

## INTIMACY AND CULTURAL CRISIS\*

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Public rumour has it that culture is in crisis. Literature, cinema, and theatre are groping for a way out while architecture is agonizing under an unknown quantity of cement. It would seem that the other culture, the day-to-day, social totalities that interest anthropologists and sociologists are also in trouble. The family, religion, and the nation are threatened with possible extinction. Our relations with nature, the environment itself, is headed for an imminent apocalypse. We will no longer be able to create, to love, to inhabit. We will no longer grow old, nor make children. ... But after all, if we do dream, think, and create, it is because we are not in agreement with the world. *Without crisis, there is no culture.*

Fernand Dumont, *Le Sort de la culture*

We enjoy thinking of ourselves as fully capable of intimacy, but it is no longer certain what we understand by claiming this capability for ourselves. Intimacy is not necessarily guaranteed in any of our most fundamental relationships: those to each other, to our own communities, to our families, and to our own gods. The absence of a durable guarantee may actually be a prerequisite to a new set of practices yet unthought of. But, before we, as a society, can come close to describing these new practices, we must ask what we mean by "intimacy" now. What has become of this term and how can we now use it?

In view of the many plausible definitions, it is perhaps best to define intimacy simply as a primary internal coherence among groups of actors, that which sets one group apart from others and from the mainstream. Yet, even this tentative definition threatens to break down. If Dumont is correct and culture is always in trouble, then the crisis of our epoch is not

entirely unique, and our definition would remain intact. But everywhere there are signs pointing to the uniqueness of our own time, which is evident in our society's inability to maintain intimacy amongst its members as a whole.

Intimacy today is a principal element in the uncertain relationships among individuals, society, and culture; its meaning is vague and subject to ceaseless variation. It is, in other words, implicated in the general crisis of disciplines that claim to reflect the life of the everyday world. What is intimacy and can it be rescued from the crisis of disciplines? At its most minimal, it is the purest form of Georg Simmel's definition of sociability: "While all human associations are entered into because of some ulterior interest, there is in all of them a residue of pure sociability or association for its own sake."<sup>1</sup> This residue, which we call intimacy, is both a process and an aesthetic state. In this duality, the "becoming" that intimacy may residually denote, the value that it still possesses, from the erotic to the economic, has the potential to shape a critical and informed disagreement with the world around us.

What has intimacy become? Even in the postmodern crisis of signs and disciplines, we still dream, think, and [pro]create. What do we mean when we say that we do these things "intimately"? We still regard these as integral and humanizing activities, ways in which values and meanings are transmitted to those with whom we choose to be close. But how can we say that these activities are equivalent to intimacy when intimacy itself is implicated in the collapse of signifying practices? In what follows, we show that a new theorization of intimacy and culture is possible, even necessary in our time, because of a broadly diffused crisis in the signs through which we traditionally understand intimacy. Yet we would be wrong to regard intimacy in crisis as a master code that would explain the fate of culture today: we cannot call for yet another social science that would simply appropriate intimacy. Many explanations, economic, intellectual, political, or familial, regardless of the differences in their contents, contain certain fragments of truth about the state of intimacy. By almost all indications, though, the always looming collapse of the social, the breakdown of institutions through which intimacy was traditionally expressed, and the irony produced by the crisis of signs, combine to produce a subject distanced from the residue of intimacy that sociability, in our reading of Simmel, contains.

Any attempt to expand the horizon of the social and the sociable is impossible in light of the fate of utopia in postmodernity. The postmodern drive to transform as much as possible into the full immediacy of visual stimuli provides one of the organizing metaphors for our existence today. Since McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and *The Medium is the Message*, the instantaneous yet alienated visual image of our intimate selves can be transmitted anywhere, whether at work, in love, or at rest. Under the signs of cosmopolitanism and autonomous personal lifestyles, we find an uneasiness, an anxiety caused by the erasure of

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referents, that has been implanted as a genetic thread in the structures of postmodern life. Intimacy today is caught in this fully dynamic act of erasure.

We want to begin exploring this absence, which intimacy now connotes, from a variety of angles and within different discursive or dialogical forms,<sup>2</sup> namely those found within the secondary cultural products of American, Canadian, and Quebecois societies and the primary dialogical forms that articulate the moments of the cultural crisis which we inhabit. Why this limitation? If it is possible to momentarily escape the crisis of signs to touch the residuum of what we still hold as intimacy, then it is necessary to reflect upon the material of mundane daily life as we know it in our particular circumstances, and as it comes to us mediated through irony and multiple meaning. In this paper, we consider intimacy in the following forms: as it appears in Canadian cultural policy; and as it becomes an articulated problem in anthropological narratives that focus on reporting on and explaining the culture of people "over there" and their contact with us "here." We also want to explore the specificity of Quebec society through two popular commercial films of 1986 and 1987: *Le déclin de l'empire américain* and *Un zoo la nuit*. These films are appropriate because of their representations of irony and their stark portrayals of urban and rural decadence throw the postmodern erasure of referents into high relief. We privilege an immanent critique that for the moment suspends the very real political and biological explanations that have reshaped intimacy, in the hope that a theoretical "highground" can be adhered to. With this in mind, we have also explored the differences between male and female erotic forms in the *New Dating Game*. This paper is decidedly less of a report of a clearly defined research program than it is an experiment in relating our thesis on intimacy and cultural crisis to the mundane, and at times trivialized, life of everyday North American society. In fact, it is an invitation to speculation and an effort to outline research questions that will offer a fresh look on what we as a society will be able to understand and signify by intimacy.

### Sociability and Intimacy

What happens to culture when one society comes into contact with another? When the foundations of a peasant social structure disappear into contemporary formations? When the traditional can no longer hide in the cracks of modernity because of the cynical folklorization of the last trace of its value? Social scientists have been investigating the shifts in sociability, the capacity to maintain intimacy through association and its changes, for several decades. Shifts from *gemeinschaft* to *gessellschaft*, from mechanical to organic solidarity, from rural to urban, from symbolic to sign-based cultures, and from face-to-face contact to serialization, are

only a few of the concepts used to address the questions of culture in crisis.

Explaining postmodern shifts in sociability is problematic, not so much because of the reported death of the social, but because of the speed at which horizons of explanation are shifting. Baudrillard's attempt at a theory of the postmodern is somewhat incomplete in that he seemingly offers little explanation for the appearance of new forms of sociability that emerge as institutions collapse in the face of crisis.<sup>3</sup> Baudrillard's work, however, offers an important point of departure, leading to the suggestion that communication, not alienation, is today's dominant social experience. Another way of understanding Baudrillard's position is to theorize sociability as having become disengaged from the disciplinary tools that traditionally have constructed the social: "all events, all spaces, all memories are abolished in the sole dimension of information." Today our most fragile and intimate moments are mirrored back at us in impersonal survey information and statistical communications. The real becomes instantly more real: it has become fully quantified. Social totalities with specific histories become numerical blocs in the hyperreal. "Obscenity begins when there is no more spectacle, no more stage, no more theatre, no more illusion, when everything becomes immediately transparent and visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication."<sup>4</sup> Intimacy itself has moved into the hyperreal, existing as series of statistical features.

### Quebec: Or the Intimacy of the Distinct Society

"Is the frantic drive for personal happiness we see in society linked to the decline of the American Empire as we are now experiencing it?"

Denis Arcand, *Le declin de l'Empire Americain*.

Quebec itself, as a living representation of the transformation of intimacy into its hyperreal state, is truly startling in that the collapse of the political will to emancipation, what was also a promise for a new kind of recognition of intimacy, has penetrated individual will. The nagging question remains though: to what extent does the emancipation of the individual depend on political emancipation of the type contemplated in Quebec? With the latter in decay, what can the former mean?

Forty years ago, Quebec was one of the western world's most traditional societies. Today it is part of the postmodern avant-garde, as is well illustrated by one of Marcel Rioux's most often-quoted statements: "to be Quebecois is to accept to live dangerously."<sup>5</sup> Amongst its youth, it reports the highest suicide rate in the post-industrial world. It has recently surpassed the West German record for the lowest fertility rate.

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Today, fifty percent of the Quebec population marries. Of those that do not marry, only a small fraction enter into common law relations. Of the portion that does marry, more than one half are divorced. Quebec demographers say that this society is a place where people increasingly live alone, a status for which there is even a provincial tax exemption. When these statistics are combined with information on wife battering, child abuse, alcoholism, and drug addiction, one cannot help but speculate that these trends point to a specific and negative-tending form of de-industrialization. This form throws new light on the continuing de-industrialization of the Maritime Provinces, and curiously, Quebec may be the clearest and most contemporary example of a process one might call "Maritimization". This process includes the concentration of regional resources around a central city: Montreal, and it also means that the decline of the centre is equivalent to the decline of the entire region. What is nationalism in this context? It is the recurring, perhaps nostalgic, claim to regional identity, a condition that inescapably implicates intimacy. Against Denis Arcand's vision, we argue that Quebec is not witnessing the decline of the American Empire from the sidelines; it is itself on the leading edge, tracing the outlines of a future in which nationalism is an uncertainty.

Cultural products are also reports on the cultural environment. *Un Zoo La Nuit* may be one such decisive object for the "emancipated" generation in Quebec.<sup>6</sup> It is precisely the escape from the effects of the much-promised emancipation of Quebec's political independence that is the subject of this film. Lauzon's work may be called a political metaphor about the reconciliation between isolated generations and cultures. The film seems to say that Quebec's future politics is connected to the difficult reconciliation between generations, as represented by the development of an intimate connection between Albert and Marcel, between father and son. The political problem is an old one: Albert has no heir. The old Quebec, tied to an unproblematic nature and to a Catholicism unwilling to acknowledge alienation and *ressentiment*, its public waiting for a female ideal that has not been seduced by American capitalism, has no hope of seeing itself in the face of its "emancipated" younger version: it cannot project the best of itself forward. This old Quebec has no heir and its life will be without communicable meaning. Slowly Marcel realizes this while extricating himself, and some of his generation, from the wastes of urban life in Quebec in the 1980s. The reconciliation between Marcel and Albert verges on a religious phenomenon.

But the film also contains a horrifying representation of the general degradation of the visual sense brought on by urban scum-culture. A scene in a peep show transmits this perfectly. The terrified girl is about to be mutilated and painfully killed by two sadistic crooked cops in front of Marcel's eyes. He keeps feeding the peep machine tokens so that he can keep seeing the torture. Marcel's past relationship with the girl is just

a cinematic excuse to keep Marcel watching. But as he watches and keeps feeding tokens, it becomes unmistakably clear that we employ vision now only to see the mutilation and degradation that daily pervades the culture and our environment. Even though this portrayal is confined to the criminal underworld, a maliciously ironic cycle is established in which we see in order to witness degradation, and in turn our overly sensitive vision becomes capable of seeing only the prevalence of obscenity. This is of course a profound metaphor on another level as well: the sacrifice of women becomes everyday titillation, a violence that has become "trivial". That the crisis in urban culture appears only now means that elements of this crisis have been accumulating for some time. This crisis is not so much about aesthetics or taste as it is about the contours of Foucault's "therapeutic state." It is about physiology: the visual and the communicative capacities as potential vehicles of intimacy are decaying in a culture that has been radically transformed across generations and through our senses.

Denis Arcand's film, *Le declin* carries a similar message, although it differs in terms of the contact between urban and rural cultures. Mario, lover of one of the members of the decaying intelligentsia portrayed in the film, is the connector between urban and rural culture in the new Quebec. His taste for sadistic sexuality brings him to the comfortable hideaway that Quebec's professorial elite have established, and he is welcomed there as a possibly interesting friend. Arcand's message: bucolic visions of an unspoiled nature and the unspoiled life of the country folk are museum pieces in the new Quebec. If anything, there is no longer any difference between the urban and rural on the register of sexual taste and appetite. Nature, to the extent that it's still preserved, is simply a silent and indifferent witness shrugging its shoulders at the professoriat portrayed in its actual decline.

Mario is Marcel's spiritual relation. Arcand's and Lauzon's visions of a degraded cultural environment feature these two characters as reporters on the current level of crisis and also as indicators of future possibilities. Paradoxically, we know nothing about their specific futures at the conclusion of either film: Mario drives off leaving the professoriat in the disarray of something like a post-nuclear dawn, while Marcel prays in silence beside his dead father. As far as inheriting some future possibility for a cultural rehabilitation outside of institutions, Marcel and Mario are portrayed as the only choices. Ironically though, both these films still work within the deeply Catholic framework of Quebec heroism: the male is shown as the only one strong enough to walk out into the dangerous territory on his own type of mission. But we must keep in mind that the portrayal of these figures provides a metaphor for the distance and alienation that have been institutionalized within ourselves as an ironic component in our day-to-day existence.

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### Culture and Irony: Why This Canada?

It is traditional in national studies to compare the meanings assigned to discourses across the social formations of both Quebec and Canada. Since the previous discussion outlined certain key problematics that are located within Quebec, it is necessary for us, especially in view of our opening remarks, to remember that we are examining the value assigned to intimacy as a social good that undergoes significant changes when it is extracted from the specificity of Quebec. We can outline this shift through a suspension of disciplinary conventions and through as direct an analysis as possible of mainstream cultural products as representations of ironic forms of intimacy. We must, therefore, assess the extent to which the administrative state in both Canada and Quebec has inserted itself into our daily lives. The state today can be seen as a producer of an accessible intimate "surface", whether through policies in pornography or AIDS education, through which intervention in social processes on both individual and collective levels is made possible. Conceptions of intimacy are in part shaped by the state and by institutions generally. Paradoxically, the socially corrosive effects of institutional legitimation functions tend to the elimination of specific characteristics of the cultural domains that they were designed to represent. The Canadian type of political solution that tries to reinvigorate cultural life through administrative practices creates instead an apparent absence on both collective and individual levels which is generally filled by surrogates or caricatured representations of culture and of intimacy.

An illustration of this intimacy and communication might well be represented by the 1986 *Canadian Task Force Report on Broadcasting*. The *Caplan-Sauvageau Report*, as well as the Quebec films we have mentioned, are artifacts that do not conceive of the range of problems that are associated with communications and reporting in postmodern conditions. For these instruments, culture, as an authentic tissue of public discourse, is not problematic whatsoever; they go about the business of producing reports on Canadian culture and associated cultural industries in a supremely literal style whose medium of expression and whose focus diminish the specificity of the objects reported on. But this public style has certain features for analysts: there are no annoying problems about meaning and language or power or colonialism. Everything can be taken at face value in this hyperliteral horizon. We are encouraged by institutions of the state to remain indifferent towards the alienation of our autochthonous intimacy through the production of surfaces through which intervention is made not only possible, but legitimate and indeed wanted.

## Culture as Incommunicability

The opposite of the preceding analysis might be called the futility of communicating meaning. This suggests that language has nothing but itself to refer to: its presence on the page is simply testimony to the surrounding absence, it is the visual representation of the always collapsing ironic horizon. Style becomes the essential parody of presence as it reifies the page, converting it into a slippery slope deflecting all climbers. There is no difference here. Clifford Geertz looks at this disturbing political extreme in the context of anthropological writing.<sup>7</sup> Geertz says:

However far from the groves of academe anthropologists seek out their subjects—a shelved beach in Polynesia, a charred plateau in Amazonia—they write their accounts in the world of lecterns, libraries, blackboards and seminars. In itself, Being There is a postcard experience [“I’ve been to Katmandu—have you?”] It is being here, as a scholar among scholars, that gets your anthropology read, published, reviewed, cited and taught.

This anthropological problem is close to everyday Canadian experience. All reporting, and perhaps all discourse on culture, fictional or anthropological, is an activity of writing what is seen somewhere else. It is taking from there and bringing here. It is a reshuffling of blank cards, especially in the institutional representations produced by Canadian cultural industries. There is no “there” to write about. The sense of “there” as being a place that is qualitatively different, that is “other,” is a by-product of institutional culture. It is a reified geography, a cartographic excess symptomatic of the visual overload produced by cultural industries.

Geertz continues:

What is at hand is a pervasive nervousness about the whole business of claiming to explain enigmatical others on the grounds that you’ve gone about with them in their native habitat. ... Both the world that anthropologists ... study ... and the one that for the most part study it from—academia—have vastly changed.

For Geertz, this is a two-headed crisis. It is not only that one culture cannot enter into another to explain that other. It is not that the act of writing carries no meaning except that of the language itself, which might be only self-referentially ironic. It also means the erasure of the power relationship that allowed one writer to stand apart from an other and try to describe that other based on an informed individual observation. There is not only a reversal of positions between observer and observed, but what was valid about the observed in the past can no longer be made valid: the observed now simply reflects the dreams of the observer in a resentment which mocks distance and difference. Ethnog-



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raphy, or cultural reporting, can no longer convince anyone of anything. As Geertz says:

The capacity to persuade readers (most of them academic) that what they are reading is an authentic account by someone personally acquainted with how life proceeds in some place, at some time, among some group, is the basis upon which anything ... ethnography seeks to do ... finally rests. The moral asymmetries across which ethnography works and the discursive complexity within which it works make any attempt to portray it as anything more than the representation of one type of life in the categories of another impossible to defend.

Three points are made here: 1) Readers have to be convinced, by writing or by some other representation, that things somewhere else are the way they are said to be; 2) that reporting on culture, one's own or anyone else's is ultimately a construction of the other in one's own terms and thereby an erasure of difference; and 3) that the fantasies of the observed are the only things visible now. The telescope has become a mirror.<sup>8</sup> Not only is the act of writing, as an activity representative of something radically other, called into question, (writing becomes solely autobiographical) but the capacity to convince anyone that things are the way I say they are is no longer there. The power relation that enabled this is no longer there. Nothing I say can convince anyone of anything. The public consensus has dissolved, as has the auditory capacity necessary for this kind of dialogue. At this extreme of dissolution, there is no authentic public discourse about anything except the nostalgia of what power was like. It is apparent that Geertz has provided an excellent allegory for one aspect of intimacy and the nostalgia for power and for authoritative discourse of any kind whatsoever that intimacy is concretely bound to.

Intimacy is deeply bound to consensus and to those institutions that are engaged in the production of consensus. Dumont's concern about the primary institutions of social life—the family, friendships, community—is also represented, we argue, in the “secondary” institutions of culture: television, the state, the economy. These institutions are no longer capable of generating consensus; and this in itself is a positive result of our time, enabling emergent forces to replace older ones. Nevertheless if there is to be any communicable desire that may emerge, it is undoubtedly that we wish to consider ourselves fully capable of intimate thoughts and acts. We claim this for ourselves and for those around us, and importantly, we claim this for future generations. If we accept Dumont's concern, then we must also accept that intimacy is impossible outside of some institutional form allowing the communication of meaning and desire. And to the extent that television is one such form, we must stare back at the image that McLuhan, for example, reflects in *Understanding Media* and ask: when the images disappear from our screens, does intimacy also disappear with them?

The images of Quebec and Canada that we have presented, and the reflections that they provide on intimacy, tend to represent intimacy as disagreement. That is, intimacy was bound to the political drive toward independence in Quebec, as in any other community in which members have shared understandings, as part of its deep disagreement with an external definition of its inmost character. The profound irony of Canadian culture and its institutions is then to claim that specific cultures have a minimal value as articulators of intimacy. "Canada" therefore also represents a particular aesthetic state that has evolved through a network of institutions aimed primarily at diminishing the intimacy of any "distinct society" within "Canada" itself. The final images of both films *Le declin* and *Un Zoo* are testimony to this aesthetic: the processes that have been tied to intimacy collapse, leaving only a dead calm in which there is neither sociability nor intimacy. This offers a startlingly real, and Canadian, representation of what Gertz refers to in his discussion of anthropological reporting.

### Lived Intimacy and the Inner Erotic

The institutional representations of intimacy that enter into the questions of cultural policy and reporting suggest a consideration of intimacy as a lived aesthetic form which defines the creative dimensions of the day-to-day. Here, we employ the distinction between primary and secondary culture as an analytic device.<sup>9</sup> Eroticism, as the inner expression of primary lived culture, is separated from the secondary institutional representations that we discussed above. Here, intimacy is the attraction between actors; it is the reduction of a gap, the *rapprochement*, the filling of an absence. Perhaps the purest aesthetic form of intimacy, the primary intimacy that we live, is located in eroticism. It is an aesthetic state that links real and imaginary associations. Bataille points out, for example, that the associative impulse suggested by eroticism is not derived exclusively from sexuality.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, his discussion of the erotic contrasts it with the biology of sex, thereby establishing the peculiar instance of the imaginary as the agency which separates humans from other animals. This imaginary suggests an "inner erotic" which involves the anticipation of a response from the other as well as the construction of the other as object. Eroticism then, as we link it to the inner erotic of the imaginary, is much more the wish for a response to our own intimate self, and less the objectification of the other through power. Television's attempts to appropriate this inner erotic is the subject for this part of our discussion. Before we explore the public representations of this aesthetic state, we must first consider some of the controversy surrounding its existential definition.

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Even in the most telling of feminist theories that explore a critique of intimacy, the existential constitution of the erotic as "inner being," is often indirectly addressed. The erotic is usually defined relationally; a political horizon is used in an explanation of eroticism. Mariana Valverde, for example, states: "Where there is strong eroticism, there is power."<sup>11</sup> Defining the erotic as power does not allow an immanent critique, but reduces it to the sexual by fixing the tyranny of the male gaze perpetually in patriarchy. Defining the erotic in relation to the political, and ultimately to the moral and ethical economies of a culture, is certainly preliminary to a newer practice and a newer theorization. But the erotic must first be located in its specific autonomy, in its critical dialogical relation to emancipation and domination, as well as in its immanent ability to construct dynamic practices. This means that the autonomy of erotic forms is open to analysis apart from gender, sexuality, and the political horizon accompanying it. This suggests, in turn, implications for theories of difference.<sup>12</sup> French feminists and their North American homologues argue that sexual difference is the issue of the epoch. Luce Irigaray argues: "La difference sexuelle represente une des questions ou la question qui est a penser a notre epoque."<sup>13</sup> We argue that this formulation tends to establish difference fundamentally within the sexual and gendered, and not within the erotic imaginary.<sup>14</sup> Privileging the erotic means that the Freudian establishment of only one sexuality, one drive, and one desire is secondary to our purpose, as is Baudrillard's claim that sexuality is masculine and seduction feminine. These views become secondary to definitions of difference because this difference cannot exist without the immanence of the erotic imaginary. Just as the erotic is necessary to the libido; sociability, association, or even simulated intimacy are necessary to difference.

Feminist psychoanalysts also address the primacy of the imaginary in their critiques of difference, and dismiss its biochemical origins. Julia Kristeva reports on the recent genetic finding that locates depression in the feminine X chromosome.<sup>15</sup> She also argues that the chemical treatment of the genetic base invariably shows a misunderstanding of the imaginary, and reduces the subject to nothing more than a complex chemical and biological compound. Linking the imaginary to the biological or to the political may be a necessity in instrumental strategies for change, but this link does not always supply an immanent perspective on the imaginary. Below we outline an immanent critique by hypothesizing the "inner erotic" production of differences in a variety of representations across gendered erotic forms of the imaginary. We do not intend to report on a wide spectrum of erotic genres. More to the point, we focus on applying the dialogical form to the function of the erotic as a point of departure, and theorize the immanence of the erotic imaginary. At this stage, our method operates only on what is generally regarded as heterosexual discourse.

## The Eroticism of the Day-to-Day

The Italian sociologist Francesco Alberoni defines the differences between the male and female erotic imaginary as a dialectic between the extremes of continuity as dreamed by the woman, and the extremes of discontinuity as dreamed by the man.<sup>16</sup> We argue for the dialogical, not dialectical, construction of these forms. Each extreme is an anticipation of the other, not as it really is, but, as Geertz argues it, as it is imagined by the other. Dialogical form, at its simplest, is one actor's anticipation of a rejoinder from an addressee that is inscribed within the utterance or word itself. A dialogical definition of the relationship between continuity and discontinuity then takes the polyvalent nature of the word and its elusive place in the imaginary as its datum. The idea of the unspoken or of the secret may well be the elusive key to discontinuous eroticism, as Alberoni defines it. From pornography to prostitution, the extreme discontinuous form in which eroticism is contained and expressed allows the perpetuation of the illusion that satisfaction has occurred at some level. And this is valorized in the illusion that the secret and its value have apparently been transferred from seller to buyer, that "satisfaction" is available for a price in the system of exchange. In an intertextual relation, pornography is bound to contemporary advertising forms. The viewer must complete the never completed story line in the purchase of a particular fiction: their participation in the primarily visual system of symbolic exchange is complete upon purchase and satisfaction is guaranteed. The eroticism or sensuousness immanent to the specific object is obviously not the point here; rather, the point is to reproduce the symbolic exchange of visual consumption. This eroticism does not seek a response to itself, it fixes the other as an object for whom response is not a question.

If pornography aimed at men can assure itself that women and men have identical structures of desire, then female eroticism, as conventionally represented, perpetuates a continuous male role-response throughout the entire spectrum of popular media, ranging from magazines and pulp fiction to daytime television.<sup>17</sup> What is seen as "mainstream female eroticism" is an attempt to equate a quasi-genetic anticipation of sensual continuity with the representation of the female. The soap opera's decontextualized sexual encounter, in which male or female adopts the dominant position is rarely the issue. Rather the less-threatening "capacity to be loved" (a passive construction that is generally disputed) is institutionally produced and results in a divided and distorted eroticism. The first aspect of this divided eroticism is the construction of female subjectivity as being passive and non-threatening. This is a function helped by the fashion and cosmetics industries whose products generate a discourse of "feeling good" which colonizes the consumer's life-world. The second erotic aspect is linked to seduction. Attracting the other

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becomes thought of as an erotic stimulation which confirms seductiveness and thus converts passivity into a sense of power. This dual construction constitutes the reified and institutionally supported erotic moment. In the extreme, this forces a response from the other confirming continued interest, and enables this type of claim: "A man thinks first of the sexual act when he sets out on a conquest. When a woman looks to a conquest, she thinks first of an emotional eroticism that allows her to make sure his desire remains permanent."<sup>18</sup>

To summarize our preliminary analysis of intimacy as an institutional product, we argue that: in cultural productions aimed at women and produced increasingly by women, the liberating polyvalent character of female eroticism is chained to the desire to be loved continuously. The production of continuity, and the attempts to locate it in the female character, deny the possibility that continuity may just as easily be a type of eroticism wished for by the male character. While the male is shown to have the similar desire, he is also shown to be susceptible to the overwhelmingly visual extreme of discontinuity, a flaw that the intelligent and alert woman, the one in every commercial, is shown as being able to remedy.

### **Semiotics of the Scene and Obscene: The All New Dating Game**

The TV game show is essential for considering the dialogical relation between these extremes of continuity and discontinuity. We will probe Baudrillard's "obscene secret" of the object, the dialogical form of the erotic imaginary, in the context of a game show that takes intimacy as its theme. The political, economic, or cultural features of the program, the glorification of the televised document, and the caricatured sexist and racist banter, are secondary to aiming the critique at television's distorted representations of intimacy.

At the bottom of television's institutional hierarchy of genres, there exists a faked lightness, a false comic sense that counters the prime-time drama and newsspeak on the more serious top end. Grafted onto the narratives of contemporary irony, the television game show feeds on the rapid doubling of utterance, on the reversal of signification, and on the fostering and maintenance of a conservative solidarity with an interiorized audience through the ridiculing or highlighting of a guest contestant. As author of its own text, the institution of television takes more than audience ratings into account in the construction of narratives. When we consider the dialogical form of the game show, it is much more important to highlight the interiorized audience than to track empirical reception of the program. This interior dialogue becomes a privileged location that provides an insight into the power relations of American television as

institution, and into norms regarding the maximum possible public discourse on the erotic and the minimum number of social constraints imposed on its expression.

Of the current games that show intimacy as their theme, (we could have selected from any one of a dozen others for analysis) the *All New Dating Game* is one of the most exemplary. It constantly plays at the edge of the erotic by feigning a conflict between ordinary innocence and the obscene edge of its public disapproval. In crude terms, the interiorized audience physically represents this conflict. Research ascribes a carnivalesque quality<sup>19</sup> to this genre, but it can never be carnivalesque in a Bakhtinian sense because of the reification inherent in the institution. There are words that cannot be uttered, reversals that cannot occur, an entire "semiotic chora" that can never be drawn on.<sup>20</sup> Still, in its simulation of the carnivalesque, the game show advertises itself as playing on the verge of some transgression. In terms of format, a narrator introduces three members of the same sex to the studio audience (generally they are paid female high school students from southern California). Each reveals details of their dating behavior and then the narrator moves on to introduce the "competitor" from the opposite sex who must choose a date based on the responses to questions posed to the three potential "dates" hidden behind a screen. After considering the responses, the competitor is introduced to the person chosen and details of their coming "date" are announced. While the screen that separates the contestants cancels out a visual dimension, all the objects remain perfectly visible through the virtual exuberance of the studio audience, acting on the narrator's encouragement. The story line is never completed, we are left to fill in what remains of the fantasy; and in so doing the privacy in which the "date" occurs becomes an object that obsesses the audience: this becomes the elusive target for the surveillance mechanisms of television. What is most striking about the dialogical form is how the addressee is constructed as object. The female uses resistance as she probes the object, she asks: "what changes about yourself from the first to the second date?" She doesn't really want to know who that man really is; rather, she wants to know if he can be what she wants him to be. He holds back, he feigns what he thinks she wants to hear, he plays on her sympathy. The first tells us that he becomes "more himself somehow" on the second date while another says that he just becomes "more quiet"; the third responds that he "introduces romance" [read:sex]. Suffice it to say that the male who reveals the sign of discontinuity (there is at least one on every exchange) is never picked. When he responds to her question "what is the one thing you would never do on a date" by saying that "I'd never show up at your house naked", he eliminates himself from the game. Here the sign of discontinuity is ironically reversed and also doubled: the audience knows that he has come too close to the transgressive scene, their reflex is to reject him. In choosing the sign of nakedness as an extreme of what he would not do, his utterance is ironically

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reversed to the point that the audience is convinced that that is exactly what the contestant would in fact do.

This double-voiced interior dialogism is also the operative mode with male contestants choosing from among females, but here it is couched in the motif of discontinuity. Here, continuity is reversed, doubled, and distanced. When he asks, "what would you never ask a guy to do on a date?" he is not addressing the quality of her "person," as one would expect in the motif of continuity. Rather he is seeking to confirm that which most closely fits his discontinuous aspiration. She also holds back on her response and attempts to simulate what she thinks he wants to hear. The first tells him that she wouldn't want him to "open doors for her" or act in the "old school," while the second informs us that she "would never ask a man to kiss her," and the third claims that she "would never ask a man to dance nude at a table." Each simulates an element of discontinuity. Unlike the continuous motif in which the sign of discontinuous transgression is reversed and thereby eliminated from the game, the "nude dancing" response of the third contestant which plays with discontinuity is also reversed, but it is celebrated rather than negated. Again, in choosing the sign of nakedness as an extreme of what she would not ask, her utterance is reversed to the point where the interiorized audience is convinced that dancing nude is exactly what she might ask of him. In effect, she wins the game by simulating the response expected of her.

While this reading of the scene of intimacy is necessarily cursory, we can draw two preliminary hypotheses from it: first, the extreme motifs of continuity and discontinuity dialogically construct the other as object through the medium of the television set virtually embedded in the audience. In its object form, the referent of an inner eroticism or intimate self is abandoned and only a model or simulacrum remains. This is the irony of the institution. Second, the model constructs a panic theatre by adjusting the parameters of transgression to fluid public norms that construct the shifting horizon of what is permissible and what is obscene. In exaggerating the intimacy of the ordinary erotic, television produces the obscene object whose job it is to always be stripped of its already fake veneer and innocence. The secret is uncovered in a simulational process that generates intimacy as a panic fear of transgression and renders it equivalent to a trusting docility.

### **Transgression, Irony, and the Will to Symptoms**

We have introduced some of the issues that are essential to a preliminary theorization of intimacy and its links with cultural representation and eroticism. Fundamental to this beginning is a consideration of the polyvalent nature of irony and its relationship to the imaginary. In this way, irony is potentially linked to resistance, and to what intimacy may

be like in the inner erotic. The element most crucial to our presentation of intimacy is this: that erotic and intimate capacities are separate from political, biological, or gender-based reductions. These can only be imperfect renderings of the intimate imaginary into a horizon which, in the postmodern crisis of disciplines, is tending toward collapse. As we have shown, simulational models or scenes serve to double and reverse utterance, and so eliminate and trivialize any possible encounters with the specific imaginary of the other. This is a metaphor for the erasures produced by institutional culture and offered to the interiorized audience constructed by each medium. In essence, these hyperreal simulations have become the everyday norm, amplified across the social to become the reality of intimacy and eroticism. As the simulation is concentrated into the virtual image, the fact of the hyperreal itself is erased from the horizon. This absence, resulting from the collapse of difference, then becomes an interiorized "real" which alienates contact with the imaginary, forcing back on the social an entire array of caricatured representations of intimate and other kinds of relationships.

A future extension of our critical model of intimacy in such a way as to articulate the difference between cultural crisis and transgression must be reflected upon. What appears as cultural crisis takes a nihilistic and reversed construction of intimacy for its basis, uncritically and unthinkingly accepting docility as a dominant principle. What is the fundamental irony of intimacy now? Is it the acceptance of passivity and docility as the peak of what intimacy means? Reflecting on transgression, however, is bound to a different sense of irony, a version that affirms the critical potentialities of an intimacy that is bound to the inexorable alternations between crisis and transgression: the desire for an intimate response instead of fixity. For this, and for further work, it is useful to remember Alberoni and Geertz: as much as Alberoni would want to locate continuity in the female and discontinuity in the male, it becomes too easy to suspect that the formulation that he offers reflects the types of fantasy and nostalgia that power, which Geertz reports in anthropological reporting, was once able to confer. Intimacy then, consonant with Simmel's definition with which we began, may be that residuum of signs associated with crisis and transgression, indifferent to power and resisting definition. That this residuum of signs has meaning at all today is ironic, yet promising of something new.

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### Notes

1. For a fuller indication of the concept of sociability that we are employing here, see Georg Simmel, "The Sociology of Sociability" tr. E. C. Hughes, *American Journal of Sociology*, LV (November 1949); "Female Culture" in *Georg Simmel on Women, Sexuality and Love*. ed. G. Oakes, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

The reader might also refer to other translations of Simmel's work which contain differences in the concept of sociability. Kurt Wolff's translation, for example, places more emphasis on intimacy as a particular way of distinguishing between insiders and outsiders, or members and non-members. See Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (Glencoe, Il.: Free Press, 1950). Also in this context, the reader may consult R. K. Merton, "Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge." in *American Journal of Sociology* 78:1 (July, 1972). As we have tried to point out, however, intimacy connotes many plausible definitions, none of which may easily be ruled out.

2. On the subject of dialogical form, see: M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 147. Also see G. M. Neilsen, "Reading the Quebec Imaginary" in *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 12 (1987): 1-2.

As well, see Brian Singer, "Introduction to Castoriadis" in *The Structural Allegory: Reconstructive Encounters with the New French Thought*, ed. J. Fekete. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.)

3. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (New York: Semiotexte, 1988). Baudrillard's other work is considered helpful here, particularly: *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis: Telos, 1971). The reader may also consult Baudrillard's *Simulations* and his *De la seduction*.
4. Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy Of Communication*.
5. Marcel Rioux, *La Question du Quebec* (Montreal: HMH, 1987).

Regarding the population and demographic issues currently plaguing the province of Quebec, see: G. Caldwell and D. Fournier, "The Quebec Question: a matter of population." *Canadian Journal of Sociology* No. 1-2 (Spring 1987). This article represents a critical and invaluable reference point for the types of relationships and shifts that we discuss here. Also see the *Globe and Mail* editorial for September 18, 1989.

6. See the series of interviews in *Cinema Canada* with Roger Frappier, January 1988; with Jean Claude Lauzon, June 1987; and Micheal Dorland's review of *Un Zoo La Nuit*, September 1987. We disagree with Dorland's remark that "Once his father is dead, there is nothing to keep Marcel 'here' any longer. He is free to leave, and you can bet your US dollars he will." Dorland's concern for Canadian film development agencies ("...Telefilm, the NFB, the SGC, and Radio Canada yet again pick up the tab for the vocational training for the Canadian filmmaker whose vocation these days ... still consists in making preparations for escape") reflects a misunderstanding of the character of Marcel in *Un Zoo*. Dorland's misunderstanding can perhaps be attributed to a lack of appreciation for a Quebecois cultural project that remains distinct from the temptations of American or other empires.
7. Clifford Geertz, "Being There, Writing Here," *Harper's* (May 1988).
8. See for example Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1985).
9. For an expansion of this analytic device see, for example, Marcel Rioux, *Essai de sociologie critique*, (Montreal: HMH, 1978). Also see Fernand Dumont, *Le lieu de l'homme*, (Montreal: HMH, 1968). The reader may also consult Dumont's article "La

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raison en quête de l'imaginaire," *Imaginaire sociale et représentations collectives* : Melanges offerts à Jean-Charles Falardeau. ed. F. Dumont and Y. Martin (Quebec: Presses Universitaires Laval, 1982). Also see this article in relation to Castoriadis, *Structural Allegory*, fn 14.

10. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes* vol. 8 *L'erotisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).
11. Mariana Valverde, *Sex, Power and Pleasure* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1987).
12. The reader is referred to constructions of difference that are helpful in expanding the conception that we use here: *Screen 28* (Winter 1987)1 ; *The Future of Difference*, H. Eisenstein and A. Jardine, eds. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987); we also suggest: H. Cixous and C. Clement, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
13. Luce Irigaray, *L'ethique de la difference sexuelle* (Paris: editions de minuit, 1984).
14. We do not employ the term "imaginary" in a Lacanian sense. Instead, the reader is referred to note 2 above, especially to Brian Singer's translation of the work of Cornelius Castoriadis in *The Structural Allegory* where the relationship drawn between the importance of the symbolic in relation to the imaginary is made quite clear:

The profound and obscure nature of the relation between the symbolic and the imaginary becomes apparent as soon as one reflects on the following: the imaginary must utilize the symbolic, not only in order to be "expressed"—this is self-evident—but in order to "exist," to move beyond a merely virtual state of existence. The most elaborate delirium, like the vaguest and most secret phantasm, consists of "images," but these "images" are present as representations of something else, and so have a symbolic function. But inversely, symbolism presupposes an imaginary capacity....In the last analysis, we are dealing with the elementary and irreducible capacity for evoking images.

C. Castoriadis, "The Imaginary Institution of Society," trans. B. Singer, in *The Structural Allegory* 9-10.

15. Julia Kristeva, "Entretien avec Julia Kristeva," *Magazine Litteraire* (July 1987) 16-19.
16. Francesco Alberoni, *De L'erotisme*, trans. R Couder (Paris: Ramsay, 1987).
17. For a fine discussion of the role of the male in contemporary mainstream feminine erotic representations, see Angela Miles, "Confessions of a Harlequin Reader" in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*. 12 (1988) 1-2. This discussion is crucial to the treatment of mainstream representations with which we work. It also underscores the analytical possibilities of reading ordinary texts without reference to, but being aware of the changes that practices and representations at "the margins" might cause in the reception of such things as "ordinary texts," if in fact these demonstrably exist.
18. Alberoni, "De l'erotisme," 44, where he also says: "Men believe that women adore their erections, that they love the God Priapus; in reality, however, women instead desire the continuity of the male interest, gentleness, a freedom from restraint and passion." (our translation).
19. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (New York: Methuen, 1987).
20. Julia Kristeva, *Revolution du langage poetique* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).