

CHAPTER ONE



Constructing Straightness

One may argue that, in contemporary cinema, visions of heterotopia no longer command the central portion of the narrative, which is now subsumed by unceasing violence and spectacle, the triumph of the disintegrated cyberbody over the reign of the idealized heterosexual couple. Recent television sitcoms, such as *Roseanne* and *Married . . . with Children*, have presented the family unit as a source of self-reflexive irony or a ghastly caricature. Today, when a “conventional” two-parent, two-children marriage is presented in contemporary cinema or television, it is almost always as a cynical joke; no one lives that way anymore. *Titanic* (1997) offers us Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio as the nominal love interests, but the real narrative is the spectacle of the foredoomed *Titanic* breaking up—the pornography of death. Martha Stewart marketed heterotopia as an empire (Martha Stewart Omnimedia) even as her own family unit imploded; Madonna has children but seems singularly detached from domesticity, despite her recent marriage to director Guy Ritchie; Rosie O’Donnell is a single mother who openly rejects the heterosexually based family model.

The era that produced *My Three Sons*, *I Love Lucy*, *Eight Is Enough*, *I Married Joan*, and *Bachelor Father* has been replaced with one that portrays stylish dysfunctionality in *Judging Amy*, *Sex and the City*, *The Sopranos*, and other teleseries that articulate what has become more than obvious: the heterosexually based model, though still desperately advertised in

Notting Hill (1999), *Miss Congeniality* (2000), *Say Anything* (1989), *While You Were Sleeping* (1995), and other mainstream films, is crumbling beneath the weight of its own imagistic prison. Indeed, one might well argue that the contemporary fascination with the serial killer has replaced audience interest in the conventional love story, with films like *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Se7en* (1995), *Kalifornia* (1993), and *Natural Born Killers* (1994) dominating the contemporary landscape. In this wilderness of pain, the heterosexual couple that *does* stay together is treated as a curiosity rather than as a commonplace. When, on *Sex and the City*, one of the protagonists gets married, the marriage turns out to be a sham: her partner is impotent. Families collapse in front of our eyes on *The Jerry Springer Show*; the “highlights” of the social implosions are then recycled on *Talk Soup*. JonBenét Ramsey’s murder brings to the public’s attention the spectacle of the overtly sexualized young girl, paraded through an endless grind of infant “beauty pageants” as a grim rehearsal for the performative arena of adult heterosexuality. It is now disaster rather than visions of heterosexual couplehood that compels audiences. The list is endless: Phil Hartman, murdered by his wife, Brynn, in 1998; John Belushi, dead of a drug overdose in 1982; the 380-pound, thirty-three-year-old Chris Farley, the Fatty Arbuckle of the 1990s, also dead of a drug overdose; Garrett Morris, shot by a gunman during a robbery in 1994; James Dean, Jayne Mansfield, Montgomery Clift, and Grace Kelly, all involved in fatal or near-fatal car crashes; Marvin Gaye, shot by his father; Kurt Cobain, dead by shotgun suicide on 7 April 1994; Latina pop star Selena, shot by a fan in 1995; Buddy Holly, Rick Nelson, and John Denver, all killed in plane crashes; television’s Superman, George Reeves, dead from a mysterious gunshot wound in 1959; Natalie Wood, Freddie Prinze, Sr., Rebecca Schaeffer, David Strickland, John Candy, Sharon Tate, all dead through accident, violence, or misfortune; Rock Hudson, Amanda Blake, Raymond St. Jacques, Ray Sharkey, Tony Richardson, Robert Reed, Peter Allen, Liberace, and Tony Perkins, all victims of AIDS. The sad litany of tabloid fodder goes on and on, enthraling audiences who feel that, because misfortune befalls others, they will no longer be at risk. It is proof of their own existence, their continued survival. “Happily ever after” has become an ironic catch phrase, an unattainable state of grace.

Consider Tom Green and Drew Barrymore. Tom Green created a statue of his mother and father having sex and put it on the front lawn of

his parents' home. Despite his father's anger, he subsequently spray-painted the hood of his parents' car with an image of two women making love. When Green was diagnosed with testicular cancer, it became the "hook" for an hour-long television special during which, perversely, we were allowed to see in clinical detail the surgery removing Green's cancerous testicle (we were denied, however, the opportunity to view a diagnostic procedure that detects testicular cancer in young men at an early stage of its progression). When Green and Drew Barrymore got married, they staged the ceremony as a publicity stunt on *Saturday Night Live*; Barrymore failed to appear. Subsequently, the couple were married in a private ceremony. *We think*. Green and Barrymore's courtship is thus a heterotopic parody of the notion of the traditional "married couple." In love, as in all other matters, they are *actors* first. Green relentlessly mines his own personal life, and the lives of those around him, for new material. He even wrote, produced, directed, and starred in *Freddie Got Fingered* (2001), a semiautobiographical feature film starring the always-game Rip Torn as his overbearing fictional father.

Nostalgia pervades not only *That '70s Show*, but also such films as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *U-571* (2000), and the teleseries *Band of Brothers*—anything to avoid the present. World War II, particularly, has become a safe haven for those who would seek to escape contemporary life; it has been transmogrified into a zone of heroes, martyrs, larger-than-life conflicts, and heterosexual romance. Vietnam remains contested ground, as such films as *Apocalypse Now* (1979, revised 2001), *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *The Walking Dead* (1995), and *The Green Berets* (1968) readily attest, but the dim presence of World War II can be reshaped at will to fit present-day marketing concerns. David Germain of the Associated Press reported on 22 May 2001, two days before the release of Michael Bay's *Pearl Harbor*, that

The war spectacle "Pearl Harbor" will play in slightly revised form in Japan and Germany, where some dialogue is being tweaked to avoid offending audiences.

Disney, which is releasing the film under its Touchstone Pictures banner, decided to alter some dialogue for the Japanese and German markets, said a Disney source, who spoke on condition of anonymity. . . .

Though the film recounts Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Disney hopes the movie will play well among Japanese audiences because of the love story at the heart of the film. (Germain)

Pearl Harbor, then, really is not about the attack on the Hawaiian naval base at all; it is the story of a romantic triangle that plays out with the attack as a backdrop. *Pearl Harbor* represents a nostalgic throwback to heterocentric World War II movies, but it is a hybrid. Here the romantic triangle competes with the spectacle of violence that audiences have come to expect. This hybrid spectacle-romance also differs from the films of the 1940s because it must play well in foreign markets. Desperate to please an older generation that still believes in heterocentrism and nationalism, a younger audience that is cynical of older values (even if they are nostalgic for them), not to mention myriad international audiences seeking an American product rife with violence and romance, *Pearl Harbor* hybridizes values of the past with the spectacle of the postmodern present. Disregard the realities of the situation if need be; one must, no matter what cuts are necessary, deliver the foreign market. As we redouble our colonial efforts on an actual scale in American foreign policy, we now repeat them on an imagistic scale in the zone of commerce. We can deliver whatever kind of World War II the customers require, particularly to our former enemies.

Furthermore, we will do it in such a way that our copyright on the material is faithfully perceived. Films were once released seasonally around the globe in distribution waves, gradually making their way through all potential markets. In the digital era, an age of instant piracy, films are now simultaneously or nearly simultaneously released in all territories to forestall the efforts of those who would seek illegally to appropriate Hollywood's vision. Beyond theatrical release, when films are recycled as DVDs after their initial run, they are produced as DVDs in rigid "coding" patterns to preserve the territorial integrity of the product being distributed. There are six DVD zones, or regions, as they are known: region one is the United States and Canada; region two is Western Europe and Japan; region three is Southeast Asia; region four is Latin America and Australia; region five is Russia, the rest of Asia, and Africa; and region six belongs solely to China. The racism of this coding system is immediately obvious: while American and Canadian audiences are assured immediate access to newly released films on DVD, a citizen of any country in Africa will have to wait up to a year to see a DVD coded for release in her or his country alone, because movies from region one (USA and Canada) will not play on a DVD player for regions two to six. Region one discs will play only on region one DVD players, region two discs will play only

on region two DVD players, and so on. Movies are released in DVD format at different times around the world, with America and Canada typically getting first access, then Australia and Japan six months later, Europe twelve months after the initial release, and Africa eighteen months to two years later. In some instances, movies are available for purchase in America and Canada as DVDs before they are released in European cinemas. Due to the easily copied digital quality of DVDs and to the movie release system used by Hollywood, these six regions were established to prevent people from watching region one movies before they were released in regions two to six, thus keeping a firm grip on the international video rental and sales market. Certain filmmakers, in particular George Lucas, have refused to release their films on DVD because the image and sound quality is such that bootleg clones can be made at will. Indeed, one of the attractions of digital technology is that every copy is as good as the original; thus, the term *original* becomes relatively meaningless. For this reason, Hollywood argues, the marketing of and access to DVDs has to be strictly monitored, and if Third World countries are the last to be considered, one can say that this is just another echo effect of the heterocentrism and racism pervading Hollywood cinema as a whole. Just as the makers of *Pearl Harbor* seem desperate to update and reaffirm crumbling heterocentric master narratives, distributors, in the face of globalism, seem desperate to control fragmenting yet expanding markets.

The trading of images and sounds over the Web has exploded in the first years of the new century, followed by a flurry of lawsuits. Napster has been effectively neutralized; Scour, a Los Angeles-based service that allowed its users to trade “music and movies over the Internet” (Richtel B4), was also forced to change its original access policies. One can, of course, access theatrical trailers (heavily encrypted) over the Internet, but the initial wave of free access available on the Web in the mid to late 1990s is now instead a series of strictly protected commercial access sites, which provide consumers with less information each day at higher cost. Advertisements, once rare on the Web, have become ubiquitous.

Even formerly ad-free print zones have been invaded by advertisers eager to target every possible segment of the market. As James MacKinnon notes,

In March, for the first time in almost 50 years, *Mad* magazine ran ads. Announcing the change with a cutesy disclaimer, the new owners at

AOL-Time Warner jumped over the dead body of founder Bill Gaines and decided the crucial . . . demographic was too good to pass up. *Mad* always sold junk, but only *Mad* junk. Now it's selling its readers—to the people who make corn nuts, PlayStation, CDs and Cheez Whiz. (84)

Indeed, *Mad*, first as a comic book and later as a black-and-white newsstand magazine, was one of the few media voices in the 1950s openly to challenge McCarthyism, rampant consumerism, Hollywood excess, and the general vulgarity and shallowness of American culture. *Mad* also consistently critiqued the heterotopic ideal of marriage and the supposedly normative values of heterosexual conduct. Who will critique these concepts in the new century? The increasing multiconglomeratization of all aspects of print, television, cable, and film media makes it even more unlikely that dissenting voices will be tolerated, or even allowed to exist. In a marketplace where ideas and images are controlled almost solely by a few major companies, with hundreds of millions of dollars riding on every roll of the entertainment dice, criticism can no longer be permitted. Cross-plugging of films and books by television, radio, print ads, Web banner ads, direct mail, “spam” e-mail, and other avenues is now so routine as to create a new, artificial coherence out of the product being marketed. Movies are no longer individual entities; they are marketing events.

Just as films are marketed for a heterosexual audience, so too are the stars that appear in these films. Matthew Modine, Nicole Kidman, Ben Stiller, Drew Barrymore, and numerous other contemporary actors must conform to rigidly constructed body and facial “typings” to attain and maintain stardom. Wardrobes are carefully selected, hair is coifed to perfection, and publicity photographs are constructed under the most scrupulous supervision. Those who cross the meticulously crafted gender “drag” line do so at their peril. Tony Perkins was forever typecast as Norman Bates after his cross-dressing performance in *Psycho* (1960). Yet another, more phantasmal figure, represents a significant force in the rupture of sexual dress and performance stereotypes.

In 1961, inspired by the success of Alfred Hitchcock's film, William Castle (and his scenarist, Robb White) created the peculiar and disturbing film *Homicidal*. The plot of the film is predictably complex, but the central point of my argument here is that two of the leading characters, Emily (a woman) and Warren (a man) are both played by Jean Arless, a woman in real life. Throughout much of the film, Emily has center stage



FIGURE 1. *Left to right:* Patricia Breslin, Eugenie Leontovich, and Jean Arless as Emily in a dystopian family scene from William Castle's *Homicidal*. Courtesy: Jerry Ohlinger Archives.

as a rampaging, psychotic, bleached-blond murderer, who kills without compunction. Warren, on the other hand, is presented as a reasonable if somewhat unattractive young man, whom everyone in the film's narrative accepts as male. During the climax, Warren lures a young woman into a deserted house at night and then ritually disrobes, removing the men's clothing she has worn through most of the film and revealing herself as the scripted construct of Emily. Up until this point in the narrative, Castle and Robb have skillfully withheld the information about Arless's double role from both the audience and the characters in the film, so Arless's abandonment of her transgendered performative role comes as a shock to both the audience and the film's other protagonists. "Now do you know me?" Warren/Emily asks his intended victim, Miriam (Patricia Breslin), speaking in a man's voice while clothed in a white chiffon dress. As Miriam looks on in horror, Warren/Emily inserts a set of false front teeth in her mouth and removes her wig with deliberate accuracy. "Now . . . ?" he/she questions Miriam again. Unable to believe the spectacle she is witnessing, Miriam screams with horror as the male/female construct of Warren/Emily moves in for the kill and attempts to stab Miriam to death with a stiletto. Naturally, Miriam's fiancé, Karl (Glenn Corbett) saves her at the last minute, and Warren/Emily dies in the ensuing struggle. Yet what makes *Homicidal* so compelling today is its careful rehearsal and construction of performative body tropes adopted by Jean Arless in her portrayal of Warren; dressed in a business suit, with tie and suspenders, hands habitually thrust into trouser pockets, Warren is every bit the assured and aggressive masculine stereotype so ubiquitous in the heterocentric cinema of the 1900s to the present. As Emily, clad in a white gown—complete with gloves—flirting with Karl and warming milk in a saucepan for her paralyzed caregiver (a neat switch in itself), Arless projects the servitude and "femme" persona of a Donna Reed or a Jane Wyatt, the homemaker with murder in her heart.

Above all, *Homicidal* is about repression: Emily is forced to conceal her true identity in the character of Warren, who is seen as an icon of stability through much of the film. Warren asks Miriam at one point in the film, "What do we really know about anybody?"—implicitly acknowledging the duality of his/her identity and the intrinsic slippage of gendered performative norms. At the same time, Warren contains the murderous violence of Emily, let out of the prison of male drag to perform acts of violence, so that Warren can inherit a fortune from his dead father.



FIGURE 2. “What do we really know about anybody?”: Glenn Corbett, Patricia Breslin, and Jean Arless as Warren in William Castle’s *Homicidal*. Courtesy: Jerry Ohlinger Archives.

As we learn more about Warren/Emily's childhood, we discover that as Warren, the young "boy" was viciously beaten by his father to make him "more of a man," until the father died. Warren left for an extended stay in Sweden and then returned to claim the family fortune with the newly created Emily persona as his assistant. Castle manages to carry off this gender-bending deception seamlessly for eighty-two of the film's eighty-seven-minute running time, and indeed, just as Miriam is about to enter the house at the film's climax to be confronted by Warren/Emily, Castle, for the only time in the film, adopts a first-person point of view so that both the audience and Miriam enter the house together. To further call attention to the nature of the gender rupture about to be unveiled, Castle momentarily freezes the image just as we are about to enter the house and superimposes the image of a clock ticking off sixty seconds (accompanied by the sound of an amplified heartbeat), while warning the audience in a stentorian voice-over that this is their "last chance" to leave before the secret of Warren/Emily's double identity (which we do not yet know) is revealed. "Ten more seconds, and we're going into the house," Castle warns the viewer. As the seconds run out, Castle tells the viewers that they are "a brave audience" and picks up the tracking shot, taking us into the house to meet Warren in drag, or Emily in drag, with knife poised; but which is it? In the film's final shot, Castle splits the screen and presents the viewer with Warren on the left, immaculately dressed in male attire, and Emily on the right, the perfect vision of 1950s performative femininity. A superimposed title reads only "Introducing Jean Arless," so even though the film's narrative has properly concluded, the question of Arless's gender remains in flux.

In fact, Jean Arless is itself a pseudonym for Joan Marshall (1931–92), whose other films include *Shampoo* (1975), *The Horse in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1968), *Tammy and the Doctor* (1963), *Looking for Love* (1964), and *Live Fast, Die Young* (1958). Joan Marshall was also a frequent guest in numerous teleseries of the 1950s and 1960s, including *Star Trek*, *Petticoat Junction*, *The Munsters*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Hawaiian Eye*, and *Maverick*. Married for a time to director Hal Ashby, who directed *Shampoo*, Joan Marshall also wrote sitcoms, appeared on television variety shows, and worked as a showgirl at nightclubs in the 1950s in both Chicago and Las Vegas. After Ashby's death in 1988, Joan married business executive Mel Bartfield and eventually moved to Jamaica, where she spent her last days. Only thirty years old when she appeared in *Homici-*

dal, Joan Marshall/Jean Arless agreed to do the role only if her true identity, along with her sexual identity, remained a secret, and for someone accustomed to accessorizing her body as a Las Vegas performer, her performative drag act in *Homicidal* was apparently fairly easy.

Tony Perkins, a bisexual man, was forced to reprise his role as Norman Bates in a series of increasingly dreary sequels (1983, 1986, 1990), and he never really escaped the iconic straitjacket of the role. Jean Arless, however, along with her roles as Warren and Emily, effectively vanished with the last frames of *Homicidal*. Joan Marshall thus remains one of the most curious and compelling examples of heterosexual performativity in cinema. She created a new persona for herself as an actor solely for one film, and then constructed two characters of different sexes within that same film; all of them would disappear once filming had been completed. As a symbol of performative sexual division within the hermetically sealed world of late 1950s-early 1960s heterosexuality, Marshall's triple personality transformation is simultaneously disturbing and instructive: all is drag, even one's personal identity.

Yet the construction of Jean Arless as a site of heterosexual dis-ease pales in comparison to a new, entirely synthetic group of performers who are created entirely out of pixels. Requiring hundreds of hours of time plotting points on a computer screen, these are the virtual actors of the future.

Dr. Aki Ross, the young female protagonist of *Final Fantasy*, Columbia Pictures' new science-fiction epic, has the sinewy efficiency of Sigourney Weaver in *Alien* and the curves of Julia Roberts in *Erin Brockovich*. . . . That achievement is remarkable considering that Aki is no more than a computer animation. . . . Last month, Aki edged out dozens of real-life models and starlets to become the cover girl on Maxim's "Hot 100." . . . The same computer wizards who rendered her digitally in the estimated \$100 million *Final Fantasy* stripped her down to a string bikini for Maxim.

Then there is Webbie Tookay, the latest lithesome discovery of John Casablancas, the founder of Elite Model Management, which shaped the careers of Cindy Crawford and Naomi Campbell. Webbie exists only in cyberspace, the creation of a Swedish animator named Steven Stahlberg, but that didn't hinder her from posing for a feature in *Details* in October, 1999, and a new Nokia phone advertising campaign in Latin America.

"Webbie can eat nothing and keep her curves," boasted Mr. Casablancas, who left Elite and founded Illusion 2K, an agency dedicated to representing

virtual models. "She can be on time, or in two places at one time, and you know she will never get a pimple or ask for a raise. Sometimes I wish all models were virtual." . . . "Think of Madonna or Michael Jackson," said Marsha Kinder, a professor of critical studies at the University of Southern California. "What's so distinctive about these stars is the malleability of their image. They are constantly reinventing themselves in a way that makes them seem like virtual figures. We even talk about them as though they were virtual, and why not? In our postmodern culture, a simulacrum is not only acceptable, it is preferable."

"People are fine with fake now," said Andrew Niccol, the writer, director and producer of *Simone*, a movie-in-progress, due out from New Line Cinema next fall[;] . . . the film's story line seems prescient: a virtual star replaces the leading lady (Winona Ryder) after she stalks off the set.

"Very soon we will be able to turn on our television sets and not know if the presenter is fake or real," Mr. Niccol said, "and frankly we won't care." (LaFerla B8)

Needless to say, these new synthetic performers will be absolutely "perfect" in their bodily proportions. They will be fantasy projections designed to appeal to men and women in a directly sexual manner. Not only is the heterosexual orientation of Webbie Tookay and Aki Ross a construct of their perceived social space, the synthespians themselves have been created to embody sites of heterosexual desire, without risk, imperfection, or involvement. It is the logical extension of the men's magazine pullout photo, once airbrushed to perfection; how unsightly bulges are eliminated through the use of Photoshop and other computer graphics programs. Why should one work from an imperfect original when sculpted, packaged, sterile "beauty" is so easily manufactured? With these new computer images of idealized heterotopia as a guide, more and more conventional performers, and viewers, will seek to trade in their human flaws for the body shaping offered by plastic surgery.

Already there is a public outcry over the artificial thinness of female performers, in particular, who must constantly maintain absurdly draconian diets to keep their weight to an absolute minimum. With a new, impossibly idealized standard to live up to, how can humans hope to compete? Even now, actual human models are being "cloned" in cybernetic doubles, so that their images can do double duty in multiple print and Internet ads. John Casablanco of Elite Model Management

recently “cloned” the model Tatiana Rossi, christening her cyberdouble Adrenalina. He envisions the clone alternating with Ms. Rossi to endorse products on the Internet, in print and in public appearances, the last as a projection on a movie screen. “Through this type of manipulation we’re going to completely confuse people,” he said. . . . But the cyberbabe’s extreme malleability has raised the ire of feminists. Virtual females are “the postmodern equivalent of a mail-order bride,” scoffed Suzanna Walters, director of the feminist studies program at Georgetown University. “They are compliant creatures created for one’s pleasure, another example of the female as object,” and, worse, Ms. Walters suggested, an ideal that real women cannot hope to emulate. (LaFerla B8)

These plastic spokesphantoms, created to appeal to the heterosexual male consumer-viewer, remind one of the artificial perfection posited by Thorstein Veblen. Veblen commented that the effects generated by these heterosexually based images “are pleasing to us chiefly because we have been taught to find them pleasing[;] . . . if beauty or comfort [are] achieved . . . they must be achieved by means and methods that commend themselves to the great economic law of wasted effort” (51). These are the images the young boys and girls have been force-fed since childhood in an avalanche of artificial desire and objectificational constructs culled from television advertisements, print ads, magazine spreads, Internet sites, theatrical motion pictures, and other sources, cuing heterosexuals to respond to certain body types, hairstyles, and facial expressions that simultaneously suggest malleability and vacancy of spirit. We have been taught to find these fantasy females pleasing, and rather than challenge these stereotypes, Hollywood and its allies seek to perpetuate feminine (and masculine) objectification even at the cost of discarding the real. Indeed, one can argue that this has been their ambition all along; they only lacked the technology to do it. There is also no question that these phantom pitchwomen conform to Veblen’s dictum that “they must be achieved by means and methods that commend themselves to the great economic law of wasted effort.”

What could be more wasteful than the production of a commercial or a print ad? Ten hours to achieve one close-up of an eye. Body doubles hired for their hands, feet, or breasts. Food, clothing, cars, leisure activities all presented in images that take thousands of hours and miles of videotape and/or film to capture. If the average ratio of a conventional feature film is seven or eight to one (meaning seven or eight wasted minutes for each

minute on the screen), commercials push this ratio into the range of one hundred to one, or even higher, because, no matter how much material and time is expended in the pursuit of these fleeting images, they must, if they are to be effective sales tools, be “perfect.” As Hollywood budgets routinely balloon into the eighty- to one-hundred-million-dollar range for large-scale action features, we should remember that, in terms of money expended per second, commercials cost on the average twenty times as much as films to produce. The end result is ten seconds of film, or thirty seconds, but the terrific waste that goes into the creation of these snippets of images is justified by their sheer visual extravagance. To commodify leisure and desire, much less to conflate them into one marketable unit, requires a prodigious squandering of time, material, and human resources. Now, however, we can do it without the human element. We only need the computer technicians, who will labor in the dark, day after day, to bring these artificial arbiters of heterosexual desire into the contemporary imagistic marketplace. And their labor is cheap—interns will work for practically nothing, convinced that, by mastering the tools of simulacrum production, they will assure themselves a place in the new cybernetic economy, where on-screen talent is at last (the revenge of the producers) dispensable. Will we really recognize the difference? The technology is still relatively crude at the present moment, but six months from now? three years from now? Who can say that the synthesians will not replace the humans in the zone of entertainment and commerce that is the moving image in the dawn of the twenty-first century?

While pioneering Internet movie sites (such as Icebox, IFilm, Pop, Shockwave, Mediatrip, and Wirebreak), burned through millions of dollars in start-up capital and have been forced to reconfigure their business plans to survive in a media landscape that no longer finds the Web as alluring as an entertainment and/or advertising medium (Grover and Eads EB 126), the Web’s place in the electronic marketplace is assured; it only needs fine-tuning. In addition to trailers, entire feature films, and digital cartoons circulating on the web, there has also been an explosion of live role-playing games that attract men and women alike. These offer the illusion of participation in a constructed hyperreality, available to one and all at a price. As AMC Entertainment, one of the nation’s leading chains of movie theaters, cuts twenty percent of its 2,774 screens nationwide (that’s 548 theaters being abandoned, to become skating rinks, grocery stores, warehouse outlets, or nightclubs) and Loews Cineplex chops

675 of its 2,967 screens because of decreased public demand for a night out at the movies (“AMC”), home video viewing (using TiVo, DVDs, and other nascent technologies), is on the rise. On-line and rental video games are becoming the entertainment medium of choice for many younger viewers. Yet, as Emily Laber found out, men and women want very different types of satisfaction from their gaming experience. *Ultima Online*, for example, has strong appeal for women gamers, and designers of video games are taking note of this new trend away from the standard “shoot ‘em up” strategy of the more primitive games.

“What women are finding so interesting about these games is that they provide a sense of community and social structure that you don’t see in other games,” [says] Patricia Pizer, a lead designer at Turbine Entertainment Software. . . .

Officials at the companies that make the three most popular games [among women]—*Ultima Online*, from Origin Systems; *Asheron’s Call*; and *EverQuest*, from Sony—said they did not design the games with women in mind and have been surprised at the response. (Laber D1)

Not that this would surprise Ernest Adams, a video-game theorist who recently created *Dogme 2001* (after *Dogme 95*, the realist-cinema movement conceived by Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, and other maverick film directors who were seeking to get back to the basics of film production, eschewing spectacle and special effects). Adams’s manifesto consciously forbids the use of numerous popular video-game structures and opens with the simple slogan “technology stifles creativity.” In Adams’s world, there are no “Good-and-Evil battles, first person shooters, technical jargon . . . knights, elves, dwarves or dragons,” or other customary visual tropes typically embraced by the game world (Taylor 13). Men are still entranced by *Doom*, *Quake*, and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, although more thoughtful players use their gaming experience to forge relationships that can potentially extend into the real world. But for all participants, it is the interactivity of the video-game experience rather than the potentially passive escape offered by the dominant cinema that attracts them. Director Atom Egoyan observes that, in the future,

There’s going to be a generation of film students that’s going to look up Antonioni on a Web site and see a clip and read a description without physically sitting through a screening. We were probably the last generation with

the notion of a graven image, where filmmaking and film watching were a very physical thing. If we wanted to understand movies, we had to commit ourselves. We had to be physically in a theater for the two hours that that took. (Rakoff 39)

When film students at Yale recently tried to produce a student feature film, they discovered that the only way they could pique student interest was to make a digital video porn film, so exhausted have conventional narrative structures and genre requirements become. The project grew out of an ad hoc student group of women and men that called itself Porn 'n Chicken; the members met regularly to “eat fried chicken and watch X-rated films” (Herszenhorn A21). Loosely based on the activities of a secret campus society, much like the real-life Skull and Bones, the proposed film generated a great deal of discussion on campus, although the actual production of the film occurred sporadically. Yet the producers of the film stated in their production manifesto that their desire in creating the film, tentatively titled *The StaXXX*, was to endow contemporary pornography with humanity and compassion, qualities notably absent from most commercial fare. Wrote the producers,

Throughout viewing of the pornographic canon . . . we found that most depictions lacked the complexity and aesthetic beauty of the sexual experience as well as the intellectual aspects of seduction. . . . The “action sequences” [will] be conceptualized and scripted in collaboration with the actors themselves, to liberate the film from any sort of preconceived sexual agenda . . . [and] safe sex [will] be the exceptionless rule. . . . At this point, the movie will include heterosexual and homosexual sequences, as well as scenes exploring fetishism, group sex and non-physical intercourse. . . . A female junior who starred in the film’s first scene called the producers serious and respectful. “I figured it was a 50–50 chance that it was a joke,” she said, recalling her initial reaction. “I was pretty impressed with their organization and their professionalism, considering what they were trying to do is create a full-length adult film on a college campus with college kids.”

The woman, who is active in feminist issues on campus, was filmed having sex with a girlfriend. “They were not interested in getting the most hard-core stuff they could find,” she said. “They were interested in college students doing what college students do. They were not going to tell us what they wanted. They were not going to direct that. It was the actors who got to choose.” (Herszenhorn A21)

Thus, in this instance, students are taking back their own sexuality, which has long been the property of marketplace commodifiers, and are creating a group work that depicts their actual sexual orientation, devoid of the standard coupling ritual presented in commercially produced video porn. In moving beyond performative heterosexuality and beyond the artificially created normative values that have been inculcated in audiences for the past one hundred years, the students have used a new, lightweight, inexpensive technology to present their true selves to the world, without patriarchal scripting, without submitting to the power of the male or female gaze. Rather than being designed for the viewer, these films are designed for the participants, in the tradition of most experimental cinema, in which the creators, rather than audience demand, shape the vision of the work in question.

Projects like this Yale film serve as a radical and transgressive counteroffensive to most contemporary television programming, particularly on cable, which seems determined to satiate the (mostly male) viewer with a series of determinedly salacious, sex-themed programs. Home Box Office (HBO) offers *G-String Divas*, documenting the lives of a group of exotic dancers in a “gentlemen’s club”; *Taxicab Confessions*, also on HBO, regales the viewer with oral narratives of sexual encounters and assignations with mind-numbing regularity. As critic A. J. Jacobs comments,

[A]s networks compete with cable, and cable competes with the Internet, and everyone competes with R-rated antics on the big screen, it seems TV has sex on the brain. It’s everywhere. Flip to *Ally McBeal* and see the under-the-knee orgasm trick. Check out *Friends*, where Chandler and Monica have all-day nooky sessions. Drink in Howard Stern’s CBS show, where he slathers mayonnaise and bologna on a woman’s naked tush. Look at MTV’s new series *Undressed*, where, in the first episode, a character snuggles up to a seven-inch vibrator: And sample The WB’s *Dawson’s Creek*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Felicity*, where there’s more deflowering going on than in a badly managed greenhouse. (22–23)

What is happening here is that, at long last, the mainstream television market has closed ranks with those who made exploitation films from the 1910s through the 1970s. Unable to garner a significant audience share by any other means, network and cable executives have embraced sexuality as yet another marketable commodity. Such theatrical exploitation films of the classical theatrical era as *The Big Snatch* (1968),

The Head Mistress (1968), *The Notorious Daughter of Fanny Hill* (1966), *Trader Hornee* (1970), *Primitive Love* (1964), *Striporama* (1954), *Teaserama* (1955), *Varietease* (1954), and *Buxom Beautease* (1956), once relegated to the Forty-second Street grind-house circuit, are now readily available on television, either by channel subscription to HBO, Cinemax, and other pay services or on an individual film-on-demand basis on such cable networks as Spice. On the Playboy channel, a new hit show called *Night Calls 411* is indicative of the new highly sexualized cable programming being offered; as one might expect, the productions are both heterosexist and boringly predictable, as critic Frank Rich observed when invited to view a taping of the program. For both the performers and the viewers of *Night Calls 411*, performative heterosexuality is a readily transparent construct in which the “hosts” of the show interact with the members of their viewing audience as if acting out a fantasy of sexual contact rather than engaging in a personal encounter. As for the “adult” films available on DVD and videocassette from such major producers as VCA Pictures, Wicked Pictures, and other companies, they present a tawdry and ultimately machinelike vision of the body as the site of repetitive performance without passion, reflecting the absence of the body within the frame, or the triumph of the ritual of performative sex over human contact, plot, setting, genre, or stylistic affectation. As Rich notes, “[n]o matter what the period or setting, no matter what the genre, every video comes to the same dead halt as the performers drop whatever characters they’re supposed to be assuming and repeat the same sex acts, in almost exactly the same way, at the same intervals, in every film” (82).

The commodification of sexual desire represented by the commercial (and highly profitable) porn industry is yet another symptom of the collapse of the empire of images created by the dominant Hollywood cinema in the twentieth century. The stars, the plots, the genres fail to satisfy. Each new film is merely an installment in a larger project that will take years, perhaps decades to complete (as in the *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and James Bond film series), with each new episode designed only momentarily to slake audiences’ thirst for a believable, alternative universe, while simultaneously leaving them somehow dissatisfied, hoping for greater spectacle, exasperated with hypernarratives stuffed with action but devoid of humanity or any external human agency. How can we break free of this imagistic prison? Do we wish to? Or have we—both producers and audi-

ences—forgotten how to dream with our eyes open? How did we get to this point in the first years of the new century?

As Jonathan Ned Katz has usefully pointed out, *heterosexuality* itself is a construct of fairly recent origin. In his book *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, Katz notes,

The earliest-known use of the word *heterosexual* in the United States occurs in an article by Dr. James G. Kiernan, published in a Chicago medical journal in May 1892. . . . Dr. Kiernan's article also included the earliest-known U.S. publication of the word *homosexual*. The "pure homosexuals" he cited were persons whose "general mental state is that of the opposite sex." These homosexuals were defined explicitly as gender benders, rebels from proper masculinity and femininity. In contrast, his heterosexuals deviated explicitly from gender, erotic, and procreative norms. In their American debut, the abnormality of heterosexuals appeared to be thrice that of homosexuals. Though Kiernan's article employed the new terms *heterosexual* and *homosexual*, their meaning was ruled by an old, absolute reproductive ideal. His heterosexual described a mixed person and compound urge—at once sex-differentiated, eros-oriented, and reproductive. (Katz 19–20)

Once identified, this new oppositional binary found its most expressive model sheet in the nascent forms of early cinema. Alice Guy Blaché in 1896 created what many consider to be the first film with a narrative, *La Feé aux choux* [*The Cabbage Fairy*]. This charming one-minute film celebrates the birth of a child delivered by the Cabbage Fairy, the French mythological version of the American stork. One could not imagine a more thoroughly heterosexual scenario than this one, and it is significant that throughout much of Blaché's work, both marriage and childbearing are almost ceremonially invoked as symbols of status and sexual role differentiation. Other early pioneers, including Augustin Le Prince, were also creating early filmstrips that captured the performative heterosexualized human body in motion.

Working at approximately the same period, Georges Méliès, William Friese-Greene, Jean Aimé Le Roy, Grey and Otway Latham, Max and Emil Skladanowsky, and other film pioneers all made significant contributions to the emerging medium. It was Louis-Jean Lumière and his brother, Auguste-Marie-Louis-Nicolas Lumière, however, who made the final breakthrough in combining the photographic and projection device into one machine in early 1895. It was patented on 13 February 1895

(Ceram 142–49), and the first Lumière projections took place shortly thereafter. “On December 28, 1895, . . . the first public performance took place—in the Salon Indien of the Grand Café, Boulevard des Capucines 14 in Paris. . . . The admission was a franc. The first day brought in thirty-five francs; within a short time the takings increased to 300 francs per day” (Ceram 149–50).

The commercial future of the Lumières’ device was assured. Birt Acres, an Englishman, patented his own motion picture camera and projection device, dubbed the Kineopticon, in May 1895. Like the Lumières, Acres was quick to exploit the moneymaking aspects of his device. He presented a series of short films to the public starting on 14 January 1896. Some of Acres’s titles, such as *Sea Waves at Dover*, are reminiscent of the pastoral scenes recorded in the Lumière actualities, but other brief subjects, including *The Arrest of a Pickpocket*, seem to anticipate the exploitative vigor of Thomas A. Edison’s later films. Max and Emil Skladanowsky also specialized in street scenes and brief “documentaries” of life in their native Berlin, but they failed to duplicate the Lumières’ commercial success. The first real genius of commercial exploitation, of course, was Thomas Edison, who introduced heterosexual, or sexualized, spectacle into one of his first filmstrips. *Annabelle the Dancer* featured Annabelle Whitford Moore performing an energetic dance in a long flowing gown; the film was hand tinted in various colors for public exhibition. *Annabelle the Dancer* was shown at Koster and Bial’s Music Hall in New York City on 23 April 1896, the first public projection of Edison’s kineoscopic films using Thomas Armat’s device, the Vitascope. Edison had intended his films to be peep-show entertainments but soon changed his mind as he saw the commercial potential of projected motion pictures.

Indeed, one can argue that of all the early film pioneers, it was Edison and his associates who most clearly saw the profit potential of the new medium. Even early Edison films, like *Blacksmithing Scene* (1893) and *Horse Shoeing* (1893) were consciously staged events, not actualities of real events taken in the field. Edison’s troupe of actors and technicians thus set about recreating the staged verisimilitude of existence, using a variety of spatial and visual tropes to achieve their goal. In such films as *The Barber Shop* (1893) and *Sandow* (1894), Edison designed hermetically sealed spaces to contain the human body and to draw the viewer’s attention to it as a fetishized object. The most notable examples of this tendency to eroticize the human corpus within a rigidly stylized setting