

*The  
Fruit  
Machine*

Twenty Years of Writings

on Queer Cinema



THOMAS WAUGH

*Foreword by John Greyson*

*Duke University Press*

*Durham and London, 2000*

*The  
Fruit  
Machine*

\*



*The  
Fruit  
Machine*

Twenty Years of Writings

on Queer Cinema



THOMAS WAUGH

*Foreword by John Greyson*

*Duke University Press*

*Durham and London, 2000*

© 2000 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper 

Typeset in Scala by Wilsted and Taylor Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

appear on the last printed page of this book.

FOR ROSS,

*who's been there the whole time*

*and put up with a lot of bad movies*



## Contents

Foreword by John Greyson, ix

Acknowledgments, xiii

Introduction, i

Films by Gays for Gays: *A Very Natural Thing*, *Word Is Out*, and *The Naked Civil Servant* (1977), 14

Gays, Straights, Film, and the Left: A Dialogue (with Chuck Kleinhans) (1977), 34

Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1976–77), 43

A Fag-Spotter's Guide to Eisenstein (1977), 59

Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane* (1978), 69

Medical Thrills: *Born a Man . . . Let Me Die a Woman* (1978–79), 72

Murnau: The Films Behind the Man (1979), 74

An Unromantic Fiction: *I'm Not from Here*, by Harvey Marks (1979), 86

The Gay Nineties, the Gay Seventies: Samperi's *Ernesto* and von Praunheim's *Army of Lovers or Revolt of the Perverts* (1979), 88

Montgomery Clift Biographies: *Stars and Sex* (1979–80), 93

Gay Cinema, Slick vs. Real: *Chant d'amour*, *Army of Lovers*, *We Were One Man* (1980), 101

*Nighthawks*, by Ron Peck and Paul Hallam (1980), 109

A Saturday Night Surprise: Burin des Roziers's *Blue Jeans* (1980), 114

*Caligula* (1981), 117



Taxis and Toilets: Ripplöh and His Brothers (1981), 122  
 Bright Lights in the Night: Pasolini, Schroeter, and Others (1981), 126  
 Patty Duke and Tasteful Dykes (1982), 131  
 Two Strong Entries, One Dramatic Exit: *Luc ou la part des choses*, *Another Way*, and *Querelle* (1982), 135  
 Hollywood's Change of Heart? (*Porky's* and *The Road Warrior*) (1982), 141  
 Dreams, Cruises, and Cuddles in Tel Aviv: Amos Gutmann's *Nagua* (1983), 145  
 Hauling an Old Corpse Out of Hitchcock's Trunk: *Rope* (1983), 148  
 Sex beyond Neon: Third World Gay Films? (1985), 151  
 Fassbinder Fiction: A New Biography (1986), 156  
 Ashes and Diamonds in the Year of the Queer: *Decline of the American Empire*, *Anne Trister*, *A Virus Knows No Morals*, and *Man of Ashes* (1986), 161  
 The Kiss of the Maricon, or Gay Imagery in Latin American Cinema (1986–87), 172  
 Laws of Desire: *Maurice*, *Law of Desire*, and *Vera* (1987), 187  
 Two Great Gay Filmmakers: Hello and Good-bye (1988), 195  
 Beauty and the Beast, Take Two (1988), 208  
 Whipping Up a Cinema (1989), 214  
 Erotic Self-Images in the Gay Male AIDS Melodrama (1988, 1992), 218  
 In Memoriam: Vito Russo, 1946–1990 (1991), 235  
 We're Talking, Vulva, or, My Body Is Not a Metaphor (1995, 1999), 237  
 Walking on Tippy Toes: Lesbian and Gay Liberation Documentary of the Post-Stonewall Period 1969–1984 (1995–97), 246  
 Archeology and Censorship (1997), 272  
 Selected Additional Works, 297  
 Index, 299

## Foreword

*John Greyson*

\* \* \* \* \*



The author and John Greyson (left), ca. 1984.

\* \* \*

When Tom sent me the manuscript of *The Fruit Machine* last spring, our semiweekly emails became limericks. No big reason: we were maybe bored with haiku or something. Every half-dozen chapters or so, I'd stop reading to zap off another five-line effort. For instance, I once rhymed *Tommy, bon-homie*, and *salami*; he responded with *Greyson, kyrie eleison*, and *d'être raison* (You be the judge).

Remember that movement called gay lib?  
Its convictions were occasionally très glib,  
But now we're a nice bunch—  
No more demos, we do brunch.  
Oh Mary, could we use a gay squib!

Reading this two-decade collection of Tom's reviews and articles, I'm struck by his squibbishness: by how much this volume is also a record of an evolving movement, and an evolving language. (The fact that we don't say

“movement” anymore with any confidence is telling. We certainly don’t say “liberation.” We don’t even say “we.”)

Another more pedestrian critic may someday pen a homogenizing account of how the earnest documentaries and Eurofaggy art cinema of the gay lib seventies gave way to the activist videos and porno narratives of the ACT UP eighties, devolving grotesquely into the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Kiss Me Guido comedies of the nineties. That’ll be another book, written from a safe historical distance. Tom can’t and won’t homogenize: he was there. This book consists of his critical missives from the front lines, insistent on the geography and community and moment that he was living through, in all its vernacular specificity. His early chapters (articles for *The Body Politic* and *Jump Cut*) make me embarrassingly nostalgic for a time when a combative and diverse gay Left (when exactly did this term become so hopelessly quaint?) picketed *Cruising* and thus forever changed our passive relationship to dominant cinema. His later chapters remind me how a decade later, in the epicenter of the pandemic, my queer film class watched *Cruising* with uncritical awe; for them it was an ethnographic account of a distant culture that had gone with the wind. How do you homogenize that? Give me Tom’s subjectivity any day.

*The Fruit Machine* takes me back to my first tentative steps out of the closet as a fag and as an artist, early baby steps when everyone was trying to figure out what a radical gay culture might look like, taste like. Tom’s writing, then as now, was special: quivering with excitement, laced with irony, tumescent with the passions and contradictions of our very queer subjectivities. His Eisenstein article changed my life: it sent me running off to see if there really was a gay subtext in *Potemkin* (oh yeah!), and ten years later I featured Sergei as one of my reluctant dead fags and dykes in my film *Urinal*.

In his introduction Tom describes how the Mounties in the sixties developed a so-called Fruit Machine to weed out security risks from the civil service. Basically, they’d show suspected homos slides of naked men and measure their responses (dilated eyeballs, sweaty palms). These poor dilated and sweaty souls would then be fired or arrested. Needless to say, the Mounties’ Machine was a crock: after a decade of breathtaking inaccuracy, it was consigned to mothballs. In contrast, Tom’s *Fruit Machine* is a dazzling success. It works. He shows us celluloid pictures of naked (and clothed) men (and

sometimes women) and measures *his own* responses. In the process he proves to even the most resistant reader how central, how fun, how *interesting*, the desiring gaze can be, the queer desiring gaze, to the production and consumption of cinema. I echo oh-so-hetero Andrew Sarris here, who credits pioneering gay film critic Parker Tyler with legitimizing his “passionate pursuit of the cinema through an eroticism of the heart.”<sup>1</sup> Tom may swoon over methodical Monty or sing a heartfelt aria to Rainer: he’s always happy to tell us who turns him on. However, the *why* is his true passion and profound subject, as he takes us from Quentin Crisp to Midi Onodera. Why do we *need* our differences on the screen? How do we *learn* our differences from the screen? Don’t they produce us, just as we produce them?

Tom’s two decades of film writing also track a singular journey through the ever-changing landscape of media criticism, from the early days of positive images through the current revelations of queer theory. With characteristic vigor, he has *fruitfully* and idiosyncratically engaged with various strands of poststructuralist thought that have impacted cinema studies. As significantly, he has critically embraced the work of a new generation of queer video and film artists (myself included), as well as supported the lesbian and gay film festival movement, contributing much-needed commentary to an emerging field. His engagements are neither tokenist nor fashionable. Indeed, of Tom’s many critical and theoretical voices, the one I most value is his mode of self-interrogation, featured prominently in the introductions that contextualize each article. He has the enviable ability to wonder, to question, to doubt his previous convictions. His questions trigger our own: why did we all hate *Sebastiane* when it first came out? Where does Almodovar find himself in our affections? Why is Tom *still* so wrong about Lothar Lambert?

Eisenstein (who signed a cartoon published in the *St. Petersburg Gazette* with the pseudonym “Sir Gay” on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution) had this to say about a related medium: “Books burst open like ripe fruit in my hands, and fold back their petals like magic flowers, bearing a fertilizing line of thought, a stimulating word, a corroborating quotation, a convincing illustration. I have loved them so much that they have finally begun to love me back.”<sup>2</sup>

The films and tapes that Tom describes on these pages burst open like

ripe fruit. His love of moving images spills down his chin, as he savors the sweet juices, revels in the sting of citrus, sinks his teeth deep into the fleshy pulp. He writes with his saliva ducts turned up full blast. His Fruit Machine is on: prepare to get sprayed.

*Notes*

- 1 Parker Tyler, *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies*, new foreword by Andrew Sarris, new afterword by Charles Boultenhouse (New York: Da Capo, 1993), xiv.
- 2 Sergei Eisenstein, *Immortal Memories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), 184.

## Acknowledgments

\* \* \* \* \*

In the original writing of the pieces in *The Fruit Machine* and in the production of the book, I have many debts of gratitude: to Concordia University and the Quebec Fonds pour la formation de chercheurs et l'aide à la recherche for generous financial and institutional support; to Duke University Press and my editor Richard Morrison for their warm and professional support; to the press's anonymous readers for incisive and constructive feedback; to the artists and distributors, too numerous to mention, who have cooperated with this bothersome critic in the past and for the purpose of this volume; to the Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Collection and other generous providers of illustrations; to my research and technical assistants, especially Marisa Rossy and Christine Harkness; for reprint permission from Pink Triangle Press, *Jump Cut*, *Cinéaste*, former editors of *Le Berdache* and *Rites* Jean-Michel Sivry and Gary Kinsman respectively, the Concordia University Faculty of Fine Arts, La Cinémathèque québécoise, University of Toronto Press, the Banff Centre for the Arts, University of Minnesota Press, and Lorraine Johnson and Toronto Photographers Workshop; to many commissioners and editors over the years, especially *The Body Politic*'s Ed Jackson, Stephen MacDonald, Rick Bébout, and the others on the Collective, consummate unpaid professionals, and to *Jump Cut*'s John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage, coeditors and gurus, all of whom *believed* in what they were doing; to John Greyson for his kind foreword and subversive complicity through the years, as well as my first starring role; to Richard Dyer for friendship, mentorship, and shopping tips; to two decades worth of loyal proofreaders and resourceful consultants, especially Steve Kokker, Ross Higgins, and indefatigable challenger José Arroyo.

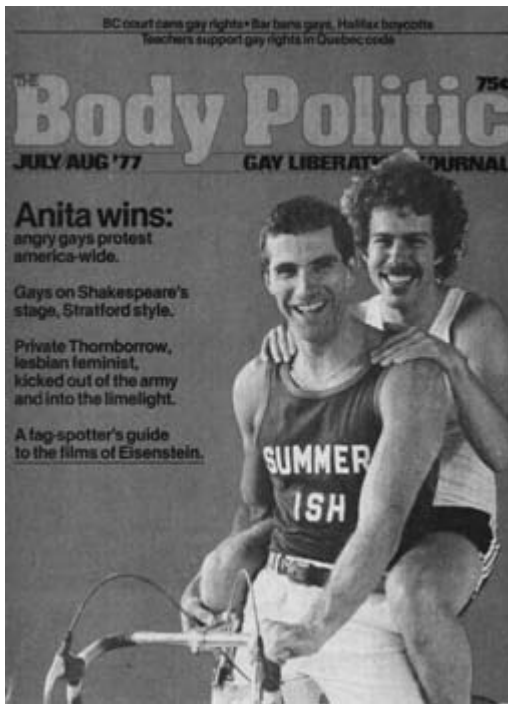
## Introduction

\* \* \* \* \*

This collection of reviews and essays about cinema and visual culture, piled up over more than twenty years, has several objectives. I would like to make available works and perspectives from the past and recent past that are now hard to find. My aim is to bring them together in coherent, chronological form, both for readers who are too young to remember even *Longtime Companion* let alone *A Very Natural Thing* and for readers who remember them all too well but would like to reconsider and resynthesize two decades of queer film culture. Tracing the context and trajectory of one person's responses, ideas, feelings, and arguments about movies will, I hope, lead to a rediscovery of certain films and filmmakers from the past and, perhaps more important, to a rediscovery of cultural and political frameworks that might have bearing on today's images and issues. Assembling all of this has already led to much personal remembering and introspection, the discovery of a voice I sometimes don't recognize and one I sometimes recognize much too well, a voice coming out of many places.

### *Genes*

My father and grandfather were preachers, and my brother followed in their footsteps. My mother and grandmother were teachers. When I reread these texts that I've produced with such monastic single-mindedness over the last two decades, I think the moral fervor and didactic bent might be in my genes. They're certainly never very far below the surface, even in my most licentious and narcissistic writing about sex. From my crusades against negative stereotypes to those against censorship, from my persistent class-analysis of queer culture to my queer-analysis of straight culture, from my early haranguing of *The Advocate* for selling out, to my more recent badgering of lawyers and editors, it's all there. In the classroom, however, I seldom subject my students to moral uplift; rather I think I'm known for lis-



*The Body Politic*: Toronto's radical tabloid, 1977.

tening to every side. So undoubtedly it's as a critic and scholar that my genetic destiny of preaching and teaching comes out.

Of course the atmosphere of permanent crisis that has been the backdrop to these twenty years of film writings has encouraged the homiletic/pedagogical tone. Starting out writing for an activist community paper like *The Body Politic*, rooted in the leftist branch of gay liberation, or a "radical" journal of media criticism like *Jump Cut*, borne out of the marriage of Marxism and feminism, certainly imprinted a habit of seeing movies, images, and the world politically. There was the naive assumption in the air in the late seventies that the feeling of urgency—the Anita Bryant crisis, the Toronto prosecution of *TBP*, the Montreal bar raids, the Briggs Initiative in California—wasn't going to last. We assumed that unmasking and challenging the system would, if not bring it to its knees, at least nudge the world in the right direction.

But in fact, twenty years after Anita and thirty years after Stonewall, those of us stumbling into our fifties, who have survived *Cruising*, Clause



28, Oregon, Colorado, Alberta, and Maine, not to mention the Pandemic and all the rest, would be surprised to wake up one morning and not hear new alarms on the horizon. But with aging, with getting used to the atmosphere of permanent crisis, with the realization that we might have failed to transmit the hard-learned wisdom of the sixties and seventies to the young, the rhetoric has changed—at least *mine* has. The result has been not only the longer, more comprehensive pieces (enabled also by leaving the newspaper milieu behind, for better or worse). There has also been a changed tone, less reactive, hopefully more profound, less prescriptive, more tolerant, more willing to see pleasure and contradiction in cultural forms. But maybe this is wishful thinking: is the sermonizer still lurking behind the aspired to urbanity?

The political atmosphere of urgency shows no sign of dissipation as the nineties come to an end. As films like *Licence to Kill*, Arthur Dong's document of the murder of gay people, remind us, it has only evolved. But no one could deny that the cultural environment has indeed been transformed. At least in terms of queer-defined representation. A film like *Licence*—sober, sturdy, and provocative—is one of dozens of features that move every year through the circuit of queer film and video festivals—on every continent now!—and occasions a dutiful but short-lived admiration that is a contrast to the major paradigm shift it would have effected two decades ago, as the 1977 epic documentary and collective self-portrait *Word Is Out* did (see “Films by Gays for Gays”). It's all about visibility. It's one of the things we film critics clamored for in the seventies, and do we ever have it now! Our banal omnipresence in the mainstream media is paralleled by such a lively and diverse universe of queer-defined media that the queer festival hordes and *Advocate* readers take it for granted. How did our culture of urgency and desperate scarcity evolve into a culture of excess, amnesia, complacency, and satedness? Now the cultural critic, at least in urban centers throughout the North—and thankfully I am no longer one—has a much bigger job on his or her hands, must navigate through the flood and indulge in the luxury of high standards of selection and evaluation.

At times, while editing this volume, I found myself regretting that in recent years I have abandoned the pulpit of the reviewer for the keyboard of the man of letters, or rather the fruit of images. It is not that the academic vocation is any harder. For I found reviewing to be a very tough and exacting dis-

cipline, a constant struggle for accessibility, tone, conciseness, insight, and wit, not to mention the precise format of plot synopsis and description, evaluation, and extension that is part of the job. We academics would do well to polish these skills, for I find I have grown rusty at keeping things short and snappy now that I no longer have those fanatical editors at *The Body Politic* to keep me on my toes.

As I was moving from famine to feast, and as I moved away from criticism (paradoxically, now that there was so much out there to criticize and so many people doing it so badly), I was moving also from a rigid essentialism to an ambivalent relativism, from cinephile auteurism to pomo eclecticism, from “positive image” Stalinism to a benign indifference to doctrines of social harm caused by negative stereotypes (in part because the antipornography movement’s doctrine of social harm has permanently devastated our already shaky constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech in Canada [see “Archaeology and Censorship”]). I have also been taken over almost entirely by my academic writing, represented here by “Kiss of the Maricon,” “Erotic Self Images in the Gay Male AIDS Melodrama,” and “Walking on Tippy Toes,” etc. This full-time enterprise has all of the institutional support and cultural status that unpaid writing for community left tabloids never had. In this esoteric subculture that is scholarly work in film and cultural studies, there are dangers of suffocation. It is a daunting challenge to make cultural reflection lucid and exciting for the nonspecialist, to build your interface with the outside world, to maintain a voice and an integrity in the face of the pernicious trendiness of academe. Here one is rewarded for quoting one brand-name deconstructionist theorist yesterday and another postcolonial high priestess tomorrow but punished for publishing in nonrefereed journals. Very few meet the challenge, and I admittedly have often lost sight of the activist intellectual role that was envisaged by that pioneering generation—Michael Lynch, Jonathan Katz, Allen Bérubé, John D’Emilio, Jane Rule, and the others—who insisted on writing for that still lamented and now crumbling newsprint rag from Toronto.

With the shifts in political and cultural environments have come a different audience and a different sense of audience. At *Jump Cut* and *The Body Politic*, if there was a feeling of preaching to the converted, leftist academics and gay activists respectively, and if there wasn’t always as much feedback and dialogue as I would have liked, there was a sense of belonging

and pertinence that animated the writing. A minority of pieces in *Fruit* were aimed for straight—or rather mixed—audiences (“Films by Gays for Gays”; “Gays and Straights”; “Film and the Left”; “Montgomery Clift Biographies”; “The Kiss of the Maricon”; “Beauty and the Beast, Take Two”; “We’re Talking, Vulva”; and “Archeology and Censorship”), and all but the last one now seem to me slowed down by the uncertainty about shared ground. I remember the feeling I’ve sometimes had, presenting queer work at predominantly hetero academic affairs, of dropping it all into a deep dark well of polite indifference, especially with male listeners. It’s strange: I spend most of my waking hours teaching groups of predominantly heterosexual students, apparently successfully, yet my writing seems to struggle with ghettos and walls. Have we failed to establish a place for queer studies at the center, all the hype notwithstanding? Perhaps the hordes of young queer grad students who have come of age in the nineties will succeed where my generation has failed—if they get the jobs that their queer work may be disqualifying them for! With this collection of work aimed originally, in many cases, at queer readers, will there be, the second time around in recycled form, a crossing over the walls and out of the ghetto?

### *Pages*

This book doesn’t look like what I thought it would. I considered several options before locking into the simple chronological organization of thirty-five articles, short and long, shallow and deep, accessible and academic, topical and abstract. Early on, committed to producing a book that you could comfortably hold in one hand (at the prodding of my publisher, admittedly), I became resigned to omitting several of the longer academic pieces I consider “major,” my articles on documentary ethics, gay narrative structures, Warhol, etc. These are easily available in existing anthologies, even though their absence creates several gaps in the political and intellectual history before your eyes. A major omission is my long article on gay pornography, for example, an intervention in the porn and sex wars between 1982 and 1985, now twice anthologized and in a sense the germ of my book *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from Their Beginnings to Stonewall*. Another gap is all the pieces from 1983 onward that were little chunks of *Hard* in embryonic form, the testing ground for the research

methods and insights that would get honed later and see print in 1996. Yet another gap is many of the pieces that intersect with my specifically Canadian/Quebec context: although a few pieces in print in Canada are included simply because they travel well and are less available elsewhere, most of the dyed-in-the-wool local color was deselected, unfortunately too full of national references to be accessible to “international” readers (i.e., Americans). We Canadians are used to the imperial politics of this, but we never tire of railing against New Yorkers who identify more with the valley of the Loire than with that of the St. Lawrence.

At one point the idea of separating a collection of “reviews” from longer in-depth articles was considered but dropped. I have ended up liking *Fruit*’s eclectic mixture and chronological peripeteia. This refusal to separate the academic from the topical community stuff was a basic principle of film studies and queer studies in their founding moments that we have too easily forgotten. Surely, writing about cultural forms, above all that hybrid eclectic cannibalistic art form that is the cinema, requires constant adjustment in tone, language, and audience orientation. I hope that *Fruit* readers will find the lurches back and forth between four-letter vulgarity and scholarly pretention invigorating rather than jarring. As for the editing of the individual pieces, the process has been quite minimal, mostly consisting of translation and minor corrections, in order to retain the flavor of the original texts. (Readers will forgive me for having lost some of the original references from newspapers, where the policy was that footnotes were distracting and elitist.)

A word about the title *The Fruit Machine* may well be in order, since it may mean something different to American readers than it does to my compatriots. The uninitiated non-Canadian reader will hopefully, as I intended, read into this phrase a sense of the cinema as a special queer technology. Historically and culturally, how much the moving image has been entangled in our subcultural networks, as well as personal dynamics of identification, longing, desire, and pleasure! No accident that so many gay men in the pre-Stonewall period loved Fellini and worshiped Judy Garland or that perhaps two of the most important pre-Stonewall English-language magazines were the closety but blatant *Films and Filming* and *After Dark*. No accident either that, after Stonewall, we queer film critics instinctively found the movies so life-and-death and that queer film and video festivals are among

our most thriving community institutions twenty-five years later. Even the other generalized film festivals (like the Montreal monstrosity I endlessly had to write about in these pages), artificial hothouses of offbeat films rejected by Cannes and distributors, often look like carnivals of queer cinephilia. I guess this volume, then, is also a document of my own personal entanglement with the technology of the fruit, like Charlie Chaplin turning round and round in the cogs and belts of some giant lavender projector (or VCR), wrench in hand.

However, there is more to the title *The Fruit Machine*, a Canadian angle. A decade or so ago Canadian gay historians stumbled on a weird, symptomatic page from our Monty Pythonesque national history that sociologist Gary Kinsman has been fleshing out through dogged detective work ever since.<sup>1</sup> In the late fifties and early sixties our very own Mounties, ever conscious of security threats, had commissioned research into mechanical devices for detecting homosexuality, inspired by similar research in the States where McCarthyism and the sex panics had created a market for such paranoid and lunatic pseudoscience. The idea was to unmask perverts by measuring involuntary pupillary dilations and other physiological reactions to pictures and words. Dubbed “the fruit machine” by terrified straight Mounties who didn’t want to be the guinea pigs and whose security was already threatened, the technology came in several proposed models. One involved perspiratory responses to vocabulary with homosexual meanings like *queen*, *circus*, *gay*, *bagpipe*, *bell*, *whole*, *blind*, *mother*, *punk*, *queer*, *rim*, *sew*, *swing*, *trade*, *velvet*, *wolf*, *blackmail*, *prowl*, *bar*, *house*, *club*, *restaurant*, *tea room*, and *top men* [sic]. Several others involved showing subjects pictures of seminude men, taken from high art or physique magazines, alongside “normal” images, like *Playboy* nudes, and measuring eye movements or attention spans. The project was eventually abandoned because of a lack of cooperative volunteers and any semblance of real results. When I reappropriated the homophobic moniker of the fruit machine from the RCMP for a retrospective of Canadian lesbian and gay film and video, curated for the Cinémathèque Ontario in 1994, the name rang so true that I felt there was more mileage in it yet. What better title for a book that registers ocular reactions to images that are all too often involuntarily physiological, reactions to images that define identity, threaten security, and elicit associations with both pleasure and danger!

*Canons*

My *Fruit Machine* film list must not be mistaken for a kind of canon of the queer cinema of the last two decades. Who could imagine what that would even look like? Richard Dyer's *Now You See It*, a study of lesbian and gay-authored work ending in 1980, was a daunting task, but at least a feasible one because it covered a half century of relative scarcity. Would it even be *possible* to come up with a similarly representative but selective intercultural narrative of queer-authored cinema over the last two decades (not to mention the larger canon, including those significant queerish works whose relationship to queer authorship is negligible or unknown, like *Lethal Weapon* and *The Taste of Cherries*, or complex, like *Philadelphia*)? Recent volumes like Raymond Murray's and Jenni Olsen's are encyclopedically inclusive and indiscriminate rather than evaluative or prescriptive, hence their great use-value as reference books.<sup>2</sup> Would a distillation of the post-1980 film deluge into a canonical form predicated on *value* or *significance* be possible at this short distance? It is clear, for example, that Arthur Bressan's *Buddies* is one of the most "important" queer feature films of the eighties, despite its total lack of availability (often the deciding factor in canon formation), but will *Mrs. Dalloway* still look like one of the duller queer features of the nineties a decade from now? If possible, would such a canon be even *desirable*? Some of my queer students think not and suspect me of a generational chauvinist conspiracy through my exposing them to *Death in Venice* and *Querelle*, thereby offending their postmodern ahistoric nonjudgmental sensibilities. Their attitude stems partly from their disaffection with what we used to call the "art cinema," the refuge for so much gay and lesbian identification of the sixties and seventies that is now one more heritage package (mostly by dead white men) that leaves them cold. The art-film culture that gave birth to queer-film culture in the sixties seems more and more like a museum piece, the cultures of VCRs and queer festivals notwithstanding. Does anyone care about Cocteau and Visconti out there? Do my students secretly feel that I love *Death in Venice* so much because I identify with that antediluvian old queen in the film? Not that I have abandoned this pedagogical challenge—far from it.

On the other hand, my students may well be reacting to the contradiction between my commitment to an often esoteric art cinema favored by my

middle-class background and intellectual formation, and the popular cultural forms, from Garland to Pee-Wee Herman, from *Rope* to *An Early Frost*, prioritized by my ingrained sense of the class politics of culture and the cultural politics of class. If so, they are on to something, of course, and the taste of seventies feminists for Marguerite Duras and of New Lefters for Jean-Luc Godard is equally problematic. With a lively third stratum of community media work having entered the scene and in fact sustaining the queer festival circuit in no small part, the mainstream/art binary is less immobilizing than it once was, but the negotiation of canons becomes all the more tricky.

A canon is the signature of a cultural constituency at a given historic moment, its collective memory. Since it implies coherence, if not monolithic conformity, perhaps the queer dispersion of the rainbow nineties—our fear of nouns like *community*, as well as the indifference to history that is by no means the unique property of queer people at this global conjuncture—means that our generation will forgo canons and revel somewhat longer in the glut before a canon-making imperative returns.

In any case, the present selection is everything but. The eclecticism of the stream of objects I have written about goes hand in hand with the eclecticism of language, tone, and audience positioning and is no doubt suitable pomo anticanon fodder. The reader will find nary a whisper let alone a major article on many of the epochal films and personalities of queer film history since the seventies. *Taxi zum Klo*, *Maurice*, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, *Law of Desire*, *Parting Glances*, and indeed *Buddies* and *Querelle* are all here. But what are *Porky's* and *Caligula* doing in place of *La Cage aux folles* and *Outrageous*, *Swoon* and *Poison*, *Looking for Langston* and *Savage Nights*? I can't believe there is no piece here on John Waters/*Divine* or on John Greyson (I did write a long piece on the latter once, published in French, but the final cut had no room for this strained explanation of queer English-Canadian art video to straight Québécois academics for whom *queer*, *English-Canadian*, and *art video* were all equally mysterious).

It is tempting to retroactively construct an argument about the importance of writing illuminatingly on minor and peripheral work, of writing against the canon—which I firmly believe in, incidentally. But in point of fact the present attention to the jetsam of film history happened rather accidentally. The big movies like *La Cage aux folles* were usually snapped up by *TBP's* Toronto staff writers close to the ghetto pulse, and my career as a critic

was usually otherwise shaped by chance or the whims of distributors and editors. At the same time, not always inspired by the *Victor Victorias* that everyone else was writing about, I did consciously think of my mission as the introduction of minor but interesting works that no one else had discovered: hence the space taken up in this volume by *By Design* and other titles guaranteed never to be seen by any reader. Was I writing evocatively and above all relevantly enough on *Born a Man . . . Let Me Die a Woman* to engage a reader, not in the rediscovery of a justifiably forgotten film but in the weighing of the issues it raised twenty years later, without the reader's having ever seen the film? If so, then I will have accomplished an important objective for this book.

Finally, my inclusion of lesbian materials needs a mention because it is inconsistent. Over the twenty years, I have oscillated between the delicately negotiated division of the world between the two gender-determined *chasses gardées* (boys talk about boy stuff, girls talk about girl stuff) and the reckless pragmatism of covering interesting lesbian texts that my male readership should know about, those that overlapped the gender divide (like *Word Is Out*), or those that lesbian critics were overlooking. I think the formerly rigid walls, not only based on gender but on other essential categories as well, may be crumbling, but should middle-class white males be chipping away at them? Yes.

### *Selves*

Though I have always tried to write openly and in the first person, hating to have to hide behind the academic veneer, I wonder to what extent the reader will find *The Fruit Machine* a personal trajectory, as well as a professional and intellectual one. Though I am no doubt just as good as my United Church of Canada father at avoiding personal feelings, there may be a confessional reading of this book leaping out at the reader. No doubt many quirks and fetishes will be unwittingly unveiled, as well as those continuities of personal sensibility that are impossible to separate from cultural perspectives: my strong autobiographical identification with the genre of narratives about teachers (at least a half dozen of them treated in this volume—not counting *Porky's!*), my erotic tastes that will seem to have developed little beyond *Physique Pictorial*, my voyeuristic disposition that will seem even



more unrelenting than that of most cinephiles and critics, my striving for love and approval that all writers must feel, my romantic idealization of coupledom. . . .

Perhaps the latter can be traced to the eleven-year primary relationship I lived between Almodovar's *Labyrinth of Passion* and his *Kika* (does anyone else measure out their sentimental lives in movies?). One resolution of the climate of urgency during the sex'n'porn wars of the early eighties was not an academic one: a work and strategy session aimed at the Trudeau government's scary threat of antisex, antigay obscenity legislation was my first date with a fiery young McGill economics student and movie buff named José Arroyo. The two of us called ourselves the Emergency Committee of Gay Cultural Workers Against Obscenity Laws, showed up with a brief at the hearings, and were quoted in the final government report (not that the surprisingly progressive 1985 "Fraser Commission" report on Pornography and Prostitution in Canada did any good, as the Tories had been swept into power the previous year). It turns out José and I both had other strategies in mind as well, and we ended up spending the next decade together. I suspect that connubial bliss had a certain impact in dissipating the sense of emergency, cultural work, and obscenity in my work during those years, and I do know that José certainly made me clarify my arguments.

As our relationship drew to a close, and as *Hard to Imagine* neared the printers, do I detect a sense of generational angst coming to the surface? In 1990, in Washington, where José and I were both delivering papers (he on Almodovar, I on gay narrative), I first began to take seriously the buzz of queer studies and queer grad students networking, flirting, and taking off. People were beginning to talk about the New Queer Cinema, as well, though I have never understood exactly what was meant, other than an amnesiac semantic construction of the music video generation, because the queer cinema had been in a process of flux and *accelerando* since the late seventies and was anything but New. I also heard myself quoted an embarrassing amount, and felt old. Do the midlife crises that followed enter into *The Fruit Machine*'s final episodes, perhaps in my nostalgic revisiting of the seventies in "Walking on Tippy Toes," or in the increasingly autobiographical discourse, both here and in *Hard*? The *Fruit* reader shall decide. I am not Roland Barthes nor Eve Sedgwick, two great cultural critics whose personal lives are inseparable from their work. But they have been right in affirming,

or at least implying, that for the queer critic especially, the element of personal desire is at the center of his or her vision and work. You can't take the fruit out of *The Fruit Machine*.

Did any of my ancestors love their own sex? Did any love movies? Not to my knowledge, in answer to both questions. Unlike a recent boyfriend, whose family tree is gnarled with knots, I know that any queer ancestors I might have hid their tracks. As for movies, my professional grandparents lived in God-fearing small towns and probably never got a chance, and my working-class urban grandparents with seven kids probably couldn't afford the time or money. However, I do have a vague childhood memory of seeing *The Robe* and *The Greatest Show on Earth* in drive-ins when I would have been four or five, together with some unclear configuration of grandparents (the former set would have approved of *Robe*, and the latter might have enjoyed *Show*). It might even have been a double bill (is my flash of Cornel Wilde's bulging white tights from the latter due to false memory syndrome brought on by latter-day film stills, or was I already a trapeze queen?). Despite this evanescent memory, I can't trace my cinematic culture to my genes: it has been shaped genetically only insofar as I still love hymn movies (*If . . .*, *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives*, and *Places in the Heart*, for example). My route through my passionate engagement with my queerness and my movies has been my own personal construction, and I have no one to blame for their inextricable linkage but myself. I now invite the reader of *The Fruit Machine* to navigate this route, with proper forewarning, with moral uplift, and, hopefully, with pleasure.

## Notes

- 1 Gary Kinsman, "Spooks in the Canadian State: Heterosexual Hegemony," *Canadian Dimension* (Winnipeg), May–June 1994, 21–23; "'Character Weaknesses' and 'Fruit Machines': Towards an Analysis of the Anti-Homosexual Security Campaign in the Canadian Civil Service," *Labour/Le Travail* 35 (spring 1995): 133–161; "The Textual Practices of Sexual Rule: Sexual Policing and Gay Men," in Marie Campbell and Ann Manicom, eds., *Knowledge, Experience, and Ruling Relations: Studies in the Social Organization of Knowledge* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 80–95.

- 2 Raymond Murray, *Images in the Dark: An Encyclopedia of Gay and Lesbian Film and Video* (Philadelphia: TLA Publications, 1994); Jenni Olsen, *The Ultimate Guide to Lesbian and Gay Film and Video* (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1996). The books do contain some canonizing discourse. Murray spotlights the following post-Stonewall directors: Chantal Akerman, Pedro Almodovar, Lindsay Anderson, Kenneth Anger, Gregg Araki, Emile Ardolino, Paul Bartel, Lizzie Borden, Arthur Bressan, James Bridges, Lino Brocka, James Broughton, Terence Davies, Eloy de la Iglesia, Robert Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Su Friedrich, Constantine Giannaris, Marlene Gorris, Barbara Hammer, Todd Haynes, Colin Higgins, Marc Huestis, Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, Derek Jarman, Beeban Kidron, George Kuchar, Lothar Lambert, Curt McDowell, Ismail Merchant and James Ivory, Robert Moore, Paul Morrissey, Ulrike Ottinger, Jan Oxenberg, Sergei Paradjanov, Pratibha Parmar, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Wolfgang Petersen, Tony Richardson, Marlon Riggs, Ken Russell, Greta Schiller, John Schlesinger, Werner Schroeter, Monika Treut, Gus Van Sant, Luchino Visconti, Rosa von Praunheim, John Waters, Franco Zeffirelli. This incomplete and problematic list fudges the issue of gay or lesbian authorship through including straights, closet cases, subtexters, and disavowers, among others, and omits the eligible Canadians, as usual, and even the French. Still it's a fine, admirably cosmopolitan start.

Films by Gays for Gays:  
*A Very Natural Thing, Word Is Out,*  
and *The Naked Civil Servant*

\* \* \* \* \*

*I still remember my quavers about publishing this, my coming-out piece in academia. I had just begun my new job teaching at Concordia University and would not be up for tenure until 1981, but plowed ahead fearlessly. I must have felt pretty confident about my place at Concordia and don't remember any reactions from my colleagues. Twenty years later I should perhaps acknowledge my gratitude and affection for this carnivalesque institution, with its erratic escalators, nurturing networks, and safe places for risky scholarship (I won't get into that nasty business about same-sex spousal benefits at the end of the eighties, when, when it came to actual money, a conservative faculty union and the inertia of a liberal institution came together to hesitate just a little too long for my liking). I also have a debt to the Jump Cut coeditors, Chuck Kleinhans, Julia Le Sage, and John Hess, who encouraged me on this first brazen venture, then not blinking, eventually got me on the board of this immeasurably influential rad tab, where I would continue to publish major work over the next decade. This indefatigable pinko media rag is celebrating its twenty-fifth birthday as we go to press.*

*All three of the films discussed in this article have entered the nineties gay canon, thanks as much to their availability on video as to their centrality to our cultural history. None has lost its power to move and astonish. I still cry at Word Is Out. The Naked Civil Servant I think I understand better now, less as a serendipitous fluke in a vacuum than as a logical outcome of a British tradition that had provided space for almost two decades for such images of queer dignity.*

*A Very Natural Thing remains the most precarious of the three but still may not have deserved the disproportionate ideological thrashing I gave it. No doubt my defensiveness reflects a lot about the atmosphere in the cultural wing of the North American New Left, about my sense of mission caught in the middle be-*

*tween the straight Left, who didn't understand identity politics, and the gay-lib mainstream, who denied class. Whether or not the late editor David Goodstein of The Advocate really deserved comparison to the fascist Chilean dictator is another question. But categorical moral judgments were the flavor of the day. Plus ça change . . .*

\* \* \*

### *Will Homosexuals Be Admitted to the Classless Society?*

The prospect of writing on a few gay-oriented films for *Jump Cut* has caused me a few tremors of hesitation. There are obvious dangers in blowing one's professional cover (i.e., coming out) in academia in 1977. But there are worse places to come out in than a faculty of Fine Arts, like a Faculty of Engineering, for example (to indulge in a little of what is called interdisciplinary retaliatory stereotyping). And if a friend of mine in an English department was able, just last year, to seize tenure from the jaws of a board of Catholic priests, things are looking up indeed. There are other more important reasons for my hesitation, which I would like to outline briefly before I get started.

Dialogue between gay leftists and straight leftists is not a new phenomenon, but until recently it was never conducted equitably or constructively. As a rule, most serious leftists now give at least token support to the issue of gay civil rights, as they do to one variation or another of the feminist analysis—you just can't keep opportunism in the closet these days. Nevertheless, gays still occasionally get expelled from left party formations; the Venceremos Brigade still won't let us go to Cuba with them; an enthusiastic gay contingent gets ignored and insulted at last summer's Fourth of July Coalition, Anti-Bicentennial Rally in Philadelphia; and one still has to deal with such provocations as a position paper recently published by a California-based splinter group that states unequivocally that "homosexuals cannot be communists."<sup>1</sup>

As a teacher, I occasionally run into a few other variations of this old song and dance. Two recent examples: a claim that "There won't be any homosexuals in the classless society" and a reference to the Nazi extermination of homosexuals as an "isolated atrocity."

Adherents to the robust and rapidly growing gay left movements in North America and Europe constantly run into that kind of bigotry within the Left. Ironically, this more often comes from middle-class intellectuals than from workers themselves, as the experiences of lesbians in working women's groups and of gay men and women in various unions have revealed. The attitudes of these pseudoradicals usually boil down to, "We think you should have job security even if you are sick and leave the revolution to us." In the face of all of this, many gay radicals have simply resorted to organizing and consciousness raising within the gay community itself. Others refuse to leave the revolution to the straights—for this courageous minority, the model provided by contemporary East Germany is an important one: it can hardly be a coincidence that the most liberal of the socialist states with regard to sexual minorities is also the one in which gays participated most actively in prerevolutionary party formations.<sup>2</sup>

To return somewhat closer to home, even a journal as progressive in its sexual politics as *Jump Cut* needs to examine its own record. The most obvious blot in this record came late in 1974, when a *Jump Cut* reviewer casually passed on one of the oldest and most libelous stereotypes going.<sup>3</sup> A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then, but the offending article, a discussion of the Clint Eastwood vehicle *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, wittily entitled "Tightass and Cocksucker," needs to be given a decent burial. One of the few critics around to have confronted the homoerotic subtext of the "buddy" genre head-on, the author, Peter Biskind, correctly points to a fabric of sly allusions and suggestive imagery beneath the surface of the film but then turns his perception in a direction so perverse and reductionist that it is hard to follow. The gist of the argument is that there must be some connection between this latent gay motif and the film's much more blatant misogynist sensibility (surely a conventional feature of the genre). But the connection posited by the article is that, as everyone knows, homosexuals hate women. Behind the film, in fact, lies a conspiracy of woman-hating homosexuals with the intent of denigrating heterosexuality. This seditious intent is no doubt realized by the total suppression of overt gay references; by the prurient, mocking, and exploitative tone of the gay subtext; and by the startlingly original idea of having the protogay character stomped to death. The film is no less antigay than it is antiwoman—in fact it is antisex and about as subversively homoerotic as a frat party drag show or a barroom fag

joke. Thanks a lot—we could pull off a better conspiracy than that anytime. (Just think of how skillfully we seduce your children.) The mind boggles over how a jumble of sly fag jokes tossed about by presumably straight filmmakers can be read as progay propaganda and, furthermore, how gays can get blamed for the antiwoman attitudes that accompany them. You can't win. For me the film is definitive proof of the intrinsic identity between homophobia and sexism.

If *Jump Cut's* single such slipup is easily atoned for, a more general homophobia-by-default is less easy to repudiate, or to define. Any faggot or dyke worth his or her salt knows that silence is one of the first symptoms of advanced homophobia, and in this sense *Jump Cut* is clearly suspect (although the silence of other radical film mags, from *Cinéaste* to *Screen*, is deafening in comparison—without even considering the latter's adherence to certain latently homophobic aspects of Lacanian psychoanalysis).

*Jump Cut's* most recent attempt to deal with the “buddy” movies, Arthur Nalletti's “Male Companionship Movies and the Great American Cool,”<sup>4</sup> was so anxious to block and repress a crucial aspect of the films under discussion—that is, the obvious homoerotic undertone of most of them—that it left a trail a mile wide. Except for a single passing reference, the article's avoidance of the love that dare not speak its name was as conspicuous as that of the films themselves.

It is true, however, that *Jump Cut* has been inching forward in this area. I was so excited to see the two open lesbians among the contributors to last summer's special issue that I nearly stopped hating women for a moment. And the two pieces on *Dog Day Afternoon* in the same issue at least recognized the relevance of the film to the gay problematic, although neither went beyond the call of duty.

Okay, it is in this context that I hesitate in writing this piece. Given the lingering homophobic tendency of the straight Left, does it not amount to treachery to criticize fellow gays (which I am about to do), to provide fuel for existing antigay stereotypes within the *Jump Cut* readership, to wash the gay movement's linen in front of a possibly unsympathetic audience? Just what the movement needs!

What it really needs, I believe (as does an increasingly articulate segment), is a recognition of its stake in all revolutionary struggles and a firmer commitment to its natural alliance with radical and feminist causes. And

not only this. What it also needs is dogged and determined spokespeople within the straight Left loudly refusing to down one or more ounce of shit from the closet bigots therein and defiantly insisting that any Marxist analysis or feminist analysis that ignores the gay struggle is an incomplete analysis. And they must persistently remind the Left that we are planning to turn out in full force, in our habitual percentage, for the classless society.

### *A Very Natural Thing*

When Christopher Larkin's *A Very Natural Thing* first appeared in early 1974, the gay movement had every reason to be encouraged. *Serious* and *first* were the two words everyone used to describe this feature-length color narrative that dared to deal with gay male life from a gay perspective and in a nonporno framework. And it is true that its seriousness and its innovativeness both guarantee its place as a milestone in gay film history, despite its many obvious shortcomings.

There had been gay films before. After all, by the seventies the concentrated, profitable market of young, urban gay males was a well-tested commercial reality. Everyone from the Mafioso gay-bar entrepreneurs to haberdashers had long since cashed in on this ghettoized market, and filmmakers, at first primarily pornographers, were no different. (During the early seventies the gay porno industry was well ahead of its hetero counterpart in technical and stylistic sophistication.) Even Hollywood would wake up to the economic reality of this market, which gay publications such as *The Advocate* and *After Dark* (respectively the largest open-gay and the largest closet-gay magazines) made clear to their advertisers was composed of free living, big spending young bachelors with sophisticated tastes. However, until *A Very Natural Thing*, the nonporno films that catered to this market seemed relics of that pre-Stonewall past that gays wanted to forget. Two fairly competent such films had appeared in 1970, for example (the year after the New York Stonewall riots, which symbolically introduced the era of gay lib), and both reflected the gay perspective of gay subject matter: *The Boys in the Band*, a quite faithful Hollywood version of a gay-authored play, slightly enervated for general consumption by director William Friedkin, and *Sticks and Stones*, a more modest, independent treatment of a similar theme, directed by Stan LoPresto. Both of these films, however, embodied



an anachronistic defeatism, a morbid, self-directed hatred that surely reinforced homophobia within their straight audiences, curious but still powerfully destructive artifacts of an era when “gay” translated onto the screen meant “trivial, tragic, and tormented.”

What was different about *A Very Natural Thing* was that it deliberately attempted to escape the traditional rituals of self-loathing. Here was a film that so many of us wanted to call our own that many of us did so without thinking, not in the least because of one specific feature of the film that had vast symbolic importance—its happy ending.

*Digression: Why Gay Endings Aren't Always Happy*

The happy ending is a convention that Hollywood and its foreign competitors have traditionally reserved for films about straight people. Gay characters traditionally drop off like flies, with clockwork predictability, at the service of dramatic expediency and the sexual anxiety of the dominant culture. Nineteen seventy-four, for example, saw, in addition to *A Very Natural Thing*, the successful release of Truffaut's *Day for Night*. Truffaut's gay audiences were momentarily transported when the film's leading man, Jean-Pierre Aumont, was revealed to be gay and to have a beautiful young lover to boot. But they should have known that it was too good to be true. Truffaut's knee-jerk liberal impulse, on introducing such a fine affirmative image, was to have Aumont and his lover summarily wiped out by the most freakishly gratuitous highway accident in film history. Two more faggots bite the dust as Truffaut's warm, humane, joyous tribute to filmmaking tidies up its loose threads in the last reel.

As I've said, Truffaut was in traditional company. Death by unnatural causes has been the standard device used by the bourgeois cinema to finish off any token minority member who doesn't know his or her place—blacks and sexually forward or independent women, as well as gays. Remember the dozens of gruesome deaths inflicted on poor Sidney Poitier by fifties liberalism and the hundreds of saloon prostitutes finished off so that Henry Fonda, or whoever, could end up with the virtuous, submissive girl from the East? The deaths reserved for lesbians and gay men have been particularly mechanical, however, and often fiendishly ingenious. If Shirley MacLaine's dangling from the ceiling in *The Children's Hour* and Ratzo Rizzo's glazed eyeballs in the Miami bus in *Midnight Cowboy* are perhaps the images im-