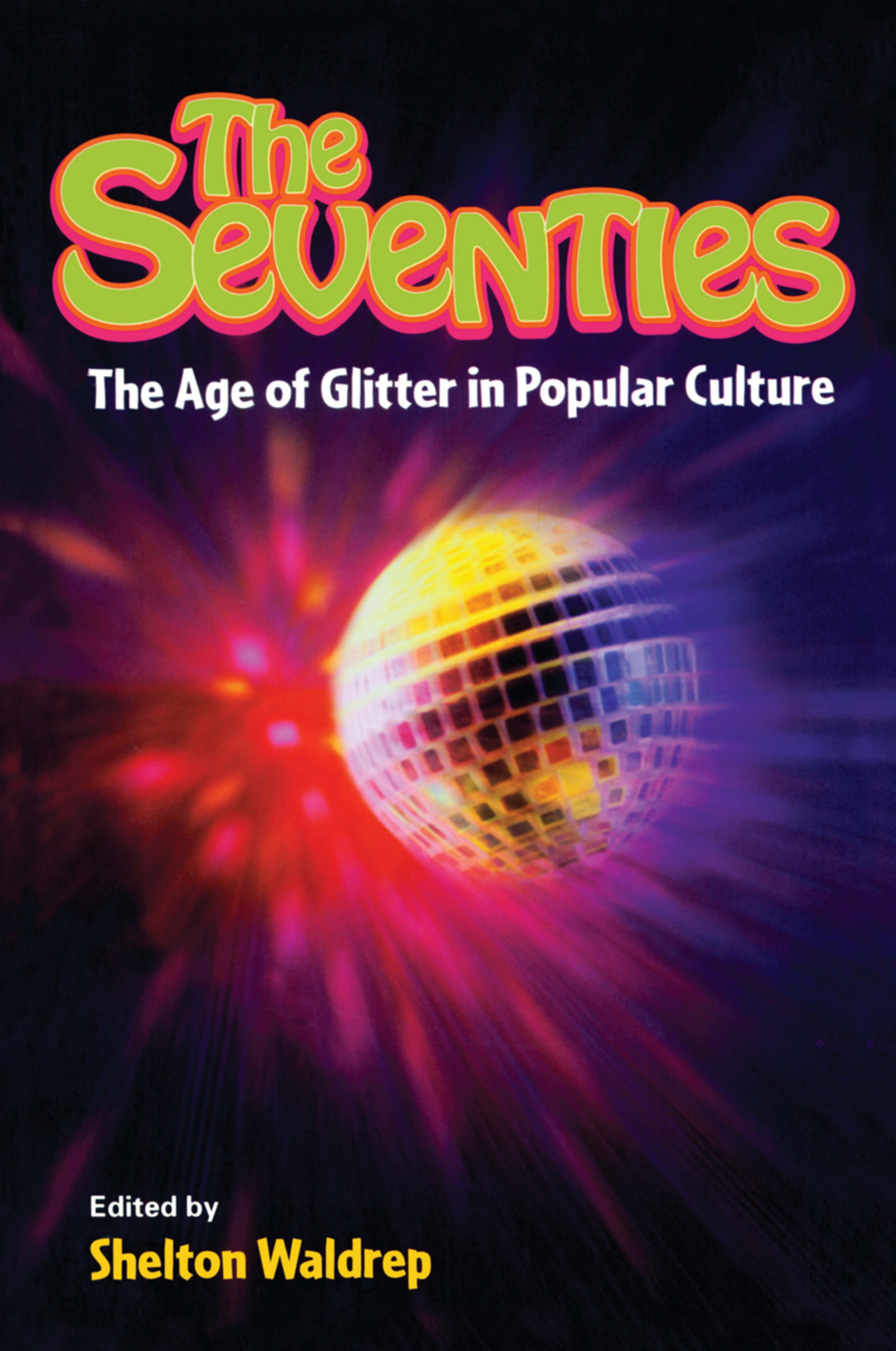
The Seventies

The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture



Edited by

Shelton Waldrep

The Seventies

Page Intentionally Left Blank

The Seventies

The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture

Edited by
Shelton Waldrep

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

Published in 2000 by
Routledge
711 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10017

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park
Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

Design: Jack Donner

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The seventies : the age of glitter in popular culture / edited by Shelton Waldrep.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0–415–92534–7 (hb). — ISBN 0–415–92535–5 (pb)
1. United States—Social life and customs—1971– 2. Nineteen seventies.
3. Popular culture—United States—History—20th century. 4. Mass media—
United States—History—20th century. I. Waldrep, Shelton.
E169.02.S4535 2000
306'0973—dc21 99–31847
CIP

PART III: FASHIONING THE BODY

PART IV: QUEERING THE SEVENTIES

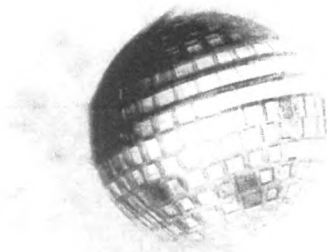
PART V: TALKING MUSIC

Acknowledgments

To work on the seventies is necessarily a group effort, and I would like to thank the contributors and everyone else who provided contacts and ideas that helped to shape this volume.

I owe a debt of gratitude to William Murphy, now at Random House, for his initial interest in our work on the seventies, and especially to our editor, Nick Syrett, whose expertise and unfailing good humor were essential to the book's publication. I would also like to thank Steven R. Tunnell for compiling the index and relieving me of much other work. As always, Jane Kuenz provided me with support of every kind.

Page Intentionally Left Blank



Introducing the Seventies

SHELTON WALDREP

This volume seeks to illuminate the remarkable range of cultural production from the American 1970s. That anyone would want or feel the need to do this might seem curious since, from the standpoint of the 1990s, the seventies won't go away. One need only look at the revival of the seventies as it has permeated the work of Martin Scorsese (*Casino*, 1995) and Quentin Tarantino (*Pulp Fiction* and *Jackie Brown*, 1994 and 1997, respectively) or provided for the resurrection of Robert Altman (*The Player*, 1992) to see the influence in film. One need only note the covers of seventies songs and their use in sampling to see a pervasive influence in popular music. One need only marvel at Nick at Night's reverence for the seventies sitcom (*The Bob Newhart Show*) or dramatic series (*The White Shadow*) as gems of a bygone era to understand the importance of this earlier decade to ours today. It is in the seventies that the cultural zeitgeist of the nineties seems to locate itself, and it is not only nostalgia or generational demographics that powers this reexamination. What, for instance, does the revival of the disaster movie say about nineties anxieties? Though they may seem to be unrelated, *Boogie Nights* and *The Ice Storm*, both released in 1997, suggest complementary answers to this question. In the former, members of the porn industry on the West Coast attempt to act as an extended family while reproducing the outlines of suburbia; in the latter, actual suburban families on the East Coast feel the pressure to act out in their everyday lives what they imagine to be the appropriate sexuality of a porn film. *The Ice Storm* was described by its director as "a disaster movie. Except the disaster hits home."[1] Both movies suggest ways in which the seeds of nineties problems and paradigms may well be located in cultural changes that took place twenty—rather than, say, thirty—years ago. That is, the sixties no longer seem to be the inevitable moment of crisis in the century—

hence, the starting point of any discussion of the decades that have come after it. Rather, the seventies have now become a key part of the equation of our millennial anxiety—the place to look to for the answer to the question: Who have we become at the century's end? Whether in "high" art or in mass culture, the seventies were a time when the use of technology and self-referential popular culture began to evidence the full postmodern effect of the rise of late capitalism. The clue to our own present seems mysteriously locked somewhere in that slippery decade.

So many aspects of seventies culture are being revived that they are starting to come in packages, such as the string of films in 1998 that dealt with seventies "decadence"—*The Last Days of Disco*, *54*, and Todd Haynes's *Velvet Goldmine*, the last based on Iggy Pop and David Bowie. Next on the horizon are remakes of *Shaft* and *The Mack* as well as *Get Christie Love!* From Crayola crayons with retro seventies colors to TV movies on the rise and fall of Sonny and Cher, the focus on everything seventies remains pervasive. During the more innocent time of the early nineties, on an October 8, 1993, broadcast of *Late Night*, host Conan O'Brien described coming out of a convenience store one day during the early seventies to see his first AMC Pacer. Noting its trademark profile, he muttered to himself, "This is the future." If the seventies were the shape of things to come, then I think now we can finally say that the future has arrived. As Susan Buck-Morss has noted in a very different context, the cultural critic Walter Benjamin had hoped that his research on the Paris Arcades—a complex project on childhood nostalgia and the objects of the past—would be a work of "collective history as Proust had presented his own—not 'life as it was,' nor even life remembered, but life as it has been 'forgotten.'"[2] To study the seventies now is to work on what we are trying to remember as much as what we are trying to forget.

This book does not attempt to periodize the seventies so much as to begin to develop a methodology for investigating the decade in order to bring it to attention as an underexamined period in contemporary cultural criticism. The pieces in this collection share an approach to performance and performativity that places an emphasis on the ways in which the seventies constitute a laboratory for experimenting with self-creation. The very simplicity of creating oneself as a character in an ongoing story is a kind of pop performance that suggests that the seventies provided the tools and the instructions for their own reassembly at a later, more advantageous date. To reconstitute the self as something to be performed—in all the vicissitudes of gender, sexuality, race, region, and ethnicity this would involve—is a paradigmatic aspect of understanding how the seventies functioned and perhaps why they have come to seem so relevant once again.

This volume implicitly questions the assumptions behind the methodologies of the major preexisting paradigm for a book of this type, *The 60s With-*

out Apology.[3] Unlike that book, our goal is not to provide coverage of the most prominent historical events of the period—whether the oil crisis or the bicentennial celebration—but to redefine what is considered most important in a materialist tracing of the cultural past. This characterization would not, however, have been apparent without either the distance that passing through another decade has provided us or the maturation of the first generation of seventies youngsters to an age in which they are able to look back at their youth with some degree of summation. In other words, the seventies are as much the product of a generation's view of themselves as they are the symptoms of a series of historical moments. Younger critics see in the subject of the seventies an opportunity to experiment with writing that allows them to use their own history and memory as material.[4] The current wave of seventies revival, however, owes much of its popularity to the even younger members of the twentysomething group, most of whom probably missed the seventies entirely—such as the cast of *That '70s Show*. One possible explanation for this generation's fascination with the seventies might be that the seventies posited a future—however dated it might have been—while the eighties expressed only a return to the past, to the "classics" in fashion and behavior.[5] The seventies, by contrast, continued the sixties' attempts to embrace formal as well as social change.

Specifically, the seventies valued internal contradiction in the artistic forms that it produced.[6] This complexity not only created a richer popular culture than some might imagine, but it also provided an opportunity for a working out of social and aesthetic problems that were left over from various decades of the century. For example, in his film *Dazed and Confused* (1993), director Richard Linklater's choice of 1976—the bicentennial year—as emblematic of the decade seems not only a parodic homage to the glorious tackiness of the birthday party that the nation gave itself but also suggests that the seventies are defined by their middle period—perhaps bookended by the Watergate hearings in 1973 and the premiere of *Saturday Night Fever* in 1977. One of the high points in his film is when the protagonist predicts that since the seventies have been so dull and boring, the eighties will be a kind of renaissance of decadence. The fact that just the opposite was the case is one of the movie's grandest critiques, for the sexual and aesthetic liberation of the seventies seems, as Linklater puts it, "a lot like the post-WWI '20s: after witnessing the horrors of war and realizing that humanity was capable of such large-scale corruption."[7]

Indeed, as the only period of our nation's history when sex had few, if any, consequences of a physical kind, the seventies were a sort of apotheosis of the twenties era. This temporal aphasia was already present in the seventies in what some might have seen as that decade's search for a "self" or a stable definition by referencing periods of time from the past—whether the 1930s (*Chinatown*, 1974), or, most famously, the 1950s (*American Graffiti*, 1973).

Usually in reaction to a period representation in film or on TV, these obsessions with the historical past might not have been so much a symptom of insecurity as an acknowledgment that the past now exists in a different form.[8]

It is significant, therefore, that in a film like *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995) the seventies would be portrayed as unchanging and innocent in comparison to the nineties. The film's conceit is that the Brady family still lives in the early seventies while within the confines of their home and yard, but venture outside into the nineties to work, attend school, and shop. This idea might be a reflection on the fact that for the original members of Generation X—people in their thirties now—the seventies represent a kind of stasis, in that they were at the right age then to be caught in the commodity fetish aspect of the seventies: our parents' homes are now museums to seventies trends and products. For the generation now in their twenties, the polyester-wearing Bradys can only appear innocent in their interaction with their earthier nineties counterparts. Indeed, the seventies might now seem like the last time a majority of people made a comfortable living: the last gasp of suburbia, of a collective style. As debased as it might seem, the sense of a suburban utopia is a form of optimism and might explain why the nostalgia for the seventies seems to be of such a distinctly middle-class type. If the seventies raise questions for a generation about how to think back to an originary moment in which their sense of themselves was formed as much against the specificities of the culture they were in as with them, then much seventies cultural production gives us an outline of how memory might work for finding our sense of a place or time without succumbing to the need for nostalgia.

In a recent essay on the sixties, George Lipsitz describes the transition from that decade to the seventies as one in which glitter became a substitute for rhetoric,

> sequins for beads, decadence for politics, and open plagiarism for originality. Whereas the counterculture of the 1960s tried to defuse sexual tension by having men and women take off their clothes, the "glam" . . . rock of the 1970s encouraged men and women to wear each other's clothes.[9]

One may agree with Lipsitz's critique while also noting that it fails to take into consideration that it is both gender and sexuality that the seventies understood in ways that the sixties did not. The unstable nature of the seventies era—its very ambiguity—provides the period with its generative and disruptive influences. The body was a good thing then, not something to be gotten over, as it must be in eighties science fiction (*Aliens* [1986] and *The Terminator* [1984] for example).[10] In the eighties the body becomes a problem to be solved, which is a reversal of the seventies, when people would collage their clothes and themselves—from writing on a military jacket to imitating dif-

ferent genders—and when one's relation to the body was performative and transformative. Indeed, the body itself was different, as Ralph Sarkonak notes in a description of the gay French photographer Guibert Hervé's photo of his lover, "T.":

> T.'s body is a very 1970s body: they just don't seem to make men like that any more, for nowadays men come complete with muscles but hardly any hair! Looking at T., I am transported back to the Toronto of the seventies and all the long-haired, thin boys who used to amble along Yonge Street on their colorful, high-heeled shoes, wearing little leather jackets. In the photo of T. . . . the sensuality is not lodged in the muscle tissue beneath the skin, in the rock hard flesh that seeks to force its way out, like pent-up sperm about to come. Rather, the sensuality is located in the touch and feel of the body's outer envelope.[11]

For the seventies, depth was surface because details were there for all to read. The eighties carried this superficiality a step further—from glam to hype, perhaps—to create a different style of artificiality: one in which the details have been eroded, leaving only a surfaceless illusion of depth, an ambiguous border at best. The seventies were the last decade of the truly visual, the last time that surface could be seen as the textured representation of complexity and detail rather than the gleaming reflection of cybernetic indifference. What the eighties coded as the future-as-now, the seventies transcoded as the inability to absorb the present, to render visible the plurality of choices—fabrics, song stylings, sexual partners—that pop culture had tossed up after the explosion of the sixties and the synergistic power of the media and youth culture came together.

As Anne-Lise François argues, the attempt to find the limits of compulsive artifice—or the bounds that one may be able to place on the transformation of the male silhouette—evidences both a desire to eliminate embarrassment as a controlling social force and to install a set of codes to stabilize difference. Likewise, for Charles Kronengold the black action film establishes new boundaries for the action-thriller genre as the character John Shaft crosses and recrosses on foot and by subway the grid of the early-seventies urban city. To translate the sixties spy hero for the seventies, *Shaft* (1971) represents a major realignment of generic codes, both musical and cinematic. Both François and Kronengold establish the street as a stage upon which seventies pop aesthetics were played out.[12]

The erotics of looking and seeing, performing and being looked at, are also played out in Amber Vogel's essay on *Vogue* in the seventies. Not only is the shiny surface of a magazine article a boundary by which to be tantalized, but the skin as literal boundary in its repose of flesh teases the viewer metaphysically. Vogel's piece reminds us most of all that the seventies exist for us now as a found object, a layer of culture to be exhumed as we would the

yellowed pages of a Victorian newspaper. The detritus of a period becomes a way (back) into a mood or period delirium for many, perhaps most especially because the associations are devoid of collective memories but rich in personal, associative ones. For Vogel, the mere act of looking—and what we do or don't see when we try—is paramount to a rethinking of a period that placed an emphasis on the surface over "depth."

The question of surface versus depth is also on display in Greil Marcus's prescient collage review for Dylan's much-anticipated album of 1970, *Self Portrait*. Knowing full well the album's ability to be seen, now, as a harbinger of not only the end of the sixties but also the advent of the more stifling parts of the next decade, Marcus presents an X ray of the flip side of seventies productive self-definition. Locating within the album a series of paradoxes related to the idea of the artist as auteur, Marcus shows the inability of Dylan to adapt his persona to the stringencies of a seventies style. It was perhaps for no less a hyperauteur than David Bowie to suggest an alternate—and ultimately radical—path out of the quandary. But if Dylan's album suggests that the auteur theory can't work for him, then is the problem in the theory or in the inability of Dylan to change? Or is the problem manifest in a culture that no longer wants its heroes to be unironic and political in an activist sense? As early as 1970, before the advent of the seventies proper, these questions were posed, with a decade of often partial answers to follow. The return of Dylan, like the return of the sixties, was not to happen in the pure form imagined by the voices that dissect the album here.

What was to happen, as shown by the two oral histories of the music scene, was the creation of a different kind of music-based community: one urban, often gay, and ultimately decadent in just the way that Marcus interrogates this concept in his review. That is, the seventies become a space for the transformation of music culture from a warm campfire to the cool precision of disco lights. The hedonism of the period was an exfoliation of the artistic decadence of the glam period via the commonality of technology and dance-as-performance. Warhol and Dylan both got the people's touch, though not in a way anyone might have suspected. As Vince Aletti's interviews with the stars of the disco period suggest, the glamour of being caught up in a phenomenon—even one begun by commercial means—was more than merely intoxicating; it was transformative of a period and culture from one point to another, very different one. The sixties don't finally end until disco. The meaning of all that has come since in music—from sampling to the return of *queer*—was laid down in the funk and in the groove.

This argument does not mean that all was wonderful on disco's high side, as evidenced by Randolph Heard's interview with KC of the Sunshine Band. Existing here more as a survivor rather than as the triumphant prophet à la Barry White he was yet to become, KC reminds us of the pure danger of burnout. The very precision with which KC defines the period only under-

lines what he has forgotten or is unable to recall. Disco's utopian impulse doesn't exist so much as a lost "lifestyle" or ideology as it does a memory of the morning after that some seem to have forgotten.

Indeed, were the eighties one long hangover? A gigantic, mournful act of contrition for some that simply allowed for the less-restrained actions of others who hadn't had any fun to begin with? Certainly, as Sohnya Sayres makes clear, the seeds of lost rebellion were already sown in Jonestown. An instant monument and memorial to a decade that was not quite over, Jonestown was one example, as another critic notes, of "the 'self' returned with a vengeance, but with a reprogrammed machinic ego."[13] If the Manson family helped conclude the sixties, the seventies ended with its own massacre, one that illustrated the limitlessness of ego when it is given all the aid of the military, the rationalization of religion, and the efficient model of corporate organization. A miniature model of hell, complete with suburban family units and Kool-Aid, was not only one ending of the decade—in 1978—but also the breaking up of one type of cultural paradigm: henceforth, the goal of cults must be to deprogram. After Jonestown, we have New Age spiritualism: "the pluralism of the '60s, but with a postmodern twist."[14]

Perhaps a part of the dialectical rhythm of the century, the narrative that the seventies presents is of collective and individual change happening in a totally asynchronous manner. Attempting to understand where this effect might come from could also mean homogenizing the culture in ways that not only efface class and culture but differences of gender, race, and sexuality as well. Though the seventies may seem inclusive when viewed from the fragmentation of the nineties, they were hardly a zone of liberation in the real sense—only in the phantasmagoric. Yet, the cultural strata of the period's dense nexus of reference yields a few clues that many were watching what was happening with their own agendas in mind. David Allen Case's memoir about *Bewitched* is a literal example of the Nickelodeon cable channel's attempts to analyze "our TV heritage." Case makes clear that a queer child's reading of the seemingly innocuous sitcom is not only a barometer of the changes in culture from the sixties to the seventies, but also of the limitations of just the sort of fantastic camp that sixties television could represent so well once social awareness emerged in the seventies in the form of TV programming. The search for a sexual self on television could be seen as another metaphor for the search for one's own representation within culture. This same question is raised by Christopher Castiglia, who shows that though the seventies might seem to constitute a decade that no one ever would want to call their own, the seventies have come back in the nineties to haunt us—in some ways, literally. As Castiglia notes, in the short film *The Dead Boys' Club*,[15] the young gay protagonist is possessed by a ghost from the seventies past when he dons the disco clothes he has purchased from a street merchant. The insertion of the seventies into the present is here seen

as a talismanic function, the bodying forth of another era previously set off from the present by the borderline of AIDS. For the nineties, then, the seventies is a birthright to be reclaimed in a way the eighties can never really be, though it took the eighties to show us just how different the seventies have turned out.

Cindy Patton reminds us that the search for self is ultimately one mediated, at least in part, by the advent of technological change. Looking at a key seventies porn film, *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (1975), Patton asks questions about performative utterances—those elocutionary phrases that are designed to *do* something, not simply to describe or question. Engaging with the debate in queer theory about the uses of J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, Patton not only points out aspects of Austin's lectures that are perhaps missed in the usual take but also provides a critique of the standard communication model as seen by relativist philosophers like Richard Rorty. Her application of Austin to this particular film allows her to show the way in which the slippage between voice and character—as mediated or brought about by technology in porn films in general and this film in particular—metaphorizes and extends the implications of performative indexicals.[16]

As recent seventies nostalgia has shown, the period's re-creation is almost wholly in terms of its pop culture features—television theme songs, various film genres, fashion, and FM radio. Patton's essay brings home the implications of technology to understanding this era, while also emphasizing the queer erotics at work in the pedagogical dictates of a certain very Austinian moment in *Misty Beethoven*. The theme of self-reference, of reference contained within a system or genre, is not only a part of the dictates of convention that Charles Kronengold describes here in reference to the black action film, but is perhaps characteristic of the decade's logic.

Indeed, Van M. Cagle provides a case analysis of the limits of genre by analyzing what happens when one type of reaction to the authenticity and sincerity of the sixties—the influential glam or glitter movement in Britain—is translated to the U.S. context. A form of self-presentation that is almost wholly made up of self-referential stylistics and theatricalized personae that represent the fragmentation of any sort of stable self, the glitter influence had a brief and ultimately limited existence in this country. The peculiar logic of the U.S. fan system allowed for the initial acceptance of the New York Dolls as a bargain-basement version of glitter drag, as an "authentic" version of an inauthentic movement. But once the Dolls became more self-consciously referential with their formula, they faced resistance from those very same fans. Their experimentation with a U.S. version of seventies glam points up the fact, however, that the United States was not immune to the energy that was available after the ideological collapse of the sixties: whether powering the Velvet Underground or the New York Dolls, the seventies avant-garde did have another tale to tell, and the movement of the

arts scene from the underground to the middle class opened up possibilities for both fans and performers that resulted in changes that brought about a synthesis of "high" and "low" cultural production which has not, until the nineties, been equaled.

One story of how this synthesis resulted from the very unlikely mixture of the Black Panthers, New Journalism, and New York society culture is told in Michael E. Staub's essay on the part that the mythologizing of the sixties played in the formation of a seventies identity—one that would result in the emergence of the queer insider as a source of cultural capital. The unfinished project by Truman Capote, *Answered Prayers*, had it been completed, would have posited the adventures of such a figure and provided an example of the milieu that Staub begins to sketch here.

That the sixties play a key role in the seventies is not new, but that the seventies are ultimately to exist for the nineties as more than merely a passing trend now seems certain. Stephen Rachman provides us with a reading of the *Wayne's World* phenomenon which allows us to begin to decode just how the seventies could conquer the nineties pop culture imagination so completely, so early on in the decade. Many of the elements necessary for the invasion, it seems, were there in Wayne and Garth's mythical den. Rachman makes clear how the films cross generational boundaries to pull together different audiences by creating their own type of cultural critique. Though popular culture has asked us to look at the nineties through the seventies lens, it is equally as important to reexamine the seventies using the critical tools of the nineties. In looking at the sequel to the film *Cleopatra Jones*, Jennifer DeVere Brody chooses a particularly complexly coded text to analyze—one in which she sees, encoded within the dictates of the black action genre, a queer subtext that operates as much at the level of costume and mise-en-scène as dialogue. The spectacle of the genre is discussed here in relation to viewership to demonstrate the ways in which identity formation, both on the screen and off, functions in ways that unsettle genre to allow for subversive readings of works that seem to have been rendered "safe" by the passage of time. Indeed, the seventies' ability to provide for an experimentation with self and with the borders between genres and forms, eras and periods, has remained one of the strengths of its cultural production. To illustrate this claim, one need take only a brief look at someone like Bowie—a figure whose career functions as a case study of what it meant to be a seventies artist.

For a brief period of time, from 1975 to 1976, Bowie became the most famous pop performer in the United States. His album *Young Americans* earned him not only a Grammy award for the hit single "Fame," which he recorded in a proto-disco style, but also spots on both *Soul Train* and Cher's variety show. In 1975, Bowie's single was number one in *Creem* magazine's "Reader's Poll" in the categories of top single and top R&B single. He was also voted top male

singer (just above Mick Jagger and Elton John), and his album came in overall at number four. Bowie even was ranked fourteenth in the category of "Top Twenty Groups."[17] By 1975, he had become something of a category unto himself.

Bowie's very seventies approach to his art can be seen in the change he made in the performance of his first major hit song, "Space Oddity." First recorded in 1969,[18] the song was written while he was working on vignettes to illustrate his songs for a film entitled *Love You till Tuesday*. Amid the saccharine tunes that Bowie was writing at the time, "Space Oddity" stood out, and, perhaps anxious to break into the big league with a bona fide hit, it is the song for which he saves his most lavish production. As the segment in *Love You till Tuesday* begins, we see Bowie dressed in a helmet and blue visor as the character Major Tom, who is awaiting the countdown to the launch of his spaceship. Once he achieves orbit, Major Tom steps outside his capsule to note that "the stars look very different today." In fact, the stars have become women—sirens, it turns out, who lure him into bed. The resignation in his character's voice at the end, "Planet Earth is blue / And there's nothing I can do," seems mostly a joke, as he has floated out into space only to find something better. This escapist interpretation is belied by another video of the song that Bowie was to make four years later. Here he sings the lyrics on the dark and empty backstage of a theater. Completely alone, his only company an array of meters and switches that stand in for "ground control," Bowie changes the meaning of the voyage from one of discovery in outer space to one of interiority and angst. The lyrics take on a sinister tone, yet the most striking difference—as it often is with Bowie—is the way that he looks. Gone is the young artiste of the earlier movie; here instead is the copper-shock Bowie with the vampiric teeth and androgynous gestural language. The seventies, Bowie seems to proclaim, are different. Major Tom is not who he once was.

Bowie was to drive home the significance of this change in a series of video clips that he made in the early seventies—none more dramatic than the one he made for the song "Life on Mars" from his 1971 album *Hunky Dory*. An album that owes much to an interest in blues and folk music as filtered through Dylan, the cover of the album shows a folksy Bowie dressed in natural fibers and sporting a very long Veronica Lake hairstyle—a look that was also used for the cover of the preceding album, *The Man Who Sold the World* (1970) (fig. 1). The image of Bowie in the video is very different (fig. 2). Here Bowie's white makeup refers to the mime tradition that interested him in the sixties and that has provided a template for many of his stylistic transformations and performances on film. The makeup's masklike effect causes his face to look like one seamless surface and emphasizes the delicacy of his features. The lack of shadow makes him appear somewhat alien—or perhaps like a Warhol pop painting.[19] The overall effect—from the faintly neo-Edwardian suit he wears to the famous Ziggy hair—becomes the basis for the

figure 1

combination of factors that Bowie is to go on to combine here and throughout his career: gay fashion stereotypes, science fiction, Orientalism, and, generally, a play with surface that reduces all style to a series of codes that are reprocessed with each new transformation of character. It is not surprising, for example, that Bowie's face is, at the end of the video clip, reduced to a series of signs in the form of camera closeups of his eyebrows, mouth, hair. His style is all style, signifying an artifice almost beyond itself, a simulacrum, if you will, of a new type of self-creation.

Throughout his career Bowie seems always to be commenting on his previous incarnations even as he is creating a new one, another version of the present in the form of the future.[20] In an essay entitled "Concerning the Progress of Rock & Roll," Michael Jarrett notes that "the dandy ... 'appears above all in periods of transition,' which makes me suspect that the nearly simultaneous rise of rock & roll and poststructuralism is symptomatic of a paradigm shift, a fundamental change in the way we approach the materials of the past."[21] Like his predecessors in the last fin de siècle, Bowie knew that it is only through an awareness of this process that we can ever hope to bring about changes in how we live in the present. For Bowie, like Warhol in a different register, the approach to take was one of *becoming* rather than *being*.[22]

The resulting synaesthesia of pop culture periods created by artists like Bowie can be seen in a later figure like Prince, whose work is brilliantly

figure 2

parodied by Sandra Bernhard in her performance of "Little Red Corvette" as a sixties hippie song–cum-striptease in her film *Without You I'm Nothing* (1990). Bernhard's mixing of references to the sixties, seventies, and eighties is credited neither to postmodernism nor simple eclectic eccentricity but to the seventies as the time that established a performative self-definition free of naturalistic sources or intentions.[23] The seventies, and the past in general, seem for her to be that which one inevitably replays as a pop cultural source in order to reveal not only one's favorite interests or influences, but somehow to order what one was forced to experience as a child, make it one's own, and simultaneously recode it as, say, an attack on homophobia, a parody of the pretension of certain essential cultural experiences, or the representation of a new consciousness. Bernhard makes this methodology explicit in one segment, where she says:

> Out of all the decades that we've exploited—and we've exploited all of them—the seventies remain the least understood and yet to me the most intriguing and pivotal to my aesthetic and philosophy. When I try to think of the one person who encapsulizes it to me, it was Patti Smith. She was a prophetess. She saw so far into the future she could afford to take ten years off and not say another word. The one thing that she said that rings true

to me today and has become my anthem and goal in life is "I may not have fucked much with the past, but I have fucked plenty with the future." I'd like to believe in that quote and all the other wonderful sayings of the past. It's hard to be that optimistic these days. Perhaps Cher said it best when she said: "Miniskirts were once the rage / Uh huh / And history has turned a page / Uh huh / And the beat goes on."

Bernhard's tongue-in-cheek spotlighting of the seventies in this performance piece does its own kind of encapsulating of the seventies as property worthy of a history, a meaning, and as a source for understanding the present. Bernhard's more serious point is that an understanding of the postmodern present is first available in the seventies. The present, like the past, is really more a blend of the twin possibilities of the past and the future—both ultimately unknowable. The seventies, then, are our own future now—embedded, like us, in time.

NOTES

1. Richard Corliss, "Left Out in the Cold," *Time*, 29 September 1997.
2. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 39.
3. A somewhat similar critique of this volume is made by Michael Warner in the second footnote to his "Introduction," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxviii.
4. Perhaps this change was also brought about by the dominance of the baby boom generation, whose members, now that they are in their 40s and early 50s, may think of time in generational rather than historical terms. Similarly, the mere size of this generation is such that all who come after it find that they must define time in relation to this massive group. At any rate, the demographics of the post-sixties period are complex. Sociologists tell us that the boom generation is in fact two generations that have been lumped together. Likewise, as someone in his 30s, I am technically a part of Generation X, originally theorized by Douglas Coupland. The term now is used to refer to anyone who is, roughly speaking, post–college age but not yet 30. Of course, since people do continue to age, Generation X is no longer the generation of those who grew up in the seventies and went to high school then—director Richard Linklater's handy definition—but, rather, a sort of moving demographic mass that comes ever closer to the present without actually arriving. In talking to my own students about demographic definitions—and just from watching MTV's *The Real World*—it is easy to see that the current generation of people in their teens and twenties is not the same as the one that Linklater and I populate. Another shift, in other words, has already occurred, and it won't be long before these younger people define themselves as something other than Gen X,

although the original definition of this faction may hold better for them than for us. The seventies as a period, therefore, exists in several parallel dimensions. It is a zone of generational memory, a boundary between times of political excess, a period of still underexamined cultural production that marks the beginning of a new plurality and diversity in popular and artistic diversity of which we are still a part. Indeed, a related issue is the growing friction between those of the boom generation who claim the sixties and dismiss the seventies—or who feel that the sixties can only be theorized by them. See Rick Perlstein, "Who Owns the Sixties?" *Lingua Franca* (May–June 1996): 30–37, or the large number of letters published in *Vanity Fair* (March 1996) in reaction to Christopher Hitchens's "The Baby-Boomer Wasteland."

5. The eighties were a sort of respite from style in that they embraced, for the most part, a preppy nonstyle—a WASPish escape from both the temptations and the dictates of change.
6. I take this idea in part from an unpublished talk given by Charles Kronengold entitled "Excess and the Contract of Genre: Functions of the Hook in Popular Music."
7. Richard Linklater, *Dazed and Confused* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), n.p.
8. Pagan Kennedy provides the best description of how the 1950s form an "alternate universe" for seventies television. Beginning realistically as a reference to *American Graffiti*, the television show *Happy Days* "[s]lowly . . . ceased to make reference to the fifties at all and began to exist in its own hermetic universe" (*Platforms* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994], 6). Eventually the show, like the decade, implodes in its own self-consciousness, creating not only *Laverne and Shirley* but the surreal variety show *Sha Na Na* in 1977. That same year, as Kennedy describes, "Donny and Marie guest-starred on the loathsome 'Brady Bunch Hour.' In a fifties segment too weird to be believed, the Bradys head for a roller rink and affect Italian accents as they perform jazzed-up rollerboogie versions of oldies hits. Just when you think it can't get any worse, Donny Osmond shows up, calling himself 'The Don,' riding a motorcycle, and otherwise pretending to be the Fonz. This is TV at its most self-referential" (8).
9. George Lipsitz, *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 230.
10. Thanks to Richard Swartz for pointing out this subtle distinction.
11. Ralph Sarkonak, "Traces and Shadows: Fragments of Hervé Guibert," *Yale French Studies* 90 (1996): 187.
12. Public space—perhaps still a recognizable form before the ubiquitous dominance of the suburban shopping mall and urban atrium space of the eighties—might have had its last signifying moment at the point at which the seventies began.
13. Erik Davis, "Stairways to Heaven," *Zirkus: The Journal of Seventies Studies* (ed. Charles Kronengold and Suzanne Yang) 13, 3 (Summer 1988): 26.
14. Ibid.

15. Director Mark Christopher, 1992.
16. Vincent Crapanzano provides a suggestive definition of indexicals:

> Despite popular grammatical understanding that a pronoun is simply a noun substitute, there is ... a fundamental difference between first and second person personal pronouns ("I" and "you" and their plurals) and third person pronouns ("he," "she," "it," "they"). The first and second are properly indexical: they "relate" to the context of utterance. The third person pronouns refer back anaphorically to an antecedent, a noun, often enough a proper noun, in the text. They are liberated, so to speak, from the context of utterance, but they are embedded in the textual context. They are intratextual and derive their meaning from their textually described antecedents.

(Vincent Crapanzano, "Hermes' Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986], 71.)

17. The poll is reproduced in Linklater, *Dazed and Confused*, n.p.
18. Released in time to be used by British TV during their coverage of the American moon landing, the song was suggested to Bowie by Stanley Kubrick's *2001*.
19. The look he has here, in fact, provides the basis for three album covers: *Aladdin Sane*, *Diamond Dogs*, and the aptly titled *Pin-Ups*. Brian Eno, among others, also seems to have borrowed the look for his *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)* (1974).
20. In 1993, Bowie began to provide his fans with convenient ways to reevaluate his career. Rykodisc released his entire oeuvre on remastered compact discs and most of his videos on two videocassettes. The records he has produced in the nineties contain numerous homages to his seventies work. Of course, Bowie had already looked back at his earlier self in 1980 when he recorded "Ashes to Ashes," which takes up the story of Major Tom from where he is left in 1969.
21. Michael Jarrett, "Concerning the Progress of Rock & Roll," *South Atlantic Quarterly: Rock & Roll Culture* (ed. Anthony DeCurtis) 90, 4 (Fall 1991): 814.
22. In contrast, Lipsitz writes that William Chafe "describes the countercultural sensibility that emerged [in the 1960s] as one that held that 'being' was more important than 'becoming.'" (Lipsitz, *The Sixties*, 214).
23. Although Greil Marcus, Carter Radcliff, and others have discussed modernism's influence on the musical production of the seventies, Carrie Jaurès Noland's "Rimbaud and Patti Smith: Style as Social Deviance" (*Critical Inquiry* 21 [Spring 1995]: 581–610) not only provides an account for the influence of decadence and modernism on popular music generally (the Doors, for example) and Smith in particular, but also attempts to begin to theorize a way to discuss the interaction of "high" and "low" art in popular music, a project fundamental to an understanding of seventies music.

Page Intentionally Left Blank

Re/Defining the Seventies

Page Intentionally Left Blank

Setting up the Seventies

Black Panthers, New Journalism, and the Rewriting of the Sixties

MICHAEL E. STAUB

In the August 13, 1995, edition of the Sunday *New York Times*, the "Week in Review" section ran as its lead story an article that mobilized memories of the sixties for the purpose of ridiculing and neutralizing political activism in the nineties. In itself, this rhetorical maneuver might be considered noteworthy only because of its typicality. For as Meta Mendel-Reyes has recently summarized it, "What is at stake in the American struggle over who owns the sixties is ownership of the nineties."[1]

But there was more to this particular news story showily decorated with neopsychedelic pop art (fig. 1.1). Written by respected veteran *Times* journalist Francis X. Clines, the article, "The Case That Brought Back Radical Chic," began like this:

> The hard fact that criminal justice is grossly relative is never clearer than when a felon gifted with articulateness approaches the gallows, rallying celebrities to his side. Tongue-tied peers—3,009 and growing at last count of America's burgeoning death rows—can only wonder in silence, perchance grunting of their own innocence, but well ignored. So it goes with the condemned among us lately as a throng from the arts, academic and entertainment worlds singles out the cause of Mumia Abu-Jamal, a finely expressive, dramatically dreadlocked, suddenly celebrated . . . convicted cop-killer.

Taking advantage of an opening provided by the last-minute stay of execution granted former Black Panther Abu-Jamal a few days earlier, Clines aired his views on black militants who write books, and on "the championing of an underclass cause by an overclass gathering." Clines reminded readers of Tom Wolfe's "hilariously" rendered send-up of "radical chic" adoration for

figure 1.1

the Black Panthers in 1970 and cited Wolfe as his star witness. Indeed, it was a Wolfe quote about Abu-Jamal—that "literary sensitivity seems to expunge moral failings"—that supplied the Clines piece with its organizing thesis.[2] What does it mean that, in commenting on progressive nineties advocates of a militant African American, Francis X. Clines and the *New York Times* could

hark back with such comedic "commonsense" knowingness (and authority) to a moment a quarter of a century earlier? And how is it that, in pretending to express sympathy for the "grunting" individuals sentenced to die (even as he insulted them), Clines could shift away from the racial politics and flawed legal processes that put such a disproportionate number of blacks on death row (the real way that justice is "grossly relative") and toward a satiric invocation of radical chic culture? What Clines's revival of radical chic managed was an adroit double displacement. In this view, elites in the United States do not hold political power (which can be used *against* blacks) but merely set trendy cultural standards so that they might derive self-gratification from them; and matters of life and death are, in this view, only matters of style.

The conjunction of Tom Wolfe, the Black Panthers, and radical chic introduces the subject of this essay: the mainstream media response to the Black Panthers in 1969–70, and, more particularly, the role played by the New Journalism. As Fredric Jameson has commented, the sixties did not end in an instant but extended until "around 1972–74."[3] And, crucially—contemporary neoconservative punditry notwithstanding—the sixties were hardly simply a utopian era when the Left flowered and flourished. This was also a moment when sophisticated anti-Left strategies were already being tested and refined, and these trends intensified at the turn to the seventies. The memory of the sixties (both as historical event and as metaphorical reference point) was, in short, being fought over almost immediately; history was getting rewritten practically as it was happening. This in itself is no great surprise to students of this era. It may be more surprising to discover how the 1970 media spasm surrounding the Black Panther Party, and particularly the crucial role of the New Journalism within it, contributed to the elaboration of an anti-Left agenda. The seventies began with the defining and denigrating of the sixties.

THE NEW JOURNALISM

The New Journalism—that genre-blurred mélange of ethnography, investigative reportage, and fiction—is widely and rightly considered to be *the* characteristic genre of the sixties. For a time, and certainly by mid-decade, it looked as if the surest means for a novelist to build a reputation—or rebuild it, as the case may be—was to write a nonfiction report on a historical event, but write it as if it were a novel. Whether the subject was a cold-blooded serial killing (Truman Capote), the hippie counterculture (Joan Didion), or a march on the Pentagon (Norman Mailer), writers who had first written successful fictions found themselves turning to "the rising authority of nonfiction" to help make sense of the "fast-paced . . . apocalyptic" times they were living in.[4] Likewise, a new generation of younger writers—for

instance, Wolfe, Michael Herr, Gail Sheehy, and Hunter S. Thompson—developed through the New Journalism a freedom of approach and range of style (along with an enormously receptive reading public) that even just several years earlier would probably not have been possible. Self-identified fiction, as none other than *The Harper American Literature* matter-of-factly informs students, temporarily lost its charms, as precisely the destabilizing hecticity of the era made life seem more interesting than art.[5] Or, as activist-scholar Todd Gitlin put it more evocatively, utilizing the highly metaphoric tense-switching language of the New Journalism itself, the "years 1967, 1968, 1969, and 1970 were a cyclone in a wind tunnel . . . when history comes off the leash, when reality appears illusory and illusions take on lives of their own, [and] when the novelist loses the platform on which imagination builds its plausible appearances."[6]

The New Journalism styled itself as providing an alternative to more standard media renderings of social reality, promising to deliver a "more real" reality, the truer story of the many social crises splitting American society in the 1960s. For it was not only a loss of interest in fiction that engendered the search for a new style. It was, probably even more significantly, precisely the atmosphere of social crisis that had begun to make the traditional media seem so suspect, and that had called attention to the way the media's claim to be "objective" was frequently a smokescreen for bias. Media coverage of Vietnam provided some of the most appalling examples, and some of the decade's best New Journalism brought readers a different version of the Vietnam War (Herr) and of antiwar protest (Mailer). But the more general intensification of domestic turmoil also contributed to the impression that many standard journalistic conventions ought to be scrapped—or at least radically modified—since, as journalist and scholar Nicolaus Mills has noted, a "who, what, where, when, why style of reporting could not begin to capture the anger of a black power movement or the euphoria of a Woodstock. . . . For an audience either deeply concerned or directly involved in the changes going on in America, it was necessary to report events from the inside out, and this is what the new journalism attempted to do." Furthermore, as one practitioner, Nat Hentoff, argued already in 1968, the New Journalism offered its audience an opportunity to read news reportage by journalists who could express that they really cared about their subjects. Only through a dramatic "novelistic" method, he proposed, could reporters openly communicate (rather than mask) their own direct engagement with and active participation in the experiences they reported and thereby "help break the glass between the reader and the world he lives in." Similarly, as Michael Schudson observed in his excellent survey of the development of the journalistic profession, in an era as conflicted as the sixties when "'objectivity' became a term of abuse," a media-savvy audience eagerly sought out "voices of an adversary culture," and the openly subjective approach of the New Jour-

nalism was extraordinarily welcome. In short, it was only by allowing imagination into journalism that journalism could speak to the imagination of the times. Indeed, according to Gay Talese, another pioneer of the genre, it was only by using fictional techniques that the media could produce news "as reliable as the most reliable reporting." This was precisely because the New Journalist "seeks a larger truth than is possible through the mere compilation of verifiable facts."[7]

Yet, although this is not so well remembered now, the New Journalism and the incorporation of subjectivity into reportage were not always associated with the counterculture. The publishing history of the New Journalism cannot be separated from the history of two magazines during the mid- to late sixties and early seventies: *Esquire*, whose literary editor was Clay Felker, and *New York* (initially the Sunday supplement to the now-defunct *New York Herald Tribune*), which Felker edited when he left *Esquire*. Under Felker's guidance, *Esquire* and *New York* published a good many writers who were closely associated with the genre: Capote, Herr, Sheehy, Talese—as well as James Breslin, Robert Christgau, Terry Southern—and (most of all) Wolfe. These writers represented a spectrum of opinions on a range of issues. It is my point, however, that *New York*'s historic role as journalistic gadfly placed it in the unusual cultural position of appearing adversarial in content (or politics) even while it was truly adversarial only in style—and I emphasize that I mean unusual *at that time*, since several other magazines (*Rolling Stone* and *Esquire* come immediately to mind) ultimately came also to fit into this category, although only *New York* self-consciously inhabited this split identity and thrived on being understood as simultaneously hip *and* sold out by contemporaneous media watchers. Felker's *New York*, at least for a while, knew its media niche as the place to go to read "the story behind the story"; or to hear about the latest trend or celebrity gossip; or to find out what the mainstream press was too cautious to report, or too invested in keeping from view. All this was related through the New Journalistic fact-based storytelling technique the standard press loved to hate—or perhaps just hated to love.

This essay focuses on two New Journalistic efforts, both written for *New York* in 1970, and both (although in very different ways) purporting to provide a truer narrative than available elsewhere about the phenomenon of the Black Panther Party and its white supporters. One is Gail Sheehy's two-part "Panthermania," ostensibly mainly a report on the impact of the Panthers on the black community.[8] The other is the Tom Wolfe piece Francis X. Clines found so funny—"Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's"—an article whose main purpose was to skewer the white supporters.[9] Both pieces appeared in book form as well in late 1970 and early 1971. Although Sheehy's writing on the Panthers has long been largely forgotten (even while Sheehy herself has once again been in the news as she serves up another installment of *Passages*), her essay bears reexamination today, for its representations of

racial identities and relations, its main tropes and obsessions, will appear quite (and I hope distressingly) familiar to nineties readers. Wolfe's tale, meanwhile, is of course infinitely more infamous, although, as I will show, it too is worth another rereading. Its title entered the language, while its content arguably shaped the historical memory of the Panthers and their white supporters—and indeed the memory of the sixties more generally—more than any other single journalistic piece from the era.

BLACK PANTHERS IN THE NEWS

In order to make sense of the timing, and much of the content, of Sheehy's and Wolfe's narratives, it is important to take an excursion into the coverage of the Panthers in the more standard news media. Something like what British cultural studies scholars have called a "moral panic" occurred in the media in response to the Panthers, putting the Panthers into the role of what British sociologist Stan Cohen has memorably termed "folk devils."[10] The Panthers were definitely cast in the folk devil role in the mainstream media, portrayed as a motley crew of unstable, paranoid black juvenile delinquents. Crucially, however, the panic did not set in either at the moment or in the manner one might expect.

While it is widely known how Federal Bureau of Investigation Director J. Edgar Hoover—who singled out the Black Panther Party (BPP) already in the summer of 1969 as "the greatest threat to the internal security of the country"—turned his considerable covert counterintelligence resources against the BPP, it is rather less noted that such standard media venues as the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report* hesitated several more months before they too aggressively began to register the group in folk devil language.[11] Indeed, for more than three years, or from the inception of the party in 1966 until the winter of 1969, mainstream media representations of the Panthers had been neither particularly hostile nor especially sympathetic. Even when, in May 1967, several dozen armed Panthers marched into California's state assembly to protest against gun control legislation, the incident earned only one sentence in *Newsweek* and no mention in *Time*.[12] In short, reportage about Panther activity was inconsistent, and what there was acknowledged—especially in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination in spring 1968—that black Americans might legitimately turn even to so-called extremist means in response to the crisis in American race relations. Likewise, when white support for the Panthers was mentioned during this time (in one instance, for example, Marlon Brando's support was reported), the media handled it in an evenhanded manner.[13] It was only as the decade wound to a close, from December 1969 onward, that the panic over the Black Panthers set in, and quite dramatically, escalating steadily through the first half of 1970. And yet this particular panic followed an unusual course that