

*Eden* (Showtime, 1982–1983), *Paper Dolls* (ABC, 1984), *Rituals*, (Syndication, 1984–1985), *Secrets of Midland Heights* (1980–1981), and *The Yellow Rose* (1983–1984).

4 I wrote this before the Heather Locklear invasion of *Melrose Place*. I am letting it stand because I think that despite its many affinities to *Dynasty*, *Melrose Place* during the fabulous 1993–1994 season did not signify an historical period and Zeitgeist so much as it did a generational awareness (Generation X, twenty-something things, and this despite its wide appeal). In this sense, despite my love for the show, I would have to say that *Melrose* is no *Dynasty*. It is, however, the only nineties show truly to understand *Dynasty's* contribution to the form of the melodramatic serial.

5 I discuss this critical trajectory at length in Feuer 1984.

6 As Landy notes, "One of Gramsci's major contributions to an understanding of political change is his emphasis on the importance of intellectuals as playing a significant role in the legitimization of power. In fact, for Gramsci, the study of intellectuals and their production is synonymous with the study of political power" (1986, p. 53).

## 6

### The Reception of *Dynasty*

For a moment in the mid-1980s the television serial *Dynasty* ceased being merely a program and took on the proportions of a major mass cultural cult. This phenomenon has been widely interpreted as representing the acquiescence of the mass audience to the Reaganite ideology of greed and asocial avarice. But the response of the so-called masses to *Dynasty* was far more complex than a mere affirmation of the worst of Reaganism. This chapter will analyze the response to *Dynasty* as a complex phenomenon that has aspects of both commodification from above and subcultural activation from below.<sup>1</sup> For although *Dynasty* was the number one rated program overall in the 1984–1985 TV season, its fans were not simply a mass audience, but rather were clustered in two quadrants of a male/female, gay/straight *combinatoire*—that is to say, the two groups that became obsessed with *Dynasty* in the mid-1980s were gay men and heterosexual women. These are, precisely, the two groups most connected to commodified beauty culture, to notions of femininity as a commodity to be purchased. They are also groups that have been considered to possess distinct "subcultural" identities vis-à-vis a dominant straight white male culture. In the case of gay men, the subcultural identity depends on their outsider status to the patriarchal family; in the case of women, radical feminist thinking has stressed the extent to which all women constitute a separate culture or subculture within patriarchal society.

Thus it seems significant that neither lesbians nor straight men as a group were especially caught up in the *Dynasty* craze. Lesbian culture, constructed in many ways to expose or resist commodified femininity, in this case emerges as the diametric opposite to the gay male culture that fetishized *Dynasty*. Similarly, although individual heterosexual men no doubt watched the program, it did not attempt to create the kind of masculine identification epitomized by J.R. Ewing of *Dallas*. *Dynasty's* dominating images of the bitchy "drag queen" Alexis, the

wooden, aging Blake Carrington, and their tortured gay son Stephen, living in various combinations in overdecorated baroque mansions and postmodern penthouse apartments, meant that its links to male action-adventure programming were far more tenuous than those of *Dallas* with its suburban ranch-house mansion, cowboy husbands, and wimpy wives. *Dallas* also lacked the camp undercurrent that propelled *Dynasty* to the center of gay male culture during the mid-1980s. Yet it was these same elements that made *Dynasty* a hit in mainstream women's culture as well. According to Stephen Schiff, "Dynasty represents something extraordinary: the incursion of so-called gay taste into the mainstream of American Culture" (1984, p. 64).

#### **Gay Activations**

Within the gay male urban subculture, *Dynasty* functioned more as a ritual than as a text; it was enacted rather than consumed. According to Stephen Schiff, "Dynasty night is an inviolable ritual in gay bars across the country; at one in Los Angeles, tapes of epic catfights between Alexis and Krystle are played over and over on an endless loop. A ritual known as D. & D.—Dinner and *Dynasty*—has become a fixture of gay social life" (Schiff 1984, p. 64). *Dynasty*'s popularity with gay men was not primarily because of the liberal portrayal of Stephen as a "manly" homosexual, but rather because of its camp attitude embodied especially in the figure of Alexis, who Schiff describes as a "perfect bitch" and "the apotheosis of the camp aesthetic" (p. 66). As Mark Finch reports, "The Hippodrome club (gay for one night each week) held a *Dallas* and *Dynasty* ball on 16 July 1984, with over sixty look-alike contestants, mostly dressed as Alexis" (Finch 1986, p. 37).

Although camp is not entirely a property of texts but rather comes into being when an audience interacts with a text, not just any text can be camped, and *Dynasty* certainly facilitates the process with its penchant for excess. If there were ever a moment prior to the camp activations by the mainstream audience, that moment preceded *Dynasty*'s popularity.

Even during the exploratory first season, Pamela Sue Martin as Fallon occupied the space of excess that Alexis would later take over. At the wedding of Blake and Krystle that opened the series, we see Fallon mounting the baronial staircase of the mansion, biting off the heads of the bride and groom figurines from the massive wedding cake. Very early on, the show's producers were aware of the show's excesses and intended to encode them in the text by devising "outrageous plots" and



"walk[ing] a fine line, just this side of camp" (Klein 1985, p. 34). Evidence exists that both urban gay men and middle-class straight women were enacting camp readings of *Dynasty* from a very early stage; these two very different "interpretive communities" were reading *Dynasty* in a similar way.

In what sense were gay men and middle-class heterosexual women "interpretive communities" for *Dynasty*? The term comes from Stanley Fish's literary theory, but contemporary literary interpretive communities differ greatly from those for mass-mediated culture in the sense that the former's *raison d'être* is reading. They are, that is to say, groups of professional interpreters. Television reception theorists have always assumed that popular audiences are already socially constituted; as Bennett and Woollacott (1987) put it, the "inter-textually" constituted reader meets the "intertextually" constituted text.<sup>2</sup> This is another way of saying that neither the text nor the community should be given priority when theorizing the constitution of popular subjectivity through encounters by subcultures with mass-mediated texts. Stanley Fish has been criticized from within literary studies for failing to recognize that "interpretive communities are bound to be communities on other grounds as well, bound to have common interests besides the production of interpretations, bound to correspond to other social differentiations" (Pratt 1986, p. 52).

This critique is even more valid when discussing interpretive communities for television programs. The gay community is certainly a community based on grounds other than the interpretation of artistic texts, although it is that as well. And, through the acting out of a process of commodification, heterosexual American women become

an interpretive community as well united in a least common denominator devotion to the culture of femininity.<sup>3</sup>

In literary reception theory, the notion of the reader "activating" the text has to do with cognitive processes rather than any kind of motor activity. But in activating *Dynasty*, the text becomes an event and even, in some cases, a way of life. At a time when urban gay men had reason to fear for their own lives, Schiff reported that fans in the East Village gay community "don't talk about [*Dynasty*] as if it were their favorite program. They talk about it as if it were their life" (1984). As we shall see, from the perspective of the producers as well, the Carrington lifestyle is offered as something to be achieved rather than merely interpreted. Although I cannot think of a single instance in which I was encouraged to smell a literary text, advertising for the fragrances Forever Krystle and Carrington offer up the odor of great romance in a quite literal way by including "scent strips" with the print ads. When the product insert exhorts me "to experience the love that lives forever . . . rub center fold along your pulse points," the gap between fantasy and fulfillment appears narrow indeed. *Dynasty* as event provides the perfect example of the pleasure to be obtained from being commodified.

#### ***Dynasty* as Event**

*Dynasty* Night parties have started to spring up all over the country in night clubs and supper houses. When I was in Hawaii in April, I found a club which built its entire Wednesday night around the show, even though *Dynasty* is seen a week behind the mainland's showing. And in Los Angeles, one such club shows first the previous week's episode, and then the current episode. The marked difference is the fact that the audience is very vocal about the proceedings. Every time ALI MACGRAW (Ashley) came on the screen she would be hissed like a villain, which she is, of course, not. JOAN COLLINS (Alexis) is received with cheers, not only when she appears in the opening credits, but every time she appears in a new NOLAN MILLER creation. LINDA EVANS (Krystle) is mildly received, but her dark-haired character, friend of Sammy Jo (HEATHER LOCKLEAR), is literally laughed at. The clientele is mostly male and at times the dialogue is difficult to hear because of remarks, often very funny, made about what is happening on the two giant screens. (Rizzo 1985, p. 37)

134 The Reception of *Dynasty*

This text from *Soap Opera Digest* represents a report on *Dynasty* as an event while at the same time belonging to the *Dynasty* event. It also represents an interpretation of *Dynasty* from within a popular critical apparatus. Our critic (the esteemed Tony Rizzo) appears to be a disciple of E. D. Hirsch in his slavish adherence to the idea of textual determinacy. Therefore he is not a very astute analyst of the fascinating and complex phenomenon of reading on which he reports in our text. His reading assumes a morally stable reading formation implied by traditional conceptions of melodrama.<sup>4</sup> It also assumes that the critic's own reading of the program (that is, his attribution of good and evil labels to the characters) is a correct reading of the text, against which the reading by a very different interpretive community (that is, as his subtext implies, the gay male community) is seen as aberrant or, at the very least, a distortion of the true meaning of the text. Rizzo thus appears puzzled that two of the "good" characters are greeted with laughter, while the villainess of the melodrama (and her wardrobe) are greeted with cheers. But of course this reading disregards the very nature of a "camp" decoding, which is usually an "oppositional" one if only because it is made from a social position outside of dominant social values. Here the criteria being applied are aesthetic rather than moral, the standards of a community for whom aesthetics and morality are not mutually opposed categories of thought. Lady Ashley is not an evil character; rather, Ali MacGraw is a terrible actress—not just a regular "bad actress," for everyone on *Dynasty* is that, but a bad camp actress. (Joan Collins, on the other hand is a brilliant camp actress.) By looking at the entire reading formation, rather than centering on a reading of a text, this becomes obvious.

*Dynasty*'s becoming an event was not entirely imposed from above; there is a great deal of evidence to consider it a type of subcultural appropriation of a text. In fact a study of the various activations of *Dynasty* makes clear the idea that the process of commodification is an interactive one, neither entirely spontaneously generated from below nor imposed from above—rather a dialectical interplay of each. The passage from *Soap Opera Digest* describes an actual subcultural activation in its portrayal of camp decodings. It is important to stress that the camp attitude toward *Dynasty* in both gay and mainstream culture does not preclude emotional identification; rather it embraces both identification and parody—attitudes normally viewed as mutually exclusive—at the same time and as part of the same sensibility. As Richard Dyer has written, the gay sensibility "holds together qualities that are elsewhere felt as antithetical: theatricality and authenticity . . .

135 The Reception of *Dynasty*



intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity" (1986, p. 154). In a similar vein, Andrea Press has noted that a representative middle-class woman she interviewed, while overtly belittling the show as ridiculous, actually "display[ed] an involvement with the show which belies this detached account of her interest in it" (1990, p. 174).

On the evening of the fall 1985 season premiere that would reveal the outcome of the previous season's cliffhanger (the Moldavian massacre), the lead story on the ABC-affiliate evening news in my local market concerned the way in which "local citizens" had gathered to celebrate this event. Nothing illustrates the camp sensibility toward *Dynasty* better than the news clip reporting on these *Dynasty* parties. The camp attitude is apparent both in the style of the report and in its content. On the one hand, the *Dynasty* craze is taken seriously enough to justify its being the lead story on the eleven o'clock news; on the other hand, the station has to indicate that it does not really take the phenomenon seriously. In this way both the fans and the reporter are camping; the reporter through a tongue-in-cheek tone, the fans through their energetic but inevitably failed attempts to provide a simulacrum of the Carringtons' lifestyle.

Over shots of fans arriving at the Hyatt Hotel in evening clothes, the *Dynasty* theme is playing. But something is not quite right. The evening clothes are makeshift and one young man is sipping champagne in a crew neck sweater. The narration is ironic: "They came looking as dashing as Blake Carrington, as daring as Alexis and everyone seemed to enjoy playing their chosen roles." When the re-

porter switches to another *Dynasty* party—this time at a singles bar—the revelers seem to be camping for the cameras: a young woman with a rhinestone tiara and long white gloves toasts us self-consciously. Perhaps the most ironic costume is that of another young woman masquerading in camouflage as a Moldavian terrorist and bearing plastic arms. On the one hand, these fans were willing to go to extremes; on the other hand, they are unwilling to admit to the cameras that they are intensely emotionally involved—whether in the program itself or in the camp event. And yet their attitude is remarkably similar to that of the audience in Hawaii. All are especially scornful toward Ali MacGraw (Lady Ashley). As one fan tells the reporter, "The big news is that Lady Ashley is dead, Ali MacGraw no more." And an older woman reports that "every kid in the office chose Lady Ashley to die." When, at the end of the report, the reporter does a sarcastic yet detailed stand-up on the outcome of the Moldavian massacre, the circuit of camp simulation is completed.

Contrasting with these "subcultural" displays were attempts "from above" to impose *Dynasty* upon us. Foremost among these was a practice of interweaving advertising with programming segments on *Dynasty* and *The Colbys*. Historians of advertising and of the soap opera have emphasized the idea of the "interwoven commercial." According to Roland Marchand, the advertising community initially believed that the radio audience would not accept direct advertising, since it would represent an intrusion into the family circle. It was felt that advertising that was interwoven into the very fabric of the program would appear more subtle and thus less jarring to the sensibilities of the listener (1985, pp. 89–110). Robert Allen has shown the extent to which radio soap operas diegetically interwove advertising and programming (1985, pp. 151). Although for many years the U.S. networks moved away from these practices, they are now returning to them because advertisers fear the dreaded postmodern practice of "zapping," rapidly changing channels whenever an ad appears. Thus, on mrv the commercials are often virtually indistinguishable from the videos.

*Dynasty*, as a fully commodified text, also returns us to these practices. Many of the ads, particularly those directly following a program segment, are for perfume and other cosmetic products; they reproduce the opulent mise-en-scène of the Carrington mansion and Alexis's postmodern penthouse. But two ads in particular relate directly to the program "text." These are usually shown between the end of the episode and the previews, and they feature Krystle Carrington herself—or is it Linda Evans? We're not sure. The ads for Ultress and For-



137 The Reception of *Dynasty*



ever Krystle are so closely linked to the mise-en-scène and narrative of the parent program that only a knowledge of the conventions of television flow permit us to distinguish them. In the Forever Krystle/Carrington ad, Krystle and Blake play themselves, in *Dynasty*-like settings. Taking the form of a thirty-second epistolary novel, the couple are shown corresponding about the fragrances they have just had especially created for each other. A printed title at the end shows the perfume logos with the superimposed words "for the love that lives forever." There is no implication that these products are for sale at your corner drugstore; indeed it is implied that millions have been spent in order that these scents be unique to Blake and Krystle. In order to identify with the ad, the viewer has to take up the position of the Carringtons and identify with this exclusive luxury. No wonder this ad was frequently camped, for in camping it, the economic sleight of hand behind it is exposed—"I've had this fragrance created especially for anyone who wants to walk in and buy it" is hardly a message for the Reagan era. The scents must trickle down to all of us.

The Ultress commercials (there were ultimately three versions) are a little harder to read as direct reflections of the show's narrative. Such a reading of the earliest one might go as follows: To be sure there is

Krystle, walking down the sweeping staircase of a somewhat bourgeoisified version of the Carrington mansion (perhaps she is visiting), talking to us about her hair and caressing the hair of various other women at the gathering. But who is the strange gentleman whose arm Krystle takes at the end of her stroll? And where is Blake? Even these questions may be accommodated to the typical discontinuities of the parent text. Perhaps another Daniel Reese has appeared on the scene? Will Krystle finally cheat on her husband? Does this account for the bounce in her walk and the shine in her hair? The second Ultress ad finds Krystle among a harem of beautiful women (all of whom color their hair) in some kind of baroque salon. It doesn't take much to imagine that she is at one of the many charity balls the Carringtons are wont to attend, perhaps even the one where they ran into Henry Kissinger.

And indeed the placement of these ads relies on the continuity provided by flow in order to erase the boundaries of the different program segments. The imagery of the commercials was reinforced in print ads that ran in many glossy magazines. We can read these ads as continuous with the program, or we can read them as commentaries on the program. As part of the text of *Dynasty*, the ads for Ultress and Forever Krystle merely continue the development of the perfect relationship between Blake and Krystle, the "love that lives forever." Even the fact that Joan Collins went off on her own to endorse a cheaper perfume, Scoundrel, seems entirely in keeping with her Alexis-like narcissism.

And yet, the interwoven ads could also be read against the program, in that their contrast with the tone and mood of the show gives away their attempts to manipulate us. For the ads are exactly the wholly affirmative endorsement of Reaganite ideology that the program as a whole has been accused of being. Historian Debora Silverman is interested in *Dynasty* because the show seems to support her claim that Diana Vreeland's exhibits at both the Metropolitan Museum and Bloomingdale's are direct reflections of the aristocratic ideology of the 1980s. She notes "a mutually reinforcing connection between popular opulent fashion and the dual roles of White House Nancy Reagan on the one hand and the television fantasy of *Dynasty*'s Krystle Carrington on the other." She concludes that Reagan's remarkable success is dependent on tapping "*Dynasty* themes in ordinary Americans' imaginations" (Silverman 1986, pp. 152–155). But the analogy she notes is between Nancy Reagan and Krystle Carrington, whereas it is Alexis in particular and the show as a whole that allow for the outlet of the same hostility that was directed at Nancy Reagan. Joan Collins's brilliant



138 The Reception of *Dynasty*



camp performance as Alexis permitted certain audiences to identify with her and against the entire Nancy/Krystle ideological complex even when the narrative level of the show encouraged us to identify against Alexis. The ads, in contrast, present a completely positive view of the rich and famous, a completely positive affirmation of the Carringtons as the perfect couple, echoing perhaps William F. Buckley's nauseating paen to the Reagans in the June 1985 issue of *Vanity Fair*: "People curious to know how it is between the man and wife dancing together on the cover of *Vanity Fair* this month are going to have to put to one side their political feelings and recognize that is the way they are" (quoted in Blumenthal 1988, p. 274). The only time the text proper sustained such an affirmation of the Carrington family dynasty as a whole and the Blake/Krystle marriage in particular is in the final scene of *Dynasty: The Reunion*. As the stiff, aging Carringtons slow dance (as if echoing Buckley), the camera pulls back on the unfurnished Carrington ballroom. As the *Dynasty* theme reaches a musical climax, so does the show. We are reminded that it is 1991 and the Reagans are no longer our first couple.

That is to say the ads and the final moments of the reunion completely miss the campy tone and delightful bitchiness of much of the show. Nor do the commercials capture the critical tone of the show, its foregrounding of the often violent power relations that underlay the Carringtons' "happy" marriage. Take, for instance, the contrast between the "Forever Krystle" commercial and the show proper. When Blake writes, "I had this fragrance created especially for you," he neglects to mention that most of the gifts he gave Krystle had strings attached—largely, reproductive ones. During the first season, Blake had flowers created especially for his new wife after raping her the night before because he discovered she was taking birth control pills. Similarly, Krystle's enabling of the Carrington scent for men in the ad neglects to mention that, at the time of the rape, she had just sold the emeralds from her hope chest to finance the oil wells of her former lover, Matthew Blaisdel, oil wells whose leases Blake was desperate to snare.

In this way advertising and program segments may jar rather than blend, especially at moments of supreme melodrama. *Dynasty*'s 21 May 1986 season finale was followed by the second Ultress ad. After listening to Alexis describe Krystle as a "blonde tramp" at the moment of her supreme victory over the couple (she has taken over Blake's entire fortune including his house), and after watching the aging Blake ludicrously try to strangle Alexis in a moment of total melodramatic excess, it is difficult to believe that merely possessing Linda Evans's hair

color will elevate one into the lifestyles of the rich and famous. There is no question that for most of the audience the fascination was with the look of the Carringtons. But this does not mean that they read Blake and Krystle as the totally positive reincarnation of Ron and Nancy, as Debora Silverman seems to imply. The meaning of the desire to simulate the world of the Carringtons was far more complex than that.

#### The *Dynasty* Collection

This desire to simulate the world of the Carringtons was both a product of and an influence on the show's producers. As a 1985 *Cosmopolitan* article explains, "Appearances are important because if there is any single component that separates *Dynasty* from the rest of television, it is what everyone associated with the show—from executive producer Aaron Spelling on down—refers to as the look" (Warren 1985, pp. 182–185). The article goes on to describe—as do so many other reports in the popular press during this period—the extreme care the producers of *Dynasty* take with its "look": they worry about the jewelry matching, the colors of the clothes matching the mood, even the manner in which the dinner table settings are photographed (in detail with close-ups). As the article explains, "A huge cult following has developed around [Alexis's] gustatory habits. Interest is so great that several newspapers have been running contests for fans to guess what she'll put in her mouth next" (p. 185). Every detail is authentic: when Blake presented Krystle with a Rolls-Royce Corniche, the scene had to be reshot because the keys he handed her weren't standard Rolls keys.

Not only was *Dynasty* the only television program to have a resident fashion designer, it was the only program that thrust its costume designer into stardom. It is no accident that in the Tony Rizzo *Soap Opera Digest* column quoted above, the name of designer Nolan Miller figures as prominently as that of the show's major stars. *Dynasty* had a costume budget of \$25,000 per episode with \$100,000 allocated for the royal wedding that closed the 1984 season. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Nolan Miller received over one hundred fan letters weekly in 1984 (1984, p. 1). No star could have a more devoted following, as evidenced by the following testimonial: "Your designs and styles overwhelm me, sometimes they actually take my breath away. . . . I usually miss each scene's first lines because I'm too busy studying each outfit" (*Wall Street Journal* 23 March 1984, p. 1).

When Nolan Miller appeared on the *Phil Donahue Show* with his

collection of ready-to-wear garments based on the show, each outfit was greeted by near-delirious applause. He played the role of *auteur* to the hilt: "I'm responsible for *everything*." Since, as many commentators have pointed out, the program served as an hour-long commercial for the clothes, it was only a matter of time before a desire to possess the material objects of the Carrington lifestyle would emerge in the audience. Whereas the homemade simulacra exhibited at *Dynasty* parties could not profit the show's producers directly, the potential for mass-produced products based on the show might satisfy both voracious fans and the needs of capital. Hence was born the *Dynasty* Collection, whose products included lingerie, hosiery, shoes, blouses, suits, linens, sheets, china, glasswear, perfume, tuxedos, and even Alexis and Krystle porcelain dolls in Nolan Miller fashions (real mink stoles, real diamond necklaces) retailing for \$10,000 apiece (*Los Angeles Times* 1985, p. 6). Previous programs had licensed commercial products tied in to their narratives, but the *Dynasty* Collection would be the first upscale product licensing geared to an adult public. *Dynasty*'s producers and their equivalents at Twentieth Century-Fox Licensing Corporation made endless claims that the *Dynasty* Collection had emerged in response to spontaneous audience requests for copies of the Carringtons' goods. *Dynasty* cocreator Esther Shapiro says: "People seem fascinated with the trappings. After one episode . . . we got 4,500 requests from women who wanted to know where to buy Joan Collins's suit" (*New York Times* 1984a, p. C29).

According to Chuck Ashman, president of Twentieth Century-Fox Licensing Corporation: "The idea for tie-ins came from those fanatical fans. The mail that comes in is as often directed to a dress as much as it is to a star." Esther Shapiro says she realized "people want to be part of it all, so it just seemed logical that we extend to merchandising" (*People* 1984, p. 69). Both Ashman and Shapiro felt the need to identify the merchandising campaign as coming from consumer demand rather than an attempt they themselves masterminded to cash in on the success of the show. The licensing corporation had reason to believe that *Dynasty* would be the perfect vehicle. Its demographics were superb—the number one rated show among women of all ages. According to Chuck Ashman, "In one informal survey 29 of 30 women stopped on Seventh Avenue admitted an addiction to the show—and confessed that they watched it largely for the clothes" (*New York* 1984, p. 15).

When the *Dynasty* Collection premiered at Bloomingdale's, over twenty thousand fans packed the store in order to view not just the col-

lection but also some of the show's stars, who were there for the event. "We have not had such excitement in Bloomingdale's since the Queen of England visited in 1976," remarked chairman Marvin Traub. The *New York Times* goes on to describe one of the fans present: "She was wearing a blue T-shirt with 'Dynasty addict' spelled out in rhinestones" (1984b, p. C15).

According to hypodermic or effects theories, the *Dynasty* merchandising campaign could not fail. And yet, although some of the less expensive products such as the perfumes were financial successes, it would appear that most of the collection did indeed fail to attract the fans. In 1986, the big-ticket items were taken off the market (*Wall Street Journal* 1986, p. 31). Apparently, *Dynasty*'s mass audience had the power to desire the items but not to purchase them. The ultimate financial failure of the *Dynasty* Collection raises interesting questions for a reception aesthetics that acknowledges the commodified nature of mass cultural decodings but that does not construct a binary opposition between commodification and subcultural activation. Perhaps the financial failure of the *Dynasty* Collection was also an ideological failure. No one wants to buy Nolan Miller ready-to-wear dresses—they want to act out the fantasy in thrift shop garb. In this case, the subcultural activation by gays and women defeats the commodification of the Fox Licensing Corporation—it becomes an act of resistance. This interpretation is very different from interpreting fan culture around *Dynasty* as mere modeling on greed and avarice—as a mere simulacrum of the Reagans.

In fact the *Dynasty* simulation mania may have stemmed at least in part from the same impetus as the general cultural hostility toward Nancy Reagan. For the flip side of Ronnie's popularity was always Nancy-baiting, a popular pastime among many who may have voted for Reagan. In Veblenesque fashion, she carried the burden of conspicuous consumption for them both. During the early Reagan presidency, "she was dubbed 'Queen Nancy,' said to be concerned above all with her new \$200,000 White House china, interior decorators—and clothing designers—which of course, she was" (Blumenthal 1988, p. 272). Note that these were also the three things *Dynasty* was most interested in. Terry Sweeney's retrospective 1990 off-Broadway show *It's Still My Turn*, in which Sweeney delivered a brilliant drag impersonation of Mrs. Reagan, took the same campy attitude toward Nancy as did many of the gay camp simulations of *Dynasty*, portraying her in a red Adolpho suit as staggeringly indifferent to the suffering Reaganomics had caused.

Given all of this, in what sense do we want to call these activations of *Dynasty* “readings” in the literary sense? When we speak of a “reading” or “interpretation” of a literary text, we usually assume that we are referring to an attribution of meaning at a high level of abstraction—telling us what the text means. Reader-response theorists have taught us that there exists a far more basic sense of “reading” consisting of the attribution of meaning to the actual words on the page. But does even this basic level of meaning attribution occur when, in the “Nolan Miller” reading of *Dynasty*, viewers watch to see the clothes? And what kind of interpretive act is signified by attempts to replicate the material signifiers of the Carringtons in the lives of the audience?

Indeed the audience activation of *Dynasty* through ritualized events may represent a refusal of meaning attribution as a positive act and thus could be labeled “postmodern” in Baudrillard’s sense. When Baudrillard speaks of the masses in relationship to meaning, he could be describing what the masses do with *Dynasty* (in a postmodern sense as opposed to one derived from subcultural theory):

Thus, in the case of the media, traditional resistance consists of reinterpreting messages according to the group’s own code and for its own ends. The masses, on the contrary, accept everything and redirect everything *en bloc* into the spectacular, without requiring any other code, without requiring any meaning, ultimately without resistance, but making everything slide into an indeterminate sphere which is not even that of non-sense, but that of overall manipulation/fascination. (1983a, pp. 43–44)

The activations of *Dynasty* could also be called postmodern in another sense, having to do with the relationship between the program and its simulators. The homemade Nolan Miller gowns, just as the commodified ones, might be considered a form of pastiche, what Fredric Jameson considers to be the postmodern form of parody. According to Jameson, pastiche is “blank parody” in an age when personal style is no longer there to be imitated. Hence it lacks the satirical or critical edge of modernist parody. It simply mimics the preexisting form (Jameson 1984). In its use of pastiche, then, the *Dynasty* reading formation is working within the postmodern era and in a postmodern style.

But ultimately neither of these senses of the postmodern captures the double-edged quality of Dyer’s definition of the camp sensibility in which blank mimicry and a critical edge may coexist. That is to say, we are observing both subcultural appropriation and postmodern pas-

tiche at the same time and from within the same sensibility. It is this double-edged quality, according to Linda Hutcheon, that distinguishes postmodern parody. Arguing against Jameson, she proposes that postmodern architecture is a contradictory enterprise when viewed from the perspective of its actual praxis. And parody, she believes, is one of its primary weapons, if we define parody as “repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (1986–1987, p. 185). In postmodern architecture, parody occurs from an inside position, and it is combined with a kind of historical reverence. Here Hutcheon quotes Charles Jencks’s comment that the Venturis’ desire to learn from Las Vegas expresses “a mixed appreciation for the American Way of Life. Grudging respect, not total acceptance. They don’t share all the values of a consumer society, but they want to speak to this society, even if partially in dissent” (p. 194). Hutcheon’s description of postmodern parody as setting up “a dialectical relationship between identification and distance” (p. 206) describes perfectly the camp sensibility toward *Dynasty*; it does not require an avant-garde sensibility to make a postmodern parody of *Dynasty*.

Yet it was not just imaginary “postfeminist” women and “apolitical” gay men who were fascinated by *Dynasty*. When a cadre of left-leaning media scholars set out to produce their own TV shows for public-access cable TV and “syndicate” them nationally in the form of a guerrilla network called Paper Tiger Television, the most popular program turned out to be *Joan Does Dynasty* (1986), a clever work of video art that preserved much of the double-edged, camp, playful, postmodern tone that characterized *Dynasty* and the mass cult that had formed around it. Joan Braderman quite literally inserts her body into scenes from the program, all the while delivering a running ironic commentary expressing her ambivalent attitude of fascination/repulsion toward *Dynasty*. The half-hour program represented Joan Braderman’s bid to be included in the illustrious line of divas bearing the name of Joan: Crawford, Collins, and Rivers.<sup>5</sup> Yet the many examples of double-edged attitudes toward *Dynasty* discussed earlier make avant-garde activations of the text almost superfluous. In many respects, *Joan Does Dynasty* merely reproduces what many in the mass audience already “did” with *Dynasty*. Her “camp” activation is certainly postmodern, but no more so than wearing a blue T-shirt with “*Dynasty* addict” spelled out in rhinestones.

Of course we can also locate more traditional interpretations of *Dynasty* both in the popular media and in more academic publications.



145 The Reception of *Dynasty*

These I call “ideological readings,” because although they do attempt to spell out what *Dynasty* means, it is always in terms of the political Zeitgeist of the era and never in terms of any kind of close textual analysis or detailed ethnographic work. Several writers including Debora Silverman, quoted above, have remarked on the similarities between the Carringtons and the Reagans, noting that *Dynasty* began broadcasting a few weeks after the first Reagan inaugural in 1981. By January 1991, *Dynasty* producer Douglas Cramer was quoted as saying: “The Reagans are out of the White House, and John (Forsythe) and Joan (Collins) are out of the mansion. You only have to look at the papers to see where we are in terms of the recession and the homeless” (Zurawik 1991).

Interviews with the producers served to validate an awareness of the parallelism between the Reagans and the Carringtons. Although *Dynasty* began broadcasting a few weeks after the first Reagan inaugural in 1981, Esther Shapiro claims it was several years before she noticed the resemblances: “a powerful executive married to a devoted woman, with a difficult ex-wife, a sensitive son, a rebellious daughter . . . and beyond that, the idea that having money and flaunting it, enjoying it, is okay—they have that in common, too” (Klein 1985, p. 35). In “The Season of the Reagan Rich,” Michael Pollan argues that TV shows about rich people thrived in the Reagan era precisely because the imagery of the Reagans and their TV analogues are mutually reinforcing ideologically:

Like the millionaires who propelled Ronald Reagan into politics—Charles Z. Wick, Justin Dart, the late Alfred Bloomingdale—the rich of prime time are all self-made men who accumulated vast fortunes in the West. As Washington society noted sourly on its arrival, the Reagan crowd is hopelessly *nouveau riche*, deficient in the graces and decorum that distinguishes the older families of the East. . . . Television’s rich and the Reagan rich also share something more insidious—their nostalgic fantasy of wealth in America. . . . Both imply that the American dream of self-made success is alive and might be made well by releasing the frontier instincts of the wealthy from the twin shackles of taxes and regulation. (Pollan 1982, pp. 14–15)

Arguably, there is a link between the postmodern readings and the ideological ones, since the ideological readings are presumably interpreting the postmodern activations. Silverman’s agenda appears to be to “read” the reading formation of Reaganite cultural politics, which in turn have produced the shallow, aristocratic postmodern activations in the mass culture. Arguably this is not what she achieves, however, be-

cause she does not understand the subcultural aspects of the postmodern readings. The danger of an ideological reading is that it will proceed directly from thin description to condemnation. As Janice Radway has shown, it is only by seeing from the perspective of those inside of a reading formation that the true complexity of popular reading can be understood (1984). Ideological critics are attempting to fix *Dynasty*’s meaning, since any interpretation stabilizes the meaning of a text. However, these ideological readings tend to miss the camp activations, attributing to prime-time serials a parallelism of attitude as well as representational symbolism of Reaganomics. From this type of traditional ideological reading, it is easy to read off effects—always negative—on the viewer. Watching *Dynasty* must be bad for us, mustn’t it? Thus Reaganism proves the dangerousness of *Dynasty*, while *Dynasty* proves the dangerousness of Reaganism in what Fredric Jameson has referred to as “billiard ball causality” (1981, p. 25). Looking at *Dynasty* from such a cultural perspective can only produce the type of ideological reading just described. It is only from the perspective of a postmodern concept of ideology that the subcultural activations of *Dynasty* can be understood in all of their multivalence and ambivalence.

### Conclusion

A theory of reception for a mass cultural text must take into account the program’s location within an intertextual network of commodity production. Thus *Dynasty*’s interpretive communities never merely interpret—they enact, they are counted as demographics, they consume not just a fictional text but a whole range of products as well. I would posit that the interpretive community not only *is* the text, it also *produces* the text and in addition is produced *by* the text. The postmodern reading formations described in this book were, arguably, producing a “dominant reading” of the program in the sense that many different contemporary interpretive communities approached the program from the postmodern perspective. But studying the camp sensibility that surrounded *Dynasty* within both gay and straight culture, and placing the program’s reception within the entire circuit of commodity tie-ins calls into question the whole notion of a dominant reading as it is usually conceptualized by ideological criticism. For what is produced is not exactly a reading, and it is not exactly dominant either. Interpretive communities for *Dynasty* are not producing the same kind of interpretations as are interpretive communities for *Ulysses*. Seen in terms

of reading formations, the activation of *Dynasty* is easily the more complex. Nor is the kind of ironic activation described—typical of the gay sensibility—exactly part of a “dominant ideology” that pervades American culture. It is something slippery and not easily transcodable into direct political and cultural effects. As a postmodern TV program, *Dynasty* challenges our received ideas about what an oppositional text might be and even of how opposition occurs in a seemingly hegemonic era.

#### Notes

- 1 Tony Bennett proposes the term “activation” as a means of “displacing . . . the concept of interpretation and the particular construction of relations between texts and readers that it implies” (Bennett 1983, p. 3).
- 2 Bennett and Woollacott define “inter-textuality” as follows: “Whereas Kristeva’s concept of *intertextuality* refers to the system of references to other texts which can be discerned within the internal composition of a specific individual text, we intend the concept of *inter-textuality* to refer to the social organisation of the relations between texts within specific conditions of reading” (1987, pp. 44–45).
- 3 On another level, qualitative research suggests that women’s interpretations of *Dynasty* may be divided along class lines as well as those of sexual preference. See Press 1990, pp. 158–180. Press found that working-class women were more likely to view the show as realistic, whereas middle-class women, while viewing it as fantasy, also tended to identify more with the characters.
- 4 Tony Bennett offers the following definition of a “reading formation”: “a set of intersecting discourses that productively activate a given body of texts and the relations between them in a specific way” (1983, p. 5).
- 5 It is an enviable heritage; just contemplating it makes me want to alter a letter here and there.

#### Afterword: Overturning the Reagan Era

Although it would be foolish to propose a precise end date for the “Reagan era,” there exist many candidates for this dubious signifying honor. Beginning with the 1987 stock market crash, one can move on to the end of the Reagan presidency, the cancellation of *Dynasty*, the airing of the *Dynasty* reunion miniseries, the election of Bill Clinton, or the *Time* magazine cover of 16 August 1993.

My personal favorite stylistic marker, however, is the decline and corporate takeover of *Metropolitan Home* magazine. In 1993, the magazine was taken over by a conglomerate, and we were told that the only new trend in home design is painting your walls yellow, and they started advertising Ethan Allen furniture. The new *Met Home* was reminiscent of the auctioning off of the Carringtons’ antique treasures in favor of a suburban ranch house for Krystle and Blake in *Dynasty: The Reunion*. Even when the couple dances together at the end in their newly regained ballroom, we can tell that the eighties are over because the house remains unfurnished. The new *Met Home* also reminded me of when Ecumena took over St. Eligius, postmodernized the nurses’ desk, and installed mauve carpeting so that the once-poverty stricken St. Eligius came to resemble the yuppie quarters of the Los Angeles doctors on *Heartbeat*. The difference was that *St. Elsewhere*, possibly the finest television program of the decade, was being (unsuccessfully, of course) yuppified, whereas *Met Home* was being de-yuppified.

Looking at American television in 1994, the eighties do appear to have been a golden age, especially since most of eighties programming is still available in the form of syndicated reruns on Lifetime or f/x. Watching *Dynasty* reruns on f/x alongside Aaron Spelling’s newest hit, *Melrose Place*, in summer reruns on Fox, it is hard not to long for the mise-en-scène and intergenerational campiness of the older show. And it is hard not to notice that both broadcast services are owned by Fox, that I’m not watching anything on the old networks this summer.