

answerable in the contracts and rituals of his lived experience. Because there was no cultural space available for Hudson to "explain why not," his homosexual body was forced to enact the premier ritual of heterosexual identity. As Michel Foucault has famously observed,

the body . . . is directly involved in a political field, power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.¹⁵

In 1955, Rock Hudson's marriage was sufficient to secure and emit the sign "heterosexuality." Though the marriage would last less than three years, the sign would remain publicly affixed to Rock Hudson's body for the following three decades.

The Anti-Body

The star has no right to be sick or even to appear out of sorts.
—Jean Marais, preface to *Comment Devenir Vedette de Cinema*?¹⁶

Consider a publicity still from the early 1950s (fig. 22). Its fictive scenario suggests the characteristics of Rock Hudson's body which I have offered as definitive. The strapping star, nearly overflowing the door-jam, is called to the phone during a shower. Photographed from below so as to loom yet larger, Hudson embodies the codes of both hygiene and domesticity, both cleanliness and hetero-social communion. Now compare a news-photograph from the summer of 1985 (fig. 23), the moment of the public disclosure that Hudson was ill as a result of AIDS. Both photographs were published in a single layout (with the news photograph markedly larger than the publicity still) in the September 1985 *Life* magazine. The caption they shared reported that

AIDS was given a face everyone could recognize when it was announced that Rock Hudson, 59, was suffering from the disease. The quintessential 1950's leading man . . . had looked ill when he appeared with Doris Day in July at a press conference.¹⁷

Implicit in the notion that Rock Hudson gave "AIDS a face everyone could recognize" is the unrecognizability, and in a sense, the un-reality of the 12,000 faces and bodies already diagnosed with AIDS in this

nation by 1985, and the 6,000 faces and bodies already dead from it. Because those were primarily the bodies of non-celebrity gay men and intravenous drug users, they were either ignored by the media or constructed as radically other from the body of the Reader. Their death and dysfunction were not to be "recognized."

But is even Rock Hudson's illness recognizable in this before and after format, and if so, what have we been asked to recognize it as? The caption offers Hudson's as a familiar and universalized "face of AIDS," but the familiar face is the one attached to the hygienic body in the publicity still. Far from being asked to identify with Hudson's ailing body, the Reader is meant to view it as the contrast and contamination of his starbody, to view it as Rock Hudson's "anti-body."¹⁸

Tinged with the stigma of illness that dramatically destroys the body, what was usually absent from representation becomes spectacularly and consistently visible.¹⁹

What was absent from prior images of Rock Hudson's body but what is now meant to be visible—to be visibly leaking out—is his homosexuality. Within the economy of *Life's* before and after circuit, the after image, the AIDS image, not only figures the physical signs of illness but proffers those signs as the evidence and horrific opening of Rock Hudson's closet. And what *Life* signified pictorially, *Time* would plainly state:

to moviegoers of the 1950's and 60's no star better represented the old-fashioned American virtues than Rock Hudson . . . [but] last week as Hudson lay gravely ill with AIDS in a Paris hospital, it became clear that throughout those years the all-American boy had another life, kept secret from the public: he was almost certainly homosexual.⁴⁰

In this scenario, homosexuality supplants HIV as the origin and etiology of Rock Hudson's illness. Closeted through all the years of his celebrity, Rock Hudson's secret finally registers, Dorian Gray-like, on the surface of his body. The physical repercussions of AIDS are here imbued with a heavy (and heavily homophobic) symbolism such that Hudson's moribund body becomes both signifier and symptom of his "almost certain" homosexuality.⁴¹

As I suggest above, Rock Hudson epitomized a particularly sanitized version of hetero-masculinity in American film culture of the 1950s

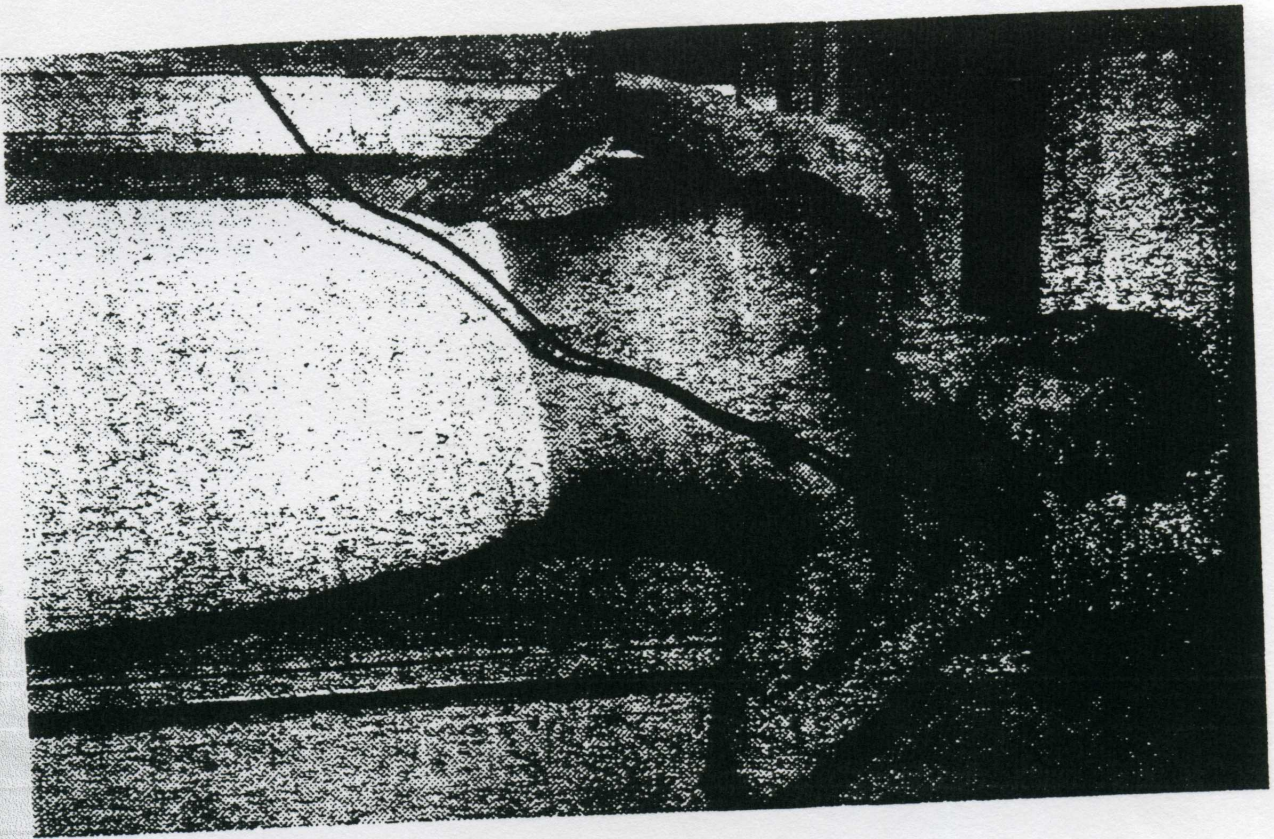


Figure 23.

and early 60s. Because this image elided not just Hudson's homosexuality but the very fluids and functioning of sex itself, an extreme excess of signification obtained in 1985 to his AIDS body. Rock Hudson, hence deeply overdetermined in his hygiene, became commensurately overdetermined in his sickness:

The faceless disease now has a face. But it is not the ruggedly handsome face of *Giant* or *Magnificent Obsession* or even *Pillow Talk* that will be Rock Hudson's greatest legacy. Instead, that legacy will be the gaunt, haggard face of those poignant last days.⁴²

Here again, the spectacular contrast of Rock Hudson's two bodies—before/after, well/fill, 1950s/1980s, and, implicitly, hetero-/homosexual—provides the central trope for the conceptualization of his AIDS.

The body/anti-body binary produced around Rock Hudson's illness may be usefully compared to the media's handling of the second episode in which a national celebrity was revealed to have contracted AIDS—the 1987 death of Liberace. Consider, for example, the covers which *People* magazine respectively devoted to each star's illness (figs. 24, 25). Published shortly after the July 1985 announcement of Hudson's illness but before his death that October, the Hudson cover features a contemporary image into which we are meant to read the visual evidence of AIDS. Image and text together signify that the "other life" of Rock Hudson, his until-now covert homosexuality, has produced this, his ailing and "other" body. By contrast, the Liberace cover presents a familiarly flamboyant image of the star with the superimposed dates of his birth and (AIDS-related) death. Because Liberace, who became a star at roughly the same time as Hudson, was already situated outside the popular codes of heterosexual masculinity, *People* did not construct from his AIDS the kind of "other life" apparently required for Hudson. For *People*, Liberace's illness is iconized well enough by his already (and flamingly) *other* image of masculinity. Hudson's illness, by contrast, must be produced as the very picture of his "fall" from ideal masculinity.

The tone of betrayal which underwrote many of the commentaries on Hudson's AIDS—though not on Liberace's—reflects an intensely fantasmatic investment in Hudson's particular image of hetero-masculinity. Theater critic Frank Rich, for example, speaking as (and for) a heterosexual audience, would write in *Esquire* magazine:

Does Hudson's skill at playing a heterosexual mean that he was a brilliant actor, or was this just the way he really was, without acting at all? I suspect that most Americans believed that Hudson, who seemed so natural on screen, was playing himself, which means that in the summer of 1985 we had to accept the fact that many of our fundamental, conventional images of heterosexuality were instilled in us (and not for the first time) by a homosexual . . . everything that happened on screen was a lie, with the real content embedded in code.⁴³

Homosexual panic here issues ("and not for the first time") from Rock Hudson's enactment of what was, for Rich, a most convincing, even an instructional masculinity. No matter that Hudson's screen-image was, as the star himself noted, "impossible" in its purity; Rich holds him accountable to it, to some imagined transparency of it.

In a similar if even more startling response to Rock Hudson's AIDS, sex-therapist Ruth Westheimer told *Playboy* magazine, "I feel sad for all the thousands of women who fantasized about being in [Rock Hudson's] arms, who now have to realize that he never really cared about them."⁴⁴ Because he has been revealed as homosexual through a spectacle of illness, Hudson is said to betray the projective fantasies of his heterosexual spectator, here a female one. Rather than scrutinizing the extreme over-investment of these spectators in Rock Hudson's starbody, Westheimer blames Hudson for not reciprocating their desire.

As Simon Watney has pointed out,

Rock Hudson's death . . . offered journalists an opportunity for particularly vicious revenge on a man whom they had casually taken to embody their own patriarchal and misogynistic values for more than three decades. To begin with we should note the practical impossibility of Hudson's "coming out" as gay in the American film industry of the 1950's . . . given the intensely homophobic atmosphere of McCarthyite values in Hollywood.⁴⁵

Watney inserts what Rich, Westheimer, and nearly all of the other mainstream commentators on Hudson's illness erase, namely the historical impossibility of any publicly homosexual identity for Hudson in the 1950s. In dehistoricizing Hudson's homosexuality, Rich, Westheimer, et al. suggest the actor's closet as a matter of personal agency and thus of deception. ("The Master of Illusion" and "The Hunk Who Lived a Lie" were among the titles of other articles on Hudson's illness). With Watney, we should recall that Hudson's closet was not an effect of individual choice but of homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality, systems of surveillance enforced with particular ferocity in 1950s America.⁴⁶

And yet, when we consider the specific image of masculinity which Hudson embodied in the 1950s, we have proper cause to wonder precisely what kind of sexuality he was offering his film viewer. Recall the fanzine hype: "Rock Hudson is not the lover type" . . . "his whole appeal is cleanliness and respectability" . . . "he smells of milk" . . . "he never, never makes a pass at a girl." Rock Hudson was a star fantasmatically defused of active (hetero)sexual desire, a man to marry or to mother but not to fuck. I would suggest that Hudson's homosexuality—however disavowed by Hollywood, by the film viewer, or by Hudson himself—registered in his star image, in the sexual immobility

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Michael J. Fox • Mel Fisher's \$400 million treasure • Haiti

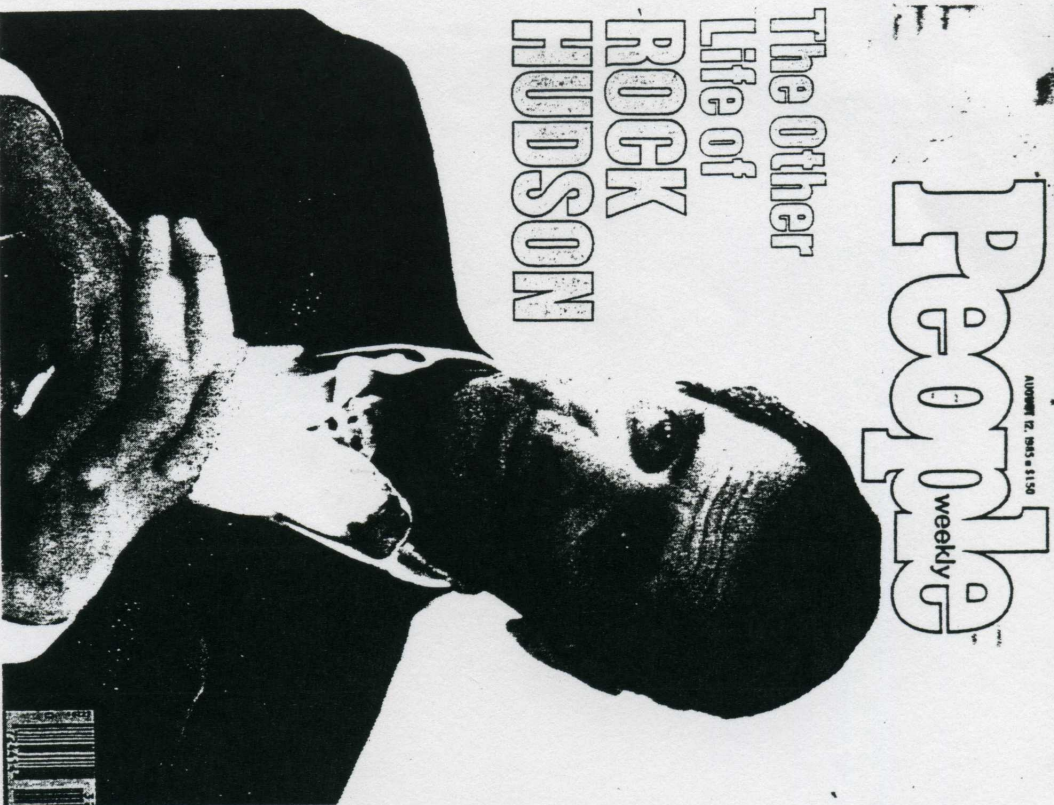


Figure 24.

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Figure 25.

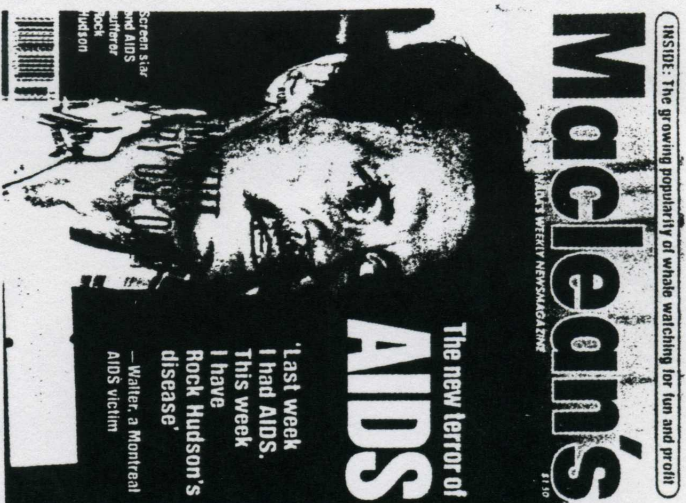


Figure 26.

of his masculinity, in the way that women really *could* count on him to maintain his erotic distance. Many of those who orchestrated Hudson's stardom were aware of his homosexuality—certainly his agent, probably his directors, photographers, and fanzine journalists and of course, Hudson himself.⁴⁷ It seems likely that the framing of Hudson's hunky but heterosexualized masculinity worked off this knowledge, responded to it, *used* it as source and building block.

How then do we explain the heterosexual desire for Rock Hudson's body, the fact that he was the male star "men wanted to emulate" and "thousands of women" fantasized about embracing? As already discussed, Hudson promised straight women a space of sexual safety—he would acquiesce to domesticity without insisting on male domination. And Hudson's less typical straight male viewers (Frank Rich, for one) were no doubt relieved to find a role-model who did not require the exhaustive work of machismo to "measure up" to its masculinity. In Rock Hudson, then, a strapping gay male body closeted its explicit desire for other men while retaining its erotic neutrality towards

women, thereby providing a sexual "safe place" for both sides of his heterosexual audience.⁴⁸ As D. A. Miller points out, the closet (and I would suggest Rock Hudson's closet in particular) might best be understood as "... a homophobic, heterosexual *desire* for homosexuality, and not merely a homophobic, heterosexual *place* for it."⁴⁹ There were things that heterosexual culture wanted from Rock Hudson's body (a safe date was one) but only under the proviso that the homosexuality underwriting those things remain unspeakable and precisely unspeakable.

In the summer of 1985, when Rock Hudson's homosexuality was finally spoken by the popular media, it was as the "New Terror of AIDS" (fig. 26). By rights, that headline should have been reserved for a death count of 6,000 Americans and the lethal indifference of a Reagan Administration faced with those deaths. Instead, it described the collapse of a particular fantasy of male containment and sexual safety—a fantasy once attached to Rock Hudson's body, a fantasy once embodied by Rock Hudson's closet.

Notes

Versions of this essay were presented at a panel on "Male Bodies" at the Conference of the Lesbian and Gay Studies Center at Yale in October 1989 and at "The Body Positive: AIDS, the State, and Immunological Politics," a session of the annual meeting of the International Association for Philosophy and Literature at the University of California, Irvine in April 1990. Alfredo Monterre and Diana Fuss were the respective organizers of those panels and I thank them both.

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Sources of the figures are as follows: figure 1: *Mouieland* February 1955; figure 2: "Photoplay Picture Gallery," *Photoplay*, March 1954; figure 3: "Can Rock's Marriage Be Saved?," *Photoplay*, February 1958; figure 4: "Meet the Champs," *Photoplay*, October 1953; figure 5: "Photoplay Pinups—Number Two—Rock Hudson: How Far is a Star," *Photoplay*, July 1959; figure 6: "Beefcake Kings," *Photoplay*, June 1956; figure 7: Publicity still, James Dean in *Giant*, reprinted in *James Dean*, Jean Loup Bourget (Paris: H. Veyrier, 1983); figure 8: Publicity photograph, 1952, reproduced in *People*, "The Long Goodbye: Rock Hudson: 1925–1980," 9 June, 1986; figure 9: Publicity photograph, 1952, reproduced in *People*, "Rock Hudson: On Camera and Off," 12 August, 1985; figure 10: "Are Actors Sissies?," *Photoplay*, February 1953; figure 11: "Pin-Ups," *Photoplay*, December 1959; figure 12: Publicity still of Marlon Brando, "Hollywood's New Sex Boats," *Photoplay*, July 1952; figure 13: Still from *Magnificent Obsession*, reproduced in *Sirk on Sirk: Interviews with Jon Halliday* (London: B.F.I., 1971); figure 14: Still, *Magnificent Obsession*, reproduced in *People*, "Rock Hudson: On Camera and Off," 12 August, 1985; figure 15: Still, *Magnificent Obsession*, repro-