

Boyd McDonald's Eye for Innuendo

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IN *CRUISING THE MOVIES: A Sexual Guide to "Oldies" on TV* (1985), Boyd McDonald scrutinizes the anatomy of Ronald and Nancy Reagan with maniacal glee. The President is not only flabby and "sloppy assed," but also has tits and wears more makeup than Lucille Ball. In an essay on *John Loves Mary* (1949), Boyd writes mainly about Reagan's curiously feminine legs, and speculates that this display of flesh—he appears in the movie without pants not once but twice—is proof of the existence of heterosexuality in Hollywood. A homosexual would not have allowed such a casting error to occur. Reagan's lack of masculine attributes caused him to lash out at men whom he (or his speechwriters) perceived to be less than full men, the homosexuals. The First Lady, a hard and remorseless political creature, exuded a skeletal and artificial femininity; she stayed thin by living on grapes and regularly flew a manicurist in from California to apply five coats of polish to her fingernails. In response to Kenneth Anger's claim that he had obtained a photograph of Mrs. Reagan's "twat" (taken back when she was Nancy Davis), Boyd asks to hear from any reader who has a picture of her "butt-hole."

These sorts of barbs, once common, are no longer much heard among cinema spectators, now that "oldies," which had formerly served as cheap programming for revival houses and independent television stations, have been elevated to serious archive screenings and expensive cable channels, where the odor of sanctity clings to them. Going to the movies is not the collective ritual it once was, and Internet blogs, written by lone spectators, are hardly an adequate replacement for spontaneous audience participation. Recent attempts to rehabilitate Reagan's image—"he wasn't as bad as the Bushes," et cetera—cry out for renewed expressions of irreverence and further reminders that there was a time when, as Boyd told an interviewer, "It was shocking to have people like Nixon and Reagan in minor offices, let alone President."

At the end of *Cruising the Movies*, Boyd admits that the book "is not strictly about movies; it frequently uses them as an excuse for political, social, sexual, psychological, biographical, and autobiographical comments." Funnier than Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (1986), more immediate in its style than Mark Feeny's *Nixon at the Movies* (2004), and haunting the scene as a kind of tactless plebeian predecessor of

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This piece is excerpted from his Introduction to a newly published edition of Boyd McDonald's Cruising the Movies (Semiotext(e)). Dropped passages are indicated by an ellipsis (...).

both books, *Cruising the Movies* was (and continues to be) a rare thing: a book of popular film criticism that is both unabashedly sexual and unapologetically political.

Boyd McDonald died on September 18, 1993. His obituary was a model of discretion: "Born July 11, 1925 in Lake Preston, South Dakota. He served in the US Army in World War II, attended and graduated Harvard University. Upon graduation he worked for *Time* magazine and IBM Corp. He pursued freelance writing up until the time of his death." After twenty years of what Boyd described as hack work, writing and editing copy for large corporations and nearly drinking himself to death, he dried out, went on welfare, and moved into a single room occupancy (SRO) hotel on New York's pre-gentrified Upper West Side. There he watched old movies at all hours of the day and night on a small black and white television set.

Like many of his fellow SRO residents, Boyd pursued something vaguely disreputable on the streets of New York, and from the late-1960s onward his "freelance writing" consisted chiefly of editing a series of chapbooks called *Straight to Hell* (STH), compendia of "true homosexual experiences" collected from readers' contributions of their own personal stories.

The direct yet suggestive title *Straight to Hell* was followed by various subtitles over the years: *Archives of the American Academy of Homosexual Research* (in homage to Alfred Kinsey, whose work Boyd saw himself as continuing), *The Manhattan Review of Unnatural Acts* (an acknowledgment of *The New York Review of Books*, where Boyd

placed an advertisement soliciting contributions to *Straight to Hell*), *U.S. Chronicle of Crimes Against Nature*, and many other parodic combinations of important-sounding words. *Straight to Hell* offered its readers the truth about sex between men, rigorously edited for style but never diluted or censored. In equal measure masturbation fodder and fine literature, this modest publication acquired a wide and appreciative following, including Gore Vidal (who called it "one of the best radical papers in the country"), William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Christopher Isherwood, and Tennessee Williams.

The original *Straight to Hell* chapbooks were compiled in paperbacks with admirably blunt titles: *Meat, Flesh, Sex, Cum, Smut, Juice, Wads, Cream, Filth, Skin, Raunch, Lewd, and Scum*. Boyd's one book that did not belong to this series, *Cruising the Movies*, collected the columns he wrote for the gay literary magazine *Christopher Street* between 1983 and 1985. While it did not appeal to readers' prurient interests as directly as did the STH anthologies—and consequently sold a fraction of the copies they did—*Cruising the Movies* gives a sense of more rarefied (and only a little less clandestine) obsessions animating urban gay life, specifically the cinephilia in which Boyd's gen-