

12. Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess

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When my seven-year-old son and I go to the movies, we often select from among categories of films that promise to be sensational to give our bodies an actual physical jolt. He calls these movies that seem to grab and wrench our bodies "gross." My son and I agree that the fun of "gross" movies is in their display of sensations that are on the edge of respectable. Where we disagree—and where we as a culture often disagree, along lines of gender, age, or sexual orientation—is in which movies are over the edge, too "gross."

To my son, the good "gross" movies are those with scary monsters like Freddy Krueger (of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series) who rip apart teenagers, especially teenage girls. These movies both fascinate and scare him. I have noticed that he is actually more interested in talking about than seeing them. A second category, one that I like and my son doesn't, is that of sad movies that make you cry. These are gross in their focus on unseemly emotions—emotions that may remind him too acutely of his own powerlessness as a child but that I admit to enjoying in a guilty, perverse sort of way. A third category, of both intense interest and disgust to my son (he makes the puke sign when speaking of it), he can only describe euphemistically as "the K word." K is for kissing. To a seven-year-old boy, nothing is more obscene than kissing.

There is no accounting for taste, especially in the realm of the "gross." As a culture, we most often invoke the term to designate excesses that we wish to exclude; to say, for example, which of the Robert Mapplethorpe photos we draw the line at but not to say what form and structure and function operate within the representations deemed excessive. Because so much attention goes to determining where to draw the line, discussions of the gross are often a highly confused hodgepodge of different categories of excess. For example, pornography is today more often deemed excessive for its violence than for its sex, while horror films are excessive in their displacements of sex into violence. In contrast, melodramas are deemed excessive for their gender and sex-linked pathos, for their naked displays

of emotion. Ann Douglas once referred to the genre of romance fiction as "soft-core emotional porn for women."¹

Alone or in combination, heavy doses of sex, violence, and emotion are dismissed by one faction or another as having no logic or reason for existence beyond their power to excite. Gratuitous sex, gratuitous violence and terror, gratuitous emotion are frequent epithets hurled at the phenomenon of the "sensational" in pornography, horror, and melodrama. This essay explores the notion that there may be some value in thinking about the form, function, and system of seemingly gratuitous excesses in these three genres. For if, as it seems, sex, violence, and emotion are fundamental elements of the sensational effects of these three types of films, the designation "gratuitous" is itself gratuitous. My hope, therefore, is that by thinking comparatively about all three "gross" and sensational film body genres, we might be able to get beyond the mere fact of sensation to explore its system and structure as well as their effects on the bodies of spectators.

BODY GENRES

The repetitive formulas and spectacles of film genres are often defined by their differences from the classical realist style of narrative cinema. These classical films have been characterized as efficient, action-centered, goal-oriented linear narratives driven by the desire of a single protagonist, involving one or two lines of action, and leading to definitive closure. In their influential study of the classical Hollywood cinema, Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger call this the Classical Hollywood style.²

As Rick Altman has noted in a recent article, both genre study and the study of the somewhat more nebulous category of melodrama have long been hampered by assumptions about the classical nature of the dominant narrative to which melodrama and some individual genres have been opposed.³ Altman argues that Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger, who locate the Classical Hollywood style in the linear, progressive form of the Hollywood narrative, cannot accommodate "melodramatic" attributes like spectacle, episodic presentation, or dependence on coincidence except as limited exceptions, or "play," within the dominant linear causality of the classical.

Altman writes, "Unmotivated events, rhythmic montage, highlighted parallelism, overlong spectacles—these are the excesses in the classical narrative system that alert us to the existence of a competing logic, a second voice."⁴ Altman, whose own work on the movie musical has necessarily relied upon analyses of seemingly "excessive" spectacles and parallel constructions, thus makes a strong case for the need to recognize the possibility that excess may itself be organized as a system. Yet analyses of

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systems of excess have been much slower to emerge in the genres whose nonlinear spectacles have centered more directly upon the gross display of the human body. Pornography and horror films are two such systems of excess. Pornography is the lowest in cultural esteem, gross-out horror is next to lowest.

Melodrama, however, refers to a much broader category of films and a much larger system of excess. It would not be unreasonable, in fact, to consider all three of these genres under the extended rubric of melodrama, considered as a filmic mode of stylistic and emotional excess that stands in contrast to more "dominant" modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative. In this extended sense, melodrama can encompass a broad range of films marked by "lapses" in realism, by "excesses" of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile, emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive. Much of the interest of melodrama to film scholars over the last fifteen years originates in the sense that the form exceeds the normative system of much narrative cinema. I shall limit my focus here, however, to a narrower sense of melodrama, leaving the broader category of the sensational to encompass the three genres I wish to consider. Thus, partly for purposes of contrast with pornography, the melodrama I will consider here will consist of the form that has most interested feminist critics—that of "the woman's film," or "weepie." These are films addressed to women in their traditional status under patriarchy—as wives, mothers, abandoned lovers—or in their traditional status as bodily hysteria or excess, as in the frequent case of the woman "afflicted" with a deadly or debilitating disease.⁵

What are the pertinent features of bodily excess shared by these three "gross" genres? First, there is the spectacle of a body caught in the grips of intense sensation or emotion. Carol J. Clover, speaking primarily of horror films and pornography, has called films that privilege the sensational "body genres."⁶ I am expanding Clover's notion of low body genres to include the sensation of overwhelming pathos in the "weepie." The body spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama's portrayal of weeping. I propose that an investigation of the visual and narrative pleasures found in the portrayal of these three types of excess could be important to a new direction in genre criticism that would take as its point of departure—rather than as an unexamined assumption—questions of gender construction as well as gender address in relation to basic sexual fantasies.

Another pertinent feature shared by these body genres is the focus on what could probably best be called a form of ecstasy. While the classical meaning of the original Greek word is insanity and bewilderment, more contemporary meanings suggest components of direct or indirect

sexual excitement and rapture, a rapture that informs even the pathos of melodrama.

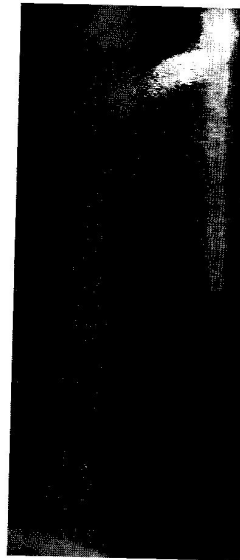
Visually, each of these ecstatic excesses could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm—of the body “beside itself” in the grips of sexual pleasure, fear and terror, and overpowering sadness. Aurally, excess is marked by recourse not to the coded articulations of language but to inarticulate cries—of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama.

Looking, and listening, to these bodily ecstasies, we can also notice something else that these genres seem to share: though quite differently gendered with respect to their targeted audiences—with pornography aimed, presumably, at active men and melodramatic weepies aimed, presumably, at passive women, and with contemporary gross-out horror aimed at adolescents careening wildly between the two masculine and feminine poles—in each of these genres the bodies of women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain.

In other words, even when the pleasure of viewing has traditionally been constructed for masculine spectators, as in most traditional, heterosexual pornography, it is the female body in the grips of an out-of-control ecstasy that has offered the most sensational sight. So the bodies of women have tended to function, ever since the eighteenth-century origins of these genres in the Marquis de Sade, Gothic fiction, and the novels of Richardson, as both the *moved* and the *moving*. It is thus through what Foucault has called the sexual saturation of the female body that audiences of all sorts have received some of their most powerful sensations.⁷

There are, of course, other film genres that both portray and affect the sensational body—e.g., thrillers, musicals, comedies. I suggest, however, that the film genres with especially low cultural status—which have seemed to exist as excesses to the system of even the popular genres—are not simply those that sensationally display bodies on the screen and register effects in the bodies of spectators. Rather, what may especially mark these body genres as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen, along with the fact that the body displayed is female. An example of another “body genre” that, despite its concern with all manner of gross activities and body functions, has not been deemed gratuitously excessive is physical clown comedy—probably because the reaction of the audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the central clown. Indeed, it is almost a rule that the audience’s physical reaction of laughter does not coincide with the often deadpan reactions of the clown.

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25. *Babylon Pink* 1979 woman.

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25. *Babylon Pink* (1979): The pornographic stereotype of the sexually ecstatic woman.

genres often seems to be measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen. Whether this mimicry is exact—e.g., whether the spectator at the porn film actually experiences orgasm, whether the spectator at the horror film actually shudders in fear, whether the spectator of the melodrama actually dissolves in tears—the success of these genres seems a self-evident matter of measuring bodily response. Examples of such measurement can be readily observed: in the “peter meter” capsule reviews in *Hustler* magazine, which measure the power of a porn film in degrees of erection of little cartoon penises; in horror films that are measured in terms of screams, fainting, and heart attacks in the audience (consider the career of horror-producer William Castle and such films as his 1959 *The Tingler*); and in the longstanding tradition of measuring women’s films in terms of one-, two-, or three-handkerchief movies.

What seems to bracket these particular genres from others is an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance, a sense of overinvolvement in sensation and emotion. We feel manipulated by these texts, an impression that the very colloquialisms “tearjerker” and “fearjerker” express—and to which we could add pornography’s even cruder sense as texts to which

some people might be inclined to "jerk off." The rhetoric of violence of the jerk suggests the extent to which viewers feel too directly, too viscerally, manipulated by the text in specifically gendered ways. Mary Ann Doane, for example, writing about the most genteel of these jerkers—the maternal melodrama—equates the violence of this emotion to a kind of "textual rape" of the targeted female viewer, who is "feminized through pathos."⁸

Feminist critics of pornography often evoke similar figures of sexual/textual violence when describing the operation of this genre. Robin Morgan's famous slogan "Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice" is well known.⁹ Implicit in this slogan is the notion that women are the objectified victims of pornographic representations, that the image of the sexually ecstatic woman so important to the genre is a celebration of female victimization and a prelude to female victimization in real life.

Less well known, but related, is the observation of the critic of horror films, James Twitchell, who notices that the Latin *horrere* means "to bristle." He describes the way the nape hair stands on end during moments of shivering excitement. The aptly named Twitchell thus describes a kind of erection of the hair founded in the conflicting desires of "fight and flight."¹⁰ While male victims in horror films may shudder and scream as well, it has long been a dictum of the genre that women make the best victims. "Torture the women!" was the famous advice given by Alfred Hitchcock.¹¹

In the classic horror film the terror of the female victim shares the spectacle along with the monster. Fay Wray and the mechanized monster that made her scream in *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) is a familiar example of the classic form. Janet Leigh in the shower in *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) is a familiar example of a transition to a more sexually explicit form of the tortured and terrorized woman. And her daughter, Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), can serve as the more contemporary version of the terrorized woman victim. In both of these later films the spectacle of the monster seems to take second billing to the increasingly numerous victims slashed by the sexually disturbed but entirely human monsters.

In the woman's film a well-known classic is the long-suffering mother of the two early versions of *Stella Dallas* (Henry King, 1925; King Vidor, 1937) who sacrifices herself for her daughter's upward mobility. Contemporary filmgoers could recently see Bette Midler going through the same sacrifice and loss in the film *Stella* (John Erman, 1990). Debra Winger in *Terms of Endearment* (James L. Brooks, 1983) is another familiar example of this maternal pathos.

With these genre stereotypes in mind we should now ask about the status of bodily excess in each of these genres. Is it simply the unseemly, "gra-



26. *Psycho*: Horror of the

tuitous" presence of the weeping woman—fluids, the blood and presumably mimicked by film? How shall we view other as a system of excessive are they really?

The psychoanalytic film study in general has been remarkably similar has been remarkable major tools of analysis. Torture and masochism frequently are, by definition as gratuitous sexual "proper" end goals and fetishes instead of genuine the perverse pleasures



26. *Psycho*: Horror offers the female victim as spectacle.

gratuitous" presence of the sexually ecstatic woman, the tortured woman, the weeping woman—and the accompanying presence of the sexual fluids, the blood and the tears that flow from her body and that are presumably mimicked by spectators—that marks the excess of each type of film? How shall we think of these bodily displays in relation to one another as a system of excess in the popular film? And, finally, how excessive are they really?

The psychoanalytic system of analysis that has been so influential to film study in general and to feminist film theory and criticism in particular has been remarkably ambivalent about the status of excess in its major tools of analysis. The categories of fetishism, voyeurism, and sadism and masochism frequently invoked to describe the pleasures of film spectatorship are, by definition, perversions. Perversions are usually defined as gratuitous sexual excesses, specifically as excesses that result when "proper" end goals are deflected onto substitute goals or objects—fetishes instead of genitals, looking instead of touching, and so forth. Yet the perverse pleasures of film viewing are hardly gratuitous. They have



27. *Stella Dallas*: Stella (Barbara Stanwyck) transcendent in self-sacrifice.

been considered so basic that they have often been presented as norms. What is a film, after all, without voyeurism? Yet, at the same time, feminist critics have asked, what is the position of women within this pleasure geared to a presumably sadistic "male gaze"?¹² To what extent is she its victim? Is the orgasmic woman of pornography and the tortured woman of horror merely in the service of the sadistic male gaze? And is the weeping woman of melodrama appealing to the abnormal perversions of masochism in female viewers?

These questions point to the ambiguity of the terms of perversion used to describe the normal pleasures of film viewing. Without attempting to go into any of the complexities of this discussion here—a discussion that

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must ultimately relate to the status of the term "perversion" in theories of sexuality themselves—let me simply suggest the value of not invoking the perversions as terms of condemnation. As even the most cursory reading of Freud shows, sexuality is, by definition, perverse. The "aims" and "objects" of sexual desire are often obscure and inherently substitutive. Unless we are willing to see reproduction as the common goal of the sexual drive, then we have to admit, as Jonathan Dollimore has put it, that we are all perverts. Dollimore's goal of retrieving the "concept of perversion as a category of cultural analysis," as a structure intrinsic to all sexuality rather than extrinsic to it, is crucial to any attempt to understand cultural forms—such as our three body genres—in which fantasy predominates.¹³

STRUCTURES OF PERVERSION IN THE "FEMALE BODY GENRES"

Each of the three body genres I have isolated hinges on the spectacle of a "sexually saturated" female body, and each offers what many feminist critics would agree to be spectacles of feminine victimization. But this victimization is very different in each type of film and cannot be accounted for simply by pointing to the sadistic power and pleasure of masculine subjects punishing or dominating feminine objects.

Many feminists have pointed to the victimization of the woman performers of pornography who must actually do the acts depicted in the film as well as to the victimization of characters within the films.¹⁴ Pornography, in this view, is fundamentally sadistic. In weepies, on the other hand, feminists have pointed to the spectacles of intense suffering and loss as masochistic.

While feminists have often pointed to the women victims in horror films who suffer simulated torture and mutilation as victims of sadism,¹⁵ more recent feminist work has suggested that the horror film may present an interesting, and perhaps instructive, case of oscillation between masochistic and sadistic poles. This argument, advanced by Clover, has suggested that pleasure, for a masculine-identified viewer, oscillates between identifying with the initial passive powerlessness of the abject and terrorized girl-victim of horror and her later, active empowerment.

This argument holds that when the girl-victim of a film like *Halloween* finally grabs the phallic knife, or ax, or chain saw to turn the tables on the monster-killer, viewer identification shifts from an "abject terror gendered feminine" to an active power with bisexual components. A gender-confused monster is foiled, often symbolically castrated by an "androgynous final girl."¹⁶ In slasher films, identification with victimization is a roller-coaster ride of sadomasochistic thrills.

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in the following way: pornography's appeal to its presumed male viewers would be characterized as sadistic, horror films' appeal to the emerging sexual identities of its (frequently adolescent) spectators would be sadomasochistic, and women's films' appeal to presumed female viewers would be masochistic.

The masochistic component of viewing pleasure for women has been the most problematic term of perversion for feminist critics. It is interesting, for example, that most of our important studies of masochism—for example, those by Gilles Deleuze, Kaja Silverman, and Gaylyn Studlar—have all focused on the exoticism of masculine masochism rather than the familiarity of female masochism. Masochistic pleasure for women has paradoxically seemed either too normal—too much the normal yet intolerable condition of women—or too perverse to be taken seriously as pleasure.¹⁷

There is thus a real need to be clearer than we have been about what is in masochism for women—how power and pleasure operate in fantasies of domination that appeal to women. There is an equal need to be clearer than we have been about what is in sadism for men. Here the initial opposition between these two most gendered genres—women's weepies and male heterosexual pornography—needs to be complicated. I have argued elsewhere, for example, that pornography has been allied too simplistically with a purely sadistic fantasy structure. Indeed, those troubling films and videos that deploy instruments of torture on the bodies of women have been allied so completely with masculine viewing pleasures that we have not paid enough attention to their appeal to women, except to condemn such appeal as false consciousness.¹⁸

One important complication of the initial schema I have outlined would thus be to take a lesson from Clover's more bisexual model of viewer identification in horror film and stress the sadomasochistic component of each of these body genres through their various appropriations of melodramatic fantasies that are, in fact, basic to each. All of these genres could, for example, be said to offer highly melodramatic enactments of sexually charged, if not sexually explicit, relations. The subgenre of sadomasochistic pornography, with its suspension of pleasure over the course of prolonged sessions of dramatic suffering, offers a particularly intense, almost parodic, enactment of the classic melodramatic scenario of the passive and innocent female victim suffering at the hands of a leering villain. We can also see in horror films of tortured women a similar melodramatization of the innocent victim. An important difference, of course, lies in the component of the victim's overt sexual pleasure in the scenario of domination.

But even in the most extreme displays of feminine masochistic suffering, there is always a component of either power or pleasure for the

woman victim. We seem to oscillate between pornography and in appear to be constructed pleasure within the genre worth noting as well. It has certainly been one of the pleasures for women for actively participating.

In the subgenre of masochist in the scene, the woman plays the part of passive victim in a patriarchal double standard. The "good girl" from the scene offers a way out of the scene. The passive "good girl" is her torturer) that she is sexually active "bad girl" arranged to endure the pain. The "good girls" are good and other pleasures have been negotiated. The "bad girl" is punished.

In contrast, the sadomasochistic "bad girls," allow active participation. But these good girls are at the point of appropriating power is granted so long as they are not of other sort of pleasure.

In the melodramatic form of masochism on the screen, the viewer does not seem to identify with the good woman, but rather with the suffering woman, including those which would not argue that the films, I do argue that the films and a bisexual oscillation.

For example, the woman in *Of Endearment or Steel* identifies with the suffering woman, identifies with the power over the deaths of their triumph of survival. The woman is entirely passive.

While there are certain

woman victim. We have seen how identification in slasher horror films seems to oscillate between powerlessness and power. In sadomasochistic pornography and in melodramatic weepies, feminine subject positions appear to be constructed in ways that achieve a modicum of power and pleasure within the given limits of patriarchal constraints on women. It is worth noting as well that *nonsadomasochistic* pornography has historically been one of the few types of popular film that has not punished women for actively pursuing their sexual pleasure.

In the subgenre of sadomasochistic pornography, however, the female masochist in the scenario must be devious in her pursuit of pleasure. She plays the part of passive sufferer in order to obtain pleasure. Under a patriarchal double standard that has rigorously separated the sexually passive "good girl" from the sexually active "bad girl," masochistic role play offers a way out of this dichotomy by combining the good girl with the bad: the passive "good girl" can prove to her witnesses (the superego who is her torturer) that she does not will the pleasure that she receives. Yet the sexually active "bad girl" enjoys this pleasure and has knowingly arranged to endure the pain that earns it. The cultural law that decides some girls are good and others are bad is not defeated, but within its terms pleasure has been negotiated and "paid for" with a pain that conditions it. The "bad girl" is punished, but in return she receives pleasure.¹⁹

In contrast, the sadomasochistic teen horror film kills off the sexually active "bad girls," allowing only the nonsexual "good girls" to survive. But these good girls are, as if in compensation, remarkably active, to the point of appropriating phallic power to themselves. It is as if this phallic power is granted so long as it is rigorously separated from phallic or any other sort of pleasure. For these pleasures spell sure death in this genre.

In the melodramatic woman's film we might think to encounter a purer form of masochism on the part of female viewers. Yet even here the female viewer does not seem to be invited to identify wholly with the sacrificing good woman, but rather with a variety of different subject positions, including those which empathically look on at her own suffering. While I would not argue that there is a very strong sadistic component to these films, I do argue that there is a strong mixture of passivity and activity—and a bisexual oscillation between the poles of each—in even this genre.

For example, the woman viewer of a maternal melodrama such as *Terms of Endearment* or *Steel Magnolias* (Herbert Ross, 1989) does not simply identify with the suffering and dying heroines of each. She may equally identify with the powerful matriarchs, the surviving mothers who preside over the deaths of their daughters, experiencing the exhilaration and triumph of survival. The point is simply that identification is neither fixed nor entirely passive.

While there are certainly masculine and feminine, active and passive,

An Anatomy of Film Bodies

Genre	Pornography	Horror	Melodrama
Bodily excess	Sex	Violence	Emotion
Ecstasy	Ecstatic sex	Ecstatic violence	Ecstatic woe
—shown by	Orgasm	Shudders	Sobs
	Ejaculation	Blood	Tears
Presumed audience	Men (active)	Adolescent boys (active/passive)	Girls, women (passive)
Perversion	Sadism	Sadomasochism	Masochism
Originary fantasy	Seduction	Castration	Origin
Temporality of fantasy	On time!	Too early!	Too late!
Genre cycles "Classic"	Stag films (1920s–1940s): <i>The Casting Couch</i>	"Classic" horror: <i>Dracula</i> <i>Frankenstein</i> <i>Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde</i> <i>King Kong</i>	"Classic" women's films Maternal melodrama: <i>Stella Dallas</i> <i>Mildred Pierce</i> Romance: <i>Back Street</i> <i>Letter from an Unknown Woman</i>
Contemporary	Feature-length hard-core porn: <i>Deep Throat</i> <i>The Punishment of Anne</i> Femme Productions Bisexual Trisexual	Post- <i>Psycho</i> : <i>The Texas Chainsaw Massacre</i> <i>Halloween</i> <i>Dressed to Kill</i> <i>Videodrome</i>	Male and female "weepies": <i>Steel Magnolias</i> <i>Stella</i> <i>Dad</i>

poles to the left and right of the positions that we might assign to these three genres (see accompanying table), the subject positions that appear to be constructed by each of the genres are not as gender-linked and as gender-fixed as has often been supposed. This is especially true today as hard-core pornography gains appeal with women viewers. Perhaps the most recent proof in this genre of the breakdown of rigid dichotomies of masculine and feminine, active and passive, is the creation of an alternative, oscillating category of address to viewers. In addition to the well-known heterosexual hard core, which once addressed itself exclusively to heterosexual men and now has begun to address itself to heterosexual

couples and which has added there is now a do it with women then all do it mental taboo. A related masculine and quarters as the gaged in the act in breaking the father-son emblem (1980) is exemplified by the (1989) or the film with its wild passion. The point is a fluidity and oscillation of masculinity of a feat of phallic power this new fluidity viewing pleasure. For example, that is shown verbally and form sex with me. The deployment of very precise function address persistent identities. The deployment of gratuitous and in a employment of sex, viewing; each draws up argued in *Hard Core* problem, and the problem the solution.²¹ In the film; more violence women's films the problem of this loss are the

STRUCTURES OF FEMININITY

All of these problems explored as genres

Melodrama

Emotion
Ecstatic woe
Sobs
Tears
Girls, women (passive)

Masochism
Origin

Too late!

-Classic" women's films
Maternal melodrama:
Stella Dallas
Mildred Pierce
Romance:
Back Street
Letter from an Unknown Woman

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couples and women as well, and in addition to homosexual hard core, which has addressed itself to gay and (to a lesser extent) lesbian viewers, there is now a new category of video called bisexual. In these videos men do it with women, women do it with women, men do it with men, and then all do it with one another—in the process breaking down a fundamental taboo against male-to-male sex.²⁰

A related interpenetration of the formerly more separate categories of masculine and feminine is seen in what has come to be known in some quarters as the "male weepie." These are mainstream melodramas engaged in the activation of the previously repressed emotions of men and in breaking the taboos against male-to-male hugs and embraces. The father-son embrace that concludes *Ordinary People* (Robert Redford, 1980) is exemplary. More recently, paternal weepies have begun to compete with the maternal—such as the conventional *Dad* (David Goldberg, 1989) or the less conventional *Twin Peaks* (David Lynch, 1990–1991), with its wild paternal displays.

The point is certainly not to admire the "sexual freedom" of this new fluidity and oscillation—the new femininity of men who hug and the new masculinity of women who leer—as if it represented any ultimate defeat of phallic power. Rather, the more useful lesson might be to see what this new fluidity and oscillation permits in the construction of feminine viewing pleasures once thought not to exist at all. (It is instructive, for example, that women characters in the new bisexual pornography are shown verbally articulating their visual pleasure as they watch men perform sex with men.)

The deployment of sex, violence, and emotion would thus seem to have very precise functions in these body genres. Like all popular genres, they address persistent problems in our culture, in our sexualities, in our very identities. The deployment of sex, violence, and emotion is thus in no way gratuitous and in no way strictly limited to each of these genres. Each deployment of sex, violence, and emotion is a cultural form of problem solving; each draws upon related sensations to address its problems. As I have argued in *Hard Core*, pornographic films now tend to present sex as a problem, and the performance of more, different, or better sex is posed as the solution.²¹ In horror a violence related to sexual difference is the problem; more violence related to sexual difference is also the solution. In women's films the pathos of loss is the problem; repetitions and variations of this loss are the generic solution.

STRUCTURES OF FANTASY

All of these problems are linked to gender identity and might be usefully explored as genres of gender fantasy. It is appropriate to ask, then, not

only about the structures of perversion but also about the structures of fantasy in each of these genres. In doing so, we need to be clear about the nature of fantasy itself. For fantasies are not, as is sometimes thought, wish-fulfilling linear narratives of mastery and control leading to closure and the attainment of desire. They are marked, rather, by the prolongation of desire and by the lack of fixed position with respect to the objects and events fantasized.

In their classic essay "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis argue that fantasy is not so much a narrative that enacts the quest for an object of desire as it is a setting for desire, a place where conscious and unconscious, self and other, part and whole meet. Fantasy is the place where "desubjectified" subjectivities oscillate between self and other, occupying no fixed place in the scenario.²²

In the three body genres discussed here, this fantasy component has probably been better understood in horror film, a genre often understood as belonging to the "fantastic." However, it has been less well understood in pornography and melodrama. Because these genres display fewer fantastic special effects and because they rely on certain conventions of realism—e.g., the activation of social problems in melodrama; the representation of real sexual acts in pornography—they seem less obviously fantastic. Yet the usual criticisms—that these forms are improbable, that they lack psychological complexity and narrative closure, and that they are repetitious—become moot as evaluation if they are considered intrinsic to their engagement with fantasy.

There is a link, in other words, between the appeal of these forms and their ability to address, if never really to "solve," basic problems related to sexual identity. Here I would like to forge a connection between Laplanche and Pontalis's structural understanding of fantasies as myths of origin that try to cover the discrepancy between two moments in time and the distinctive temporal structure of these particular genres. Laplanche and Pontalis argue that fantasies which are myths of origin address the insoluble problem of the discrepancy between an irrecoverable original experience presumed to have actually taken place—as in the case of the historical primal scene—and the uncertainty of its hallucinatory revival. The discrepancy exists, in other words, between the actual existence of the lost object and the sign that evokes both this existence and its absence.

Laplanche and Pontalis maintain that the most basic fantasies are located at the juncture of an irrecoverable real event that took place somewhere in the past and a totally imaginary event that never took place. The "event" whose temporal and spatial existence can never be fixed is thus ultimately that of "the origin of the subject"—an origin that psychoanalysts tell us cannot be separated from the discovery of sexual difference.²³

It is this contradictory temporal structure of being situated somewhere

between the "too early" that generates desire and the "too late" that has produced the concept of fantasy. It is the structure of fantasies that seem to be enigmas confronting the subject with the enigma of the origin. To speak, by the fantasy, is to "solve" the problem of the origin of self, "solved" by the fantasy of origin.²⁵

Each of the three body genres correspond in important ways to the structure of fantasy, for example. In the case of the fantasies of primal seduction, the "too early" is produced by the other in the act of seduction. As noted, it is always bedeviled by the repetition of the trauma of the original problem of the origin. The genre that seems to end the repetition of the origin, the impossible in the most fundamentally repeated.

Of course, each of the genres repeats. The fantasy is not fixed and eternal. It is shown to have emerged from the intensifying importance of the origin.

But the importance of the very different temporal structure is, in fact, that these different utopian components of the fantasy (nonsadomasochistic) "solve" the problem of the insoluble question of the seduction of the parent. The fantasy answers this question from within the subject. The pornography attempts to position the subject: a subject and object, other "on time!" and "not on time!" It is the special challenge of the fantasy.

In contrast to pornography, the fantasy responds to a temporal structure that is already, the problem, in effect.

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between the "too early" and the "too late" of the knowledge of difference that generates desire that is most characteristic of fantasy. Freud introduced the concept of "original fantasy" to explain the mythic function of fantasies that seem to offer repetitions of and "solutions" to major enigmas confronting the child.²⁴ These enigmas are located in three areas: the enigma of the origin of sexual desire, an enigma that is "solved," so to speak, by the fantasy of seduction; the enigma of sexual difference, "solved" by the fantasy of castration; and, finally, the enigma of the origin of self, "solved" by the fantasy of family romance or return to one's origin.²⁵

Each of the three body genres I have been describing could be seen to correspond in important ways to one of these original fantasies. Pornography, for example, is the genre that has seemed to endlessly repeat the fantasies of primal seduction, of meeting the other, seducing or being seduced by the other in an ideal "pornotopia" where, as Steven Marcus has noted, it is always bedtime.²⁶ Horror is the genre that seems to endlessly repeat the trauma of castration, as if to "explain," by repetitious mastery, the original problem of sexual difference. And melodramatic weepie is the genre that seems to endlessly repeat our melancholic sense of the loss of origin, the impossible hope of returning to an earlier state that is perhaps most fundamentally represented by the body of the mother.

Of course, each of these genres has a history and does not simply "endlessly repeat." The fantasies activated by these genres are repetitious, but not fixed and eternal. If traced back to origin, each could probably be shown to have emerged with the formation of the bourgeois subject and the intensifying importance to this subject of specified sexualities.

But the importance of repetition in each genre should not blind us to the very different temporal structure of repetition in each fantasy. It could be, in fact, that these different temporal structures constitute the different utopian component of problem solving in each form. Thus the typical (nonsadomasochistic) pornographic fantasies of seduction operate to "solve" the problem of the origin of desire. Attempting to answer the insoluble question of whether desire is imposed from without through the seduction of the parent or whether it originates within the self, pornography answers this question by typically positing a fantasy of desire coming from within the subject *and* from without. Nonsadomasochistic pornography attempts to posit the utopian fantasy of perfect temporal coincidence: a subject and object (or seducer and seduced) who meet one another "on time!" and "now!" in shared moments of mutual pleasure that it is the special challenge of the genre to portray.

In contrast to pornography, the fantasy of recent teen horror corresponds to a temporal structure that suggests the anxiety of not being ready, the problem, in effect, of "too early!" Some of the most violent and

terrifying moments of the horror film occur when the female victim meets the psycho-killer-monster unexpectedly, before she is ready. The female victims who are not ready for the attack die. This surprise encounter, too early, often takes place at a moment of sexual anticipation when the female victim thinks she is about to meet her boyfriend or lover. The monster's violent attack on the female victims vividly enacts a symbolic castration that often functions as a kind of punishment for an ill-timed exhibition of sexual desire. These victims are taken by surprise in the violent attacks that are then deeply felt by spectators (especially the adolescent male spectators drawn to the slasher subgenre) as linked to the knowledge of sexual difference. Again the key to the fantasy is timing—the way the knowledge of sexual difference too suddenly overtakes both characters and viewers, offering a knowledge for which we are never prepared.

Finally, in contrast to pornography's meeting "on time!" and horror's unexpected meeting "too early!" we can identify melodrama's pathos of the "too late!" In these fantasies the quest to return to and discover the origin of the self is manifest in the form of the child's fantasy of possessing ideal parents in the Freudian family romance, in the parental fantasy of possessing the child in maternal or paternal melodrama, and even in the lovers' fantasy of possessing one another in romantic weepies. In these fantasies the quest for connection is always tinged with the melancholy of loss. Origins are already lost; the encounters always take place too late, on deathbeds or over coffins.²⁷

Italian critic Franco Moretti has argued, for example, that literature that makes us cry operates via a special manipulation of temporality: what triggers our crying is not just the sadness or suffering of the character in the story but a very precise moment when characters in the story catch up with and realize what the audience already knows. We cry, Moretti argues, not just because the characters do, but at the precise moment when desire is finally recognized as futile. The release of tension produces tears—which become a kind of homage to a happiness that is kissed good-bye. Pathos is thus a surrender to reality, but it is a surrender that pays homage to the ideal that tried to wage war on it.²⁸ Moretti thus stresses a subversive, utopian component in what has often been considered a form of passive powerlessness. The fantasy of the meeting with the other that is always too late can thus be seen as a reflection of the utopian desire that it not be too late to merge again with the other who was once part of the self.

Obviously there is a great deal of work to be done to understand the form and function of these three body genres in relation to one another and in relation to their fundamental appeal as "original fantasies." And obviously the most difficult work of understanding this relation between

gender, genre, fantasy, tempt to relate original history. However, one res, which may seem dismissed as evidence of a pure sadism for male existence and popularity between the sexes and means to be a man or a of explicit sex, violence masochism or sadism—lem solving. Genres they address; but genres these problems.

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Notes

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 2. David Bordwell, *Ki*
 3. Rick Altman, "Dick
 4. *Ibid.*, pp. 345-346.
 5. For an excellent study melodrama and the "woman
- anthology *Home Is Where I Film* (London: British Film theatrical origins of melodrama (New Haven: Yale University quiry and analysis of a book Doane, *The Desire to Desir*

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gender, genre, fantasy, and structures of perversion will come in the at-
tempt to relate original fantasies to historical context and specific generic
history. However, one thing already seems clear: these "gross" body gen-
res, which may seem so violent and inimical to women, cannot be dis-
missed as evidence of a monolithic and unchanging misogyny, as either
pure sadism for male viewers or as masochism for females. Their very ex-
istence and popularity hinges upon rapid changes taking place in relations
between the sexes and by rapidly changing notions of gender—what it
means to be a man or a woman. To dismiss them as bad excess—whether
of explicit sex, violence, or emotion, or as bad perversions, whether of
masochism or sadism—is not to address their function as cultural prob-
lem solving. Genres thrive, after all, on the persistence of the problems
they address; but genres thrive also in their ability to recast the nature of
these problems.

Finally, as I hope this analysis of the melodrama of tears suggests, we
may be wrong in our assumption that the bodies of spectators simply re-
produce the sensations exhibited by bodies on the screen. Even those
masochistic pleasures associated with the powerlessness of the "too late!"
are not absolutely abject. Even tearjerkers do not operate to force a
simple mimicry of the sensation exhibited on the screen. Powerful as the
sensations of the jerk might be, we may only be beginning to understand
how they are deployed in generic and gendered cultural forms.

Notes

I owe thanks to Rhona Berenstein, Leo Braudy, Chick Callenbach, Paul Fitzger-
ald, Mandy Harris, Brian Henderson, Jane Gaines, Marsha Kinder, Eric Rent-
schler, and Pauline Yu for generous advice on drafts of this essay.

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