*, created between 1974-1979. In its central room, the installation presents thirty-nine sets of female genitals as the sculptural avatars of (mostly white) women from history and mythology.¹⁷ Chicago solves Alice's conundrum by turning vaginas *into* faces, seating them at a "dinner party," each aesthetically rendered in a style expressive of its subject's individuality. Here the individuated, socialized and expressive vagina takes over the function of the face as bearer of subjectivity

and social standing—rather than an organ whose presence on a body occasions their erasure. Yet there is a danger with this strategy too. As conservative art critic Maureen Mullarkey sarcastically opined, the installation — devoid of any satire that would have made the irony here part of its formal strategy — inadvertently "reaffirms the notion it sets out to demolish: turn 'em upside down and they all look alike."¹⁸ For Mullarkey, there is something strangely paradoxical, and potentially counter-productive, in the attempt to reinsert women into the historical record by picturing them as what they are in any case already reduced to according to the terms of their patriarchal interpellation: namely, vaginas. Virginia Woolf, she writes, would not be pleased to be represented this way.

¹⁷ For a cultural history of this piece that documents and analyzes the process of its production as well as its cultural circulation both within and outside of art institutions, see Jane F. Gerhard's comprehensive study, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013). See also a number of essays in Amelia Jones, ed., *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum, 1996.

¹⁸ Maureen Mullarkey, "The Dinner Party is a Church Supper," *Commonweal Magazine*, 1981. Reprinted at <http://www.maureenmullarkey.com/essays/dinnerparty.html>.



Figs. 2-3 Georgia O'Keeffe and Virginia Woolf attend Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* (1974-79)

In the US context at least, the bringing into view of the female genitals was an activism, an action, that used various technologies of the image to wrest the meanings of the female body out of men's hands and to reclaim the body for women themselves. It was a question, as the title of a documentary produced by the Cambridge Women's Collective in 1974 put it, of *Taking Our Bodies Back*.¹⁹ In the terms of the documentary, this meant overcoming shame, overcoming the taboo on the image of women's bodies. A voiceover in the documentary reminds us that "men have the advantage of looking at their genital area," a visual privilege it is implied is connected to men's greater sense of autonomy. If women are also to enjoy "autonomy over [their] own bodies" — and this is the guiding motto of the film — they must also learn to visually inspect their genitals, to bring them into view, to reclaim the frame (of representation): to make the vagina, using a speculum and a mirror, using a camera, *seen*. So here it is the vagina that makes the claim on an autonomy normally associated rather with the face.

Similarly, in *Self Health* (San Francisco Women's Health Center, 1974), a direct connection is established between making the vagina (both its exteriority and its interiority) visible, forging a *public* context for this visibility, and "taking back what is ours. Our bodies, our spirit, our destiny, our lives." Although what is taken back is *autonomy* (an attribute of the individual), the taking back is to be necessarily a *collective* effort — the plural possessive is emphasized; it is an action that requires group solidarity, and this solidarity is to be forged through meetings (documented in the film) where women examine their own and each other's genitals, using mirrors and speculums, learning to overcome the shame that has been associated with those genitals — the sense, as one woman puts it, that "it's such a yucky thing down there." The film both documents actual community spaces and produces, through its circulation, a virtual public space for women in which the genitals can be seen but not objectified by men, where women's bodies are not objects for men's

¹⁹ *Taking Our Bodies Back: The Women's Health Movement*, dir. Margaret Lazarus, Renner Wunderlich, and Joan Finck. Consider also the title of the feminist health anthology, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, published by the Boston Women's Health Collective in 1971. I am most grateful to Christie Milliken for bringing the two documentaries discussed to here to my attention.

gazes or male medical knowledge, but are the object of *self*-health, the new *material ground* of women's subjectivity.

The theme of the body's division — and the possibility of overcoming it through the action of “taking back” — is directly invoked in an early scene of consciousness raising in *Self Health*, in which several women express a feeling of disconnect from their sex organs — a sense that, as one woman puts it, “this part of you is *divided* [from the rest]; *it's not yours*.” The woman describes how this sense that her vagina is somehow alien to her subjectivity is compounded by gynecological exams in which the doctor draws a curtain which literally divides the lower part of the body from the upper, rendering the lower half inaccessible to the woman's view. She recounts how at her last such exam, as a feminist action, she tore away the curtain “and threw it in the garbage can,” leaving the (male) doctor dumbfounded. The division between face and vagina, it appeared from this North American vantage point, belongs to a cultural system in which women's bodies were objects of medical knowledge, and in which they are not considered agents of their own bodies. Bringing the vagina into view is, then, a way of reclaiming this agency, and thus of restoring the body's wholeness — producing a commensurability of face and sex — through overcoming the sense that the body's lower half is somehow separate and objectified.

“My whole body is me”: *Réponse de Femmes* (1975)

It is this restoration of wholeness that is aimed at in a short film made by Agnès Varda — fresh from an extended trip to the US — in 1975. Varda made her film for a series organized by *Antenne 2* in honor of the United Nations-declared International Women's Year. The station commissioned a number of women directors to produce televisual answers to the question, *qu'est-ce qu'être femme?* (“what is it to be a woman?”).²⁰ Varda titled her eight-minute contribution *Réponse de femmes: Notre Corps, Notre Sexe* (Women's Reply: Our Body, Our Sex). She made the film the same year Laura Mulvey published “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and, like Mulvey's essay, Varda's film takes up the problem of women's bodies specifically in relation to the way film technology is implicated in that problem. Here, the cinematic apparatus is both foregrounded — through the use of intertitles, clapperboards, lighting and camera equipment in the frame, as well as Varda's onscreen presence— and invested as a means of potential redress. On the one hand, the film channels the impetus behind other feminist art project in the 1970s that produce images of women's naked bodies as an activist intervention in a culture where women, as the film tells us, are taught from an early age that their genitals are a source of shame and must be hidden at all costs. (A small girl says in the film: “We are told all the time to hide ourselves. I am sick of it!” “But now, all that is going to change...”) At the same time, as one of the narrators says, women are also told: “Show yourself, you please, you sell products!” To be shown is to be instrumentalized within a system of gendered commodification, even as to be hidden is to be rendered a subject (or object) of shame. To be a woman — which means, the film tells us, “to live in a woman's body” — means to suffer under the weight of this paradoxical demand. Neither of the contradictory imperatives — neither mandated display nor enforced modesty — allows women their own autonomy. And it is autonomy that this film attempts to produce through a new form of framing.

As the film begins, an intertitle tells us this will be *un ciné-tract d'Agnès Varda*: a cinematic pamphlet by Agnès Varda. In inserting her own authorial signature, Varda claims authorship of this “women's reply,” thus introducing a certain tension between plurality and univocality which is also

²⁰ Of the eight pieces allegedly produced, only Varda's, sadly, has been preserved (to my knowledge).

reflected in the subtitle: our [plural] body [singular], our sex. The film's title and subtitle seem to announce that women — a plural but univocal category: *Réponse* (singular) *de femmes* (plural) — will here speak for themselves, that they are, or will now be, subjects of speech, and that the terms of body and sex will henceforth be subject to an autonomous determination by women (our body, our sex), whose reply (singular) Agnès Varda takes it upon herself to deliver on their behalf.

We will return to this important tension between plurality and univocality, but let us first observe that the sovereignty over body and sex to which the film lays claim is linked, as it is in the women's health documentaries discussed above, to a rhetoric of wholeness which prohibits the visual cutting up of women's bodies into objectified part-objects. Immediately after the title sequence, the film offers a simple answer to the question "what is it to be a woman?": "To be a woman is to be born with a woman's sex (*avec un sexe féminin*)," a voiceover tells us over the image of a naked baby, genitals towards the camera: it's a girl. The collapse of *sex* and *sex organ* — both comprehended in the French *sexe* — means answering the question "what is it to be a woman?" is quite simple: contrary to Simone de Beauvoir's contention that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman, the film suggests that being a woman means nothing other than being born with a vagina. The next shot offers the corollary: a naked adult woman, shown full-length and facing the camera, says (now in sync sound): "To be a woman is to live in a woman's body." So being a woman means: being born with a vagina and living in a woman's body.

The film now cuts from the full-length shot of the naked woman to a close-up of her face, as she says directly to the camera: "It's me, my *entire body* is me." In the sequence of shots that follows, we see the woman's body divided into pieces: a breast, the genitals. We first see a clapperboard framed against these body parts, then we see them isolated in the frame. Over this procession of part-objects, the woman's voice negates the legitimacy of such views: "I am not limited to the hot points [*points chauds*] of men's desire. I am not a sex" — we see her genitals in close-up — "and breasts" — a close-up of one of her breasts. Finally, united with her voice once more in a full-length shot, she asserts: "I am a woman's body (*je suis un corps de femme*)."



Fig. 4. Varda's full shot: "*Je suis un corps de femme*"

For the remainder of the film, Varda will preserve this wholeness of the body, avoiding close-ups of body parts, showing the body in full-length shots. Or rather: Varda avoids close-ups of body parts *other than the face*. Indeed, it was over a close-up of the face that the woman asserted: “It’s me, my *entire body* is me,” whereas the close-ups of vulva and breast were introduced only in order to illustrate the kind of objectification — the kind of reduction to the “hot points of men’s desire” — that the film’s insistence on wholeness leads it to reject. The face, it seems, can and does signify wholeness and autonomy, whereas images of the “hot points of men’s desire” reduce women to the status of objects. (Here we see that Varda’s formal choices seem to confirm the incommensurability that so troubles Alice.) So the close-up of the face, which, along with the full-length body shot, comprise Varda’s key syntactical units, has a unique status among possible close-ups of body parts. The close-up of the face — unlike the close-up of the vulva or the breast — does not divide the body, does not turn it into an object of men’s desire, but is rather expressive of wholeness.

It seems Varda has run into problems, because at the same time that she wants to insist on an individual autonomy that only the *face* can sustain, Varda wants this to be *women’s* autonomy specifically: this face that speaks utters a *réponse de femmes*. This *réponse* is both individual and collective, hence the tension between the plural *femmes*, and the singular *réponse*. The fact that the reply is a *women’s* reply is insisted on by the pluralizing imperative that groups the women and multiplies them in the frame. Though the women are actually not very diverse (they are all white, all French, and all appear distinctly bourgeois), the very emphasis on the plural suggests that the *empirical* limits on this diversity are merely contingent, the point being that women are a potentially limitless multiplicity. Yet what accounts for the strange homogeneity that arises from the way the women interchangeably deliver the film’s (unified) narration? The women seem, and within the structure of the film are, interchangeable; each is merely a contingent example of the *general category* (*women*) which superordinates. Any woman here might be any other woman, so even while Balázs insists that the face, in close-up, is the “most *subjective* manifestation of man [*des Menschen*]” in his or her individuality, it seems that the individuality and subjectivity that the face allegedly conveys cannot here transcend the superordinate category in whose name it speaks: what it utters will be, irreducibly, a *réponse de femmes*.

Does the close-up of the face conduce to the production of what Balázs, elsewhere, called an “international universal humanity”?²¹ If it does, it does so by transcending gender — it is only in this way that what Balázs calls the Face of Man could here include faces of women. Does the close-up of the face, then, overcome or transcend sexual difference? Does it produce an autonomy as the effect of objectively rendering what is “individual and personal,” which is to say, *not categorical*, like sex? But at the same time, when this face speaks, it enunciates (nothing other than) a *réponse de femmes*. In so doing, it remains identified with — appears as an example of — the differential category that is

²¹ Balázs, “Der Sichtbare Mensch,” in *Theory of Film*, p. 45.

precisely what belies universality.²² According to the very terms the film presents us with at the outset — “being a woman means being born with a female sex organ” — women’s faces, as *women’s* faces, are ghosted by the refused close-up of those sex organs that produce their categorical status. (We might think here of Magritte’s famous 1934 painting which captures this conundrum well, in which the portrait of a woman’s face is depicted as at the same time a portrait of a generic, non-transcendable, female body.)



Fig. 5. René Magritte, *Le Viol*, c.1934

If Magritte diagnosed this problem of the face in 1934, does Varda’s camera in 1975 manage to overcome it? The ambiguity Varda’s film turns around, and around which it falls into incoherence, is the ambiguity — perhaps irreconcilability — between two modes of rendering an object, both apparently inherent to cinema: objectivizing its subject’s individuality and thus producing universality (this is what the close-up of the face is said to do) and *objectifying* the subject in the way Kant says that sexual appetite objectifies its object of desire by remaining unable to transcend the category of *Geschlecht*. It seems to be *sex* that forestalls — or renders unrealizable — the universality onto which cinema otherwise opens. This double movement, towards and away from universality, is registered nowhere more clearly than in Varda’s effort to overcome it. In her film, we see two competing models of cinematic relationality at war, as it were, on woman’s body, or more precisely in the tension between her (woman’s?) face and her body. It seems that what is at stake here is not in fact the question: what is it to *be* a woman? but rather the question: can one have a face and a

²² The same vexing paradox presents itself in other statements of identity politics that emerge in the 1970s. Consider the Combahee River Collective’s Black Feminist statement of 1975 (the same year as Varda’s film), reprinted in Nicholson, ed., *The Second Wave*, 63-70. The authors refer to “our need as human persons for *autonomy*” (65, my italics), something the markedness of their bodies, as black women’s bodies, has thus far prevented them from attaining. The specificity of those bodies — the *categorical* specificity, as black and female — is claimed as the ground on which the political claim on autonomy is to be lodged: “We believe that the most profound and... radical politics come directly out of our own identity” (65). Yet those profound and radical politics have a universal aim, which they formulate in the next sentence: “To be recognized as human, levelly human.” The “levelly” seems to signal the dissolution or transcendence of those very categories in whose name it is most profoundly and radically asserted.

vagina? This is precisely the question that haunts Breillat's Alice, in a film that was being made by Varda's compatriot at the same time her *ciné-tract* went to air.

***Une Vraie Jeune Fille* (1976): the sociality of the face**

Breillat and Varda are often categorized together as “feminist film-makers,” but if Breillat is a feminist, her feminism remains far removed from the American context in which Varda had immersed herself, with its emphasis on autonomy. While Varda produced a *ciné-tract*, Breillat sees her work (confoundingly) as non-political; she protests: “I don’t engage in... sociology, politics, or psychology. What attracts me is myth and ritual.”²³ In staging the tension between face and sex, Breillat does not hope, as I suggested earlier, to redeem it. Nor does she consider that autonomy would be any kind of goal for feminism, since for Breillat autonomy and sexuality are radically counterposed. She is thus situated less in a feminist than in a French literary tradition whose points of reference include Sade, La Fontaine, and Bataille.²⁴ But Bataillean eroticism (to which I will return at the end of the chapter) tends to efface the operation of sexual difference, or at least fails to credit (or to apprehend) the structural function of that difference. Sexual difference may be (though is in fact often not) “transgressed” in Bataille, but it is not — unlike “eroticism,” a term which for him is quite separable from sexual difference — subjected to an analysis. Bataille’s pursuit of the connections between eroticism and death do not help us see the imbrication of this connection with the problem of sexual difference; it takes eroticism, but not sexual difference, as a problem. Thus when Bataille writes, “In that he is an erotic animal, man is a problem for himself,” his use of the gendered term as a universal demonstrates that for him, eroticism is precisely a universal problem; he cannot see, or does not want to consider, what Breillat will insist on: that it is sexual difference that makes it a problem.²⁵ That problem remains central for Breillat, and I turn to her because her treatment of this problem, and her model of sexuality — like Bataille’s, and like Sade’s — are radically incompatible with the ones I pursued in the last chapter via the notion of the “liberal sexual subject.” Breillat’s Alice thus offers a counterpoint not only to Varda’s narrator proclaiming “my whole body is me,” but also to Fonda’s Barbarella, Bardot’s Juliette, and (as we will see in a later chapter) Sook-Yin Lee’s Sofia from *Shortbus*. Those figures all have in common that they connect sex to pleasure and to autonomy. Breillat will mount a significant challenge to this liberal view.

Une Vraie Jeune Fille begins with an establishing shot of a train on which, we soon learn, sits Alice, on her way home from boarding school for the summer vacation. The real young girl of the title is introduced to us in a medium shot inside the carriage, where she sits in her school uniform, staring blankly offscreen. “My name is Alice,” she tells us in voiceover. In keeping with conventional cinematic grammar, we then cut to a brief reverse shot, showing what she sees: three other passengers sitting opposite her. Cutting back to a close-up of Alice’s face, the voiceover specifies: “Alice Bonnard — like the name of my father and my mother.”

There are several things to note about this brief sequence. First, by way of introducing the film’s viewer to its protagonist, the film pairs face with name, and this is a name that situates Alice

²³ “The Ministry of Desire: Interview by Dorna Khazeni,” in Catherine Breillat, *Pornocracy*, trans. Paul Buck and Catherine Petit, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2005, p. 109.

²⁴ On La Fontaine’s influence on Breillat, see Douglas Keesey, *Catherine Breillat*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009, especially the Introduction.

²⁵ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, San Francisco: City Lights, 1986, p. 273.

within a patrilineal (and patriarchal) field: if “Bonnard” is the name of her “father and [her] mother,” that is to say it is actually the name of her father that has also become her mother’s name. So if this name confers on Alice a certain status as soon-to-be citizen waiting to come of age — if it promises an eventual formal equality of the citizen — it presents as the condition of that equality the fact that the name that goes with the face is, quite literally, the name-of-the-father. If the face in cinema is *das Gesicht des Menschen*, as Balázs contests, and is as such a portal onto its bearer’s universal “humanity,” then it remains the case that insofar as each face has a name — which is to say is the bodily site of a socially recognizable identity (think also of the passport photo or the facial portrait of the ID card) — it is situated within a patriarchal social field.

The close-up that introduces us to Alice demonstrates a second important point, which is that the close-up, the close-up of the face, does not in fact appear as an autonomous, self-contained shot (as do the close-ups of vulvas in *Near the Big Chakra*). As Mary Ann Doane has observed, the close-up of the face typically appears rather as an element of a larger syntactical complex, the shot/reverse shot. Doane, discussing Balázs and Jacques Aumont, comments: “The face in the cinema inherits certain tendencies of the portrait in its reflection/production of the concept of the bourgeois subject, but *it is the shot/reverse shot that consolidates that humanity as an aspect of intersubjectivity*.”²⁶ It is significant that Doane associates the cinematic close-up with a tradition of specifically bourgeois (liberal) portraiture, but she also emphasizes that the shot/reverse shot system knits the individual cinematic shot (of the face) into a syntactical sequence, creating a grammar (film theorists sometimes call this “suture”²⁷). Close-ups, then, while they may abstract the face from its spatio-temporal coordinates, just as importantly set in motion a syntactical chain which situates the face within an intersubjective field, in which each element is not autonomous, but calls forth what follows it, and refers back to what preceded it. The face necessarily belongs to a social world; the look brings that world into being. (It is this social world Judy Chicago attempted to reclaim for the vagina, but for Breillat that is impossible, as we shall see.)

In his book *Du Visage Au Cinéma*, Aumont relates this relational disposition of the face to its anatomy, pointing out two particular anatomical features of the face that render it the organ of intersubjectivity: the mouth and the eyes. The mouth, writes Aumont, is “the visible seat of something invisible and connected to the soul: the voice.”²⁸ The fact that it is equipped with a mouth means that the face is a face which speaks — “*un visage parlant*” — and face and voice together are “the two royal roads that permit me to access the humanity of other men” (51-2). The eyes, for their part, “emit and receive communication” (54), in the form of the look (*le regard*), which is connective and directional, a “vectorization” leading towards and away from others. Thus the face, which speaks and looks (actively and passively), is not only the bodily avatar of an autonomous or autarchic subjectivity; or rather, it is this but only insofar as that subjectivity emerges, at the outset, within a “communicative and social network” (58) that is given form in its very facial anatomy. The subject’s *face*, equipped with eyes and a mouth, reveals that its autonomy is conditioned on, and

²⁶ Mary Ann Doane, “The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema,” *Differences* 14.3 (2003): 89-111, p. 106, my italics.

²⁷ The best account of “suture” remains Kaja Silverman’s in *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

²⁸ “...*le siège visible d’un invisible, lié à l’âme: la voix*.” Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au Cinéma*, Paris: Éditions de l’Étoile, 1992, p. 51.

expressed through, its imbrication within a social field, an imbrication mandated by the form of its flesh; the subject is impinged upon by this field, subjected to this field, by virtue of its very anatomy, which *cannot help but* receive and express; which transcends itself only as or through those organs that situate it within a communicative (social) network. That transcendence is not the achievement of autonomy but rather of sociality. (We might consider that the function of sunglasses is to mitigate this anatomical communicativity of the face, both its expressive and receptive dimensions; their erotic effect is no doubt related to this withdrawal from sociality, this withholding of the active and receptive gaze.)

That this social imbrication is experienced as a sometimes intolerable impingement is confirmed by Alice's next statement, as we cut back to the reverse shot of the surly passengers who share the carriage with her: "I don't like people," she says. "They oppress me." The circuit of looks in and through which the face is constituted both produces the conditions for the subject's autonomy *and* subjects her to a certain social surveillance and to the force of a set of normative demands. The face, it seems, is not only the bodily organ of the autonomous (transcendent) subject, it expresses the subjectivity of a subject *trapped* in a social world; a social world where markers of gender, age, race, and class are *not* transcended but rather stick fast. Recall Franz Fanon's account of how he is "fixed" by the looks of others, "in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye."²⁹ The face, as bodily avatar of universal humanity, may *ideally* incarnate the transcendence of visible particularities, but that transcendence cannot be a freedom from the violence of those particularities: the face *cannot* be removed from a social field, it gains its status and its meaning only within that field, and that field is structured according to a set of normative demands that are in fact violently policed. Thus the existence in a social world, open to others through the receptivity of ears and eyes, means the subjection to a perpetual surveillance, which begins to seem like just the opposite of freedom. Under such conditions, we can understand that contrary to what we might have at first suspected, at the moment we first meet Alice, it is the demands of the face — and not of the vagina — that the young girl finds oppressive.

The division between face and sex is laid out spatially in an early scene in which Alice eats breakfast with her parents. The scene is filmed, for the most part, as a series of medium close-ups of faces. Though no-one speaks, the circuitry of their looks establishes a communicativity of gazes, and a social world structured *through* these gazes which perform a variety of social functions, including parental surveillance: although she has not yet broken any rules, Alice is subject to the suspicious gaze of her mother, which seems to ceaselessly accuse her of a potential for transgression she carries as already a guilt. Faces here are bearers of looks, looks which configure a network of relationality, in which Alice — face exposed at the breakfast table — occupies a position defined by her age and her position within the nuclear family:

²⁹ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Press, 1967, p. 82.



Figs. 6-8. Familial drama of faces and looks: (a) Father watches Mother; (b) Mother watches Alice (guilty in



(c) The eyes “emit and receive communication” (Aumont)

Very early on an extreme close-up of a sticky fly trap breaks the continuity, in the first place seeming to offer a visual metaphor for the stasis and deathliness of the domestic environment, which Alice experiences as a prison, but also introducing a visual theme that will persist throughout the film in the frequently recurring close shots of various sticky and *viscous* substances that Alice’s eyes — and her fingers — will be drawn to:



Fig. 9. Viscosity and organic death

From this strangely interpolated shot of the fly trap, the film returns to the human participants in the breakfast scene, but now Alice, as if called away by this inhuman interpolation (and interpellation), drops her spoon. In one continuous shot, the camera pans from her face in medium close-up, down

to the floor as she picks the spoon up and brings it to her crotch, where the camera stays as she inserts it underneath her underpants and into her vagina. The table blocks this genital action from the view of her parents, though it delivers it to us, and in so doing it blocks Alice's face from our view; it thus institutes a literal division between face — the level at which she participates, however unenthusiastically, in the familial breakfast drama — and the under-the-table world of the vagina, which comes to be linked to this other visual theme, the theme of viscosity, first associated with the sticky surface of the fly trap and the dead or dying flies. Alice is divided in this scene, both visually and behaviorally, into two parts, the one human and social (imprisoned by the disciplinary network of gazes constitutive of the bourgeois family structure), the other connected by analogy to a liquid, animal, and mineral world whose properties we will need to specify. Significantly, this world is first introduced as an *escape* from the oppressive and socially ordered regime of faces that exists above the table. Invisible to that regime — which purports to ignore her body but nevertheless punishes her for having one — Alice's under-the-table action appears to be an act of defiance, an assertion of her autonomy from that imprisoning world above the table where, still a “real young girl,” she is beholden to a parental gaze, not yet an adult.



Figs. 10-13: 1. Alice drops spoon....



2. Camera pans down



3. Table blocks parents' view



4. Pan back up

Although the face and the name seem to be the domain of the subject of rights, of autonomy, and of identity, in this opening scene that very identity the face upholds, that legibility within a social system, is shown to require submission to a disciplinary gaze that is on the lookout for signs of illicit gratification. This may be what Etienne Balibar refers to as the “normative” dimension that

belies the openness of pluralistic liberal democracy³⁰: Alice suffers the burden of conforming to norms that will *secure* her rights and liberal social privileges, offering her (an eventual) political autonomy that is at once a subjection to a set of normative social and cultural demands. Under the table, on the other hand, she appears to elude this subjection to the burdensome force of normativity and its mechanisms of surveillance, to which the anatomy of the face condemns her; she foregoes political (and “adult”) subjectivity, but also escapes the surveilling and oppressive bureaucratic/parental gaze.

Escapes it, however, to where? We should not make the mistake of presuming that what Alice finds under the table, away from the socially normative regime of the face, is a true, realized, or embodied autonomy that only the reconciliation of face and vagina can afford. Breillat will not — precisely not — offer us another version of the “liberal sexual subject” we encountered in *Barbarella*, for whom sensual pleasure is the site at which autonomy is materialized at the level of the body. If that were the case, Alice would not experience the proximity of face and vagina as intolerable (certainly *Barbarella* does not); she would simply — like Wilhelm Reich — embrace the domain of sexuality as the means to a liberation from social injustices and a realization of true equality. Meanwhile, Varda’s short film, as we have seen, attempts to recuperate women’s bodies for autonomy, while however paradoxically insisting that only close-ups of the face (not of the genitals) can sustain the demands of that autonomy. Chicago, for her part, seizes on the vagina itself, investing it as avatar of autonomy and individuation. That effort of individuation, however, is complicated by the fact that it is the organ of categorical difference that is to be its vehicle. Breillat will not (unlike Varda) push the vagina out of the frame in favor of the face, and yet also will not (unlike Chicago) claim it as a site of autonomy. For Breillat, the vagina represents the inexorability of sexuality, but not in the sense of pleasure, as with *Barbarella*, or of benign diversity as in *Shortbus*. If not pleasure, and if not a property of the autonomous subject, then *what is sexuality?*

sex, or domination?

In order to formulate an answer to this question it will be helpful to return briefly to *Romance* (1999), a film in which the question of what sexuality is — framed in that film through the question of what relation it bears to love — forms the organizing premise. Recall Marie’s dream of the divided body, in which her head is separated from her lower body by a “system resembling a guillotine.” Recall also that Marie concludes her description of the dream with the assertion that being a woman is impossible, because to want a woman is to want to fuck her, and “to want to fuck a woman is to despise her.” Therefore, she says, love between men and women is impossible.

This description might have been taken right out of Andrea Dworkin’s frequently reviled 1987 masterpiece of radical feminist polemic, *Intercourse*, in which the author notoriously argued that sexual penetration is (a) the phenomenological paradigm of sexuality as we know it and (b) an

³⁰ “Ambiguous Universality,” *Differences* 7.1 (1995): 48-74. “[N]ormality,” he writes, “is the standard price to be paid for the universalistic liberation of the individual from the immediate subjection to primary communities. For normality is not the simple fact of adopting customs and obeying rules or laws: it means internalizing representations of the ‘human type’ or the ‘human subject’ (not exactly an essence, but a norm and a standard behavior) in order to be recognized as a person in its full right, to become *présentable* (fit to be seen) in order to be represented. To become *responsable* (fit to be answered) in order to be respected” (62-3). It is interesting that he recasts the universal (“human”) not as an *a priori* but rather as a socially produced norm.

expression or experience of domination.³¹ As Dworkin sees it, the material reality of intercourse — the fact of one body “occupying” the space of another — requires two differentiated forces or vectors: a penetrating force and a penetrated threshold, and the two are not equivalent; thus penetration is the carnal ground zero of inequality. Dworkin puts it quite plainly: “[B]eing occupied in your body is different from not being occupied in your body” (133). She elaborates:

In the experience of intercourse, [the penetrated partner] loses the capacity for integrity because her (*sic*) body — the basis of privacy and freedom in the material world for all human beings — is entered and occupied; the boundaries of her physical body are — neutrally speaking — violated. (137)

The integrity and personhood, the autonomy, of the subject as material being are incarnated as the integrity of the body’s borders; when those borders are “violated,” breached, this is a literal, carnal, violation of integrity. Insofar as Dworkin considers integrity and autonomy to be definitive of humanness (she cleaves to this extent to a liberal conception of the subject), this violation of integrity is equivalent to a reduction to the status of less than human. Penetrated, the body’s boundaries violated by an external force, one foregoes self-determination (even if one consented to the act one is not the *agent* of it), and is thus no longer “human in any sense related to freedom or justice” (141); one becomes, as part of the very phenomenology of the act, “*something, not someone*” (141, my italics). Dworkin concludes: “Whatever intercourse is, it is not freedom” — at least not for the penetrated partner.

Here we have a powerful retort to the gynocentric feminist art movement in the ‘70s that hoped to forge an autonomy for women by reclaiming the image of the vagina. Much as Brecht once observed that “A photograph of the Krupp works or of the A.E.G reveals almost nothing about these institutions,”³² the mere phenomenal facticity of the sex organs conceals the system of *relations* that they reify. Monique Wittig made some version of the point this way:

What we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an “imaginary formation,” which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through *the network of relationships in which they are perceived*.³³

For Wittig, as for Dworkin, the body’s very anatomy is taken to reify a relational system. (It is perhaps for this reason that when asked at a conference at Vassar College whether she had a vagina, Wittig famously answered no.³⁴)

Like Breillat’s Marie — and, moreover, like Kant — Dworkin argues that one can only love a fellow human, and that therefore fucking (which reduces the penetrated partner to less-than-human)

³¹ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse*, New York: Free Press, 1987.

³² Quoted in Benjamin, ‘A Short History of Photography,’ in Alan Trachtenberg (ed.), *Classic Essays on Photography*, Stony Creek: Leete’s Island Books, 1980, p. 213.

³³ Monique Wittig, “One is Not Born a Woman,” in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1992, pp. 11-12, my italics.

³⁴ This incident is recounted in Leo Bersani, *Homos*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 45.

and loving are incompatible. To love a person is to respect him, to honor his autonomy and to cherish his freedom. In Dworkin and Breillat's democratic conception of love, one can only love one's equal.³⁵ But sexuality is a dynamic that counterposes mutual recognition: men, writes Dworkin, "cannot fuck equals" (140). Or, in the words of the author of "What is Enlightenment?":

Love, as human affection, is the love that wishes well, is amicably disposed, promotes the happiness of others and rejoices in it. But... those who merely have sexual inclination love the person from none of [these] motives of true human affection, are quite unconcerned for their happiness, and will even plunge them into the greatest unhappiness, simply to satisfy their own inclination and appetite... The desire of a man for a woman is not directed to her as a human being; on the contrary, the woman's humanity is of no concern to him, and *the only object of his desire is her sex (Geschlecht)*.³⁶

Kant says sex dehumanizes both partners in different ways: one becomes an object/ reduced to generic sex and thus not individual — this recalls the problem of the category that we faced in Varda's short film. The other partner, giving in to his own appetite, is dehumanized in that he becomes like an animal, acting out of "pathological" motives and not on the basis of universalizable principles. Nevertheless, the dehumanization, while mutual, is not symmetrical, and this asymmetry is constitutive of sexual appetite, or what Kant calls *Geschlechts-Neigung*. For Kant, and for Dworkin, sexuality is inherently *relational* — it is an appetite whose object is other humans (but not as humans, rather as sexes) — which is to say, on neither one side nor the other of the divide it occasions is it a property of the autonomous subject. For Kant, the idea of the liberal sexual subject thus presents, on both sides of the asymmetry and as its result, an absolute contradiction in terms.

The result, in Marie's fantasy in *Romance*, is that women are divided in two, worthy of love on one side (socially agential but for that reason unable to be fucked), and reduced, on the other, to an impersonal, generic function, subjected to a literal effacement of identity and autonomy. Dworkin comments:

Entry is the [woman's] first acceptance in her body that she is *generic*, not individual; that she is one of a many that is antagonistic to the individual interpretation she might have of her own worth, purpose, or intention... Entered, she finds herself depersonalized into a function... (132, my italics)

One cannot love a function, nor a category. It is for this reason that intercourse, writes Dworkin, "is the pure, sterile, formal expression of men's contempt for women" (138); or, as Marie puts it, "*vouloir enfiler une femme c'est la mépriser*" ("to want to fuck a woman is to despise her"). The latter concludes her fantasy with the statement: "Love between men and women is impossible," and we see that there is a precise, formal (rather than psychological) sense in which this is so, according to Breillat's semantics of sex.

³⁵ This "democratic" notion of love begins, according to Niklas Luhmann, in the mid-18th century. Prior to our modern, democratic notion of romantic love, in the regime of *amour passion* or courtly love, one did not love one's equals; love was determined not by individual traits but by structural properties; love was a relation across social classes. See *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.

³⁶ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, pp. 155-6; *Gesammelte Schriften* 27.384-5; my italics.

Both Dworkin and Breillat clearly have heterosexual pornography in mind when they advance their respective (but consonant) interpretations of penetration; what Breillat calls the “sex side” in Marie’s fantasy is filmed using porn actors engaging in unsimulated sex acts, and deploys the rhetoric of pornography. (For her part, Dworkin was famously an anti-pornography crusader.)³⁷ Breillat even casts Rocco Siffredi — an actor from hardcore pornography known for his violently dominating performances — in the role of the stranger in *Romance* and again later, in *Anatomy of Hell*, as a mythic Everyman. Pornography, for Breillat — like for Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon — seems to convey the truth of sex. *Pace* the claims of feminists like Anne Koedt, for whom “the clitoris embodied the implicit promise of women’s full sexual autonomy,”³⁸ sexuality *cannot* model autonomy, because it is inherently relational, just as it cannot model equality, because the form of relationality it produces is *inherently* unequal. The reason it is inherently unequal is explained by both Breillat and Dworkin by recourse to the body: sexuality is related to the opening of the body, the transgression of its boundedness and of its integrity, but this opening is not reciprocally produced; there is an opening and an opened; there is thus only one agency in any act of penetration (however consensual).

Even if two partners were to take turns penetrating each other, the sequentiality in this case merely confirms the inequality of the act: at the very root, the radical root, of sexuality lies an asymmetry which corresponds to a splitting of sexual forces into an active and a passive dimension, and which is incarnated through the opening of one body, its receptivity to the (unopened and agential) body of another. This is why MacKinnon argues that homosexuality does not escape this system, since “the one to whom it is done is the girl regardless of sex”³⁹ — it is the act itself that seems to produce a polarization where (in the case of two men) none is given *a priori* by anatomy. In this sense, if MacKinnon is right, the vagina would be the anatomical paradigm for all penetration, whether gay or straight; a man’s anus when penetrated would thus be “vagified” — it would be transformed, through that act, into a vagina, symbolically speaking.⁴⁰

This view of sex was invented neither by Dworkin nor by Breillat; indeed, it conforms to the classic Greek understanding of penetration, according to which, as Leo Bersani puts it, “to be

³⁷ Cf Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, New York: Perigee Books, 1981 and Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women’s Equality*, Minneapolis: Organizing Against Pornography, 1988.

³⁸ Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution*, p. 106. Cf Anne Koedt, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm,” in Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, Antia Rapone (eds.) *Radical Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973), 198-207. “According to Koedt, women must become full sexual agents, responsible for claiming their own pleasure” (Gerhard, 105). See also Susan Lyndon, “The Politics of Orgasm,” in Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, New York: Random House, 1970.

³⁹ MacKinnon, “Not A Moral Issue,” in *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 160.

⁴⁰ Dworkin argues something similar: “[A woman], a human being, is supposed to have a privacy that is absolute; except that she, a woman, has a hole between her legs that men can, must, do enter. This hole, her hole, is synonymous with entry. A man has an anus that can be entered, but his anus is not synonymous with entry.” (*Intercourse*, 122)

penetrated is to abdicate power.”⁴¹ But the liberal discourse on sexuality that arises in the 1960s (discussed in chapter one), which posits a sexually autonomous subject, seeks to replace its venerable progenitor with a model of sexuality as the subject’s pleasurable self-relation. Breillat’s highlighting the tension between face and sex reminds us that if there is something inherently *unequal* in sexuality — if it names a relationality incompatible with a regime of autonomous equals — then sexuality finds itself at odds with the suppositions of liberalism, or of any ideal of universal equality. Dworkin and MacKinnon are two feminist theorists often derided as “anti-sex.” If that appellation holds true, it is because they, like Kant, consider that sex and freedom are antinomic terms; that there is, as Kant puts it, “something contemptible in the act itself, which runs counter to morality,” and thus to the possibility of freedom and equality (*Lectures*, 157). This incommensurability is affirmed by Kant, Dworkin, MacKinnon, and Breillat’s Marie alike.

“male sexual desire”

The preceding analysis seems to lead us towards a view shared by Kant, Dworkin and MacKinnon, but one that marks the crucial point of non-convergence between their theories of sexuality and Breillat’s. I am referring to the idea that what Kant calls *Geschlechts-Neigung* is the paradigmatic — indeed the only — form of sexual desire. It is to this desire that MacKinnon, for her part, attributes the entire system of gender with its production of two sex classes in a relation of hierarchy. “Masculinity precedes male as femininity precedes female,” she writes, “and *male sexual desire defines both*.” (“Sexuality,” 131, my italics). MacKinnon seems not to notice the circularity here: the “maleness” that qualifies the originary sexual desire that produces the system is also produced *by* it (since “masculinity *precedes* male”). Masculinity cannot be defined by a “male” desire it also *precedes*; so this “male sexual desire” seems to be groundless, to have no origin. Laura Mulvey makes a similar assumption about the objectifying gaze. In her follow-up essay to “Visual Pleasure,” in which she ponders the position of the empirically female spectator, Mulvey can only aver that the female spectator engages in a “phantasy of masculinization,” one that remains “restless in its transvestite clothes.”⁴² In other words, *the look* remains masculine, active, sadistic, fetishizing, and a woman who looks is necessarily engaging in a (“transvestite”) fantasy of masculinization.

Recall, though, that the problem in *Romance* is not that Marie’s husband Paul wants to dominate her by fucking her; it is rather that he does *not* want to fuck her. This is not an idiosyncratic plot point; it is a structural principle. The problem that plays out across Breillat’s oeuvre is not that men desire women; it is that they do not desire them. In *Anatomie de l’Enfer* (2004) — a film that, dispensing almost entirely with narrative, distills her view of sexuality to its essence — the problem is not that the female protagonist (referred to in the novel version, *Pornocracy*, as simply “the woman”) is objectified, it is that she cannot be looked at. The premise of the film is that this anonymous Everywoman pays a man (“the man”) whom she meets at a gay bar to “watch [her] there where [she is] unwatchable.” It is not coincidental that the man she engages in this task claims to be gay. Women’s bodies, in Breillat, do not incite desire in men; men in her films are typically “unfit

⁴¹ Bersani, “Is the Rectum A Grave?”, in *Is the Rectum A Grave? and Other Essays*, p. 19. I have romanized Bersani’s italics. For an elaboration, see David M. Halperin, the title essay in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love*, New York: Routledge, 1990.

⁴² Laura Mulvey, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by *Duel in the Sun*,” *Framework* 15/16/17 (1981): 12-15.

even for stud service[;]... incapable of zestfully, lustfully, tearing off a piece, [and] instead... [are] eaten up with guilt, shame, fear and insecurity.”

This description comes not from the pen of MacKinnon or Dworkin, but rather from Valerie Solanas’ 1968 *SCUM Manifesto*.⁴³ For all its infamous quirks (such as the injunction to kill all men), Solanas’s manifesto is unique among ‘60s and ‘70s feminist texts in challenging the authenticity of the “male sexual desire” that is taken, by Kant, Dworkin and MacKinnon to be the trouble with sex. Solanas flatly rejects the notion that the sex/gender system could be explained by an originary (putatively “male”) desire to dominate, or that sexual appetite (*Geschlechts-Neigung*) is a “male” appetite to “use” women. “Use them for what?” she asks. “Surely not pleasure” (37). In her account, “male sexual desire” is an elaborate ruse that disguises the male’s true passivity and desire to be a woman:

[The male] hates his passivity, so he projects it onto women, defines [himself] as active, then sets out to prove that he is (“prove that he is a Man”). His main means of attempting to prove it is screwing (Big Man with a Big Dick tearing off a Big Piece). Since he’s attempting to prove an error, he must “prove” it again and again. Screwing, then, is a desperate[,] compulsive, attempt to prove he’s not passive, not a woman; but he is passive and does want to be a woman. (37)

The problem of inequality as Solanas sees it is not the problem of the phallus. There is no phallus. Maleness is a “deficiency” (32), not a potency. As this passage attests, it is also a position that is produced only defensively. “*Sex is itself a sublimation*,” writes Solanas in a surprisingly inventive formulation — sex conceived as a dominating or sadistic or objectifying drive is *not itself originary*, nor is it the problem.⁴⁴ We see clearly here the difference from MacKinnon: for Solanas, the fear of the desire to be female (though “female” has no determinate referent in her text, since its meanings are produced only projectively) precedes and produces “male sexual desire” as an elaborate disguise, rather than the origin of the system. The driving force behind that system — what MacKinnon identified as “male sexual desire,” and Kant as a troublingly immoral *Geschlechts-Neigung* — is now revealed to have no positive or originary content but rather to be produced reflexively, a reflexivity implied, but not acknowledged, in MacKinnon’s own circular formulation.

I have drawn Solanas into the discussion because her analysis — which differs from other radical feminist analyses which presume the *authenticity* of “male sexual desire” — helps us recognize that in Breillat’s films, the phallus is *not* the organizing term. In *Anatomie*, the penis is dwarfed by the unfathomable depth of the vagina, stupidly exposed (and always inadequate). In *Romance* it is barely functional at all, as Marie complains to Siffredi’s stranger: “Do you know why most guys can’t wear condoms? Because their erections are too soft... Yes, they go flaccid constantly. Because it’s not true that they desire us...” Here Marie might as well be reading a passage from the *SCUM Manifesto*. In *Sex is Comedy* (2002), a meta-commentary on the making of *A Ma Soeur!* (2001), the actor (played by Grégoire Colin) requires a prosthetic penis in order to perform his role; once equipped with this prosthetic, he happily flaunts it around the set, suddenly empowered — but that is precisely because

⁴³ Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, London: Verso, 2004, p. 36.

⁴⁴ *SCUM Manifesto*, p. 38. This sentence (which I have italicized) is inexplicably missing from the Verso edition. It can be found in other editions, for eg Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, San Francisco and Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996, p. 4.

it is not real; the phallus is a myth, a prosthesis; an inert piece of latex embodies it much more effectively than an actual penis. While MacKinnon maintains that “sexuality” is defined by “[w]hatever it takes to make the penis shudder and stiffen with the experience of its potency” (“Sexuality,” p. 137), we see that in Breillat’s films, this shuddering and stiffening occurs defensively, if at all. (The role Siffredi plays in both *Romance* and *Anatomie de l’Enfer* is to embody the mythology of a masculine potency that persists, precisely, only as myth.)

In Breillat, the difference between women and men seems to lie not in the fact that the desire of one defines the gender of both, but rather in their differential relation to the shame, fear and insecurity that the materiality of the body occasions. Confronted with the sight of the woman’s vagina in *Anatomie de l’Enfer*, the man (who we will recall had to be paid even to look at it) says:

It’s not what one sees [that horrifies], though the spreading wide of your legs revolts us with its too-vivid color and the formless and indolent aspect of your hidden lips and the thinness of the skin, even if goose-fleshed here and there; a skin sweating, suppurating, a vile skin like the skin of frogs who at least have the decency to be green, but whose thighs too have, symbolically, the widespread immensity of yours. It’s not what one sees, it’s what slips away, whose obscenity is the most frightening to our eyes.

In this admittedly turgid commentary, during which the camera stays on Siffredi in midshot, the woman’s genitals are described via figures of animality (“goose-fleshed,” frogs’ thighs) and of viscosity (“sweating, suppurating”). What is declared repulsive is the passivity of the “formless and indolent” flesh, its lack of resistance to whatever might enter it.⁴⁵ Unlike the vagina, a “boy’s anus,” as he tells her at another moment, has “elastic resistance” which “doesn’t lie... It’s the lie of women’s softness which is hateful.” That comment comes right after he has penetrated her for the first time, with his hand, which we see in a close shot. First he inserts a finger and removes it, covered in a gel-like substance which he puts in his hair; then he places his hand again in her vagina, this time pushing it all the way in.

⁴⁵ In a philosophical reflection on sexual difference as an ontological and anatomical principle, Catherine Malabou also emphasizes this passivity and vulnerability of the vaginal folds, considering the idea that the form of the vulva might model what she calls a “hetero-affection,” a being in relation to difference, and incarnating an ethical challenge: “*Les lèvres silencieuses, repliées, offertes et sans défense du sexe anatomique de la femme permettent de figurer mieux que tout autre schème peut-être la fragilité absolue, le sans défense.*” At the same time, “*Rien n’empêche de voir les deux lèvres en d’autres étants qu’en la femme, dans tout sujet exposé, souffrant.*” The openness, the defenselessness of the vulva may provide the “schema” for a femininity that is a generalized condition of being. (The mouth also has lips, notes Malabou.) *Changer de différence*, Paris: Galilée, 2009, pp. 32-33. It would also be interesting to consider Luce Irigaray’s work in relation to Breillat.



Fig. 14. “*Les lèvres silencieuses, repliées, offertes et sans défense*” (Catherine Malabou)

As we cut back to the woman’s face, she laughs, seemingly oblivious to, or amused by, his digital investigation of her sex organs. In a later scene, after removing a tampon, she says: “See the space it can take up, without us feeling a thing? [The tampon] is about the same size as most human penises. Proof that intercourse consists not in the materiality of the act, but in its meaning.” That meaning is presumably the one described so evocatively by Dworkin, but we now see that what impels it is not any “male sexual desire” in the sense imagined by Kant or MacKinnon. What then accounts for the cultural meaning of penetration?

The scene where the man first recounts his horror of the vagina is followed by a flashback sequence representing one of his childhood memories, in which we see that this horror — which Breillat takes to be paradigmatic — is at base a horror in the face of the organic fragility of life; a horror at the way life’s inexorably material substrate manifests a perfect indifference to, and thus renders impotent, the too-human affects of tenderness and curiosity, of interest in others. Death answers an interest in life. Over a close-up of the woman’s vulva, a voiceover tells us that these “black tufts with their shiny putrid hairiness” remind the man of “a just-hatched bird, still wet from the egg, so touching in its newborn weakness,” and the image of the vulva is replaced by the image of this hatchling:



Figs. 15-16. *The vulva...*



becomes a hatchling

Next we see a small boy — the man as a child — climbing a tree, feeding the tiny bird a worm he has transported for the purpose, cradling the bird in his hands, sheltering it in his shirt pocket as he carefully climbs back down. When he reaches the ground, however, we see his pocket has become

stained with blood. He reaches in and pulls the hatchling out, which is now no more than a bloody piece of flesh. Horrified at this betrayal of his love, he dashes it on the ground and stomps on it violently with his boot:



Fig. 17. “*The slime that seemed to mock him...*”

Cutting back to the man’s face back in the bedroom, the voiceover (it is Breillat’s own voice) tells us: “And until today, the boy, who would become all men, retained his horror of the slime that seemed to mock him.” A moment later, the woman adds another dimension to the analysis offered by the voiceover, commenting: “Men’s anger is against the invisible.”

In this poignant story, it is the material world’s inhuman indifference to the boy’s good intentions, to his desire to care for and nurture the hatchling, that provokes his rage and his violent horror. As if “mocking” his affective investment in the scene of attempted nurturing, the hatchling responds by transmuting into flesh, flesh which the boy then dashes on a stone, punishing it for the fact that it has exposed itself as only “slime” — or what Teresa de Lauretis has called “the corpse implicit or latent within the living organism.”⁴⁶ So we see that the vagina comes to symbolize, in this strange parable, the materiality of a world that remains indifferent to affect, that answers love with the mortality that mocks it, that negates the human world through exposing its material foundations in inert slime, exposing the corpse implicit or latent within every living organism. At the same time that it exposes the abjectly material foundations of existence and thus demystifies and desacralizes that existence, the vagina represents what slips away, remains hidden; it folds in on itself, refusing the exhibitionism of the penis; rather than a ribald display of its own potency it recedes into hidden depths, seeming to enclose something that cannot however be reached; later the woman taunts him by saying: “the human penis, as highly as it’s valued, is nothing once inside but an indefinite mass whose shape the vagina ceases to perceive once swallowed.” The vagina, which extends into the body’s interiority, does not display itself, it withdraws; it thus evokes what cannot be apprehended by any gaze; in the imaginary of this film, it evokes not only slime but also the sublime, which Jean-François Lyotard describes as the apprehension of the “ineffable” within the perceptible which exposes the latter as inadequate to the task of representing it.⁴⁷ It is this sublime — this presentation of what eludes representation — that the film evokes in the repeatedly interpolated shots of the swirling ocean that surrounds the house, an ocean Breillat’s voiceover tells us is capable of “opening its flanks to engulf [one] to the point of total disappearance.” The ocean and the vagina are the sublime in

⁴⁶ Teresa de Lauretis, *Freud’s Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 13.

⁴⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, “Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime,” *Artforum* 20(8), 1982: 64-69. Cf also Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, Berkeley: UC Press, 2003.

nature; confronted by the immensity of this ocean which leaves him “*démuni*” (literally: disarmed/ destitute), the man experiences the “sounds and signs” of nature as “obscene.” His hatred of the vagina is no more nor less than a fear of his destitution in the face of the impersonality of the material world which is at once *too* material and riven with a sublimity that eludes any attempt to materially apprehend it.⁴⁸ The vagina embodies both excess, and default, of materiality: combining both the sublime and slime, it is the *sublime*.

sex, or the chain of metaphors

The ocean is a repeated trope in Breillat’s films, and it is often brought into direct contiguity — both semiotic, syntagmatic (through editing) and spatial — with the vagina. In *A Ma Soeur!*, Anaïs sits on the beach with her legs spread wide exposing her genitals to the ocean, of which it now appears to be an extension. This image repeats a scene from *Une Vraie Jeune Fille*, to which it is now time for us to finally return. If we have seen that some principle of asymmetrical differentiation may be inherent to sexuality, I have also argued that what MacKinnon calls “male sexual desire” is not as self-evidently the driving force of this differentiation as she assumes, and considered the thought — elaborated at length across Breillat’s oeuvre — that the differentiation inherent to sexuality is somehow related to the body’s situation within a world that is both merely material (made up of “slime”) and sublime (eluding its adequate capture by representation). To this we can add that the cinematic apparatus in Breillat is not the one described by Mulvey — the latter corresponds to a system driven by “male sexual desire,” but we have seen that this is an evacuated category. Cinema here delivers a different kind of look than a controlling, sadistic one; the practice of montage produces a contiguity that is also a correspondence, as we see in the interpolated shot of the flies that interrupted — and connected with — Alice’s investigation of her vagina in the scene at the breakfast table. The shot-reverse shot is only one form of cinematic syntagm; one that corresponds to the face and the exchange of looks. But the vagina, as it turns out, puts a different kind of contiguity in play.

Alice’s exploration of her vagina corresponds, in the film, to her sexual awakening, explored through a series of failed encounters. The most important of these encounters involves Jim (Hiram Keller), a laborer at her father’s sawmill on whom she develops a crush. This seemingly unrequited crush is itself an experience of abjection for Alice; she spends much of the film following Jim around, shamelessly (and therefore shamefully) exposing herself to him, watching him longingly as he labors at the mill. “I could see that he was not interested in me,” she says. “I was too young”; the abjection of this rejection resonates perfectly with the abject dimension in which she situates her sexuality.

⁴⁸ This horror is not the exclusive domain of the man. Breillat makes clear in interviews that it was her own horror at the sight of the female genitals that prompted her to make this film: “C’est parce que j’avais moi-même beaucoup de mal à supporter la vue d’un sexe féminin que j’ai fait *Anatomie de l’enfer*.” [“It is because I myself had so much difficulty standing the sight of the female sex organ that I made *Anatomy of Hell*.”] In Catherine Breillat, *Corps Amoureux: Entretiens avec Claire Vassé*, Paris: Denoël, 2006, p. 107. However, the horror is coded as male insofar as the female is identified with what is horrifying.



Fig 18. The gratuitousness of desire



Fig. 19. Jim's indifference

We see here that not only do the eyes “emit and receive communication,” as Aumont puts it — not only do they structure a social world — they also burden it with a certain excess in the form of (useless) desire; the look may or may not be tinged with desire; that desire is not the active, controlling, sadistic “male sexual desire” of MacKinnon’s account, or the *Geschlechts-Neigung* of Kant’s. It seems to be a gratuitous errancy of the gaze, a functionless excess that emanates from the bodily foundations of looking, an excess belying the mere functionality of eyes, exposing them as an organ not only of (instrumental) vision but also of a more complicated relational embeddedness in a material world. As gratuitous excess which overburdens the otherwise functional/communicative look, desire, it seems, is experienced as an unwanted supplement, inarticulable outside of certain legitimated social supports which in any case are never adequate to it, and which always arrive belatedly. (Here, Alice is too young to be a socially viable partner for Jim, so her attraction to him remains invisible to her oblivious father.) The body is the necessary foundation of any social scene, but sometimes is a body too much, failing to properly recede to its assumed position as mere (disavowed or bracketed) corporeal support for the sociality of the face. Through the desirous look — Alice’s look — the body incarnates itself in the face; the face becomes more than just a social agent but also the organ of a not-yet-socialized desire.

Alice’s problem, in *Une Vraie Jeune Fille*, is precisely that her body is too present, always obtruding improperly, such that neither Breillat’s camera nor the characters in her film can manage to stay focused on her face for very long. “You’re built like a woman,” her father tells her as he gropes her ass, and she feels this fact constantly reaffirmed in the alternately reproofing and desirous looks her body seems to draw from others that also seem to accuse her of an inherent obscenity. The shopkeeper at the grocery store stares at her if her body — which she can never adequately hide behind her clothes, no matter how baggy — had already incriminated itself by virtue of its own inexorably self-affirming corporeality. Alice’s body is experienced (by her and others) as an obscene gratuitousness; the problem is not that it makes her an object but rather that the gratuitous desiring supplement contaminates her looks (and the series of shot/reverse shots that communicates them); the reverse shots alternate between showing Jim’s face and showing his crotch. That crotch, however, concealed behind thick jeans, is rather an effect of this abject superfluity of Alice’s body, this gratuitousness of her desire, rather than its cause. The crotch does not propel a phallic economy in which she inexorably assumes the place of subordination; rather, by looking at it, she hopes to invest it with a life it seems not to have; it is her eyes that settle on and render it, through so doing, obscene.

After Alice suffers, across an extended series of shot/reverse shots, the indifference of Jim's stare, the film stages the first of her fantasies about an encounter with him. In this fantasy, Alice lies prostrate and naked on the beach, while Jim dangles an earthworm over her stomach, before touching her vulva and bringing it into contact with the worm:



Figs. 20-21. Penis as worm

Rather than actually insert the worm, however, Jim instead breaks it into pieces and lies it on top:



Fig. 22. Jim breaks the worm into pieces and lies it on Alice's vulva

His laughter at her humiliation in this condition, with broken worm atop vulva, concludes the fantasy, which, we might note, involves no penetration at all. Moreover, when Jim and Alice later do have sex, on the same beach,⁴⁹ that sex also involves no penetration but rather an elaborately staged becoming-animal. Alice parades on hands and knees before Jim with a feather inserted into her rear, clucking like a chicken: "*Clack clack clack, moi aussi je suis une poule!* [I am a chicken too!]" Jim kneels down and takes the feather in his mouth and they kiss across it; he adorns her with a wreath of weeds he picks out of the sand; he takes the weeds in his mouth; as they writhe together, we hear the sound of flies buzzing (earlier we have seen the corpse of a dead dog on the beach); they each masturbate and he ejaculates on his hand, finally smearing the sperm on her (still clothed) chest.

⁴⁹ Or is it another fantasy? Douglas Keesey reads it that way in *Catherine Breillat*. It is not clearly marked, narratively or formally, one way or the other. But like with Freud's hysterics, it is in any case the fantasy that is important.

Far from having any special status by virtue of the fact that it emanates from a penis, this sticky liquid assumes its place within a metonymic chain connecting the numerous other sticky liquids which have been the objects of the film's, and Alice's, close attention since the introduction of what I earlier referred to as the under-the-table world of Alice's vagina. We observed in the breakfast scene that the sticky fly trap which prompted a pan (the film's first) from Alice's face to her vagina introduced the visual theme of viscosity along with the image of dying insects. Those same insects feature prominently in the soundtrack to this scene of sexual consummation, a consummation which does not take the form of the "occupation" of Alice's body by Jim (the occupation Dworkin takes to be constitutive of sexuality) but rather contributes another term to the set of liquids which — now including sperm — thus seems to connect penis to vagina not as differential and oppositional terms (the opposition fullness/lack) but rather as associated terms in a metonymic chain. Neither the original nor the final term in this chain, sperm takes its place alongside the moist stickiness of the fly trap; the urine that emits from Alice as she sits on the toilet; the marmalade in which some flies have drowned; the blood dripping from a chicken's neck after Alice's mother cuts it; the running yolk of an egg she squashes between her fingers; Alice's vaginal juices, with which she writes her name on the mirror; her earwax as she wipes it on a towel; and the sap from a rubber tree, which Alice smears on her face:



Figs. 23-30. Figures of viscosity (metonymic chain) — the liquid depths of things

The last of these examples is particularly instructive, because the sap emanates from trees which are first depicted standing tall and erect, ancient and noble in their upright rigidity. The function of what we might now call Alice's *vaginal vision* — a vision which, starting with the breakfast scene, the camera absorbs and takes over as its own — is thus clear: it reveals the hidden liquid depths of things, the dialectic of erectness and oceanic viscosity into which things, all things, by virtue of their materiality, harden and dissolve. Alice's vaginal vision, which is an analogic vision in that its logic is not one of symbolic opposition but rather of contiguity and analogy, also connects the human and the inhuman worlds. After Jim wipes his sperm on her, Alice tells us in voiceover, "I watched his cock flopping like a dead fish." The cock too, as flesh secreting liquids, is caught up in the circuit of analogies set in motion by Alice's vaginal vision, a circuit that analogizes it to a dead fish, to the bleeding head of a chicken, and annexes it to the liquid circuit of sperm — egg yolk — urine — vaginal juice.

In Roland Barthes's astonishing essay on Bataille's *L'Histoire de l'Oeil*, he points out two sets of metaphors around which that text is organized.⁵⁰ The first, at the center of which stands the Eye of the title itself, is a series of objects connected by their shared *globularity* (and the associated properties of whiteness and roundness): egg, eye, saucer of milk, testicle. The second chain is "made up of all the avatars of liquid...; all the varieties of 'making wet' [which] complement the original metaphor of the globe" (121). These include both substantives — urine, milk, tears, egg yolk — and qualities, states or properties, such as "damp" and "streaming." The two metaphorical sets are connected through metonymy such that properties or terms from each come into unexpected association with the other, the result being an expanding radius of semiotic contamination leading, for example, to the "urinary liquefaction of the sky" (via the sun as disc and globe), and to improbable statements including "the eye sucked like a breast." Sex here, writes Barthes, is not the hidden meaning of the text; on the contrary, "[t]he metaphor is laid out in its entirety; it is circular and explicit, with no secret reference behind it" (123). Sex is not sublimated but it is "transgressed" (126), not through any acts of transgression per se (though these obviously feature heavily in the plot), but more importantly through this metonymic contagion of categories and properties that transgresses the proper borders of each; it is not that sex spills out to saturate the whole world; rather it finds itself swept into a metonymic circuit that includes it without being reducible to it. Barthes does, however, refer to the whole process as "eroticism."

One of Barthes' points is that Bataille mines the capacity of linguistic signs to transform and transgress their meanings when placed in unexpected combinations; for Barthes, this eroticism is "linguistic" (125) and is a property not of the body, but of literature (127). Bataille's pornographic story demonstrates, for the literary theorist, the erotic linguistic operation by which literature proceeds as literature. If a "sexual fantasy" lay behind this story, writes Barthes, we would have a phallic theme, but the theme is globular and liquid, not phallic, thus the story is not about sexuality per se. But here, as elsewhere, Barthes is rather too quick to engage in his own form of critical sublimation.⁵¹ In insisting on linguistic figures as eroticism's true domain, Barthes elevates the body to the status of a figure whose linguistic displacements, themselves assuming the mantle of the erotic, save the body from the materiality (and the material acts) the significations themselves insist on. In

⁵⁰ Roland Barthes, "The Metaphor of the Eye," trans. J. A. Underwood, in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, trans. Joachim Neugroschal, London: Penguin, 1982, pp. 119-127. Originally published as *Le Métaphore de l'Oeil*, in *Critique* 1963.

⁵¹ Cf D.A. Miller, "Foutre! Bougre! Ecriture!" *Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.2 (2001): 503-511.

liquifying the body's meanings, like the sun liquifies the sky, Barthes' Bataille also liberates it from the framework of sexual difference — liberates it from the tyranny of the “phallic.”⁵²

Bataille's story reminds us that the eyes too — those moist orbs — are hardly immune from the analogical pull that draws all forms into a circuit, one *Une Vraie Jeune Fille* invites us to describe as vaginal. But is the vagina whose proximity to her face Alice finds unbearable the site at which sexual difference exposes itself (literally) as a carnal truth? Or of a viscosity that connects her own liquid body by analogy to the male body, the world of animals and also the inanimate world — of trees for example? If the film's “vaginal vision” brings into view the liquid surfaces and depths of things, the analogical circuit it thereby sets in motion ultimately belies both the humanism of the face (so celebrated by film theory) and the “network of relations” reified, as Wittig put it, in the vagina. I do not mean to suggest that *Une Vraie Jeune Fille* offers us a utopian redefinition of vaginal relationality that would unshackle us from the (patriarchal) law of sexual difference. In the visual economy of *Une Vraie Jeune Fille*, the male and female sex organs, so frequently on view, surely signify that law in relation to which Alice and all other speaking beings must learn to take their place. But this is only half the story — the meaning of the sex organs at the level of the symbolic. Perhaps, then, it is the story the sex organs tell the *face*, if we can describe the face, finally, as the place-holder of *human meaning* in a symbolically organized social order in which, we might even conclude (a conclusion Varda's *Réponse de femmes* also inadvertently pushed us towards), it is ultimately the eminently social organ of the *face* that upholds sexual difference as structuring law. This would suggest that while the film wrestles, like other works of '70s feminist art and film, with an antinomy between face and vagina that it seemed at that moment important for technologies of the image to confront, the terms of this division are not the ones we have come to expect. The more expected terms await Alice, no doubt, as they awaited her parents whose name, she reminds us, she also bears. But for now at least, Alice remains a real young girl who does not yet quite know how to be a liberal subject, poised at a point where she has not fully heeded the call of autonomy, and where the vagina opens her liquefied eyes to a mode of relationality whose formal analogy would not be the “objectifying” gaze of the individual shot, but the contiguity that connects each shot in surprising ways to the next.

Breillat, as I have said, agrees with Dworkin that the vagina is what dehumanizes women. Unlike MacKinnon, she cannot attribute this dehumanization to the agency of a sadistic “male sexual desire.” If her 1976 film does *not* stage a narrative about women “becoming subjects,” as Liz Constable has argued — does not effect the transformation of vaginas into faces that Judy Chicago attempted in *The Dinner Party*— it does, however, suggest something perhaps more interesting: that the cinema is a technology that trains eyes in the art of vaginal vision.

⁵² I laid out my reservations with this reading of Bataille earlier in the chapter; sexual difference is one thing that is not, in Bataille, transgressed: men remain men and women women, both defined in fairly standard terms. Thus the “phallus” has not exactly been displaced.



Part Two:
Exceptionally Queer

Preamble: the antisocial vs. the liberal queer

The relation of queers to the “social” has been a notoriously contentious topic of recent queer theory. One polemical line of argumentation in a series of published debates on this topic targets what has been dubbed the “antisocial thesis.”¹ Jose Esteban Muñoz paraphrases that thesis thus:

Political hope fails queers because, like signification, it was not originally made for us... Instead..., queers [should] give up hope and embrace a certain negation endemic to our abjection within the symbolic. What we get, in exchange for giving up on futurity, abandoning politics and hope, is a certain jouissance that at once defines and negates us... [T]he social is inoperable for the always already shattered queer subject.²

Against this position (however inaccurately it characterizes the views of the scholars it is attributed to), Muñoz and a number of other theorists have instead insisted on “an understanding of queerness as collectivity,” arguing that “queerness is primarily about futurity and hope,” and proposing more communitarian, future-oriented, avowedly “utopian” programs for queer theory and politics.³

At the same time, exemplifying a different trajectory within queer theory, it has been forcefully argued that queers have, especially since September 11, 2001, come into a new kind of alliance with the Western, liberal nation state. According to the machinations of what Jasbir Puar has termed “homonationalism,” the (white, able-bodied) queer now appears not as harbinger of the destruction of the social order but rather as avatar of a patriotism that reproduces that order’s normative allocations of privilege as well as its operations of death dealing or what Puar (adapting a term from Achille Mbembe) calls “necropolitics.” Even as they come into a new alliance with a state authority that justifies new and old forms of death dealing, queers themselves, according to Puar, enjoy a newfound association with life and its supporting institutions of marriage, child rearing, and the family. “[T]here is a transition underway,” she writes, “in how queer subjects are [positioned in relation] to nation-states, particularly the United States, from being figures of death (i.e., the AIDS epidemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e., gay marriage and families).”⁴ In

¹ On these debates, see “Forum: Conference Debates: The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121.3 (2006): 819-828. See also Damon Young & Joshua J. Weiner (eds.), *Queer Bonds*, *GLQ* 17.2-3 (Feb 2011).

² Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York: NYU Press, 2009, p. 91.

³ Muñoz, p. 11. Also cf Juana Maria Rodriguez, “Queer Sociality and Other Sexual Fantasies,” in *Queer Bonds*; Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. A huge range of work critiques or resists Lee Edelman’s arguments in particular, thus no doubt demonstrating their force; cf also Katherine Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. For an unusually insightful, and appreciative, engagement with Edelman’s project, see Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of a Future,” in *Queer Bonds*, 243-263.

⁴ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, p. xii.

Puar's argument, certain narrowly defined "queer subjects" not only find now representation within, but *themselves come to represent*, the liberal state and the institutions (like marriage) that structure its social norms. The "antisocial thesis," from this perspective, appears as a form of nostalgic investment in a "subversive" or transgressive position for queerness — akin, maybe, to the position it occupied in *Rope*— but now entirely at odds with the social function queerness has come to perform within the liberal nation-state. Puar, moreover, associates this development within liberalism with the polemical and imperialist dismissal of "non-liberal," specifically Islamist, systems of government, social organization, gender and sexuality; so the queer becomes an accessory to — indeed the (sometimes unwitting) ambassador for — violent, neo-imperialist incursions of Western nations into the Middle East.⁵

How do we reconcile Lee Edelman's claim that queerness figures "the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" with Puar's argument that queers have become the privileged figure of liberal imperialism?⁶ Which figure is the salient one? Or perhaps it is this very tension that defines the position of queerness today. Consider, as an example that lends support to Puar's argument, President Obama's second inaugural address on the steps of the Capitol on January 21, 2013, in which he hailed the protagonists of the Stonewall riots, alongside those of the Seneca Falls Convention and the Selma marches, as avatars of the "most self-evident truth of all" and defining national principle, namely that "all of us are created equal." In including these proper names in this radically reconfigured narrative of the nation's march towards ever-greater equality, Obama not only argued for the extension of rights to formerly marginalized groups — women, blacks, and gays — he named these groups, in their struggles for rights, as the very embodiment of the nation's defining values. The marchers from Selma, beaten by police batons, and the rioting drag queens and other assorted queers of Stonewall, were now hailed as "our forebears" and national "pioneers," in a remarkable move that locates the truth or spirit of US liberal democracy not in the state itself but rather in a history of (racialized, gendered, sexualized) protest and struggle against the state:

We the people declare today that the most evident of truth that all of us are created equal -- is the star that guides us still; just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls and Selma and Stonewall... It is now our generation's task to carry on what those pioneers began, for our journey is not complete until our wives, our mothers and daughters can earn a living equal to their efforts. Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law, for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal, as well.

Far from posing an antisocial threat to the social contract, the unruly drag queens and assorted queers of color that met lines of police shields with chorus lines of can-can dancers are now hailed as its most valiant defenders. This reclamation aligns the true and enduring values of the US Constitution with the drag queens and not with the police who bludgeoned and arrested them. Obama singled out their struggle against the state, along with the earlier struggles for women's suffrage and black civil rights, as examples of the self-correcting teleological momentum of liberal democracy, its asymptotic inclination towards realizing its defining promise of freedom, justice, and

⁵ My reading of *Shortbus* in chapter five shows how that film's rhetoric of queerness as "permeability" and "connectivity" functions by invoking a domain of the "outside" (implicitly Islamic) to this liberal democratic queer utopia.

⁶ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, p. 9.

equality. This inner or ideal truth, towards which the United States moves as towards an ever-greater realization of its founding premises, is embodied in all three of Obama's examples not by the state or its institutions, but by those who struggle against it — and notably here, not only by African Americans and women, but also by queers, now recast as patriotic soldiers that bring the liberal state closer to its essence.

There is a slippage in the passage from the initial invocation of the Stonewall rioters to the “gay brothers and sisters” worthy of a love equivalent to (because resembling) that of heterosexuals.⁷ The “sissies” and “queens” at the forefront of the Stonewall insurrection are retrofitted in their liberal Sunday finest through their rhetorical inclusion into the family as “our gay brothers and sisters.” This specification secures a gender binary that love, however, is no longer imagined to have as its precondition. So sissy queens and butch dykes — now “our gay brothers and sisters” — are invested as avatars of liberal democracy in at least two senses. First, Obama's rhetoric draws on an impeccable liberal logic that preserves the primacy of the family as the *pre-political* foundation of civil society. As such, it is a protected domain of freedom, which “our gay brothers and sisters” have every right to inhabit. Second, “our” gay brothers and sisters hold liberalism accountable to its own principles of universality and of abstraction from substantive particularities. Previously, that pre-political domain of the family preserved and mandated what Carole Pateman calls “status” difference, i.e. a patriarchal structure that subjugated women within the terms of a disavowed, but fully operational, *sexual contract*.⁸ But, Obama asks, why should love require status difference? Liberalism upholds private freedom, freedom of contract, and this means substantive attributes, or “status,” should not be embedded in any liberal institutions as structural preconditions or as structurally pre-determined. A truly liberal marriage is one that can take place between two partners regardless of sex or gender.

Avatars for, and educators of, the liberal public sphere; queers are here hardly the subject of an “antisocial thesis”; rather, Puar's argument about “homonationalism” seems to find a startlingly direct confirmation. But this is hardly the whole, or the end of, the story, and Obama's rhetoric is also strategic, which is to say it does not describe the actual state of things but rather attempts to rhetorically effect a valorization of gay and lesbian identity that, if it is now speakable, remains far from realized. Consider, in this regard, the massive public protests in France on the occasion of the recent legalization of gay marriage in that country. Protestors opined — sounding a well-known refrain — that the official legitimization of gay partnerships will spell the end of civilization as we

⁷ In his account of the riots, David Carter writes: “All available evidence leads us to conclude that the Stonewall Riots were instigated and led by the most despised and marginal elements of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community” (*Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004, p. 262). Or as Dick Leitsch described it: “The most striking feature of the rioting was that it was led, and featured as participants, ‘queens,’ not ‘homosexuals.’ ‘Homosexuals’ have been sitting back and taking what the Establishment handed out; the ‘queens’ were having none of that.” (Qtd in Carter, p. 191.) In Leitsch's terms, those queens are now recast by Obama as homosexuals — in the *name* of “the Establishment.”

⁸ Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

know it.⁹ Pope Emeritus Benedict, too, perhaps responding to the events in France, made a *social*, rather than a religious, case against homosexuality in explaining why gay marriage, along with abortion and euthanasia, poses "a threat to world peace."¹⁰ Gay marriage, like homosexuality in general, said the leader of Catholicism, represents a hypertrophy of "spirit and will" — i.e. willful self-determination — at the expense of a submission to the imperatives of "natural existence": as the Pope puts it, "man and woman as created realities, as the nature of the human being, no longer exist. Man calls his own nature into question. From now on he is merely spirit and will." In a move that may have surprised the author of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the so-called "Hegelian" Pope here attributes a homosexual teleology to Absolute Spirit. At the same time, this dominion of "spirit and will" is decried as not productive of, but threatening to, social harmony when *Geist* is allowed to ascend definitively over nature.¹¹ It is not a question here of liberal secularism versus religious prohibition: on the contrary, it is Obama who asserted the imperative of gay rights, embodying the principles of the Declaration of Independence, as "God-given," while Pope Benedict invoked the sexual contract of liberalism, and not God-given laws, in his argument against gay marriage. The argument against homosexuality is here neither theological nor moral; it is social.¹²

On the one hand, a new homonationalism, the queer as ambassador of the truth or promise of liberal democracy; on the other, a queerness that spells an end to civilization as we know it, threatens the social contract with its annihilation and replaces the peace and equality that contract secures with a condition of permanent war. Insofar as both positions remain active, it is not simply the case that one has come to replace the other, i.e. that as it takes on new forms of publicness, the figure of

⁹ Guy Hocquenghem laid out this position in his crucial early text *Homosexual Desire* (1972) where he quotes an argument advanced by sociologist André-Morali Daninos: "Were homosexuality to receive, even in theory, a show of approval, were it allowed to break away even partially from the framework of pathology, we would soon arrive at the abolition of the heterosexual couple and of the family, which are the foundations of the Western society in which we live." In *Sociologie des relations sexuelles* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), 1963, p. 49. Quoted in Hocquenghem, p. 60. On more recent French debates about the anti-sociality of gay and lesbian relationships, see Joan Wallach Scott, "The Discourse of the Couple," in *Parité!*, 100-123.

¹⁰ Nicole Winfield, "Pope: Gay choices destroy human 'essence,' threaten world peace," *MSN News*, Dec 21, 2012, at <http://news.msn.com/world/pope-gay-choices-destroy-human-essence-threaten-world-peace>

¹¹ Kant, in his discussion of homosexuality, sees this as an aporetic proposition. Like Pope Benedict, he assumes that homosexuality is unnatural, since (he claims) animals are not homosexual. For Kant, sexuality (i.e. heterosexuality) is a return to an animal state, foregoing our specifically human powers of will and self-overcoming, and giving in to "pathological" impulse. This makes us like animals. But since animals are not gay, gay sex cannot be seen as a retreat to a natural state. Nothing could motivate it except an act of will, but will follows principles of practical reason, and there is no reason to will homosexuality. Thus it remains purely incomprehensible, akin to an equally willful "radical evil" (and worse, he says, than suicide). Nevertheless his own argument for marriage — that it creates a formal structure of equality and reciprocity that overrides the inequality inherent to sexual appetite — could easily be used to support gay marriage, where the lack of "status" difference seems to make a formal equality and reciprocity easier, not harder, to imagine.

¹² In claiming that homosexuality is at odds with the social contract that preserves world peace, Benedict implies first that the social contract is rooted in nature, not in human "spirit and will," and second, that the social contract and world peace depend on — and cannot do without — a principle of what he calls "duality," i.e. categorical difference that the will can easily, but must never, overcome. So, echoing some French Lacanians, Benedict insists that the preservation of "status" difference within the private sphere (Pateman's "sexual contract") is crucial to the maintenance of a harmonious social order.

queerness has moved from a transgressive to a representative relation to the liberal social order. The ambiguity hangs over the manner in which queerness is said to be made public; as an unspeakable supplement or transgressive “outside” to the social order, or as a claim on a minoritarian (or representative) position within it. It is with this contemporary tension in mind that I now turn to three films — from 1978, 1980, and 2006 respectively — each of which made homosexuality (as identity or practice) more public in a significant way, and each of which did so by invoking some form of liberal social contract, though in radically divergent senses. Though the films are presented in a chronological progression, it will be clear that this is not a teleological argument; each film, I propose, models a way of thinking about homosexuality’s relation to the liberal social order that remains more or less contemporary.

Word is Out (1978) and the Queer Public Sphere

[T]o live in society is to live in heterosexuality... [S]ocial contract and heterosexuality are two superimposable notions.

— Monique Wittig, “On the Social Contract”

This chapter and the next explore two films that bring homosexuality into the US public sphere through the medium of cinema, at the end of the 1970s — in radically distinct ways. The first, and the subject of this chapter, is the collectively produced documentary film *Word is Out: Stories from Some of Our Lives* (Mariposa Film Group, 1978) which brought stories of gay and lesbian experience, treated without melodrama, without tragedy, in a strictly realist manner, to theaters nationwide and also to living rooms through its screening on public broadcast television. The “out” of the title means public, and the question of the film is: what does it mean for gay people to declare their homosexuality publicly, to make of homosexuality a *public* identity? This is a text that comes “on scene” almost a decade *after* gay liberation; its significance lies in the way it has been taken to mark a watershed moment in the history of “gay liberalism,” a term that invites careful reflection, since it is not immediately obvious how liberalism could be “gay.” (It’s easier to imagine how gays could be “liberal,” but the equivocation is an interesting one.) The second, discussed in chapter four, is a film that brought not gay identity but gay sex into the domain of public visual culture, in a remarkably explicit way that offended almost everyone. The film in question is *Cruising*, William Friedkin’s generically confused horror-cum-detective film from 1980, starring Al Pacino as an undercover cop who ventures into the New York leather scene and whose performance of gay S/M becomes a little too convincing. At the end of the seventies, at “that happy historical moment... after Gay Liberation but before AIDS,”¹ both *Word is Out* and *Cruising* produced a new publicity for homosexuality, though they offer radically different visions of what that publicity entails. In different ways, *Word is Out* and *Cruising*, if not strict historical “firsts,” are representative of a substantive transformation in the status of homosexuality in the public sphere of representation (in both the semiotic and the political sense of that term).

One way of framing a narrative about homosexuality in US cinema would be to say that from the Code era to the post-Code, from pre-Stonewall to post- (those two historical divisions coinciding almost exactly), cinema not only reflects but is also a significant agent in the broad cultural transition of homosexuality from the domain of invisibility and connotation — the opacity of the closet — to a light-filled realm of explicit representation. And indeed, this chapter explores a key moment in that transition from the domain of the unspeakable and the unseen to the seeable and the spoken. *Word is Out* is often criticized because the victories it claims for the spoken — the “word” of its title — are taken to be won at the expense of the seen; the film is criticized for what Greg Youmans describes as its emphasis on “post-sexual forms and definitions of gay life,” ones which de-emphasize sex itself and keep it out of view.² I will consider that criticism along with the charge that the film models what Lisa Duggan would later call *homonormativity*. In some sense, that is true, since the film

¹ D.A. Miller, “Second Time Around: *Cruising*,” *Film Quarterly* 61.2 (Winter 2007/08), p. 71.

² Greg Youmans, *Word is Out*, Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011, p. 162.

deploys norms of self-representation in the public sphere to make a claim on public space in the name of lesbian and gay identity. It constructs a domain of queer privacy that is also wielded in a highly strategic manner. In this chapter, then, I will not so much be defending *Word is Out* from the charge of “liberalism” as attempting to demonstrate: (a) that *gay* liberalism, if that’s what the film produces, is a most interesting proposition; and (b) that “radical queer” critiques of the private — accompanied by a polemical call for queer “sex in public” — fall into interesting kinds of contradiction. *Word is Out*, I will argue, uses liberalism’s own categories to wreak lasting havoc on what Monique Wittig, in the epigraph, diagnoses as its implicitly heterosexual social contract.

Word is Out and the becoming-public of “gay liberalism”

Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives, a collectively-authored documentary comprised of “talking-head interviews” with gay men and women, premiered at the Castro Theater in San Francisco in 1977.³ While *Word is Out* was not the very first realist documentary about gay men and lesbians, in its scope, length and technical finesse, it marked a “profoundly qualitative shift in gay and lesbian representation” (Youmans, 47).⁴ It also achieved an unprecedented reach, screening theatrically around the US and subsequently airing on national public television (in October 1978).⁵ As such, *Word is Out* marks a significant milestone in the history of queer representations in the mainstream and, as we shall see, the ascendancy of a new form of gay politics. Both these things — the consolidation of a new representational paradigm and its attendant form of political mobilization — concern the *assertion of homosexuality as a viable and legitimate public identity*.

It is important to emphasize here that I do not mean public in the sense of “unruly sites of queer public culture” (Youmans, 146), which is to say the gay and lesbian “marches, parades, demonstrations, press conferences, zaps” of the post-Stonewall era (Waugh, 113). It is these sites that predominated in a number of earlier documentaries about gay and lesbian experience, including *Some of Your Best Friends* (Kenneth Robinson, 1971), *Home Movie* (Jan Oxenberg, 1972) and *Gay USA* (Artie Bressan, 1977). What distinguishes *Word is Out* is its address to a public that is precisely not a counterpublic; the virtual space into which *Word is Out* delivers its word is not a “parallel discursive [arena] where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and

³ Youmans offers an account of the film’s long production process, as a collaborative project between six men and women (many of them first time film-makers) who formed the Mariposa Film Group for the purposes of making this film. See also Nancy Adair and Casey Adair, *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*, San Francisco: New Glide Publications, 1978.

⁴ Thomas Waugh situates *Word is Out* in a broader history of gay, lesbian and queer documentaries in “Walking on Tippy Toes: Lesbian and Gay Liberation Documentary of the Post-Stonewall Period 1969-84,” in Chris Holmlund and Cynthia Fuchs eds., *Between the Sheets, In the Streets: Queer, Lesbian, Gay Documentary*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 107-126.

⁵ “Through television the film reached a viewership likely in the low millions, an exponential leap over the many thousands who saw it in theaters. Perhaps more importantly, on television it entered the homes of closeted and isolated lesbians and gay men, and it also reached a number of intolerant straight people who would never have paid the price of a ticket.” Youmans, pp. 85-6.

needs.”⁶ *Word is Out* addresses its performance rather to a *general* public sphere, which Nancy Fraser defines in revealingly performative terms as the “*theater* in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk.” Of course, the general (liberal-bourgeois) public sphere (which arose, as Habermas tells us, in the eighteenth century) ideally serves a critical function, as a “site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state.”⁷ But it is distinct from the unruly sites of counterpublic self-fashioning whose absence from *Word is Out* Youmans and many other critics regret.

In “*Anal Rope*,” D.A. Miller shows how Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948) exposes the semiotic mechanics of a pre-Stonewall regime of the closet in which homosexual signification is produced at and confined to the realm of connotation, while what is *denoted* (in that film) is a transgression of the liberal social contract.⁸ *Word is Out* boldly transfers connotative meaning to the level of denotation — a passage declared by the “Out” of the title — and in so doing, reclaims what is now denoted as fully and benignly concordant with the norms of liberal sociality. The grammar of the title, *Word is Out*, suggests mere predication (the indicative tense) but what appears constative is actually performative: in saying that the “word is out,” it becomes so; through the advent of the film, something is effected, something becomes true. This bringing out is both a rendering speakable, articulable, narratable (the “word” of the title), and a bringing into the open, bringing to light, into view — making public, if we recall Hannah Arendt’s definition of the distinction between public and private spheres as the “distinction between things that should be shown and things that should be hidden.”⁹ Such a strategy, some three decades after *Rope*, rejects the “off scene” imperative that determined that film’s system of allusions and elisions, as well as the anti-sociality it ascribes to a homosexuality that remains unspeakable.

Word is Out is comprised of interviews with twenty-six gay men and lesbians — an even number of each as a testament to its egalitarian ethos — each in dialogue with a member of the directorial collective, narrating life experiences relating to their homosexuality.¹⁰ Formally, the film depends heavily on the close-up of the face, and portrays its subjects in domestic or bucolic settings, where they appear sometimes alone, and sometimes with their partners. The final, two-hour long version of the film was the outcome of a long process of editing and community consultation. The

⁶ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Bruce Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 14.

⁷ Fraser, p. 2. Of course, Habermas has said that this public sphere no longer exists, due to the corporatization of mass media (he puts this concisely in Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article,” *New German Critique* 3 (Autumn 1974): 49-55). I won’t address the empirical account (on which, see Bruce Robbins, “Introduction: The Public as Phantom” in *The Phantom Public Sphere*); the relevant point here is simply that *Word is Out* *imagines* such a sphere, invokes it as its implicit field of address. It performs its participation in an ideal public sphere also in that it is produced by a non-profit collective in the name of contributing to enlightened public debate and out of no corporate or profit-bearing interest.

⁸ D.A. Miller, “*Anal Rope*,” in Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, New York: Routledge, 1991, 118-141. See my discussion of the film, and Miller’s essay, in chapter four.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 72.

¹⁰ In fact there are more than twenty-six subjects featured in *Word is Out*, because some of the central characters have partners who are included in the film but not in the count.

film-makers filmed one hundred video pre-interviews, each half an hour long, as part of the process of casting the final film. It is worth noting that a number of the film's documentary subjects — including Harry Hay, Sally Gearhart, Tede Matthews, Cynthia Gair and George Mendenhall — were well-known gay, lesbian and/or feminist activists at the time. The performance of everyday domesticity that predominates in *Word in Out* is thus in some cases a form of civilian drag (cf Youmans, 48); while the narratives are authentic, the subjects do not speak about their activist work in the community, focusing instead on stories of personal experience.¹¹ Just as the documentary subjects in *Word is Out* perform everydayness (and keep their organized activism off/scene), Thomas Waugh reminds us that the performance of “spontaneity and inner authenticity” that defines the coming out “genre” is of course itself an elaborate construction — in the case of *Word is Out*, some version of the narratives had been rehearsed in the video “pre-interviews” during the process of casting (Waugh, 119-20).

What distinguishes *Word is Out's* making-public from earlier iterations of homosexuality in cinema is not, then, its authenticity but rather the direct address to a public sphere it effects via its “word.” Queer sexualities had, of course, come explicitly into view in a wide range of film genres between 1948 (the year of *Rope*) and 1978.¹² In Hollywood cinema, as the Production Code was eroded throughout the 1960s, homosexual characters became overtly recognizable as such in films like *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967) and *The Sergeant* (1968) (typically killed off in the last reel), and, with the advent of *The Boys in the Band* (dir. Friedkin, 1970), they became for the first time a Hollywood film's central protagonists.¹³ Homosexual or queer characters also populated a number of well-known films by European auteurs in the '60s and '70s, including, most famously, works by Pasolini, Visconti, Akerman, Ottinger, and Fassbinder. Waugh writes that the gay themes and characters of '60s European cinema emerged within a framework of “melodramatic catharsis and the open or dead-queer ending” — he calls these the “angst-ridden Continentals” which he counterposes to the “suicidal Rod Steigers” of Hollywood in the late '60s.¹⁴ As Waugh also notes, “positive image ideology” — which found a systematic articulation in Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* (1981) — was at this moment “still limited to low-key griping by an increasingly anachronistic and film-

¹¹ Youmans points out that prior to *Word is Out*, only activists had appeared in documentary treatments of homosexuality. In the most direct precursor to *Word is Out*, the 40-minute USC thesis film *Some of Your Best Friends* (dir. Kenneth Robinson, 1971), non-activist subjects appear only as silhouettes.

¹² In fact, as Laura Horak has pointed out, early narrative silent cinema featured a wide range of gender crossing performances, which in the 1920s began to be marked (or insinuated) as specifically homosexual, though of course what is insinuated can always be denied. Laura Evelyn Horak, “Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Woman and the Legitimation of American Silent Cinema” PhD dissertation, UC Berkeley, 2011.

¹³ The classic account of homosexual characters in Hollywood film is given in Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

¹⁴ Thomas Waugh, “Cockteaser,” in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, ed. Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996). Waugh writes that “The first (mini-)cycle [of Hollywood films featuring queer characters] had featured Shirley MacLaine, Capucine, and Don Murray as dead queers; the second was much more substantial, killing off Sandy Dennis, Rod Steiger, Marlon Brando, Dustin Hoffman, and Cliff Gorman.” And he notes that “*Variety* pronounced in March 1969 that themes dealing with sexual deviation were now box office, listing seventeen deviate films already made or definitely set, with three more in the possible category” (71-2).

illiterate Mattachine constituency” (*ibid.*).¹⁵

In a different register, avant-garde and experimental cinema were strongly associated with explorations of queer sexuality, beginning with Kenneth Anger’s *Fireworks*, exhibited the same year as *Rope* (1948), which is at once a seminal work of the avant-garde canon and, in my view, the first work of queer cinema.¹⁶ Here, homosexuality appears in the form of sadomasochistic fantasy.¹⁷ In ‘60s experimental works like Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1963), Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963), Barbara Rubin’s *Christmas on Earth* (1963), and works by Warhol, George and Mike Kuchar, Ken Jacobs, Marie Menkin and others, queer sexualities found a wide range of expressions associated with formal experimentation. The flourishing of the so-called “New York Underground” corresponded to a broad new interest in the 1960s in the body as an object of performative and artistic exploration.¹⁸ This exploration frequently deployed tropes of homosexuality, albeit in a register quite distinct from that of an emergent identity politics. In Rubin’s film, for example, through disorienting close-ups and a technique of double projection, body parts are made to detach themselves from human subjects, and brought together in surprising combinations in such a manner that “the dichotomies between male and female, subject and object, and ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ cease to obtain as the relationship between anatomical difference and prescribed sexual roles collapses in an orgy of fluid exchanges” (Osterweil, 137). What *is* clearly recognizable is the act of male anal intercourse that forms the literal centerpiece of the spectacle. But here that act does not serve to consolidate any identity category; rather, it gives carnal form to identity’s dispersal.



Fig 1. Barbara Rubin’s *Christmas on Earth* (1963)

¹⁵ Incidentally, Russo would hail the protests against *Cruising* (in 1979-80)—perhaps emboldened by *Word is Out!*—as the dawn of a new era of gay and lesbian positive-image activism. *The Celluloid Closet*, pp. 236-240.

¹⁶ What “queer cinema” means is open to debate, but I mean something like: films by queers and about queer desire. (Though this definition is too broad, since it evokes moments in films by Eisenstein or Murnau, which would not qualify as queer cinema.) We could say, then: films made by self-avowed queers explicitly thematizing queer desire (but now this definition seems too narrow; it excludes, for example, Todd Haynes’ *Safe*.) Perhaps we should stick with the definition proffered by Justice Stewart in attempting to define pornography: “I know it when I see it!”

¹⁷ Cf also Jean Genet’s sole film *Un Chant d’Amour* (1950)

¹⁸ For a fantastically insightful analysis of this development in experimental cinema, see Ara Osterweil, “Flesh Cinema: The Corporeal Avant-Garde 1959-1979,” PhD Dissertation, UC Berkeley, 2005. On the rise of “body art” in the 1960s and ‘70s, see Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

What Osterweil calls the “corporeal avant-garde” produced and addressed a “counterpublic” sphere in which formal experimentation and sexual experimentation overlapped.¹⁹ The address to a public — now importantly generalized as *the* public — in *Word is Out* takes an entirely different form. It is not just that the film rejects the tragic and/or melodramatic narrative frame through which queer figures had been conjured up as subjects of narrative cinema both in the US (eg *Boys in the Band*, 1970) and Europe (eg *Death in Venice*, 1971 and *Fox and his Friends*, 1975).²⁰ Nor is homosexual desire here marshaled as a force that upsets the normal order of things and effects a radical transformation or dissolution of the existing social order (cf Pasolini’s *Teorema*, 1968). Rather, the formal and political gambit of *Word is Out*, delivered via an aesthetics of “sober realism” (Youmans, 50), is to construct the homosexual as a universal subject with an ordinary claim on civil rights.²¹ To that end, *Word is Out* rejects the association of queer sexuality with formal experimentation that was the legacy of the New York Underground and other queer experimental work. In those traditions, a fluid sexuality that transcends or complicates normative categories is produced through and associated with experimentations in film form and ambiguities of cinematic time and space. Queer sexuality is marshaled to push against the formal constraints of naturalism and narrative, producing an experimental cinema as correlate to an experimental sexuality.²² In *Word is Out*, homosexuality is not experimental; it is domestic. Its individuated subjects speak articulately for themselves — they are autonomous, speaking subjects, and their modes of self-narration formally and narratively reproduce both existing conventions of realist documentary portraiture and the constitutive qualities of the liberal subject addressing a public sphere. But what they speak is something that has been excluded from that sphere. In thematizing and redressing that absence, the film transforms the public sphere it addresses.

Word is Out delivered an image of homosexuality as something quite unremarkable into the American domestic interior; it domesticated homosexuality both in its treatment of the subject and via its means of transmission. For Youmans, the film’s ability to render homosexuality articulable and

¹⁹ On the New York Underground as a social sphere that produced an incipient, pre-identitarian queerness through aesthetic experimentalism, cf Janet Staiger, “Finding Community in the Early 1960s: Underground Cinema and Sexual Politics,” in *Swinging Single: Representing Sexuality in the 1960s*, ed. Hilary Radner and Moya Luckett, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 38-74. On this convergence in the early 1970s, see also Elena Gorfinkel, “Erotic Film Festivals of the Early 1970s and the Utopian Sexual Public Sphere,” in *Framework* 47.2 (Fall 2006): 59-86.

²⁰ Many of these instances occur in films made by queer film-makers in a European tradition of what D.A. Miller calls “homo-cinema.” Consider in this regard Tom Waugh’s complaint about the “irreconcilability of subject and object” in Visconti’s “morbid Teutonic trilogy (*The Damned*, *Death in Venice*, and *Ludwig*)” (“Cockteaser,” 72).

²¹ By “universal” I obviously do not mean that *Word is Out* suggests that everyone is gay. I mean “universal” in the sense that the autonomous individual of liberal (and French republican) theory is a “universal” subject; the universality that defines this subject and authorizes him or her to speak in the public sphere is one that (ideally) transcends contingent particularities — now extended to include sexual orientation. But in the very act of insisting on sexual orientation as something transcendable, that sexual orientation comes firmly into view, whereas before it was non-transcendable *precisely because* invisible.

²² Barbara Hammer’s films of the 1970s also exemplify this tendency. She makes an explicit case for it in her essay, “The Politics of Abstraction,” in Martha Gever, Pratibha Parmar and John Greyson (eds.), *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 70-75.

legitimate within a public (not just a counterpublic) sphere demonstrates what he takes to be its most historically significant feature: its crystallization of the broader cultural and political formation of what he calls “*gay liberalism*.”²³ Distinct from the *liberationism* of earlier, post-Stonewall queer and radical movements, gay liberalism marks, for Youmans, the beginning of a new paradigm that finds its consummation in the contemporary gay and lesbian rights movement’s currently near-exclusive focus on gays in the military and gay marriage.²⁴

Unlike the works in the experimental tradition I mentioned earlier, with their emphasis on deterritorializations of gender as part of a broader critique or camp rejection of bourgeois social form, gay liberalism functions through a direct address to a public sphere — the liberal public sphere — and to its constitutive principles of rights, equality and freedom, as well as its clear-cut separation of the private from the public. Gay liberalism has a distinct stylistics: whereas works by Warhol and Smith were decidedly campy, and works by Rubin and Anger delirious, ecstatic or hallucinatory, rhetorical mode of *Word is Out* is entirely earnest, though the film’s subjects’ narratives do involve moments of humor; it is not that the *content* of the stories is humorless, but rather that the form itself constructs a frame of seriousness that is respectful of the dignity and personhood of the narrating subject, and that implies the seriousness of the claim for political enfranchisement. While this strategy has its roots in the pre-liberation Homophile movements which argued for tolerance of gays and lesbians, what distinguishes gay liberalism is the way it elevates the homosexual to the status of universal subject:

Word is Out is the quintessentially gay liberal film because it formally and ideologically presents gay and lesbian subjects in ways that are akin to how [the US Constitution and the French *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen*] define the proper citizen of liberal democracy. (Youmans, 89)

The emphasis here falls on “proper,” in both its senses. Earlier queer films, writes Youmans, “made heavy use of theatrical contrivance, as well as a general camp flamboyance,” evoking “a publicization of secret communities, and a realization of hitherto unrealized... queer realities.” He continues:

²³ Gay liberalism is Youmans’ historically situated term for what other scholars, following Lisa Duggan, have called “homonormativity” (*The Twilight of Equality*). Duggan’s account of homonormativity identifies it as a reaction on the part of an emergent cadre of gay conservatives (among whom Andrew Sullivan is singled out as preeminent) to the AIDS crisis: an attempt to undo the negative associations of male homosexuality with promiscuity and the spread of HIV by adopting a model derived from heterosexual monogamous marriage, as an ideal and a norm for gay relationships. But Youmans’ account of *Word is Out* demonstrates that this trajectory of queer politics has a history that pre-dates AIDS. He also ties it specifically to the aesthetics of realist documentary.

²⁴ Youmans argues that gay liberalism emerges partly in response to the Anita Bryant “Save Our Children” campaign to overturn an antidiscrimination ordinance in Florida (in 1977), and to the imminent vote in California on the so-called Briggs Initiative, which proposed to outlaw gay teachers in public schools. Youmans writes, “These [late ‘70s] threats to gay rights prompted many lesbians and gay men to participate in activism for the first time; they spurred others into a political reawakening after a mid-1970s slumber, and they absorbed still others into a liberal political agenda after they had spent years criticizing and practicing alternatives to liberalism” (26-7).

the early films evinced a non-liberal understanding of out gay life: they envisioned coming out as a first step toward dramatic transformation of the self and (ideally) society, and they took it for granted that performances of straightness, sameness, and respectability would not follow a person beyond the closet door. (104)

In contradistinction to these early films, Youmans argues that *Word is Out*'s gay liberalism drains "outness" of its "disruptive potential" (108). Paradoxically, it asserts this "outness" precisely by insisting on homosexuality as no longer a publicly transformative, but rather a benign, "bounded, privatized attribute" of an individual subject (92).

This individualizing of homosexuality, which resists the modes of publicness produced by both liberationist and separatist movements, was the condition of possibility for a massively expanded public visibility for homosexuality that the film achieved. Herein lies the inherent paradox of *Word is Out*, and, by Youmans' account, of its gay liberal subject: the "becoming-public" of gay and lesbian identity takes place via an inscription of that orientation (conveyed via the "word") as an essentially private and contingent aspect of subjective particularity, the very kind that is transcended in the production of the subject who circulates in the liberal public sphere. As Jonathan Flatley puts it in a different context, acquiring a "public persona or identity" involves an abstraction from particulars that in some cases — especially for historically minoritized or oppressed groups — can be considered a meaningful strategy of empowerment. "[T]o be public," writes Flatley, "is to transcend particularity, embodiment, and domesticity, the spaces where the disenfranchised have historically been made to dwell."²⁵ But here *Word is Out* alerts us to another paradox, because it is precisely *through* placing its queer subjects in domestic settings that it manifests the legitimacy of their claim on public identity. The film inserts its subjects in a public sphere precisely by representing them in no public spaces at all, but rather by enclosing them in the atomized space of individual or coupled domesticity, and never in a social space that evinces a collectivity or a public larger than that of the *tête-à-tête* with the interviewer.



Fig 2. Domestic space in *Word is Out*: beds for talking on!

For Youmans, this insistence on a privatized individuality, central to gay liberalism, paradoxically renders homosexuality "nonpolitical":

²⁵ Jonathan Flatley, "Warhol Gives Good Face," in *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*, p. 104. Cf also Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," in Robbins, ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere*, 234-256.

Like the French *Déclaration*, *Word is Out* is at pains to construct a community of individuals, and it does so by presenting an illusion of civic participation and national community that is in fact an editing together of distinct cells, or “isolated monads” [Marx’s term]... By de-particularizing its subjects, the film universalizes gay and lesbian experience and renders it abstract. *Word is Out* is bound up with the liberal separation of spheres in the sense that its main political project is *to render homosexuality a nonpolitical issue, i.e. the purview of the individual rather than the citizen*. The film articulates homosexuality not as a disruptive public force, as in gay-liberationist formulations, but as a bounded, privatized attribute. (91-92, my italics)

In addressing the film’s contradictions, Youmans makes the surprising claim that the “main political project” of *Word is Out* — a film he has just hailed as representative of, precisely, a new form of gay identity politics — is to render homosexuality a “*nonpolitical issue*,” by which he means “the purview of the [private] individual rather than the [public] citizen.” He derives this logic from Marx’s critique of the way the modern (liberal) sphere of the “political” is founded on the distinction between civil society — the domain of man as “an *independent* and *egoistic* individual” — and the political state, the (merely ideal) domain of man as “species-being” or citizen.²⁶ Youmans’ argument is that because the film isolates its subjects (or confines them to coupled domesticity, an important distinction that I will return to), and expresses homosexuality as a dimension of private, individual experience and not public, communitarian transformation, then this means it brings up the topic of sexual orientation only to relegate it to the domain of the non-citizen, an individual or private affair.

The “liberal” retort would of course be that for the non-queer subject, sexual orientation is also precisely “the purview of the individual rather than the citizen.” The very definition of citizen, in the liberal-bourgeois-capitalist system analyzed by Marx, formally designates matters of sexuality as outside its purview. Sexuality, which belongs to the *Intimsphäre*, is not even part of civil society, which for Marx is primarily the domain of commercial and economic transactions.²⁷ In any case, the bourgeois/liberal demarcation of the political as a transcendent realm of formal equality relegates sexuality *in toto* to the domain of non-political privacy. So at face value, it is hard to imagine how sexuality would be a question for “the citizen,” since the very distinction of “individual” from “citizen,” which Youmans himself reiterates uncritically, specifies the former alone as the proper domain of the sexual. This distinction holds for the queer and the straight subject alike. In other words, it is hard to know what kind of “citizen” Youmans has in mind, though he seems to imply something like the communitarian “citizens” of Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* or Hammer’s *Dyketactics*—but the absurdity of that proposition suggests that perhaps “citizen” is not the right term here for what he is looking for.

Now perhaps it is not so much the refusal to elaborate queerness as a property of the “citizen” that really bothers Youmans so much as the film’s relentless focus on the “individual.” Behind this criticism lies a normative claim: no doubt, Youmans is implying that queer sexuality *should be* public sexuality, or should (an imperative apparently not shared by non-queer sexuality) reconfigure or even

²⁶ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 46.

²⁷ On the contextually shifting distinctions between civil society and the private and public spheres, see Carole Pateman, “Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy,” in *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989. The term *Intimsphäre* is from Habermas.

refuse the distinction between individual and citizen. In other words, perhaps he is suggesting that queer sexuality *should* “queer” (in the verb sense) citizenship, infusing (queer) sexual values into the properly political domain of the citizen. This would be a normative claim that would still need further explication, since it raises the questions: What is a sexualized *citizen*? Why should it be the burden of queerness to sexualize public space? Why shouldn’t queerness elaborate itself as a dimension of the personal?

Unless, of course, the category of the citizen *is* already sexualized, albeit in a disavowed way.²⁸ This was not Marx’s argument; Marx’s critique was leveled at the idealism of the category of citizen, which he accepted as authentic and constitutive; it was not his contention that the ostensibly abstract category of citizen was not really abstract but was secretly marked by substantive attributes. But Pateman and other feminists have argued that the “individual” of the liberal system is not only an idealist but also a substantively (though implicitly) defined category that is normatively male or masculine, where the masculine (but not the feminine) is a disavowed correlate of the “abstract.”²⁹ In a similar vein, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner begin their essay “Sex in Public” with the claim that “official national culture... depends on a notion of privacy to *cloak its sexualization* of national membership.”³⁰ That sexualization is, or historically has been, heteronormative, which is to say that the institutions (such as marriage and the family) that support and reproduce systems of national membership are implicitly organized around, and uphold, the norm of heterosexuality, even as they purport to confine sexuality to the non-public space of some (ideologically produced) private sphere.³¹

Kept out of view, off the public scene, the intimate life that is “the endlessly cited *elsewhere* of political public discourse” (Berlant & Warner, 553) maintains its structures of legislated and normative privilege. “Public” culture is officially de-sexualized, a pretend realm of abstract equals, but the individuals that constitute it are sustained through a culture of (private) intimacy that is both

²⁸ Here I invoke a point made by Michael Warner and many others. Warner puts it this way: “[S]elf-abstracting disinterestedness...is a differential resource... The subject who could master this rhetoric in the bourgeois public sphere was implicitly, even explicitly, white, male, literate, and propertied. These traits could go unmarked, even grammatically, while other features of bodies could only be acknowledged in discourse as the humiliating positivity of the particular.” *Publics and Counterpublics*, New York: Zone Books, 2002, pp. 165-6.

²⁹ Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*; for related discussions, cf also Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) and Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*. This argument, of course, has a long and distinguished genealogy, and derives in part from Simone de Beauvoir’s critique of the “subject” in *The Second Sex*.

³⁰ Berlant & Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Winter 1998), p. 547 (my italics).

³¹ As Berlant and Warner define it, heteronormativity is “a constellation of practices that everywhere disperses heterosexual privilege as a tacit but central organizing index of social membership” (555) — the *tacitness* is key, and is what removes this system of power from the view of traditional conceptions of politics, including Marxist conceptions. The argument depends heavily on Foucault’s critique of power not as the struggle of agential subjects but as the operation of systems of norms that produce the “subject” in the first place.

patriarchal (Pateman) and heteronormative (Berlant & Warner).³² For Berlant & Warner, this leads to the perhaps overstated claim that “[m]aking a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear *no necessary relation* to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (558, my italics).³³ It is perhaps along these lines that Youmans deems *Word is Out*’s inhabitation of precisely those spaces and tropes — domesticity, kinship, the couple form, property and the nation — to be “nonpolitical,” because it fails to challenge the public-private divide that Berlant & Warner take to be inherently heteronormative (and of course capitalist, though whether the counter-public spaces all three authors prefer are inherently more at odds with capitalism remains a question). Berlant & Warner argue that “queer world-making” necessarily involves “improvisation” with and against existing social forms: “In the absence of marriage and the rituals that organize life around matrimony, improvisation is always necessary” for the production and navigation of queer intimacies. Just as Youmans argues that *Word is Out* too readily accepts the distinction between individual and citizen that makes sexuality a property of a “bounded, privatized” individual, Berlant & Warner worry that by “betrothing themselves to the couple form and its language of personal significance,” queers who (like the subjects of *Word is Out*) merely make claims on the forms of intimacy developed as part of a patriarchal and heteronormative system leave “untransformed the material and ideological conditions that divide intimacy from history, politics, and publics” (562).

³² Berlant & Warner: “Heteronormative forms of intimacy are supported... not only by overt referential discourse such as love plots and sentimentality but materially, in marriage and family law, in the architecture of the domestic, in the zoning of work and politics” (562).

³³ I say “overstated” because I would question the plausibility of the clause “no necessary relation”: Can any form of intimacy really be forged that bears “no necessary relation” to the institutions that produce and sustain social life? Even their use of the term “kinship” belies the argument, since the queer world they invoke is organized around understandings of kinship that have to take their reference point from something — often enough, from the “couple form” and from “domestic space” even if only negatively. As to whether the “making [of] a queer world” has proceeded with “no necessary relation” to property — I reserve my judgment, but refer the interested reader to John d’Emilio’s illuminating essay, “Capitalism and Gay Identity.” In my view, the “queer world” Berlant & Warner refer to here is a utopian — not to say disingenuous — projection.

But the queer claim on domesticity and the personal, of the kind so effectively staged in *Word is Out*, does effect a transformation.³⁴ It does this via the very terms and categories of liberalism, but in appropriating these terms, I will argue, it shows how intimacy — even when claimed as a dimension of personal or private experience — is not separable from history, politics, and publics. Moreover, by inserting a gay and lesbian subject into the public sphere of (unmarked) discourse without relinquishing or bracketing those qualifiers, the film quite literally queers citizenship, exposing its implicit heteronormativity. In offering my own reading of the *Word is Out*'s “gay liberalism” along these lines, I challenge the critique of the personal that informs both Youmans' account of the film and Berlant & Warner's utopian call for queer publicity. *Word is Out*, precisely through the insistence of its non-utopian, domestic modes of queerness, produces its own form of queer publicity that challenges the terms of that critique.

queer privacy

For Berlant and Warner, the same process of differentiation that separates the private sphere from the political installs heterosexuality as a pervasive norm that also structures the intelligibility of apparently non-sexual practices such as

paying taxes, being disgusted, philandering, bequeathing, celebrating a holiday, investing for the future, teaching, disposing of a corpse, carrying wallet photos, buying economy size, being nepotistic, running for president, divorcing, or owning anything “His” and “Hers” (555).

These and a whole host of other social practices are extensions or ramifications of the “love plot of intimacy and familialism that signifies belonging to society in a deep and normal way” (554).

Queerness disturbs that plot because it upsets its structure of complementarity arrayed around sexual difference.³⁵ In Berlant and Warner's account, it seems the privatization of sexuality and the consolidation of a system of heteronormativity are inextricably intertwined. (Analogous to this is

³⁴ In saying so, I bracket the question of why it is queers who should be expected to carry the burden of such a transformation, of overcoming the putative division between intimacy and “history, politics, and publics.” In Berlant & Warner's essay, there is a strange slide from descriptive to normative. They make a series of statements of fact or necessity: “queer culture... *has* almost no institutional matrix for its counterintimacies” and thus “improvisation is always *necessary*” (562, my italics); “Queer culture has *found it necessary* to develop... mobile sites of drag...” (561); “Making a queer world *has required* the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space”; “the heteronormative culture of intimacy *leaves queer culture especially dependent* on ephemeral elaborations in urban space and print culture” (562). Queer culture has necessarily been improvisational; it has required an extra-domestic elaboration; it has depended on ephemeral uses of space as its condition of possibility. These analytic statements are not the same as, though they support by association, a critique of queer aspirations to recognizably personal forms of intimacy that Berlant and Warner imply follows naturally from their observations. In spite of the claim of necessity, they concede that “same-sex couples have sometimes been able to invent versions” of heteronormative — i.e. domestic and personal — forms of intimacy, but this is only by betraying the inherent (world-making, utopian) promise of queerness; against this misguided strategy, the “necessity” Berlant and Warner identify in the historical elaboration of queer cultural practices gets mapped onto the radical, world-making promise of what they call public sex. Here, a politicized (and maybe erotic) preference for certain kinds of practices (public sex, impersonal connections, non-domestic intimacies) is translated into the language of necessity. A new normative imperative is smuggled in by virtue of what appears to be a merely descriptive sets of claims.

³⁵ On this point, also see Michael Warner, “Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality,” in *Engendering Men*, Boone & Cadden (eds.), 1990, 190-206.

Pateman's argument that the category of the liberal "individual" is unsalvageable, inextricable from the patriarchal subordination of women.³⁶) Berlant and Warner's solution is to call for the production of sexualized publics (on this logic, sexualized publics are inherently queer) and the cultivation of modes of sexuality and publicness that reject the association of sexuality with domesticity and the private self, as well as with correlative norms of biological reproduction, filial kinship, and the distribution of capital.

But must the individual be a patriarchal category? And must privacy, intimacy and the family — as well as paying taxes, disposing of corpses, and teaching — be practices and institutions that only amplify and perpetuate the normative force of heterosexual complementarity? *Word is Out* suggests something else: precisely by producing, for public view, *queer* domesticities and insistently queer individuals, the film exposes and challenges the veiled heteronormativity of those practices and institutions, pointing up the contradiction between the liberal promise of equality and the failure of its realization. It stages a takeover of the categories of the domestic and the personal and uses them to launch a public assault on heteronormativity, one that challenges the structuration of all the activities listed above. Let us consider how it does this.

The film, as I mentioned, is a "talking-head" documentary, one which purports to transform what Jacques Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible" by rendering sensible alternative (explicitly queer) forms of subjectivity, modes of experience and intimacies. It effects this transformation primarily through personal narrative. In his analysis, Youmans insists on what the film thereby *occludes from view*: not only those "unruly sites of queer public culture" (146) that have ceded the stage to a drama of domesticity and the personal, but also the *sexualized body* so spectacularly on display in Rubin's *Christmas on Earth*, as in the work of Smith, Warhol, the Kuchar brothers, Hammer, and other practitioners of "the corporeal avant-garde." The body, now brought out, *unlike* in those works, as gay, here declares its gay presence by paradoxically *removing* itself from the frame, transforming itself into a "talking head" (though not only that, as we shall see) and multiplying the utterances of a word whose effect Youmans takes to be a troubling de-corporealization. What remains is the face: "Everything clears the frame," writes Youmans, "in order to make room for the leveling, universalizing, and magnetic presence of the face in close-up" (170-171). And he adds: "*Word is Out* demonstrates that the gay liberal politics of visibility has always been about rendering gays and lesbians, in one sense, functionally invisible — which is to say, visually *undifferentiated* from everyone else."

This universalization and undifferentiating take place, it seems, via the film's focus on faces rather than bodies. Apparently it is the face that is singular and individual (as well as "respectable");

³⁶ Pateman formulates this idea in several different ways: "[T]he civil individual has been constructed in opposition to women and all that our bodies symbolize" ("Fraternal Social Contract," in *The Disorder of Women*, 53); "[T]he 'individual' is a patriarchal category" (*Sexual Contract*, 168); and finally, she connects this category explicitly to sexuality: "The 'individual' is a man who makes use of a woman's body" (*ibid.*, 185). Thus, "sado-masochism is less a rebellious or revolutionary fantasy than a dramatic exhibition of the logic of contract and of the full implications of the sexuality of the patriarchal masculine 'individual.'" So, in an argument that anticipates Catharine MacKinnon's, the problem for Pateman comes down to the fact that this putatively abstract and neutral contractual "individual" is inherently *sexualized*, indeed insuperable from the constitution of sexuality as objectifying and sado-masochistic. (Elsewhere she writes that Sade gives this individual its fullest expression.) For Pateman, then, the tension between the autonomous individuality and the Sadean relationality of sex discussed in the last chapter is not a tension: they are products of the same system.

the body collective, “unruly,” and sexual. Faces individualize (as well as, paradoxically, “leveling” and “universalizing”); bodies enter into dangerous or transformative collectivities. If the film puts on view the public, civic subject it does so via the face as the organ of a civic identity that is de-particularizing and abstract in its very constitution. Thus the “illusion of civic participation and national community” the film evokes is rendered through

an editing together of distinct cells, or “isolated monads.” These cells are laterally distributed and presented as interchangeable, as if one could replace the subjects with a random sampling of twenty other lesbians and gay men and still have basically the same film—the same collective portrait of good, rights-worthy subjects. *Word is Out* downplays differences among queer populations, in particular between lesbians and gay men, as well as between queer and straight populations. And it does so largely by pushing particularities, such as political beliefs and sexual practices, off-screen. (Youmans, 91)

Not just bodies but also “particularities” are pushed off-screen, rendering the film’s queer subjects interchangeable with others and even, writes Youmans, with straight subjects. Queerness is at once asserted and bracketed; it is asserted abstractly, “de-particularized” and made interchangeable with other queers and non-queers because it puts on view an abstract subject through the universalizing close-up of the face. That face, filling the frame, crowds out particularities like “political beliefs and sexual practices.”

This is a seductive argument, and apparently damning in its account of the way the film defuses the transformative political charge of the very identity category whose legitimate place in the public sphere it asserts. In chapter two, I considered the way the close-up of the face is said to “universalize” its subject, via a discussion of the tension between face and sex in the work of Agnès Varda and Catherine Breillat. But recall from that discussion that the classical film theorist of the close-up, Béla Balász, argues that the close-up universalizes *not* through “de-particularizing,” as Youmans claims, but on the contrary, by rendering particularities in their objective singularity.³⁷ *Word is Out* seems to share Balász’s optimistic estimation that film,

which makes visible man equally visible to everyone, will greatly aid in levelling physical differences between the various races and nations and will thus be one of the most useful pioneers in the development towards an international universal humanity.³⁸

The universality that is produced in this description through the close-up is not achieved via an effect of abstraction but rather through its “objective” rendering of “facial expression,” the “most subjective and individual of human manifestations” (60). Yet this *individualization* that the close-up secures is precisely the one Youmans and Berlant & Warner decry as contrary to the project of queer world-making. So perhaps it is not that *Word is Out*’s mobilization of the close-up pushes “particularities” off-screen but rather renders them *too* particular and too personal, to the exclusion of a queer collectivity which would function as a “disruptive public force” (Youmans, 92).

³⁷ “Facial expression is the most subjective manifestation of man, more subjective even than speech... This most subjective and individual of human manifestations is rendered objective in the close-up.” Balász, *Theory of the Film*, p. 60.

³⁸ “Der Sichtbare Mensch,” revised version in *Theory of Film*, p. 45.

The distinction, however, is too neat, because the film doesn't *really* keep sex private; on the contrary, the medium for constructing and circulating these “private” stories is itself an aggressively public work, aiming at maximal distribution. The *film itself*, rather than any collectivies represented within it, functions as a “disruptive public force,” one that produces a range of effects, from threats of censorship (some theaters refused to screen the film) to the generation of a fan community.³⁹ So the “privacy” that is being constructed is constructed in order to be publicized, i.e. as a public intervention. Thus while the film may (diegetically) *represent* homosexuality “as a bounded, privatized attribute” (*ibid.*), this very act of representation itself *makes* homosexuality something quite different from that. So too, while the subjects *within* the film may not thematize their own political actions around homosexuality, the film's very insistence is itself a political act.

Moreover, while it is surely true that *Word is Out* emphasizes the face as organ of the civic subject, it is not quite right to say that the body is thereby rendered invisible or illegible in its queerness. Rather, the body respectfully submits to the requirements of the genre; clothed and for the most part still, it transforms itself into the discrete and dignified bearer of a face that represents the subject to a larger social world. But neither the discrete, dignified body nor the speaking face conceal their queerness. On the contrary, they insistently announce it — they, and the film, bring it out. The queerness of the bodies in *Word is Out* obtrudes repeatedly throughout the film; in *insisting*, the subjects' diverse forms of queer embodiment are produced as the ground of a civic personhood that refuses invisibility and that claims space within the liberal public sphere:



Figs 3-6. Styles of queer embodiment in *Word is Out* (clockwise from top left): Rusty Millington; Pat Bond; Tede Matthews; Michael Mintz and Earl Carter

³⁹ This fan community continues to inhabit a virtual counterpublic sphere, through the film's online discussion board. See <http://wordisoutmovie.blogspot.com/>

While most of the film consists in interviews in domestic settings, the spatialized passage into the public sphere is literalized in a short sequence in which Tede Matthews, the film's most gender nonnormative subject, is shown gleefully walking across a children's playground with a bearded man and a young girl (neither of whom is identified in the film), to the accompaniment of the all-male band Buena Vista's cover of "He's A Rebel." Tede takes the man's hand as they pass a group of nonplussed parents; the young girl watches the parents watching, returning their gaze:



Figs 7-10. First we take San Francisco: onlookers are confused by Tede Matthews and friends

Neither the boyfriend nor the young girl are ever mentioned in the interviews with Tede. They emerge into visibility in this sequence from a domain of privacy to which they subsequently return and which the film constructs as outside its purview. Here it is the effects of Tede's ambiguously gendered body and his public display of queer kinship that are thematized — his occupation of a space, the children's playground, normally seen as distinctly unqueer. If Tede's ambiguous gender confuses his onscreen audience, the presence of the young girl in the sequence confounds things further by bringing an intergenerational relation into view whose precise nature is unknown to the onscreen audience and the viewer of the film alike. (Is the girl his daughter? His boyfriend's daughter? A niece? A friend's daughter? A friend? The film activates, renders salient, an intimacy between Tede and the girl that clearly falls outside of normative modes of kinship, even as it remains undefined and unspecified.) While the critique of "homonormativity" bemoans the shrinking of a radical horizon for queer politics, and the aspiration to symbols of bourgeois normativity like marriage and children, here the non-specified though distinctly queer grouping of two men (one of whom is not clearly identifiable as such) with a young girl causes a current of alarm through the bystanders in the film, and presumably in the film's audience: rather than an aspiration towards

normativity, I see it as a disruptive occupation of domains of intimacy previously coded as strictly heterosexual. In this occupation, it is not that the queer subject becomes “normalized,” but rather that the structuring norms of those domains are put under a radical kind of pressure. Tede’s walk through the playground is a scandalous act of queer publicity, just as the film’s “private” narratives are themselves produced for public circulation. The subject of *Word is Out* negotiates queerness between public and private, and the film thematizes the disruptive effect that negotiation has on the production of both domains; in other words, it thematizes a specifically queer tension between private and public space, a tension it aims to transform without simply eradicating — without, in other words, simply making queer sex “public.”⁴⁰

If *Word is Out* constructs a sexuality that would belong to an “individual,” “privatized” subject, this is neither a subject that retreats from the public and the political, nor is it a subject whose gayness is merely contingent and interchangeable with straightness (recall that these were the two charges against the film’s “gay liberalism”). Rather, the narrating subjects of *Word is Out* express an individuality that is under threat or wounded, a damaged subjectivity that, via the process of self-narration, nevertheless insists on its dignity. That insistence is essential, because the terrorizing operations of the closet have entailed that “privacy” does not function for these “marked” subjects as a domain of freedom and security in the same way it does for the (unmarked) liberal subject. As Warner has written in a different essay:

Being publicly known as homosexual is never the same as being publicly known as heterosexual; the latter always goes without saying and troubles nothing, whereas the former carries the echoes of pathologized visibility... So it is not true, as common wisdom would have it, that homosexuals live private lives without a secure public identity. They have neither privacy *nor* publicness, in these normative senses of the terms... It is this deformation of public and private that identity politics — and the performative ritual known as coming out — tries to transform. (*Publics and Counterpublics*, 53)⁴¹

Word is Out’s way of claiming a right to publicity *and* privacy is not to downplay the differences between queer and straight individuality, rendering them interchangeable, as Youmans suggests. The film embraces the “pathologized visibility” that makes homosexuality never sufficiently private in the hope of producing a de-pathologized mode of public gayness *and* a rescued privacy. Unlike Lionel Trilling’s characterization of the liberal view on sexuality, *Word is Out* does not treat sexuality as a mere “physical fact, to be considered only in its physical aspect and apart from any idea or ideal that might make it a social fact.”⁴² It does not vacuously celebrate diversity. On the contrary, it thematizes the fraught relation between the private subject of sexuality and the public or social world to which she or he is called upon to craft a relation, and through which she or he is formed (with the

⁴⁰ For gays and lesbians to claim this right to privacy was itself a bold political strategy, fifteen years before *Lawrence v. Texas*. Cf Janet Halley, “The Politics of the Closet: Towards Equal Protection for Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity,” in Jonathan Goldberg (ed.), *Reclaiming Sodom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 145-206.

⁴¹ Catharine MacKinnon makes a similar argument about the category of the private as it relates to women: “Privacy is everything women as women have never been allowed to be or have...” “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence,” *Signs* 8.4 (Summer 1983): 656-57.

⁴² Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*, New York: Viking, 1950, p. 235.

equivocation between she and he being key to the process of formation). It stages queerness precisely as a social problem.

From this perspective, we do not need to read the film's lack of sexual explicitness as a concession to the squeamishness of a mainstream public about gay sex, as many of its critics did.⁴³ The film's relative reticence about sexual practices is not simply a strategic attempt to avoid provoking homophobic "disgust." In this regard we might consider Foucault's comment in an interview near the end of his life that it is all too easy to imagine queerness on the model of a brief and meaningless sexual encounter. But to imagine an entire socially expressed web of queer relations and intimacies: that is what is "disturbing":

One of the concessions one makes to others is not to present homosexuality as anything but a kind of immediate pleasure, of two young men meeting in the street, seducing each other with a look, grabbing each other's asses and getting each other off in a quarter of an hour. There you have a kind of neat image of homosexuality without any possibility of generating unease... To imagine a sexual act that doesn't conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another — there's the problem.⁴⁴

I will return to Foucault's provocation, but it is first worth mentioning that while the film is reticent on the topic of sexual practice it is not entirely silent. Consider the following exchange, near the end of the film, between one of the film-makers and George Mendenhall:

GM: My sex life is pretty much occasional pick-ups, you might say. Having sex with people...

Interviewer: Do you think that's healthy?

GM: Huh?

Interviewer [repeats]: Do you think that's healthy?

GM: I have been told for twenty-five years that it's not a healthy thing to do what I've been doing for twenty-five years, and that is, I've been having sex with people without getting emotionally involved with them. And I have been told time and again that I should get emotionally involved with someone, and then have sex with them, or have sex with them and then get emotionally involved; I should have a lover, I should have a steady companion. I say, it's worked alright for me; I still enjoy sex very much, I still enjoy my companions very much; and I think, why should I judge my life on what society expects of me, what a psychologist expects of me, I've got my life to lead, it's worked alright for me, and I'm not going to go bananas trying to satisfy everybody else.

Here, the interviewer offers Mendenhall a pathologizing frame for interpreting his own experience that is clearly not unfamiliar to Mendenhall, even though he makes the interviewer repeat the

⁴³ Waugh's early dismissal of the film on the grounds of its "assimilationist agenda and its soft-pedaling of activism and transgression" (*op. cit.*, pp. 123-4fn) was typical of the reaction of queers with more radical goals in sight. Waugh later developed a much more nuanced view, though the essential reservations remain. It is the meaning of the charge of "assimilationism" that I am here challenging.

⁴⁴ "Friendship as a Way of Life," interview in *Gai Pied*, April 1981, reprinted in Paul Rabinow (ed.), *Ethics*, pp. 136-7.

question. It is then with some sense of weariness that he reiterates his understanding of this frame and explains his minimal rationale for rejecting it; he uses his own “enjoyment” as justification for resisting the wisdom of psychologists.

We can see from this exchange that the film is not committed to only putting forward a “homonormative” or “assimilationist” image of its subjects, which is to say one that asserts monogamy and domesticity as privileged frameworks for intimacy. At the same time, the film acknowledges that monogamy and domesticity constitute *normative* frameworks for intimacy; but it celebrates the individual as someone who has the freedom to resist — however painfully and ambivalently — the force of those norms. But it is equally true that the film is not interested in *showing* sex. What the film brings into view is neither a sexuality forged through the rejection of the “private” and the psychological (a rejection Berlant & Warner want queerness to entail), nor public cultures of gay sex per se (though their existence is acknowledged in the film), but rather the embodied expressivity of the subject’s self-narration. This subject is neither what Marx calls “an isolated monad, withdrawn into himself” (“Jewish,” 42), nor an autonomous or existentialist *être-pour-soi*, i.e. a fully sovereign subject; it is rather *a subject produced in and through a fraught relation to societal norms and expectations about gender and sexuality — though not wholly reducible to, or successfully constrained by, those norms*.⁴⁵ This is not a sentimental portrayal (though the film experiments with sentimentality in the moments when the folksy soundtrack by Trish Nugent swells) but it is one which brings into focus the *affective* experience of the public and sexualized subject whose sexuality is the scene not of effortless social integration but rather of conflict with a social world.⁴⁶ Sexuality is not something over which one has any control; yet at the same time it is bound up in a theater of self-fashioning that escapes complete determination by norms; the dimension of a freedom that preserves an element of the subject’s incalculability, even her (partial and non-autonomous) sovereignty. The close-up, throughout the film, functions less as a means of abstract “leveling” than as a means of registering the affect that attends this conflict in its maximally expressive detail. So I would say the film is not just a polemical text asserting gay rights, nor is an Ur-text of the aesthetics of a weak and assimilationist politics of identity. Rather, *Word is Out* is a study of affective personhood as it takes shape in some necessary relation to questions of gender, sexuality and social belonging.

⁴⁵ From a Lacanian perspective (one I have chosen to keep latent in my discussion), this describes *every* subject, in the sense that “the ways of what one must do as man or as woman are entirely abandoned to the drama, to the scenario, which is placed in the field of the Other... [T]he human being has always to learn from scratch from the Other what he has to do, as man or as women.” (Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, p. 204). The queer subject gives the anxiety that ensues — the inherently neurotic experience of gender — an intensified form of expression. In the Lacanian sense of the terms, I would suggest that the queer subject is the neurotic of sex and gender rather than (as Lacanian clinicians suppose) the pervert. The neurotic is the one who asks, “What does the Other want?”; whereas the pervert has no need to ask.

⁴⁶ This is to give a social spin to the Bataillean dictum that “In that he is an erotic animal, man is a problem for himself” *Eroticism*, p. 273.



Fig 12. *Word is Out*: the affected subject, both sovereign and constrained (George Mendenhall)

In the exchange with Mendenhall, we see that the private individual (of liberalism, whether gay or otherwise) and the participant in “unruly sites of queer public culture,” or what Berlant & Warner call “improvisational” modes of sexualized publicity, are not just ideological opposites; nor do they stand for incompatible modes of becoming-political, the one liberal and the other radical. They belong, rather, to different genres or contexts of sociality that are far from mutually exclusive. In Berlant & Warner’s account, and in queer theory more generally, it sometimes seems as if anonymous or de-personalized queer sexual practice carries an inherently radical-political valence; it is valorized in through terms like “world-making,” “improvisational,” and “collective” (“Sex in Public,” 562), with the politicizing, leftist implications that last word conveys. But does public sex translates directly into political effect? I am not even sure that it functions as a mode of *critique* of the normative divide between privacy and publicity. Anonymous or public sex is not in itself a critical or a political practice but rather an erotic one.⁴⁷ Certainly, that is how George Mendenhall appears to see it: he defends his erotic choices, the pleasure he takes from his casual or anonymous sexual encounters outside the couple form, but that practice is political not in its substantive content but rather through its translation into *Word is Out*’s personalizing frame of self-representation. The work of politicization requires a translation from the scene of erotic practice into a different discursive register — here, into the intimate and personalizing face-to-face encounter with the interviewer, as proxy for the (anonymous, public, generalized) viewer. In Mendenhall’s narration, those practices are defended in liberal terms, as personal choices that instantiate a freedom that is only negative, which is to say freedom defined as “the power which man has to do everything which does not harm the rights of others” (Marx, “Jewish,” p. 42).

Yet Mendenhall’s liberal articulation of that practice as a negative freedom is precisely what here challenges the conflation of sex with personalized intimacy Youmans, Berlant & Warner

⁴⁷ Authors as different as Leo Bersani and Jack Halberstam have both made this point. In “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” Bersani wryly warned us against the rather too sanguine assumption that gay bathhouses, for example, are themselves sites of ethical uplift. However, in his later essay “Sociability and Cruising,” he himself invests in the bathhouse as a model of a kind of relationality based on a mode of asceticism that allows us to “live less invasively in the world” (in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays*, 62). Nevertheless, Bersani is right in both cases to problematize (rather than treating as obvious) “the extremely obscure process by which sexual pleasure *generates* politics” (14). I tend to agree with Teresa de Lauretis that they belong to different registers, and that “a translation is needed from one to the other” (“Queer Texts,” 259).

attribute to liberalism — thus producing a strange paradox. What Mendenhall asserts as a personal right is also a defense of a particular mode of sociality and disseminated intimacy that involves what he calls “companions” but not an “emotionally involved... lover.” So it is not just an individual right to a privatized sexuality that is claimed but also a practice of sociality that (unlike many of the intimacies on display in *Word is Out*) disentangles sex and pleasure from the language of emotional involvement and conjugality. The film’s liberal political framework defends not only a privatized sexuality but also a de-privatized, de-psychologized sexuality; it *makes the right to public sex a fundamentally liberal right*, which reminds us the very inversion of categories inherent to Berlant & Warner’s “queer world-making” takes place within — and perhaps does not transcend — the context and framework of liberalism.⁴⁸ But the queer appropriation of that framework — here exemplified in a poignant way by Mendenhall — hardly renders sex “nonpolitical.” This is a familiar critique, though one that risks flattening the complexities that attend the act of making sex public not by showing it (or practicing it) but by translating it into an act of self-representation. The (liberal) aim here is not “the protection of private life” as distinct, and therefore insulated, from the political, but rather the *translation* and articulation of diverse modalities of private experience *into* “the give-and-take of public activity.”⁴⁹ This is not a de-politicizing but, on the contrary, a rendering-political. The practice of collective or public sex between agents with a shared set of erotic preferences — much like the insistence on queer domesticity — *only* becomes political when translated into this other mode of publicity, which is to say the mode of general address to a field of unknown interlocutors. Erotic practice, whatever form it takes, requires translation into the language of “speech and action” in order to be rendered political, and it is this that the film provides.⁵⁰

While the field of speech and action (speech as action) is necessarily general, Mendenhall does not enter it as an “abstract” or “de-particularized” subject, but rather as an affective, psychological, and also queer, subject for whom gender and sexuality are explicitly thematized nodal points of affective significance as well as social and political consequence. Mendenhall deploys a liberal rhetoric of individual rights as negative freedom to resist the framework of pathology the interviewer offers him (“do you think that’s healthy?”) and to effectively shut down a “confessional” framing to his statement about his erotic practices by bracketing them as his private right. Meanwhile, the camera that films and thus renders public his defense of his right to those practices allows us to see that those “impersonal” practices (whose impersonality he defends) are clearly not separable from his psychological and affective being, which the film renders with its close-up of his emotionally expressive face.⁵¹ But he deploys the liberal defense of the right to privacy to shut down any interpretive framework for *understanding* his preferences. Here there are various forms of making-public and rendering private at play; what is interesting about this moment is that Mendenhall is produced as at once a psychologized individual, a political subject of public speech, and the subject of de-personalized, “public,” sexual practices. The film may not show what we think

⁴⁸ For a different argument along similar lines, see Elizabeth Povinelli, “The Part That Has No Part,” in *Queer Bonds*.

⁴⁹ Here, I invert the terms of Warner’s critique of sexual liberalism in *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ I have in mind here Hannah Arendt’s definition of politics as speech and action in *The Human Condition*; cf. chapter 24, “The Disclosure of the Agent in Speech and Action.”

⁵¹ To the chagrin, perhaps, of those gay theorists who hope gay sex might somehow save us from the psychological.

of as “unruly sites of queer public culture,” but — remarkably — it *transforms the liberal public sphere into such a site*. Mendenhall’s narration reminds us that it is speech, not sex, that *acts* politically. And it also reminds us that the political actor — like the participant in an “impersonal” or “public” sexual scene — remains, perhaps recalcitrantly, a psychological subject. It is precisely through its embrace of psychological personhood, outside of a pathologizing (or “epistemological”) frame, that *Word is Out* launches its grenade-like assault on the liberal public sphere. That the topics of gay marriage and gay parenting still provoke such polarized and affectively charged responses today demonstrates that the queer reverberations of that assault have not yet ceased to ramify.



Figs 12-13. Launching a hand grenade: Pam and Rusty, the lesbian butch-femme couple and their family in *Word is Out*

I have described *Word is Out* as itself an “unruly site of queer public culture” whose suturing of the categories of “queer” and “public” constitutes a queer appropriation of liberal categories; an assault on the generalized public sphere to which its recalcitrantly psychologized subjects address themselves. *Word is Out* queers the public sphere by bringing queerness *into* the public sphere without negating or transcending it, as an articulable and visible orientation towards intimacy and sociality; I have argued that in so doing, *pace* the standard critique of the film, it constitutes a “disruptive public force,” exposing and challenging the heteronormativity that pervasively structures institutions of social and political life. In my view then, the film “queers” the normal world rather than normalizing queerness.

The reader will note that in making this argument, I have left without comment two important features of the film’s gay liberal stylistics. The first is that *Word is Out* is an entirely earnest film; its rhetorical mode allows no room at all for irony; it even manages to translate Buena Vista’s camp appropriations of heterosexual love ballads into a register of folky earnestness. The liberal self-reflexivity that in a film like *Barbarella*, as I argued in chapter one, takes the form of *camp* is here transformed into an actual (elaborate, discursive, and wholly earnest) self-reflection. These may be different modes of the liberal sexual subject, though it seems ironic (so to speak) that it is the “straight” mode (of *Barbarella*) that is camp, and the “gay” mode (in *Word is Out*) that is earnest.

The second point I have left unremarked, for now, is that the central premise of *Word is Out*, as Youmans succeeds in showing, is to produce the queer as *non-exceptional*. I have challenged the coherence of the charges of “assimilationism” and “homonormativity,” and argued for the radical effects of *Word is Out*’s gay address to a public sphere. Yet it remains true that the rejection of queer exceptionality is the *sine qua non* of that address. (One addresses a field of interlocutors that one belongs to.) The film offers a vision of, and stages an intervention into, a liberal public sphere in

which it is the operation of certain restrictive norms that is challenged. The violence thematized in *Word is Out* is the normative violence of institutions of domesticity, intimacy, and publicity; the violence the film has in its sights takes the form of homophobic harassment, discrimination, or the brutal medical treatments exemplified in the film by Rick Stokes' account of the electric shock therapy he was subjected to when he came out as gay to his wife and her family, and whose lasting effects can be discerned in the lines on his face. This is a bodily violence dependent on a normative violence that *Word is Out* attempts to counter by radically critiquing those norms and refashioning the public sphere in a manner that would accommodate more diverse forms of queer embodiment, intimacy and desire. But what *Word is Out* does *not* imagine — what it definitively refuses — is any position outside the social contract. Instead, it makes a claim *on* that contract, effectively holding it accountable to its own inherent promise of freedom and equality for a now-expanded *all*. Here queers come polemically into public view as minoritarian participants in the social contract. In claiming the prerogative of both publicity and privacy, they are no longer the “eternal irony of the community,” as Hegel once said about women, but rather themselves the community that can abide no irony.

Cruising (1980) and the Fraternal Social Contract

Homosexuality haunts the “normal world.”

— Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*

Even without forty minutes of what director William Friedkin calls “the most graphic homosexuality” cut from *Cruising* in order to secure its R rating, the 1980 murder mystery is unsurpassed by any other Hollywood film before or since in the explicitness of its treatment of male homosexuality.¹ This is all the more remarkable given the context in which it appeared. After the post-Stonewall advances of the early 1970s, a conservative tide — one that came to a head with Anita Bryant’s mass publicized “Save Our Children” campaign of 1977 — had challenged the small advances gay rights groups had made. What emerged in response to the conservative challenge was what Greg Youmans calls “gay liberalism,” discussed in chapter three. *Word is Out* was among the first publicly broadcast works (it aired on PBS in 1978) to make a sober, respectable case for gay identity addressed to a general public sphere, and not only to a counterpublic of other queers or activist and community groups. Lesbian and gay identity, here embodied in a carefully orchestrated diversity of ages, sizes, colors, and geographical locations, presented itself to a mass public in the form of the domestic confessional. That film, I argued, both minoritized gay identity (made it specific, specifiable, articulable in its specificity) and strategically asserted its legitimacy within a general public sphere. I also argued that the polemical articulation of a *gay* liberalism was more radical than is typically assumed; it appropriated the categories of the private and the public and used them to insist on the viability of specifically *queer* modes of citizenship, thus unsettling the substantive assumptions that underwrote the normative force of those categories.

Given the context of new gay claims on respectability on the one hand, and an increasingly politicized homophobia on the other, *Cruising* seems to have literally appeared out of nowhere, without precedent, and with no obvious legacy in any subsequent films, certainly not in Hollywood (no future!) It is an entirely *singular* film, and not only because it is both the first and the last Hollywood film to include a scene of fisting. In her history of sex on screen, Linda Williams settles on *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) as the film that constituted a gay “primal scene” for American audiences.² But this demonstrates just how bizarre and anomalous *Cruising* is, how difficult to integrate into a history of American cinema. Some twenty-five years earlier than the “gay cowboy film,” it is *Cruising* that presented mass audiences with images and scenes of sex between men — scenes that make *Brokeback* look like a Sesame St. special. *Brokeback* was the film everyone

¹ Friedkin says that the studio, Lorimar, forced him to remove forty minutes of additional footage of “[a]bsolutely graphic... homosexuality with Pacino watching, and with the intimation that he may have been participating.” (In Linda Ruth Williams, *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005, p. 135.) That footage, apparently destroyed, is the object of a recent collaboration by gay art-porn director Travis Matthews and bad boy Hollywood star James Franco, “Interior. Leather Bar.” (2013).

² Linda Williams, “Primal Scenes on American Screens (1986-2005),” in *Screening Sex*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 216-257.

could love — the film we had been “waiting for,” a gratifying and indeed edifying melodrama that told us everything we already knew, namely that gay love is just as romantic, just as impossible, just as psychologically turbulent, just as fraught, just as human, as heterosexual love. (The poster reminded us that “Love is a Force of Nature,” and Ang Lee described it, with no apparent sense of irony, as a “universal American love story.”)³

But the point about a primal scene is precisely that it arrives *without any framework for receiving it* — it is traumatic; it comes from nowhere, unanticipated and unassimilable; the traumatized child of the psychoanalytic narrative has no frame of reference for the sensory information to which she or he is exposed. *Brokeback Mountain* filled a “need” and made, with great craft, a series of entirely laudable, necessary, moves; unsurprisingly, everyone applauded; the film was nominated for Best Picture (and in eight other categories). *Cruising*, on the other hand, received no Academy nominations, and was derided as both an aesthetic and moral failure. In fact, the universally shrill and even hysterical response to *Cruising* — “universally” in the sense of being shared by gays and straights alike — demonstrates that it filled no need and arrived unexpected and unwanted; unlike *Brokeback*, then, *Cruising* may in fact possess some of the qualities that characterize a primal scene. It is thus not surprising that many people involved in its production — including its star, Al Pacino — would prefer that its existence were forgotten.

Primary among the shocking qualities of *Cruising*, no doubt, is the fact that its graphic and numerous scenes of gay sex are delivered in the absence of any narrative about gay identity, far less in the context of an edifying or tragic tale of gay love. The decidedly queer acts and pleasures it brings on scene are not ushered in under the flag of identity (that flag, as we saw with *Word is Out*, is more likely to usher them “off scene”); the claims of its critics notwithstanding, the film is not about homosexuals as a discrete, minority group. Indeed, the whole narrative premise of the film depends on its assertion of the instability of the line between heterosexual and homosexual male identity. The thesis of the film is not, then, that homosexuals are sick, but rather something like the one articulated in Guy Hocquenghem’s pioneering work of queer theory, *Homosexual Desire* (published in French in 1972): “Homosexuality haunts the ‘normal world.’” In *Cruising*, that haunting needs to be understood in the strongest possible sense: not as a visitation by an alien spirit, not as an invasion by a lawless barbarian force from outside the “normal world,” but as the background hum of the normal itself, as inexorable and ultimately deafening as Poe’s telltale heart.

This is not to say that *Cruising*’s thesis is simply that male homoeroticism is the real glue of the social order, as Freud himself sometimes implied. *Cruising* is not a film about sublimation or repression, in the ordinary senses of those terms. It doesn’t tell us anything about the actual sexual desire (whether repressed or not) of men for men, though it clearly spends a lot of time documenting its translation into acts. As we shall see, its failure to “tell us” anything about this desire at all is precisely what straight critics found unconscionable: the film doesn’t offer us the alibi of an investigative report or a psychological explanation.

If the film is not about gays and it is not about actual gay desire and it is also not about repression, then *what authorizes its brazen display?* The fact that its strange vision — a vision, I will argue, of the function of law in the “fraternal social contract” — was and is so hard to assimilate

³ The film even functions to redeem the heterosexual love narrative, as I argue in my essay “*The Living End*, or, Love Without a Future,” in *Queer Love in Film and Television*, Pamela Demory & Christopher Pullen (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 13-22.

suggests that it contains a truth that must remain inarticulable; something is at stake. For as Joan Copjec has written — a thought expressed in a different register in the work of Carl Schmitt — what remains unspeakable in any social system is precisely its own effaced condition of possibility, the act or principle (for Schmitt: the state of exception, *Ausnahmezustand*) that cannot be assimilated *within* the terms of the very regime it produces. But before we get to Copjec's primal father, Schmitt's state of exception, and the inexpressible within any social system, we need to first consider what is most formally striking about *Cruising*, namely the way it brings not just any sex but group scenes of what Friedkin calls "the most graphic homosexuality" firmly "on scene."

gay sex off scene: *Rope* and the queer exception

Gay sex, in *Cruising*, comes "on scene" in a shocking and unprecedented way. Joe Wlodarz writes that the film "doesn't simply peek into the celluloid closet, it tosses its mainstream audiences into what was typically seen as a dungeon of denotative gay sex" (Wlodarz's choice of the term "dungeon" is referential as well as metaphorical.) And D.A. Miller writes that in *Cruising*, "[f]rom being barely able to suggest what two gay men did at home between sheets, Hollywood suddenly proceeds to grant us a full and accurate idea of what scores of them were doing at the Anvil in slings."⁴ What the film presents as "simply" the background to a murder mystery is, in Miller's words, "a superabundant spectacle, as crowded with bodies as a Bosch painting, of acts and pleasures."⁵

Cruising, although often written off as a misfire or a mistake, is the film that put the final nail in the coffin of the closeted representational regime that kept homosexuality unrepresentable in Hollywood cinema during the Code era, and whose effects lingered in Hollywood films of the '60s and '70s that portrayed or invoked gay characters while keeping gay sex firmly "off scene." A regime that banishes homosexuality from the realm of denotation is one, as Miller has also shown, in which an elaborate system of connotation ensures that homosexuality, because it can *never* be shown, might *always* potentially be implied. Miller's famous analysis of *Rope* (Hitchcock, 1948) — a paradigm case of Hollywood's epistemology of the closet — reminds us that the queers in that film aren't directly said or shown to be queer; the connotation that makes them ambiguously so "tends," as Miller puts it, "to light everywhere, to put all signifiers to a test of their hospitality... like an arriviste who hasn't arrived, it simply cannot stop networking."⁶ The unanswerable question of what Brandon and Phillip *are* is displaced onto the question of what they have *done*, which, by contrast, can be named: "I don't know what you thought or what you are," Rupert tells them, "but I know what you've done: you've murdered." *Rope* thus offers an object lesson both in the epistemology of the closet before identity politics (as Miller demonstrates) and also in Hollywood's much-remarked and long-standing

⁴ D.A. Miller, "Second Time Around: *Cruising*," *Film Quarterly* 61.2 (Winter 2007/08): 70-73, p. 70.

⁵ In his director's commentary on the remastered DVD, Friedkin claims the bar scenes were shot in real leather bars. Joe Wlodarz, however, writes that "although the film's bar scenes were not actually shot [in real bars], longtime manager Wally Wallace noted that Friedkin had an 'obsession to re-create the Mineshaft interior and exterior.'" ("How'd You Like to Disappear?": *Cruising* and Gay Clone Culture," in *American Macho: Masculinity in Seventies Cinema and Culture* [book MS, forthcoming, n.p.].) The entrance sign for one notorious (real) gay leather bar, the Ramrod, appears in the film.

⁶ D.A. Miller, "Anal *Rope*," p. 125.

conflation of queerness with criminality.⁷ For both these reasons, a brief reconsideration of *Rope* will help make clear what is at stake in *Cruising*.

Rope both demonstrates the richness of a connotative system that keeps homosexuality off scene while leaving it always in question, and gives early textual shape to an “antisocial thesis” about homosexuality — to the idea that a homosexual orientation is an antisocial orientation; that its *sexually* transgressive character is matched by, and at the representational level displaced onto, *socially* transgressive acts, the paradigm case of which would be that act on whose proscription the social order depends, namely murder.

Queerness, the unspeakable of this representational system, is thus *exceptional*; it is positioned at, or oriented towards, the social order’s *outside* (unseen, unknowable, unthinkable), and when it congeals into the form of a character, it tends to be one who embodies principles at odds with “civilization.” In *Rope*, Brandon tells the humanist Mr. Kentley that “what is called civilization is hypocrisy.” He does not believe in the social contract that Mr. Kentley defends as a self-evidence. That social contract, Mr. Kentley reminds the group, operates on the principle of universality, which is to say *no exception*, i.e. on condition that *no one* is exempted from the agreement it represents; moreover, no-one could make a determination about when such an exception should obtain: “Who is to decide,” asks Kentley, “that a human being is inferior and thus a suitable victim for murder?” Nobody occupies a position from which they could decide, thus murder is universally proscribed. Kentley’s social contract is Rousseau or Lockean rather than Hobbesian — for Kentley there is no exceptional sovereign authority above the law; sovereignty is rather dispersed among a community of equals.

Rupert, too, reiterates the impossibility of an exceptional position and offers his own lesson in the theory of the social contract. The very picture of earnestness, he tells the murderers:

[W]e are each of us a separate human being, Brandon, with the right to live and work and think as individuals, but with an obligation to the society we live in. By what right do you dare to say that there’s a superior few to which you belong? By what right did you dare decide that that boy in there was inferior and therefore could be killed? Did you think you were God, Brandon?

That Brandon illegitimately arrogated to himself sovereign or even divine right can only be attributed finally, in Rupert’s analysis, to “something deep inside” him that makes him (presumably) homosexual. The queer claims an exceptional position that exempts him from the principle of formal equality that sustains the social contract. That “something deep inside” him is this exceptional disposition; his unintelligible, unaccountable transgression both of sexual and social norms.

Of course this lesson that Rupert offers, now becoming as tedious as Mr. Kentley, is significantly different not only in content but also in style to the kind of pedagogy it is implied he offered Rupert, Brandon and Kenneth as their old school master. It is only when the murder comes to light as fact (and no longer merely theory) that Rupert’s discursive style — which throughout the film has been relentlessly *ironic* — transforms into a steadfast (and defensive) earnestness. One gets

⁷ On the latter point, cf for example, John Hepworth, “Hitchcock’s Homophobia,” in Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty, eds., *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995, and Robin Wood, “The Murderous Gays, Hitchcock’s Homophobia,” in *Hitchcock’s Films Revisited*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, 336-357.

the impression his lectures were much more interesting when he was in what Kentley calls his “Nietzschean” mode, a mode in which the irony which is now disavowed played a central role. The status of that irony has been in question throughout the film. And indeed, Rupert’s discovery of the murder is conveyed via the terms of an accusation that: “You’ve given my words a meaning I never intended them to have!” The meaning that the queer murderers have given the words is, of course, the meaning they actually have; their crime is to have taken words *too seriously*.

Earlier, of course, it was Rupert himself who insisted to Mrs. Atwater with sanguine assurance that murder is a “privilege... reserved for those few who are really superior individuals.” The same Rupert protested to Mr. Kentley that “I am a very serious fellow,” even in spite of the latter’s insistence that “You’re... pulling my leg.” During the discussion of the virtues of murder as an art, the same Mr. Kentley remained perplexed, muttering, “Well, I confess I’m so stupid I don’t know if you’re all serious or not.” Clearly, the ability to distinguish seriousness from irony is key to the plot machinations of *Rope*, just as it now appears to be key to the distinction between Rupert’s (straight) moral probity and Brandon and Philip’s (queer) moral lassitude. This final alignment of queerness not with irony but with a surfeit of seriousness is just the reverse of what the film otherwise leads us to expect. It is Brandon whose protestations to Janet and Kenneth, in attempting to orchestrate a romance between them, are laced with irony; moreover, his and Philip’s performance of social graciousness is an ironic facade veiling what is really a diabolical *antisociality*. They ape the form of the bourgeois couple while not “truly” forming one; in their homosexuality, they “ironically” quote the structure of a heterosexual norm, a quotation that conceals their murderous disrespect for that norm and the society it structures.⁸

So the distinction between irony and seriousness that Rupert ends up attributing to a “something deep inside me” versus “something deep inside you” is not so easily maintained as Rupert’s recourse to a language of innate disposition attempts to suggest. He now suggests that it is his socially upright irony (merely joking about murder as an art, about an exceptional class of legitimate murderers) has found its diabolical foil in Brandon and Phillip’s queer literalness. (“You’ve given my words a meaning they were never intended to have!” — the meaning they literally possess.) However, in order to set them straight, as it were, via a banal lesson in the liberal principles of equality and universality—which is to say, the liberal foreclosure of the exception—Rupert himself resorts to the very literalness that has rendered them so monstrous. No wonder he can only keep the distinction alive, as Miller observes, through the performative force of mere assertion.⁹ And lest that assertion itself become contaminated by queer irony, he backs it up with a weapon whose bullets “speak” unequivocally.

It is only the violence of the gun Rupert flourishes as he speaks that gives his speech the plain-speaking force that now *saves* it from being queer, even as the charge of queerness corresponds to the charge of taking words too seriously. But there is another point of contradiction underwriting

⁸ Lee Edelman describes irony as “that queerest of rhetorical devices” in *No Future*, p. 23; cf also David Halperin’s elaborate argument to this effect in *How to be Gay*, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2012.

⁹ “Whatever Rupert may think he is saying or doing, his speech goes to show that, when homosexuality is entrusted to the totalizing, tantalizing play of connotation, the only way to establish the integrity of a truly other subject position is performative; by simply declaring that one occupies such a position and supporting the declaration with a strong arm” (Miller, “Anal *Rope*,” p. 127.)

Rupert's confused display (a display that mirrors the structures both of phobia and of paranoia).¹⁰ In invoking the liberal social contract and the principle of universal rights it secures, Rupert also demonstrates a fact that will prove key in *Cruising*, namely that *the social contract is itself grounded in exceptional violence*. Though he earlier defended murder as an “art” reserved for a “privileged few,” Rupert now rescinds that claim, explaining that because all individuals in society have equal rights — because there is no position of exception, and no legitimate way of establishing a basis for such an exception — then killing a fellow human is always and in all cases a crime. A crime that, paradoxically, *deserves the death penalty*: “It’s not what I’m going to do, Brandon, but what society is going to do, and I don’t know what that’ll be, but I can guess, and I can help. You are going to die, Brandon, both of you. You are going to die...” In that slippage from uncertainty (“I don’t know what that’ll be”) to certain violence (“You are going to die”), the power of exceptional violence whose existence Rupert negates (“by what right do you dare to say...?”) is surreptitiously but unequivocally handed over to the agency of “society” — an abstract agent who *retains* the right to kill in order to uphold a regime in which killing is universally prohibited.



Fig. 1 The strong arm of the law

Thus does it become alarmingly apparent in *Rope* that the queer is the monstrously inverted mirror image of the “strong arm” of the law itself — that abstract arm for which Rupert, wielding a gun in the name of “society,” now substitutes his own. Moments after asking Brandon “by what right” he claimed the power of exceptional violence, Rupert now incarnates that very power in the name of the state which would administer the death penalty. He attributes this agency to “society” (“It’s not what I’m going to do but what society is going to do”); though disembodied and dispersed among a social field of mutually respecting equals, this “society” manifests its exceptional sovereign right in its implementation of the death penalty. *That* death-dealing, unlike Brandon’s, is

¹⁰ Freud’s analysis of paranoia in the Schreber case attributes to it the structure: “I do not love that man; he hates and persecutes me.” Cf Guy Hocquenghem’s discussion of paranoia, citing Ferenzi, in *Homosexual Desire*, pp. 55–61. Hocquenghem also connects the “anti-homosexual paranoia” around which modern (“Oedipal”) society is organized with the particular association between homosexuals and murder undertaken — as in *Rope* — “merely for pleasure”: “Homosexual murder is paranoiacally experienced as murder for pleasure, the main danger to civilised society” (69).

not antisocial but rather the very *condition* of the social. In his queer appropriation of sovereign right Brandon has made death-dealing into an act of social transgression rather than the act that sustains the social *per se*. His queer antisociality redoubles in the form of transgression the exceptional violence that sustains the social order of universal equality. In *Cruising*, the radical implications of this alignment will come into view along with the gay sex acts on whose confinement to the “off scene” *Rope*’s system of connotative displacements depends. But far from bringing queerness into view as a monstrously transgressive exception, *Cruising* will show that the agency of the law itself is the site of a queer exception that sustains the social order of the “fraternal social contract.”

***Cruising*: Hollywood goes to the leather bar**

Cruising was a major Hollywood studio release, a cross between a murder mystery and a horror film, in which Al Pacino — major Hollywood star and “icon of white ethnic [American] manhood” — plays an NYC police officer, Steve Burns, who goes undercover in the gay leather scene to track down a serial killer.¹¹ Filming in 1979 was continually interrupted by gay activists protesting what they took to be the film’s pathologizing portrayal of homosexuals as both perpetrators and victims of gruesome violence.¹² (Reproducing the hysterical tenor of the protestors’ critique in a 1996 review, Gary Morris describes *Cruising* as “the queer equivalent of *Birth of a Nation*.”¹³) Unlike the lesbian and gay identity that make an eminently respectable claim on publicity in *Word is Out*, the bloody queerness that here came “on scene” could hardly be assimilated to a reconfigured version of the liberal public sphere, though this is precisely, as I shall argue, what it puts on view. The film responded to the hostility it provoked among the gay community with a disclaimer warning us that

¹¹Joe Wlodarz, “Al Pacino: From the Mob to the Mineshaft,” in *Hollywood Reborn: Movie Stars of the 1970s*, ed. James Morrison, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2010, p. 62. My reading is indebted to a number of excellent existing and forthcoming treatments by film scholars, including Miller, “*Cruising*,”; both above-cited essays by Wlodarz; Guy Davidson, “‘Contagious Relations’: Simulation, Paranoia, and the Postmodern Condition in William Friedkin’s *Cruising* and Felice Picano’s *The Lure*,” *GLQ* 11.1 (2005); David Greven, “Mirror Shades: *Cruising*,” in *Psychosexual: Male Desire in Hitchcock, De Palma, Scorsese, and Friedkin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013, 183-206); Adrian Martin, “*Cruising*: The Sound of Violence,” *fIPRESCI* 4 (10.2008), at http://www.fipresci.org/undercurrent/issue_0407/martin_cruising.htm, and an early piece by Robin Wood, “The Incoherent Text: Narrative in the 70s,” in *Hollywood From Vietnam to Reagan... And Beyond*, New York: Columbia UP, 2003 [1986]. That the film has occasioned so many reappraisals since the time of its release confirms my sense that its sadomasochistic vision of the “liberal social body” has a significance that remains to be fully unpacked. I hope this chapter contributes to that unpacking.

¹² The protest, writes Wlodarz, was “a declaration of gay community and militancy to battle homophobia a mere decade after Stonewall. For several nights, following the leak of an early version of the script, hundreds of gay clones and their compatriots took to the streets to ‘Stop the Movie *Cruising*!’” (“*Cruising* and Gay Clone Culture,” n.p.). The protest continued throughout production and, after the release of the film, changed its strategy to picketing theaters at which the film was screening. Vito Russo writes that the film caused “rioting... in New York at the end of 1979” (Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, New York: Harper & Row, 1981, p. 91). Robin Wood, in his early and excellent account of the film, argues that the protestors’ accusations of homophobia missed their real target: *American Gigolo*, a film in which “homophobia is central... was playing without protest in the same Toronto theater complex where gay activists were picketing *Cruising*” (“The Incoherent Text,” p. 53.)

¹³ Gary Morris, “*Cruising*,” in *Bright Lights* 16, April 1996, <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/16/cruise.php>. Also cited in Wlodarz (n.p.)

it is “set in a small segment of [the homosexual] world which is not meant to be representative of the whole.” According to this claim, the film’s violence implicates only a marginal section of a marginal subculture. Yet as we shall see, its most radical proposition is, on the contrary, that male homosexuality is a universal disposition, or at least propensity, of the patriarchal/liberal social order — a disposition in which both women and men are implicated. The violence that in the film is indistinguishable from homosexuality is, as we shall see, the violence of the social order itself.

Few were fooled by the disingenuousness of *Cruising*’s late-added disclaimer. For Vito Russo, who published the first edition of *The Celluloid Closet* a year after *Cruising* appeared in theaters, the protests around the film, though ultimately unsuccessful, marked a new height of gay community consciousness and political empowerment. By Russo’s account, the film’s historical significance begins and ends there; he sees *Cruising* itself as nothing exceptional, as merely the apotheosis of a long Hollywood tradition of conflating gay sexuality with murder and the antisocial — he thus puts it in the same tradition as *Rope*¹⁴. Not only does the film portray murder; Russo attributes to the film actually murderous effects:

Protest leaflets against *Cruising* said, “People will die because of this film.” In November 1980, outside the Ramrod Bar, the site of the filming of *Cruising*, a minister’s son emerged from a car with an Israeli submachine gun and killed two gay men. (238)

The issue was not one of censorship but that of a minority group’s taking the lead in securing the right to defend itself against what has become a national pastime — attacks on gays by gangs of marauding teenagers in every major city in the United States with a gay ghetto... The protests against *Cruising* were... in a real sense, a fight for survival. (240)¹⁵

In the first statement, Russo implies a direct causal link between the production of *Cruising* and the murder of two gay men. (The murderer himself claimed he had not heard of *Cruising*.¹⁶) In the second, he conflates the protestors’ aim of stalling production of the film with the aim of forestalling real violence against gays, thus implying that the film and real violence are the same thing, that representational violence in the space of the theater and violence against queer bodies on the city streets belong to the same ontological register. Yet in the very bluntness of their counterfactuality, Russo’s claims about *Cruising* betray an almost obsessive fascination; indeed, his book contains more references to that film than to any other.

While the protestors decried *Cruising*’s conflation of gay sex with murder, what disturbed mainstream critics was that it resolutely failed to provide an explanatory framework for either. Wlodarz (“*Cruising* and Gay Clone Culture”) notes that Vincent Canby, writing in the *New York Times*, lamented that the film “makes no attempt to comprehend... it just *stares*,” and for Canby that

¹⁴ Cf Russo’s discussion of *Rope*, pp. 92-4.

¹⁵ Many of the protestors had neither read the script nor seen the film, though some of them had in mind the novel by Gerald Walker on which the film was based (New York: Stein & Day, 1970). Gerard Koskovich, curator of the GLBT History Museum in San Francisco, told me in conversation that as a young college student at Stanford he picketed the film when it screened in Palo Alto, but never saw it until years later. Thomas Waugh has said the same thing (cited in Greven, 184).

¹⁶ See Davidson, p. 42.

staring unmotivated by a desire for knowledge qualifies not just the killer's, but the film's own gaze, as both perverse and morally suspect.¹⁷ In strikingly similar terms, Charles Champlin in the *LA Times* bemoaned the film's lack of an epistemological frame: *Cruising*, he wrote, "sees a lot but learns or tells disappointingly little." Champlin reassured his readership that the film deals in matters that concern only a "small, sick segment of society."¹⁸ And again in almost identical terms, Kenneth Turan protested (a little too defensively?) that "for noninitiates, a group that includes *almost every adult in America*, this is repulsive stuff."¹⁹ So the insight these three straight critics accuse the film of failing to provide is also one they insist would be of *absolutely no interest or relevance to almost anyone*.

Yet in their absolute and vehement concurrence on this point, this normally astute critical triumvirate engages in a form of momentary (symptomatic) collective blindness, one that causes them to overlook the film's most basic narrative premise. That premise is that the rash of killings — like the sexual disposition that seems to deliver them — *cannot* be confined to a subcultural space. Certainly, the camera's descent into the leather bars seems at first to confine gay S/M spatially to a minoritarian underworld, localizable and thus containable (or dismissable as of interest to only a "small, sick segment of society"). But this gay underworld, in the terms of the film, turns out to be as much a metaphor as a literal place: it is revealed as the *underbelly* of the normal world to which it at first appears to provide merely a transgressive alternative. That the film effects a confusion between subculture and general culture has been remarked by a number of its more recent commentators; among the examples commonly adduced of this confusion is the fact that the police officer DiSimone, to whose homophobic diatribe we are subjected at the beginning of the film, himself turns up several times in the leather bars, where he is one of many similar-looking men who cruise Al Pacino.²⁰ The film's treatment of DiSimone is representative of a more general analogy it constructs between the sadomasochistic homoeroticism of the gay leather scene and the homosociality of the police force. The analogy comes fully into focus in a humorous early scene in which Burns (Pacino), in undercover civilian wear, visits one of his usual haunts to find it full of men in actual police uniforms. "It's Precinct night," he is informed, before being evicted from the club because he himself lacks the requisite "attitude." Before he leaves, we see, among other sights, a man fellating a police baton, actualizing a metaphor which found an earlier iteration when DiSimone's beat partner told a drag queen he wanted to "show her his nightstick." The relation between the two worlds, throughout the film, is not merely one of parody or metaphor but rather of direct overlap and pervasive correspondence.

¹⁷ Vincent Canby, "Another Country," *New York Times*, Feb 15, 1980, C6. I owe this point to Wlodarz's discussion of the film's "insistent frustration of the ethnographic gaze." (In "*Cruising*," n.p.)

¹⁸ Charles Champlin, "'Cruising' — Looking Past the Images," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 10, 1980, M1. (Also cited in Wlodarz.)

¹⁹ Kenneth Turan, "Sex Without Joy," *The Progressive* 44 (May 1980), p. 54, my italics. (Also cited in Wlodarz.)

²⁰ On this point, Greven, for example, writes that "SM culture serves [in *Cruising*] as an allegorical realm which Friedkin uses to explore issues of male sexuality generally. A perfervid counterworld, SM here is the 'under-nature'... to straight masculinity and to the normative social order." ("Mirror Shades," p. 187.) I agree with this though later Greven downplays the significance of his own observation, arriving at the far less interesting conclusion that the film "organizes a dialogue" between "straight and gay masculinities." I am not sure it's a "dialogue" the film organizes, which would imply the film's success in keeping those categories distinct.



Fig 2. "Precinct Night"

Queerness here is not a quality that pertains to a "small, sick segment of society"; it is not distinct from normative masculinity; it is the latter's shadow side, its mirror image. Guy Davidson argues that *Cruising* stages simulation as a "postmodern" principle in general, giving narrative and visual form to the idea that "identity in postmodernity is premised on simulative processes" (51). For Davidson, *Cruising* attests to the (late capitalist) destruction of the notion of an "original" identity. This is surely true, though formulated in this way, the film's intricate tropology of simulation loses its specifically and explicitly sexual referent, a referent that makes simulation not simply "queer" in some generic sense, but rather bear some necessary relation to a specifically male homoeroticism. Burns is selected for the job, after all, because he is the killer's "type," as Captain Edelson understands well. Then again, it is not just Burns who is the killer's type; the Manhattan of *Cruising*, unlike the Manhattan of *Manhattan* (released the year before), seems to be almost entirely populated by men with "dark hair, dark eyes, [weighing] about 140, 150 pounds." Pacino doubles crop up all over the place, but Davidson is right to point out that it is not so much doubling as "mimetic or replicative proliferation" that is here at stake, a mise-en-scène of sameness (46). But this is not a neutral or unmarked proliferation. The specificity of what proliferates — butch-on-butch masculinity — is central to the social scene it puts on view.²¹ In *Cruising*, as we shall see, a pervasive sameness in the image of the '70s macho clone seems to give embodied form to what feminist political theorist Carole Pateman calls the "fraternal social contract."²²

²¹ See Wlodarz, "Pacino," on Pacino's particular way of signifying butchness, a butchness that is not separable from his explicit ethnicization (typically, as Italian-American, but in *Scarface*, as Cuban), and that is always modulated against his diminutive physical stature. Of course, Edelson's description of Burns, and the killer's victims, as having "dark hair [and] dark eyes" introduces a racialized dimension to the sameness that the film puts on view; the only evident blonde in the film is Burns's neighbor, Ted Bailey (Don Scardino), who is removed from the otherwise pervasive sociality of male sadomasochistic homoeroticism. It would be worth reflecting on the function of this "queer exception."

²² Carole Pateman, "The Fraternal Social Contract," in *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1989), 33-57.



Fig 3. Downtown Manhattan: a world of men

Before we get to the queer inflections of this fraternal social contract, let us take stock of the argument so far: the preceding discussion has advanced the assertion that *Cruising* brings “on scene” and into the realm of denotation a gay sexuality produced, in *Rope* and other pre-liberation films, as structurally “off scene.” *Cruising* has taken from gay liberation the imperative to bring gay practices and gay sex into view and (according to the film’s critics) cruelly turned it against gays, rendering explicit an association between homosexuality and murderousness that films like *Rope* at least only made through connotation. Yet we have seen that there are some problems with this view. The first is that *Cruising* is not a film *about* homosexuals, which is to say not a film that has any interest in answering Gene Siskel’s question, “Why do these men do the things they do?” (qtd. in Wlodarz, “*Cruising*,” n.p.). The film takes a universalizing — as opposed to a minoritizing — view on homosexuality, thereby disturbing the framework that would render homosexuality the perverse sexual preference of a definable minority; in the intersections and parallels it constructs between the police force and the world of gay S/M, homoeroticism in *Cruising* is pervasive rather than localizable. Moreover, the thematic of proliferation and replication does not position homosexuality as simply an ironic or parodic copy of straight masculinity; the film connects male sexuality and even male identity in general, as Greven noted, to the eroticized process of masculine mirroring and externalized self-reflection. The film seems clear on the point that all male sexuality is potentially tainted with (even founded on) a homoerotic mirroring.²³

Finally, we can add that Burns’s confusion over his sexual orientation (an ambiguity reflected in Friedkin’s comment that the lost footage contained the “intimation” that Burns was participating in the acts he observed) does not make *Cruising* a coming out film — far from it! — or a narrative about repression. Burns remains opaque; or rather, the film’s mapping of his surface transformation

²³ Michael Warner has argued that modern Western (or “liberal”) subjectivity is, in its self-reflective formulation, inherently bound up in an eroticization of the self reduplicated in another, making homo-narcissism the paradigm case not only for gay eroticism but for heterosexuality. Freud, in “On Narcissism,” also describes heterosexual love as “narcissistic,” seeming to root it in an infantile structure of desire that is more properly homosexual. See Warner, “Homo-Narcissism; or, Heterosexuality,” in *Engendering Men*, Boone & Cadden (eds.), 1990, 190-206.

into a gay clone fully exhausts its interest in him. If Burns has been, by the film's end, "queered" (Miller, 71), this is not because some pre-existing truth about him has come to light. Wlodarz is right to comment that the film offers "no frame of reference to determine whether Burns (or Pacino) derives pleasure from [the gay S/M] environment or whether he is merely doing his job" ("Pacino," 78). Nor does the film encourage us to pursue this line of questioning (this is precisely what Canby et al complained about). It suggests, rather, that sexual identity, far from expressive of an inner truth, is based on imitation, which is to say it is both *social* and *performative*. If, as I stated earlier, the film narrativizes Hocquenghem's claim that "homosexuality haunts the normal world," then we can further specify that this haunting is due to the film's startling implication that "*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*."²⁴ (As Friedkin says in his director's commentary of the accoutrements that produce the clone's butchness: "what is it? it's just a leather cap, a leather jacket; it's make believe"; the phallus is a prosthetic, available for appropriation and recirculation — *Cruising* gives us no reason to surmise that a "lesbian phallus" would be any less real than any other kind.)

Far from simply demonizing homosexuals as killers, it now seems that ten years before queer theory, *Cruising* anticipates all three of its major strands: the theory of gender performativity; the analysis of the panicked and unstable divide between male homosociality and homosexuality; and the so-called "antisocial thesis." And yet for all that, I cannot agree with Greven that the film "uses the power of art to disturb sexual assumptions and... to critique a culture of homophobia" ("Mirror Shades," 206), a description which would be better applied to *Word is Out*. The protestors were quite right that in *Cruising*, murdering and gay sex not only participate in the same structure of desire, they are in some sense transposable acts. Before we attempt to reconcile these two antinomic features of *Cruising* — its queer theoretical insights *avant la lettre* and its old-school homophobia — let us consider more carefully, then, the charges against *Cruising*, namely the fact that the film makes an association between gay sex and killing. It is not enough to say that male identity in *Cruising* is proliferative and unoriginal, nor that sexuality is not a prior, inner property but a self-externalization in the other. It was not, after all, this that disturbed people about *Cruising* but rather the fact that far from a proliferative network of sameness suggestive of equality, the sexualized social body on view in *Cruising* is one that polarizes radically and relentlessly into two incommensurable positions: top and bottom, killer and victim. In unpacking what I will call the film's queer theory of the social contract, we will have to account for the fact that its vision of sexuality is inherently sadomasochistic. What is S/M *doing* in *Cruising*, apart from offending everybody?²⁵

sex as murder, or is the killer is a top?

Cruising opens on a view of the Manhattan skyline; a fishing trawler moves left to right across the Hudson. (The film also closes with a shot of the trawler, still moving left to right — a circularity that defeats, at the narrative level, both closure and a "minoritarian" interpretation: the killing will continue.) A gangrenous arm floats into view. The divided body with which the film begins becomes,

²⁴ Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss, New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 21.

²⁵ The film's conflation of gay eroticism with S/M continues to offend many. In presenting versions of this work, I have frequently been met by the objection, including from practitioners of queer theory, that the film reduces homosexual desire to sadomasochistic desire (with the implication that it is therefore irredeemable, and that my project of "redeeming" it, if that's what *reading* it entails, is illegitimate).

in the following sequence, a figure for society on the brink of dissolution: “One day this whole city’s going to explode,” says the cop DiSimone to his beat partner. Looking with disgust from the patrol car out onto the streets of downtown Manhattan, he reminisces: “You used to be able to play stickball on these streets.” The city that was once a children’s playground now seems to be populated entirely by men, as the saying goes, of a certain type: “Look at these guys,” says DiSimone. “Christ, what’s happening?” So there is something rotten in the state of Denmark, or rather of New York as the case may be: the homosexual apocalypse has come to the land of liberty. “These streets” used to be a place where children played stickball. Now they are the scene of a ubiquitous cruising which has been rendered ominous by the shot of the dismembered limb that introduced it.

If a connection between dismemberment and cruising is first established syntactically, it will soon receive a properly narrative elaboration (though at the level of narrative, as its detractors point out, *Cruising* is not very effective: like the cruiser himself, it only appears to be going somewhere). Next, in a series of tracking shots, we follow a dark-haired, leather-clad man — keys jangling from his left pocket — down a stairwell marked “Private Club: Members Only.” Downstairs, *under* the city, a scene of jubilation, more public (or “counterpublic”) than private, appears as the complement to the furtive stoicism of the streets. Both spaces are cruisey, but in the club cruising is only one among a number of activities that also includes, as the shot proceeds, kissing, playing pool, sucking nipples, talking, and especially dancing:



Figs. 4-7 (continuous shot): Pacino doubles proliferate in the film

The protestors’ complaint was that the film confuses the proliferated affective intensity on display in the social space of the leather bar with an eminently *antisocial*, which is to say murderous intensity; it imagines that the *telos* of the first, distributed intensity is its condensation in the second.

True enough, in the sex scene that follows, which transmutes into the film's first murder, a direct link between fucking and killing is installed as both narrative truth (the killer fucks the victim, about whom we learn in the next scene that his "anus was dilated at the time of death"; the killer, unsurprisingly, is a top²⁶) and a principle of the film's formal construction, through the interspersing of subliminal (non-diegetic) shots of gay pornography into the diegetic shots of a knife plunging into the victim's muscular back. These shots of explicit sex do not belong to or emanate from the diegetic world of the film; they are interpolations, which establish a link at the level of the film's own "enunciation" between gay anal sex and murder.²⁷ At the level of allusion and metaphor, this connection has a long history; it saturates the connotative system of "off scene" homosexuality, as we learn from Miller's essay on *Rope*. But never before (and never since) has a Hollywood film made it so fully and grotesquely *explicit*.



Figs 8-9. Penetration with the knife is transmuted into (non-diegetic) penetration with a penis; an Eisensteinian "montage of attractions"!

So the sociality of sameness staged by *Cruising*, which moments earlier appeared an almost Whitmanesque scene, is radically refigured by this intrusion — like a knife slicing into a back — of penetrative non-reciprocity, indeed of penetration *as* non-reciprocity. The pairing off that removes sex from the group space of the bar does not issue in a gratifyingly egalitarian "flip flop" scene, like in much '70s gay pornography; in *Cruising*, unlike in that pornography, the penetratee ends up dead. Wlodarz describes one of the subsequent murder scenes as a "vision of violent and sexual reciprocity that strikes at the core of social anxieties about gay male sex" (n.p.) The troubling point, however, is precisely that sex here offers *no* "vision of... reciprocity"; in *Cruising*, sex is violent precisely because, even or especially between two men, it is non-reciprocal and — by macabre extension — finds its

²⁶ Albeit one who "is shooting blanks," i.e. whose "semen contains no sperm," as we are also told by the forensics expert — narratively gratuitous information that however serves, in a grotesquely literal (and entirely redundant) way, to distance the killer (and, by extension, gay sexuality) from what Edelman calls "reproductive futurity." How presciently fitting, then, that in one scene Burns refers to Captain Edelson as "Captain Edelman"!

²⁷ Greven's argument that these interpolated shots "serve as evidence of the associations in the killer's mind between the two acts, rather than as the film's own equivalence between the two" is needlessly defensive (as well as unconvincing, not least because there is no "killer's mind" in the film) ("Mirror Shades," 197). In any case, even if the shots are "meant" to construct a diegetic psychological association, it is one the film adapts as its own formal principle; to me this reads more like Eisensteinian montage than like free indirect discourse.

structural culmination in murder.²⁸ Which is to say: murder hyperbolizes a structure of relationality already inherent to sexual penetration. As we saw in chapter two, this is a view of sex as “intercourse,” in the strictly Dworkinian sense:

In the experience of intercourse, [the penetrated partner] loses the capacity for integrity because her (*sic*) body — the basis of privacy and freedom in the material world for all human beings — is entered and occupied; the boundaries of her physical body are — neutrally speaking — violated.²⁹

For Dworkin, it would not be preposterous to say that sex and murder are analogous. In *Cruising*, they are not only analogized but actually conflated. Crucially, however, while for Dworkin the murderously non-reciprocal dynamic of sexual intercourse expresses as action the structural paradigm of sexual difference and heterosexuality, in *Cruising*, it is *homosexual* penetration that provides the paradigm case of sexual non-reciprocity.

With this in mind, let us consider the significance of the detail I passed over without comment before, the fact that the man we follow into the leather bar wears his keys dangling to the left. Keys play an important role in the audioscape of *Cruising*; they are foregrounded in the pared back, stylized sound mix, which was largely constructed in a studio. (Wlodarz comments that most of the film’s dialogue had to be post-synched because the live audio recordings were spoiled by the protestors’ chants of “Stop *Cruising*!”) We hear jangling keys prominently in the mix every time a cruise transforms into a sexual encounter, a jangling that quickly accrues an ominous charge, since it announces that murder is not far away. Keys also play a significant role as one of a number of clone accoutrements in which the film, like *Burns*, takes a special interest. In an early sex scene with his girlfriend Nancy (Karen Allen), Burns is wearing the studded leather band sported by all the men in the club; this is an early sign that the homosexual sociality of the leather bar is beginning to colonize his fantasy life and to transform even his straight sex into a fantasmatically gay relation. In a montage sequence of Burns’ undercover induction into gay life in the West Village, he is attracted to a display of colored handkerchiefs in a store. We have previously encountered these handkerchiefs in the tracking shots in the leather bar, tucked into back pockets, stuffed into jockstraps, and tied around necks; Burns, in his faltering manner, asks the shop clerk for an explanation of their significance.

Shopclerk: Well, light blue hanky in your left back pocket means you want a blowjob. Right pocket means you [want to] give one. Green one left side says you’re a hustler; right side a buyer. Yellow one left side means you give golden shower; right side you receive. Red one...

Burns cuts him off just in time to avoid hearing that the red hanky communicates a predilection for fisting; soon after, however, in a much-remarked scene in Central Park, Burns is himself cruised by a

²⁸ This idea — that murder extends the relational logic of sex to its furthest degree — finds an elaborate treatment in the novels of Dennis Cooper, but also in Catherine Breillat, in the context of a larger Bataille (and Sadean) French tradition. On this point, see chapter two. Catharine MacKinnon, of course, sees the connection *Cruising* makes explicit between pornography, sex and murder as inherent to (all) sexuality as we know it. So for MacKinnon too, *Cruising*’s violent view of sex hardly pertains only to a “small, sick segment of society” — she would say it lays bare the structure of sexuality in general.

²⁹ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press, 1987), p. 137.

man sporting a red hanky in his *left* back pocket; the pair walks off together as the scene gives way to ellipsis, leading us to wonder if the fisting scene that Burns later witnesses in the leather bar is really his first encounter with that practice. Burns' left-hankied cruiser also happens to be the killer from the first murder scene, but Burns apparently survives the encounter to meet with Edelson the next day; so apparently not all sex — not even all fisting — ends in murder.³⁰

In the scene in the West Village store, the clerk asks Burns if he sees any hanky he likes. "Ah," stammers Burns, "I'm going to go home and think about it." To which the clerk replies: "I'm sure you'll make the right choice." The point being, of course, that there are only right choices, since the semiotics of sex they translate into "code" comprises a purely artificial system devoid of any "natural" (including anatomical) pre-determinants. The hanky system furnishes a symbolic system for the willful self-fashioning of sex; preferred practices are rendered as a rainbow spectrum of colors, and the distinction between top and bottom through the differential copula left vs. right. The purely *symbolic* nature of sexual difference in this system crucially detaches sexual position or mode (top vs. bottom; penetrator vs. penetratee) *from both sex and gender*. By this, I mean that within the terms of this differential system, anatomy is here no longer destiny; the earlier point about "proliferation" being the film removes the problematic of anatomical (sexual) difference by making all the participants in its sexual scenography copies of each other. But sexual position is also de-correlated in *Cruising* from *gender*. This disassociation of sexual position from gender is characteristic to some extent of gay clone culture in general, which removes the "feminine" position typically associated with bottoming from the equation. We can see this in masculine '70s porn like the "trucker" films of Joe Gage.³¹ In those films, the sexual exchange between two masculine partners does not de-masculinize either of them, because they trade roles; masculinity is installed as universal principle, and sexual actors switch between topping and bottoming.³² *Cruising* absorbs from these films, and from clone culture in general, the principle of universal masculinity. (In *Cruising*, even the drag queens are distinctly muscular and aggressively butch; note the scene in the police station where the drag queen informant puts her foot up on the chair, displaying her crotch, as it were!) But unlike in '70s pornography, in *Cruising* each sexual encounter is strictly unidirectional.

Its singularity in this context, then, inheres in the fact that while *Cruising* associates sex with a radical polarization most fully expressed in murder, it does *not* imply that, as Catharine MacKinnon asserted about sex in general, "the one to whom it is done is the girl regardless of sex."³³ There are *no* girls in the sexual encounters in *Cruising*, and being fucked (or killed, which amounts to the same thing) does *not* make one into a "girl." There is, in fact, one woman in *Cruising* — Burns's fiancée Nancy. But heterosexual sex, which occurs several times in the film's first third, quickly

³⁰ We can begin to see here some of the incoherencies that make it difficult to pin down the structural rules in *Cruising*, or to make any logical sense of its plot. These incoherencies, of course, are of signal importance, as I shall argue.

³¹ For example, *Kansas City Trucking Co.* (1976) and *El Paso Wrecking Corp.* (1978).

³² Consider this in contrast to the rise of the polarized top and bottom in '80s gay porn, with exclusive tops like Jeff Stryker and Chad Douglas counterposed to exclusive bottoms, typically younger, slimmer, and consequently coded more feminine. See my unpublished essay "Gag the Fag, or Tops and Bottoms, Persons and Things."

³³ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 160.

exhausts its interest — for the film and for Burns. As Wlodarz observes, when we see Steve having sex with Nancy, the fact that his mind is elsewhere is signaled not only by the studded leather band he has forgotten to remove but also by an audio dissolve “from the calm [and boring] classical music of the bedroom to the grunts, shouts, and throbbing punk rock of the bars.” Burns “cums to the sounds of the Cockpit.” This does not mean that he has become “gay.” It means heterosexual sex has lost its plausibility in *Cruising*. Woman in *Cruising* does not represent the subordinated term in a hierarchized (and sexualized) pair, à la MacKinnon; rather, she represents a domesticity counterposed to sexuality. In this allegorical world, sexuality is not the production of “woman” as subordinated term; woman represents the aphanisis of sexuality. The film offers no explanation for this, other than what I described earlier as its removal of both sexual *and* gender difference from the scene of sex; sex in *Cruising* is inexorably masculine. This sexlessness of women in *Cruising* is expressed both spatially (Nancy is only ever seen inside the apartment, she has no access to the sexualized public spaces) and aurally: to the “punk pulsations” of the score by Jack Nitzsche that electrifies the all-male world of the leather bars (Miller, 70) is counterposed the dimensionless string quartet that makes it seem formally pre-determined that she will soon be asking Burns, to no-one’s great surprise, “Why don’t you want me anymore?”

We could read the film’s disinterest in women as a symptom of misogyny, just as we could read the nearly universal whiteness of its cast (the ethnicizing description of the killer’s “dark hair” and “dark eyes” notwithstanding) as a symptom of its racism.³⁴ Both are legitimate readings. But the film’s pervasive anatomical sameness functions allegorically; it does not express a hatred of difference; it is rather that the film’s object of investigation is precisely *not* the sexual and social problematics of difference. If there is a “fundamental contradiction between liberal formulations of equality as sameness and gender as difference,”³⁵ *Cruising* does not explore this contradiction but rather gives carnal and aesthetic form to the notion of a social contract among equals, where that abstract sameness has been rendered material. As Pateman, MacKinnon, Brown and other feminist political theorists have shown in different ways, classic liberal formulations construct gender as difference, and the public as a masculine sphere counterposed to the feminized sphere of the private and domestic. Sex, in this schema, is confined to the domestic, and removed from public life. *Cruising* at first glance follows and extends this schema, creating public spaces — the park, the street, the leather bar — entirely populated by men. But the second part of the analysis is contradicted in *Cruising*, in which sex, unlike in liberal formulations, is *separated* from the domestic. The private is thus a sexually evacuated category in *Cruising*, and private subjectivity (in the sense of psychological depth) is equally vacated as a site. But if sexuality is removed from the domain of private interiority and also removed from the domestic interior, it is only to be relocated in the social and the public. The effect of the exclusion of women from the public spaces of *Cruising* is *not* a separation of sex from public life, which is what Rousseau hoped keeping women out of the public sphere would achieve. On the

³⁴ Several writers have commented on (without being able to make much sense of) the strange scene in which an African American police officer, dressed only in a jock strap (as if he has come straight from the Ramrod) physically assaults the undercover Burns and the suspect Skip Lee as part of the police interrogation. This mysterious figure seems not to fit within the world of the film, and his singularity and difference is racially marked. While noting his racialization, Robin Wood says only that this “grotesque” scene “seems to be there primarily to underline the connection between the two worlds.” i.e. the police and gay S/M (57).

³⁵ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 140. Here Brown refers to an argument expounded by Catharine MacKinnon, which I discuss at length in chapter 4.

contrary, the exclusion of difference from the sociality of sameness staged in *Cruising* is what occasions its pervasive sexualization.

We have yet to address the protestors' charge that *Cruising* makes this sexuality of sameness analogous to murderous sexuality. It seems to infuse the social sphere imagined as a sociality of sameness with sexuality at the same time that it constructs the male homosexual as an antisocial figure outside the social contract because he fails to abide by its most fundamental law, the prohibition on murder. Just as in *Rope*, the homosexual seems to be defined here *as* murderer — homosexuality and murderousness are conflated — only much more explicitly. At the same time, as Miller observes, there are *two* kinds of spaces and two modes of sexual encounter in *Cruising*, and only one of them issues in murder. Safe sex in *Cruising* is public sex, the kind which delivers the “superabundant spectacle of... acts and pleasures” Miller refers to, and in which the “plugging-in of sex organs seems *almost incidental* to what is more fundamentally an ecstatic, X-rated cuddle whose goal is to put every body in total erotic contact with every other” (71, my italics). By contrast, any time two cruisers pair off to retreat to the privacy of an apartment or the seclusion of a park, the odds are high that their sexual encounter will morph into an act of murder.

On the one hand, a molecular, Deleuzean/Foucauldian spectacle of bodies and pleasures; on the other, a molar polarization that find its apotheosis in murder. How can we reconcile these two contrasting views of homosexual relationality, now both brazenly on display? Should we conclude, with Miller, that the second, murderous kind of relationality is merely a reaction formation against what has been allowed to become visible in the first, which is to say that “the authenticity of the bar sequences sanctions the film’s punitive wish to annihilate what it has glimpsed in them”? (71) But the tension in *Cruising* between de-territorializing groups of aesthetically similar bodies and a rigidly structured inequality culminating in murder is not, to my eyes, the tension between a genuinely new cinematic possibility and its phobic cancellation, as Miller concludes. Rather, it is precisely on this tension that what I have been calling the film’s queer theory of the social contract depends.

Before I explain this still-enigmatic formulation, consider again the film’s interest in what I earlier referred to as the semiotics of sex, the system of coding that produces sexual difference not as gender or “status” difference nor as anatomical destiny, but on the purely artificial axis L | R. In this regard, we can observe that the killer — though he lacks a unitary identity — *is* however consistent in always carrying his keys to the left. We already know the killer fucks his victims before slicing into them; in the scene in the coroner’s room after the first murder, we hear that the victim’s “anus was dilated at the time of death,” with a “slight rupture above the anus indicating intercourse.” But the fact that in every one of his subsequent appearances the killer also carries keys to the left confirms the structural significance of what might otherwise have only been a contingent detail.

What else do we know about the sex that takes place in *Cruising*? Skip Lee, the handsome suspect Burns nominates, and whom he seduces in the hope of uncovering murderous intentions, also always wears *his* keys to the left. Burns, on the other hand, wears his own keys to the *right*, in both the scenes in which he is seen in a get-up that might be the killer’s. In the scene near the end of the film in which Burns faces off with Stuart Richards, the man he has discovered to be (one of) the killer(s), the two men wear identical outfits. As they sit together on the park bench, Stuart’s keys hang conspicuously to the left, but Burns wears no obvious keys. Subsequently, however, as they stand facing each other in preparation for sex, Burns — as he enquires: “Hips or lips?” — now seems to be wearing keys after all — clearly hanging to the right:



Figs 22-23. Burns wears his keys to the right; Stuart wears them to the left

In the following long shot, the last before the stabbing, Stuart's keys still hang, as expected, to his left.

I argued earlier that *Cruising* is not a film about secret or repressed homosexual desire, and that its interest in Burns' superficial transformation into a gay clone also exhausts its interest in Burns, which is to say that the film — to the chagrin of the critics — does not pursue an inquiry into his personal psychology. Burns's predilection for right-hanging keys does not make him "secretly" (or not so secretly) a bottom, though it does suggest that if he has sex in the course of duty, he dutifully takes the passive role (and yet somehow survives). Logically, we could surmise that Burns realizes the killer is a top, so he wears his keys to the right in order to attract the right kind of patron. But the killer is also not a psychological being; as many commentators have pointed out (beginning with Wood), the film never coherently establishes who the killer is. The first killer, as I mentioned, is subsequently shown cruising Burns, now with no keys but a red hanky in his back left pocket. In the next scene, the same actor picks up the man who will now kill him — that man wears the "killer" outfit of leather pants, leather jacket, mirrored shades and eagle cap, with keys hanging to the left. Just as "top" appears to be a position one might occupy for the evening, "killer" is not a fixed identity, it is a position constructed through prosthetic means. (In this sense, Stuart is right to protest, lying apprehended in the hospital: "*I never killed anybody!*") Unlike in the novel, where the killer turns out to be Burns himself, struggling with repressed desire, in the film we could say that killing is a de-individuated intensity within the eroticized sociality of sameness, a principle of non-reciprocity that striates and ruptures the system of correspondences by virtue of which many of the figures in *Cruising* appear as "inaccurate replications" of the same.³⁶

How does the L/R distinction correspond to the "superabundant spectacle of acts and pleasures" if, as I have argued, it does not simply replace it or act as its phobic cancellation? The left-side symbolic accessories, whether hankies or keys, are clearly integral to the film's fascination with gay male S/M subculture; they are also metonyms for murder. But just as clearly, the modulated dynamics of topping and bottoming spreads out across the superabundant spectacle without *necessarily* congealing as murderousness. I suggested that some sex is inoculated by virtue of being public, and that it is private sex that is dangerous in *Cruising*. That may be true, but it cannot be a rule, since lots of private sex takes place — including sex, probably, between Burns and the first killer, and between Skip Lee and many people — that does not issue in murder. What, then, if not

³⁶ Leo Bersani, *Homos*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 124.

the public-private distinction *per se*, accounts for the killing that cuts across the sexual-social field of sameness?

voices, bodies, fathers

The left-hanging keys are a *necessary* but not a sufficient condition for the eruption of the discordant relationality that slices through the otherwise pleasurable modulation between varieties of sexual practice (colored hankies) and positions (left vs. right). The missing factor is the enunciation of the “killer’s voice.” The killer, though he is multiple, speaks with just one voice, which Adrian Martin describes as “a very particular voice: very low, heavy, always post-synchronised, [seemingly recorded] almost obscenely close to a microphone.”³⁷ This voice utters the stock phrase “I know what I have to do,” and sings the childlike rhyme “who’s here? I’m here, you’re here.” The voice is “disembodied,” as Martin puts it, because it is literally detached from its body of origin.³⁸ In some sense, as Michel Chion points out, all cinematic voices are detached from bodies, and artificially fused with them via the synchronization of tracks on the film strip: “[T]he talking cinema is simply a sort of tying up” of body and voice (205), and in this tying up — this suturing of voice to visible body — inheres cinema’s reality effect. Post-synchronization, extensively used in *Cruising*, generally produces an effect of stylization without necessarily dispelling the suspension of disbelief that narrative cinema depends on.³⁹ The voice of the killer, however, becomes eerier as it becomes apparent that it transcends the particular instance of each of its incarnations, and fails to fully coincide with any of them.

We first hear the voice in the patrol car in the early scene I described above. In that scene, DiSimone’s patrol partner speaks with the low, heavy voice that will soon be heard again in the bar when the man who turns out to be the first killer flirts with his victim-to-be. That the first body to issue the killer’s voice belongs to a police officer who is never seen again in the film serves to underscore the confusion of the police force with the world of gay S/M. Eventually, we learn where the killer’s voice apparently originated, and it appears to be rejoined with its body of origin. That body belongs to Stuart’s father, who we see and hear in an (imaginary) meeting with Stuart that takes place on a bench in Central Park. When this occurs, it seems the film has offered us the key to its murder mystery, in the form of a psychological diagnosis: Stuart is the killer, and when he kills, he is literally possessed by the voice of the father, whose injunction “you know what you have to do” is internalized (along with the commanding voice) as “I know what I have to do.” In any case, this is how Martin understands the film. He writes: “Friedkin makes it emphatically clear that [Stuart] Richards is — like Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960) — literally not himself when he kills: he speaks with his father’s voice, becoming the possessed vessel of an aggressive Other.”

³⁷ Martin, “*Cruising*: The Sound of Violence.”

³⁸ On the disembodied voice of the mother in *Psycho* — clearly parallel to *Cruising* — see Michel Chion, “The Impossible Embodiment,” in Zizek (ed.) *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Hitchcock But Were Afraid to Ask Lacan*, New York: Verso, 1992, 195-207. “Embodiment,” Chion explains, “is realized through the simultaneous assembly of a visible body and an audible voice. The body has to testify, in a particular fashion, ‘this is my voice’; or the voice likewise has to testify, ‘this is my body’, through a sort of marriage contract consecrating the reassuring fixation of the voice in the residence of the body” (197)

³⁹ Martin estimates that 80% of the dialogue is post-synchronized, rendering the film’s sound design “extremely controlled... very stylised and pared down.”

If this is right, *Cruising* does indeed offer a parallel scenario to *Psycho* insofar as in that film too, the murderous voice belongs to a parent who is no longer alive. Stuart's "problem" in that case is that like Norman's mother in *Psycho*, his father won't stay dead. When, after his arrest, the detectives discover a box of letters Stuart has written to his father and never sent, his roommate tells them that the father "has been dead for ten years," offering further: "I guess he never got over it; he used to talk about him like he was alive." Indeed, not only does Stuart talk about his father as if the old man were still alive, he goes to meet with him in Central Park. So the problem is that (not the Mother, as in *Psycho*) but the Father won't stay dead; the fact of his being dead is disavowed, disavowal ("I know but all the same...", the catchcry of the fetishist) being, in psychoanalysis, the very mechanism of perversion. The effect of this perverse disavowal is a rupture with the social order whose smooth functioning — as with Freud's band of brothers — seems to depend on the Father's remaining dead. The eruption of murderous violence obeys no social law, respects no social contract; it occurs through the obtrusion of a perverse and unaccountable voice whose command is "arbitrary, relative, and yet absolute in its power." The sovereign exception that in *Rope* was embodied (illegitimately) in the figure of the murderous homosexual has here returned, still in the form of a murderous homosexual but one whose act is now revealed to be the execution of an injunction by the Father. Not the benign or impotent father, like Mr. Kentley in *Rope*, but the phallic Father as embodiment of sovereign right; the primal father who, because he is above the law, had to be killed by the band of brothers in order to insure the law's viability.

"*Arbitrary, relative, and yet absolute in its power*" — this is how Joan Copjec describes the Law that the pervert, in the psychoanalytic schema, follows to the letter. She offers as a grotesque illustration of this principle the case of Eichmann who,

[p]rotesting that he himself had nothing against the Jews,... clearly and publicly acknowledged the arbitrariness of Hitler's edicts. They contained for him no necessary truth, yet he insisted that he had to obey them to the letter because they were the law.⁴⁰

"I know what I have to do," says Stuart: the pervert, like Eichmann, follows the arbitrary law to its letter, accepting its arbitrariness without making of it the object of an independent judgment. (For Copjec and Lacan, this is what distinguishes the pervert from the neurotic; whereas there is "no wavering in the pervert's relation to the law," the neurotic, for her part, "want[s] to obey the law — it is just that she is a little vague about what it is" [*ibid.*].)

We could derive from these observations a psychological diagnosis that would isolate the pathology in question in the person of Stuart. This would to "minoritize" the structure of murderous desire on view in *Cruising* to point of reducing it to a single figure. We could extend this diagnosis to include Burns, who, as several commentators have observed, has unresolved father issues of his own: in an early scene with Nancy, she tells him ominously: "your father called..." prompting a cut to a lengthy close-up on his inscrutable, dark gaze. So maybe there are two perverts with father issues behind the murders. Or maybe all gay men have father issues (not mother issues as we thought), or maybe gayness *is* a kind of father complex. And maybe many policemen are also gay, like DiSimone who cruises Burns in the bars, and DiSimone's beat partner, who (in the Father's voice) orders the

⁴⁰ Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002, p. 224. For a (non-psychoanalytic) account of Eichmann's scrupulous adherence to the law as "arbitrary, relative and yet absolute" see also Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Viking, 1963.

drag queen to go down on him. Whereas Martin seems to accept without question the reading that Stuart is the killer, Wood takes us a step closer to the heart of the matter in his contention that “[t]he film suggests... that we don’t have to feel we know who the killer is, because it could be anyone; and that the violence has to be blamed on the *culture*, not on the individual” (*H*, 56, my italics). What Wood appears to be diagnosing is a kind of pervasive father complex — certainly not just limited to homosexuals — symptomatic of a larger political and social crisis in the US in the 1970s. In this vein, he concludes in a remarkable passage that:

the film’s real villain is revealed as patriarchal domination, the “Law of the Father” that demands the rigid structuring of the subject and the repression of all conflicting or superfluous realities — the *denial of the Other, both internal and external*. The implications of this are enormous: taken symbolically, it was Stuart’s father who demanded the Vietnam war. (*H*, 60).

This reading is as brilliantly compelling as it is implausible. In Wood’s hands, the film becomes a critique of a historically specific moment in US capitalist patriarchy that culminated in the disastrous advent of the Vietnam War; the film is one of many, in Wood’s view, that respond to that war with a critique of the “Law of the Father” that mandates the repression of both the subject’s internally polymorphous desires and the “external Other.” This is a Marcuse-inflected reading of *Cruising* as a film that criticizes repression, in which violence is invoked as the symptom of a repressive culture that expunges Otherness, internal and external. *Cruising*, by the logic of this account, would be a film whose critical motive is the celebration of diversity, a pluralistic embrace of Otherness.

Yet it is hard to see in what specific textual sense the proliferation of sameness in *Cruising* could be shown to conceal a desire to nurture diversity and cherish Otherness. And as I already indicated, the “riddle” of the film is not (unlike in the source novel) the riddle of Stuart’s or Burns’ repressed desire. Moreover, if we learn anything about the killer in *Cruising*, it is that unlike Norman Bates in *Psycho*, this is not a killer who has any trouble with sex; the victim’s anus, after all, was “dilated at the time of death.” But Wood is absolutely right to point out that what is at stake in *Cruising* is a social analysis; a diagnosis not of an individual (nor of a homosexual “type”) but of a social system — “society” — in general.

Most everyone looks alike in *Cruising*; the killer’s voice might be embodied, at any moment, by any of these like-bodied men, which is to say, any of the participants in the orgy of acts and pleasures that fills the underground spaces of *Cruising* might at any moment begin to speak with a murderous intensity that heralds the eruption of exceptional violence. This exceptional violence is a sovereign violence in the name of the Father (“Sovereign is he who decides on the exception” — so begins Schmitt’s *Political Theology*).⁴¹ We have established that Stuart, as one of a limitless number of potential killers, becomes the “possessed vessel of an aggressive Other” (Martin), where the Other is the Father, and where the Father speaks a law — “you know what you have to do” — that is “arbitrary, relative, and yet absolute in its power.” The Father, in other words, dead but not buried, embodies the position of the *exception*; he metes out exceptional violence arbitrarily, which is to say unaccountably; he is accountable to no-one; he embodies pure sovereignty and transcends every social contract. This Father is not of course a real person, not a “someone” *within* the social field; he

⁴¹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

is only a voice, but his lethal effects are no less real for that. If he is a superego, he is not an individual superego, not Stuart's superego, but a socially pervasive paternal superego that occupies the position of the exceptional sovereign. *This* is the social structure on view in *Cruising*, and it is a structure that is neither at odds with, nor a punitive response to, the sexualized sociality of fraternal acts and pleasures staged in the leather bars, parks, and other public spaces. *Cruising* reminds us that exceptional violence is both foreclosed within "liberal" society, a society of equals, the fraternity of Freud's band of brothers, but is also *the condition of possibility of the fraternal regime*.⁴²

In political terms, as Schmitt demonstrates, this means that the functioning of any constitutional state is premised on the operation of a sovereign right to declare the *Aufnahmestanzung*, the state of emergency or exception that creates the regime and retains executive privilege to suspend the constitution. (Obama exercises this privilege in the name of the "state of emergency" declared by George W. Bush in relation to the war on terror.) Pointing out the hypocrisy of liberal pacifism, Schmitt writes that in liberalism's quest for "perpetual peace,"

War is condemned but executions, sanctions, punitive expeditions, pacifications, protection of treaties, international police, and measures to assure peace remain. (*Concept of the Political*, 79)⁴³

These "measures" who aim is "to assure peace" themselves depend on the exceptional violence either of the law itself or (as in the case of Guantanamo or Abu Ghraib) of executive privilege in the "name" of the law. That privilege must necessarily remain unaccountable; that is precisely what makes this power of exception violence *sovereign*.

Schmitt's discussion of sovereign violence finds an interesting parallel in Freud's "social contract" narrative in *Totem and Taboo*: his story of the primal father and the band of brothers.⁴⁴ *Cruising* only makes sense, I propose, not when read as a film about a minority sexual preference or an individual (or group) psychopathology, but rather as a film about the relation between law and exceptional violence in the (patriarchal, fraternal) social contract the modern liberal state invokes as its mythological origin. In *Cruising*, the principle of abstract and formal equality is literally incarnated as an embodied sameness. But *pace* Wood, the film does not puzzle over the sorry fate of difference or "the Other" under patriarchy; bracketing this problem (the fate of Nancy — and of heterosexuality in general — is never resolved in *Cruising*), *Cruising* explores the erotics of a social world without inherent "status" (like sexual difference), a social sphere of equals free to pursue their pleasures in any consensual way they like — i.e. subjects of negative freedom. *Cruising's* simple contention is that *the condition of a social contract that assures the negative freedom of all is the exceptional position from which that contract can be enforced*. This is precisely what Rupert's wielding of the "strong arm of the law" demonstrated in *Rope*: that the social contract that proscribes violence requires an agency that can itself wield the force of exceptional violence (Rupert's gun in the name of the "society" who will administer "the death penalty.") If the implicit eroticism of this position was

⁴² "[I]n the strictly political, institutional sense," writes Bruno Gulli, "power [is] always grounded in violence." "The Sovereign Exception," *Glossator* 1 (Fall 2009): 23-30, p. 24. Walter Benjamin, in his "Critique of Violence," observes that violence is "implicated in the problematic nature of law itself." In *Reflections*, New York: Harcourt, 1978, p. 287.

⁴³ Cf also Gulli's discussion, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-7.

⁴⁴ Carole Pateman also reads Freud's story as an account of the liberal "social contract" (see below).

apparent in *Rope*, in *Cruising* it is this eroticism — and not just gay sex *per se* — that is rendered fully explicit. In other words, unlike conventional accounts of the social contract or the public sphere, however — and indeed, unlike Schmitt's own account of the sovereign exception — *Cruising* understands that *eroticism inheres in the very principle of the exception*. It is for this reason that the police force — agency of the law's (violent) enforcement — is thoroughly sexualized and homosexualized in *Cruising*; it is for this reason that the film conflates, to the consternation of its critics, the paraphernalia of gay S/M with the police force's instruments of violence. It is S/M that furnishes the relevant erotic structure, because S/M reflects the structure of sovereign right that demands absolute submission to an law that is arbitrary but absolute in its power.

In this latter sense, *Cruising* offers an eroticized and intensely carnal staging of the fact that, as Nancy Fraser puts it (referring to France), “masculinist gender constructs were built into the very conception of the republican public sphere.”⁴⁵ The leather bar and the park of *Cruising* are spaces of the de-sublimation of what Pateman takes to be the disavowed premise of liberal myths of the social contract, namely that:

The contract is made by brothers, or a *fraternity*. It is no accident that fraternity appears historically hand in hand with liberty and equality, nor that it means exactly what it says: brotherhood. (“Fraternal Social Contract,” 40)

Pateman finds this truth expressed most plainly in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, one of the few myths about the origins of society that makes the significance of both sexuality and gender explicit.⁴⁶ “The crucial point about the contract” in Freud's narrative, writes Pateman, “is that it takes place after the death of the father and *abolishes his arbitrary right*” (42, my italics). In place of arbitrary right, i.e. sovereign violence, the brothers implement their own law upholding the principles of equality, negative freedom, and justice:

A contract between free and equal brothers replaces the [arbitrary] ‘law of the father’ with public rules which bind all equally. As Locke [also] makes clear, the rule of one man (father) is incompatible with civil society, which requires an impartial, impersonal set of rules promulgated by a collective body of men who stand to the law and each other as free equals, as a fraternity (42).

We can see here that the principle of equality, fundamental to modern liberal social systems, is born in Freud's account — and in Locke's too — not from a neutral or unmotivated commitment to justice. It takes shape in a formative relation to the father/sovereign whose “arbitrary right” it abolishes; equality arises as a solution to the problem of arbitrary right; it takes shape only in (a negating) relation to that exceptional power, that sovereign exception that it functions through foreclosing. But in Freud, the regime of equals embodied by the band of brothers *never frees itself* from the father who becomes all the more tyrannical by virtue of being dead; it is the unavowable, uninhabitable position of the dead father that continues to sustain the political system of equality,

⁴⁵ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” in Bruce Robbins (ed.) *The Phantom Public Sphere*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Pateman, like Phillip Rieff, argues that Freud's tale can fruitfully be read alongside social contract stories of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, who similarly describe a transition from a “state of nature” to organized political community. (Cf Pateman, 41-42).

now in the form of internalized law or superego.⁴⁷ In the terms of political theory, what this means is that, as Schmitt observed, it is not possible to have any constitutional regime without the sovereign position that creates and sustains it; the “state of exception” of Schmitt’s account corresponds, in Freud’s, to the position of the dead father.

In the Freudian account, the society of brothers is sustained through the prohibition that ensures that no single one of them will ever occupy that terrible position of arbitrary right. Each brother contracts with the others to give up absolute power in order to achieve security; unlike in Hobbes, where arbitrary right is handed to the Leviathan, here sovereignty is equally dispersed among the community, claimable by no one individual. Yet what ensures that a brother will not, seeing an opportunity, simply seize power for himself? It is the *force of prohibition* that guards against this possibility, which is to say, either the force of law — whose strong arm itself maintains the prerogative of exceptional violence (the police officer’s right to kill “in the name of the law”) — or its internalized agent, the superego. Both solutions, however, end up reproducing a position of extra-legal, unaccountable violence, either as the actual violence of legal enforcement or as the violence of the dead father’s voice, all the more terrible for being deprived of a living body. Installed as superego, the father continues to wield a power that is accountable to no higher authority — that is “arbitrary, relative, and yet absolute in its power” — which is to say, an exceptional power, against which the ego has no right of appeal.

The killer in *Cruising*, no one individual, quite literally incarnates, as voice, the uninhabitable position of the dead father. The freedom of the brothers is only a negative freedom, i.e. “the power which man has to do everything which does not harm the rights of others.”⁴⁸ But the father has absolute freedom. In Lacanian terms that seem quite fitting to *Cruising*: there is no subject within the universal field who is not subject to the “phallic function,” i.e. to the law. (That the law is “phallic” is confirmed in the Precinct night scene.) But, as Lacan reminds us in *Seminar XX*, the *condition* of this “there is no,” i.e. this universality, is the paradoxical necessity of an exceptional position whose externality from the universal produces it as a complete set; this is the position of the dead father whose former existence, like his murder, must be denied representation *within* the “universal” field, the field of all subjects (of the law). As Copjec puts it in terms that are at once Freudian and Kantian: “*The initial cause cannot be tolerated by, or disappears from, the mechanical field that it founds.*”⁴⁹ And elsewhere she writes, “That [the primal father] is unthinkable within [the] regime of brothers does not gainsay the fact that the *institution* of the regime is inexplicable without him” (*Desire*, 12); this is the psychoanalytic and Kantian principle, differently put, that “every phenomenal field occludes its cause” (11-12).

That cause erupts in the form of exceptional violence, illegitimate *within* the terms of the social order and intelligible only as crime. In *Cruising*, these are crimes for which there is no motive other than the injunction: “I know what I have to do.” There is no substance (or rather the substance remains enigmatic and unaccountable, much as Eichmann considered Hitler’s edicts to be enigmatic

⁴⁷ In *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1962), Freud writes that the father is elevated to the status of divinity “long after he [has] met his death by violence” (89).

⁴⁸ Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 42.

⁴⁹ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994, p. 231. This is of course Kant’s solution to the third antimony of reason — the one dealing with causality and freedom — in *Critique of Pure Reason*.

and unaccountable but absolutely enforecable); there is only command. This rules out the reading that the cause of the murders is repressed homosexual desire, which, as I have already observed, fails to account for why they occur *in addition to*, and not as a displaced substitute for, sexual intercourse. We could read the murders as reflexive eruptions of post-coital, homophobic guilt, but the film gives us no evidence to support such a reading. None of the men in the leather bars who could at any moment morph into killers appears to be struggling with their homosexuality. And the father's injunction to kill is also not a punitive response to Stuart's homosexuality. Consider the following exchange, in the Central Park scene:

STUART: Father, I need to talk to you. I wish just once you'd say something positive to me. I've tried to do everything you wanted, but it's never good enough.

FATHER: I've taken it for granted that you understood, Stuie. You know what you have to do.

The command is couched in the language of self-evidence, and, crucially, given no substantive justification. Like Eichmann in Copjec's reading, Stuart merely executes a law to whose logic and rationale he is not privy. What he knows is *what* he has to do, *not why*; the "why" is bracketed as irrelevant. After each murder, the killer tells his victim: "You made me do that." The father's will is "arbitrary, relative, and yet absolute in its power."

But the position of the exception is not just occupied by the dead father in *Cruising*, which is also to say, it is not just a question of gay guys with daddy issues (as it may be in *Rope*). *Cruising's* ingenuity lies in the way it conflates this exceptional position *with the agency of the law itself, its very force* — not an abstract agency, but an embodied agency, incarnated as the police force. *Cruising* gives body to the law: that body is the body of the macho clone, which, as the Precinct night scene attests, is indistinguishable from the body of the police officer. The policemen in *Cruising* (for they are all men) constantly exercise their power of arbitrary right, against which no recourse is possible. The first such example occurs in the squad car, when DiSimone's partner forces the drag queen to perform oral sex. She tries to report the incident but Edelson shuts down that endeavor. ("You're full of shit. How do you know they're cops? There's more guys out there impersonating cops than there are actual cops!") Later, in the interrogation room, a black man dressed in a jock strap strikes Burns and threatens Skip Lee. This violence is sanctioned by the law, or more precisely is (like the detention of prisoners at Guantanamo) extra-legal but in the name of the law. In the parallel it constructs between the arbitrary command of the obscene father and the perverse violence of the law itself, *Cruising* offers what turns out to be a radical social theory of the liberal public sphere, as — in its very legality — sustained by an embodied agency of sovereign exception that is perverse and homoerotic. In so doing, it exposes sadomasochistic relations of domination as the underside of the system of liberal equality. The law becomes a scene of perverse enjoyment, where what is perversely enjoyed is the exception to the law itself, which is the same as the strong arm of its enforcement. The reason this enjoyment takes the form of gay sadomasochistic fantasy is because the law, as *Cruising* sees it, is irredeemably phallic. Just as Pateman does, *Cruising* sees the fraternal social contract as patriarchal and premised on a law that is not simply abstract but *phallically enforced*. The film is so interested in bottoming *not* because it is (phobically) fascinated by gay men as a "small, sick segment of society," but because we are all bottoms to the law. To be a bottom to the law is not a position "within" the law. *Cruising* is fascinated precisely by the fact that *submission* to the law is necessarily submission to a sovereign authority that is properly extra-legal. (To this extent, the film queers, by

illustrating, the Benjaminian principle that violence is “implicated in the problematic nature of law itself.”)

Wilhelm Reich, anticipating the spirit of the ‘60s, maintained that it is repression that is responsible for perversion; if pleasure is freed, argued Reich, society will function non-perversely, harmoniously. *Cruising* counters that the repressive force of law is itself a primary scene of perverse enjoyment — for everyone. I think what we can most profitably locate in *Cruising*, then, is not only what Miller calls the “structure of AIDS panic” *avant la lettre*, but also a startling vision of liberal sociality as both patriarchal and perverse, haunted by a homosexual eros which, if it is the deterritorialization of the law (as Hocquenghem’s utopian reading of homosexual desire would have it), is also its *perverse insistence*. In *Cruising*, unlike in *Word is Out*, heterosexuality and homosexuality are not mere varieties of individual human sexual preference, like preferences for ice cream flavors — you like vanilla, I like strawberry. Patriarchal-liberal society, the fraternal social contract, is itself homo, at least as *Cruising* presents it. Consequently, the film offers no analysis of heterosexuality, whose fate within its framework is uncertain. Steve’s devolving relationship with Nancy demonstrates that heterosexuality is itself saturated with homosexual eros; if that relationship continues at the end (a big “if”), it is through Nancy’s marshaling of homosexual signifiers, her appropriation of phallic prosthetics — the “make believe” of the force of law. That the film cannot imagine any erotic position other than butchness does not necessarily make it misogynist. But it does mean that for *Cruising*, the erotic economy of the phallus — that nonexistent, prosthetic object — is one to which all sexual subjects are bound, whatever their “orientation.”



Fig. 10. There is nothing outside the “phallic” law; eros is that “nothing”

Rope, as we saw earlier, positions its killers as the antisocial queer exception, whose location outside the social order finds its fitting formal correspondence in the fact that homosexuality remains off screen, out of view. After gay liberation, after the radicalism of Stonewall, *Word is Out* brings homosexuality into the public sphere, expanding its parameters to accommodate queer forms of intimacy, sociality, and embodiment. Here, the universality of the declaration that “all men are created equal,” foundational to the modern liberal state, is held critically accountable to its own

premise, which means queerness is rendered no long exceptional; the declaration holds that *there is no exception*. Taking this universality for earnest, in content and style, *Word is Out* rendered gay and lesbian identity a minoritarian position within a pluralistic social field.

Edifying and important as that mode of critical liberalism was and remains, *Cruising's* vision of the liberal social body is much more disturbing and much less easy to assimilate to a "politics." This is precisely what ultimately bothered Wood about the film; he complained that *Cruising*, for all its boldness, represents a sadly missed opportunity: rather than using gay sex as a model for relations of dominance and submission, Friedkin might instead have mined the *egalitarian potential* in gay culture, which Wood locates in the fact that its most intense forms of relationality "transcend" the divide of sexual difference. Friedkin, writes Wood,

uses gay culture to epitomize domination relationships, whereas at its best it transcends them... He hasn't fully confronted the fact that the central inequality of our culture is male/female, and that same-sex relationships offer at least the possibility of escaping this. (*H*, 61)

In other words, *Cruising* might have treated the sexual culture of sameness it depicts as an allegory for a sociality based on an equality that transcends sexual difference, and overcomes the problems of the inegalitarian "sexual contract." *But what sustains a social field of equals, what guarantees their equality?* What force of law? That is the question Freud posed in *Totem and Taboo*, and it is a question *Cruising* answers by incarnating the foreclosed position of sovereign exception, the slayed-but-not-dead phallic father whose authority enables the law to function on condition that he appears "nowhere" within it. *Cruising* confronts us with the obscene irruption of this sovereign authority, its tethering to phallic signifiers. It imagines that it can only ultimately be a perverse enjoyment — the enjoyment of the bottom in the scene of gay S/M, the man wearing his red hanky in his right back pocket — that sustains the "fraternal social contract." *This* becoming-public of sex is a rendering-*sexual* of the public itself; a singular and disturbing vision of a truly queer public sphere. The homosexuality that haunts the "normal world" of *Cruising* somehow belies the fact that liberalism has produced a gay subject fully integrated with — even a new avatar for — that world. In *Cruising*, we stake our identitarian claims in an erotic-social field in which we are all bottoms, haunted by prosthetic fathers.

Through the Window from *Psycho* to *Shortbus*: Cinema and the Liberal Sexual Subject



[T]he four walls of one's private property offer the only reliable hiding place from the common public world, not only from everything that goes on in it but also from its very publicity, from being seen and being heard. A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes... shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense.

— Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* (2006) is a film that has many queer critics excited — for more than prurient reasons. Leopold Lippert, to take one example, finds in the film a welcome corrective to queer theory's recent embrace of "social negativity."¹ Whereas the "antisocial thesis" in queer theory proposes that queers embrace "the opposition to family, social belonging, and life" they have been made to figure (197), *Shortbus* pursues what Lippert considers a "wiser" course, one in which the spectacle of free sexual exchange in a queer sex club in Brooklyn does not figure queer anti-sociality but rather offers "an imaginative blueprint of community" (203).

How does the spectacle of queer sex, I ask in this chapter, come to suggest a "blueprint of community"? And what is the structure of the community it figures? Does this figuration depend specifically on the fact that the sex shown in *Shortbus* is queer and/or polymorphous — the "and/or" here reflecting the additive logic of this film's vision of queerness? Or is it rather the fact that sex is here liberated from its enclosure behind the four walls of the apartment interior — from the domain of a spatially demarcated privacy — and makes its way into some kind of semi-public space? This space would be both the *Shortbus* club itself, the mythical Brooklyn gathering place that (in the film's narrative) provides a communal setting for queer sex, and, meta-diegetically, the semi-public

¹ Leopold Lippert, "Negotiating Postmodernity and Queer Utopianism in *Shortbus*," in Petra Eckhard, Michael Fuchs & Walter W. Höbling (eds.), *Landscapes of Postmodernity: Concepts and Paradigms of Critical Theory*, (Vienna: LIT, 2010), p. 196. The queer theoretical position he refers to is associated with Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

exhibition space into which the film *Shortbus* delivers the documentary evidence of that sex. And if I say “documentary” it is because the film’s formal point of distinction inheres in the fact that the sex it shows is “unsimulated”: unlike the kind of “sex” that more conventional films indicate but elide through careful editing or camera angle, the sex shown in *Shortbus* “really” takes place, with a degree of explicitness generally only found in pornography.

Nick Davis, in his reading of the film, suggests that it is the combination of these two things that accounts for *Shortbus*’s especial appeal.² In the first place, *Shortbus* is a queer film, since its conception of sex is inherently queer: the film includes scenes of gay male, lesbian and heterosexual sex, but focuses especially on the Shortbus club where the distinctness of those categories is complicated precisely by their physical contiguity and overlapping. At the same time, Davis groups *Shortbus* with a number of other films, recent and less recent, which also show “real” sex—making sex “public” by showing it in the theater³—and reads them as enacting forms of “counterpublicity.”⁴ These two groups of films, queer cinema and narrative films that incorporate scenes of unsimulated sex, felicitously overlap in *Shortbus*, fleshing out, so to speak, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s argument that social practices of queerness entail, and emerge from, re-mappings of the public/private divide.⁵ Such films, writes Davis, “imbricat[e] sexual daring... with political reflection” and “activat[e] rich, new relationships among... the sensations of sexuality, visibility and community” (625); they effect or potentialize forms of “erotic rezoning” (635) through “new confoundings of ‘public’ morality.” In creating “counterpublics,” queer and sexually explicit films like *Shortbus* allow us to imagine “revised structures of kinship” (636).

In my own analysis I will ask to what extent the “blueprint” of community, sociality and revised publicity *Shortbus* offers in its sexual scenes can be rightfully thought of as *counter* in this way, where that prefix implies “subversive” (Davis, 625), or “oppositional” (Fraser, 67). It may be that *Shortbus*’s “confoundings of ‘public’ morality” derive from, rather than contest, classical models of the liberal public sphere, even while updating them by reconfiguring, as Davis notes, the relation of privacy to publicity, or, in the terms I suggested in the Introduction, of the “off scene” (what cannot

² Nick Davis, “The View from the *Shortbus*, or All Those Fucking Movies,” *GLQ* 14.4 (2008): 623-637.

³ As Tung-Hui Hui pointed out after seeing a talk based on this chapter, film screenings increasingly do not take place in theatrical settings. Yet even non-theatrical films still circulate in some version of “public” space, which the Internet transforms (and perhaps virtualizes) without making it less “public.”

⁴ Though Davis draws on Michael Warner’s work, the term itself comes from Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25.26: 56-80.

⁵ Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (Winter 1998), 547-566. Berlant & Warner argue, among other things, that because the “heteronormativity of U.S. culture” is connected to its privatization of sex, queer world-making involves forging “paths through publicity” (565-6). Where “the intimate relations of private personhood appear to be the realm of sexuality itself” — i.e. in modern liberal societies — “sex in public” appears “like matter out of place” (553). And this insufficiently privatized domain is the one in which queer culture resides: “Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (558). A close look at *Shortbus* will give us occasion to question the last item on this list.

be shown) to the “on scene” (what is inside the frame).⁶ Notable in this regard is a detail most of *Shortbus*’s commentators have passed over without mention, but whose significance I will insist on, namely that the film opens with a (digitally-animated) shot of the Statue of Liberty and, through an about-face of the camera, aligns the spectator’s view with that statue’s “look.” The bringing “on scene” of sex in *Shortbus* thus takes place under the sign, and under the gaze, of the Statue of Liberty. Indeed, that Statue stands at the figural center of the plot’s key turning points, and the film ends not with Sofia’s orgasm (about which, more later on) but with the re-illumination of the Statue’s torch. The goddess Libertas — avatar of modern liberal democracy — thus bookends the film’s sexual scenes.

Something of the utopian energy of the Statue’s promise of liberty has perhaps been absorbed into the critical accounts of what the film achieves through its focus on queer sex. In these accounts, sex occasions a series of gratifying communitarian, social, and political imaginaries; imaginaries of (better models of) life in common, from Lippert’s “reinvent[ion of] the kinship structures that tie humanity together” (205) to what Michael O’Rourke and Karin Sellberg have described in a Deleuze-inspired vocabulary as “‘a becoming-spiral,’ a relationscape of tangled, rotating and recombinative bodies... a preaccelerative opening toward different textures, shades, colors, ‘platforms of relation’.”⁷ Sex here figures a relational inventiveness, which owes more to Foucault’s brief discussion of “bodies and pleasures” at the end of his *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* than to the analysis of the modern *dispositif* of sexuality that precedes it.⁸

While I share the utopian desire for better, less constrained, less normative forms of relationality, and indeed for unexpected combinations of bodies and pleasures, my own analysis will not take the form of a polemic in favor of queer “counterpublicity” or modes of relational “becoming.” I will bracket the film’s utopian rhetoric (one that many of these accounts adopt as their own) in order to critically analyze the set of assumptions that inform it. In a rather more sober manner, then, I will argue that *Shortbus* crystallizes — in spite of, or somehow connected to, the radical utopian desires it also expresses — a post-1960s trajectory of figuring sociality and political community in sexual terms that is bound up both with a set of liberal assumptions and, complicating those assumptions somewhat, with a desire to free sexuality from its (liberal) confinement to the domain of privacy. In bringing sex on scene, and doing so (significantly) under the sign of the queer, *Shortbus* gives us a contemporary portrait of what I will call the *liberal sexual subject*, a liberal subject whose sexuality is no longer the axis along which the split between public and private operates as a precarious fault line. This is a subject whose liberalism, I will suggest, now saturates even the domain of embodied pleasures. But this conception of the liberal sexual subject is not the one against which Foucault launched his critique of the repressive hypothesis. It is a subject for whom repression has ceased to be the engine of subjectivity. What it is that has replaced or supplanted a repressive hypothesis, and what this transformation implies for contemporary notions

⁶ Linda Williams defines the “on/scene” as “the gesture by which a culture brings on to its public arena the very organs, acts, bodies, and pleasures that have heretofore been designated ob/scene and kept literally off-scene,” out of view. (“Introduction:..” in Williams, ed., *Porn Studies*, p. 3.)

⁷ Michael O’Rourke and Karin Sellberg, “John Cameron Mitchell’s Relationscapes,” *in media res*, Jan 31, 2011, at <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2011/01/31/john-cameron-mitchells-relationscapes>

⁸ On the distinction between the two, see Judith Butler, “Revisiting Bodies and Pleasures,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 16.2 (1999): 11-20.

of “sexual politics,” are questions that will orient the analysis that follows. We will begin with a brief detour through the history of the liberal subject of sex, which will lead us back to the cinema and to the opening sequence of Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), whose famous choreography *Shortbus*’s opening reprises.

Kant’s “dustbin,” or the modern individual (sex in private)

“Every house keeps its dustbin in a place of its own,” noted Kant in his *Lectures on Ethics*.⁹ In that dustbin, where *Unreinigkeit* (impurity) is confined to *einem besonderen Ort* (a special place), away from the view of the house’s visitors, Kant implies we would find bodily functions like excretion, but also whatever activities and impulses are best kept behind “closed shutters.” Man’s social being, notes Kant, exists only by virtue of effecting this split between the domain of appearance and the domain of hiddenness or concealment (*dissimulatio*).¹⁰ It is precisely against the idea that sex belongs to the group of things that must be concealed or hidden from view that *Shortbus* levels its formal strategy of bringing sex “on scene.” Appearance, however, is no simple matter; when we are not concealing, we are just as likely to be pretending (*simulatio*). And it is just as well, says Kant, because man “is full of iniquity” (27:444). Indeed, if “men were good, nobody could hold anything back; but since this is not so, we must keep our shutters closed” (27:445).

Kant’s metaphor spatializes the split between public and private *within* the architecture of the home. But his figure of *simulatio* (pretending) shows that the public/visible subject is also split, between his manifest bearing and an inner realm of iniquity that he withholds from view; “nobody, in the true sense,” observes Kant, “is open-hearted” (445). Kant’s “dustbin” remark allows us to see that the subject of bourgeois modernity, or what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the “modern individual,” is — before the invention of psychoanalysis — already a split subject.¹¹ In Chakrabarty’s words:

Subjectivity itself, or... the “interiority” of the subject, comes [in discourses of European modernity] to be constituted by a tension between the individual’s private experiences and desires (feelings, emotions, sentiments) and a universal or public reason... [I]t is this opposition that manifests itself in the split between the private and the public in modernity. (129-30)

That private self is the one that “pours [itself] out incessantly in diaries, letters, autobiographies, novels, and of course, in what we say to our analysts” (35) — all, except the last, constituents of the eighteenth century liberal-bourgeois public sphere. In Habermas’s canonical account of that sphere, he argues that the very voluble private self of bourgeois modernity was “always already oriented to

⁹ It only appears this way in the Infeld translation (Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infeld, London: Methuen, 1979, p. 225). In German: “Ebenso wie die Unreinigkeit im Hause am besonderen Ort ist...” 27:445. Infeld euphemizes “Unreinigkeit,” since Kant seems to be referring to the toilet rather than a “dustbin”; the Cambridge edition (Peter Heath & J.B. Schneewind, eds., trans. Peter Heath, Cambridge UP, 1997) renders it as “domestic nastiness” (p. 201).

¹⁰ Cambridge ed., p. 201 (27:444-445).

¹¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), p. 35. In the same paragraph he refers to the “bourgeois individual” — he uses the terms interchangeably.

an audience [*Publikum*].”¹² The discursive, *Publikum*-oriented private 18th century self was thus not benignly or transparently self-expressive; it was, in William Connolly’s words, a “stratified subject” soon to be understood as comprised of “levels of unconscious, preconscious, conscious and self-conscious activity” and fractured by “convoluted relays among passions, interests, wishes, responsibility and guilt.”¹³ In other words, this garrulous modern subject is not only one who holds forth, in transparent prose, to a *Publikum* whose image of her is fully concordant with the one she produces; it is rather an individual who, as Kant reminds us, both *withholds* and *conceals*, indeed “disguise[s] [her]self” (27:444), not only because she has something she knows she must hide, but also because she does *not* know what, with all that talk, all those diaries, letters, autobiographies, and novels, she is actually revealing. The modern—and we can now add, neurotic—individual’s discursive profusion can be, and typically is, read *symptomatically*, and according to Foucault’s famous analysis it always leads back... to sex.¹⁴

It is well known by now that the “modern individual” of all those letters and diaries is destined for psychoanalysis, and psychoanalysis will interpret their contents as more (or less) veiled narratives, paradigmatically Oedipal, of sexuality. In Chakrabarty’s account, which aims to historicize this figure and to demonstrate its normative articulation in colonialist practices and discourses, this split individual who speaks nothing but sex¹⁵ is quite literally the liberal subject: it is the analog to “the bureaucratic constructions of citizenship, the modern state, and bourgeois privacy that classical [i.e. modern] political philosophy has produced” (43). If liberalism is the “grand narrative of rights, citizenship, the nation-state, and public and private spheres” (41), bound up, as Chakrabarty emphasizes, with a history of colonial violence and also with the global rise of industrial capitalism, then this voluble subject, split between public and private, who will be most completely recognized by (and may well end up in) psychoanalysis, is in fact the liberal subject: let us say, the subjective fiction that grounds the set of “universalist” narratives (Chakrabarty, 41), theoretical and economic developments associated with liberalism.¹⁶

¹² Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 49 . Also quoted in Chakrabarty, 35.

¹³ William Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity*, p. 71.

¹⁴ It is the amazing homogeneity of what all that symptomatic discourse reveals that Deleuze and Guattari satirize in their essay on Freud’s Wolf Man: “[W]itness Freud’s reductive glee: Seven wolves... six wolves... five wolves... One wolf: the wolf is the Father, as we all knew from the start.” *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Massumi, 1987, p. 28.

¹⁵ Like Habermas, Chakrabarty does not make the connection between the subject’s profusion of discourse and its inexorably sexual meaning. Yet in the example he gives in the first chapter of his book (pp. 35-6), of Bengali writer Nirad Chauduri’s autobiographical narration of his first night with his new wife, it is precisely sexuality that lurks behind the ellipses Chakrabarty notes in his analysis (“He screens off intimacy with expressions like ‘I do not remember’ or ‘I do not know how’”, p. 36). While Chakrabarty notes that some of these protestations are “very Freudian,” he concludes only that “The desire to be ‘modern’ screams out of every sentence” of the autobiography without recognizing that the “interiorized private self” he finds only incompletely narrated in that work is one revealed, by these ellipses, to be constituted by repressed sexuality.

¹⁶ Cf Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. As Duggan narrates it, “By the seventeenth century, the ideas, values, and categories known as *Liberalism* began to cohere into a political theory for capitalist economies administered through nation-states” (p. 4).

This split liberal subject inhabits a social sphere itself constitutively split between public and private as spatially separate zones. Joan Landes defines the former as “that which pertains to the people as a whole, the community, the common good, *things open to sight*, and those that are accessible and shared by all.”¹⁷ The latter denotes the realm of what “ought to be hidden from view” (*ibid.*). What Kant confines to the “dustbin” *within* the house is here represented by the house itself, as a private space beyond public view. According to Landes, that “private” realm is defined by liberalism as a domain of freedom on which the state may not encroach. We see an illustration of this liberal logic of privacy — and the special place of the apartment interior within it — in the Supreme Court’s *Lawrence v. Texas* ruling of 2003. Striking down a Texas statute that prohibited sodomy, the majority opinion declared that it “furthers no legitimate state interest which can justify its intrusion into the personal and private life of the individual.” The image of a group of policemen storming the apartment of John Lawrence, weapons drawn, and arresting him and his sexual partner *in flagrante delicto* was an image, according to the Court’s ruling, of state force literally overstepping its legitimate bounds. In this case, the limits of that legitimacy coincide with the walls of the apartment. What takes place inside the apartment — that spatial zone demarcated as private and thus protected — is sex. So in this sense, the liberal view on sexuality is that it takes place in a domain outside the purview (and the view) of the state, in a space other than the public sphere, the space of “things open to sight.” At the legal level, this ruling invalidates heterosexual privilege precisely by ratifying the privacy of sex, marked by its location within the four walls of the apartment.

According to this liberal view, sex is benign precisely insofar as it is bracketed as private, and confined to the domestic interior. Of course, the division that confines sex to privacy is undone in advance by the trial itself, which brings what takes place in Lawrence’s bedroom onto a public scene just as emphatically as the ruling specifies that it is condonable only to the extent that it “does not involve *public* conduct.” In the various accounts we have considered, the split between public and private itself keeps shifting location: from a division *within* the apartment (private dustbin vs. public living room), to a division between the private apartment and the public square, to a division within the subject itself, where even the “public” or visible aspect of the self may be internally split between what it simulates and some truth it obscurely conceals. Wherever the split is located, it seems to have trouble maintaining its integrity. And while Freud gave the name of “repression” to the splitting of sex from public or social life, he also demonstrated that the split is never at all successful — that public and social life is saturated with sexuality, and that even where the norms of public reason and rationality prevail upon our conscious actions, they do so via the force of an agency (he called it superego) that is shot through with exactly the kind of perverse desire it is charged with suppressing. (In the last chapter, I showed how this idea was given cinematic expression in William Friedkin’s *Cruising* [1980]). So in Freud, as in *Cruising*, the division between public and private is always collapsing, and yet that collapse fuels the very agency that polices it.¹⁸

We see that what is demarcated as “off scene,” out of view, here is not actually kept off scene. We could say that its omnipresence is ensured by its never fully coming into view: its failure to ever

¹⁷ Joan Landes, *Feminism: the Public and the Private*, p. 2, my italics.

¹⁸ This analysis falls under the broad compass of what Foucault designated as the *dispositif* of sexuality, which describes (though Foucault does not narrate it in these terms) the discursive production of a sexual subject in liberal modernity. Wendy Brown makes this point, noting that “Foucault’s critique of the subject is [in fact] a critique of liberal discourses of the subject.” *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton UP, 1995), p. 145n.

be fully manifest means that it is *always* latent. Certainly, the sense of something hidden, something concealed from the precariously-bordered *Publikum* to which the subject addresses his prolix interiority, invites narratives of liberation, like Wilhelm Reich's, because it produces an effect of repression: something always remains to be uncovered. In the domain of cinema, that "something to be uncovered" is what is kept "off scene" but might be brought at any moment "on scene." In this sense, cinema emerges as a technology perfectly calibrated to this subject of liberal modernity. As Vicky Lebeau and others have suggested, the bourgeois-liberal-Freudian subject, the psychoanalytic subject of modernity (the one Foucault hoped to save us from) is precisely the subject of cinema. It is no accident, writes Lebeau, that psychoanalysis and cinema were invented and rose to cultural prominence in historical tandem.¹⁹ Not only by virtue of their historical coincidence, we could argue that cinema *is* the technology of this split modern subject (certainly, from a different perspective, the Frankfurt School writers considered that cinema was the technology proper to the subject of modernity — though for them this was somehow a mass, and potentially a revolutionary, subject).

The split between manifest and latent finds its cinematic correlate, I suggested, in the distinction between "off scene" and "on scene." That distinction might be effected through framing or editing, techniques of screening from view or cutting. In US cinema, in the period of the industry's Production Code (roughly 1930-1960), this system was codified and formalized through a detailed set of regulations. Unsurprisingly, in that cinema, sex is kept off scene; it cannot be spoken, far less shown. Precisely for that reason, as several commentators have noted, it is the very thing that never ceases to be implied. In reference to the films of Hitchcock, Robin Wood notes the omnipresent "dread of repressed forces" that is "accompanied by the sense of the emptiness of the surface world that represses them."²⁰ Here, withheld from view, sex constitutes a concealed foundation (*dissimulatio*, to return to Kant's distinction) always threatening to destroy the surface world by exposing its appearance as mere *simulatio* or pretense.

The camera's move through the apartment window is a privileged figure of Code-era cinema, one both thematizes and gives choreographic form to the transgression of the divide between public and private that I have suggested is constitutive of cinema's operation.²¹ In the *Lawrence v. Texas* ruling, like in many films, that division is spatialized as one between public space (open to sight) and the domestic interior (hidden from view). It is this boundary that cinema penetrates, in two senses: first, in the sense of a literal penetration by the camera into the domestic interior; "breaking" the "fourth wall," it literally enters the space of the domestic. Second, cinema breaches the divide between private and public in its mode of circulation, as a mass medium that it delivers its intimate images *to* a mass public. Cinema, as I have been arguing throughout this dissertation, is a *technology of publicity*, which is to say a technology that whose mode of operation is to render the private public. It is the consequences of this rendering, this mode of action, that I have been exploring — here in its relation to the subject of sexuality that has arguably always been primary for cinema.

¹⁹ Vicky Lebeau, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Play of Shadows* (London: Wallflower, 2001).

²⁰ Robin Wood, "Ideology, Genre, Auteur," in Leo Braudy & Marhsall Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory & Criticism*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), p. 483.

²¹ Consider the opening sequences to any number of Hitchcock films, such as *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), *Rebecca* (1940), *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Rope* (1948), and *Dial M for Murder* (1954); it is reversed in *Rear Window* (1954). A similar play with the tension between public and private space informs the openings to *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) and *Touch of Evil* (Welles, 1958).

Among the thousands of examples from classical Hollywood cinema that we could take to illustrate this dialectic of the public and private, on scene and off scene, manifest and latent, I would like to look closely at just one: the opening sequence of *Psycho* (dir. Hitchcock, 1960). This sequence compels particular attention in the present context not only because Mitchell recreated it in the opening sequence of *Shortbus* (whether inadvertently or not, I am not sure), but also because *Psycho*, I will argue, crystallizes the constitutive features of a period or a regime (a mode of subjectivity) of which it also marks the beginning of the end.²² The sequence illustrates in a pointed way the significance of the apartment as a figure that spatializes the liberal public/private distinction, as we also saw in the discussion of *Lawrence v. Texas*. And it articulates that distinction to the cinematic apparatus itself as a medium which from the outset has staged the vacillation between off scene and on as its essential mode of operation.

“the very institution of perversion”

Psycho opens to a high, wide view of a city, soon identified by superimposed title as Phoenix, Arizona. The camera pans right in a slow, steady manner, surveying the city as if from an observation tower. Two dissolves bring our view in slightly tighter; on the third, along with the panning action which continues left to right, the camera also begins to track and zoom in. We are unmoored from our static position of surveillance, now moving down towards and — in an act of Hitchcockian cinematographic virtuosity (or rather trickery) — *through* the window of an apartment block that, we soon learn, is in fact a hotel. From a very wide bird’s eye view the field of vision progressively narrows and searches, as if driven by what Kant might call the “pathological interest” of some unknown subjectivity:



Fig. 1: Wide view on Phoenix



Fig. 2: The camera settles on a building

²² Perhaps Sylvère Lotringer is right to remark (in an interview with Baudrillard) that a system can only reveal its true structure “if it is already disappearing.” “Forget Baudrillard: Interview with Sylvère Lotringer,” in *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, ed. Mike Gane, New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 101.



Fig.3 Zooming and tracking in towards...



Fig. 4... and through the window

The ominous effect of this opening sequence of *Psycho* derives from the fact that though the camera's trajectory seems to perform a choreography of *subjective interest* — there is nothing that would justify such movement in what Jean Mitry calls an *objective* shot, i.e. one serving an unmarked or neutral narrative purpose — we do not, however, have any referent for this mysterious subjectivity, though its view corresponds to our own. That view penetrates the window that serves a double function. If the apartment wall, as I have suggested, marks the spatial boundary between “open to view” and “hidden from view,” and thus delimits a domain safe even from the scrutiny of state surveillance (according to the majority opinion of *Lawrence v. Texas*), the apartment window, though a part of the wall, allows the look to pass through, and thus to penetrate the boundary which it also physically upholds. Looking in through the window, looking in on private space, involves a certain visual transgression of established boundaries between public and private; it is—we might say structurally—contaminated in this way. In *Psycho*, this inherent perverseness or transgressiveness of the act of looking through a window is redoubled by what that look here alights on: a scene we should “not be seeing”: the apparently post-coital murmurings of two still half-undressed lovers, embroiled in what seems to be a secret affair. In other words, the transgressive feel of that ominous pan and zoom finds its appropriate correlate in the scene of sexual transgression it arrives at; the content delivers what the form seems already to anticipate.

The choreography of the camera here amplifies the transgressive thrill that attends cinema's characteristic invasion of the private sphere, which is to say its formal affinity for the window and the crossing of the threshold between public (“open to sight”) and private (hidden from view), that the window, like the camera, uniquely facilitates.²³ The sequence thus effectively allegorizes the operation of the cinematic apparatus as it was understood by 1970s film theorists; among those theorists, Laura Mulvey, for instance, notes that classical narrative cinema produces the illusion of “*looking in on a private world*” as part of a “voyeuristic phantasy.”²⁴ Here we can note that if the camera's breaching, via the window, of the threshold that normally divides private from public creates what I just referred

²³ For an overview of realist film theory's conception of film as a “window,” see Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: a Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). See also Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Boston: MIT Press, 2006).

²⁴ Mainstream film and its conventions, writes Mulvey, “portray a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic phantasy... [C]onditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of *looking in on a private world*.” In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18, my italics.

to as a “transgressive thrill,” or a perverse appeal—in the sense of a deviation from normative parameters of vision— this perverseness has typically been taken to be *gendered* in a highly regimented way. The “perverseness” at play here, in Mulvey’s famous analysis, is diagnosed in her clinical terms as voyeurism, a “sexual satisfaction that... come[s] from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other” (“Visual Pleasure,” 835). That active voyeurism and its passive object are respectively coded male and female. So perverse cinematic looking, as it has been understood by an important body of film theory, is essentially heterosexual.²⁵ *Psycho*, for its part, is one of the classic texts that illustrates this heterosexual male voyeuristic gaze that was taken, by apparatus theorists, to be paradigmatic of the gaze constructed by classical narrative cinema in general. The figure of Norman gazing through the keyhole at an oblivious Marion, which aligns the spectator’s view with his, seems to lend an easy support to this analysis, reprising a theme that has existed through the history of cinema, beginning with the Pathé film *Par le trou de serrure* (*Peeping Tom*) from 1901, in which a man gazes “through the keyhole” at a series of what I would call proto-sexual scenes.²⁶ But a closer look at the opening sequence of *Psycho* forces us to revise this classic understanding of the perverse cinematic gaze. That gaze—the “male gaze” on a woman whom it, by selecting her as its object, objectifies—here seems to be something like the gaze’s self-presentation, the account it gives of itself in normative terms that belie a more troubling training of the camera’s look, one that suggests, without giving us enough evidence to confirm, the existence of some more complicated latent agenda.

As it pushes through the window, the camera finds Marion stretched out on the bed, as Mulvey’s analysis of cinematic voyeurism might lead us to expect; Sam stands to her left, everything above his navel out of frame (*Fig. 5*). But this shot, which seems indeed to establish woman as object of the perverse cinematic look, lasts barely a second; in the very first line of dialogue, Sam remarks that Marion “never did eat [her] lunch”—a piece of information utterly devoid of narrative significance— though the film wastes no time in immediately cutting to a close-up of that unremarkable, uneaten lunch (*Fig. 6*). To what end? All the better, it seems, to cut back to the scene from a different vantage point, this time one focused entirely on John Gavin’s impressively naked torso (*Fig. 7*):

²⁵ For a retort to this assumption in film theory, see D.A. Miller’s reading of *Suddenly, Last Summer* in “Visual Pleasure in 1959,” *October* 81 (Summer 1997): 34-58. Among the many critiques of Mulvey’s argument, notable is also D.N. Rodowick, *The Difficulty of Difference: Psychoanalysis, Sexual Difference and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1991) (see below, fn28).

²⁶ The voyeur looks through a series of keyholes: first he sees a woman grooming; then what at first appears to be a woman slowly removing her corset, fake breasts, false teeth, and finally a wig revealing a bald pate; then a couple drinking who kiss; then, when he looks through the final keyhole, a tall man wearing a large top hat and carrying a cane comes out and beats him up, as if punishing him for his perverseness and restoring moral order. (Clearly, the butch man with the cane cannot abide being the object of the gaze — it is that threat that in fact leads to the punishment; thus introducing homosexual looking as a transgressive *latency* — insofar as it can’t be acknowledged — for which the “transgression” of heterosexual looking is only a pretext.)



Fig. 5 First view in the apartment



Fig. 6 "You never did eat your lunch, did you?"



Fig. 7 Reverse shot



Fig. 8 (continuous) Camera pans as couple lies down



Fig. 9 (continuous) Marion on top



Fig. 10 (continuous) Sam on top

The shot of the lunch, immediately forgotten and never referred to again, seems merely to have facilitated this transition to a view—of Sam—that the camera will henceforth refuse to relinquish. Without further cuts, the camera still squarely focused on Sam, Marion sits up, re-entering bottom frame right, and Sam sits down to kiss her. The two lovers then lie down together with their heads towards the camera, and in order to get a better view, the camera pans around to one side: the side that allows it to keep Sam's face and frontal body in its sights, at the expense of Marion's (*Figs. 8-10*).

If the voyeuristic gaze is "male" (and its subsequent association with Norman suggests that, in the terms of this film, it is), its drive to objectify women does not seem sufficient to distract it from its rather more transfixed attention to Sam, who (unlike Marion) is kept in frame continuously for

almost the entire sequence. In fact, at both the formal and narrative levels, Marion is *refused* as the object of both Norman's gaze (in this sense, the murder is not a tragically displaced expression of his desire for her, but rather its foreclosure as a possibility) and also the spectator's, for whose Norman's is the only available surrogate.²⁷ Norman, to this extent a queer figure, retroactively comes to anchor that free-floating, unattributed, pathological subjectivity whose ominous intent seemed to motivate the slow zoom of the opening sequence and its entrance *par la fenêtre*. But I do not mean to suggest that the gaze of *Psycho*, or of classical Hollywood cinema, is a gay one.²⁸ I mean to suggest, rather, that the so-called "male gaze," the voyeuristic gaze of classical narrative cinema, is itself split between its socially authorized, manifest orientation, heterosexual and objectifying, and a dimensionality or perverse latency that encodes queerness, or its possibility, as a troubling—indeed closeted—subtext. I use the word "closeted" advisedly, because classical Hollywood cinema is in fact a closeted cinema, which is to say an "off scene" cinema. *Sex* is never made fully explicit, but even where it almost is (and in no studio film before 1960 has it come closer than in this scene of post-coital lounging), it never fully coincides with its own object or performance; that performance seems—like the Kantian subject—both to *conceal* and to *dissemble*. While the sex act is hidden away in the "dustbin" of concealment, the look that anticipates it is put ostentatiously on view. Ostentatiously, but not transparently, since there is always more to it, so to speak, than meets the eye.

We can thus understand in what sense Raymond Bellour was able to argue in his famous essay on *Psycho* that "film and cinema... are the very institution of perversion."²⁹ I agree with Bellour—so long as we are talking about classical Hollywood cinema ("off scene" cinema) and the *dispositif* of sexuality and repression it puts on view. The gaze that cinema constructs *is* perverse; not just in the hetero-voyeuristic sense Mulvey specified, but in a rather more dimensional way, where that surface voyeurism is itself pretextual or duplicitous, made dimensional by the play of *simulatio* and *dissimulatio*. This complicated viewing position constructs as its implicit addressee (and mimics the standpoint of) the "modern individual" as subject of *desire*, in the very sense Foucault diagnosed that term as key to the modern (post-Christian, medical and psychoanalytic) system of sexuality: desire as what "has psychological depth;" "can be latent or manifest, apparent or hidden; ... repressed or sublimated;" as some non-transparent drive that thus "calls for decipherment, for interpretation."³⁰ *Psycho* is a film about desire in exactly this sense; a film that, in Robin Wood's memorable estimation, takes us, along with the camera, "forward and downward into the darkness of

²⁷ On the alignment of the spectator's gaze with Norman's, see Kaja Silverman's classic discussion of suture, in *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 194-236.

²⁸ Nor is my point the same as the one Rodowick makes in his response to Mulvey (though his is well taken), namely that Freud's own theory highlights the impossibility of "fixing" identification according to a stable binary of sexual difference (identification is promiscuous, and not, as Rodowick reminds us, "isomorphic with the biological body" (*The Difficulty of Difference*, p. 38.) I agree with this, but my point has a comparative emphasis: the sexuality put on view in *Psycho* is not only promiscuous in its identifications and objects; it is also duplicitous and dissimulating, non-transparent. We will see how this is no longer the case in *Shortbus*.

²⁹ Raymond Bellour, "Psychosis, Neurosis, Perversion," *Camera Obscura* 1-2.3-4 (Summer 1979), 104-132; 125.

³⁰ Arnold Davidson, "Foucault, Psychoanalysis, and Pleasure," in Tim Dean & Christopher Lane (eds.), *Homosexuality & Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 45.

ourselves”; that “begins with the normal” whose inexorable foundations in abnormality, in perversion, it proceeds just as inexorably to demonstrate.³¹

In the symbolic universe of *Psycho*, the fragile domain of the *social* is precariously premised on the containment of the perverse drive; what Wood called the “dread of repressed forces” is the anxiety about a final collapse of the social that always seems imminent (and that, when it happens, will reveal a rotten foundation of perverse sexuality—this could be said of almost all of Hitchcock’s films). This is a sociality barely held together by a socially mandated and policed suppression (sublimation or repression) of sexual and other non-rational, non-reasonable forces or drives. The tension that, according to Chakrabarty, constitutes the modern individual—the tension between “the individual’s private experiences and desires” and a “universal or public reason”—remains irresolvable, and threatens to unseat the social. This tension is embodied by Marion herself, who is riven between the anti-social, private compulsion that leads her to steal the money because of her desire for Sam, and what Wood calls her “freedom of will, her power of rationality” (“*Psycho*,” 146), which leads to her decision to return the money and thus to rejoin “normal” society. Here sexually motivated desire and universal reason are arrayed as antagonists; that tension not only produces the *subject* as split between private (the domain of the compulsive drive) and public (the domain of “universal reason”), it constitutes the *social* as what is riven by this split, always on the brink of collapse, threatened, as it were, by invisible demons, which dwell in the secret interiority of its not fully self-coincident subjects. Connolly notes that this “modern theory of the stratified subject” locates within the self a struggle that early modern thinkers like Hobbes and Rousseau externalized as a struggle between the self (as locus of desires) and the dictates of the *polis*. In *Psycho*, that struggle has been incorporated into a superegoic self, wrestling with its own now opaque and irrational desires.³²

What connects early modern political thinkers with modern theories of the split subject, then, is the idea of a “universal or public reason” — whether externalized in the form of the liberal state, or internalized as the superego — existing in a state of tension with non-universalizable, private desires. In *Shortbus* we will find a *reconciliation* of the two. But while the former will not transform — universal reason will remain the hallmark of the liberal state — the latter will no longer be recognizable in the terms I have just described it. Which is to say: “non-universalizable private desires” will be neither non-universalizable, nor private. Nor will the term desire, in the sense I described it above, adequately track the way sexuality operates in this new regime. Indeed, *desire* as what “calls for decipherment, for interpretation” will give way to *pleasure* as, in Arnold Davidson’s paraphrase of Foucault, an experience “exhausted by its surface,” which “can be intensified, increased, its qualities modified”; something, “related [only] to itself and not to something else that it expresses, truly or falsely” (“Foucault,” 45-6). We shall see to what extent this pleasure becomes the condition of a sociality now no longer troubled by, but rather figured and embodied through, sexuality. Here the bringing “on scene” of sex shores up the very social order that in the earlier film was precariously premised on sex’s (never-successful) confinement to the domain of privacy, whether walled into the interior of a seedy hotel room, or cloistered away as the festering truth of the subject’s ultimately inaccessible interiority.

³¹ Robin Wood, “*Psycho*,” in Wood, *Hitchcock’s Films* (New Brunswick: A.S. Barnes, 1977), p. 142.

³² Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity*, pp. 71-2.



Fig. 11 Opening shot

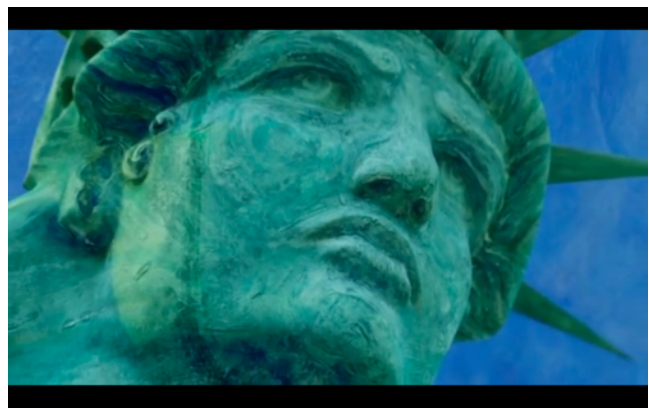


Fig. 12 Whole face swirls into view

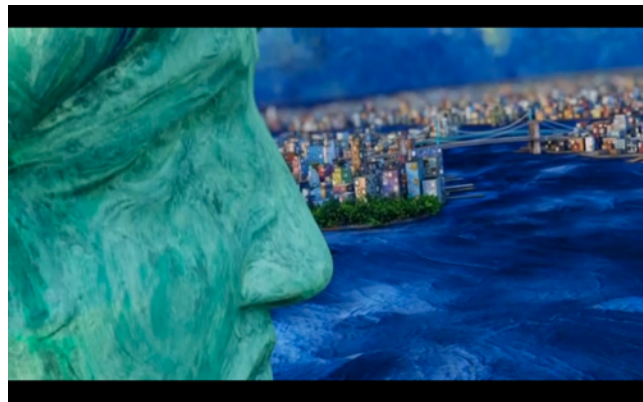


Fig. 13 The "camera" aligns its look with the eye of Libertas...

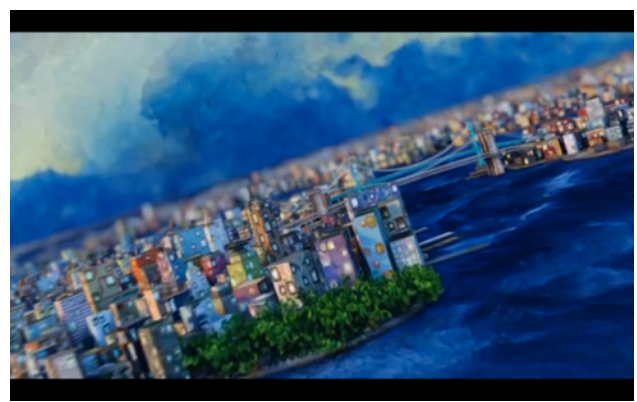


Fig. 14 ...and plunges down into



Fig. 15 ... zooming in towards...



Fig. 16 ...and through the window...



Fig. 17 (optical view)... tracking back...



150 Fig. 18 ...to find James in the tub

sexual democracy

The digitally-animated opening sequence of *Shortbus* reprises the pan and zoom across the city and through the apartment window made famous by the opening sequence of *Psycho*, albeit with a crucial difference: whereas the sweeping, then penetrating, view of *Psycho*'s camera was without diegetic anchor, producing an effect of eery voyeurism, *Shortbus* aligns its plunge through the apartment window with the view of the Statue of Liberty. Now it will be Lady Liberty herself, that avatar of the democratic state, who anchors the look through the window, and whose gaze, neither perverse nor closeted, has no agenda other than illuminating with her torch the manifold varieties of "sexual behavior in the human species."

The film opens with a digitally animated close-up of a green eye (*Fig. 11*), followed by a series of swirling views on a hand, a foot, and a mouth, before the computer-generated point of view standing in for the "camera" sweepingly pulls back to reveal that these body parts belong to no body at all but rather to the Statue of Liberty or, as she is also known, *La Liberté éclairant le monde* (Liberty Enlightening the World). A gift from France to the US in 1886, the Statue cements the bond between those two great nations as self-appointed avatars of modern liberal democracy. Apart from her enlightening torch, the Goddess Libertas also bears a tablet on which is inscribed the date of the Declaration of Independence, 1776, which, like the French *Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* of 1789, asserts the principles of liberty and equality over which the modern state is to stand guard.³³ No sooner has the eye of Libertas come into view than the spectator is invited to share its perspective: in one continuous "shot," the digitally-generated "camera" sweeps up and about-faces, aligning itself with the Lady's monumental look (*Fig. 13*), then plunging deliriously down into the city she surveys with a view formally positioned as at once hers and ours. To the accompaniment of a jazzy Anita O'Day number, the gaze of the Goddess sweeps — like *Psycho*'s camera but without its ominous soundtrack, or its ominous reserve — through the streets of the land of the free, now entering the window of an apartment block.

Once inside the apartment, the digital animation is replaced by the view of a real camera, first alighting on a bathtub where James (Paul Dawson) is filming his own penis, reflexively doubling the documentary effect. Unlike the view of John Gavin's half-naked body the camera both delivered and disavowed in *Psycho*, here the camera presents the view of James's fully naked body unapologetically and without pretext. It looks on untrammelled, indeed cuts to a close view, as James releases a stream of urine into the bathwater, then a fart which bubbles to the surface. In the face of those quotidian, private bodily processes we keep hidden from "polite society" and even from our lovers, *Shortbus* does not demur. It maintains a steady, clear gaze, which insists, through demonstrating, that nothing about the body need be hidden from view: Lady Liberty will shine her torch of Enlightenment on those body parts and acts that have been wrongly condemned to the "dustbin" of the "off scene."

If Lady Liberty's first port of call in this visual survey of her city's inhabitants is the bathtub where James is filming his penis, she will not however privilege that particular organ; with democratic openness, the film proceeds out and through a number of other apartment windows, in

³³ As the French *Déclaration* has it: "2. The purpose of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man... 6. The law is the expression of the general will [as opposed to the will of a sovereign]... All citizens being equal in its eyes are equally admissible to all public dignities, offices and employments... 16. Any society in which the guarantee of rights is not assured or the separation of powers not settled has no constitution." Reprinted in Lynn Hunt, *The Invention of Human Rights*, pp. 221-2.

each case encountering some sexual view or scene: here a dominatrix (Severin, played by Lindsay Beamish) preparing dildos for and whipping her male client, here a heterosexual couple having sex on a piano and in a variety of unlikely positions, and here a voyeur using a telephoto lens to spy on James, the latter now engaged, having left the bath, in an impressive act of “yogic auto-fellatio.”³⁴ Note that the voyeur in *Shortbus* — unlike the voyeur in *Psycho* or *Peeping Tom* (1960) — is no pathological murderer with an Oedipus complex. Here voyeurism has been rendered as benign as every other sexual proclivity: the now-anachronistic concept of “perversion” has been replaced by what Gayle Rubin has proposed, in a different context, as a principle of “benign sexual variation.”³⁵ Consequently, the queerness that haunted the gaze of *Psycho* as an inner deviation or duplicity, a domain not only of *dissimulatio* (the “off scene”) but also *simulatio* (the duplicity of the “on scene”), has been externalized in a sequence to which queerness adheres as its non-exclusive, “additive” character. As such, all the sex in the sequence, and in the film, becomes part of an overarching queerness that amasses possibilities: this *plus* that, a sexual multiculturalism. What interests Libertas, it seems, is the very diversity of her subjects’ strategies for producing a sexual pleasure the capacity for which appears to be the one thing — aside from, though not unrelated to, their location in New York — that unites them. The paths one may take to pleasure are indifferent, as long as pleasure is where everyone ends up.

The index of that sexual pleasure is the orgasm,³⁶ represented three times over in the opening sequence: James, yoga plough position, comes on his own face; Severin’s client shoots a thick stream of ejaculate which blends into the Jackson Pollock-like painting on the wall behind him; and Sofia (Sook-Yin Lee) shouts and grimaces her way to an apparent climax. The orgasms announce at once the film’s formal boldness (showing, not suggesting, sex) and its central narrative trope, from which will also derive, as we shall see, its ethos or ethical position. But all is not well in the land of liberty: for all the orgasm’s showiness, we are soon reminded that orgasms can be faked. If *simulatio* was a structural condition of *Psycho*’s queer gaze, here it is a problem to be solved in a plot that follows the structure of a *Bildungsroman*. The pedagogy in question concerns Sofia’s climax, whose semblance in the opening sequence was, in fact, merely semblance. In a scene that follows soon after, Sofia, a couples counsellor, loses her temper during a session with James and his boyfriend Jamie (PJ DeBoy), who have come to discuss their desire to open up their relationship to other sexual partners. Telling him after a vacuous exchange that he has had a “false epiphany,” Sofia slaps Jamie across the face. Mortified at her own violent action, she excuses herself by explaining that she is “pre-orgasmic.” “Does that mean you’re about to have one?” asks Jamie. “No—” says Sofia, “I’ve never had one.”

³⁴ Annamarie Jagose, “Straight Woman/ Gay Man: *Shortbus* and the Modernization of Orgasm,” in *Orgasmology*, Durham: Duke UP, 2013, p. 94. Jagose reads *Shortbus* as exemplifying a tension in modern discourses of sexuality between the impersonal (figured by the gay man) and the personal (figured by the woman). I have found this reading helpful, though my departure from it will become clear as my argument proceeds.

³⁵ Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Deviations* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011), p. 149.

³⁶ As it is in hard core pornography. See Linda Williams on the “money shot,” in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible.”* No doubt *Shortbus* borrows this convention, at least in its opening sequence, from hard core pornography. Indeed, it shares its central plot conceit with the 1972 pornographic feature film *Deep Throat*, which was also about a woman’s quest to have an orgasm. We can also see here the connection to *Barbarella*, analyzed in chapter one.

Thus is Sofia's inability to have an orgasm announced as the problem that animates the film's narrative and will eventually draw together its narrative threads into a (literally) climactic resolution. Indeed, when Sofia finally comes at the end of the film, she does so with a force so intense it illuminates the whole of New York City after a power failure which also symbolized a blockage in the sexual and relational circuitry of the film's central characters. "We all get it in the end," croons Justin Bond as order is restored, through Sofia's orgasm, to the social and sexual spheres.

I say "social *and* sexual spheres," but the gambit of *Shortbus* is precisely to render them indistinct. Sex is the literal and figural means through which sociality is imagined, understood and experienced. I am reminded here of a comment Wilhelm Reich made when discussing the failures of the Russian Revolution. "The alternative of sexuality and sociality does not exist," wrote Reich.³⁷ But while the film owes more than a little to the original theorist of "sexual revolution," it also goes beyond him in important ways. Reich influentially argued that sexual liberation is key to the success of any revolutionary project, and is the necessary condition for the forging of a harmonious and peaceful social order.³⁸ Nevertheless, his view of what that "natural" sexuality awaiting its liberation looked like rested on his own normative assumptions about the social forms this natural drive, if unimpeded by cultural repression, would take. Reich certainly opposed the criminalization of homosexuality.³⁹ But he also believed that all forms of sexual "perversion," a category in which he included homosexuality, would disappear in an authentically liberated, "sex-economic" society. "Homosexuality," he writes, "can be reduced only by establishing all necessary prerequisites for a *natural* love life among the masses."⁴⁰ Both Reich and *Shortbus* insist on the orgasm as the *Hauptfigur* for sexuality in general, the ultimate sign and index of sexual pleasure. (For Reich, the biological tendency towards "orgastic release" is the very essence of sexuality, and establishes its natural basis.⁴¹) But if the orgasm is a universal capacity of the sexual subject in *Shortbus*, it is for this very reason that the film rejects any pre-determined concept of what kinds of scenarios should be marshaled to produce it. The Shortbus club is precisely a *queer* space, because the pursuit of sexual pleasure effects an abstraction from the specificities of any sexual practice: here sexuality, whose figure is the orgasm, abstracts from the contingent circumstances that produce its pleasures and lifts the subject up into

³⁷ Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution: Toward a Self-Governing Character Structure*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1969), p. 206. The first German edition, which Reich repeatedly revised and expanded, was published in 1930 as *Die Sexualität im Kulturkampf*.

³⁸ "We must learn from the Russian revolution that the economic revolution, the social ownership of the social means of production and the political establishment of social democracy (dictatorship of the proletariat) goes automatically hand in hand with a revolution in attitudes toward sexuality and in sexual relationship" (p. 179).

³⁹ Indeed, he argued that the re-criminalization of homosexuality in the Soviet Union in 1934, after its initial decriminalization following the Revolution, was a symptom of the general sexual repressiveness and sex-negativity that accompanied the Soviet Union's decline into authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

⁴⁰ *The Sexual Revolution*, p. 211, my italics. He also believed that masochism "results from the *repression* [not the liberation] of natural drives." Reich, *The Discovery of the Orgone: The Function of the Orgasm*, New York: Noonday Press, 1961, p. 225.

⁴¹ Cf also Juliet Mitchell's commentary in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1974.

the realm of a true universality, one that has done away with the spurious distinction between “natural” and “perverse.”⁴²

But the most significant way in which *Shortbus* departs from a Reichian framework lies in the way it does away with the notion of repression. Though the characters face challenges, they are not caused by repression; no-one is exactly repressed. In contrast to Reich, the problem of the social is *not* the problem of a repressed sexual drive. The problems faced by individual and socius alike have two figures in *Shortbus*, and neither occasions a hermeneutics of the subject. The first is the trope of *permeability* (in a subplot involving James, this literally means getting fucked, but the figure also functions as a metaphor). The second is the notion of *connection* or *connectivity*. The working out of problems in *Shortbus* is not the working out of the subject’s relation *to itself* — its unique personality — but rather its participation in what Shortbus club hostess Justin Bond, advancing a metaphor that will be literalized when Sofia’s orgasm lights up the city, calls a “magical circuitboard, a motherboard filled with desire that travels all over world, that touches you, that touches me, that connects everybody.” This connectivity takes place on a plane of transcendence (of specificity) rather than in a dimension of (individualizing) depth. When Sofia finally comes it is not because she has understood anything about herself, nor articulated any truths; it is because she has given herself over to an abstract, though embodied, connectivity. What is at stake in the film is thus not a discourse of self-knowledge based on a repressive hypothesis but rather *the body’s ability to realize some form of idealized relationality through its capacity for pleasure*.

We should not let Bond’s use of the word “desire” here throw us off — clearly, neither permeability nor connectivity have much to do with desire as something that, in Arnold Davidson’s words, “calls for decipherment [and] interpretation,” though they do have some affinity with Deleuzian notions of rhizomatic becoming. It is in this vein that O’Rourke and Sellberg write that the bodies in *Shortbus* are not characters but rather “*fleshy monads* in an immanently orgiastic flesh complex. They have finally given up their fruitless strife for individual *sexuality* and allowed themselves to become *sexual*” (*op. cit.*) Poetic though it may be, this remark quite accurately describes the film’s implicit rhetorical posture, which, as I have mentioned, is bound up with its formal program of bringing more sex “on scene.” The comment is equally apropos insofar as it demonstrates a point I have been inching towards: the figure of fleshy monads in an orgiastic flesh complex suggests the political structure of the liberal social contract, which likewise posits autonomous agents — fleshy *monads* — harmoniously co-existing in an abstract social space, now figured as the scene of a public orgy, with the abstract qualities of autonomy and equality now literally embodied, transformed into flesh. In the figure of monads exchanging intensities in a harmonious “flesh complex” we have an updated model of the social contract, where the sexual and the social — flesh and autonomy — have become fused.

Unlike the kind of desire given figural form in *Psycho*, pleasure in *Shortbus* is benign, indeed democratic or at least compatible with what Gayle Rubin calls a “democratic morality,” one which, she urges, “should judge sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and the quantity and quality of pleasures they

⁴² In the shots of the “Sex Not Bombs” room where the orgies take place, the film is careful to show us a *diversity* of sexual acts, as well as body types, genders, races, ages. This insistence on *diversity* and a formal equality that transcends any sexual specificity is key to the film’s modeling of a liberal sexual subject, as I will show.

provide.”⁴³ Rubin’s democratic sexual utopia is here likewise described in the liberal terms of mutual respect and autonomy (as opposed to coercion), dependent on pleasure as a universal attribute of the democratic sexual subject, whose maximization is the central good: pleasures, abstracted from the contingent acts that produce them, have different qualities and quantities which form the sole basis for their evaluation — in other words, a liberal utilitarianism of pleasure.

While Rubin’s vision of a democracy of pleasures is premised on essentially liberal subjects (ones able to enter into contracts and to respect each other’s autonomy), Foucault hoped pleasure might free us from the subject. Pleasure, a term “which in the end *means nothing*,” is:

unsullied by possible uses... an event... that happens, I would say, outside the subject, or at the limit of the subject, or between two subjects, in this something that is neither of the body nor of the soul, neither outside nor inside — don’t we have here... a means of avoiding the entire psychological and medical armature that was built into the traditional notion of desire? (“Gay Science,” pp. 389-90)

If desire belongs to sexuality as at once self-relation and a means of normative discipline, pleasure, in Foucault’s description here, is relational, it happens either “at the limit” of the subject or “between two subjects,” at the point of meeting, i.e. at the superficies. Meaningless and apparently self-evident, it requires no interpretation. It thus avoids the twin determinations of psychology (providing no deep content that discipline would latch onto) and medicine (refusing to present itself as a fixable attribute of the subject). It is for these reasons resistant to pathologization: “there is no ‘abnormal’ pleasure; there is no ‘pathology’ of pleasure” (388).

Or, as the refrain of the pornographic feature film *Deep Throat* put it in 1972: different strokes for different folks! (This is not quite what Foucault meant, though it is close to Rubin’s view.) The scenes in the Sex Not Bombs room where group sex takes place owe something to Foucault’s paean to pleasure, though, I would suggest, the film translates this celebration (unlike Foucault) into the terms of liberal political economy. Rather than doing away with the subject, *Shortbus*, like Rubin’s “democratic morality,” and like liberalism, abstracts it, making it an (abstract, universal) autonomous subject of consent. This subject is unburdened of the complications, the dimensionality, of desire. Pleasure becomes the self-evident, meaningless, but universally shared experience whose quantification is the material index of evaluation. That evaluation is not, of course, without its own normative frame: in Rubin’s terms, mutual consideration, and in the terms of *Shortbus*, sex not bombs, i.e. a sociality free from violent conflict and war, a sociality of sex that has realized the promise inherent, according to Kant, to life in common: what Kant described as *perpetual peace*.

“a world without wars”

What precisely is at stake in this shift from sexuality as a discourse of personal or psychological depth to (orgasmic) pleasure as the bodily site of universal connectivity is suggested in the scene where Sofia stumbles into the so-called “Pussy Parlor” at the Shortbus club, a separate room in which a group of women have established a de facto all-female space (and which recalls the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s). Since talk, in this room, does indeed seem to be the order of the day, Sofia asks the women: “I wanna know, what did your very best orgasm feel like?” Jid (JD Samson), volunteers the first answer, which sets the tone for the others: “This is gonna sound really cheesy,” she

⁴³ Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” p. 168.

says; “but I felt like I was shooting out creative energy into the world, and it was merging with other people’s energy — and then — there was no war, there was peace.” Bitch (Bitch) says, “I was finally not alone.” And Little Prince (Daniela Sea) confides: “Mine felt like I was talking to the gods or something.”

Admittedly here it is still a question of an “incitement to discourse” — Sofia literally asks the women to speak. But what is produced through that discourse is not the confession of personal truth. Rather, the discourse on the orgasm, which is portrayed in all three of these accounts as a peak moment of connectivity, *unifies* rather than individuates the women. For Bitch, it is the moment where she is finally no longer alone — the orgasm inducts her into an experience of relationality that belies her (false) feeling of aloneness. For Little Prince, the orgasm is also figured in terms of communication or communion, and given, further, a divine inflection (notably pantheistic). But it is Jid’s description that fully encapsulates what is at stake in the semantic economy of *Shortbus*, what allegorical load figures of sex are able to bear; that allegory, furthermore, connects sex to the Declaration of Independence whose guardian, Libertas, the film’s opening shots set up as the point of view from which the entire spectacle unfolds.⁴⁴ As Jid figures it, the orgasm is in the first place an experience of personal dynamism and creativity that is directed *outward* rather than inward — “shooting out creative energy.” This outwardly expressed energy, which seems to realize the subject’s full subjective capacities precisely by taking her out of herself, merges with other people’s creative energy, and this fusion of outwardly directed energies produces, self-evidently it seems, a world in which “there was no war, there was peace.”

There are several things to note here. A certain ambiguity attends Jid’s image of merging energies that lead to peace not war. Is it Jid herself who merges? Or is it that Jid remains intact, indeed whole and autonomous, and it is the “creative energy” she projects outwards through her orgasm that merges? In other words, what merges and what is preserved in its autonomy? Jid’s orgasmic creative energy seems to have no particular quality other than intensity; its merging with other peoples’ energies suggests that “creative energy” is a vast, common reserve, or perhaps an abstract “capacity to do work” (OED)— in this case, the work of forging world peace. I emphasize this in order to underscore that Jid’s creative energy is not marked by deeply personal specificities; it does not bear witness to a personal history of desire. It exists in the domain of physics, an abstract quantity that connects individual subjects—and I think that here Jid does remain a subject, though her subjectivity is supervened by or *aufgehoben*, sublated/lifted up, into this higher, universal level of energetic merging. In any case, like Foucault’s “pleasure,” Jid’s subjectivity appears to be emptied out or de-specified through this action of projective merging.

Against those cynics who, like Jacques Lacan in *Seminar XX*, think of orgasm as a quintessentially arelational experience (Lacan makes a running joke of the fact that one always comes alone), the women in the Pussy Parlor construct orgasm as the very emblem of a utopian form of

⁴⁴ Here we can see that the cinematic precursor to Sofia is not only Linda Lovelace from *Deep Throat* (1972) but, even earlier, the eponymous heroine of *Barbarella* (1968). That film, like *Shortbus*, organizes its narrative around its heroine’s capacity for orgasm; through this narrative focus, both films invest the female orgasm with the power to save the liberal democratic social order, and to secure a political condition of “perpetual peace.” Both also reduce sexuality to pleasure and elevate pleasure to the status of a universal principle of the liberal democratic subject. The difference lies in the fact that in *Barbarella*, queerness figures the outside to the liberal democratic regime, but in *Shortbus*, queerness has been claimed by, and speaks for, that regime, as the principle of limitless benign diversity.

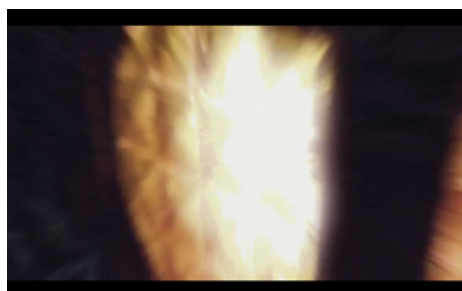
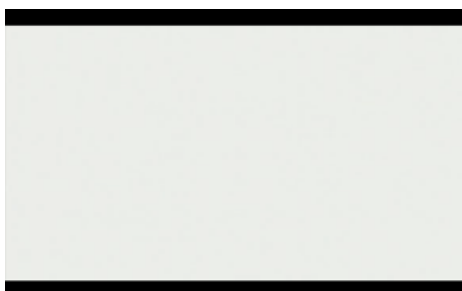
relationality, of connectivity, of togetherness and bonding into a community of being that nevertheless has no determinate content — other than the orgasm that forges it.⁴⁵ What connects the orgasming subject to the “motherboard” is precisely her ability to shoot out (orgasmic) creative energy — in other words, what forges this community is not anything held in common, no properties or qualities of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, or sexual orientation. This appears to be a truly queer utopia (if queer means beyond *identity*) where the orgasm marks precisely the ascension to a realm of shared being in which the subject is at once abstract *and* embodied, abstracted *through* pleasure. No longer mandating or channeled through introspection, the universally shared capacity for sexual pleasure is here the means to a perfected *communitas* — perfect because transcendent of difference. Through orgasm, an authentic universality can be not only theorized or declared as an imperative, but embodied and experienced.⁴⁶

Perhaps we can better understand the merging, and how it is connected to the specifically political vision of a world without wars — not to mention the actual vision of the Statue of Liberty — by considering the visual terms the film offers in the illumination of the city’s electrical circuits through the force of Sofia’s orgasm (*Figs. 19-27*). This important sequence carries the film’s narrative and emotional climax, which coincide with Sofia’s sexual one; it also helps make clear the relationship between individuality and sociality the film projects through the trope of sexual pleasure. Prior to the sequence, we see a series of quick cuts in the Shortbus club, during the moment of the blackout, when all the central characters have converged there along with a large number of “sextras.”⁴⁷ Fantastically, a marching band enters the small space of the club, and plays along as Justin Bond sings. In quick succession we see a series of sexual pairings or groupings, in the communitarian space of the club and in full view of the other characters and of the camera: Caleb (the voyeur) kisses Ceth, Jamie mounts James (who has finally learned to become permeable), Jid kisses a sextra, Sofia

⁴⁵ Williams also notices “the film’s metaphoric use of orgasm as a form of connection” (*Screening Sex*, 290), and makes the further important observation that while the film’s narrative “imitates the pornographic quest for pleasure,” unlike pornography “it harnesses that quest to the larger social goal of forming a community of ‘permeable,’ unafraid beings” (288). She thus argues that the film invests quite sincerely in “the liberatory utopian ideals of the 1960s” (289). I agree with all of this, but think that it remains for us to understand *how* the film is able to make this connection, which is both metaphoric and literal, between orgasm and political utopia; and how and why the “liberatory utopian ideals” of the 1960s themselves came to take up pleasure as a key trope.

⁴⁶ At the formal level, too, the film underscores that orgasm transcends the boundaries of personality, and effects a transpersonal connectivity. Jagose observes: “The way the film’s visual field momentarily expands to open up impossible spectatorial points of view that inscribe accelerated trajectories through recognizable but transformed cityscapes virtually rearranged around unconnected and unlike erotic intensities suggests something of the impersonal force of sexuality itself since the mobile sightlines established in the animated sequences are similarly less about content than form, detached from any organizing subjectivity or consciousness and bent on no object in particular” (*Orgasmology*, 102). However, if this description is intended to make sexuality in the film sound like it behaves in the manner of a psychoanalytic *drive*, I argue that it does the opposite, operating as pure pleasure principle. Whereas the drive, as given expression in *Psycho*, troubles sociality and is a dimension of the subject’s opacity, connectivity in *Shortbus* is transparent and benign.

⁴⁷ This is how director John Cameron Mitchell describes the participants in the orgy scenes on the DVD commentary; he himself, not wanting to create a distanced relation between director and object of the gaze, participated in the scenes as a “sextra.”



Figs. 19-27 *La Liberté éclairant le monde*

finds herself in a threesome with a heterosexual couple she has admired on previous visits to the club; these groupings are interspersed with scenes of laughing revelers and of Justin Bond singing. Finally, a large group shot is replaced with an extreme close-up on Sofia's face, now completely isolated in the frame, as she achieves her first ever unsimulated orgasm (her pedagogy is thus complete).

Upon coming, Sofia's face dissolves into a white field of illumination (*Fig. 21*), then the "camera," once again digitally animated as in the opening sequence, pulls back, back outside the apartment window it had entered at the outset. Sofia's orgasm dissolves into an illumination that is revealed, as the "camera" pulls back, to be the light from a single apartment — that domain, as we have seen, of liberal privacy. Both the close-up of the face and the shot of the apartment are figures of an individuality, but it is an individuality that communicates with an entire electrical/social field: as the "camera" sweeps back, the illumination spreads like a contagion from apartment to apartment, building to building, across the Brooklyn Bridge and finally ends by re-lighting the torch of the Statue of Liberty itself, which had been extinguished during the blackout. The orgasm becomes the light of the apartment; these individual orgasm-lights are queer, as we have seen, in the sense that they are produced by unexpected combinations and fabrications of pleasures. But their contingent particularities give way onto a transcendent universal ("pleasure"), just as the close-up of Sofia's face gives way to an abstract white light that then becomes any one of the countless squares of light on the motherboard. Pleasure, as "empty of content" as lights on a grid, inflames the torch of Libertas, illuminating a harmoniously shared social world with no remainder.

But of course, in spite of the film's efforts at total inclusiveness, there *is* a remainder which manifests even at the narrative level. In the opening sequence, the dominatrix Severin answers her client's question about her last orgasm by telling him "it was great, it was like time had stopped and I was completely alone" — thus giving voice to a view that the film will decisively reject, and one which becomes associated with what cannot be incorporated into its universalizing schema. At the end of the film, Severin sits in the Shortbus club, strangely peripheral to the otherwise-universal scene of pairings and groupings.⁴⁸ It is no coincidence that when we first meet her, Severin is looking out over Ground Zero, at the chasm where the Twin Towers once stood. Indeed, the figure of Ground Zero crops up, visually and verbally, repeatedly throughout the film, crystallizing what is at stake where permeability and connectivity are in default. In spite of the great reach of Lady Liberty's powers of illumination, Ground Zero marks the existence of an outside to the otherwise universalizing regime of modern liberal democracy, an outside domain that — unlike the "on scene" Land of Liberty — remains recalcitrantly opaque. Indeed, the *absence* of the towers signals an *invisibility* that disturbs or resists the film's formal program of maximum visibility and transparency. In an early scene in the Shortbus club, the Ed Koch-like former mayor of New York City tells Ceth that "New York is one of the last places where people are still willing to bend over to let in the new." To which he adds: "New Yorkers are *permeable*... Therefore, we're sane. Consequently, we're the target of the impermeable — and the insane." Acts of violence, notably those committed against a state whose avatar is the goddess Libertas, are to be understood as signs of an impermeability which corresponds (literally and figuratively) to one's inability or unwillingness to be sexually penetrated,

⁴⁸ A number of *Shortbus*'s commentators have puzzled over the strange fate of Severin; see for example the discussion dedicated to this question at <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2011/01/31/john-cameron-mitchells-relationscapes>. These otherwise enthusiastic critics feel let down by the film's failure to include Severin in its concluding scene of communitarian reconciliation; this is of course precisely why I think she is the film's most interesting figure!

and that also corresponds to the troubling invisibility of the former World Trade Center. In other words: if we could all get fucked, there would be no more violent attacks on New York City, symbol of the free world, and last bastion of those who, because they are willing to “bend over and let in the new,” will not engage in acts of destruction.

Impermeability has replaced repression as the “problem” of the subject in *Shortbus*. *Shortbus*’s liberal sexual subject is at once autonomous *and* permeable; indeed permeability appears to be a condition of participation in that system of “mutual consideration” that structures both group sex and the nation. *Shortbus* institutes permeability and the publicity of sex as normative values — and it does so both formally, with its insistence on showing, not suggesting, unsimulated sex; and narratively. The narrative rule that subtends each of the film’s plot strands is that the problems sex causes as an index of privacy (now recast as impermeability) can be overcome not by searching within but by letting sex out, tapping into its public, communicative, universalizing possibilities. The function of the Shortbus club is precisely to draw sex out of the domain of privacy and to give it a public geography. We can note this rhetorical emphasis in the series of scenes that immediately precedes Sofia’s narratively climactic orgasm. In a long sequence where her sexual frustration reaches a peak, the film figures Sofia’s interiority — her psyche — in a daydream she has of fighting her way through a forest:



Fig. 28. The dark forest of the psyche

We cut to Sofia lying alone on a bench, desperately trying to bring herself to orgasm. In a kind of montage sequence of personal atomization, we see each of the other characters also isolated in the frame, tormented by their various forms of entrapment within a psychological hell of their own making. The sequence ends with the blackout — the solipsism of Sofia’s journey through her own tormented psyche seems to catalyze a breakdown in the city’s electrical circuits.

In the Shortbus club, Sofia’s achievement of orgasm takes place in the context of a three-way encounter with a heterosexual couple, but it is just as importantly mediated by the exchange of looks — and the accumulation of cutaway shots — which mark this sexual intimacy as being of a particularly social kind. The Shortbus club is itself a figure for sex “on scene,” for sex as not something private, not something deep, but something that circulates in a public network (or a “counterpublic” network, as Davis would have it, but the exclusivity this implies is contradicted by the film’s universalist libertarian/liberal framework) and whose ability to occasion a democratically

distributed pleasure and the socio-political harmony it entails depends precisely on this free circulation, of pleasures and visual images alike.

As we noted at the outset, *Shortbus* marshals publicity under the sign of the queer. And while Davis is right to point out in his reading of the film that there is something about making sex public that is here distinctly queer, we can perhaps now revisit the question of exactly what queer means in this context. In *Psycho*, perversion was the hidden foundation of the liberal subject: the liberal subject was produced as perverse through the operations of a gaze that is barred from ever arriving at its (unknowable) object. In *Shortbus*, there is no more concept of perversion, only impermeability and the consequent default of connectivity. Neither one of these failings can be understood in terms of perverse desire; it is rather a question of blockage versus free circulation. In a move formally characteristic of liberalism, the film insists that paths to pleasure have in themselves no significance; *pleasure itself* is the universal term, the abstract level at which a formal equality is sustained in spite of the differences that exist at the level of sexual practices. We are equal in our right to and capacity for pleasure. And we can finally note here that the film treats race and body type in exactly the same way: as non-essential, contingent differences — transcended by the universalizing discourse of pleasure. This is a multicultural model of difference, that the film applies to race, body type, and sexual practices alike.⁴⁹

It is surely only in this way that the orgasm can dignify (and produce) the liberal democracy over which the Statue of Liberty stands guard. For liberal democracy posits a domain of formal equality, a universality whose grammar is the one articulated in universal declarations of human rights, such as the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” In order to insist on the equality of all men (a category whose implicit gendering, as we will see in the next chapter, already belies the universality it professes), the political domain is produced by abstracting from their contingent particularities: social class, (eventually) race, also their personal dispositions and capacities, psychology, history. Rights are universal, and inalienable. In *Shortbus* it is precisely the orgasm that effects this abstraction; in it is expressed the inalienable autonomy of the subject *as well as* the socio-political regime imagined to issue forth from that shared and mutually recognized autonomy of all subjects. Sofia’s quest to have an orgasm is thus not merely a quest for private sexual pleasure, though it is also that; this orgasm she seeks characterizes a relation to the self *as the subject of an ideal political order*, a world allegedly free from violent conflict, purportedly without subjugation, coercion, or hierarchy, where the equality and autonomy of all subjects, now expressed *through* sensuous embodiment rather than by its *bracketing*, combine to forge an enlightened, orgasmically explosive socio-political utopia; a utopia whose guiding principle and figure, across the limitless field of its diverse articulations, is the pleasure

⁴⁹ In spite of its token efforts, it is on this account that many of the film’s otherwise enthusiastic commentators ultimately find it wanting. Davis, for example, regrets that “the lone avatar of the elderly” in the film is “summarily abandoned by the willowy male-model object of his desires in favor of a telepathically promised threesome with two shapely gym specimens” (626). In suggesting that the film might have been — better? less hypocritical? — if it had been able to follow through on its rhetoric of diversity by bringing the inter-generational encounter truly “on scene,” Davis absorbs into his own critical framework the film’s model of liberal inclusiveness. He finds the film wanting according to its own criteria, which he also adopts as his own.

principle. The biopolitical regime of late liberalism — now under the sign of the queer⁵⁰ — here finds itself bolstered by (the fantasy of) a pleasure “exhausted by its surface.”

Ironically, if it is permeability that transforms the land of Libertas into a great Queer Nation, it is the breach of national *impermeability*, of which Ground Zero serves as icon and threatening reminder, that haunts the film from beginning to end.⁵¹ The film celebrates bodily “permeability” as the precondition of peace and freedom even as it stages a paranoid fear of *national* permeability as what threatens that peace and freedom. There is no place for violence in the orgasmic world without war fantasized by Jid in the Pussy Parlor, a fantasy Sofia brings home to New York City when she comes at the end of the film. But that “no place” is of course a place. It is the place where the state exercises its permanent right to sovereign violence in the name of its own “security”; in other words, it is the means by which the state renders itself impermeable.⁵² As Carl Schmitt famously demonstrated, the state of exception is a constitutive condition of liberal democracy. In relation to a film that seems to have confirmed the redundancy of a psychoanalytic model of desire, it would seem paradoxical to use the word “projection” to describe the mechanism via which that violence is attributed to those faceless, “impermeable” others, the ones who do not appear in the Shortbus club as they are unwilling to “bend over to let in the new,” and of whom those who stand under the Lady’s light might at any moment once again become the “victims.” In order to guard against the threat of such a death drive-like breach of national borders, measures must no doubt be taken. National security, national sanctity, impermeability in the name of universal freedom, are what authorize a sovereign state violence that — unlike sex — here remains truly “off scene,” screened from view, withheld or disguised, condemned to some opaque and indistinct realm away from the illumination of the torch of Liberty that could not, however, burn without it.

⁵⁰ My argument that it is the very diversity of “queerness” that is inscribed under the sign of liberal democracy differs from the one Jasbir K. Puar makes about “homonationalism” in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007). (For Puar, it is able-bodied and white gay men — rather than the principle of diversity itself — who become allied with the liberal democratic state.) Nevertheless, the impetus behind Puar’s argument is one the present chapter draws on and shares.

⁵¹ On the fear of the nation-state’s “permeability” as a response to dwindling sovereignty under conditions of globalization, see Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

⁵² I am thinking, for example, of Guantánamo Bay or Abu Ghraib.

Conclusion: the end of privacy?

“Nobody has a private life anymore, Tara”

—Christian in *The Canyons*

The preceding pages have mapped a cultural transformation I have variously described as a movement from a *connotative* to a *denotative* system of sexual representation, from “*off scene*” to “*on scene*,” and from *private* to *public*. This transformation is surely a “progressive” one. The various case studies have shown, among other things, how women’s sexuality and queer sexualities find new forms of expression in this period; cinema helps to forge an expanded range of possibilities (political, aesthetic, and existential) around which new subjectivities, new “counterpublics,” and new subcultures emerge.¹ The reader may be left wondering why it is, then, that my readings seem so circumspect; why I am not more forthright in taking a position “for” more sexual representation, more bodies and more pleasures on screen, a position shared by almost all of the writers on cinema with whom my readings are in dialogue?² My aim, however, has been a more critical one, namely to explore how the ethos of the “on scene” that values greater explicitness, greater publicity, and a greater “authenticity” or realness of sex on screen also tends to tether those values to a liberal framework whose problematic contours and constitutive blindnesses the chapters have approached from various angles. Throughout, I have been critical of the way a certain rhetoric of “making public,” especially in the US but also in France, untethers sexuality from *desire* — as something which “calls for decipherment, for interpretation” — and pins it to *pleasure*, a quality or experience “exhausted by its surface[;]... related [only] to itself and not to something else that it expresses, truly or falsely.”³ Though Foucault taught us to be suspicious of “progress” narratives that see “more” sex as a liberation, Foucault also advocated just this supplanting of desire by pleasure, since where the concept of desire produces an “incitement to discourse” inseparable from modern systems of categorization and discipline, there is by contrast “no pathology of pleasure.”⁴ Pleasure, by this token, seems able to liberate us from discipline by liberating us from sexuality as an apparatus of power-knowledge.

¹ For example, Thomas Waugh’s pioneering study of gay visual culture demonstrates that increasing sexual explicitness played a crucial role in the formation of gay political movements and sexual communities. Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film From Their Beginnings to Stonewall*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

² This group includes many of the best US writers on sex on screen, including Waugh, Linda Williams, Elena Gorfinkel, Greg Youmans, Ara Osterweil, Douglas Crimp, and Marc Siegel. Williams, for example, in *Screening Sex*, takes great pains to insist that her narrative is not intended to be teleological, but she also cannot avoid using developmental metaphors that implicitly suggest a “progress” in the direction of greater “maturity.” Thus she refers to the Code era as the “long adolescence of American movies” (ch. 1) and writes of “primal scenes” (ch. 6) and also a “belated coming of age on American screens” (121). Waugh’s book on gay eroticism in film has an even more overtly teleological organization.

³ Arnold Davidson, “Foucault, Psychoanalysis, and Pleasure,” p. 45.

⁴ Foucault, “The Gay Science,” p. 388.

From this perspective, Foucault sounds surprisingly like Wilhelm Reich, the same Reich whose “repressive hypothesis” he famously helped to demolish. Unlike Reich, Foucault did not take pleasure to be an instinct repressed by socially conservative forces that awaited its (socially redeeming) liberation, but he shared with the inventor of the Orgone Box a desire to separate bodies and pleasures from the psychoanalytic notion of the (death) drive, or any other notion that makes desire opaque and semiotic rather than transparent and self-confirming. In Part One, I show how this desire (so to speak) for a sexuality liberated from the unconscious (for that is what it amounts to) aligns — inadvertently, no doubt — with a broader cultural convergence between sexual representations and liberal concepts and categories. In *Barbarella* (1968), pleasure is more fully separated than ever before in mainstream popular culture from a scene of heterosexual passion. Barbarella’s pleasures are indeed incompatible with any framework of pathology, because they have no psychic content. The pleasure that she ushers on scene through and as the face of the female orgasm is indeed a pleasure “exhausted by its surface” and “related to itself and not to something else that it expresses, truly or falsely.” It is also a pleasure that the film — anticipating *Shortbus* (2006) some four decades later — connects directly and explicitly to a political system defined as liberal and democratic. At the same time, as I show in Chapter Two, a countervailing feminist investigation of sexuality mobilizes Sadean and Kantian ideas to fashion an image of sexuality as inherently hierarchical, non-egalitarian, and fundamentally incompatible with socio-political principles of equality. In both cases, it is women’s bodies that come “on scene” as avatars for, respectively, a liberal sexual subject and a sexuality that exposes the false premises of liberalism.

The severing of pleasure from the scene of (hetero)sexual congress (a severing whose earlier roots can be seen in a film like *And God Created Woman* [1956]) produces interesting queer possibilities, but while the later *Shortbus* will pursue these possibilities, making queerness a kind of embodied practice of liberal democracy, in *Barbarella*, queerness still represents what lies outside the liberal democratic universe of the Sun System: that universe is counterposed to (and threatened by) Tau Ceti, an authoritarian dictatorship whose political structure corresponds to a sexual culture of sadomasochism and homosexuality. So in the film that I argue first stages the drama of the liberal sexual subject, queerness is however *counterposed* to the liberal democracy of pleasure from which the heroine hails; by the time of *Shortbus*, queerness has come to be *aligned* with that system, and the sexually explicit spectacle that takes place under the appreciative gaze of the Statue of Liberty is an inexorably queer one, with queerness refashioned as (not sadomasochism or authoritarian dictatorship but) a principle of benign diversity. It is this transition, and its tensions and contradictions, that I thematize and analyze in Part Two, via the notion of the “queer exception.”

The “exception” describes the position (or non-position) queerness occupies during the “off scene,” pre-Gay Liberation period in which it was associated with the outside of the social — a murderously antisocial force, as in *Rope* (1948), or the implicit but inexpressible queer latency of a gaze that ostentatiously performs its ostensible heterosexuality, as in *Psycho* (1960). In both cases, and in the pre-Stonewall period in general, queerness names a position — identifiable, as D.A. Miller has shown, only via a system of connotation — that imperiously exempts itself from the universal mandate of the social contract. I have offered analyses of three distinct US films that exerted some force on this system, effecting a transformation in the exceptional status of queerness. One approach to such a transformation is *activist*; exemplary of this approach, *Word is Out* (1978) attempts to render queerness visible and articulable within a general public sphere (rather than producing a spectacle of and for a “counterpublic.”) *Word is Out* — more powerfully, I argue, than critiques of

“homonormativity” typically allow — makes a queer claim on the “normal,” and in so doing, makes the normal (more) queer. *Cruising* (1980) proceeds very differently. It has no “political” intent. What is interesting about this film is not just its near-documentary portrayal of ‘70s gay subcultural life; it is that that portrayal becomes an allegory for the way that the law operates via the agency of an “exceptional” position outside it, as the extra-judicial prerogative of its enforcement, which is also its condition of possibility. This strangely sexualized view of the law’s principle of enforcement (the film’s elision of the distinction between gay S/M subculture and the police force) does not so much effect a transformation of the exceptional status of queerness as it thematizes the constitutive queerness of the law that secures the “normalness” of the “normal world.” A much more sanguine, palatable vision of queerness is put forward in *Shortbus*, in which, as we have seen, queerness is the libidinal glue that upholds the social contract by powering its electrical and interpersonal circuits of connectivity (and introducing into it a redeeming concept of permeability). If the position of the exception becomes troublingly explicit in *Cruising*, as the very condition of the “normal world,” in *Shortbus* that position is disavowed, dissolved into a rhetoric of universality which belies the film’s own fear of the (unrepresentable, impermeable) terrorist Other, hellbent on the destruction of the liberal nation-state, and unwilling to “bend over and let in the new.” The repeated shots of Ground Zero that haunt the film evoke a death drive that has been expunged from the film’s vision of queerness but that, like the repressed that returns symptomatically, eludes eradication.

The question of the exceptional or non-exceptional status of queerness is a key one for contemporary debates in queer politics, but these readings aim to show how it has also been central to our cultural imaginaries of queerness, even before the “on scene” (and Gay Liberation) era. Thinking in terms of the exception offers a more complex view than the one that holds that queerness names a “resistance to regimes of the normal.”⁵ In *Word is Out* (which I read as an activist film), it is the claim on the categories and institutions of the normal (rather than the resistance to them) that constitutes a powerfully and even radically transformative act. In *Cruising* (which I read as diagnostic), the “normal world” (Hocquenghem’s term) is exposed as resting on queer foundations; the idea of “resistance” fails to register the structural principle of the exception which, operating entirely outside the system, cannot be resisted within it. In *Shortbus* (which I read as propagandistic or ideological), queerness is imagined as a universalizable force of social redemption rather than subversion. Analyzing the political, social and cultural status of queerness in terms of the exception rather than of resistance helps dislodge a certain utopian investment that informs a lot of work in queer theory (whether in the idea of public sex as politically transformative or in the figure of the sex club as model of liberal democracy, or even in the idea of the anonymous cruise as a liberation of bodies and pleasures from the burden of psychology). My preference for films which register the tension between the universal and the exception without attempting to resolve it (and without attempting to “resist the regimes of the normal”) explains why I have placed so much emphasis on films — for example by Breillat and Friedkin — that have historically found few admirers. Across all my examples, though, in both Part One and Part Two, it becomes clear that sexual difference and queerness take on a deep significance in twentieth century as nodal points of tension between the universal — which orients many of our political and social goals — and its limit or its outside. Figures of female sexuality and queerness have, since the ‘60s, translated this tension into powerful visual and narrative terms. Cinema’s “making sex public” has brought women’s and queer sexuality to the forefront not only of our sexual but also of our *social* imaginaries.

⁵ Michael Warner, “Introduction,” *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. xxvi.

Or at least it did so in the twentieth century, and perhaps the first decade of the twenty-first. It remains an open question whether the set of problems whose cultural elaboration I trace in this dissertation are now mere anachronisms. With this question in mind it is worth considering, finally and briefly, the narrative of sexual publicity put forward in a contemporary film that takes as axiomatic that the making public of sex is a *fait accompli*. It is not coincidental that the lead character in *The Canyons* (dir. Paul Schrader, 2013) is played by a porn star, James Deen, whose parodic name marks the distance (also a historical distance) between his mode of stardom and that of his namesake. While *The Canyons* holds that pornography is our current reality, it does not bring to this observation the utopian elation of a *Shortbus*, and it seems equally detached from Catharine MacKinnon's pronouncement that "[p]ornography is the essence of a sexist social order, its quintessential social act."⁶ For *The Canyons*, MacKinnon's view is as hopelessly literal as *Shortbus*'s is naive; both mistake as real a field of sexual relations that, in the post-cinematic century, is thoroughly simulacral. If pornography is our current reality it is because, as Deen's character Christian tells Tara (Lindsay Lohan, herself ostensibly a casualty of this fact), "no-one has a private life any more." In *The Canyons*, not only sexuality but film narrative and film form have become "pornified," to borrow the title of a reactionary book: the film absorbs these truths as its own, seeming like it might at any moment career off into X-rated explicitness, unmotivated by any "authentic" story needs. Sexuality in *The Canyons* has become pornographic insofar as activities of mediated visual display have come to dominate its exercise, but also metaphorically in that authenticity is no longer its intelligible measure; it has become performance-oriented and transactive, "exhausted by its surface" and subjected only to a calculus, game theory-like, of social and professional advancement. *The Canyons* offers a dystopian view of what we can finally call the neoliberalization of sexuality, its quantification and instrumentalization that is bound up in its total publicization, with no remainder of "privacy" — as Christian reminds Tara.

The Canyons associates the final demise of the private, paradoxically enough, with the death of cinema. Its opening montage presents a series of abandoned and dilapidated movie theaters, each signifying that death. (The publicity around the film, in turn, made much of the fact that it was released on iTunes concurrently with an extremely limited theatrical release, presuming an audience primarily comprised of home viewers). Cinema — traditional, narrative cinema, seen in theaters by spectators who are absorbed in the spectacle they attend to — has come to an end, according to Schrader's film, even as the society of the spectacle, cinematic society, is itself responsible for effecting the end of privacy. Cinema fuels the spectacle and the spectacle ends by destroying cinema. In keeping with its position, *The Canyons* does away with character development, verisimilitude (including any investment in "good" acting) and spiritual substance, offering only a self-consciously vacuous series of conventionally melodramatic plot devices, delivered without any trace of performative, narrative or enunciative authenticity — as if narrated and performed by neoliberal zombies.⁷

It would be stating the obvious to say that *The Canyons*, unlike *Shortbus*, does not believe in sexual liberation. It does not believe that a sexuality freed from privacy is one that has redeemed or will redeem the social, cementing social bonds in a queer, liberal utopia. Nor does the film believe in the aesthetics of transgression. Nothing is transgressive in *The Canyons*, neither nudity, nor sexual

⁶ Catherine A. MacKinnon, "Not a Moral Issue," in *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 154.

⁷ Developing these claims would require a longer analysis of the film's formal components, a project I will save for another occasion.

explicitness (though it shows no erect penises or penetration), nor homoeroticism, which surfaces in the camera's indifferent objectification of the bodies of its male as well as female actors, and which, like all sexuality, appears in the narrative as a strategy game divorced from any authenticity of desire. *The Canyons* thus seems to embody, though not to diagnose (since diagnosis requires a critical distance that the film actively refuses), a set of cultural-economic conditions under which both transgression and resistance have been folded back into the spectacle. It is in this vein that Steven Shaviro writes:

In the twentieth century, ... the most vibrant art was all about transgression. Modernist artists sought to shatter taboos, to scandalize audiences, and to pass beyond the limits of bourgeois "good taste." From Stravinsky to the Dadaists, from Bataille to the makers of *Deep Throat*, and from Charlie Parker to Elvis to Guns N' Roses, the aim was always to stun audiences by pushing things further than they had ever been pushed before. Offensiveness was a measure of success. Transgression was simply and axiomatically taken to be subversive.⁸

Today, he continues, under conditions of a neoliberalism with no outside, "far from being subversive, transgression... is entirely normative. Nobody is really offended by Marilyn Manson or Quentin Tarantino." And he quotes Hardt and Negri's claim in *Empire* that "there is no longer an 'outside' to power."⁹

This is the (hopeless) world to which *The Canyons* addresses itself as an impotent post-film, "entirely immanent," as Shaviro puts it, to that world, and thus without critical perspective on it; under such conditions, the question of whether sex is egalitarian or radically non-egalitarian has lost its sense; sex is not liberal (or non-liberal), it is "entirely immanent" to neoliberalism; the belief that cinema confronts us with contradictions or effects a transformation of anything is a naive holdover from a prior era. Rather than rail against these inexorable conditions, Shaviro praises art that accepts its own futility, writing that what characterizes the aesthetic (at least in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, as Shaviro reminds us) is its gratuitousness, its "purposiveness *without purpose*" — art is not of the order of effectivity. From this perspective, the agonistic strivings around sex of an artist like Catherine Breillat begin to look dated, "modernist." It does not matter whether sex is egalitarian or non-egalitarian, because sex is a simulacrum. (Like the simulacrum, it can be used strategically: recall the title of Baudrillard's *Fatal Strategies*.) Ironically, Shrader's film seems to associate the triumph of a simulacral reality devoid of critical negativity with the death of theatrical, narrative cinema. After cinema, the simulacrum. After cinema, a sexuality so public that there is nothing left of it that escapes the spectacle, and thus (by Shrader's weird logic) no more cinema.

It may be that we may have reached a state of neoliberal (as Shaviro puts it) saturation of human experience so thoroughgoing that no transgression, no negativity, no critical contradiction remains. This then would make the transformations and problematics I have thematized in this dissertation mere anachronisms, remnants of an earlier, modernist era. So what is the point, then, of Shaviro's (or any) essay? Is the critic, too, simply to revel in the inexorability of what is? I close with a

⁸ Steven Shaviro, "Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption," *e-flux* 46 (June 2013), at http://www.e-flux.com/journal/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/#_ftnref16

⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 32.

counter-reading that suggests something different: if *The Canyons* is a film about the impossibility, all at once, of cinema, of transgression, of private experience, and of negativity, then what are we to make of the fact that *the signifier* poses such a problem in that film? If sexuality is depthless and transparent in this postmodernist world, the signifier is neither of those things; it remains stubbornly opaque, and — like a hieroglyph in the desert — seems to address a subject who, far from “immanent” to this world, is absent from it. The vapid characters who populate the “glossy surfaces” of *The Canyons* cannot seem to tell the truth about anything; every utterance is a lie.¹⁰ These lies are not driven by psychological depth or authentically human emotional needs; they are strategic moves in a game whose modality is signification but whose ultimate goal remains unclear. The signifier — the verbal utterance, the image (of sex), the gesture, the look, the acquiescence to a sexual proposition, the shedding of tears, the physical expressions of affect — is not psychological; rather there is a “text machine, an implacable determination and a total arbitrariness... that inhabits words [and, here, corporal signs] at the level of... the signifier.”¹¹

The Canyons, we might say, does not depict a world so fully saturated with capital that no position of exteriority remains; it depicts a world so fully saturated by capital that it circles around a void, riven by the implacable signifier, a world of inhuman drives and irrational envies; not a world so reconciled with itself that it fills all possible spaces, but on the contrary, a world where the constitutive relation of capital (that entirely abstract system of valuation) to the signifier has risen to a head; for it is the signifier that introduces “emptiness and fullness... into a world that by itself knows nothing of them.”¹² That might also be a description of both commodity culture and finance capitalism, in other words a world of abstract values and deracinated signs. The world of capital is not a world free of signification or of its constitutive negativity; it is a world in which the distinction between emptiness and fullness has been transformed into an abstract and expansionist system, a world dominated by the signifier and thus (Lacan would say) by the death drive. In *The Canyons*, the body is a signifier, which it was trying not to be in *Barbarella*, where an attempt was made to reduce it to a physiological response system on the model of Pavlov’s dog.

Whereas we might see in *The Canyons* the triumph of the spectacle, the end of critical negativity, and the final evidence of the hopeless anachronism of the private, to read the film that way is to simply believe the man on the train who tells you he is going to Krakow, when he *really is* going to Krakow. If that man is telling the truth, as Freud reminds us, it is only all the better to deceive us. Freud’s joke highlights the opacity of the signifier even when the latter manages to accord with its signified; *The Canyons* answers the utopian blitheness of a film like *Shortbus* with an equally blithe assertion of the signifier’s implacability, its machine-like quality, which makes the total publicity of sex the film purports to represent appear as nothing so much as an elaborate ruse. This fully de-privatized sex hardly indexes our final escape from signification, from interpretation, as might a pleasure that refers only to itself. Sex here, in the words of Valerie Solanas, “is itself a sublimation.” Whereas once connotative signifiers referred to something “off scene,” which was sex, by a strange reversal it is now sex that refers to something else, something “off scene,” truly or falsely. This film that delivers the news that cinema, now in its death throes, has succeeded in making sex so

¹⁰ Manohla Dargis, “The Cellphone Gets Its Close-up: *The Canyons*,” *New York Times*, August 1, 2013.

¹¹ Paul de Man, qtd. in Lee Edelman, *No Future*, p. 23.

¹² Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI*, p. 120.

public that it is finally fused with neoliberalism ends up confirming something more promising, namely that the liberal social body is one still beholden to the negativity of the signifier.

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