

Editor's Note

“Let Your Kids Go to the Movies!”

THIS IS MY LAST ADVENTURE AS EDITOR OF *PMLA*. IT'S BEEN A blast—especially working with the incomparable Judy Goulding, Eric Wirth, Annabel Schneider, and Julia Gold. I'm delighted that the current issue, on Celebrity, Fame, Notoriety (so beautifully introduced and organized by the divine Joe Boone and Nancy Vickers), gives me the chance to quote Frank O'Hara:

Mothers of America

let your kids go to the movies!
get them out of the house so they won't know what you're up to
it's true that fresh air is good for the body
but what about the soul
that grows in darkness, embossed by silvery images

What a delightful imperative! And what gaiety when the clichéd “fresh air” gives way to umber ecstasy. In “Ave Maria” O'Hara reminds us that the pull of the movies and of the celebrities they breed is hard to resist. The movie-watching soul feels “embossed,” marked and saturated by glamour. But O'Hara also redefines the ways we think about glamour. He taunts America's adulterous moms with the promise that the silver screen offers their kids secrecy, escapism, and “their first sexual experience / which only cost you a quarter / and didn't upset the peaceful home.” O'Hara is talking not about straight kids making out in the back row of the theater but about a gay boy who finds sensual apprenticeship at the movies and leaves “before it's over” to tryst “with a pleasant stranger whose apartment is in the Heaven on Earth Bldg / near the Williamsburg Bridge / oh mothers you will have made the little tykes / so happy.” Is this where celebrity watching turns notorious? Or is this where celebrity and notoriety become transactional, charismatic, and strangely uplifting? In “Ave Maria” the aura of

celebrity, the “transactional energy that flows between the charismatic idol and the crowd” (Boone and Vickers, in their introduction to this issue), happens askance, between the “pleasant stranger” and the film-happy boy.

For O’Hara movies (or sex enabled by movies) are reparative, life-bestowing. As Eve Sedgwick explains, there are many ways in which marginalized “selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (150–51). O’Hara’s mothers represent this nonsustaining, straitlaced American culture. Protecting their sons from “darker joys,” these mothers are oblivious to their gay children’s needs, inimical to queer nurture. In contrast, “the movies” are salubrious, a site for self-discovery and self-repair, for conferring “plenitude” on “an inchoate self” (Sedgwick 149). At the end of the poem O’Hara salts this plenitude—the gay boy embossed in silver, the straight mother unlaced—with a masturbatory joke about the lesser joys of television and the nuclear family:

so don't blame me if you won't take this
advice
and the family breaks up
and your children grow old and blind in front
of a TV set
seeing
movies you wouldn't let them see when they
were young

One of the virtues of being editor of *PMLA* has been getting to think, read, and write about fields and ideas that are not my own. Thinking about O’Hara’s poetry in the context of the essays in *Celebrity, Fame, Notoriety*, I’ve realized that glamour (which I pursue endlessly, uselessly, through the pages of *People* magazine but contemplate officially through the lens of the Frankfurt school) can play a role in the care of the self. That is, glamour (as deviant gleams, as “the ongoing appetite for il-

lusion,” as a detour from authenticity) can offer fabulous resources in a world where the only authentic self is the straight self (Brown 69).

Throughout his poetry O’Hara brings the resourceful inauthenticity of the celebrity into the everyday as a source of contingent happiness: a brightness meteor-like and mundane, pervasive and rare, inevitable in its mythy constancy and yet only encountered by happenstance (Herring). Take a look at all the touchable, expendable objects that rub up against self and celebrity in “The Day Lady Died,” “Steps,” or “A Little Travel Diary.” In adding glamour to the everyday O’Hara also brings celebrity down to earth:

Lana Turner has collapsed!
I was trotting along and suddenly
it started raining and snowing
and you said it was hailing
but hailing hits you on the head
.....
and suddenly I see a headline
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
there is no snow in Hollywood
there is no rain in California
I have been to lots of parties
and acted perfectly disgraceful
but I never actually collapsed
oh Lana Turner we love you get up
 (“Poem”)

As editor I hope I’ve been, at least occasionally, disgraceful, and at times I’ve wanted to collapse. But I have also been graced by celebrity sightings. These include Rosemary G. Feal, a passionate supporter of the journal in every storm; Marianne Hirsch, *PMLA*’s editor from 2003 to 2006, who invented a new architecture for the Editor’s Column; and the new editor, Simon Gikandi, who will do a marvelous job bringing the plenitude of the profession to *PMLA*.

Pat

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