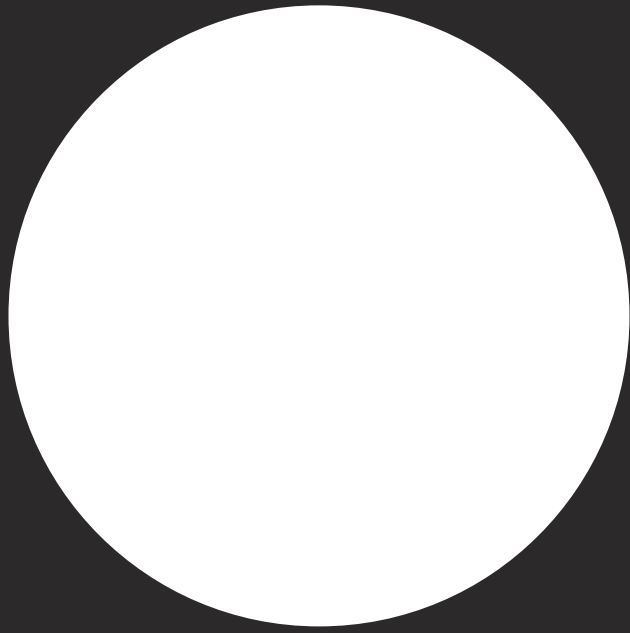


Behind the Peephole

The Voyeuristic
Aspect of Feminine
Representation

Kathleen Pickavance





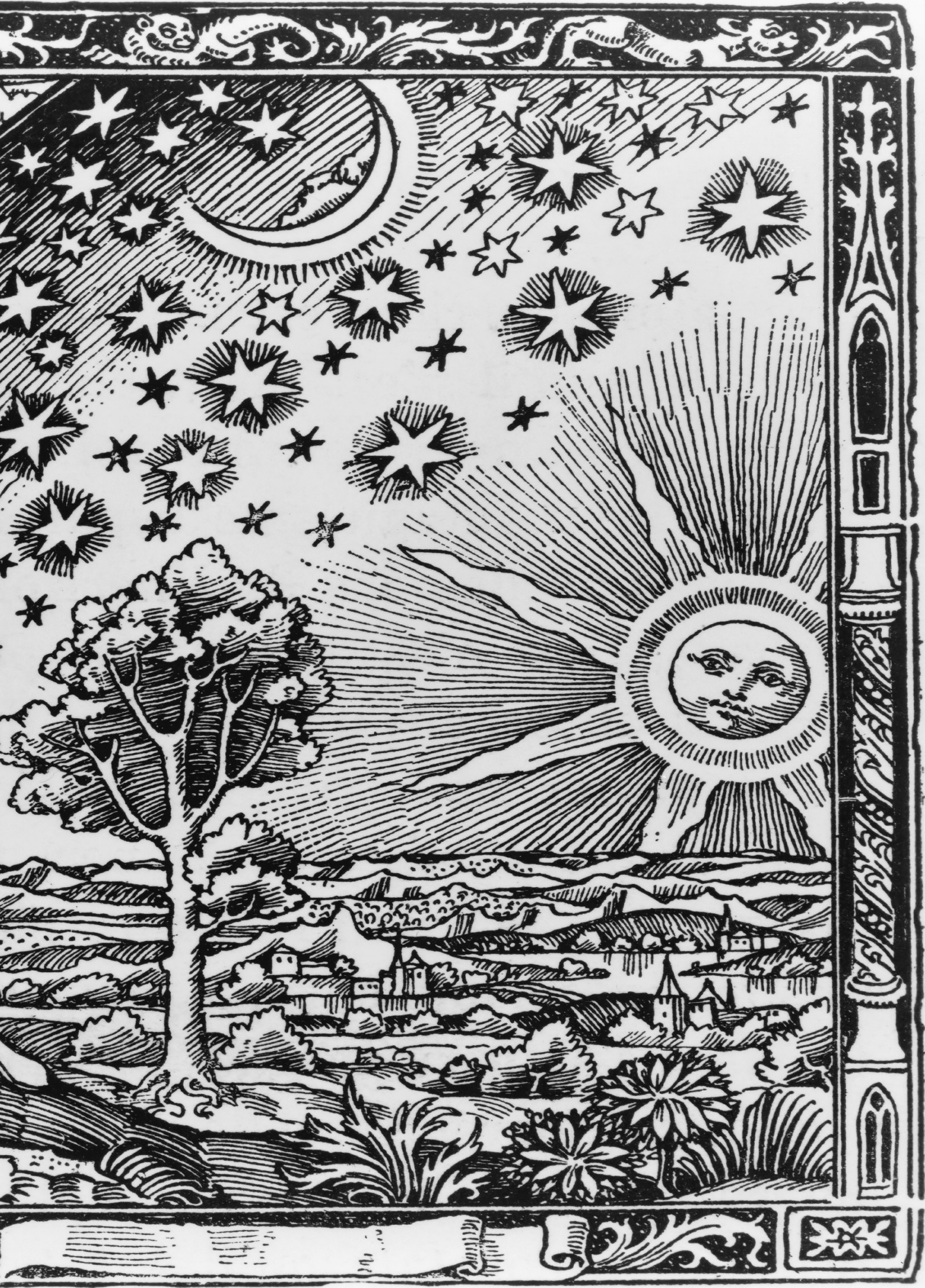
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On the following page *The Flammarion* 1888, Camille Flammarion

Camille Flammarion's engraving depicts a pilgrim piercing the firmament to glimpse the hidden mechanisms behind the visible world. It is often interpreted as a metaphor for scientific or mystical revelation. For me, it visualizes the desire to look beyond the surface of representation in order to see what lies beneath.





Introduction

This thesis documents my ongoing research around feminine representation in the arts, with a particular focus on voyeurism and its legacy from early cinema to contemporary artistic practice. I examine how structures of looking shape the representation of women, and how feminine artists negotiate, appropriate, or disrupt those visual systems.

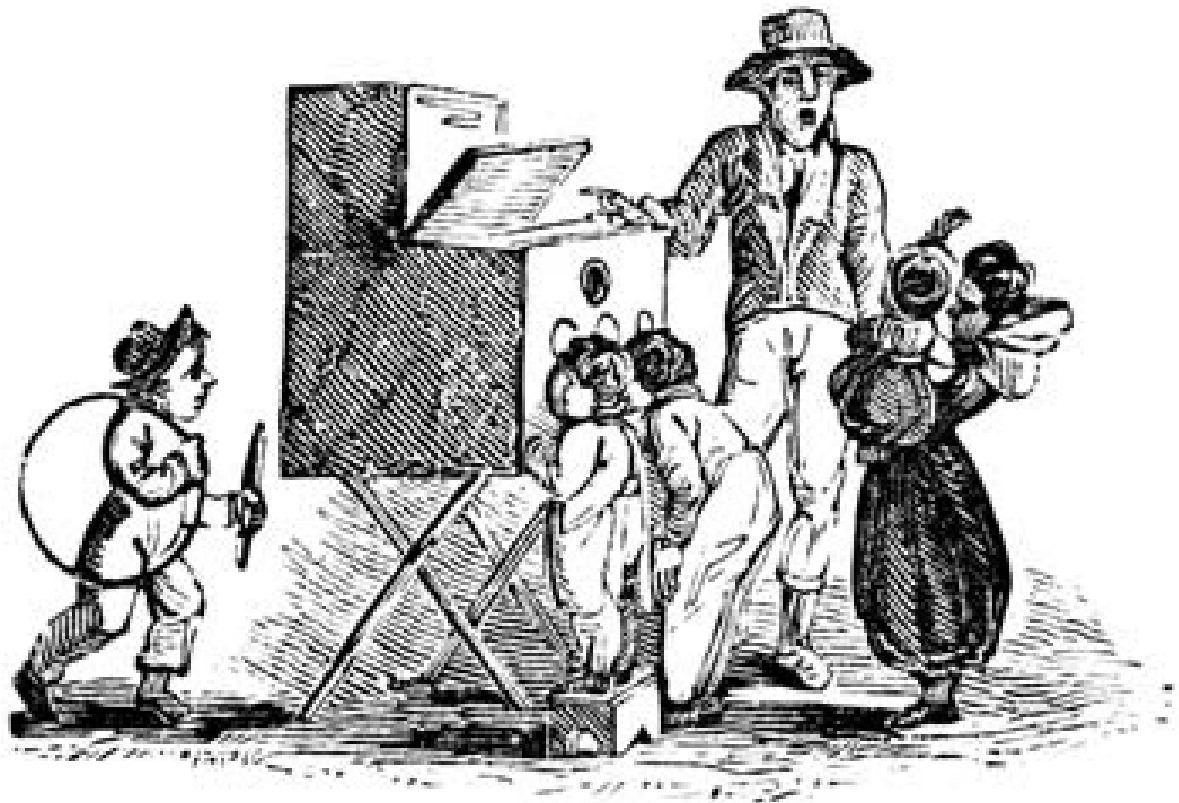
I question not only how we look, but the structures of looking themselves. Displays such as peep shows or peepholes which amplify voyeurism are key elements to me. These formats induce a feeling of intimacy and underline the relationship between watching and being watched and sometimes reinforce questions of pleasure and power.

I am drawn to forms of femininity that appear excessive, theatrical and out of place. Women who refuse patriarchal framing have historically been pathologized as hysterical, unstable, or monstrous. Engaging with the history of hysteria and theories of the monstrous feminine, I explore artistic strategies of self-representation that rely on artifice: masks, mannequins, and constructed personas.

A recurring tension within my research concerns the risk of reenactment. When artists, like myself, use voyeurism as a form of critique, how close are we to simply restage the very gaze we are criticizing? This ambiguity is not something I attempt to resolve, but something I want to enlighten and question.

This thesis does not aim to offer definitive answers. Instead, it traces my thought process and references as a way of documentation and attempting to understand my own practice.

OPTICAL AMUSEMENTS



Peepshows

So, what's a peep show? According to the English dictionary:

"A peepshow, also called a raree show, is a small box with a peephole through which a series of pictures, especially erotic poses, can be seen. It also refers to a booth from which a viewer can see a live nude model for a fee."



I, personally, have never seen one, but I've seen archives of them.

You'd put a coin in and watch a short film for a limited amount of time, peering through a little hole with your eyes fixed on the scene inside. This concept relates to the very beginning of cinema, the time where Raree Men (also called Show Men) wandered the streets with their traveling boxes and offered passersby an experience where they could bend down and watch a small show.

This environment of creating a mini show captivates me; a small stage with details, lighting and décor, a space that somehow feels immersive despite the size of it. The ingenuity behind it is amazing! One could animate a scene with just a candlelight that changed the images or use mirrors to create visual allusions or even construct small mechanisms and puppetry.

When one leans forwards, unaware of who might be standing behind, a sense of vulnerability and immersion emerges. It's as though the viewer becomes closer to the image, more intimate. Maybe the intimacy you get by peeping in a hole comes from the sense of being alone with the scene.

This isolation intensifies the voyeuristic dimension of the experience; concealed from other viewers, you are free to look wherever and however you want.

But it's not just the scale of early cinema that has a link to voyeurism, but the films themselves. When cinema moved to large-scale projection, some of the films had literal keyhole and peephole framings, reinforcing the voyeuristic position of the gaze. Often depicted through characters peering through keyholes, as in Ferdinand Zecca's *What the Butler Saw* (1901), the voyeur is portrayed as ridiculous and clumsy which gives voyeurism a funny and distinguishable form.



What the Butler Saw (What is Seen Through a Keyhole) 1901, Ferdinand Zecca

In *As Seen Through a Telescope* (1900), the man behind the telescope directs his gaze towards different female subjects, before zooming in on a woman's leg, which is such an explicitly taboo thing to do! These types of close-ups were frequently used in early cinema.

In these movies, voyeurism is staged openly, the act of looking is visible, sometimes clumsy and even punished.

But as cinema develops, we tend to see this voyeuristic dimension gradually disappear from the screen and become absorbed into the camera itself.

The spectator no longer watches a character who looks but is invited to occupy that position directly. It is at this point that voyeurism ceases to be staged as a gag or narrative motif and begins to function as a structural condition of cinematic spectatorship.



Voyeurism

Before going further, it is necessary to clarify how I am using the term voyeurism in this text. Rather than treating it as a fixed definition, I am interested in the conditions under which looking becomes voyeuristic. Voyeurism, in this context refers to a mode of looking that is marked by a sense of transgression, by the feeling of watching something private, intimate, or not meant to be seen. It emerges at the moment when looking is charged with intensity, desire, or shame, distinguishing the voyeur from a neutral observer or a simple admirer.

Importantly, this experience is not always comfortable for the voyeurs themselves. While discussing *The Piano Teacher* with a friend, she described feeling trapped in an uncomfortable position while watching the film, as though she was forced to witness something OBSCENE.

A curious detail, I learned during my interest in the concept of the *Theatre of Cruelty* developed by Antonin Artaud in the 1930s; OB-SCENE etymologically derives from hors-scene which implies something that should not be shown or is meant to remain unseen. The off-stage is not simply absent; it is charged with potential, a zone where imagination and desire converge because it is denied to the audience. In this sense, voyeurism mirrors that tension: it involves watching something private while being acutely aware that one should not be watching. Crucially, this position is not inherently perverse; rather, it is defined by the uneasy pleasure of witnessing something forbidden, a charged interplay of curiosity, desire, and guilt. Voyeurism, then, can be understood as inhabiting the space between revelation and concealment, the thrill of being allowed a view that is not meant to be seen.

So, my question deepens: where do we draw the line between voyeurism and admiration?

I think there is a clear distinction between voyeurism and admiration. When we admire, we are in awe, we regard in respect. Voyeurism, by contrast, often disregards the subject's comfort and consent. It is marked by secrecy, by being hidden, unseen, and unnoticed, and by a gaze that risks reducing the subject to an object of desire.

The space itself in which cinema is experienced reinforces this voyeuristic position. You are barely ever bothered by the other spectators, sitting, unseen, and free to look wherever you please. Laura Mulvey, a grand theorist in cinema, argues in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975); that the darkness of the theater makes us feel **almost as if we are alone, looking in on a private world**. The contrast itself with the bright screen produces a kind of voyeuristic separation which facilitates the erotic or transgressive gaze.

But my goal isn't to judge or moralize voyeurism but more to identify the precise moments when it occurs. Understanding voyeurism in this way helps us comprehend not only the psychological dynamics of looking, but also how cinema structures and reinforces that gaze.

The Gaze in Art & Cinema



An artist that I really admire, VALIE EXPORT, an icon of the art world, plays with these ideas perfectly. In her piece *Tapp- und Tastkino* (1968), she invites spectators in the streets (as a raree man would) to come touch her breasts hidden behind small curtains inside a box. By doing this, she exposes the voyeur, bringing them out into the open, outside the comfort of the cinema.

In *Le regard féminin* (2020), a great book which describes the female gaze, the author, Iris Brey, recounts an anecdote shared by Désirée Akhavan, an American filmmaker. Akhavan mentions that during a dance scene, the chief camera operator was framing the actress in a sexualizing way. She physically pushed him so that the actress's body shifted from the center to the edge of the frame, and the impact of the image immediately changed: her breasts were no longer the focal point, and she no longer appeared vulnerable.

Women's bodies are often stylized and fragmented by the camera. Rather than framing them in a full shot, we film them in close-up and turn them into ornaments. This observation is center to the male gaze. Laura Mulvey, who is the first to use that term, mentions in her book *Fetishism and Curiosity* (1996) that in early cinema, framing women in a desirable way made more money, so, everyone started doing it.



As companies struggled for dominance or even survival, consumer seduction and the seductive powers of the female image on the screen grew side by side. Just as the other new industries developed advertising, promoting desirability, gloss and glamour, so the film industry invested in the visibility of the star. Perhaps the chrome on a motor car, shining, modern and streamlined, had an equivalent in the image of sexualized femininity in the cinema.

- Laura Mulvey

The close-up at first glance seems to be embellishing and maybe not even worth criticizing. Women are shown in a beautiful light, they look at the camera with glamour, but it does more than what we see at surface level. The framing of the curves, the silhouette, lips, or even the sleepy doe eyes emphasize her function as spectacle, cutting her image out from the general flow of the narrative which transforms her presence into aesthetics rather than giving us a story of her experience. She is passive and reduced to the status of an icon.

Mary Ann Doane dedicates an entire chapter to Close-Ups of the Woman in her book *Femmes fatales: feminism, film theory, psychoanalysis* (1992).

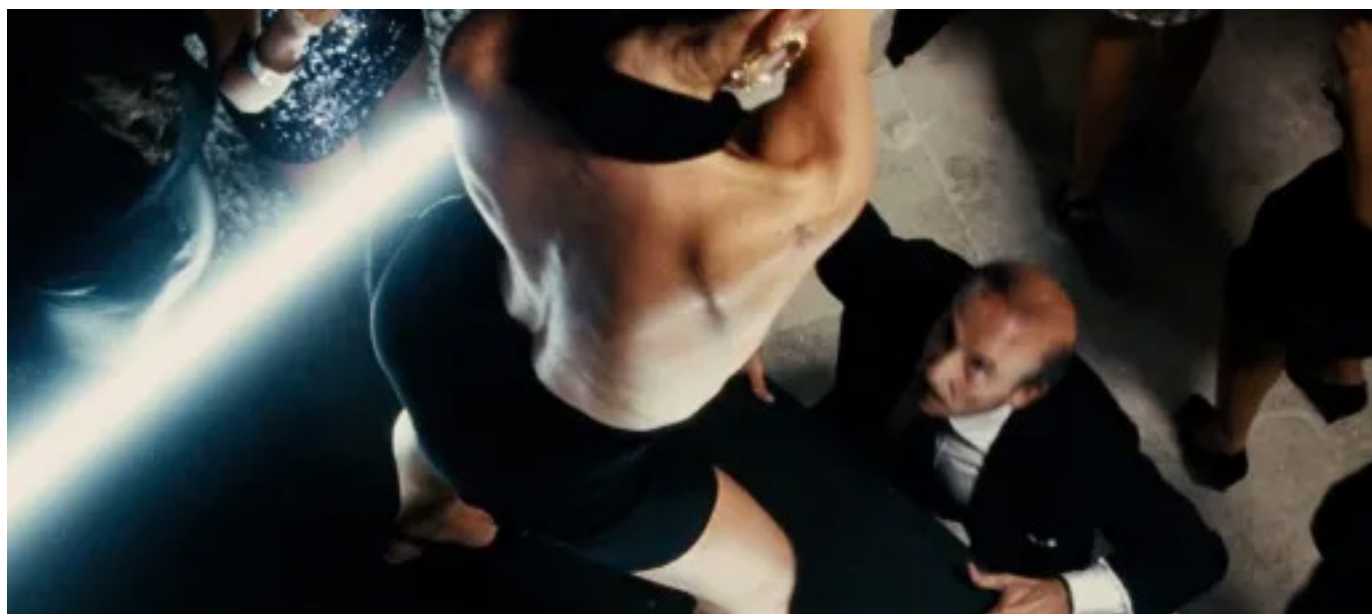
This fragmentation does not simply beautify. It protects the gaze. By reducing women to aesthetic surfaces, cinema avoids confronting them as agents who might look back. The male character drives the narrative forward, while the female figure is suspended in visual pleasure, detached from experience, history, or interiority.

To question the male gaze in a film is to reflect on the way in which a filmmaker depicts the female body and the imagery associated with women. It is not, therefore, a question of opposing a filmmaker's desire to film women as asses, but of questioning the way in which these asses are filmed and what results from the filmmaker's gaze on human beings.

- Iris Brey

I don't mind voyeuristic framings and seeing the observer watch. Being portrayed as a voyeur is not inherently negative to me. What frustrates me are films where I can feel the gaze, but it is never addressed. We, as spectators, are clearly watching a woman dance, yet the film never acknowledges that this is what is happening. The act of looking remains invisible, normalized.

I felt this strongly while watching *La Grande Bellezza* (2013) by Paolo Sorrentino. Throughout the film, women are constantly shown dancing, and many frames are centered on their sexualized bodies. At no point does this become strange or uncomfortable within the logic of the film, it is simply part of its visual language. There are so many butts on screen, yet they are never questioned, never commented on, and rarely serve the actual scene beyond decoration. Again, there is no issue with sexualized bodies in a movie for no reason. What bothered me was the consistency of the framing, the feeling that no woman could escape this visual treatment. The gaze felt omnipresent, yet completely unexamined.



La Grande Bellezza 2013, Paolo Sorrentino

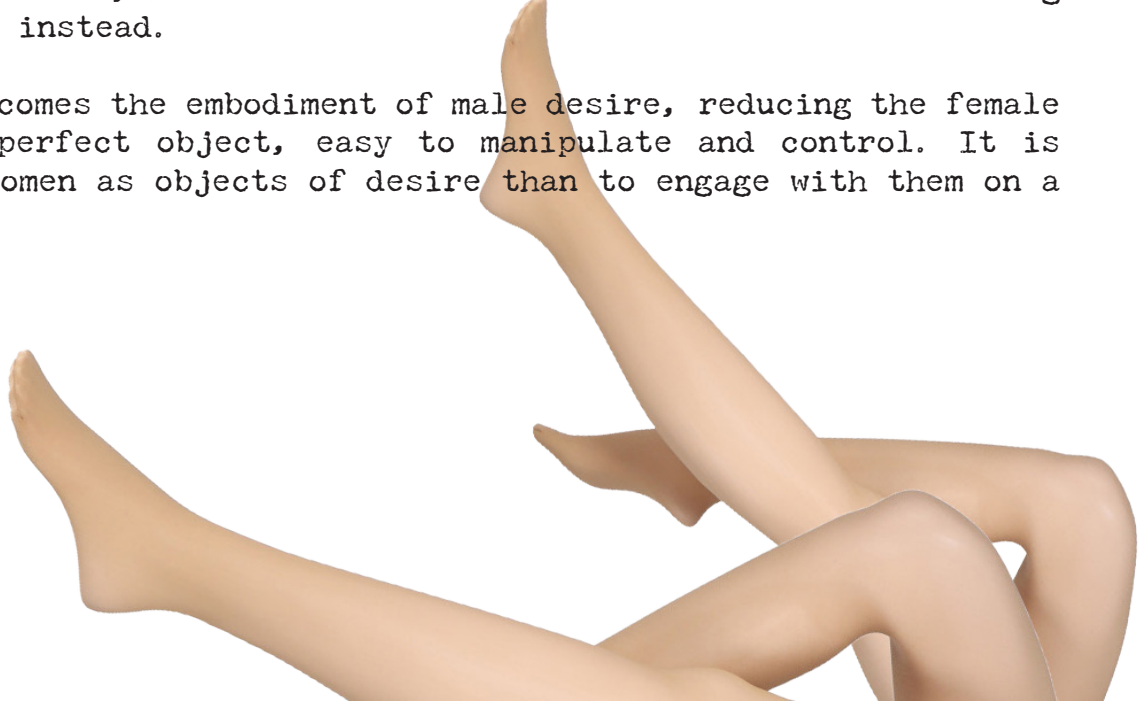
There are, however, many films in which voyeurism is openly the subject of the narrative, films where the protagonist himself is a voyeur. Many of these are films I have watched and enjoyed.

When I went to go see *Peeping Tom* (1960), by Micheal Powell, I expected the stereotypical creepy voyeur, framing women in a perverted and sexualizing way. Instead, we were given a lonely misunderstood guy who's a "peeping tom" (which is the name we give to peepers). He has his camera and uses it as an external lens through which he watches women as he pleases. He projects these films in his private cinema and watches them repeatedly. In this part of the film, his gaze does not feel overtly sexualizing or violent, it reads more as a way for him to interact with women, or to compensate for his inability to connect in real life.

This portrait of the misunderstood man appears to me as a kind of disguise for disturbing voyeuristic behaviors. Because his gaze is not overtly aggressive or traditionally perverse, it becomes easier for the audience to empathize with him, and his behavior is more readily accepted.

Which makes me think of a very interesting story I read by Sadeq Hedayat, *The Mannequin Behind the Window* (1933)(which later inspired one of my films). The story follows a man who doesn't know how to interact with women. He one day walks in front of a store and falls in love with a porcelain mannequin he is desperate to buy. He manages to buy it and gets obsessed by it. He loves that it can't talk, can't get fat, can't get pregnant, can't complain, can't judge him and has perfect skin and a perfect body. He then hides it behind a curtain and watches her daily. He ends up marrying a woman, but he still obsesses over the mannequin. The wife, who is no match to his precious mannequin, decides to impersonate it and embody her husband's desire. But the story ends tragically where, in a psychotic episode, he decides to kill the mannequin as a way of escaping his obsession, he confuses it with his wife as she was doubling it and kills her instead.

The mannequin becomes the embodiment of male desire, reducing the female figure to this perfect object, easy to manipulate and control. It is easier to view women as objects of desire than to engage with them on a human level.



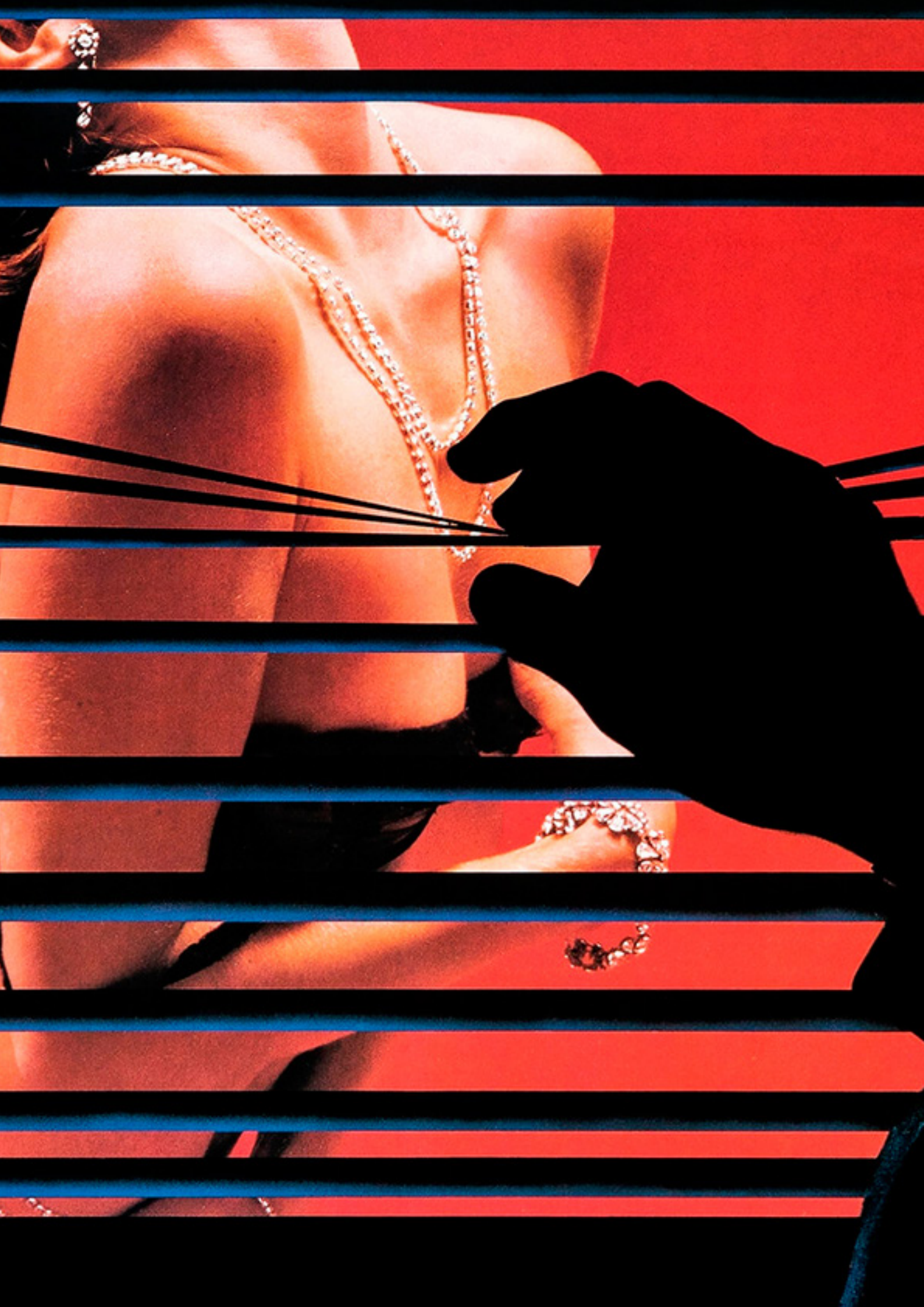
I recently watched *Body Double* (1984) by Brian de Palma, which had been on my watchlist for years since it inspired Brice Dellspenger's doubling practice (also an inheriting concept in my own videos). I think the first half of the movie was the most relevant part to my research. We see the protagonist as the voyeur, in one particular scene, we see him with a telescope watching his neighbor getting undressed. She is dancing and getting naked, and he watches it all. He doesn't glimpse for a bit, he watches with no remorse.

The voyeur, here is shown more as the most known form of voyeurism, he's the creep, the pervert. He's shown as a man that observes women in an erotic lens, careless of their comfort.

This makes me wonder, is it always about dominance, does the watched automatically become the victim?

One of the most popular voyeur movies that comes to mind is *Rear Window* (1954) by Alfred Hitchcock where the protagonist is by the window with a telescope during the entire movie. But again, I wasn't put off by his voyeurism, even though he watches a woman dancing during one scene, his behavior and the one of the camera didn't come off as perverse voyeurism (to me).

All these movies portraying voyeurism are written by men, they all participate in the pleasure in looking in an explicit way. But I enjoyed them, for the most part, is that bad?





I believe these films remain deeply relevant in current reflections on women's representation. The perspective they adopt has not disappeared; it has simply become normalized. Many mainstream films continue to reproduce this visual logic, often without acknowledging it. Becoming aware of this perspective is essential. Female characters cannot fully emancipate themselves if they remain framed within the same visual tendencies that have historically reduced them to spectacle.

In reaction, contemporary feminist film critics articulate and emphasize the notion of **female gaze**. This gaze is not simply the reversal of the male gaze, nor is it merely about filming women beautifully. It goes beyond aesthetics. It is concerned with subjectivity, interiority, and lived experience.

The objectification of bodies, male or female, remains tied to the logic of the male gaze, because it privileges visual possession over embodied experience. The female gaze, by contrast, shifts the focus. It moves away from a patriarchal unconscious and toward a consciously constructed perspective.

If we were to define it, the female gaze would be one that grants subjectivity to the female character. It allows the viewer to inhabit her experience, to feel with her, without necessarily identifying with her. It does not position her as spectacle, but as a subject whose interiority shapes the narrative.



Be Nice to Me (Flatten 04) 2000, Pipilotti Rist

Hysteria and

The Monstrous Feminine

I'm interested in femininity, most specifically an exaggerated version of it. Exaggerated in a way where they are solely in their world, in their norms. Where they can escape the world and find themselves living without a care, refusing restraint, practicing their quirks freely. Just them fully focused on themselves.

Historically, such figures of feminine excess have been pathologized, most notably through the diagnosis of hysteria.

Hysteria has never been a coherent medical diagnosis. Women were labeled hysterical for almost anything; depression, lesbianism, psychosis, epilepsy, disobedience, or desire. You're being too intense for the box they are trying to put you in, therefore you're hysterical. The word itself derives from the Greek **hystera**, meaning uterus. In ancient Greece, the uterus was imagined as a wandering animal inside the body, restless, disobedient, choking the lungs and devouring the heart.



Feminist artists have repeatedly returned to this history. A striking example is *The Hysterical Herstory of Hysteria and How It Was Cured* (2016) by the Guerrilla Girls where they debunk dumbass hysteria diagnoses in a satirical way.

Another treatment for hysteria, if you could afford it, involved a physician massaging the inside edges of a patient's vagina with aromatic oils.

If the procedure was successful, the patient would fall into a frenzied state of groaning and moaning, sometimes over and over again. It was not unusual for the patient to lose consciousness or fall asleep. When revived, she was in a state of calm relaxation. Cured! Until her next episode of hysteria.

Some women had the procedure as often as once a week. It was especially effective on virgins, widows, and nuns. Sometimes the treatment would take minutes, sometimes hours. What a lot of work for doctors!

Reality check: Doctors gave women orgasms and got paid for it. Was this healthcare... or prostitution?

- The Guerrilla Girls



Hysteria has been a tool for centuries to refuse women their voices, discredit them, and deny their experiences of violence, whether familial or institutional. Women have been interned and dismissed without ever having their suffering listened to.

For Jean-Martin Charcot, hysteria was inherently feminine, amounting to what he described as *an exaggeration of the female temperament*.

At the Salpêtrière Hospital, neurologists such as Charcot did not simply diagnose hysteria; they staged it. During what they called *Bals des folles*, patients were costumed and hypnotized before audiences of doctors, writers, and aristocrats. The clinic became a theater, and hysteria an art form.

Women deemed hysterical such as Augustine Gleizes were extensively photographed and filmed for archival purposes.

Zoe Beloff, an artist currently working around hysteria, created the film *Charming Augustine* (2006) where she revisits these images arguing that *the archive is only meaningful if we activate it to address contemporary issues*. Revealing how hysteria was constructed through framing, repetition, and expectation we see that these women did not simply express symptoms; they learned how hysteria was supposed to look like. Augustine was actually a collaborator.

As Georges Didi-Huberman observes in *Invention of Hysteria*; these women used imitation, mimicking the behaviors of other illnesses and recreating poses, for example those of saints.

Luce Irigaray parle de féminité comme étant une mascarade, c'est-à-dire un déguisement que revêt la femme afin de pouvoir trouver sa place et son rôle dans la société patriarcale, ce comportement qu'elle nomme mimétisme.

Toutefois, ce mimétisme rend possible le recouvrement d'une certaine liberté, par une prise de distance entre la mascarade, but du mimétisme, et le comportement mimétique. Si l'être féminin est conscient d'adopter une attitude mimétique, autrement dit de jouer un rôle, et ne se réduit pas passivement à celui-ci, il peut s'en distancier et le critiquer.

- Melissa Rérat





I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much 1986, Pipilotti Rist

Pipilotti Rist, a Swiss contemporary artist, reuses “hysterical gestures and behaviors”. She treats hysteria as a way of questioning femininity; *I glorify hysterical actions. They are powerful gestures, a form of resistance when one is in a weak position.*

In her video *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much* (1986), we see her frolicking and singing in states of somatic convulsions. But the convulsions are not limited to her body. Through the acceleration and blurring of the video, the electronic image itself begins to stutter and fragment, as if the hysteria had migrated from the flesh to the screen. What may appear as bodily excess becomes, more precisely, a disruption of representation.

In her amazing song *I Am a Victim of This Song* (1995), she covers *Wicked Game* where she ends up screaming its lyrics.

This act of screaming and refusing that “women are supposed to be just pretty and make pretty noises” makes me think of Yoko Ono. She was a true avant-gardist and a real Girl Monster. When she was on stage, as early as the 1960s, she liked to sing out of tune as if she was *mentally deranged*, as she said herself.

People don't want to
hear women scream.

- Yoko Ono

This political practice was collectively taken up by a new generation of female musicians. In the feminist punk rock movement of the early 1990s, riot grrrl advocated the use of rage, distortion, and noise as artistic means.

Bands such as Bikini Kill or Sista Grrrl challenged the presence of women and girls in the punk scene. Their performances focused on confrontation and excess, transposing hysteria into a politics of amplification.

The “Girl Monster” behavior is revealed through these girl groups as a personal artistic statement rather than an imposed label.

Valentine's Day RIOT

featuring:
SISTA GRRRLS

9:00 HONEYCHILD
10:00 SIMMIE
11:00 MAYA
12:00 TAMARA

@Brownies
Ave. A betw 10th & 11th sts
Saturday, Feb. 14th
doors open 8pm
damage: \$5
for more info: 212.420.8392

Although hysteria was officially removed from the **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders** in 1980, its legacy remains deeply embedded in Western medicine's long history of misattributing, trivializing, and discrediting women's pain.

Pauline Chanu, author and documentarist, points out that hysteria continues to function as a tool to silence women, discredit survivors of violence, and control women's bodies and reproductive power. During the debate *Déconstruire l'hystérie, De la pathologisation à l'émancipation* (February 2025), which was held at *Le Bal* in Paris in the context of Laia Abril's exhibition *On Mass Hysteria*, she states:

Je pensais m'intéresser à un sujet historique, bien sûr, j'avais conscience que le terme était toujours employé comme un jure, que son imaginaire persistait, mais je ne pensais pas qu'il continuait de condamner les femmes à l'errance médicale, qu'il continuait d'enfermer et de stigmatiser celles qui ont subi des violences. Or l'hystérie est loin d'être une catégorie morte, au contraire le moment de backlash que nous vivons en ce moment et qui consiste en grande partie à discréditer la parole des femmes et à contrôler leur utérus me semble réaffirmer l'importance d'identifier là où l'hystérie affleure pour mieux la déconstruire.



This categorization persists not only in social and medical discourse, but also in cinema. In horror films, what is perceived as feminine excess has been translated into monstrosity.

In *The Monstrous Feminine* (1986), Barbara Creed questions: "what does the figure of the female monster in horror film reveal about the unconscious fears and desires of patriarchy?"

By doing this, she shifts feminist film analysis away from the dominant focus on women as victims in horror films. In her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws, gender dynamics in horror* (1992), Carol Clover writes on gender-based victimization and the recurring trope that sexually active women deserve death and torment, and that the women who survive are those who remain "pure."

But Creed doesn't dismiss those points, she just shifts our attention to films in which women are not merely threatened by monstrosity but embody it.

Crucially, Creed argues that the female monster is not monstrous by coincidence. Her monstrosity is inseparable from her femininity. Horror cinema repeatedly associates female monstrosity with sexuality, reproduction, and maternal functions, reinforcing the idea that femininity itself is excessive, unstable, and dangerous.



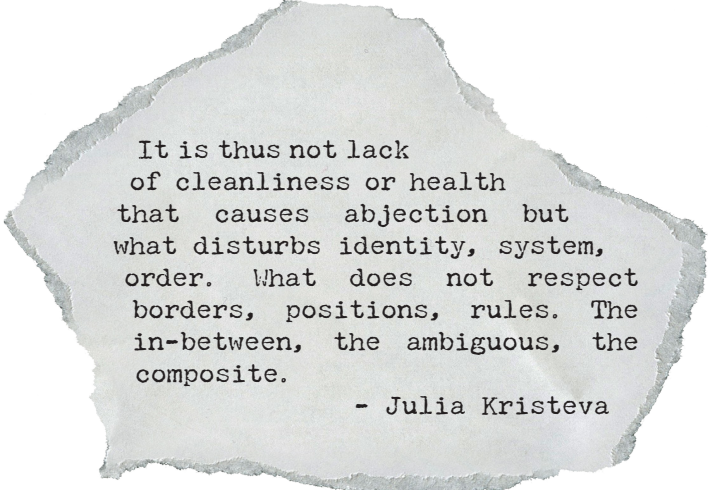
Species II 1998, Péter Medák



To theorize why the female body is such a powerful site of horror, Creed draws on Julia Kristeva's concept of **ABJECTION** as developed in *Powers of Horror* (1980).

What is abjection? Ab -> away / Ject->to throw

To throw away in disgust, maybe in a state of fascinated repulsion?



It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.

- Julia Kristeva

Bodily fluids, decay, wounds, excrement, menstrual blood, pregnancy, and childbirth all unsettle the fantasy of a stable, self-contained body. They remind us that we are made of matter, subject to permeability and decay.

Within patriarchal culture, these disruptions are gendered. The female body becomes abject because it visibly resists containment and control. It is the fear that arises when one's subjectivity is confronted with one's own physical vulnerability. Horror cinema depicts this fear by externalizing it onto women's bodies, transforming reproductive and sexual functions into monstrous spectacles.

Horror films engage with the abject in order to reaffirm the boundaries between the human and the non-human, order and chaos, male control and female excess. The monster allows patriarchal fear to be named, framed, and ultimately punished.

Hysteria and monstrosity therefore operate along the same continuum. What is pathologized or rendered monstrous is not the woman herself, but the threat that her visibility, autonomy, and bodily power pose to symbolic order.



Cosey Fanni Tutti, an amazing artist, constantly questions the ability of women artists to stage and dramatize their own bodies and desires, particularly when this ability relates to female power as a form of monetary exchange.

But Cosey exceeds the neat lineage which a feminist discourse might trace from Hanne Wilke's S.O.S Starification Object Series photographs (1974-82) or Carolee Schneemann's Interior Scroll (1975) to the riot grrrl abandonments of Pipilotti Rist or Tracey Emin's confessional video *Why I Never Became A Dancer* (1995). Those works signal a critical deployment of the body within the context of art, addressing their audience with anger, entreaty, even shame. By contrast, Cosey crosses over into pornography. In Szabo's glossy photographs she looks into his camera with a stark and insolent gaze. Yes, her directness could be read as a feminist recalibration of the peekaboo provocations of conventional glamor photography, but there is also the suggestion that she is doing this for pleasure, not under sufferance.

- Lucy Reynolds for Cabinet Magazine

All these artists push the boundaries of representation. They analyze the systems that control women's bodies and refuse to occupy a passive position within them.

Hysteria and other accusations of "unacceptable" femininity carry a heavy legacy that continues to affect the perception of femininity. However, these perceptions can be reclaimed without reproducing the very gaze that initially stigmatized them.

If hysteria functions as a form of resistance, it is precisely due to the hysteric's ability to represent herself in a versatile and potentially infinite number of ways, representations that both operate within and destabilize paternal authority, simultaneously performing femininity and questioning what is expected of it.

To engage with hysteria today is therefore not to repeat its history, but to re-stage it consciously. What was once used to silence women can now become an instrument of visibility, action and disruption.



Masks and the Artifice

The idea of femininity as something worn, something staged, is not new. In her 1929 essay *Womanliness as a Masquerade*, Joan Riviere proposed that femininity itself may function as a mask.

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it.

- Joan Riviere

The titular womanliness, according to Riviere, is akin to such a mask, adopted to conceal masculinity and prevent retribution should its presence be revealed. Riviere posits that women desiring masculinity might don a mask of womanliness to evade anxiety and potential punishment from men.

The concept raises questions about the authenticity of female identity. If womanliness is primarily a masquerade, then:

- What does it mean to be truly oneself?
- How much of womanhood is genuine versus performed?
- Can women break free from these masks and embrace their authentic selves?

Riviere's work suggests that embracing the performative aspect of femininity can be empowering, allowing women to critically examine societal expectations and choose their own expressions of identity.

This is where my interest in masks begins.

Masks have always fascinated me, the uneasiness they provoke to an audience, or the comfort they bring to the performer. Wearing a mask offers another skin, another face to inhabit, a persona to hide behind or become. It is simultaneously a shield and a tool for self-exploration.

Masks can function as an alter ego. They can provide confidence and allow the performer to mimic something or someone they admire.

The first mask I used was just a plastic mask. I got on 42nd Street in an erotic store. I was not an experienced performer, so I liked it at the beginning to often have my face covered or to use it as a disguise to become a different persona. You move in a different way if you have a mask on.

- Joan Jonas

Joan Jonas uses masks, mirrors, and costumes in her work to examine theatrical gestures and archetypes of female identity. She performs as herself and as her masked double.

In her piece *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy*, she explores artifice, masquerade, and narcissism through a female alter ego dressed as a doll.



Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy 1972, Joan Jonas

Another artist who uses masks as a main tool in her work is Marnie Weber. When asked why she uses dolls and masks, she described taking an acting class in the 1990s because of stage fright. When she could not access an emotion, she was told to put on a blank mask.

Somehow, the real emotion would pour out... I came away believing that masks can actually allow for real expression.

- Marnie Weber

In *The Sea of Silence* (2009), Weber's characters *the Spirit Girls* use ventriloquist dolls to express their truths. Their speech is fragmented, their threads seem tangled. In the end, they abandon the dolls' bodies on the shore and step into the ocean in a symbolic gesture of cleansing.



Weber works with masks, prosthetics, and dolls to exaggerate physical traits and craft uncanny figures. She interrogates inherited feminine norms while engaging with characters who exist at the margins: older women, crones, or fantastical, doll-like personas. In works such as *Old Lady Poodle*, Weber embodies this tension between reality and artifice where selfhood and character intermingle, and where the grotesque, uncanny, and playful coexist.



Noémie Ninot, another contemporary artist, uses masks in a similar way:

Je recherche avant tout de l'inconfort. (...) Les sujets nous paraissent familiers, pourtant ils n'ont rien de vivant ; je suis dans le faux, le factice, le simulacre.

- Noémie Ninot

She uses silicone and latex as it mimics skin like material and blends in our real skin with artificiality, giving it an eerie weird feeling where the spectator is forced to question what is real or not. In *Poupée de Peau*, she draws on a survey conducted on dating sites in which men were asked to describe their feminine ideal. These descriptions are translated into latex masks, producing artificial faces that embody and fix these projected fantasies.

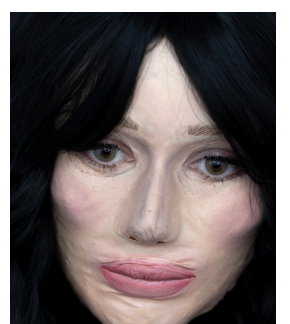
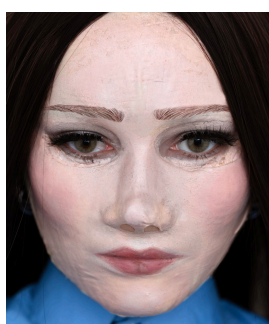
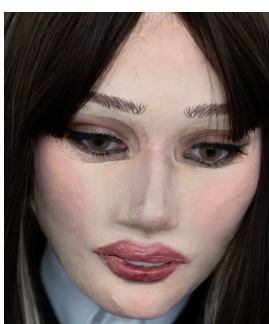
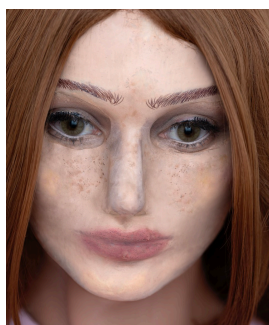
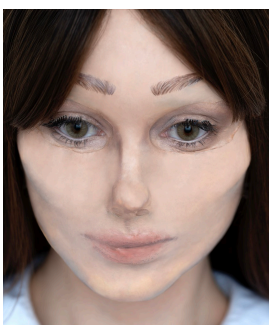
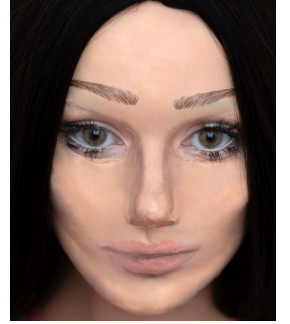
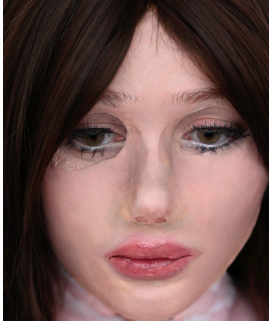
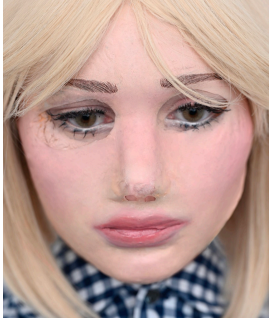
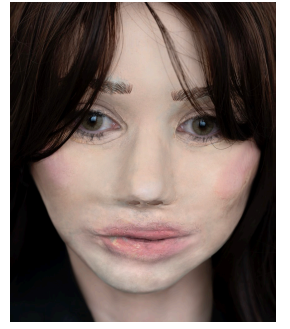
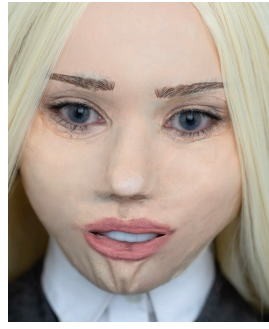
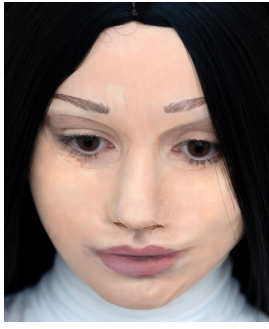
In an interview we did in December 2025, I asked her:

De manière plus générale, lorsque des artistes femmes mobilisent ou manipulent le male gaze dans leur travail, comment voyez-vous l'équilibre entre appropriation, subversion et reproduction ? Y a-t-il, selon vous, un point où ce jeu atteint ses limites, ou est-ce précisément dans cette zone d'ambiguïté que se situe l'intérêt du geste artistique ?

She replied:

C'est une question que je me pose également et à laquelle je n'ai pas encore de réponse. Je suis prise dans des injonctions dont je reproduis les codes. Je dirais que pour trouver cet équilibre, il faut se réapproprier ces codes intériorisés pour les renverser à l'image. Dans mon travail, j'utilise ces impératifs et je les renvoie de manière brutale au spectateur, l'idée est de décaler le regard pour voir différemment le sujet, le voir sous un autre prisme. Mais je ne me suis pas encore aventuré à changer ce regard. Peut-être dans un prochain temps.

I do not want to imply that staging or representing men's desire automatically means participating in the male gaze. On the contrary, when artists like Noémie Ninot presents these feminine ideals in such an abrupt and literal way, we are forced to confront what this idea of beauty entails. Do we really want to reduce ourselves to the gaze of others? Do we want to be perceived only as objects capable of sustaining such standards?



This political approach to framing and questioning female representation through masks is emblematically associated with the feminist art group Guerrilla Girls, who use gorilla masks to preserve anonymity, exercise strategic power, and highlight the invisibility of women in the art world. Their masks allow them to speak freely and critique institutions without personal retribution, turning anonymity from a weakness into a strength, and make them instantly recognizable.

On one of their most know actions, they placed a gorilla mask on the Grande Odalisque, fracturing the feminine ideal and interrupting the passive nude by exposing the power structures that depend on its visibility.



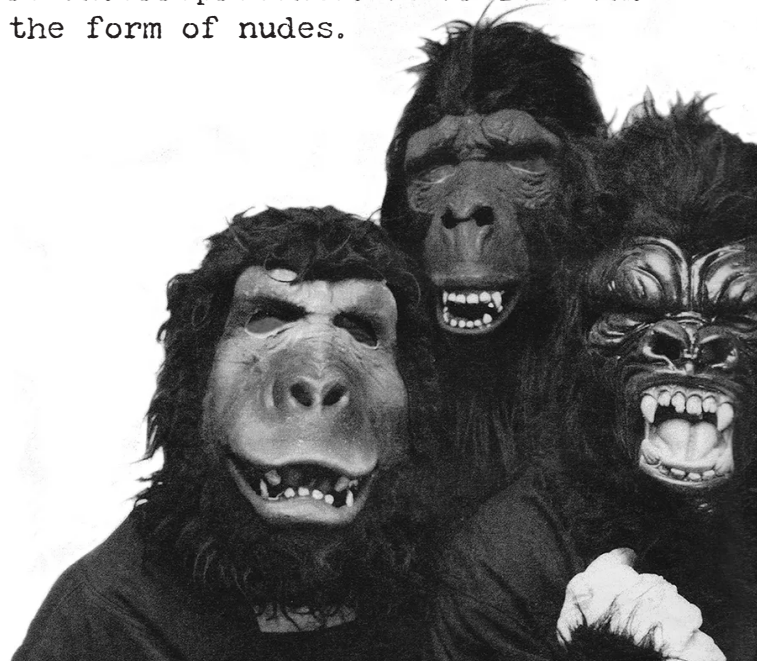
Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?

Less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 76% of the nudes are female.

Statistics from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, 2011

GUERRILLA GIRLS CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD
www.guerrillagirls.com

In this action, they write that women are underrepresented as artists and that most female representation takes the form of nudes.



In her work *La Parallaxe Psy* (2023), Noemie Ninot reappropriated several paintings of Venus and Renaissance nudes in order to redefine these codes, or at least attempt to update them.

This project started with the reading of John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), where he explains in an extraordinarily simple and effective way that women are transformed into objects of vision and thus become a spectacle. He then makes a connection between this observation and the tradition of the nude in art history, particularly during the Renaissance, where women are painted for the gaze and satisfaction of the spectator -often a dominant white heterosexual man.

- Noémie Ninot with Odda Magazine



La Parallaxe Psy 2023, Noémie Ninot



But masks are not the only way to stage artifice.



In *How We See* (2014), Laurie Simmons photographs young women in close-up. Their eyes appear open and directed toward the viewer. On closer inspection, the eyes are painted onto their closed eyelids.

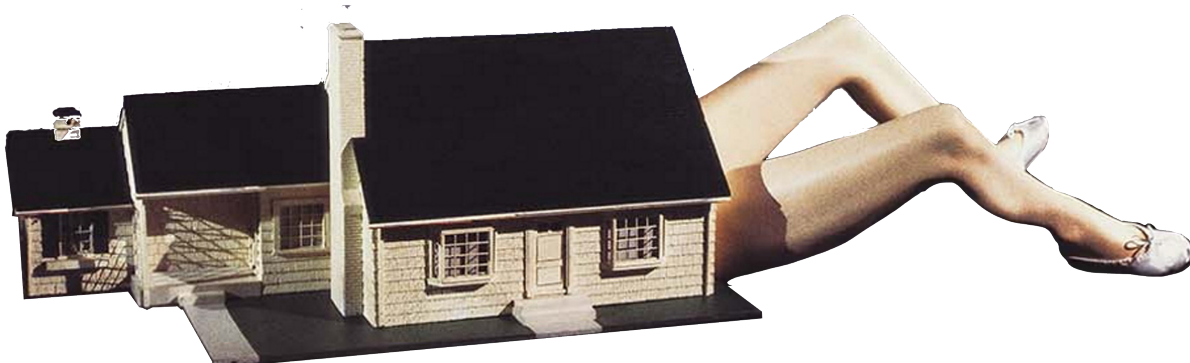
The effect is simple. The subjects appear to be looking back, but they cannot see. The image offers a structure of reciprocity without the possibility of exchange. What appears to be mutual gaze is only an appearance.

Starting in the 1970s, Simmons staged carefully lit photographs of dollhouse interiors populated by miniature plastic women. In works such as *Pushing Lipstick* (1979), the domestic scenes appear immaculate, almost nostalgic. Yet the scale creates distance. The housewife is frozen, suspended in ritual. The domestic ideal becomes controllable, miniaturized, and therefore exposed.

The manipulation of scale is crucial. By reducing the woman to a doll, Simmons reveals how diminished and scripted her role already is.

Later, in the *Lying Objects* series (1992), household objects sprout slender female legs. A handbag walks. A house stands on heels. A perfume sleeps. The body disappears, replaced by consumer products.

Simmons' work highlights something unsettling: the female image has consistently been staged.





How We See 2014, Laurie Simmons



Pushing Lipstick 1979, Laurie Simmons



The body as object reaches a different register in the work of Pippa Garner. In the late 1980s, she transitioned (or as she referred to it, “gender-hacked”) from Philip to Pippa.

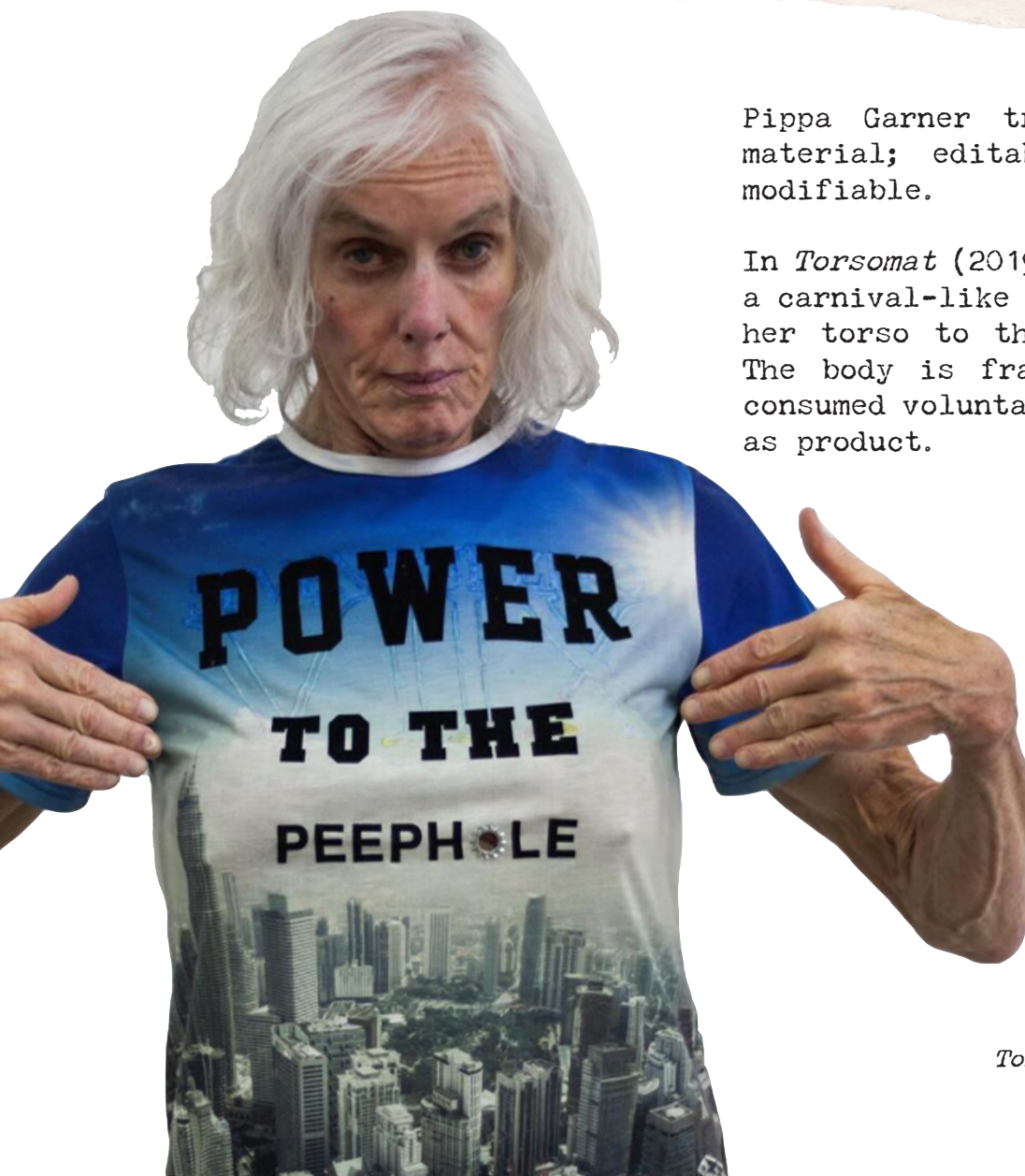
Reflecting on her earlier practice modifying consumer appliances and automobiles, she recalled looking in the mirror and thinking: “I’m an object too. What can I do to play with my body?”

I began to see myself as an artifact ... I turned this beam that I had focused on things that were external at myself, and I saw potential for an art project that would be ongoing, that would always create a disorientation in my position in society, and sort of balk at any possibility of ever falling into a stereotype again.

- Pippa Garner

Pippa Garner treated her body as material; editable, marketable and modifiable.

In *Torsomat* (2019), she stood inside a carnival-like booth, offering only her torso to the audience’s touch. The body is fragmented, displayed, consumed voluntarily and reassembled as product.

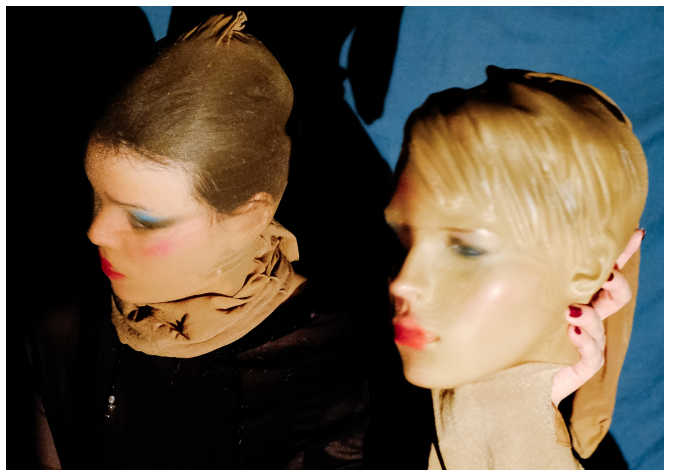
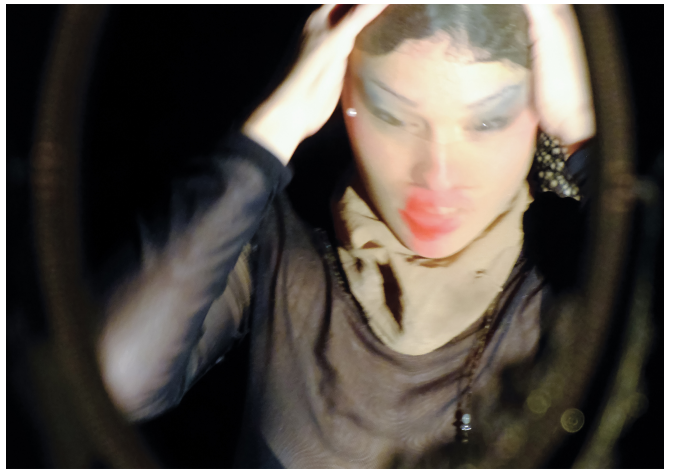
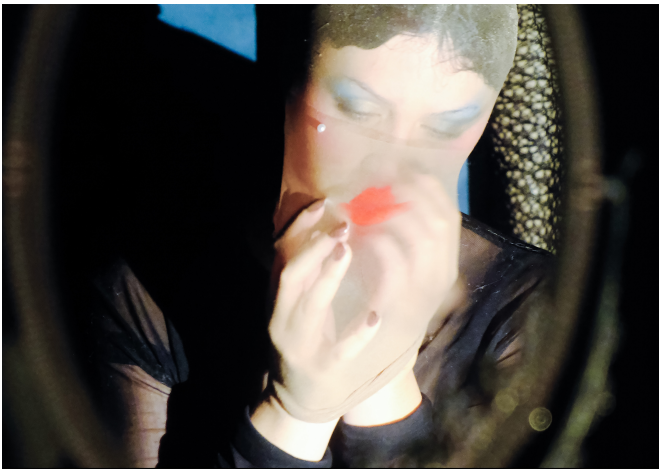


Torsomat 2019 Pippa Garner



TORSOMAT





This makes me turn to my own practice.

When I work with mannequins or fragments of my own body on camera, I come back to the same question: where do I stand within this system? Am I exposing the artificial construction of femininity, or am I aestheticizing it? When I frame the mannequin, light her & eroticize her, am I participating in the gaze I am criticizing? Or does the artificiality expose the mechanism?

In my work, *Me And Her*, I explore the morphing between mannequin and human: which is artificial, which is human? This work stages an attempt at becoming the mannequin. In its continuation, the work *Me And Her (transparently)*, images are printed on plastic sheets and placed on an overhead projector by a librarian-archivist type figure. The stacked images form a hybrid body, neither fully human nor fully synthetic, a blend of mannequin and human, producing a subtle, uncanny, monstrous femininity.

This ambiguity is central to my practice. I do not attempt to purify the image from the gaze. Instead, I turn the gaze back toward the viewer. As Noémie Ninot observes discomfort often arises not from what is shown, but from the spectator's awareness of their own looking. The image exposes the mechanism of desire as much as the body it frames.

The mask, the doll, the prosthetic, the mannequin, none provide escape. They provide exaggeration. And through exaggeration, the mechanism becomes visible. And with awareness the art of seeing and being seen as a woman evolves to more self authenticity.





My Final Thoughts

This in-depth research across decades of cinema, art, and writing has given me a deeper understanding of the codes that shape representation today. I found it especially meaningful to trace how voyeurism emerged in early cinema and how it continues conditioning the way we look.

Immersing myself in voyeuristic films, in the writings of women who resisted dominant narratives, and in the practices of artists who challenged social codes has shifted the way I see images. I notice things differently now. When I watch a film, I immediately recognize gestures and visual structures I might once have overlooked.

Reading about hysteria and its long history also felt essential, particularly in the current context, where women's bodies remain sites of political control and projection. Understanding this history has allowed me to situate contemporary debates within a much broader continuum.

Sharing these references has been one of the most rewarding parts of this thesis. I hope the reader has found in them the same sense of discovery and recognition that I did. There is something deeply reassuring in encountering artists who are grappling with similar questions.

Some questions remain unanswered. I don't yet know whether representing the mannequin, or the male gaze, in my own work inevitably reproduces the structures I am trying to resist. What remains, and what drives my practice forward, is the ongoing tension between reflection, repetition, and critique, a tension in which artifice becomes a lens through which to reflect, and perhaps alter, the very gaze it portrays.







Fin

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