
H-France Review Vol. 21 (September 2021), No. 159

Damon R. Young, *Making Sex Public and Other Cinematic Fantasies*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2018. xii + 301 pp. \$104.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4780-0133-1; \$27.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-4780-0167-6.

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What is the political value, if any, of making sex public? This ticklish question propels Damon R. Young's remarkable monograph, the title of which reworks that of a famous article from 1998 called "Sex in Public" by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, which articulated a major tenet of queer theory, namely, that the private sphere is de facto an institution of heteronormativity, while public space is politically subversive and radical. Queerness, they argued, represents the utopian promise of a world-making project involving the creation of new, provisional, and marginal forms of intimacy "that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation."^[1] Yet can it ever be that simple and clear-cut? Is anonymous sex in a public space inherently radical without some form of translation from the erotic sphere into the political? Might depersonalized queer sexual practices actually be concordant with the system that defines the private sphere in terms of heterosexuality?

Young sets out ambitiously to unravel the historical complexities of these interrelated questions by focusing on cinema, a cultural form that, as he rightly explains, "mediates and transgresses the boundary between public and private as its constitutive mode of operation" (p. 2). He returns to the pivotal moment in the late 1950s when representations of—and narratives about—sex proliferated on French and American movie screens, due largely to the collapse of the Motion Picture Production Code. Sex could now be more explicitly represented and moved from the closet to the public sphere, and from bedroom to film screen, displacing the epistemological paradigm of secrecy and disclosure, concealment and revelation. The privileged figures of this fantasy of "making sex public" were women and queers who became central to the imaginary of what Young terms a new paradigm, the "liberal sexual subject;" that is, "a subject for whom sexuality...assumes its significance in relation to concepts of social contract, public sphere, and nation" (p. 4). The book's central thesis is that if cinema helped develop new imaginaries of making sex public, it has been shaped by an irreducible tension between two fantasies: an emergent fantasy of the liberal sexual subject as an autonomous, pleasure-seeking agent (with sexuality conceived as a property affirmatively negotiated among equal and self-transparent subjects), and the enduring fantasy of the republican social contract that rejects the idea of sexuality as an individual attribute and insists on sexual difference and the family as constitutive of the social.

In a compact introduction defining liberalism as a set of normative ideas and fantasies about the social which is linked to multiple ideals (for instance, a mythological social contract founding the social order as a regime among equals, or the republican virtues of liberty, equality, and fraternity), Young makes clear that his aim is not to reconcile the non-concordant aspects of liberalism, but rather to show how, in each film studied, one or several of these ideas shapes the way sex comes into view. Indeed, his concern is with how cinema has imagined—as opposed to realized—new ways in which sex could become truly public. What distinguishes his admirably polemical approach is not only a bold commitment to contesting theoretical assumptions and reevaluating canonic theoretical texts (from Freud, Reich, and Foucault to Rubin, Sedgwick, and Queer Theory, sociologists like Anthony Giddens and Henning Bech, and film theorists such as Bazin, Cavell, Mulvey, and Linda Williams), but also a meticulous attention and sensitivity to context (social, cultural, historical, political, critical). Young insists, for instance, that the shifting parameters in the representation of sex have depended on the circulation of stars, directors, and cinematic tropes between France and the US, reflecting the two countries' liberal-democratic traditions and their “closely intertwined...circuits of mutual influence and exchange” (p. 215). His chosen method, which he fully assumes, is interpretive close reading rather than comprehensive coverage, and his select and enterprising choice of popular, experimental, and documentary films include those that have been at the center of critical debates, or else represent a “first” of some kind (first female orgasm, first coming out, etc.).

The book is divided thematically into three main parts, each comprising two chapters. Part One, “Women,” explores the significations that accrued to proliferating images of women's pleasure from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. The first chapter, “Autonomous Pleasures: Bardot, *Barbarella*, and the Liberal Sexual Subject,” examines the sexual-political significations of women's orgasms in two films by Roger Vadim: *Et Dieu...créa la femme* (*And God Created Woman*, 1956) and *Barbarella* (1968), starring Jean Fonda as the “first (American) face of female orgasm on the American screen” (p. 3). Young shows that *Barbarella* aligns female *jouissance* with an egalitarian political system, placing female orgasm at the heart of the new liberal subject. Reading the film's gendered pleasures with and against Mulvey, Young argues that *Barbarella*'s status as the subject of pleasure-not-desire is an expression of the political regime of liberal democracy that has produced her as a new kind of liberal sexual subject detached from the psychic complications of desire (a key theme in the book). A potent fantasy is created of a liberal sexual subject that, by resolving the tension between reason (civilization) and instinct (pleasure), has done away with the unconscious. Yet if the film is a utopian fantasy of transparent pleasure as well as a tongue-in-cheek parody of sexual liberation, it is also decisively anti-queer: in the rogue planet Tau Ceti, where sexuality takes the form of homosexuality, sadomasochism, and polymorphous perversion, sex eroticizes inequality and is the embodied expression of a feudal, non-liberal, antihumanist, perverse, political system, where no rights and sexual contract exist. Diversity is not yet a hallmark of the liberal sexual subject.

Chapter two, “Facing the Body in 1975: Catherine Breillat and the Antinomies of Sex,” explores how feminist filmmakers, theorists, and artists in the 1970s tested out the role of the film apparatus in sustaining or challenging the system of sexual difference that troubles notions of universalism. Young addresses the paradox of the female face as at once universal and sexually marked with reference to Catherine Breillat's little-known but astonishing debut feature, *Une vraie jeune fille* (*A Real Young Girl*, 1976). For Breillat, making sex public entails recognizing the antinomy between a woman's face and her vagina. As the adolescent Alice puts it: “I can't accept the proximity of my face and my vagina.” Young argues persuasively that in France the face must

be visible and public, for it is at once individual and universal (i.e., it transcends categorical distinctions and lends itself to the republican abstraction of the universal). Yet unlike Judy Chicago, say, Breillat does not claim the vagina as a site of individuation, and the vagina and face cannot be sutured into a neat whole by a performative act of reclamation. By placing the film within the context both of Breillat's later work and of Agnès Varda's 1975 short *Réponse de femmes* (*Women Reply*), which uses the cinematic apparatus to restore the wholeness to women denied by culture, he reveals the real stakes of Breillat's "vaginal vision" which rejects the imaginary of the liberal sexual subject in favor of a Sadean and Bataillean view of sexuality.

Part Two, "Criminals," attends to the increasing visibility of male homosexual desire, often figured as a malignant threat to the social body, comparing films made before, during, and after the gay liberation movements of the 1970s that offered fascinated but phobic visions of male homoeroticism as both essential to, and destructive of, the patriarchal order. In chapter three, "The Form of the Social: Heterosexuality and Homo-aesthetics in *Plein soleil*," Young analyzes René Clément's *Plein soleil* (*Purple Noon*, 1960), one of the first mainstream French films to put a queer bond at its narrative centre, although homosexuality is never named as such. Instead, homosociality is given a queer charge, with the female figure serving as a conduit in the bond between the two men, while male beauty (Alain Delon in his prime) is made a spectacle. In this new vision of the male body flouting the norms of the male gaze of the period, homosexual desire haunts the scene as an aesthetic trope of redoubling—a mimicry of gestures, clothing, colours, and formal lines. Hence, in the terms of Guy Hocquenghem, homosexual desire "threatens the social order not as an invasion of alterity but rather as a hypertrophy of the self-same" (p. 119). In a wonderful opening out of his central analysis typical of the book, Young offers a strong cultural argument that the Nouvelle Vague's critical assault on Clément as the embodiment of the *cinéma de papa* rehearses a set of oppositions through which queerness finds its place (or "non-place") in French imaginaries of the social. This comes down to the fear of a formal and non-psychological—and thus anti-social—narcissism: the familiar fantasy of homosexuality as a demise of the nation and of the social itself, and of sociality understood to depend on sexual difference. Clément, Young avers, turns the Nouvelle Vague's transcendental principle of heterosexuality into a facsimile, a depthless mirror image, through the film's images of homo-narcissism where Tom triangulates himself (a theme continued in the three-fold mirror).

Chapter four, "*Cruising* and the Fraternal Social Contract," considers William Friedkin's controversial 1980 film *Cruising*, which put gay sex graphically on mainstream view while continuing the long tradition of conflating queer desire with a murderous impulse. In an astute reading informed again by Hocquenghem but also Leo Bersani's theories of sociality, Young argues that *Cruising* offers an erotic allegory of the exceptional violence underlying the social contract (the mythic origin of the modern liberal state), whereby the repressive force of the law is itself a perverse source of pleasure. On the one hand, the film celebrates with its ambiguously ethnic white men a social world without status difference, where homoeroticism is intrinsic to the social order and not a perverse exception. On the other, homosexual desire is presented as a threat of the metastasis of the social body. The police force is masculinized and homosexualized, with gay S/M constituting an eroticized and intensely carnal staging of the fact that the law is phallic. Through a careful consideration of the film's style, including its postsynchronization techniques, Young concludes accurately that the film's "mode of making sex public is also a rendering-sexual of the public: a singular and disturbing vision of a truly queer public sphere" (p. 155).

The third and final part, "Citizens," looks at the emergence of a new model of queerness based on a liberal notion of diversity with a claim on ordinary citizenship. Chapter five, "Word Is Out, or Queer Privacy," examines *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1978), a collectively produced activist documentary composed of interviews with a group of lesbian and gay subjects. Taking aim at critiques of the film's "gay liberalism" (p. 160) which invokes the institutions of family and marriage and keeps sex to some extent private (the film has been accused of being a model and prototype for homonormativity, not helped by its conventional, talking-head documentary format), Young contends that the subjects' dual claim to public representation and private domesticity actually has disruptive, nonnormative political effects. For the film's sober realism, its individualizing of homosexuality (the camera's attention to the singular face in universalising close-up rather than to bodies with the promise of queer collectivity), its *mise en scène* of privatized individuality which does not preclude the pleasures of public sex, and, above all, the fact that it was disseminated through the mass medium of television, serve to transform the public sphere and enact a transformative violence on the symbolic order. Addressing a public world from which queerness has been implicitly excluded, the film, Young forcefully suggests, claims a right to publicity and privacy in the hope of producing a depathologized mode of public queerness and a rescued privacy. It leads him to assert, in a neat reversal of terms, that the anonymity of public sex is also its privacy.

Chapter six, "Sex in Public: Through the Window from *Psycho* to *Shortbus*," tracks the cinematic trope of camera movement through a bedroom window (the penetration into private space) in John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* (2006) which, by recreating the opening sequence of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), illustrates the transition from a psychoanalytic hermeneutics of desire to a model of permeability, connectivity, and unblocked circulation in a new, globally connected network. Like *Barbarella*, *Shortbus* organises its narrative around the trope of female orgasm, and turns sex made public into an allegory of liberal democracy (the film ends with simulated images of the Statue of Liberty marking a symbolic alliance between France and the US as bastions of a liberal democracy now remade as queer-friendly). Young interrogates the premisses underpinning the film's utopian rhetoric whereby orgasm is a progressive form of relationality and connectivity, and pleasure itself becomes the way to realise the fantasy of a society without violence, thus exemplifying Foucault's distinction between desire and pleasure where the latter does not involve repression and requires no interpretation. Queerness is here "an all-encompassing transparency" because there is "no longer an errancy or secret reticence of the signifier" (p. 203). But Young insists, crucially, on a remainder in the film: sovereign state violence may remain off-screen, withheld from view, relegated to some opaque realm away from the Statue of Liberty, yet without it the torch of liberty could not burn.

The book is rounded off by an extended epilogue entitled "Post-cinematic Sexuality," which shows how new media have reconfigured the relation between sexuality and the public realm by creating a "pornified world" (p. 229), with direct implications for the nature and structure of community. In the book's only direct encounter between French and American cinema, Young presents two recent films that, on the face of it, could not be more different: Alain Guiraudie's *L'Inconnu du lac* (*Stranger by the Lake*, 2013), a self-conscious art film that returns in time to a familiar public site of queer sexual culture before its reconfiguration by digital technologies and economic globalization; and Paul Schrader's *The Canyons* (2013), which proclaims the decay of cinema (metonym for the humanist subject) since sex has completely absorbed the strategic and transactional logic of the neoliberal digital market place with its surveillance and commodity values of once private sexual acts. Yet, in both cases, the cinematic

making-public of sex is seen to give form to a destructive though depersonalized and depsychologized drive. In the lakeside u/dys-topia of *L'Inconnu du lac*, nothing is repressed or foreclosed—the murderous violence is a deracinated operation of the drive and operates autonomously and without reason. Put differently, transgression and subversion are now banalized and institutionalized (Young makes provocative reference here to the blatantly homoerotic images of torture at Abu Ghraib). In a final deft critical move, Young returns to Paul de Man's principle of negativity as irony: words mean what they say, or don't. For the world of finance capital in *The Canyons* is still beholden to some inscrutable negativity that interrupts the free-flow of information, namely the terrifying opacity of the signifier. Young is insisting here, contra Foucault, on a Lacanian model of desire that necessarily functions within signification—it can't somehow exist outside it in the realm of pure (visual) pleasure. Such return at the current juncture of a pure, insistent negativity calling into question the logic of transparency and self-enclosure suggests to Young, almost against the odds, that there is, in fact, an outside to the global system.

If I have provided a concrete sense of the conceptual richness, originality, and sheer scope of *Making Sex Public, and Other Cinematic Fantasies*, as well as the scholarly rigor and subtlety with which Young's crafts his powerful insights into intricate, far-reaching theoretical arguments, I need to highlight that the book is also an immense pleasure to read. Young writes stylishly and compellingly in fluent, vital, and elegant prose that generates consistently dynamic and vivid formulations and turns of phrase. For instance, of *Cruising*: "the 'normal world' is an erotic-social field in which we are all bottoms, topped by prosthetic fathers" (p. 155). Or of *Une vraie jeune fille*: "The vagina embodies both the excess, and default, of materiality; combining both the sublime and slime, it is the *sublime*" (p. 84). In addition, the volume is immaculately produced with an inventive use of images, including in thematic series. My only slight quibble is that occasionally the sense of "our" is left vague and demands clarification and interrogation, especially when nearly all the films discussed present an essentially white world (a notable exception is the scene in *Et Dieu...créa la femme* with Bardot surrounded by Black male musicians, which, as Young observes, underlines the racial [racist] structure that subtends the imaginary of the autonomous liberal subject). This does not detract, however, from what is a dazzling achievement and critical tour de force that will be required reading for scholars and students exploring the place of sex and queerness in post-war and contemporary French and American cinema and society.

NOTE

[1] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547-566 (558).

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ISSN 1553-9172