

social critique, self-reflexivity, and, in particular, distancing effects, there is still a refusal of the "vulgar" enjoyments suspected of soap operas. This refusal again functions to divorce the critic from an image of a mindless, hedonistic crowd he or she has actually manufactured in order to definitively secure the righteous logic of "good" taste. It also, as Haskell's remark about shop girls suggests, perpetuates negative notions of female taste and subjectivity. Critiques of mass culture seem always to invoke a disdainful image of the feminine to represent the depths of the corruption of the people.

The process of tastemaking in both historical periods operated, then, to create hierarchical differences between the aesthete and the masses through the construction of canons and aesthetic positions antithetical to the perceived unrestrained and tasteless pleasures of the crowd.

## 4

## Star Gossip

Rock Hudson and the Burdens  
of Masculinity

STARS OCCUPY A privileged place in the social apprehension of films in mass culture. Films often attract audiences and remain in the public memory on the basis of celebrity performers (a "Humphrey Bogart" or "Mel Gibson" movie). The prominence of stars in mass media interviews and feature stories strongly enhances their status as significant cultural icons. Indeed, celebrity coverage ranks as one of the most visible, pervasive staples of the mass media, and one of the key forms mediating the relation of people to their culture.

Edgar Morin's work in *Les Stars* introduced the notion that the star phenomenon was best analyzed as a combination of both movie roles and offscreen personality (constructed by studio press releases, magazine stories, etc.).<sup>1</sup> While movie roles could create a certain definition of star persona (such as Lauren Bacall's friendly femme fatale in *To Have and Have Not* [1944]), personal details were at least equally important in adding an aura to stardom (the fact that Bacall and Humphrey Bogart fell in love during the filming of *To Have and Have Not*). Biographical revelations were a constituent part of the celebrity image, creating dimensions of fascination and meaning for stars beyond any specific role they might play. This perspective suggests that to capture a star's meaning, the analyst must attend to an inherent intertextuality spanning from film roles to "extra-filmic" sources depicting the actor's offscreen self. The star thus emerges as a "structured polysemy," a signifying entity composed of multiple but finite meanings, generated by diverse texts and subject to change over time.<sup>2</sup>

By examining the various sources that constitute star identity within specific historical contexts, the theorist can explore the relation between a star's popular meaning and the social function this meaning serves. The star is never a mere celebrity, but a bundle of media constructed traits that reflect cultural preoccupations.



pations, whether we consider Shirley Temple and the Great Depression or Marilyn Monroe and 1950s conceptions of female sexuality.<sup>3</sup>

But, aside from the star's significance as a cultural barometer, there is another, equally important dimension of star study. As Richard de Cordova suggests, analyses should ask the question of how the presence of a star affects the reception of a film.<sup>4</sup> The exact relationship between a celebrity's intertextual persona and its impact on viewing a particular film may be difficult to determine with certainty. But the star's strong social presence and ability to attract audiences suggest that it has a particular power over the consumption of artifacts that requires serious consideration.

### Rock Hudson: Creating the Image

Of all the stars who have passed through the Sirk universe, including Jane Wyman, Robert Stack, Dorothy Malone, and Lana Turner, Rock Hudson is the actor most identified with this director and his work at Universal Pictures. Hudson gained his first major success in a starring role in *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), and appeared in seven other Sirk/Universal films during the decade: *Has Anybody Seen My Gal?* (1952), *Taza, Son of Cochise* (1954), *Captain Lightfoot* (1955), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), *Battle Hymn* (1956), *Written on the Wind* (1957), and *Tarnished Angels* (1958).

During this time and into the 1960s, Hudson enjoyed tremendous popularity as a beefcake idol and romantic lead. However, extra-filmic information about him late in his career dramatically transformed this image. In the 1980s, Hudson was the first major celebrity to publicly announce he had been diagnosed with AIDS, revealing his long-hidden homosexuality and virtually dismantling his previous ultraheterosexual identity. Given Hudson's close association with Sirk films, his role in each decade as a central cultural symbol, and the drastic revision of his persona, he represents a particularly compelling case with which to explore the impact star discourse has on the meaning of Sirk's melodramas. I will thus analyze the media's construction of Hudson's persona in the 1950s and 1980s—the two moments in his career when he attained his greatest social importance—to examine how his star image affected the perception of Sirk's films within such different historical contexts.

While it is very tempting to look on the 1950s ironically, equipped with 1980s revelations about Hudson's gay identity, an ironical approach to the decade could easily disregard Hudson's actual importance to postwar culture. During the 1950s, Hudson had the kind of iconographical sexual significance critics usually associate with the more flamboyant types represented by Marilyn Mon-

roe, Elvis Presley, and Marlon Brando. In contrast to these figures, Hudson embodied a certain brand of sexual normalcy, a normalcy every bit as important in defining the tenor of the times as the more excessive. As I will later argue, Hudson's image functioned defensively against changing conceptions of masculine power and sexuality in the post-World War II era. In a society obsessively concerned with the problem of male "weakness," posed as a result of such social specters as the "modern woman" and the "homosexual menace," the media developed Hudson's image as proof of the widespread appeal and endurance of uncomplicated virility. They helped sustain, that is, a certain brand of traditional masculinity in the face of great public turmoil over appropriate social and sexual behavior for men.

Between 1948 and 1959, when he began his career with a bit part in Raoul Walsh's *Fighter Squadron* and enjoyed the heights of his popularity with *Pillow Talk*, Hudson appeared in nearly forty films. Most of his early appearances were bit parts until he caused a sensation among female fans with his small role as a gambler in Anthony Mann's *Bend of the River* (1952). After this, he secured the lead in a number of films from 1952 to 1954, including *Scarlet Angel* and *The Lawless Breed*. But it was not until *Magnificent Obsession* that his leading man status intertwined successfully with that of romantic heartthrob. *Magnificent Obsession* grossed eight million dollars, and Hudson reportedly started receiving three thousand fan letters a week from teens and older women. While critics frequently related Hudson's appeal to his "good looks," his acting ability received short shrift until *Giant* (1956), for which he received an Academy Award nomination for best actor.

Hudson's box-office stature after 1953 was manifested in the numerous magazine and industry honors he received, as well as by his prominence in magazine coverage. He was voted the most popular male movie star by *Modern Screen* in 1954, *Look* in 1955, *Photoplay* in 1957, and by theater owners the same year. From 1957 to 1964, the Film Buyers of the Motion Picture Industry consistently named him the number one box-office attraction, which meant that audiences bought more tickets for his movies than anyone else's. Magazine features helped declare his unequivocal popular status: among almost countless others, *People*, *Look*, and *Life* each ran cover stories on Hudson, respectively titled "Rock Hudson: No. 1 Lover," "Rock Hudson: Why He's No. 1," and "Hollywood's Most Handsome Bachelor."<sup>5</sup> Hudson was unquestionably the strongest box-office attraction Universal had from the mid-1950s through the early 1960s, and arguably the most popular male star of the time overall (albeit with stiff competition from Cary Grant).

During this period, Hudson appeared in westerns, war films, adventures,



costume dramas, romantic comedies, and melodramas. Within these genres, Hudson's roles included American Indians, army officers, swashbucklers, gamblers, bachelors, doctors, journalists, and gardeners. But despite such diversity, Hudson's starring roles emphasized a consistent persona: a strapping, physically appealing, clean-cut, often sensitive, and ultimately morally upright character. The largest role of his early career, that of boxer Speed O'Keefe in *Iron Man* (1951), demonstrated how he would be typecast in his later films. In this film he plays a young, wholesome boxer whose honesty contrasts with a "dirty" fighter played by lead Jeff Chandler. Similarly, in *Bend of the River*, while his character begins as ambiguous in terms of good and evil, by the end of the film he has joined with protagonist Jimmy Stewart and even gets the girl.

Hudson's parts in Sirk films helped cement this persona. In *Taza*, he is the good Indian who allies himself with the white man against other warring Indians to secure peace in the West. In *Magnificent Obsession*, his character (Bob Merrick) begins as a careless playboy who indirectly causes the death of Jane Wyman's husband, and then directly causes her blindness. Stricken with a sense of painful responsibility, inspired selflessness, and love for Helen Phillips (Wyman), he returns to medical school to learn procedures that could restore her vision, eventually saving her sight and her life. *All That Heaven Allows* accentuates the essential simplicity and uncluttered rightness that lay at the center of Hudson's particular kind of masculinity. His character, Ron Kirby, is overtly linked with nature both by his gardening vocation and his lifestyle. Kirby is presented as the "natural man"—earthy, generous, soft-spoken, and unassuming. As someone who rejects social artifice, preferring the woods and down-to-earth friends, he stands in contrast to the cronies of his beloved, Cary Scott (Jane Wyman). Similarly, in *Written on the Wind* and *Tarnished Angels* (despite his drinking problem in the latter), he appears as the personification of stability in contrast to other players tormented by psychological and sexual problems.

Even in films that toyed with his wholesome persona, such as *Magnificent Obsession* and George Steven's *Giant*, in which he plays a bigoted patriarch, the narratives were preoccupied with restoring his "good guy" status. Hence, we see a fairly quick transformation of Merrick from an irresponsible ladies' man to a committed lover and doctor, while *Giant* ultimately finds Hudson's character battling over the rights of Mexican patrons to be served in a white Texas cafe. Like Bette Davis's awaited transformation from dowdy spinster to radiant, independent woman in *Now, Voyager* (1942), Hudson's roles in films like these served to magnify his type through a kind of dramatic striptease that would eventually reveal the "real" image of the star behind the disguise of the character in question.

Until the release of *Pillow Talk* in 1959, the first in a series of sex comedies with Doris Day that included *Lover Come Back* (1961) and *Send Me No Flowers* (1964), the majority of Hudson's film roles depicted a romantic hero whose relative lack of emotional complexity was matched by generally unerring moral instincts supporting basic social ideas of right and wrong. Although coded visually as beefcake, Hudson's sexual allure remained on the path to monogamous devotion in his early films. The Day/Hudson trilogy and Hudson's other sex comedies of the 1960s founded his second wave of popularity and a new persona—the bachelor playboy—apparently at odds with his earlier, more pristine image, the ramifications of which I shall discuss later.

While film roles were undoubtedly important in providing the contours and appeals of Hudson's star image, extra-filmic coverage added prolific and significant dimensions to this image that clarified how it was to function within the culture at large. As mentioned, Hudson received prodigious press coverage during the 1950s in fan, women's, and general circulation magazines. The kinds of stories appearing in these magazines—behind-the-scenes accounts of the star's personal and romantic life—originated in the story formulas of confession magazines in the 1920s, which focused on intimate revelations about ordinary people's lifestyles and love problems. From confession magazines, fanzines, and scandal rags to respectable middle-class sources, publishers found that such "inside" stories sold. Mass media "gossip" featuring apparently private information about notable people had a sizable market value resting largely on a female public.

Star gossip typically relied on biography as a foundation for its revelations about star lifestyles and romantic status. These biographies were inevitably derived from studio press books which provided the "official" life story of the star. The basic life story tended to chronicle the star's childhood, adolescence and adulthood, building to the moment he or she was discovered by Hollywood. Each step of the chronology was punctuated by facts about his or her romantic relationships. No matter what the variations in the writer's perspective or in particular details included in the account, the same major biographical facts tended to form the basis for most star commentary.<sup>6</sup>

The backbone of the official Hudson biography was comprised by the following information. Hudson was born Roy Scherer on November 17, 1925 in Winnetka, Illinois, in a poor section of a well-to-do neighborhood. His parents divorced when he was four, and he was later adopted by his mother's second husband, Wallace Fitzgerald. His mother subsequently divorced Fitzgerald, a Marine Corps officer whom Roy never liked. From an early age, Roy worked odd jobs to help support the family, including soda jerk and window washer. He



was a bad student in high school, but liked by his classmates who remember him as quiet, shy, good-looking, and a "one-woman" man. He was drafted by the Navy, where by almost wrecking a plane, he was transferred to permanent laundry duty. After the Navy, he worked at a post office and as a truck driver. His truck driver friends urged him to try to become a movie star, and through a mutual acquaintance, he was introduced to Henry Willson in 1947, who was in charge of talent for David O. Selznick.

Biographies reported that "When Willson asked him if he could act, Rock told the truth, 'No.' 'Good,' answered Willson." Thus began Hudson's famed transformation at the hands of Willson, who hoped that Hudson's good looks would appeal to female fans. However, as Roy Fitzgerald, he had a crooked eye tooth, a slouch, a bad haircut, a Midwestern twang, and an uninteresting name that had to be changed for this appeal to be truly realized. Willson fixed all of that. As the man who created the names of Tab Hunter and Rory Calhoun, he coined Rock (from the Rock of Gibraltar) and Hudson (from the river), and took charge of necessary cosmetic and locutionary alterations to add finesse to Roy's new identity.

Hudson's career began slowly with a one-liner in *Fighter Squadron*, which allegedly took him thirty-four attempts to get right. After a few more films, he landed the part that made him a screen idol in *Magnificent Obsession*. Since coming to Hollywood, Hudson dated script girl Betty Abbott, starlets Vera Ellen, Terry Moore and Julia Adams, and Henry Willson's secretary, Phyllis Gates (whom Hudson married in 1955 and divorced in 1958).

Fanzines recounted these details with adulatory rhetoric and often with assurances that theirs was an especially exclusive look into the actor's life. For example, Joe Hyams's "The Rock Hudson Story," published in *Photoplay*, the most successful fan magazine of the decade, offered itself as an unprecedented study of the "real" person behind the star hype. Hyams's purpose was to counter Hudson's simple "beefcake" image by giving an account of his complexity as "a solid, stable, intelligent young man who has built up an almost uncanny ability to take life as it comes and make not only the best but the most of it."<sup>7</sup> Like other star stories, Hyams's biography was intended as a backdrop for an elaborate work of characterization, defining traits, hobbies, and romantic dispositions that would help define the person behind the celebrity. In Hyams's account, Hudson emerged as a handsome, shy, easygoing fellow who "laughs about misfortune." As Hyams wrote, "Rock is and always has been a stranger to worry and anxiety" (91). We learn that Hudson loves music, collects records, dances the jitterbug expertly, and adores food. Hyams established Hudson's tremendous appeal to women with quotes from fans (women who proposed to him or were

saving up money to buy him cuff links without their husband's knowledge, etc.), but qualified this hysteria by describing his dating life as selective and seriously focused on one woman at a time.<sup>8</sup>

Despite Hyams's proclaimed desire to counter the beefcake image, his essay joined every other biography in promoting and capitalizing on Hudson's obvious sex appeal to fans by featuring numerous photos of Hudson's naked upper torso, as well as his embraces with co-stars and real-life dates.<sup>9</sup>

Hudson's romantic status in "reel" and "real" life was so important that there were types of essays devoted exclusively to this subject matter: lifestyle and marital status reports. Lifestyle and marital status were often inextricably linked in magazine articles. In the early 1950s, essays on Hudson's bachelor status abounded, as they did for other unmarried male stars. In "How a Hollywood Bachelor Lives," the writer described Hudson's house (a mountaintop glass and redwood structure) and lifestyle (the fact that he is a casual host, barbeques steaks, has parties centered around his player piano, and sleeps in the raw in the summer) to characterize his particular embodiment of a single male's home existence.<sup>10</sup> Supporting photos show him with a dog, in his convertible, and answering the phone outside the shower wrapped in a towel and baring his chest.

After his marriage to Phyllis Gates, the home continued to be the site most revealing about the star.<sup>11</sup> *Photoplay's* "Planning a Heavenly Love Nest" described Hudson's dream home as a direct extension of his personality. This nest, for example, would be built on high ground, for "a fellow who has . . . wanted an uninterrupted view of whatever world he found himself in." In addition, it would be close to nature (relating to his past as a golf caddy and his summer trips), have an unplanned decor (jokingly referred to as Early Ad Lib), be filled with the kind of chairs he likes ("big, deep and comfortable with a hassock in front so a guy could stretch out and take it easy"), and be free from draperies with fringe and doilies ("Rock's dislike for these decorations was developed at an early age" when he visited an older woman's house decorated in this manner and tipped over a Christmas tree).<sup>12</sup> Despite his marriage, this essay was at pains to sustain an image of "free" masculinity for his fans by so strategically minimizing any sense of domesticating feminine influence in decor.

Press coverage of Hudson, then, generally depicted his humble Midwestern origins, uncomplicated personality, love of nature and the simple pleasures of life, and his appealing manliness. Throughout, Hudson emerges as a rather exceptional fellow except for his torso. This depiction owed partially to the studio's desire to conform to contemporary public tastes about stardom in the post-World War II era. During this time, the public resented the aristocratic profile of



the star that traditionally had been generated by Hollywood publicity. The film industry responded by portraying the "real" lives of its stars through ordinary, domestic, middle-class imagery.<sup>13</sup> But Hudson's media identity owed more strongly to other factors that better explain his tremendous popularity and particular significance to 1950s culture. The media used Hudson to popularize a certain "alternative" conception of masculinity.

### An "Alternative" Masculine Ideal

Magazine stories explicitly presented discourse on the home as discourse on the "natural" man. We see Hudson the bachelor living on top of a mountain in a redwood house with a dog, eating steaks. Through such associations with rugged individualism and nature, Hudson emerges as a historical throwback, a quasi-Paul Bunyan figure who has maintained innate masculine characteristics unpolluted by fame or civilization. The description of the "heavenly love nest" in relation to his marriage sustains this impression. Although describing interior decor, a province typically affiliated with domestication and women, the mise-en-scène of the nest is carefully described in terms that evacuate the feminine. The unplanned, disorganized decor, chairs structured for men, and an absolute rejection of anything feminine like doilies and fringe, attest to the domination of a pure masculine ethos opposed to cultivation. Such elaborations corresponded nicely to the wholesome roles Hudson played in 1950s films, particularly his gardener in *All That Heaven Allows*. In addition, while promoting his sex appeal through beefcake photos, the press balanced their flagrant display by consistently downplaying Don Juanism, emphasizing that "Rock is the farthest thing from a 'ladies' man."<sup>14</sup> In this way, Hudson emerged as a wholesome, conventional, ultra-American, and pristine masculine type.

Given such conventional definitions of Hudson's image, why, then, refer to him as an "alternative" masculine ideal? His extra-filmic and filmic identities were so associated with normalcy that there appeared to be absolutely nothing different about him. However, when we place his image in the context of the 1950s, the reasons for his "alternative" label become clearer.

As Richard Dyer has pointed out, the popularization of psychoanalysis in the 1940s and 1950s inflected prior brooding, introspective portraits of masculinity in stars affiliated with the Romantic tradition (such as Valentino) with an overtly neurotic twist.<sup>15</sup> The best known "psycho-stars" of the 1950s—Montgomery Clift, Marlon Brando, and James Dean—presented a tormented version of masculinity, characterized by emotion, violence, and a brutal interrogation of self-identity and social convention. Even actors who previously had been defined

as all-American heroes, such as James Stewart and John Wayne, appeared in semi-psychotic roles that challenged their prior wholesome characterizations (such as, respectively, *The Naked Spur* [1953] and *The Searchers* [1956]).

There were those biographers of Hudson who attempted to attach him to this trend of the new romantic hero. One writer, for example, uncovered Hudson's fear of performing, bouts with anxiety, and suppressed anger.<sup>16</sup> Such accounts probably related Hudson to the more obviously troubled and increasingly appealing personas of young actors like Dean and Brando, modifying his persona to compete in a world of attractive neurotics. But such presentations never overtook the simplicity incarnate Hudson profile, Hyams's description of Hudson as a "stranger to worry and anxiety." To most fans, Hudson was "the boy next door, the captain of the football team, and favorite Hollywood hero."<sup>17</sup> In addition, Hudson's press coverage could not have been at more complete odds with the equally prolific star gossip on Brando and Dean.

Although both Brando and Dean came from the Midwest as well, reporters found nothing prosaic or admirable about their off-camera behavior. Brando's antics alone were prodigious. They included the constant presence of his pet raccoon, Russell, feeding raw eggs to a kitten on a hotel dining room table, yoga exercises on hotel lawns, setting off firecrackers in hotel lobbies and strolling through them with his head encased in a rubber monster mask, running broad jumps into pools, rude silences, messy clothes, and wild stories about eating grasshoppers and gazelle eyes.<sup>18</sup> These activities perhaps overshadowed Dean's penchant for beating tom-toms on table tops, setting fire to napkins or pouring bowls of sugar in his pocket if he felt he was not getting enough attention at restaurants.<sup>19</sup>

Hence, Brando acquired a "screwball" reputation that reporters linked to a "completely uninhibited animal nature, born of a Bohemian upbringing,"<sup>20</sup> while Dean could be labeled, even amidst the adulation he enjoyed after his death, "sadistic, uncouth, arrogant, cruel, and a filthy slob."<sup>21</sup>

Brando's unconventionality, like Dean's, even caused reporters to psychoanalyze them. A scandal magazine, *Rave*, declared Brando the "world's worst lover." This report claimed that Brando's love life was a "mess" because he happened to be "one of the most neurotic and unfortunate men, a dyed-in-the-bedsheets Don Juan." Calling his "inadequacies" as a lover more psychic than physical, the writer cited psychiatric opinion of Don Juanism, which finds that it is rooted in "doubt of one's own virility, and a loveless childhood." The future of his love life depended "on what luck he has on the psychoanalyst's couches he's been resting his curly head on lately."<sup>22</sup> Such speculations were probably only enhanced by mass coverage of Brando's nervous breakdown and his treat-



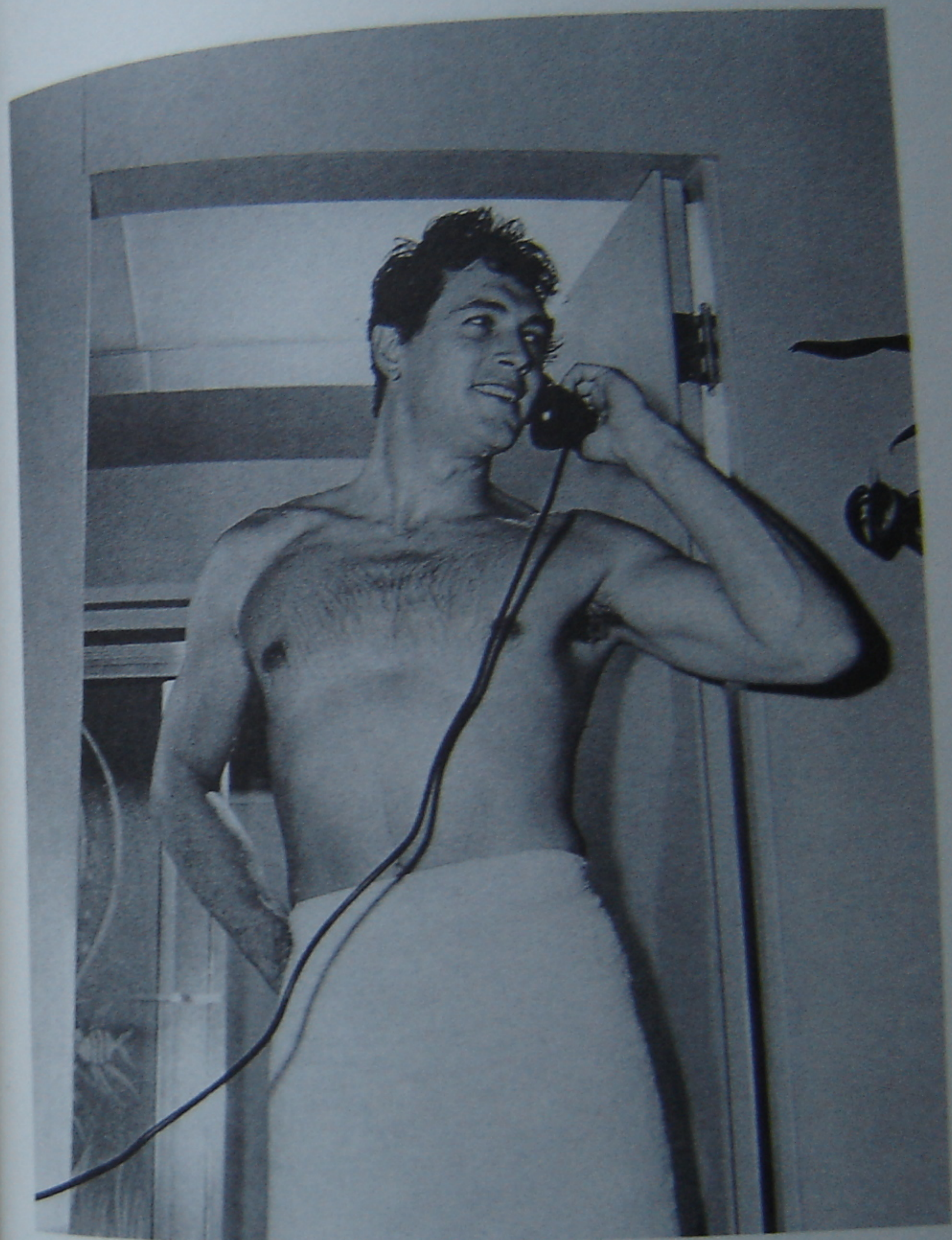
ment by a psychiatrist in 1954 before the filming of *The Egyptian*, in which he was scheduled to star. Dean's sociopathic behavior was attributed to the "confusion of adolescence," which turned him into "a sullen, bad-mannered rebel."<sup>23</sup> However, for some, "there was nothing in (his) boyhood to account for the eccentricities, exhibitionism, and downright bad manners" that Dean later acquired in Hollywood.<sup>24</sup>

While the psychoanalytic examination of these actors by the popular press no doubt generated excitement in fans over their "bad boy" appeal, it also served as a means of explaining and defusing the Brando/Dean assaults on civilized behavior and social norms as the conduct of "sick," maladjusted people. Magazine information on Hudson often acted exactly in the spirit of this sort of defensive gesture. That is, constructions of his image presented him as an alternative to the psychoanalytic romantic hero, a testimony to the continuing appeal of the normal in the face of disturbing new trends in male stardom. Above all, the Hudson persona communicated a masculinity that was always nonthreatening and that supported the tradition of a "clean-cut," masculine ethic. He was seen as providing relief from many actors of the time who "have been sensitive and spooky like Jimmy Dean; the public got tired of decay. So now here's Rock Hudson. He's wholesome. He doesn't perspire. . . . He smells of milk. His whole appeal is cleanliness and respectability—this boy is pure."<sup>25</sup>

The role of Hudson as foil to the psychoanalytic tenor of post-World War II Hollywood was nowhere more apparent than in an essay in the fan magazine *FilmLand*, which I quote at some length because of its particular relevance here. Ironically titled "Hollywood Exposé," this article featured Rock Hudson, George Nader (another young, aspiring Universal star), and their dates on a picnic. The article began, "Hollywood a crazy, mixed-up town? Peopled by oddballs and weirdies? Let's take a look at four typical citizens. . . . Sorry to disappoint you."

In a madhouse town, where battiness is practically a vogue, these two guys are terrifically, sensationally, super-colossally normal. This makes them the odd ones. After all, when everybody else is talking about his psychiatrist, his divorce, or his love affairs, these two haven't a thing to say. . . . Rock and George resent being thought strange simply because they act like normal citizens and avoid the pill-taking, psychiatrist-seeing gang like the plague. With a lot of other normal outcasts, they live in Hollywood just as they would in Anytown, U.S.A."<sup>26</sup>

Some captions to photos of the picnic read, "Hey, we nearly forgot the lemonade"; "Rock, George, and their dates devour a lunch of sandwiches, chicken, fruit, and milk"; and "Nader's good boy scout training," as he cleans up.



A typical torso shot of Rock Hudson. Photo by Sid Avery, © 1952. Motion Picture and Television Photo Archive.





The middle-class pleasures of a Hollywood bachelor. Photos by Sid Avery, © 1952 Motion Picture and Television Photo Archive.

Here, the term *exposé* is reversed in its usual association with shocking facts to refer to the continued presence of normality in a sea of disintegrating personalities. The picnic is a bit of Americana that invokes "a happy, normal, good time," a boy-scoutish banquet with lemonade and milk, pre-sexual, uncomplicated in its pleasures, and apparently nature's answer to psychiatric therapy. Such a perspective also served as the basis of a *Saturday Evening Post* spread featuring a game of charades and a backyard barbecue with Hudson and his friends.<sup>27</sup> Through this kind of iconography, wholesome Hudson appeared as a kind of antidote to an overdose of unstable oddballs—drugged, divorced, and uncertain of their identities.

Another look at Hudson's film roles confirms how extra-filmic and cinematic images joined together in endorsing this function. Hudson's film persona was almost absolutely foreign to the neuroses and violence characterizing the screen male during this period. Even in films like *Magnificent Obsession* and *All That Heaven Allows*, in which he falls in love with an older woman, the Oedipal alarm bells that could easily go off with a Paul Newman or James Dean are muffled by Hudson's image of stalwart normalcy. Further, in many roles, Hudson specifically represented a moral and psychological counterpoint to the deep chaos and social rebellion represented by the psychoanalytic male. This is evident in his pairings with neurotic characters—for example, the alcoholic, symbolically castrated, and Thanatos driven Stack in *Written on the Wind* and *Tarnished Angels*; the power hungry and potentially sexually subversive Dean in *Giant*; and the incestuous Kirk Douglas in *The Last Sunset* (1961).

In each of these films, Hudson not only provides the voice of reason, but acts as an ideological anchor of sanity. Even in his later sex comedies, his zestful bachelor contrasts with other male characters who have therapists. In *Lover Come Back*, for example, Tony Randall plays a businessman who cannot exercise his power effectively and says things like, "My psychiatrist gave me that walking stick to build my confidence." Hence, film pairings often acted out the same drama between Hudson's relative psychological stability and the neurotic Other found in star gossip.

As is clear from these last examples, Hudson's normalcy did not operate simply to counterpoint psychoanalytic inflections of masculinity. Randall's remark about his walking stick relied for its humor on the stick's obvious compensatory phallic significance for a character whose neurosis was clearly linked to emasculation. In the post-World War II era, social critics often equated troubled masculinity with weakness, and this weakness, in an ascending spiral of possibilities, could lead to perversion and homosexuality. On a deeper level, Hudson's image represented a "healthy," that is, solidly heterosexual, masculinity





A last minute check of the provisions, and this happy foursome are off on a picnic. George Nader's date for the day is pretty Marn Gardner. "Hey, we nearly forgot the lemonade," says George.



Both George and Rock love the desert country, so they decided to have their picnic in a desert oasis. After a short trek they found the perfect spot. Rock's next role is Metro's "Something of Value."

HOLLYWOOD EXPOSÉ



Phyllis made lots of sandwiches and both boys are camera fans, so there was plenty to unload. "We picnic in high style," laughs Rock.



Beating the ants to it, four hungry people demonstrate their hearty appetites as they devour a lunch of sandwiches, chicken, fruit, milk.

HOLLYWOOD EXPOSÉ



Rock Hudson is a movie fan as well as a movie star. Here he shoots his pet subject—wife Phyllis. Rock is great in UP's "Battle Hymn."



You can see George's good boy scout training has stuck as he cleans up. He has just completed filming UP's "Four Girls in Town."

Excerpts from "Hollywood Exposé": The simplicity and sanity of Americana, Filmland, April 1957, courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.



within Cold War perceptions about the deterioration of virility and its implications for national power and familial stability.

Specifically, cultural concerns about male weakness tended to be expressed in relation to two male types: the homosexual and the breadwinner. The homosexual and the family man were subjected to intense scrutiny, always as subjects of a sexual pathology underwritten by anxieties about emasculation. By the end of the war, the continuing assimilation of Freud and the popularity psychiatry had gained after widespread psychiatric screenings of armed forces inductees helped develop notions of sick and healthy behavior that invaded the public consciousness. Further, what was defined as sick often centered on deviations from normative ideals of proper male and female roles.<sup>28</sup> In a culture still uncertain about the success of postwar civilian readjustments and enmeshed in a Cold War that left its powers somewhat in question, the definition of gender roles attained paramount importance, particularly because of their implicit affiliation with social stability. Concomitantly, "failures" at assuming proper gender responsibilities, such as wife and mother or father and breadwinner, caused congressmen, sociologists, psychologists, and other professionals to pathologize deviations and ponder their destructive effects on national security.

As mentioned in chapter 2, homosexuality became much more publicly visible after the war due to an amalgam of factors. These included same-sex experiences during the war, the Kinsey reports which affirmed the prevalence of non-heterosexual behavior, books such as Donald Webster Cory's *The Homosexual in America* and Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, and an efflorescence of films such as *Rope* (1948), *Tea and Sympathy* (1956), *The Strange One* (1957), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), which offered barely suppressed representations of homosexuality.

That homosexuality became a demonic pathology through its affiliation with communism at this time is by now a familiar fact. According to John D'Emilio, the link between homosexuality as a pathology and communist ideology was forged in 1950 in a congressional hearing about the loyalty of government employees, which discovered that many dismissed for "moral turpitude" were homosexuals.<sup>29</sup> With the help of a general climate fascinated by both sexual pathologies and the Cold War, Senator Joseph McCarthy escalated this finding into an equation between "moral turpitude," disloyalty, and communist subversion. This series of relationships further demonized communism by aligning it with sexual depravity, at the same time as it heightened anxieties over homosexuality by characterizing it as a serious social menace and threat to national security.

This politicizing of a socially defined pathology had a definite impact on

images of masculinity at the time. As Elaine Tyler May has written, "National strength depended on the ability of strong manly men to stand up against communist threats . . . 'perverts' . . . presumably, had no masculine backbone."<sup>30</sup> While Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer might stand as too extreme a version of this anti-communist macho, concepts of a sound nation were nonetheless inextricably bound to a gender morality that bestowed the imprimatur of virility, corruptibility, sanity, and patriotism on male heterosexuality. Within this logic, "unmasculine" behaviors such as homosexuality bore the taint of a debilitated moral fiber that made certain individuals susceptible to communist propaganda, and hence, by implication, weakened an entire nation.

The second instance of public anxiety about male weakness, that concerning the breadwinner, was similarly subtended by fears of homosexuality. This time the well-being of the family, always the symbolic subunit of the nation, was the focus.

Psychiatric theory defined adult masculinity strictly in terms of the breadwinner role—the husband and father who earned a living for his family and thus assumed family responsibilities. At best, failure to achieve this role signaled immaturity; at worst, it indicated impaired manhood. In the psychological terms of the time, "immaturity shaded into infantilism, which was, in turn, a manifestation of unnatural fixation on the mother . . . [reaching] its clinical climax in the diagnosis of homosexuality."<sup>31</sup> This perverted family romance led to a series of equations: "I am a failure = I am castrated = I am not a man = I am a woman = I am a homosexual."<sup>32</sup> A refusal of marriage and its attendant commitments often cast dire suspicions, then, on the masculinity of those indulging in such "irresponsible" behavior.

Once men attained the desired status of breadwinner, however, their psychologies were no less subject to the scrutiny of apprehensive professionals. Certainly, the coercive conformity perceived to be at the heart of postwar corporate enterprise raised fears about the loss of rugged individualism and manhood. Best-selling books such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) sounded the alarm about the effects of conformism on society.<sup>33</sup>

But the shrillest analysis of the problems of the family man linked his failure to the looming presence of the "modern woman." According to some contemporary writers, the modern woman enjoyed increased authority in society due to a number of developments. Among these were: changing conceptions of home life that found her sharing housework and decision-making with her husband in a new spirit of democracy, her increased participation in the work force, and her growing prominence as a sexual being with equal right to satisfaction



in the bedroom. According to some, the modern woman's emancipation directly and negatively affected the psychology of the U.S. man, who found he had to submit to "petticoat rule."

An article in *Look* magazine called "The American Male: Why Do Women Dominate Him?" revealed this ideology with candor. Citing social scientist David Riesman, anthropologist Margaret Mead, scientist Alfred Kinsey, motivational researcher Ernest Dichter, and other professionals, this essay produced evidence that women's roles were changing in such a way that they had more power, which they often chose to exercise as a series of harmful demands on men. Of particular concern was woman's "new sexual aggressiveness," resulting in the sexual domination of men. Selectively culling facts from the above authors—that women regulated the extent of physical contact, that they made birth control decisions, and that they expected sexual satisfaction on par with their husbands—*Look* defined the impact of this new aggressiveness on men. Men suffered symptoms that ranged from fatigue, passivity, and anxiety (about satisfying women) to impotence and the Freudian "flight from masculinity" that resulted in homosexuality. By exercising her powers, the modern woman could thus "seriously damage his male capacity." Unsexed by failure, the male's potency declines. The author concludes by warning, "We are drifting toward a structure made up of he-women and she-men."<sup>34</sup>

The family man had, then, a difficult double duty to fulfill. On the one hand, he was to be eminently mature and responsible, while on the other, he was to safeguard his family against any imbalance in internal power relations that would threaten proper gender roles and disastrously confuse sexual identity.

In this way, definitions of masculinity were at the center of ideological turmoil over the health of the nation and the family.<sup>35</sup> Through contemporary psychoanalytic thinking, debate obsessively detected a causal relation between new social developments in the Cold War era—from the greater visibility of homosexuals and the modern woman to a business world oriented toward the corporate group—and the emasculation of the U.S. male. In their respective national and familial contexts, the manly man and the responsible patriarch represented militant ideological icons, armed against the subversive infringements on traditional concepts of masculinity signified by male neurosis and its logical terminus in homosexuality.

There were 1950s films that overtly dealt with anticommunist macho (such as *Kiss Me Deadly* [1955]) and the social dangers of weak paternal function (such as *My Son John* [1952]).<sup>36</sup> Hudson's films and star gossip lacked such an explicit Cold War rhetoric. But they nonetheless resonated with reigning definitions of what constituted appropriate masculinity and often the stake of devia-

tion from the desirable norm. For the postwar era, Hudson represented the quintessence of the manly man, the Great Straight Hope in an environment increasingly defined by changing and contested conceptions of manliness.

As U.S. society continued to grapple with sex roles and identities in the 1960s, Hudson's conservative function only sharpened. As Vito Russo has argued in relation to his 1960s films, Hudson's emblematic virility came to be used as a means of ridiculing and supplanting "weaker" versions of masculinity that frequently hinted at homosexuality.<sup>37</sup> The pairings of Hudson with Tony Randall in his three comedies with Doris Day, with Gig Young in *Strange Bedfellows* (1965), or Dick Shawn in *A Very Special Favor* (1965) placed him unequivocally in relation to actors whose physiques and roles conveyed an "impaired" masculinity. Whereas the Stacks, Deans, and Brandos offered attractive images of masculinity with which the Hudson image had to compete, these sex comedies emptied the neurotic male of any sexual allure, pushing his characterization into an unrelieved parody of male capability.

Contrasting characterizations provided one forum for the specter of the feminized male to appear in these sex comedies. But Hudson's characters themselves were also associated with homosexuality. A running gag through *Pillow Talk* finds Hudson mistaken for a man of confused sexual identity by the medical establishment, as he appears in a ladies room, a gynecology and obstetrics waiting room, and as he announces, "I'm going to have a baby," at the end of the film to a doctor who carts him off for observation. In *Lover Come Back*, he has to stroll through a hotel lobby in a mink, the only thing he could find to wear after Doris Day stranded him naked at the seaside. Upon seeing him, two men who had been observing his sexual exploits throughout the film remark, "He's the last guy in the world I would have figured." And in *A Very Special Favor*, Hudson pretends to go off with another man to a love tryst as a means of making Leslie Caron feel guilty about her attempts to emasculate him.

It is debatable, however, whether these plays with Hudson's sexual identity seriously tamper with his established persona. In one sense, the incongruity between his virile persona and the possibility of "compromised" masculinity is responsible for securing the jest, an incongruity already heightened by the overall contrast between Hudson and Randall or Shawn. The jest is carried out, in addition, as a clear case of mistaken or assumed identity, a charade. But perhaps more important, in accord with the *Playboy* ethos, Hudson's new playboy image enabled a depiction of the single male that was so heterosexually fixated that it helped relieve the homosexual implications that had been attached to bachelorhood earlier in the 1950s. Since his bachelor status always terminated at the end of the film with marriage and a passel of kids, the inevitability of heterosexual



monogamy as a social norm still held sway. Thus, despite the sexual confusion at the heart of the comedy in these films, Hudson's manliness survived the humor as eminently heterosexual and ultimately family oriented.

While film roles might joke about Hudson's sexual identity, star gossip, almost unequivocally straight in its representation of the actor through the 1960s, left few doubts as to his personification of the manly man. Extra-filmic coverage could attempt to reveal his neuroses (such as stagefright and anger). But, as we have seen, it most often presented him as uncontaminated by traits that might tamper with his healthy manliness. By detailing such things as the Bunyan-esque decor of his home, devoid of any feminine accoutrements, his participation in the small-town, bucolic ritual of the picnic or barbeque, his monogamous disposition, and his difference from "spooky" types like James Dean, star gossip created a male image that was simultaneously distinctly American, traditionally masculine, de-feminized, and antineurotic. The continual presentation of Hudson as beefcake operated to make all this "normality" hyper-virile and sexy.

Characterizations of male stars both in and out of films were often, then, deeply informed by Cold War rhetoric about masculinity. "Is Tony Perkins a Mama's Boy?" and "How Rock Hudson Dodges Dangerous Dames" blared the headlines for one magazine in 1957, indulging once again in contrasts between male types distinctly rooted in sexual disposition.<sup>38</sup> At the same time as the new ultra-emotional, neurotic male star was rewriting the kind of masculine appeal represented by prewar types, he invoked postwar anxieties about the national and social repercussions of maladjusted masculinity.

We can thus regard Hudson's popularity during the 1950s and early 1960s as owing in good measure to the fact that he reinforced notions of "normal" masculinity in the face of growing public evidence that masculinity was under siege. Since, in Cold War terms, this crisis had dire implications for the continuation of the American way of life, Hudson's strong media presence reassured the public through an apparently unchanged and unchangeable facade of exemplary manliness, marked by sanity and status quo sexuality. Hudson was in this sense the veritable "Rock," a sign of the stability of certain old-fashioned notions of the "natural man" uncontaminated by complex social developments.

### Star Vehicles and Sirk

What impact could Hudson's social signification have had on Sirk's melodramas? One possible answer to this question concerns the diegetic function of his presence in these films. Genre critics have often seen the depiction of normalcy as intentionally boring and parodic in post-World War II cinema, so much

so that it seems to help indict dominant ideological values, rather than salvage them.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the normal operates as an insipid backdrop against which more exciting, dangerously subversive forces take ideological center stage—such as the femme fatale's or neurotic's challenge to the family in film noir and melodrama, respectively. In critical discourse, diabolically flashy characters have tended to overshadow the normal (banal), acting as evidence for the transgressive ideological meaning of these genres.

In this vein, Sirk critics have often treated Sirk's "split" characters such as Robert Stack (Kyle) and Dorothy Malone (Marylee) in *Written on the Wind*, as charismatic signifiers of the subversive politics of his films. "Split" characters have a kind of schizophrenia, an internal divisiveness that fuels the emotional complexity of the family melodrama (such as Kyle's desire for paternal respect which is undone by his alcoholic compulsions). This divisiveness leads to violent confrontations with familial and social orders that Sirk critics have read progressively as ideological critique. The "split" character's counterpart is the one-dimensional, relatively uncomplicated, "immovable" character, played frequently by Rock Hudson, who acts as a dull foil to the former's fascinating destructiveness.<sup>40</sup>

However, if we consider how strongly Hudson's image was freighted with the appeal of the normal, how the normal in turn was posed as such a crucial defense against shifting sexual tides, and how the abnormal itself, though exciting, could conjure up the specter of social disaster, we could imagine a different ideological chemistry between "split" and "immovable" characters in these films. In this revised chemistry, the latter would attain a strong degree of parity with the former, qualifying the ideological impact of what critics have seen as the overpowering presence of the misfit.

When placed more fully within historical context, though, we can see that the significance of Hudson's image was not that it totalized the meaning of Sirk's films in some new way. Rather, his star semiosis joined a number of other ideological meanings circulating around and through these melodramas during the 1950s. It was the particular social function of Hudson's image to embody reactionary protest against postwar transformations in male sexuality, while giving the normal a certain persuasive attractiveness. But, as I have argued in chapter 2, the crazed or sexy character had a charisma of its own, invoking voyeuristic pleasures focused on the objectification of the female body and on the sensationalizing of intimate stories. Whether we examine the climate of sexual display or Cold War anxieties about masculinity, Hudson's case continues to suggest that films serve as sites for the confluence of various, sometimes contradictory, ideological concerns. Sirk's films could at the same time act as a forum for the titil-



lation of psychological and sexual excess and as a commentary on the virtues of sanity and normative gender identity.

But the diegetic implications of Hudson's image do not exhaust his impact on the film experience. As we have seen in previous chapters, extra-filmic, social productions of meaning create modes of engagement with films that digress from the narrative proper.<sup>41</sup> Whether through the publicity of sexuality, consumer items, or, in this case, stars, the intertextual network surrounding films and spectators adds a significant dimension to viewing that is not driven solely by film dynamics. As Miriam Hansen so aptly writes in her work on Valentino, "By activating a discourse external to the diegesis, the star's presence enhances a centrifugal tendency in the viewer's relation to the film text. The star's performance weakens the diegetic spell in favor of a string of spectacular moments that display the essence of the star."<sup>42</sup> Hence, the extra-filmic presentations of the star's body, background, personality, etc. inspire a rapture with the image that takes the viewer beyond the horizons of the narrative, encouraging a spectacle-driven sensibility that derives pleasure in a sporadic, alinear, anarrative manner.

When reconsidering the presence of the "strapping" Hudson body in Sirk's films in this light, we can suppose that it created a series of tableaux of desire for the viewer, attracted to the essence of healthy masculinity that Hudson's persona and physical representations in his publicity signified. For the female fan at least, to whom Hudson's publicity was largely addressed, his image could serve as a catalyst for a series of extra-filmic adventures of the imagination that related his diegetic presence to the lore offered by the publicity machine. In this process, his filmic presence offered an arena of fantasy and pleasure for the viewer, rooted in the vision of the virile boy-next-door. Through these viewing dynamics Sirk's films were truly reduced to star vehicles, contexts for the exercise of a sensibility fixed on the appearance and subsequent imaginary romance with a star who typified certain masculine ideals.

### 1964–1984: Beyond Popularity

As I mentioned at the outset of the chapter, I am focusing on two decades here—the 1950s and the 1980s—since they were the periods in which Hudson attained his greatest social and media prominence. While I do not have the space to analyze the intervening years in detail, I would like to give the reader some sense of what transpired in his career during this time before turning to the 1980s.

After the spate of highly successful comedies Hudson did with Doris Day, his popularity diminished substantially. His reign as number one at the box office ended in 1964, and by 1967, he had completely dropped off the Film Buyer's box-office attraction chart. Hudson continued to make a few comedies, and notably John Frankenheimer's drama *Seconds* (1966), but his comedies fizzled, and his dramatic roles dwindled in number. By the late 1960s, Hudson tended to appear in action genres that underscored a more authoritative, less romantic status. These included *Tobruk* (1967), a war film; *Ice Station Zebra* (1968), a Cold War thriller; and *The Undefeated* (1969), a western. In these, he played a veteran overseeing a "world of men," that is, casts made up almost exclusively of male characters. In *Ice Station Zebra*, Hudson starred with Ernest Borgnine, Patrick MacGoohan, football player Jim Brown, and Lloyd Nolan. Similarly, in *The Undefeated*—set after the Civil War with Hudson and John Wayne cast, respectively, as Confederate and Union colonels—other actors included grizzly old-timer Ben Johnson and more football players—this time Merlin Olsen and Roman Gabriel. The combination of male action genre, his status as protagonist/commander, and the wide world of sportsmen in which he often found himself, further reified his association with a straight brand of masculinity. While no doubt subtended by the latent homosexuality implicit in the "buddy" film (an impression magnified by our present knowledge of Hudson's sexual preference), Hudson's image grew more overtly "macho."

Hudson's fortunes in the 1970s lay with television, particularly his role in "McMillan and Wife" (1971–1976) and "McMillan" (1976–1977). He played Stewart McMillan, a police commissioner in San Francisco married, until the 1976/1977 season, to Susan St. James. This series blended the comedy of marriage with crime detection, combining aspects of his prior roles from romantic comedies with his status as patriarch accrued from his post-1950s performances. But this period also saw Hudson entering the definitive "has-been" stage of his film career. During the 1970s, he appeared in an exploitation/horror film, *Embryo* (1976) and producer Roger Corman's disaster film, *Avalanche* (1978). In 1980, he starred in *The Mirror Crack'd*, from an Agatha Christie story that played self-reflexively on aged stars of the 1950s. Hudson was cast as Jason Rudd, a movie director married to Elizabeth Taylor. Besides recalling Hudson's pairing with Taylor in *Giant*, the film featured two other big stars of the 1950s, Kim Novak and Tony Curtis. The exploitation films and the Agatha Christie appearance, both legendary forums for has-been stars, signified the demise of Hudson's film career, his inability to draw all but the most marginal audiences as a leading man.



With one exception, extra-filmic coverage of Hudson during this period was sparse. The exception was the rumor of Hudson's secret wedding to Jim Nabors in 1971. This created the first major public rift in Hudson's ultra-heterosexual image. The story was picked up by the press and caused such a stir that Hudson had to publicly denounce it as false. CBS canceled Nabors's variety show, but Hudson's career and "McMillan and Wife" remained untouched. While magazines might later casually broach the issue of sexual preference in stories on Hudson, as *People* magazine did in 1982, they mainly resorted to more conventional topics in their reportage on the star.<sup>43</sup>

Like 1950s sources, the press continued to write about Hudson's personality and lifestyle, but with a particular emphasis on him as an expert on classic Hollywood, able to provide behind-the-scenes information on what it was like to be a studio star in the past. In these stories, we still find biography and character portraits confirming his unassumingness and generosity, accompanied by photos of him with dogs in nature. But we also discover that he is freer now that he is out from under the control of the studios—in his language, dress, and behavior.<sup>44</sup> Among other things, Hudson debunked the cherished myth of the star discovery (such as Lana Turner sitting in a drugstore), discussed his resistance to roles he was forced to play (such as *Taza, Son of Cochise*), and commented on the difference between film and television.<sup>45</sup> By treating Hudson as a seasoned Hollywood veteran, the press transformed him into a kind of historical artifact—in keeping, as we have seen, with the 1970s nostalgic interest in Old Hollywood. Thus, between the 1950s and 1980s, Hudson's image entertained some flux without any serious constitutional changes, despite the Nabors incident. While his social centrality diminished substantially, he was quietly enshrined as a piece of Hollywood history.

### The 1980s: Reversal

The issue of Hudson's sexuality was dramatically resolved on July 25, 1985. French publicist Yanou Collart announced that Hudson was in Paris for AIDS treatment, having been diagnosed more than a year earlier in June 1984. What followed was a furor that one writer compared to the media melee during the Beirut hostage crisis.

The impact of this announcement was dramatic, but not only because of the controversial nature of AIDS. The virus was suddenly connected to a sensational case of celebrity image-reversal, as well as to the issue of representativeness. That is, on the one hand, the announcement precipitated a vertiginous reversal

of Hudson's image as a public emblem of masculinity and celebratory heterosexuality. As *People* magazine put it,

As the first public figure to announce his affliction with acquired immune deficiency syndrome, Hudson had stunned the world and shattered an image cultivated over three decades . . . for fans who knew him onscreen it was hard to reconcile the image of the indestructible and quintessential '50s movie star with that of the insidious and quintessential '80s disease.<sup>46</sup>

On the other hand, because a star (a super-human, invulnerable type) had gotten the disease, the implications were that anyone could be susceptible: "If a wealthy celebrity can get it, who's safe?"<sup>47</sup> And it was not just any celebrity. With Hudson's diagnosis, it appeared as though "the disease was affecting even all-American types."<sup>48</sup>

It would be hard to underestimate the impact the Hudson announcement and his death a few months later in October had on public awareness of AIDS. Although the AIDS virus had been named in 1984, this breakthrough had been followed by a paucity in media attention, due to the press's continued hesitancy to address "sensitive" homosexual matters. But, as James Kinsella, analyst of the media coverage of AIDS, has documented, Hudson's public admission precipitated a 270 percent increase in AIDS reporting by the end of 1985. Because Hudson was an old friend of the Reagans, AIDS "crept onto the agenda of the national political reporters," giving it a bona fide place in journalism and focusing unprecedented medical attention on the disease. In addition, Hudson's case even affected national policy. While the Reagan administration had been planning a \$10 million cut in the AIDS budget, they now increased it by \$100 million.<sup>49</sup>

Hudson thus became the definitive icon of the disease. AIDS hotline callers in Los Angeles referred to it as the "Rock Hudson disease," magazines like *Newsweek* featured cover photos of an emaciated Hudson to accompany issues devoted to AIDS,<sup>50</sup> and pieces on Hudson's ordeal were accompanied by articles on "regular" people searching for treatment. In addition, *People* magazine's special issue on twenty people who had defined the 1980s featured Hudson, stating that, "it seemed impossible that one man's fatal infection could transform the public image of AIDS from an alien four-letter word into a shared emergency. But it did."<sup>51</sup>

The social impact of Hudson's death spread in two directions. First, as we have just seen, it mobilized serious and broader media attention on the disease. It was responsible, as one AIDS official commented, "for moving the fight against AIDS ahead more in three months than anything in the past three



years.<sup>52</sup> Part of this advance took the form of government spending, as well as AIDS fundraisers, such as Elizabeth Taylor's massive benefit in Hudson's honor, and Hudson's own donations to medical research through his AIDS foundation. While he certainly did not resolve the many problems AIDS victims had to endure because of social prejudice and ignorance, part of the media blitz about Hudson's case helped raise public consciousness. In the process, he became a new kind of hero, a "tragic trailblazer," martyr for a real-life cause.

However, Hudson's affliction and death bred a second response that was not so charitable. In an essay titled "The Media and AIDS Panic: The Post-Hudson Syndrome," Geoffrey Stokes labeled this response "media hysteria," commenting that before Hudson AIDS was nowhere, "now it's everywhere."<sup>53</sup> The *New York Post* ran features titled "AIDS Hits More Hollywood Stars" and "School Cook Dies of AIDS," while the July 1985 issue of *Life* announced, "No One Is Safe from AIDS," and *Newsweek* ran the cover "Fear of AIDS" in September 1985. Journalists proliferated articles about the possibilities of infection in public places—on campus, in prisons, in Hollywood, in the military, and in the work place.

This media hysteria helped generate a "moral panic" over contamination. This panic often arose in relation to concerns over both sexual behavior and professionals who came into contact with blood, such as doctors, dentists, and morticians. But just as frequently, fears of contamination were incited by confusion over the facts of transmission. Sometimes simple contact was perceived as a danger. Thus, bus drivers worried that they might contract the disease from paper bus transfers, social workers were afraid to handle papers from people with AIDS, and patrons stopped going to restaurants with gay waiters.<sup>54</sup>

As AIDS historians and critics tell us, the particular power waged by AIDS contamination fears has its roots in long-standing cultural attitudes toward disease. What Cindy Patton has called "germophobia" in this culture, an irrational, visceral response to the contamination possibilities of germs, was only worsened by the epidemic proportions, sexual origins, and the marginality and "otherness" of those most associated with AIDS (such as homosexuals, IV drug users, prostitutes, and Caribbean nationals). Thus it was that bus drivers, social workers, restaurant patrons, etc. reacted with disgust and paranoiac alarm at the very thought of the most quotidian contact.

But more important, the discourse of contagion served a powerful political ideology. Like both the plague and venereal disease before it, the fear AIDS instilled because of its potential for invasion into the general populace was accompanied by a moralizing discourse that used disease as a means to justify and

sustain social differences.<sup>55</sup> This was no more apparent in the contemporary setting than in the New Right's commentary on AIDS, which blamed homosexuality and the modern, sexually liberal society that encouraged it for a new potential apocalypse. From this perspective, AIDS was a just punishment visited on the unjust, a revenge on homosexuality and the sexual revolution. At the same time, its presence ratified the New Right's pro-family platform, the return to "traditional values."

As in the 1950s, right-wing interpretations of homosexuality branded it with the taint of invasive disease that had implications for catastrophic national subversion. Like the "Commie" homosexual, the otherness of AIDS victims seemed to convey the message that *difference* was the problem. It was difference that caused "diseases which have the power to leap social barriers." This logic dictated that the answer to diseased difference would be for individuals "to conform to rigid, traditional standards in order to protect the health of the whole society."<sup>56</sup> Thus, frenzy over contamination fears suited an agenda bent on eradicating social and sexual otherness, while implicitly confirming the rightness and importance of the white, middle-class, nuclear family.

The panicked media response to Hudson's illness, then, helped set off a rhetoric of contamination with historical roots and ideological ramifications. While the sensationalistic coverage of AIDS developed in relation to otherwise legitimate medical and ethical questions raised by the Hudson case, particularly those concerned with transmission and disclosure, it used these issues as a means of profitably capitalizing on cultural paranoia toward disease and non-conformity.

The much-publicized "Dynasty" kiss between Hudson and Linda Evans stands as a case in point. For nine episodes during the 1984–85 season, Hudson appeared on "Dynasty" as Daniel Reece, a wealthy rancher update of his *Giant* image. Although at this point he knew he had AIDS, when the script called for him to kiss Evans, he did, with very little information available about the transmission of the disease and without telling Evans about his diagnosis. This occasion prompted coverage of the means of transmission of AIDS (in this case saliva and non-sexual contact) and the tension between disclosure and the privacy rights of AIDS victims.

"Yellow" presses like *The Enquirer* fixated on the moment of the Hudson/Evans kiss by displaying large, color, cover photos of their embrace which strongly imbued the moment with a sense of deadly contagion and pseudo-ethical outrage. Marc Christian's lawsuit against Hudson's estate for failing to disclose his diagnosis inflamed the disclosure issue substantially, at the same time as it





The much-publicized "Dynasty" kiss.

heightened the sensationalistic aspects of Hudson's personal life. This type of press coverage promoted Hudson as antithetical to heroism, binding Hudson-the-homosexual to a fear of contagion.<sup>57</sup> The fact that this fear was so linked with the kiss, the cornerstone of the major Hollywood convention of heterosexual romance, caused reverberations in the film industry; actresses were reportedly fearful of playing opposite gay actors, and a "legion of actors were facing a groundswell of paranoia."<sup>58</sup>

In both his heroic and plague-associated images, Hudson's social impact in the 1980s rivaled his significance to the 1950s, encouraging liberal and reactionary sentiments alike around a crucial national health crisis. Also, as one might expect, it inspired alterations of his 1950s image. Intertwined with press coverage of Hudson as a medical and ethical subject were the inevitable revisionist biographies designed to reconsider his Hollywood image.

### Revising the Image

The 1980s press rewrote Hudson's past according to the revelation that he had always been homosexual. Revisionist forms included the first television docudrama on Hudson telecast in January of 1990,<sup>59</sup> talk shows featuring his friends and ex-lovers, magazine stories, and an authorized biography. The format of these reports recalled 1950s biographies in that the press covered his early childhood, the beginning of his career with Henry Willson, and his rise to fame, accompanied by photos from each period. However, biographies were substantially altered to emphasize his "hidden" life as a gay person; they focused on how the studio protected Hudson by planting stories in fan magazines that emphasized his heterosexuality, by arranging his marriage to Phyllis Gates, and by encouraging his own successful secrecy about his private life.

In keeping with traditions of celebrity journalism, these pieces juxtaposed Hudson's "real" and "reel" lives. But this time they acted not to support the screen image, but to savor the contrast, bringing out the artificiality of classic Hollywood and the romantic roles Hudson played in light of his true sexual orientation. *People's* cover promised "the other life of Rock Hudson" in a story titled "Rock Hudson: On Camera and Off." The first line of the story read, "The tragic news that he is the most famous victim of an infamous disease, AIDS, unveils the hidden life of a longtime Hollywood hero." The magazine explained that from the start, "Hudson projected one image in front of the camera and another away from it—he has always been gay."<sup>60</sup>

More explicit revisionist work took place outside the framework of magazine publishing. Rock Hudson and Sara Davidson's *Rock Hudson: His Story*, an authorized biography published in 1986, rewrote his history in candid detail.<sup>61</sup> This book follows Hudson through the various stages of his career, concentrating on his homosexual lifestyle and, ultimately, on the details of his affliction with AIDS. We find that it was his first lover in California, Ken Hodge, who urged him to try acting, not truck driver friends as fan magazines had reported, and that Henry Willson was a "notorious homosexual." The story of how Hudson got his name undergoes a similar radical shift. Davidson reports that Hudson's name was coined at a gay party—"Rock" for strength and "Hudson" out of the phone book. In addition, the story of how he got to keep his job in *Magnificent Obsession* after a broken collarbone threatened to keep him off the set involves a liaison with an influential male executive at Universal.

While Hudson's image-reversal is dramatic, I should note that it is not without relation to certain conventions of press coverage of stars. Around the same



time that the press was reporting on Hudson and AIDS, it was also doing stories on Ann Jillian's bout with breast cancer, as it had on previous occasions with Happy Rockefeller, Betty Ford, and Jill Ireland. One has only to think of John Belushi's drug overdose, Len Bias's death from cocaine, or Drew Barrymore's drug addiction to realize how prevalent such star coverage was during this period, and continues to be with more recent examples such as Michael Landon's death from cancer and Magic Johnson's diagnosis with HIV. Hudson was very much a part of the "sick star" convention by which the media elaborated social problems via celebrities. Similarly, sensationalistic exposés of stars' private lives are a publishing mainstay. From the "kiss and tell" accounts of Shelly Winters or Zsa Zsa Gabor to biographies detailing Cary Grant's bisexuality, the exposé is part of a publicity machine focused on celebrities.

But even given these commonplaces of star stories, Hudson's case is especially powerful because its obliteration of his 1950s identity afforded more than just a revealing glimpse into Hollywoodiana. It was inextricably bound to a shared, and in some people's minds scandalous, health crisis. Whereas Grant's bisexuality could actually suit his suave image of the 1940s and 1950s, Hudson's homosexuality directly affronted the public's conception of him as a romantic (that is, heterosexual) icon. Hudson's image-reversal was not only associated with sexual behavior still at the center of social debate, but with the relation between that behavior and an incendiary disease which, as we have seen, tapped strongly reactive public sentiment.

Given the substantial revision of Hudson's image from "healthy" heterosexual to "stricken" homosexual, how can we conceive of the impact such a transformation might have on the signification of his past screen roles? Following the cues of press coverage, I offer some tentative hypotheses on this subject.

### The Politics of Clashing Codes

Extra-filmic material can often instigate what Richard Dyer has referred to as a "clash of codes" in star signification; this clash is produced from a severe disalignment of on- and off-screen images.<sup>62</sup> According to Dyer, Charles Eckert, and others, the star image typically functions to manage or resolve contradictions within ideology. The fusion of role and "real" person creates the impression of seamlessness within this process. We can see such a function for Hudson's image in the 1950s, when his roles and extra-filmic depictions created and sustained a notion of an ideal, "old-fashioned" masculinity at a time when masculine types were becoming more socially rebellious and sexually ambiguous.

However, this typical operation of ideological management is no longer applicable when we consider the 1980s. Star gossip in this period introduced a substantial conflict between the semiotics of Hudson's past roles and extra-filmic information, resulting in a paradigmatic instance of a "clash of codes." Rather than managing social turmoil by asserting the status quo, the later rewriting of Hudson's image produces ideological tension in relation to his screen roles in the 1950s. The contemporary press created fundamental doubt about his on-screen romantic heterosexual image by underscoring the contradictory "facts" of Hudson's private life as a homosexual. The overall impact of this tension lends an artifice to Hudson's roles by directing attention to the apparatus of deceit on which the "magic" of Hollywood is based, as well as to its primary convention, heterosexual romance. A self-reflexive and distancing element is thus introduced into the spectatorial experience of these films. As a result, Sirk's films were most likely "made strange" in ways totally unforeseeable by him or his critics. Press accounts suggest that this awareness of artifice could operate in a number of different ways.

Like Judy Garland, whose MGM image of the girl-next-door was smashed by press coverage of her suicide attempt and personal problems,<sup>63</sup> extra-filmic knowledge converted Hudson into a tragic figure. The press constituted him as a tragic hero, not only because of his public admission and death from AIDS, but because of the duplicitous existence he was forced to lead as a Hollywood star. For liberal readers, Hudson's films become evidence of the compulsory heterosexuality of the film industry and society. His films act as testimony to a schizophrenic relation between public/straight image and private/gay reality, underscoring the price that social mores extract from nonheterosexuals.

Awareness of this kind of schizophrenia is closely related to a camp aesthetic. Camp has always been affiliated with a heightened sense of style as well as role—a theatricalization of the person who affronts social conventions of appearance whether embodied in a "camp" person (such as Oscar Wilde, Andy Warhol) or projected as a sensibility on an image (such as Jayne Mansfield, Victor Mature). While to my knowledge there is no record of a camp canonization of Hudson,<sup>64</sup> the clash of codes characterizing his image creates a situation ripe for this kind of reaction by its dramatic unmasking of heterosexist presumptions, a key facet of the camp aesthetic of identity.

As I mentioned in the preceding chapter, reviewers have sometimes recognized the camp values apparent in Sirk's melodramas, especially in their excesses of color and *mise-en-scène*. Because of the commentary on gender it produces, Hudson's image offers another potential source for camp reaction to these films.



The Sirk melodrama is so highly structured by the romantic entanglements characteristic of the genre that Hudson's reversed image produces a keen sense of the social constructedness of sex roles. The disjuncture between his homosexuality and the necessary heterosexuality defining his screen roles undermines the apparent naturalness of the sexual conventions of Hollywood cinema and society, reconstructing them as artificial impositions on conduct. Such artifice, as Jack Babuscio comments, makes fun of "the whole cosmology of restrictive sex roles and sexual identification which our society uses to oppress its women and repress its men, including those on the screen."<sup>65</sup>

When viewed from this perspective, romance in Hudson's Sirk melodramas or Day comedies no longer operates as a point of complicit identification of the audience with the emotional center of the film. It appears, rather, as a kind of role-playing demanded by a system that obliterates contradictions in sexual identity and defines the world heterosexually. In this way, Hudson's romantic narratives are injected with heightened artifice around roles, undermining the compulsory heterosexuality that forms the core of the Hollywood film. Extra-filmic knowledge ultimately operates to *ironicize* sex roles, making the Sirk melodrama into a showcase for tragic and humorous recognition of the contrasts between the heterosexual rule over Hudson's public life and the contradictory private facts.

On the other end of the political spectrum, the incongruity can produce reactionary responses as it did in the press. We can consider again for a moment the rewriting of the "Dynasty" kiss between Hudson and Evans from a scripted, dramatic, romantic moment of transgression against marital bonds to a profound example of AIDS contamination and threat. The kiss, shown on television and in print media as one of the emblems of the dangers of undisclosed AIDS, sparked reevaluation of a major institution within the cinema and other media that signifies heterosexual romance—the kiss—but not in a progressively self-reflexive way. The press showed it as contamination, a negative routing of a screen convention where homosexuality makes an unwelcome appearance. In addition, the "Dynasty" kiss often appeared with similar images of romantic involvement from Hudson's previous films, seeming to suggest that these images too were somehow compromised. Hudson's screen kisses thus cease to represent the height of romantic commitment and desire, as the aura of contamination reaches back to redefine even distant screen embraces.

We find an awareness of artifice here that, like liberal camp, undermines steadfast romantic conventions and their heterosexist presumptions. This response, however, materializes as a sort of "retro-camp," where privileged

knowledge of the contrasts between role and private life results in a reactionary, homophobic reading. Such a response transforms the screen embrace into a moment of horror or a moment of hilarity. This may very well be the reason students in a classroom will now howl at the line in *All That Heaven Allows* where Hudson tells Jane Wyman that he wishes she were more like a man, or in *Written on the Wind*, when he insists to nymphomaniac Dorothy Malone that he could never satisfy her. Extra-filmic knowledge thus converts romantic scenes into parodies of intended conventions, without the slightest hint of sympathetic political sentiment or awareness.

I have tried to show in this chapter how Rock Hudson's star image functioned filmically and socially in the 1950s, and how through changes in extra-filmic information, that image attained new functions profoundly different from its initial design. Hudson's persona evolved from an affirmation of Hollywood and heterosexual myths to their demystification some thirty years later. By this later period, the authority Hudson's image exercised over reception was magnified, as his mere presence almost guaranteed a confounding of the original design of many of the films in which he appeared. I speculated on how definitions of masculinity may have affected the terms under which Sirk films are received by their audiences, arguing once again how networks of meaning work and rework texts historically—and how difficult it would be to proclaim the meaning of a text once and for all against such unpredictable historical flux.

While we have begun to see the importance of camp in relation to Sirk's melodramas, we have not yet fathomed its full impact on the reception of these films. This will be the focus of the last chapter.<sup>66</sup>

## Rock Hudson: Film, Television, and Theater Performances

### Films and Directors

- 1948: *Fighter Squadron*, Raoul Walsh
- 1949: *Undertow*, William Castle
- 1950: *Peggy*, Frederick de Cordova  
*I Was a Shoplifter*, Charles Lamont  
*One-Way Street*, Hugo Fregonese  
*Winchester '73*, Anthony Mann  
*The Desert Hawk*, Frederick de Cordova  
*Shakedown*, Joseph Pevney
- 1951: *Tomahawk*, George Sherman  
*The Iron Man*, Joseph Pevney



- Air Cadet, Joseph Pevney  
 The Fat Man, William Castle  
 Bright Victory, Mark Robson  
 1952: The Lawless Breed, Raoul Walsh  
 Horizons West, Budd Boetticher  
 Has Anybody Seen My Gal?, Douglas Sirk  
 Bend of the River, Anthony Mann  
 Scarlet Angel, Sidney Salkow  
 1953: The Sea Devils, Raoul Walsh  
 The Golden Blade, Nathan Juran  
 Seminole, Budd Boetticher  
 Back to God's Country, Joseph Pevney  
 Gun Fury, Raoul Walsh  
 1954: Taza, Son of Cochise, Douglas Sirk  
 Magnificent Obsession, Douglas Sirk  
 Bengal Brigade, Laslo Benedek  
 1955: Captain Lightfoot, Douglas Sirk  
 One Desire, Jerry Hopper  
 All That Heaven Allows, Douglas Sirk  
 1956: Never Say Goodbye, Jerry Hopper  
 Giant, George Stevens  
 Battle Hymn, Douglas Sirk  
 1957: Something of Value, Richard Brooks  
 A Farewell to Arms, Charles Vidor  
 Written on the Wind, Douglas Sirk  
 1958: Twilight for the Gods, Joseph Pevney  
 Tarnished Angels, Douglas Sirk  
 1959: This Earth Is Mine, Henry King  
 Pillow Talk, Michael Gordon  
 1961: The Last Sunset, Robert Aldrich  
 Lover Come Back, Delbert Mann  
 Come September, Robert Mulligan  
 1962: The Spiral Road, Robert Mulligan  
 1963: A Gathering of Eagles, Delbert Mann  
 1964: Man's Favorite Sport?, Howard Hawks  
 Send Me No Flowers, Norman Jewison  
 1965: A Very Special Favor, Michael Gordon  
 Strange Bedfellows, Melvin Frank  
 1966: Blindfold, Phillip Dunne  
 Seconds, John Frankenheimer  
 1967: Tobruk, Arthur Hiller  
 1968: Ice Station Zebra, John Sturges

- 1969: A Fine Pair, Francesco Maselli  
 The Undefeated, Andrew V. McLaglen  
 1970: Darling Lily, Blake Edwards  
 Hornet's Nest, Phil Karlson  
 Pretty Maids All in a Row, Roger Vadim  
 1971: Showdown, George Seaton  
 1973: Embryo, Ralph Nelson  
 1976: Avalanche, Corey Allen  
 1978: The Mirror Crack'd, Guy Hamilton  
 1980: The Ambassador, shown only on television  
 1986:

## Television Shows

- |          |                     |          |                         |
|----------|---------------------|----------|-------------------------|
| 1971-76: | "McMillan and Wife" | 1981:    | "World War III"         |
|          | "McMillan"          |          | "The Starmaker"         |
| 1976-77: | "Wheels"            | 1982:    | "The Devlin Connection" |
| 1978:    | "The Martian        | 1984:    | "Las Vegas Strip Wars"  |
| 1979:    | Chronicles"         | 1984-85: | "Dynasty"               |

## Theater

- |          |                   |       |                          |
|----------|-------------------|-------|--------------------------|
| 1973-75: | I Do! I Do!       | 1977: | Camelot                  |
| 1976:    | John Brown's Body | 1979: | On the Twentieth Century |