Cinematic shorthand

Here's a challenge for the budding film title designer in all of us: come up with a credible opening sequence for a movie about a transgendered East German rock singer whose botched sex-change operation leaves one sixth of his penis intact. Remember that the lead actor also co-wrote the script and he's the director too. And there's not much money because most of it has been blown on production. Oh, and it's a musical. Off you go.

The movie is, of course, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* – a pun-addled film title if ever there was one. And Marlene McCarty's titles, created with the assistance of Andy Capelli, are as wacky as the movie's opening: the live performance of a raucous rock'n'roll number ('I'm the new Berlin Wall, baby – try tearing me down!') by Hedwig and his band in a cheesy mid-West restaurant filled with bewildered or plain disapproving guests. The anarchic letterforms of a colour-blind madman wheel and flash across the screen, jostling with Hedwig for attention. McCarty takes aim at the movie audience with spinning wheels and lurid 3D titles, while Hedwig flicks his outrageous, platinum sausage curls at the bewildered diners. A heady brew indeed.

Popular accounts of the recent history of film title design tend to rely either on a predictable invocation of famous names (most likely beginning with Saul Bass and ending with Kyle Cooper), or focus on the aesthetic innovations of a particular period as somehow definitive of the industry as a whole; or they do both. In her tongue-in-cheek account of this way of thinking about graphic design history, former *Eye* columnist Jessica Helfand recently suggested that a period of self-conscious 'leaves-and-twigs' eco-design had been eclipsed by a David Carson-inspired 'Age of the Blur,' which had then been superseded by Cooper's 'Cult of the Scratchy' – as heralded in the titles for the movie *Se7en*.

Rather than simply adding one more name to the film-title hall of fame, this article seeks to complicate such received ideas by narrowing in on an individual whose work, mainly on independent movies, is much less easy to characterise in terms of an overall look or style. Over the past decade, Marlene McCarty has been involved in relatively low-budget projects directed by the likes of Rose Troche, Mary Harron and Cindy Sherman. All of these movies have demanded a constant process of project-by-project resourcefulness, and this is a direct reflection of the comparatively limited production finances (and hence the miniscule budgets for titles) available to directors working outside the Hollywood mainstream.

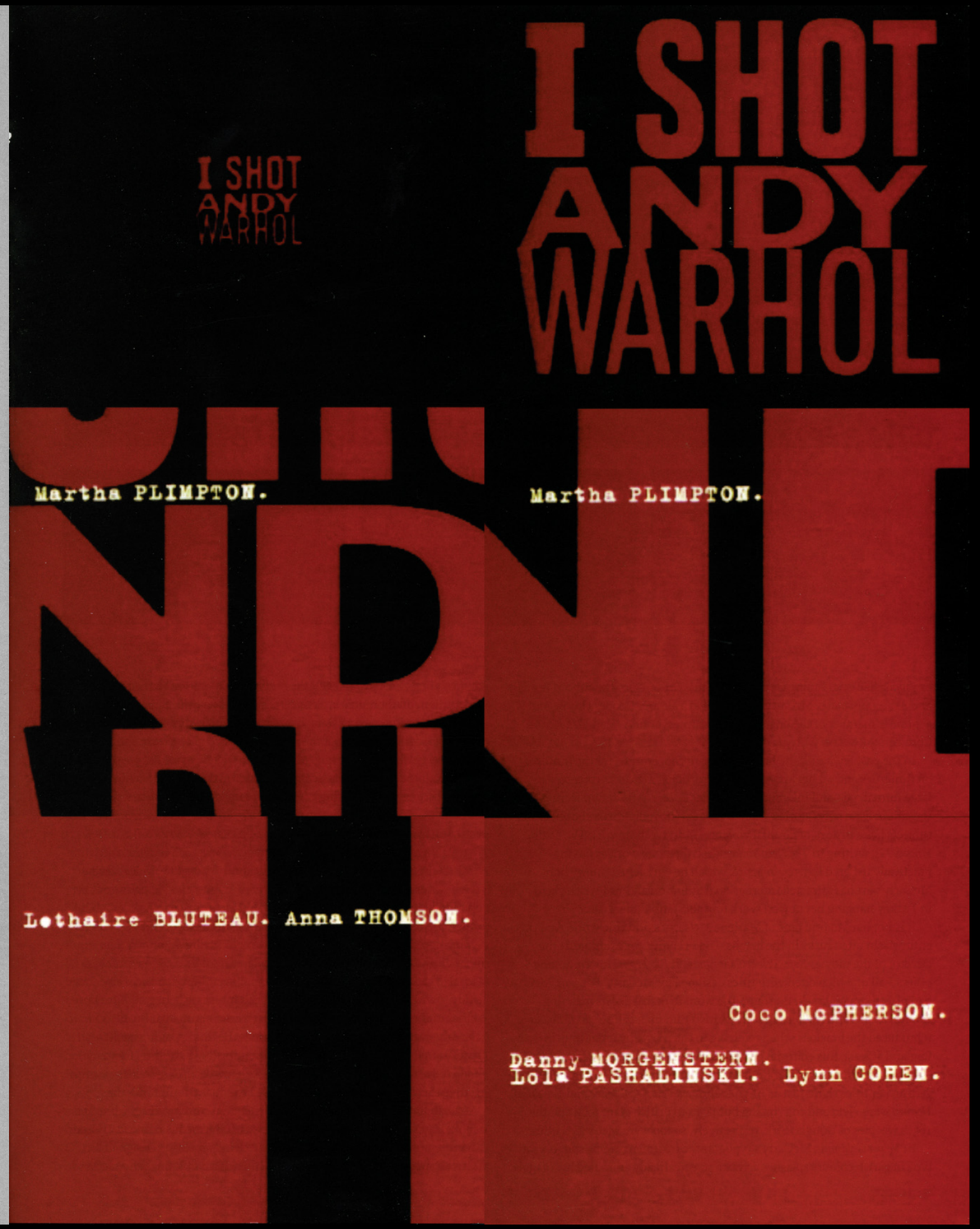
Trained in Cincinnati and Basel, Switzerland (in film animation and video), McCarty worked at Seigal & Gale, The Museum of Modern Art, and M&CO before co-founding the design company Bureau in 1989. McCarty, along with business partner Donald Moffett, built a roster of socially

Designer profile
Marlene McCarty

50

Commitment and brevity inform the film titles of Marlene McCarty

Cinema	Gran Fury	By Matt Soar	→
Typography	New Queer Cinema		
Film titles	Conceptual panache		pages 18-29
ACT UP			



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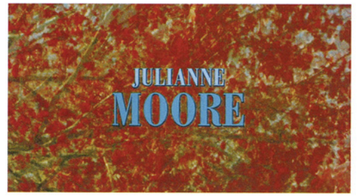
I Shot Andy Warhol

1 (previous page). Randy Balsmeyer of Big Film Design commented that, in general, 'type can communicate a lot of things instantly that would take much more time and detail if you tried to do the same thing with live pictures.' As he points out, using Courier in the credits often indicates that a movie is about the writing process. In *I Shot Andy Warhol*, McCarty combined this notion with a vivid pop-art graphic that practically pops out of the screen, only to float gently across it as alternating fields of red and black. The pacing is provided by John Cale's staccato-string score.

Far From Heaven

2. Todd Haynes: 'It was definitely the love of films by Douglas Sirk, a Danish-born émigré, who worked at Universal Studios in the 1950s, that first inspired me to make a 50s-style melodrama . . . This opening credit sequence is probably most inspired by the opening credits of his film *All That Heaven Allows*, which *Far From Heaven* draws from quite liberally. Marlene McCarty, the artist and title designer – who's done a lot of titles for my films – designed this beautiful credit sequence and the closing credit sequence as well, and painted this beautiful main title . . . it's one of the very few digital sequences in the film . . . [allowing us] to separate the colours in the titles from the colours in the film.'



engaged clients including Gay Men's Health Crisis, Doctors without Borders, and Art Against AIDS. McCarty has taught at Yale and Cooper Union, and is a founder member of the ongoing graphic intervention Women's Action Committee ('WAC is Watching').

In the past few years she has been able to concentrate, for the most part, on film titles and on her art. A recent series of her artworks consisted of large-format, pen-and-ink renderings of adolescent girls drawn from sensationalistic news stories. Each of the real-life individuals chosen as her subjects has a history of familial violence, most often murder. The critic Hilton Als, writing in *The New Yorker*, described this work as having practically ushered in its own genre, which he christened 'sunny noir'. McCarty's art has attracted international attention and, as I write, she is in Turkey hanging her newest work for the Istanbul Biennale.

It is not hard to find fans of Marlene McCarty's film title work. And this enthusiasm often lurks in the details. Todd Haynes, for example, is the director of the movies *Safe*, *Velvet Goldmine* and *Far From Heaven*, among others – all of which open with titles designed by McCarty. For *Safe*, McCarty had placed square brackets around the word to dramatise its meaning. Haynes recalls with delight that the British film magazine *Sight & Sound* reproduced the brackets when referring to the movie by name and, in England at least, this editorial quirk has since been widely repeated. Haynes – a gifted director and writer himself – referred to McCarty's 'genius' in getting her titles right. Just as Haynes' movies *Velvet Goldmine* and *Far From Heaven* were vivid and convincing homages to British glam rock and the 1950s weepies of Douglas Sirk, respectively, so too were McCarty's titles.

In *Velvet Goldmine*, McCarty's typographic treatment seems spot-on: fat type in garish colours splashes across a screen already animated by a gaggle of androgynous kids in gaudy clothes, who stumble through the streets of 1970s London on their way to a concert. In the main title credit the type is embellished with revolving stars; in several others the typeface immediately invoked personal memories of the TV show *The Partridge Family*, starring David Cassidy; all that's missing is Milton Glaser's typeface Babyteeth. The overall result is as cheap and cheerful as glitter make-up, and is delicious fun precisely because (as the saying goes) it's as camp as a row of tents.

FAR FROM HEAVEN: ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND ALLUSION

As we might expect, the titles for *Far from Heaven* are both lengthy and restrained. In this respect, they are also uncannily evocative: indeed, even as screen after screen of formally laid-out crew names and job titles goes by, the action is already unfolding beneath them: an omniscient POV descends through the trees, settling on an immaculate station wagon that weaves its way through the fall colours of a mid-century New England town. The clincher is the main title itself, a hand-rendered, fanciful script with elaborate shadowing that fills the screen (and, seemingly, the neat sky above the tidy town commons). The choreographed interplay between the action and the titles comes to an equally tidy close: the car-cum-boat floats to a halt in the driveway of a picturesque house just as the final opening credit – Haynes' name – settles on the screen. The set-up allows the director to acknowledge directly his debt to Douglas Sirk, while also introducing some narrative themes that could only be alluded to – if at all – in Sirk's day.

According to the wildly successful independent film producer Christine Vachon, Haynes writes his opening scenes with the credits in mind. Indeed, it's hard not to imagine that the title sequence in *Safe* wasn't designed for McCarty's subtle design concept. Haynes himself says that in general 'the

3

Safe

3. Haynes: 'I wanted *Safe* to have an extremely discreet and quiet title sequence, based on the style of the film and the general tone of it.' McCarty 'really just tries a lot of different things and presents me with a range of ideas that she tries to execute with as much specificity as possible. And then we just go from there and start to really be able to talk about specifics together . . . we're friends, and sometimes that can actually end up being a cause for problems or arm-wrestling about things. I find with Marlene it creates an incredibly easy bed on which to begin to do our work.'

way in which the text emerges marks – visually, aesthetically and through reference – a series of expectations that the film is intentionally setting up. And I enjoy that manipulation, I enjoy that privileged moment – it's almost like a curtain parting.' In *Safe*, too, we see a car being driven home, but all similarities with *Far from Heaven* end there. Our night-time view is through the windshield of a late-model Mercedes gliding through a wealthy Californian suburb. As if the gloomy synthesizer chords were not enough, McCarty's densely set, all-caps type treatment stretches very small and very wide across the screen. Each credit seems to glow briefly against the wide horizon framed by the car's windshield, suggesting distant lightning or bugs caught briefly in the headlights. The word 'Safe', huddled between two peculiarly square brackets, momentarily glows red just before fading away. This controlled understatement is richly suggestive of the desperately vacuous existence of the central character in the movie, a bewildered housewife played by Julianne Moore. (The very next scene is merciless in its depiction of Moore's character being screwed by her husband; as he humps away, energetically and obliviously, we see her face rather than his, betraying a peculiar blend of resignation and sympathy.)

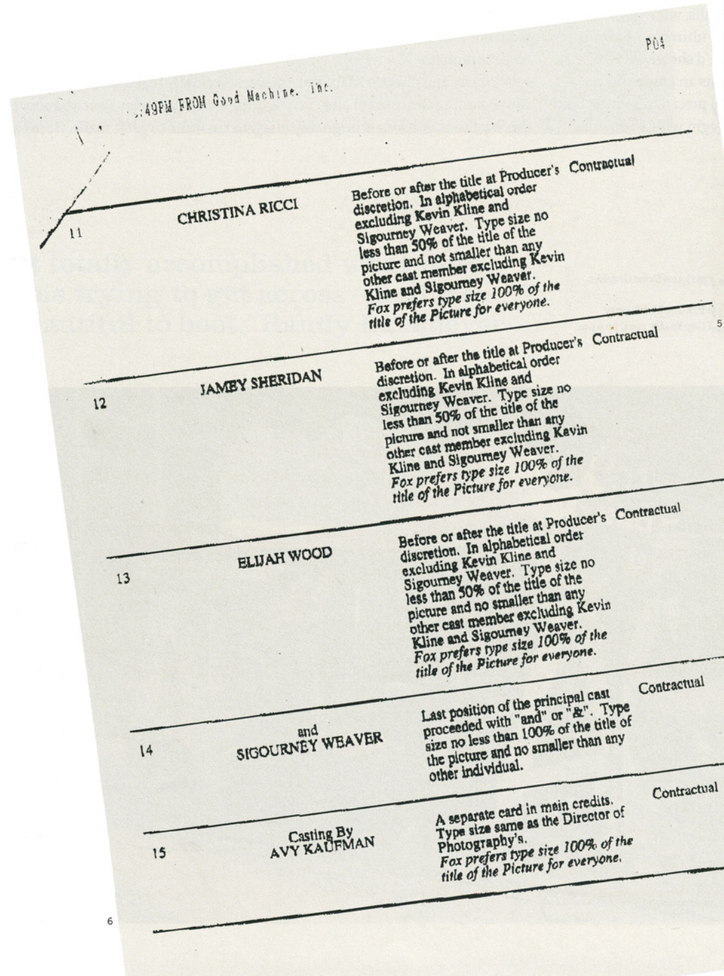
While they have never been the mainstay of her busy career as a designer, artist and media activist, McCarty has nevertheless built up a remarkable oeuvre of title designs, beginning with business partner Donald Moffett at Bureau. Moffett and McCarty came together via their shared concern about government inaction and pharmaceutical company exploitation, surrounding what became known as the AIDS crisis. Indeed, Moffett and McCarty, along with Todd Haynes, Tom Kalin (director of *Swoon*) and Christine Vachon (Killer Films), were all at one time or another members of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) or Gran Fury (an agitprop

'She's someone who's *been there*, who has done social, cultural and political work as a designer.' Donald Moffett

4

Hedwig and the Angry Inch

4. McCarty: 'All that animation was created in AfterEffects. We worked on top of a QuickTime movie. Then we would get rid of the QuickTime movie, take the AfterEffects files to the Avid cutting-room where they were working on the movie, import the AfterEffects animation on top of the editing they were doing, then place it. You couldn't edit the animation in the Avid, you could only edit the picture, so what would happen is we'd get the animation in there but we couldn't place it, we couldn't time it, and then they would start recutting the picture underneath it, so then we would have to take a new QuickTime of the recut version, redo the animation to fit the new picture. This went on for three months. But now it works.'



P04

...49PM FROM Good Machine, Inc.

11	CHRISTINA RICCI	Before or after the title at Producer's discretion. In alphabetical order excluding Kevin Kline and Sigourney Weaver. Type size no less than 50% of the title of the picture and not smaller than any other cast member excluding Kevin Kline and Sigourney Weaver. *Fox prefers type size 100% of the title of the Picture for everyone.*	Contractual
12	JAMEY SHERIDAN	Before or after the title at Producer's discretion. In alphabetical order excluding Kevin Kline and Sigourney Weaver. Type size no less than 50% of the title of the picture and not smaller than any other cast member excluding Kevin Kline and Sigourney Weaver. *Fox prefers type size 100% of the title of the Picture for everyone.*	Contractual
13	ELIJAH WOOD	Before or after the title at Producer's discretion. In alphabetical order excluding Kevin Kline and Sigourney Weaver. Type size no less than 50% of the title of the picture and no smaller than any other cast member excluding Kevin Kline and Sigourney Weaver. *Fox prefers type size 100% of the title of the Picture for everyone.*	Contractual
14	and SIGOURNEY WEAVER	Last position of the principal cast proceeded with "and" or "&". Type size no less than 100% of the title of the picture and no smaller than any other individual.	Contractual
15	Casting By AVY KAUFMAN	A separate card in main credits. Type size same as the Director of Photography's. *Fox prefers type size 100% of the title of the Picture for everyone.*	Contractual

6

The Ice Storm

5. Ang Lee's movie is an unsettling invocation of 1970s suburban dysfunctionalism. The titles appear over a visual effects sequence created by Big Film Design featuring exteriors of a commuter train stranded in the icy darkness between New York and New Canaan. McCarty's titles – set in Futura – swim and fade on and off the screen. Revealing one of her tricks of the trade, McCarty notes that the 'refracting lens' used to achieve this effect was in fact some 'cheap drinking glasses'.

6. This page from the lengthy legal agreement between Bureau and *The Ice Storm*'s various producers gives some idea of the particular – and peculiar – constraints title designers must work within.

outgrowth of ACT UP[1] New York; its name was taken from a particular model of car favoured by the New York police for undercover operations).

The film-making scene that grew out of this period – named by one invested observer as the 'New Queer Cinema'[2] – has often focused on the exploration of themes relating to gay sexuality and, more particularly, its various oppressions. Perhaps predictably, Haynes' early movie *Poison* became a lightning rod for the right-wing, moralistic backlash against artists and the National Endowment for the Arts that was perhaps all the more venomous because of the modest gains in visibility and rights won as a direct result of the tireless interventions of groups such as ACT UP and Gran Fury.

It is telling that even with a film title that McCarty wasn't ultimately happy with (Ang Lee's *Ride with the Devil* comes to mind) the result is still as clean and effective as any other low-key type-only titles one might come across. What this example betrays, and what makes it decidedly un-McCarty, is a lack of the conceptual panache one rightly comes to expect of her work. McCarty recently recounted one of the few times she's actually fired a client. She'd been invited by director Todd Solondz to design some titles for his movie *Happiness*. Having been presented with the director's ideas, she came up with two or three distinct concepts she felt would be appropriate for a downbeat movie about suburban ennui and dysfunctional relationships. While the film itself opened to critical acclaim (and not a little controversy), McCarty's ideas never saw the light of day. As she recalls, while the director initially welcomed her concepts with enthusiasm, he ultimately balked. Solondz asked her, finally, to produce the title idea he'd shown her when they first sat down to discuss the job. Her response was an emphatic 'no'.

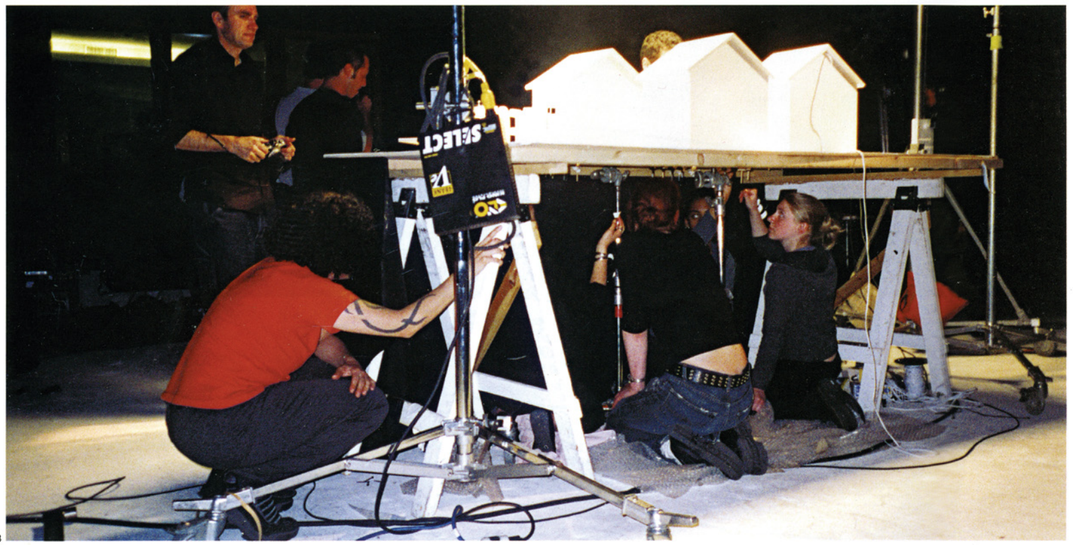
Decisions such as these were an affordable luxury, precisely because there was barely any money involved in such projects to begin with. Film title work actually becomes the exception that proves the rule. As McCarty and others have pointed out, when successful design businesses grow, they tend to take on a life of their own, often developing voracious appetites in the form of overheads that cannot be ignored (rents, salaries, benefits, capital equipment, insurance, etc.). The most practical solution is often to take on less glamorous bread-and-butter work simply to allow the business to keep functioning. This is the kind of work that rarely makes it to the company showreel, or the reception area walls, or into the awards annuals. McCarty and her business partner Donald Moffett took a different route: in 1999 they closed the business down. Or at least they dispensed with everything except the company name, a few of their clients, and a new website: Bureau became vBureau; 'v' as in 'virtual' (www.vBureau.com).

AMERICAN PSYCHO: 'NO INTRODUCTIONS NECESSARY'

Christine Vachon, whose impressive credits as an independent producer include *Kids*, *Boys Don't Cry* and *One Hour Photo*, described the perfect – and perhaps unattainable – cinema-going experience thus: 'watching any great film, one should feel as if one is in the hands of somebody who is taking you somewhere you haven't been before. And if those hands are deft and sure, it can be an incredible experience.' In particular, she added, 'a great title sequence is the first indicator that a film is prepared to do that for you.' Vachon – who also happens to be McCarty's girlfriend – cites the opening sequence for *American Psycho* as a case in point; one that produces a distinct sense of dis-ease.

McCarty and director Mary Harron worked closely together on this title, storyboarding the concept and even fighting for extra money over and above the few thousand dollars originally budgeted in order to get it made. Harron,

1. For more on the graphic history of ACT UP, see D. Crimp & A. Rolston (1991) *AIDS Demo Graphics*. Seattle: Bay Press.
2. Initial notes and arguments on the 'new queer cinema' can be found in B. Ruby Rich's essay 'Reflections on a Queer Screen' in the journal *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1993, pp.83-91.



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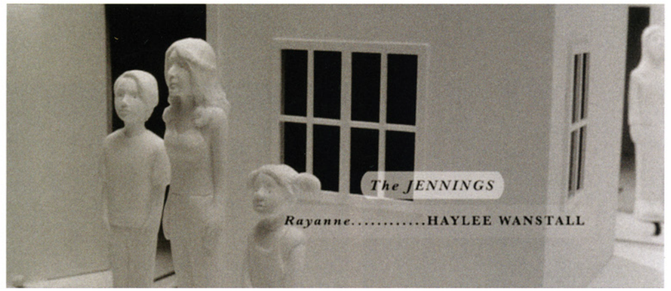

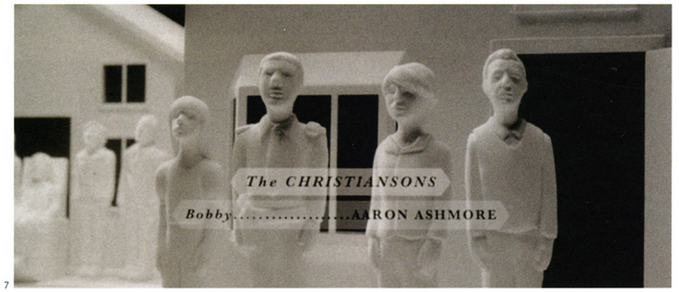

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The Safety of Objects

7-9. McCarty's titles for this movie (based on a book of short stories by A. M. Homes, and directed and adapted for the screen by Rose Troche) are a thing of beauty – shot entirely in-camera. Stylised models of each character move in and out of their respective homes. As she recalls, 'we basically had a huge table set up with our props on it, and I had my students underneath the tables with sticks moving them around. I felt the studio was going to have a heart attack when they saw what we were doing.' Randy Balsmeyer (whose Big Film Design has made titles for Spike Lee and the Coen Brothers) notes McCarty's commitment to developing concepts independent of any specific technology. Of her titles for *The Safety of Objects*, he said: 'It's just so out there, and brilliant . . . it totally accomplished what Rose was trying to get across – and it's beautiful to boot.'

'It totally accomplished what Rose was trying to get across – and it's beautiful to boot.' Randy Balsmeyer

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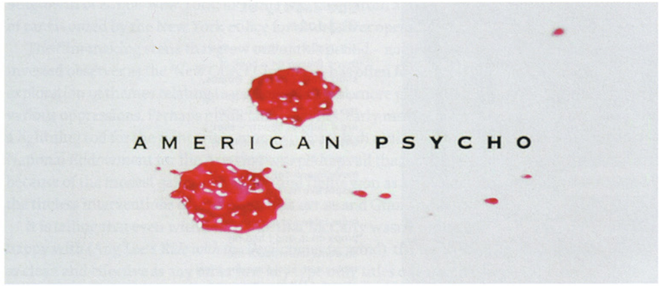

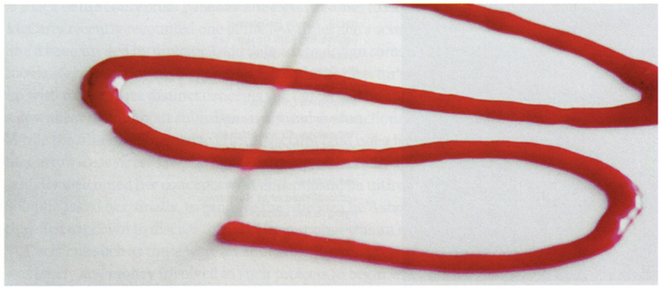

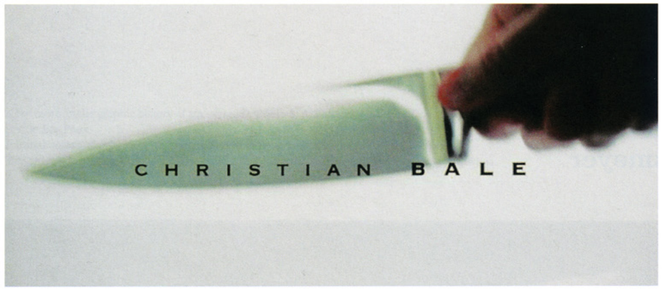

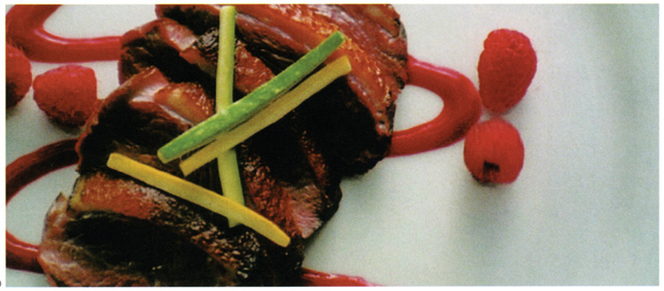

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American Psycho

10. This brief but astonishingly effective opening sequence cleverly combines the visual iconography of murder (droplets of blood falling through the frame; a huge blade rising and falling rapidly) and nouvelle cuisine. The 'blood' is revealed to be raspberry sauce being applied to a dessert plate; the knife is actually chopping a morsel of exquisitely prepared meat. It also achieved the desired effect for the director: to play with the audience's expectations. The titles dovetail seamlessly into a late 1980s restaurant scene populated by sycophantic waiters and equally detestable yuppies. Haynes says of the sequence: 'It compacted the themes of that film in the most succinct visual shorthand.' Director Mary Harron used a special camera more commonly found in the production of commercials, where extreme close-ups are often required (to pick up the froth and condensation on a glass of soda, for example). The camera delivered a very bright, 'advertising' feel, and allowed Harron to shoot in extreme slow motion. Having art directed the shoot, McCarty selected the most appropriate shots of the viscous red liquid falling through the frame, marrying these with the timed appearance of each credit.

11

Swoon

11. This film marked the first time Bureau ventured into title design. Moffett and McCarty already knew Tom Kalin (the movie's director, co-writer and co-producer) through Gran Fury, the agitprop wing of ACT UP New York. As McCarty recalls: 'When Tom started to do *Swoon*, I said to him, 'Can I do your titles? Can I do the film titles to *Swoon*?' and Tom was like, 'Yeah, sure! Um, what are film titles?' So we were definitely figuring it out together.' This apparent naivety belies the formal impact of the resulting work. The main titles are set in huge blocky capitals that slide horizontally onto the screen, their entrances and exits timed to the action (in this case a tracking shot of the two lead characters striding across a piece of waste ground). The titles' resemblance to shrieking tabloid headlines is entirely appropriate in this context, and is further emphasised by the use of monochromatic film stock. Kalin's is an engrossing and beautifully crafted movie, reminiscent of some of the work of the late British director Derek Jarman. Shot in black and white, with a very small budget, it is a dramatic retelling of the true story of two privileged young men whose romantic involvement, in 1920s Illinois, came to an abrupt end when they were arrested for murder. Kalin was interested in exploring the ways in which the reactions of American high society – and of the news media – focused on their status and their homosexuality. This was a time when preoccupations with the classification and prediction of criminality centered, erroneously – and disastrously – on discernable physical (hence ethnic; class; racial) characteristics. An interlude during the movie conveys this idea beautifully, as animated, handwritten labels are applied to a whole series of suitably styled mug-shots.While not a title sequence *per se*, it is an elegant and articulate example of McCarty and Moffett's art directing abilities.

Velvet Goldmine

12. Explaining why she never has high resolution versions of her own work to hand, McCarty says: 'I usually send 'film ready' bits and pieces to the postproduction house used by the film production. Then, following my specifications and supervision, those pieces are put together and output to film.' On *Velvet Goldmine*, in particular, she explains, 'cards had to be created of just single letters and fragments of words. Those were animated in After-Effects then rendered as a Pict file sequence, then composited with the images in London.'

12

who also directed *I Shot Andy Warhol* and episodes of the TV series *Homicide* and *Oz*, commented that McCarty's strength lay in her 'minimalist' approach; her sensitivity to the interplay of timing, spacing and composition. Harron, like Haynes, also found it easy to work with McCarty, partly because of their similar art backgrounds; in effect, they could share references to artists, styles, or periods as a kind of shorthand in their creative deliberations.

Harron noted that the title for *I Shot Andy Warhol*, also designed by McCarty, was scripted into the movie before production began. (As it happened, McCarty and her partner found this treatment lacking in drama, and came up with the punchy black-and-red main title as a response.) In contrast the basic concept for *American Psycho* – blood droplets that are revealed to be raspberry sauce – came about during post-production. McCarty's skills came into their own through her art direction of the sequence, and her choreography of the movement of images with the typographic and musical cues.

McCarty's enthusiasm for titles work has hardly diminished over the past decade: she is as busy as ever, with two new projects currently on the horizon. McCarty is also an enthusiastic fan of other people's titles work; her recent favourites include the anarchic opening for *24-Hour Party People* ('Loved 'em! Completely illegible! Fab!') and the 'appropriation' of Saul Bass's signature style in *Catch Me if You Can*.

In separate conversations, Moffett and McCarty have acknowledged that, in contrast to the kind of design work they most often engaged in as Bureau, doing titles is not terribly political. McCarty suggested that the politics comes in the jobs you don't do (for her, it is a studied avoidance of 'stupid romantic comedies' – which I took to mean not merely the general theme, but the predictable, heterosexual confections that regularly plop off Hollywood's conveyor belt). Moffett allowed that titles could be political in the sense that they might bookend the work of a talented director whose film deals with an urgent social or cultural issue. That said, he also added that this was hardly significant since, even in these cases, the designer is a very minor player in the private realm of production, and even more so in the public reception of the movie. ◎

Thanks to Marlene McCarty for giving me complete freedom to write about her work, to my interviewees, and to Lesley Husbands for valuable research assistance.

SELECTED FILM TITLES

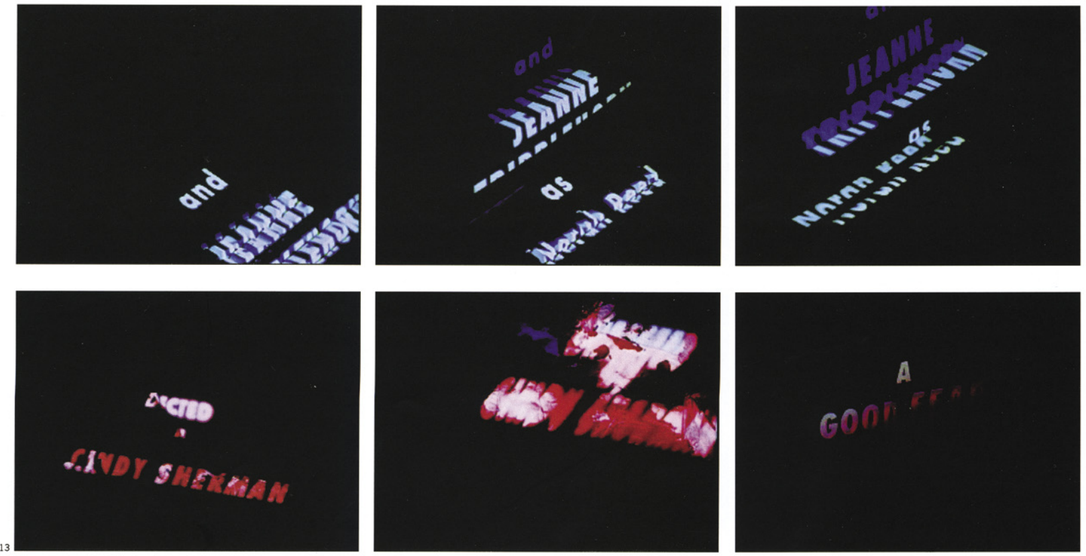
Bureau (Marlene McCarty and Donald Moffett)
Suvoon (1992)
Postcards from America (1994)
Safe (1995)
I Shot Andy Warhol (1996)
Ratchet (1996)
Office Killer (1997)
The Ice Storm (1997)
Velvet Goldmine (1998)
Three Seasons (1999)
In a Savage Land (1999)

Marlene McCarty for Bureau
Jesus' Son (1999)
American Psycho (2000)
The Eyes of Tammy Faye (2000)
Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001)
The Safety of Objects (2001)
Far from Heaven (2002)

Office Killer

13. Mary Harron cites the credits for *Office Killer*, a brief directorial foray by the artist Cindy Sherman, as one of the reasons why she and McCarty got together again to work on *American Psycho*. McCarty set her titles in Futura Extra Bold Condensed, and then had each one projected artfully across a darkened office suite. As Todd Haynes suggests, 'the sensuality of those words creeping around the corners of walls and the shapes of those office surfaces was so strong and so visually powerful that it made it a tough job for the film that followed.'

'The sensuality of those words was so powerful . . . it made it a tough job for the film that followed.' Todd Haynes



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