



## BASIC AND POSTMODERN INSTINCTS: THE NEW POPULAR REALISM IN FILM SPRING 1992

*Basic Instinct* is a box office smash which, like all box office smashes, draws me like Michael Douglas, in the film, is drawn to Sharon Stone. Why?

If there is a provocative drama of disorder and order in a box office smash—and I believe such a drama is at the heart of all such successes today—our little and local way of looking at things works toward, but never succeeds in, keeping the noise down. The provocation gets deformed and transformed. Derrida says we make a *mythos* out of our own idiom and call it “universal reason” but it’s still just provincial, regional, local.<sup>1</sup>

I say *if* there is this clash of order and disorder, it’s because either the film or the culture or both may have already defended themselves against that performance of provocation. The film’s viewers might already be positioned by both the culture and the film not to be able to view the real action. The film might be working strenuously to block off the play of its own disorder while such play is already blocked off from our view by the *mythos* of our own cultural idioms. We’re thus blind to the struggle going on.<sup>2</sup> Asking if there is yet a struggle even though we don’t see it is like asking whether a falling tree makes a noise even though there’s no one there to hear it fall.

We have already been positioned in a certain way before we walk into the darkened theatre and take our seats. And yet in that

darkened theater what is dark to us may draw us, fascinate us. What is suppressed slips past all defenses. What we struggle to leave out is what in fact draws us in such huge numbers to contemporary box office smashes. What is left out is what our culture is struggling to leave out.

I don't know how you prove these last two statements. Proving is like defending in that everything you don't want manages to slip through. It is only when you engage in a sort of crisscrossing, later-alizing foray that slipping *through* and slipping *by* are not disasters. They would be disasters if we held to some hierarchical (vertical) order of things in which the subsumed and resolved, the synthesized and relegated, would just pop up as intractable as ever. Now if there is no such determinate proving but only a plane of lateral crossings, then what was previously slipping by is now just meeting or intersecting in a sort of Borgesian garden-of-forking-paths journey. The more intersections the greater the likelihood that here indeed something was going on in the garden. I don't have to prove a statement about how popular films crisscross our culture. We just have to walk along the paths. We have to learn how to perform sidewise.

I forked off here. We were in the act of defending ourselves against popular film.

The greater our defending against what haunts us, the greater our vulnerability to what causes that defending. We can be drawn into changing our *mythos* channel as a new movement of light and shadow, of recognized and unrecognizable, brings our idiom before us as only an idiom, our reason and subjectivity before us as only constructs. Or, we can seize the opportunity to reconfirm and solidify the place we're already at by making everything that rolls before our eyes appear subject to our own subjectivity.

In the first instance—when we see how we have been positioned to see—we must be drawn out of the security of our own dominant viewing position and into the agonistics of the film that upsets that dominancy. In the second instance—when we repeat, “I'm alright Jack!”—the film lies before us as a sequence of action, a chain of signification, which is brought to meaning because it shares the viewer's linkage of word and world, *those* visuals and

what *we* think they mean. Here the film sends its images on a channel we can receive and that channel is, of course, 'reality.'

In both instances we can be sure that the film that rolls has already 'rolled' us—it has already searched us, taken the measure of our worth, and identified our positioning as subjects. I mean that both the disruption of reality and the confirming of it are grounded in a working knowledge of which construct or *mythos* of reality already holds sway.

The question then is not "How do we interpret the meaning here?" or "How is reality interpreted here?" but rather "How does the film work in relation to the culture/society, and how does it work the viewer?" What is modeled as a sort of majority sense of order of how the real works? And, most important to me, what is tapped into as *not* working, or working *against*, or working *without* apparent connection to that real?

It may be that a box office smash film is either on one extreme or the other: either it totally enframes the prevailing *mythos* so that the viewer's sense of absolute domination and control brings her and the film along with her to a sort of high of identity confirmation, a sort of affirmative reality check; or, it taps into a disorder that the viewer cannot handle directly. The disorder film seems always to be transmitting against that disorder that it is at the same time making conceivable to us. In other words, for it to be seen at all it must be seen as transmitting an order that keeps the noise down. Paradoxically, that noise is coming through loud and clear. Such a film seems to be always putting off as unassimilable what the film has already been collaborating with.

If we were looking to categorize popular films in terms of this putting off and yet attending to, we would be searching for something in the film about which culture itself had nothing to say. In other words, the film would be making conceivable what the culture had not itself held as conceivable. The film would be bringing to a level of representation what has not already existed as a 'something' within the culture. The culture couldn't give us the means to categorize.

If we chose to search from the other end we would be looking for what both film and culture take for granted. But since this is all

we are able to identify anyway—identify in the sense of re-presenting what already exists for us—this would hardly be a search, a critique, a categorizing, and so on.

When we are indeed searching for the play of order and disorder in film, we must recognize that a search is bound by present narratives of both order and disorder. A retrieval therefore of past dramas of order and disorder is a retrieval carried on by the priorities of the present.

Yet popular films do put off and play with the as-yet inconceivable. And we are, as viewers, the ones toward whom all this putting off and taking on is directed.<sup>3</sup>

A film achieves its recognizable structure and its cultural identity by becoming one with the culture itself and one with the mass subjectivity already constructed by that culture.<sup>4</sup> To see the film is to be brought into the ‘real-as-it-is’ and to experience a clear mirroring of one’s own subjectivity. The more the culture seems carnivalized, by which I mean contesting “little stories” (Lyotard’s *petits recits*) overspill any Big Controlling Story, the more the workings of order within a film have stabilizing and therapeutic value.<sup>5</sup> They provide a center that will hold, a home base to which we can return. Echoes of home base strengthen a frame of real-izing that is true, though in our postmodern world this frame is often beclouded, under attack, overwhelmed, by disruptive narratives. There is a heroic import given to all films that play with the fires of disruption only to quell them simply by showing the real nature of things. If they were literary texts they’d get canonized.

This is why the visual representations that simulate in every way the order of the real world as concocted by a prevailing majority find a majority audience. Only a film that invests itself deeply in that order and *shows* us that investment is capable of reaching that majority. This is but one of the criteria a film must meet to become truly popular. But it is essential. Truth has merely to be shown to be believed.

If, however, this truth is not universal but coming out of some cultural positioning, there is no way that either the social order or the filmic order is doing more than cleverly putting off disorder and its disruptions. It is the nature of all grand narratives, social and

aesthetic included, to have, at best, only a slippery hold on both a present notion of the real and subjectivity.

Disorder, then, is always an active if hushed participant because the order of reality in a film derives from the prevailing order of society at a particular time. That order is always struggling to keep at bay the forces of contingency, what Zygmunt Bauman calls the tropes of “the other of order.” The tropes here are: “undefinability, incoherence, incongruity, incompatibility, illogicality, irrationality, ambiguity, confusion, undecidability, ambivalence.”<sup>6</sup>

Within the Modernist Project this exchange between order and disorder is resolvable and it is resolvable because there is a universal, transcultural, and ahistorical truth out of which order emerges and in whose name disorder is always simply challenged as what’s not yet ordered. Order is not so easily put aside. Again we have a reaffirmation that a film becomes box office not because it taps into disorder but rather because it taps into the truth.

Yet I have said that what our culture struggles to leave out draws us to certain films and makes them box office successes. Where’s the truth here? I would argue that it is in the intensity of the play between already conceived notions of truth and what those notions have left out, what I call “disorder.” Huge popularity attends films that draw a bead on what at any moment a culture wants to leave at an unsayable level. But that popularity also stems from the fact that the film’s disruptions are enfolded and encased in such a way that the viewer’s truth *mythos* is, if not endorsed, at least seduced.

We might think that film as part of popular culture shouldn’t have to bear the weight of this truth mission. Isn’t popular film just escapist entertainment, a seduction from the truth? Under the umbrella of postmodernism, film, along with all of popular culture, is no more seductive than high culture. All narratives become equally seductive in the sense that they tell compelling stories of the truth and inevitably lead us astray. High culture has gotten into the preservation of a culture’s *mythos* as truth and reason business. Popular culture seems to be in both the preserving and the escaping business. While postmodernity wants to pay close attention to this ‘double business,’ modernity in this last quarter of the twentieth century

invests little concern in what cannot reclaim and preserve the 'cultural legacy.' Unlike the high seriousness of the institution of literature, there has been no inherited, institutionalized, persevering-against-all-odds effort to canonize film. This is liberatory because film, as all popular culture, is not burdened by a high canonical *mythos* that it should bear from one generation to another.

While popular film remains popular by buying into popular truth, it has no commitment to the protocols of high serious art and *its* commitments to reinscribing universal truth. There is in popular film a greater license to traffic in the turmoil of our truth-making and *enjoy it* than there is in serious art that does not play with such turmoil but rather sets out to vanquish it.

Without having a stacked deck (what E. D. Hirsch calls "cultural literacy") forced on us, we now see what Catherine Belsey puts so clearly, that we have affirmed as universal and ahistorical, "as natural and inevitable both the individualism and the world picture of a specific class and a specific sex," that our truth has always emerged from "a very specific political position."<sup>7</sup> Contingencies have returned to contest our universal ordering.

And this contesting is box office. It's dynamite.

Our capacity to detect and analyze this contesting, I repeat, is limited by the priorities and perceptions of our own present ordering. Popular film is popular because it knows this; it shapes itself within the current scene. This doesn't mean we can grasp our own present contingencies. It just means they're *ours* and therefore we're going to take them personally.

What about past films?

We can't say anything about a past film that is not just another way of saying something about how we perceive our own present play of order and disorder. We are always where Borges places us in "Pierre Menard": not reading the Quixote but reading Menard's Quixote *which is word for word the original Quixote but its words are linked differently*. Perhaps we can go through the paces of the New Historicists: track down social texts that reveal a moment in the past and use them as a way of retrieving the play of order and disorder in past popular films.<sup>8</sup> In short, perhaps we can hold a past film bound to the discourse of its own day, but how can we keep

that discourse unbound by a present discourse? Contingencies that escape a past order and still escape a present order are obviously not retrievable. Past contingencies that have now been transformed into solutions and resolutions of the present can indeed be seen at work in past films, but that very difference in perception and response undermines our attempt to retrieve a *past* relationship of order and disorder.

There is nothing disastrous, however, about reading the Quixote through Menard's identical rewrite of the Quixote; that is, linking the words of the Quixote to Menard's world, linking the signs of *Rebel Without a Cause* or *Duck Soup* to the world of the viewer. Anything else would be ungraspable and unseeable. Or it would be an imposition of power perhaps made in the name of preserving the past or enabling a common cultural communication grounded in common linkages of word and world. From a postmodern frame such an imposition suppresses the present in the name of a past that it cannot retrieve. The question to be asked by the postmodernist is, from what political positioning have these common cultural linkages been linked? What other and different linkages do these cultural linkages link themselves against?

This is our own present 'Menard frame': we now have an eye out for the linkages of order and the unlinkages of disorder, for identifiable connection of image and world and different and other connections of image and world. And we now employ this postmodern filtering lens when we say something about past popular film. When cultural paradigms change, as in our own shifting from modernity to postmodernity, there is a growing incommensurability between past and present narratives of order. There is more cause behind the young's impatience with old texts than a degeneration in literacy. It is part and parcel of the postmodern paradigm to both undermine the privileging of print and the *mythos* of reason that guided all past texts.

Films no longer signify, from our postmodern perspective, unless we can reattach their signifiers in ways those films may have actually ordered themselves against. We no longer value films because they identify order but because we can talk about their alignment of

order and disorder. Talking about the fabrications of order and the disruptions of disorder is our postmodernist context, our own 'Menard' writing.

Since, however, the popular film, past and present, is not valued for its hermeneutical potential but for its immediate impact, past popular films, played out on another chessboard, within other rules of the game, become archival at best. They seem to be always taking the wrong turn, investing their energies in inertia, always caught up in some too predictable sequence of order. It is the transparency of their ordering that wears us down. Black and white becomes not an aesthetic matter—should original black and white films be colorized?—but a political one: the ordering here is too clear-cut, too absolutized, universalized, and objectified. It becomes a sign of the Modernist Project itself. The workings of that project make a present viewer restless, impatient, annoyed.

Our present postmodern 'Menard' context applies its own criteria to past films, although from logocentrism's centered view these are dismantling-criteria criteria. Nonetheless, postmodernity interrogates and unravels our modes of understanding, and there is something of the serious art enterprise involved here. But this is not a purely academic, cementing sort of endeavor because it offers the possibility of reentering the gambol of order and disorder in a past film.

We eye the ways our understanding puts off what defies that understanding. Such reentries make us wary and self-reflexive in the present. We would be learning nothing if we were already committed to recovering some diminished truth or reality of a past film and adding it to our ever-growing foundation of truth. We would be fooling ourselves if we thought we could just put aside the biases of the present and then critically and objectively distinguish chaff from kernel in past films. The horizon of our present seeing is the means by which we distinguish kernel from chaff. What has become popular are the ways we uphold and at the same time undermine the dream of an unchanging, determinate linking of image and world.

When we switch from the modernist paradigm that supports desires to attain some outside perspective on the truth and enter a postmodern paradigm, our critical priorities regarding past and present change. Distance does not give us a better slant on things, or widen



the cherished gap between subject and object, so that we can analyze more objectively. Past films are subject to present perceptions anyway. There is no compulsion to efface present biases and impose high critical standards. Present films not only get treated to present perceptions but they arise out of present perceptions. They arise out of newspaper headlines, not out of the wellsprings of high canonical ordering. Therefore, we, the viewers, share a contemporary film's playing with and putting off of our culture's fears and anxieties, its worst nightmares. We are mutually haunted.

If our intent is to make conceivable what the present holds as inconceivable—so as to balkanize our way of real-izing identity through difference—then the popular film and its cozenage with the present become more worthy of our attention than serious art, which is either praised for its control of disruption or for its re-presentation of the cultural legacy.

The cultural legacy of the past, that legacy whose prominence cast popular culture into the dreck pile, film included, becomes from a postmodern real-izing, a legislated analogue (a supplementary reading) that blocks off the play of order and disorder. The analogue sets itself up in place of that play, or, more exactly, it becomes the site to which all future play must finally wind up.

Postmodernity always wants to question the order we wind up with, the analogue of meaning, and put before us contesting, alienating, disordering narratives and so return us to the action between order and disorder. The fact that this is the representing frame we find ourselves in prompts my interest in the popular box office success film. Why? Simply because the paradigm also drives our critical response and a present classification of serious film. In other words, we privilege a postmodern film of undecidability, of problematizing, of advancing contingencies as steadfastly as problems and solutions.

Our postmodern discursive account of order and disorder therefore blocks off that play of order and disorder that is prediscourse, that is yet play and not analogue of meaning. Paradoxically, postmodernity is the frame out of which our anxieties regarding our real-izing and our turn to the tropes of disorder emerge. We are left with the following conclusion: an enabling discourse of disorder is yet not that *play* of order and disorder we see, for instance, in the

popular film. Postmodern tenets may haunt Habermas's Modernist Project but they only open the doors to the ways popular film can possess our culture and our culture can possess film.<sup>9</sup>

We are already living within a life-world in which all affirmations have become citational, have become not truths but representations ideologically constructed. Whereas modernity had set up both a canon of confirmations of truth and a confirming methodology that provided a model for classic realism's illusionism—this *is* reality being shown here—postmodernity envisions reality as always narrated from within some particular narrative frame, upsets our sense of observing it all from the catbird seat (dominant specularly), and hinders us from sorting through a tangle of views and coming to a sure closure.

The classic realist formula—the means to make this film not a picture but reality itself—now is formulated, if you will, within the postmodern frame. Let's say that all this creates a postmodern attitude toward the real. We presently consume within this attitude and since box office is the site of enormous consumption, we are consuming a provocation of the real. We are playing fast and loose with the real and at the same time being attracted by concealed notions of the real. The contemporary popular film has a sort of cultural *carte blanche* to evoke and disrupt clichéd realities. It also works up those off-limits linkages of image and world that the culture itself fails to represent. The popular film allows us to consume and respond to that play of order and disorder that is at that very moment overspilling the prevailing order's capacity to contain it.

In the same fashion that the film works without a discourse net, but rather works up a montage of stimulating loose ends, digs up and exposes the roots of the culture's own present demons, the viewer consumes without choosing or analyzing, responds without digesting or committing. What the culture has not yet brought to a level of re-presentation—in the sense that identifying is always a rediscovery of what order already has—is not brought to us as a given in the popular film. Our consuming is sufficient because it makes conceivable to us what yet remains unsayable in us and in our culture. It is only such powerful interchanges of the conceivable and the inconceivable, these unsayable repasts, which drive a cul-

ture, already supersaturated with visual loose ends, with meaning as sound-bytes, to the ticket lines of popular films.

There is undoubtedly in the popular film the same sustained effort at bringing this play to order as there is in the culture itself. But now there is a lateral pursuit of illicit and repressed notions of truth and meaning with only a pro forma sort of gesturing toward a coherent reality. Any progression from point of origin to closure is no longer box office, a shopworn article that a pomo audience has lost patience with.

## BASIC INSTINCT

It is the intensity of play between order and disorder that sells tickets and not merely the presence of such play. That degree of intensity, unlike its presence that I shall now talk about, I cannot talk about. Nevertheless it inspires the talking.

How does this film work in relation to the culture? What unsayables of our culture does the film traffic in? Since we are always entering the play of the text from within our own cultural framing, we are therefore always beginning from the culture side. And that's where I shall begin.

Both feminists and lesbians have attacked *Basic Instinct* for its portrayal of lesbians as man-haters and serial murderers. For them there is nothing of the unsayable in this film: the film says the wrong thing or, more accurately, it shows lesbians within a stereotypic frame that further confirms the stereotype. Lesbian critics have hailed this as yet another example of a homophobic Hollywood, exploitation of a whole life-world for market reasons. Lesbians, in protest, stand outside theaters urging potential ticket buyers to change their minds and boycott the film.

The connections a majority audience makes between the signifier "lesbian" and world/meaning/reality are endorsed and not questioned by the film. In this fashion the film links itself to a mass-market audience at the price of the lesbian minority. The manipulation is rudimentary classic realist: when Michael Douglas, the subjectivity through which our own subjectivity is situated, engages Roxy, Sharon Stone's lesbian lover, man to man and calls her

“Rocky,” his wit elicited a number of laughs from my audience, a Heartland audience that I say something about in another chapter. We were clearly putting her in her place, returning the challenge of the hate and anger in Roxy’s eyes with a mocking, “Fuck you, bitch. I’m not scared of you.”

That line is put in our heads; it’s unsaid in the film. Why do I say it now? It seems to me part of the unsayable dimension of the film. Nick, Douglas’s character, has just had what he will later describe as “the best fuck in the universe” and has gotten up from bed, walked stark naked into the bathroom with the camera tracking from behind. We watch as he throws water on his face and grabs a towel. And then Roxy is there, fully clothed, leathers, beautiful, intimidating, hostile. She’s watched their lovemaking. Nick is a rival. She’s seen other bouts of lovemaking but Nick is the rival who really worries her. Nick is special, privileged—which is all right with us in the audience because that makes us special, privileged.

She is clearly threatening; clothed while he is naked, although the camera plays on Nick’s upper torso fleetingly, not a full view, always shadowed. The torso looks pumped up. I don’t recall Douglas having any sort of a build in any of his other movies. The walk into the bathroom had been a cock of the walk strut, in shadows. If there are love handles to his waist the camera finesses them. He’s a good male specimen but endangered. What will she do? Kick him in the balls since they are exposed to her? Will she do him violence? That is how the scene is played and that drama creates the scene’s tension. “I’m not scared of you” is its unwritten, unsaid caption: Masculine . . . , heterosexual order here. But there’s fear nonetheless. The film is hot-wired to it.

Let’s go back into the culture. Sick, gratuitous violence makes this a “Don’t-Bother-to-See-It” movie people tell me after they’ve all told each other not to see it and have gone ahead and seen it and now tell me not to see it and I’ve seen it and am already excited enough by it to write about it. We say we are already culturally sated with cinematic violence but violence now in our own culture has an imaginative force that dismisses our words. The more we decouple ourselves from the rest of nature, the more we are attempting to decouple ourselves from its contingencies, its devastation and disas-

ters, its unprogrammable violence and destruction. Our own mortality haunts us. It is a force of nature we project on our screens. The violence of *Basic Instinct* has such force. It has an edge to it, or in my way of talking, it's a violence that attracts us but we are loathe to describe the attraction. We legislate against it.

The murder with which the film begins may be one in a series, a series whose point of origin never really becomes clear, and whose ending may or may not coincide with the ending of the movie. In the ending, the camera pans down to the ice pick lying underneath the bed, within Sharon Stone's reach and in that scene she seems always to be reaching for it. Or is she? Is the ice pick hers? Is the violence hers? Must we go back and dismantle the story we seemed finally able to tell about her—that she wasn't the murderer, that the violence wasn't hers, that she was simply lost and now has found her way, her man, found real love, which is heterosexual love?

No, the ending rather asks us to leave the theater with one of three stories. The first as I have described it—a story of undecidability. The second as follows: she is the murderer, the violence is hers, she is a brilliant psychopath who has set up the police psychologist and who will eventually use that ice pick on Nick. When she will use it and why she will use it and why she already has used it takes us into her life-world, a life-world that it turns out we cannot enter and cannot share. It is deviant and that deviance is connected richly and deeply. It lies in her directness, her candor, her failure to align herself within social conventions and expectations. She likes sex. She has sex with anyone she wants. Society can't police her. What are they going to do? Arrest her for smoking? Does her great wealth give her that freedom? She puts no restraints on her sexuality, turning to men as well as to women.

The third story also enacts the tensions of the whole film: she has used the ice pick to murder, she is a brilliant psychopath, she has refrained from murdering Nick. The film ends and we have seen her make moves toward the ice pick on the floor but not pick it up. Nick has won her over. Love has put pathology into check. They *will* live happily ever after though without the rug-rats, the kids, which Nick foresees. In this story, as in the others, we have a play between a not abrogated masculinity, a normalizing heterosexuality,

a boy-gets-girl kind of romance *and* a troubling femininity, a challenging lesbianism, a love that turns men's bodies to ice, men's pricks to picks in women's hands.

The undecidability of the ending makes the whole film undecidable and therefore not able to be funneled toward a firm ending. We don't end choosing a story; we get caught up in a story we can't end. The story we leave with is not just a story. It's a chart of the way the film plays us, or, how we are brought both with our consent *and* against our will into the play of the film. We are drawn into what remains unsaid in our culture and what the film doesn't want to say. Nonetheless, our culture is already fortifying itself against what lies unsaid and the film's popularity lies in its putting "out there" what the culture doesn't want to say.

The male bonding between Nick and his partner, Cowboy, which draws upon all cop hero-sidekick bondings in cinematic history right up to Mel Gibson and Danny Glover, is not there for its own sake but only to position us defensively. Against what? Against a woman who plays her scenes in cool disdain, in open mockery of such a bonding. But this defense doesn't hold the line and her offense doesn't seem to be in their rule book. She's playing outside the rules of the game.

Our whole postmodern culture is in a state of defending itself against both its past violence to the life-worlds of women and holding off a saying of "what rough beast slouches toward Bethlehem to be born." The question is: What new woman lies on the horizon who is not caught within the masculine narrative and also is no longer hindered by having to respond to it? What ways of love and sexuality will this woman narrate for herself? And when women fall out of the romantic conquest, boy gets girl, how defenseless—like Nick tied to the bed—will men be?

Sharon Stone's steely composure, her self-awareness, her charisma, her dominance challenge and threaten. Her love can be dangerous because it has not yet been scripted by our culture. In the culture this remains frozen. In the film it is brought into play. Our consuming is a sign of being drawn into that play; our being drawn in is evidenced by our response—we make the film a box office success.

Love's capacity to conquer all plays badly in this film. Is Nick in love with the psychologist? If he is, we don't see romantic lovemaking. We see love as rough trade. Sex and violence get linked as Nick slams her hard, pulls her, rips at her clothes, angry, as if there were more hate here than love. He has already met Sharon Stone. He has seen the man she may have murdered. A naked man struck over and over again with an ice pick. That is the scene the film opens with: sex and then sudden violence. The link is the lesbian, the beautiful, alluring, but dangerous woman. Playing with her is like playing with fire, playing with death. Out of Eros comes Thanatos.

Again we are dealing with our own culture's unsayable. Out of the sex act now comes possible death. The sex act is now haunted by the AIDS virus. We never know for sure as we lay back in a post-coitus daze whether this now is also death striking. We trust and we thrust; whether the ice pick will puncture a hole and let death run through is precisely what we cannot represent to ourselves as we lose ourselves in the ecstasy of the 'act of love.' At the end of every act of love, our lover looms above us with an ice pick; death is in the climax. But is it? Perhaps the ice pick will remain unused. Only Eros penetrates here. Death lies checked, on the floor, unpenetrating. For how long? When does it enter?

Is this too far-fetched, too much 'Menard'? In our culture what AIDS is doing to love and sex, or, more precisely, how AIDS is forcing us to relink these signifiers to new, and other meaning, can only be said within the links that have already structured our perceptions, our thoughts, our affections. We are, in other words, structured against such conceivability. The film brings that into play, taps into the power of such a drama between what we want to hold as just another re-presentation and what has to break that hold and show us what is fundamentally different and other.

The film begins with the sexual act and then the violent, sudden, unexpected, murder. When the police run through the apartment for clues they surround the bed with the naked male victim lying there. We get as quick a shot of his genitalia as we do later of Sharon Stone's as the police interrogate her. Did we see what we think we saw? Genitalia are there like in a porno film to be seen but

the seeing here is more potent than in any porno in a pre-AIDS age and culture. Seeing, viewing, showing are what we are left with as safer courses. Sex through the eye. The film not only links sex with violence and death but seeing the film make these linkages already taps into the place our culture has retreated to in regard to sex—the eye, the act of seeing. Viewing the opening scene sex act is more charged than any prior seeing. And the genitalia we see for a split second haunt us because we can't have our old way of seeing them and we don't have a Death's way of seeing them.

The police surrounding the bed speak of the ample semen covering the sheets, mentioning the prowess as well as the evident pleasure, the success the dead man must have had. His lovemaking was a success but led to death. Death lies in the semen lying there on the sheets. Later, in an offhand riposte to Cowboy, Nick says, "I didn't even wear a rubber." How to explain Cowboy's drunken berating of Nick, his fear that Nick has destroyed himself by taking up with Catherine Tramell? Death traces back to her. The femme fatale. The woman who enjoys sex and whose sex leads to murder. The woman already feared, who challenges the order of masculinity, must also in this film link together—within her own pathological-because-inconceivable being—sex and death.

The culture once again: the order from the center, the panoptic ordering, is heterosexual and patriarchal, but in our postmodern culture that center is no longer a place to rest, the place where traditionally classic realism rests. Nor is it a place that must continuously and repeatedly draw into itself through either a critical or communal consensus the tropes of the other of order, the project of modernism. The whole American culture is now looking back to the center, some nostalgically, some angrily, so that there is an awareness of keeping ourselves there as well as an awareness that we are already someplace else. Once heterosexuality stands before us as a construct we are already either posed to defend it or posed to deconstruct it. The center for the majority of viewers now is a defense of the center, a defense that already admits the power of the unsayable.

Whereas a short time ago we could, under the spell of the Great Communicator, be drawn to films that centered the romance of returning to the center, we are now recession weary, AIDS fear-



ing, abortion divided, environment sick, and in the spring of 1992, presidential campaign disgusted. What plays on the popular level is the play of our worst fears, our most pathological linkages, our most cruel 'final solutions.' But they are played in no order, toward no purpose, with no expressed intent, except to make millions, to make our life-world dependent upon seeing this film. And herein lies the power of the popular film to put before us not only our cheapest thrills but our present overspilling of what previously sufficed as our cultural order, its purpose and intent.

The situation is clear: the film market itself now depends upon the play of order and disorder. There is no way the film can find or assert a place for the viewer to rest. While the film seems to rest in love, sexuality, and men and women as we've always had them, the film for the sake of its very popularity dare not rest in these. They are set in motion and the ensuing tensions shape forbidden connections of image and world. We are consuming our psychotic 'projects of resolution' as well as learning to live with what was a short while ago inconceivabilities regarding gender and sexuality, love and death.

Catherine Tramell and Roxy are given up as in a witch trial: lesbian sex does violence to 'normal' sex and romantic love, to the role of the hero and his conquest of the heroine, to the future of families, of child-rearing and living happily ever after. Lesbian sex does violence to happy endings, or endings that bring a sense of closure, rarely achieved in life but almost a necessity in popular films. Lesbian sex is violence and in this film sex leads to violence that leads to death. The death that lurks in sex is there because aberrant sex has put it there. There is a reason why lesbians and all feminists protest this film.

But the film does not rest in this psychotic linkage nor does it push it forward as the film's discourse, or parody it in its own self-reflexive metanarrating of itself. Rather, as I have described, the film throws out lines in multiple directions toward a new woman already exceeding what we are able to say about her; toward love, sex, and gender that have already slipped past our chain of signification; toward love, sex and death that our culture has no way of linking but that nature has already linked for us.