

*Introduction* ∞ AT FIRST SIGHT: DEFINITIONS,  
CLARIFICATIONS, AND ASSORTED PROLEGOMENA

*I'm uncomfortable generalizing about people who do queer writing and teaching, . . . but some effects do seem widespread. I think many adults (and I am among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged.*

—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies*

When I was ten years old, my grandmother gave me a book about the films of Judy Garland.<sup>1</sup> This book quickly became one of my most cherished possessions, and I would spend countless hours poring over it, scrutinizing each photograph and reading the text so often that I virtually memorized it by heart. I recall that there was one particular part that held a special fascination for me. It was an addendum at the very end of the book about Garland's "number one fan," Wayne Martin. According to the piece, Martin took movie fandom to "new extremes," going so far as to turn his modest-looking apartment into a veritable Garland shrine, which he dubbed "Judyland." My fascination with this particular section came from a pressing sense that Wayne Martin and I shared something more than just an interest in Judy Garland. Though it was never stated, I "recognized" that Martin was gay, in much the same way—and using many of the same hermeneutical signs—that I was coming to "recognize" my own gayness. I could see it, for example, in the carefully structured references to Martin as "strange," "peculiar," "gentle,"

and “lonely.” I could see it in the accompanying photographs of Martin where he stands near but never really with Garland, looking ill-fitting, sidelined, different, an outsider. But more than anything I could see it in the “obsessive,” “fanatical” way Martin took up and lived out his film spectatorship.

I understood very early on that a certain connection existed between an intense, overinvested film spectatorship and male homosexuality. This knowledge came no doubt from numerous sources, but by age ten it was so entrenched that I could instantly interpret Martin’s “movie madness” as a sign of gayness. I was not alone in this knowledge. Those around me were equally privy to it and were thus quick to interpret my own filmic obsessions as a symptom of social and sexual dissonance. Yet despite the conviction that I and others may have had about this correlation between an excessive cinephilia and male homosexuality, it was something that was never formally recognized. Like so many signs of gayness, this was one that, in my childhood at least, could only circulate as an “open secret,” relegated to the shadowy realm of unspoken, if not unspeakable, knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Some recent scholarship has suggested that there may in fact be something “unspeakable” about the figure of the “fan-atical” spectator in general. Henry Jenkins argues that “fandom” functions as “a scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the target of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire.” Because fans “transgress . . . bourgeois taste and disrupt . . . dominant cultural hierarchies,” they are seen “as abnormal and threatening” and must, therefore, “be represented as ‘other,’ . . . held at a distance so [as] . . . not [to] pollute sanctioned culture.”<sup>3</sup> This argument helps draw into sharper focus two of the issues raised by my autobiographical anecdote. The first is how the gay spectator functions as “the figure of a certain discursive unease” in contemporary culture.<sup>4</sup> Like fandom in general, gay spectatorship poses a scandalous affront to dominant sensibilities. It represents a cultural perversion, an abnormal deviation, an outrageous refusal of “appropriate” modes of conduct and taste. In fact, the popularity and marked receptivity of the image of the gay spectator as fan-atic is a direct result of the way male homosexuality and fandom already share fundamental discursive equivalences. Both function as points of otherness, a troubling excess in the social order. Much of the rhetoric of contagion employed to character-

ize the status of the fan, for example, is strikingly similar to that used by dominant discourses to represent male homosexuality. This is one reason why gay spectatorship is so representable/readable in terms of an over-invested fanaticism.

The second issue is that because gay spectatorship signals such a scandalous affront to mainstream sensibilities, it must, to repeat Jenkins's formulation, be "held at a distance so [as] . . . not [to] pollute sanctioned culture"—it must, in other words, be marginalized and contained. As a child reading my book on Judy Garland, I realized that there was a very good reason why the piece on Wayne Martin was relegated to the appendix, and I used its peripheral status as further evidence to surmise that something was "not quite right" about Mr. Martin and his passions. Just as quickly, I learned that the only proper, not to mention safe, place for my own filmic obsessions was in the secretive margins of my private world, far away from public scrutiny and ridicule. The demonizing cast of dominant discursive representations encodes gay spectatorship with a sense of social impropriety, even shamefulness, ensuring that, again like so many other forms of queerness, it remains largely sequestered, repressed, closeted.

The pressure, if not the demand, for the marginalization of gay spectatorship resides in more specialized discourses as well. Academic film theory also promotes a central suppression of gay spectatorial possibilities. Judith Mayne writes:

For the longest time, I think I naively accepted that [film] theorists weren't addressing the kinds of issues I addressed because they weren't personally interested in them—you know a basic liberal approach to the field. But [now] . . . it's obvious that [these silences] . . . are in a sense . . . [the result] of conscious refusals within film theory to acknowledge the lesbian or gay other.<sup>5</sup>

I can still recall the sense of incredulous frustration I experienced when, as an undergraduate student, I first came to film studies with the hopeful expectation of having my queer cinematic desires and pleasures accounted for. What I found instead was a complex of critical discourses that informed me, however eruditely, that those desires were once again unrepresentable, those pleasures unknowable. In addition to being disappointed, I was extremely perplexed, because much of the work I was read-

ing—indeed, much of the work that has dominated film theory for the better part of the past three decades—was explicitly concerned with the interrelations between cinema and sexuality, analyzing how and why the former functions as a privileged forum for the production, incitement, and regulation of the latter. However, because this work was, almost to a critic, cast and recast in emphatically heterocentrist terms, it effectively excluded questions of the interrelations between homosexuality and film. Whether it was Raymond Bellour declaring that the heterosexual couple “organizes, indeed constitutes, the classical American cinema as a whole,” or Laura Mulvey asserting that cinema enforces a heterosexual masculinization of spectatorship, “regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real live movie-goer,” the message was the same: heterosexuality is the inalienable condition and effect of film, and everything else must be disallowed.<sup>6</sup> As far as film theory was concerned, gay spectatorship was all but a conceptual impossibility.

Ironically, even the little work available in film studies that has attempted to address issues of homosexuality and film has tended to close off with equal dogmatism questions of gay spectatorial pleasure. Until recently, most of this work was situated within certain political traditions of representational analysis, aimed primarily at identifying and castigating the deformative effects of Hollywood’s heterocentric agenda on filmic constructions of homosexuality. The resulting theory of cinematic homophobia has been of undoubted critical value, but with its exhaustive taxonomies of pernicious stereotypes and its impassioned diatribes against an allegedly universal filmic heterocentrism, it has effectively marginalized gay spectatorial desires out of existence. “In decrying Hollywood homophobia,” writes Ellis Hanson, this work concerns itself “with only one gaze: the ubiquitous, prefabricated, gullible, voyeuristic gaze of homophobia. . . . Meanwhile, our own pleasure, that elusive gaze of delight, is left curiously undertheorized and at times inadmissible.”<sup>7</sup> How can one conceive, let alone account for, an active or pleasurable gay spectatorship when mainstream cinema is deemed to be, as one of the more popular and broadly influential works of this tradition puts it, a wholly homophobic enterprise “incapable of giving [gays and lesbians] the kinds of films that truly touch their lives and experiences?”<sup>8</sup> What does this say—indeed, what can it say—about the many gays and lesbians, myself included, who have not only had Hollywood cinema “touch

their lives” but have made it an integral, even foundational, component of those lives, and whose most intense and pleasurable experiences have often been provided by the very films that this critical work seeks so vehemently to condemn?

Recent work has, however, increasingly challenged the occlusion of gay and lesbian spectatorships in film theory and criticism. Some writers have started to insist on not only the possibility but the validity of gay/lesbian/queer spectatorship as a formation of cinematic reception and a category of critical analysis. Although they frequently write from divergent theoretical positions and employ different methodological approaches, these critics agree that, given the centrality of sexual difference, subjectivity, and identification to theories of spectatorship, the question of the role of *homosexual* difference, subjectivity, and identification is vital. As the editors of one recent collection put it, it is high time to “challeng[e] cultural readings which overlook the dynamic of sexual preference . . . [and] explor[e] how lesbians and gay men might position themselves as spectators of popular culture.”<sup>9</sup> Much of the work proceeds from the relatively simple but critically indispensable proposition that mainstream cinema and its receptions are substantially more polyvalent and capacious than film studies has traditionally seemed prepared to acknowledge. Although Hollywood’s role as an institution of heteronormativity is indisputable and its representational strategies of homophobic abuse glaringly evident, this in no way exhausts the vast range of cinema’s signifying effects or the dynamic ways in which it is often used and interpreted within the contexts of gay and lesbian reception. As Ellis Hanson asserts with delightful camp flourish, “Hollywood, despite its history of censorship and its pretense to heterocentrism, is one of the queerest institutions ever invented.”<sup>10</sup>

This study is intended to contribute to and develop this nascent (counter)tradition of queer spectatorial studies. In this book I explore one central question: How is cinematic spectatorship articulated, practiced, and experienced in the contexts of gay male subjectivity? I argue that the cultural, historical, and psychic frameworks of gay subjectivity furnish gay-identifying spectators with certain positions and references that fundamentally inflect their cinematic engagements. In particular, the psychocultural specificities of gay subjectivity motivate gay spectators to forge distinctive investments in and readings of cinematic texts. In short,

I argue that gay identification functions as a “difference that makes a difference” in filmic reception, and it is possible, therefore, to speak of gay spectatorship as a specific—if inevitably complex and contingent—configuration of cinematic meaning production and exchange.

Such a project is fraught with epistemological dangers and vulnerabilities. The very notion of gay spectatorship may seem to many theoretically misguided and epistemologically indefensible. To adapt an argument mounted by Diana Fuss in relation to notions of female spectatorship: is it really possible to “speak so simply of [‘gay male spectatorship,’ ‘gay subjectivity’] as if these categories were not transgressed, not already constituted by other axes of difference (class, culture, ethnicity, nationality . . .)? Moreover, are our reading responses really so easily predictable, so readily interpretable?”<sup>11</sup> Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman clearly think not. They argue that the notion of gay spectatorship is rooted in and promotes the unacceptably “essentialist idea that relations of looking are determined by the biological sex of the individual/s you choose to fornicate with” and that it therefore reduces the multiple differences of spectatorship to the single issue of sexuality. “It seems far too simplistic,” they assert, “to argue that who you sleep with may determine how you identify with cinematic images.”<sup>12</sup>

Gayness or homosexuality is, however, much more than just a question of “who you sleep with.” In a culture in which, as Foucault has famously demonstrated, sexuality is deployed as the privileged locus of individual truth and knowledge, homosexuality has assumed a veritable excess of social significances, an ever expanding range of meanings and effects that exceed those of simple sexual acts. Indeed, the injunction enforced by modern Western cultures to “place ourselves under” and know ourselves through “the sign of sex” means that, again as Foucault has demonstrated, homosexuality operates as the grounds for a specification of identities and that it takes on therefore all the various capacities and properties this entails.<sup>13</sup> To identify as homosexual is to be situated in a particular network of sociodiscursive relations that, though undeniably complex and multivalent, occasions specific, if not specified, identity effects. Homosexuality thus functions in modern Western cultures as what Teresa de Lauretis terms “a sociosymbolic form,” “a form of psychosocial subjectivity that entails a different production of reference and meaning.”<sup>14</sup> It is within this context that I place the claim for a notion of gay spectatorship as a

particular configuration of cinematic reading relations. If gay-identifying subjects inhabit different sites or frames of psychosocial discursivity, then this will affect processes of meaning production and exchange in certain ways. As a site of subjective specification, homosexuality provides identifications, desires, and knowledges that, though not entirely predictable or even knowable, make for specific forms of cinematic engagement and reading.

This may seem simply to be gilding the lily. Is not the crux of the problem precisely the deployment of homosexuality as the grounds for a specification of identity? By assuming and asserting the category of gay identity, am I not simply buying into a dominant discursive system of sexual personhood that enforces an essentializing and, therefore, oppressive binarism of hetero/homo sexual definition? This is the pith of the argument mounted by Evans and Gamman in their critique of theories of gay reception referred to above, in which notions of gay and lesbian spectatorship and the categories of gay and lesbian identity on which such notions depend are defined as “essentialist fictions” that need to be recognized and repudiated as “instruments of regulatory regimes.”<sup>15</sup>

Apart from its problematical supposition that sexual identities are optional, this type of argument assumes that gay identity is always represented and mobilized in an essentializing and, thus, disabling manner. Yet the idea of gay identity is rarely quite so homogeneous or self-identical, referencing and producing diverse, even contradictory meanings and effects. In fact, formations of gay identity are largely taken up and articulated contradictorily by gay subjects themselves. Jonathan Keane argues that

excluded identities such as gays, blacks and lesbians . . . do not often live in an Imaginary realm of coherence but are more likely to be only too painfully aware of identity as incoherence. . . . those marginalized by cultural hegemony find it almost impossible to experience identity as self-presence, as they are constantly positioned by that culture as its negative element while they are simultaneously constructed through other discourses to aim for mastery and positivity.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly, my understanding and mobilization of gay identity in this study is not a unified, stable essence but a complicated field of subjective articulation that is provisional and shifting. For this reason, I prefer to

use the term *gay subjectivity* rather than *gay identity*, for it imparts a greater sense of conceptual heterogeneity. The term *subjectivity* encompasses a much broader definitional sweep than *identity*, taking in the full range of subjective articulations across the social, the cultural, and the psychic. As Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis argue, the term *subjectivity* “suggests a whole range of determinations (social, political, linguistic, ideological, psychological) that intersect to define it. Refusing the notion of self as a stable entity, . . . subject[ivity] implies a process of construction by signifying practices that are both unconscious and culturally specific.”<sup>17</sup>

In particular, because of its psychoanalytic provenance, the term *subjectivity* helps restore the psychic as an integral component of gay identity formations. In discussions of homosexual definition the notion of gay identity is often used as little more than an expanded version of the sociological concept of role. This is particularly true of neo-Foucauldian social constructionist paradigms, which have in many ways come to dominate discussions of gay identity and which, with their central emphasis on reading homosexuality as an effect of sociodiscursive disciplinarity, have made the social the primary if not exclusive field of homosexual articulation. I write from the conviction, however, that homosexual definition is played out not simply at the level of social and institutional discursivity but at the level of psychic organization as well and that this must be acknowledged in critical analyses. Given the centrality of issues of desire to the definitions, representations, and performances of gay subjectivities, any analysis that ignores the role and specificity of the psychic in and for those subjectivities is both conceptually impoverished and analytically restricted.

A critical reassertion of the psychic dimensions of gay subjectivities also resists any simplistic reification of gayness as a fixed essence, for it forces a recognition of the fundamental heterogeneity of psychic life and the destabilizing presence of the unconscious in all subjective forms. As Jacqueline Rose writes, “The unconscious constantly reveals the ‘failure’ of identity. Because there is no continuity of psychic life, so there is no stability of sexual identity, no position . . . which is ever simply achieved.”<sup>18</sup> This does not mean, as sometimes is suggested, that sexual identity is, from the point of view of psychoanalysis, an impossible fiction that must be abjured. Some form of identity or structuration is crucial



for a psychosexual subject to exist in the first place; without it there could only be psychosis or what Jane Gallop refers to as “the oceanic passivity of undifferentiation.”<sup>19</sup> However, the conflicting dynamics of psychic life and the destabilizations of the unconscious mean that, to repeat Rose’s formulation, “no position . . . is ever *simply* achieved.” For my discussion, this means that the “gayness” of gay subjectivity is never self-identical or absolute but, rather, polyvalent, conditional, and mobile.

Because the concept of subjectivity encompasses a greater degree of relational diversity, its deployment as a definitional frame for discussions of gay identity-formations foregrounds the irreducible heterogeneity of those formations. No gay subject—or, for that matter, no gay spectator—is ever *just* gay; that gayness is always cut across and inflected both by the heterogeneous fluidity of unconscious desire and by the real world dissymmetries of race, ethnicity, class, age, nationality, and so forth. The notion of gay subjectivity helps accommodate a recognition of this by insisting on the fundamentally contingent nature of (homo)sexual identifications and thus referring those identifications to the full range of competing discourses, psychic and social, through which individual, material subjectivities are always produced and experienced.

I am aware, however, that to speak of *gay* subjectivity or *gay* spectatorship as I do is still to claim a certain coherence for gayness as a critical term. No matter how much I may seek to complicate, pluralize, attenuate its definition, the very concept of gay subjectivity/gay spectatorship means that I am still effecting, even if only implicitly, a conceptual reification of gayness as a separable category, still expropriating gayness from the wider field of differences within which subjectivity and spectatorship are always located. In that respect, the project I propose here is still open to charges of abstraction and essentialism. To a certain extent, this is unavoidable, for there is, as Mary Ann Doane notes, no “realm in the production of knowledge which escapes abstraction.”<sup>20</sup> In the case of critical writing, a degree of abstraction is both necessary and desirable. To write critically and productively, one must be able to generalize, to identify patterns and typicalities, and to construct heuristic models with which to read and make sense of these things. The theoretical construction of gayness as a relatively coherent and therefore potentially abstracted category is itself a response to and acknowledgment of the specificity and productivity of gayness as a structuring term. Homosexuality *is* a central

determining paradigm in modern, Western cultures, and many subjects articulate their desires, make their meanings, and live their lives, whether in part or whole, whether centrally or peripherally, through it. Thus it is valid to speak of gayness as an identifiable category of subjective organization, to recognize that it has a specific force and function, even if its realization in material contexts, its performance so to speak, will always be contingent and variable.

Furthermore, the production of a formal figure of gay spectatorship can be a powerful and enabling strategy to combat heteronormative presumption, and this more than justifies any putative risks of abstraction and essentialism. Not only does the construction of a theoretical image of gay spectatorship refuse the pervasive demands to silence and marginality that circulate around the very idea of gay spectatorship in dominant culture, making visible the invisible, speaking the unspeakable; such a theory also provides important opportunities for the production of new, gay-identified sites of discourse and knowledge. An argument mounted by D. N. Rodowick in reference to the concept of female spectatorship has equal significance for a theorization of gay spectatorship:

The very question of the female spectator presents certain political and theoretical risks. Even when employed in arguments that critique . . . essentialism, locating a female spectatorship always implies an ontology. The singularity and self-identity of this concept—the female spectator—can only be preserved by a binary logic that opposes it to what it is not or what it must negate. . . . There are, however, advantages to envisioning “femaleness” as an ontological category, best represented by Gayatri Spivak’s suggestion that feminist theory might have to accept the risk of essentialism. . . . I take this to mean that it is incumbent upon feminist theory—and in fact all critiques of domination—to attempt to *create* new positions of interpretation, meaning, desire and subjectivity even while acknowledging they sometimes stand on shaky philosophical legs.<sup>21</sup>

It is, however, also incumbent on “critiques of domination” to make their shaky philosophical legs as stable as possible. Gayness may be a central category in Western technologies of the subject, and the deployment of gayness by gay-identifying subjects may also be a potent tactic of

antiheteronormativity, but unproblematized reifications of gayness as an overly homogenizing abstraction only reinscribe further forms of discursive domination and exclusion. Any notion of gay subjectivity/spectatorship is at best a speculative fiction, a heuristic construct designed to help us think about the nature of gay cinematic receptions. As Rodowick puts it: “Despite the achievements of psychoanalytic film theory and textual analysis in the past twenty years, I would insist that all claims made about processes of identification [and reading] in actual spectators, powerful and important as they may be, are speculative. . . . To assert that film theory describes positions of identification that are ultimately undecidable with respect to any given spectator is . . . an indispensable political *a priori*” (269).

To keep this sense of “ultimate undecidability” at the forefront of this book, I frame my theorizations of gay spectatorships within the psychoanalytic concept of “the fantasmatic.” As I argue in the next chapter, the fantasmatic is a post-Lacanian concept that refers to the variable networks of fantasy and desire that subtend and structure subjectivity. Different subjectivities are sites of different fantasmatic organizations. Thus one may speak of the gay male fantasmatic, meaning the various formations of psychocultural fantasy, desire, and identification specific to and constitutive of male homosexual subjectivities. In terms of the present discussion, the organizational effects of the fantasmatic are understood in psychoanalysis to be simultaneously structural and contingent. The fantasmatic functions not only structurally, in that it positions the subject within preexisting paradigms of desire and meaning, but also contingently, in that the realization of fantasmatic imperatives always depends on the determinate conditions of the subject’s cultural and historical particularity. In other words, the fantasmatic may be the site of general, transindividual formations of fantasy and desire, but how those formations are actually played out at the punctual level of the subject is always directly determined/shaped by the full range of that subject’s material individuality.

In relation to gay spectatorship, the fantasmatic provides a conceptual framework within which to speculate about possible formations of gay subjective and spectatorial specificity while avowing the contingency of those formations. It forces a recognition that any potential features of

gay spectatorial specificity identified at the structural level may be articulated by individual spectators—if in fact they are at all—in diverse and often unpredictable ways.

My project here is primarily theoretical. To open up a space within film theory for the construction and exploration of questions of gay spectatorial specificity, I engage with and interrogate critical paradigms that have been central to discussions of spectatorship in film studies. In particular, I work across what I see as the three major approaches to spectatorship in contemporary film theory: the text-centered readings of apparatus theory; the contextual models of social spectatorship drawn from cultural studies; and recent cine-psychoanalytic theories of spectatorial fantasy. Although I ultimately argue for a fantasy-based model of gay spectatorship, I also assert that these approaches share important points of continuity and overlap and that it is possible therefore to use arguments and insights from all three. I champion the fantasy-based model because it accommodates readings of spectatorship across the interrelated registers of institutional, textual, social, and psychic determination.

My mobilization of fantasy theory as a governing paradigm, does, however, entail an undeniable prioritization of psychoanalysis as an epistemological and methodological approach to questions of gay spectatorship. This is both willful and, I hope, strategic. I believe that psychoanalysis provides an unparalleled framework within which to pursue questions of subjectivity, sexuality, and cultural identification. In particular, for gay and lesbian theory, psychoanalysis can be invaluable for analyzing homosexual desires and their complex effects on both psychic and social life. I am, nevertheless, cognizant that psychoanalysis is plagued with pitfalls, that, as its critics proclaim, it is frequently universalizing, ahistorical, and reductive. I am also well aware that psychoanalysis is, particularly in its institutionalized forms, a powerful tool of heteronormativity and that its instrumental role in producing and promoting pathological readings of homosexuality cannot be ignored. For some, this all but invalidates the utility of psychoanalysis for any gay-identified critical enterprise. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, has mounted a sustained and broadly influential critique of psychoanalysis in her work as so “profoundly . . . shaped by homophobic and heterosexist assumptions and histories” to be irreparably “damaged at its origin.”<sup>22</sup> More recently—and in specific re-

lation to film—Ellis Hanson explicitly questions the efficacy of psychoanalysis as a framework for analyses of gay spectatorships. Although he concedes that psychoanalytic theory might provide a “nuanced analysis of queer desire and spectatorship,” its heteronormative presumptions pose “severe problems,” rendering it incapable of thinking gay spectatorial specificity outside the dominant fictions of heterosexuality. Because “the definition of homosexuality in [psychoanalysis] almost always relies on dubious Freudian conceptions of same-sex desire as a narcissistic crisis in gender identification, . . . homosexuality becomes the return, or perhaps merely the persistence, of the repressed in an otherwise anxious and heterosexual narrative.”<sup>23</sup> This is an important critique and, to the extent that it advocates a cautious reflexiveness for gay deployments of psychoanalysis, it is well taken. I am not so certain, however, that the alleged heteronormativity of psychoanalysis nullifies its use-value for gay/lesbian or queer theory.

If psychoanalysis does promote a critical imaging of sexuality in which certain heterosexual fictions—sexual difference, oedipality, phallic desire, to cite the usual suspects—are accorded theoretical centrality, one must ask how much of this is heterocentric prejudice and how much simply analytic recognition of the importance these fictions assume in contemporary culture. This hoary issue of “description versus prescription” has long been bandied about in relation to psychoanalysis. Although the debate is tired and, in many respects, irresolvable, it remains vitally significant. For better or worse, heterosexuality is encoded in almost all the dominant discourses and institutions of contemporary Western culture as the normative ideal, which affects all forms of human desire, homosexuality included. To the extent that psychoanalysis theorizes the psychocultural ramifications of this, it offers an important critical mapping of how the social imperatives of heterocentrism are translated—or not—into a psychic reality for the sexual subject. For gay or queer sexualities, the psychoanalytic referral of these to cultural scenarios of compulsory heterosexuality is simply a recognition of the fact that these sexualities never occur outside the sociosymbolic networks through which they are constructed. All of us learn to desire from within the narratives of sexuality made available by the culture at large, which is not to say that desire is simply preprogrammed but that it is psychoculturally determined and governed. Homosexualities undoubtedly can produce and

pursue possibilities of desire not contained or even understood by the available scripts of heterosexuality—and psychoanalysis avers as much, addressing both the particularities and the complexities of homosexuality as a dynamic configuration of desire—but this is never absolute, and it would be the worst type of naive utopianism to assume a homosexuality somehow outside or free from the dominant psychosocial discourses (discourses of compulsory heterosexuality, gender, oedipality, and so forth) that frame and regulate, however variably, the field of contemporary sexuality.

It would also be erroneous to assume that psychoanalysis simply trades on and installs an unproblematical heteronormativity. The foundational psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious necessarily undercuts any assumption of a straightforward or absolute sexual fixity. Because sexuality is always understood in psychoanalysis in relation to the unconscious, it cannot be assumed as coherent or guaranteed but as shifting and mobile, constantly prone to lapses, excesses, and conflicting impulses. The centrality of the unconscious to sexuality means that, as Freud contends in the “Three Essays,” all desire is ultimately perverse, irreducible to either conscious aim, zone, or object-choice. The most resolutely heterosexual-identified subject is, according to Freud, “capable of making a homosexual object-choice and ha[s] in fact made one in [the] unconscious,” just as the most resolutely gay-identified subject could and would incorporate important unconscious heterosexual cathexes.<sup>24</sup> By thus insisting on the inherent “queerness” and wayward heterogeneity of desire, psychoanalysis is in many respects profoundly antinormative, pitting sexuality against the normalizing efforts of sociosymbolic discourses of identity, even as it also recognizes and theorizes the juridical operations and psychic effects of those discourses. Therein can be identified perhaps both the difficult radicalism of psychoanalysis and its extraordinary fecundity for gay criticism. “In its understanding of sexuality as unconscious,” writes Tim Dean, psychoanalytic theory “invalidates the distinction between normal and pathological” and “reveals sexuality in its full complexity, opening up queer possibilities.”<sup>25</sup>

Undeniably, profound dynamics of heteronormative conservatism course through the psychoanalytic project, and histories of homophobia have plagued—and, in some cases, continue to plague—psychoanalytic discourse and practice. Nonetheless, psychoanalysis is never entirely co-

incident with or reducible to these dynamics and histories, and the values of psychoanalytic theory are, in the words of Stephen Heath, “vastly more important than the positions [it is] led to develop, the worst stereotypes [it] grotesquely rejoins and repeats.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, though aware of its many failings and dangers, I remain committed in this study to the epistemological value and political worth of psychoanalysis and use it—carefully, respectfully, and, I hope, productively—as a strategic tool to theorize gay spectatorial possibilities.

It has become almost mandatory to preface discussions of gay issues with a brief clarification of terminology. It frequently goes along the lines of: “I use *homosexual* to refer to mainstream representations, *gay* to refer to politicized, self-identified representations, and *queer* to refer to everything that exceeds these two.” I am not quite so systematic, however, in my writing. I tend to use all three terms in different ways. In some contexts, I do use *homosexual* to refer to hegemonic or otherwise traditional definitions, *gay* to refer to modern or subcultural definitions, and *queer* to refer to wider notions of antiheteronormative desire; yet in others, I use the three terms interchangeably, almost as synonyms. In part, this is a result of a need for stylistic variety—there are only so many times you can use the same word in the one paragraph. But it is also a result of a very real desire to acknowledge and hopefully replicate the sense of definitional heterogeneity that I argued earlier was vital for a reasoned analysis of gay subjectivities and/or spectatorships. By shifting references between gay, homosexual, and, sometimes, queer, I hope to avoid any oversimplified stabilization of these terms while imparting a sense of how “gay subjectivity”—or indeed any form of subjectivity—necessarily exceeds the limits of its categorization.

This is, of course, precisely what is claimed for the notion of queer. My own response to queer tends to be rather ambivalent, however, and this comes through in my use of the term. When I first started researching this book, queer was more-or-less in its infancy. Over the past few years, though, it has developed at a breathtaking rate. One has only to look at the explosion of books, articles, and even university courses with the term *queer* in their titles to evidence the meteoric rise of queer as a category in both academic and popular discourses.<sup>27</sup> Proponents of queer claim it provides a new category “beyond” the limits of received hetero-

sexist notions of gender and sexuality and that it is therefore a strategic term for deconstructing and displacing heteronormativity. They also claim that, because of its mercurial status, queer is a far more inclusive term than gay/lesbian, capable of representing sexual differences other than just homosexual, as well as the social differences that cut across and, in many instances, refigure sexualities. This is an exciting and enabling development, and in this respect I value queer as a term and a concept. However, in its desire to transcend the “limits” of received notions of gay and lesbian identity, queer incurs the possibility of devalorizing and/or displacing gay and lesbian specificity.

One problem I have with queer is that it frequently encourages an acritical pluralism wherein the differences that structure sexual subjectivities are all flattened out into a postmodern vision of democratic pansexuality. Although this may represent an appealing type of libidinal utopianism, it runs the risk of ignoring the specificities of sexual subjectivities, as well as the very real disymmetries of power that govern and work through those subjectivities. Thus, though it certainly provides an important and suggestive paradigm within which to extend the signifying range of homosexualities, speaking to the differences and silences elided in and by received notions of gay and lesbian identity, queer is itself frequently in danger of being reduced to some sort of megalithic ur-category that circumscribes and subsumes the unique particularities of its various constituencies.

I think queer is at its most valuable (and this is largely how I deploy it) when it is seen not as an alternative to gay or lesbian—as a wider umbrella-term that incorporates these categories—but as an adjunct to them, an additional way to reconceive and extend the terms of gay and lesbian sexualities and identities that still respects and upholds the organizational force and political primacy of these terms. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick presents this point with characteristic eloquence when she argues that queer “can never and must never stand outside of the province of gay and lesbian meanings from which it arises. For to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term’s definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself.”<sup>28</sup>

In chapter 1 I explore in detail some of the foundational issues flagged here in the introduction, arguing for a theoretical recognition of the



specificity of gay spectatorship and developing a critical framework for its analysis. Through a series of arguments about identity and sexuality, I develop a broad reading of gay spectatorship as a site of performativity in which the queer spectator articulates and cathects a discourse of gay difference, producing and confirming gay identifications, desires, and meanings. In a survey of existing analyses of gay and lesbian spectatorship, I examine how and where they provide support for such a reading, exploring in particular the use of cultural studies models of social spectatorship. Although their insistence on reading spectatorship as a site of struggle between competing frames of textual and social determination is invaluable for theorizing gay cinematic reception, these models are frequently limited by a prioritization of the social dynamics of spectatorship at the expense of other equally vital dynamics, notably the psychic. As a corrective, I turn to the psychoanalytic concept of fantasy, which has recently been popularized by certain theorists precisely because of its perceived capacity to support a combined sociopsychic reading of spectatorship. In particular, I mobilize the post-Lacanian notion of the fantasmatic, defined as the specific network of libidinal organization that undergirds and determines our psychocultural identities, as an ideal framework for such an exploration. I argue that it is possible to theorize a gay fantasmatic as the network of fantasy and desire that subtends and works through gay subjectivities and that this can then be used as a framework to analyze the processual performativities of gay spectatorship.

Chapter 2 initiates my theoretical exploration of potential exchanges between gay fantasmatic specificity and cinematic spectatorship by focusing on gay subcultural receptions of the Hollywood musical. One aim of this chapter is to establish a model of gay spectatorial reading that may then be developed and complicated in subsequent chapters. In particular, I demonstrate how gay spectators can engage in queer fantasmatic negotiations of mainstream film. I suggest that, in their readings of the Hollywood musical, gay spectators latch on to those points of rupture or excess to which the musical is so spectacularly prone and mobilize them to construct patently queer forms of fantasmatic desire.

Chapter 3 develops this analysis of gay cinematic negotiation further by addressing the celebrated discourse of camp as a particular mode of gay cultural taste widely deployed in gay spectatorships to produce disruptive, antinaturalist readings of mainstream film. In particular, I focus

on gay camp engagements with the excessive female star-image, arguing that such readings subvert heteropatriarchal apparatuses of gender and sexuality. Such readings are both effects of the gay subject's own "experiences" of gender/sexual dissonance as well as an "articulation" of queer psychic ambivalence vis-à-vis normative discourses of (hetero)sexual difference. I pursue this argument through an analysis of gay subcultural readings of a classic Hollywood star, Mae West.

Chapter 4 attempts a slightly more specific analysis of the exchange between gay fantasmatic economies and cinematic reception by focusing on matrocentrism and its potential role in the constitution and performance of gay spectatorships. Psychoanalysis accords a central role to maternal identification in the fantasmatic organization of male homosexualities; this has, however, been largely construed and mobilized in homophobic and misogynous ways. The issue of maternal identification needs to be reclaimed as a potential site for the articulation of gay specificity, and I work through and beyond Freudian theories of mother fixation to theorize the identificatory bonds between gay subjectivities and the maternal. I explore how the maternal may function as a key organizational category in gay spectatorial forms, looking at, for example, gay male fascination with vintage Hollywood film and the gay cult of female star worship as variable configurations of gay male matrocentrism, as well as gay subcultural popularizations of the Hollywood maternal melodrama.

The final chapter addresses gay male relations to paternal desire and phallic masculinity. I argue that gay relations to and uses of masculinity are underscored by a logic of refusal and destabilization and focus on how this can translate into gay cinematic readings. In particular, I concentrate on how gay spectators appropriate and transform some of the figures of masculinity offered by mainstream film. To this end, I look at gay male reconstructions of the cinematic male image as an insistently erotic spectacle and the potential destabilizations this generates for the phallogentric economies of meaning on which mainstream film is based. I also develop an analysis of gay identifications with the cinematic male image, arguing that gay spectators frequently cathect those male images that provide aberrant or marginal types of male gender signification. These arguments are referenced and developed through an ex-

tended case study of gay subcultural engagements with the star-image of Montgomery Clift.

As should be evident from its title, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorships*, this book is essentially an exploration and celebration of desire. Most specifically, it is an attempt to trace and account for the production of gay male spectatorial desire in mainstream cinema. For over a century now, cinema has been an influential “dream factory,” furnishing contemporary cultures with an arena for collective fantasmatic escape and libidinal tutelage. The dazzling images, sounds, and narratives of cinema that entertain, astonish, and seduce us into returning again and again to the dark of the movie house do not merely reveal desire in some sort of simple representational mimesis, they actively teach desire, interpellating us into the psychocultural discourses of sexuality and providing us with a luxuriant lexicon through which to speak and hear our own libidinal utterances. Gay men have been no exceptions to this process. Although mainstream cinema may have studiously sought to excise homosexuality from the screen—at least, in manifest terms—this has not prevented gay-identifying men from mobilizing film as a significant site for the investment and production of their own queer desires, fantasies, and meanings. The aim of this study is to affirm and theorize how this production of gay spectatorial desire can and does occur. It seeks to bring gay spectatorship out from the tenebrous margins to which it has been relegated and provide it with some theoretical recognition and (virtual) existence. Consequently, this book is unavoidably political in design and, I hope, effect. It seeks to make a direct gay intervention into dominant discourse—especially the “discourse” of film studies—and claim a space there for gay spectatorial specificity.

However, as should also be evident from its title, this book is not intended to provide or even aspire to a single model of gay spectatorship. Even if such a model were possible, it would be entirely counterproductive, for it would repeat the exact type of homogenizing universalism that has marginalized critical questions of gay spectatorial specificity for so long. Instead, this book provides speculations, hypotheses, and fictions that address themselves to the possibilities of gay spectatorship. I see and offer this study as a theoretical logbook, a plotting of certain coordinates

across the complex field of gay cinematic reception. On their own or even together as a group, these coordinates do not constitute a definitive overview of that field or exhaust its ever shifting range of potentialities, but they do provide a possible route through it and, I hope, ways to begin to think about the question(s)—and passions—of gay spectatorship.