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Sexual Imagery and the Media

AIDS strikes at the heart of the most intimate of human relationships, sexual closeness. In so doing, it has fractured what had become the basis of a new social identity. Not for everyone, but for a significant number in our society, the search for sexual fulfillment, the wonder of new partners, the thrill of spontaneous, unrestrained, luxurious lovemaking—these have been among the central motivations of our time, permeating music, television, advertising, motion pictures, theater, and literature.

Here was the idea of freedom rendered available, satisfying, concrete. Far more than a way of selling movie tickets or travel to the Mediterranean, the idea of sexual freedom has been, for the generations that have come of age since the 1960s, synonymous with freedom itself, with a sense of individual possibility, a powerful metaphor for the way we define ourselves and our capabilities. We assert sexual freedom virtually as a badge of the openness and creativity of our society, as a fulfillment of some unarticulated constitutional promise of individual autonomy.

This may seem like a great exaggeration, but only if it is taken as a description of the actual conduct of men and women. The millions who watch soap operas do not necessarily replicate—or even think they will replicate—the conduct they see there. But they do define themselves as living in a society where the conduct they witness is possible. Even if they recognize that what is being performed is religiously or morally forbidden,

they see it legitimated to the extent that it unfurls unencumbered on the living room screen. And whether or not sexual liberation, as it is often called, is realized in the daily sex life of the majority, as an ideal it has had immense implications for family structure, for attitudes toward work and leisure, indeed for the shaping, even architecture, of cities. The ideal of liberation has affected decisions about where to live, if and when to marry, whether to have children, whether to divorce.

The celebration of individuality and personal autonomy that is so inextricably wrapped up in our images of sexual freedom—all this has been put at risk by the AIDS epidemic. The symbols of sexuality that permeate our culture have become inconsistent with the public health need for a very different basis upon which to establish our sense of self-fulfillment. Sexual autonomy is rapidly being transformed from a sign of individual freedom into a source of potential death. The emergence of sexual autonomy as a powerful national symbol in the 1960s changed the national consciousness for three decades; a change in symbolism, driven by the pressing public health needs of the 1990s, could alter our sense of self for the foreseeable future.

The process of change in the national consciousness—and therefore in public imagery—is taking place gradually, but noticeably. It is an arresting combination of the voluntary actions of those who guide media, the forces of economics, and the subtle pressures of government and public opinion. Already, motion picture scripts are being rewritten and records are being *censored more stringently by radio stations*. Television plots that would have been selected are now being rejected, and the images that have come to dominate advertising are changing as well. Industries that for years have been fending off external demands for censorship now fitfully but quite palpably are altering the visage of American entertainment. It is too early to determine how extensive and how rapid these changes will be, just as it is too early to know how threatening the AIDS crisis will ultimately become. But even at present levels of fear, those who are the gatekeepers and image makers of the culture have

become increasingly conscious of the fact that a change must come, that those whose work has such a significant impact on the way people live must act to benefit the public health effort.

They realize that in the long absence of any vaccine, they cannot celebrate the older, freer ways, at least so long as personal caution in sexual conduct seems to be the most important way of controlling the spread of AIDS. They know too well that casual attitudes toward personal relations have been deeply reinforced through the media, and that, if these attitudes are to be altered, a sweeping revolution in the way the media depict sexual behavior may be necessary. This recognition has come not through imposition of new laws or government regulation but through a self-originated sense of the mood and need of the country, from what is left of a feeling of communal responsibility, and, undoubtedly, from the personal pain and loss within the entertainment industry, resulting from the death and dying of friends.

The assumption that the media have a substantial impact on conduct and attitudes has a long tradition. The money spent on advertising is ample testimony to the faith of American enterprise in this proposition. Believing in the power of the media over cultural values, underrepresented and outsider groups have tried to affect the way they are reflected in television shows and commercials, in textbooks, and in other mirrors of ourselves. They have tried to correct perceived abuses, such as the absence of minorities and the elderly on television shows, or the depiction of Italians as gangsters, or gangsters as Italians. At first, these efforts tended to be private in nature, conducted by civic groups in conversations behind closed doors with those who shape popular images. More recently, methods for bringing about change in the media have become increasingly public and sophisticated: threats of government regulation or boycotts of products or productions. In the process, law and regulation have become a way to enshrine a vision of a democratic society, as opposed merely to a means of incorporating and reflecting realities. These pressures on the media are intense, because

those groups that want to refashion attitudes and conduct recognize that it is easier to change them through the shaping of images than to do so directly. Thus, groups with a social agenda of this kind seek to have the media alter the public's perception so as to prepare the audience for a romanticized future by insinuating that it already exists.

If we view television, for example, as a medium of social realism that teaches us who we are and, more interesting, who we should be, then the efforts by racial minorities, by women, by business interests, by the handicapped to revise that projected image are more understandable. Television is not alone. Twenty years ago, Adam Clayton Powell held hearings on the way in which minorities, particularly African-Americans, were depicted in school textbooks. Despite their discomfort, publishers came before his committee to help it evaluate whether a proper function of government was to question the content of material taught widely in public schools. For Powell, the answer was obvious: What people read in textbooks about themselves and others helps to define their identity. Impatiently, he was asking whether history, to the extent it can be accurate at all, was being distorted—distorted in a discriminatory way in the “official” material young people read—and whether a particular representation of history and the role of minorities would beneficially influence civic attitudes in the future.¹

In the two decades since Powell's hearings, the debate about the role of government in holding the media, including the *publishers of textbooks*, accountable for the way in which they portray and affect segments of the society has become virtually institutionalized. Not only African-Americans and other racial minorities but women, the elderly, and advocates for children all have come to the table asking the same questions: Are you harming us by the way you are depicting us? Are we becoming who you say we are? Does the power of your message strongly influence the struggle for identity within each of us?

With the coming of the AIDS crisis, these kinds of inquiries and demands are more generalized, pitched at the overall im-

pect of television and the media on society as a whole, not at the relationship between a particular segment and the entirety. Suddenly, the concern is with the way the *mainstream* is portrayed, a concern growing not from the rancor of discrimination but from fear. To be sure, strong vestiges of the minority agenda and perspective still abound: for example, in increased worry about the depiction of homosexuals and the potential for isolation and rancor that could flow from false and condemnatory stereotyping. But the issue becomes much broader: how individuals are portrayed in modern life, what their values are and should be, what conduct will be deemed worthy of imitation, and, as a result, how behavior will be shaped. Not out of a political agenda, nor a utopian vision for the future, but rather out of intense worry about survival, these issues arise and assault one of the central themes of modern life and art, namely, how the society defines the relationship between men and women. And because the anxiety is so widespread and the question so pervasive in its implications, the response has been immediate. Even without government regulation, the media have changed.

Exactly how this process of change is taking place varies from industry to industry. Each area of expression plays a different role in shaping our sense of personal identity, and each has a different relationship to government. What is often called the gatekeeping function—the ability of arbiters of taste to determine the content of the message—is also different for each industry. So is the nature of the audience, how old or young it is, how publicly or privately it enjoys the medium. All of these factors contribute to an understanding of how each medium has developed, how it contributes to ideas about personal liberties and sexual autonomy, and how it is affected by the AIDS crises.

The Balcony as Classroom

Almost from the start, the motion picture industry has been a merchant of romance, and the balcony, or its modern counter-

part, has been a place to escape. The handsome leading men and ravishing leading ladies who virtually defined the genre during the twenties and thirties may have, from time to time, played the role of the girl or boy next door, but they remained nevertheless remote and inaccessible. One could aspire to be like them, in the way one held a cigarette, or cocked one's head, or wore a hat, but the reach was great, the distance forbidding.

Motion pictures in recent decades have been a different story. Joan Crawford gave way to Audrey Hepburn, who gave way in turn to Annette Funicello and, ultimately, to Rosanna Arquette. Movies now portray, to a far greater extent, the real people next door, people much like the audience except that these ordinary people somehow manage to lead exciting lives. Instead of stimulating its audience to merely imitate certain affectations of film stars—in the way one might emulate royalty—movies in recent years have seemed to provoke their audience into asking why their own lives are not as charged as the lives of the otherwise very similar people depicted on the screen. At the dawn of the AIDS epidemic, the movies had become less of an escape, more of an immediate prescription for a change of lifestyle.

This transformation in the role of films as teachers or molders of behavior has been inextricably tied to a demographic transformation in the market. As television ate away at the previously massive adult audience of motion pictures, teenagers—with their restless urge to get out of the house and congregate with peers—became the single most important target of the film industry. In the 1970s and 1980s a special conversation between the industry and its audience was established, one that recognized the rebelliousness of youth and spoke the language of dissent. It was on the large screen, not its smaller cousin, that Cheech and Chong could flaunt marijuana as a symbol of liberation. Movies such as *Easy Rider* became the medium of the anti-hero. The path of the young rebel first pioneered on the screen by James Dean and Marlon Brando had, for teenage America, become the middle of the road.

A crucial element in this new consciousness, and in this commercially successful dialogue between Hollywood and the young, was the bold assertion of sexual autonomy—the liberation of the young, and women in particular, from the sexual mores of their parents. Much of the strength of the film industry in the last two decades was built on the importance to those in the demographic target of this rich and important dialogue about sexual behavior.

The film industry's new intimacy with its young audience was established at a time when fewer and fewer curbs were being imposed by individuals or custom, and virtually none by government, on the way that sexual relations could be depicted on the silver screen. Film producers have not had to deal with the dilemma facing producers for network television that at some level the government affects the medium of exhibition, through its ability to grant or withhold licenses. Compared with television, the film production business is fairly easy to enter. The ability to produce an independent film and have it screened requires money and distribution, of course, but government approval in the form of a license is not necessary.

Motion pictures do not have to enter the living room war fought both by parents and children and by networks alike over the family identity. Television has to meet several sets of standards all at once; many would argue that it meets none of them very well. A movie is a much more private affair, targeted to the tastes and values of its particular audience. Even when movies are invited into the home, in the form of video cassettes, the impact has been only to enhance the privateness of films. VCRs allow the individual to establish, free of coercion, the set of messages that will be reinforced, the company that he or she will keep while receiving them, and even the time of day or night that the viewing will take place.

If the halcyon days of Hollywood still existed, the executives of the small number of studios who controlled production might collusively set standards of taste. But given the high degree of competition in production and among the various methods of

exhibition, the likelihood of the industry's agreeing to restrain itself is quite low. In that sense, the film industry is remarkably democratic. No agency determines the way in which any particular film affects either the health of the industry or the health of the nation.

The evolution of the industry-imposed classification and rating system captures this loose relationship between industry structure, gatekeeping, and self-censorship. During the Hays Code, commencing in 1930, the rules about what could be shown and what could not were quite detailed and comprehensive. By contrast, under the current ratings program, administered by the Motion Picture Association of America, there are no effective prohibitions; the idea, rather, is to inform. The primary barrier is an X or R rating, but only the X rating is a significant obstacle, for only it means that a picture cannot gain wide distribution. The rules for PG13, the most common rating, have steadily changed since the introduction of the rating system. This ranking, which sets only a guideline for parental supervision, deals primarily with particular sorts of explicit sexual behavior but does not prohibit the portrayal of attitudes inconsistent with concerns about preventing AIDS. PG13 films have regularly shown practices and attitudes which public health programs are now desperately trying to alter.

Success at the box office has always turned on the ability of a film's promoters to persuade a modern audience that the film at least touches, usually confirms, and perhaps expands, their fantasies. In the decade before AIDS, this meant the portrayal of attitudes that are now, as physicians would say, contraindicated. In the age of AIDS, the movie industry is at least playing with a new consciousness. During the making of a motion picture called *Casual Sex?* the producers debated the issue of whether a question mark should go in the title. Without the question mark, the producers worried about the mild advocacy, the suggestion that this is more of the pre-AIDS culture. With the question mark, the movie asks the question that is on the minds of its audience: What can be done? How can current life be adjusted to earlier hopes and expectations?

The film itself is coquettish and clumsily didactic. It is like the movies of the 1950s, once seen in drive-ins, in which sex education was a cover for providing pleasure for lusting adolescents. In this post-AIDS film, the relationship between the screen narrative and the audience is achieved by making the leading actors into quasi-teachers, taking them out of the story so that they can confer with the viewer. And the lessons they teach are post-AIDS as well: You may seek the excitement of the early 1980s, in which "sex was still a good way to meet new people," but the sexual revolution is "something in the past." The two leading women, in their late twenties, journey to a health spa in southern California, where they seek at first the casual sexual relationships of their remembered (or anticipated) past. Humor allows the film to touch sensitive subjects. In the hotel room on their arrival is a bouquet of condoms in a ribboned basket. But the conclusion of this film is the most relevant thing about the post-AIDS movie industry. The consequence of their efforts is, ultimately, conversion to a Doris Day fifties marriage, with a Christmas tree and large dog, split-level house, children, and a changed sense of dress and of self. Safe sex is rejected for the safer sex of the mutually monogamous, happy marriage. It is as if the architecture of a new model of the ideal life is being worked out, awkwardly, on a thousand screens.

Casual Sex? is a fluff of a movie, but a telling one. The consciousness of the impact of AIDS is too explicit, too formally apparent—that is not the way we like our entertainment and education mixed. More subtle, but still specifically evocative, is the scene in *Broadcast News* in which the heroine surreptitiously places a condom in her purse on the way to a tryst with the handsome television anchorperson she loves. *Broadcast News* is a film more of the present, and while there are large numbers of exceptions, to be sure, the theme that casual sex is the norm, or even that it is generally acceptable, seems to be declining. For a modern-day James Bond, the numbers of objects of adoration have declined into the low single digits.

The 1988 Mike Nichols film *Working Girl* is a fable of the AIDS era. Confounding feminism and femininity, the film retains

many past themes of sexual involvement, but with a softness and charm, a sincerity and regard for constancy and marriage that was less pronounced a decade ago. The movie is about a tough and attractive woman, an investment banker of the new breed, who is unknowingly engaged in a struggle with her more feeling, more feminine secretary both for a man and for her business position. Early in the film, singles bars and random affairs are depicted as somewhat sleazy. Both the secretary's lower-middle-class friends and the elite acquaintances of her new life are all aiming, in one way or another, toward marriage. "Being single is dangerous" is one of the first lines of the film. There are no one-night stands with strangers. No explicit sign of the condom need appear; the AIDS consciousness is present nonetheless.

A Language All Their Own

Music is the special language of the young, to the young. It has declared the independence of more than one generation. Rock music united young people from coast to coast, giving them a set of heroes and an intensely personal communications link—in essence, their own medium. It has been the foundation not only of its own empire but of empires of fashion and style. Rock music has affirmed ideas of freedom in the United States and subverted political systems inconsistent with freedom beyond American borders. The music industry, even more than the motion picture industry, has shaped the attitudes of the young toward sexual liberation since the 1960s.

A private and effective voice for cultural revolution, the rock music industry in the United States has enjoyed a strong and unencumbered adolescence. But in the face of a public health imperative that Americans, especially the young, change their conduct, the music industry is being asked to come of age. The maturity it is able to demonstrate as it weighs its various responsibilities to its youthful audience will be of utmost interest to observers both in and out of government.

Whatever the message of any individual segment of rock music, the message of the genre as a whole has been to underscore a notion, perhaps ersatz, of autonomy, choice, and independence. The impact of rock music on the conduct of the young is thought to be extraordinary, though that conclusion is as much a product of intuition as of documentation. Still, for the teenage population that is the primary focus of AIDS-related education, rock music and its accoutrements are central to their image of themselves. The impact is made even stronger by the fact that youth themselves often create the music and lyrics. The special poetic codes of rock lyrics make them virtually and purposely inaccessible to all but their intended audience. This inherent privacy of the medium contributes to the confusion over intent and impact.

In the last decade, even prior to the AIDS crisis, strong efforts to curb the industry were made by an odd combination of the religious right, a group of concerned mothers called the Parents Music Resource Center, and occasionally feminists concerned with the exploitation of women. Their actions included demanding a rating system for rock music, encouraging disclosure of the lyrics, and trying to influence the choice of music played over the air by disc jockeys. In 1985, at Congressional hearings reminiscent of Powell's inquiries into the content of textbooks, Frank Zappa and John Denver took issue with the fundamental premises of those seeking to draw conclusions from ambivalent though admittedly raucous texts. Public health concerns relating to AIDS were still far in the future, and all sides were more cautious then about the desirability of direct government intervention than might now be the case.

In the eyes of many observers, the mere existence of these hearings calling for more collective responsibility in the music industry raised important First Amendment questions. The heavy burden in a free society, they maintained, was on those who were attacking rock based on their personal interpretation of the meaning of the songs of Prince, Twisted Sister, AC/DC, and others. Many people expressed discomfort with the idea

that government should draw lines between the permissible and the impermissible in this context.

Distrust of the new music of each generation and of its impact on morals is a great American tradition. But in a public health crisis, the dynamic is far different. If there is a sustained, mass concern about modifying the behavior of the young for the purpose of protecting the public's health, then the arguments will take a wholly different form. Debating moral goals and determining whether a set of oblique messages is inconsistent with standards that cannot be agreed upon becomes beside the point. Unlike the hearings on the "meaning" of the lyrics of Prince, where the focus was on evidence of isolated suicides, theoretical impacts on psyches, or attenuated burdens of proof, the discussion in the AIDS era will center on the large-scale conflict between rock music's celebration of sexual activity and public health efforts to control the spread of infection. This invocation of public health is likely to have a far more compelling and unifying impact than did appeals to moral codes that are the subject of difference and debate.

Just as with motion pictures, the structure of the music industry is important to an understanding of how the content of music may change in light of the AIDS crisis. Music is perhaps the most democratic of the media. It is cheaply and universally available, and, in the form of the audio cassette, is easily duplicated and traded from hand to hand. The Walkman, with its ability to provide a private tent of communication between the listener and the musician, is perhaps the ultimate symbol of modern music's celebration of individual autonomy.

All this has given music a special force in the lives of the young and also has made it a more difficult area for control or influence by government. Even the Federal Communications Commission, which has sought to dampen appeals to prurience, has had enormous difficulty limiting language and innuendo on radio. To be sure, the regulated airwaves of radio are the major outlet for music. But federal hostility to regulation, competition from other unregulated technologies, and competitive-

ness within the industry make regulation virtually ineffective.

As concern about an AIDS epidemic heightens, the music world seems to be taking self-regulatory actions on its own. Jon Pareles in a *New York Times* article has demonstrated the change in song lyrics. "After decades in which opportunities to cut loose multiplied and consequences seemed to dwindle," he wrote, "pleasure has become suspect, even dangerous . . . Rock and pop songs, cultural artifacts that help define pleasure while they deliver it, are in a new bind: are they fantasies, chronicles of current mores, how-to's or teases?" Pareles saw an end to songs like Donna Summer's "Love to Love You Baby," in which "a beat, a melodic hook and moans galore suggested a world in which the party would go on forever with a sexuality that was tireless and polymorphous and all-embracing."²

Now, Janet Jackson urges, "Let's wait awhile, before we go too far"; Gwen Guthrie sings, "Love is no longer free / The price is high / I don't want no AIDS or herpes . . . I'm too young to die." New themes express a sense of shame for conduct that is socially unwise; they favor marriage and monogamy and affection without physical intimacy. The BBC, caught up in its sense of responsibility, banned George Michael's "I Want Your Sex" because of lyrics that stated, "Sex is natural—sex is good / Not everybody does it / But everybody should." On MTV, Michael's music video was reinstated only when the image for the song made monogamy a clearer context for the lyrics.

Prior to the AIDS crisis, the regulatory actions stimulated by rock music amounted to not much more than middle-aged head-wagging. And even then, the issue was not always sexual morality per se. In his essay on music in *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom's concern is not with the moral effects of rock music but with its effect on education. His view is that the intense and early exposure of the young to rock harms the imagination and ultimately "makes it very difficult for [students] to have a passionate relationship to the art and thought that are the substance of liberal education."³ But with AIDS, sexual ac-

tivity itself is suddenly very much the issue with rock music. Is the extraordinary impact of music on the young hostile to a public health message that the state needs effectively to communicate? If the industry does not act responsibly, on its own initiative, and if the crisis worsens, the forces of censorship and control will turn to government once again.

Primetime Tutor

More than any other medium, television is the instrument that records the story mainstream America tells about itself and the life its members imagine themselves to lead. In an odd way, TV is the legacy of the official painting and sculpture of earlier times. We no longer commission statues of men on horseback for our parks, but we do have morality plays on television that establish a set of ethical rules for the decent conduct of our ordinary lives.

The traditional motivations of television executives have been twofold: to retain their ever-more-valuable television licenses, and to secure the confidence of advertisers, who are generally nervous about programming that diverges at all from middle-America's standards of morality.

The hand of the government in the television licensing process has been heavier than we often admit. Although censorship is explicitly forbidden, even the potential for review has contributed mightily to the restraint shown by producers for prime-time programming. As an example, a little more than a decade ago the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, responding to pressure from Congress and from groups around the country opposing excessive violence on television, held meetings with the heads of each of the three major networks to reduce what was thought to be the scourge of this programming for American youth. He obtained agreement from them to voluntarily establish a "family viewing time" in which industry-generated standards would be imposed to reduce the level of violence and bring the images shown on television up

to some mediated ideal. Antitrust litigation eventually stopped this FCC-supervised effort of the networks, but the message had been clearly delivered and received.⁴

The FCC's standard for prohibiting programming on broadcast television and radio is "indecent" as well as obscenity.⁵ The specific meaning of indecency is unclear, but broadcasters know that indecency may be reached well in advance of obscenity. And although broadcasters have been fighting for full First Amendment protection, they understand that pushing the indecency line is not the best way to gain Congressional support for their position.

When Congress debated how cable television should be regulated in the mid-1980s, one of the most important obstacles to consensus was the standard to be used to regulate cable television programming. One solution of Congress was to require cable operators to provide subscribers, on request, with a locking device that would give parents control over what channel was being watched.⁶ The idea, perhaps too optimistic, was that programming could be more adventuresome, but that children would be protected.

Like members of Congress, but for different reasons, advertisers are also reluctant to risk offending the standards of decency of the vast primetime audience. The sitcom's seemingly innocuous conventions about family and sexuality, according to some industry analysts, are popular with advertisers because they attract large and passive audiences, sitting ducks for the much shorter, much more sexually charged hard-sell commercials. Even violence and car chases, for reasons that are deep within us, seem to reach and hold the attention of the many while offending only a few, and these shows too reappear season after season, decade after decade.

Partly because of the licensing process, partly because of the mass audience that they must deliver to the advertisers, television broadcasters do not take the chances that motion picture studios do. As a consequence, the impact of AIDS on television will be different from its impact on motion pictures or the music

industry. Television programming has not been an engine for the assertion of individual freedom, as celebrated by sexual autonomy. Rather than feeling the need to reform its message away from this theme, television will feel the effect of AIDS in its odd function as a teaching medium. Though we think of television as largely escapist, it is, as a visual realization of the society the mainstream desires, blatantly instructionist. Thus it is not surprising that, from the miniseries to the situation comedy to the documentary, television programming is being used to get the message of AIDS to mainstream America. Even the evening news is an electronic pulpit, ever ready to deliver the sermons and speeches that emanate from Congress and other official spokespersons. The news has become a tool with which public health officials instruct people in how to think and how to behave during the AIDS crisis.

On television news, AIDS had at first been virtually ignored, largely, many thought, because of the character of the epidemic's victims. But after Rock Hudson's death, the existence of AIDS was daily hammered into the nation's consciousness, and the danger existed that coverage would more likely whip up scorn for the gay community rather than enhance understanding and aid public health initiatives. Coverage was less about sexuality and behavior than it was, in a sense, about the discovery by television of a frightful new battle zone. Deft use of language and symbols became of the greatest importance. Some responsible journalists sought to ensure that alarm did not translate into hatred for the gay subculture. Part of the task was to understand and transcend the general contempt of homosexuality that preceded AIDS and would be the referent for most viewers as they absorbed vast amounts of information in the period after 1982. Yet ironically, as Randy Shilts later reported, when NBC News was planning coverage of the 1984 Democratic Convention in San Francisco, it tried to make sure that gays would not be involved in the catering for its staff.⁷

Always present, though often beneath the surface, was concern that coverage of the epidemic could have its own impact

on behavior. Sensitive efforts to further public health needs through careful education could drown in a climate of fear. To the extent that sound strategies depended on the coming forward of those infected or at risk, too terrifying a story of AIDS would hinder progress. And not only was it a question of discrimination and prejudice. News coverage could impugn the integrity of the blood supply, because of fear of infected donors; reports could cause undue hysteria among parents where children with AIDS were attending schools. Fear of using forbidden words was coupled, in the minds of network executives, with the fear of encouraging—or being seen to encourage—homosexuality. When NBC showed a drama about a young man in New York who contracts AIDS, the network censor cut elements of the script that could be seen as an endorsement of homosexuality. The hero's grandmother, for example, could not tell her grandson, "I think your boyfriend is nice." At the end of the drama, after young Michael dies, there is a closing shot of a family album, all united, but Michael's friend is excluded.

So vital is the question of how people are depicted in AIDS-related dramas that there are now negotiations between producers and representatives of gay organizations. In 1988, Lorimar showed an episode of the television program *Midnight Caller* about a bisexual man in San Francisco who was knowingly spreading the AIDS virus through sexual promiscuity. In the original script, the talk-radio personality who is the star of the program tracks down the villain, and the episode was to end in his violent death. After tense discussions with gay civil rights groups, Lorimar radically altered the program, softening the ending and representing the sense of responsibility and compassion that has been characteristic of the gay response to AIDS. Yet even after these changes in the script, the finished program was condemned by AIDS leaders: by portraying an individual with AIDS as a killer out to infect others, television was, they said, exhibiting the callousness and ignorance that ignites and perpetuates discrimination and violence.

The clumsy difficulty of serving as a mirror of the society and a moral tutor at a time of change is illustrated by the programming of CBS one summer evening in 1987. To much fanfare, the network showed *An Enemy among Us*, a program about a young middle-class boy who tested AIDS-positive as a result of receiving a blood transfusion several years before. It was state-of-the-art AIDS instruction, with Gladys Knight delivering a lecture to a classroom of students about the need to postpone sexual relations. "The free-wheeling days of the 60s and 70s are over," she said. This brave attempt to chasten America's youth was followed by the fifth annual Miss Teen America Contest, featuring, as role models, the cheerleaders of the Dallas Cowboys, along with fifty-one contestants singing a sultry version of "I Wonder Who's Hot Tonight." The ironies did not end there, however. Among the advertisements was a commercial for an eye-coloring brush, called a Stick Wand, whose shape, according to accepted advertising doctrine, is designed to inspire happy associations with the male sex organ.

But the Stick Wand is part of advertising, not programming. When we examine commercials, we find quite a different relationship between the curriculum of the 1970s and 80s and the public health needs of the AIDS era.

Haiku of Desire

Advertising in general, and television commercials in particular, are more powerful than most other creative efforts at driving home the triple whammy of individualism, choice, and sexual freedom. This medium therefore presents a forbidding obstacle to those who would alter our images of proper sexual behavior during the AIDS crisis. Here is ideology put in the service of consumerism, and it is a forceful combination. Advertising is firmly grounded in the principle of choice, in the commitment to convincing each consumer that he or she is a free person, free to choose, and free to exercise that choice through the selection of consumer goods. And it was long ago discovered

that when the desire to consume is joined with the desire to consummate, the compulsion to buy is intensified.

Marshall McLuhan early argued that consumerism and sexuality are closely linked. Cars, perfume containers, deodorant sticks, all have been configured as sexual objects to enhance sales. Lucy Komisar wrote in the early 1970s about the "obvious attempt to promote sexual fantasies with soap advertising." She cited what seemed to be an effort "to project a virtual love affair between housewife and soap-suds." Ultra Brite toothpaste was designed to "give your mouth sex appeal." Colgate mouthwash is "the mouthwash for lovers." And, as Komisar reported almost twenty years ago, "An ad for bath oil shows a man embracing a woman while the copy blazes away: 'Sardo. When you live with a man.'"⁹

The commercials of the 1950s and 1960s have been attacked by feminists, not necessarily for showing the sexuality of housewives but for showing women generally with a husband and always in need of authority. Enter the commercials of the 1970s, the era of the liberated female consumer. This woman has "come a long way, Baby" as a role model; she buys a great many things to enhance her sexuality, and she enhances it, in large part, to demonstrate her independence, her freedom, and her range of choice. The stories of the 1980s are different still from those of the 1970s, in that they imply immediate sexual payoffs. The pioneers of the 1980s—Calvin Klein, Guess? Chanel—have created an art form out of this new image of the American woman and her potential. There is a harsh mystery and taut sensuality to the new woman, a seeming fulfillment of independence (though one that is bitterly attacked by some feminists because the independence itself is founded on a need for alluring sexuality). In Riunite wine advertisements, the process of swallowing raspberries has set a new standard in sexual suggestiveness.

If motion pictures are the narrative of sexual relations in the 1980s, commercials have been their haiku. From jeans to chewing gum, the extraordinarily compact and highly produced stories in commercials are exquisitely designed to fuel autonomy,

an intense sense of self, and the idea of the ever more fabulous conquest, and to implicitly criticize lives that are drab, bland, and therefore not in need of the embellishments that symbolize pursuit. Buying a product is portrayed as a prerequisite to fulfilling sexual dreams, or at least facilitating their fulfillment. Indeed, sometimes the product sold *is* the dream, or at least the dream and the product are indistinguishable. And as the focus of marketing has changed to the young and well-heeled, away from the paradigmatic Midwestern family, the nature of the dreams that are the foundation of commercial fulfillment have changed. The dream of a satisfied, though stereotype-drenched, family life has more and more given way to dreams of a freer, more casual life, less bound by rules, by monogamy or sexual loyalty, less bound, in sum, by other people, more bound up in the concept of self.

So this is the situation of that most polished and public of creative forms at the threshold of the AIDS crisis. If we are concerned about television as one of the shapers of our identities, we must be even more concerned with the meaning of commercials. The producers of advertising have been masters of the use of television to imprint an idealized society on our minds. They have proclaimed a society to exist in which the action of consuming goods has been transformed into a moral imperative, in which happiness in love is linked with fulfillment in consumption. They are the counterparts to the forceful molders of culture in government-controlled central economies. Advertising has been the pre-eminent proof of the power of the media to shape habits, to change culture, to affect patterns of life. Indeed, the idea of the free, unencumbered individual, the maker of decisions, is as critical for the foundation of advertising as he or she is for the foundation of democratic theory.

The advertising industry has not been impervious to the AIDS crisis. Television advertisements for Paco Rabanne, a French men's perfume, illustrate how AIDS consciousness is already

affecting commercial messages. In the 1982 television campaign, a man lies in bed, satisfied, covered with sheets of silk. A phone rings: "Hello," the man answers. "You snore," a woman says. "And you steal the covers," he retorts. In the 1988 advertisement, a new Paco Rabanne man blows a kiss to the air, descends a winding stairway, walks down cobblestone streets and across a bridge, enraptured in a fantasy about the previous evening. The creator of the new commercial attributes the difference to AIDS: "Fantasy and romance are in; explicit sex isn't."¹⁰

Television finds ways of adjusting sexuality to the constraints of AIDS. Love and sexuality have found a new place of notoriety within marriage. An advertisement for Hyatt Hotels, soft-core, bodies moving in silken sheets, is at great pains to show the woman of the pair with a wedding band on her finger. Epilady, a maker of depilatories, arouses zeal for its product by depicting a very long, very inviting leg, but concludes with a clearly ring-bearing hand stroking its smoothness. Oldsmobile, as in days of old, suggests the power of a car to assure happiness in love, but increasingly, through the symbol of the ring, marriage is an implicit part of the visual text. Here, advertising is reinforcing trends elsewhere. *Cosmopolitan* magazine features a story on "taking the monotony out of monogamy," and advice-column letters in *Penthouse* are increasingly about sexuality within marriage, as opposed to without.

On the other hand, inconsistent with the imperatives of AIDS is the tendency of the networks, because of the force of competition, to become more hospitable to explicit sexuality in the exercise of their acceptance or "clearance" standards. Faced with a shrinking audience, because of the competition from cable and other new video forms, network executives strive harder to keep advertising revenues strong. If one network relaxes its practices about sexual explicitness in advertising, then the other networks find it hard to resist the pressing of established boundaries by those who advertise with them.

Government regulation of advertising, even of television commercials, has been virtually nonexistent as they relate to the

new sexuality, and regulation imposed from within the industry has been trivial. Even that low level of self-regulation steadily diminished as a result of a bizarre action by the U.S. Department of Justice in the mid-1980s. Until then, the National Association of Broadcasters had followed a self-imposed program of standards in advertising. But the Department of Justice claimed these standards violated antitrust laws because they were an agreement among competitors to limit competition.

Controversy over the content of broadcast television commercials and the message they send to the society emerged in the early 1970s over advertising for cigarettes. Many argued that these commercials had two messages: one for the specific brand of cigarette, and another, implicit, that advocated the practice of smoking itself. This second message, it was argued, raised a controversial issue of public importance and, under the then-existing fairness doctrine, stations had a duty to broadcast commercial messages that proclaimed another view—that smoking was dangerous. For a variety of reasons, one of which was the power of the antismoking ads, the cigarette companies acquiesced in federal legislation that banned cigarette advertising in the regulated media. It was a way of keeping the antismoking ads off the television screen.

As a result of the FCC's penchant for deregulation, there is little of the fairness doctrine alive today. Consequently, no forum exists in which to argue that many ads subliminally present only one side in a current controversial debate of public importance, namely, what personal sexual practices should be encouraged in the face of the AIDS epidemic. But stations themselves have already demonstrated their willingness to carry public service advertisements that advocate changed behavior. It remains to be seen how fervently these stations will refuse to broadcast commercials that promote sexual practices discouraged by public health officials. More to the point, one may ask whether their public service programming—their documentaries and news accounts—adequately countervail the impact of product advertising.

One would have thought that a major impact of the AIDS crisis on the advertising industry, and on television commercials in particular, would be a dramatic change in the permissibility of promoting condoms. Prior to AIDS, the NAB Code prohibited television commercials for condoms or any other prophylactic product. The Surgeon General and the Centers for Disease Control are advocates for far more extensive use of condoms for safer sex. It ought to be considered a sign of responsibility to show condom ads, and the advertising industry has been enormously creative about ways to present the use of condoms so as to enhance the public health process without implicitly encouraging sexual conduct among the young. Yet as the AIDS epidemic entered its second decade, no network and few local stations showed condom ads, with the exception of random public service announcements.

But condom advertising alone should not be the litmus test for whether or not the industry is acting with foresight and care. The strong fables about autonomy and sexuality that the industry creates for society have contributed greatly to the American identity, and ultimately it is this very identity that is at stake as concerns about public health mount.

Scared Sexless

Every day, in newspapers, in television programs, in political speeches, the struggle to properly shape the image of AIDS and reshape our sense of personhood is newly engaged. Each story, each anecdote, each event is a cue as to whether to become more fearful or more compassionate, more confident or more concerned about the capacity of government and medicine to deal with this crisis. Each story has within it, consciously or not, a bundle of messages about the expertise of government and medicine, about how individuals should behave, what is expected of them, what constitutes responsibility.

At the end of 1987, NBC broadcast an hour-long program primarily directed at bringing teenagers and singles up to date

on the implications of AIDS for their behavior. The program, *Scared Sexless*, displayed the conflicts and tensions in American society that influence how the AIDS crisis is depicted and how the significance of the crisis is absorbed and translated into everyday life.

There was Connie Chung, consummate anchorperson and interlocutor, solitary on the screen, authoritatively determined to guide us through the uncertainties of AIDS. She exemplified the general desire in the community for answers. This was television at its most successful and reassuring, with anchor as surrogate, the voice of every person, given the opportunity and endowed with the resources to ask questions and communicate the answers. The impression inherent in a network news and documentary presentation is one of objectivity and comprehensiveness. The audience is ostensibly being presented with an understanding and some resolution of a complex and intensely troubling subject. A network television program is often a looking-glass of sorts: Almost by definition, it must hallow and incorporate the collection of ideas and background that the American public brings to its crises. Like all television programs, *Scared Sexless* was a cultural artifact, a rosetta stone whose message, as well as what it omits from that message, tells us a good deal about the society in which it was produced.

Scared Sexless was one of the most-watched documentaries of the year, indicating the heightened consciousness and apprehension concerning AIDS and the hunger for information and reassurance. Because this was a significant program, dealing with a subject of great sensitivity, there were few accidents in its production. It was a purposeful documentary that embodied and reflected many of the current tensions in American culture while trying to make a factual presentation of AIDS issues.

Standing alone on a darkened set among a group of empty brass bedsteads, Connie Chung opened the program by stating that a significant percentage of people infected with AIDS are not from the high-risk groups thought to dominate the ranks of AIDS victims, and that in Africa most of the spread of AIDS

has been through heterosexual intercourse. Immediately, the program was taking a stance in the struggle over how AIDS should be depicted—AIDS, she was asserting, is a generalized threat, a dilemma that affects the community at large. By underscoring AIDS as being of increasing danger to heterosexuals, the aim of the program was to jolt awake people who consider themselves in line with the sexual norms of society and therefore protected from the ravages of AIDS. This was a program addressed to, and about, mainstream, heterosexual Americans. It sought to strike the nerves of people who cheat on their spouses, of singles leading hit-or-miss sex lives, of teenage sweethearts attending the school prom.

In one part of the program there appeared, almost as a paradigm, a sweet boy and girl, high school seniors, who regularly sleep together with the knowledge of their parents. Connie Chung interviewed the mothers, who spoke of the cautions taken to ensure that the sexual relations of the young couple are not endangering their health. Though a random example of behavior, this case history takes on the stature of a synecdochal symbol. This particular teenage couple's adjustments to life in modern society, and the liberal supervision by parents who symbolize the community at large, are supposed to stand for the general relationship all Americans should endeavor to maintain. The message was clear: We must adjust, but we can remain essentially the same.

The lesson emanating from government was similarly reassuring: There is no reason to panic; your society is doing everything it can to find a vaccine for AIDS; our researchers are the world's best; they are motivated, they have the resources; there will probably be a solution; in the meantime, AIDS means changing your personal conduct. But these changes, according to the program, will not damage the existing fabric of American life. Just a little condom will do the trick.

As the AIDS crisis has intensified, programs like *Scared Sexless* have repeatedly faced the question of whether to depict the epidemic as a moral issue or a public health issue. The sharp

division and insecurity in the country over the nature of morality, religious teaching, and their connection to sexuality was resolved by the NBC program, that December night, by not calling upon any religious figures or ethicists to indicate their perspectives on ways to alter conduct. The view that public health messages should stress abstinence was relegated to a lone White House official, a bureaucrat lacking in persuasiveness. AIDS, for NBC, was strictly a public health matter, not a moral matter. The solution was primarily a technical one.

Not surprisingly, ironies abounded as the network struggled with the permissible range of representations, with the images that could be shown, the words that could be used. A lengthy segment of *Scared Sexless* dealt with condoms, showing how they are manufactured, how they are tested, how they can fail. Here was a straightforward message about preventive measures—"safer sex," in the jargon of the moment. Yet the local stations that carried this network program did not, as a matter of policy, broadcast advertisements for condoms. Moreover, in a kind of witless misadventure that is so revealing, one of the commercials during the program—an advance promotion for *An Officer and A Gentleman*—showed Debra Winger passionately making love with Richard Gere. The mix of images presented by the documentary was only a visual escape from the real dilemma our society must face. The program appeared neutral, but it was not. Buried in the coolly edited presentation was a deeply felt conflict in the society between our fear and our fantasies.

Scared Sexless was interesting, too, because of the way it reflected changes in gender roles in the society. NBC was particularly careful about the images of men and women that it chose. In emphasizing safer sex as the most important element of public health education, the documentary implicitly rejected the macho image of the postadolescent male who measures his worth by the number of his female conquests. It also implicitly rejected the image of young women as passive, not demanding of consideration from their boyfriends, as victims both of social pres-

tures and personal domination. Yet in a segment that featured frank discussions with young men—with a male airline steward interviewed with a group of flight attendants, male and female, and with star football player Marcus Allen—the program exposed the flaw in making these assumptions about male–female relationships. There was Allen, in his trophy-lined study, model of achievement and male apotheosis, being asked if he still celebrated life as a successful object of physical adoration, as a stud on the road. His answer was no, but it was not all that convincing. The embarrassed look, the snicker, acknowledged a fast-paced life, or at least the hope for one, in which freedom from sexual constraints is taken for granted. The nervous young steward, when asked about his sexual practices, defensively asserted—despite the contradictory opinions of his female friends—that he did not always insist on condoms, that they interfered with his sexual pleasure and his idea of himself. Two men, then, very different, both commenting on their relationship to the great tradition of maleness in our society and how uncomfortable they were as that tradition was coming under assault.

It was not by accident that the program's principal interlocutor—the guide—was a woman, and one, like Ms. Chung, whose persona is strong and controlled, yet feminine, a woman who has succeeded by being somewhat different, or perhaps in spite of being somewhat different. Like Ms. Chung, the other women in the program were the people who were most in control of themselves and of change, who were confident, cool, learning to be safe and to stay safe. The prototype of the young, single woman was a comedienne in New York who works hard, who uses her tough wit as a shield, whose life has been a history of coping. The stewardesses, models of male fantasy, also asserted that their styles of life have changed. And when the program turned to the young high school lovers, it was the mothers, not the fathers, who were in charge of determining that their sexual relations were not putting them at risk of disease.

By nuance and inference the program sought, as well, to place distance between those who are responding "properly" and those who were clinging to pre-AIDS cultural norms. Singles bars were depicted as places of loneliness, not as trendy cultural innovations. A bartender mused about the understandable dropoff in business. At the counter, people were seen dimly, through a haze of smoke and lights, drinking, virtually abandoned.

Here then is the complex situation with respect to the media as our society undertakes the task of defining risk and educating itself anew as to proper conduct. The culture has become suffused, through the media, with an appreciation of freedom of choice and autonomy of the individual, both associated, very strongly, with sexual achievement and sexual choice. The motor of the consumer society for two decades has been adjusted to this set of images. Some products are directly dependent on this set of messages, and many products have been closely identified with them.

The AIDS crisis is bringing pressure to alter this image of sexuality in American life. In New York and Los Angeles, news of glittering charity benefits, attended by movie stars, rock musicians, and industry executives, fill the society pages as money is raised for AIDS services, research, and treatment. *The question is how high these impulses to respond* in times of national emergency otherwise rank in the minds of often cynical business leaders. Entertainment executives have themselves personally seen the ravages of AIDS and suffered the loss of valued talent; they cannot help but see, in the need to control the disease, the irony of their own glorification of behavior that is potentially destructive. They also will not fail to notice that audiences themselves are building new ways of interpreting sexual imagery. Scenes of passion that once triggered feelings of desire now trigger thoughts of contagion in the minds of many moviegoers. Today, casual sex, like cigarette smoking, delivers at best a mixed message.

Finally, corporate America also knows that if the crisis intensifies, pressure from government could become enormous. Groups that historically have sought to constrain the media will have powerful allies and a stronger argument for government intervention. What they lacked before—some legitimate reason why government should choose their standard over that of others—is provided by the public health need.

So change may be occurring, change in the stories that film and television tell, that music plays. Even advertising is slowly shifting, however difficult and expensive it is to alter the identification and sense of a product. "Hollywood is talking about getting around to recognizing that the backseat of the limousine, first time out, can lead to the grave," A. M. Rosenthal wrote, starkly, in 1987. "But aside from one or two pictures, it still is all to come later."¹¹

The pace of change will be determined by how important it is to government that a public health message be effectively communicated. The government's messages cannot be successful if they must do battle with the competing voices of commerce and the arts. Self-change is preferable to censorship. But the government's role in defining the relationship between public health and private lives may increase. If it does, the consequence will be a change in the way we think about law, speech, and culture.¹²