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Queer Visibility in Commodity Culture

Rosemary Hennessy

For a lesbian and gay political project that has had to combat the heteronormative tyranny of the empirical in order to claim a public existence at all, how visibility is conceptualized matters. Like “queer,” “visibility” is a struggle term in gay and lesbian circles now—for some simply a matter of display, for others the effect of discourses or of complex social conditions. In the essay that follows I will try to show that for those of us caught up in the circuits of late capitalist consumption, the visibility of sexual identity is often a matter of commodification, a process that invariably depends on the lives and labor of invisible others.¹

This argument needs to be prefaced, however, with several acknowledgements and qualifications. First of all, the increasing cultural representation of homosexual concerns and the recent queering of sex-gender identities undoubtedly have had important positive effects. Cultural visibility can prepare the ground for gay civil rights protection; affirmative images of lesbians and gays in the mainstream media, like the growing legitimation of lesbian and gay studies in the academy, can be empowering for those of us who have lived most of our lives with no validation at all from

the dominant culture. These changes in lesbian and gay visibility are in great measure the effect of the relentless organizing efforts of lesbians and gay men. In the past decade alone groups like The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, The Human Rights Campaign Fund, GLADD, and ACT-UP have fought ardently against the cultural abjection and civic eradication of homosexuals. Like other gay and lesbian academics now who are able to teach and write more safely about our history, I am deeply indebted to those who have risked their lives and careers on the front lines to make gay and lesbian studies a viable and legitimate intellectual concern. Without their efforts my work would not be possible.

But the new degree of homosexual visibility in the United States and the very existence of a queer counterdiscourse also need to be considered critically in relation to capital's insidious and relentless expansion. Not only is much recent gay visibility aimed at producing new and potentially lucrative markets, but as in most marketing strategies, money, not liberation, is the bottom line.² In her analysis of the commodification of lesbians, Danae Clark has observed that the intensified marketing of lesbian images is less indicative of a growing acceptance of homosexuality than of capitalism's appropriation of gay "styles" for mainstream audiences. Visibility in commodity culture is in this sense a limited victory for gays who are welcome to be visible as consumer subjects but not as social subjects. The increasing circulation of gay and lesbian images in consumer culture has the effect of consolidating an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity for both straight and gay audiences. This process is not limited to the spheres of knowledge promoted by popular culture and retail advertising but also infiltrates the production of subjectivities in academic and activist work.

Because so much of lesbian and gay studies and queer theory has all but ignored the historical relationship between (homo)sexuality and capitalism, however, one of the dangers of an analysis that sets out to address the connection between the processes of commodification and the formation of lesbian and gay identities is that it risks being misread. Drawing attention to the operations of commodity capitalism on lesbian, gay, and queer knowledges can be misconstrued to mean—as *I certainly do not*—that the material processes of commodification are only economic, and that they are

all determining and impossible to oppose. As I understand it, the materiality of social life consists of an ensemble of human practices whose complex interdeterminate relations to one another vary historically. These practices include economic divisions of labor and wealth, political arrangements of state and nation, and ideological organizations of meaning-making and value. Although capitalism is a mode of production characterized by the economic practice of extracting surplus value through commodity exchange, the processes of commodification pervade all social structures. In certain social formations under late capitalism, information has become so much the structure in dominance that language, discourse, or cultural practice is often taken to be the only arena of social life. The challenge for social theory now is to queer-y the reigning Foucauldian materialism that reduces the social to culture or discourse and to refute misreadings of postmodern historical materialism as advocating a return to economic determinism. To examine the historical relations between homosexuality and commodification as they operate at all levels of capitalist societies does not mean dismissing the materiality of discourse and the ways culture constructs subjectivities, reproduces power relations, and foments resistance. Quite the contrary. Postmodern historical materialist critiques of sexuality are postmodern to the extent that they participate in postmodernity's historical and critical remapping of social relations, but at the same time they maintain that sexuality is a material practice that shapes and is shaped by social totalities like capitalism, patriarchy, and imperialism as they manifest differently across social formations and within specific historical conjunctures. As social practice, sexuality includes lesbian, gay, and queer resistance movements that have built social and political networks, often by way of capitalist commercial venues. That academic gay studies and queer theory have not very rigorously inquired into the relations between sexuality and capitalism is indicative of the retreat from historical materialism in social and cultural theory in the past decade. But I think it also suggests the particular class interests that have increasingly come to define lesbian and gay studies.

Although I have been using the words "queer" and "lesbian and gay" as if they were interchangeable, these are in fact contentious terms, signifying identity and political struggle from very dif-

ferent starting points. The now more traditional phrase “lesbian and gay” assumes a polarized division between hetero- and homosexuality and signals discrete and asymmetrically gendered identities. The more fluid and ambiguous term “queer” has recently begun to displace “lesbian and gay” in several areas of urban industrialized culture—under the signature of “queer theory” in the realm of cultural studies; in avant-garde, gay, and lesbian subcultures; and in new forms of radical sexual political activism. Lending a new elasticity to the categories “lesbian” and “gay,” “queer” embraces a proliferation of sexualities (bisexual, transvestite, pre- and post-op transsexual, to name a few) and the compounding of outcast positions along racial, ethnic, and class, as well as sexual lines—none of which is acknowledged by the neat binary division between hetero- and homosexual. In other words, “queer” not only troubles the gender asymmetry implied by the phrase “lesbian and gay,” but potentially includes “deviants” and “perverts” who may traverse or confuse hetero-homo divisions and exceed or complicate conventional delineations of sexual identity and normative sexual practice. “Queer” often professes to define a critical standpoint that makes visible how heteronormative attempts to fix sexual identities tend to fail often because they are overdetermined by other issues and conflicts—race or national identity, for example. To the extent that “queer” tends to advance a subjectivity that is primarily sexual, it can threaten to erase the intersections of sexuality with class as well as the gender and racial histories that still situate queer men and women differently. In this respect “queer” is, as Judith Butler indicates, a “site of collective contestation” (*Bodies* 228) that is only partially adequate to the collectivity it historically represents.

While in this essay I may string together the terms “lesbian and gay” and “queer,” then, this is not in order to conflate them but to indicate that both expressions are being used to name homosexual identities now, even if in contesting ways. To the extent that my analysis focuses primarily on “queer” issues, this is because they are increasingly shaping postmodern reconfigurations of gay and lesbian cultural study and politics. Even though many formulations of queer theory and identity are to my mind limited, it does not follow that the viability of “queer” as a sign of collective history and action is to be dismissed. Instead, I would argue for a renarra-

tion of queer critique as inquiry into the ensemble of social processes—systems of exploitation and regimes of state and cultural power—through which sexualities are produced. I agree with Judith Butler that the two dimensions of queering—the historical inquiry into the formation of homosexualities it signifies, and the deformative and misappropriative power the term enjoys—are both constitutive (*Bodies*). But I would add that these dimensions of queer praxis need to be marshalled as forces for collective and transformative social intervention.

Queer Theory and/as Politics

Most well known in political circles from the activities of Queer Nation, “queer” has recently begun to circulate more widely in public and academic writings, the sign of an unsettling critical confrontation with heteronormativity, a distinctly postmodern re-scripting of identity, politics, and cultural critique. Although queer academic theory and queer street politics have their discrete features and histories, both participate in the general transformation of identities occurring in Western democracies now as new conceptions of cultural representation are being tested against the political and economic arrangements of a “New World Order”—post-colonial, post-Cold War, post-industrial. The emergence of queer counterdiscourses has been enabled by postmodern reconfigurations of subjectivity as more flexible and ambivalent and by shifting political pressures within the gay community. Among them are the new forms of political alliance between gay men and lesbians yielded by activist responses to the spectacle and devastation of AIDS and to a lesser extent by challenges to gay politics from radical race movements in the seventies and eighties. In troubling the traditional gay versus straight classification, “queer” draws upon postmodern critiques of identity as stable, coherent, and embodied. Queer knowledges upset traditional identity politics by foregrounding the ways contested issues of sexuality involve concerns that, as Michael Warner puts it, are not captured by the languages designed to name them (xv). By targeting heteronormativity rather than heterosexuality, queer theory and activism also acknowledge that heterosexuality is an institution that organizes

more than just the sexual: it is socially pervasive, underlying myriad taken-for-granted norms that shape what can be seen, said, and valued. Adopting the term that has been used to cast out and exclude sexual deviants is a gesture of rebellion against the pressure to be invisible or apologetically different. It is an “in your face” rejection of the “proper” response to heteronormativity from a stance that purports to be both antiassimilationist and antiseparatist. Like lesbian feminism and the gay liberation movement, the queer critique of heteronormativity is intensely and aggressively concerned with issues of visibility. Chants like “We’re here, We’re Queer, Get Used To It” and actions like Queers Bash Back, Queer Nights Out, Queer Kiss-Ins, and Mall Zaps are aimed at making visible those identities that the ubiquitous heteronormative culture would erase. Politically, the aim of queer visibility actions is not to include queers in the cultural dominant but to continually pressure and disclose the heteronormative.

Although their often distinct institutional positions situate queer theorists and activists differently in relation to the professional managerial class and the regimes of power-knowledge they help organize, ideologically these contrasts are less neat than is often acknowledged. Both queer activists and theorists employ some of the same counterdiscourses to expand and complicate the parameters of sexuality; both set out to challenge empiricist notions of identity as grounded in an embodied or empirical visibility; and both recast identity as a version of performance: as drag, masquerade, or signifying play. Across the promotion of more permeable and fluid identities in both queer theory and activism, however, visibility is still fetishized to the extent that it conceals the social relations new urban gay and queer identities depend on. The watchwords of queer praxis in both arenas are “make trouble and have fun” (Berube and Escoffier 15). But often trouble-making takes the form of a cultural politics that relies on concepts of the social, of resistance, and of pleasure that keep invisible the violent social relations new urban identities depend on.

In order to examine some of these concepts and their consequences I want to look more closely at academic and activist knowledges, beginning with three academic theorists whose writings are shaping the new queer theory and whose reputations now rest on their work in this area: Judith Butler, Diana Fuss, and Teresa de

Lauretis. All three articulate a version of cultural studies with loose affiliations to post-structuralism. All three offer critiques of heteronormativity that, to paraphrase de Lauretis, are interested in altering the standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility, of what can be seen and known ("Film" 224). And all three are concerned to varying degrees with the invisibility of lesbians in culture.

Butler's book *Gender Trouble* (1990) offers one of the most incisive and widely read critiques of heterosexuality. Against what she calls "the metaphysics of substance" or empiricist and humanist conceptions of the subject, Butler launches a rearticulation of gender identity aimed at making visible the ways in which the fiction of a coherent person depends on a heterosexual matrix. How we see sex and gender is for Butler a function of discourses that set the limits to our ways of seeing. From Butler's postmodern vantage point, the seeming internal coherence of the person is not natural but rather the consequence of certain regulatory practices that "govern culturally intelligible notions of identity" (16–17). Identity, then, is not a matter of a person's experience, self-expression, or visible features but of "socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility" (17). Intelligible genders are those that inaugurate and maintain "relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire" (17). In this sense, gender intelligibility depends on certain presuppositions that the dominant knowledges safeguard or keep invisible. Chief among them is the heterosexual "matrix of intelligibility" that produces "discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'masculine' and 'feminine,' where these are understood to be expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female'" (17). All sexual practices in which gender does not follow from sex and desire does not follow from either sex or gender thereby become either invisible or perverse (17).

Despite the efforts to safeguard these presuppositions, the fiction of a coherent identity is inevitably vulnerable to exposure as a representation, and it is the deliberate enactment of this fiction as a fiction, and not some utopian sexuality outside or free from heterosexual constructs, that for Butler serves as the site of resistance to heterosexuality. She argues that if sex is released from its naturalized meanings it can make gender trouble—subverting and displacing reified notions of gender that support heterosexual

power. This process can only occur *within* the terms set by the culture, however, through parodic repetitions like drag that expose the heterosexual matrix as a fabrication and sex as “a performatively enacted signification” (33). Drag for Butler is not merely a matter of clothing or cross-dressing. It is a discursive practice that discloses the fabrication of identity through parodic repetitions of the heterosexual gender system. As parody, drag belies the myth of a stable self preexisting cultural codes or signifying systems. Against the dominant reading of drag as a failed imitation of the “real thing,” Butler posits it as a subversive act. By turning a supposed “bad copy” of heterosexuality (butch and femme, for example) against a way of thinking that posits heterosexuality as the “real thing,” drag exposes this pseudo-original as itself a “copy” or representation. It follows for Butler that lesbian or gay identity is inevitably drag, a performance that plays up the indeterminacy of identity and for this reason can be seized upon for political resistance.³

According to Butler, then, visibility is not a matter of detecting or displaying empirical bodies but of knowledges—discourses, significations, modes of intelligibility—by which identity is constituted. In this sense, her work is clearly a postmodern critique of identity, identity politics, and positivist notions of the visible. Her analysis of sexuality and gender undoubtedly has a strong social dimension: she speaks to and out of feminism and understands the processes that construct sexuality and gender as political. For Butler heterosexuality is a regime of power and discipline that affects people’s lives. But her reconceptualization of the experiential and embodied self as only a *discursive* construct is a strategy that safeguards some presuppositions of its own.

One of them is that the social is equivalent to the cultural. Throughout her work, Butler’s approach to the problem of identity begins with the premise that identity is only a matter of representation, of the discourses by which subjects come to be established. This notion of the discursively constructed subject is heavily indebted to Foucault, and it is Foucault’s problematic concept of materialism and of discursive practices that troubles Butler’s analysis as well. While Foucault understands the materiality of the social to be comprised of both discursive and nondiscursive practices, he never explains the material connection between them. Further-

more, most of his attention is invariably devoted to discursive practices.⁴ This social logic of noncorrespondence appears in Butler's analysis, too, and is most explicit in her explanation of materialism in *Bodies That Matter* (1993). In her own words, this new book is a "poststructuralist rewriting of discursive performativity as it operates in the materialization of sex" (12). This post-structuralist reading of materiality begins with the premise that matter is never simply given but always materialized. But what constitutes this materializing is one domain of social production only—the regulatory practices, norms, and discourses that constitute ideology (10). Butler's version of materiality is directed against notions of the body and of sex common among constructionists who still maintain them to be in some ways "matter" in the sense of a constitutive "outside" that exceeds the boundaries of discourse. But by explaining materiality so exclusively in terms of discursive practices, Butler effectively conflates the materiality of the social into culture. While she frequently refers to heterosexuality as an institution or a norm, she never explains the material differences or relations between institutions and normative discourses. Are they one and the same? Do institutions like the family, the military, or schools organize and rely on more than discourses: aspects of life like labor and wealth, or social resources like health and health care, the distribution of food and shelter? All of these aspects of social life are, of course, discursively mediated and regulated, but at the same time their materiality is not simply discursive.

I am not disputing that the insidious dictates of heterosexuality operate through the discourses of culture, but surely they organize and help shape other features of social life as well. While political and economic practices are always made intelligible and shaped by our ways of making sense of them, reducing materiality to discourse alone has the effect of obscuring much of social life. The ways of making sense of sexuality that are dispersed through institutions like the military, churches, or the media also depend on and condition divisions of labor and are affected by the operations of particular state and national formations. The proposal to lift the ban on gays in the U.S. military, for instance, threatens to disclose the fiction of heterosexual coherence. But the discourses of identity and sexual citizenship that organize this proposal have only become possible under certain historical conditions, among

them changes in the place of the United States in global politics after the Cold War and in the sexual division of labor that has enabled a more flexible patriarchal gender ideology in multinational capitalist economies.

Given Butler's reduction of the social to discourses, it is not surprising that she understands history in very local, limited terms, a feature of her work that is in keeping with its post-structuralist roots. For example, at one point she admits that gender parody in itself is not subversive, rather its meaning depends on "a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered" (*Gender* 139). She quickly passes over the problem of historical "context" (it appears in one of her frequent series of rhetorical questions). But it is, I think, a crucial issue for queer politics now. What does it mean to say that what can be seen as parodic and what gender parody makes visible depend on a context in which subversive confusions can be fostered? What exactly is meant by "context" here?

As Butler uses it, context would seem to be a crucial feature of the meaning-making process: its contingent foundation serves as a backdrop of sorts linking one discursive practice—drag, for example—to others; through these links, presumably, meaning is produced. But considering historical context is quite different from historicizing. Historicizing does not establish connections only in this local scene of reception—between one discursive practice and another—nor does it leave unaddressed the relationship between the discursive and the nondiscursive. Historicizing starts by acknowledging that the continuation of social life depends on its (re)production in various spheres. As a mode of reading, it traces connections between and among these spheres at several levels of analysis—connecting particular conjunctural arrangements in a social formation to more far-reaching ones. To historicize the meaning of drag among the urban middle class in the United States at the turn of the 21st century would be to link it as a discursive practice to the social relations that make it possible and in so doing situate practices specific to a particular social formation in the United States within the larger frame of late capitalism's geopolitics and multinational economy. Butler's presupposed concept of the social displaces analysis of social totalities like capitalism and patriarchy, however, in favor of an exclu-

sive emphasis on the specific and the local (a la Foucault). In so doing, she confines history to a very limited frame whose unspoken “context” has a very specific address: the new bourgeois professional class.

This historical address is most evident in her earlier conceptions of drag as subversive political practice. For Butler, drag challenges the notion of identity implicit in “coming out,” the act of making visible one’s homosexuality. In her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” she argues that coming out is a process one can never completely achieve. No homosexual is ever entirely “out” because identity, always undermined by the disruptive operations of the unconscious and of signification, can never be fully disclosed. This means that any avowal of the “fact” of one’s homosexual (or heterosexual) identity is itself a fiction. Performative activities like drag play up the precarious fabrication of a coherent and internal sexual identity by putting on display the made-up (in)congruity of sex, gender, and desire. In her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” Butler acknowledges these social limitations on signification: “one is compelled to live in a world in which genders constitute univocal signifiers, in which gender is stabilized, polarized, rendered discrete and intractable” and where performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments (279). But here as elsewhere the critical force of Butler’s commentary denaturalizes reified versions of sexuality by addressing them as discursively constructed rather than considering why they are historically secured as they are. Even though Butler concedes that the subversiveness of gender parody depends on the historical context in which it is received, most of her earlier analysis assumes that *anyone* might participate in exposing the fiction of sexual identity.

But of course, they cannot. One reason is that, unfortunately, societies are still organized so that meaning is taken to be anchored in referents or signifieds; “lesbian” and “gay” are often read as referring to authentic identities, either benign or malevolent perversions of a naturalized norm. To date, the indeterminate meanings Butler assigns these words are not shared by all. Gay bashings, at times with murderous outcomes, indicate that the insistence of the signified in the symbolic order continues to organize social life, as does the military’s latest “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. And in both

cases the disclosure of the identity “homosexual” has definite consequences for people’s lives. A book like Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch Blues* or a film like Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*, both of which document the ways “gender parody” often blurs into “passing,” each demonstrates the powerful hold on lesbian and gay imaginations of the notion that sex should align with gender. For many lesbians and gays who have not had the social resources or mobility to insulate themselves from heteronormativity’s insistence that sex equals gender, drag has been not so much playful subversion as a painful yearning for authenticity, occasionally with brutally violent results.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler addresses some of the ways Livingston’s documentary of the Harlem balls in *Paris Is Burning* tests her own earlier arguments on performative subversion and the contextual boundaries of drag. As Butler reads their representation in *Paris Is Burning*, drag balls are highly qualified social practices that can both denaturalize and re-idealize gender norms. Furthermore, the murder of Venus Xtravaganza by one of her clients (for whom the discovery that Venus had male genitals is perhaps not at all a playful subversion of gender identity) dramatizes the limits of gender parody. In other words, as she puts it, “there is passing and then there is passing” (130). Unlike Willie Ninja, who “makes it” as a gay man into the mainstream of celebrity glamour, Venus is ultimately treated the way women of color are treated. Butler’s reading of the film acknowledges the insistence of the signified in the symbolic order—Venus dies, she tells us, because the possibilities for resignifying sex and race that the drag balls represent are eradicated by the symbolic. Her death “testifies to a tragic misreading of the social map of power” (131) and suggests that the resignification of the symbolic order along with the phantasmic idealizations that drag enacts do have their refusals and their consequences.

There are moments in this book when Butler hints that the social map of power, while discursive, also includes more than the symbolic order—for example, when she refers to the situation of the numbers of poor black women that the balls’ idealizations deny, or when she indicates that the balls’ phantasmic excess constitutes the site of women “not only as marketable goods within an erotic economy of exchange, but as goods which, as it were, are also privi-

leged consumers with access to wealth and social privilege and protection” (132). But for the most part, here, too, the materiality of social life is ultimately and insistently confined to the ideological. While she makes use of concepts like “ideology” and “hegemony” here to conceptually relate discourse, subjectivity, and power, the systemic connections among ideology, state, and labor in the historical materialist theories of Althusser and Gramsci are dropped out. The result is that important links among social contradictions that materially effect people’s lives—uneven and complex though they may be—remain unexplained. I am thinking here especially of connections between the continual effort (and failure) of the heterosexual imaginary to police identities and the racialized gendered division of labor Butler alludes to earlier.

To sum up, my reading of Butler’s work suggests several points about the materiality of sexuality that are politically important to queer theory and politics. First of all, if the materiality of social life is taken to be an ensemble of economic, political, and ideological production, we can still acknowledge that the coherent sex-gender identities heterosexuality secures may be fabrications always in need of repair, but their fragility can be seen not as the property of some restlessness in language itself but as the effect of social struggle. Second, the meanings that are taken to be “real” are so because they help secure a certain social order, an order that is naturalized as the way things are or should be and that “illegitimate” meanings to some degree threaten. Because it is the social order—the distribution of wealth, resources, and power—that is at stake in the struggle over meanings, a politics that contests the prevailing constructions of sexual identity and that aims to disrupt the regimes they support will need to address more than discourse. Third, the naturalized version of sexual identity that currently dominates in the United States as well as the oppositional versions that contest it are conditioned by more than just their local contexts of reception. Any specific situation is made possible and affected by dimensions of social life that exceed it. A social practice like drag, then, needs to be analyzed at several levels: in terms of the conjunctural situation (whether you are looking at what drag means when walking a ball in Harlem or turning a trick in the Village, performing in a Hasty Pudding revue at Harvard or hoping to pass in Pocatello); in terms of its place in the social

formation (whether this local scene occurs in an urban or rural area, in the United States, Germany, Nicaragua, or India, at the turn of the 20th or of the 21st century); and in terms of the global relations that this situation is tied to—how even the option of drag as a flexible sexual identity depends on the availability not only of certain discourses of sexuality, aesthetics, style, and glamour, but also of a circuit of commodity production, exchange, and consumption specific to industrialized economies. Recognizing that signs are sites of social struggle, then, ultimately leads us to inquire into the social conditions that enable and perhaps even foster the slipping and sliding of signification. Is the subversiveness of a self-consciously performative identity like drag at risk if we inquire into certain of the other social relations—the relations of labor, for instance—that help enable it? What is the consequence of a theory that does not allow this kind of question?

I want to suggest that one consequence is the risk of promoting an up-dated, postmodern, reinscription of the bourgeois subject's fetishized identity. Alienation of any aspect of human life from the network of social relations that make it possible constitutes the very basis of fetishization. By limiting her conception of the social to the discursive, Butler unhinges identity from the other material relations that shape it. Her performative identity recasts bourgeois humanist individuality as a more fluid and indeterminate series of subversive bodily acts, but this postmodern subject is severed from the collective historical processes and struggles through which identities are produced and circulate. Moreover, in confining her analysis of the inflection of sexuality by racial, national, or class difference to specific historical contexts, she forecloses the possibility of marshalling collectivities for social transformation across differences in historical positioning.

This postmodern fetishizing of sexual identity also characterizes the recent essays of Fuss and de Lauretis. While their projects are distinct and differently nuanced, they share an ideological affiliation in that the subjects their work constructs are in many ways much the same. Unlike Butler, both Fuss and de Lauretis reference commodity culture in the cultural forms their essays target—advertising and film—and, significantly, de Lauretis occasionally explicitly mentions the commodity. For some readers, Fuss's emphatic psychoanalytic approach and de Lauretis's more insistently politi-

cal feminist analysis might seem to distinguish their theoretical frameworks both from Butler's and from one another's. But it is precisely these differences that I want to question.

In "Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look," Fuss is concerned with relations of looking that structure fashion photography, in particular the tension between the ideological project to invite viewers to identify with properly heterosexual positions and the surface structure of the fashion photo, which presents eroticized images of the female body for consumption by a female audience (713). Her essay sets out to decode this tension, which Fuss formulates in terms of the "restless operations of identification" (716). Drawing primarily on psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity (Freud, Lacan, Kristeva), Fuss explains this restlessness of identity as an effect of the subject's entry into the symbolic and its subjugation to the law of the father, a law that mitigates against return to an always irretrievable presymbolic unity. Fuss argues that by persistently representing the female body "in pieces" (showing only a woman's legs, hands, arms, face . . .), fashion photography reminds the woman spectator of her fetishization. But unlike Marx, who takes fetishization to be the concealment of a positive network of social relations, Fuss understands fetishization as Freud does, that is, as a lack (castration). For Freud fetishization is the effect of a failed resolution to the oedipal romance whereby the child disavows his knowledge that the mother does not have a penis by substituting other body parts (a leg, a hand, a foot) for it. Through their fixation on women's body parts, Fuss argues, fashion photos dramatize the role woman plays in the disavowal of the mother's castration, at the same time the fragmented body serves as substitute for the missing maternal phallus (720). Fashion fetishism is in this sense an effort to compensate for the "divisions and separations upon which subjectivity is based" (721). At the same time, it also points to some of the mechanisms of primary identification, in particular the "fundamental female homosexuality in the daughter's preoedipal identification with the mother" (721). The fascination of fashion photography with repeated close-ups of a woman's face, Fuss argues, entails the ambivalent disavowal—denial and recognition—of the source of pain and pleasure invoked by the potential restitution of this lost object for an always imperfectly oedipalized woman.

The Freudian concept of the fetish Fuss appropriates might be read as itself a symptom of capitalism's fetishizing of social relations in that it condenses into the nuclear family circle and onto a psychically charged object—the phallus—the more extensive network of historical and social relations the bourgeois family and the father's position within it entail.⁵ Fuss fetishizes identity in the sense that she imagines it only in terms of atomized parts of social life—a class-specific formation of the family and the processes of signification in the sphere of cultural representation. Her concepts of vision and the look participate in this economy of fetishization in that visibility is divorced from the *social* relations that make it possible and understood to be only a matter of *cultural* construction: “If subjects look differently,” she asserts, “it is only the enculturating mechanisms of the look that instantiate and regulate these differences in the first place” (736–37).

Like Butler's theory, her analysis is not aimed at claiming lesbian or gay identity as a resistant state of being in its own right, but instead sets out to queer-y the dominant sexual symbolic order by exposing the ways it is continually disrupted by the homospectatorial gaze. Heterosexuality is not an original or pure identity; its coherence is only secured by at once calling attention to and disavowing its “abject, interiorized, and ghostly other, homosexuality” (732). For her, too, identity is postmodern in its incoherence and social in its constructedness, but because it is consistently framed in terms of the individual psyche and its history, the subject for Fuss is ultimately an updated version of the bourgeois individual. This individual, moreover, constitutes the historical frame for the images of fashion photography that “tell us as much about the subject's current history as they do about her already shadowy prehistory, perhaps even more” (734). The “perhaps even more” is significant here because it is this individualized “prehistory,” a story of lost origins and mother-daughter bonds, that Fuss emphasizes. Indeed it constitutes the basis for the homospectatorial look. Although she insists that the lesbian looks coded by fashion photography “radically de-essentialize conventional notions of identity” (736), contradictorily, an essentially gendered and embodied spectatorial encounter between infant and mother anchors the “history” that constitutes the fashion text's foundational reference point. If history is localized in Butler's queer theory, then, it is even

more narrowly circumscribed in Fuss's reading of fashion ads, where it is reduced to an individual's presocial relationship to the mythic mother's face (722).

Locating the basis for identity in a space/time outside history—in memories of an archaic choric union between mother and child—has the effect of masquerading bourgeois individualism's universal subject—with all of the political baggage it carries—in postmodern drag. Like Butler, Fuss admits history makes a difference to meaning: “more work needs to be done on how spectators from different gendered, racial, ethnic, economic, national and historical backgrounds might appropriate or resist these images” (736). But the recognition of sexuality's differential historical context so late in her essay echoes the familiar liberal gesture. Premised on a notion of history as “background,” this assertion thematizes difference by encapsulating the subject in individualized cultural slots, while the social struggles over difference that foment the “restless operations of identity” remain safely out of view.

Teresa de Lauretis's essay “Film and the Visible,” originally presented at the conference *How Do I Look?: Queer Film and Video* (1991), shares many of the features of Butler's and Fuss's analyses. While she, too, draws upon psychoanalysis as well as a loosely Foucauldian analytic, her work is, I think, generally taken to be more “social” in its approach, and she will at times situate it as such against a more textual analysis. Her purported objective in this essay is indeed “not to do a textual analysis” but to “put into discourse” the terms of an autonomous form of lesbian sexuality and desire in relation to film (224). While there are films about lesbians that may offer positive images, she argues, they do not necessarily produce new ways of seeing or new inscriptions of the lesbian subject (224). De Lauretis presents Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* as an exemplary alternative because it offers spectators a new position for looking—the place of a woman who desires another woman. While the effort to articulate the dynamics of a specifically lesbian sexuality links de Lauretis's work with Fuss's essay, unlike Fuss, she renounces formulations of lesbian sexuality founded in the mother-child dyad. At the same time, for de Lauretis lesbian sexuality is neither contingent with heterosexual female sexuality nor independent of the oedipal fantasy structure.

However, the presuppositions on which these two assertions rest belie her antitextualist stance and link her “new subjectivity” with other fetishized queer identities in the post-structuralist strand of cultural studies.

De Lauretis reads McLaughlin’s film as a tale of two women who are lovers and image makers. One (Jo) literally makes movies, and the other (Agatha) does so more figuratively in the fantasies she fabricates about her lover. The film demonstrates the ways a pervasive heterosexuality structures the relations of looking for both women; at the same time, the two women’s butch-femme role playing flaunts its (in)congruence with heterosexual positions by marking these roles *as* performances. De Lauretis contends that this role playing is always at one remove from the heterosexual paradigm, and it is the space of this “remove” that constitutes for her the “excess” of the lesbian subject position. As in Butler’s similar argument about performative identities, however, lesbian excess is fundamentally and exclusively a matter of cultural representation. This partial frame of reference for the social is compounded by de Lauretis’s reading of Jo’s film-within-the-film as a lesbian revision of the psychoanalytic oedipal drama. Although she reads the interpolated film as a skewed rewriting of the primal scene from the perspective of a woman desiring another woman, de Lauretis’s endorsement of this origin story has the effect of equating generic lesbian identity with a very specific bourgeois construction, founded in highly individualized notions of fantasy, eroticism, scopophilia, and romance.

That the narrow limits of her conception of the subject are ultimately the effect of the historical position from which she is reading becomes clear in the audience discussion of her essay included in this collection. The first question from the audience addresses a gap in de Lauretis’s text—one might even call it an “excess”—that is, her erasure of the film’s treatment of racial difference. Her response to this question reveals the fascination with form that underlies de Lauretis’s way of reading. Although she may seem more “social” in her orientation, like Fuss and Butler, she too fetishizes meaning by cutting it off from the social and historical forces that make texts intelligible. In defense of her omission of any discussion of race, de Lauretis argues that she has “concluded that the film *intentionally focuses on other aspects of their*

relationship” [emphasis added] (“Film” 268). Despite her initial disclaimers to the contrary, meaning for de Lauretis here seems to be firmly rooted in the text. Indeed throughout the essay she defines the “new position of seeing” McLaughlin’s film offers the viewer by reference to the various textual devices that comprise it—the film’s reframing of the oedipal scenario, its structuring of the spectator’s look, its title, and its campy use of masquerade, cross-dressing, and Hollywood spectacle. The audience’s insistent return to the problem of racial difference can be read as resistance both to this formalist approach to visibility and to the generic lesbian subject it offers.

While de Lauretis insists that race “is not represented as an issue in this film” (“Film” 268), clearly for her audience this is not the case. Their questions suggest the need for another way of understanding meaning, not as textual but as historical—the effect of the ways of knowing that spectators/readers bring to a text, ways of making sense that are enabled and conditioned by their different social positions. For some viewers this film may not deal with Freud or Oedipus, show Agatha sharing a common fantasy with Jo, or any number of the things de Lauretis sees in it, but it may deal with a black Latina who is also a lesbian and a lawyer in love with a white woman. The “visibility” of these issues is not a matter of what is empirically “there” or of what the film intends, but of the frames of knowing that make certain meanings “seeable.” From this vantage point, a text’s very limited “dealing” or “not dealing” with a particular social category can be used to make available another possible telling of its tale, one that might begin to inquire into the historical limits of any particular construction of social reality.⁶ At the very least, the problem of Agatha as a Brazilian Latina pressures de Lauretis’s closing assertion that *She Must Be Seeing Things* “locates itself historically and politically in the North American lesbian community” (263).

In another essay, “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,”⁷ de Lauretis acknowledges that lesbian identity is affected by the operation of “interlocking systems of gender, sexual, racial, class and other, more local categories of social stratification” (148). However, the conception of the social hinted at here and the notion of community it entails are somewhat different from those offered above. For in this essay de Lauretis uses Audre Lorde’s

image of the “house of difference” (“our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference”) to define a social life that is not pluralistic and a community that is not confined to North America, but (in de Lauretis’s words) “at once global and local—global in its inclusive and macro-political strategies, and local in its specific, micro-political practices” (148). If taken seriously, the social and historical frame de Lauretis alludes to briefly here would radically recast the fetishized conception of identity that leads her to suggest that in order to address the issue of race we would need to “see a film made by or about lesbians of color” (269). But even in her allusion to a more systemic mode of reading the connection between sexuality and divisions of labor remains entirely invisible, an excess whose traces are hinted only in passing references to the commodity. What would it mean to understand the formation of queer identities in a social logic that did not suppress this other story?

While queer theorists generally have not elaborated the answer, two of de Lauretis’s brief remarks on commodification provide glimpses of this unexplored way of seeing. One of them appears in a fleeting comment on Jill Dolan’s contention that “desire is not necessarily a fixed, male-owned commodity, but can be exchanged, with a much different meaning, between women,” an assertion de Lauretis reads as either “the ultimate camp representation” or “rather disturbing. For unfortunately—or fortunately, as the case may be—commodity exchange does have the same meaning between women as between men by definition, that is, by Marx’s definition of the structure of capital” (“Indifference” 152). The other appears in her argument that the critique of heterosexuality in films like *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *The Color Purple* is “suppressed and rendered invisible by the film’s compliance with the apparatus of commercial cinema and its institutional drive to, precisely, commodity exchange” (“Indifference” 153). Both of these remarks suggest an order of (in)visibility that queer theory’s critique of heterosexuality does not explore. What is the connection between the ways commodity exchange renders certain social relations (in)visible and the ways of looking that structure heteronormativity or even queer theory? Do fetishized versions of identity in queer theory comply with the institutional drive to commodity exchange in the academy?

Queer Nationalism: The Avant-Garde Goes SHOPping

If academic queer theory for the most part ignores the relationship between sexuality and commodification, groups like Queer Nation do not. Founded in New York City in 1990 by a small group of activists frustrated by ACT-UP's exclusive focus on AIDS, Queer Nation has grown into a loosely organized collection of local chapters stretching from coast to coast.⁸ The list of affinity groups comprising Queer Nation is too long and too variable to list here; included among them are the Suburban Homosexual Outreach Program (SHOP), Queers Undertaking Exquisite and Symbolic Transformation (QUEST), and United Colors, which focuses on the experiences of Queers of color.⁹ Queer Nation is less committed to ACT-UP's strategies of direct action through civil disobedience than to creating awareness and increasing queer visibility. Often representing their tactics as explicitly postmodern, Queer Nation shares many of the presuppositions of queer theory: deconstructing the homo vs. hetero binary in favor of a more indeterminate sexual identity; targeting a pervasive heteronormativity by miming it with a campy inflection; and employing a performative politics that associates identity less with interiority than with the public spectacle of consumer culture.

The signifier "nation" signals a commitment to disrupting the often invisible links between nationhood and public sexual discourse as well as transforming the public spaces in which a (hetero)-sexualized national imaginary is constructed in people's everyday lives—in shopping malls, bars, advertising, and the media. In seizing the public space as a "zone of political pedagogy," Queer Nation, like ACT-UP, advances some useful ways of thinking about pedagogy as a public political practice.¹⁰ My concern here, however, is with how their antiassimilationist politics understands and makes use of the commodity as part of a campaign for gay visibility.

For Queer Nation, visibility is a crucial requirement if gays are to have a safe public existence. To this end, they reterritorialize various public spaces through an assortment of strategies like the policing of neighborhoods by Pink Panthers dressed in "Bash Back" T-shirts or Queer Nights Out and Kiss-Ins where groups of gay couples invade straight bars or other public spaces and scandalously make out (Berlant and Freeman 160–63). In its most

“postmodern moments,” Queer Nation uses the hyperspaces of commodity consumption as sites for political intervention. Queer Nation is not interested in marketing positive images of gays and lesbians so much as inhabiting and subverting consumer pleasure in commodities in order to “reveal to the consumer desires he/she didn’t know he/she had” (Berlant and Freeman 164). Tactics like producing Queer Bart Simpson T-shirts or rewriting the trademarks of corporations that appropriate gay street styles (changing the “p” in GAP ads to “y”) are meant to demonstrate “that the commodity is a central means by which individuals tap into the collective experience of public desire” and to disrupt the heterosexual presupposition on which that desire rests (Berlant and Freeman 164). To this end, the Queer Shopping Network of New York and the Suburban Homosexual Outreach Program of San Francisco (SHOP) stage mall visibility actions. By parading into suburban shopping spaces dressed in full gay regalia, holding hands or handing out flyers, they insert gay spectacle into the centers of straight consumption. Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman argue that the queer mall spectacle addresses “the consumer’s own ‘perverse’ desire to experience a different body and offers *itself* as the most stylish of the many attitudes on sale at the mall” (164).

If in postmodern consumer culture the commodity is a central means by which desire is organized, how are Queer Nation’s visibility actions disrupting this process? I want to suggest that, while Queer Nation’s tactics attend to the commodity, the framework in which the commodity is understood is similar to the informing framework of much queer theory. It is, in short, a cultural one in which the commodity is reduced to an ideological icon. Like queer theory, Queer Nation tends to focus so exclusively on the construction of meanings, on forging an oppositional practice that “disrupts the *semiotic* boundaries between gay and straight” (Berlant and Freeman 168; emphasis added), that social change is reduced to the arena of cultural representation. Condensed into a cultural signifier, the commodity remains securely fetishized. Infusing consumer space with a gay sensibility may queer-y commodities, but “making queer good by making goods queer” (Berlant and Freeman 168) is hardly antiassimilationist politics! If the aim of mall visibility actions is to make the pleasures of consumption

available to gays too and to commodify queer identity as “the most stylish of the many attitudes on sale at the mall,” then inclusion seems to be precisely the point. Disclosing the invisible heterosexual meanings invested in commodities, I am suggesting, is a very limited strategy of resistance, one that ultimately nourishes the commodity’s gravitation toward the new, the exotic, the spectacular.

As in queer theory, many of the activities of Queer Nation take visibility at face value and in so doing short-circuit the historicity of visibility concealed in the logic of the commodity. In *Capital*, Marx demonstrates that this sort of “oversight” is very much a part of the commodity’s secret and its magic: “A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (163). Marx’s “analysis” of the commodity explains this “first sight” as a fiction, not in the sense that it is false or merely a copy of a copy but in the sense that it confuses the seeable with the visible. The visible for Marx is not an empirical but a historical effect. Indeed, it might be said that much of Marx’s critique of the commodity redefines the nature of vision by establishing the connection between visibility and history.¹¹ Marx demonstrates that the value of a commodity is material, not in the sense of its being made of physical matter but in the sense that it is socially produced through human labor and the extraction of surplus value in exchange. Although the value of commodities is materially embodied in them, it is not visible in the objects themselves as a physical property. The illusion that value resides in objects rather than in the social relations between individuals and objects Marx calls commodity fetishism. When the commodity is fetishized, the labor that has gone into its production is rendered invisible. Commodity fetishism entails the misrecognition of a structural effect as an immediate property of one of its elements, as if this property belonged to it outside of its relation to other elements (Žižek 24). This fetishizing is enhanced and encouraged under late capitalism, when the spheres of commodity production and consumption are so often widely separated.

Any argument for the continued pertinence of Marx’s theory of the commodity risks being misread as a reductive “return” to orthodox marxism. While a more extensive engagement with

contemporary rewritings of Marxian commodity theory, Baudrillard especially, is necessary to forestall such a misreading, it is beyond the scope of this essay. Certainly Marx was not theorizing commodity fetishism from the vantage point of late capitalism's flexible production and burgeoning information technologies and their effects on identities and cultures. Nonetheless, because his reading of the commodity invites us to begin by seeing consciousness, state, and political economy as interlinked historical and material forces by which social life is made and remade, it is to my mind a more politically useful critical framework for understanding and combatting the commodification of identities than a political economy of the sign. When the commodity is dealt with merely as a matter of signification, meaning, or identities, only one of the elements of its production—the process of image-making it relies on—is made visible. The exploitation of human labor on which the commodity's appearance as an object depends remains out of sight. Changing the Bart Simpson logo on a T-shirt to "Queer Bart" may disrupt normative conceptions of sexuality that infuse the circulation of commodities in consumer culture, but it offers a very limited view of the social relations commodities rely on, and to this extent it reinforces their fetishization.

Queer-y-ing the Avant-Garde

Some of the problems in queer theory and politics I address above are reminiscent of the contradictions that have punctuated the history of the avant-garde in the West over the past hundred years. It is a history worth examining because the modes of reading in cultural studies and queer intellectual activity now are in the process of repeating it. The genealogy of the concept of the avant-garde in radical political thought dates from the 1790s when it signalled the progressive romantic notion of art as an instrument for social revolution (Calinescu). Early 20th-century avant-garde movements, provoked by the enormous social upheavals of the First World War and the Revolution of 1917, promoted a critical rejection of bourgeois culture. Like the aesthetes at the turn of the 20th century, the avant-garde reacted to the increasing fragmentation of social life in industrialized society. But while aestheticism

responded to the commercialization of art and its separation from life by substituting reflexive exploration of its own processes of creation for social relevance, the avant-garde attempted to reintegrate art into meaningful human activity by leading it back to social praxis (Burger). As Raymond Williams has pointed out, there were innumerable variations on avant-garde complaints against the bourgeoisie—often articulating quite antithetical political positions—depending on the social and political structures of the countries in which these movements were active (54). Despite these variations, like queer theory and activism, avant-garde movements—among them Dada, Surrealism, Italian Futurism, the German Bauhaus, and Russian Constructionism—attacked the philosophical and political assumptions presupposed in the reigning bourgeois realist conceptions of representation and visibility. Like Queer Nation, Dada was a broad and disparate movement, crossing national boundaries as well as the ideological divisions between art, politics, and daily life. It, too, found expression in a variety of media: poetry, performance, painting, the cinema, and montage. Attacking the cultural, political, and moral values on which the dominant social order relied, it set out to “shock the bourgeoisie” (Plant 40–41). The Surrealists, many of whom had participated in the Dadaist movement in France, rejected Dada’s shock tactics and its purely negative approach, and aimed instead to try to make use of Freud’s theory of the unconscious in order to unleash the pleasures trapped in experience and unfulfilled by a social system dependent on rationality and the accumulation of capital (Plant 49). Convinced that the union of art and life, of the individual and the world, was “possible only with the end of capitalism and the dawn of a new ludic age,” nonetheless, like other avant-garde movements, their experiments were pursued mainly in the cultural domain (Plant 52).

The Situationist International movement that surfaced in France in the late fifties and lasted through 1972 is an interesting example of a political project that attempted to reclaim the revolutionary potential of the avant-garde and supersede the limitations of its cultural politics. The Situationists acknowledged the historical importance of their avant-garde antecedents’ efforts as an effective means of struggle against the bourgeoisie, but were also critical of their failure to develop that spirit of revolt into a coherent cri-

tique. Consequently, they set out to transcend the distinction between revolutionary politics and cultural criticism once and for all, and in some respects went further than their predecessors in doing so (Plant 55–56).¹² Several of their strategies for disrupting the spectacular organization of everyday life in commodity culture share much in common with those of queer activism.

The tactic of *detournement*, for instance, is one—that is, the rearrangement of a preexisting text like an advertisement to form a new and critical ensemble. The Situationist critique of consumer society, political agitation in commodity culture, and efforts to form an international collective had both a revolutionary and a ludic dimension. Sorting out the contradictions in their vision and accounting for the failures in their attempt to revamp the avant-garde might be a useful project for queer intellectuals to pursue and learn from.

Historically, the dissolution of the more revolutionary aspirations and activities of the early avant-garde movements cannot be separated from political forces like Stalinism and Nazism that were responsible for the suppression of their potential oppositional force by the mid-20th century. But their critical edge was also blunted by their own participation in the increasing commodification of social life by retreating to cultural experimentation as their principal political forum. That the term “avant-garde” now connotes primarily, even exclusively, artistic innovation is in this regard symptomatic. Seen from this vantage point, the distinction between the direction the avant-garde finally pursued and aestheticism seems less dramatic—as does the distinction in contemporary theory between post-structuralism’s fixation on representation and more recent formulations of social postmodernism. Many of the aesthetic features of the avant-garde reverberate in this more worldly “social postmodernism”: a tendency toward formalist modes of reading, a focus on performance and aesthetic experimentation, an idealist retreat to mythic/psychic spirituality, and the disparity between a professed agenda for broad social change and a practice focused exclusively on cultural politics. One way to begin to understand this gravitation toward cultural politics in the history of the avant-garde is to consider it in relation to the more general aestheticization of everyday life in consumer capitalism.

At the same time that oppositional intellectuals struggle against the separation of art from daily life, capitalism's need for expanding markets has in its own way promoted the integration of art and life—but in accordance with the requirements of commodity exchange. The aestheticization of daily life is one consequence of this process. By “the aestheticization of daily life,” I mean the intensified integration of cultural and commodity production under late capitalism by way of the rapid flow of images and signs that saturate myriad everyday activities, continuously working and reworking desires by inviting them to take the forms dictated by the commodity market. Advertising epitomizes this process and is its primary promoter. Along with computer technology, advertising permeates the fabric of daily life with an infinity of visual spectacles, codes, signs, and information bits. In so doing it has helped erase the boundary between the real and the image, an insertion of artifice into the heart of reality that Baudrillard has coined “simulation.”

One effect of the aestheticization of daily life in industrial capitalism is that the social relations cultural production depends on are even further mystified. The aestheticization of everyday life encourages the pursuit of new tastes and sensations as pleasures in themselves while concealing or backgrounding the labor that has gone into making them possible. In keeping with the aesthetic emphasis on cultural forms, “style” becomes an increasingly crucial marker of social value and identity. While the term has a more restricted sociological meaning in reference to specific status groups, “lifestyle” as a way of making sense of social relations crystallized in the 1980s in the United States as new forms of middle-class professionalism became the focal point for heightened involvement in consumption and the promotion of cosmopolitanism (Clarke 67–68).¹³ The concept of identity as “lifestyle” serves to manipulate a system of equivalences that structures the connection between the economic functions of the new middle class and their cultural formation (Clarke 68). The economic re-making of the middle class depends on the rising significance of the sphere of circulation and consumption and the invisible though persistent extraction of surplus value through exploited human labor. Although their cultural formation is increasingly flexible, “middle-class identities” continue to be organized by gen-

der and racial hierarchies as well as by a residual individualism. "Lifestyle" obscures these social hierarchies by promoting individuality and self-expression but also a more porous conception of the self as a "fashioned" identity. Advertising, especially, champions a highly coded self-consciousness of the stylized construction of almost every aspect of one's everyday life: one's body, clothes, speech, leisure activities, eating, drinking, and sexual preferences. All are regarded as indicators of individuality and style, and all can be acquired with a few purchases (Featherstone and Goldman). Reconfiguring identities in terms of "lifestyles" serves in some ways, then, as a linchpin between the coherent individual and a more porous postmodern one. "Lifestyle" consumer culture promotes a way of thinking about identity as malleable because open to more and more consumer choices rather than shaped by moral codes or rules. In this way, "lifestyle" identities can seem to endorse the breakup of old hierarchies in favor of the rights of individuals to enjoy new pleasures without moral censure. While the coherent individual has not been displaced, increasingly new urban lifestyles promise a decentering of identity by way of consumer practices which announce that styles of life that can be purchased in clothes, leisure activities, household items, and bodily dispositions can all dissolve fixed status groups. Concern with the stylization of life suggests that practices of consumption are not merely a matter of economic exchange but also affect the formation of sensibilities and tastes that in turn support more flexible subjectivities. At the same time, the capacity for hyperconsumption promoted by appeals to lifestyle as well as the constituent features of various "lifestyles" are class specific. For example, in the eighties in the United States, the class-boundedness of stylization became evident in the polarization of the mass market into "upscale" and "downscale," as middle-class consumers scrambled to shore up symbolic capital through stylized marks of distinction: shopping at Bloomingdales or Neiman Marcus, as opposed to K-Mart; buying imported or chic brand name foods (Becks or Corona, rather than Miller and Budweiser) or appliances (Kitchen Aid or Braun, vs. Sears' Kenmore (Ehrenreich 228).

Aestheticization in consumer culture is supported by philosophies of the subject in postmodern theory that, for all of their

“social” dimensions, nonetheless pose art—not social change—as the goal of a new ethics. In one of his last interviews, for instance, Michel Foucault protests,

But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an object, but not our life? . . . From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art (“Ethics” 236–37).

The aestheticized technology of the self here, and in Foucault's later writings generally, is taken straight from Nietzsche's exhortation to “give style to one's character—a great and rare art!” (290).¹⁴ Queer theory and activism's conception of identities as performative significations anchored in individual psychic histories is not very far from this notion of identity as self-fashioning. For here, too, visibility is theatrical, a spectacle that shows up the always precarious stylization of identity. Foucault's equation of lamp, house, and life as “created” objects elides the different social relations that go into their making by securing them in individual creation. But the answer to why everyone's life couldn't become a work of art could take us somewhere else, to another story, one that makes visible the contradictory social relations the aestheticization of social life conceals. For even as the regime of simulation invites us to conflate style and life, some people's lives are not very artful or stylish, circumscribed as they are by limited access to social resources. How might the woman earning \$50 a week for 60 hours of work operating a sewing machine in a sweat shop in the South Bronx or the exhausted migrant worker in the San Joaquin Valley harvesting tomatoes for 12 hours a day at \$2 an hour make their lives an art? How artful was the life of Venus Xtravaganza, forced to support herself as a prostitute until she was murdered? Unless “art” is so reunderstood as to be disconnected from individual creation or choice and linked to a strategy for changing the conditions that allow so many to suffer an exploited existence, making one's life an art is an intelligible possibility only for the leisured class and their new yuppie heirs. When queer theory reconfigures gender identity as a “style of the flesh” (*Gender* 139), to use Judith Butler's

phrasing, or as “the most stylish of the many attitudes on sale in the mall” (Berlant and Freeman 167), it is taking part in the post-modern aestheticization of daily life.

In the Life(style): Postmodern (Homo)sexual Subjects

It is not accidental that homosexuals have been most conspicuous in the primary domains of the spectacle: fashion and entertainment. In 1993 no fewer than five national straight news and fashion magazines carried positive cover stories on lesbians and gays. One of the most notable among them was the cover of *New York Magazine*'s May 1993 issue, which featured a dashing seductive close-up of k. d. lang dressed in drag next to the words “Lesbian Chic: The Bold, Brave World of Gay Women.” Every imaginable facet of gay and lesbian life—drag, transsexuality, gay teens, gay parents—has been featured on daytime talk shows. *The New York Times*' recently inaugurated “Styles of the Times” section now includes along with the engagement and marriage announcements regular features on gay and lesbian issues, here explicitly figured as one of many life “styles.” The drag queens Ru Paul and Lady Bunny have both been profiled there, and in 1993 the front page of the section carried full-page stories on the Harlem balls and gay youth.

Gays and lesbians have been more visible than ever in arts and entertainment, despite the industry's still deeply entrenched investment in heteronormativity. Tony Kushner's “joyously, unapologetically, fabulously gay” play, *Angels in America*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1993 and was nominated for nine Tony Awards. The list of commercial film and video productions on gay subjects grows monthly and includes such notables as Neil Jordan's transvestite love story, *The Crying Game*; Sally Potter's film version of Virginia Woolf's transsexual, *Orlando*; Jonathan Demme's AIDS courtroom drama, *Philadelphia*; Barbara Streisand's film production of Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*; and HBO's adaptation of Randy Shilts's AIDS exposé, *And the Band Played On*. While the movie industry still fears a subject it wouldn't touch 5 years ago, it goes where the money is, and so far in the nineties “gay” is becoming a warmer if not a hot commodity.

Nowhere is gay more in vogue than in fashion, where homoerotic imagery is the epitome of postmodern chic. Magazines firmly situated in the middle-class mainstream like *Details*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, or *Mademoiselle* have all recently carried stories addressing some aspect of gay life and/as fashion, and it is here that gay and lesbian visibility blurs readily into a queer gender-bending aesthetic. The June 1993 issue of *Details*, for example, featured a story on couples that included one gay and one lesbian couple; another story offered a gay man's perspective on lifting the ban on gays in the military (including a graphic account of his one-night-stand with a marine who is "not gay") and a favorable review by gay novelist David Leavitt of Michelangelo Signorile's book *Queer in America*. The first volume of *Esquire's* new fashion magazine, *Esquire Gentleman*, carried a feature on "The Gay Factor in Fashion" that declared "Just about everyone dresses a little gay these days. . . . It is now a marketing given that gay sensibility sells to both gay and straight" (Martin 140). *Esquire's* regular June 1993 issue included a review of Potter's *Orlando* as well as a short story by Lynn Darling entitled "Single White Male Seeks Clue."

Darling's story is a symptomatic example of the incorporation of a queer aesthetic into the gender structure of postmodern patriarchy. "It's not easy to be the scion of a dying WASP culture," the cover blurb announces, "when women have more confidence, gay men have more style, and everyone seems to have the right to be angry with you." This is a tale of young urban professional manhood in crisis, a crisis managed through nostalgic detours into the "now vanished set of certainties" preserved in the world of boxing. As the story draws to a close, John Talbot, the single white male of the title, and his girlfriend look out of their hotel room and find in their view a gay couple "dry-humping" on a penthouse roof right below them. "Talbot was tempted to say something snide, but he checked himself. In fact, it was really sweet, he decided, and in his happiness he saw them suddenly as fellow travellers in the community of desire" (Darling 104). Talbot's inclusion of gays in the diverse community of "fellow travellers" offers an interesting rearticulation of Cold War moral and political discourses that once made all homosexuals out to be communists. Here, gays are included in an elastic community of pleasure seekers and a tentatively more pliant heterosexual sex-gender system.

As Talbot's story suggests, the once-rigid links between sex, gender, and sexual desire that the invisible heterosexual matrix so firmly secured in bourgeois culture have become more flexible as the gendered divisions of labor among the middle class in industrialized countries have shifted. While these more accommodating gender codes are not pervasive, they have begun to take hold among the young urban middle class particularly. There are hints, for instance, that wearing a skirt, a fashion choice once absolutely taboo for men because it signified femaleness and femininity, is now more allowed because the gender system's heteronormative regime is loosening. The designers Betsy Johnson, Matsuda, Donna Karan, and Jean Paul Gaultier all have featured skirts on men in their spring and fall shows for the last few years. Some rock stars (among them Axl Rose of *Guns N Roses*) have worn skirts on stage. But skirts for men are also infiltrating more mundane culture. The fashion pages of my conservative local newspaper features sarongs for men, and my 15-year-old daughter, Kate, reports that at the 2-week co-ed camp she attended in the summer of 1993 at least one of the male counsellors wore a mid-calf khaki skirt almost every day.

As middle-class women have been drawn into the professional work force to occupy positions once reserved for men, many of them are now literally "wearing the pants" in the family, often as single heads of household, many of them lesbians and/or mothers. The "new man," like Talbot, has managed the crisis of "not having a clue" where he fits anymore by relinquishing many of the former markers of machismo: he expects women of his class to work outside the home and professes to support their professional ambitions, he "helps out" with the housework and the kids, boasts one or two gay friends, may occasionally wear pink, and perhaps even sports an earring. Men of Talbot's class might also read magazines like *GQ* or *Esquire*, where the notion of the "gender fuck" that queer activists and theorists have presented as subversive cultural critique circulates as radical chic—in essays like David Kamp's piece "The Straight Queer" detailing the appropriation of gay codes by hip heteros or in spoofs like "Viva Straight Camp" that parody ultra straight gender codes by showing up their constructedness (Powers).

Much like queer theory, the appropriation of gay cultural

codes in the cosmopolitan revamping of gender displays the arbitrariness of bourgeois patriarchy's gender system and helps to reconfigure it in a more postmodern mode, where the links between gender and sexuality are looser, where homosexuals are welcome, even constituting the vanguard, and where the appropriation of their parody of authentic sex and gender identities is quite compatible with the aestheticization of everyday life into postmodern lifestyles. In itself, of course, this limited assimilation of gays into mainstream middle-class culture does not disrupt postmodern patriarchy and its intersection with capitalism; indeed, it is in some ways quite integral to it.

Because patriarchy has become a buzzword in some postmodern/queer circles, I should explain what I mean by it here. I understand patriarchy to be a concept that explains the systematic gendered organization of all areas of social life—economic, political, and ideological—such that more social resources, power, and value accrue to men as a group at the expense of women as a group. In this sense, patriarchy is social, not merely cultural, and the privilege it accords some at the expense of others affects more than the making of meaning. Many post-structuralist critiques rightly target “the notion that the oppression of women has some singular form discernible in the universal or hegemonic structure of patriarchy or masculine domination” and remind us that any sort of monolithic theory of *the* patriarchy fails to account for the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists (Butler, *Gender* 3). But often they also reduce patriarchy to contingent cultural forms or dismiss it as a viable concept altogether. Like capitalism, patriarchy is a politically urgent concept because it allows us to analyze and explain social hierarchies by which gender, sexuality, and their racial articulations are organized. Patriarchy is a variable and historical social totality in that its particular forms for organizing social relations like work, citizenship, reproduction, ownership, pleasure, or identity have had a persistent effect on heterogendered¹⁵ structures in dominance at the same time these structures vary and are the sites of social struggle.

Some patriarchal formations entail kinship alliances ruled by fathers, although in industrialized countries this form of patriarchy has been unevenly and gradually displaced as the ruling para-

digm by bourgeois patriarchy. In bourgeois patriarchy, kinship alliances are subordinate to a social organization split between public wage economy and unpaid domestic production, both regulated by the ideology of possessive individualism. In advanced capitalist countries, public or postmodern patriarchy has recently begun to emerge as the prevailing form. It is characterized by the hyperdevelopment of consumption and the joint wage earner family, the relative transfer of power from husbands to professionals in the welfare state, the rise of single-mother headed and other alternative households, and sexualized consumerism (Ferguson 110). While any one patriarchal formation may dominate, it often coexists with other contesting or residual forms. Policy debates like the current controversy over lifting the ban on gays in the U.S. military as well as cultural narratives of various sorts (films like *A Few Good Men*, *Jungle Fever*, or *The Firm*, for instance) can be read as articulations of the struggle between bourgeois patriarchal formations and their accompanying moral ideologies and postmodern patriarchy's newer forms of family, gender, sexuality, and work.

Finally, patriarchy is differential. This means that while all women as a group are positioned the same (as subordinate or other) in relation to men, they are positioned differently in relation to each other and at times in relation to men in subaltern groups. Some women have access to resources—a professional job, an urban condo, a cleaning lady, a vacation home, a fancy car—that are only possible because of the work of other women and men who do not have these resources. Because patriarchy functions in concert with a racial system of white supremacy, disproportionate numbers of people of color, men and women alike, have historically occupied these exploited, underresourced social positions. That more women than men fill the ranks of the impoverished speaks loudly to the ways class exploitation is reinforced by patriarchal structures. Similarly, some men have more patriarchal power than others, sometimes power over and at the expense of other men. This difference means that not all men benefit the same from patriarchy. Because the division of labor in general is racialized at the same time race is not necessarily congruent with class, the cultural capital people of color might gain on entry into any class can be canceled out or undermined by the operations of racism. Consequently, the white gay psychiatrist or lawyer is not in the same

patriarchal position as his white straight colleagues nor is he in the same patriarchal position as a black gay man of the same class. Some women, lesbians among them, can claim patriarchal power over other women and men by virtue of their institutional privilege. For instance, women, lesbians included, in administrative or managerial positions can make use of their institutional positions to wield power over men and other women who work for them or are affected by the policies they draft.

But even women who benefit from patriarchy in some areas of their lives are disadvantaged in a society that systematically accords men power over women. The pervasiveness of rape and wife battering across classes and races and the general invisibility of lesbians in the culture demonstrate the systematic persistence of patriarchy despite the claims of a postmodern cosmopolitanism that gender hierarchies no longer operate or are readily subverted.

In positing male and female as distinct and opposite sexes that are naturally attracted to one another, heterosexuality is integral to patriarchy. Woman's position as subordinate other, as (sexual) property, and as exploited laborer depends on a heterosexual matrix in which woman is taken to be man's opposite; his control over social resources, his clear thinking, strength, and sexual prowess depend on her being less able, less rational, and never virile. As a pervasive institution within other institutions (state, education, church, media), heterosexuality helps guarantee patriarchal regulation of women's bodies, labor, and desires. Queer critiques of heterosexuality have often not acknowledged—in fact, they often disavow—the relationship between heterosexuality and patriarchy. But the struggles of lesbians in groups like Queer Nation and other gay political organizations are testimony that gender hierarchies persist between men and women even when both are fighting against heterosexuality as a regime of power (Maggenti).

The gender flexibility of postmodern patriarchy is pernicious because it casts the illusion that patriarchy has disappeared. But behind this facade corporate interests are delighting in the discovery of new markets. Among the most promising are gays and lesbians in the new professional/managerial class. Among them are "lifestyle lesbians" like the Bay area vice president of a lesbian-owned business group who announced, "Here I am, this funny,

warm person that you like and I happen to be a lesbian. I am bourgeois. I have a house in the suburbs. I drive a Saab" (Stewart 56). Given the increased "visibility" of this sort of gay consumer, "tolerance of gays makes sense" (Tobias). Increasingly marketers of mainstream products from books to beer are aiming ads specifically at gay men and lesbians; *Fortune* magazine contends "it's a wonderful market niche, the only question is how to reach it" (Stewart). Reaching it has so far involved manufacturing the image of a certain class-specific lesbian and gay consumer population. "Visibility is what it is all about," says David Ehrlich, of *Overlooked Opinions* (Gluckman and Reed 16). These stereotypes of wealthy free-spending gay consumers play well with advertisers and are useful to corporations because they make the gay market seem potentially lucrative; they cultivate a narrow but widely accepted definition of gay identity as a marketing tool and help to integrate gay people as gay people into a new marketing niche (Gluckman and Reed 17, 18). But if gay visibility is a good business prospect, as some companies argue, the question gay critics need to ask is "for whom?" Who profits from these new markets?

Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Commodification structures much more than the exchange of goods on the market; it affects even as it depends on the knowledges that mediate what and how we see. The commodification of gay styles and identities in the corporate and academic marketplaces is integrally related to the formation of a postmodern gay/queer subjectivity, ambivalently gender coded and in some instances flagrantly repudiating traditional, hetero and homo bourgeois culture. Nonetheless, as I have been arguing, to a great extent the construction of a new "homosexual/queer spectacle" perpetuates a class-specific perspective that keeps invisible the capitalist divisions of labor that organize sexuality and in particular lesbian, gay, queer lives. In so doing queer spectacles often participate in a long history of class-regulated visibility.¹⁶ Beginning around the mid-19th century, the bourgeoisie mediated their experience of the working class through spatial as well as cultural/ideological arrangements. The erection of physical barriers—sub-

way and rail construction and the siting of retail and residential districts—structured the physical arrangement of the city so as to foreclose the trauma of seeing the laboring classes (Kester 73). This physical regulation of class visibility was also compounded by the consolidation of a characteristically “bourgeois” mode of perception through an array of knowledges, the philosophic and aesthetic chief among them. The notion of an autonomous aesthetic perception, first developed by 18th-century philosophers (Kant, Hume, Shaftsbury), whereby perceived objects are abstracted from the social context of their creation, provided the foundation for a way of seeing that has dominated modern culture and aesthetics through the late 20th century (Kester 74). This mode of perception reinforces and is indeed historically necessary to commodity exchange and comes to function as a “phenomenological matrix” through which the bourgeoisie confront an array of daily experiences through modes of seeing that erase the differently valued divisions of labor that organize visibility (Kester 75). In late 20th-century “post-industrial” societies like the United States, the (in)visibility of class divisions continues to be spatially regulated by urban planning, but it is also reinforced by changes in first world relations of production as industry has been increasingly consigned to sites in “developing countries” outside the United States. Capital has not been significantly dispersed or democratized in “first world” economies as a result, simply transferred to more profitable sectors (the so-called “tertiary” or service sectors, banking, finance, pension funds, etc.) (Evans 43). The escalating domination of the ideological—the proliferation of information technologies, media images, codes—in post-industrial cultures has helped to reconfigure bourgeois modes of perception in first world populations, producing subjects who are more differentiated and less likely to experience capitalism collectively through production relations and more likely to experience it through relations of consumption. As a result, the neat subject-object split of Kantian aesthetics has been troubled and to some degree displaced, even as the invisibility of social relations of labor in corporate and intellectual commodity spectacles persists.

Gay-friendly corporations like Levi-Strauss, for example, reinforce the gender-flexible subjects their advertising campaigns promote through gay window dressing strategies by way of public

relations programs that boast of their progressive corporate policies for lesbians and gays. Levi's gives health insurance benefits to unmarried domestic partners of their employees, has created a supportive environment for employees who test HIV⁺, and has a Lesbian and Gay Employees Association. Members of this association prepared a video for the company to use in its diversity training in which they, their parents, and their managers openly discuss their relationships (Stewart 50). But Levi's workers in the sweatshops of Saipan who live in cramped and crowded barracks and earn as little as \$2.15 an hour remain largely invisible. Although Levi's ended its contracts last year with the island's largest clothes maker after an investigation by the company found evidence of unsatisfactory treatment of workers in his factories, they still continue to make shirts at five plants there (Shenon). Meanwhile, back in the United States, Levi's closed its San Antonio plant in 1990, laying off 1,150 workers, 92% of them Latino and 86% of them women, and moved its operations to the Caribbean, where it can pay laborers \$3.80 a day, roughly half the average hourly wage of the San Antonio workforce (Martinez 22). Displaying the gay-friendly policies of "progressive" U.S. corporations often deflects attention from the exploitative international division of labor they depend on in the interests of the company's bottom line—profits.¹⁷

The formation of a gay/queer imaginary in both corporate and academic circles also rests on the suppression of class analysis. There have been all too few books that treat the ways gay history and culture has been stratified along class lines.¹⁸ With several notable exceptions, studies of the relationship between homosexuality and capitalism are remarkably sparse, and extended analyses of lesbian and gay poverty are almost nonexistent.¹⁹ To ask the more pointed question of how the achievement of lesbian and gay visibility by some rests on the invisible labor of others is to expose the unspeakable underside of queer critique.

The consolidation of the professional middle class during the 1980s brought with it an array of social contradictions. The recruitment of more and more women into the workforce bolstered the legitimation of both the professional "New Woman" and of academic feminism. The increasing, albeit uneven and complicated, investiture of lesbians and gays into new forms of sexual citizenship and the relative growth of academic lesbian and gay studies

accompanied and in some ways were enabled by these changes. But these were also decades when the chasm between the very rich and the very poor widened and poverty became more than ever feminized. As the 1990s began, a total of 33 million people in the United States—more than 13.5% of the population—were officially living in poverty. While estimates of the numbers of people who are homosexual are notoriously unreliable (ranging from the 1993 Batelle Human Research Center's 1.1% to the 1948 Kinsey Report's 10%), assuming that somewhere between 1% and 10% of the population are homosexual, it would be fair to say that there are between 1.65 and 3.3 million impoverished lesbians and gay men in the United States today.²⁰

Most lesbians are leading less glamorous lives than their chic commodity images suggest, and poor lesbians of color are the most invisible and worst off. While the wage gap between women and men has supposedly narrowed in the eighties—in 1990, women earned 72% of what men did—much of this change is due to a drop in men's earnings, while the incomes of women have stayed the same (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991). Furthermore, the bulk of necessary work at home, by some estimates 70%, is still left up to women. In other words, women as a group do more than half of all the work in this country and make less than half of what men do (Abelda et al. 52). Of all poor people over 18, 63% are women, with 53% of poor families headed by women (Maciones 282). While there is no reliable data available on the numbers of poor who are lesbian or gay, the racialized and gendered division of labor suggests that there are more lesbians than gay men living in poverty and proportionately more of them are people of color.²¹

Redressing gay invisibility by promoting images of a seamlessly middle-class gay consumer or by inviting us to see queer identities only in terms of style, textuality, or performative play helps produce imaginary gay/queer subjects that keep invisible the divisions of wealth and labor that these images and knowledges depend on. These commodified perspectives blot from view lesbians, gays, queers who are manual workers, sex workers, unemployed, and imprisoned. About a quarter to a half million homosexual and bisexual youths are thrown out of their homes and subjected to prostitution and violence in the streets (Galst). Severing queer and homo sexuality from the operations of class keeps these lives from view, forecloses consideration of the ways sexual

identities are complicated by the priorities imposed by impoverishment, and keeps a queer political agenda from working collectively to address the needs of many whose historical situation is defined in terms of counter-dominant sexual practices. That so little work has been done in the academy, even within lesbian and gay studies, to address these populations and the invisible social relations that maintain their marginality and exploitation speaks loudly to the ways a class-specific “bourgeois (homosexual/queer) imaginary” structures our knowledge of sexual identity, pleasure, and emancipation.

Critique-al Visibility

Critique is a political practice and a mode of reading that establishes the intimate links between the visible and the historical by taking as its starting point a systemic understanding of the social. A radical critique of sexuality understands that the visibility of any particular construction of sexuality or sexual identity is historical in that it is shaped by an ensemble of social arrangements. As a way of seeing sexuality, critique insists on making connections between the emergence of a discourse or identity in industrialized social formations and the international division of labor, between sexy commodity images and labor, the spectacle and the sweatshop, style and class. This sort of critique-al intervention into heterosexuality, therefore, does not see sexuality as just the effect of cultural or discursive practice, merely the product of ideology or institutions, but as a regulatory apparatus that spans the organization of social life in the modern world and that works in concert with other social totalities—capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism.

As a political practice, critique acknowledges the importance of “reading” to political activism. Understood broadly as all of those ways of making sense that enable one to be conscious, to be literate in the culture’s codes and so to be capable of acting meaningfully in the world, reading is an activity essential to social life. Although they often go unacknowledged, modes of reading are necessary to political activism. Paying attention to how we read and considering its implications and consequences is a key component of any oppositional political work. To ignore this crucial di-

mension of social struggle is to risk reproducing the very conditions we seek to change. The ways of making sense available in any historical time will tend to support the prevailing social order, but they are also contested. A critical politics joins in and foments this contest not just to reframe how we interpret the world but in order to change it. It is radical in the sense that it does not settle just for a change in the style or form of commodities but demands a change in the invisible social relations that make them possible.

I have tried to show that this way of reading is not just a matter of widening the scope of what we see, but of starting from a different place in how we see. Understanding social life to be “at once global and local” requires that we analyze what presents itself on first sight as obvious in order to show its connection to social structures that often exploit and oppress. While local situations (the commodification of pleasure in suburban malls, for instance) are necessary and important places to disrupt heteronormativity, they do not exist on their own, and we read them as such only at a cost. I am suggesting that a radical sexual politics that is going to be, in Butler’s words, “effectively disruptive, truly troubling” needs a way of explaining how the sexual identities we can see are systematically organized. We need a way of understanding visibility that acknowledges both the local situations in which sexuality is made intelligible as well as the ties that bind knowledge and power to commodity production, consumption, and exchange.

The critical way of reading I am proposing in this essay is indeed queer. If it is not very well received now in the academy or in activist circles—and it is not—that may be because in challenging the postmodern fetishizing of social life into discourse, culture, or local contexts, critique puts into crisis the investments of middle-class academics and professionals, queers among us, in the current social order. For this reason it is undoubtedly a risk. Perhaps it is also our best provisional answer to the question, “What is to be done?”

Notes

1. For sharing her many resources and ideas and for her strong readings of various drafts of this essay, I want to thank Chrys Ingraham. I am also indebted to the students in graduate courses I taught in 1993 on the topics of Lesbian and

Gay Theory and Critique of Commodity Culture at the State University of New York at Albany. Their work inspired and challenged me, and offered a critical forum for developing many of the arguments I present here.

2. For an astute analysis of the commodification of gay and lesbian culture, see Gluckman and Reed.

3. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler qualifies her earlier position by asserting that drag may not always be unproblematically subversive. Nonetheless, due to the theatrical gender trouble that drag incites, it remains for her a commendable practice, perhaps the only viable form of political resistance to heterosexuality's regulatory power.

4. For a more detailed critique of Foucault's concept of discursive practice, see Hennessy, 37–46.

5. While the concept of the fetish has been taken up in some recent work in cultural theory (a few of the many recent examples include Adams, Apter, Findlay, and Mercer), the relationship between Freud's theory of the fetish and Marx's theory of commodity fetishism has not been very rigorously addressed from a materialist perspective. Most analyses tend to draw upon one theoretical framework or the other, with the Freudian version receiving most attention. Žižek's work on ideology, for example, makes use of Lacanian analysis and post-structuralist reconceptualizations of the social (vis-à-vis Laclau and Mouffe) to elaborate and extend the post-marxist return to idealism in cultural theory; his endorsement of the Freudian concept of the fetish as "lack" ignores the possibility that the very notion of castration might be read as the effect of a positive network of (patriarchal) social relations.

6. For a much fuller elaboration of this distinction between the see-able and the visible and its bearing on the reception of film, see Zavarzadeh.

7. I have chosen this essay of de Lauretis's for its attention to issues of visibility but also because of its institutional impact which is indicated by its publishing history. Originally appearing in *Theatre Journal* (1988), it has since been reprinted in *Performing Feminisms* (Case, 1990) and most recently in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (Abelove et al., 1993). The page numbers I am using are from Abelove.

8. For summary analyses of Queer Nation's history, see Baker et al; Berlant and Freeman; Berube and Escoffier; Bull; Chee; Duggan; Signorile, 88, 317–18; and Smyth. For more critical assessments, see Fernandez, Maggenti, Mitchell and Olafimihan, and Smith. Since 1992, Queer Nation, like ACT-UP, has been riven by internal strife over whether its focus and political actions should also address issues of racism and sexism; as a result, several chapters have been dissolved or fragmented.

9. For more extended lists of affinity groups, see Berlant and Freeman, 152n3, and Berube and Escoffier, 16.

10. For a more detailed analysis of the concept of nationhood in Queer Nation, see Berlant and Freeman.

11. Ann Cvetkovich's chapter on *Capital* in her study of Victorian sensationism offers an incisive reading of the relationship between visibility and the commodity.

12. On the SI, see Knabb, Marcus, and Plant.

13. On the former connotations of lifestyle, see Bourdieu, Sobel, and Rojek. On the latter, see Ehrenreich, Featherstone.

14. See Callinicos, 62–91, 168–71, on the connection between post-structuralism and aestheticism, particularly in Foucault. See also Hennessy, 55–59, on the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical in Foucault.

15. For an elaboration of the concept of “heterogender” and its effects on the disciplining of knowledge, see Ingraham.

16. Grant Kester’s fine essay on the imaginary space of post-industrial culture prompted my analysis of the class dimensions of visibility here; the phrase “Out of Sight, Out of Mind” is in part a reference to his title.

17. I am grateful to Catherine Sustana for pointing out to me the following detail: Levi’s is owned by Robert Haas, the great-great grand nephew of the company’s founder; when Haas staged a successful leveraged buyout to take the company private in 1985, profits rose by a staggering 31% (Sustana).

18. Among the books that address the class dimension of lesbian and gay history and culture are Bunch, Faderman, Kennedy and Davis, Moraga, and Nestle. Essays include D’Emilio, Franzen, and Weston and Rofel.

19. On the relationship between (homo)sexuality and capitalism, see Altman, D’Emilio, and Evans. Most of the little work on gay poverty has, not accidentally, focused on lesbians and has circulated mostly in alternative/activist presses. Notable examples include Egerton, Helmbold, and Lavine.

20. The accuracy of the federally funded Batelle Institute’s findings has been questioned for a number of reasons: the study was aimed at addressing behavior related to AIDS, not homosexuality per se; the survey was based on self-reports from men; the interviewers were exclusively women who were not trained in sex research; and the questions about sex with men had a 30% nonresponse rate.

21. About 30% of the poor in the U.S. are black (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991).

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