

# Damon R. Young, *Making Sex Public and Other Cinematic Fantasies*

Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

## HALEY HVDSON

Damon R. Young's *Making Sex Public and Other Cinematic Fantasies* (2018) arrived in my mailbox at an idiosyncratic conjunction of transformations of *the* public sphere and *my* sex. In March 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsom and Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti respectively declared their March 2020 "Stay at Home" and "Safer at Home" orders as attempts to mitigate—ultimately, unsuccessfully—the potential collapses of already-failing state and city healthcare systems, simultaneously caused and accelerated by the confluence of ever-expanding austerity regimes of "anti-state state"<sup>1</sup> racial capitalism and the COVID-19 pandemic. The public/private binary felt at once redoubled and eviscerated. On the one hand, presence and participation in the *scenes* of the public sphere, with its differentialized and differentializing interpersonal and structural pleasures and violences, felt unevenly wrenched away amidst lockdowns within the space perhaps most paradigmatic of the fantasy of the private sphere—the home. On the other hand, the promise of the public and the private's constitutive, yet phantasmatic, distinction, if not already eradicated, felt increasingly liquidated by an intensification of the dispossessive forces of housing crises and general precarity exacerbated by an incipient

economic depression. What, now, was the *public* I saw emblazoned across Young's monograph?

And, if the explorations of *Making Sex Public* mobilize, in part, from the historical co-occurrence of "a reinvigorated feminist critique of the private sphere and a new visibility of queer sexuality in the public sphere" (Young 2018, 3), what too now was this *sex*? The question stuck as my body marked six months of hormone replacement therapy with the softening of skin; the budding of breasts; and the sense of the loss of a scopic regime, concomitantly phobic and fetishistic, through which my sex could be made public—or even hold as *sex*. At first glance at the book's chapter structure, I found myself split and sutured in the interstitial space between the "Women" of Part I and the "Criminals" (cis gay men) of Part II. Still, I, and this review more broadly, follow *Making Sex Public* through a syntactical loophole crafted by Young and indeed performative of a central tension—the aesthetic of attempts to resolve the irreducible particularity of sex/ual difference with the "unmarked universalism" (11) of the republican social contract—charted by the book. Whereas Young, for instance, offers what he cheekily terms "a (gay male) analysis" (11), I offer here a reading through a similarly haunting

parenthetical of a (*white trans woman of faggot experience*) that equally toggles presence and absence, public and private.

Young's *Making Sex Public* takes a transatlantic approach to the study of how French and U.S. cinemas after the 1950s were precipitated by and participated in the industrial shifts, historical-political conditions, and latent psychosocial anxieties around "the imaginary convergence of the sexual subject and the political subject of modern liberal democracy" (5). Across the six chapters, Young gently twists key normativities of queer theory, such as the preeminent status of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's closet as the figural "organizing trope of Western sexual power/knowledge" (12), and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's investment of "anonymous or depersonalized queer sexual practices" with "an inherently radical-political valence" (182), through careful aesthetic analysis of an array of filmic genres, forms, and narratives.

*Making Sex Public* turns on representational shifts following "[t]he collapse of the Production Code and the rise of an auteur cinema" (3) that brought figures burdened with the significations of sexual and gender transgression into what Linda Williams terms "on/scene" (2004, 3). The proliferation of cinematic representations of female sexuality and gay sex in the 1960s and 70s coincided with and served as a site for the working out of reinvigorated anxieties around the constitution of a liberal public sphere under the republican social contract. Tracing the metaphoricity of "democracy, liberalism, and the market" (Young 2018, 7) across the work of

philosophers and scholars of gender and sexuality, Young argues that "the way in which French and U.S. cinema makes sex public in the second half of the twentieth century" fantasizes and aestheticizes "a narrative in which ideals of equality and autonomy, introduced into the private domain of sexuality, generate a complex and often contradictory set of imaginaries, with women and queers at their center" (7). While the centering of *fantasy* would seem to lend itself to an analysis driven by a psychoanalysis around which cinema and media studies, as a discipline, has cohered and critiqued, Young instead suggests that the "liberal sexual subject" that takes hold across Roger Vadim's *Barbarella* (1968) to Catherine Breillat's *Une vraie jeune fille* (*A Real Young Girl*) (1976) to John Cameron Mitchell's *Shortbus* (2006) "assumes its significance in relation to concepts of social contract, public sphere, and nation" rather than "psychic interiority" (4). Twinned with the aforementioned reversals of queer theory, *Making Sex Public* will be of interest to readers engaged with pushing and reformulating the genealogies of psychoanalytic theory and queer studies in cinema and media studies. Indeed, for studies of pornography, Young's monograph makes salient how the appearance of sex and sexuality in narrative and non-fictional texts does not hold an inherent attachment to a radical political comportment, but is one that is aesthetically negotiated in the late 20th century.

Young's six chapters are organized into three sections: "Part 1: Women," "Part 2: Criminals," and "Part 3: Citizens." The individual chapters are tightly structured largely around for-

mal analyses of single films alongside their emplotment in film history. While the naming of the titles ostensibly lacks a clear schema by which the figure of the “criminal” becomes largely overdetermined by the “gay man,” and “women” can only stick to “women,” Young’s move takes hold through the oft repeated refrain from Guy Hocquenghem’s 1972 book *Le désir homosexuel* (Homosexual Desire) that “homosexuality haunts the ‘normal world’” (96).

“Chapter 1—Autonomous Pleasures: Bardot, *Barbarella*, and the Liberal Sexual Subject” tracks how two films by Roger Vadim, *Et Dieu... créa la femme* (1956) and *Barbarella* (1968), “gave visual and narrative form to female sexual pleasure, [and] contributed to the consolidation in the 1960s of what John d’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman refer to as a paradigm of ‘sexual liberalism’” (Young 2018, 22). Young unearths an essay on Bardot from Simone de Beauvoir to consider how *Et Dieu* provides a critical augmentation to the understanding of autonomy that is considered central to the constitution of the liberal subject of the republican social contract. For Young, the climactic scene of Bardot’s Juliette feverishly dancing in a jazz club demonstrates how “[t]he unshackling of her sexuality from the stultifying confines of heterosexual coupling does not promise to improve or redeem society but rather to destroy it” (31), “not as nurturer of bonds but as a figure of their destruction” (32). The decade stretch between *Et Dieu* and *Barbarella* allows Young to reflect on how this “fantasy of a jouissance” so threatening to civilizational order has been “now reconciled with social order” (35). Young shows how

Jane Fonda’s *Barbarella*’s “unlimited capacity for pleasure is at once what occasions the possibility of a new world order...and what designates her as a subject without any depth, a subject of (transparent and transactional) pleasure rather than (hermeneutic and unsatisfiable) desire” (48). Both films mark out its configurations of femininity, however, in relation to racialized others: Black musicians of the jazz club in the former, and the racialized and lesbian practitioners of sadomasochistic sexuality on the planet Matmos in the latter. A relative weakness of this book is leaving under-theorized race and whiteness in relationship to the pressures that femininity and queer sexuality newly place on liberal fantasies, but Young’s framework nevertheless remains useful and instructive as a reparative mode for interrogating the prevailing schemas of gender, sexuality, and publicity.” Chapter 2 - Facing the Body in 1975: Catherine Breillat and the Antinomies of Sex” complicates the possibilities of reconciliation of “women” with the liberal sexual subject. In keeping with the smart inversions characteristic of this text, Young torques Mulvey’s formal conceptualization of the male gaze towards what he terms “vaginal vision” (59). Wielding film theory’s treatment of the face as simultaneously universalizing and particularizing alongside the vagina’s relegation as out of view or ob/scene, Young reads Breillat’s *Une vraie jeune fille* (1999) as a film that fleshes out the relationship between the two not in the form of a resolution—as in Agnès Varda’s attempt to overcome the antagonism between the face and vagina in *Réponse de femmes: Notre corps, notre sexe* (1975)—but as a bodily

irreducibility that absconds transcendence. Vaginal vision, then, works not through “differential and oppositional terms (the opposition fullness/lack)” but through “contiguity and analogy” (87, 90). Young’s analysis here will be of interest to researchers of porn insofar as Young provides an ingenious reading of the negativity that inheres in Andrea Dworkin, Catherine McKinnon, and Valerie Solanas alike.

The four following chapters follow a similar contrapuntal approach that helps locate Young’s argument inside the generative tensions that inhere in the constitution of the liberal sexual subject within the republican social contract. Part 2 shifts the figure from that of “women” to the queerness of gay men in its “imaginary conflation...with criminality” (125). “Chapter 3 - The Form of the Social: Heterosexuality and Homo-aesthetics in *Plein soleil*” takes up a perverse push of the necessary equality, the sameness, that makes possible the liberal social sphere; in Young’s terms, “the threat of homosexuality is not that of the unknown outside (or the unfathomable interior) but the fear of differences disappearance, of metastatic sameness” (98). Young’s pursuit of sameness structures in both “Criminal” chapters provides a critical torque to queer theory’s positionality of the queer/male homosexual as ultimate alterity. In Chapter 3, Young traces this threat in the formal and aesthetic doublings of characters Tom Ripley (Alain Delon) and Philippe Greenleaf (Maurice Ronet). This discussion of doubling finds its own double in a rather wonderful progression through William Friedkin’s *Cruising* (1980) from “look-alike men” (148) to *Cruising*’s reminder

“that the condition of the social contract that offers universal equality is the exceptional nonplace, permeating all places, of the contract’s violent enforcing” (149). Indeed, Young’s analysis offers an interesting path to an abolitionist film theory, showing how “*Cruising*’s ingenuity lies in the way it conflates the exceptional position with the agency of the law itself, its very force...incarnated as police officers” (152-53).

The final part “Citizens” builds on Young’s capacity for inventiveness in his discussion of the documentary *Word Is Out: Stories from Some of Our Lives* (1978). Here, Young engages in some significant interventions into Nancy Fraser’s “counterpublics,” as taken up by Michael Warner, and Warner and Berlant’s conception of the structurations of heteronormativity in their canonical essay “Sex in Public” (1998). Here, Young brilliantly pushes the rhetoric of “necessity” from Warner and Berlant to re-think the very terms of radicality and where the radical may take place. Young’s analysis will be of interest to documentary scholars, for he takes up the conventionalized “voice” of documentary and the frame of the “talking head” to reconsider how the film does not merely reproduce a gay liberalism but also “thematizes the fraught encounter between the private subject of sexuality and the public or social world to which she or he is called upon to craft a relation, a relation that is formative” (179). Insofar as *Word Is Out* engages documentary studies, scholars might take an interest in how Young’s text does not examine, but could be mobilized towards, examples of “useful cinema” (Acland and Wasson 2011) as well as

other fictional and non-fictional media like pornography.

Young concludes with a brief epilogue on “Postcinematic Sexuality,” some of which has been further refined in his recent 2019 article “Ironies of Web 2.0” and he plans to take up in his next book project “After the Private Self”. Here, Young bookends his discussion, from Susan Sontag’s claim that cinema is “the art of the twentieth century” (1) to her declaration at the end of the 20th century that cinema is dead (215). Young looks to two unusually paired films—*The Canyons* (dir. Paul Schrader, 2013) and *L’inconnu du lac* (dir. Alain Guiraudie, 2013)—to consider the new articulations of the liberal subject in the post-cinematic and digital 21st century. Here, Young locates “a paradoxical affirmation of a negativity, appearing at the cusp of a media transition from the cinematic to the postcinematic and where the transition is itself in question” (217).

Although *Making Sex Public* was written before the COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant restructurings, Young nevertheless stages an analysis of the aesthetics of cultural and political imaginaries that emerge through the inter-/intra-face of *sex* and *public*, and offers valuable epistemological approaches for critically interrogating, say, rapid Zoomification. While Young’s work focuses largely on film aesthetics, *Making Sex Public* provides epistemological and ethical frameworks for considering digitality and the screen to the legislation of anti-sex work bills that criminalize the work-

places of sex workers off- and online. Young’s *Making Sex Public* is essential reading for those working in queer and feminist cinema studies.

#### Notes

1. I borrow this term from Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore, who define it as “a state that grows on the promise of shrinking”; see, Wilson Gilmore and Gilmore 2008, 152.

#### References

- Acland, Charles R. and Haidee Wasson. 2011. *Useful Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. 1998. “Sex in Public.” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (2): 547-66.
- Gilmore, Ruth Wilson and Craig Gilmore. 2008. “Restating the Obvious.” In *Indefensible Space: The Architecture of the National Insecurity State*, ed. Michael Sorkin. New York: Routledge.
- Hocquenghem, Guy. 1972. *Le Désir Homosexuel*. Paris: Editions Universitaires.
- Williams, Linda. 2004. “Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies On/Scene: An Introduction.” In *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Young, Damon R. 2018. *Making Sex Public and Other Cinematic Fantasies*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2019. “Ironies of Web 2.0.” *Post45* 2. <https://post45.org/2019/05/ironies-of-web-2-0/>.