

# THE GENDER AND MEDIA READER

Edited by

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43.

## THERE'S SOMETHING QUEER HERE

Alexander Doty

## There's Something Queer Here

But standing before the work of art requires you to act too. The tension you bring to the work of art is an action.

Jean Genet<sup>1</sup>

I'm gonna take you to queer bars  
I'm gonna drive you in queer cars  
You're gonna meet all of my queer friends  
Our queer, queer fun it never ends.

"The Queer Song,"  
Gretchen Phillips, *Two Nice Girls*<sup>2</sup>

The most slippery and elusive terrain for mass culture studies continues to be negotiated within audience and reception theory. Perhaps this is because within cultural studies, "audience" is now always already acknowledged to be fragmented, polymorphous, contradictory, and "nomadic," whether in the form of individual or group subjects. Given this, it seems an almost impossible task to conduct reception studies that capture the complexity of those moments in which audiences meet mass culture texts. As Janice Radway puts it:

No wonder we find it so difficult to theorize the dispersed, anonymous, unpredictable nature of the use of mass-produced, mass-mediated cultural forms. If the receivers of such forms are never assembled fixedly on a site or even in an easily identifiable space, if they are frequently not

uniformly or even attentively disposed to systems of cultural production or to the messages they issue, how can we theorize, not to mention examine, the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of cultural circulation and consumption?<sup>3</sup>

In confronting this complexity, Radway suggests that mass culture studies begin to analyze reception more ethnographically by focusing upon the dense patterns and practices "of daily life and the way in which the media are integrated and implicated within it" rather than starting with already established essence categories.<sup>4</sup> Clearly the danger of making essentializing statements about both audiences and their reception practices lurks behind any uncritical use of categories such as "women," "teenagers," "lesbians," "housewives," "blue-collar workers," "blacks," or "gay men." Further, conducting reception studies on the basis of conventional audience categories can also lead to critical blindness about how certain reception strategies are shared by otherwise disparate individuals and groups.

I would like to propose "queerness" as a mass culture reception practice that is shared by all sorts of people in varying degrees of consistency and intensity.<sup>5</sup> Before proceeding, however, I will need to discuss—even defend—my use of "queer" in such phrases as "queer positions," "queer readers," "queer readings," and "queer discourses." In working through my thoughts on gay and lesbian cultural history, I found that while I used "gay" to describe particulars of men's culture, and "lesbian" to describe particulars

of women's culture, I was hard-pressed to find a term to describe a cultural common ground between lesbians and gays as well as other nonstraights—a term representing unity as well as suggesting diversity. For certain historical and political reasons, "queer" suggested itself as such a term. As Adele Morrison said in an OUT/LOOK interview: "Queer is not an 'instead of,' it's an 'inclusive of.' I'd never want to lose the terms that specifically identify me."<sup>6</sup>

Currently the word "gay" doesn't consistently have the same gender-unifying quality it may once have possessed. And since I'm interested in discussing aspects of cultural identification as well as of sexual desire, "homosexual" will not do either. I agree with those who do not find the word "homosexual" an appropriate synonym for both "gay" and "lesbian," as these latter terms are constructions that concern more than who you sleep with—although the objects of sexual desires are certainly central to expressions of lesbian and gay cultural identities. I also wanted to find a term with some ambiguity, a term that would describe a wide range of impulses and cultural expressions, including space for describing and expressing bisexual, transexual, and straight queerness. While we acknowledge that homosexuals as well as heterosexuals can operate or mediate from within straight cultural spaces and positions—after all, most of us grew up learning the rules of straight culture—we have paid less attention to the proposition that basically heterocentrist texts can contain queer elements, and basically heterosexual, straight-identifying people can experience queer moments. And these people should be encouraged to examine and express these moments as queer, not as moments of "homosexual panic," or temporary confusion, or as unfortunate, shameful, or sinful lapses in judgment or taste to be ignored, repressed, condemned, or somehow explained away within and by straight cultural politics—or even within and by gay or lesbian discourses.

My uses of the terms "queer readings," "queer discourses," and "queer positions," then, are attempts to account for the existence and expression of a wide range of positions within culture that are "queer" or non-, anti-, or contra-straight.<sup>7</sup> I am using the term "queer" to mark a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural production and reception.<sup>8</sup> As such, this cultural "queer

space" recognizes the possibility that various and fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever anyone produces or responds to culture. In this sense, the use of the term "queer" to discuss reception takes up the standard binary opposition of "queer" and "nonqueer" (or "straight") while questioning its viability, at least in cultural studies, because, as noted earlier, the queer often operates within the nonqueer, as the nonqueer does within the queer (whether in reception, texts, or producers). The queer readings of mass culture I am concerned with in this essay will be those readings articulating positions *within* queer discourses. That is, these readings seem to be expressions of queer perspectives on mass culture from the inside, rather than descriptions of how "they" (gays and/or lesbians, usually) respond to, use, or are depicted in mass culture.

When a colleague heard I had begun using the word "queer" in my cultural studies work, she asked if I did so in order to "nostalgically" recapture and reassert the "romance" of the culturally marginal in the face of trends within straight capitalist societies to co-opt or contain aspects of queer cultures. I had, in fact, intended something quite different. By using "queer," I want to recapture and reassert a militant sense of difference that views the erotically "marginal" as both (in bell hooks's words) a consciously chosen "site of resistance" and a "location of radical openness and possibility."<sup>9</sup> And I want to suggest that within cultural production and reception, queer erotics are already part of culture's erotic center, both as a necessary construct by which to define the heterosexual and the straight (as "not queer"), and as a position that can be and is occupied in various ways by otherwise heterosexual and straight-identifying people.

But in another sense recapturing and reasserting a certain nostalgia and romance is part of my project here. For through playfully occupying various queer positions in relation to the fantasy/dream elements involved in cultural production and reception, we (whether straight-, gay-, lesbian-, or bi-identifying) are offered spaces to express a range of erotic desire frequently linked in Western cultures to nostalgic and romantic adult conceptions of childhood. Unfortunately, these moments of erotic complexity are usually explained away as part of the "regressive" work of mass media, whereby we are tricked into certain

"unacceptable" and "immature" responses as passive subjects. But when cultural texts encourage straight-identified audience members to express a less-centered range of queer desire and pleasure than is possible in daily life, this "regression" has positive gender- and sexuality-destabilizing effects.<sup>10</sup>

I am aware of the current political controversy surrounding the word "queer." Some gays, lesbians, and bisexuals have expressed their inability to also identify with "queerness," as they feel the term has too long and too painful a history as a weapon of oppression and self-hate. These nonqueer lesbians, gays, and bisexuals find the attempts of radical forces in gay and lesbian communities (such as Queer Nation) to recover and positively redefine the term "queer" successful only within these communities—and unevenly successful at that. Preferring current or freshly created terms, non-queer-identifying lesbians, gays, and bisexuals often feel that any positive effects resulting from reappropriating "queer" are more theoretical than real.

But the history of gay and lesbian cultures and politics has shown that there are many times and places where the theoretical can have real social impact. Enough lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and other queers taking and making enough of these moments can create a more consistent awareness within the general public of queer cultural and political spaces, as these theory-in-the-flesh moments are concerned with making what has been for the most part publicly invisible and silent visible and vocal. In terms of mass culture reception, there are frequent theory-in-the-flesh opportunities in the course of everyday life. For example, how many times do we get the chance to inform people about our particular queer perspectives on film, television, literature, or music during conversations (or to engage someone else's perhaps unacknowledged queer perspective)? And how often, even if we are openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual, have we kept silent, or edited our conversations, deciding that our queer opinions are really only interesting to other queers, or that these opinions would make people uncomfortable—even while we think familiarly, friends, and strangers should, of course, feel free to articulate various heterosexual or straight opinions in detail at any time?

Of course, queer positions aren't the only ones from which queers read and produce mass culture.

As with nonqueers, factors such as class, ethnicity, gender, occupation, education, and religious, national, and regional allegiances influence our identity construction, and therefore are important to the positions we take as cultural producers and reader-consumers. These other cultural factors can exert influences difficult to separate from the development of our identities as queers, and as a result, difficult to discuss apart from our engagement in culture as queers. For example, most people find it next to impossible to articulate their sexual identities (queer or non-queer) without some reference to gender. Generally, lesbian- and gay-specific forms of queer identities involve some degree of same-gender identification and desire or a cross-gender identification linked to same-gender desire. The understanding of what "gender" is in these cases can range from accepting conventional straight forms, which naturalize "feminine" and "masculine" by conflating them with essentializing, biology-based conceptions of "woman" and "man"; to imitating the outward forms and behaviors of one gender or the other while not fully subscribing to the straight ideological imperatives that define that gender; to combining or ignoring traditional gender codes in order to reflect attitudes that have little or nothing to do with straight ideas about femininity/women or masculinity/men. These last two positions are the places where queerly reconfigured gender identities begin to be worked out.<sup>11</sup>

"Begin to be," because most radically as Sue-Ellen Case points out, "queer theory, unlike lesbian theory or gay male theory, is not gender specific."<sup>12</sup> Believing that "both gay and lesbian theory reinscribe sexual difference, to some extent, in their gender-specific constructions." Case calls for a queer theory that "works not at the site of gender, but at the site of ontology."<sup>13</sup> But while a nongendered notion of queerness makes sense, articulating this queer theory fully apart from gendered straight feminist, gay, and lesbian theorizing becomes difficult within languages and cultures that make gender and gender difference so crucial to their discursive practices. Through her discussions of vampire myths, Case works hard to establish a discourse that avoids gendered terms, yet she finds it necessary to resort to them every so often in order to suggest the queerness of certain things: placing "she" in quotation marks at one point, or discussing R. W. Fassbinder's

film character Petra von Kant as "a truly queer creature who flickers somewhere between haute couture butch lesbian and male drag queen."<sup>14</sup>

Since I'm working with a conception of queerness that includes gay- and lesbian-specific positions as well as Case's nonlesbian and nongay queerness, to examining the ways in which queerness influences mass culture production and reception. For example, gay men who identify with some conception of "the feminine" is through processes that could stem from conscious personal choice, or from internalizing longstanding straight imperatives that encourage gay men to think of themselves as "not men" (and therefore, by implication or by direct attribution, as being like "women"), or from some degree of negotiation between these two processes, are at the center of the gay culture cults built around the imposing, spectacular women stars of opera (Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, Beverly Sills, Renata Scotti, Teresa Stratas, Leonayne Price), theater (Lynn Fontanne, Katharine Cornell, Gertrude Lawrence, Maggie Smith, Angela Lansbury, Ethel Merman, Tallulah Bankhead), film (Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Judy Garland, Marlene Dietrich, Vivien Leigh, Bette Midler, Glenda Jackson), popular music (Mildred Garland, Eartha Kitt, Edith Piaf, Barbra Streisand, Billie Holiday, Donna Summer, Diana Ross, Debbie Harry, Madonna), and television (Carol Burnett, the casts of *Designing Women* and *The Golden Girls*, Candice Bergen in *Murphy Brown*, Mary Tyler Moore and the supporting cast of women on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*).<sup>15</sup> For the past two decades in the gay popular press, book chapters and articles on the connections between gay men and women stars have been a commonplace, but only occasionally do these works go beyond the monolithic audience label "gay men" to suggest the potential for discussing reception in a manner attuned to more specific definitions of sexual identity, such as those constructed to some degree within the dynamics of gender and sexuality.<sup>17</sup>

Given this situation, one strand of queer mass culture reception studies might be more precisely focused upon these networks of women performers who were, and are, meaningful at different times and places and for different reasons to feminine-identified gay men. One of the most extended analytic pieces

on feminine gay men's reception of women stars is the "Homosexuals' Girls" chapter of Julie Burchill's *Girls on Film*. But Burchill is clearly writing critically about a particular queer reception position; she is not queerly positioning herself. Indeed, Burchill's analysis of how "queens" respond to women stars seems written to conform to very narrow-minded ideas about audience and reception. For Burchill, all "feminine homosexual" men's investment in women stars is rooted in envy, jealousy, misogyny, and cruelty—and she concludes this even as she relates a comment by one of her gay friends: "You may have a flaming faggot's taste in movies, kid, but your perspective is pure Puritan."<sup>18</sup>

Clearly we need more popular and academic mass culture work that carefully considers feminine gay and other gendered queer reception practices, as well as those of even less-analyzed queer readership positions formed around the nexus of race and sexuality, or class and sexuality, or ethnicity and sexuality, or some combination of gender/race/class/ethnicity and sexuality.<sup>19</sup> These studies would offer valuable evidence of precisely how and where specific complex constructions of queerness can and do reveal themselves in the uses of mass culture, as well as revealing how and where that mass culture comes to influence and reinforce the process of queer identity formation.

One of the earliest attempts at such a study of queers and mass culture was a series of interviews with nine lesbians conducted by Judy Whitaker in 1981 for *Jump Cut*, "Hollywood Transformed." These interviews touched upon a number of issues surrounding lesbian identity, including gender identification. Although careful to label these interviews "biographical sketches, not sociological or psychological studies," Whitaker does make some comments suggesting the potential for such studies:

Of the nine women who were interviewed, at least six said they identified at some time with male characters. Often the explanation is that men had the interesting active roles. Does this mean that these lesbians want to be like men? That would be a specious conclusion. None of the women who identified with male characters were "in love" with the characters' girl friends. All of the interviewees

were "in love" at some time with actresses, but they did not identify with or want to be the male suitors of those actresses. While the context of the discussion is film, what these women are really talking about is their lives. . . . Transformation and positive self-image are dominant themes in what they have to say. Hollywood is transcended.<sup>20</sup>

After reading these interviews, there might be some question about how fully the straight ideologies Hollywood narratives encourage are "transcended" by these lesbian readers' uses of mainstream films, for as two of the interviewees remark, "We're so starved, we go see anything because something is better than nothing," and "It's a compromise. It's a given degree of alienation."<sup>21</sup> This sense of queer readings of mass culture as involving a measure of "compromise" and "alienation" contributes to the complexity of queer articulations of mass culture reception. For the pathos of feeling like a mass culture hanger-on is often related to the processes by which queers (and straights who find themselves queerly positioned) internalize straight culture's homophobic and heterocentrist attitudes and later reproduce them in their own queer responses to film and other mass culture forms.

Even so, traditional narrative films such as *Sylvia Scarlett*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *Trapeze*, *To Live and Die in L.A.*, *Internal Affairs*, and *Theima and Louise*, which are ostensibly addressed to straight audiences, often have greater potential for encouraging a wider range of queer responses than such clearly lesbian- and gay-addressed films as *Scorpio Rising*, *Home Movies*, *Women I Love*, and *Locals*.<sup>22</sup> The intense tensions and pleasures generated by the woman-woman and man-man aspects within the narratives of the former group of films create a space of sexual instability that already queerly positioned viewers can connect with in various ways, and within which straights might be likely to recognize and express their queer impulses. For example, gays might find a form of queer pleasure in the alternately tender and boisterous rapport between Lorelei/Marilyn Monroe and Dorothy/Jane Russell in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, or in the exalting woman-bonding of the title characters in *Theima and Louise*. Or lesbians and straights could queerly respond to the erotic elements in the relationships between the major male characters in *Trapeze*, *To*

*Live and Die in L.A.*, or *Internal Affairs*. And any viewer might feel a sexually ambiguous attraction—is it gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight?—to the image of Katharine Hepburn dressed as a young man in *Sylvia Scarlett*.

Of course, these queer positions and readings can become modified or can change over time, as people, cultures, and politics change. In my own case, as a white gay male who internalized dominant culture's definitions of myself as "like a woman" in a traditional 1950s and 1960s understanding of who "a woman" and what "femininity" was supposed to be, my pleasure in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* initially worked itself out through a classic gay process of identifying alternately with Monroe and Russell, thereby experiencing vicarious if temporary empowerment through their use of sexual allure to attract men—including the entire American Olympic team. Reassessing the feminine aspects of my gay sexual identity sometime in the 1970s (after Stonewall and my coming out), I returned to the film and discovered my response was now less rooted in the fantasy of being Monroe or Russell and gaining sexual access to men, than in the pleasure of Russell being the "gentleman" who preferred blonde Monroe, who looked out for her best interests, who protected her against men, and who enjoyed performing with her. This queer pleasure in a lesbian text has been abetted by extratextual information I have read, or was told, about Russell's solicitous and supportive offscreen behavior toward Monroe while making the film.<sup>23</sup> But along with these elements of queer reading that developed from the interaction of my feminine gay identity, my knowledge of extratextual behind-the-scenes gossip, and the text itself, I also take a great deal of direct gay erotic pleasure in the "Is There Anyone Here for Love?" number, enjoying its blatantly homo-historic and erotic ancient Greek Olympics mise-en-scène (including Russell's large column earrings), while admiring Russell's panache and good humor as she sings, strides, and strokes her way through a sea of half-naked male dancer-athletes. I no longer feel the need to mediate my sexual desires through her.

In 1985, Al La Valley suggested that this type of movement—from negotiating gay sexual desire through strong women stars to directly expressing desire for male images on screen—was becoming increasingly evident in gay culture, although certain

*There's Something Queer Here*

forms of identification with women through gay connections with "the feminine" continue:

One might have expected Stonewall to make star cults outmoded among gays. In a sense it did. The natural-man discourse, with its strong political and social vision and its sense of a fulfilled and open self, has supplanted both the aesthetic and campy discourses. . . . A delirious absorption in the stars is now something associated with pre-Stonewall gays or drag queens, yet neither gay openness nor the new machismo has completely abolished the cults. New figures are added regularly: Diana Ross, Donna Summer, Jennifer Holliday from the world of music, for example. There's a newer, more open gay following for male stars: Richard Gere, Christopher Reeve [and, to update, Mel Gibson], even teen hunks like Matt Dillon [Christopher Atkins, Johnny Depp, Jason Priestley, and Luke Perry].<sup>24</sup>

One could also add performers such as Bette Midler, Pat LaBelle, and Madonna to La Valley's list of women performers. While ambivalent about her motives ("Is she the Queen of Queens . . . Or is she just milking us for shock value?"), Michael Musto's *Outweek* article "Immaculate Connection" suggests that Madonna is queer culture's post-Stonewall Judy Garland:

By now, we finally seem willing to release Judy Garland from her afterlife responsibility of being our quintessential icon. And in the land of the living, career stagnation has robbed Diana [Ross], Liza [Minnelli], and Barbra [Streisand] of their chances, while Donna [Summer] thumped the bible on our heads in a way that made it bounce back into her face. That leaves Madonna as Queer Queen, and she merits the title as someone who isn't afraid to offend straight America if it does the rest of us some good.<sup>25</sup>

Musto finds Madonna "unlike past icons" as she's "not a vulnerable toy"; this indicates to him the need to reexamine gay culture's enthusiasms for women stars with greater attention to how shifting historic (and perhaps generational) contexts alter the meanings and uses of these stars for particular groups of gay men.<sup>26</sup>

Examining how and where these gay cults of women stars work in relation to what La Valley saw in the mid-1980s as the "newer more openly gay following for male stars" would also make for fascinating cultural history. Certainly there have been "homosexual" followings for male personalities in mass culture since the late nineteenth century, with performers and actors—Sandro the musclemen, Edwin Booth—ying with gay enthusiasms for opera divas and actresses such as Jenny Lind and Lillian Russell. Along these lines, one could queerly combine star studies with genre studies in order to analyze the gay appreciation of women musical performers, and the musical's "feminine" or "effeminized" aesthetic, camp, and emotive genre characteristics (spectacularized decor and costuming, intricate choreography, and singing about romantic yearning and fulfillment), with reference to the more hidden cultural history of gay erotics centered around men in musicals.<sup>27</sup>

In film, this erotic history would perhaps begin with Ramon Navarro (himself gay) stripped down to sing "Pagan Love Song" in *The Pagan*. Beyond this, a gay beefcake musical history would include Gene Kelly (whose ass was always on display in carefully tailored pants); numbers like "Is There Anyone Here for Love?" (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*) and "Y.M.C.A." (*Can't Stop the Music*) that feature men in gym shorts, swimsuits (Esther Williams musicals are especially spectacular in this regard), military (especially sailor) uniforms, and pseudo-matry or pseudo-classical (Greek and Roman) outfits, films such as *Athens* (bodybuilders), *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (Western Levis, flannel, and leather men), *West Side Story* (Hispanic and Anglo i-t-shirted and blue-jeaned delinquents, including a butch girl), Elvis Presley films (and those of other "teen girl" pop and rock music idols—Frank Sinatra, Ricky Nelson, Fabian, Cliff Richard, the Beatles, and so on), and the films of John Travolta (*Saturday Night Fever*, *Grease*, *Staying Alive*), Patrick Swayze (*Dirty Dancing*), and Mikhail Baryshnikov, who in *The Turning Point* and *White Nights* provided the impetus for many gays to be more vocal about their "lowbrow" sexual pleasure in supposedly high-cultural male bod-ies. If television, music video, and concert performers and texts were added to this hardly exhaustive list, it would include David Bowie, Morrissey, David Cassidy, Tom Jones, and Marky Mark, among many others,

and videos such as *Cherish, Express Yourself*, and *Just My Love* (all performed by Madonna), *Being Boring* (The Pet Shop Boys), *Love Will Never Do Without You* (Janet Jackson), *Just Tell Me That You Want Me* (Kim Wilde), and *Rico Suave* (Cezarido), along with a number of heavy-metal videos featuring long-haired lead singers in a variety of skintight and artfully opened or ripped clothes.<sup>28</sup>

I can't leave this discussion of gay erotics and musicals without a few more words about Gene Kelly's "male trio" musicals, such as *On the Town*, *Take Me Out to the Ball Game*, and *It's Always Fair Weather*.<sup>29</sup> Clad in sailor uniforms, baseball uniforms, and Army uniforms, the male trios in these films are composed of two conventionally sexy men (Kelly and Frank Sinatra in the first two films, Kelly and Dan Dailey in the last) and a comic, less attractive "buffer" (Jules Munshin in the first two, Michael Kidd in the last) who is meant to diffuse the sexual energy generated between the two male leads when they sing and dance together. Other Kelly films—*Singin' in the Rain*, *An American in Paris*, and *Anchors Aweigh*—resort to the more conventional heterosexualizing narrative device of using a woman to mediate and diffuse male-male erotics.<sup>30</sup> But whether in the form of a third man or an ingenue, these devices fail to fully heterosexualize the relationship between Kelly and his male costars. In *Singin' in the Rain*, for example, I can't help but read Donald O'Connor maniacally unleashing his physical energy to entertain Kelly during the "Make 'Em Laugh" number as anything but a case of overwrought, displaced gay desire.<sup>31</sup>

Kelly himself jokingly refers to the queer erotics of his image and his many buddy musicals in *That's Entertainment!*, when he reveals the answer to the often-asked question, "Who was your favorite dancing partner... Cyd Charisse, Leslie Caron, Rita Hayworth, Vera-Ellen?" by showing a clip of the dance he did with Fred Astaire ("The Rabbit and the Bromide") in *Ziegfeld Follies*. "It's the only time we danced together," Kelly remarks over the clip, "but I'd change my name to Ginger if we could do it again." As it turned out, Kelly and Astaire did "do it again" in *That's Entertainment 2*, and their reunion as a dancing couple became the focus of much of the film's publicity campaign, as had been the case when Astaire reunited with Ginger Rogers in *The Barkleys of Broadway*.<sup>32</sup>

While there has been at the very least a general, if often clichéd, cultural connection made between gays and musicals, lesbian work within the genre has been less acknowledged. However, the evidence of lesbian viewing practices—in articles such as "Hollywood Transformed," in videos such as *Dry Kisses Only* (1990, Jane Cotts and Kaucyia Brooke) and *Grapefruit* (1989, Cecilia Dougherty), and in informal discussions (mention *Calamity Jane* to a group of thirty- to forty-something American lesbians)—suggests that lesbian viewers have always negotiated their own culturally specific readings and pleasures within the genre.<sup>33</sup> Although it never uses the word "lesbian," Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca's 1982 article "Pre-text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*" is perhaps the best-known lesbian-positioned piece on the musical. While couched in homosocial rhetoric, this analysis of the authors' pleasures in the film focuses upon Lorelei/Moore's and Dorothy/Russell's connection to each other through looks, touch, and words ("lovey," "honey," "sister," "dear"). Noting that a "typical characteristic of [the] movie musical genre is that there are two leads, a man and a woman, who sing and dance together, and eventually become romantically involved," Seneca and Arbuthnot recognize that in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* "it is Monroe and Russell who sing—and even harmonize, adding another layer to the metaphor—and dance as a team."<sup>34</sup> Slice the men in the film are "never given a musical role," the authors conclude "the pretext of heterosexual romance is so thin that it scarcely threatens the text of female friendship."<sup>35</sup>

One note hints at a possible butch-femme reading of the Russell/Moore relationship, centered upon Russell's forthright stride and stance: "The Russell character also adopts a 'masculine' stride and stance. More often, Monroe plays the 'lady' to Russell's manly moves. For example, Russell opens doors for Monroe. Monroe sinks into Russell's strong frame, allowing Russell to hold her protectively."<sup>36</sup> Released in 1935 during the height of traditional butch-femme role playing in American urban lesbian culture, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* could well have been read and enjoyed by lesbians at the time with reference to this particular social-psychological paradigm for understanding and expressing their sexual identity.<sup>37</sup> The film continues to be read along these lines by some lesbians as well as

by other queerly positioned viewers. Overall, Seneca and Arbuthnot's analysis of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* qualifies as a lesbian reading, as it discusses the film and the musical genre so as to "re-vision . . . connections with women" by focusing upon the pleasures of and between women on the screen and women in the audience, rather than on "the ways in which the film affords pleasure, or denies pleasure, to men."<sup>38</sup>

Working with the various suggestive comments in this article and considering actual and potential lesbian readings of other musicals can lead to a consideration of other pairs and trios of song-and-dance women performers (often related as sisters in the narratives), certain strong solo women film and video musical stars (Eleanor Powell, Esther Williams, Carmen Miranda, Lena Horne, Eartha Kitt, Doris Day, Julie Andrews, Tina Turner, Madonna), and musical numbers performed by groups of women, with little or no participation by men.<sup>39</sup> Of particular interest in this latter category are those often-reviled Busby Berkeley musical spectacles, which appear in a different light if one considers lesbians (and other queers) as spectators, rather than straight men. I'm thinking here especially of numbers like "The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat" in *The Gang's All Here*, where Carmen Miranda triggers an all-woman group masquerade fantasia involving banana dildos and foot fetishism; "Dames" in *Dames*, where women sleep, bathe, dress, and seek employment together—some pause to acknowledge the camera as bearer of the voyeuristic (straight) male gaze, only to prohibit this gaze by using powder puffs, atomizer sprays, and other objects to cover the lens; "The Polka-Dot Ballet" in *The Gang's All Here*, where androgynized women in tights rhythmically move neon hoops and large dolls in unison, then melt into a vivid, hallucinogenically colored vaginal opening initially inhabited by Alice Faye's head surrounded by shiny cloth, "Spin a Little Web of Dreams" in *Fashions of 1934*, where a seamstress falls asleep and "spins a little web of dreams" about a group of seminude women amid giant undulating ostrich-feather fans who, at one point, create a tableau called "Venus with Her Galley Slaves"; and parts of many other numbers (the two women sharing an upper berth on the Niagara Limited who cynically comment upon marriage in *42nd Street*'s "Shuffle Off to Buffalo," for example).<sup>40</sup>

Since this discussion of queer positions and queer readings seems to have worked itself out so far largely as a discussion of musical stars and the musical genre, I might add here that of the articles and books written about film musicals only the revised edition of June Feuer's *Hollywood Musicals* goes beyond a passing remark in considering the ways in which this genre has been the product of gay film workers, or how the ways in which musicals are viewed and later talked about have been influenced by gay and lesbian reception practices.<sup>41</sup> From most accounts of the musical, it is a genre whose celebration of heterosexual romance must always be read straight. The same seems to be the case with those other film genres typically linked to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals: the horror/fantasy film and the melodrama. While there has been a rich history of queers producing and reading these genres, surprisingly little has been done to formally express this cultural history. There has been more queer work done in and on the horror film: vampire pieces by Richard Dyer, Bonnie Zimmerman, and Sue-Ellen Case; Bruja Florida, Polly Gladwin, Isling Mack-Nata's lesbian vampire film *The Mark of Lilith* (1986); Amy Goldstein's vampire musical film *Because the Dawn* (1988); a sequence in *Dry Kisses Only* that provides a lesbian take on vampire films; an article by Martin F. Norden on sexuality in *The Bride of Frankenstein*; and some pieces on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (although most are not written from a queer position), to cite a few examples.<sup>42</sup>

But there is still much left unexamined beyond the level of conversation. Carl Dreyer's lesbophobic "classic" *Vampyr* could use a thorough queer reading, as could Tod Browning's *Dracula*—which opens with a coach ride through Transylvania in the company of a superstitious Christian straight couple, a suit-and-tie lesbian couple, and a feminine gay man, who will quickly become the bisexual Count Dracula's vampirized servant. Subsequent events in the film include a straight woman who becomes a child molester known as "The Woman in White" after the horror director James Whale has yet to receive full-scale queer auteurist consideration for films such as *Frankenstein* (the idea of men making the "perfect" man), *The Bride of Frankenstein* (gay Dr. Praetorius, queer Henry Frankenstein, the erotics between the blind man, the



monster, and Jesus on the cross; the overall campy atmosphere), *The Old Dark House* (a gay and lesbian brother and sister, a 103-year-old man in the attic who is actually a woman), and *The Invisible Man* (effeminate, mad genius Claude Rains spurns his fiancée, becomes invisible, tries to find a male partner in crime, and becomes visible only after he is killed by the police).<sup>49</sup> Beyond queer readings of specific films and directors, it would also be important to consider how the central conventions of horror and melodrama actually encourage queer positioning as they exploit the spectacle of heterosexual romance, straight domesticity, and traditional gender roles gone awry. In a sense, then, *everyone's* pleasure in these genres is "perverse," is queer as much of it takes place within the space of the contra-heterosexual and the contra-straight.

Just how much everyone's pleasures in mass culture are part of this contra-straight, rather than strictly anistaight, space—just how *queer* our responses to cultural texts are so much of the time—is what I'd finally like this chapter to suggest. Queer positions, queer readings, and queer pleasures are part of a reception space that stands simultaneously beside and within that created by heterosexual and straight positions. These positions, readings, and pleasures also suggest that what happens in cultural reception goes beyond the traditional opposition of homo and hetero, as queer reception is often a place beyond the audience's conscious "real-life" definition of their sexual identities and cultural positions—often, but not always, beyond such sexual identities and identity politics, that is. For in all my enthusiasm for breaking down rigid concepts of sexuality through the example of mass culture reception, I don't want to suggest that there is a queer utopia that unproblematically and apolitically unites straights and queers (or even all queers) in some mass culture reception area in the sky. Queer reception doesn't stand outside personal and cultural histories; it is part of the articulation of these histories. This is why, politically, queer reception (and production) practices can include everything from the reactionary to the radical to the indeterminate, as with the audience for (as well as the producers of) "queercore" publications, who individually and collectively often seem to combine reactionary and radical attitudes.

What queer reception often does, however, is

stand outside the relatively clear-cut and essentializing categories of sexual identity under which most people function. You might identify yourself as a lesbian or a straight woman yet queerly experience the gay erotics of male buddy films such as *Red River* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, or maybe as a gay man your cultlike devotion to *Lawrence and Olivier*, *Kate and Allie*, or *The Golden Girls* has less to do with straight-defined cross-gender identification than with your queer enjoyment in how these series are crucially concerned with articulating the loving relationships between women.<sup>50</sup> Queer readings aren't "alternative" readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or "reading too much into things" readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along.

## Notes

1. Jean Genet, *Gay Sunshine Interviews*, ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1978), 73.
2. Gretchen Phillips, "The Queer Song," performed by Two Nice Girls, *Chloe Likes Olivia* (Rough Trade Records, 1991). Lyrics quoted by permission.
3. Janice Radway, "Reception Study: Ethnography and the Problems of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects," *Cultural Studies* 2, no. 3 (October 1988): 361.
4. *Ibid.*, 366.
5. Stuart Hall's article "Encoding/Decoding" informs much of my general approach to queer cultural readings of mass culture. This important essay is in *Culture Media Language*, ed. Stuart Hall, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (Birmingham: Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1980), 128–38.
6. Adele Morrison as quoted in "Queer," Steve Cossan, *OUT/LOOK* 11 (Winter 1991): 21.
7. Although the ideas that comprise "straightness" and "heterosexuality" are actually flexible and changeable over time and across cultures, these concepts have been—and still are—generally understood within Western public discourses as rather clearly defined around rigid gender roles, exclusive opposite sex desires, and such social and ideological institutions as patriarchy, marriage, "legitimate" child-bearing and -rearing, and the nuclear, patrilineal family. And all of this has been/is placed in binary opposition to "homosexuality" or "queerness." However, if we consider the notion of "queerness" in relation to the terms of the still commonly evoked utopian binary of sexuality (with its implicit dynamics of heterosexual gender stability versus homosexual [cross-gender] instability), it becomes clear that queerness, not straightness, describes an enormous space of cultural production and reception. For it is *deviance* from the demands of strict straight/heterosexual paradigms (however they are defined in a given time and place) that most often defines and describes our sexualized and/or gendered pleasures and positions in relation to movies, television, videos, and popular music. Indeed, many so-called straight mass culture texts encourage "deviant" erotic and/or gendered responses and pleasures in straight viewers.
8. These thoughts about queer spaces in mass culture are most immediately indebted to Robin Wood's "Responsibilities of a Gay Film Critic," *Movies and Methods* 11, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 649–60, and Marilyn R. Farwell's "Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Subtexts: Toward a Theory of Lesbian Narrative Space," *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, ed. Kara Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 91–103. Concerned with the politics of film critics/theorists (Wood) and the creation of uniquely lesbian narrative spaces for characters in literature (Farwell), these articles lucidly combine academic theory with gay- and lesbian-specific cultural concerns to suggest how and where being gay or lesbian makes a difference in cultural production and reception.
9. bell hooks, "Choosing the Margins as a Space of Radical Openness," *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 153.
10. While I use the term "regression" here in relation to queerness and mass culture, I don't want to invoke conventional psychoanalytic and popular ideas about queerness as a permanently infantilized stage past which heterosexuals somehow progress.
11. In "On Becoming a Lesbian Reader," *Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction*, ed. Susannah Radstone (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), Alison Hennegan offers many incisive examples of the complex workings of gender in the construction of queer identities and cultural reading practices, as well as indicating the reciprocity between sexual identity formation and reading cultural texts. Speaking of her adolescence, Hennegan states: "That I turned to ancient Greece need come as no surprise. If there's one thing everyone knows about the Greeks it's that they were all That Way . . . That women's own voices were virtually silent, but a few precious scraps of lyric poetry and the occasional verbatim transcript from a court hearing, did not then worry me. What I was looking for were strong and passionate emotions which bound human beings to members of their own sex rather than to the other. That the bonds depicted existed primarily between men didn't
12. Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire," *differences* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 2.
13. *Ibid.*, 3.
14. *Ibid.*, 8, 12.
15. Some gay men will prefer the terms "effeminate" or "woman-identified" where I use "feminine" in this section, and throughout the text. I find the former term still too closely connected to straight uses that simultaneously trivialize and trash women and gay men, while the latter term might appear to place gay men in the position of essentializing theoretical transsexuals. Where I use "effeminate" in this book (*Making Things Perfectly Queer*), it should be understood as describing culturally dictated heterosexual ideas about gays and gender (which queers might also employ).
16. Although most of these performers have an international gay following, this list is rather Anglo-American. To begin to expand it, one would add names like Sarah Leander (Germany), Isa Miranda (Italy), Dolores del Río, Maria Félix, Sara Montiel (Latin America and Spain), and Josephine Baker (France). As is the case in the United States and Great Britain, while some national and regional queer cultural work has been done regarding (feminine) gays and women stars, much more needs to be done. Television series cited in this section: *Designing Women* (1986–present, CBS), *The Golden Girls* (1995–92, NBC), *Murphy Brown* (1989–present, CBS), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77, CBS).
17. Among the work on women stars that concerns feminine gay reception (with the "feminine" aspects usually implied) are: Parker Tyler, "Mother Superior of the Paggos and Some Rival Queens," *Screaming the Stars: Homosexuality in the Movies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1973), 1–15 (on Mae West); Quentin Crisp, "Stardom and Stars," *How to Go to the Movies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 11–30; Gregg Howe, "On Identifying with Judy Garland" and "A Dozen Women We Adore," *Gay Life*, ed. Eric E. Rodes (New York: Doubleday, 1986), 178–86; Seymour Kleinberg, "Frier Clay: The World Eroticized," *Alienated Affections: Being Gay in America* (New York: St. Martin's, 1980), 38–69; Michael Bronski, "Hollywood Homo-sense," *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 134–43; Jack Smith, "The Perfect Filmic Apparatus of Maria Montez," *Film Culture* 27 (1962–1963):

28-32. I might also include critic John Simon's *Private Screenings* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) on this list, for its Wildean bitchy-witty critiques of stars such as Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Streisand, Anna Karina, and Monica Vitti, which are embedded in film reviews. Simon may be a self-declared straight, but his style and sensibility, in this collection at least, are pure scathing urban queen—which works itself out here, unfortunately, to include a heavy dose of misogyny.

18. Julie Burchill, *Gits on Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 109.

19. More work is being done in these areas all the time. Some of the more recent essays include: Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 145-60; Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Differences and the Homocentric," *ibid.*, 169-210; Mark A. Reid, "The Photography of Robert Panikayode," *Wide Angle* 14, no. 2 (April 1992): 38-51; Essex Hemphill, "In Living Color: Toms, Coons, Mammies, Faggots and Bucks," *Outweek* 78 (December 26, 1990): 32-40; Marion Riggs, "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections on a Sharp Queen," *The Independent* 14, no. 3 (April 1991): 32-34; Manthia Diawara, "The Absent One: The Avant-Garde and the Black Imaginary in *Looking for Langston*," *Wide Angle* 13, nos. 3/4 (July-October 1991): 96-109; Anthony Thomas, "The House the Kids Built: The Gay Imprint on American Dance Music," *OUT/LOOK* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1989): 24-33; Jackie Goldsby, "What It Means to Be Colored Me," *OUT/LOOK* 3, no. 1 (Summer 1990): 8-17; Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien, "Race, Sexual Politics and Black Masculinity: A Dossier," *Unwrapping Masculinity*, ed. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 97-164.

20. Judy Whitaker, "Hollywood Transformed," *Jump Cut* 24/25 (1981): 33; Gail Sausser, "Movie and TV Heart-Throbs" chapter of *Lesbian Etiquette* (Tunmansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1986) offers another expression of lesbian reception practices, their connection to gender identity, and the evolution of both through time; "I loved romantic movies when I was a teenager. I unconsciously identified with all the heroes who got the girl. Since I came out, however, my identifications have changed. Now I yell, 'No, no, not him!' at the heroine and root for her female roommate. What a difference a decade (or two) makes" (p. 57).

21. Whitaker, "Hollywood," 34.
22. Films mentioned in this section: *Sylvia Scarlett* (1936, RKO, George Cukor), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953, Twentieth Century-Fox, Howard Hawks), *Trapeze* (1956, United Artists, Carol Reed), *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1985, New Century, William Friedkin), *Internal Affairs* (1990,

Paramount, Mike Figgis), *Thelma and Louise* (1991, MGM, Ridley Scott), *Scorpio Rising* (1962-63, Kenneth Anger), *Home Movies* (1972, Jan Oxborough), *Women I Love* (1976, Barbara Hammer), *Lords* (1980, Cam McDowell).

When I say certain mainstream films elicit a "wide range of queer responses" than films made by, for, or about lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, I am not commenting upon the politics of these films or their reception, only about the multiplicity of queer responses. And while the lesbian and gay films listed here are much more direct and explicit about the sex in them being homo, the sexual politics of these films are not necessarily more progressive or radical than that of the mainstream films.

23. The strength of the Monroe-Lorelei/Russell-Dorothy pairing on and off screen was publicly acknowledged shortly after the film's release when, as a team, the two stars went through the ceremony of putting prints of their hands and feet in the forecourt of Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood.

24. Al La Valley, "The Great Escape," *American Film* 10, no. 6 (April 1985): 71.

25. Michael Musto, "Immaculate Connection," *Outweek* 90 (March 20, 1991): 35-36.

26. *Ibid.*, 36.

27. In the revised edition of *The Hollywood Musical* (London: BFI/Macmillan, 1993), Jane Feuer has added a brief section focusing on MGM's Fred Unit and Judy Garland that suggests ways of developing gay readings of musicals with reference to both production and queer cultural contexts. Mentioned in Feuer's discussions, Richard Dyer's chapter "Judy Garland and Gay Men," in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 141-94, is an exemplary analysis of how and why queers and queer cultures read and in certain ways, help to create star personas.

28. Films mentioned in this section: *The Pagan* (1928, MGM, W. S. Van Dyke), *Athlete* (1954, MGM, Richard Thorpe), *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954, MGM, Stanley Donen), *West Side Story* (1961, United Artists, Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins), *Saturday Night Fever* (1977, Paramount, John Badham), *Grease* (1980, Paramount, Randall Kessler), *Staying Alive* (1984, Paramount, Ardiolino), *The Turning Point* (1977, Twentieth Century-Fox, Herbert Ross), *White Nights* (1987, Paramount, Taylor Hackford).

29. Films cited: *On the Town* (1950, MGM, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen), *Toke Life Out to the Ball Game* (1949, MGM, Busby Berkeley), *It's Always Fair Weather* (1955, MGM, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen). For a more extended discussion of Gene Kelly and the "buddy"

musical, see Steven Cohan's chapter, "Les Boys," in *Musical Men: American Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Indianapolis and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

30. Films cited: *Singin' in the Rain* (1952, MGM, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen), *An American in Paris* (1951, MGM, Vincente Minnelli), *Anchors Aweigh* (1945, MGM, George Sidney).

31. In *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), Vito Russo uncovers material on *Singin' in the Rain*'s production history that reveals that the erotics between Kelly and O'Connor were referred to in the original script. "One line of dialogue in Betty Comden and Adolph Green's screenplay for *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) was percolated out by the censors because it gave 'a hint of sexual perversion' between Donald O'Connor and Gene Kelly. When O'Connor gets the idea of dubbing the voice of Debbie Reynolds for the high-pitched, tinny voice of Jean Hagen in a proposed musical, *The Dancing Cavalier*, he illustrates his idea for Kelly by standing in front of Reynolds and mouthing the words to 'Good Morning' while she sings behind him. When the song is over, O'Connor turns to Kelly and asks 'Well? Convinced? Kelly not yet catching on, takes it as a joke and replies, 'Enchanting! What are you doing later?' The joke was eliminated" (pp. 98-99).

32. Films cited: *That's Entertainment* (1974, MGM, Jack Haley Jr.), *Ziegfeld Follies* (1946, MGM, Vincente Minnelli), *That's Entertainment 2* (1976, MGM, Gene Kelly), *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949, MGM, Charles Walters).

33. Film cited: *Calamity Jane* (1953, Warners, David Butler). Some lesbians also take what they would describe as a gay pleasure in musicals, and perform readings of individual films and of the genre in terms they identify as being influenced by their understanding of the ways gay men appreciate musicals. These kinds of gay approaches might take the form of specific star cult enthusiasms (for Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, or Bette Midler, for example) that individual lesbian readers feel aren't important in lesbian culture, or of an appreciation for certain aesthetic or critical approaches (camp, for example) which seem unpopular, inoperative, or not "politically correct" in the lesbian culture(s) within which the individual reader places herself.

34. Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, "Pre-text and Text in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," *Film Reader* 5 (1983): 20. This essay is reprinted in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 112-25.

35. Arbuthnot and Seneca, "Pre-text and Text," 21.

36. *Ibid.*, 23.

37. Alix Stanton's "Blondes, Brunettes, Butches and

Femmes" (unpublished seminar paper, Cornell University, 1991) offers a more extended consideration of butch-femme roles and cultures in relation to readings of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (and *How to Succeed in a Millionaire* [1953, Twentieth Century-Fox, Jean Negulesco]).

38. Arbuthnot and Seneca, "Pre-text and Text," 21. For another approach to the lesbian aspects of this film, see Maureen Turim's "Gentlemen Consume Blondes" in *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Erens, 101-11; originally in *Wide Angle* 1, no. 1 (1979), also reprinted in *Movies and Methods, Volume II*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985): 369-78. As part of an addendum to the original article, Turim considers lesbianism and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in light of certain feminist film theories about straight male spectatorship. Turim sees the main characters as male constructed "pseudo-lesbians," and the film's use of them as being related to "how lesbianism has served in male-oriented pornography to increase visual stimulation and to ultimately give twice as much power to the eye, which can penetrate even the liaisons which would appear to deny male entry" (pp. 110-11).

39. While not a lesbian-specific reading, Shari Roberts's "You Are My Lucky Star: Eleanor Powell's Brief Dance with Fame" (from an unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "Seeing Stars: Female WWII Hollywood Musical Stars," University of Chicago, 1993) is suggestive of how and where such a reading might begin, with its discussion of Powell's (autoerotic) strength as a solo performer and its threatening qualities. "If . . . Powell represents a recognition of women as independent, working women, her films also reflect society's related fear of this 'new' woman, and potential gender confusion. . . . This anxiety is demonstrated with homophobic and cross-dressing jokes in the Powell films" (p. 7).

40. Films mentioned in this section: *The Gang's All Here* (1943, Twentieth Century-Fox, Busby Berkeley), *Dames* (1934, Warners, Ray Enright), *Fashions of 1934* (1934, Warners, William Dieterle), *42nd Street* (1933, Warners, Lloyd Bacon).

41. Feuer's "Gay Readings of Musicals" section in *Hollywood Musicals* (cited in note 27) concentrates on gay male production and reception of musicals.

42. Articles mentioned in this section: Richard Dyer, "Children of the Night: Vampirism as Homosexuality, Gender sexuality as Vampirism," *Sweet Dreams: Sexuality, Gender and Popular Fiction*, ed. Susannah Radstone (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 47-72; Bonnie Zimmerman, "Daughters of Darkness: Lesbian Vampires," *Jump Cut* 24/25 (1981): 23-24; Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire," *Differences* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 1-20; Martin F. Norden, "Sexual References in James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein*," *Eros in the Mind's Eye: Sexuality*



and the *Fantastic in Art and Film*, ed. Donald Palumbo (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 141–50; Elizabeth Reba Weise, "Bisexuality, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and Me," *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out*, ed. Lorraine Hutchins and Lani Kaahumahu (Boston: Alyson, 1991), 134–39.

43. Films mentioned in this section: *Vampire* (1931, Gloma Film, Carl Theodore Dyer), *Dracula* (1931, Universal, Tod Browning), *Frankenstein* (1931, Universal, James Whale), *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935, Universal, James Whale), *The Old Dark House* (1932, Universal, James Whale), *The*

*Invisible Man* (1933, Universal, James Whale). In light of the discussion of musicals in this essay it is interesting to recall here that Whale's biggest success apart from his horror films was directing Universal's 1936 version of *Show Boat*.

44. Films and television series mentioned in this section: *Red River* (1948, United Artists, Howard Hawks), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969, Twentieth Century-Fox, George Roy Hill), *Lavigne and Shirley* (1976–83, ABC), *Kate and Allie* (1984–90, CBS), *The Golden Girls* (1985–92, NBC).

#### 44.

### BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

#### *Video Recorders in the Home*

Ann Gray

The video cassette recorder is arguably the major innovation in home entertainment in Britain since television. When we address questions of how women watch television and video we inevitably raise a complex set of issues which relate to women and their everyday lives. In talking to women about home video cassette recorders (VCR) and television use, I have identified some of the determining factors surrounding these activities which take place within the domestic environment.<sup>1</sup> With the development of VCRs and other products such as home computers and cable services, the 1980s is seeing an ever-increasing trend towards home-centred leisure and entertainment. New technology in the home has to be understood within a context of structures of power and authority relationships between household members, with gender emerging as one of the most significant differentiations. This far from neutral environment influences the ways in which women use popular texts in general and television and video in particular, and the pleasures and meanings which these have for them.

#### The Video Revolution

Although it is a relatively recent phenomenon, home video arrived as long ago as 1972 with Philips VCR and Sony U-matic. But it wasn't until Sony Betamax and VHS (video home system), both of which use 19 mm tape, brought the cost down significantly that the stage was set for a consumer boom. In 1983 15 per cent of households in the United Kingdom had access to a VCR, by 1986 the figure had reached 40 per cent.

An important factor in the British VCR experience is that the distribution of recorders operates through the already existing television rental networks, thereby making it possible to rent a VCR on a monthly basis, without the necessity for large capital investment. This results in video recorders being made available to a much wider range of socio-economic groups than might at first be imagined. We are not, in the British case, considering a 'luxury' item which graces the affluent household, rather a widely available home entertainment facility which has rapidly become an accepted and essential part of everyday life, cutting across economic and class boundaries.

The development and marketing of entertainment consumer hardware can often outpace the provision of 'software' or 'content'. Raymond Williams points out that when domestic radio receivers were first marketed there was very little to receive in terms of programming content, 'It is not only that the supply of broadcasting facilities preceded the demand; it is that the means of communication preceded their content' (Williams, 1974: 25).

There are two major uses for VCRs: time-shift, which involves recording off-broadcast television in order to view at a different time, and the playing of pre-recorded tapes.<sup>2</sup> These can be purchased, though the majority are hired through video rental 'libraries'. Although off-air recording is an attractive proposition, it has become obvious to a few entrepreneurs that there is a large potential market for the hiring of pre-recorded tape. In Britain during the early 1980s one feature of almost every high street was a new