

WAR AND PERCEPTION

Trudi Tate

Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, tr. Julie Rose, Indiana University Press and British Film Institute, Bloomington and London 1994, £9.95 paperback. John Taylor, *War Photography: Realism in the British Press*, Routledge, London 1991, £12.99 paperback.

'We have all had enough of hearing about the death of God, of man, of art and so on since the nineteenth century', writes Paul Virilio. These imaginary deaths are actually symptoms of another crisis: the loss of faith in perception. No longer do we rely on the evidence of our own eyes. Vision takes place at one remove, as machines do much of our looking for us. And machines spend a lot of time looking *at* us. In the street, in shopping centres, on public transport, even in the local paper shop, we are scrutinised by automatic cameras. And at the same time, we live out a fantasy of seeing everything, of complete knowledge, a 'totalitarian ambition' of omnivoyance (p33). Everything must be investigated, illuminated under bright lights. Virilio locates this development in the French Revolution, a period obsessed with lighting. 'The general public, we know, craved artificial lighting. They wanted lights, city lights, which just involved man illuminating himself' (p35). The public sphere was lit up; the revolution tried to make the private sphere equally visible, through investigation, the secret police, and a terror based on looking. A tragedy, says Virilio, 'brought about by an exaggerated love of light' (p34).

From self-illumination, we have come to live in a culture of surveillance, surrounded by objects which look at us. This produces both comfort and paranoia. Who is it that is watching us? Often there is nobody, just the machine, impersonally recording. The perception of our surroundings is now split between the gaze of the human subject and the gaze of the object (p59).

Lacan, too, argues that it seems as if the world (and its objects) are always looking at you.¹ Virilio criticises Lacan for 'passing prudently from image to language, to the linguistic being' (p23), and for paying too little attention to the function of images. For Virilio, the loss of faith in perception has produced a crisis in our social and psychic organisation. 'In the West', he argues, 'the death of God and the death of art are indissociable'; linked through changes in perception. We are left with '*the zero degree of representation*', fulfilling a prophecy of a thousand years ago: 'If we remove the image, not only Christ but the whole universe disappears' (p17).

Virilio's vision machine is partly real, partly imagined. Much of his discussion refers to what already exists; to changes in the act of looking produced by photography, film, computer-generated images. But the book also strives to

1. Jacques Lacan, 'The Eye and the Gaze', *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, tr Alan Sheridan, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1979, p75.

imagine where this is leading. Virilio quotes Paul Klee's statement, 'Now objects perceive me', and asks: 'What will be the effects, the theoretical and practical consequences for our own "vision of the world" of Paul Klee's intuition's becoming reality?' This is more than simply the 'proliferation of surveillance cameras in public places' of recent years, but a 'doubling of the point of view', shared between subject and object; between person and machine. And this has significant consequences for the very structure of perception, for our understanding of human subjectivity. More than this: we are on the verge, says Virilio, of *synthetic vision*; of the machine itself producing the thing seen.

Although we know that the imagery from video cameras in banks and supermarkets is relayed to a central control-room, although we can guess the presence of security officers, eyes glued to control monitors, with *computer-aided perceptions* – visionics – it is actually impossible to imagine the pattern, to guess the interpretation produced by this sightless vision (p62).

The Vision Machine is an apocalyptic book, compelling if often confusing, and drawing on a fascinating range of historical and theoretical material on the displacement of looking in the twentieth century. Some of the ideas in *The Vision Machine* are set out (rather more clearly) in Virilio's early work, *War and Cinema*.² Much of his argument is based on technical developments in modern warfare, and here his work is most instructive.

Virilio argues that the First World War radically altered the cultural uses of photography. War photography moved into mass production, 'like a factory':

it was not a matter of images now, but of an uninterrupted stream of images, millions of negatives madly trying to embrace on a daily basis the statistical trends of the first great military-industrial conflict (p48).

Aerial photographs were vital in the First World War, though with mixed results, for they could be out of date within hours, and it was not always possible to get new information to the front lines. This was a particular problem for the early tanks, which often relied on aerial photographs for navigation. Photography played a significant part in the development of modern warfare; of organising battle at one remove. And it was equally important in the management of civilian responses to the war, through propaganda. 'Immediately after the war', Virilio argues, 'Britain decided to abandon classic armaments somewhat and to invest in the logistics of perception: in propaganda films, as well as observation, detection and transmission equipment' (p49). After the war, military filming continued and was to become vital in the planning and execution of the next war. Virilio describes this as the 'continuation of the First World War by other means' (p50).

Photography and film have become vital elements of warfare, both for military planners and for the civilian public. British and American

2. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, tr. Patrick Camiller, Verso, London 1989.

photographers made a significant contribution to the defeat of Nazism; 25 years later, photography was instrumental in America's defeat in Vietnam.

Once the military twigged that photographers, steeped in the traditions of the documentary, now lost wars, image hunters were once again removed from combat zones. This is perfectly apparent with the Falklands war, a war that has no images, as well as in Latin America, Pakistan, Lebanon, etc (p56).

Photographers and television workers are now at risk of imprisonment or even murder in many of the world's war zones. In others, they have become, wittingly or not, a valuable part of the military propaganda machine, as we saw (or rather could not see) in the Gulf War of 1991.

John Taylor's book, *War Photography: Realism in the British Press*, looks at the use of newspaper photography from the First World War until the Falklands, with a chapter devoted to press reports on terrorism. Where Virilio's argument is dazzling, if disorganised, Taylor's is well organised and clearly written, if somewhat unadventurous. The book draws upon a limited but useful range of historical material; the chapter on the First World War, for example, places research on popular photography and the family snapshot in the context of well-established arguments about the culture of the war (pp28-34). Taylor summarises current historical views of major wars and gives a concise account of the function of the press in each case.

Like Virilio, Taylor demonstrates that the use of photography transformed the structure of the First World War, though he does not take up the theoretical implications of his material. He notes that the commanders derived much of their knowledge of the war indirectly, through reading photographs, while some journalists saw the war at first hand, watching the battle from a vantage point, 'almost like the generals of old'. However, the journalists could see almost nothing, and were reliant upon official military communiqués for their own reports (p22). This peculiar circularity inverts the whole structure of *seeing* the war. Those who are present see almost nothing; the real view is available only to people miles away, whose looking is done for them, by machines. Taylor documents this remarkable shift; Virilio explores its consequences.

The problems with seeing serve the complex propaganda machine of the time. Journalists who are present at the bloodbath on the first day of the Somme, for example, have no idea what is going on. Their articles, based on misleading military reports, suggest a successful day of battle with light casualties. The appalling suffering of that day is simply rendered invisible (p22). Here and in later wars, the reporting produced the 'truth' of the conflict: photographs were used to endorse the written material in the press, producing a kind of evidence which Taylor suggests seemed incontestable to many readers. Taylor notes that journalistic 'realism' is itself a set of conventions, and he looks at how those conventions determine what is photographed, how the

picture is composed, and how it is used by editors in setting up the page. This is useful, but needs to be argued further. Taylor often assumes that the conventions of realism produce only one meaning, and he makes too little allowance for other meanings and other possible ways of reading. Part of the problem lies in his tendency to treat the population as a unified readership, and to locate oppositional voices outside the discourses of the time. So when he looks at pacifism during the Great War, for example, he refers unquestioningly to 'popular resentment at the actions of pacifists', and writes as if pacifists were somehow not part of the general public. A more persuasive view would take more account of the fact that several different discourses were in circulation at the time. Pacifism might have been a minority position, but it was a potent discourse which seriously challenged popular support for the war; that is why such drastic measures were taken to suppress it.

Similarly, key terms such as 'patriotism' need to be argued through, and not merely assumed as a single, monolithic way of thinking. Taylor's attempts to explain everything at a fairly simple level leaves too much unquestioned, and sometimes leads to some rather troubling statements. In a brief discussion of British anti-Semitism during the Second World War, for example, Taylor argues:

We should remember that the British antagonism towards rich Jews was not translated into death camps. Anti-Semitism was part of a groundswell of hostility towards the rich in general (p65).

'Jews' and 'the rich' become elided in this argument (as also occurred in Nazi propaganda). This airy remark covers up the question of British anti-Semitism, rather than engaging with it. The book would be stronger if it questioned some of its own assumptions, and did not try to explain away complex historical and ideological issues in a few terse sentences.

Taylor makes extensive use of the notion of 'common sense' during various wars, and indicates that a good deal of ideological work – censorship, propaganda, and so forth – was required to keep it afloat. This is a crucial aspect of the book, and needs to be explored further, for it renders the very notion of 'common sense' precarious. How it has been sustained, in various forms, up until the present day, is an ideological question which requires more analysis. As Slavoj Žižek argues, it is not a matter of people not knowing what they do; the real problem is that we know quite well what we are doing, but we do it anyway, pretending that we do not know.³ That is how ideology works, and we need to understand it much better if we are to grasp why we continue to fund and support wars (and sell large quantities of armaments) whilst claiming that we oppose them.

3. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London 1989, pp30-2.

HEROES AND VILLAINS

Sean Nixon

Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes, British Adventure: Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*, Routledge, London 1994, £14.99 paperback, £50.00 cloth
Michael Roper, *Masculinity and the British Organization Man Since 1945*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1994, £25.00 cloth.

The production of powerful public narratives around, on the one hand, the Falklands/Malvinas War and, on the other hand, economic regeneration emerges as a strong framing presence within Graham Dawson's *Soldier Heroes* and Michael Roper's *Masculinity and the British Organization Man*, respectively. Given the importance of both these narratives in giving shape and direction to the Thatcherite project of 'regressive modernisation' in the 1980s, it should not surprise us that they surface in these two fine, scholarly books researched during this period. Both books, however, have, tangentially, something new to tell us about this recent history; namely the way images of national decline, the national past and the revitalisation of the nation were powerfully linked with representations of masculinity within a range of public discourses.

The Falklands/Malvinas War provides the immediate context for Graham Dawson's enquiry into the place of the soldier hero in representations of the imperial and post-imperial British nation. As he notes early on in his account, the starting point for his study was the ambition to make sense of the popular support for the war and the language of Britishness aggressively celebrated within this. In a post-imperial moment, asks Dawson, how could a language of Britishness forged in the heyday of Empire and reaccented by the experience of the Second World War still give shape to the sentiments and sense of identity of a large swathe of the population? In answering this question, what emerges strongly in Dawson's book is the centrality of military men to the modern imagining of the British nation and the resonance of these heroic soldier's tales in more recent invocations of the national past and national greatness: invocations guided – as in the case of Thatcherite discourse – by the ambition to reverse what was simultaneously imagined as a process of national decline.

A version of this story of national decline also emerges strongly in Roper's book. Specifically, it is an account of economic decline and the positing by business historians and other commentators (notably the advocates of enterprise culture) of a decline history. Roper quotes a vociferous exponent of this history – the military historian and conservative revisionist of the post-1945 years, Corelli Barnett – reviewing Martin Weiner's influential book *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit*. What was so striking about Barnett's review, as Roper suggests, was the way Barnett amplified the gendered

metaphors of Weiner's decline history. For Barnett, like Weiner, Britain's economic crisis stemmed from the way the British education system – especially in its elite institutions – had drained the manly virility of England's middle class men and shorn its industry, as a result, of the necessary levels of 'industrial spirit'. Instead, then, of reproducing the aggressive desire for profit and the spirit of enterprise of their fathers, the British education system had turned the sons of the great British entrepreneurs into men disdainful of industry and more interested in pursuing the genteel and cultured lifestyle of the aristocracy. In a prescription which echoed that of the advocates of enterprise culture, the solution for Barnett was the reinstilling of enterprise in the making of 'aggressive and acquisitive capitalists'.

The importance of this decline history for Roper's book concerns the way it impacted on the generation of career managers in UK manufacturing firms who form the focus of his account. In fact, as Roper demonstrates, the gendered narrative of economic decline very pointedly challenged the business culture which the post-war generation of managers he discusses had been forged within and had partly helped to create. Roper argues that this critique of the generation of post-war managers was often made in terms of a battle over competing versions of masculinity and caste by the advocates of enterprise culture; as a struggle to install a superior version of masculinity in business (the creation of new business heroes like Lord Weinstock of GEC, notorious for his ruthless cost-cutting, was prominent in this process).

It is in the context of this critique of post-war British management practices, as well as the declining economic significance of the sectors in which they worked, that the managers interviewed by Roper reflect on their careers. One effect of these conjunctural factors, together with the fact that most of the men interviewed by Roper were either on the edge of retirement or had recently retired, is to produce an 'end of an era' feeling in their accounts. It is these factors, however, which clearly propel the stories these men offer to Roper and which furnish him with a particularly rich set of testimonies from which to piece together the subjective dimensions of the masculinity lived by this group of men.

Roper develops his account through a life-history method. This means, as he notes, encouraging the men (and the few women he interviewed) to largely structure their own stories. From these accounts Roper then draws out, as he puts it, the 'mythical and symbolic aspects of the account as much as its factual content'. At the heart of this form of life-history method deployed by Roper is an attention to the forms of transference operating between interviewer and interviewee. In reflecting on this process, Roper perceptively argues that his own identity – as a young, single Australian graduate student interested in business history – had important consequences for the kinds of accounts produced by the managers. In particular, he notes the way the strong emphasis in his interviewee's stories on the early parts of their careers, and the motifs of youthful omnipotence and freedom from domestic responsibility, were likely to have been shaped in part by what he represented to them.

The central pay-off from using a life-history method for Roper's book is the way it offers up to him a sense of the emotional investments made by these men in their work. This allows him to explore the fractures between the dominant public image of this generation of managers as rational 'organisation men' and their own subjective experience of this identity. What emerges strongly in his account – and it is one of the book's most important arguments – is the way that far from operating as rational managers along the lines set out in the management textbooks they themselves helped pioneer, these men continued to draw on the repertoire of the owner-manager's emotional and intuitive investment in the company. Most important within this, Roper argues, was the persistence of forms of patrimony within organisational culture and its structuring around homosocial desire between men at work.

Roper notes the way his presence in the interview situation brought into play aspects of these forms of desire between men: the dynamics of seduction and succession and forms of aggression and hostility. Drawing on Freud's essay 'Family Romances', Roper gives considerable weight to comments made by all his male interviewees concerning their relationship with mentor figures. He reads these relationships as romances, in which his managers idealised these older men. For Roper this amounted to more than the repetition of father/sons relationships and strongly suggested the organisation of desire and seduction in these relationships. One striking claim that he makes is that these relations between older and younger men might mimic the dynamics of normative heterosexual relations. Underpinning this, he argues, was the importance of family symbolism within the work-environment in mediating relations *between* men.

It was not only in relations between men at work that this family symbolism was important. The marked separation of the spheres of home and work reproduced within management during the formative years of his career managers had profound consequences itself for how managers viewed secretaries. What loomed large amongst the men interviewed by Roper was both the dismissal of the servicing work done by secretaries in comparison to their own heavy-weight contributions and the casting of these functionaries in the role of 'office wives'. Negotiating this particular gendered regime was just one of the problems faced by women attempting to move into management positions within this sector.

If relations of affection and desire operated between men at work and were central, as Roper claims, to the processes of succession within management (and key to the exclusionary practices which faced women attempting to move into management), then relations of aggression also surfaced in relations between men. Succession might not be a smooth process in management. Younger men might decide to 'take on' and aggressively challenge their superiors.

Bright young men armed with new ideas about business were certainly not protectively nurtured. Change in management might just as easily be driven by aggressive unseating of older men by younger men.

A valorisation of an assertive masculinity and toughness was also a distinctive component of the self-representation of the managers interviewed by Roper. This took particular forms. A celebration of what Roper christens a 'cult of toughness' based upon hands-on experience gained in the early years of their careers figured prominently amongst his interviewees. Anxieties about their largely desk-bound and cerebral role in organisations also led these men to emphasise their technical know-how and valorise the products produced by their companies. What also loomed large was the generational experience of national service and its importance in underpinning the sense of superiority with which these men viewed their masculinity when compared to a younger generation of business school trained managers.

A clue to the valorisation of this experience of soldiering by Roper's career managers emerges in Graham Dawson's *Soldier Heroes*. As he states in the introduction, the soldier represents a quintessential and idealised figure of masculinity with deep roots in Western cultural traditions. In his book, Dawson explores the figure of the soldier hero in relation to representations of the British nation and the way in which images of the nation itself were gendered through public representations of great men and within the cultural forms of boy culture. As he notes, soldiers have historically occupied a central place in the representation of English-British national identity – from heroes like Drake and Wolfe to Nelson and Wellington. This link between the imagining of the nation and masculinity was made particularly strongly within the configuration of British identity forged in the period of Empire and it is the legacy of this formation of English-British masculinity which centrally preoccupies Dawson.

What emerges strongly in Dawson's account of these imperial and post-imperial soldier heroes is the way the consolidation of a modern mass media and associated leisure and entertainment industries provided key conditions for the telling and retelling of these heroic soldier's tales. In relation to Dawson's first case study – Sir Henry Havelock, hero of the 1857 relief of Lucknow in the Indian rebellion – it was the speeding up of trans-imperial communications, and with it the new intensified sense of excitement introduced into war reporting, which was a condition for the representation of Havelock as a soldier hero. In Dawson's second case study – T.E. Lawrence – it was the American journalist Lowell Thomas's multi-media events (using slides and film to accompany a lecture) first brought to London in 1919, which constructed the heroic figure of 'Lawrence of Arabia'. In the third case study – an autobiographical reflection on his own childhood investment in the boy culture of war – it is mass produced toys and periodicals which make possible the imaginative playing out of heroic military deeds.

Getting to grips with the process of narration or story-telling involving soldier heroes, and the way the adventure form in particular furnished a specific range of attributes in the figure of the soldier hero, is at the heart of Dawson's account. In an impressively lucid exposition, Dawson draws out the importance of narrative forms for not only the creation of masculinities in widely circulated public forms of culture, but also as an everyday cultural

practice through which (in this instance) men inhabit and compose for themselves a sense of masculinity. Dawson makes good use of the double meaning of the verb 'to compose', emphasising both the way it refers to the creative cultural work of producing or fictioning stories and as signalling the process of subjective composure: the creation of a position for the self which orientates it in relation to the norms of a cultural milieu.

The most striking conceptual presence in Dawson's development of the notions of narrative composition and narrative composure is that of Kleinian psychoanalysis. Dawson mobilises Kleinian concepts to open up the place of phantasy in the processes of cultural production and cultural consumption and to furnish him with a model of the psychic economy underpinning the distribution of figures within narrative compositions. His deployment of Klein is far from doctrinaire and Dawson offers a carefully delimited reading of what Kleinian psychoanalysis can deliver to his analysis. Where this works best is in relation to his analysis of the racialised nature of the distribution of figures within the soldier's tales. In his analysis of the reporting of the relief of Lucknow by the British troops led by Havelock, for example, Dawson emphasises the split within the reporting between the brave heroic Havelock and the abject brutality projected onto the perpetrators of the 'mutiny' and the counterposing of images of innocent Christian women and children with that of maniacal 'cruel Hindus'. These psychic dimensions of the telling of Havelock's story in the press, Dawson argues, in turn drove a series of revenge fantasies in which a highly-charged form of story-telling called for retribution for the 'mutiny' and the reimposition of British rule.

The historical context of each of his three case studies – the era of high Empire, the beginning of the erosion of confidence in the imperial ideal in the post-1918 years and the post-Suez years of decolonisation – throws different light on the narration of the soldier heroes tale for Dawson. An important finding of the book in this regard is the change in the rendering of the soldier hero across these periods. The contrast between the public lives of Havelock and Lawrence is particularly striking. The triumphalist story of Havelock's 'exemplary life' is not mirrored in Lawrence's most ambivalent public representation as the 'Blond Bedouin'. Thus, while the stories of both men are 'imbued with power and imagine the continuing dominance of Britishness' (as Dawson puts it), Lawrence is a different kind of soldier hero to Havelock. Subsequent retellings of the Lawrence myth have made this differentiation in the figure of the soldier hero even clearer.

In his account of the Havelock and Lawrence stories, Dawson concentrates on the process of cultural production. In the third and final section of the book, he turns to a discussion of how these public stories of the soldier hero might be inhabited by real historical men and boys. In exploring the consumption of these soldier tales, Dawson turns to an autobiographical mode of analysis, exploring his own investments in the figure of the soldier hero through an analysis of his childhood participation in the boy culture of war. This section represents some of the most original passages of the book and

certainly for me (as a boy of the *Airfix* generation) is deeply evocative. Drawing strongly on Klein in these sections, Dawson explores the ways in which comics, toys (notably, model soldiers) and childhood war play open up key ways of composing a masculine identity that can be lived in relative psychic comfort.

Dawson ends *Soldier Heroes* by posing a set of questions about how it might be possible to come to terms with the figure of the soldier hero as it resides in both individual and larger collective representations of masculinity and English-British identity. Dawson's central contention is that any adequate strategy of reparation must insist on not simply forgetting or repressing these tales of heroic soldier deeds – whether in the figure of Havelock, Lawrence or boyhood self-imaginings as a soldier hero. Rather, he suggests the need to develop more integrative ways of retelling these stories that would be based around

the heroes of Imperial British adventure [being] brought into dialogue with the colonized peoples whom they once triumphed over, and if the dichotomous narratives of adventure and domestic life could be brought into creative tension and enabled to speak and argue with each other, then it might become possible to acknowledge the historical damage that has accompanied heroic idealization and to readjust our conceptions of others accordingly (p291).

A concern to refigure the divide between domestic life and adventure – in this case between the servicing work performed by wives and secretaries and the adventures played out between men at work – also emerges as a part of the practical politics of masculinity advocated by Roper at the end of his book. Both books propose a politics of masculinity based around the specific configurations of power operating within the cultural forms and institutions they focus upon. In one sense this is a perfectly proper position. It certainly has the advantage over more recent grandiose versions of a politics of masculinity informed by cultural politics. These have tended to produce overblown (and in practice, largely rhetorical) models for transforming masculinity tout court drawn from a reading of the progressive currents in popular culture. However, I remain convinced – in line with this version of sexual politics informed by cultural politics – that it is necessary to go on thinking about a broader based politics of masculinity because (as the tropes of military masculinity in both these books suggest) there are social hegemonies operating across discrete versions of masculinity. Given the arguments, however, about the differentiated nature of masculinity well evidenced in both these books, this broader-based politics cannot be built around only one version of a reconfigured masculinity. Rather it must recognise a gender future based around a plurality of different formations of masculinity and femininity. This ambition to reconfigure the relations between masculinities and between masculinity and femininity, must necessarily retain from cultural politics the concern with representation (like that evidenced in Dawson's injunction to cultural practitioners to reinvent the soldier's tale).

Some clues to the strategies for transforming masculinity, however, might also be found in the model of how one thinks about the relationship between cultural languages and lived identities. I have problems in this regard with the psychoanalytically driven model deployed by both Dawson and Roper. Leaving aside other difficulties with psychoanalysis for social and cultural criticism, it does locate both the persistence of specific cultural identities and the grounds for their transformation within what goes on inside people's heads. This attention to an ideational account of identity formation – the way in which, as Graham Dawson puts it, identities are fashioned in the imagination – fails to recognise the 'dull compunction' of non-ideational techniques and practices through which forms of conduct and subjective composure are produced and reproduced. It is these techniques of the self which provide the conditions for forms of agency and individuation and which are themselves associated with specific technologies of government across a range of compartments of social life. Reconfiguring masculinities, then, needs to lay bare these technologies of government and offers proposals for transforming these governmental technologies. Such a project might have little to do with what is going on in men's heads. Such a project is not advanced by these books. However, in elucidating key problems with contemporary formations of English-British masculinity, both books facilitate the task of thinking beyond the contemporary range of masculine heroes and villains.

1992 – THE YEAR QUEER BROKE

Michael Wyeld

Paul Burston and Colin Richardson (eds), *A Queer Romance – Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture*, Routledge, London 1995; £12.99 paperback. £37.50 cloth.

In the run-up to the London Lesbian and Gay Pride Festival in June of 1992, Britain's *Guardian* newspaper published an article headlined, 'The politics of the new queer'. The tone of the article was simple – picking up on a new trend. Melanie Phillips wrote about queer for *Guardian* readers to digest, 'It's punk, it's anarchic, it's dangerous, it's gesture politics. It's also very confusing.'¹ Who were these queers? And why weren't they happy, for example, that one of Britain's most respected queens, Ian McKellen, had been knighted and had had tea with John Major? What more could they want?

Over the next weeks and months, a variety of media outlets and cultural institutions, including the ICA, *Sight and Sound* magazine and *The Guardian*, as the daily newspaper that includes lesbians and gays more than any other, explored these (seemingly) new ideas. The September 1992 edition of *Sight and Sound* picked up on queer with a twelve page supplement on Queer Cinema² with contributions from Cherry Smyth and B. Ruby Rich, who *The Guardian* noted as 'one of the first to spot the trend'.³ The ICA hosted *The New Queer Cinema Conference* in September of 1992 that featured a talk from film producer Christine Vachon who, again in September of 1992, *The Guardian* called 'American cinema's queen of queer'.⁴

These initial discussions of what queer meant, at least in cinematic terms, defined some of the new players, spokespeople and their interests, but did little to define a history of this new curiosity. Director Dave Markey's 1993 film, *1991 – The Year Punk Broke* went back to 1991, exploring the unparalleled success of a different 'new' phenomenon – grunge – and revealed it as punk's greatest apology, not only because of the popular success of bands like Sonic Youth and Nirvana, but because of a pervasiveness among a certain group of people of the ideas coded in that music. Like that film, *A Queer Romance* goes back – to 1992 – and finds some of the players who helped formulate queer in Britain and allows them a more formal attempt at defining the ways that a new generation of lesbians and gays perceive the world.

The real trouble is that we have rescued a word not allowed to our kind.

Jeannette Winterson⁵

Actor Michael Cashman, a founding member of the lesbian and gay lobby group Stonewall, in the same Melanie Phillips' *Guardian* article, dismissed the

1. *The Guardian*, 23 June 1992, p19.

2. *Sight and Sound*, September 1992.

3. *The Guardian*, 15 September 1992.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Jeannette Winterson, 'The Poetics of Sex' in *Granta 43, Best of Young British Novelists 2*, Granta, London 1993, p318.

6. *The Guardian*, 23
June 1992,

new ideas as he bitched, 'The New Queer politics is a metropolitan phenomenon of media queens.'⁶ And media queens the writers of *A Queer Romance* are. Co-editor Paul Burston is the opinionated, much talked about editor of the gay section of London listings magazine *Time Out*. Likewise Burston's partner in crime, Colin Richardson is the Assistant Editor at *Gay Times*. Both Richardson and Burston are notorious for their public squabbles and fisticuffs with other journalists and writers. The evidence of these squabbles and the alliances formed as a result are apparent in *A Queer Romance*.

7. *The Guardian*, 17
December 1993.

In December of 1993 *The Guardian* ran an article on a new movement within the indie-pop music scene that was getting a lot of attention – queercore – a kind of music that was as important to the gay scene as it was to the music scene.⁷ The article was critical of the lesbian and gay press and in particular *Gay Times* for ignoring queercore. In response Colin Richardson wrote back, 'There's a good article to be written about queercore. Sadly, [*The Guardian's*] was not it.'⁸ Contained within *A Queer Romance* is the article about queercore to which, presumably, Richardson referred. Written by one of queercore's founding dissidents, film-maker Bruce LaBruce, it is an article that is set apart from the remaining contributions to this collection, not because it is any different in quality from the remaining articles, but because of its dissent. Writes LaBruce, 'I don't feel I have a lot in common with a bunch of rich kids with degrees in semiotic theory ... I've never felt comfortable with the new 'queer' movement, never attended a Queer Nation meeting or participated in any marches or protests or actions' (p194).

8. *The Guardian*, 22
December 1993.

So Bruce LaBruce's inclusion in this work was not merely because he is an interesting character with something to say about his fascinating corner of the world or because he fits in with queer ideology, but because of the strange nature of queer theory in Britain at the moment. It is a scene rife with great gossip and some good stories, and the players in this new queer theory, like the characters in some as yet unmade Robert Altman's film, have their histories and their axes to grind. All of this goes to make *A Queer Romance* a trendy, sexy, happening and compelling read. But does it say anything true about the world, or some small section of it?

Obvious to anyone regularly browsing through the more urbane book shops, the last few years has seen an explosion in titles explaining the lesbian and gay bent on the world. Some of the material is less than well thought out, as though publishers had rushed to print to cash in quickly. The recently published book *Queer Noises*, written by John Gill (Cassell, London 1995), presents a rather silly look at lesbians and gays in popular music. Despite the disclaimer on the jacket to the contrary, the entire book is dedicated to outing lesbians and gays involved in the music industry. *Queer Noises* amounts to not much and leaves you thinking, 'who cares?' *A Queer Romance* is thankfully concerned with the more legitimate and interesting question of the ways that lesbians and gay men engage with popular culture despite the fact that acknowledging a lesbian or gay spectator in most film and television is rare.

'Reading mainstream films subversively, lesbians have constructed heroines

who do not officially belong to them, not only by disrupting the authority of the heterosexual male gaze, but also by appropriating the heterosexual woman as a homosexual object,' writes *A Queer Romance* contributor Cherry Smyth (p123). In this most succinct explanation of why lesbians bother to pay the price of a cinema ticket, Cherry Smyth also sums up the project central to this collection. In revealing the existence of a queer gaze most of the contributors use film and television and the framework set out in Laura Mulvey's essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema',⁹ to show how a variety of readings and positions are available to lesbian and gay spectators, allowing them the opportunity to take pleasure in works that don't speak directly to them. The question remains about whether a queer gaze will suffice to do what the contributors to *A Queer Romance* seem to want it to do – unify lesbians and gays in an approach to looking at the world.

9. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1989.

On the one hand these writers want to avoid dictating how the world is read by lesbians or gays, to show that it is possible, for example, that many lesbians enjoy Hollywood cinema, maintaining that there is plurality among a group of people who were once imagined homogeneous. On the other hand there is the desire to formulate a shared reading of popular culture by lesbian or gay spectators. As Cherry Smyth writes (p125):

As we feel freer to be ourselves, the useful organising fiction of the past – that a person's politics could be determined by his or her sexual orientation (or some other salient feature of identity) – no longer serves. We need a new way of thinking about identity, or at least a new application, one that preserves the promise of sexual liberation. It isn't enough to become parallel to straights – we want to obliterate such dichotomies altogether.

So if sexual orientation can't explain a person's politics, why then, according to another of this collection's contributors, Steven Drukman, can it explain why gay men prefer George Michael to Iron Maiden? Or do they? Steven Drukman wants to define how a generalised gay man can watch MTV, which doesn't specifically speak to him, and still enjoy it. In so doing Drukman makes the same assumptions about gay men that the old school gay scene has made – they like Madonna, they don't like heavy metal. Why is it necessary to define out of existence the possibility that there are lesbians and gay men who position themselves as spectators in all sorts of ways to enjoy all sorts of artistic works?

Here is a passage from Drukman's piece:

Although the antics of the [heavy metal] band members are often replete with stroking guitars and inventive uses for the microphone, [heavy metal] videos are not the ideal sit of application for the gay gaze. The reason may lie in the bands' uses of their 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. More often than not, the performers work to subvert the spectator's pleasure, usually through

methods of visual distraction. Often this involves constant cutaways to adoring (usually female) fans in the 'audience', allowing for a shift in gaze to diffuse the one-on-one relationship of MTV spectator and spectacle... (p191)

If it is possible to use this argument to show why gay men don't like these videos, how can he explain how heterosexual women can enjoy them or are they, too, excluded from enjoying these videos? Drukman uses a very limited number of examples to prove this point and has missed a variety of heavy metal, punk and noise music videos that do court the kind of gaze for which he argues. Among those readily memorable are Van Halen's *Pretty Woman*, in which singer David Lee Roth – dressed as Napoleon – makes advances to a man in drag. There are also the videos of Metallica and Soundgarden, which are often as homoerotic as Drukman claims George Michael's videos are. It is increasingly evident that a large number of lesbians and gay men do enjoy all sorts. There are gay men and lesbians who like heavy metal or whatever – but they don't talk about it while on the dance floor at *Heaven*.¹⁰

10. 'Heaven' is a (mostly) gay London nightclub owned by Richard Branson.

In the light of this, it is perhaps Bruce LaBruce's writing that, despite lacking an explicit intellectual framework, is the most challenging and exciting. Writes LaBruce, 'I've never been able to surrender my mind to prefabricated dogma, or reduce my politics to a slogan, or even situate myself in a fixed position on the political spectrum. No, I'm not "queer," and I don't know why they had to go and ruin a perfectly good word, either' (p194).

Preferring to remain the perpetual voice of disagreement, LaBruce is in the privileged position of never having to produce limiting ideas on anything – continually looking for a new way of looking, merely for the sake of looking. LaBruce's writing is part of a larger picture of his career, '... when [I] find any kind of foothold into being legitimised or institutionalised [I] drop it and turn on it and move on to something else.'¹¹ This is either very irresponsible or a license to continually enjoy the world as you come in contact with it. To borrow a line from *The Guardian* back in 1992, 'It's punk, it's anarchic, it's dangerous, it's gesture politics. It's also very confusing.' If that's queer, then count me in.

11. 'The bitched is back', an interview with Bruce LaBruce *Gay Times*, January 1995.