

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 Genet¹

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

*"The Queer Song,"
Gretchen Phillips, *Two Nice Girls*²*

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?³

In confronting this complexity, Radway suggests that mass culture 1

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.⁴ 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.⁵ Before proceeding, however, I will need to discuss—even defend—my use of “queer” in such phrases as “queer positions,” “queer readers,” “queer readings,” and “queer discourses.” In working through my thoughts on gay and lesbian cultural history, I found that while I used “gay” to describe particulars of men’s culture, and “lesbian” to describe particulars of women’s culture, I was hard-pressed to find a term to describe a cultural common ground between lesbians and gays as well as other nonstraights—a term representing unity as well as suggesting diversity. For certain historical and political reasons, “queer” suggested itself as such a term. As Adele Morrison said in an OUT/LOOK interview: “Queer is not an ‘instead of,’ it’s an ‘inclusive of.’ I’d never want to lose the terms that specifically identify me.”⁶

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

My uses of the terms “queer readings,” “queer discourses,” and “queer positions,” then, are attempts to account for the existence and expression of a wide range of positions within culture that are “queer” or non-, anti-, or contra-straight.⁷ 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.⁸ As such, this cultural “queer space” recognizes the possibility that various and fluctuating queer positions might be occupied whenever *anyone* produces or responds to culture. In this sense, the use of the term “queer” to discuss reception takes up the standard binary opposition of “queer” and “nonqueer” (or “straight”) while questioning its viability, at least in cultural studies, because, as noted earlier, the queer often operates within the nonqueer, as the nonqueer does within the queer (whether in reception, texts, or producers). The queer readings of mass culture I am concerned with in this essay will be those readings articulating positions *within* queer discourses. That is, these readings seem to be expressions of queer perspectives on mass culture from the inside, rather than descriptions of how “they” (gays and/or lesbians, usually) respond to, use, or are depicted in mass culture.

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

position that can be and is occupied in various ways by otherwise heterosexual and straight-identifying people.

But in another sense recapturing and reasserting a certain nostalgia and romance is part of my project here. For through playfully occupying various queer positions in relation to the fantasy/dream elements involved in cultural production and reception, we (whether straight-, gay-, lesbian-, or bi-identifying) are offered spaces to express a range of erotic desire frequently linked in Western cultures to nostalgic and romantic adult conceptions of childhood. Unfortunately, these moments of erotic complexity are usually explained away as part of the “regressive” work of mass media, whereby we are tricked into certain “unacceptable” and “immature” responses as passive subjects. But when cultural texts encourage straight-identified audience members to express a less-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 queerly 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 feminist, gay, and lesbian theorizing becomes difficult within languages and cultures that make gender and gender difference so crucial to their discursive practices. Through her discussions of vampire myths, Case works hard to establish a discourse

that avoids gendered terms, yet she finds it necessary to resort to them every so often in order to suggest the queerness of certain things: placing "she" in quotation marks at one point, or discussing R. W. Fassbinder's film character Petra von Kant as "a truly queer creature who flickers somewhere between haute couture butch lesbian and male drag queen."¹⁴

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"¹⁵ 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, Marlene Dietrich, Vivien Leigh, Bette Midler, Glenda Jackson), popular music (Midler, Garland, Eartha Kitt, Edith Piaf, Barbra Streisand, Billie Holiday, Donna Summer, Diana Ross, Debbie Harry, Madonna), and television (Carol Burnett, the casts of *Designing Women* and *The Golden Girls*, Candice Bergen in *Murphy Brown*, Mary Tyler Moore and the supporting cast of women on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*).¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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 "Homosexuals' Girls" chapter of Julie Burchill's

that Burchill is clearly writing critically about a particular reception position; she is not queerly positioned herself. Burchill's analysis of how "queens" respond to women stars is limited to conform to very narrow-minded ideas about audience reception. For Burchill, all "feminine homosexual" men's investment in women stars is rooted in envy, jealousy, misogyny, and homophobia and she concludes this even as she relates a comment by a gay friend: "You may have a flaming faggot's taste in movies, but your perspective is pure Puritan."¹⁸ Burchill's analysis of why we need more popular and academic mass culture work that fully considers feminine gay and other gendered queer reception practices, as well as those of even less-analyzed queer readership and audiences formed around the nexus of race and sexuality, or class and sexuality, or ethnicity and sexuality, or some combination of gender/class/ethnicity and sexuality.¹⁹ These studies would offer valuable evidence of precisely how and where specific complex constructions of queerness can and do reveal themselves in the uses of mass culture, as well as revealing how and where that mass culture comes to influence and reinforce the process of queer identity formation.

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

Of the nine women who were interviewed, at least six said they identified at some time with male characters. Often the explanation is that men had the interesting active roles. Does this mean that these lesbians want to be like men? That would be a specious conclusion. None of the women who identified with male characters were "in love" with the characters' girl friends. All of the interviewees were "in love" at some time with actresses, but they did not identify with or want to be the male suitors of those actresses. While the context of the discussion is film, what these women are really talking about is their lives. . . . Transformation and positive self-image are dominant themes in what they have to say. Hollywood is transcended.²⁰

After reading these interviews, there might be some question about how fully the straight ideologies Hollywood narratives encourage are

“transcended” by these lesbian readers’ uses of mainstream films, for as two of the interviewees remark, “We’re so starved, we go see anything because something is better than nothing,” and “It’s a compromise. It’s a given degree of alienation.”²¹ This sense of queer readings of mass culture as involving a measure of “compromise” and “alienation” contributes to the complexity of queer articulations of mass culture reception. For the pathos of feeling like a mass culture hanger-on is often related to the processes by which queers (and straights who find themselves queerly positioned) internalize straight culture’s homophobic and heterocentrist attitudes and later reproduce them in their own queer responses to film and other mass culture forms.

Even so, traditional narrative films such as *Sylvia Scarlett*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *Trapeze*, *To Live and Die in L.A.*, *Internal Affairs*, and *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 *Loads*.²² The intense tensions and pleasures generated by the woman-woman and man-man aspects within the narratives of the former group of films create a space of sexual instability that already queerly positioned viewers can connect with in various ways, and within which straights might be likely to recognize and express their queer impulses. For example, gays might find a form of queer pleasure in the alternately tender and boisterous rapport between Lorelei/Marilyn Monroe and Dorothy/Jane Russell in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, or in the exhilarating woman-bonding of the title characters in *Thelma and Louise*. Or lesbians and straights could queerly respond to the erotic elements in the relationships between the major male characters in *Trapeze*, *To Live and Die in L.A.*, or *Internal Affairs*. And any viewer might feel a sexually ambiguous attraction—is it gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight?—to the image of Katharine Hepburn dressed as a young man in *Sylvia Scarlett*.

Of course, these queer positions and readings can become modified or can change over time, as people, cultures, and politics change. In my own case, as a white gay male who internalized dominant culture’s definitions of myself as “like a woman” in a traditional 1950s and 1960s understanding of who “a woman” and what “femininity” was supposed to be, my pleasure in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* initially worked itself out through a classic gay process of identifying, alternately, with Monroe and Russell; thereby experiencing vicarious

if temporary empowerment through their use of sexual allure to attract men—including the entire American Olympic team. Reassessing the feminine aspects of my gay sexual identity sometime in the 1970s (after Stonewall and my coming out), I returned to the film and discovered my response was now less rooted in the fantasy of being Monroe or Russell and gaining sexual access to men, than in the pleasure of Russell being the “gentleman” who preferred blonde Monroe, who looked out for her best interests, who protected her against men, and who enjoyed performing with her. This queer pleasure in a lesbian text has been abetted by extratextual information I have read, or was told, about Russell’s solicitous and supportive offscreen behavior toward Monroe while making the film.²³ But along with these elements of queer reading that developed from the interaction of my feminine gay identity, my knowledge of extratextual behind-the-scenes gossip, and the text itself, I also take a great deal of direct gay erotic pleasure in the “Is There Anyone Here for Love?” number, enjoying its blatantly homo-historic and erotic ancient Greek Olympics mise-en-scène (including Russell’s large column earrings), while admiring Russell’s panache and good humor as she sings, strides, and strokes her way through a sea of half-naked male dancer-athletes. I no longer feel the need to mediate my sexual desires through her.

In 1985, Al 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 increasingly 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 political and social vision and its sense of a fulfilled and open self, has supplanted both the aesthetic and campy discourses. . . . A delirious absorption in the stars is now something associated with pre-Stonewall gays or drag queens, yet neither gay openness nor the new machismo has completely abolished the cults. New figures are added regularly: Diana Ross, Donna Summer, Jennifer Holliday from the world of music, for example. There’s a newer, more open gay following for male stars: Richard Gere, Christopher Reeve [and, to update, Mel Gibson], even teen hunks like Matt Dillon [Christopher Atkins, Johnny Depp, Jason Priestley, and Luke Perry].²⁴

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 *Outweek* article “Immaculate Connection” suggests that Madonna is queer culture’s post-Stonewall Judy Garland:

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

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

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

In film, this erotic history would perhaps begin with Ramon Navarro (himself gay) stripped down to sing “Pagan Love Song” in *The Pagan*. Beyond this, a gay beefcake musical history would include Gene Kelly (whose ass was always on display in carefully tailored pants); numbers like “Is There Anyone Here for Love?” (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*) and “Y.M.C.A.” (*Can’t Stop the Music*) that feature men in gym shorts, swimsuits (Esther Williams musicals are especially spectacular in this regard), military (especially sailor) uni-

forms, and pseudo-native or pseudo-classical (Greek and Roman) outfits; films such as *Athena* (bodybuilders), *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (Western Levis, flannel, 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* provided 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), *Being Boring* (The Pet Shop Boys), *Love Will Never Do Without You* (Janet Jackson), *Just Tell Me That You Want Me* (Kim Wilde), and *Rico Suave* (Gerardo), along with a number of heavy-metal videos featuring long-haired lead singers in a variety of skintight and artfully opened or ripped clothes.²⁸

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*.²⁹ Clad in sailor uniforms, baseball uniforms, and Army uniforms, the male trios in these films are composed of two conventionally sexy men (Kelly and Frank Sinatra in the first two films, Kelly and Dan Dailey in the last) and a comic, less attractive “buffer” (Jules Munshin in the first two, Michael Kidd in the last) who is meant to diffuse the sexual energy generated between the two male leads when they sing and dance together. Other Kelly films—*Singin’ in the Rain*, *An American in Paris*, and *anchors Aweigh*—resort to the more conventional heterosexual(izing) narrative device of using a woman to mediate and diffuse male-male erotics.³⁰ But whether in the form of a third man or an ingenue, these devices fail to fully heterosexualize the relationship between Kelly and his male costars. In *Singin’ in the Rain*, for example, I can’t help but read Donald O’Connor maniacally unleashing his physical energy to entertain Kelly during the “Make ’Em Laugh” number as anything but a case of overwrought, displaced gay desire.³¹

Kelly himself jokingly refers to the queer erotics of his image and his many buddy musicals in *That’s Entertainment!*, when he reveals

the answer to the often-asked question, “Who was your favorite dancing partner . . . Cyd Charisse, Leslie Caron, Rita Hayworth, Vera-Ellen?,” by showing a clip of the dance he did with Fred Astaire (“The Babbit and the Bromide”) in *Ziegfeld Follies*. “It’s the only time we danced together,” Kelly remarks over the clip, “but I’d change my name to Ginger if we could do it again.” As it turned out, Kelly and Astaire did “do it again” in *That’s Entertainment 2*, and their reunion as a dancing couple became the focus of much of the film’s publicity campaign, as had been the case when Astaire reunited with Ginger Rogers in *The Barkleys of Broadway*.³²

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

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 Russell’s strong frame, allowing Russell to hold her protectively.”³⁶ Re-

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.³⁷ The film continues to be read along these lines by some lesbians as well as by other queerly positioned viewers. Overall, Seneca and Arbuthnot’s analysis of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* qualifies as a lesbian reading, as it discusses the film and the musical genre so as to “re-vision . . . connections with women” by focusing upon the pleasures of and between women on the screen and women in the audience, rather than on “the ways in which the film affords pleasure, or denies pleasure, to men.”³⁸

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.³⁹ Of particular interest in this latter category are those often-reviled Busby Berkeley musical spectacles, which appear in a different light if one considers lesbians (and other queers) as spectators, rather than straight men. I’m thinking here especially of numbers like “The Lady in the Tutti-Frutti Hat” in *The Gang’s All Here*, where Carmen Miranda triggers an all-woman group masturbation fantasia involving banana dildos and foot fetishism; “Dames” in *Dames*, where women sleep, bathe, dress, and seek employment together—some pause to acknowledge the camera as bearer of the voyeuristic (straight) male gaze, only to prohibit this gaze by using powder puffs, atomizer sprays, and other objects to cover the lens; “The Polka-Dot Ballet” in *The Gang’s All Here*, where androgynized women in tights rhythmically move neon hoops and large 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 falls asleep and “spins a little web of dreams” about a group of seminude women amid giant undulating ostrich-feather fans who, at one point, create a tableau called “Venus with Her Galley Slaves”; and parts of many other numbers (the two women sharing an upper berth on the Niagara Lim-

ited who cynically comment upon marriage in *42nd Street's* "Shuffle Off to Buffalo," for example).⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ From most accounts of the musical, it is a genre whose celebration of heterosexual romance must always be read straight. The same seems to be the case with those other film genres typically linked to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals: the horror/fantasy film and the melodrama. While there has been a rich history of queers producing and reading these genres, surprisingly little has been done to formally express this cultural history. There has been more queer work done in and on the horror film: vampire pieces by Richard Dyer, Bonnie Zimmerman, and Sue-Ellen Case; Bruna Fionda, Polly Gladwin, Isiling Mack-Nataf's lesbian vampire film *The Mark of Lilith* (1986); Amy Goldstein's vampire musical film *Because the Dawn* (1988); a sequence in *Dry Kisses Only* that provides a lesbian take on vampire films; an article by Martin F. Norden on sexuality in *The Bride of Frankenstein*; and some pieces on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (although most are not written from a queer position), to cite a few examples.⁴²

But there is still much left unexamined beyond the level of conversation. Carl Dreyer's lesbophobic "classic" *Vampyr* could use a thorough queer reading, as could Tod Browning's *Dracula*—which opens with a coach ride through Transylvania in the company of a superstitious Christian straight couple, a suit-and-tie lesbian couple, and a feminine gay man, who will quickly become the bisexual Count Dracula's vampirized servant. Subsequent events in the film include a straight woman who becomes a child molester known as "The Woman in White" after the count vampirizes 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. Praetorius; queer Henry Frankenstein; the erotics between the blind man, the monster, and Jesus on the cross; the overall campy atmosphere), *The Old Dark House* (a gay and lesbian brother and sister; a 103-year-old man in the attic who is actually a woman), and *The In-*

visible Man (effete, mad genius Claude Rains spurns his fiancée, becomes invisible, tries to find a male partner in crime, and becomes *visible* only after he is killed by the police).⁴³ Beyond queer readings of specific films and directors, it would also be important to consider how the central conventions of horror and melodrama actually encourage queer positioning as they exploit the spectacle of heterosexual romance, straight domesticity, and traditional gender roles gone awry. In a sense, then, *everyone's* pleasure in these genres is "perverse," is queer, as much of it takes place within the space of the contra-heterosexual and the contra-straight.

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

What queer reception often does, however, is stand outside the relatively clear-cut and essentializing categories of sexual identity under which most people function. You might identify yourself as a lesbian or a straight woman yet queerly experience the gay erotics of male buddy films such as *Red River* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*; or maybe as a gay man your cultlike devotion to *Laverne 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 these series are crucially concerned with articulating the loving relationships between women.⁴⁴ Queer readings aren't "alternative" readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or "reading too much into things" readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along.

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 refuses 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 slyest 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 antidomestic wisecrack pertinent to 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 retort 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 closeted 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, auteurism, 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. The particular con-