

## Introduction

### Sexual Visibility, or, The Duel in the Sun

Red Riding Hood: What big eyes you have, Grandma.

The Wolf: All the better to see you with, my dear.

1940s culture became an increasingly visual culture, a culture more interested in pictures and less in words. Television does not make an impact until the end of the decade, but magazines, all along, point in that direction.<sup>1</sup> The heightened emphasis on photographs in *Life* magazine would make it one of the most popular magazines of the period. A 1943 *Harper's* article surveyed "The Picture Magazines"; what distinguished the recent magazines—*Life*, *Look*, and *Click*—from older publications such as the *Illustrated London News* was that the newer magazines ran "picture stories," where photographs did most of the work, and the text was reduced to captions.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 1940s "picture stories" could be found everywhere, regardless of whether the magazine was a picture magazine. *Coronet* offered both a "picture story" and a "picture gallery," while radio magazines would summarize plots with a sequence of pictures in order to turn the radio show into a miniature movie.<sup>3</sup> Pictures tell the story better than words.

In the 1944 essay "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics," William Moulton Marston, an academic psychologist as well as the creator of *Wonder Woman*, justified his own excursion into comic books. People just understand things better, he says, when they can look at pictures. "Eight or nine people out of ten get more emotional 'kick' out of seeing a beautiful

girl on the stage, the screen, or the picture-magazine page displaying her charms in person, or via camera or artist's pen, than they derive from verbal substitutes describing her compelling charms. It's too bad for us 'literary' enthusiasts, but it's the truth nevertheless—pictures tell any story more effectively than words."<sup>4</sup>

Here Marston usefully links the emergence of 1940s visual culture to 1940s sexual culture.<sup>5</sup> The argument is not logical, but in the way that it willfully manipulates sex and the female body, the argument is characteristic of the period. In a figurative leap, Marston says that "any story" is equivalent to a "beautiful girl . . . displaying her charms." This way he can win the argument—just like the late paperback that uses its cover to seduce a purchaser—by emphasizing sexual "oompf," an "emotional kick." It is a hugely illogical argument since many stories—about the way that bats hear or the rules of canasta—will not have much "emotional kick."<sup>6</sup> But logic is not the point; this debate is won by frankness. The war has made everyone franker, less euphemistic. Pictures get to the heart of the matter and so does sex.

An equally characteristic example of 1940s sexual visibility occurs in a book called *The Technique of the Picture Story: A Practical Guide to the Production of Visual Articles* (1945). This purports to be a textbook for the visually oriented future of journalism; in practice, it uses examples from *Look* and *Life* in order to make those articles seem as sophisticated, educational, and artistic as possible.<sup>7</sup> Their textbook analysis of a photograph of Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman in passionate embrace runs as follows: "The impact of this picture is unquestionable. It is the age-old impact of sex, made both violent and attractive by Ingrid Bergman and Gary Cooper in Warner Brothers' *Saratoga Trunk*. No successful modern magazine ignores the reader appeal in sex, but the responsible ones avoid dealing with it objectionably and try to contribute their share of reliable, scientific, and much-needed sex information."<sup>8</sup>

Marston compared the "emotional kick" of any picture story to a sexy woman on display; here is a picture of sex, full of "impact," "the age-old impact of sex." The textbook authors bring sex forward as both a traditional ("age-old") and a practical concern. This is a commercial enterprise after all; they intend to sell magazines, and "no successful modern magazine ignores the reader appeal in sex." Yet even though sex comes with a bang (a kick, an impact) and is there primarily to make money, the textbook authors still imagine themselves entirely in control, on exactly the right side of morality ("the responsible ones avoid dealing with it objectionably"), while providing scientific and educational contexts. The picture textbook authors,

such as Marston the comic-defending psychologist, think that they can *see* everything. Journalism, science, and commerce combine perfectly to bring us sex, right there before our eyes.

But what does this sex look like? Ingrid Bergman looks up at Gary Cooper—or she would look if her eyes were not closed. Gary Cooper grimaces, his left hand spread out over Bergman's face and throat. The caption has the right idea: "It is the age-old impact of sex, made both violent and attractive by Ingrid Bergman and Gary Cooper." In fact, the adjectives map onto Bergman and Cooper respectively; she looks "attractive" and he looks "violent." Yet the "violence" of sex does not bother the scientific, educating authors, even though they are apparently the "responsible" people who try not to treat sex "objectionably." It is understood—scientifically and realistically—that sex is both violent and attractive. In specific, male sexuality is violent, aggressive; in the language of the times, it is "wolfish." This is just a given; hence there is nothing objectionable. By contrast, female desire is more mysterious, much harder to see. Ingrid Bergman looks beautiful, but what does she want? She consents to Gary Cooper's *visible* desire.

These two examples bring us to this book's main question. In a period overwhelmed by visible examples of male sexual desire, what does female sexual desire look like? If male sexual desire is imaged as "natural," "aggressive," or "wolfish," what images are attached to female sexual desire? If men are allowed their wolfishness—and how can they help themselves—how does society view the sexually aggressive woman, the she-wolf? For if female sexual desire becomes visible, then the woman potentially becomes pathological, oversexed, a nymphomaniac. And if female sexual desire stays invisible, then the woman potentially disappears. In the patriarchal horror show that is the 1940s, therefore, female sexual desire is apparently fated to two categories: sexually aggressive monster or self-disappearing ghost, which is to say, wolf-woman or phantom lady. In forthcoming chapters we will meet both characters many times.

In *Danse Macabre*, a history of horror in popular culture, Stephen King claims that the 1940s were not amenable to horror. Following the weirdness of the Lovecraftian thirties, says King, the forties were too scientific and rational, which was good for science fiction, but bad for the fantastic.<sup>9</sup> The decade prides itself on its science, such that the psychological and scientific authority around sexual discourse is inescapable and almost unquestionable. But this ubiquity, indeed this tyranny of the scientific creates its own horrors. That is what Val Lewton's *Bedlam* (1946) implies when the film prefaces its cruelty and chaos with an ironic quote: "The people of the Eighteenth Century called their Period the Age of Reason." By dividing

sexual behavior into the normal and the abnormal, by supporting rather than questioning society's arbitrary expectations about gender roles, 1940s psychology makes as many monsters as any Hollywood mad scientist.

My opening emphasis on 1940s visual culture means to stress not just the continued emergence of visual media, but also the deployment of the visual as a means of power. Even radio plays an important part in 1940s visual culture. Not only does radio often work as an extension of film (in radio shows made out of movies, such as *Lux Radio Theatre*), radio also follows the same patriarchal principles of visual assessment found in movies and magazines. Although radio is intimate rather than spectacular, centered on voice rather than image, it still maintains a system of gendered surveillance and appraisal. Women are not just heard on the radio, they are viewed; even if listeners cannot see them, female characters are judged by what they look like. Thus the potentially "asexual" world of radio continues quite uninterrupted the visual focus on sex and sexuality found in magazines and movies.<sup>10</sup>

1940s popular culture finds male heterosexual desire everywhere, while female sexual desire is methodically obscured. Male desire is overt, expected, visible, and violent. The male gaze and male desire are the same thing, and the man is expected to look. In films, men look women up and down, appraising them. In novels, even ones that are not hard-boiled, men look as long as they like at women: "Studying her more carefully now Slade discovered, to his surprise, that the impression of fragility was an optical illusion. Actually, as he considered her in detail, she was a remarkably beautiful and well-molded girl. . . . Her body was slender but not frail, and she carried herself with a suggestion of disciplined strength. He decided quickly that she didn't wear a girdle and could get along without a bra and not sag or lump all over the place."<sup>11</sup> Men are, as it were, permanently aroused, and not only look with desire, but also look like they desire. In an episode of the not normally risqué *Lux Radio Theatre*, Steve (William Powell) looks at his wife, Susan (Hedy Lamarr), in their bedroom, lights off. "You shouldn't be allowed to stand in the moonlight like that," says Steve. "It ought to be against the law, like other strong drugs."<sup>12</sup> But this sensuously romantic moment is interrupted by a relative knocking at the door. The intruding aunt says to Steve, "You look funny; are you all right?" This remark can only imply that when Steve looked at his wife (played by Hedy Lamarr, after all), his looking changed his looks. He looks "funny" because desire is written all over his face. The intruding aunt may not get it, but everyone in the audience does, because everyone understands that male sexual desire is both acceptable and overt.

As counterpart to this army of desiring men are a chorus line of sexualized females trained to consider themselves as both models and wives. Sexualized women are everywhere in 1940s popular culture, usually with a man's eye trained on them. The female body is scrutinized and compartmentalized by every radio comedian, psychologist, marriage counselor, gossip columnist, and advertisement. This is the decade of the female pinup, which bolsters the soldier in his wartime quarters and even appears on the side of his bomber. This is the decade of the paperback novel, whose voluptuous covers stage an escalating competition for the wandering eyes of the bookstand consumer. Radio comedians such as Bob Hope, Jimmy Durante, Groucho Marx, and even Harold Peary ("The Great Gildersleeve") fill their routines with double entendres, anecdotes about women-chasing, and overt leering. Hit songs such as "Strip Polka" (1942) and "Huggin' and Chalkin'" (1947, where the male singer uses measuring tape to keep track of his immense beloved) extends female display and male surveillance into the musical realm. *Billboard* magazine, "the world's foremost amusement weekly," not only provides industrial statistics for music, movies, and burlesque shows, but it also advertises sexy novelty items such as "Peek-a-Pen" and "Scan-Teez," which both show the drooling male viewer pictures of glamorous "models."<sup>13</sup> Articles and advertisements in women's magazines confirm the nationwide pinup fantasy, thereby confirming in their turn this ideal of men's own making. Ads in *Ladies' Home Journal*, in addition to *Life* and *Time*, methodically devote every feminine hairstyle, lip gloss, skin cream, brassiere, and stocking to a man's appraising gaze. Forties visual culture looks like a male-centered world where men sexually desire women, and where women, accordingly, make themselves sexually desirable to men.

Such a description is no doubt all too familiar. Feminists from Betty Friedan to Laura Mulvey have focused their attention on this phallogentric culture. Feminist critics have looked not only at the eclipsing scale of masculine desire, but also at the consequent whisper of female desire. Hence when Mary Ann Doane seeks out female agency and subjectivity, she calls her book, most instructively, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Jennifer Scanlon's study, *Inarticulate Longings: The "Ladies' Home Journal," Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture*, suggests that in contrast to the fantastically detailed outlines of male desire, female desire will be "inarticulate," less accessible.<sup>15</sup> Feminist critics such as Doane and Scanlon search through an empire of signs built by masculine desire in order to discover female desires not so readily observed.

These important projects can be expanded into 1940s popular culture. Over the course of this book I look at representations of female desire in

movies, radio, comic books, best-selling fiction, music, and popular magazines. An early chapter examines novels about waiting wives on the home front during World War II; how are these women allowed to express sexual desire? Later chapters survey images associated with wolves, wolf-women, and wolfishness in comic strips and animated cartoons. All these ideas have to come from somewhere, and we will see how female heterosexuality is mapped out for young women from magazines for teenagers to college marriage studies textbooks. Film visibly presides over this glamour-obsessed decade, but radio too, although invisible, supplies many instructive models of male and female sexuality. And while female same-sex desire is invisible to the point of nonexistence in 1940s culture, we will work through the representation and evaluation of female homosexuality. Turning between the explosive visible and the suppressed invisible, we examine the ways that the period conceives of the relationship between race and sexuality.

My title deliberately places this investigation in a setting of horror. Female desire has often been rendered monstrous, and 1940s popular culture turns desiring white women into wolf-women, nonwomen, and nonwhite women. As Barbara Creed writes in *The Monstrous Feminine*, such transformations “speak to us more about male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity.”<sup>16</sup> Male authorities, of course, rarely see their own fears, and 1940s sexual discourse often appears in an enlightened, bantering, self-confident light, as if everything were clear. Yet at the same time, sexuality is aligned with the animal, with the primitive, with the wolf. Who will point out the contradictions? From our point of view, the male domination of the sexual universe is a horror show unto itself, and the controlling scientists and leering comedians now seem like scary clowns. But sometimes the period itself can see the sexual violence for what it is. Horror films are prepared to reveal such darkness, and *Cat People* (Tourneur, 1942) presents a perfect reading of the period’s suppression of female desire. Fritz Leiber’s extraordinary horror story, “The Girl with the Hungry Eyes” (1949), not only makes a rare confession of male sexual anxiety (“I know sex can be frightening”), but it also unveils the abyss at the heart of a society that centers its attentions on the beautiful pinup. “I realized that wherever she came from, whatever shaped her, she’s the quintessence of the horror behind the bright billboard.”<sup>17</sup> Since girls with hungry eyes—with intense desire—could so easily turn into panthers or vampires or worse, rendering these women blind or invisible was often easier.

Sometimes the truth comes out, then, but far more often 1940s culture makes certain to render female desire invisible. This book concludes with examples from two brilliant lady phantoms, Ruth Herschberger and

Elizabeth Hawes, both of whom saw how popular culture represented and repressed female sexual desire. Their work is clear, logical, energetic, and often funny, yet contemporary readers had almost no idea what they were doing. Feminist projects were controversial, but identifiable, yet Herschberger's and Hawes's powerful descriptions of female sexual desire went virtually unnoticed because male heterosexual desire provided the dominant focus of sexual discourse. As we will note more than once, psychologists' and philosophers' liberating recognition of human sexual desire always applied to men, not women.

As a representative example of this universalizing tendency, a contemporary summary of the first Kinsey report in 1948 stated: "The picture of man's sexuality, as it emerges from the Kinsey data, confirms Freud's concept of the libido. The universal urge for sex expression cannot be ignored or wished away. It is a force society must recognize."<sup>18</sup> The book from which this quote is taken is "dedicated to the scientists whose studies in human behavior have contributed to the happiness of men," and this is liberating postwar rhetoric. Yet the 1948 Kinsey report studied only men, not women, and everything the commentary has said so far about a "universal urge for sex expression" has also treated men only. The 1940s universe has almost no interest in whether women possess the "urge for sex expression." Hence our retrospective interest in those haunting moments when the lady phantoms speak.

Much excellent work has been published on the sexual desires and behavior of women during the 1940s. John Costello's *Virtue under Fire: How World War II Changed Our Social and Sexual Attitudes* (1986) is one of the earliest discussions of the way that war transformed sexual behavior and morality.<sup>19</sup> Later, more specifically focused studies include Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps during World War II* (1996); Jane Mersky Leder, *Thanks for the Memories: Love, Sex, and World War II* (2006); Marilyn E. Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality during World War II* (2008); and Meghan K. Winchell, *Good Girls, Good Food, Good Fun: The Story of USO Hostesses during World War II* (2008). The period's concern with the sexuality of young women is treated superbly in Susan K. Cahn's *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (2007).<sup>20</sup> All of these splendidly researched books show the factual and experiential contours of female sexual desire within a culture that did its best to obliterate it.

By contrast, my book focuses on the obliterating culture itself. Whereas the historians just mentioned conducted countless interviews in order to find out what people actually did and thought, I interpret selections from

movies, radio shows, comics, newspapers, and novels in order to trace the shape and structures of sexual representation. Just as so many readers were struck by the large gap between idealized prescriptions for sexuality and Alfred Kinsey's more graphic descriptions in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, so too is there a large distance between the reality of female desire as brought to light by historical research and the representations of female desire found in various regions of popular culture. Instead of studying the lived actuality that existed behind the fantasy, this book interprets the ideological dynamics of the cultural fantasy.

Although 1940s culture is in some respects well-travelled terrain, not much academic work moves through the various media simultaneously. Radio scholars tend to study radio, film scholars mostly stick to film, and literary critics tend to write about books, not magazines or newspapers. There are myriad good reasons for these divisions given the many thousands of radio programs, movies, books, magazines, and comic books. The gaps and flaws in my approach will be quite apparent, no doubt, but I pursue my theme across all the major media. Without claiming to have read every book or every magazine, or to have listened to every radio program, cultural analysts of those days thought very comparatively—across the media—and we can do the same thing.

Why study popular culture? Nowadays we can agree that popular culture is as fruitful a field as any for intellectual analysis. But it is worthwhile, nonetheless, to say a few words about why we find ourselves here. In the first place, popular culture serves as a mirror by which we can reflect on our psychological and social identities. Perhaps it should not be this way since we know that a capitalist enterprise is trying to enrich itself by seducing us with dreams and by telling us what our desires are and should be. Yet even knowing this, the thoughtful viewer can sort through the flood of images, not only condemning certain elements, but also finding other aspects useful or energizing. Lisa Ben, creator of the first lesbian magazine, *Vice Versa* (1947–1948), shaped her project around an evaluation of lesbian images in popular culture. As all-around reviewer of everything, she not only discussed high culture novels such as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), but she also looked at relevant contemporary plays, movies, and novels. She evaluated the representation of homosexuality in these works, and recommended to her readers those movies and novels that gave lesbian characters dignity and humanity. In a cultural landscape that hid away lesbian desire ("The Sisterhood may have no badge, its members are unknown"), Lisa Ben was anxious to direct her readers to those rare examples of lesbian visibility where women could see themselves in a positive light.<sup>21</sup> Likewise,



my study seeks not only to critique dehumanizing representations, but also to celebrate characters and ideas that break through the oppressive weight of conventional discourse.

In the 1940s, when methodical studies of popular culture begin to emerge, cultural analysis was often underlined with a sense of ethical condemnation; that is, the investigator of popular culture did not omit a feeling that popular culture remains low culture or superficial culture. Adorno and Horkheimer's "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1944) paints a savage picture of repetition, standardization, and meaninglessness distributed throughout culture in the name of entertainment.<sup>22</sup> Adorno's mode of analysis was not typical for a 1940s American sociologist, but his work was known in the United States and was published alongside other work in the burgeoning discipline of communications. Toward the end of the decade, in the essay "Mass Communications, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action," Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton make a mild form of Adorno's point, arguing that the sheer repetition of popular culture does not assist progressive political action.<sup>23</sup> The next chapter discusses a range of 1940s popular culture critics in order to see how they handle problems of aesthetic and cultural significance. In contrast to figures such as Edmund Wilson and Lionel Trilling, who have little patience for "commercial" literature, Diana Trilling maintains a moral perspective without the patronizing condescension of most of her learned contemporaries. She is open to the possibility that ideas and truths can appear in popular literature, and her book reviews display this openness with exemplary consistency.

The most energetic and lively critical analysis of 1940s popular culture from the period itself is Marshall McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951).<sup>24</sup> Built out of wide-ranging, theoretically self-aware two-page chapters, *The Mechanical Bride* looks positively futuristic and points ahead not only to Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957), but also to American cultural studies today. McLuhan turns his interpretive eye toward—above all—advertisements, but also to pop culture icons (Charlie McCarthy, Tarzan, Walter Winchell, Emily Post), comics, corporate ideology, self-help books, all manner of magazines, and paperback novels. Like the present book, *The Mechanical Bride* insists that we study relationships between apparently disparate parts of culture. Thus the passive radio listener is akin to the passive *Vogue* reader; the statistical authority of sexologist Kinsey is related to that of the pollster Gallup; *Time* magazine, comic books, and book clubs produce similar combinations of sex and violence. When McLuhan jumps from a Book-of-the-Month Club newsletter to the

movie magazine, *Modern Screen*, he authorizes his leap thus: “It is important to grasp the interlocking character of the mechanisms employed in these seemingly separate spheres of writing” (28). As an analytical method for the study of popular culture that last sentence cannot be improved.

*The Mechanical Bride* looks like it should be fun—at least as fun as a modernist artwork by Duchamp—and McLuhan plays with the idea of the book, with what words, pictures, and captions are for. Looking ahead to the way that Jean-Luc Godard denaturalizes the relationship between word and image in his criticism and films, McLuhan underlines the overwhelming visuality of 1940s culture by reproducing numerous images from ads and comic strips, many of which occupy an entire page. Chapters begin with strange surrealist questions (“How Dry I Am?”), which are neither epigraphs for the text nor captions for the pictures, and thus do not emerge from any identifiable point of view. These detachable words show that McLuhan is performing a species of critical modernism inspired not only by sociologists such as David Riesman and anthropologists such as Margaret Mead, but also by modernists such as Mallarmé and Joyce. As McLuhan says: “[Joyce] was very high-brow, very middle-brow, and especially very low-brow. To write his epic of the modern Ulysses he studied all his life the ads, the comics, the pulps, and popular speech” (59). McLuhan likes *Li'l Abner* (“Capp’s vitality suggests that perhaps the obsequies of our popular culture have been prematurely sung” [64]), and with his oddball jokes, colloquial banter, and punchy visual design, he shows himself to be completely at home in the language and look of popular culture.

Yet the whole point of organizing the chaos of popular culture is for McLuhan to defend himself against it. Whereas Joyce made a life-long study of popular culture, 1940s culture simply rains down on man, on “the drowned man” (88). One needs, says McLuhan, to be a “second Ulysses” to survive the “siren onslaught” of the “visceral riot” of popular culture (97). Thus McLuhan urges us to reflect on mass culture in a detached, thoughtful way or be swept away by hallucinatory dreams. “Without the mirror of the mind, nobody can live a human life in the face of our present mechanized dreams” (97). This mass culture home is a “trance world,” an unreal dream, a narcotic, an artificial, tyrannical machine. Although McLuhan is about to invent postmodernism, and although some of his modernist predecessors liked both machines (the futurists) and dreams (the surrealists), he is still just as snobby as any 1950s humanist snob since he is for the natural over the mechanical, for reality over unreality, and for the mind over the body.

In McLuhan’s view, one of the main ways that popular culture drowns man is by sex and sexuality. Modern industrial society is seen as suffering

from a “barrage” of sex imagery, where “sex weariness and sex sluggishness are, in measure at least, both the cause and increasingly the outcome of these campaigns” (99). Many of his contemporaries noticed the sexualized storm around them; McLuhan’s twist is to emphasize the mechanical nature of sex in an industrial age. The “Mechanical Bride” is produced on the “Love-Goddess Assembly line,” and is thus made out of interchangeable body parts—breasts, hips, legs (93). McLuhan wonders how this must feel to an actual woman: “The switch-over from competitive display to personal affection is not easy for the girl” (99). But for the most part McLuhan’s point of view is a man’s point of view, where he wonders how a man can survive the “siren onslaught.” Although some of his observations support a feminist critique of cultural iconography, his goal is not to empathize with women, but to resist deathly machines and numbing dreams through intense and individual thinking. The thoughtful individual must cultivate his “inner resources” in order to “resist the mechanism of mass delirium and collective irrationalism” (144).

McLuhan thus critiques the deluge of commercialized images from the perspective of high culture individualism. His heroes—Siegfried Giedion, James Joyce, Al Capp, Parker Tyler—are chosen eclectically rather than methodologically. McLuhan regularly satirizes the representation of high culture and education by popular culture so that his innovative critique is grounded in the thoughtfulness to which high culture gives rise. But although this high culture thought can see how pernicious ads, bestsellers, and magazines are for both women and men, he is not willing to express his resistance in the form of a collective.

Thus while his analyses of 1940s masculinity and femininity are masterful and complex, McLuhan is still stuck with some very traditional notions about gender. He offers the compelling idea that the war made men threateningly macho (“early in the war we heard the cry, ‘All men are wolves!’”), but that figures like Dagwood and Frank Sinatra provided an antimacho antidote. McLuhan convincingly views the 1940s as offering a variety of male ideals, yet he himself tends to equate masculine with “active” and feminine with “passive.” He calls society a “kept woman” because of its passivity and says that, like an intelligent girl on a date, it must hide its intelligence. Since the whole point of his “active,” “vital” thinking is to overcome the deadly, mechanical trance state, the tendency is to equate thought with the masculine and absence of thought with the feminine. It is the monstrous Medusa of the Mechanical Bride who obstructs the clear thinking of the high-cultured male. McLuhan’s dreamworld is a sexual nightmare, but his individual horror is that he cannot think straight.

In this book I trade McLuhan's cultural snobbery for political snobbery. This is meant to entail a more empathic and collective response. I also perceive a sexual nightmare, but my emphasis is not on the man's bad dream ("I can't think properly"), but on woman's ("I can't exist"). I survey the same artifacts as McLuhan—ads, magazines, radio shows, movie stars, popular books—but I evaluate them according to feminist priorities. In this evaluation of culture, the "high" and "low" have to do with better portraits of women and worse. Just as we need to keep reminding ourselves of how we hurt one another or how we harm the earth, we need to continually remember and reflect on the shape and reach of patriarchal power, even though the general outline may not, at this late date, surprise.

But there are still plenty of surprises. The patriarchal regime is all-encompassing, yet still peopled with incisive pockets of resistance. It surprised me to find not only Herschberger and Hawes, but also numerous other female (and some male) writers who both see and critique the masculinist flood of sexualized culture. The critiques are there already in the 1940s. Some writers need our interpretation to draw out the politics, but some critiques are as clear as any we would make today.

Crossing sometimes rapidly between different media, this book focuses on both the horror and the heroines. I detail how male figures sequester and regulate the female body, but I also collect writers—mostly women—who challenge conventional representations. In early chapters we meet heroines such as Diana Trilling, who is throughout her book reviews interested in underrepresented sexuality, and Hannah Lees, who bravely and realistically shows a war wife whose sexuality cannot be constrained by clichés. Nancy Wilson Ross writes impassioned feminism into her novels and histories, while Jane Rice and C. L. Moore use horror and science fiction to comment on contemporary gender roles. In 1946 Jo Sinclair publishes a best-selling novel that describes a lesbian character who is three-dimensionally human rather than a stereotyped disaster. Geoffrey Gorer, whose work with Margaret Mead helped him to see outside the standard confines of "male" and "female," talks more openly about the place of homosexuality in American culture than most other commentators.

What does it mean to study and interpret female desire in popular culture? Ideally, it means finding places where women speak for themselves, where they become subjects rather than objects. Cynically, it means finding places where the patriarchal fantasy allows women to speak, but only within patriarchal guidelines. Novels written by women sometimes critique conventions around sexuality and sexual expression, and the effect can feel politically liberating. But one realizes as well that a socially constrained

marketplace has to a degree determined what kinds of things can be said, and, of course, to say things does not mean anyone will hear. One can interpret the expression of sexual desire in a literal way, as limited to a relatively cordoned-off section of a single person's psyche. But one can also interpret the expression of sexuality as standing for a major political statement, where to express desire amounts to a political voice and where the absence of such expression amounts to the harshest political silencing. In this book, my interpretations will navigate among most of these positions, as I sometimes will indeed find liberating breakthroughs in sexual expression, while at other times—or even at the same time—I will find that patriarchal ideology has itself generated all the terms in a given arena.

This book usually assumes that female sexual expression is a right akin to a fundamental political right. However it also assumes that there is almost no way out of the sexual apparatus that the patriarchy has built for its own convenience. Freud argued for a subterranean sexuality that decisively organizes our lives. By contrast, 1940s popular culture sexualizes everything quite openly. Radio—although without images—and movies—although overseen by the Hays Code—are still uninterrupted purveyors of the period's overt sexual regime. So when women express sexual desire into this social space, what sexuality means and can mean has already been largely determined. Hence we find so often that when women characters express sexual desire, it comes out sounding like a man, like a “wolfish” man in a system whose terms have already been defined by men. What is easy to hope for, but hard to see, is a female voice or consciousness that has an understanding of sexuality that is more clearly separated from thoughts already provided by men.

The openly visible structure of 1940s sexuality is evidenced in a film such as *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1946). Producer David Selznick spent two years shooting and reshooting a western epic whose scale and ambition was on a par with Selznick's earlier success, *Gone with the Wind* (1939). But when the film was finally released, it ran into endless trouble with moral arbiters such as the National Legion of Decency and numerous women's organizations.<sup>25</sup> Even after Selznick's additions and subtractions, the film still seemed too focused on sexual themes. And even if it did not offend at the level of sex, it seemed aesthetically incomprehensible. For it appeared that Selznick had shot for two years, on an epic scale—with a huge cast of stars and thousands of extras, in spectacularly gorgeous color— all in order to tell a story about sensuousness and lust. As Bosley Crowther wrote in the *New York Times*, despite “some eye-dazzling scenes of wide-open ranching and fronting, all in color of the very best,” what the movie came down

to was a “juvenile slobbering over sex.”<sup>26</sup> What was the connection between the historical vision—the trains, herds, hundreds of men, the desert, and the town—and the erotic drama between “bad son” Lewt McCandles (Gregory Peck) and “half-breed” Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones)? As an integrated aesthetic object that has some idea of what it wants to be, *Duel in the Sun* made not much sense then and makes not much sense now.

But as a cultural reading of the period’s overtly visible sexuality, *Duel in the Sun* provides a spectacular interpretation. 1940s sexuality is open and everywhere, “in the sun,” not hidden in the night, and epic in itself, not limited to any private, walled-off space. Male sexual desire is not sublimated or displaced, but open. The film begins with Pearl dancing in a circle of gazing men, and even when she is not performing most men claim the right to stare at her. When Lewt first sees her, he leers and openly looks her up and down. If we read the film conventionally and morally, Lewt’s overt expressions of lust immediately signal his badness, in contrast to good brother Jesse (Joseph Cotten) and good suitor Sam (Charles Bickford). But if we read Lewt as the powerful, appraising man who displays sexual desire as an uninterrupted norm, then he becomes emblematic of the 1940s patriarchy, which looks out over all cultural space with a measuring and coercive gaze.

The leering eyes and grin of Lewt make him and men like him present before us like ancient Greek dramatic players, who wore erect penises as part of their costumes. Male sexual desire has always been easier to read and confirm than female desire because of the penis, because of the erection. The male erection is visible proof of sexual desire. Lewt and 1940s men, in essence, have erections all the time. Their looks and looking, the way they organize social space, the way they speak, all embody this visibly confirmable desire. Lewt, the armed, leering cowboy, is not a brutal bad man in an otherwise mostly civilized culture; he is instead 1940s masculinity itself. He is not a marginal, dark figure who will eventually be overcome by civilization; instead he is at the center of what matters most for 1940s American culture.

Read in this way, *Duel in the Sun* emblemizes not only overt masculine desire, but female desire as well. The period demands visible readability. Female bodies are read for sexual desirability and availability by the male gaze. Men decide whether women are attractive, and they infer from women’s costumes whether they are available. Female desire does not exist if men cannot see it. How, then, to represent female desire? In *Duel in the Sun*, female sexual desire is represented with the same literal-minded approach that attends the male erection. As the “half-breed” daughter of a sensuously dancing mother and a cultivated but derelict father (Herbert

Marshall), Jennifer Jones plays Pearl Chavez in tawny brownface throughout. In a culture where female sexual desire *others* white women into monsters, her brown face *means* sexual desire. Even though Lewt almost rapes her to begin his courtship, Pearl cannot keep herself from wanting him. Her desire to be a proper, well-behaved good girl is always conquered by her “primitive” Indian self. Again and again her sexual desire returns as we always knew it would; we could see it in her face.

When female sexual desire becomes as visible as a man’s, it often starts to look like a man’s desire and is organized on those terms. If desiring women do not turn into actual monsters, they might turn into men, which can be monstrous enough. Brownfaced Pearl can match leering Lewt in terms of passion, lust, and cruelty. In part, this is because she is as much a man as he is. She rides horses without any feminine delicacy, and she shoots a rifle as accurately as a man. In popular songs like “Pistol Packin’ Mama” (1943) and musicals like *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), 1940s culture registered gender anxiety through women such as these. In the famous final sequence of *Duel in the Sun*, Pearl trails Lewt up into desert rocks and shoots him from hundreds of yards away. When Pearl aims a rifle at her cruel gunslinger lover, she has become every bit the man that he is. As they crawl in the dust at the end—each having mortally wounded the other—the movie executes the couple for their wayward sexual desire with an operatic conclusion that also satisfies the Hays Code. But *Duel in the Sun* has also provided the basic terms of male and female sexual desire in the 1940s. It has shown the overt, coercive nature of male sexual desire, and it has demonstrated that if female sexual desire is visible, it will tend to look like a man’s.<sup>27</sup>

Most of the material for this book is drawn from the years 1940 to 1950; this decade is thus eleven years long. I do not claim that abrupt boundary lines fall through the years 1940 and 1950; in terms of sexual ideology, a *Life* magazine from 1937 does not look radically different from one in 1943, and a film noir from 1949 may feel more or less the same as one from 1953. Some cultural historians would want to emphasize more strongly the division between the war years of the decade’s first half and the postwar recovery of the second half. In what follows, however, I treat the decade as possessing a relatively coherent system of sexual representation and evaluation. I tend to emphasize similarities across media, rather than differences. Although I pay a good deal of attention to the role of race and ethnicity in these cultural representations, most of my examples are drawn from the white mainstream media, from the magazines, radio shows, and movies consumed by the populations of sociologically average Middletown or Elmtown, U.S.A.<sup>28</sup>

What allows us to treat the decade's mainstream sexual culture as a relatively coherent unit? World War II is obviously the major contributor to the presentation of sexuality in the 1940s. Although women do men's jobs in the factories, sexual roles in popular media are not necessarily confused. On the contrary, one could argue that Hollywood films aim to resolve societal confusion by restaging and exaggerating the same plot in which a desiring male gazes upon a female model. Precode Hollywood films treat sexual themes more openly and more fluidly, no doubt, but the 1940s sexual "system" is more systematic precisely because the Hays Code has regularized what is possible. The authentic threat and horror of the war gives rise to greater sexual candor in discourse around sex education and adolescent desire. And whereas businesses have always aimed to sell magazines, movies, and cars with the faces and flesh of pretty girls, the wartime model becomes a kind of angel, a culturally ubiquitous figure of hope and consolation to young men risking their lives. The war gives men the right as never before to openly express sexual desire, and it obliges women like never before to fashion themselves as the glamorous answer to such need.<sup>29</sup>

Chapters that follow will work through more historical specifics. "Spicy" magazines—which look mostly the same from the 1930s to the early 1940s—are put out of business by U.S. postal laws in 1943. Men's magazines such as *Esquire*, *True*, and *Argosy* needed to reinvent themselves to stay within new regulations. The most sexually graphic comics do not fold until the 1950s; we will look at an exemplary jungle comic—*Tiger Girl*—which found a perfect home in the 1940s. Wartime sexual candor made stripping popular again and even respectable; in 1942 a slew of stripping plays hit Broadway.<sup>30</sup> Kathleen Winsor's best-selling novel, *Forever Amber* (1944), changed the sexual range and possibilities of the historical romance. In the same year, *Seventeen* magazine confirmed the invention of the teenage girl. Paperback books are a wartime innovation; as the decade goes on their covers—and sometimes their contents—become more sexually explicit. Popular forms of psychoanalysis reached an authoritative peak during the decade; everyone wondered whether they were sexually "adjusted" or "normal." Marriage—and especially the role of sex in marriage—seems to have fallen into crisis; college courses on marriage reach their statistical height during the 1940s.

Radio, films, and magazines promote a sexual plot in which aggressive men openly pursue glamorous women. This story is the average, everyday story, and it is not just accepted but encouraged. Yet change the outline of this familiar story just a little, and it becomes a tale of monstrosity and horror. Comics and pulp fiction exaggerate characteristics of the plot, but it



is really the same plot. Thus when parents complain about the bloodthirstiness and sensuality of comic books, they think that comics have crossed a line. In protest they put up this sign in the Milwaukee Public Library:

Who are your children's pals?  
Werewolves?  
Sex maniacs?  
Murdering perverts?  
Bloodthirsty bums?<sup>31</sup>

The parents are outraged by gory comics, and the comics are indeed outrageous. But there is a clear continuity between this wolfish, monstrous sexuality and the decade's promoted model for heterosexuality. The gory monster comics have not transgressed boundaries, so much as they have brought forward the violent truth at the heart of the manufactured fantasy of heterosexual desire.