

Watching Critics, Watching Journalists, Watching Cameras, Watching Sheriffs, Watching Pee-wee Herman Watch: The Extraordinary Case of the Saturday Morning Children's Show Celebrity Who Masturbated

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If one more person comes in here to take a peek, I am going to charge admission.

—Pat/Patricia Gaddison in “The Fourth Sex”

The sacred image, the liturgical icon, principally represents *Christ*. It cannot represent the invisible and incomprehensible God, but the incarnation of the Son of God has ushered in a new “economy of images”: “Previously God, who has neither a Body nor a face, absolutely could not be represented by an image. But now that he has made himself visible in the flesh and has lived with men, I can make an image of what I have seen of God . . . and contemplate the glory of the Lord, his face unveiled.”

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church*

I knew people fooled around with each other [in the theater], but I thought it was OK to be by myself.

—Paul Reubens

Scene 1 | Scenario For a Scandal/Scandal of a Scenario

You are alone in a theater watching a movie, keeping your eyes on the silver screen

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as photon facsimiles of assorted, attractive, unclad or scantily clad people touch each other with abandon. You note something else as well: appreciably less time is being spent on plot development than on sexual intercourse. In the midst of this festival of cinematic erotic intrigue, you note that others around you in the movie palace—mostly men, mostly men utterly obscured save for an occasional intrusive flash of light from the screen—have begun to touch themselves. Slowly but surely, uncannily but assuredly, you too feel yourself similarly moved. You watch amazed as *your* hand descends below your waist, and you watch bewildered as you begin to touch yourself. No true sinning going on here, one imagines—the species *homo sapiens* being, after all (and especially when it comes to the movies), more lemming-like than it is apt to admit. The movie speaks to you and those around you in ways you cannot imagine. But why be critical? Why worry about anything at all when such pleasure is right at hand?

As you touch yourself, watching others touch each other on the pulsing screen before you, enjoying great pleasure in the process, imagine now, unbeknownst to you, that three others (uniformed, professional, eyes peeled) are watching you.

In a peculiar way, *you* are providing *their* entertainment. These three, reasonably trained in the arts and sciences of civilian inquisition, are armed and potentially dangerous. Ironically, the three armed men watching you touch yourself as you watch others touch each other, also want to touch you.

And that is not all: they want to bind you, and then, against your will, photograph you, renaming you also with a caption of stark numbers that will proxy for your unseen name. Your name will *come to light* soon enough.

As this watching-touching conspiracy comes to pass within the dark, sweaty confines of this theater (and not just any theater but one dedicated to a decidedly pornographic dramaturgy), there is, waiting for you in the lobby, another unseen witness: a video camera. Albeit inorganic, this sentinel is no less diligent than the undercover officers now surveilling you as you watch and touch and touch and watch. This camera, this electronic eye, is also waiting to watch you—it *will* watch you and record what it has seen for others, who will watch you also.

You, too, reading these words—I know you are watching also. But look around you. Who is now watching you?

Scene 2 | An Eye on Sacred Pee-wee at the Video Altar

Was the preceding scenario a working gloss for a David Lynch/Atom Egoyan collaborative film? Some odd screenplay inspired by the works of Gore Vidal, Jeremy Bentham, Michel Foucault, and Madonna Ciccone? An erotic Hollywood thriller coming soon to a theater near you? Not quite.

The preceding is an only mildly exaggerated summary of events that took place now nearly a decade ago, the evening of July 26, 1991, when movie star/television celebrity Paul Reubens (a.k.a. Pee-wee Herman) was arrested outside a Sarasota, Florida pornographic movie house called *The South Trail Cinema* in alleged violation of Florida statute 800.03, “Exposure of Sexual Organs,” an all-encompassing

civic ordinance that, via the magic of synecdoche, is routinely invoked by “peace officers” for all manner and species of public sex acts, including acts of *public* masturbation. No *cinema paradiso* for Reubens, these widely broadcast events have permanently marked his career, costing him millions of dollars and introducing the masses to a postmodern rhetoric of scandal that has been since perfected via the televised coverage of the Menendez brothers’ parricide, the O. J. Simpson trial, the Princess Diana death crash, the Jon Benet Ramsey murder, “John John” Kennedy Jr.’s Icarus-like plunge into the Atlantic Ocean, the Clinton Impeachment/Lewinsky blow-job affair, and no doubt the impending show-trial of ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Returning to the events of that fateful night and to a critical sifting-through of this scandal’s coverage affords us the possibility of profitable intellectual philandering, offering those of us drawn to the allures of cultural study with another opportunity to examine that knotty, always already interesting nexus of gender, sexuality, and the American body politic. This is made all the more tasty owing to the complex duo of Reubens and his singular alter ego Pee-wee Herman. The *alter ego* is, of course, the stuff of psychoanalytic/hermeneutic wet-dreams; one does not have to be a student or aficionado of *doppelgängers* to understand that anytime someone presents themselves as someone other than who they might otherwise appear to be, there will be room for a general consideration of identity and disguise, existentialism and camouflage—domains with long-standing traditions of discussion in the Humanities, but domains also made much more salient, not to mention politically pertinent, by technological advances in video surveillance and image dissemination/dissimulation.¹

Reubens’s case is even more intriguing as his particular mode of performance, the particulars by which he becomes his alter ego, brings us to the general terrain of transvestites, *persons who dress as exemplars of that which they are not*. Pee-wee, in fact, provides us with the opportunity to rethink and expand (if not explode) the semantic/political contours of gender and transvestism. Certainly transvestism introduces here the thematics of costuming and camouflage, but it may also be seen alternatively and simultaneously as a cultural practice that disturbs the *visuo/political* order of things. Reflecting back on the coverage, that is to say, the creation, of the Pee-wee Herman controversy, we find ourselves rehearsing a scenario wherein the semantic domain of transvestism changes clothes, revealing itself as synonymous with strategic inversion, diastrophism, displacement, and rupture—in short, transvestism as revolutionary praxis *and* fun to boot!

The general premise, though, and this returns us to the specifics of Reubens’s case, is that the transvestite is that threat to the status-quo that the status-quo must regulate—and *not only so that one will not be outdressed*. Transvestites must be guarded and policed, surveyed and isolated, if not eradicated entirely—and not just *now* in the age of high priest prude Attorney General John Ashcroft, but in the past as well.

So it is of no little importance to the essay twitching here in your hands that we see Reubens dressing up as Pee-wee Herman as an act of transvestism—doing so puts us in a better position to understand the avalanche of media coverage that



Figure 1 - Barthes Meets Barbie

attended to his arrest and was attendant upon the scandal that ensued.

Why “twitching”?

Because the essay you are reading may be thought of as a *transvestite* in its own right—especially if one understands rhetorical *genres* as the conceptual blood kin of sexual *genders*. Originally and essentially a piece of performance art for a gathering of scholars at a lesbian and gay male film conference at the University of California-Davis, my writing appears here in the stolid garb of the scholarly essay. One example of this genre/gender cross-dressing analogy will suffice: during the original performance of this piece at the conference, a quotation from Roland Barthes on the topic of toys (illustrated with an appropri-

ated photograph of Barbie) was a literal, traveling epigraph.

Barthes’s statement on toys and adults was printed on a small piece of paper grafted to a plastic see-thru package enclosing two blonde airline stewardess dolls, which attendees passed about the auditorium as I delivered my lecture. So please do not let these rigorously marshaled footnotes and works cited fool you. You are not reading an essay, but a glammed up simulacrum of a performance.

For the moment, however, let us leave the frock of transvestism to one side and turn to a related set of circumstances, conditions that ensured Reubens’s sex act made the front pages of newspapers, newsmagazines, and tawdry tabloids here and abroad. Let us now turn, then, to the notion of *celebrity*.

Paul Reubens was and is an American celebrity: both a motion picture star and a children’s television fixture—many adults, too, were fans of his *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* series on CBS. In short, he was, like any face that graces the boob tube, a public *icon*.

My use of italics here is a none-too-subtle hint for us to look back at the second epigraph above. I found this conspicuous gloss on Christ and iconography in a volume of official Roman Catholic catechism, in a section where the Holy Roman Church lays down the law regarding the worship of images (Martin Luther had a ball *kvetching* about just this kind of stuff earlier this millennia).

Said Catholic catechism relies upon and quotes from the findings of one St. John Damascene, an eighth-century theologian and the last of the Greek fathers of the Church. Given our interest in television celebrities, it is noteworthy that St. Damascene’s “first important writings were three apologies defending the veneration of sacred images against the iconoclastic edicts of Byzantine emperor Leo III the Isaurian” (“Damascene” 37). Were he alive today, he no doubt would be on CNN’s Larry King Show touting the cinematic excesses of Mel Gibson’s *The Passion*.

Let us (not with *hubris*) imagine that we have somehow progressed to the point that these ancient Catholic edicts, themselves underwritten by references to

centuries-old theological findings, are somehow no longer pertinent to you and I as we glibly surf the new millennia. The increasing secularization of the globe, the displacement of the sacred by web browsers, Nintendo, high-definition TV, and movies may have left us with less of “God” proper, but we are all the same still immersed with many, many, many more sacred images.

After all, what is television as a cultural practice but the “veneration of sacred images”? And what more sacred, pristine image is there these days than the sacrosanct icon of the children’s television celebrity? (Matt Groening’s Krusty the Clown and Sideshow Bob excepted, of course.) I have dealt with related issues at length in “Artif(r)ecture: Virulent Pictures, Graphic Narrative, and the Ideology of the Visual.” Yet the work that appears before you here owes a deep debt to Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, which I view to be as moving and powerful a collection of thoughts on the theorization of image technology as the issues of *Screen* edited by Stephen Heath or John Berger’s groundbreaking volume and television series *Ways of Seeing*. Using Morrison’s narrator as a lens of sorts, I am enabled to rethink movies, toys, and, by contiguity, Saturday morning children’s programming. Those of you who have read Morrison’s novel will recall the striking sequence where Claudia MacTeer, perplexed as to the source of a white, blond-haired doll’s ostensibly intrinsic “beauty,” sets out to destroy the doll, to *analyze* it literally, breaking it down into its constituent parts and destroying the doll in the process:

Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around, and the thing made one sound—a sound they said was the sweet and plaintive cry “Mama,” but which sounded to me like the bleat of a dying lamb . . . I destroyed white baby dolls.

But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. (21-22)

Morrison’s narrative exegesis on the dynamics of identity and self-loathing serve as a succinct, critically incisive counterpoint to the earlier findings of French semiotic sovereign Roland Barthes: “All the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world. They are reduced copies of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus, to whom must be supplied objects of his own size” (53). One has only to glance at figure 2 to see at once the veracity of Barthes’s suggestion.

To be speaking of toys and identity in a piece concerned with the scandals of Pee-wee Herman, or, better put, the scandal of the manufacture of scandal surrounding Reubens having sex with himself in a public theater, is not to move so far afield from the subject at hand—especially in an age when children’s entertainment is nothing more and nothing less than a vehicle for the sale of plastic figurines, dolls, toys, and games. After all, what are our Saturday morning televised sentinels but large dolls purposefully posed and marketed to swell the coffers of media giants from New York City to Berlin to Mexico City? Pee-wee, though, was something, someone different. And it cuts to the core of the industry that rose above and throttled him to examine the dynamics of his difference, the threat his particular form of juvenile costuming, his pointedly peculiar act of transvestism, posed for the

trustees of corporate mass culture. Imagine here the following hypothetical scandals: dearly departed Mr. Rogers caught with his pants down outside a Las Vegas cathouse; or Captain Kangaroo, the late Bob Keesham, entering the Betty Ford clinic for the second time to beat a crack cocaine habit; or, in potentially the worst possible scenario, the spectacle of Big Bird caught on camera defecating on a public sidewalk.

The Catholic catechism's reference to a new "economy of images" brought on by the incarnation of God as man is a hermeneutically sophisticated signal of a paradigm shift in visual exegesis; while it allows for the literal pictorial representation of God on earth for the faithful, it simultaneously authorizes parodic and bowdlerized versions of the same that can and do pass for the real thing. No less sacred than God or god or the gods (take your pick), and no less removed, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition, from the sultry sensuality and materiality of genitals, copulation, and sexual intercourse, the body of children's television stars cannot be seen to function as organic, sexualized entities. The spectacle of an ostensibly de-sexualized body, determined fit by the networks for the weekly consumption of children, getting caught touching itself in a Florida porn house, brings into high relief all the laws, sanctions, taboos, and policing institutions Western culture has amassed for the domestication of what Freud rightly and, in my view conservatively, termed our polymorphous perversity. And this is exactly the contentious nexus that Reubens introduced when he, out of costume and perhaps out of character, gave himself over to the delights of Onan—forgetting the lesson that Onan, too, learned the hard way.² When our culture industry hosts a crucifixion, we best attend to the particulars lest we find ourselves invited to star in its next production.

Scene 3 | While The Emperor Has No Clothes, The Transvestite Has Someone Else's

Since I will be using the term transvestite and speaking of Reubens's dressing as Pee-wee Herman as an act of transvestism, I need to tell a short story about the first time I delivered this paper at UC-Davis in May 1993.³ As these events are not at all extraneous to the etymological intrigues of transvestism, I beg the indulgence of my readers.

It was the day before my presentation and the one and only Professor Earl Jackson Jr. had just finished introducing the audience to the allegorical and theoretical intricacies of a non-heterosexual, specular dynamics—a homoerotic, gay male "gaze" if you will—which he had illustrated with selected fuck-scenes from his treasure trove of gay male porn. In his prepared comments, he alluded to a breakdown of sorts that occurs in feminist film theory whenever it chances to touch upon the concept, practice, or phenomenon of transvestism. Given that my own prepared notes on Pee-wee Herman dealt with a generalization of the concept of the transvestite, I queried the good doctor as to whether Reubens's curious form of transvestism was worth looking into.

"No!" Jackson bellowed.

"Wrong!" he added, and none too gently.

Holding forth with the passion of a wounded rhinoceros, pontificating with the vindictive dedication of the self-righteous academic, Jackson declared to one and all assembled the inanity of my premise. Jackson's view was clear: Reubens dressing as Pee-wee Herman was not an example of transvestic costuming, as no gender alteration was involved. I had not been shouted at in a public gathering with such passionate severity since Sister Cecilia wailed at me in fifth grade at Blessed Sacrament Elementary School in Laredo, Texas.

I must say that I was both startled and pleased by Jackson's heated rejoinder: startled at the vehemence of Jackson's rebuke (the cur!) and pleased that in our chaotic, indeterminate, post-post moment in the intellectual history of the West it was still possible to be absolutely "wrong."

My suggestion regarding Reubens's costuming as a form of transvestism was not "valorized," nor "informing," nor "suggestive," nor "symptomatic," nor "tangential."

It was wrong. *I was wrong.*

How did Sir Jackson Jr. justify his decisive negative verdict? His command of the English language. For Jackson Jr., English was a proper language with rules and usages regarding the deployment of the term *transvestite*, which heterosexually-tainted ("determined," "marked," "polluted") types, like yours truly, are apt to misconstrue.⁴

That afternoon, after Jackson's presentation and before my own talk the following afternoon, I decided to plot my response carefully. Having been humbled before my peers, I quietly skulked out of the hall and scouted about for a library and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. I found that the etymological derivation for the word "transvestite" has, of course, little to do with English and more to do with Latin, which I, as one raised partly in the mother tongue of Spanish, was pleased to see. "Transvestire": "trans" means to change, alter, or move; "Vestire" is akin to the Spanish reflexive verb "vestirse" and alludes to the action of dressing oneself ("Transvestite"). Language purists and Earl Jackson Jr. please note, there is nothing, etymologically speaking, that *speaks* to any particular gendering or sexing or culturing of this clothing transfer. Jackson's whole rationale for bellowing me down on the niceties of the word "transvestite" was his misinformed view that to speak of Pee-wee Herman as a transvestite was a piece of utter nonsense because he was not a man dressing as a woman but a man dressing as a boy—Herman's choice, and not by the by, I read to be an intriguing manifestation of a novel *transvestite* logic.

Now there *is* a gender specific term that also speaks to the phenomenon of one



Figure 2

gender dressing as another, and it is the word *eonism*, which some of my readers will be familiar with either owing to scholarly research or evening habits. Eonism refers to the adoption by a male subject of female clothing and mannerisms; the word was *fathered* by the Chevalier Charles d'Eon, an eighteenth-century French diplomat known more for wearing female garments and effecting feminine manners than for international détente.⁵ I know that some may counter that it is a colloquial truism that “transvestites” are men who dress as women, but when have cultural critics ever taken the colloquial as the place to build a speculative edifice? Should the notion of the transvestite be limited to discussions of men in drag or might it be of use as a critically enabling term to metonymically reference those instances where a subject elects to confuse gender identity?



Figure 3

It seems a waste to limit the scope of *transvestism* to critical meditations and mediations of examples, such as the Dunkin Donuts ad in figure 3, where corporate culture oddly mixes classical notions of the *chimaera* with a denuded, valorized visioning of a cross-dressing male.

Let us move from the abstract to the specific enigma that is Pee-wee Herman. Reubens is a man dressed as a boy; or, to be more specific, Reubens is a male actor impersonating the character of a boy dressing as a man; or, even more specifically, the character of a boy dressed how parents, or other adults, might dress a boy they wanted to look like a man. Reubens does not change clothes to embody the character of another gender,

but to become the personage of another age, another mindset. This, then, I read as a radical form of transvestism that sentinels of cultural standards found hard to countersign.

Those familiar with Mexican television know the pleasures of watching a man dressing and performing as a boy is not limited to the rarified television-rich atmosphere of the United States. Mexican television's *El chavo del ocho* (*The Boy from the Eighth Floor*) is another example. Here an actor known as “Chespirito” (Roberto Gómez Bolaños) plays a pun-loving, mischievous, impoverished child, the bane of the low-income, high-rise neighborhood within which he dwells and the show is set.

A man dressing and acting as a boy. What a curious theatrical desire, both peculiar and provocative. “Chespirito” is seventy; Reubens was still playing Pee-wee in his late thirties, and now, past fifty, is considering re-enacting his singular role. What of Bob Denver, the dopey, indeterminately adolescent Gilligan? Is he,

too, part of this phenomenon?

I am not alone in my suspicion regarding global, critical deployments of the transvestite concept, as I have been guided in my efforts by the works of the late Cuban exile Severo Sarduy. In “Copy/Simulacrum” Sarduy develops his theory of transvestism, building upon the work of Roger Callois in a study of *camouflage*. Sarduy does not read transvestites as men who want to look like women, but as individuals who assume the exaggerated guise of the other gender so as to disappear: “[N]othing insures that the chemical—or surgical—conversion of men into women does not have as its hidden goal a kind of disappearance, invisibility, *effacement*” (94). In “Toward a Hypertelic Art” Sarduy expands this view: “Camouflage: not to seem the aggressor. Not to have to defend oneself. To counteract the enemy’s scrutinizing eye by resorting to an apotropaic death: theater of invisibility” (95). In the end, Sarduy fashions a “law of true disguise” so as to better render



Figure 4

the nexus of desires and acts at the heart of transvestism. Not as an act with a goal, nothing so economically practical, but as an example of performance without end: performance in the interest of performance—ironically enough, a *spectacle* of the visible.

In a Western context so thoroughly saturated with a psychoanalytically informed and existentially motivated view of identity and the self, shape-shifting entities like the transvestite, or like the actor who assumes the alter ego of a child masquerading as a man, are sure to call into question the very foundations of the state and the social body that believes in the reflection it fashions for itself in the mirror of mass culture. In his succinct, probing introduction to the memoir of hermaphrodite poster child Herculine Barbin, Michel Foucault ironically asks: “Do we *truly* need a *true* sex? With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative” (vii). Three pages later Foucault remarks: “At the bottom of *sex is truth*” (x). It goes without saying that the categories of self and truth share turf when one examines the ideology of the West. Gender is in there too, and all this comes to a head and spills (shades of Onan) with the sad, titillating case of Paul Reubens.

Scene Four | Saturday Morning Rogues, Innocent Family Situation Comedies, and a Singular Transsexual

Let us begin again. And let us talk about the difficulty of talking *to* each other without talking *at* each other. Can we even speak of each other, of the “other”? My designated academic specialty is Chicano/a and Latin American culture. Chicano/a



Figure 5 - Drunk Mexicans



Figure 6 - Mexicans in Trash

Figure 7 - Chick Inspector -
Libidinally Charged Mexicans

and Latino artifacts line my office, analyses of the same decorate my vitae. So this, then, is my turf. But if you were going to graduate school as I was in the mid-1980s, you could not overlook, unless purposely, the determinate and indeterminate findings that were beginning to accrue and now prosper under the rubric of gender studies and queer theory.

I have recently been engaged in the critical examination of Latinos and Latinas in United States mass culture, and Warner Brothers' ubiquitous rodent, Speedy Gonzales, has been very much on my mind.⁶ It was, in fact, my interest in Speedy Gonzales that led a would-be specialist on Latin American literature and culture to the rather alien terrain of Saturday morning children's television celebrities, to Pee-wee, and, as we will see, to father/other figures on *The Brady Bunch*. What yokes Speedy and Pee-wee together is their audience—by and large these are moving picture entertainments for children and young adults—but what makes them blood brothers of sorts is that they are both highly sexed and sexualized. In these entertainments and in the controversies surrounding their real-life puppeteer/creators, we are presented with modern-day parables wherein revelations regarding diverse ideological constructs abound.⁷ Speedy Gonzales entertainments ask viewers to navigate the ever-bumpy terrain of ethnic stereotypes, Latino masculinity, “swarthy” machismo, as well as the processes that naturalize heterosexual rakishness as the signature of Latino desire. All are readily apparent in the images here for your perusal.

I grew up, as most of you did, with Speedy Gonzales. It is only recently that I have begun to assess the magnitude of the marks this particular piece of animated vermin has tattooed on my psyche, on the psyches of all who have witnessed his clever antics.

As we dally here momentarily with Warner Brothers' redoubtable rodent, we are not so far afield of our more general concern with transvestism and an oddly and highly sexualized children's television star. For a whole generation of American television viewers, Warner Brothers' cartoons defined Saturday morning television, moving amidst CBS, NBC, and ABC from the 1960s to the 1990s. And discussions of Speedy are not extraneous to concerns with archetypal sexuality: Speedy

typifies the Latino “macho” who, as Sarduy suggests in his reading of José Donoso’s *El lugar sin límites* (*The Place That Has No Limits*), is “incapable of confronting his own desire, of assuming the image of himself imposed by that desire, the macho—a *transvestite in reverse*—becomes an inquisitor, an executioner” (34, emphasis added). The step between costume and language, subjectivity and mother tongue, is here a rather short one: a “space of conversions, of transformations and disguises: the space of language” (35). Sarduy’s words here allow us to suture together our concern with celebrity and innocence, transvestism and resistance, to the phenomenon of transvestism by mass culture.

We have another television icon to consult before we return to watching Pee-wee Herman watch, to watching others watching others watching Pee-wee Herman watch. It begins innocently enough with the image in front of you—a somewhat familiar shot of nine black-bordered cells showcasing two remarried parents, one cheery domestic servant, and six children.

Readers chained in Plato’s cave since the 1970s won’t have a clue that the image is culled from the opening credit sequence of the ABC television series *The Brady Bunch*. These images, in particular the bottom center image of beneficently smiling patriarch/daddy Mike Brady, are to be held in the foreground of your consciousness, held in reserve as it were, so as to prepare you for the next set of images to follow. Without giving away too much, I will only add that if



Figure 8

you ever watched *The Brady Bunch*, that quasi-mythological grand narrative of a post-divorce/reconstituted/American nuclear family, that epitome of cold war age suburbia, you may be in for a bit of a surprise. In front of you now is a black and white still image from a made-for-television movie-length special episode of another 1970s television series entitled *Medical Center*—this particular episode tellingly entitled “The Fourth Sex.” In this momentous piece of late twentieth-century tele-cinema, we are confronted with the tragic dilemma of one Dr. Patrick Gaddison. Pat’s doctor and friend, Joe (played with the thespian range of a rotting log by seventies “hunk” Chad Everett), has just informed Pat that a “four-hour procedure” on the operating table awaits him.

The operation?

“Pat” wants to become “Patricia.” No mere transvestite, Dr. Pat[ricia] yearns to change more than just his clothes. In the scene reproduced here, Pat approaches the soon-to-be spectre of his male self in the mirror. There he pauses to deliver a simple, poignant line with conviction: “Goodbye,



Figure 9

Patrick James Gaddison.”

Both Pat and Patricia Gaddison are played to the hilt with melodramatic adroitness by Robert Reed. Yes, *that* Robert Reed, the very same actor who developed the character of Mike Brady, the Kronus of gated California sprawl on *The Brady Bunch*. In “The Fourth Sex,” however, this special, award-winning TV movie (Reed won the Emmy in 1976 for outstanding actor in a television drama), one encounters the *paterfamilias* of the Brady clan as never seen before. Needless to say, Pat’s metamorphosis into Patricia comes as a bit of a shock to his wife, Heather, and their baseball-loving son, Steve.

“No visitors,” glares the sign. Patricia’s “wife” Heather confronts that bar, having just removed her wedding ring and glancing at her nails as if anticipating some odd, uncanny encounter that will challenge her gender identifications, some ungodly rendezvous that is somehow anathema to the institution of marriage—for *how* can Heather be married to Patricia?



Figure 10

Ignoring the bar, the sign that forbids entry to the “freak” within, she braces herself for her encounter with her “husband.” The camera lingers on the actress’s back as she slowly approaches the hospital room portal—a one-way door that forbids the solace of a return. It is at just this highly charged moment that Patricia/Pat, complaining of scores of unanticipated visitors, mouths the words that appear in the first epigraph to this essay: “If one more person comes in here to take a peek, I am going to charge admission.”

At the time, *Medical Center* was riding a wave of public interest in the U.S. concerning those technological and procedural advances in the medical arts that allowed men to “become” women; Pat/Patricia’s crisis was a thinly-veiled take on the then-breaking and landmark Renée Richard’s transsexual operation story (Richards). And to their credit, director Vincent Sherman’s and writer Rita Lakin’s “The Fourth Sex” was a poignant performative success. 1975: a year that witnessed the incarceration of Nixon Watergate figures H. R. Haldeman, John Mitchell, and



Figure 11

John Erlichman; the capture of heiress/bank robber/terrorist diva Patty Hearst; and, finally, the death of fascist Generalissimo Francisco Franco in Spain. It also marked a turning point in the development of the critic whose words you are now reading here.

Scene Five | An Autobiographical Intrusion, A Biographical Rendering

An affable, if a bit peculiar, husky, tele-addicted thirteen year old from Laredo, with limited experience and even less insight, I remember laughing quite viciously at the

spectacle of Pat/Patricia's conundrum—Pat's choice to go under the knife and emerge as Patricia left me in howling tears, doubled over at the, for me, ridiculousness of the situation. After all, it was 1975. *The Brady Bunch* ended its series run in 1974. Mike Brady in a dress, castrated, invaginated, was too much too soon. It was all I could do not to wet my pants as I rolled, convulsing on the shag carpet of my very American living room.

Speedy Gonzales, too, was a source of no little delight. Here, after all, was an animated facsimile of a world somewhat akin to the Mexican-American domain of South Texas—the “Mexicans” in Speedy's world were familiar, or at least the accented English was familiar, the familiar being all that is usually necessary to deliver paroxysms of laughter from your average human subject. I was no different. I laughed at Speedy, at the trash, at the thieving *ratoncitos*, and at Pat—most loudly at Patricia née Patrick James Gaddison.

And today, some thirty years later, I am perplexed with a nagging curiosity. I want to isolate the source of my glee. I want to touch the source of my wholesale delight and somehow document the mechanics of that laughter. I do not have the vocabulary to address the source of my merriment. This return is not to enforce upon my past guilt for acts I would now not think to perpetrate. *This essay is not a mere exercise in recuperative nostalgia. It is an attempt to reconstruct the culturally disseminated rewards that rendered sexualized acts of transition laughable.* Transsexualism is not identical to transvestism, but there is in the medical procedure an echo of the dynamics of the costumed act.

All of which reminds me of an anecdote a friend told me. At the age of 22 she became acquainted with an eccentric twenty-nine year old woman in the bordertown of Laredo, where she and I were born and raised. One night this woman drew her close and confessed that she was a hermaphrodite as she/he attempted to grope and snag a kiss. My friend was taken aback, more from the novelty of kissing her “female” friend than by her hermaphrodite status—for she *had no idea what a hermaphrodite was*. She had neither heard of nor imagined the possibility. As these things sometimes go, even for those of us with only one set of genitals, no romance ensued from the woman's advance and my friend asked to go home. End of anecdote.

What matters about this minor tale is not the sordid allure of scandal or romance, the Herculine Barbin-like potential for taboo libidinal intrigue. What matters is the encounter with that for which there is no prior model. Nothing in Laredo, her education, or her experience had prepared her for this situation. Her perplexity, and her honesty about her perplexity I might add, underwrites much of what has here passed and what will herein follow: the idea of transvestites, transsexuals, and hermaphrodites as culturally intriguing “anomalies” that carry the mark of difference within and sometimes without—a difference that brings into high relief the conforming strategies of the status quo.

Perhaps it is my dual imprinting between rakish, macho Speedy and the revised body politics of Mike Brady reborn as a woman named Patricia, yes perhaps it is this twin set of boundaries that led me to seriously think through journalistic accounts of the “scandal” of Reubens walking into a Florida porn house and alleg-

edly masturbating, or “masterbating” (sic), as the voyeuristic Florida security forces wrote in their arrest report (see Achenbach).

And so it concludes with this: everyone wants to be moved by what they see. An alternative take? *Everyone* will be *touched* by what they see.

Scene Six | Watching Journalists Watching Pee-wee Watch

Our locale and *modus operandi* shift somewhat: where transvestism and Saturday morning celebrity have been our subjects, surveillance now comes to the fore and dominates as we move to a tale of dueling glances and of actions taken as a result of what was seen. So let us move to the journalistic aftermath of the events of the evening of July 26, 1991, and let us see what the yellow press had to say about the events of that evening.

July 31, 1991: Five days after the capture, Joel Achenbach’s story appeared in *The Washington Post*: “Paul Reubens is living out every man’s and every boy’s worst nightmare. He is alleged to have been seen touching himself” (B1). Achenbach’s words strike the voyeuristic keynote that will typify media coverage of Reubens’s sex act. Interestingly, Achenbach’s piece finds him dismayed by the work of his journalist colleagues, lamenting how “the simple equation of fame plus alleged sex crime equals news[,] requir[ing] . . . the entire clammy story be exposed to the world” (B1). Refreshingly acute, Achenbach’s sarcasm cuts to the quick: “[T]here were no witnesses to the event other than one of the undercover officers assigned to stake out the theater—masturbation is apparently such a grave public threat in Sarasota that the Sheriff’s Office assigned not one but three detectives to infiltrate the place and *watch for flapping elbows*” (B9, emphasis added). In addition to clear editorializing, Achenbach’s round-up gives us the straight facts, noting Reubens was detained for acts “in violation of Florida statute 800.03, Exposure of Sexual Organs” (B1)—a personal choice that exacts a price: it costs Reubens \$219.00 to post bond. Achenbach’s piece is quite good and includes a highly entertaining, if brief, thumbnail sketch of the history of attempts to eradicate masturbation, from Samuel Pepys to Sigmund Freud, concluding quite evocatively, and even perhaps autobiographically, that masturbation “*is universally practiced*, and it is universally considered vile” (B9, emphasis added). In his final thoughts, Achenbach muses upon “people cast[ing] a jaundiced eye at any adult who makes a living around children” (B9).

The Associated Press, perhaps fearing the repercussions of said jaundice, were hot to the wire the very same day with an unattributed sidebar to the burgeoning Pee-wee story: “How to Explain Pee-wee Herman’s Arrest to Children.” The highlight of this brief journalistic vignette is a quote from Professor Jeffrey Derevensky of McGill University, who passes along these *bon mots* for parents to pass on to their young children concerning the recent exploits of their “TV pal”: “You are to say Pee-wee Herman was doing things that were inappropriate. He went to a place that Pee-wee Herman shouldn’t have gone to and he did something wrong” (B5). Other social scientist pundits are called upon in this guide to explain adult sexual predilections to pre-school children. Elissa Benedek, a clinical profes-

sor of psychiatry at the University of Michigan Medical Center, offered helpfully that “parents should distinguish between Reubens the actor and Herman the character even when a child is as young as 3 or 4” (B5). Benedek’s own psychological condition comes into question, however, in her conclusion: “It is important to teach youngsters that what they see on television is make-believe, *other than on the news*” (B5, emphasis added). Needless to say, Benedek’s implied faith in Rather, Brokaw, Jennings, et al. ought to have given her readers (including three and four year olds) pause.

August 1, 1991: Daniel Cerone and Alan Citron’s piece in *The Los Angeles Times* attempts to measure the west coast zeitgeist regarding Reubens’s movie-watching activities, citing this noteworthy pronouncement from the mouth of local KCBS tele-anchor Michael Tuck: “It’s almost like Donald Duck flashing in a public park” (“Pee-wee’s Big Story” F1). Tuck, who identifies himself as a “disappointed Pee-wee Herman fan,”



Figure 12

here invokes the holy name of Disney via analogy, underscoring the severity of Reubens’s act—in southern California there are few more sacrosanct categories than Disney. Tuck’s lament signals the outrage that attaches to the spectacle of a sacred image fouling itself. Auto-erotism and career suicide are revealed as synonymous.

In the articles appearing on a daily basis in newspapers and magazines across the U.S. (echoing, I might add, the semiotic wisdom of St. Damascene), Hollywood producers and industry pundits repeatedly allude to the mug shots of Reubens after his arrest, which were run on television and in the print media.

Ultimately, the appeal and pleasure of iconic juxtaposition ends up fueling much of the publicity. *Sally Jessy Raphael* producer Burt Dubrow’s “eloquent” observation is typical: “[I]t really freaked us out when we saw the picture, because it was so opposite from what we know of him” (Cerone and Citron, “Pee-wee’s Big Story” F10). *New York Post* metropolitan editor Hohn Cotter’s explanation for his none-too-subtle tabloid’s attraction to the story, which they ran on page 1, is clear about the draw: “[T]he mug shots were definitely the thing that grabbed us” (Cerone and Citron, “Pee-wee’s Big Story” F10).

August 3, 1991: More and more stories began to appear regarding the slim celebrity’s sexual scandal. Lost in all the mud was a small notice in *The New York Times* regarding an old friend of Reubens in the Sarasota Sheriff’s Department, who tried to lend Pee-wee a hand. Corporal Joan Verizzo “will be suspended for a day without pay for helping to provide bail money for the actor Pee-wee Herman, a longtime friend” (“Deputy” 25). Here is a narrative with real intrigue—signaling a minute fracture in the order of the policing institution charged with Reubens’s prosecution. More on this suggestive schism below.

August 5, 1991: The scandal continued to snowball, with the effects of Reubens’s *alleged* public sex act rippling throughout the entertainment industry and business community. David Kilburn’s “Sayonara Pee-wee” in *Advertising Age* explores the

immediate, multinational economic implications of a masturbating Reubens. Kilburn's blurb notes that a Japanese corporation, Wako Securities, has suspended Reubens's commercials until the case could be heard. The ad firm responsible for the production of this publicity series has a nose for western sex scandals, it would seem, having also hired Rob Lowe for earlier ads that had to be pulled from the airwaves lest Wako's face be lost in the process.⁸

August 6, 1991: The shit really hit the fan when the mother of all newspapers on the mother of all editorial pages weighed in with its own less-than-mother-like (unless one's mother was a sociopath), pithy judgement. So it is that on this day, *The New York Times* held forth below stolid editorial pieces on workers' rights and the politics of embryos: "There seems to be little doubt that Paul Reubens, the actor who created Pee-wee Herman, violated the special standard that society rightly imposes on personalities of the world of children" ("Sick Jokes" A16). This



Figure 13²¹

unelaborated "special standard" is, of course, the ideologically inculcated values whereby sites and methods of sexual pleasure are collectively legislated and regulated. Needless to say, *The New York Times* is responsible, along with the broadcast networks, for a fair share of this elided, yet essential, cultural legislation.

August 12, 1991: *Time* finally weighed in with its comprehensive account of Reubens's epic sexual act. The graphic juxtaposition included with their article (see figure 14) speaks volumes—a terse, iconic

shorthand and a nice counterpart to the *New York Post* editor's huzzahs cited above. Writer Paul Gray's view of Pee-wee is as curious and extraordinary as the noted graphics. Finding that Reubens's "hyperkinetic nerdiness was irresistible to millions of children," Gray muses,

Pee-wee Herman was a grownup version of little brother: winsome, goofy, capable of saying dumb things and beatifically happy with the panorama of the world . . . This man-boy with the tight suit, googly eyes and lipsticked mouth was not every parent's cup of tea: add a leer and the little guy could pass for the emcee of a Berlin nightclub circa 1935. (58)

Here, Gray aptly unravels the semiotic complexity of Pee-wee's routine. As we will see below, the particular aesthetic vein Reubens mined as Pee-wee has its roots in a realm of sexual desires and practices perfectly suited to outrage guardians of our domestic cultural status quo. Gray's conclusion is equally acute: "Perhaps the real crime, the one for which Reubens has been so relentlessly pilloried, was the successful pretense of childishness" (58). I read Gray's finding here literally: adults really do derive no little satisfaction from the pillory of others for the exploration of sexual pleasures allowable in toddlers and infants (if then!). In short, much of the public spanking Pee-wee received may profitably be read as a mass cultural castiga-

tion for the particular flavor of “entertainment” his Saturday morning television show, stage act, and holiday specials embodied (for more in this regard, see Huskey).

August 12, 1991: The highlight of Charles Leerhsen’s *Newsweek* piece is the following loaded, not-so-rhetorical question: “Can an electronic babysitter violate our children’s trust?” (54). The image of a babysitter masturbating at the local porn house inflames the heady mix of celebrity and scandal surrounding Reubens’s situation. Leerhsen’s essay adds a few tidbits regarding the circumstances of Reubens’s arrest: “The undercover detectives were said to be working on a drug case, and when their leads did not pan out, they decided to check the theater for sex offenders” (55). That the agents charged with maintaining Sarasota’s public hygiene move so easily from narcotics stake-out to porn house surveillance speaks less to their particular range as detectives, I suspect, and more to the boredom of under-educated law enforcement types out for a good time and a little work on the side. The denouement of this particular story is memorable: a quote from a professor emeritus of children’s shows, one-time celebrity Soupy Sales, who weighs in with this bit of sage advice: “He can masturbate his brains out, but you don’t do that in a porno theater when you’re a role model” (55).

August 14, 1991: A memorable *Wall Street Journal* op-ed piece by Doy Aharoni appeared. Aharoni, a rabbi, author, and student at the University of California-Los Angeles School of Law, disclosed a bit of cultural study minutia that actually solicits and licenses a return to the work of Sarduy. Aharoni’s sympathetic piece notes that among the many project cancellations endured by Reubens (the remaining episodes of his CBS Saturday morning television program, advertising, and promotion contracts, etc.), “the Philadelphia Zoo has zapped [their] two minute Pee-wee flick, this one explaining metamorphosis and starring a butterfly and a caterpillar” (A8). The irony of this cancellation in the context of our inquiry is not to be missed: ultimately, this study submits that Reubens was punished in the media for, among other things, embodying a flexible subjectivity: there is a price to be paid for being an existentially charmed entity that sanctions flexible gender and sexual practice oscillations. Reubens’s invention of a character who wears the costume of a boy dressed as a man has been revealed here as a striking alternative form of transvestism that does not operate strictly with regard to gender but also to age. The irony of a zoo’s decision to excise a two-minute short film on insect metamorphosis comes into high relief in a discussion of transvestism informed by Sarduy, as the transformation of caterpillars into butterflies provides an analogue to human costuming strategies. As Sarduy concludes in “Copy/Simulacrum,” “the animal-transvestite does not seek a friendly appearance in order to attract (nor a disagreeable appearance in order to dissuade), but an embodiment of fixity in order to *disappear*” (94). More generally, Sarduy uses these views in order to sustain his striking revelations concerning the relation between behavior and rhetoric, culture and narration: “*Transvestism . . . may well be the best metaphor for writing . . . mak[ing] us see . . . not a woman who might be hiding a man beneath her appearance, . . . but the very fact of transvestism itself*” (37).

August 19, 1991: Three weeks after the story broke, *The New Republic* published an article that seems at first to strike a sympathetic stance of advocacy on the

whole issue of Pee-wee's incarceration:

The question to be asked is not why Pee Wee [sic] Herman was allegedly masturbating in an X-rated movie house (arresting him for such is like arresting someone for drinking in a bar) but rather why the police were sweeping the aisles with flashlights in the first place. If there is any indecency to expose, it's the prurience of the police, and the cowardice of CBS. (Barnes et al. 10)

A laudable view, but before we acclaim the courage of the editors of *The New Republic*, let us take a closer look at the odd opening sequence that precedes their defense: "The appearance of children's television star Paul Reubens . . . on the cover of Tuesday's *New York Post* was, to some, a myth-shattering revelation. Reubens's mug shot after being arrested for indecent exposure in a Sarasota, Florida porno theater was a far cry from his rosy-cheeked, *asexual* on-camera persona"(10, emphasis added). "Asexual"? Pee-wee Herman? I do not think the semantic contours of the term asexual can be of any use to our survey. It is, in fact, the particular form of Pee-wee Herman's overlooked and highly sexualized popular subjectivity that underwrites the scandal that arises from his public sex act.

November 6, 1991: Weeks after Reubens's brief imprisonment, Cerone and Citron were documenting the judicial end of the Pee-wee sex drama: "Paul Reubens will plead no contest to a misdemeanor charge of indecent exposure . . . *The deal was offered last week, it appears, after Reubens's lawyers showed the court a videotape from a surveillance camera in the adult movie theater that allegedly supported Reubens's claim of innocence*" ("Florida Cuts Deal" F1, emphasis added).

Talk about a late-breaking ironic scenario. In the final weeks of a case that allegorically fuses together all sorts of late twentieth-century concerns with voyeurism, identity, sexuality, and subjectivity, the star witness for the defense is an unseen VHS surveillance camera in the garish lobby of a fateful Sarasota porn house. The break "came October 7," relates Cerone, "when lawyers representing Reubens disclosed to the prosecution a videotape shot by a security camera in the lobby of the theater on the night of the arrest. According to Dresnick [one of Reubens's attorneys], *the time code on the videotape showed that Reubens was in the lobby when detective William Walters allegedly saw the actor masturbating*" (F1, emphasis added). The human detective/voyeur's testimony is at odds with another star witness/voyeur, this one *non-human*: a camera. "Walters claimed in a deposition that he had constant watch over a man he alleges was Reubens for a 20-minute period in the theater. Halfway through that time frame, however, is when Reubens was videotaped in the lobby" (F1). A camera's eye, with timecode, elides the witnessing gaze of a superceded sheriff's peeking.

I am at great pains to resist anthropomorphizing this Pee-wee friendly camera, to personalize it like *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* puppets Chairie and Globie, and have it sassy-mouthed and irreverent, chiming in with its findings in the final hours, affording Pee-wee a last minute reprieve from hard time in Sing Sing.

Dresnick's conclusions are, in light of the previous scenario, kind of pedestrian, but their political and economic implications are nonetheless worth sampling.

Recalling the Rodney King tape evidence controversy, Dresnick waxes semiotic: “It’s a perfect example of the power of the videotape recorder, where police just don’t have any idea who’s watching them” (F1). This documentation of surveillance and the police in the context of sexuality sanctions an introduction of power/knowledge thoughts from the late-lamented, oft-cited French scribe Michel Foucault: “With these themes of surveillance, and especially in the schools, it seems that control over sexuality becomes inscribed in architecture. In the Military Schools, the very walls speak the struggle against homosexuality and masturbation” (“Eye of Power” 150). The irony here? Reubens was incarcerated for lewd acts upon his



Figure 14



Figure 15

person in a structure architecturally designed to provoke masturbation. Akin to a dark waking dream space, the site of the motion picture theater seems designed by the likes of a Bentham for the pleasure of the seated voyeur. The antithesis of a panopticon prison, the movie house seems the perfect place to “flap [one’s] elbow” with impunity. Who would imagine that a palace designed for the delights of the watcher would solicit the policing gaze of Sarasota sheriffs? In our everyday waking, walking public lives, policing agencies and public institutions have “no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising their surveillance over, and against, himself” (155).⁹

But a movie house is different. Akin to the bedroom or toilet, a movie house seems that most remote island of privacy. Hence the irony of the public spectacle that comes to surround Reubens’s private screening of *Nurse Nancy*, *Turn up the Heat*, and *Tiger Shark* in the South Trail Cinema.

Scene 7 | Spanking the Gender-Bending Prankster

This is an informed chat. A thinking through. I am sharing some recent findings, initial but well-worked through—more a deck of cards than a road map. So we have watched journalists watching, amused ourselves with the sometime apt, sometimes annoying dispatches from the world of newspapers. Now it is time to come clean. Cultural commentators, academic cultural workers, what can we add to the discussion that might take us outside this circuit of scandal, disappointment, and banal outrage?¹⁰

When I shared this chat at UC-Davis, I was in the initial moments of thinking through Thomas Laqueur’s *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* and its well-crafted take on the one sex/two sex debates on sexual differ-

ence—a volume that is worth the price of admission if only for its selective art historical survey on the aesthetics and sexual politics of anatomy illustration. So now it is with mild trepidation that I move to a mild rebuke of some choice words drawn from Laqueur’s book.

Trepidation not because of the esteem that has accrued upon Laqueur’s project, but from where it is drawn: his conclusion. Rhetorically speaking, conclusions are odd, anxious sites, the desire for closure running up against a critic’s desire to analyze, to break things down—my own piece will cop-out with a post-script in lieu of a conclusion, which introduces attendant complications of its own.

Here then, in his denouement, Laqueur writes: “[T]he content of talk about sexual difference is unfettered by fact, and is as free as mind’s play” (243). We can intuit Laqueur’s goal in these lines, crafting a thesis about the cultural construction of gender roles, not to mention gender costumes (two different beasts if you ask me); Laqueur wants to stress the open-endedness of it all, how having acknowledged the constructedness of men and women, of bodies designated male and female, we can now critically walk past that limited binary view and throw ourselves (rhetorically?) into the churning polymorphous waters of life. Leaving aside my cynical suspicion that while lunching at *The Plaza* Laqueur uses the men’s room, I merely want to re-emphasize that we would do well to sidestep the issue of freedom with regard to the content of our talk. To talk is to be fettered, and to imagine otherwise a naive dream.

In this essay, I would like to translate Laqueur’s critical architecture and try to imagine infants, kids, teenagers, adults, and the elderly as categories much akin to those associated with gender. Sex practices and taboos also figure in and intersect with these age categories. While it is perfectly acceptable for an eight month old male infant to publicly hold and manipulate his genitalia, a thirty-nine year old male in a public theater will have a tougher go of it. Once a community brings these age-sensitive categories on-line, they are quietly and powerfully naturalized, and the stage is set for all manner of neuroses. I am not being obtuse or abstract: one has only to mention the specter of the pederast to kindle the outrage of the masses. And part of the controversy surrounding the “scandal” of Reubens’s sex act derives from the fact that he produced a program ostensibly designed for children; that he dressed, singularly, as a child; and that he pleased himself sexually.



Figure 16 - Panoply of Camp Stars.

And I think it is time to allow Reubens to weigh in on his own behalf. As I suggested above, I read the vehemence of the response against Pee-wee and his private sexual act in a public venue (the cancellation of multi-million dollar ad accounts, neighborhood Pee-wee impersonators out of a job, the network cancellation of his remaining shows) as a collective vote of sorts, on the part of a significant, determining minority. This vote, the equivalent of a slap in the face or boot in the ass, amounts to a public spanking of Pee-wee for his misbehavior: namely his nationally televised showcasing of gender-bending celebrities. We can account for the scandal, but not the glee of the media. What had Pee-

wee done? What had his productions perpetrated on the American masses to deserve such a public caning?

To begin to answer these queries, let us screen a few frames from *Pee-Wee's Playhouse's* 1988 Christmas special. In these images one confronts status-quo gender propriety subjected to ironic and subversive parody—campy, irreverent, and, in my view, delicious. The vehemence of the main-stream media's response may be read then as a

rebuke for this boy/man/comic/trickster not playing by the stagnant, concrete rules of identity and sexual choice. Consider only this: in his singular special, Reubens and his coterie of actors, artists, and producers attack for comic profit that most sacred of Christian and capitalist holy days: Christmas. December 25th is both the ostensible birthday of Jesus Christ *and* the time for that consumer frenzy most associated as a tonic for capitalism: the Christmas shopping season. One would have to search long and hard for more important totems in U.S. mass culture. I don't imagine I will have to provide you with a slew of citations from sociologists and anthropologists on the topic of Christmas and holiday rituals in order to sway you to my view of things on this issue. That all of Christianity and all of the retail barons of Wall Street and the European Commonwealth celebrate equally the glorious rituals of worship and purchase that is Christmas hardly calls for concrete substantiation.

And it is with the particular genre of the child's Christmas television special that Pee-wee Herman elects to launch his campy satire. A domain best known for the likes of Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, and Charlie Brown, the Christmas season television line-up is a paean to the spirit of Christmas past, those pre-secular days of yore when Christ was born and gifts were exchanged and children rubbed their eager noses on windows scouting for reindeer and an overweight, if generous, strange man's largesse. As I argued in "Autopsy of a Rat," even when the characters are downright cruel (like Dr. Seuss's Grinch and ol' man Dickens's Ebenezer Scrooge), their malevolence is merely a pretense for their ultimate redemption in the final act.



Figure 18 - Semper Fi meets Esther Williams.

Nothing so contrived is to be found within the confines of *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*. The opening sequence of the program begins with a tracking shot of a line of elves throwing extravagantly decorated gifts down a snow-framed well, anything but an auspicious beginning. And we have not yet mentioned the mischievous selections of casting director Diane Dimeo in pulling together her multicultural. This, then, has been a short story about scandal. Recently, the number of scandals in the United States mass media has risen in direct proportion to the rise of what is called "tabloid television," such as *Real Video*,



Figure 17 - Stern singing Marines.



Figure 19 - Marine playfully gooses Pee-wee.

multi-sexual, polymorphously endowed company of players, who visit Pee-wee for Yuletide cheer. This singular and provocative grouping merits a brief pictorial review. It is a veritable who's who of kitschy, camp, U.S. celebrity, including Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, Whoopi Goldberg, Earvin "Magic" Johnson, and kd lang. Note the juxtaposition of clean-cut X-mas symbolism (each star ringed by a holly wreath) with ironic camp lurking there on the fringes — Avalon, lang, and Goldberg. The

possibilities are endless.

The Christmas special's boisterous opening song sequence, a Gene Kelly-style extravaganza that begins with the gift-down-the-well-throwing-elves animation, ends with a stern and sober company of what appear to be Marine Corps Honor Guard singers solemnly and richly intoning a minor-chord heavy carol, "It's Christmas in the Playhouse."

This almost sacred and somewhat melancholic interlude comes to what appears to be a closing pause when Pee-wee appears suddenly and the slow, dirge-like music suddenly bursts into a rock'n'rolling melange of Busby Berkley and Esther Williams, with Pee-wee leading his Marines-cum-Rockettes through a rousing song and dance sequence whose choreography is pure MGM.

The flamboyant, knowing, camp aesthetics of this performance is all the more ironic within the politico-sexual context of recent controversies surrounding gay men and "don't ask, don't tell" policies in the United States armed forces.¹¹ Needless to say, the scene experiences a bit of a climax when one of the crooning soldiers gooses a surprised and rather dismayed Mr. Herman. The pinch comes just as the troupe sings, "it's Christmas in the playhouse, we're gonna have some fun."

After this dazzling opener, the special gets down to work with peripatetic glee:



Figure 20 - Dinah & the Automaton.

one sub-plot follows the running gag of Pee-wee's greed (a greed made all the more acute by the gift-potential of Christmas); another is a curious vignette that charts Pee-wee's attempt to speak Spanish (*feliz navidad* in Pee-wee's

mouth becomes "felesshh nabbaabbah") with a Latino dupe, Ricardo, which ends with a festive piñata sequence. The piñata skit is itself merely a set-up for a succinct paean to Hollywood Latinas via Dolores Del Rio/Lupe Velez simulacrum "Charo." "Now the only thing missing is Charo," Pee-wee exclaims.

Another compelling vignette captures the late singer Dinah Shore, who had a sickeningly sweet morning show of her own at one point, singing the "Twelve Days of Christmas" to a cruel Pee-wee via videophone. Pee-wee, annoyed with Shore's

interloping, replaces himself with a masked mannequin, to whom Shore, oblivious, addresses her song. This is a text rife with semiotic possibilities: simulacra, automatons, the mask, television, the phone, etc.

Earlier in the gala, Pee-wee is visited by New York City cabaret fixture Grace Jones, who enters *chez* Pee-wee via a sealed box. Intended destination? The White House. Just before the crate is opened, Pee-wee says, “I hope it’s not another fruitcake.” The unsolicited, unwanted fruitcake is a motif of the Christmas special, with guest after guest handing ungrateful Pee-wee Herman one of these peculiar holiday confections. An odd overlap of Christmas and gay male aesthetic here appears, as “fruitcake” is also a popular early twentieth-century English epithet for gay males. This is not a hermeneutic stretch, as any viewer of the show quickly gathers. The motif culminates in a topper of a vignette late in the show. The walls of Pee-wee’s playhouse part between reproductions of da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* and little boy blue, revealing a backroom with a wall of fruitcakes being assembled by two beefy construction worker types (Village People-style hunks). Pee-wee’s succinct exchange with the sweaty shirtless laborers speaks reams and reams: “Here’s two more fruitcakes.”

But let us return to Grace Jones and her oddly appealing, disco-fied version of “The Little Drummer Boy.” Jones’s version of the X-mas classic is like no other I have ever seen. The solemn tale of Christ’s herald is reborn as a modified striptease gyration. In the image reproduced here you see the shadow of the gloves she has just flamboyantly hurled off camera. When Jones intones, “I saved my best for him,” we know we are not in Santa’s workshop anymore.

It is the purpose of this essay to suggest that sequences like this lead mainstream media pundits to discount and abuse the entertainments issued by Reubens and his camp. The following quote is typical: “His show was ‘a gallery of weirdos,’ says John Hannah, a Los Angeles writer who knew Reubens. ‘A kind of surrealist bathhouse’”(Leerhsen 55). Given the impact of surrealism on the art and politics of the twentieth century, Hannah’s remarks may be re-appropriated and championed as an astute analogy. In Leerhsen’s *Newsweek* piece, it merely serves to underscore Reubens’s allegiance to the domain of gay male aesthetics.

Scene 8 | Turn off the Cameras and Close Your Eyes

Hard Copy, *Inside Edition*, *The World’s Wildest Police Videos*, and their ilk. Although they purport to take the pulse of the American nation, these “journalists” are more interested in profiting from (and at the same time nurturing) a growing



Figure 21 - Pee-wee & the Fruitcake.



Figure 22 - Grace Jones strips.

hunger for the titillation and pleasure that derives from electronic voyeurism. Needless to say, this has led to a reinforcement of some of the more retrograde “shared” cultural attitudes in the U.S. towards those whose sexual orientation or practices are at odds with a powerful fictional oddity of the late twentieth century that goes by the name of “family values.”

This essay, then, chronicles a brief interlude in the history of surveillance and the policing of those values. Focusing primarily on the set of events surrounding Reubens’s arrest for public masturbation, it also deals with the status that attaches to the bodies and actions of individuals whose celebrity derives from the gaze of children. Citing various sources (Sarduy and Barthes, among others) and media (newspaper stories, photographs, and toys), I argue that part of the scandal that



Figure 23 - Pee-Wee & the Author, San Diego, 1994

arose from Reubens’s unfortunate incarceration derives in large part from the nature of the entertainment he had been producing for CBS during his reign at the network. We have just briefly peeked at parts of one of these entertainments.

Though a Saturday morning celebrity’s encounter with cinema and some sheriffs provides the centerpiece of this project, the essay also unfolds with some institutional goals attached. The piece attempts to build a bridge of sorts between the interests and practices of ethnic American

theorists and those professionals engaged in gender and/or gay male and lesbian studies. Ultimately, via Sarduy, I am attempting to fashion a speculation that might span the concerns of chicano/latino theory and gender studies. And if I linger upon the spectacle of the cross-dressed subject, of transexualism on television, it is because I sense in these critical somatic interventions an ally or a means of confluence with what chicana theoretical diva Gloria Anzaldúa calls the “*mestizaje*” (27). This speaks to my overall goal: articulating recent American cultural trends with regard to the intersection of technology and desire, film, sexual attitudes, surveillance technology, and what one might call the pathology of celebrity are all found in bed together simultaneously.

Scene 9 | The Final Costume Change

In dealing with the epidemic of visibility menacing our entire culture today, we must, as Nietzsche quite correctly said, cultivate mendacious and deceptive clear-sightedness (see Baudrillard 45). So we have assayed the theoretical implications of Pee-wee Herman and the odd, moving tale of a man who profits by dressing as a boy dressed as a man. A television and movie star who, still on camera, bathed in the wondrous carnal entanglements of filmed pornography, gets caught up in the gears of a cultural machinery dedicated to sexual policing, an embarrassing provocative tale of public outrage.

We have spoken of spectators and surveillance, of the dueling eyes of cameras and detectives wanting to see and, having satisfied that urge, acting on it after the fact. Our topics have spanned the gamut of cross-dressing, transexualism, transvestism, and hermaphrodites, a veritable hodge-podge of ostensibly marginal sexual subject positions.

This essay ends by reflecting upon a labyrinth of reflection: Reubens returned to the silver screen after his masturbation scandal in the role of the Penguin's evil and heartless father in *Batman Returns* (1992). The film, the second in the recent Batman series, was directed by Tim Burton, who also directed, more recently, *Ed Wood*, a bio-documentary about a famous bad filmmaker and, not incidentally, a transvestite (played admirably enough by the somewhat handsome, always half-shaved Johnny Depp). One of Wood's first feature films was *Glen or Glenda*, also known as *I Led Two Lives* (1953). The movie poster appears here. In it I read a compelling, evocative visual counterpoint to the essay now drawing to a close.

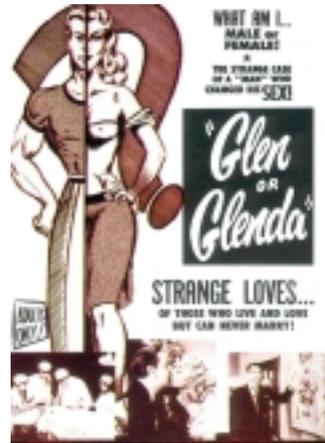


Figure 24 - Glen or Glenda?

Some conclusions: transvestism is a process of self-willed othering, of costume and camouflage, where the othered subject submits gender categories to that most acute analysis which, in the theory of comedy, is known as farce. Farce is serious business, as Freud was not the first to bring to light in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. So transvestites are those who dress as someone else, someone other than who it is others suppose them to be, perhaps someone other than who it is they imagine themselves to be. Reubens's approximation of a spoiled child dressed as a middle-aged used car salesman is no less curious than Rue Paul, or Milton Berle for that matter. They are actors in masks who call into question the boundaries of the real, remarking upon it and challenging it in unmatched fashion through unmatched fashion. Ultimately, transvestites and acts of transvestism reveal the limitations of the philosophical category of the existential. For that crime, their trace must be silenced, rendered farcical, or be subjected to the eliding ubiquity of televised scandal.

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Post-script, April 2004

In November 2001 a search warrant was issued for Reubens's home in connection with another court case. The object of this particular Los Angeles City Attorney-inspired safari? Child pornography. Reubens understood right away the ramifications of the search, stating, "the moment that I realized my name was going to be said in the same sentence as children and sex, that's really intense. That's something I knew from that very moment, whatever happens past that point, something's out there in the air that is really bad" (Phillips). Though he defended his "vast and

Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality. Also spongeworthy: Matthew Tinkcom's *Working Like A Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema*.

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