THEME ISSUE
Desiring Images: Sex and Sexuality

146 INTRODUCTION: Desiring Images: Sex and Sexuality
By Harvey Roy Greenberg, Guest Editor

149 The Liminal Iconography of Jodie Foster
By Christina Lane

154 Disease, Masculinity, and Sexuality in Recent Films
By Robert Eberwein

162 "Something Reflective": Technology and Visual Pleasure
By Fred G. See

172 Bending Phallic Patriarchy in The Crying Game
By Jack Boozer Jr.

180 The Enterprise of Seduction: Sex and Selling in Lover Come Back
By Frank Krutnik

192 INDEX to Volume 22

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Desiring Images

SEX and SEXUALITY

HARVEY ROY GREENBERG, Guest Editor

Sex is the ultimate metaphor, shifting signifier par excellence, imbricated and resonating with a vast spectrum of human activity. It gives us the best and worst of moments, provokes experiences sublime, disastrous, or merely trivial. One has to be impressed by the sheer duration, let alone the intensity, of our species’ preoccupation with the carnival of feelings and behaviors intimately or distantly related to its means of reproduction. Writing, speaking, teaching, diagnosing, scolding, pontificating, rhapsodizing, or giggling about sexuality by the open- or closed-minded, by high-, middle-, or low-brows, in places and times repressed or liberated, has flourished across the reach of history. Nevertheless, just as lovers believe they’ve invented sex (or at least have newly minted the coinage of jouissance), so this post-Freudian age sometimes seems to imagine it has invented or newly coined discourse about sexuality. Of the making of theories, the issuing of encyclopedias, the publishing of papers on the many faces of Eros, in church, clinic, or classroom, there is no end in sight.

Inevitably, film scholarship entered the discursive fray. Earlier work on eros and cinema was inflected by psychoanalysis (French Freud in the main), Marxism, and feminism. Presently, gay and masculinity theorists of various persuasions command major attention. The most hotly contested debate in the academy swirls around the cinematic construction of sexuality and gender, supposedly in accord with, or against the grain of, patriarchy’s mandates, from one decade to the next, from one genre to the next. But—it is being inquired—what in fact constitutes the dimensions of this arbitrarily determined, much-maligned institution? How univocal are the mandates of patriarchy? From whence do they spring?

Much is made of masculine as well as feminine masquerade, as a species of engineering practiced upon the desiring/desired body toward oppressive or subversive ends. Screen homosociality and homophobia are regularly probed (they are often conterminous). The very notion that Hollywood always consistently constructed monolithically gender boundaries is being scrutinized. Frank Krutnik, for instance, indicates that film noir regularly placed macho nonparcels like Mitchum, Douglas, and Bogart in submissive, even masochistic positions.

Consonant with the polysemic intentions of the Journal of Popular Film & Television, the five articles in our special issue on Sex and Sexuality make up a balanced, pluralistic take upon these and other current topos of critical inquiry into the vicissitudes of Eros at the Bijou.

Laura Mulvey’s canonical study explored how classic Hollywood narrative cinema neutralizes the potential dangers of feminine sexuality by fetishizing, marrying off, or murdering the problematic lady in question (803–16). Real life mimicked reel life in the grossly manipulative strategies practiced within the industry to contain the threat posed to the (male) status quo by female stars seeking greater freedom in script and role selection, salary, off-screen life, and so forth.

Bette Davis was one of the few luminaries in her time to resist demeaning repression and representation. In ours, Jodie Foster has succeeded in forging her own compellingly ambiguous identity. Christina Lane (“The Liminal Iconography of Jodie Foster”) describes how Foster has presented herself as a perennial open text, cannily exploiting significant binary oppositions—masculine/feminine, public/private—in her roles and projects, as well as interviews and images away from her work.
Robert Eberwein’s “Disease, Masculinity, and Sexuality in Recent Films” discovers a covert homophobic thrust at dead center of many AIDS pictures, which appear on first glance to fairly trumpet their compassion. The author contrasts the relentless, harrowing physical deterioration of the AIDS patient in films such as Philadelphia with the robust physicality of the gravely ill, but eventually healed heterosexuals in films such as The Doctor and Regarding Henry. In the latter, the photographic medium is enlisted to affirm the inevitability of virile health being recuperated, said recovery assisted by wholesome sex with a suitably redemptive female. By contrast, the medium in mainstream AIDS films perniciously cooperates with a narrative trajectory that privileges gross displays of degeneration and absolutely forecloses the gay sufferer-onto-death’s possibility for any sex life at all, let alone a satisfying one.

Fred  See’s “‘Something Reflective’: Technology and Visual Pleasure” elegantly cites Mulvey’s seminal theories to unpack a key sequence in the film Rising Sun. The curious narrative flatness of the impotent detective heroes’ largely miscarried adventures contrasts with the excitement generated by viewing and re-viewing the film’s intricately tampered, spectacularly reconstructed videotape of a copulation/murder.

See argues that advanced imaging technology has created new levels of anxiety around the once “safely” fetishized feminine icon. Now dangerously destabilized, mutable, eerily seductive, it obscures a master narrative of masculine power. Rising Sun’s feminine victim is depicted as herself obscurely complicit with the wily Japanese in the depoliticizing and implicit mongrelizing of America (intriguingly, the reconstruction of her killing is performed by a Japanese American female technocrat, whose crippling by exposure to the Hiroshima blast has made her a pariah in her own culture). One analogizes to those seductive images of feminine evil that, according to Bram Dijkstra, began proliferating in fin-de-siècle Europe, during another epoch when burgeoning technology was beginning to outrace the ordinary citizen’s conceptualization, let alone control.

The Crying Game’s enthusiastic reception was tempered by a negative backlash in some critical quarters. One heard waspish complaints that the film was ideologically shallow; that it only dressed up in New Age multicultural raiment Hollywood’s “certain tendency” toward tidily resolving complex political issues in simplistic individual terms. Jack Boozer Jr.’s “Bending Phallic Patriarchy in The Crying Game” asserts that director Neil Jordan’s work, here and elsewhere, is exceptionally valid precisely because of its insistence upon the primacy of engaged personal experience, “the microcosm of individual character development” in confronting the dehumanizing invasion of subjective space by a host of monolithic ideological formations.

Fergus and Dil share the marginality and disenfranchisement of other Jordan protagonists, rendering their stormy reciprocal empowerment even more meaningful. Fergus successfully discards the IRA’s Freikorp male warrior code to affirm a more complex, intuitive nature; Dil casts aside her self-absorbed, feminized passivity, without losing her femininity. Both struggle against the constraints of the “ingrained social hierarchies that constantly enlist, objectify, and alienate them,” against the suffocating paradigms of political, heterosexist, and racial dogma—including the pan of pop-culture romance. In the end, their choices leave them incomplete and groping toward the light, but still poignantly transformed.

The special issue concludes with Frank Krutnik’s thoughtful article, “The Enterprise of Seduction: Sex and Selling in Lover Come Back.” Robin Wood notes that trash/exploitation films deemed negligible by makers and consumers can be more scathingly critical than mainstream reformist cinema created within the “system” (e.g., Stanley Kramer’s oeuvre). Comedy has a similar subversive potential, but in Krutnik’s view, Lover Come Back’s satire is hopelessly contaminated by the very enterprises it critiques; in effect, it becomes what it beholds. The film blithely sends up the nascent advertising industry’s seductive hawking of every commodity in sight, and finally the selling of seduction itself. Yet, at a time when movie attendance was seriously declining, Lover Come Back was also intended to seduce viewers away from their televisions, and back to Hollywood’s lush blandishments.

Every character in the film’s glitteringly corrupt mise-en-scène winds up demeaned, but the fate of the Doris Day heroine is arguably the most debasing. She surrenders a promising career (in which she is implicitly labeled as dissatisfied, repressed, and castrating) for marriage to a Playboy pig. His utter unregenerateness uncannily continues to echo in the mind after the jury-rigged ending, much as one’s perception of the Cary Grant antihero’s unredeemed psychopathy persists after Suspicion’s uneasy conclusion. The dubious victory implicitly recommended to the large female audience for such fare at the time resides in the Day heroine’s achieving the status of mindless consumer, a housewife, of the products she formerly merchandised as executive.

In the JPF&T special issue on Psychoanalysis and Cinema several years ago, I commented that the acrimony prevailing among rival schools of psychoanalytically based film criticism was such that some scholars would gladly consign dissenters to rack or flame (Greenberg 3–5). The same inquisitional enthusiasm often unfortunately mars current debates over sex and gender-related issues in film academia. For instance, a critic making the faintest suggestion that sexual behavior might to some degree be dictated by hormonal or hereditary influences, as opposed to cultural factors,
risks being condemned by the dominant critical faction for the most heinous of crimes of all—essentialism.

Ironically, analysts who once proposed that anatomy was not always destiny, who insisted on speaking to the impact of society upon personality development, were likewise hooted down by echt Freudians as shallow culturalists. The received truth among most practitioners today is that social and biological forces are inextricably connected. Abraham Jankowitz observes that, rather than indulging in rancorous polemics on either side of the debate, it is more useful to explore the fantasies mediating between the two paradigms on a case-by-case basis.

Given the amount of important research and lucid theorizing about sexuality and gender occurring today in many different fields—endocrinology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, anthropology, cultural criticism—a modest, flexible approach would seem a pre-requisite for productive discourse amongst film scholars. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, in a well-reasoned meta-theoretical consideration of theoretical biases among feminist psychoanalysts, admonishes that:

theory making involves not only processes of idealization and denigration, but processes that can easily be debased or vulgarized. . . . When theories can be construed as ideals—as portraying the ideal masculinity, the ideal femininity—they are picked up by those in need of ideals. . . . (392)

Beware of experts, goes the Zen aphorism. And the true believer of whatever stripe, says the editor.

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WORKS CITED


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