

"I WANT TO BE AT LEAST AS ALIVE
AS THE VULGAR": FRANK O'HARA'S POETRY
AND THE CINEMA

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*I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen*

—Hart Crane ("To Brooklyn Bridge," Poems 43)

*Poems about movies, then, quickly changed from being a
starry-eyed mode of praise to a form of cultural criticism.
Poets have always been not only makers of aesthetic
objects but monitors of the aesthetic habits of their
society. . . . it is the ultimate function of a movie poem to
encourage our wariness of visual media by modeling their
nearly irresistible attractions.*

—Laurence Goldstein (8, 14)

*I'd have the immediacy of a bad movie,
not just a sleeper, but also the big,
overproduced first-run kind. I want to be
at least as alive as the vulgar.*

—Frank O'Hara ("My Heart," O'Hara CP 231)

Frank O'Hara ends his 1955 ode "To the Film Industry in Crisis" with a prayer that suggests what draws him, as an artist, to the movies: "Long may you illumine space with your marvelous appearances, delays / and enunciations . . . It is a divine precedent / you perpetuate! Roll on, reels of celluloid, as the great earth rolls on!" (O'Hara CP 232-33). O'Hara's gushing celebration of the silver screen as a modern-day deity is undercut by his ironic tone and overdramatic

praise; he neither wholeheartedly embraces "low" art nor does he merely mock pop culture's vulgarity, but rather conveys a complex mixture of ambivalent feelings towards the cinema. Indeed, in his movie poems, O'Hara is both uneasy about the pleasures of film and drawn to it as a serious aesthetic experience that demands our attention because of its combination of beauty and baseness, motion and permanence, illusion and "reality."

O'Hara's obsession with the cinema grows out of (and feeds) certain long-standing preoccupations in his work, such as his interest in the tensions—in both art and experience—between appearance and actuality, fiction and "truth," representations and the "real."¹ Such tensions provide some of the central, driving paradoxes of O'Hara's work, and we will see how and why O'Hara turns to the cinema as a particularly compelling way of exploring the disorienting play of fiction and reality in modern life. At the same time, O'Hara is profoundly intrigued by the formal qualities of film, by the fast visual jumps and dislocations it makes possible, because his own poetics is based on a hatred of "all things that don't change" and an enduring fascination with "quickness" and transience (O'Hara CP 275, 49). Noting that "photographs, monuments, static memories . . . have no place in the poet's world," Marjorie Perloff points out "why O'Hara loves the *motion* picture, *action* painting, and all forms of dance"—these, like O'Hara's poetry itself, are all "art forms that capture the *present* rather than the past, the present in all its chaotic splendor."²

O'Hara thus finds this relatively new medium, capable of "illuminating space" with "marvellous appearances," an inspiring example of art's ability to mesmerize us with its motion, its shadowy surfaces and artificial images, with what O'Hara's predecessor Hart Crane calls its "panoramic sleights." Art—whether it is cinematic or poetic—is never the same as life, O'Hara knows, but rolls alongside it with glittering surfaces and delightful delusions, "as the great earth rolls on!" At the same time, O'Hara's stance towards the movies—like his stance towards many subjects—is paradoxical and contradictory. While he celebrates the artifice, immediacy, and exciting motion inherent in the cinematic experience, he also displays discomfort with the passivity and loss of individuality demanded by the popular arts, concern about its disturbing impact on our sense of "reality," and

skepticism towards the larger-than-life, illusory images produced by the movies and swallowed uncritically by American society as "real." As we will see, O'Hara's movie poems are exemplary artifacts of what we now think of as "postmodernist" art, because they embrace phenomena and forms outside the traditional boundaries of "high" art, while at the same time they "contest the 'simulacritization' process of mass culture—not by denying it or lamenting it—but by problematizing the entire notion of the representation of reality."³

As part of his effort to write poetry that is "at least as alive" as the representations produced by mass culture, work that will seem, as he wrote in 1950, "the inexorable / product of my own time," O'Hara turns his attentive and critical eye to billboards, the radio, and especially, movies (O'Hara CP 231, 49). To make art that is truly vital and contemporaneous, O'Hara adapts the resources of the poetic tradition to the details of life in the middle of the twentieth century, unaesthetic as they may seem by conventional standards. He responds to his poetic predecessors not by breaking entirely with the past, but rather by using what Linda Hutcheon sees as a typically postmodernist practice of "installing" and "subverting" intertextual echoes from past poets (*Poetics* 4-5). Thus O'Hara appropriates, ironically comments on, and updates poetic tradition: in his movie poems, O'Hara frequently recalls and revises previous tropes, replacing the sublime "Ocean" of Byron in one poem with "reels of celluloid," and the mythological swan of Yeats in another with an image of flying film-projecting machinery. In our modern world, O'Hara suggests, divinity may come only in the shadows and dreams of the mass media, in the form of celluloid and the glamorous guises of actors, for better or for worse. While the poetry establishment in the 1950s tirelessly churned out New Critic-inspired poems in traditional forms about conventional subjects, despairing over the moon, cathedrals, swans, and the decline of Western culture, O'Hara was daring enough to celebrate *and* to investigate the curious, powerful attraction of the movies in modern American life.

Although critics have always recognized this love of the movies as a feature of O'Hara's poetry, and have indeed discussed O'Hara's influential and ground-breaking openness to both "high" and "low" culture, they have not sufficiently considered the ambivalence and

complexity of his poetic response to pop culture and the movies, nor have they examined this aspect of O'Hara's poetry in the cultural context of postwar America.⁴ By context, I mean both how O'Hara's movie poems can be seen as an integral part of his rebellious response to the rigid orthodoxy of the literary establishment in the 1950s, and how they can be seen as a reaction to the on-going intellectual debates, waged in the postwar period, over the value and place of popular culture.

Of course, the question of popular culture's impact on society had troubled intellectuals and artists long before O'Hara began writing; Andrew Ross, in his book *No Respect*, usefully chronicles the modern intellectual's vexed relationship with popular culture. In a particularly relevant chapter, Ross explores the effort by liberals in the postwar period to "understand" the role of the "masses" and the art produced either by or for them.⁵ The intellectual left, in such forums as the *Partisan Review*, feared that art produced by and for the masses and unchecked by the intelligentsia would eventually overrun the canons of taste and "high" culture, and produce a society of passive drones and automatons who were willing to settle for "standardized products of the entertainment industries" instead of "the more enlightened liberal values of high culture" (Ross, *No Respect* 54). Fearful intellectuals wondered: could this *leveling* of culture lead to a "mass society," to the emergence of totalitarian movements like fascism and communism? Ross argues that the implicit goal of many Cold War intellectuals was to guard against "the excesses of egalitarianism," excesses represented by the mindless production and consumption of the popular arts. Such debates about pop culture and the role of the intellectual were paralleled by contemporaneous controversies over the possible negative effects of the mass media on the national morality: could movies lead to crime, corruption, and youthful sexual experimentation?⁶ Many felt that the intellectual's job, as the self-appointed guardian of culture, was to *contain* the contagious and dangerous growth of popular culture, and maintain the standards of high culture.

This struggle over the viability of pop culture, which included debates about what materials were appropriate for high art, is illustrated quite nicely by the flurry of negative responses that followed the publication of one of O'Hara's movie poems. In March 1956,

Poetry magazine printed his poem "For James Dean," an elegy for the recently deceased actor. Shortly thereafter, Sam Astrachan quoted a passage from O'Hara's poem in the pages of the *New Republic* in order to attack "the mumble-jumble of Dean morality," while the poet and New York intellectual Paul Goodman complained elsewhere that James Dean "wasn't a suitable subject for poetry" (Gooch 268). A letter by the poet Turner Cassity, printed in *Life* magazine, pointed out that the appearance of the poem in *Poetry* proved that the "James Dean necrophilia has penetrated even the *upper levels* of culture" (quoted in Gooch 268; italics added). Evidently, for some intellectuals and poets, there were things poems should be about, and there were things that they should *not* be about.⁷

But for how long could this cultural elite "contain" popular culture without actually attending to the *dynamics* of the experience of the mass media? Many intellectuals were so worried about the threat "mass" culture posed to their own status as intellectuals that they overlooked the important questions O'Hara was willing to explore. We must not ignore O'Hara's earnest concern when he asks, in the otherwise ironic poem "Ave Maria," "but what about the soul / that grows in darkness, embossed by silvery images?" (O'Hara CP 372). What effects does the rise of movies have on our culture and our lives? Is the thrilling and affecting experience of popular culture truly inimical and dangerous to society? Isn't there something exciting and liberating about a new art form, a new medium of representation, that an artist should attend to and contemplate, especially when it is a medium that exhibits the motion and speed that characterizes modernity, one that is endlessly reproducible and accessible to all? Could the cinematic experience and its creation of "stars" have something to tell us about how art and society function or could function differently in the future? What are the psychological, social, and aesthetic dimensions of experiencing the movies? O'Hara's poems about film repeatedly struggle with these vexed questions, and must therefore be read closely and viewed against the backdrop of contemporary debates about the relationship between the intellectual and the mass media. We must recognize that O'Hara's work is driven by a sophisticated and influential engagement with popular culture and the images it creates.

The early "An Image of Leda" (1950; O'Hara CP 35) is a quintessential "movie poem," because it (as Laurence Goldstein defines such poems) "dramatize[s] with maximum sophistication the moments of contact between poetic and cinematic realms of being."⁸ The poem explores—with marked ambivalence—the attraction and power of motion pictures. Characteristically, O'Hara alludes to poetic tradition as he dismantles its pieties and extends its grasp. The poem evokes, of course, Yeats's somber and masterful sonnet "Leda and the Swan," in which Zeus, descending in the guise of a great swan, rapes the mortal Leda, an experience Yeats depicts as both terrifying and disturbingly sensuous (Yeats 121). O'Hara's poem alludes to what he views as the modernist's *outdated* mythological subject but replaces it with that epitome of contemporary popular culture—the cinema. However, O'Hara not only boldly rebels against and updates existing literary conventions; he also uses the poem to reflect on the intellectual debates over the value and effects of the cinema. Instead of Zeus's violent yet sensual seduction of passive Leda, O'Hara describes the relationship between the medium of film and the moviegoer (and by extension, the relationship between popular culture and its consumers) in similar terms:

The cinema is cruel
like a miracle. We
sit in the darkened
room asking nothing
of the empty white
space but that it
remain pure. And
suddenly despite us
it blackens. Not by
the hand that holds
the pen. There is
no message. We our-
selves appear naked
on the river bank
spread-eagled while
the machine wings
nearer. We scream
chatter prance and
wash our hair! Is

it our prayer or
wish that this
occur? Oh what is
this light that
holds us fast? Our
limbs quicken even
to disgrace under
this white eye as
if there were real
pleasure in loving
a shadow and caress-
ing a disguise!

(O'Hara CP 35-36)

By modeling this poem about the movies on an encounter between the divine and the human, O'Hara adopts a mock-heroic stance that is certainly meant to deflate seriousness with irony. After all, an afternoon at the movies is hardly a brush with the divine! O'Hara, instinctively wary of overserious attitudes towards any institutions (whether poetry, cinema, religion, myth), is never one to write about such things with grave reverence. Thus, he summons echoes of Yeats's dramatic poem and Greek theme only to subvert them, in order to bring Yeats down to earth, to force him into the modern world. Why *not* talk about movies, O'Hara demands, when actual modern experience is more likely to be filled with afternoons watching "Clark Gable rescuing Gene Tierney / from Russia" than contemplating symbolic swans (O'Hara CP 232)? O'Hara's strategy suggests that perhaps the true "myths" of contemporary life are actually figures like James Dean and Lana Turner, for all their human weaknesses, rather than Zeus and Leda. However, the parodic gestures involved in using such a lofty metaphor for this rather demotic experience do not preclude O'Hara's poem from containing an underlying seriousness, as his humorous poems almost always do.

In fact, the seriousness results from the poem's ability to hold in tension the speaker's mixed feelings about the medium of film, from the poem's initial paradox through its disorienting transitions. The opening line, "the cinema is cruel," is immediately altered and surprisingly undercut by the next line "like a miracle"; through this rapid switch, the first two lines contain the double attitudes of the

poem in microcosm—the cinema is dangerous at the same time that it is a miraculous, indeed god-like, blessing. The opening lines warn us that this poem will paradoxically function both as a nervous celebration of pop culture and its magic, and as an ironically undercut warning about its perils.

After stating this ambivalence towards movies, O'Hara goes on to use cinematic techniques to describe, and simultaneously to *enact*, our experience of this "cruel miracle." The poem begins with an image of ourselves as audience members, in which "we sit" watching a white screen that suddenly darkens; then, as in a movie, several quick jumps follow that re-direct our "eye." The focus is suddenly shifted from the recently darkened screen to an image of "our- / selves . . . naked / on the river bank / spread-eagled." The cinematic effect of fast cuts and dissolves is also created by O'Hara's use of short, oddly interrupted lines, which forces our reading eye to jump from the end of one line to the start of the next to see what is going to happen (both syntactically and logically). Moving from line to line, the reader suddenly sees, as in a B movie, a somewhat naturalistic scene (humans lying by a river) interrupted by an approaching monster-like film-projector.

O'Hara appropriates cinematic techniques into his writing for various reasons. Here, he uses monster-film imagery to parody the overdramatic responses to pop culture given by some stuffy intellectuals; he mocks the prevailing "sky-is-falling" fear among the cultural elite about technological change—as if poking fun at the alarmed guardians of culture who would cry "watch out! the machine wings nearer!" by literalizing their exaggerated fears. Again, O'Hara's poem must be seen in the context of the very real, sometimes hysterical arguments about the deleterious effects of mass culture on American morality that epitomized the debate surrounding censorship and Hollywood.⁹ But O'Hara also adopts filmic techniques in order to approximate in his poetry the exciting dislocations, alluring images, and rapid shifts of cinema (Perloff, *O'Hara* 49). For example, to enhance the cinematic effect, he writes the lines "we scream / chatter prance and / wash our hair!" with verbs run together, without punctuation, in order both to mimic and to mock cinematic experience. One activity leaps to another and another in absurd rapid-fire fashion, like fast jumps in a movie montage; the rather drastic

enjambment of lines and words reinforces the film-like quality of the poem's dynamic action. Thus, O'Hara's embrace of the cinema extends beyond thematic concerns: his images and poetic form, in this and many other poems, draw their energy from the aesthetic techniques and qualities of cinematic art. His poems very often rely on shifting visual imagery, and on "cuts and dissolves," whether spatial, temporal, or referential (Perloff, *O'Hara* 121). By writing a poem about the effects of the cinema that appropriates film-like strategies, O'Hara's form neatly underscores—and is entangled with—his thematic exploration of the nature of the movies.

It is not surprising that O'Hara would incorporate techniques of film into his poetics, because ultimately he finds the cinema intriguing not merely as a "vulgar" pleasure, but as an *aesthetic form* and as an *experience*. He is drawn to the question of how this relatively new—and quintessentially modern—medium of representation affects us as viewers as well as how it may alter the practice and conception of poetry. For example, with the sudden image of ourselves on-screen (lines 12-13), O'Hara evokes the disorienting impact movies have on our sense of "reality"; in this way, the poem comments on the vicarious thrill inherent in movie-going. This medium is so powerful that the viewers see and feel themselves in the midst of the action, despite its obvious unreality. We also see "our- / selves" "naked," in an extremely vulnerable position—a detail which highlights the seductive, erotic quality of the cinema's pleasures while emphasizing the negative effects such a seduction might have. The separation of "our-" and "selves" by a strange line break and hyphen stresses the fragmentation caused by this experience. Our identity shatters into an image of numerous selves, naked and spread-eagled to underscore our vulnerability to the godlike power of film.

While O'Hara's decision to place "our- / selves" on the screen is certainly meant to highlight the vicarious charge spectators receive from the movies, I think it also makes a more profound point that is parallel to Walter Benjamin's well-known argument about the cultural effects of the cinema. With the advent of film technology, Benjamin argues, "mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own

destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order" (242). In O'Hara's poem, a remarkably similar moment occurs in which we watch our "selves" become images on-screen, only to experience our own destruction as a troubling erotic and aesthetic pleasure.¹⁰

O'Hara stresses another facet of the movie-going experience: with film, a group of people undergo the same experience at the same time. He over-stresses the pronoun "we" throughout the poem (leaving "we" or "our" hanging at the end of lines 2, 12, 17, and 24) in order to emphasize that movie-going is a shared, democratic (or "mass") experience, unlike earlier forms of art: the poet, the reader, and, in fact, *everyone* has witnessed the cinema. Though one could read this repetition of "we" as O'Hara's effort to celebrate the communal aspect of film-going, one must be wary: as much as he relishes the accessibility and commonality of film, he is too much an individualist, too devoted to personal experience and eccentricity of vision, to feel truly comfortable with an experience that "we" all undergo at the *same* time in the *same* way. In his embrace of pop cultural forms and demotic speech, O'Hara is certainly drawn, like Whitman and Williams, to a more *democratic* notion of art, but one must be careful not to reduce O'Hara's sophisticated feelings about collective experience and democratized art to an attitude of simple populist celebration.¹¹ Robert von Hallberg, for example, critiques O'Hara's affection for pop culture, in general, for being grounded "in the considerable claim that the mass phase of cultural production entails a democratization of art that enriches life *simply and without fuss*" (*American Poetry and Culture* 195; italics added). In seeing O'Hara as a "leveler" who is content "with an absence of discrimination between high and low art," Von Hallberg overstates the case and underestimates O'Hara's complexity; clearly O'Hara's movie poems, like "An Image of Leda," do *not* assert that the collective and democratic experience of pop culture "enriches life simply and without fuss," but instead explore the often troubling dynamics of our tense relationship with popular culture.

Thus, O'Hara's overemphasis of the plural pronoun is intended to stress his discomfort with the group mentality pop culture demands. O'Hara echoes here, with a similar ambivalence in tone, Hart Crane's evocation of the mesmerized "multitudes bent toward some

flashing scene / . . . Foretold to other eyes on the same screen" (43). Walter Benjamin argues that the advent of film made it possible for the first time for art to be "a simultaneous collective experience" for the masses, unlike painting or literature, and O'Hara seems to be both drawn to and wary of the cinema because of this unique quality (238). Though attracted by the liberating potential of such a democratic group activity, O'Hara points out that movie-going is also disturbingly *passive*: "we sit" held "fast" and immobile, "in a darkened / room asking nothing," and later lie spread-eagled and naked on the ground. Benjamin describes the changes in "the mode of participation" that occur when the masses begin watching the mechanically-reproduced art of film, and points to the passivity involved in watching a movie, the fact that "this position requires no attention" (241). Surely O'Hara's depiction of the viewers as "spread-eagled" naked bodies, along with the sense of guilty pleasure underlying the poem, partially derives from his own anxiety about the kind of passive reception Benjamin finds in the cinematic experience. This ambivalence is further underscored by subtle wordplay in the phrase "what is / this light that / holds us fast?" The word "fast"—with its double meanings of *swift* and *firmly fixed or fastened*—demonstrates once more O'Hara's contradictory feelings towards this medium. He gestures towards the dangers of the new art form (its ability to hold us "fast," fixed, or trapped) but also its liberating advantages (the quickness and speed so often desired by O'Hara, and its ability to hold us *immediately* because of its rapid motion). The dual meanings of "fast" allow O'Hara to yoke together the "cruelty" and the "miracle" of film again.

When Benjamin discusses the dramatic difference between the experience of film and the experience of painting, he emphasizes the fact that film "assail[s] the spectator" with its "constant, sudden change" (238). A strangely similar conviction that film has the ability to attack its viewer is reflected in O'Hara's use of rapid cuts to mimic cinema's "constant, sudden change" and especially in his literal treatment of the notion that film can "assail the spectator" with the image of the movie "machine" flying nearer to the viewers' prostrate bodies. This subtext of anxiety about the group mentality, passivity, loss of agency, and brutal domination that one experiences at the movies provokes nervous, unstated questions: could this kind of collective

submission to the powers of cinema lead to a "mass culture" or a "mass movement" like fascism or communism? Is popular culture an instrument of oppression, an opiate, used to control the empty-headed masses?

Troubled by these implications, O'Hara suggests that we willingly submit, as a group, to the fantasy of the cinema, and even enjoy it—but not without a sense of *shame*. The image of "blackness" covering "the empty white space" stresses the *impurity* of the movie-going experience. For the intellectual or the artist, especially, the "impure," unsophisticated, and erotic experience at the movies is a kind of "guilty pleasure," a naughty taboo-breaking (or "slumming") that O'Hara purposely and repeatedly links to illicit sexuality.¹² O'Hara appropriates the unsettling sensual undercurrents in Yeats's poem in order to suggest that the cinema's ability to ravage us contains a disturbing quality that is simultaneously enticing, grotesque, and violent. The poem implies that as receivers of popular culture, we (perhaps too easily) give in to the charms of this powerful and fearful stranger, and let it violate us despite our better judgment. We do not ask for the cinema's degradations (in fact, we ask nothing "of the empty white / space but that it remain pure"), yet, ironically, we have chosen to come to the cinema in the first place. We wait with fearful and excited anticipation and, as with Yeats's Leda, there is "a sudden blow" and "suddenly despite us / it blackens."

O'Hara creates an implicit link between the movie's ability to violate its passive audience and the uneasiness intellectuals, in particular, feel about this supposedly unsophisticated art form. Thus, O'Hara is partially ironic when he says that the screen darkens "not by / the hand that holds / the pen" and notes warily that "there is no message," as if he were adopting for a moment the voice of a *Partisan Review* intellectual contemplating the movies. Unlike a poem or a painting, where an artist's hand blackens the blank space, a film seems to be immaculately conceived *ex nihilo*, as if it descends from nowhere, without human author and authority—a troubling possibility for the intellectual community. Like the typical postwar intellectuals sketched in Ross's book, the audience in O'Hara's poem is wary of succumbing to an experience in which, unlike "high" art, "there is no message"—either political or literary (11-12). Artists and thinkers should not opt for

"message-less" cultural experiences. While O'Hara himself may be uncomfortable with the lack of clear message and definitive authorship, we should recall that his subversive poetics was based from the start on the alternative conviction (shared by many proponents of postwar experimental poetry) that art need not contain a predetermined message or a static meaning. Indeed, for O'Hara, as he argued in another 1950 poem, "art is no dictionary" ("Memorial Day 1950," O'Hara CP 17). This anti-symbolist stance towards art was disconcerting for the New Critical establishment, with its battery of methods for uncovering and defining messages and meanings. Thus, while O'Hara knows that the lack of a "message" in popular film is threatening to the intellectual community (and while he may, as a thinker and writer, find this lack of significant content disconcerting), he implicitly finds this feature of cinema to be liberating, inspiring, and valuable for his poetic practice.

O'Hara's mixture of attraction and apprehension towards the cinema is further emphasized by the ambiguous questions of the second half of the poem, which imitate Yeats's frequent use of dramatic rhetorical questions:

Is
it our prayer or
wish that this
occur? Oh what is
this light that
holds us fast?

In the earlier poem, Yeats's questions highlight the inherent paradoxes of the victim's encounter with this alien force ("How can those terrified vague fingers push / The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?" [*Poems* 214]). The ending of O'Hara's poem similarly stresses the ambivalence of the movie-goer towards the paradoxes of the cinematic spectacle. At the same time, the ending exemplifies O'Hara's preoccupation with tensions between illusion and "reality," and the cinema's ability to create both:

Our
limbs quicken even
to disgrace under

this white eye as
if there were real
pleasure in loving
a shadow and caress-
ing a disguise!

The obvious artificiality of this medium does not deter us from feeling *jouissance*, from experiencing a sexual shiver at its caress, or a physical, vicarious response to on-screen sensuality. The movie—with its thrills, its motion, its larger-than-life mythic figures—seduces us, rapes us, even brings us to the point of orgasm. However, the very quickening of our limbs which we relish is the source of the guilt or “disgrace” we feel. We are troubled, as Laurence Goldstein notes in discussing these lines, partially because we know that “real pleasure” lies outside . . . where something more physical than shadows can be embraced” (158). Though I agree with Goldstein that the shadows do indicate the possibility that “real pleasure” lies elsewhere, I think the poem more importantly confronts a fundamental ambiguity of the cinematic (or any aesthetic) experience: which pleasure is “real”? After all, “our limbs” *do* “quicken” and we *can* feel the sensation of love while watching a movie. The end of the poem intentionally blurs the lines between “real” and “shadows,” in order to foreground a vexing question: what exactly happens to our perception of “reality” in light of the aesthetic experience of cinema? If such shadows are not “real,” then why does the “white eye” of the film projector have such a physical, visceral hold over us—why do our limbs tingle with orgasmic pleasure in response? Is the “immediacy” of a movie just a sham after all, a merely cunning fabrication of immediacy (O’Hara CP 231)?

O’Hara’s abiding preoccupation with the interplay between appearances and “reality” in art (and in life) is at the heart of this poem. If, as movie-goers, we are left with shadows that seem to bring us strange sensual pleasure, is that all we can expect when confronting film? Do we gain anything *more significant* from the experience? Because Yeats’s famous final line lingers behind O’Hara’s poem, this question about knowledge is posed in a subtle yet profound way. Yeats ponders the meaning of Leda’s ecstatic experience with Zeus, and asks, “Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” (*Poems* 215). While

cinema, as indifferent to us as Zeus is to Leda, dominates its audience with its images and makes us feel a mixture of fear and physical pleasure, a question remains implicit: do we gain *knowledge* when we submit to the power of the movies? Actors and cinematic images are but insubstantial shadows, gorgeous surfaces, much like the swan, which is only the form Zeus takes as his “disguise” when he descends to earth. But beneath the disguise and artifice of film, is there a potent force, “reality” or “being” inherent in the medium, like Zeus existing in all his divine power beneath the feathers of the swan? Hidden under the manufactured images and theatrical poses of Hollywood’s ravishing icons, do “true” selves pulse? O’Hara’s poem poses these questions but, typically, provides no definitive answers (and instead, ends with a provisional and inconclusive “as if” statement). O’Hara intends the disturbing and complex questions to linger, as they do in “Leda and the Swan,” indefinitely.

One of the issues deliberately not resolved in the poem, then, is the relationship between an “image” and the “real.” O’Hara conveys this ambivalence towards *images*, towards Crane’s “panoramic sleights”—those projected by film and poetry alike—both by including multiple, shifting images in the poem and by playing on the word “image” in the title. The title emphasizes that this poem is merely “An *Image* of Leda,” and not Leda herself—as if what we are about to read were once removed from the “real” Leda. However, the title begs us to consider some difficult questions: is O’Hara’s “image of Leda” any further distanced from the “real” Leda herself than Yeats’s image of Leda? Furthermore, is this poem itself any more or less an image than the shadows we lovingly caress in the cinema? Is poetry, after all, any further removed from, or any closer to, “reality” than movies? Isn’t a symbol, like those Yeats employs, or any image in poetry, just another kind of mask or shadow? Doesn’t all art contain fictive representations? The poem implicitly asserts that any kind of image or myth, whether it is the Greek Leda of legend, Yeats’s or O’Hara’s Leda, or an actress playing Leda on-screen, is an *illusion*. “An Image of Leda” asks us: which “image,” religious, poetic, cinematic, is more *unreal* than the next? They all mesmerize us, they all violate us with their power. Poetry, like the cinema and like Zeus, functions by seducing its audience with “panoramic sleights” and imagery—not with “real” caresses.¹³

In later movie poems, O'Hara builds on the themes and practices of "An Image of Leda" in diverse ways, while repeatedly probing, and exploding, the distinction between the "fantasy" of the cinematic experience and "reality" of mortal, physical existence. In the somewhat notorious poem "Ave Maria" and the lesser-known, but certainly more shocking, "In the Movies," O'Hara explores further the seriocomic link between cinematic spectacle and forbidden sexuality first enunciated in "An Image of Leda." In "Ave Maria" (1960), O'Hara brashly offers some hilarious advice to the forces of puritanical repression, dogmatism, and censorship that would compel us to disavow the mass media:

Mothers of America
 let your kids go to the movies!
 get them out of the house so they won't know what you're up to
 ...
 instead of hanging around the yard
 or up in their room
 hating you
 prematurely since you won't have done anything horribly mean yet
 except keeping them from the darker joys
 it's unforgivable the latter
 so don't blame me if you won't take this advice
 and the family breaks up
 and your children grow old and blind in front of a TV set
 seeing
 movies you wouldn't let them see when they were young
 (O'Hara CP 371-72)

O'Hara is clearly responding, with acerbic irony (which begins with the title's mock-religiosity and extends throughout the poem), to those intellectual currents of the 1950s which decried the violence and sexuality displayed on-screen in popular movies. O'Hara intends his poem as an ironic response to those who would argue, like Frederic Wertham in his 1957 book *Circle of Guilt*, that violence in the mass media *causes* children to commit violent acts on the street, and that society must protect children from pop culture and censor its content. Attacks on popular culture often point out its power to "seduce" us, and O'Hara deliberately literalizes this trope (as he does in "An Image of Leda" and "In the Movies") to satirize such a view and to create this poem's central drama:¹⁴

they may even be grateful to you
 for their first sexual experience
 which only cost you a quarter

... leaving the movie before it's over
 with a pleasant stranger whose apartment is in the Heaven on Earth Bldg
 near the Williamsburg Bridge

O'Hara's cheerful condoning of this erotic union is meant as a blast against the conventional decorum of postwar "academic" poetry and as a shock to complacent middle-class sensibilities. The movies are seen as a comic locus of permanent and on-going adolescent erotic fantasy, a site of forbidden homosexual encounter, in which the worst fears of all the repressors are ironically realized. However, O'Hara's engagement with popular culture is multi-layered: his ironic tone mocks both the would-be censors *and* the youthful "fans" preoccupied with popular culture (these kids who are starving to be "truly entertained either way" [O'Hara CP 372]), while still conveying the "real" potency and pleasures inherent in the movie-going experience. He allows both the critique and the celebration to remain suspended in mid-air.

If the overdramatic tone of "Ave Maria" is meant to poke fun at the absurdity of a culture obsessed with either censoring movies or enjoying their naughty titillation, there is also, as always with O'Hara, the note of seriousness that accompanies his explorations of the cinema's fantasy. The poem also suggests that in the twentieth century it is *cinema* that fosters and nourishes the growth of our sensibilities, as "fresh air" or mountain streams may have in an earlier time (O'Hara CP 371); therefore, we should not deny this formative experience to our children or ourselves, nor should it be disregarded as trivial. Thus, O'Hara's question — "but what about the soul / that grows in darkness, embossed in silvery images?" — is an urgent reminder that contemporary intellectuals must consider this new experience's ramifications for our sense of reality. Like O'Hara's other movie poems, "Ave Maria" questions the firm distinctions between "real" life and the life nurtured "in darkness" by the "silvery images" of film. It is important that the "darker joys" which O'Hara would preserve in the name of freedom occur, in "Ave Maria," both *in* the theater and *outside* it — in the

“real” world with the “pleasant stranger.” But, then again, how “real” is the potential tryst O’Hara describes? Where exactly would the “Heaven on Earth Bldg” be anyway? Once again, O’Hara portrays the cinematic experience as a complex blurring of fantasy and reality.

Another example of this disorienting juxtaposition of image and actuality occurs in the poem “In the Movies” (1954), which describes an experience at the theater that is at once illusory and viscerally “real”:

and the blood in my pants mounts to the stars
as I ponder the silver square.

...
There *seems* to be a *ghost* up there,
brushing off his gems and plumes.
It’s a great feathery candle glowing in the rain
of my fine retrieving gaze,
the large feathered prick that impaled me in the grass.

(O’Hara CP 207; italics added)

Like “Ave Maria” and “An Image of Leda,” this poem links movie-going with illicit sexuality, only here the erotic experience is more overt and more luridly described. But the act of “loving / a shadow / and caress- / ing a disguise” (O’Hara CP 36) in the theater, which we confronted in “An Image of Leda,” is again shown to be a complicated and contradictory experience that is as much imagined and illusory as it is “real” and physical. “In the Movies” further blurs this distinction between on-screen fantasy and “real” physical pleasure by intertwining surrealistic depictions of the cinematic experience occurring “up there,” between “ghosts” on “the silver square,” with what seems to be a fractured narrative of a “real” experience down here: homosexual oral sex in the theater while a movie is playing. Note the ambiguity in the title itself: is the experience the poem relates found “in the movies” (as in “inside the theater, in ‘real’ life”) or “in the movies” (as in “found on-screen, in images”)? This distinction is never made clear, because, O’Hara implicitly asserts, it cannot be clearly made to begin with.¹⁵

Although O’Hara repeatedly characterizes the movies as a realm of erotic fantasy and vicarious thrill, this is not a merely superficial comment on the “movie magic” of Hollywood. He suggests that there is something more profound about the experience than sensory stimu-

lation. Indeed, the strange temporal quality of the medium also fascinates him: its paradoxical ability to entice with its fleeting pleasures at the same time that it exhibits permanence and imperviousness to time:

I bought a ticket so I could be alone. . . .
. . . with my death written in smoke
outside this theatre where I receive my mail.
(O’Hara CP 207)

Inside the solitary cinematic experience, real time is suspended: one can love the delicious shadows indefinitely, can evade the pressures of a world *in* time. That mortal world is symbolized here by the speaker’s own death lingering outside the borders of film, where the daily punctuality and burdens of the mail’s arrival represent “real” life. The cinematic world provides a temporary, albeit illusory alternative to the realm of suffering, transience, and dying, the very human and fragile universe O’Hara’s poetry so often confronts.

However, the marvellous alternate universe of cinematic gods and goddesses is ultimately as fragile as our own. This recognition leads O’Hara to write several poems which urgently pray for the “reels of celluloid” to “roll on . . . as the great earth rolls on!” (O’Hara CP 233). “To the Film Industry in Crisis” (1955), written at the pivotal moment when the advent of television seemed to be robbing the film industry of its audiences, addresses the possibility that the movies may be in their death throes (O’Hara CP 232). Once again, O’Hara shows his sensitivity to the pressure of new technologies on aesthetic experience, as he laments that the development of television—an even more democratic and accessible medium than cinema—may supplant his beloved “silvery images” (O’Hara CP 372). Rather than celebrating current movies of the 1950s in his defense of cinema, O’Hara instead offers an ebullient catalog of movie stars and scenes from the heyday of Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s in order to connect the potency of the movies to his own adolescence and to sexual vitality in general. The poem underlines O’Hara’s fascination with the seemingly timeless images which nourished his youth and sensibility, as his own “soul” grew “in [the] darkness” of America’s movie theaters (O’Hara CP 372).

Although “To the Film Industry” is overtly a defense of cinema, it maintains, as do O’Hara’s other movie poems, a wariness of what

Goldstein calls the “nearly irresistible attractions” of movies (14). It registers this wariness by mocking the strong pull of Hollywood’s “star system” and its “industry” (O’Hara CP 233). This is accomplished by means of an ironic imitation of fan enthusiasm, which manages to be both satirical and truly celebratory (“you, Motion Picture Industry, it’s you I love!”). As he so often does, O’Hara attacks the solemnity of “high” culture, and praises the vitality, lightness, and speed of cinema in contrast:

Not you, lean quarterlies and swarthy periodicals
with your studious incursions towards the pomposity of ants,
nor you, experimental theatre . . . nor you,
promenading Grand Opera, obvious as an ear (though you
are close to my heart), but you, Motion Picture Industry,
it’s you I love!

(O’Hara CP 232)

O’Hara uses the theatricality of the camp aesthetic to “dethrone the serious,” to use Susan Sontag’s definition of camp.¹⁶ After literally dethroning literary journals, drama, and opera, he chooses cinema as the art form most worth preserving and admiring. In the poem, O’Hara pits the pleasures of the movies—which are, once again, eroticized—against both the pomposity of “high” culture and the repressive environment of his “starved nurse” and “the Catholic Church” (O’Hara CP 232).¹⁷ The movies are praised for their “heavenly dimensions and reverberations and iconoclasm,” the implication being that the “glorious Silver Screen” is no less absurd and artificial, and no less powerful, than the Catholic Church. As with the divinity-metaphor that underlies “An Image of Leda,” O’Hara stresses (with some carefully pointed irony) that the movies are our present-day version of mythology and religion, and movie stars our current incarnations of divinity.

As I have suggested, when O’Hara extends the boundaries of poetry to include popular culture, he often does so by echoing and subverting poetic tradition, stretching its resources to fit current particulars. While the “Leda” poem uses and abuses the poetic tropes of Yeats, in “To the Film Industry” O’Hara adopts long Whitmanesque lines to catalogue the wild diversity of film. In this way, O’Hara con-

sciously updates Whitman’s attempt to encompass the multiplicity of American experience through the listing of the names, places, activities, and people that crowd the country’s landscape. We have moved, O’Hara suggests, from Whitman’s “pure contralto . . . in the organloft” and “carpenter dress[ing] his plank” to the mid-twentieth century where “Elizabeth Taylor [is] blossoming” instead (Whitman 37; O’Hara CP 232). It is significant that O’Hara’s catalog is not a static enumeration of the names of movie greats nor fixed verbal snapshots of their faces. Instead, these images of movies past writhe and wriggle with life, mimicking a movie montage:

Ginger Rogers with her pageboy bob like a sausage
on her *shuffling* shoulders . . .
Miriam Hopkins *dropping* her champagne glass off Joel McCrea’s yacht
and *crying* into the dappled sea . . .
Cornel Wilde *coughing* blood on the piano keys while Merle Oberon *berates*,
Marilyn Monroe in her little spike heels *reeling* through Niagara Falls . . .
and Jean Harlow *reclining* and *wiggling*, and Alice Faye *reclining*
and *wiggling* and *singing*. . .

(O’Hara CP 232; italics added)

With its repetitions of present participles, its verbs in the continuous present, and its exhausting headlong rhythm, the poem attempts to approximate and to preserve the “chaotic splendor,” the action which O’Hara finds so stimulating about *motion* pictures (Perloff, O’Hara 21). However, O’Hara deliberately avoids memorializing his beloved deities, fixing them as frozen monuments, for O’Hara disdains “all things that don’t change, / photographs, / monuments. . . .” Instead he attempts to capture their energy, variety, and motion so that even if the movies were to become obsolete in the age of television, and could no longer “illumine space with [their] marvellous appearances” in the theater, at least within the space of O’Hara’s ode the delightful artifice and action of the cinema will “roll on” indefinitely.

In addition to echoing Whitman in this gathering together of diversity, O’Hara also appropriates and parodies the use of the apostrophe from Romantic poetry in order to link the movies with transcendent sublimity. In this way, he ironically suggests that while Ginger Rogers is not quite Aphrodite, and while experiencing the cinema is not quite the peak of Mont Blanc, such joys are practically the most we

can expect to have in postwar American life. At the end of the poem, O'Hara directly addresses the film industry: "It is a divine precedent / you perpetuate! Roll on, reels of celluloid, as the great earth rolls on!" (O'Hara CP 233). Goldstein points out that this "rhapsodic" prayer for the continuance of film in the final line is a parody of Byron's "famous apostrophe" in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean—roll!" (163). However, Goldstein does not explain the significance of the allusion. At the end of Byron's poem, where the line appears, the poet contrasts the purity and solitude of the natural world—represented by the ocean—with the ruin humankind strews about the world. Byron speaks of his former adolescent delight in the sea in sexualized terms that resemble O'Hara's erotic (and pubescent) attachment to movies: "And I have loved thee, Ocean! and my joy / Of youthful sports was on thy breast to be / Borne . . . from a boy / I wantoned with thy breakers" (201). O'Hara turns to Byron, and creates this equivalence between "Ocean" and film, as a way of ironically commenting on the poetic tradition, its outdated and overly serious celebration of nature as transcendent; he substitutes today's "reels of celluloid" for yesterday's "ocean," the artificial and the modern for the natural and archaic. Furthermore, O'Hara's tongue-in-cheek tone shatters any sense of reverence towards the subject that may exist in the Byron passage.

However, the allusion also serves another purpose: it links Byron's Romantic contrast of humankind and the natural world to O'Hara's semi-serious attitudes about similar issues. Byron extols the ocean as a transcendent alternative to human mortality and evil; O'Hara similarly celebrates the purity and innocence of the cinema in contrast to the sorrows of mortal experience. (Recall that it is "In the Movies" that O'Hara can escape time, "with my death written in smoke / outside this theatre where I receive my mail" [O'Hara CP 207].) Through such postmodernist parody of his predecessors, O'Hara conveys his giddy faith and partially disillusioned recognition that the cinema is the closest we can come in our age to an ideal expression of perfection and to release from mortality.¹⁸

Despite O'Hara's evocation of this "marvellous" perfection, he is painfully aware of the gap between the glossy image of movie stars and the "reality" behind their idealized representations. Just as the

"Leda" poem foregrounds the confusing blur of on-screen "image" with actuality, "To the Film Industry" explores the dynamic interrelations between larger-than-life Hollywood icons, film images, and the "real" world of time, pain, and loss. Goldstein rightly points out the irony that "time has already finished off the careers of some of his actors . . . the toll of names in the catalog is accompanied by the tolling of bells in the distance" (163). Neither the adolescent passions of the viewers nor the world of the silver screen is immortal, nor can these deities truly exist as perfect and two-dimensional spectacles. Through the irony and humorously inflated tone of "To the Film Industry," O'Hara shatters what Benjamin calls "the phony spell of a commodity," while still delighting in its sheer phoniness (231).

Another poem that further emphasizes this double attitude of reverence and wariness towards pop image and icon is "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)". The well-known poem is, of course, exemplary of a camp aesthetic, as O'Hara adopts an irreverently *faux-sérieux* stance towards "low" culture in order "to dethrone the serious":¹⁹

Lana Turner has collapsed!
 I was trotting along and suddenly
 it started raining and snowing
 and you said it was hailing
 but hailing hits you on the head
 hard so it was really snowing and
 raining and I was in such a hurry
 to meet you but the traffic
 was acting exactly like the sky
 and suddenly I see a headline
 LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
 there is no snow in Hollywood
 there is no rain in California
 I have been to lots of parties
 and acted perfectly disgraceful
 but I never actually collapsed
 oh Lana Turner we love you get up
 (O'Hara CP 449)

As in his other film poems, O'Hara takes an ironically affectionate stance towards the banality of popular culture, again using a theatrical and slightly hysterical tone which magnifies to mock-heroic pro-

portions the actress's collapse. The casual air of the poem, emphasized by the breathless, unpunctuated colloquial lines ("I was trotting along and suddenly / it started raining and snowing / and you said it was hailing"), is a deliberate slap in the face of the artistic "establishment," as is its overdramatic lament for the ailing Lana. She is a base pop icon whose entrance into the domain of "high art" is intended to shock the audience. The oft-mentioned story about the poem's origin is significant: it was written on the Staten Island ferry one wintry evening, while O'Hara was on the way to a poetry reading he was to give with Robert Lowell. Because O'Hara had always associated Lowell's poetry with the establishment, with a kind of pompous, false, overly traditional and high poetic mode of writing, this extemporaneous, unconventional little poem was presumably intended to be provocative. At the reading, O'Hara announced he had just written the poem *en route*, and read it to an amused audience. When Lowell's turn to read came, "he prefaced his poems by apologizing somewhat disingenuously for not having written a poem on the spot. His implication was that writing poems was not such a casual affair for him."²⁰

Not unsurprisingly, Lowell seems to have overlooked the underlying gravity and richness of "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)". In this brief poem, O'Hara's distress is palpable, his recognition of the ubiquity of transience (both Turner's and his own) signified by the sudden crumbling of the once-powerful contemporary goddess. What is one to do, the poem asks us, when the "marvellous appearance" of an immortal image like Turner is punctured, when the deity is revealed to be as fragile and mortal as the rest of us? With his mixture of irony and genuine concern, O'Hara sees beyond "the phony spell of the commodity," to urge us to think about the intriguing combination of godlike and human qualities in these "stars" we so revere, and to resist—or at least question—the idealized images of the marketplace.

Here as in his other film poems, O'Hara measures the gap between the fictive and the real. From the midst of the slings and arrows of actual life where it is "raining and snowing . . . snowing and raining" (where it seems possible, or even likely, for "real" people to collapse), O'Hara contemplates the magical, golden, endless world of movies: "there is no snow in Hollywood / there is no rain in California." But that perfect coast is a world now questioned, now suddenly vulnerable:

how could Lana Turner, at home in this sunny California of dreams, have collapsed? Perhaps the realm where stars reside is all hollow illusion, misleading fantasy, myth. If only Lana would "get up," resist time and fate, one's faith in the power of cinema's illusion could remain intact a bit longer. The line "oh Lana Turner we love you get up," which Andrew Ross rightly sees as an ironic "survivalist exhortation," an example of "camp's insistence that the show must go on, that irony and parody can redeem even the most tragic *and* sordid events, which color everyday life" (Ross, "Death of Lady Day" 387), also expresses an urgency, an earnest though doomed will to believe that the space created by cinematic images can be impervious to temporality. In this respect, the poem's conclusion seems to echo the mixture of comedy and urgency in the prayer for continuance at the end of "To the Film Industry": "Roll on, reels of celluloid, as the great earth rolls on!" (O'Hara CP 233). The poem shifts from the past to the present tense, and the immediacy of the final line, theatrical and dramatic, both mocks and pays tribute to our cultural need, as "movie fans," for the "marvellous appearances" of the glittering stars to remain intact and unchanging. In O'Hara's movie poems, this desire for the cinema to endure as a site of endless youth, sensual vitality, and pure fantasy is constantly undermined by doubt, and by the recognition that both illusion and "reality" are fragile and evanescent.

An understanding of O'Hara's infatuation with the movies reveals a great deal about the contradictions that make his poetry so interesting and his influence so pervasive. As we have seen, the cinematic experience is at once a cultural and aesthetic phenomenon that engrosses and troubles him, as well as an important model and parallel for his own writing and conception of poetry. O'Hara's simultaneous embrace of and critical attention to the popular arts in his poetry make him a pivotal figure in the development of both contemporary poetry and postwar cultural attitudes towards high and low art. When viewed against the backdrop of literary culture in the 1950s, in the context of the debates about the mass media's effects on society and about the intellectual's role in relation to pop culture, O'Hara's poetic response to the movies comes to life as an important witness. His movie poems indicate how postwar American poetry, O'Hara's art, and the culture of (what we now call) "postmodernism" evolved out

of "anxieties about image multiplication, self-definition, and cultural power" that arise with the growth of popular culture and the mass media (Goldstein 14). In such poems as "An Image of Leda," "Ave Maria," "In the Movies," "To the Film Industry in Crisis," and "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)," O'Hara's encounters with pop culture do not reveal him to be, as Robert von Hallberg claims, merely a "leveler," one who expresses "attractive but blunt contentment with an absence of discrimination between high and low art" (*American Poetry and Culture* 195). Such an interpretation of O'Hara reduces the complexity of his response: in fact, these poems can be seen as a kind of cultural criticism, in which the poet "monitors the aesthetic habits" of his movie-mad, image-saturated society and writes poems that at least question, if not resist, the commodification of superficial images in the marketplace (Goldstein 8). O'Hara both delights in and fears the disorienting impact such a proliferation of images in the twentieth century will have on our sense of "reality" and art. He celebrates the thrill and "vulgarity" of the movies and their stars, while deflating their god-like status through irony and camp; he conveys excitement about the artifice and motion of the new medium along with a wariness towards the group mentality of mass spectacle, the passive consumption of pop culture, and the seductive quality of mass art icons and images. At the heart of these tense responses to the "cruel miracle" of the cinema flicker crucial paradoxes that engender so much postmodernist art, paradoxes that make O'Hara's poetry so prophetic, so influential and "at least as alive as the vulgar" (O'Hara CP 231).

NOTES

1. James Breslin's perceptive essay on O'Hara makes a persuasive case that this opposition provides "O'Hara's most pervasive contradictions, and many of his poems construct a world of display, disguise, and theatricality in which O'Hara exists with the same mixture of delight and uneasiness with which he speeds along the noontime sidewalks of New York" (231). I have taken Breslin's remark that "one place to locate O'Hara's fascination with illusion and appearance is in his film poems" (231-32) as a cue to look more closely than previous critics have (including Breslin himself) at the origins and results of this fascination, as it manifests itself in O'Hara's movie poems.
2. Perloff, *O'Hara* 21. For accounts of O'Hara's much-noticed interest in achieving speed and quickness, see, for example, Perloff, *O'Hara* 20-21; James Breslin 211, 215.

3. Hutcheon, *Poetics* 223. I do not mean to suggest that Linda Hutcheon's version of "the postmodern" should be taken as the *only* definition of this obviously slippery concept. Rather, Hutcheon's argument, which is both a fairly representative and an influential account of postmodernist aesthetics, can help shed light on the qualities I am isolating in O'Hara's movie poems. See Hutcheon, *Poetics*, esp. 3-21 ("Theorizing the Postmodern"); also, on the blurring of high and low culture as a defining feature of postmodernism, see Huyssen (178-221: "Mapping the Postmodern"); for a readable and informative overview of the entire debate over "postmodernism," see Bertens.
4. Numerous critics have discussed O'Hara in relation to the movies, but none with enough attention to O'Hara's fascination with the cinema's contradictions, to the cultural context, nor to the significance of these poems to postmodernist poetry and to O'Hara's work as a whole. See, for example, Goldstein's useful chapter in *The American Poet at the Movies*, "The Audience Vanishes: Frank O'Hara and the Mythos of Decline" (151-74). For a brief essay on O'Hara and film, see Elledge, "Never Argue"; Elledge counts fifty-four poems in O'Hara's *Collected Poems* which "rely on film in varying degrees" (350). See also Perloff, who focuses on O'Hara's use of cinematic *technique* (O'Hara 49, 120-124), and James Breslin, who notes that "O'Hara's fascination with illusion and appearance" underlies his film poems (231-32). Breslin's essay on O'Hara briefly discusses "An Image of Leda," but does not engage in a full analysis of O'Hara's film poems, except for an insightful and thorough discussion of "The Three-Penny Opera" (232-33). Also see Gooch (34-36) on O'Hara's early love of movies.
5. See Ross's chapter, "Containing Culture in the Cold War" in *No Respect* (42-64). For more complete discussion of the dimensions of this debate, in addition to Ross, see Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture*; and for the contemporary debates, see the 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium entitled *Our Country and Our Culture* (Phillips and Rahv).
6. On the effort to suppress the negative effects of movies through censorship, see Schumach; Sklar, 122-140, 161-194; also see Note 9.
7. For two brief accounts of the "For James Dean" controversy, see Gooch (268) and Smith (19); also, see Sam Astrachan, who quotes the third stanza of O'Hara's poem, and then writes: "That Dean was killed in a traffic accident that he was certainly at least partially responsible for is forgotten. Yet Mister O'Hara is as correct as anyone in his judgment formulated in the mumble-jumble of Dean morality. Why can't we blame society for making us find release in speed?" (17).
8. Goldstein 4. For one of the few extended readings of "An Image of Leda," see Goldstein 156-58. Although Goldstein usefully discusses the vulnerability of the viewer in relation to the cinema, and the obvious mixture of fear and desire that energizes the poem, he does not delve deeply enough into the complexities of this poem, and thus simplifies its exploration of the tension between "real" and "image." For other brief commentaries on the poem, see Vendler ("Virtue of the Alterable," 244-45) and James Breslin (232).

9. For an example of the contemporary controversies about the mass media's negative influence, see, for example, Frederic Wertham, *The Circle of Guilt* (1957) and *A Sign for Cain* (1966); and Michael Maccoby's review of the earlier book. Also, see Sklar's chapters "Movie-Made Children" (122-40) and "The Moguls at Bay and the Censors' Triumph" (161-94), and Schumach.

10. See also Benjamin's remark, in a footnote to "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," that with film "mass reproduction is aided especially by the reproduction of masses." He argues that "the masses are brought face to face with themselves" (as they are in O'Hara's poem) by the reproduction of images that resemble themselves. Benjamin emphasizes the political efficacy of such technology for mass movements like fascism and Communism, much more so than in O'Hara's work, where such a fear is only subtly hinted at (251 n21).

11. In this regard, it is useful to consider as another precursor poem for "An Image of Leda," William Carlos Williams's poem "At the Ball Game," in which the poet describes the mingling of beauty and terror inherent in the masses at a baseball game. Like O'Hara, Williams is troubled by the passive response to entertainment ("the crowd is laughing . . . seriously / without thought"); Williams chillingly stresses the potential for such crowds to lead to violent mob action ("it is deadly, terrifying—It is the Inquisition, the / Revolution") (Williams CP 1: 233). Both poets explore the thoughtless passivity mass culture demands, the herd mentality and lack of individuality it fosters, and the domineering power of its illusory images.

12. See "Ave Maria" (O'Hara CP 371) and "In the Movies" (O'Hara CP 206); both poems are discussed below.

13. For another excellent example of O'Hara "dramatiz[ing] with maximum sophistication the moments of contact" between cinematic and poetic realms of being (Goldstein 4), see "The Three-Penny Opera" (O'Hara CP 32), written at the same time (1950) as "An Image of Leda." See Libby ("at least four types of reality flow together in magic changes" [148-49]); and James Breslin, who argues that the poem does not offer "a fixed reference point that would permit us to discriminate between what's real and what's imaginary, [so that] reality itself is enigmatic, fictive, and theatrical" (232-33).

14. For an example of this common rhetorical emphasis on "seduction," see also Wertham's 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, a study of the negative impact of comic books on children.

15. It is also significant, though outside the scope of this argument, that O'Hara's homosexual encounter in the theater is with a black man, as this presumably controversial detail further emphasizes that the movies, for O'Hara, are a site of transgression on many fronts. This film poem breaks taboos by frankly talking about sex itself, about same-sex desire, and about interracial sexual desire, all in the context of movie-watching and movie-going.

16. See Sontag ("Notes on 'Camp,'" 288); Kikel, who quotes Sontag on camp in relation to O'Hara (338); and Ross's effort to define and delimit camp (*No Respect*, Ch. 5 "Uses of Camp," esp. 146-47).

17. The original manuscript for this poem has the word "mother" crossed out and "starched nurse" written in. The earlier version underscores the relationship between the repressive forces here and the puritanical "mothers of America" in the later poem "Ave Maria" (see Donald Allen's note, O'Hara CP 536).

18. By "postmodernist parody" I again refer to what Hutcheon calls the "installing and ironizing" gestures of postmodernist art which summon up echoes of past texts only to subvert them. She sees this stance of "critical irony" towards the past and its texts as a pervasive feature of "postmodernism" (see *Poetics* 4-5, and 124-140).

19. Andrew Ross notes the poem ends with O'Hara's "most celebrated camp line" ("Death of Lady Day," 387). Also see Kikel (338-39) for a brief discussion of this poem and camp.

20. Gooch 387. On this event, see also Allen's note in O'Hara CP 554; Perloff, *O'Hara* 13.