ALEXANDER DOTY

MAKING THINGS PERFECTLY QUEER

Interpreting Mass Culture

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For my June 1st guys, Van Cagle and Richard Dyer, who were never far from my thoughts as I wrote
CHAPTER ONE

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

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

"The Quee Song."

Gretchen Phillips, Two Nice Girls

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?

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 audience categories. 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. Before proceeding, however, I will need to discuss—even defend—my use of "queer" in such phrases as "queer positions," "queer readings," "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 particularities 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 nonstrait—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 OUTLOOK interview: "Queer is not an 'instead of,' it's an 'inclusive of.' I'd never want to lose the terms that specifically identify me." 66

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 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, transsexual, 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 heterosexual 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. 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. 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 "normative" or "straight") while questioning its viability, at least in cultural studies, because, as noted earlier, the queer often operates within the normative, 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." And I want to suggest that within cultural production and reception, queer eroticities 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...
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-censored range of queer desire and pleasure than is possible in daily life, this "regression" has positive gender- and sexuality-destabilizing effects. 10

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 family, 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 queervy reconfigured gender identities begin to be worked out. 11

"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." 12 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." 13 But while a nongendered notion of queerness makes sense, articulating this queer theory fully apart from gendered straight feminism, 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."15

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, gender definitions and uses here remain important 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"16 through processes that could stem from conscious personal choice, or from internalizing long-standing 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 Scotto, Teresa Stratas, Leontyne Price), theater (Lynn Fontanne, Katharine Cornell, Gertrude Lawrence, Maggie Smith, Angela Lansbury, Ethel Merman, Tallulah Bankhead), film (Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Judy Garland, Melissa Dieterich, Vivien Leigh, Bette Midler, Glenn Jackson), popular music (Mia'se, Garland, Eartha Kitt, Edith Piaf, Barbara 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 the Mary Tyler Moore Show).17 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.18

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 most extended analytic pieces on feminine gay men's reception of women stars is the "Homeworker's 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 positioned herself. Indeed, Burchill's analysis of how "queers" 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 fagot's taste in movies, kid, but your perspective is pure Puritan."19

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 reader/ leadership 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.20 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 1961 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 role. 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 alter ego of those actresses. While the context of the discussion in film, what these women are really talking about is their lives. . . Transformation and projection self-image are dominant themes in what they have to say. Hollywood is time-wound.21

After reading these interviews, there might be some question about how fully the straight ideologies Hollywood narratives encourage.
“transcended” by these lesbian readers’ uses of mainstream films, for
as two of the interviewees remark, “We’re so starved, we go see any-
thing because something is better than nothing,” and “It’s a compro-
mise. It’s a given degree of alienation.” This sense of queer read-
ings 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
handmaiden is often related to the processes by which queues (and
strangers who find themselves queerly positioned) internalize straight
culture’s homophbic and heteronormative 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, Gen-
tlemen Prefer Blueses, Trapped, To Live and Die in L.A., Internal Affairs,
and Thelma 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
Loaves.26 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 posi-
tioned viewers can connect with in various ways, and within which
strangers might be likely to recognize and express their queer im-
pulses. For example, gays might find a form of queer pleasure in the
altitudinous render and hoistiness of the main characters in Thelma and
Louise. Or lesbians and straighties could queerly respond to the erotic
elements in the relationships between the major male characters in
Trapped, To Live and Die in L.A., or Internal Affairs. And any viewer
might feel a sexually ambiguous attraction—is it gay, lesbian, bisex-
ual, 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 modi-
fied or can change over time, as people, cultures, and politics change.
In my own case, as a white gay male who internalized dom-
inant culture’s definitions of myself as “like a woman” in a traditional
1950s and 1960s understanding of who “a woman” and what “femini-
nity” was supposed to be, my pleasure in Gentlemen Prefer Blueses
initially worked itself out through a classic gay process of internalizing,
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 (af-
after Stonewall and my coming out), I returned to the film and discov-
ered 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 extra textual information I have read, or was
told, about Russell’s solicitous and supportive off-screen behavior to-
ward Monroe while making the film.27 But along with these elements
of queer reading that developed from the interaction of my feminine
identity and knowledge of extra textual information on screen, and the
film itself, I also have a great deal of direct gay erotic pleasure in
the “Is There Anyone Here for Love?” number, enjoying its blatan-
tly homo-historic and erotic ancient Greek Olympics mise-en-
scène (including Russell’s large column earrings), while admiring
Russell’s paunch and good humor as she sings, strides, and strikes
her way through a sea of half- nacked male disco-athletes. I no longer
feel the need to meditate on my sexual desires through her.

In 1985, Al LaValley 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 increas-
ingly evident in gay culture, although certain 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 personal and social vision and its sense of a fulfilled and open
self, has supplanted both the aesthetic and campy discourses... Indeed
the absorption of the stars is now something associated with pre-
Stonewall gay or drag queens, yet neither gay openness nor the new
masculinity has completely abolished the cults. New figures are added
regularly—Diana Ross, Demi’s Summer, Jennifer Holliday from the
world of music, for example. There’s a new, more open gay following
for male stars: Richard Gere, Christopher Reeve (and, to update, Mel
Gibson), even two thugs like Matt Dillon (Christopher Atkins, Johnny

One could also add performers such as Bette Midler, Patti LaBelle,
and Madonna to LaValley’s list of women performers. While ambiva-
lent about her motives ("Is she the Queen of Queers. . . Or is she just milking us for shock value?"). Michael Musto’s Outreach 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 the afterlife responsibility of being our quintessential icon. And in the land of the living, career stagnation has robbed Diana Ross, Liza Minnelli, and Barbara 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 Queen 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."

Musto finds Madonna “unlike past icons” as she’s “not a vulnerable toy; this indicates to him the need to reexamine gay culture’s enthusiasm 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.”

Examining how and where these gay cults of women stars work in relation to what LaValley saw in the mid-1960s 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—Sandow the muscleman, Edwin Booth—vying with gay enthusiasts 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.

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 beeboke musical history would include Gene Kelly (whose ass was always on display in carefully tailored pants); numbers like “Is There Anyone Here for Love?” (Gentleman Prefer Blondes) and “1.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) uni-

forms, and pseudo-native or pseudo-classical (Greek and Roman) outfits; films such as Athena (bodybuilders), Seven Brides for Seven Brothers (Western Levi, damsel, and leather men), West Side Story (Hispanic and Anglo 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 provides the impetus for many gays to be more vocal about their “lowbrow” sexual pleasure in supposedly high-cultural male bodies. 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 Justify My Love (all performed by Madonna). Doing It Right (The Pet Shop Boys), Love Will Never Do Without You (Janet Jackson), Just Tell Me That You Want Me (Kim Wilde), and Rico Suave (Gerardo), along with a number of heavy-metal videos featuring long-haired lead singers in a variety of kilts and artfully opened or ripped clothes.

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. Kelly in sailor uniforms, baseball uniforms, and Army uniforms, the male trio 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 heterosexual/sing narrative device of using a woman to mediate and diffuse male-male erotics. But whether in the form of a third man or an ingénue, 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 manically unleashing his physical energy to entertain Kelly during the “Make ‘Em Laugh” number as anything but a case of overwrought, displaced gay desire.

Kelly himself jokingly refers to the queer erotics of his image and his many buddy musicals in That’s Entertainment!, when he reveals
leased in 1953, 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. The film
continues to be read along these lines by some lesbians as well as by
other queerly positioned viewers. Overall, Seneca and Arbusnoot'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 be-
tween 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." 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.
Of particular interest in this latter category are those often
reviled Busby Berkeley musical spectacles, which appear in a differ-
ent 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 Tutu-Frotti Hat" in The Gang's All Here, where
Carmen Miranda triggers an all-woman group masturbation fantasy
involving hannya 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 on hoops and large dots 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 laps asleep and
"spins a little web of dreams" about a group of seminude women amid
a giant undulating ostrich-feather fans who, at one point, create a tab-
leau called "Venus with Her Galley Slaves"; and parts of many other
numbers (the two women sharing an upper berth on the Niagara Lim-
the answer to the often-asked question, "Who was your favorite danc-
ing 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 Brontide") 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. 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 Trans-
formed," in videos such as Dry Kisses Only (1990, Jane Cottis and
Kassia Brooke) and Grapefruit (1989, Cecilia Dougherty), and in
informal discussions (mention Calamity Jane to a group of thirty-
forty something American lesbians)—suggests that lesbian viewers
have always negotiated their own culturally specific readings and
pleasures within the genre. Although it never uses the word "lesb-
ian," Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca's 1982 article "Pre-text and
Text in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" is perhaps the best-known les-
bian-positioned piece on the musical. While couched in homosocial
rhetoric, this analysis of the authors' pleasures in the film focuses
upon Monroe/Monroe'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," Sen-
eca 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." Since the men in the
film are "never given a musical role," the authors conclude the pre-
text of heterosexual romance is so thin that it scarcely threatens the
text of female friendship.

One note hints at a possible butch-femme reading of the Russell/
Monroe 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 Rus-
sell's strong frame, allowing Russell to hold her protectively." Re-
ied who cynically comment upon marriage in 42nd Street's "Shuffle Off to Buffalo," for example."

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 Jane 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. From most accounts of the musical, it is a genre whose celebration of het erotosexual 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; Bruna Faúda, Polly Gladwin, Isling Mack-Natal’s lesbian vampire film The Mark of Lilith (1966); Amy Goldstein’s vampire musical film Because the Dawn (1956); a sequence in Dry Kisses Only that provides a lesbian take on vampire films; an article by Martin P. Noeden 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."

But there is still much left unexamined beyond the level of conversation. Carl Dreyer's lesophobic "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 (the Woman in White) after the count vampireizes her. It is also amazing that gay 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. Pescatorius; 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 (effete, mad genius Claude Rains spurs his fiancée, becomes invisible, tries to find a male partner in crime, and becomes visible only after he is killed by the police). 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 spectacles of heterosexual romance, straight domesticity, and traditional gender roles gone awry. In a sense, then, everyone’s pleasure in these genres is "perverse," in queer, as much of it takes place within the space of the contra-het erotosexual and the contra-straight. Just how much everyone’s pleasures in mass culture are part of this contra-straight, rather than strictly antistraight, 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 home 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 erotica of male body films such as Red River and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid; or maybe as a gay man your cultlike devotion to Lorenne and Shirley, Kate and Allie, or The Golden Girls has less to do with straight-defined cross-gender identification than with your queer en-
joyment in how those series are crucially concerned with articulating the loving relationships between women. Queer readings aren’t “alternative” readings, wild-eyed 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.

CHAPTER TWO
Whose Text Is It Anyway?
Queer Cultures, Queer Auteurs, and Queer Authorship

There is a moment in George Cukor’s 1939 film *The Women* that I will use as a condensed illustration of the critical issues in this chapter. The scene is a luncheon at Mary Haines’s suburban home. As Mary passes biscuits around, Sylvia Fowler sniffs them because she is watching her weight. “Go ahead, dear. No starch, it’s gluten!” Mary exclaims. Taking a biscuit, Sylvia sarcastically remarks to the other women: “Have you ever known such a housewife?” In a film abounding with in-jokes, this moment is perhaps the oldest and the most subversive of them all. For Sylvia is played by Rosalind Russell, who three years earlier had portrayed the neurotically “perfect” housewife Harriet Craig in *Craig’s Wife*, directed by Dorothy Arzner.1

Linked by an actress who was to become a cult favorite for many lesbians and gays, Cukor’s reference to Arzner pivots on an implicitly iconoclastic wide-angle view of the hidden agenda of both *Craig’s Wife* and *The Women*, as well as to that of a number of Arzner and Cukor films. In terms of queer cultural history, Russell’s role also offers itself as a hidden homage by one queer director to another—that is, if you know Cukor was homosexual (Cukor disliked the term “gay”) and Arzner was lesbian.2 With this queer biographical information, the moment of cloistered comradeship in *The Women* becomes both touching and provocative, placed as it is within the context of a conventional narrative film produced by a capitalist industry for a straight society.

The genesis of the following thoughts on Cukor, Arzner, autodidact, authorship, queerness, and queer cultures was an invitation to present a paper at a Cukor and Arzner symposium that was part of the 1990 Pittsburgh Lesbian and Gay Film Festival.
Notes

Introduction
1. It might be argued that many texts including visible, "demonstrative" lesebians, gay men, and bisexualse are other queer sex acts like the kike in The Silence of the Lambs aren't necessarily "queer texts" because the "queerness" here is often more about opposing the queer than it is about expressing it.
3. Ibid.
8. de Lauretis, "Queer Theory," 111.
10. de Lauretis, "Queer Theory," 111.
13. Looking through this book, I realize I have given rather cursory attention to specifically bisexual positions. Since examining bisexuality seems crucial in many ways to theorizing sexuality and nonhetero quotations—indeed, some see bisexuals as queers (see note 12 above and its textual reference)—I consider the absence in this book of any extended discussion of bisexuality and mass culture a major oversi
sims. For the present, however, I will suggest one approach—mass culture theory and criticism—might help in considering bisexual and queer texts.

To anchor a lesbian reading of Gentlemen Prefer Blonds is the first chapter of this book, Lucie Arnaud and Gail Seiden's "Pre-Text and Text in Gentlemen Prefer Blonds." (Film Reader 5 (1982): 14-20, cp. in Patricia Erens, ed., Images in Perpetual Film Critics (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 112-25) also provides a clue useful in constructing a fascinating biocultural interpretation of the text. Their analysis that Gentlemen Prefer Blonds's narrative of heterosexuality and romance serves as a mere pre-text for many viewers, who foreground another "cultural" semiotic text involving Marilyn Monroe/Arnaud and Jane Russell/Seiden, suggests that the film text is generically bisexual as it combines both opposite sexes and a same sex narrative (6). From their feminist/lesbian perspective, Arnaud and Seiden see the opposite sex (the "heterosexual") semiotic narrative as being "continuously disrupted and undermined" by the woman-reading aspects of the text (16). But in the text! In Gentlemen Prefer Blonds necessarily a text in which woman-reading undermines straight patriarchy or where homophobia subverts heterosexuality? Could we see these narratives as coexisting in the text, as supplementing each other? In this light, a film like Gentlemen Prefer Blonds could be read as a construct biocultural main characters in a biocultural text, as well as to encourage bisexual (or queer) positions and pleasures in space.

Two number of mass-culture texts are constructed within the "pre-text" and "text" terms Ascher in Seiden set out. Indeed, a number of the examples I cite in this book fall within the paradigm, and could be discussed as biocultural texts. The Golden Girls and other "lesbian" sitcoms, male buddy films, and so on. Thus far, feminist, gay, and lesbian studies have read these texts largely in terms of how the "pre-text" of compulsory heterosexuality is disrupted or constrained by the "text" of same-sex or opposite-sex stories. But these works are constructed to support interpretations that see same-sex and opposite-sex discursive or erotic narratives as separate and in conflict with one another, but as coexisting to offer a range of possibilities that could be called "biocultural."

For a psychoanalytic approach to the "depicted biocultural imagination" in traditional Western cultures and cultural texts, see Robin W concentrated on Vietnam in Reagan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), especially those chapters on horror films and horror narratives.

1. Thore's "Something Queer Here"

4. Ibid., 266.
5. Stuart Hall's article "Encoding/Decoding" offers 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 (Basingstoke: Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1980), 129-50.

7. Although the idea 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 discourse as rather closely defined around rigid gender roles, exclusive opposite sex desires, and such cultural and ideological institutions as marriage, "legitimate" child-bearing and rearing, and the nuclear, patriarchal family. And all of this has been placed in binary opposition to "homosexuality" or "queerness." However, if we consider the notion of "queerness" in relation to the terms of the still-contested erotic origins of binary 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 directly from the demands of strict straight/heterosexual paradigms (however they are defined in a given time and place) that most often derive and describe our sexualized and gendered pleasures and positions in relation to movies, television, video, and popular music. Indeed, many so-called straight mass culture texts encourage "deviant" and/or gendered responses and pleasures in straight viewers.


10. While I use the term "regression" here in relation to queerness and mass culture, I don't want to make conventional psychoanalytic and popular ideas about queerness as a permanently institutionalized stage past which heterosexuals somehow progress.
11. In "On Becoming a Lesbian Reader," Sexy Dynamic: Sexuality and Popular Fiction, ed. Susanah Radstone (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), Alison Helms offers many incisive examples of the complex workings of gender in the construction of queer identities and cultural representations, as well as indicating the congealing between sexual identity formation and reading cultural texts. Speaking of her adolescence, Helms notes: "That I turned to ancient Greece seems so an anomaly. If there's one thing every woman knows about the Greeks it's that they were all Thetis. . . . That woman's voice was virulently white, but a few passages of erotic lyric poetry and the occasional verbal transcript from a court historian did not then worry me. What I was looking for were strong and passionate emotions which found human beings to numbers of their own sex rather than to the other. That the gods depicted supplied primarily between men didn't matter. In fact this was because I spent at least half my adolescence 'being made' inside my own
head ‘gender identity confusion’ in today’s terminology, or ‘male identified,’ but nei-
ther phrase is right or adequate. I never for a moment thought I was a man or wished to be. But somehow I had to find a way of thinking of myself which included the possibility of desiring women. And those who desire women are men.” p. 170.


13. Ibid. 3.

14. Ibid., 8, 12.

15. Some gay men will prefer the term ‘feminine’ or ‘woman identified’ when I use ‘Sensor’ in this section, still throughout the text. I find the former term still too closely connected to estranged ideas which socially trivialize and trash women and gay men, while the latter term might appeal to those gay men in the position of essentializing theoretical transcendals. Where I use ‘feminine’ in this book, it should be understood as describing culturally dictated heteronormative ideas about gay and gender (which queers might also employ).

16. Although most of these performances have an international gay following, this list is rather Anglo-American. To begin to expand it, one would add names like Zed Luftler (Germany), Mia Miranda (Italy), Dulces del Rio, Maria Felix, 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) gay men and women stars, much more needs to be done. Television series cited in this section: Designed Women (1990-present), CBS, The Golden Girls (1981-92, NBC), Mighty Women (1989-present, CBS), The Mary Tyler Moore Show (1970-77, CBS).


berg, N.Y.: Crown Forum, 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 heroines who got the girls. Since I came out, however, my identifications have changed. Now I say, ‘No, no, not him!’ at the heroine and rest for her female roommate. What a difference a decade (or two) makes!” (p. 57).


When I say certain mainstream films elicit a “wide range of queer responses” than films made by, for, or about lesbians, gays, and biocisuals, I am not commenting upon the politics of these films or their reception, only about the multiplicity of queer responses. 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 radical or atavistic than that of mainstream films.

23. The strength of the Movie-Lesb-Queer-Dandy 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 Theater in Hollywood.


26. Ibid. 36.

27. In the revised edition of The Hollywood Musical (London: BFI/Macmillan, forthcoming). June Rehr has added a brief section focusing on MGM’s Fred Unit and Judy Garland which covers many of the main points mentioned in this chapter, referring to both production and queer cultural contexts. Mentioned in Fuerth’s discus-

28. Richard Dryer’s chapter “Judy Garland and Gay Men,” in Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 141-64, is an exami-
play analysis of how and why queers and queer cultures read and, in certain ways, help to create queer personas.


35. In The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), Vito Russo compares material on Sissies in the film's production history to reveal that the scenes between Kelly and O'Connor were referred to in the original script. "One line of dialogue in Betty Comolli and Adolph Green's screenplay for Sissies (1950) which was presented in the script because it gave a hint of sexual perversion" between Donald O'Connor and Frank Kelly. When O'Connor sees the idea of sharing the same space of Debbie Reynolds for the high-pitched, trilly voice of Joan Hagen in a proposed musical, The Dancing Cavalier, he illustrates his idea for Kelly by standing in front of Reynolds and mouthing the words "Good Morning" while she sings behind him. When the song is over, O'Connor turns to Kelly and asks 'What was that on Joan?" Kelly, not yet catching on, takes it as a joke and replies, "I'll teach you! What are you doing later?" The joke was eliminated." (pp. 90-99).


37. Films cited: Sing Out (1952, Warners, David Butler). Some lesbians also take what they would describe as a gay pleasure in musicals, and perfect 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 approaches might take the form of specific star cult enforcements (for Judy Garland, Barbra Streisand, or Betty White), for example, that individual lesbian readers feel aren't important in lesbian culture, or as an appreciation for certain aesthetic or critical approaches (camp, for example) which seem unpopular, imperious, or not "politically correct" in the lesbian culture within which the individual reader places herself.

2. Whose Text Is It Anyway?


2. In his interview with Beate Haddig in Co-existing with My Elders (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), Cukor asks, "What calling a homosexual?" (p. 138). Except where the material in this chapter refers directly to Cukor’s sexual self-definition, however, I will use the term "gay" to refer to Cukor’s homosexuality, although I still want to acknowledge the importance of being precise about historical and cultural differences in individual and group definitions of homosexuality, progress, lesbianism, bisexuality, and heterosexuality.

3. Implicitly in Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), and explicitly in "Believing in Faeries: The Author and the Homosexual," in Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 185–201, Richard Dyer says for the political and theoretical value of rethinking certain notions of authorship in discussing lesbian and gay filmmaking. While acknowledging the importance of individual and group readers in reestablishing queer cultural interpretive practices, Dyer’s work is centered upon examining production practice and context. Of particular interest to Dyer is how and where notions of authorship (as a site of multiple authors "with varying degrees of hierarchy and co-authorship") and homosexuality (as "a culturally and historically specific phenomenon") might be applied to formulate a more precise and nuanced understanding of films made by and for lesbians and gay people (p. 187).


7. The association of certain Hollywood stars with lesbian culture appears to be international. For example, a scene in the Japanese film Early Summer (1951, Shochiku, Yasujirō Ozu) has Narkis, the central character, being discussed by her lovers and her best friend. When the friend mentions that Narkis likes Katharine Hepburn, the lover matter-of-factly asks if Narkis is a lesbian.

8. Marcia Auers, "Greta Garbo’s ‘Mysterious’ Private Life," 177/3, 23 (Fall 1998); 25. For another angle on lesbian star cults, see Victoria A. Brownworth’s "The Aunt Another Soupsick" culture in The PUF (Philadelphia: GAY New, no. 34 [June 19–25, 1992], 43. Brownworth uses the presence of Aliai, no, 22, Twentieth Century-Fox, David Fincher) as a reason to discuss what she finds problematic about how certain mass culture images: "Now I know that the is treasured amongst most feminists who see Sapphire/Waver... and her ‘Aunt’ character, especially, in leading ladies, but you girls need to get over these straight women and find some nice real-life role models to dress up as... The trouble is this fascination becomes so pathologized, the great pretenders, the women who will just don’t kiss, the lesbian women’s—Oh, yes we held this terrible attachment to Katharine Hepburn. Now that she’s nearly dead we can adjust to the fact that she was a woman, other than herself and always has. She may have played a few cross-dresses, but the never one in real life."

9. Of course, this is not to say no gay men haven’t made use of the knowledge of Aliai’s lethargy in conducting readings of her films, so that no readers haven’t done the same with Cukor’s "homosexuality" and his films. Here I am discussing more general trends in lesbian and gay cultural reading practices.


11. Dry Kinsey only combines mass-academic discussions, "British on the street," interviews, and cleverly edited clips from films such as The Great Lie (1941, Warner, Edward G. Robinson, Ingrid Bergman), The Man with the Golden Arm (1955, John Cassavetes), and The Hustler (1980, MCA, Tony Scott) to reveal the variety and complexity of lesbian culture’s formations with mass culture. Throughout the video, Cotkin and Brooks suggest readings of films (including Arzner’s Christopher Stang that concentrate on lesbian culture and lesbian readers apart from any aesthetic influences. Overall, the video implies that mass-culture blacklisted authorship in mass culture is conducted without perspective in directors or even in stars, but rather is achieved by performing "powerless readings" articulating a mix of "consciousness," "covert narratives," or "homosocial subtexts" through "searching out the plot, the configuration, the conversational language of the woman character," and looking for "disunities" of the (masculine) plot. However, these lesbian reading practices are very much like the interpretive practices of certain assuming (more discussed later in this section) who read films "obliquely." looking for "twists" and "evasions" in a text’s "apparent formal coherence," which they would then attribute to a particular director’s work on the project.