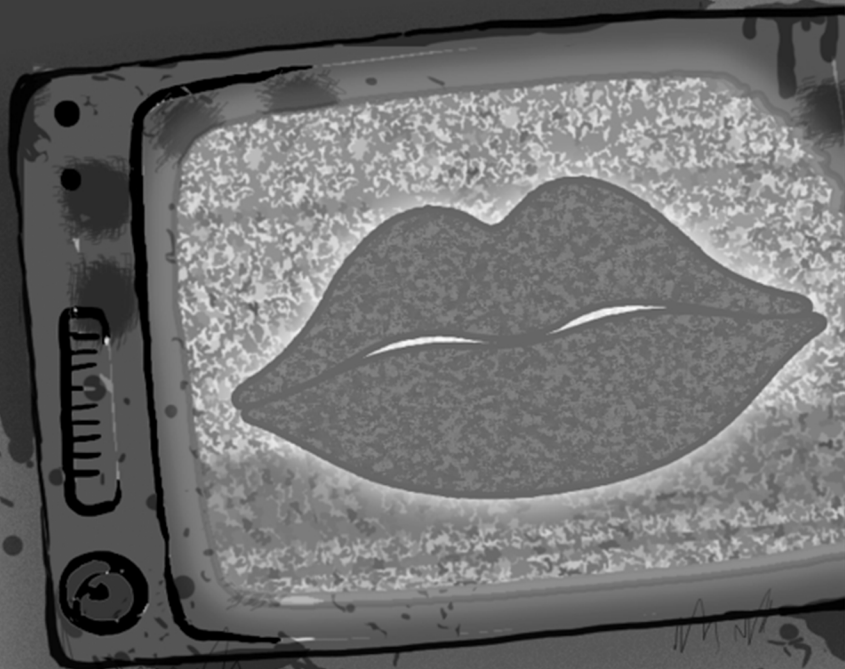


# FOCUS MEDIA JOURNAL



2012-2013 UCSB Film and Media Studies  
Undergraduate Journal

# FOCUS

MEDIA JOURNAL

VOLUME XXXIII

2012-2013



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# A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

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First of all, THANK YOU to everyone who helped on the 2012-2013 issue of *Focus Media Journal*, from the entire staff and me. We could not have published this edition without your support. We are especially grateful to the Film and Media Studies Department faculty members and graduate students who dedicated their time and expertise.

This year's journal revolves around the theme of "excess." In mainstream culture, film and media texts that are labeled excessive are also considered lowbrow or crude. As a media scholar, I believe this claim to be superficial and unsupported, and I hope to use this edition of *Focus* to academically redeem excess. Every article published in this journal supports this intent, all proving the constructive use of excess in cinema, television, and new media.

I hope the cover of *Focus* also accurately conveys the journal's intent. In the foreground lays a "dead" television set, representing the growing power of new media over traditional viewing platforms. Its screen projects a pair of female lips which show the persistence of issues of gender and sexuality in today's society. In the background, zombies race toward the screen—which the back cover shows are escaping from a pile of discarded television sets—once again indicating changes in media technology and a cultural obsession with excess.

A very special part of this year's *Focus Media Journal* is an article celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the UCSB Film and Media Department. Publishing this piece is the very least that we, as undergraduates, can do to recognize our remarkable staff and faculty.

I would especially like to thank our staff advisor Joe Palladino for his continuous guidance, patience, and for trusting me to run this issue. Finally, I want to extend gratitude to our faculty advisor Jennifer Holt, for her support of *Focus* and all undergraduate endeavors.

This year's staff is excited to present to you the 2012-2013 edition of *Focus Media Journal*, enjoy!

Yours Truly,



Corie Anderson  
Editor-in-Chief  
2012-2013

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# **IN FOCUS:**

## **A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE**

THIS IS



# THIS IS 40: CREATING FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES HISTORY AT UCSB

BY LAURA HORSTMANN

**W**ith the U.S. film industry's \$10 billion average annual domestic market gross, social media's multifaceted coverage of every major global event, and the omnipresence and constant accessibility of the internet in everything from our homes to our pockets, media is more prevalent and ubiquitous than ever before. This constant presence has made it incredibly important to understand not only the implications this permeation has upon our society, but our own relationships with media. Over the past 40 years, UCSB has cultivated a strong and highly esteemed Film and Media Studies department that strives to explore these complex industries and relationships. The department's passion, creativity, talent, and stimulating discourse makes celebrating its Fortieth Anniversary a great honor for *Focus Media Journal*.

UC Santa Barbara's personal relationship with film and media began in 1973, when a small collective of interdisciplinary professors, each with a passion for cinema, collaborated to create a freestanding program—now academically renowned. What the program lacked in institutional clout, it made up for in the energy, enthusiasm, and curiosity its students and professors

shared, a passion that would only expand. Over the past 40 years, the program has grown into an incredibly respectable and dynamic department that is currently credited as one of the best in the country.

Though underfunded and largely ignored by administrators when it first began, national interest and recognition the program received in the early 1990s helped recruit donors and expand into a full-fledged university department. In 1978, Charles Wolfe became UCSB's first faculty member to hold a Doctoral degree in Film, which he received from Columbia University. Professor Wolfe would become one of several talented and dedicated individuals, including many current faculty members, that would shape the Film and Media department into what it is today. Other notable scholars include Janet Walker, Constance Penley, and Edward Branigan, who retired in 2012. This collaborative group's goal was to create a department that could offer the same access and benefits of a large research university, while retaining the intimacy of a small liberal arts college. With today's current enrollment rate of approximately 500 undergraduates, a rigorous critical curriculum, and a dynamic faculty consisting of scholars, published



authors, archivists, curators, and filmmakers, they have definitely exceeded their original goal. In 2005, the department expanded even further by introducing a Film and Media Graduate program.

The uniqueness of the department comes from its primary focus on the analytical and theoretical study of film and media as opposed to production, which according to Professor Wolfe, aims to help students develop “a capacity for critical and creative thinking, using film as a lens to hone and refine these skills.”<sup>1</sup> This critical analysis of film is particularly important, as media is a powerful cultural tool that reflects the dreams, fears, and anxieties in any society. Current PhD student Maria Corrigan says that studying film is a “beautiful way of thinking about and looking at histories that can easily be forgotten.”<sup>2</sup>

Another unique and treasured aspect of the department is the Reel Loud Film Festival, an annual event exhibiting student-made short films, which are accompanied by live musical acts, much within the tradition of the original silent films and Vaudeville Theater acts. The festival was founded by an enthusiastic group of film students in 1991, who were passionate and proactive about investigating cinematic history. Professor Wolfe and Undergraduate Advisor Joe Palladino both point to Reel Loud as their favorite event of the department, and Palladino recalls how incredibly excited he is to witness the, “tremendous amount of creativity” student filmmakers display every year.<sup>3</sup>

The passion that drove those

student founders of Reel Loud in 1991 can be found in the department’s current students as well, who are just as excited to continue Reel Loud’s legacy. Senior Hilary Campbell took on a tremendous amount of responsibility as director for this year’s festival. One of her main goals was to involve as much of the student population as possible, instead of settling for the guaranteed audience of Film and Media majors that historically attend. To achieve this goal, Campbell introduced more pre-show awareness and fundraising events than ever before, including a themed carnival, fundraising concert, and a film Trivia Night in Isla Vista. Campbell hopes these events have, “paved the way for a new festival that’s more interactive with the community.”<sup>4</sup>

The Film and Media Department also hosts the annual Word Farm, a 3-day interactive screenwriting conference where students are able to meet, exchange ideas, and receive advice from working industry professionals. This year, the student-run event celebrated its 11th anniversary. Joe Palladino described Word Farm as something he wishes existed when he was a UCSB Film Studies undergraduate.<sup>5</sup> Senior Corie Anderson, who organized this year’s event, says, “Word Farm is a unique experience because there are few other places where screenwriting students can directly interact with and receive feedback from successful film or television writers.”<sup>6</sup>

The department has undergone several transformations throughout its rich history. Most of which have

come from the program's object of study: the changing media industrial structure and advances in cinematic technology. With the growing accessibility of tools for production, it seems we are entering an age of unlimited creativity in which almost anyone can make a film. Joe Palladino describes this technological age as being reminiscent of the Do-It-Yourself attitude of the punk movement of the early 80s.<sup>7</sup> While the Film and Media major only has a few production courses and just requires one basic skills class, this accessibility has allowed students to apply what they learn in film theory and history courses to their technological and creative pursuits—continuing their critical study of cinema outside of the classroom.

One of the greatest educational tools on campus is the recently founded Carsey-Wolf Center, a joint creation of the UCSB Film and Media Studies and Communication Departments. The center is devoted to media research and teaching, made possible by donors well-known in the industry such as Marcy Carsey, Dick Wolf, and Dr. Joseph Pollock. According to their mission statement, the Carsey-Wolf Center offers, "an intellectual as well as a physical space in which the university and media industries can interact through educational activities, research projects, and public programming."<sup>8</sup> This physical space, and the crown jewel of the Film and Media Studies Department, is The Pollock Theater. While plans for the theater began in 1994, this state of the art facility recently

opened its doors in 2011, providing an unprecedented classroom experience and public theater, and attracting students and community members alike.

As technology has shifted, so has UCSB's Film and Media Department. One major change was the program's expansion to include Media in its range of study (and its title). From its inception, the department has also strived to recruit new and innovative faculty that would advance the department and the future of the study of cinema. Palladino argues that "while there is a strong sense of institution still in place, the introduction of fresh voices and talent will hopefully quell the fear of stagnancy that might come with having a core, permanent faculty."<sup>9</sup> Maria Corrigan confirms the success in doing this and describes being able to feel the, "inspiring character of the people who shaped the department," something which "can be seen in the level of education you receive."<sup>10</sup> This winning combination can even be felt by one of the department's most recent faculty members, Ross Melnick, who describes his first year and reception at UCSB as, "a dream for a new faculty member."<sup>11</sup> Melnick went on to express how inspiring it is that, "as much as the faculty here are prolific in their research, it's obvious that they also care an enormous amount about teaching."<sup>12</sup>

No matter how much the entertainment field continues to change, the study of film and media will never lose its value. In fact, the increased importance of new

technologies has only solidified the academic study's longevity. Maria Corrigan notes that "people are often unaware of the level of intimacy with which they engage with media," further showing the significance of this critical discourse.<sup>13</sup> The Film and Media department at UCSB continues to provide the opportunity to not only embrace this incorporation, but to understand and critically analyze it's significant effect on our culture and ourselves.

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THE ORIGINAL ART ACCOMPANYING THIS  
ARTICLE HAS BEEN CREATED BY  
LAURA HORSTMANN



# TRANSCENDENTAL TRENDSETTERS: FILMMAKERS AND GENERIC EXCESS



# THE SPECTACLE OF THE FEMALE ABJECT: POSTMODERN GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN *JENNIFER'S BODY* AND *DEADGIRL*

BY CORIE ANDERSON

No genre of film is as fixed on images of the body or as devoted to arousing bodily sensations from the audience as horror, except perhaps pornography, both of which are included in what Carol Clover terms “body genres.”<sup>1</sup> This focus on sensation, along with the prominence of gender relations and sexuality, is especially apparent in postmodern horror films, those made after 1960 which blur boundaries and break down traditional modernist categories.<sup>2</sup> Films like *Night of the Living Dead* (G. Romero 1968), *Halloween* (J. Carpenter 1978), *The Evil Dead* (S. Raimi 1981), and *Scream* (W. Craven 1996) epitomized the genre for decades, paving the way for a new batch of deeply postmodernist movies to emerge. Two such rule-breaking films, drenched in reflexivity, are the Diablo Cody-written teen-horror-comedy *Jennifer's Body* (K. Kusama 2009) and the cult indie-thriller *Deadgirl* (T. Haaga 2008). In this paper, I will examine how both *Jennifer's Body* and *Deadgirl* successfully negotiate contemporary issues of gender and sexuality through the use of postmodern horror film techniques. In particular I will argue that the female characters of Jennifer, Joann, and *Deadgirl* reflexively embody classic horror theories such as the

male gaze and the object, and whose deployment in the films provide a space for wider cultural debate.

The postmodern horror tradition is probably best known for its extremely self-referential nature, what Kendall Phillips describes as “simultaneously highly derivative and deeply aware of its derivative status.”<sup>3</sup> This practice is evident in the *Scream* series, which combines humor and terror to cleverly define the generic horror rules for the audience only to break them later. The more recent *Jennifer's Body* also constantly references formulaic horror practices, particularly in its refusal to inhabit a specific subgenre. Instead, the film combines rape-revenge, occult, and slasher tropes with the comedy and teen genres. In the beginning of the film, after best friends Jennifer and Anita “Needy” escape a burning concert in their town of Devil's Kettle, Jennifer is persuaded to leave in a creepy van with the band, Low Shoulder. This imagery, along with Needy's comment about the van looking like an “'89 Rapist,” and Jennifer asking the all-male band members if they actually are rapists, explicitly allude to the rape-revenge subgenre. Her name even references the protagonist, Jennifer, of the subgenre's defining film, *I Spit on Your Grave* (M. Zarchi 1978). But instead of raping Jennifer in the



woods that night, Low Shoulder attempts to sacrifice her—wrongly thinking she is a virgin—in order to become famous musicians. Instead, Jennifer is turned into a demon, a possession which serves as the plot of occult films like *The Exorcist* (W. Friedkin 1973).<sup>4</sup> For the rest of the film, Jennifer viciously murders boys in her high school, a bloody rampage typical of the slasher film's masked killer. Unlike these films, however, Jennifer is clearly shown to be the murderer, and the film therefore does not rely on leaving clues for the audience to speculate who is killing and why the murders are taking place. *Jennifer's Body* is, at the same time, all of these subgenres and none of them, calling attention to horror's formulaic structure with extreme imagery and humor.

While *Jennifer's Body* uses playful comedy to refer to horror traditions, *Deadgirl* aligns itself more firmly with hard-to-watch exploitation horror, once again taking these practices to the extreme in this new period of postmodernism. Like any genre, exploitation cinema contains many variations, including classic films like *The Last House on the Left* (W. Craven 1972), new cult hits like *The Human Centipede* (T. Six 2009) as well as the “splatter” and “sexploitation” subgenres. *Deadgirl's* contemporary context allows it to comment all these films and subgenres, invoking zombie, rape-revenge, and body horror tropes in addition to the story's

teen context, set in high school and focused on young characters (like most horror). From the title alone, *Deadgirl* makes reference to the zombie film, first seen in *Night of the Living Dead* (G. Romero 1968), where “reanimated corpses” attack and kill the living.<sup>5</sup> This deadly rampage is also typical of the rape-revenge subgenre, that *Deadgirl* makes reference to in its final moments. Throughout the film, the antagonist JT becomes more and more obsessed with Deadgirl, first exploiting her by exposing her naked body and eventually tying her down and raping her multiple times a day. JT even encourages



sexual violence by his male friends, who he brings to visit Deadgirl on multiple occasions. At the end of the film, Deadgirl escapes her bonds and bites or kills everyone in the asylum, except the protagonist Rickie who had consistently refused to take advantage of her. Nevertheless, *Deadgirl* ultimately places its focus on areas other than revenge, such as images of the body, particularly Deadgirl's naked, dirty, and rotting corpse, shown in extreme close-up in many scenes. In one scene in particular, JT proves Deadgirl's inability to die by pushing his finger into a bullet hole in her stomach. Yellow fluid oozes out and Deadgirl moans with "life." Here the film recalls body horror, which aims to shock and disgust viewers, seen famously in *Videodrome* (D. Cronenberg 1983). All these elements are played out in a high school setting, as the film cuts mainly between Deadgirl's dark, abandoned mental asylum and the bright high school where typical teen drama occurs. This part of the film features the familiar storylines of a boy in love with a girl who doesn't notice him, conflict between jocks and loners, and general boredom with school. *Deadgirl* uses these cinematic tactics to not only comment on the horror genre, but to create an entirely new type of film.

Postmodern horror also harbors an affinity for sexual themes, a combination of sex and violence that many degrade as excessive, sensational, and low culture.<sup>6</sup> Linda Williams refutes this condemnation of horror films,

instead arguing that they "address persistent problems in our culture" and thus act as a "cultural form of problem solving."<sup>7</sup> *Jennifer's Body* focuses even more intently on the gender and sexuality of its characters than its predecessors, successfully invoking Williams' argument and acting as a space for public communication about sex. This is obvious before the film even begins. The theatrical poster for *Jennifer's Body* shows Jennifer (played by pop culture sex symbol Megan Fox) seductively posing in a high school classroom, a smashed hand protruding from the desk she sits on. Her red tank top, high heels, and skin-revealing short skirt, along with the film's title, makes something abundantly clear: this film is all about the female body.

The posters for *Deadgirl* are similarly suggestive. One features a close-up picture of Deadgirl herself, eyes rolled back and mouth open, a pose that can be read not only as lifeless but also as a woman in the height of sexual ecstasy. In the film, sex and death are completely and complexly tied up in the character of Deadgirl. Another *Deadgirl* official poster includes an extreme close-up of a woman's lips, which are pink, sparkly, and seemingly alive, in stark contrast with the title's promise of a "dead" girl. Both of these posters emphasize the sexual over the horrific, perhaps to appeal to a larger audience in addition to its targeted adolescent males. The posters also increasingly confirm the similarity between *Jennifer's Body* and *Deadgirl*. In

both cases, the films are named for their lead characters, women who embody the seductive, sickening, and excessive nature of humanity. These two characteristics are played to such extreme that the films' ideas can be communicated to viewers with only an image.

Traditionally, horror has been criticized by feminist theorists for displaying women as "spectacles of feminine victimization," a position postmodernism rejects.<sup>8</sup> Feminist Laura Mulvey famously wrote about patriarchal influence on film form and the active male gaze of the passive, exhibitionist female.<sup>9</sup> Linda Williams argues against this modernist view, instead reading a "new fluidity and oscillation" in viewing pleasures, one that includes females too.<sup>10</sup> *Jennifer's Body* also recognizes this feminist disagreement, and aligns closely to Williams' ideas on postmodernist flexibility, as the character of Jennifer is both the passive spectacle of female form and the active, plot-driving force. However, this emphasis on femininity and sexuality, in addition to the inclusion of a female title character, sets *Jennifer's Body* and *Deadgirl* apart from postmodern films of earlier decades.

Through the use of cliché and sexual excess, Jennifer's character successfully calls attention to historical cinematic representations of women. The film can hardly be taken seriously, instead forcing the viewer to critically analyze the demeaning roles in which women are so frequently placed. The beginning

of *Jennifer's Body* introduces Jennifer as the stereotypical high school cheerleader: attractive, dim, and only concerned about her appearance and boys. More importantly, Jennifer is put on display for the audience, first seen in a revealing cheerleading uniform and then in a stomach and cleavage showing cropped t-shirt. Here Jennifer's physique is flaunted for viewers, and they are encouraged to look at her, fulfilling what Mulvey would call the "traditional exhibitionist role" of women in cinema.<sup>11</sup> This spectacle of *Jennifer's Body*, however, is full of textual meaning and therefore does not serve only to attract male viewers like a modernist film would. Instead, Jennifer's hypersexuality becomes an important element of the plot, played to the extreme and used as a tool of seduction and murder. In one sequence, a boy from school, Collin, intends to drive to Jennifer's house for a date. Instead of her own home, she gives him the address to an abandoned building and waits for him with candles and romantic music. At this point in the film, Jennifer looks haggard from not feeding on humans and is in need of a kill. This is not a typical sex scene. As Collin and Jennifer become more intimate, the camera moves away from them, focusing on their candlelit shadows instead. Suddenly, Jennifer bites and kills Collin. Though the audience never completely sees, it is clear from the shadows that Jennifer castrates Collin with her mouth, blood spewing from his genital region



## SEXUALLY-AGGRESSIVE JENNIFER CHALLENGES TRADITIONAL FEMININITY.

similar to the fluids produced from the expected *sexual act*. This not only shows the intensely sexualized nature of everything Jennifer does (including killing), but emphasizes fluid gender roles and recognizes “horror films’ appeal to the emerging sexual identities of its... spectators.”<sup>12</sup> Throughout the sequence, Jennifer acts as the sexually experienced, masculine partner and forces herself onto Collin. Conversely, Collin seems to be the more passive, feminine partner and is nervous when driving to meet Jennifer, screams at the sight of a

rat, and lets Jennifer take the lead by kissing him and pulling off his pants. It is clear how willing *Jennifer’s Body* is to confront cinematic portrayals of gender and sex.

*Deadgirl* challenges Laura Mulvey’s critical modernist readings of female passivity, exhibition, and spectacle in classical narrative cinema in a slightly different way. Instead of reversing these stereotypes, the film consciously inhabits them. In particular, *Deadgirl* embodies Mulvey’s idea of scopophilia, or “pleasure in looking,” which asserts

a spectatorship position that indulges in taking another person as object and projecting a “repressed desire onto the performer.”<sup>13</sup> This is evident in the sequences where JT and the other boys are shown raping Deadgirl. Here, audience members may accept the film’s horrific circumstances because it allows them to safely experience the fantasy of possessing a woman and having sex with her at any time. The degrading events in these scenes seem to reinforce Mulvey’s claims, as the men see Deadgirl as only their sexual object. However, *Deadgirl*’s cinematic style contradicts these views. This is most explicitly seen in the film’s commitment to showing images of Deadgirl. During these scenes, the film cuts between images of the excited boys and the woman they are raping. Close-up shots of her body reveal dark bruises, bullet holes that have not healed, and limbs in unusual positions, all covered in a layer of grime. These horrific images of Deadgirl reject any erotic connotations to the “sex scenes,” proving the film’s refusal to condone the sick actions of JT and the others. Here, *Deadgirl* makes clear that rape should be no one’s sexual fantasy.

On the surface, *Deadgirl* also reinforces typical uses of the male gaze, the idea that female characters are displayed and erotically coded to

"LOOK AT  
HER, SHE'S  
BEAUTIFUL."

appeal to male desire.<sup>14</sup> *Deadgirl* is filled with male characters looking longingly at women. In the very first scene, the film’s protagonist Rickie stares at the beautiful Joann across the high school quad. When she comes near him to retrieve a ball, she notices his look and asks with annoyance, “What are you staring at?” This postmodernist moment not only calls attention to moments of looking later in the film but also refers to the position of spectatorship, forcing viewers to analyze what they are looking at, which is of course the film. The same image of Rickie staring at Joann occurs many times in *Deadgirl*, visually showing his romantic aspirations and alluding to the twist ending where Joann is bitten by Deadgirl and becomes Rickie’s undead sex slave.

Another one-side “romance” is seen in the association of looks between JT and Deadgirl. When they first find Deadgirl, Rickie is freaked out and wants to leave while JT is calmly fascinated. He pulls off the plastic to reveal her face and breasts, smiling while he says “Look at her, she’s beautiful.” As he exposes the rest of her body, the camera shows it to the audience, becoming JT’s gazing eyes for a moment. Here, once again, the sight of her body is a tool of disgust, not arousal. In the scenes where JT comes to see Deadgirl with his friends, he is masculine and hypersexual. However, later when he is alone with her, he whispers

while raping her, "Look at me, look at me." This moment reveals JT's twisted romance with the corpse and gives power to the female gaze, as Deadgirl denies the look that JT so desperately desires. Rickie also shows this female power when he has a disturbing sex dream where Deadgirl is staring into his eyes. He nervously asks JT, "She been looking at you like she knows something?" Here, the woman's look is associated with knowledge and control, or an oscillation between female victimhood and active empowerment that Williams calls "bisexual" identification.<sup>15</sup> The film's excessive eye imagery and references to looking calls attention to the victimized cinematic positions women are typically placed in as well as the privileged site of the audience. Though many could argue that *Deadgirl* simply reinforces the degrading male gaze in horror, the film's explicit consciousness of these tropes proves the opposite. Without such obvious markers of postmodernism such as comedy, its commentary is hard to read. However, I argue that this confusion is productive, as *Deadgirl*'s controversial nature will hopefully provoke conversation about gender and sexuality in new settings with entirely different viewers.

The modernist assumption of victimization is also challenged in *Jennifer's Body* once Jennifer is transformed into a monster and becomes the plot's main active force. After being turned into a human-eating demon, Jennifer's character is the perfect embodiment of what

Julia Kristeva terms "the abject."<sup>16</sup> Horror films are filled with images of abjection, including those of the corpse, the wound, blood, and waste. It is also a concept central to the monster, literally "the place where meaning collapses," threatening the stability of the symbolic order.<sup>17</sup> Firstly, Jennifer is a literal corpse, as she is sacrificed by Low Shoulder and only brought back to the world of the living as a demon who feeds on humans. Her abjection is best exemplified when she comes to Needy's house after she is killed. In true horror film fashion, Needy is alone at night and goes downstairs to investigate a strange noise. She finds Jennifer in the kitchen, covered in blood and looking lifeless. When Needy tries to talk to Jennifer, she can only respond with animalistic noises and screams, revealing her nonhuman nature. After ravaging Needy's refrigerator, Jennifer then throws up a thick, sticky (and supernatural) black matter. Here, Jennifer represents the abjectified corpse, bloody wound, and ejection of waste all at the same time. Abjection also emphasizes the denial of borders, positions, and rules, a rejection of authority that define postmodernism as well.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, the abject can be read not only in the character of Jennifer, but more widely in *Jennifer's Body*, the postmodernist movement, and the entire horror genre.

*Deadgirl* similarly embodies the abject, as like Jennifer, she is literally a corpse who is reanimated to action, on the border of the "condition as a living being."<sup>19</sup> Because *Deadgirl*



does not heal, much like a zombie and unlike Jennifer, her appearance moves toward literal abjection throughout the film as she is beaten, raped, and shot on numerous occasions. The film's frequent shots of Deadgirl's bruised body and disfigured face are used to prove her role as the abject (and to disgust the audience). Deadgirl's signified death is further exemplified through her animalistic (and therefore inhuman) noises and actions as well as the film's choice to only show her in the dark, underground asylum. These traits prove her difference from the rest of the film's world, as Deadgirl refuses to be labeled as either "alive" or "dead." This ambiguity is the most threatening trait of the abject, as without an adherence to a system of rules, society disintegrates.<sup>20</sup> Deadgirl's character is also contrasted with the live boys who visit her, each vibrant and full of color, and her setting (the asylum) is juxtaposed with the daytime scenes at the high school and Rickie's house. Even though Deadgirl has little physical agency in the film (she is tied down for most of it), unlike the very active Jennifer in *Jennifer's Body*, her function as the abject is still the main plot-driving force. The movie's inciting incident is when Rickie and JT first find Deadgirl and its climactic ending is when she finally escapes. JT spells it out for viewers when he says, "She's pretty active for a dead girl."

According to Carol Clover, female killers in horror, the few there are, show no gender confusion and usually do not have overtly

psychosexual motives for murder.<sup>21</sup> This is completely reversed in *Jennifer's Body*, as Jennifer is consistently associated with masculinity and homosexuality and is shown seducing her male victims before killing them. It is in this retreat from convention and greater emphasis on sex where *Jennifer's Body* attempts to examine cultural attitudes about sexuality more than any previous postmodern horror film. This is apparent in the film's foregrounding of desire and attraction. In his writing on hyperreality, Baudrillard claims that the "discourse of desire" is an important tool in convincing people of true reality.<sup>22</sup> Jennifer wholly acts as this discourse, being the object of attraction for every boy that she kills and even Needy, demonstrated when they make out in her bedroom. Jennifer overtly tells Needy, "I go both ways." Though she is talking about the sex of those she kills, this can also be read as an admission of bisexuality. In the film, though others (obviously) desire Jennifer she also desires them, a sexual urge that is intensified when she is turned into a flesh-eating demon and displayed in the film's emphasis on gaze. Though Deadgirl isn't necessarily beautiful or desirable, her immobile and verbally unresponsive state turns her into an object that the male characters desire to control. By the film's end, however, Deadgirl makes JT and his male friend the object of *her* desire when she breaks free from her restraints and bites both of the boys, feeding on and killing them.

In both *Jennifer's Body* and *Deadgirl*, the female characters oscillate as the objects and subjects of desire, calling attention to the scarcity of this trait in modernist—and even previous postmodernist—female horror characters.

On the surface, the portrayal of women in *Jennifer's Body* and *Deadgirl* seems problematic. However, postmodernist techniques like humor and generic excess are used to call attention to traditional representations of women and thus promote a site of social discussion. Additionally, the intense focus on issues of gender and sexuality in these films (more than any others in classic or postmodern horror) shows just how important this discussion is in today's changing culture.



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THE ORIGINAL ART ACCOMPANYING THIS  
ARTICLE HAS BEEN CREATED BY  
VICTORIA TSAI

# THE CULTURAL OBSESSION WITH ZOMBIES IN MODERN MEDIA

BY JENNIFER LANDE

“**R**omney is the candidate we need to usher in the zombie apocalypse,” famed film and television writer/director Joss Whedon said in his satirical endorsement for Mitt Romney. “Let’s all embrace the future. Stop pretending we care about each other and start hoarding canned goods. Because if Mitt takes office, sooner or later, the zombies will come for all of us.” This video has now received over 7.3 million views on YouTube, showing how far-reaching the current zombie craze has become.<sup>1</sup> Even my interest in politics is overtaken by references to these undead monsters. Comparisons of candidates to zombies and debates over which policies will bring about the zombie apocalypse have consumed the 2012 United States presidential election. Zombies now overwhelm everyday conversation and evade every corner of popular culture, a pervasiveness that is becoming harder to escape. *The Walking Dead*, currently the highest rated cable drama on television, has captured the attention of zombie fans of all ages, and new zombie feature films are emerging at an increasing rate (*Warm Bodies*, *World War Z*). Why has this morbid, cannibalistic monster secured a place in the minds of teenagers and adults alike? It could be an innate psychological drive within each human being

that lures us in or it may stem from deeper fears. The zombie genre successfully entertains and shocks people with playful horror and more importantly, it resonates with current cultural and political anxieties, making it especially relevant in today’s society.

Greg Nicotero, co-executive producer for *The Walking Dead*, knows a thing or two about harnessing this zombie obsession and why record-breaking numbers of viewers tune in to watch the putrid monsters on his show every week. *The Walking Dead* has the most viewers in the 18–49 age demographic (the most desired audience on television) than any other show this year.<sup>2</sup> Its Season 3 premiere was the most-watched basic cable drama telecast in history.<sup>3</sup> Matt Gutman and Lauren Effron from *ABC Nightline* asked Nicotero why he thinks *The Walking Dead* ratings have flourished, to which he responded, “It’s the threat of losing humanity against a lifeless group of monsters. As a superior race, humans fear something that can physically match us, let alone have an enhanced hunger, drive, and instinct to kill.”<sup>4</sup> Fear excites people enough to stimulate adrenaline and provide the perfect amount of enjoyment.

Still, there must be a deeper root to this demographics’ zombie craze. The online podcast *The Psych*



*Files* recalls Freud's theory that "humans have an innate aggressive drive" that they harbor underneath a socially desirable front and "every day we restrain ourselves from expressing these true emotions."<sup>5</sup> This is a popular argument—that zombie storylines in the media allow a societal catharsis, and by killing them, we unleash our pent up hostility. "Killing zombies, or at least watching people kill zombies, allows for that instinct to express itself," Britt suggests.<sup>6</sup> It is as if addressing this uncivilized side of our psyches gives us more sanity. Britt references Jeff Greenberg, a researcher on Terror Management Theory: "Because zombies are

'already dead' we can be free of guilt, gleefully watching them be killed in every way possible—no matter how grisly.<sup>7</sup> After forcing myself to watch a few episodes of *The Walking Dead*—searching for an explanation as to why all my friends are so entranced—I did experience pleasure and relief witnessing humans shoot the zombies dead, one by one, right through the head.

Maybe humans have latched onto the undead trend simply because it's fun to feel afraid. Just one bite and the infection can infiltrate our bodies, change our chemical make-up and revert our entire insides—our previous minds and souls—into blood-sucking, rapa-

cious monsters. My friend, Natalie, watches *The Walking Dead* religiously and when I asked her why she loves it, she said, "I get angry when one of the main characters dies, like why? But then I'm just, eh, glad it's not me." Many people like Natalie love zombies, *The Walking Dead* in particular, because they can experience these bloody and gut-wrenching tragedies through someone else. They can feel this extreme fear from the safety of their own living room—watch the emotional trauma of a fellow human succumbing to the undead while snacking on popcorn and ice cream.

The appeal of zombie horror is understandable. People enjoy watching heroic humans prevail over carnivorous monsters; it's the classic theme that good always prevails. Zombies provide people with an appropriate figure to despise, an agreeable and unreal evil. The UGO article titled "The History of Zombies," traces this hatred back to the Vietnam and Cold Wars, apparent in the similarity in the terms "Commie" and "Zombie."<sup>8</sup> They add, "People jumped from terrorist to walking dead in an instant."<sup>9</sup> America's wartime involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan today could in fact explain the need to project hatred of a foreign enemy onto a fictional monstrous "other." Watching characters kill zombies provides the satisfaction of watching an enemy die, a real situation over which people otherwise have no control.

An early movie manifestation of this foreign enemy trope can be

seen in the 1953 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (D. Siegel). The story follows a small town doctor who learns that all the residents of his community are being replaced by emotionless alien duplicates. The Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB) describes the film as a paranoid 1950s warning against those "Damn Commies," or as a metaphor for the tyranny of McCarthyism.<sup>10</sup> For audiences, the widespread fear of a powerful, unknown enemy seems to be more manageable in a fictional setting, where it is easy and expected that the "good" characters will rise against and defeat the bad, which doesn't always happen in real life.

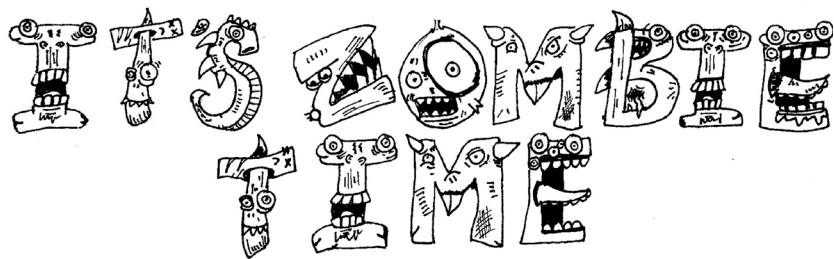
While in 1950s science fiction and horror films the enemy was generally an element outside of U.S. authority, today zombies are increasingly used to represent a mistrust of our own government or large corporations. "Sadly we could imagine a government that causes and covers up toxic spills, dangerous pandemics, or even zombie outbreaks," Kelley B. Vlahos argues in "Obsessed with the Undead."<sup>11</sup> The past decade of war, deceit, and a decreased sense of security have all contributed to the resurgence of this zombie obsession. Joss Whedon's popular YouTube video perfectly captures this mentality. The radical political propositions by Mitt Romney and, in particular, his running mate Paul Ryan, created a strong political resistance among liberal Hollywood and its loyal fan base. Fearful of what the next four years could potentially bring, people be-

gan to imagine the worst, comparing the current political sphere to Hollywood's horrific, manufactured stories. With uncertainty permanently plaguing American politics and deceit continually occurring behind closed doors, people have begun to blame the government's past mistakes, and even its present and future blunders, entirely on zombies—the fictional scapegoats of American unrest.

Max Brooks' popular post-apocalyptic horror novel *World War Z* explores just what would happen to a government-less civilization in the face of a zombie invasion. Told from the perspective of Brooks, an agent of the United Nations Post-war Commission, the book gathers a collection of first-person anecdotes detailing the ten-year post-

pouularity. As long as people's fear of and fascination with the enemy exists, zombie films, television shows, and novels will continue to top the charts—and their end doesn't seem to be in sight.

Zombies scare audiences enough to physically excite them and satisfy their need to indulge in fear. People imagine themselves in the line of action and ponder how they would deal with a mob of approaching ravenous sub-humans, or maybe on the other end of things, attacking a society they have deemed worthless. Though it is likely just another trend, never before has a presidential candidate been so wrapped up in popular culture, being compared to a force ushering in the impending apocalypse. The zombie craze has infiltrated every



apocalyptic war against zombies. Themes such as government ineptitude and the survivalist mentality run through the novel, explaining why people are revering it today, in a time of similar conflict and uncertainty. This summer, a feature film adaptation of the book, also named *World War Z* and starring Brad Pitt, will be released, once again proving the zombie genre's widespread

form of media—films, books, television—and has even begun its attack on politics. What's next? Since Romney didn't win the election, according to Joss Whedon, that buys us some time before the zombies come for us. But when it does, the readers and viewers of *The Walking Dead* and *World War Z* will be aptly prepared to fight back and save us all.

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THE ORIGINAL ART ACCOMPANYING THIS

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SONIA VIRGEN

# NEW COUNTRIES, NEW SELVES: TRAVEL AS METAPHOR FOR PERSONAL GROWTH IN *LOST IN TRANSLATION* AND *THE DARJEELING LIMITED*

BY HALIE ALBERTSON

**T**he modern American condition can more accurately be defined by what it lacks than what it is. Lack of spiritualism brought about by consumerism, and the

filmmakers including Sofia Coppola and Wes Anderson. These filmmakers are defined by their particular approach to filmmaking and view of the world; although critics have judged their films for



BILL MURRAY AS BOB LOST IN THE VOID OF JAPANESE CULTURE.

lack of depth in interpersonal familial and romantic relationships in modern America contribute to a sense of alienation and an inability to connect with others. Nowhere are these phenomena more vividly depicted onscreen than in the films of the “American Eccentrics,” a term coined by Armond White to describe a group of young American

being overly stylized, the stylistic nature of American Eccentric film doesn’t automatically indicate a lack of substance.<sup>1</sup> Backed by major studios, they create films with mainstream appeal yet manage to retain the Independent Cinema sensibilities of their early films. Younger and set apart from earlier filmmakers, the American Eccentrics



treat uniquely modern issues, such as globalism and alienation, with fresh eyes, frequently using foreign settings as cultural foils against which to delineate the values that modern America lacks. According to Jesse Mayshark regarding the *American Eccentrics*, "Their overriding concern is a sort of yearning for connection, but one that is colored by an awareness of all the things that get in the way—the misunderstandings and deliberate or indeliberate injuries that mark human relationships; the barriers of sex, race, class, and culture; and, most of all, the simple and ceaseless inability to transcend the boundaries of body and consciousness."<sup>2</sup> These barriers are made abundantly clear in the works of Sofia Coppola and Wes Anderson, who highlight not only cultural barriers but also the interior ones that prevent their characters from achieving meaningful relationships. The films *Lost in Translation* and *The Darjeeling Limited* show how travel abroad can serve as a catalyst for personal growth. This personal growth in turn proves that the struggles experienced outside one's native country contribute to a realization of the shallow nature of the American way of life, both spiritually and interpersonally, and how building relationships and communities can rectify this modern predicament.

*Lost in Translation* and *The Darjeeling Limited* suffered heavy criticism upon their releases, bearing the charges that the heightened sense of self-awareness

achieved throughout the films is not contingent upon their settings (Japan and India, respectively), which serve as a form of Orientalist entertainment rather than as a trigger for self-discovery. According to Mark Browning, not only does *Limited* give India a cursory—and at times offensive—glance, but it also lacks the sort of spiritual enlightenment that the Whitmans, the brothers portrayed in the film, are seeking: "Perhaps India could be said to be a catalyst to some change to [the] dynamic [of the relationship between the three main characters], but this might just have equally been achieved in America."<sup>3</sup> However, the relationships that build in the two films belie this notion. In *Lost in Translation*, Charlotte, an aimless recent college graduate, and Bob, a once-successful film star who is now reduced to appearing in foreign whisky advertisements, would likely have never met under different circumstances and, even if they had, their age difference would probably have prevented any relationship from forming. They are drawn together by their common Americanness, which would not be unique or compelling in any other setting. The three estranged Whitman brothers of *The Darjeeling Limited* who had avoided each other in the United States, are forced to join together as a family once more to seek their absent mother who has gone to live as a nun in the Himalaya mountains. Seeking Mrs. Whitman is the catalyst for the rebuilding of the brothers' relationship and, as she is physically



displaced in another country, it would be impossible to reach the film's conclusion any other way.

With regards to accusations of Orientalism directed towards the films, it is fair to recognize that neither Coppola nor Anderson explores Asian society in any meaningful way. Both directors even employ Japanese and Indian characters as caricatures, at odds with the films' fleshed-out, emotionally complex, Caucasian main characters. Here, critics fail to note the directors' intentions. Nandana Bose argues that *The Darjeeling Limited* attempts to attack Orientalism rather than exploit it.<sup>4</sup> Bose discusses the long-time Western tradition of exotifying Asian cultures and presenting India as the mysterious "Other;" by exaggerating these elements, Anderson is actually criticizing them. According to Bose, Anderson also condemns "American materialism, emotional vacuity, and lack of spiritualism," through his over-exaggeration of the film's most "Indian" elements, thereby making a farce of Western ideas of Indianness and the depiction of India in earlier Western films.<sup>5</sup> Anderson turns Orientalism on its head by emulating it to such a comical degree that it forces the viewer to reflect upon the Americanness of the characters in contrast to the Indianness of the setting.

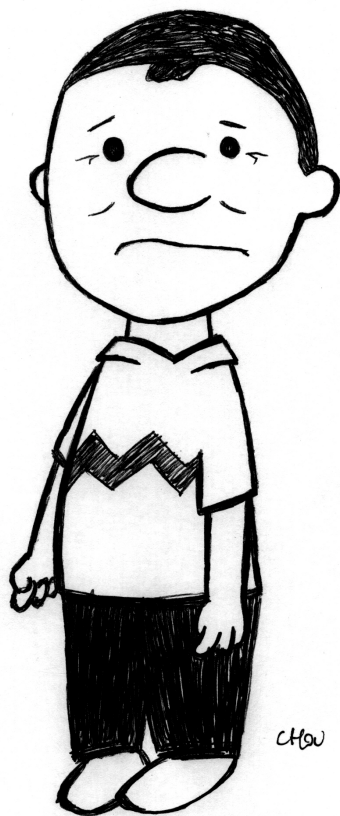
In the case of *Lost in Translation*, Japan serves less as a source of humor and more as a method for forcing the characters (and by extension the viewer) to recognize their own lack of comprehension, not only linguistically or culturally in the

setting of Tokyo, but also regarding their own self-realization. As Todd McGowan notes, "The film's failure to penetrate below the surface of the Japanese Other is at once its great success."<sup>6</sup> For Coppola, "the Other does not house a wealth of strange or even exotic content—it is not a mystery to be solved—but is simply a void."<sup>7</sup> This void is particularly visible in Charlotte, whose lethargic numbness is equally brought about by alienation from her husband, who seems to have assimilated into Japanese society easily (he even picks up his cell phone with Japanese greetings), as alienation from her surroundings. Her aimlessness comes to a head when she visits a Buddhist temple, about which she remarks that she "felt nothing."<sup>8</sup> Once again, McGowan underlines the fact that this is less of a reflection on Japan and more of a reflection on Charlotte herself: "Far from indicating the failure of the film to go deep enough into Japanese culture, Charlotte's failure to feel anything demonstrates the film's refusal to treat Japan in an Orientalist manner."<sup>9</sup> Yet while McGowan correctly asserts that the superficial, surface survey of Japan is meant to reflect Charlotte's own emotional shallowness, Coppola does treat Japan in an Orientalist manner in her use of Japanese character tropes such as the waiters at the restaurant, the old man at the hospital, and the stripper who speaks incomprehensible English. However, like Anderson, she inverts Orientalism in order to highlight its inconsistencies. The use of

Orientalism in an atypical, ironic manner further highlights that the films' two settings, rather than serving as exotic locales meant for entertainment, are crucial to the development of the characters and their collective sense of feeling alienated, feeling outside of themselves, and feeling American.

Anderson and Coppola paint two portraits that, while very different from one another, manage to accurately depict the incomplete nature of modern American life. The struggle to keep up with a fast-paced society forces people to overlook what is most important and thus, exhausted, to settle into chronic dissatisfaction. Jesse Mayshark asserts that the roots of these phenomena are mired in the United States' ambiguous role in the modern world and that American Eccentric films "represent a certain restlessness and insecurity that seem like apt expressions of American uncertainty on the cusp of what will almost certainly not be an American century."<sup>10</sup> Mayshark notes that our "complicated present" is a defining factor in the way that directors like Coppola and Anderson shape the worlds of their characters.<sup>11</sup> One of the most important features of this present is the haste with which modern life is carried out. At the

beginning of *The Darjeeling Limited*, a harried, unnamed businessman is seen running through the train station chasing after the Darjeeling Limited. He isn't able to make it onto the moving train, while Peter Whitman, younger and fitter, manages to keep up and jump onto the train just in time. Francis, the oldest Whitman brother employs a personal assistant, Brendan, to perform tasks such as tracking down a power adaptor (symbolizing overreliance on technology) and passing out laminated and



BOB'S CHARACTER CHANNELS

CHARLIE BROWN'S SOCIAL LOAFING.

meticulous schedules among the brothers (symbolizing obsession with punctuality and the view that “time is money”). The brothers seem to deal with these anxieties with cigarettes and suspicious “Indian muscle relaxers, tranquilizers, and painkillers.”<sup>12</sup> Likewise, Bob and Charlotte in *Lost in Translation* seek to alleviate their insomnia by self-medicating with cigarettes and Suntory whisky at the hotel bar.

However, while both films use their foreign setting to accentuate the pace of life, India and Japan are presented as two very different ends of a spectrum. In India, life seems to move at a gentler pace. When the Whitman brothers are stranded in a small Indian village, they see three boys caught in the raging current of a river and attempt to save them. Jack and Francis each manage to save a boy, but the one that Peter had attempted to save dies. His funeral procession is shot in slow motion, the camera traveling with the Whitman brothers who amble forward to pay their respects, each swathed in traditional white Indian garments. The slow speed of the funeral scene stands out in contrast with the speed of the river that had claimed the boy's life. In the Tokyo of *Lost in Translation*, the city surroundings move at a faster pace than the characters, rather than slower. As Anita Schillhorn van Veen states in her analysis of the depiction of Tokyo in modern film, “Seen as embracing consumerism and technological progress without reservation, Japan is the site of Western fantasy and fear of the

future, and [Lost in Translation uses] Tokyo to epitomize alienation and amorality as a product of modernity.”<sup>13</sup> The lights and sounds of the cityscape are overwhelming to Bob and Charlotte; Charlotte is frequently seen idling by her hotel room's window, her listless reflection layered over the skyline of the city below her, a study in contrasts. If the Whitman brothers discover their own emptiness as a result of the richness around them in India, Bob and Charlotte discover it in the excess of emptiness in Tokyo. As Todd McGowan explains, “Neither character gains any positive content from the events we see depicted in the film; instead, the encounter with Tokyo causes both characters to recognize the void that defines their existence. Instead of finding a self-replete with new content in Japan, Bob and Charlotte discover an absence of content. Tokyo reveals to them their own fundamental emptiness.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the hurried existence of life in Tokyo is just as empty as in the United States, which Coppola proves in her images of Tokyo sidewalks and Pachinko parlors. In these scenes she fills her frames with people constantly bobbing forward against a backdrop of city stimuli. As Brian L. Ott and Diane Marie Keeling aptly assert, “Tokyo has functioned not so much as a setting... but as a metaphor for modern life.”<sup>15</sup> If this is the case, one can also note that India functions as a foil for modern life. According to Nandana Bose, “The Indian landscape performs a choric function, a

primordial, timeless presence.”<sup>16</sup> Both Anderson and Coppola identify the constant activity of modernity as one of the shortcomings of American life and as one of the root causes of chronic dissatisfaction.

Next, Anderson and Coppola each suggest that modern consumer culture causes one to misplace a sense of self. Coppola depicts her characters as being uncomfortable with the consumerism that surrounds them. Upon his arrival in Tokyo, Bob is bombarded with gifts from his hosts—perhaps a Japanese cultural custom, but one that leaves Bob uneasy. Bob is figuratively commoditized in his advertisements for Suntory whisky; the celebrity that Bob symbolizes in the billboards is a product itself, much like the whisky he advertises, as both are waiting to be consumed by the masses. Lydia, Bob’s wife, is determined to redecorate while her husband is away, going so far as to ship a ridiculous amount of fabric and carpet samples to his hotel. The overwhelming array of choices that spill out of the FedEx box from Lydia mirror the inundation of choices on the streets of Tokyo. In an article discussing femininity in Coppola’s films, Todd Kennedy suggests that Bob’s unease stems from the lack of traditional masculinity that surrounds him: “Part of the reason Bob seems so out of place in Tokyo, for example, is that he is surrounded by a consumer culture in which the men around him (such as the Japanese commercial director) all seem feminine, in addition to his encounters with

strippers and call girls who beg him to consume. Even in the States, Bob lives in an environment that equates capitalist consumption with femininity—his wife sending him carpet samples.”<sup>17</sup> As a result, Bob becomes complacent, allowing others take action for him: letting his wife decide the carpet color, sitting through the stripper’s performance until Charlotte arrives, and passively letting the prostitute sent as a “gift” by the Suntory whisky company (herself a commodity) try to seduce him in a fantasy of rape—symbolizing male domination. In being surrounded by an abundance of choice, Bob loses his ability to choose.

In *The Darjeeling Limited*, the role of consumerism is less subtle. Rather than being confused by consumerism as Bob is, the Whitmans embrace it. Although the three brothers are meant to be in India on a “spiritual journey,” they seem to spend more time shopping for useless items (Peter buys a poisonous snake that belongs in the wild) at their pilgrimage points than praying. And when they do pray, spiritualism does not come first in their minds; later, kneeling at one of the altars, Francis accuses Peter of stealing his \$6,000 belt. Afterwards, Francis becomes incensed when one of his \$3,000 loafers is stolen. Furthermore, Anderson frequently employs objects to symbolize characters, showing how these people have become commoditized by their possessions. Alice, Peter’s wife, is represented by her homemade

candle and Jack's unnamed ex-girlfriend is represented by a bottle of perfume. As Stefano Baschiera explains in his article on the role of the object in Anderson's films, "[Baschiera wants] to be conscious of the role played by the objects that Wes Anderson carefully places in front of the camera, and their agency over the characters of the film. The idea is that the objects in his cinema fill the space left empty by the failings of the family and by the disruption of the most important object in people's lives: the house."<sup>18</sup> As Baschiera explains, although Anderson's films are often criticized for their clutter, each object bears significance and holds power over his characters. For example, only when Jack destroys his ex-girlfriend's bottle of perfume can he begin to move past their failed relationship. Perhaps more importantly, the Whitman brothers have immortalized their late father through his objects which, according to Baschiera, are all "undoubtedly linked to the topic of travel."<sup>19</sup> In an attempt to assuage the sense of abandonment they feel, having effectively lost both of their parents, they fight over their father's belt, his glasses, his car, and his numerous pieces of luggage. Throughout the film, the viewer never actually learns anything about the Whitmans' father, as if the importance of the objects has superseded the importance of the man. Anderson makes this particularly clear in his use of the elaborate set of luggage. Made for the film by designer Marc Jacobs

on behalf of luxury leather-goods brand Louis Vuitton, the luggage, symbolizing the "baggage" of the broken Whitman family, weighs the brothers down until the very end of the film when they must shed each piece of luggage to keep up with the departing train. In this scene, the Whitmans are finally able to let go of their consumerism in addition to the sense of loss for their deceased father and absent mother.

Anderson and Coppola also highlight the isolation caused by the demise of traditional family structures in modern America. In the case of the Whitman brothers, familial relationships are marked by confusion. They literally do not know where their mother is, they squabble over their father's last words, and Francis asks Jack and Peter, "Did I raise us, kind of?" Later, Jack conjectures, "I wonder if the three of us would have been friends in real life. Not as brothers, as people." The brothers' adult attitudes towards family life are clearly a reflection of the breakdown of their own household. Peter notes that he "always thought [he] would get divorced," a fatalist attitude likely a result of his mother's unreliable presence in his life and his father's death. In an article discussing paternity in Wes Anderson's films, Joshua Gooch argues that the director employs a kind of ironic humor to explore issues of fatherhood. The viewer hopes for a reconciliation and reinstatement of the father figure at the end of the films but this dream usually remains unfulfilled. As a

result, Gooch notes, "No wonder audiences do not know when to laugh."<sup>20</sup> They want nothing more than to be on the side of the Father's knowledge, and instead they only find themselves confronted by its lack."<sup>21</sup> Stefano Baschiera sees the loss of the family home as a means of emphasizing this lack.<sup>22</sup> In the film, the Indian village serves to show the Whitmans what they are missing; here "it is the idea of community more than that of family that characterizes the domestic space."<sup>23</sup>

In *Lost in Translation*, Japan similarly puts in perspective the missing familial aspects of the characters' lives. Charlotte's husband, John, is able to find his own niche within Japanese society, which makes her feel more distant from him than ever. According to Todd McGowan, this is because, unlike Charlotte, John is able to embrace the Japanese excess surrounding him and fill the void he feels in his own culture: "For John, Tokyo represents an opportunity for the kind of total enjoyment that he doesn't have at home. He embraces aspects of the culture – he earns a greeting in Japanese and wears Japanese clothes – because they allow him to immerse himself in the exotic."<sup>24</sup> In Kyoto, Charlotte sees a traditional Japanese wedding and she stares at the couple, perhaps meditating on what she doesn't have in her own marriage. Charlotte's idealization of a foreignness she doesn't understand (the wedding) is once again an example of Coppola's Orientalism, which serves to show Charlotte's lack of understanding

of Japanese culture rather than the director's. Bob's home life is somewhat more complex than Charlotte's. He loves his children, and says, "it's the most terrifying moment of your life, the day the first one is born... [but later] you want to be with them. And they turn out to be the most delightful people." Yet his relationship with them is marked by indifference: he forgets his son's birthday and his daughter doesn't even want to talk to him on the phone. Perhaps, it is the physical distance between Bob and his family that brings out the emotional distance between them. Their interactions are exclusively via fax or phone, symbolizing the wedge of alienation that modernity and technology drive between people. Truly it is Charlotte and Bob's physical proximity that brings them together in the film. They would certainly have never met in other circumstances, owing to Bob's celebrity and Charlotte's age, yet they are both drawn to the presence and tangibility of one another, in the same way that the trip to India forces the Whitman brothers to rekindle their relationship.

The final major facet that Anderson and Coppola see as lacking from American life is religion. While much more overt in *The Darjeeling Limited* than in *Lost in Translation*, the lack of spirituality in both films' characters ultimately translates into a lack of feeling and an inability to find meaning in the order of the world. Anderson and Coppola, again calling upon Orientalist traditions, paint rural

India and Japan as beatific, spiritual, and thus superior to America, whether or not this is actually the case. Although Coppola uses the Tokyo cityscape as an example of the modern excesses of capitalism, this fault does not extend beyond the city limits. Stereotypically Japanese and Buddhist images make appearances throughout the film, further highlighting Charlotte's own emptiness. Imagery of Charlotte in Kyoto, as well as of the traditional flower-arranging class in the Tokyo hotel, underscore the mindfulness that Charlotte seems to lack. However much she seems to be indifferent to spirituality and the world around her, it is clear that Charlotte wants to escape this state but she simply cannot. In her hotel she is seen listening to a series of self-help tapes called "A Soul's Search: Finding Your True Calling," to which Bob, in the same floating state as Charlotte, replies, "I tried that." According to Kara Lynn Andersen, this lack of understanding is exacerbated by the foreign environs of Tokyo: "[Bob and Charlotte] remain observers who want to break free from the surface stereotypes of Japan, but cannot find an entry point to a deeper and more nuanced understanding."<sup>25</sup> Charlotte is ultimately only capable of being an observer of spirituality rather than an active participant. At the Buddhist temple, she

"DO YOU THINK  
IT'S WORKING?"

DO YOU FEEL  
SOMETHING?"

"doesn't feel anything." This calls to mind the scene in *The Darjeeling Limited* in which the Whitman brothers attempt to perform some sort of religious ceremony, with the immediate response being "Do you think it's working? Do you feel something?" This quasi results-based quest for spirituality epitomizes the criticisms that Anderson and Coppola both make about modern society: our constant demands for definitive answers prohibit us from attaining inner spirituality. In a way, this ties back to the earlier described criticisms on capitalism; everything, even spirituality, has become an exchange of goods. In exchange for their efforts on their spiritual journey the Whitmans should find their mother, which should make them happy. However, like Charlotte, they are incapable of grasping the concept of a spiritual discovery, despite their claims otherwise. When the brothers discover that their mother is living as a nun in the Himalayas, it is immediately asserted that "she's obviously suffered some sort of mental collapse." Quite at odds with their supposed spiritual goals, it is unfathomable to the brothers that someone could actually experience a legitimate religious awakening. Beyond the issue of religion,



Anderson seems to highlight—once again—the self-centeredness of the brothers, which includes this inability to understand the actions and intentions of others.

Ultimately, the characters in the two films attempt to escape from the emptiness that occupies their lives, with varying levels of success. One way is through the adoption of a new persona. While living in a new place it can seem easy to mask oneself in an attempt to escape the pain of alienation. For example, when Charlotte is singing karaoke, surrounded by the unfamiliar, she finds it easier to adopt a new sense of self by wearing a pink bob wig—completely disconnected from her normal self. As Diana Diamond notes, Charlotte is situated on the gulf between adolescence and adulthood, “that treacherous and elusive developmental terrain.”<sup>26</sup> Finally, the only way she can bridge this gulf is through the relationship she builds with Bob, as he seems to implicitly understand Charlotte’s ungrounded state of mind and alienation. In one of the film’s most

memorable lines, Bob tells Charlotte, “Can you keep a secret? I’m trying to organize a prison break. I’m looking for, like, an accomplice. We have to first get out of this bar, then the hotel, then the city, and then the country. Are you in or are you out?” The tacit understanding that builds between the two is mirrored in the ultimate state of the brothers’ relationship in *The Darjeeling Limited*, who have been forced to forge new relationships due to the foreignness that surrounds them, resulting in a renewed and different sense of identity. Essentially, what Anderson and Coppola aim to reveal to the viewer is that, despite the vacuity of modernity, there is still hope for fulfillment. More importantly the filmmakers demand a sort of participation. By reflecting the moral vacantness of the American condition against disconcerting Orientalist themes, Anderson and Coppola force the viewer to recognize his or her own similarities to Charlotte, Bob, and the Whitman brothers.



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**SEXUAL SURPLUS:  
EXCESSIVE CINEMATIC DISPLAYS  
OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY**

# APPEALING TO THE MALE: MELODRAMA AND THE FEMALE GAZE IN *BLACK SWAN*

BY KEVIN VELTRI



In her work *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Laura Mulvey defines and discusses the “male gaze”—the male’s active pleasure in looking at the passive female—and the use of the female body and visual spectacle in relation to the normative development of a film narrative.<sup>1</sup> Mulvey argues that while the woman is important to both the spectacle and the narrative in classical Hollywood cinema, her presence creates tension; she explains that this presence “tends to work against the development of a story-line, to

freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.”<sup>2</sup> Linda Williams combines the discussion of the male gaze and the female body in her analysis of the appeal of visual excess for spectacle in the genres of horror, pornography, and melodrama, where she argues that these genres of excess often display presentations of heightened human emotions (ultimately, of a female subject) to attract the gaze and provoke such heightened emotion or sensation on the part of the viewer.<sup>3</sup>

*Black Swan* (D. Aronofsky 2010), based on the ballet *Swan*

*Lake*, both cinematically exemplifies and challenges this tension that the presence of a female creates. The film stars Natalie Portman as Nina, who is shown in intertwining, heightened emotional state that are more conventionally incorporated into the three separate genres of excess that Linda Williams details. These heightened emotions—sadness, fear, and sexual arousal—are seen by many to interrupt or delay the development of a coherent story. However because *Black Swan* intertextualizes its foundation in *Swan Lake*, a familiarity of the story is already enforced, in addition to its multiple representations of the real acting as signifiers of identifiable genre conventions within other Hollywood films.<sup>4</sup> The characterizations of excess that *Black Swan* seems to utilize and draw from are adherent to a collection (and collision) of those from, as Williams describes “these movies” that “...both fascinate and scare.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, *Black Swan* distorts Mulvey’s discussion of the male gaze through the representation of its central female character Nina, who gazes at her peers as a representation of herself and is also subjected to the desires of her directors’ gazes (Thomas’, Aronofsky’s, and even ours as the directors of our choices to watch the film). *Black Swan* could additionally be seen to attract the male—and adolescent—spectator by incorporating the spectacle of female body and the heightened emotion of ecstasy within its melodramatic context,

predominately “feminine” material.<sup>6</sup>

“We all know the story... *Swan Lake*, done to death I know, but not like this. We strip it down, make it visceral, and real.” - Thomas (Vincent Cassel)

Thomas, the director of the production of *Swan Lake* in the film, articulates his own demands for the ballet’s visual spectacle, right after describing the entire ballet’s storyline (and subsequently, the film’s) during the first audition, summarizing the entire plot in less than a minute. This “highlighted parallelism” of *Swan Lake* within the film’s own plot offers familiar footing for the viewer, and thus coincides with Rick Altman’s analysis: “Unmotivated events, rhythmic montage, highlighted parallelism, overlong spectacles—these are the excesses in the classical narrative system that alert us to the existence of a competing logic, a second voice.”<sup>7</sup> The familiarity of the story can therefore direct the viewer’s focus to its spectacle, primarily shown through Nina’s despair, fear, and orgasm.

Laura Mulvey constitutes the male gazing on himself (especially his first look in the mirror) as a connection of the visual representation of self layered with the characteristics of the male’s surroundings and others with whom he can identify.<sup>8</sup> With the consistent use of mirrors to show Nina’s representation of herself, it becomes relevant to discuss the female look—especially the woman’s look at herself in reference to other females (such as her mother)—

as she is passively subjected to the male tendency to also look. Frequently when Nina is alone on-screen, the viewer is given a visual representation of Nina's world, not of reality (such as when she grows wings, her toes become webbed, and she sees herself and Lily in places where they are not). Its parallelism within the story, laid out for the viewer by Thomas through *Swan Lake*, draws attention to Nina's gaze in comparison to a male spectator or a male protagonist within a film.

While Mulvey explains that a male will see himself represented as what he actually looks like along with a sort of ego he has gained from his environment, it contrarily seems that the female—as depicted through Nina—sees herself as what she is, what she strives to be, and frequently compares her perceived reflection to those traits of the women with whom she interacts (possibly in attempts to transcend her passive role).<sup>9</sup> Nina's ability to distinguish herself from others becomes increasingly blurred as the narrative progresses. In the scene when Nina thinks she takes Lily home and sleeps with her, a mixture

of identities is symbolized by Lily's flowing movement through the room—a room full of mirrors. When Lily mouths the words Nina relays to her mother, it is as if she and Nina are the same person (are they, in the

"ULTIMATELY, THE MEANING OF WOMAN IS SEXUAL DIFFERENCE, THE VISUALLY ASCERTAINABLE ABSENCE OF THE PENIS... THUS THE WOMAN AS ICON, DISPLACED FOR THE GAZE AND ENJOYMENT OF MEN, THE ACTIVE CONTROLLERS OF THE LOOK, ALWAYS THREATENS TO EVOKE THE ANXIETY IT ORIGINALLY SIGNIFIED."

-LAURA MULVEY

"objective" of the film's depiction of the female body?). A sense of women being interchangeable within the film is prominent (e.g. a man at the club tells the two girls they look the same, Nina often mistakes Lily for herself, Lily becomes Nina's "alternate," and finally Lily's line, "How about

I dance the Black Swan for you"). Not only is she being looked-at by viewers via the projection of images of her on screen, but within the story of *Black Swan*, Nina is watched by the other dancers, Thomas, her mother, and eventually an entire crowd. Is the woman's look at herself and others a manifestation or a succumbing to a pressure of constantly being looked-at?

It is also important to note Mulvey's analysis of the male's view of his mother when he first becomes conscious of his surroundings, as Nina's mother plays such a significant role in the film. Nina actively works to transcend her mother's expectations of her, seen in her increasing opposition and

consciousness of their dysfunctional relationship as the plot progresses.<sup>10</sup> Nina exploits the ways in which she believes herself to be closer to “perfect” than her mother: “I’m the Swan Queen, you’re the one who never left the corps;” “What career [did you give up to have me]? You were 28.” This idea is related to the female’s representation of herself in a competitive comparison to those other women around her. To Nina, being “perfect” is not something that can actually be measured or calibrated, but instead is personified by a dancer in her company, Beth. When Beth declares to Nina that her own ideas of perfection are skewed, she no longer has a direct comparison of herself with who she thinks is ‘better’ when she looks in the mirror.

There is a persistent presence of a controlling gaze from the male characters within the story, though this gaze does not exactly unify with the male spectator’s gaze. The viewer is to believe that the men in the film experience accurate representations—in their everyday existences—of reality, yet the subjective, sometimes intrusive, use of handheld camera distorts reality into Nina’s (female) perception of it. The camera often moves with Nina, not in a “reactionary” sense, but rather adherent to a “choreographed” method, similar to the technical nature of Nina’s craft. If the camerawork were more reactionary in its intrusiveness, it would be more applicable as a “following” of the male spectator’s eyes on the female body, but its



NINA SUCSUMBS TO THE PRESSURE OF BEING LOOKED AT BY HER SWAN LAKE AUDIENCE



choreographed nature grounds it within Nina's view of reality. In relation to the male gaze and the female's typically passive role of being looked-at: Are we given a visual representation of her—the female protagonist—reacting to being looked-at? Additionally, because of the heightened sensations the film could translate onto the unsuspecting spectator with its focus on female despair, fear, and pleasure: Are male audience members able to “share” (not share as in a full mimicry of emotion, but in the sense of some sensory affection by the material) Nina's experience of succumbing to the pressure of being looked-at?<sup>11</sup> Nina's particular case of this pressure manifests as physical acts of self-masochism, consistent with depictions of human fear and violence in horror, and even visually complies with the male anxiety of gender roles, the female representing the “bleeding wound.”<sup>12</sup>

While visual elements of *Black Swan* rely heavily on the depiction of the female body and the woman's excessive cinematic expression as a visual spectacle, the main premises of its subject matter—as well as the highlighted use of melodrama—would actually be of general feminine interest. In comparison to a classical Hollywood narrative, in which the male is ‘used’ on-screen to develop the story, and the female primarily for exhibition, *Black Swan*'s central focus is subjectively on Nina—and so—does the female develop the story in this case, or is there no active concrete story (other than its noticeable parallels

to *Swan Lake*) that exists to develop beyond the spectacle and projections of images of excess?<sup>13</sup>

Linda Williams perceives that melodrama's portrayal of female despair is primarily aimed at “passive women.” *Black Swan* draws from key images of women in melodrama, but also incorporates other genres of excess to evoke fear and sexuality. Consequently, its uses of “sobs and anguish” typically seen in a female “weepie” can still correlate to the interests of the male spectator.<sup>14</sup> Here, the dichotomies between the Black Swan and the White Swan, and thus the characters Nina and Lily—both female—represent a modification of Mulvey's idea of masochism and sadism in film. In the sex scene between the two women, ideas of the passive female are distorted when Lily assumes an unusually active role.<sup>15</sup> However, Mulvey could argue that since nothing is really happening, and a true story is not developing, both women may still submit to passive roles (although Lily does actively “force a change” in Nina).<sup>16</sup> Asking Nina to ‘become’ the Black Swan is like asking her to transcend the passive role of the White Swan whilst also still submitting to the passive nature of her craft, which requires her to constantly be looked-at and take direction from the presence of a dynamic male.

In these contexts, it can be observed that *Black Swan* contains a mixture of generic film elements, particularly from films that emphasize human emotion over narrative development. The film also contains many opposing elements

that, if observed exclusively from one another, would function to appeal to opposing genders. If the film appeals to both males and females while containing such a mixture of excessive content, then which is the tying element that overlays its form, functioning as an 'apparatus' to carry such excess? The answer lies within the spectacle itself, as the spectacle is what attracts the pleasure of looking in the first place. "The spectacle is the main production of present-day society."<sup>17</sup>

Aronofsky's *Black Swan* successfully adheres to conventions of the melodrama, horror, and pornography genres on some level. Simultaneously, it subversively layers these conventions in primary favor of the spectacle (and maybe, the watch-ability to general film audiences). In effect, the film has the ability to both pleasure and frighten the male spectator—who can be drawn even to its melodramatic moments—with the emphasis on the

female body. In turn, Laura Mulvey's discussion of the female body can also be cautiously applied, as Nina is often looking at herself and others, perceiving them to be real. Rather than 'hiding' "...a tension between a mode of representation of woman in film and conventions surrounding the diegesis," *Black Swan* draws attention to them.<sup>18</sup> The film does this by effectively showing the viewer Nina's reality, which often blurs the development of what is actually happening in the story's own fictional context. By favoring Nina's point of view, the film challenges the ability of the viewer to mentally recreate the complete story, since it is sequentially comprised of segments that depict this central female character (and the visual representation of her body) primarily in moments of her elevated sadness, pleasure, and terror, showing her own tendencies to look while exhibiting her body for multiple audiences to view.

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# TALKING SCHMIDT: HOW METROSEXUAL CHARACTERS SUBVERT GENDER BINARIES IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

BY SARA CALLAHAN

There is a surprising lack of 'gay vague' effeminate male protagonists in contemporary film and television. A stylish male is either declaratively homosexual, or a metrosexual womanizer. At first consideration, this lack could imply a missed opportunity to use such characters to explore themes of homosexuality by projecting queer qualities onto a character and using sexual ambiguity to evade taboo. Instead of gay vague characters, the entertainment industry has capitalized on metrosexuality as a gay-straight hybrid, and used the increasingly popular lifestyle to probe themes of homosexuality, gender roles, and the social anxieties that reproduce them. As a case study of *New Girl*'s Schmidt will exemplify, there is a patterned use of metrosexuals as the site of comedy in television and film. Because metrosexuals 'look gay' but do not actually engage in homosexual sex acts, the audience can project homosexual readings and desires onto these characters with the reassurance of a heteronormative ending. Once the heteronormative coupling is assured, themes of homosexuality can be explored safely. These gay-coded themes then become comedic by their seemingly contradictory nature.

In order to critically analyze the location of metrosexuals on Jeffrey Weeks' Spectrum of Sexuality, it is first necessary to discuss what makes a man metrosexual, as well as the history and cultural determinants through which these characteristics developed.<sup>1</sup>

The term Metrosexual is relatively new, used to describe straight men that take pride in a stylized appearance. Academia has begun using the word to replace previous problematic labels including "sissies," "effeminate men," and "feminine heterosexual men,"—and is more specific than "nontraditional men" or "new men."<sup>2</sup> Mark Simpson, responsible for coining the word and typifying the metrosexual in his book *Male Impersonators*, describes these men as a "new, narcissistic, self-conscious kind of masculinity produced by film, advertising, and glossy magazines to replace traditional repressed, unmoisturished masculinity."<sup>3</sup> In an article for *Salon*, Simpson stereotypes the typical metrosexual as a "young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis."<sup>4</sup> The term is a portmanteau of the words metropolitan and heterosexual, and in so doing inscribes the connection of sexual orientation with sartorial prowess. The term

creates a distinction between true homosexuals and the heterosexuals who merely adopt the fashion and lifestyle stereotypically associated with gay culture.

Academia has compared the metrosexual to the Dandy of the 19th Century, a man dressed with flair who knows just enough about art, literature, sports, and the finer things in life.<sup>5</sup> “He was just as likely to fancy the ladies as the lads. The dandy did not follow trends; he set standards. The metrosexual is his flickering holograph.”<sup>6</sup> Simpson draws some major distinctions however, which argue that cultural determinants make the metrosexual trend more than just a modern day Dandy. Metrosexuality differs from Dandyism, in that the latter was an aristocratic pursuit to flaunt refined taste, while the modern metrosexual trend is a mass culture phenomenon rooted in consumerism. Metrosexuality “takes Hollywood, ads, sports and glossy magazines as its inspirational gallery, rather than high classicism. The metrosexual desires to be desired. The dandy aimed to be admired.”<sup>7</sup>

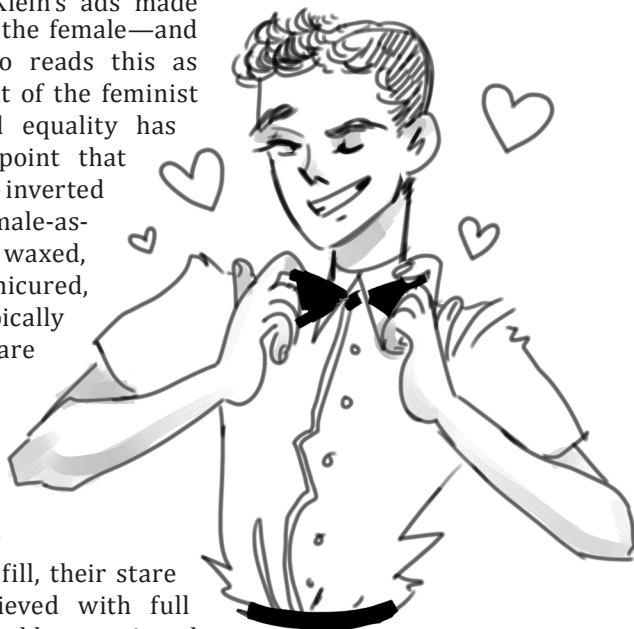
Although Simpson did not coin the term until the early Nineties, the Metrosexual figure actually emerged from the growing consumer culture of the 1980s. Following the counterculture of the 60s and 70s, America saw a return to commercialism and materialism in the following decade. President Ronald Reagan stood for an “America is back” mentality—interpreted by the public as ‘spend, spend, spend’

through the Reagonomics policies of lowered taxes and increased disposable income. These policies rewarded success; those who made more money could keep more of it, in turn spend more of it, and therefore put more of it back into the economy.<sup>8</sup> This decade saw the rise of MTV, and the materialist popular culture that came with it. The ‘yuppie’ epitomized a shift from the previous conservative generation to one that was young, urban, self-centered, well employed, and materialistic. Yuppiedom also underscores the increase in male products, male demographic targeting, and male consumerism.<sup>9</sup> Cologne, cleansers, and clothes coded men as a new pool of potential buyers, which led to an evolution in the strategies of how to appeal to them.

Susan Bordo credits the fashion industry, specifically designer Calvin Klein, with leading the violation of taboos relating to masculinity, including the explicit depictions of the (well hung) male and combining feminine qualities into mainstream conceptions of what it means to be manly.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the 90s, Calvin Klein invented a new male aesthetic that—although definitely exciting for gay men—would scream ‘heterosexual’ to (clueless) straights.”<sup>11</sup> In this way, feminine male models pioneered a dual marketing approach in which one model excited both the heterosexual female and homosexual male markets.<sup>12</sup> Klein was the first to recognize and exploit this strategy, though today it can be seen in brands like Abercrombie &

Fitch and H&M. Klein's ads made men the object of the female—and male—gaze. Bordo reads this as an accomplishment of the feminist movement; sexual equality has reached such a point that gender roles can be inverted to portray the male-as-object.<sup>13</sup> Although waxed, plucked, and manicured, these ads typically retain “face off, stare down” poses which recall primitive demonstrations of masculinity. Although these men are as glossy as the pages they fill, their stare can only be achieved with full manhood. This trend has continued to the present day so that “today good looking straight guys are flocking to the modeling agencies, much less concerned about any homosexual taint that will cleave to them.”<sup>14</sup>

In this way, the fashion industry has shaped the progression of nontraditional displays of masculinity. The description of ‘nontraditional’ carries with it several implications, including that there is a traditional, or correct, way of being heterosexual and that the men depicted in Klein's ads somehow do not satisfy this conception. Gender is no different from other normative behavior codes, which are defined by what they are as much as by what they aren't. Together, this collision forms the meaning of what is normal. For sexuality in general, Weeks argues that heteronormativity was only defined after homosexuality “came



along.”<sup>15</sup> That is, heterosexuality only needed defining after what it wasn't became just as important as what it was. The construct of metrosexuality is similarly defined by a collision of meaning; it is defined by what is ‘heterosexual’ by having the very word in the new hybrid term. The existence of the portmanteau at all implies that the term was created because of a societal need to mark metrosexuals' difference (as not fully masculine). This necessity to point out a lack of traditional masculinity reveals what Weeks calls the “Heteronormative Assumption.”<sup>16</sup> There is an implicit heterosexual default in society, which places men and women on opposite sides of a gender dialectic. Weeks argues that there is a systemic hierarchy of sexuality at work in our society, which places heterosexual marriage

at the top and sexual 'deviance' at the bottom, however that may be defined. Heterosexuality has been so institutionalized that any alternative is in turn marginalized, devalued, and labeled taboo. Weeks prescribes that this hierarchy be replaced with a spectrum of sexuality on which there is a continuum of gender such that sexual difference is relieved of the stigmas of perversion and non-normativity.<sup>17</sup> If metrosexuality were placed in this continuum it would no longer be a perversion of gender roles but simply another alternative. Gone is the implication that a more

they identify as wholly straight. Hill argues that it is not so much a confusion but a refusal to participate in the heterosexual stereotype.<sup>18</sup> Weeks would agree that the traditional male should be considered a stereotype as well. Not every man need spit, drink, and itch himself as many believe. By this logic, the metrosexual is providing an alternative heterosexuality, but not a lesser one. "By 'refusing to be a man,' in a traditional sense, they are developing a less oppressive way to be heterosexual."<sup>19</sup> Metrosexuals bring up the issue of perceived sexuality.<sup>20</sup> That

SCAMIDT'S  
PERFORMANCE OF  
METROSEXUALITY  
DISRUPTS THE  
CONVENTIONS OF  
MASCULINITY.



feminine form of masculinity is any worse or less heterosexual than the lumberjack archetype.

Accepting the prevalence of the Heteronormative Assumption, metrosexuals are often read as a 'confused' sexuality even though

is, the metrosexual is perceived as a homosexual because of his stylish presentation. Metrosexuals make obvious the previously invisible constructed nature of gender categories without transgressing sexual orientation boundaries.

"Effeminacy was established as the nature of gay men" and "assumed and performed by straight men."<sup>21</sup> This brings the discussion of a display of heterosexual difference as a performance of gender. Metrosexual style is a performance of gender in its own right, different but equal to something like the hyper-masculine body builder. According to Simpson, metrosexuality is a performance of gender, "the difference is that it subverts the hyping UP of masculinity by hyping it DOWN."<sup>22</sup> This disrupts the traditional dialectic of masculine vs. unmasculine, which prescribes only two different expressions of masculinity. By this logic, metrosexuals are creating a second school of hyper-masculine display.

Actor Max Greenfield performs this degree of heterosexuality with his character Schmidt on FOX's sitcom, *New Girl*. His character is a twenty-something, suit collecting, hair primping urbanite who is able to exude a confident, masculine machismo even when wearing a floral kimono. He considers himself an alpha male, motivated by traditional masculine goals of affluence, a successful career, beautiful women, and posterity. At the same time, he is written to possess lesser male qualities of cooking, cleaning, neuroticism, fashion sense, sensitivity, and self-consciousness.

The show's writers flaunt Schmidt's sexual activity more than any other characters'. Schmidt orders customized condoms, tutors his roommates in sexual technique, and even catches the attention of his

boss. In an episode entitled "Eggs," Schmidt visits the gynecologist office for a consultation with a lesbian physician. When the physician sets out to offer him some sex tips for female pleasure, he takes over the conversation, and describes his technique in intimate detail using veiled terms. Meanwhile the camera turns back on the doctor, revealing that Schmidt's skills can even arouse a lesbian.<sup>23</sup> At the end of the first season, Schmidt's bedroom skills earn him a literal supermodel girlfriend who is otherwise embarrassed of their relationship but cannot give up the physical connection. "I'm 100 percent ashamed of you," she says, but not until after they have impromptu sex in the car.<sup>24</sup> Though she is content, Schmidt protests, "I can't do any of my moves in there. I like to improvise with my body. I'm like a sexual snowflake—each night with me is a unique experience." His self-flattery is highlighted by the fact that each time he makes such a comment he has to put money into a jar (The Douchebag Jar) and acknowledge his trumpeting. The writers use this to remind the audience of his heterosexuality, especially as the level of the jar rises higher throughout the seasons. Securing this assumption of heterosexuality, however, Schmidt remains the butt of homosexual jokes and subplots. In "Naked," Zooey Deschanel's character Jess walks in on her fellow housemate, Nick, naked. When she tells Schmidt about the incident, Schmidt becomes preoccupied with seeing—or at least finding out—how well endowed Nick is. He



expresses this to his friend Winston:

Schmidt: Why haven't I seen it?

Winston: Why do you wanna see it?

Schmidt: He's my best friend.

Winston: Again, why do you wanna see it?<sup>25</sup>

In another scene, he defends one of his more flamboyant sartorial choices, which doesn't help his case much: "Kanye wore this belt and looked beautiful in it, his whole midsection lit up." He continues, "Now all I have to do is meet him and dazzle him until we're each others' last call before bed."<sup>26</sup>

Schmidt is an interesting case, a heterosexual man playing a heterosexual character, yet homosexual themes nuance many of the episodes. This strategy introduces gay themes to a market lost by other shows; *Will & Grace*, *Modern Family*, *Glee*, and *The New Normal* have lost (or never gained) the demographic disenchanted with homosexuality.<sup>27</sup> Schmidt has arguably upstaged the show's principal character because he is able to play off these cultural anxieties. If metrosexuals are a nonthreatening performance of homosexuality, writers can project homosexual readings onto their characters. In turn, the audiences' attention is brought to social issues of homosexuality without being directly addressed and therefore the issues remain uncontroversial. This 'safety' of a heteronormative resolution works to reveal and negotiate a social taboo, and the media can inch homosexuality into the cultural consciousness without actually portraying homosexual

relationships. Comedy is created in the tension between *New Girl*'s frequent textual reassurances that Schmidt is not gay, and his subsequent stereotypically gay behavior. This seeming mismatch of orientation and masculinity is funny partly because of its context and self-consciousness of the national debate surrounding homosexuality, as well as of the incongruence between actual and perceived sexual orientation.

The patterned avoidance of 'gay vague' characters reveals the cultural anxiety surrounding this sexual limbo of sorts. Hollywood tends to clarify effeminate male characters as either outright with their homosexuality (Mitch and Cam of *Modern Family*, Will and Jack of *Will & Grace*), or neutralize their femininity with a promiscuous heteronormative sex life. Metrosexuals subvert the traditional dialectic of masculinity, serving as a foil for an effeminate man or a boastful womanizer. By establishing a character as metrosexual (that is, clearly heterosexual yet hyper concerned with appearance), the audience is assured that the character will reinforce heteronormative coupling. With this ending known, themes of homosexuality can be explored 'safely' and become comedic in their seeming contradiction. Through safety and comedy, the discussion of homosexuality and all its social contingencies can enter the public discourse in an uncontroversial and comfortable way: the metrosexual character type.

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# QUESTIONING HETERNORMATIVITY: SHE-DEVIL AND STEREOTYPICAL GENDER ROLES OF THE 1980S

BY ALYSSON FEIL



**I**n the last fifty years, waves of feminism have persistently lobbied that gender exists as a separate construction from biological sex. Though widely acknowledged, the conflation of gender and sex has contributed to the stereotypical gender roles that exist today. In the 1980s, feminist director Susan Seidelman directly addressed these gender issues in her conservative dark comedy *She-Devil* (1989). The film presents viewers with a satirical analysis of heteronormative definitions

of femininity and sexuality in relation to economic authority. The sharp contrast between the character of Mary—a pure embodiment of wealth, fragility, and pseudo-romance—and Ruth—a frumpy, middle-class housewife—highlights the rigid stereotypes perpetuated about females. However, while Mary's masquerade acts as a parody of excessive femininity, Ruth embodies the “abject,” whose comedic value is a result of her grotesque figure and dysfunctional body.<sup>1</sup> As the

film progresses, the narrative reveals both women to represent an oppositional statement on traditional family, gender roles, and economic inequality—specifically relevant to feminism in the 1980s.

To understand the satire of *She-Devil*, one must be aware of the conservative political atmosphere in which the film was created. The Reagan administration's indoctrination of the conservative New Right outwardly opposed social liberal movements of the previous two decades. Specifically, considerable resistance was shown to the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) for women's equality. Initially passed by Congress in 1972, the New Right's anti-feminist rhetoric delayed state legislatures' ratification by the 1982 deadline, eventually causing the amendment to fail. Overall, feminists significantly lost support in the 1980s, primarily due to their heavy reliance on the previous federal power of the Democratic Party. This lack of feminist representation affected Congressional support for woman's issues such as abortion, child-care, and family leave bills.<sup>2</sup> Despite its political context, *She-Devil* expresses the perseverance and alterations of the feminist movement throughout the New Right's influential power, perhaps the most obvious aspect being the character's typical projection of "femininity"—or lack thereof. Throughout its many waves, feminism has persistently criticized the norms of feminine appearance as being a socially-constructed

ideal of patriarchal culture.<sup>3</sup> Yet the resulting lull of the 1980s conservatism shifted radical feminists' "presentation of self and life-style" to a more ambivalent one.<sup>4</sup> Radical feminists—more prominent in the 1970s—opposed normative, surface-level notions of their gender, such as make-up, tight-fitting clothes, high heels, and shaved legs.

In *She-Devil*, Mary Fisher is the prime example of such flaunting artificiality. According to Nancy Whittier's Ph.D research, the shift towards a more traditional "correctness" of femininity resulted from the movement's slump in the 1980s. Without guaranteed equal rights, some women changed their appearance, not because of political beliefs or even their own preference, but because of pressure from within the workplace. Whittier interviewed various women on the topic, one saying: "I shave my legs, I sometimes wear makeup...I do [this] because I feel that I have to do them to get by, to keep my job." Another woman told her: "I have finally decided that I can get more accomplished if I look a little bit more traditional."<sup>5</sup> In his book, *Sexuality: Key Ideas*, Jeffrey Weeks attests that such pressure is the inescapable "product of the historically rooted power of men to define and categorize what is necessary and desirable."<sup>6</sup> In *She-Devil*, Ruth's transformation epitomizes the ambivalent outward representation of feminism in the 1980s, one that struggled to resist male definitions of femininity. Though she alters her appearance by wearing make-up, styling her

hair, and removing the large mole above her lip, Ruth does not abandon her quest for career success and personal independence—even when competing against her ex-husband and male counterpart. Though Ruth's initial motive behind changing her appearance is to re-attract her husband, her subsequent ambition to become a businesswoman undoubtedly illustrates her desire for gender equality.

Ruth's transformation is not only representational of political ideals, it also enables a shift in the film's comedic source. Before she is made-over, the comedy of Ruth's scenes comes from her dysfunctional, unattractive body. According to Andrew Stott, the "comic body is exaggeratedly physical, a distorted, disproportionate, profane, ill-disciplined, insatiate, and perverse organism."<sup>7</sup> Comedy emerges from the body's untamed functional purposes, such as overconsumption and its physical result, shown in scenes when Ruth eats "too much," while aware of her imperfect appearance. While working at The Golden Twilight Rest Home, Ruth nearly inhales a long chocolate donut, spilling its cream filling on her prominent mole and down the sides of her face. During the opening credits, Ruth attempts to beautify herself in a department store full of thin, attractive women adorned with jewelry, perfume, and heavy make-up, drawing attention to her unconventional lack of femininity. While in a dressing room, a fit young girl in a constricting black and gold

dress admires herself in the mirror. A second later, Ruth walks toward the same mirror, wearing the exact same dress. The ludicrously contrasting figures consume the frame, blatantly suggesting Ruth as the archetypal ugly twin sister. Ruth's narrative voice-over, "sometimes you just have to pull out all the stops," adds to the scene's comedy. Ruth's lack of etiquette in conjunction with her unruly body epitomizes the "grotesque," and thus embodies what Stott describes as the "abject." He asserts, "the abject is a physical reality that cannot be defeated through the simple application of additional layers of cultural refinement," such as a department store dress.<sup>8</sup> By laughing at the perverseness of her body, Ruth diminishes the fear of one's deviation from the respectable norms of civility. Consequently, the humor found from Ruth's anti-traditional femininity renders her differences as safe to poke fun at. This bodily humor, however, is not exactly pro-feminist, and laughing at Ruth's initial appearance only reinforces traditional ideas of femininity, as her success as a businesswoman is simultaneously tied to her physical transformation. Nevertheless, her journey accurately reflects the fluctuation in feminists' appearance throughout the 1980s, due mostly to pressure within the workplace.

Similar to radical feminists, Ruth's ultimate challenge to authority, or the normative ideals of femininity, would entail rejecting the very artificial touches she adopts.

Ruth's eventual makeover eliminates the continuation of physical comedy, replaced by a comedic inversion of power. The film presents a traditional sense of family, in which Bob is the primary source of income while Ruth stays at home. Before their separation, the couple's inequality is evident in Ruth's restrictive gender role as homemaker. While Bob irately packs his belongings, he yells out the four basic "assets"—numbered on Ruth's pink notepad as "home, family, career, freedom"—that sum up his life's worth. Ruth's subsequent revenge focuses on the destruction of the material manifestations of Bob's wealth—such as causing his house to explode. Ruth asserts her own power by economically castrating her husband, a power inversion

typical in "battle of the sexes" narratives where comedy is derived when the underdog successfully challenges the dominating structure. As a result, Bob is sent to prison and Mary experiences a hilarious psychotic episode.

Although Mary's comedy climaxes in her psychotic break, her foundational existence is humorous in itself. Her soft, whispering voice, dramatically cliché movements, and pink palace by the sea all emanate fragility and whimsicality. Essentially, Mary's excessive femininity acts as a parody of the ultimate woman, particularly one who fantasizes about nothing but romance and pleasing her man. Such idealistic sexual longing is not only shown with Mary's thirty-something novels, but is



MERYL STREEP PLAYS MARY AS A PARODY OF FEMININE BEHAVIOR



also suggested to be a part of her essential character. Remembering that Mary's character is created as a parody of feminine behavior, statements like, "My books reflect my own experience of lovemaking as sacred and beautiful," become comedic polysemy. The extremity of Mary's very essence is unable to be taken seriously, thus transforming her "truthful" declarations into ironic double entendres. Andrew Stott's writings on Marilyn Monroe's role in *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder 1959) similarly applies to Mary in *She-Devil*, described as an "unrealistic construct and product of 'glamour'."<sup>9</sup> Kathleen Rowe would similarly label Mary as congruent with aspects of the "unruly woman," an archetype of Classical Hollywood Cinema. Like the unruly woman character, Mary belongs to a higher class, is outwardly (and overly) sexual, and holds an advantageous position to exert power over her prey.<sup>10</sup> Yet Mary's role-play of the classic damsel in distress is the key to her manipulation. At various times, Mary appeals to Bob's ego by helplessly asking for his assistance—whether helping her dry off her alcohol-stained dress or managing her investments. The scene of Bob and Mary's first sexual encounter highlights her manipulative power of male seduction. She coyly whines to Bob, "sometimes sitting here, day after day, banging away at my keyboard... [sigh] writing can be so, so, lonely," Mary's right hand strategically falls between Bob's legs. Here, her melodramatic performance enables

her ready-and-willing intentions to be so obvious that Mary becomes comedic. Moreover, the fact that Bob succumbs to his carnal lust is even more humorous because of the absurdity of Mary's masquerade. Essentially, Mary's parody of artificial aspects of heteronormative femininity is performed to such an extent that it denaturalizes the very idea of femininity. Her comedic value produces an uncomfortable and neurotic association with femininity that suppresses any source of empathy within the spectator. Mary's excessiveness thus pokes fun at heteronormative gender ideas and sends a pro-feminist message about womanhood—that it is about much more than romance, pink dresses, and miniature poodles.

Overall, the film confronts traditional marriage and nuclear family promotions that persevered through the Reagan administration. Though strikingly different, the fact remains that neither Ruth nor Mary remain happily monogamous. Ruth's despair begins with her acknowledgement of Bob's affair—noted in her non-diegetic narration—yet she remains passive. Instead of confronting Bob, Ruth resolves to use magazine tips on "the art of winning back your man" with "sure-fire economical, sexy recipes." The ensuing dinner scene with Bob's parents (expectedly) culminates in disaster, when the "seductive mushroom soup" is accidentally garnished with Herbie, the pet gerbil. This lose-lose situation subsequently entraps Ruth, as neither her passivity nor

(failed) domestic efforts are enough to win back her husband. On the other hand, Mary's psychotic break is the result of her inability to inhabit the domesticated mother role for Bob's children. Nicolette, a sassy pre-teenage girl, repeatedly wears and destroys Mary's clothes, while the younger brother Andy accidentally causes Chérie, Mary's poodle, to jump off a cliff. In addition to adultery—as Bob has yet another affair while with Mary—the film promotes an opposing view of family through these two dysfunctional mother characters. Feminist support of the independent woman is exemplified through both Ruth and Mary, who actively portray the woman's ability to be self-sufficient.

Bob's two unsuccessful relationships accurately reflect the dissolving traditional family of the 1980s. In 1989—the year *She-Devil* was released—nearly 50% of marriages ended in divorce.<sup>11</sup> A statistic from Richard A. Viguerie's book, *The New Right: We're Ready to Lead*, claims the early 1980s witnessed, "six out of ten married women with school-aged children work[ing]" outside of the domestic sphere.<sup>12</sup> The break-up of the traditional family, such as the Patchett's, resulted in a pro-family public movement that feared greater statistical rise. Conservative movements fought against anti-family organizations, including the National Organization of Women (NOW) and the aforementioned Equal Rights Amendment, based on their alleged, "attack [on]

families and individuals."<sup>13</sup> Though many see marriage as a promise of eternal solidarity between a couple, groups like NOW believe heterosexual pairings to be the legal establishment of control over a woman and a suppression of her sexual liberation. Bob's adultery, for example, solidifies stereotypical norms of male sexual behavior, while his both his naive wife and mistress remain utterly loyal, perpetuating passive female norms. The film concludes with both women becoming successfully independent, illustrating a refusal of traditional marriage. Such an ending condemns the heteronormative views of marriage, extremely relevant when the film was released in the 1980s and even today with the debate over gay marriage.

It is quite apparent that *She-Devil* is more than just a comedic playground for actresses Roseanne Barr and Meryl Steep. The film also combats the cultural longing for a time of innocence—that supposedly existed—prior to counterculture group love, LSD trips, Vietnam War, and the prevalence of divorce. The exaggerated and comedic performances in *She-Devil* allow taboo subjects such as anti-family and anti-traditionalism to persevere—in Hollywood no less—within in a culture shifting toward conservatism. Thus, *She-Devil* was, and still is, a film which has raised the social and cultural consciousness of issues that combat traditional patriarchal heteronormativity.



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# EXPANDING MAINSTREAM CONCEPTIONS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY ON *BOY MEETS WORLD* IN THE 1990S

BY DAISY ROGOZINSKY

Comedy is notorious for dealing with taboos and deviant topics.<sup>1</sup> This idea is complicated, however, when applied to comedic texts designed to entertain young audiences such as the 1990s teen sitcom *Boy Meets World*. Topics deemed appropriate for a mainstream youth audience are rarely very subversive, suggesting that *Boy Meets World's* treatment of cross-dressing and sexual coercion in its 1997 episode "Chick Like Me" represents a shift in ideas of normativity and acceptable content for a young audience. The show draws upon the relative sexual openness of the 1990s, the ability of comedy to make topics safe for discussion, and uses the cross-dressing narrative template to posit the idea of gender as performance and show sexual power dynamics in a way that represents changing standards of normativity in the United States.

The 1990s were a period of increased encouragement of sexual diversity in the United States. In 1994, the American Medical Association ceased to list homosexuality as a mental illness.<sup>2</sup> Queer political issues gained national prominence, including debates over topics like gay marriage and gays in the military.<sup>3</sup> The year 1997 in

particular saw landmark events like Ellen DeGeneres coming out as a lesbian on her sitcom *Ellen*. The values of openness and visibility were strongly emphasized.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, President Clinton's multiple sex scandals led to the country's crackdown on issues of sexual harassment. All of these historical determinants created a relatively liberal political and social climate, granting the media more freedom to cover topics previously considered subversive or unsuitable for a mainstream audience.

The network sitcom *Boy Meets World*, created by Michael Jacobs and April Kelly, originally aired on ABC from 1993 to 2000. It was a part of the TGIF prime-time television-programming block that was marketed as "family-friendly." The show is set in Philadelphia, PA and follows a young Cory Matthews, from middle school to college, as he grows up and learns about life. Since the program depicts major issues that accompany adolescence, it often deals with sex-related material like first kisses and first sexual experiences. Generally, though, *Boy Meets World* began to stick to more romantic issues and promote a somewhat conservative understanding of sex (Cory and his girlfriend Topanga waited until their honeymoon to have sex for the first time, despite being in

a relationship since childhood).

The episode “Chick Like Me” aired in the show’s fourth season, when Cory and his friends were juniors in high school. It is representative of the show’s typical format; using comedic hijinks to teach the audience a lesson or promote a certain morality. In the episode, Cory and Shawn overhear Topanga and her friend Debbie talking about how boys are too sexually aggressive on dates. Shawn suggests that Cory dress up as a girl and write about the experience for his school newspaper column. Somewhere along the plot, Shawn replaces Cory as the one slated to cross-dress and takes on the feminine identity of Veronica Wazboyski. He then goes out on a date with Gary, a notorious womanizer at John Adams High School, and immediately finds out that Debbie’s complaints were true: Gary is physically forward with Veronica without asking consent, and even ignores Veronica’s clear protests. As a benefit from of the experience, Shawn learns a lesson about what it is like to be a woman, Cory writes a successful newspaper article, and Debbie asks Shawn out to reward him for his effort.

There are several larger issues pertinent to sexuality that

*Boy Meets World* explores in this episode. The first is the revelation of gender as performance through elements of cross-dressing and drag. In *Comedy*, Andrew McConnell Stott makes a distinction between the two elements—the classic cross-dressing “progress narrative” is one in which a character must disguise their gender in order to achieve a specific goal.<sup>5</sup> This is usually temporary, and the narrative must resolve with a return to heterosexuality that reaffirms traditional normativity.<sup>6</sup> Shawn’s brief experience as Veronica Wazboyski falls under the category of the progress narrative. First, a specific reason for the donning of women’s clothes is provided—to obtain material for Cory’s newspaper column. Cory makes this clear when he says to his mom (before the plan of who will cross-dress changes) that he is “not dressing up like a girl for the sake of dressing up like a girl.” However, Cory’s motive is not entirely shallow. It has an aspect of genuine desire to become empathetic to the experiences of women, just as Cory’s mother says, “it could be a wonderful learning experience that could serve him well for the rest of his life.” At the end of the episode, after Shawn has learned his



lesson, he returns to school in his usual clothing and is rewarded for the adventure by the traditional resolution of a heterosexual coupling with Debbie, which comfortably reinforces gender norms. This iteration of a man dressing as a woman services the narrative more than it acts as a critique of hegemonic ideas of gender. However, it does seem to promote feminist ideals of compassion for women and awareness of male privilege.

Despite the fact that the less subversive cross-dressing narrative is at the heart of the episode, there still remains the underlying aspect of drag. Stott writes that drag “allows the male comedian to exploit his attire to offer a deliberately provoking perspective on women.”<sup>7</sup> Rather than reaffirming heteronormativity, as cross-dressing seems to do, drag is an interrogation of gender, agitating normative conceptions of sex and gender and exploring them as a continuum and performance. Though Shawn’s Veronica is best categorized as an instance of cross-dressing, Cory’s Cora enters in drag halfway through the episode, where he is dressed as a waitress at the restaurant where Veronica and Gary go on their date. This performance has several elements of drag rather than cross-dressing. The first being that there is no specific reason given for Cory’s masquerade; it simply happens. Additionally, his clothing is not meant to convince anybody but is instead a costume meant to suggest the performative elements of fulfilling gender roles. Furthermore,

Cora’s voice is not the traditional high-pitched sound associated with the imitation of a woman, but is a low growl that calls to mind Paul O’Grady’s Lady Savage. This illusion is not intended to be believable but rather—once again—to call attention to its status as an illusion, suggesting that an essentialist understanding of femininity (and masculinity) will not do.

The last line of the episode hints at a new understanding. Back in men’s clothing and celebrating the success of his newspaper article, a strange look comes over Cory’s face and Topanga asks him what is wrong. In Cora’s gruff voice, he answers, “my hosiery is still bunching.” This is perhaps the biggest laugh of the episode, but more than that, it suggests that Cora is not gone just because the make-up and wig have been removed. This implies that femininity does not simply come from clothing or accessories but is ever-present in all of us, as a part of the complex gender continuum from which the ideas of “male” and “female” are drawn. Though fleeting, Cora’s drag-inspired presence brings with it an assertion of gender’s constructed nature. Because *Boy Meets World* is geared toward children and teens, it is rarely transgressive in its depictions of sexual issues, yet this episode explicitly uses drag—a style that traditionally accompanies a subversive and critical perspective. For example, John Waters’ use of drag in *Female Trouble* purposefully pushes against boundaries of what is considered acceptable to show

onscreen in order to question societal norms and taboos. However this is not *Boy Meets World's* purpose, rather, the use of drag in the series suggests a shift in the normative—or what is considered normative. It does not actively seek to rebel, but appropriates drag traditions into the framework of a sitcom in order to entertain and teach a lesson. The fact that drag is acceptable in the context of a youth-oriented show suggests that it is no longer as dangerous and transgressive as it once was.

The lesson of the episode is found in the interrogation of sex roles and power dynamics between sexes, especially as negotiated within the patriarchal institution of dating. According to Rose and Frieze, gender roles and the sexual scripts associated with them are particularly salient during the dating stages of a relationship, as individuals tend to rely on social norms to guide their behavior.<sup>8</sup> They write that gender traditional roles, in which the female is submissive and the male is dominant, “are expressed by men assuming the proactive role in initiating sex and women adopting the reactive or ‘gatekeeper’ role by resisting or refusing sexual advances.”<sup>9</sup> They go on to say that “such gender differences serve to give men more power in the initial stage of the relationship,” namely, dating.<sup>10</sup> According to Byers, adherence to these traditional sexual scripts “supports and condones male sexual coercion against women.”<sup>11</sup> This idea of power inequality

and sexual pressure is explored in “Chick Like Me” through both humor and a few more dramatic moments. The exploration of gender and sexual norms is labeled the episode’s moral, a crucial part of the sitcom framework.

The episode begins with Debbie’s complaints about feeling powerless and ignored on dates with men. She says, “Maybe I am or maybe I’m not [interested in making out], but it shouldn’t be expected because I went on a date with you...You’re too busy planning your next move to hear us say no.” Debbie’s statement is a serious complaint about the social issue of sexual consent, made safe in the context of the episode’s general comedic tone. Later, on his date with Gary, Shawn experiences this female sense of powerlessness. After Gary attempts to touch Shawn several times, ignoring his protests, Shawn storms away from the date, saying to Cora, “it’s my knee, what makes him think it’s his knee?” Shawn later says that “the only signal I sent [Gary] was ‘stop it,’” but Shawn’s lack of consent didn’t discourage him. When Gary finally gets that Shawn is not interested in being felt up, he accuses Veronica of being a lesbian. These are all instances in which Gary is fulfilling the male proactive role of initiating sexual contact, while Shawn has no choice but to adopt the female role of “gatekeeper.” These moments are all examples of sexual coercion, a very serious issue that is lost within the context of the date. *Boy Meets World* critiques this patriarchal sexual script, and safely gets away



THE 1990S  
SITCOM ALLOWED  
A SAFE

## ANALYSIS OF GENDER ISSUES THROUGH CROSS-DRESSING AND DRAG.

with it for two reasons: because the episode generally takes a tone of comedy and playfulness (with heartfelt dialogue sandwiched between easy punch lines that lighten the mood) and by using the critique of the patriarchal sexual script as the “moral” of the story.

Even when the dialogue of the episode is joking, it still explores the idea of a power inequality between the sexes by reversing the traditional power dynamic. An example of such a reversal is seen when Debbie asks Cory what goes on in his head and he responds that it is “all Topanga, all the time.” Topanga then rewards him by feeding him a treat and asking, “who’s a good boy?”

The comedy in this joke comes from the idea that Topanga, the female, holds power over Cory, the male, to an extent that he is compared to a pet dog, a reversal of the expected power relationship. Additionally, on Shawn’s date, Gary offers to teach Shawn to play foosball, to which Shawn responds with “how about I teach you?” and goes on to be much better at the game. In this situation, again, the reversal of the traditional power dynamic is the source of the comedy. Many of the jokes in “Chick Like Me” also come from homosexual anxieties that arise when Shawn’s Veronica is unexpectedly attractive. Cory offers to carry Veronica’s books, prompting Topanga to ask

why he never carries her books. Cory's response is a confession of attraction – "well, look at her!" In this instance, the episode uses comedy to play upon underlying uncertainties surrounding the threat to heteronormativity that comes from cross-dressing. Thus, in moments of both drama and comedy, "Chick Like Me" manages to safely explore the underlying issue of women's powerlessness under the patriarchal dating structure as promoted by sexual roles, scripts, and the heterosexual assumption. The episode achieves this by fitting this exploration into the general structure of the sitcom. The fact that it deals with such serious and complex issues, rather than the simpler and more accessible adages that earlier television shows such as *Full House* and *The Facts of Life* covered, suggests that society's conceptions of what is acceptable for children have changed.

*Boy Meets World's* coverage of power inequalities points to a structural shift of normativity. However, it is a mistake to assume that the episode is actively

subversive and progressive in its representation of sexuality. Modern discourse surrounding the episode seems to suggest that the 1990s were a special time in which mainstream television programming marketed toward youth could cover topics that it cannot cover even today. This view is problematic, though, as the use of drag is primarily comedic and the interrogation of sexual scripts is just another moral lesson. Though the relatively liberal culture of the 1990s and the comedic tone of the episode allowed for the discussion of issues that may be more critical and progressive in nature, it is unlikely that the producers of *Boy Meets World* were actively seeking to be transgressive. "Chick Like Me" was produced at a time when the definition of normativity and what was acceptable for youth was expanding to include things like gender masquerade and criticism of sexual power dynamics. Therefore, the show's coverage of these topics was easily subsumed into the sitcom structure and was used to deliver a lesson to viewers, like any other topic of its day.

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# PRIDE FOR SALE: EXPLOITATION OF THE GAY AUDIENCE IN CONTEMPORARY ADVERTISING

BY ALEXANDRE EISENHART

**T**he gay rights movement in America has made remarkable progress since its humble beginnings in 1969 at New York City's Stonewall Inn. The American Psychiatric Association no longer classifies homosexuality as a mental disorder, nearly a dozen states recognize same-sex marriage, and Americans are far more aware of homophobic bullying in schools than they were a decade ago. President Obama even went so far as to publicly endorse the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2012, a gesture no sitting President had ever made before. This movement towards tolerance has been in large part due to the increased media representation of gay men since the early 1990s. While 25 years ago, Coors Brewing Company was an outspoken opponent of gay rights, today the company creates ads specifically targeting gay men. Because of its statistical economic prosperity, the gay consumer niche market has become highly valued as a legitimate advertising investment for large corporations. While many praise this ever-growing trend as social and political progress, scholars and activists alike are critical of how gay men are being represented in advertising. While companies may appear to be making strides to combat homophobia

and inequality, I will argue that advertisers actually exploit the discourse of "gay pride" as a means of promoting a consumer lifestyle that profits corporations and reinforces a stereotypical, narrow representation of gay culture.

In order to fully conceptualize the effects of advertising that target gay men, it is necessary to review the origins of this trend. The Stonewall riots in 1969 were a major turning point in the gay rights movement—a moment when the members of the LGBT community fought back against police raids at the Stonewall Inn. These people were the first of many to stand against oppression and socially constructed ideologies of "normal" and "acceptable" behavior and gender expression. Their courage was a major step in shaping the contemporary queer movement. However as William O'Barr argues, it was the Florida Orange Juice boycott of 1977 that solidified the gay community's power as a politically active, economically significant force.<sup>1</sup> The boycott came in response to Florida Orange Juice spokesperson, Anita Bryant, and her campaign against anti-gay discrimination legislation in Dade County, Florida. The controversy generated significant national media coverage, which played an intricate role in bringing attention

to gay issues, prompting further boycotts of companies that spoke against gay rights. Another critical (and unfortunate) historical event that raised awareness of the gay community was the AIDS epidemic.

base, worthy of investment.<sup>2</sup> By the 1990s, advertisers began moving in for the sales pitch.

The most overt use of the AIDS epidemic in advertising was a 1992 United Colors of Benetton ad, which



As the disease initially only affected the gay minority, the general public was not too deeply concerned. Once pop culture icons like Rock Hudson and Freddie Mercury began making their affliction public however, the general population became increasingly conscious of gay men as a significant demographic, many of whom became consumers of the most advanced HIV medications. While much of the publicity—or lack thereof—surrounding the virus was misleading or controversial, there is no doubt that the disease contributed to the emergence of today's gay niche market as a well-recognized consumer

shows the tragic image of a father and mother sitting beside their son's deathbed—slowly dying of AIDS.<sup>3</sup> Though the ad does not include any of Benetton's actual products—and therefore many have questioned if it even qualifies as advertising—it successfully shocked much of the general public, including the woman who took the photo. In an interview with LIFE Magazine, the photographer, Therese Frare, was amazed at the impact that photo had on raising public awareness about the epidemic.<sup>4</sup> The photo has since been praised as “The Photo That Brought AIDS Home” by LIFE.<sup>5</sup> In the past two decades, estimates

indicate that approximately one billion people have seen Frare's powerful photograph.<sup>6</sup> While it is true that advertising played a critical role in placing the AIDS epidemic in the public eye, the Benetton advertisement is a early example of how advertising would also become a threat to the integrity of gay pride. In the ad's aftermath, corporations surmised that simply giving gay men more mainstream media exposure could double as evidence of their support for gay rights, and in turn, companies could enjoy increased sales from the profitable consumer market of white gay men.

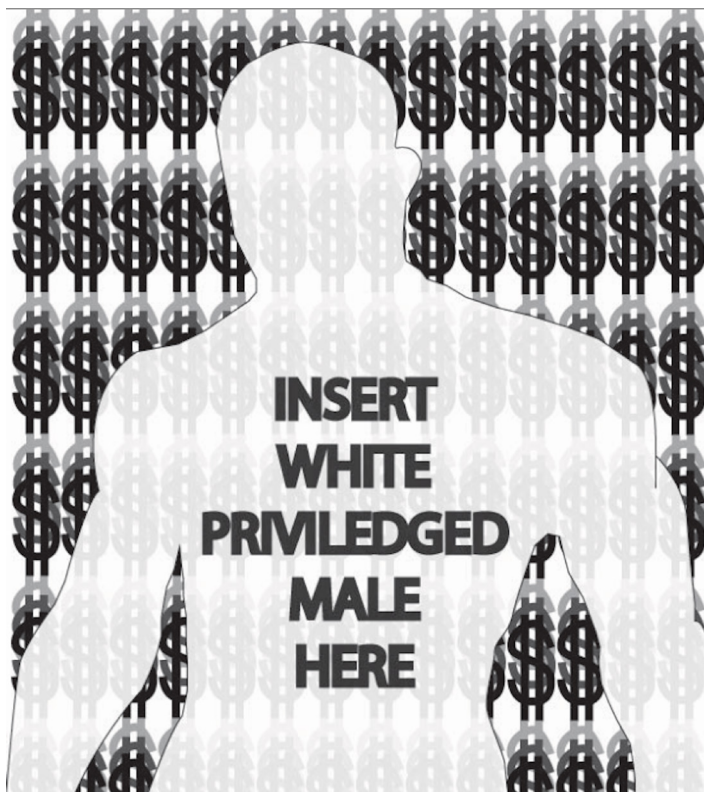
With increasing widespread gay rights support, marketing firms determined to start targeting gays and their heterosexual supporters, who also happened to have a significant amount of disposable income. This demographic is composed of college-educated 18-to-49-year-olds who live predominately in urban areas and do not have children. Scholar Ron Becker refers to this consumer group as "socially liberal, urban-minded professionals, or slumpies"—which also includes rich white gays.<sup>7</sup> In 1994, IKEA became one of the first companies to plunge into the world of gay television advertising with a commercial depicting two men describing their new IKEA table as "a symbol of commitment in our relationship," making it obvious that they were a homosexual couple.<sup>8</sup> Three years later, clothing and spirit companies followed suit with marketing campaigns that would shape the dominant style of gay ads that still exist

today. The ads promote and glorify popular urban gay culture with three major factors in mind: sex, alcohol, and body image. It is this corporately constructed framework that I argue has widely influenced the dominant ideology behind what it means to be a gay man. Most common of the three urban gay culture factors is body image. Following IKEA's landmark advertising campaign, Abercrombie & Fitch began publishing ads with homoerotic images of mostly naked, athletic, hairless men sporting A&F jeans.<sup>9</sup> While the ads didn't explicitly state anything about gay men, the implied reference to gay culture would influence the public's image of mainstream homosexuality. In a particular A&F photograph where a man is standing in nothing but his tight underwear in front of his many male friends, blatant homoerotic subtext is apparent, as there are few explanations for why heterosexual men would be stripping their male friend down in this situation. These ads illustrate the advertising community's definition of a gay male body, that it should fit within certain physical parameters to be considered attractive by consumers. According to the industry, as illustrated in countless advertisements depicting gay men wearing little to no clothes, "idealized male bodies... are young, toned, hairless, athletic, and classically handsome."<sup>10</sup> And if a gay man doesn't look like the models in Abercrombie & Fitch posters, they should strive to. Companies put forth the idea that *all* gay men should be turned on by

the stereotypical male models in their advertisements, even though most men, including homosexuals, will never look that way (and should not be expected to). Certainly, one cannot help but acknowledge the genius behind these ads, that although a gay man may not have the body of an Abercrombie & Fitch model, they can at least have satisfaction of wearing a pair of jeans associated with that look. As a result, companies like A&F encourage customers to buy their jeans with the belief that it will make them more attractive and help them find a (perfect model-like) man. Pushing forward one dominant symbol of sexual attraction to an entire niche market is not an inclusive practice, however, as not all gay men are necessarily attracted to a single body type. Many men, for example, are turned on by bigger and hairier men which are often referred to as “bears,” yet consumers rarely see depictions of this body type in mainstream advertising. For the past 30 years, gay men have been homogenized by corporations and marketing firms, who assume that they will be attracted to a particular image. This unfortunately causes many consumers to subscribe to that dominant ideology without thought. The media tells the public that Abercrombie & Fitch models are hot, bears are not, and no advertiser will say otherwise.

Alcohol advertisements take body image a step further by associating consumption with sexual desire and attractiveness. Coors Brewing Company released

an ad campaign in 2006 depicting a group of fit, athletic men lounging by the pool in their bathing suits, collectively enjoying a six pack of Coors light beer.<sup>11</sup> In addition to maintaining a standard body type, the interaction depicted in this advertisement suggests that Coors beer serves as an effective catalyst for meeting guys. One man is offering another man a beer, two other guys are chatting poolside, and another man is tanning in a speedo while checking out the others.<sup>12</sup> The erotic scene is a blatant attempt to sexualize the Coors beer brand. Ads like this where men’s half-naked bodies are put on display imply a fantasy of all gay men, that they want the opportunity to have sex with men who look like these models. In this case, advertisers make the assumption that the only thing gay men want is sex, and so they provide it. While this advertisement may in fact be an accurate representation of *some* gay men, it creates an unfair social pressure for the rest of the population. Like body image, this marketing strategy misrepresents a much larger part of the gay demographic—those who do not identify with the ideology promoted in these ads. One of the most well recognized companies among gay advertisers is Absolut Vodka, which recently celebrated its 30-year-anniversary of gay promotional ads. The Swedish company embodies all three factors of the advertised urban gay lifestyle, and is also a major sponsor of Logo’s hit (queer) reality television show, *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, as well as the show’s national gay



pride tour. With so much influence over a single demographic for 30 years, Absolut has successfully perpetuated the assumption that all gay men drink and party often. While some gay men may enjoy the gay urban club scene, as depicted by major advertisements, these ads create a false standard of how all gay men *should* spend their money—on alcohol and clubs.

Absolut recently ran a product placement stunt on *RuPaul's Drag Race* when the company sponsored the first ever Roast of RuPaul.<sup>13</sup> In the episode, RuPaul briefly glorifies Absolut for being the first spirit company to advertise to

gay audiences. At one point, two stereotypically attractive men holding trays of Absolut cocktails and wearing nothing but Andrew Christian underwear—a company that has historically targeted gay consumers—strut into the room and serve drinks to the contestants.<sup>14</sup> All at once, Absolut is visually associated with attractive gay men, drag queens, sexy underwear, and the stamp of approval from RuPaul—an icon in the queer community. As far as Absolut is concerned, there is no reason why gay men would *not* want to buy their vodka after watching this episode. I continue to argue, however, that a majority



of gay men do not identify with this homogenized depiction of gay desire.

In addition to sexualizing products and promoting a dominant body image, the advertisement of alcohol has created a consumer society that juxtaposes consumption and restraint. Kathleen Rowe points out that we live in “a society that says ‘consume,’ but look as though you don’t.”<sup>15</sup> Companies want gay men to buy things like a “dry look” gel to make hair look more natural, skinny jeans that will make the wearer’s butt more defined, or a gym membership to work off the 5 pounds they gained over the holidays. People are trained to consume. In addition, gay males are encouraged to purchase certain brands that display their conformity to the advertised ideology of what gay men *should* look like. By wearing a pair of Abercrombie & Fitch jeans, a man becomes associated with the attractive male models in their advertisements, whose same jeans are practically falling off their shiny, smooth bodies. If you drink too many Absolut cocktails, you might not fit into those A&F skinny jeans. But then again, there’s always that gym membership you haven’t used in two months. Gay consumerism is designed to exploit men’s sexual desire by marketing products that allegedly increase one’s chance of having sex, once again showing the cultural stereotype of casual sex in gay culture.

Body image is especially prevalent to the marketing of gay nightlife. Walking down the streets of West Hollywood, it is commonplace to find a partially nude

man handing out flyers for events like “Twink Night” at Tiger Heat, a popular 18+ gay club. Not only do urban nightclubs use the dominant ideology about body image to get attention on the streets, they also dedicate entire nights of partying to a subset of very skinny (slim and toned) gay men, and the men who are attracted to those classified as “twinks.” Another club in West Hollywood, GameBoi, recently celebrated the 10th anniversary of its gay Asian night by bringing in Asian dancers from San Francisco, all of whom fit the standard “hot” body type agreed upon in the gay advertising industry, with their bulging muscles and small waistlines.<sup>16</sup> These clubs contribute to the body image standards placed upon gay men by popular media. Sexualization and body image are not the only factors that exclude groups within the gay community though, as race also influences with how gay men are represented in mainstream advertising. Abercrombie & Fitch ads are a perfect example, as a large majority of their male models are white; implying that people of color are not part of the company’s target consumer group. Because the goal of these ads is to sell sex, advertisers implicitly promote the idea that white men are attractive to everyone. This simply is not true, and to produce advertisements that suggest such a statement is not only exclusive, but also racist and elitist. This overrepresentation of white men is perhaps the most damaging aspect of gay advertising. Few people are discussing issues pertaining specifically to gay men of color, such

as the increasing HIV rates among black gay men or the issue of suicide among gay youth of color. In fact, the only media consistently depicting black gay men are advertisements for AIDS medication. It is undeniable that profit is the primary motive for excluding multicultural men from mainstream gay advertising, as it was profit that initially convinced companies like Absolut and IKEA to target the gay male population.

It is this money-driven mentality that best proves my argument that the majority of gay men—those who are under/misrepresented in the media—are not considered powerful consumers by advertisers. Companies create the illusion that they support the gay male lifestyle, when in fact, they just want affluent gays to buy their products. In this capitalist society where the only goal is profit, exploitation and falsification are common. In his analysis of the effects of media representation, Henry Jenkins reinforces this claim by arguing, “groups that are commodified

find themselves targeted more aggressively by marketers and often feel that they have lost control over their own culture, since it’s mass-produced and mass marketed.”<sup>17</sup> Whether its sexualizing products, glorifying a particular body type, or associating alcohol companies with social progress, advertisements targeting gay audiences have created the illusion that the gay rights movement has come a long way since 1969. But has it really? The Stonewall riots were a landmark stand *against* the power of big money over society’s standards and norms, yet it seems as though advertising today has turned back the progressive clock. This lack of consumer awareness is worrying, and does not point to a bright future for queer media representation. Hopefully, gay culture will not continue to be governed by advertisers like Coors light or Abercrombie&Fitch. After all, no one has the absolute authority to define beauty for an entire community of people, least of all big business.

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# MASS MEDIA: TECHNOLOGY IN THE DIGITAL AGE OF EXCESS

# CONVERGING CONVERGENCE: THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS OF ICARLY'S CONVERGENT CULTURE

BY CHRISTY ZEEB

“Stay in school, recycle, pour milk on your parents, hug a duck, eat a stick of butter and shampoo a squirrel!” may not be reasonable advice for the masses, but on a TV show dedicated to kids and enjoyed by adults, it is advice that successfully resonates with the audience of one of television’s top cable networks. At the time of this research, in 2012, TV’s most viewed content was no longer being produced with the mass audience in mind. American television has come a long way since its early days of broadcasting in the late 1920s. Due to the proliferation of television channels that followed the introduction of cable TV in the 1970s, the television landscape began rapidly developing in novel ways. In the last few decades, the number of available TV channels in America has more than quadrupled from less than 800 stations in 1970 to over 4,500 in 2010.<sup>1</sup> As subscriptions to satellite services continue to increase, one can be certain that the number of available TV channels will continue to rise. While the population of American TV viewers has also increased over the years, it is not large enough to reduce competition for viewers among television networks. Amidst this competitive market, TV networks are experimenting with new business models to capture a share of the audience.

One cable network in particular has done exceptionally well in securing a stable audience: Nickelodeon. According to the 2011 Securities and Exchange Commission report for Viacom, the channel’s corporate owner, Nickelodeon “provides high-quality entertainment and educational programs, websites and online services targeted to kids ages 2-to-17 and their families.”<sup>2</sup> Given their broad offerings across many platforms, it is evident that Nickelodeon is fully adept with the trend of convergence. In 2004, media scholar Henry Jenkins suggested that “media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets and reinforce viewer commitments” while at the same time, “consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and interact with other users.”<sup>3</sup> In this context, the following research will examine the connotations of digital convergence by acknowledging additional forms of convergence that emerge from the use of multi-platform media texts. Nickelodeon, specifically, will be examined to explain how an innovative kid’s show is redefining media practices and audience relationships. This research will

analyze how the show, *iCarly*, has maintained popularity among a diverse audience through its quirky cast and nonsensical shenanigans. Focusing on the episode “iMeet Fred” and the three-part episode “iParty with Victorious,” I will explain the emergent, and excessive, complex matrix of technological, media, content, and audience convergence of *iCarly*, which has shaped new audience experiences and has helped make the network so successful.

As a network devoted to the empowerment of kids, Nickelodeon has also been the number one rated basic cable network since 1996, indicative of their comprehensive programming practices.<sup>4</sup> Cable’s

arrival brought an industry shift from targeting the mass to the niche audience, and in 1979, Nickelodeon began to target the lucrative youth market.<sup>5</sup> However today, this audience is not as niche as it once was. The emergence of the “tween” age group—9-to-12 year olds—has prove to be a very powerful demographic, controlling a large portion of the family’s consumption power.<sup>6</sup> Thus targeting the youth market has yielded the top position for daytime ratings, since it is primarily kids who watch TV in the after school hours. Yet dedication to one segment of the total viewing public is not the only factor contributing to Nickelodeon’s success; their



interaction with the audience also plays a large role. Though the 2012 Nielsen ratings reported that Disney was the new top daytime cable network, Nickelodeon held the position for the past sixteen years.<sup>7</sup> Although the focus of this paper is not to examine ratings trends, it will acknowledge innovative convergent programming among digital technologies, media, content, and audiences that have been partly responsible for the network's historical-ratings success.

The philosophy behind the Nickelodeon network is a major influence on the practices within *iCarly*. Nickelodeon was officially established in 1979 to become fully devoted to the empowerment of a large underserved segment of the television audience due to their position outside the realm of political life: the youth audience. Film and Media scholar Kevin Sandler explains Nickelodeon's brand attitude as "Promoting specific prosocial elements such as diversity, non-violent action, appropriate levels of humor, and guidelines for success—all without ever talking down to kids."<sup>8</sup> While other TV channels such as Disney and PBS promote similar practices, Nickelodeon seeks to provide kids with a space that acknowledges them as citizens of their own media environment. Nickelodeon's efforts to publicize their behind the scenes practices through their network reputation is an effort of meta-branding, and is significant because it gains attention through public

awareness that helps distinguish their presence among other television channels. Examination of their 'kids-win' motif reveals the network's aim to attract the youth audience with content that kids prefer to watch rather than what their parents say is good for them. As most television content for children exists in the format of educational programming to justify a child's time spent before the screen, it also cultivates a brand attitude that is condescending to the youth audience. Alternatively Nickelodeon sets themselves apart by utilizing the term "kids" instead of "children" in their marketing, which provides the impression of elevating the status of the kid-audience as one in need of less TV supervision than a child-audience. Such an idea is realized in Nickelodeon's content offerings that strive to entertain rather than simply educate their audience, which also reinforces a brand attitude recognizing youth autonomy. Further, it is because Nickelodeon is a cable network that it has the benefit of taking more content risks like providing entertaining kid-programming all day, which broadcast stations constrained by regulations and profit motives must be cautious of. This allowance of risky behavior was especially advantageous in the creation of a new unconventional series that would become Nickelodeon's most successful show, and provide kids with more prosocial power than ever before.<sup>9</sup>

It was 2007 when Dan Schneider, the successful producer

of several Nickelodeon teen sitcoms, shared the concept for his next television comedy. Without even hearing the show's complete pitch, Nickelodeon green-lit a 13-episode season due solely to the fact that Schneider created it.<sup>10</sup> In the *New York Times*, Schneider credits his own child acting experience on the show *Head of the Class* for his success in the production of many teen shows. "I was 19 but I played a kid, and they treated us like kids... Basically we were considered props who spoke."<sup>11</sup> Having endured first hand the stresses for kids in the entertainment industry, Schneider's goal behind his shows is "to have kids come out on top. They're the ones in charge."<sup>12</sup> Thus Schneider's aim to make his actors feel self-sufficient converges with Nickelodeon's brand image seamlessly. After being hired by the network in 1994 and given the mandate from executives that "kids win," all seven of Schneider's Nickelodeon sitcoms have become champions of the TV industry.<sup>13</sup> *iCarly*, in which a teen calls the shots of her own web show, also plays by this rule.

*iCarly* is a live sitcom about Carly Shay (Miranda Cosgrove), an 8th grader living with her older-oddball brother Spencer (UCSB alumna Jerry Trainor). Together in their Seattle loft, Carly produces the popular web series *iCarly* with her best friends Sam and Freddie. *iCarly* is one of the first television shows to make the convergence of the television screen and the computer screen the central theme

of every episode; a similar situation appeared in a reoccurring sketch of Schneider's previous series, *The Amanda Show*. This innovative operation focuses on the production of a web show featured within a television show. During the TV series, Carly assigns her web viewers a specific task that relates to the subject of her next webisode and encourages them to film the task and upload it to iCarly.com for a chance to be featured on her web show, or in reality, featured on both shows as *iCarly* webisode content appearing on a TV episode of *iCarly*.

The show's focus on the Internet proves the emergence of digital convergence. Jenkins describes convergence as an ongoing process that "alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences," as we live in an era of prolific media, and "use all kinds of media in relation to each other."<sup>14</sup> In the case of *iCarly*, Nickelodeon converges digital technologies by producing original content that is distributed on both the television screen and the computer screen, with a narrative that is carried across both digital platforms. Here, an audience member can watch the production of an *iCarly* webisode on the TV sitcom and then access the iCarly.com website to watch the featured web video as well as other videos uploaded by audience members in response to Carly and Sam's assignments. Engaging with both forms of content is not necessary though; each individual

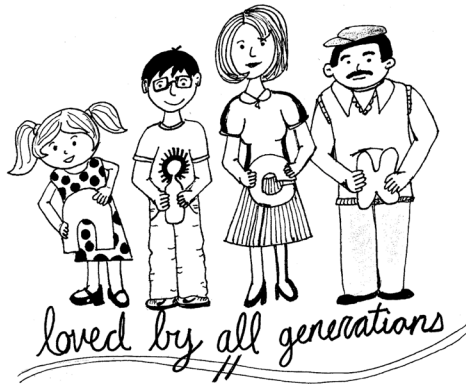
work can still be easily understood in itself. Therefore, kids are not given an order to participate for a full understanding; instead they are given the choice to be active or passive consumers, rewarding the former with more laughs. With 14.7 million visitors to iCarly.com in January of 2008, it is evident that the audience's active relationship to media has made iCarly.com just as popular in the real world as it is in the fictional sitcom.<sup>15</sup> This additional web traffic also contributes to the network's success because it keeps their audience actively engaged with Nickelodeon content.

The notion of a new active audience due to technical convergence is also present in the shaping of media content. With technical advancements providing easy access to webcams and simple video editing software, kids now have the power to create their own media content. Once an audience's self made video gets selected on iCarly.com and makes the transition from uploaded web content to scripted television content, the kid experiences an exciting new role of a creative producer. The engaged audience then reinforces Nickelodeon's image of kid empowerment by participating with *iCarly*, where the show provides these kids the opportunity to negotiate with the media and express themselves to a large audience through their video responses. This act demonstrates what media researcher Elizabeth Evans describes: "incorporation of new media platforms into the

traditional media industries [offers] a different experience for audiences."<sup>16</sup> Where kids are commonly viewed as passive receivers of media content, Nickelodeon asks them to turn on their webcams, speak up, and contribute content for both digitally converged environments. Although audiences are frequently encouraged to contribute content to the entertainment industry, *iCarly* is novel in the way it uses new media and prosocial methods to build on user-generated production processes.

Nickelodeon not only converges *iCarly's* content across platforms, between the television and the web, it also converges other popular media content with its television content, resulting in a form of merging best referred to as media convergence. A simple relationship appears in the release of Miranda Cosgrove's solo music album, *About You Now*. This practice converges the music medium with TV, as her album includes original songs by the actress, as well as her single "Leave It All to Me," which Cosgrove sings for the *iCarly* theme song. A more complex relationship of media convergence is illustrated in the *iCarly* episode "iMeet Fred," which integrates the actual viral Internet sensation *Fred* with *iCarly's* fictional web popularity. Fred's (Lucas Cruikshank) real life YouTube channel has 1.9 million subscribers where his video "Fred Goes Swimming," which was featured on the TV episode of *iCarly*, has over 59 million views, reflecting the millions of kids who enjoy his web show.

According to cultural researcher Gordon Berry, “Nickelodeon is what kids want, not just what adults think kids want.”<sup>17</sup> Converging content from *Fred’s* famous real-world web show with *iCarly’s* famous TV-world web show represents Berry’s description of Nickelodeon’s branding practice. However, the fact remains that Nickelodeon is still what adults think kids want since adults make



the network decisions and produce the show. Yet *iCarly* achieves to deliver its young audience with a sense of empowerment, despite the limitations of control. Through the incorporation of *Fred*, we witness a form of media convergence in the combination of two separate phenomena: one corporately produced by the TV industry and the other independently produced on the web and incorporated into TV.

This convergence occurs through Nickelodeon’s relationship with its audience, by acknowledging their interests and behavior outside of *iCarly*—on the Internet. Here Nickelodeon producers stay true to putting kids in charge by providing them with content they choose to watch on their own. The debut of this episode proved successful, with a reported audience of 5.2 million viewers.<sup>18</sup> Within this episode, the script also reflects Nickelodeon’s image of empowerment and

audience engagement and distribution. When Freddie states on the *iCarly* web show that he doesn’t think *Fred* is funny, *Fred* responds by posting an angry video saying, “Now I’m not going to post any more *Fred* videos ever again.” When the kids at school get angry with the *iCarly* crew for “killing *Fred*,” Freddie defends himself by claiming he has a right

to his own opinion. Meanwhile, the fictional kid characters voice their opinions with an organized boycott against the *iCarly* web site. Freddie’s rebellious opinion stands in for Nickelodeon’s encouragement of independent thinking, and the “neverwatchiCarly.com” website is a way to show how kids can use media to come together and speak out against the popular media.

A complex relationship that emerges from *iCarly’s* media convergence is demonstrated when the crew visits Lucas to apologize so viewers will forgive them. Lucas confesses that he himself is a fan of *iCarly*, and only acted upset as a stunt to increase visitors for both of their websites, where he then reveals that both sites have experienced a recent jump in web traffic. Thus the distribution of one *Fred* video converged separate *Fred* and *iCarly* fans and increased viewers for both web sites. The



episode concludes as the two media platforms, and the two web series, fully converge on TV in the production of an *iCarly* webisode. Here Fred is introduced on *iCarly* as his real-life self, Lucas, in a webisode featuring the humorous antics of *iCarly* in the fast-paced style of *Fred*.

A similar combination of content is more clearly seen in the three-part episode “iParty with Victorious.” Here *iCarly* converges with another Nickelodeon show, *Victorious* (about a famous high school singer Victoria Justice), to create a new pattern of content convergence—and become what was described by the network in a promotional commercial as “the biggest television event of the year.” The crossover of content between *iCarly* and *Victorious* created a new transmedia pattern that doesn’t fit with the likes of adaptations, sequels, or spins-offs, nor does it resemble what scholar Mary Celeste Kearny calls “transmedia exploitation.”<sup>19</sup> Since both shows are currently active in production and already share a majority of their audience, one text does not exploit another established text for its own commercial gains.<sup>20</sup> Instead, this emergent form of convergence combines two separate onscreen-realities into one episode of *iCarly*, bringing the girls together in one super-narrative.

In this episode, digital convergence meshes with content convergence while Victoria watches a video on her laptop and asks her boyfriend, “don’t you think that *iCarly* girl is really pretty?” The appearance of *iCarly* in Victoria’s

diegetic world is an example of what Jenkins calls “transmedia storytelling.”<sup>21</sup> While Evans feels that with convergence the “term ‘medium’ is problematic” and often undefined, she suggests that ‘medium’ describes a way for imparting fictional or factional information.<sup>22</sup> Thus, under her definition, the individual sitcoms become their own mediums for imparting fictional information, and validates Jenkins’ concept of transmedia storytelling, which integrates content from “multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium.”<sup>23</sup> Or in the case of “iParty,” within in a single night.

This three-night event integrating *iCarly* and *Victorious* narratives brings awareness to how convergence plays into another recent television trend called ‘world building,’ what Jeffery Sconce describes as increased attention “to crafting and maintaining ever more complex narrative universes...that has allowed for a wholly new mode of narration and that suggests new forms of audience engagement.”<sup>24</sup> Although multi-night television events are nothing new, Nickelodeon adds an innovative touch by converging both sitcoms, with additional real world content, to create an even more complex narrative universe. During this episode, the *iCarly* crew crashes a party at Keenan Thompson’s house to catch Carly’s boyfriend out with his second girlfriend, Victoria. Here Keenan plays himself and is known by other characters as his real-life self, the famous actor from *Saturday*

*Night Live.* The audience encounters a new form of engagement as they contemplate the crossing and blurring of boundaries that bind the events of TV shows and real life by calling upon their knowledge

jokes” for kids, and a violence-free atmosphere of “ethnic and racial diversity, and gender parity” for parents.<sup>26</sup> This brings out a form of audience convergence in the joining of youth and adult viewers.



ICARLY CONVERGES SOCIAL, CULTURAL, TECHNICAL, AND INDUSTRIAL CONTENT TO BE ENJOYED BY AUDIENCES OF ALL AGES.

of each individual show and their experience with the world to better understand the events of the crossover episode. This combination of Keenan’s real existence further engages the family audience by converging content that appeals to different generations (*SNL*).

With *iCarly*’s occasional ratings of over twelve million viewers per episode and ability to gather a large enough audience to beat out *American Idol* and *60 Minutes*, it becomes apparent that there are more than just kids watching the show.<sup>25</sup> Media historian Heather Hendershot claims that Nickelodeon succeeds as a network in their ability to satisfy both kids and adults; through the way Nickelodeon offers quality programming in “gross-out

Several videos of *iCarly* on YouTube have comments similar to William Webb’s: “I’m 41 and I love the show. I watch it every chance I get and I have all the DVDs.” revealing the reality of such efforts. Rather than displeasing parents with violent gags and vulgarity, or distancing kids with boring “good-for-you” content, Nickelodeon’s practice involves an innovative and proper balance of physical and verbal comedy in original jokes that brings kids and adults together to share a laugh.

In one example of such a joke, the laughs come at the expense of the adult but the joke is not intended to be insulting; it is delivered to please the converged kid-adult audience. In the “iParty with Victorious” episode, Freddie’s mom comes to

Carly's house and when she says, "I don't see how a boy can make a girl that happy." Sam replies with, "Sure, that's because you haven't had a date since *Seinfeld* got canceled." Not only does the script incorporate popular culture from the adult's generation, it is also respectful of the traditional parent-child relationship. This dual-audience joke is convergently carried out as the mother expresses authority. However, when she corrects Sam's snarky retort by responding with: "It wasn't canceled! Jerry chose not to do another season," she inadvertently admits to not having a date in years, keeping the joke consistent to Nickelodeon's image of favoring the youth.

As audiences of different generations come together through content convergence, a shift in the audience's relationship to media emerges—seen in *iCarly*'s digital convergence of television and Internet technologies: the real TV audience combines with the fictional web audience to create a complex, transformative viewing position. As Carly's requests for engagement targets her fictional web show's audience, members of the real-world TV audience take on the role of the fictional audience as they become the ones to act on assignments given to the fictional audience within the sitcom. In Carly's direction for viewers to visit her website and post their own original videos, only real kids

can fulfill the task and visit the website to upload their content. Carly's encouragement to the audience is not only empowering, it also convergences both the passive and active kid audience, and the fictional and real audience into one.

What this research on convergence illustrates is exactly what Jenkins offers as a model of media convergence that incorporates multiple sites of new forms of merging, including (but not limited to): social, cultural, technical, and industrial. After all, this content flows across multiple media platforms and is accompanied by "migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."<sup>27</sup> Although it was announced in May of 2012 that the cast of *iCarly* would air their last episode that November, the incredible success of the show and its audience's enthusiastic participation does not mean the end of Nickelodeon's convergent activities. Given his reputation, it is safe to assume that it is only a matter of time before Dan Schneider debuts his next hit for Nickelodeon in his effort to "always out-do the last thing [he] did."<sup>28</sup> With this in mind, Nickelodeon audiences should expect to have a new show that excessively meshes content from a variety of mediums to form more complex relationships within an even larger narrative universe.

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THE ORIGINAL ART ACCOMPANYING THIS  
ARTICLE HAS BEEN CREATED BY  
SONIA VIRGEN

# THE DAMSEL'S QUEST: BREAKING DOWN THE MALE GAMING COMMUNITY

BY ASHLEY ARMITAGE

**I**nteracting with media is meant to be entertaining, many times nothing more than a mindless activity used to forget the problems of the day. Though watching television, reading magazines, and playing video games have become habitual and pervasive parts of our society, it is imperative to acknowledge that media is not only used to entertain; it is used to educate. Media illustrates, creates, and comments on culture, and its representations teach us ideology, or what is arbitrarily deemed culturally appropriate, normal, and 'natural.' Because media is so pleasurable and entertaining, it spreads this ideology innocuously. However, these views don't account for the entire culture, and they only represent the perspectives of the select few gatekeepers who control the creation of media texts. Like other mass media, the processes of video game design, production, and distribution are also concentrated in the hands of very few. In mainstream video gaming, male-run companies produce masculinist games that serve only to perpetuate male-dominated gaming culture. Though video games used to only be associated with teenage boys, gendered tension has begun to rise as more females enter this territory. However, certain members of the gaming community are eager to

retain the 1980s boys-only tradition, and thus any time a woman steps in or speaks up to challenge the system she is faced with resistance and abuse. In May 2012, pop culture and media critic Anita Sarkeesian launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund a series of videos called *Tropes Vs. Women* with the intent of exposing how certain representations in video games are damaging to women.<sup>1</sup> Immediately following this release, Sarkeesian received more than just emails of complaint—she was hit with a wave of online hate from aggressive male gamers, all trying to force her into the 'traditional' place as a woman. This backlash towards Anita Sarkeesian's oppositional stance proves how female gamer exclusion is reinforced by values such as the Damsel in Distress trope, which allows the victimization of women to continue, emphasizing the idea that femininity and beauty are more important than intelligence and skill.

Before analyzing the manifestations of the Damsel in Distress trope, we should acknowledge technology's ability to either limit or extend mediated human communication. In the early days of gaming, graphics were constrained to primitive pixels forming two-dimensional scenes and female characters

weren't very different from their male counterparts. In the case of Ms. Pacman, the only variation from her Mister was a red bow over the mass of yellow squares. However as technological capacity has grown, realistic imagery has advanced. Studying representations in video games is more important now than ever, as those pixilated shapes have become incredibly lifelike, three-dimensional women. Representation, misrepresentation, and underrepresentation of women through these female characters are thus used to covertly convey ideology. The Damsel in Distress and the Alpha Male are two tropes that predate video games, and have been overused into cliché.

In March 2013, Sarkeesian released the first video of her series focusing entirely on the Damsel in Distress.<sup>2</sup> Portrayals of women in media are often one-sided, one-dimensional, and have one purpose: to cater to a man's desires. In her video, Sarkeesian teaches that the Damsel in Distress is "a prize to be won, a treasure to be found, or a goal to be achieved."<sup>3</sup> Princess Peach, from Nintendo's *Super Mario* franchise is the archetypical Damsel in Distress: she wears a pink dress, and appears quiet, passive, and pleasant. She rarely speaks, and when she does, her dialogue is typically just "Oh!" or "Help me!" Her only role in the Mario games is as a device to propel the male (heroic) journey forward. In an attempt to refute Sarkeesian's claim that Princess Peach is a Damsel in Distress, Youtube user MrRepzion

uploaded a video talking about the Nintendo DS game *Super Princess Peach*, in which the gender roles are reversed and Peach is the one who fights to save Mario.<sup>4</sup> Nintendo took a bold step forward with this game release, and it's an advancement that brings us closer to the solution,



"DON'T WORRY MARIO,  
PRINCESS PEACH WILL SAVE YOU."

but does *not* completely fix the problem—especially in comparison to every other game where Peach is the Damsel to be saved. After all, "The ill-fated Princess appears in 14 games of the core *Super Mario* platform games and she's kidnapped in 13 of them."<sup>5</sup> In the *New Super Mario* Wii games, there



are four playable characters: Mario, Luigi, and two Toads. Nintendo had the chance to include Peach in the action, but instead, they kept her locked away in the castle. Shigeru Miyamoto, creator of the *Mario* franchise, explained that Peach is non-playable because they would have needed to do extra work for her dress, “I thought it’d be nice to have her as a playable character, but... we’d have to come up with a special programming to handle how the skirt is handled in the gameplay.”<sup>6</sup> The game developers could have easily managed to program the graphics for her dress, but they used Toad instead because of his similar body type to Mario. This is a lazy excuse, used to keep Peach in the immobile, victimized role she plays far too often. After all, if not Peach, who else would be saved?

In her video address, Anita Sarkeesian extensively lists various video game Damsels in Distress, but she does not mention the effects these representations have on the player. Texts are polysemic: made ambiguous to host multiple meanings. The content in these video games can therefore be read in many ways, but is dominantly interpreted as innocent, normal, and the ‘way things should be.’ In fact, the action in most games is so easily digestible that people never take the time to question it. When women aren’t portrayed as society tells them to, they usually face both internal and external resistance. Additionally, when women fall outside of patriarchy’s definition of beautiful—when they

aren’t simultaneously tall, skinny, white, fit, wide-eyed, perfectly proportioned, and clear-skinned—they are labeled undesirable. The standards media set for women are far too high. But it’s about more than just looks, the Damsel in Distress trope also reproduces the troubling cultural assumption that women should be quiet, passive, innocent, incapable, agreeable, pleasant, dependent, and controlled. When women are loud, excessive, sexual, capable, and independent—anything other than what society thinks they should be—they become a threat to masculinity. Anita Sarkeesian is viewed this way, as such a threat to dominant order that she has been cyber-bullied by thousands of disgruntled gamers. As proven by these attacks, the Damsel in Distress trope really does have a detrimental effect on the players: it teaches people that it is acceptable to put a woman’s gender and appearance before her ideas, and that when she voices her opinions she is wrong, threatening, and should be shut down.

Before she released her Damsel in Distress video, Sarkeesian published a Kickstarter video on May 17th, 2012 with a goal of fundraising \$6,000.<sup>7</sup> She began the video by listing the pros and cons of video games, “gaming can improve problem solving skills, teamwork, creative thought, and multi-tasking...unfortunately in addition to many of these benefits, many of these games tend to reinforce and amplify sexist and downright misogynist ideas about women.”<sup>8</sup>



The purpose of her Kickstarter was to share her plan for a series of videos that would expose five stereotypes of women in video games. Over the next month, she was overwhelmed with both support and abuse. Although she easily passed her \$6,000 goal—ending with an astounding \$158,922—she also became victim to a mass of cyber attacks. Comments she received on the Youtube upload of her Kickstarter include: “She needs a good dicking. Good luck finding it though,” “Would be better if she filmed this in the kitchen,” and “Tits or GTFO.”<sup>9</sup> Although the comment feature has since been disabled, all 14,000 comments are still visible on the Youtube page. The comments target her sex, gender, appearance, and ethnicity. The majority of these comments contain no criticism to her actual argument; they are just hateful jabs coherent with the values of the Damsel in Distress. This abuse only further proves that sexist tropes in video games can manifest themselves in the normalization of misogyny, toward women in the gaming industry in particular.

The attacks on Sarkeesian weren’t just in comments on Youtube. People also hacked her Kickstarter page to overloaded the server with requests and prevent anyone from donating. They attempted to spread her phone number and address online, edited her Wikipedia page to contain vulgar and false information, and took previously existing images of Sarkeesian and added speech bubbles saying things like, “Give me money you sexist pig,”

or “I post all my videos when I’m on my period.”<sup>10</sup> Some of the worst forms of abuse she received were drawings posted online depicting her in different rape scenes. In one photo she is being raped by Mario, and in another photo five penises are ejaculating on her. On July 5th, someone even created and uploaded a game to NewGrounds in which the player can beat up Sarkeesian.

Throughout all this abusive opposition, Sarkeesian maintained her integrity by staying true to her beliefs that women should be able to speak freely. She believes that her victimization needed to be exposed rather than kept a secret, and explained the harassment of the game on her website:

The fact that this video game—which justifies violence and abuse towards women—was not only

It invited players to ‘punch this bitch in the face’ and with each click a photoshopped image of me would become progressively more bloody and battered until the screen turned completely red. The “game” was then proudly circulated on various gaming forums by those engaging in the sustained harassment campaign against me. It remained on NewGrounds’ website for about 24 hours before being removed.<sup>11</sup>

created, but also played and enjoyed, is another example of how gaming culture is influenced by the Alpha Male/Damsel in Distress paradigm, which dictates that the man uses aggression to win because he is the stronger gender, and the woman is punished because she should not

have boldly stepped into man's territory. All of these attacks on Sarkeesian happened between May and July, before she had even made a single video in her proposed series. Then in March of the following year, after much resistance and anticipation, she published the Damsel in Distress video, and another wave of attacks followed.

Her opponents again expressed disagreement in the forms of gender and appearance-based insults on comments, websites, and their own Youtube videos. However this time, people were upset not only by her opinions, but also because she had turned off the comment feature of her video upload. A male Youtube user, TheAmazingAthiest, argued that as a publicly funded project, Sarkeesian's Damsel in Distress video should allow comments, and by disabling these she had prevented democratic discussion. He asked in a Tumblr post, "What are you afraid of, Anita? Why can't people have a discourse about your material?"<sup>12</sup> The previously mentioned user MrRepzion also commented, calling Sarkeesian a hardcore "Feminazi" and saying, "Really Feminist Frequency..."

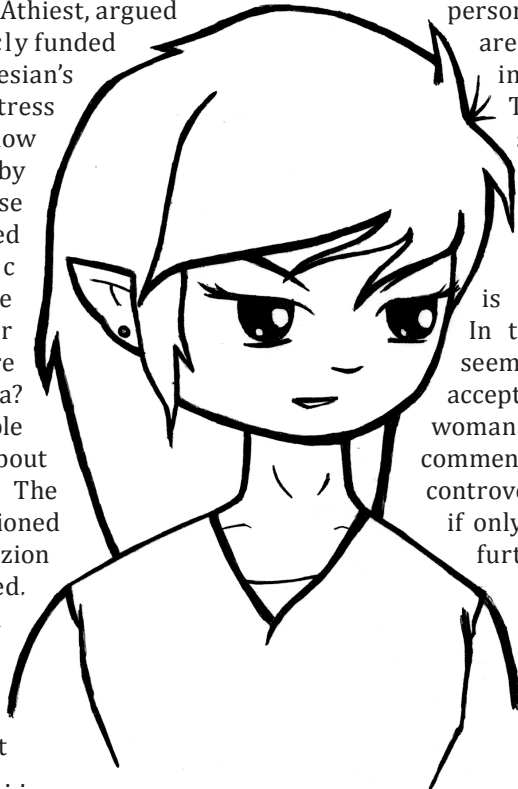
A FEMININE LINK

the least you can do is allow likes and comments to contribute to a discussion."<sup>13</sup>

These users seem to think that by silencing her opponents, Sarkeesian is preventing free speech, but really it's Sarkeesian's freedom of speech that is being threatened. She is one woman trying to challenge a wrong system and spread awareness, and has been met with people who want nothing more than to silence her. Both The AmazingAthiest and MrRepzion acknowledge that the comments "will be abusive in nature" and still ask "so what?" These men fail to see that sexist cyber bullying, rape threats, death threats, and personal attacks

are seriously intimidating. They fail to see why a woman's security and comfort is important.

In this case, it seems perfectly acceptable for a woman to mute comments on a controversial video, if only to prevent further abuse and protect herself. Ironically, while these men



complain that Sarkeesian is silencing their intellectual dialogue, they are trying to silence hers.

Historically, men have excluded women from the gaming sphere. Male gamers see female gamers as a joke, and as people who could never be a part of a culture of serious players.<sup>14</sup> But as the gaming climate has shifted, this dominant gaming culture has begun to feel threatened. Video games are the fastest growing mass media, so ubiquitous that anyone can be a gamer—and virtually everyone is.<sup>15</sup> No longer are video games an isolated activity of teenage boys glued to their television screens. In fact today, women represent 30% of the video game population while boys 17 years or younger only represent 18%.<sup>16</sup> The gender gap continues to shrink, and as of 2012, 47% of gamers were women and 53% were men.<sup>17</sup> However, these numbers aren't the same at the level of the game producers. Though there are far more female gamers today, there are still very few female video game producers, designers, and publishers.<sup>18</sup>

When attacks like the ones on Anita Sarkeesian happen, women may get the idea that the video game world is male-dominated, and men make it clear that they want it to remain that way. This could be one reason why women seem scared or disinterested in pursuing jobs in the video game industry. One of the world's leading video game producers, Nintendo, has zero women on its board.<sup>19</sup> In mainstream video gaming, male-run companies

produce male-minded games to maintain a male-dominated gaming culture. Games are meant to sell, and those with male leads seem to disappear off the store shelves faster than those with female leads. Geoffrey Zatkin, chief operating officer at the EEDAR, explains that games "with only a male hero sold around 25% better than games with an optional female hero. Games with exclusively male heroes sold around 75% better than games with only female heroes."<sup>20</sup> However, marketing is important here: simply put, the more money spent on advertising, the better a game will sell, and "games with only female heroes are given half the marketing budget as games with male heroes."<sup>21</sup> Video games that feature female protagonists are considered niche by the male-controlled industry, and thus they never even start out on equal footing—disadvantaged from the beginning.

How can this playing field be leveled? The only way is to diversify this male-centricity by adding women to the mix, especially in positions of design, coding, and development. Companies occasionally come up with games that feature female leads, but through the approval process within the (male-dominated) company and the (male-dominated) publishers, these ideas are often shot down. Companies like Activision are only concerned with how well a game will sell, and games with female leads have a poor sales history. Game critic and writer Leigh Alexander suggests, "If Activision does not see a female lead in the top

five games that year, they will not have a female lead...and the people that don't want a female lead will look at games like *Wet* and *Bayonetta* and use them as 'statistics' to 'prove' that female leads don't move mass units."<sup>22</sup> Here's the problem: if no one steps out of their comfort zone to create female-led games, the cycle of reusing comfortable and boring (but lucrative) game stories will continue. This environment is unfertile for innovation and quality. Without risk, games will only continue to reproduce homogenous, generic content. But if there were more women on the creative end, who knows how exceptional games could become?

Women are gamers, it's a fact. The majority of women (80%) prefer to play the Wii over the Xbox360 and Playstation3.<sup>23</sup> Wii's top selling games of as of March 2012 were *Wii Sports*, *Wii Sports Resort*, *Wii Play*, and *Mario Kart*—all of which contain fairly equal gender representations by allowing the player to choose between many (male and female) characters.<sup>24</sup> This shows just how much women value gender representation in their games. These games are also full of customization, as *Wii Sports* and *Wii Play* games allow players to completely personalize their avatar with the Mii creator. *Mario Kart* is equally balanced; a player can be their Mii, or they can select between one of many male or female Mario game characters. It's evident that women lean towards games that represent their gender, and more women working in

the industry would likely mean more games with female leads.

Many online male gamers don't want to see female leads or female gamers. To them, women could never possibly be *serious* gamers—the only kind of gamers they believe should play. The Damsel in Distress trope hosts an environment that allows gamers to think it's normal for men to be the skilled heroes and women the weak victims. This hegemony extends beyond fictional representations and manifests itself in real-life too. As proven by Anita Sarkeesian, a poisonous strand of male gamers want to keep their culture male-dominated and, when women try to challenge the tradition, they are viciously attacked. Women are absent at the corporate level of video games as well, not because they are deliberately banned and excluded, but because they are deterred from applying in the first place. This does not mean that women are uninterested in video games, on the contrary, they represent almost half of the gaming population. But hostile work environments that support the industry's culture of sexism and a history of male gamers attacking women are the ultimate dissuasion to females. Though it may be the current model, today's capitalistic patriarchal cycle in the video game industry needs to be broken. And only when more women like Anita Sarkeesian speak out will the culture be ready to create a friendly and accepting gaming community.

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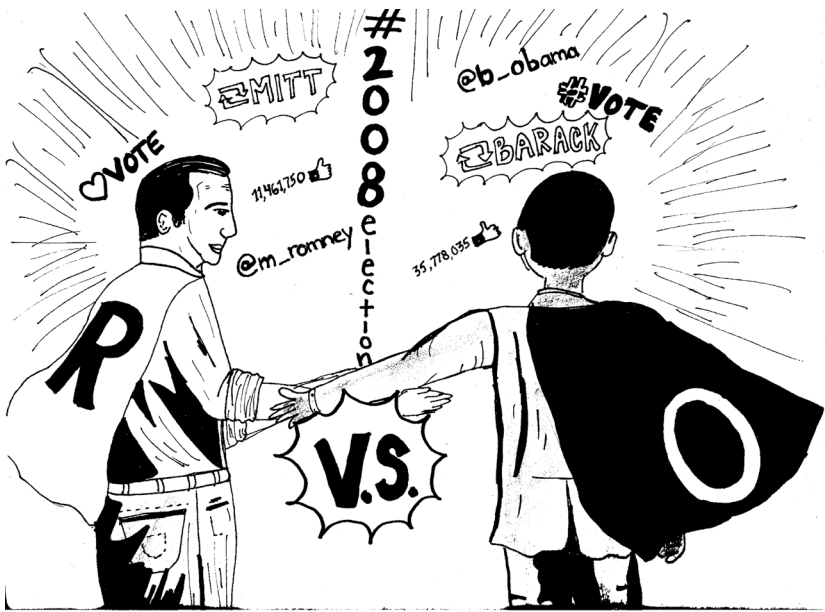
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JUSTIN CHOU

# ATTRACTING YOUNG PEOPLE TO POLITICS ONE DIGITAL TOOL AT A TIME

BY MARISA ENDICOTT



IN THE 2012 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, NEW MEDIA WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER.

**W**hen you checked your email during election season, candidates greeted you with a message to support them and their vision by donating as little as \$2 to \$5. Each time you logged on to Facebook, an onslaught of political opinions, suggestions, and appeals awaited you. As you watched the presidential debates, new media bustled about the screen in all its forms: fact-checks, viewer tweets, charts and graphs, and audience response meters. New media has

woven its way into most aspects of our daily lives, from banking, shopping, and even sleeping—here politics is no exception. But the question is, to what extent? Are these tools powerful enough to continue to sway and engage the younger generation, politically, for the long term? Are its effects in this arena real and lasting? A positive relationship between physical and virtual politics seems to be burgeoning, but with millions of Americans still skipping the polling booths, just how much

impact can cyberspace have?

New media's omnipresent nature, especially in the lives of young Americans, has helped politics secure a position of priority with newer generations. The political participation gap between typically disinterested youth and more engaged adults is less apparent online, according to a recent study by the Pew Research Center. A notable 37 % of Internet users, ages 18-to-29, use blogs or social network sites for political or civic engagement.<sup>1</sup> New media is an outlet for instantaneous intake and output of information and opinions, something very attractive to the younger generation. Sara Callahan, 21, a fourth year student double majoring in Film and Media Studies and Communication, and also the executive director of UCSB's College Republicans Club, agrees. "I think that new media has definitely urged youth to re-think politics as an 'old people thing,'" she said. In Callahan's opinion, the 2008 Obama campaign was a historical championing of the youth demographic, done almost entirely via social networking.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, social media's political presence is palpable; during the 2012 political conventions more than 50,000 tweets were sent per minute, according to Denver's 9News.<sup>3</sup>

But what makes new media such an effective tool? "It is the easiest, cheapest, and fastest way to access information," according to Ruben Dominguez, 35, a PhD student at UCSB studying contemporary political processes. "I think mobility and portability

are the biggest players in social media's effectiveness."<sup>4</sup> This ease and accessibility seem to be driving factors in the usage of social media to promote political content. For Caleb Peyton, 21, a full-time kitchen manager at a Bay Area restaurant, websites like Stumbleupon—which generates random web pages with each click—have increased his political awareness, "I won't even be looking for it, and an article about political issues or current events will pop up, and I'll read it because, why not?" he said.<sup>5</sup>

For Ryan Hui, 22, a Sociology major at UCSB, Facebook serves as a real-time news source, as every time he refreshes his home page, he gets the latest updates. "Because it is posted by my peers, it is often topics that are more relevant and interesting to me," he said.<sup>6</sup> New media is an especially powerful tool because it brings information to people who might not otherwise seek it out. Not only do these cyber processes expose young people to political information, they also help them understand it. For instance, the live analyst breakdowns and links to other sources and explanations that constantly popped up during the 2012 presidential debates made content clearer, more relevant, and more relatable to voters like Peyton. "Otherwise, a lot of political stuff goes over my head," he said.<sup>7</sup>

Another less recognized benefit for political engagement is the anonymity of new media. In Callahan's club, there are some people who do not want to attend organized meetings or events for fear of being chastised by



their more liberal peers for being Republican. Callahan notes, “they can be a member of the Republican group page without anyone knowing, so the people who used to fall between the cracks are now at least somewhat integrated into the group.”<sup>8</sup> For many, new media can feel like a safe haven.

However, the connection between new media and political engagement is a two-way street. Social networking and crowdsourcing sites recognize and exploit the market that politics provides them. Twitter has a whole government and politics department that analyzes data and often collaborates with third parties like polling firms. During election season, the company rolled-out the Twitter Political Index, which measured users’ feelings towards candidates and assigned them scores. Aside from the exposure to political material, can new media actually change young people’s minds? “Not directly,” said Peyton, “It doesn’t change my views, but it allows me to develop a stance on issues I wasn’t formally aware of.”<sup>9</sup>

Today, virtual tools are essential to the success of political organizations. Official groups use every possible outlet to reach and persuade the population, particularly the younger generations. During the election, both President Barack Obama and Mitt Romney created blogs on Tumblr.com that reflected their stances and political strategies. Obama’s site tended to be more light-hearted and humorous, while Romney’s was more direct

(Romney’s page has not been active since the election.) After the election, Obama harnessed Twitter to urge his side of ongoing budget negotiations. The President used the hashtag “#my2K” to refer to the potential \$2,000-plus in taxes that middle class families may have had to pay if a deal was not reached. Going directly to the public through new media channels has also helped Obama win an extension of payroll tax cuts and discount interest rates for student loans in the past.<sup>10</sup>

These cyber developments have been particularly helpful in fundraising among young people. “Crowdsourcing funds was a huge contribution to Obama’s 2008 victory and something Mitt Romney also capitalized on in 2012,” said Callahan. “This strategy is certainly more inclusive of college students who may not have a lot to give, with the high cost of tuition, books, and food,” she continued. “But if they can buy a Frappuccino, they can give a few bucks to the next President of the United States.”<sup>11</sup>

New media has also opened doors for feedback and adaptation. Being able to interact with and gauge the opinions of young people—in real time—allows for flexible campaign strategies.<sup>12</sup> Political organizations have the opportunity to instantly know what works and what does not, greatly improving their effectiveness in a way not possible before. According to a Pew Research Center study, more than half of those who are a part of a political or community group communicate with each other using digital tools.<sup>13</sup> Today, you would be

hard-pressed to find an organization that does not take advantage of the Internet's tools. This does not just pertain to the big-time players, but organizations on all levels.

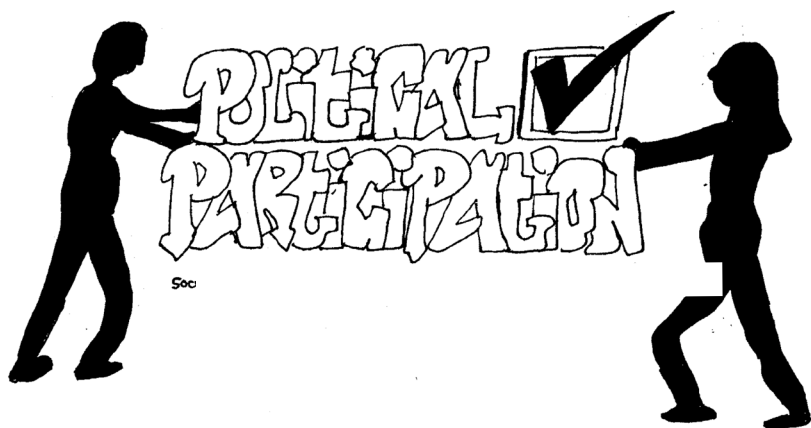
The UCSB College Republicans Club has especially benefitted from New Media's political prevalence. According to Callahan, "sharing a political article or announcing a club event is easy and highly visible, since everyone goes on Facebook daily anyway." She thinks it has fostered greater communication, both social and logistical, for the organization. New Media also has allowed the club to spread their message farther than just Santa Barbara: "We have people across the country re-tweeting us and people across the state donating."<sup>14</sup> Despite all the power that these technological advancements have brought to political groups, Dominguez maintains that young people are more influenced by their friends than by political organizations.<sup>15</sup> Still, new media has significantly increased the possibilities for outreach and relation.

When it comes to translating

virtual action into real action though, the verdict is mixed.

A study published in *Nature* reports that an extra 340,000 people voted in the 2010 congressional elections because of a Facebook message that was sent to over 61 million users on Election Day.<sup>16</sup> Door-knocking campaigns increased voter turnout by about 8% while email campaigns only boosted turnout by one percent or less. The same study also concluded that new media action still does not compare to its real-life counterpart. Callahan's club had a similar experience when they posted online encouraging members to work at phone banks during the elections. "As a page administrator, we could see how many people had viewed the post or even liked it," she explained, "but we still only had two people get downtown to call around."<sup>17</sup>

Some are doubtful that new media transfers to real action. "For the most part, I don't think the Internet converts people so to speak," Callahan said. "Next to 're-pinning' on Pinterest and '<3-ing' on Instagram, 'liking' on Facebook



is the laziest engagement behavior you can do.”<sup>18</sup> Others are even more cynical. “I think that more people repost political material to feel good about themselves and show they are well-rounded than because they really care,” Hui claimed. He pointed to Invisible Children’s online Kony 2012 movement as an example: “It was huge, and everyone was reposting about it, but now it is all but forgotten, and as far as I can see, it didn’t make any real difference.”<sup>19</sup>

But not everyone is so pessimistic. “Virtual action doesn’t necessarily translate into real action, but it eases the process for those who are seeking to participate,” said Peyton. “Because new media is so accessible and far-reaching, those pursuing real-life engagement have a much easier time figuring out where to start.”<sup>20</sup> There is substantial evidence to support his point of view, such as the Pew Research study that concluded: over 53% of people who posted online about political or social issues also engaged in two or more civic or political activities offline. Only 14% of those who did not go online did the same. Among those who engaged online, more

than 50% contacted a government official, as opposed to 18% who stayed offline. And, while 61% of people using new media politically signed a petition, only 13% of people with no online engagement did so.<sup>21</sup>

When Planned Parenthood’s federal funding was on the chopping block, the public’s online reaction in the form of themed statuses, petitions, and fundraising hugely contributed to the organization’s preservation. Similarly, the viral spread of congressional candidate Todd Akin’s “illegitimate rape” comment—and the ensuing memes and online outrage—greatly contributed to his campaign loss.

The real world and cyber world are intrinsically linked: what happens in one influences the other and vice versa. Furthermore, many see a mutually beneficial relationship between virtual and physical political action. “New media didn’t push me to vote for the first time more than real world interactions,” Peyton said, “But all the online exposure to information sparked my curiosity and triggered me to go out and seek answers, and discuss them with my friends and family face to face.”<sup>2</sup>

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SONIA VIRGEN

# ABOUT THE STAFF

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## CORIE ANDERSON : EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



Corie Anderson recently graduated from UCSB with a degree in Film and Media Studies, a major she mainly chose to justify the absurd amount of time she spends in front of the television screen. Her hobbies include drinking cappuccinos, playing with cats, and buying blu-rays that she cannot afford. She can also frequently be found watching horror movies alone and avoiding exercise. After graduation, Corie plans on moving to Los Angeles and making no money. Hopefully, one day people will pay her to write, but she will continue to write for free in the meantime.

## CHRISTY ZEEB : ASSOCIATE EDITOR



Christy Zeeb is a recent UCSB graduate where she double majored in Film and Media Studies and Communication. In her spare time she devises elaborate heists that will pad her bank account to allow her to trot the globe, sparing no expense. Christy plans to pursue a career in action sports entertainment, but without a job lined up for the future, she hopes to continue her laid back lifestyle of minimal commitments for as long as possible. And if that gets old, she knows that there is always money in the banana stand.

## BIANCA BELTRAN : COPY EDITOR



Bianca Beltran is a graduating fourth year Film and Media Studies major, from Oxnard, CA. Bianca began her career as a journalist writing for *The Bottom Line* and reporting for KCSB News. She has been practicing her anchorwoman smile in the mirror every morning, and hopes to continue to work in news after graduation. When not asking the hard hitting questions, she likes to watch movies, help her friends make movies, and talk about movies on her KCSB radio show, *The Picture Show*.

## GRACE DELIA : COPY EDITOR



Grace Delia is a senior English Literature major with a minor in Professional Editing. Grace most enjoys watching *Amelie*, often while eating cinnamon toast. Her favorite punctuation mark is the exclamation point! She plans to pursue writing in the entertainment industry.

## PAULA ERSLY : COPY EDITOR



Paula Ersly is a graduating senior from UCSB with a double major in Literature & Creative Writing and Film & Media Studies. She expects both degrees to serve as very nice fly swatters in the near future. She enjoys geeking out over dated science fiction programs and spends exactly 200% more time on tumblr than in the real world. (You can tell she did not major in math.) Her heroes include Tina Fey and Indiana Jones, and in an ideal world she would like to be a television-writing-archaeological-adventurer but in the meantime will be ecstatic to fetch your coffee. Now was that two sugars or three?

## **LAURA HORSTMANN: COPY EDITOR**



Laura is a graduating senior majoring in Film and Media Studies, originally from a farm outside of Chico. She writes, illustrates, and designs for WORD Magazine while also being an expert pizza connoisseur. After graduation she's pretty up for anything as long as it doesn't involve living in her car. Despite popular opinion and belief she is not Aubrey Plaza.

## **KEVIN VELTRI : COPY EDITOR**



Kevin is a third year Film and Media Studies major from Garnet Valley, PA, a small town sandwiched between Philadelphia and Wilmington, DE. If you don't know where Delaware is, it's a state next to a small town called Garnet Valley, PA that's next to Philadelphia. When he grows up he would like to go to grad school, or invent a way to switch lives with another human, then participate in the process; Paul Bettany would also participate. He shamelessly promotes the television show *Parks and Recreation* and films starring Jennifer Connelly.

## **CELESTE WONG : COPY EDITOR**



Celeste Wong is a fourth year Film and Media Studies major and French minor from Berkeley, CA. In her four years at UCSB, she has worked on various student film productions as an actress, art director, and script supervisor. Her diverse interests range from sitting in a dark room watching and rewatching her favorite tv shows to sitting in a dark room watching movies. After graduating in June, she hopes to pursue a career as an actor and keep working with as many UCSB alumni as possible.

# ABOUT THE COVER DESIGNER

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## REBEKAH CHON

Rebekah Chon is a second year Film and Media Studies Communication double major who stays classy in her hometown of San Diego. Besides loving television, fashion, and graphic design, Rebekah is a big fan of puppies, crafting, and caramel macchiatos. Her favorite film is *The Departed*, her favorite show is *Game of Thrones* and her favorite superhero is a close tie between Batman and Thor. As the “visionary” and “lawyer” type, according to the Myers-Briggs personality test, Rebekah is both imaginative and logical. When she is passionate about her creative vision, she will fight to get it made.

Samples of her work can be found here:

**[rebekahchon.jobrary.com](http://rebekahchon.jobrary.com)**

STAFF PORTRAITISTS ILLUSTRATED BY  
HILARY CAMPBELL



# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**HALIE ALBERTSON** is a third year double major in French and Classics. She is currently studying abroad at the University of Bordeaux III Michel de Montaigne. Although not a Film and Media Studies major, she is an enthusiastic cinephile and is using her time in France to watch Nouvelle Vague films without subtitles. After graduation, she hopes to pursue an advanced degree in Comparative Literature.

**ASHLEY ARMITAGE** is a first year Film and Media Studies major and an aspiring film director. At age 13, she began making films and has since had her work accepted into many film festivals, notably winning in her category at the Seattle International Film Festival. By day, Ashley makes movies and plays video games. By night, she equips her sword to battle the monsters of sexism, racism, classism, and all the other -isms in order to eradicate injustice and restore peace to the world.

**SARA CALLAHAN** is a fourth-year Film and Media Studies and Communication double major, with a minor in Professional Writing for Multimedia. While at UCSB, Sara works as a Marketing Assistant for the Pollock Theater, a position which has given her the opportunity to meet and interview the likes of Ben Affleck, Seth Rogen, Danny McBride, and *Modern Family* creator Steven Levitan. After graduation, Sara hopes to work in market research and consumer insights for a new media company.

**ALEX EISENHART** is a first-year Film and Media Studies major with a passion for performing arts, *Star Trek*, and aviation. Originally from San Jose, CA, this Bay Area boy is slowly making his way into the world of Los Angeles in pursuit of a career in the entertainment industry. Alex has dabbled in numerous fields of media, including journalism, newscasting, film production, photography, and screenwriting. Currently, his interests lay in creative directing, film editing, and on-stage performing.

**MARISA ENDICOTT** is a fourth year Global Studies major and Professional Business Writing minor, graduating in June. Currently, Marisa works for a Santa Barbara nonprofit company and UCSB's Sustainability department. In her free time, she loves to explore the beautiful natural setting of the University by hiking. After graduation, she plans to return to her native San Francisco Bay Area and pursue communications and social advocacy.

**ALYSSON FEIL** hails from the gorgeous San Luis Obispo and is a senior Film and Media Studies major and English minor at UC Santa Barbara. In addition to being a full time student, Alysson is an active member of Nikkei Student Union and has interned with the documentary production company, Green Living Project, as well as the Santa Barbara International Film Festival. Currently, Alysson interns at the Mark Gordon Company in west Los Angeles while finishing her degree.

**JENNIFER LANDE** is a fourth year Communication major with a minor in Professional Writing for Multimedia. At UCSB, Jennifer works as a staff assistant for the Pollock Theater and writes articles for the online entertainment magazine, TheCelebrityCafe.com. Jennifer loves baking, graphic design, and the San Francisco Giants, but most of all, she loves to watch and write about television and film. She hopes to become a production assistant upon graduation and eventually work as a television producer.

**DAISY ROGOZINSKY** is a second year Film and Media Studies major. She is passionate about writing, cinema, poetry, comedy, curiosity, and being passionate about things. Her favorite letter is X. In her spare time, she likes to alphabetize things, tickle newborn kittens, and talk about herself in third person. She might just be a figment of your imagination.

# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

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**JUSTIN CHOU** is a fifth year Biopsychology major. Justin published one zine, *blahblah* vol. 1 no. 1, to limited acclaim. He helps out with the Santa Barbara Do-It-Yourself scene sometimes (sbdii.org).

**HILARY CAMPBELL** is a graduating Film and Media Studies major at UCSB, but there's just so much more to her. She loves writing depressing movies, drawing cartoons of sarcastic dogs, drinking wine, eating popcorn, and sleeping to *Sleepless in Seattle*. That's about it.

**SLATER ELLIS** is a fourth year Psychology major. After finishing his degree in Winter 2013, Slater continues to work as a customer service representative at the UCSB bookstore. In his free time Slater enjoys doodling, watching TV, and the outdoors. In the future he plans to pursue a career in social work.

**TIM ROSSI** is a fourth year Art major, who also is completing pre-requisites for nursing school. He has created multiple large-scale murals in local hospitals that, hopefully, provide a safe and welcoming environment for pediatric patients. He hopes to eventually become a practicing artist and full-time nurse.

**VICTORIA TSAI** is a first year pre-Biology major. Her hobbies include drawing and playing the cello. While at UCSB, Victoria hopes to further her interests in both science and art and pursue a career in Pharmacology.

**SONIA VIRGEN** is a second year Art and Global Studies double major. While at UCSB, she has discovered many different mediums—such as sculpture, printing, and digital media—which have opened her eyes to new artistic possibilities. Unsure of her future, Sonia hopes to go to grad school, someday work for Pixar Animation, and possibly be part of the Peace Corps.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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We would like to thank the following for contributing their time, effort, and/or financial support :

Ellen Anderson and IV Arts,  
Cristina Venegas & the UCSB Film & Media Department,  
The Office of Student Life (OSL), Associated Students (AS),  
Joe Palladino, Flora Furlong, and Kathy Murray.

We would like to thank the following faculty members for their time and help :

Alston D'Silva, Hannah Goodwin, Ross Melnick, Joshua Moss,  
Diana Pozo, Janet Walker, Charles Wolfe, and John Vanderhoef.

A very special thanks to :

**JENNIFER HOLT**

for her support and effort in advising.

and

**JOE PALLADINO**

for his constant help and availability.

and

**DANA WELCH**

for his time and advice with editing.

The staff would like to thank everyone who submitted a piece for consideration in this year's journal.



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