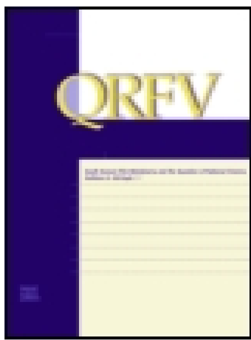

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Quarterly Review of Film and Video

ISSN: 1050-9208 (Print) 1543-5326 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gqrf20

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To cite this article: Vera Dika (2020): The Power to “Not Want” in a Global Women’s Film Context, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, DOI: 10.1080/10509208.2020.1768016

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2020.1768016

Published online: 21 Jun 2020.

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QUARTERLY REVIEW OF FILM AND VIDEO
https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2020.1768016

The Power to "Not Want" in a Global Women's Film Context

Vera Dika

> Desire for her, her desire, that is what is forbidden by the law of the father, of all fathers: fathers of families, fathers of nations, religious fathers, professor-fathers, lover-fathers, etc. … Perhaps we have reached a period in history when this question of domination by fathers can no longer be avoided.
>
> —Luce Irigaray, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother"[1]

> Do what you want.
>
> —Dr. Michael Dulchin[2]

> First you have to want it, and that is the hardest part.
>
> —Eric Bogosian[3]

I have included the quotes above because they intrigue me. Across the years I have either read them or they have been spoken to me. What does engage me is the use of the words "desire" and "want" in these various quotes. What is the difference between these two words? In the dictionary I found definitions that are almost interchangeable, each word used to define the other:

Desire: to strongly wish for or want something

Want: to have a desire to possess or do (something); wish for

The difference seems to be the action required by both. Desire has a quality of bodily intensity, one that often finds synonyms in sexual words such as lust or passion. Want seems in to be more general and presented in synonyms such as need or craving. But while there is an emptiness to it, there is also a sense of commitment, a movement. Want drives towards an action ("to do", "to possess," as defined above). It is more conscious, a deliberation, while desire is more passive, settled in the body, an emanation. Want is the drive that carries the protagonist of a drama to its

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completion, or the author to the construction of a work. Desire is a state of being, but a necessary one.

These are the ways I will use the terms here, but I will also address the contradictions. I will, for example, consider the opposite of wanting, specifically in the form and content of the films and art to be discussed, and I will do so in gender terms. That is, I will discuss the condition of a woman *not wanting,* that is, the act of declining what is wanted of her, and more, of refusing the dominant codes of cinematic representation, so opening doors to identity, and to authorship. We will test the poles, from desire to wanting, from content to form, and the structures of meaning they reveal.

"What do women want?" Sigmund Freud's famous question has not been given an easy answer because, of course, there are many answers. It would be nonsensical to ask, "What do men want?" But it is obvious that even in this last question one of the answers becomes apparent. The latter implies an individual: each man has his own wants. On the other hand, the former implies a category: women belong to a herd. Perhaps women want to be individuals, to speak in their own individual voices, like men do, especially as white males do.

Or as Helene Cixous has famously written:

> Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history - by her own movement.[4]

Through this newly found voice then each woman can enact her own desires, she can want. Each woman can claim authorship.

The 76th Venice Film Festival

To address these issues, I will begin my discussion of a several films presented at the 76th Venice Film Festival in 2019, as well as the films and photographs by Cindy Sherman included at the National Portrait Gallery in London that same year. The issues of desire and want, about and by women, featured strongly in these works shown in Europe by global filmmakers, as was the controversy over gender representation and authorship. From the opening press conference at the Venice Film Festival, for example, a set of controversial questions were posed to the director of the festival, Alberto Barbera, and to the competition jury president, Lucretia Martel. These questions involved primarily film, such as *Joker* by Todd Phillips, *Ad Astra* by James Gray, *J'Accuse,* by Roman Polanski, *American Skin* by Nat Parker, and *The Perfect Candidate* by Saudi woman director Haifa Al Mansour.

Figure 1. *Ecstasy:* A film about female sexual desire.

The first question came from a young male journalist from Russia who began the press conference with a pointblank inquiry, “Why have you selected so many blockbuster films for competition at this festival?” A female journalist from Germany followed by asking “Why have you included films by Roman Polanski and Nate Parker, both men notoriously accused of rape?” And an American female journalist asked the question that had been so pressing in the previous year at the 2018 Venice Film Festival, an event that featured only one woman director in the 21 films chosen for competition. “Why is it that this year you have chosen only two films by women in 21 films competing for the Golden Lion?” A heated discussion ensued.

In light of the standing controversy over the number of women filmmakers included in the festival in all categories, and implicitly, the representation of women, it is interesting that the 2019 Festival had begun the night before with a pre-opening screening of *Ecstasy,* a renowned 1933 Czechoslovakian film made by Gustav Machaty and starring a 19-year old Hedy Lamarr (Figure 1).

The restored 4 K print of *Ecstasy* was widely publicized and shown at the Festival in the Palazzo del Cinema. The message seemed clear enough, in

some ways it was an apology for the limitations on women's presence in the festival. *Ecstasy* is a film about a woman's sexual desire, and to be fair to the festival organizers, this is a topic that even today is not well-depicted in mainstream film and needs to be addressed. The question, of course, is how? In this case, the star of *Ecstasy* is a woman, and the film seems to be about her needs for sexual fulfillment, especially in the actions she takes by leaving her sexually inadequate elderly husband and finding a young lover. The woman in the film, Eva, played by Hedy Lamarr (before her legendary rise as Hollywood star and genius inventor) takes pleasure in her body and seeks fulfillment almost as would a man. And while this appears to be a welcome addition to the representation of women (i.e. to want, not only to be wanted) it is of course replete with often-cited pitfalls, not only narratively, but materially as well.

As frequently noted, the power again rests in the ability to choose, and in this case, the central action of the film is only tangentially about the power of a woman to choose a sexual partner. This is primarily because Eva is a secondary character. The overriding power rests with her husband, Emil, the true protagonist of the film, and, cinematically, the character who has the power over who will be allowed into the space of the film itself. On a material level, on the level of exhibition and distribution, on the other hand, the power of inclusion ultimately belongs to the male, and the Venice Film Festival in 2019 is no exception, with Alberto Barbera its director and Paolo Baratta its president. But *Ecstasy* is not without its contributions, certainly in terms of its artistic acumen, as well as in the presentation of the body, both female and male, in conjunction with desire and want.

A discussion of *Ecstasy* in these terms will set guidelines for the works later addressed. What is it for a woman to desire, and to want, but more importantly, to not want, *to refuse*, in art and in film? With examples from the Venice Film Festival, not only from the film *Ecstasy,* but also from *Lingua Franca* (2109) by Isobel Sandoval, and *Hava, Maryam and Ayesha* (2019) by Sahraa Karimi, as well as a selection of photographs and films by Cindy Sherman shown at the National Portrait Gallery in London, I will ask, "What are the important contributions of woman as filmmaker, as author, offered by these in contemporary global works?" In our essay, the concern with the woman's body is compounded by the question of women's subjectivity and so must be considered through formal structures, form still being the central point of enervation in the making of art.

Ecstasy: Looks Can Be Deceiving

On its surface, *Ecstasy* looks like a movie about a woman wanting. Instead, it makes spectacle of the desire emanating from the woman's body. *Ecstasy*

Figure 2. *Ecstasy:* Eva is aligned with the sensuality of nature.

is a Fascist-era film that originally showed at the Venice Film Festival in 1934 (the Festival was founded in 1932 by Benito Mussolini) and shared first prize (then called the Copa di Citta di Venezia) for Best Director. In addition, the Festival audience itself at the Excelsior Hotel was mesmerized by *Ecstasy* and voted it Best Foreign Film. Michelangelo Antonioni, then a young film critic, was in attendance and wrote about the reception of *Ecstasy* in this way, "In the garden of the Excelsior you could hear the breathing of the enthralled viewers, you could feel the shiver running though the audience."[5] The nude scene by Lamarr in *Ecstasy* stunned many, and it is claimed that Mussolini himself summoned the film to Rome to see what all the commotion was about (Figure 2).

In our present era, the fact that the nude scenes of a teenage Lamarr were done without her full knowledge (Lamarr claims she did not know the cameras were equipped with telephoto lenses), and that other sexually dubious shooting practices were employed (such as the pricking of Lamarr's buttocks with safety pins in order to simulate the facial cringing in the orgasm scenes) resonate in our # Me Too era. Moreover, the subsequent facts of Lamarr's life, such as her career-long branding as a sex symbol, her six failed marriages, and her obsession with the decline of her beauty, most notably, her botched facelifts, all raise the question of the representation of women, of authorship, and the right of refusal.

Laura Mulvey taught us in 1976 that for a woman to be looked at on film, to be the bearer of the look but never the maker of meaning, is to be caught in the male gaze, and is a form of subjugation, and a silencing.[6] And as Edward Said has explained, on a national level, to be represented,

especially in a colonial context, is a form of domination.[7] And it is here that I will begin my inquiry. Although these concepts have been well-rehearsed across the last 45 years of film criticism, the recent offerings of 76th Venice Film Festival, and Cindy Sherman's art exhibition in Europe, have addressed new questions.

In *Ecstasy,* the central onscreen character is female, or so it may seem. The subject position is male, with the author/narrator organizing the film's gaze, story structure, and sensual surface. But in *Ecstasy* we will note that there is something more. We will consider that the camera gaze nonetheless comingles the male and the female in affective ways. As I will argue, the attention in this partial-talkie black-and-white film, one dominated by a silent film image, with its granular surface of light flickering in darkness, brings a whiteness of skin and blackness of hair across the gray scale of surrounding tonalities that is mesmerizing and seductive. And while *Ecstasy* most prominently features the body of Hedy Lamarr in this regard, it is important to note that the film does not entirely absent the man's physical body, while maintaining his overarching gaze. The male body, as we shall see, is ever-present, within, and outside, the frame, overlapping with the female, in a telling clash of perspective, intention, and presence.

I Want Your Body

Ecstasy begins with a point of view shot of a man's gloved hand. Unsure, the hand attempts to place a key into a keyhole. In this opening shot we are symbolically given almost the entirety of the film in visual form. The viewers of *Ecstasy* are being let into a world of suppressed sexual desire (the metaphor of key into keyhole needs little explanation) but one in which our stay, and that of the character of the woman, is only tenuous. We are allowed into this cinematic world by Emil, the male protagonist of *Ecstasy*, the character whose actions generate the flow of the narrative, and who has opened the door to sexual desire. But of course, this is only the content of *Ecstasy*. The film as whole will be brought to us by the director of the film, Gustav Machaty, who will organize its narrative structure, as well as visual and aural surfaces. Going forward, I will distinguish between the representation of the characters, both male and female, which is the content of the film, and the organization of shots by the director, who is the author/narrator.

The opening of *Ecstasy* continues as we watch Emil succeed in turning the first door lock only to find that he has two more locks to open. Here we get a visual metaphor for Emil's fastidiousness, but also for his sexual weakness. We watch as Emil fumbles, and then finally opens the door. In the next shot, the truth is revealed. In the bright light of the reverse shot

we see Emil, an aging gentleman, as he holds his teenage bride, Eva, in his arms. This is followed by a low angle shot of Emil's feet seen from a perspective inside the darkened apartment. Tight-fitting patent leather dress shoes bind misshapen feet and become phallic metaphors. A sense of the advance of age and its limitations is implied, even as Emil finally steps over the threshold.

In some ways the opening sequence in *Ecstasy* recalls the early sequences of Maya Deren and Alexander Hamid's *Meshes of The Afternoon* (1943). The association is not insignificant if we consider that Hamid had emigrated from Czechoslovakia to the US in 1938. There is a good probability that he had seen *Ecstasy,* a famous film by one of his countrymen, and now transposed some of its elements. *Meshes* too begins with point of view shots of the protagonist's feet, only now those feet belong to a young woman, to Maya Deren herself. We also see from Deren's POV as she walks up to the front door of her house, opens the lock with a key, and then steps over the threshold. Unlike *Ecstasy*, *Meshes of The Afternoon* will present Deren's dream, taking us into a non-linear circular structure of repeating objects and events in the enclosed space of the house. *Meshes* presents a film dream of a woman's unconscious conflicts, now viewed from the perspective of both male and female authors.

In *Ecstasy* we instead open to a secret sex world fantasy from the POV of patriarchy. The figure of Emil, the protagonist, and the agent of the author Machaty himself, opens the door to the spatial coordinates of the film, and to its narrative, both of which will terminate when Emil's final action decides it. Until then, the woman, Eva, will be allowed to move through the interior and exterior spaces within the film, and to explore her sexuality, making spectacle of it for the viewer. It must be stressed that Eva does not author the spaces or the time of *Ecstasy*, yet she is the agent through which the story's binary oppositions are enacted. In these spaces, where the symbolic elements emerge through story, character, costumes, and props, the material of the woman as light will intermingle with the material of film. The sensual symbolism is formed between such interlocking binaries as young/old, fertile/infertile, nature/civilization, life/death, father/son and religion/myth. As we shall see, Eva takes a lover, Adam, a young man who is the rival of Emil, as well as the mythic "son" who will rise to the position of the father. Adam thus completes the myth of origins, to be stated here as the birth of new generations and does so from the position of patriarchy.

From our first vision of Eva she is white light. Held in Emil's arms wearing her wedding dress, Eva is ablaze in translucent gauze. And if my description has a touch of "purple prose," so be it, for it explains how Eva's body will be presented throughout the film. Her body will cause

disturbances on the film's surface, a sensual disruption, a distortion of forms. We view Eva in conjunction with sheer materials like veils in which she is draped, for example, or diaphanous curtains that outline her form, or silks against her skin of pure white. Her skin is at times transformed through light into illusions recalling the sheen of marble, or even the delicate and deadly transparency of wax. Water too is presented in *Ecstasy* as a medium as it ripples to distort Eva's naked flesh beneath its surface, adding streaks of blackness to the white. And smoke serves a similar purpose as it emits from Eva's mouth, grayish white against the blackness of the background, making her breath visible. All these disturbances, and transparencies, bring Eva's body into tactile contact with our own, and a sense of immediacy and sensuality is created in the experience of the film.

This physicality is also tied to the postures in which Eva's body will be seen, postures that will greatly distinguish hers from the those of men in the film. For unlike the disruption of contours that we have already noted in Eva's body, the male body (even in Emil's somewhat depleted state) will be presented as upright, integrated, and with secure boundaries. In relationship of the material substances within the film, such as clothes and surroundings, for the male, there is the sense of sameness and unity, while the black and white film stock itself registers the male in the more somber tones of the gray scale. Eva's body on the other hand, will have the diffuse contours extended to her posture and stance. As in the earliest shot just described, when Eva enters the room in Emil's arms, the young woman will be seen as either "crumpled," in a seated position, for example, or held like a baby in arms, or elongated, in some way, her body often seen horizontal across the frame, reclining on the couch, in the grass, in the bed, in the water. And her body and face will be fragmented. A medium shot of her young rounded arm and hand, for example, is viewed for a longer duration. Or her face is seen in close-up, viewed from a variety of angles, upright at times, or from side to side, from left or right, or at odd angles, or even upside down.[8]

The Movement of the Body in Space

Going forward I will discuss *Ecstasy* to engage these oppositions and the meanings they engender. Most importantly, I will begin with the figure of Eva as she moves across the various spaces of the film. These spaces form the basis of articulation in *Ecstasy,* not only in the enclosures that are presented, but also in the length of time the shots are held, the tension with the frame line, and the manner in which these open up and close across the film.

In the beginning sequence, for example, Eva is gently placed to stand on the apartment floor by Emil. She then walks from room to room in their new apartment, bringing the film viewers with her. We enter a darkened foyer, and then a sterile kitchen, and then a barren living room. Walking through doorways, frames within frames, we and the camera follow Eva as her long white veil extends her body across the screen. Eva takes her wedding bouquet, a diaphanous arrangement of flowers and tulle, a metaphor for Eva herself in terms of her fragile disturbance, and places it a metal bucket on an empty mantle. The notion of a young bride in these series of sterile rooms, enclosures within enclosures, opposing her youth with age, her fertility with infertility, is deadly, and its meaning is made palpable.

The beginning of a sexual release comes visually and narratively when Eva finally rejects her husband's impotence and returns to her father's house. Within this new set of enclosures, she soon encounters framed pictures of her dead mother. Eva's father tells his young daughter that she is just like her mother, wild, and never satisfied. From this point on, female sexuality, the "suppressed disturbance" within this narrative, and Eva herself, will be seen as aligned with the forces of nature. As a prelude, Eva steps out onto the veranda of her father's house and looks up at the moon above her.

The next series of shots reveal Eva moving freely across a wooded field on a sunny day. Eva is first seen on horseback galloping toward the camera, and then descending from the horse, disrobing, and running naked to swim in the waters of a clear lake. Here we see full frontal nudity from afar, her body a glimmer of white light approaching us, and then into the water with Eva again elongated as she floats naked on her back (Figure 3).

The ripples disturb the surface of the lake and the surface image of her body as well. Soon emerging from the waters, like an image of Venus herself, Eva now realizes that her horse has fled. Crouching because of her nakedness, Eva runs through the wild fields to retrieve the animal until she is finally discovered by a young man, Adam. "Adam and Eve," the reference to a myth of origins is now complete. Adam, stands, his body erect, and looks down at Eva as she looks up at him, covering her nakedness with her arms, and panting (Figure 4).

Eva's heavy breathing is a significant body movement not displayed by any other character in *Ecstasy.* In this scene, Eva is panting, an animal reflex, because she is afraid. In other sequences she will pant because of her long-unfulfilled sexual desires.

The handsome young Adam will be her savior as Eva, after much deliberation, finally enters his secluded residence at night to have sex with him. The encounter continues the body language already described, only now Adam disappears below the frame line to perform cunnilingus as we watch

Figure 3. *Ecstasy*: The contours of Eva's reclining body merge with the rippling water.

Figure 4. *Ecstasy*: Eva hides her nakedness from the male gaze.

Eva's orgasm made visible by her upper body and facial gestures. Aided by the camera framing and lighting, Eva's face is bathed in white light, rendering her visage almost translucent, as her arms clasp over it, v-shaped, when she climaxes (Figure 5).

Ecstasy will now begin its denouement, showing the eventual tension and rivalry that results between the young lovers and the aging husband, thus referencing the mythic deadly conflict between the son and the father. In *Ecstasy*, the son ultimately triumphs, as Emil, in defiance of the young people's union, kills himself. And while this action effectively ends the film, we nonetheless witness the rise of the son to the dominant position of the father. In this later sequence, Eva is largely ejected from the visual field, as she leaves Adam, never to return. Adam, on the other hand, will remain

Figure 5. *Ecstasy*: Eva climaxes, her face obscured and her skin waxlike.

on screen and complete the narrative outcome, his body prominently on view. Seen from low angles, Adam's body is made large in the frame, and more erect than ever, as he oversees his workers in the field, many of whom appear to be people of color. Adam has lost Eva, but as he gazes at a young indigenous woman, apparently one of his workers, with her young son, he has memories of his own child. At this point, we are given Adam's flashbacks to Eva, now alone with the child she bore him. True to the cinematic outcome predicted by Laura Mulvey, the woman, Eva, is punished for her sins of desire, while the man is free. In *Ecstasy,* Adam is free to oversee subjugated peoples and continue his gender-and class-based dominance within patriarchy. The overarching metaphor of this movie is insistent and pronounced. A film about women's sexual desire ends with woman's subjugation and with the man's triumph. In these images, the continuation of subsequent generations in patriarchy is symbolically upheld.

The Cinematic Art of Cindy Sherman

In Cindy Sherman's art, the visions of the woman's body, such as we have been discussing in *Ecstasy*, and the significant patriarchal conventions in presenting it, are dislodged and refuted by her formal strategies. Most typically, Sherman presents staged photographs that at once highlight the material base of the image, while also referencing other forms of storytelling, which include film, as well as theater and painting. In many of these images the depicted woman's sexual desires are largely suppressed or unfulfilled. Critical concerns instead rise to the fore, such as the formal structures that create meaning, and Cindy Sherman's position as author.

In her *Untitled Film Still #14* (1978), for example, the clash that results among these elements, especially the body of the woman in a defined space, disrupts the narrative flow to reveal a crucial dynamic: the existence

Figure 6. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #14*, 1978. Gelatin silver print, 10 × 8 inches, 25.4 × 20.3 cm. Multiple perspectives on the image of a woman are presented. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

of the cinematic shot, that time-based event that in Sherman's work has been reduced to a single frame. In doing so, it reveals the edges of the frame line itself, or what Andre Bazin has termed a "mask" on reality[9] (Bazin also noted that this is not a property of the frame in painting where attention is instead directed to the center of the image), By capturing only a fragment of an ongoing reality, then, the single shot (and in Sherman, the single frame) asks the question, "What is it that lies beyond the frame line?" In *Untitled Film Still #14* a number of spaces open up. To the woman's right, for example, we wonder, "Who is in the room with her?" From the mirror reflection, "Where am I, the viewer, in the mirror?" and, "Where is the camera as it reflects Sherman in front of it, and as author of its vision?" (Figure 6)

In the avant garde film, the practice of using a fixed frame single image as the totality of the cinematic work, now for the purpose of disruption, recalls the Structural Films of the late 1960s early 1970s era. The films of Andy Warhol, such as *Screen Tests* (1964-1966), are significant examples.[10] Here the refutation of narrative is engaged through the often-truncated image of the human body. In *Screen Test: Edie Sedgwick* (1965), for example, a close-up of a face is shown

(conflating the conventions of the cinematic shot, painting, and the photograph), caught within the confines of a single frame for approximately 4 minutes. The reduction of the elements, and the length of time the image is held, destroys expectation of a fictional narrative, as well as making us conscious of the presence of the camera itself, and of Warhol's agency as author. Warhol also uses this technique in his 1964 film, *Empire*, an 8-hour single shot of the Empire State Building with little ensuing action. The duration in *Empire* is also important because it allows us to experience its cinematic elements. Here we are given a moving picture that is still, a cinematic image that exists in time but that does not move. On the other hand, the film material itself, its physical surface, never stops moving. We experience the light that flickers over its surface, the visible "dancing" film grain, and the distortions from the chemical bath.

It is important to note that Cindy Sherman bridges the gap in this cinematic tradition, taking us from Structural strategies of Warhol to postmodernism, or to what Douglas Crimp has called "Pictures."[11] In Sherman's work, this results in a critique of representation of women by interrogating the way images make meaning. To this I will add that it does so by the articulation of the surface material of the image and by the bodies and genders positioned in space. As a relational strategy, the tension with the frame line is most crucial, for this is the point of contestation with the real, opening to the presence of the viewer, and of the author herself.

In most of her career, Sherman has presented us with framed staged photographs featuring a single woman in cinematic-like poses, and later, in visual presentations that openly reference other mimetic forms such as theater and painting. Sherman's photographs are often highly produced, offering glossy images and featuring costumes and makeup that are meticulously chosen. However, the resulting image is not naturalistic. On the contrary, its artifice is made manifest, both in terms of its content and its formal elements, causing a disruption on the surface of the image.

Cindy Sherman at the National Portrait Gallery – A Contestation

Concurrent with the Venice Film Festival in the summer of 2019 was the historic retrospective of Cindy Sherman's work at the National Portrait Gallery in London. Renowned in the history of portraiture, the Gallery is known for its collection of British paintings. Seen in this context, the Sherman photographs are almost literally haunted by the conventions on display. Sherman's use of costumes, lighting, and pictorial strategies, for example, now comply and conflict with the historic paintings. The comparison raises questions about the content and styles on view, as well as the underlying social conventions and formal structures (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Madame Moitessier,* 1856. 75 × 36 inches. The woman accosts our gaze. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled # 204,* 1989. Chromogenic color print, 60 × 44 inches, 152.4 × 111.8 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. The woman disrupts our gaze.

This historical tension is made explicit in the Gallery show by the pairing of two pictures. One is *Madame Moitessier* by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1856) and the other is a comparably sized photograph by Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #204* (1989). In pose, gesture, costume, and use of props, the Sherman picture specifically references yet confronts the Ingres painting. The comparison is jarring, almost convulsive. And while the Sherman photo stands to critique the representation of the woman in the Ingres painting, and comments on the representation of women in art and popular culture, the question now is "How?"

The Sherman photograph in some ways gives us elements from the "real" because it is created by an imprint of light, a photochemical process that brings traces of the model's body onto paper. The camera eye produces evidence, or so it may seem. The Sherman photograph may tentatively connote the real, but it nevertheless "lies" as it references another painting, as well as foregrounding its own theatricality. And here, along with the diminution of desire or eroticism, are the formal points of contestation. What becomes apparent in the Sherman photograph is its distortion, a quality evident of much of Sherman's work.

The forced comparison of the two pictures foregrounds the Ingres painting as presenting a young woman of smooth contours, plump flesh that curves round in velvety softness. She wears a dress of pink and white floral

pattern, offering a portrait to decorate the house of the rich man who has commissioned it and who has taken a wife as a possession to display[12]. The woman's expression, however, warns the viewer, that she has considerable stature herself. As the wife of a powerful male, she stares down at the viewer, confronting the gaze, putting us all in our place. We are held in abeyance against the wealth and position that she both embodies and holds.

The photo of Sherman, on the other hand, seems to tell the underside of this story. We see that the dress on the Sherman model is too tight, yet almost falling off the body, and arranged in folds that copy yet deform the elegant flow of the original. The pink silk, for example, unbecomingly digs into the flabby flesh, and while the arm is in a similar pose, it does not have the swell of youth as displayed in the Ingres. The skin of the woman's face in Sherman's photograph too looks worn in comparison, and the expression is tired, perhaps signifying abuse. No doubt this could well have been the story of the Ingres painting, the hidden story that is not in evidence on the surface. In Sherman, we are seeing the "unconscious," now a social unconscious, a story of a woman's life, lived by many women across history. The female viewer may see herself in the painting and in the photograph – both aspects of representation, and of life. And even without the comparison, the Sherman piece stands on its own. The disruptions literally rip the visual the surface, rising to critique the idealized renditions of the female, especially within the conditions of entrapment and economic subjugation implicit in its historical form.

This level of disruption, and refusal, of conventional forms, is also evident in Sherman's photographs that feature dolls. One that has always been my favorite is *Untitled #316* (1995). This picture was also exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery and is important because the face of the doll, now seen in close-up, almost like a cinematic shot, holds the sense of a narrative, of the before and after, in the conditions of its representation (Figure 8).

Untitled #316 is poignant from the start because of the anonymity of its title. And while this unspecified type of titling is typical in much of Sherman's work, it holds special resonance here. We see that something terrible has happened, an interpretation possible because the doll has uncannily taken on a human quality. The doll seems abused, trashed, violated. The evidence of trauma is on the plastic face, in the eyes that don't match, and in the repositioned parts. The nose and mouth are askew, opened, for example, yet create a point of suspension, as in an elongated gasp, or as in the moment of death. The material under the "top-skin," has been laid bare to reveal the attack marks, the deep gouges in the flesh below. The implications for a story are here, of what came before and what

Figure 8. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #316*, 1995. Cibachrome 48 × 32 inches, 121.9 × 81.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. An uncanny image, the doll is life-like, perhaps at the moment of death.

will come after, of the victimization in the past, or of what continues in the future. The fingers of the hand placed haltingly on the naked breast seems to attest to this fact. (Interestingly, this image recalls in expression, gesture, and pose, the shot of Eva in *Ecstasy,* Figure #4, as earlier discussed.) And if one looks closely, the doll's black hair flows on the surface behind her, for she too is lying down, reclining. This plastic inanimate object has been made animate, and now she confronts our gaze, and positions us as viewers.

Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #316* has cinematic implications because of its narrative impetus, and because of the formal elements that imply a world beyond the frame, a story evolving in time. This quality is evident in many other of Sherman's works, especially in the *Untitled Film Stills* that make direct, although ironic, reference to the cinematic form.[13] It is now interesting to note that two of Sherman's never-before-exhibited short Super 8 films *I Hate You* (1975) and *Unhappy Hooker* (1976) were also shown at

the National Portrait Gallery this past summer. These films are of special interest because they serve as a crucial link between Sherman's early cinematic strategies, and her later photographic output, both of which reflect on medium-specific norms for critical purposes. Made as an undergraduate at the State University College at Buffalo (Buffalo State), *I Hate You* and *Unhappy Hooker* show Sherman's engagement with the film frame, her direct address to the viewer, and the narrative implications of the out-of-field. In one sense, these characteristics and their form of presentation can be traced back to the films of Andy Warhol, but, as we have noted, in Sherman's work these are skewed to critical gender-based perspectives that reject established forms.

Sherman utilizes strategies of disruption, and refusal, in the claiming of authorship, specifically a woman's authorship. And here it must be stressed that this is not a just a question of a female "gaze," as has often been postulated, but one of authorship of the text, which is greater, because it controls speech as well as sights. And Sherman does this by opening up what had been closed, that is, by lifting one shot from a proposed sequence of shots, from an imagined narrative (as in the later *Untitled Film Stills*), thus rupturing what Jean-Pierre Oudart had called the "system of the suture,"[14] This system is a set of formal cinematic conventions that typically keep us inside the illusion of narrative, and oblivious to the workings of the dominant ideology. In rupturing this flow, Sherman reveals the workings of the apparatus, as well as her own authorship (Figure 9).

It is interesting to note that even within the context of the National Portrait Gallery, Sherman's youthful films *I Hate You* and *Unhappy Hooker* do not resonate as juvenilia. *I Hate You,* for example, presents a fixed frame close-up of a young woman's face, in many ways recalling Andy Warhol's *Screen Test: Edie Sedgwick*. *I Hate You* features Sherman herself, for the 6′ 24″ duration of the Super 8 film (here shown as a loop), placed at a camera distance and framing reminiscent of the Warhol original, but not quite. There are significant and telling differences. Sherman is approximately the same age as was Edie in *Screen Test*, and in some ways resembles her. In *I Hate You*, however, the image is seen through a blue filter. What's more, the surface of the image is marred by tiny specks and scratches, as well as mild discolorations from the film processing bath. These imperfections dance across the image as we watch Sherman who, unlike Edie, speaks. As in the Warhol film, the camera is in a fixed frame position, and Sherman, seen in close-up, is caught in the confines of the frame. Unlike Edie, however, Sherman is the author of her film, and she has placed herself at a different angle than was Edie. Instead of the full-frontal close-up of Warhol's *Screen Tests* (and of Sherman's later work

Figure 9. Cindy Sherman, *I HateYou*, 1975. Super-8 film, color, silent. Duration: 6′24″. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. A woman speaks her rage. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

Untitled #316 previuosly discussed), ones that typically include the face, neck, and top of the shoulders of a subject centered in the frame and looking out at the viewer, *I Hate You* presents a different composition. In a strategy often in Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, the single woman in the frame of *I Hate You* looks off-camera with her head slightly angled to the side. From this position Sherman repeats, "I hate you" for the duration of the film. Speaking at regular intervals, Sherman addresses someone beyond the frame line, someone who we never see or hear, so can only imagine.

Because the fixed shot of *I Hate You* has been taken out of a sequence from an implied narrative, and no additional or reverse shot is presented, the areas to the left and right of the frame are never revealed. What is revealed, however, is the mask on the real itself, the shot, and so leaves it open to our own interpretation of what the story might be outside the frame. The questions arise. Is Sherman speaking about herself? If so, whom does Cindy Sherman, the person, the artist, hate? Or, if is this part of a fictional narrative, who are the "I" and the "you" in the story? It should be noted that "I" and "you" are linguistic shifters, changing meaning according to their placement in a sentence, in some ways like the cinematic shots change meaning by their placement in a sequence. By extracting a single shot, as Sherman has done in *I Hate You*, a number of interpretations are possible for the viewer to ponder.

What's more, by relinquishing the edited flow of the visual field, another field is reveled. First, we acknowledge our position as viewers. This becomes more pronounced as we watch tears fall down Sherman's cheek,

and we search for the difference between the artist and the actress. Sherman holds her expression as she repeats “I hate you.” We cannot help but ask ourselves who is outside the frame line? Is Sherman talking to her boyfriend? Or maybe Sherman is addressing her mother, her sister, her brother, her girlfriend, or if she is impersonating a fictive character, her rapist, her therapist, her prison guard, her teacher? The categories are varied and complex, inviting imagined personal narratives, or mass-produced movies. However, the presence of Sherman grows stronger as the film progresses. We acknowledge that she is both in front of and behind the camera. She is the author of the images, and of the text.

Sherman’s second film shown at the National Portrait Gallery is a 3′ 33″ Super 8 film. Presented on a flat screen video monitor as a loop, *Unhappy Hooker* is shot from a frontal fixed camera position and continues so for its duration. Here, however, it features Sherman seen with her full body in frame. Like a Warhol film, of which *Paul Swan* (1965) is a good example, the camera presents the background as a shallow interior space, and is now covered by a sheet. This simple prop gives the cinematic image a theatrical reference, collapsing the film frame and the proscenium arch into one. Performance is put on display in *Unhappy Hooker,* now by the unrelenting look of the fixed camera. In Sherman’s film, however, this is specifically done to highlight issues of gender, of the image, and of the self-image, but most importantly, to underline the female authorship of the film (Figure 10).

Masquerade is the content of so much of Sherman’s work, and even explicitly the content of another early film entitled *Doll Clothes* (1975) where Sherman plays a paper doll who changes costume throughout. It must be noted, however, that in *Unhappy Hooker* critical issues come to the fore in different ways. The “masquerade” in *Unhappy Hooker* is not so much the costume and makeup worn by Sherman, as it is the body movements, the gestures, and the poses she enacts. In this film, Sherman arranges her body to make a “picture” pleasing enough to attract (to “hook,” as in the title) an imagined viewer. Sherman, now dressed in fashionable white top and long black skirt, strikes a pose. Hand on hip, for example, her head turned, looking distractedly to the side, Sherman maintains this for a beat, and then relinquishes it in a series carefully paced succession of poses. Almost like the continuing picture frames on a roll of film, one pose moves into the another. The weight of the body maybe placed on the opposite hip, for example, with the face fancifully looking upward. Then Sherman shifts again, to adjust her hair, and again, to look in the compact mirror to fix her makeup. In one hilarious moment she tosses her handkerchief to the ground. She waits for a beat. No one comes. Sherman finally picks it up herself.

Figure 10. Cindy Sherman, *Unhappy Hooker,* 1976. Super-8 film, color, silent. Duration: 3′ 33″. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. "Who am I today?" "Who do you want me to be?"

It is important to note that through these various moves, Sherman never raises her eyes to the camera, never confronts its gaze. This opens another question: "Who is looking?" With her body facing outward, and fully in frame, Sherman is positioned for the camera to see. Her culturally coded actions are read as playing to an imagined other, to a male viewer. As the pun in the title *Unhappy Hooker* implies, this is not a pleasant position to be in. John Berger had written about the representation of woman, as well as self-image in woman, in his seminal 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*. Berger posits that women, through a process of social conditioning, learn to internalize the coded dynamic of looking, and being looked at. Even at her father's funeral, Berger projects, a woman will wonder how see looks, being at once the viewer and the viewed in her own consciousness.[15] This is a compromised position for a human being to be in, for many reasons, but in terms of the thesis of this essay, it is because it is a relinquishing of the authorship of one's self. The authorship is given it to someone else. A someone else who then, in turn, exists inside yourself. As an imposed image, the image of the woman comes now both from inside and from outside herself.

The male gaze is at issue here, and so are we as viewers. Each individual viewer is implicated in the "male gaze," the dominant form we have to some degree incorporated through social conditioning. Sherman as the

"hooker" in her film portrays a character who is partially seer, and partially seen. Sherman the artist, however, takes on a different position. As the author of *Unhappy Hooker* she is the constructor, not only of the gaze, but of the whole of the textual system. Because of the fragmented structure of *Unhappy Hooker*, one outside of the conventional flow of narrative, we are "ruptured," put into a distanced position to acknowledge Cindy Sherman's presence in front of and behind the camera. These spatial coordinates are made palpable, revealing her position as women and as author.

Through the works of Cindy Sherman discussed here, the theme and structure of refusal have become dominant. In *I Hate You, Unhappy Hooker,* and *United #316,* we note Sherman's refusal to participate in some of the dominant conventions for representing women. And while this stance is apparent throughout Sherman's work, in these early films it offers a focus that will guide the remainder of our discussion. This is primarily because the refusal is not only delivered through content (by means of a masquerade, for example, or the story implied in the image) but also by dynamizing the frame line of the film medium, and the characters and persons that may exist beyond it.

Global Women's Authorship

Formal tensions have also been enacted in film by women who exhibited at the 2019 Venice Film Festival, an event with which we began our discussion. Transgender and global women filmmakers have taken on the frame line, and the characters beyond its boundaries, especially those spaces that male characters have traditionally occupied. These shifts in subject positions and narrative strategies accost the dominant male viewing position for political purposes. Female authorship is secured in the themes and esthetic strategies it presents, especially from a global and LGBTQ perspective.

Lingua Franca (2018) by transgender Filipina woman Isabel Sandoval was featured in competition at the Venice Film Festival. Written, directed, edited, co-produced, and starred in by Sandoval, *Lingua Franca* tells the semi-autobiographical story of Olivia, an undocumented immigrant from the Philippines who works as a health care worker in Brooklyn. Sandoval's authorship is securely grounded, and the subject position is transgender. Olivia in the film plays a young woman whose life is in flux because she is entering new worlds. She is attempting to gain permanent residency in the US and to be fully socially accepted as a transgender woman. Olivia's initial attempt in obtaining a green card through marriage had failed. She then meets Alex, a handsome young man she falls in love with, and he with her. Alex only later learns that Olivia is a transgender woman. Like so many

Figure 11. Isabel Sandoval, *Lingua Franca*, 2018. Transgender Olivia in a traditional reclining pose.

Hollywood stories, this is as a film of mismatched love, only now it is about two strangers who learn to love and accept each other for who they are. The emphasis in this film is on the post-op body of Sandoval and the lovemaking scenes that ensue. This is where the story of *Lingua Franca* complicates the themes and strategies that have been the topic of this paper. The antipatriarchal perspective is now enacted from a transgender position (Figure 11).

The image of the reclining female figure, especially when nude,[16] has been presented in painting and in film. Linda Williams has also noted the presence of this figure and camera positioning in pornography, and typical of the cinematic presentation of the woman in orgasm.[17] In pornography, closeups of the woman's face are provided for the male viewer to give him erotic pleasure. Having identified with his male counterpart in the film, he is the agent of the woman's orgasm made visible. In *Lingua Franca*, however, this convention is challenged by knowledge of the body of the trans woman. It puts the cis gender male viewer at a distance and confronts the dominance of that position. With Alex disappearing below the frame line to pleasure the woman, (and with a conventional editing pattern in some ways similar to that of *Ecstasy*), the question of Olivia's genitals are brought to consciousness. The displaced cis gender male viewing position is replaced by a transgender viewing position. The possibility of understanding different stories, different bodies, and different realities, is brought to the fore. This is made possible by working within standard codes for presentation of eroticism on film, especially regarding the framing of the body, and the bodies outside the frame, but now by displacing their gender identity (Figure 12).

This kind of displacement also happens in a film from Afghanistan entitled *Hava, Maryam and Ayesha* (2019). Directed by an Afghani woman

Figure 12. Sahraa Karmi, *Hava, Maryam and Ayesha,* 2019. Hava lovingly speaks to her unborn child.

Sahraa Karimi, the work premiered in the Horizons section of the Venice Film Festival. Again, speaking from a position of female authorship, it tells the story of three women in Kabul who must make choices that counter the patriarchal subject. The content and the form of the film, however, put the viewer at a distance and on guard. *Hava, Maryam and Ayesha* is about the reproductive rights of women, a topic that has been discussed by feminist filmmakers from around the word. But the style of the film, and its historical, social and religious context make it remarkable in the terms we have been discussing. The film, told in three vignettes, shot in quasi-documentary style, often with a frontally positioned camera in shallow depth, tells the story of three women in Kabul who are pregnant and who decide to terminate their pregnancies. This fact is not immediately apparent to the viewer, and our understanding of it develops slowly, as does the relationship of the women to each other. The position of the women within the frame line is experienced as a kind of enclosure, a trap within which the women are caught. Moreover, the fathers of the children are almost exclusively presented outside the frame. But unlike *Ecstasy*, the male characters are not the ones who control the frame, and ultimately its female characters. The men are not the protagonists of *Hava, Maryam, and Ayesha*. The women are the protagonists of their own lives and their own narratives. As we will learn, it is they who have ejected the men from their lives, and who have, in most cases, barred them from access to the women's spaces.

I will start with the title of the film itself, *Hava, Maryam, and Ayesha*. First, we must note that in Afghanistan, the country in which the film is set, the major portion of the population is Muslim. According to Islam, as the

Figure 13. *Hava, Maryam and Ayesha*: Hava selflessly cares for her home and her in-laws.

youngest of the world's monotheistic religions, all previous narratives from Judaism and Catholicism are accepted as part of the messages from God. The title of this film acknowledges this teaching by presenting the central female figures of all three religions: Hava (Eve), Maryam (Mary) and Ayesha (Aisha). Eve, as the first woman in the Garden of Eden from the Old Testament, Mary, as the mother of Jesus in the New Testament, and Aisha, as the favorite wife of Mohammed in the Koran. The characters in his film refer to the dignity of woman within these world religions (Figure 13).

The first story is that of Hava, as a poor woman who lives in the city of Kabul in an extended family setting. We watch her fulfilling her daily routine. Hava cooks and cleans, along with taking care of her elderly mother-in-law, and suffering the criticism of her father-in-law. When she is alone, and with loving anticipation, she talks to the baby she is carrying. But one day, Hava has a new feeling, and it worries her. The baby has stopped moving inside her. She tells her father-in-law, who discounts it. She tells her husband, who makes only a quick appearance in this film. He comes to the door of a party he is having. Hava wants to see a doctor, but her husband is busy and has no time to talk to her. She will be fine, he says.

The second story is about Maryam, a news anchor at a major Kabul TV station. Maryam is an educated, elegant, opinionated woman, and we first meet her at work. In the next sequence, she is at home alone in her apartment and on the phone with her philandering husband. We never hear the husband's voice, we never see his face. Maryam is filmed in center frame medium shot within the shallow space of a dimly lit room. She accuses her husband, "You taught me how to live alone in this city." The husband pleads with her. He wants to return to her, to raise their child. Maryam refuses. She hangs up the phone (Figure 14).

Figure 14. *Hava, Maryam and Ayesha*: Maryam, with sorrow, makes the decision to leave her marriage.

Maryam puts on her old wedding dress, and then removes her wedding ring. In a poignant scene, she lies on the bed in her dress, a posture recalling the history of images of women reclining, horizontal, now in a gesture of sorrow, but also acceptance. Maryam mourns her failed marriage and her unborn child. Yet her decision to live beyond this moment is hers.

The last segment of film is about Ayesha, an 18-year old girl who has been promised in marriage, as is the custom in her family. In *Hava, Maryam, and Ayesha* she is to marry her cousin, a beautiful, kind young man, who brings presents and a gold bracelet at their first meeting. He is grateful for her acceptance of his proposal. Ayesha, however, is secretly pregnant by her previous boyfriend, a film character who also is never seen, and never enters the frame. Ayesha must now decide and act. She speaks to the boyfriend on the phone and tells him their relationship is over. With the help of a girlfriend whose mother is a doctor performing clandestine abortions, and with a payment that includes the bracelet she has been given by her betrothed, we, for the first time, see our female character moving through the streets of Kabul. Wearing a burqa that completely covers her face and enfolds her body, yet flutters behind her when she walks, Ayesha hurries to her destination. Once in the doctor's office we are again in an enclosed shallow space. Here all the three women of the film, Hava, Mayam and Ayesha, wait their turn to exercise the right to the control of their own bodies and their own future. In this film, the decision to exercise their reproductive rights has been a refusal of the patriarchal law that controls the lives of women in society. On a formal level, the viewer is put in a viewing position that forcibly excludes the dominating agent from the visual field and allows the woman to make their own decisions, unencumbered, and on-camera (Figure 15).

Figure 15. *Hava, Maryam and Ayesha*: Ayesha takes an action to save her future.

A Cindy Book and Authorship

The international women filmmakers and artists we have been discussing have insisted on their selfhood and on their authorship. As a last example, I will return to an early work of Cindy Sherman that was also exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in the summer of 2019. Entitled *A Cindy Book,* the themes and strategies of refusal we have addressed are again presented. *A Cindy Book* is not a film, but a scrapbook of photographs of Sherman growing up, one that the artist kept from when she was 9 years old into her teenage years. Even in her early life, Sherman seems to have been interested in chronicling images of herself, and of individuating, that is, of making the necessary psychological journey in the process of defining selfhood. As adolescents, we all strive to separate from our parents and navigate within our new social groups in establishing our own identity. *A Cindy Book* was a relic from childhood that Sherman rediscovered in 1975 while an undergraduate at Buffalo State College, and decided to "finish it."[18] She did so by circling in green marker her presence in group shots, and by mimicking a childhood scrawl (to imply successive stages of maturation) with the statement, "That's me,". Sherman grew up as the youngest daughter in a family of 5 children. In a brief conversation at the National Portrait Gallery with the artist, Sherman told me that she circled the photographs to find how she fit into her family group and her group of friends (Figures 16 and 17).

What this old document does for us in the context of our essay is raise a fiction. Where is the self in these works? Is it found in a body type, a location, a costume, a hair do? Philosophers such as Judith Butler note that the self is identified in relation to others, as well as being opaque to the subject.[19] In *A Cindy Book,* the snapshots connoting the 1950s and 1960s ask

Figure 16. *A Cindy Book*, 1964–1975, 26 color and black and white photographs, green marker, paper, staples. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. Cindy Sherman as a young child.

questions of who Cindy Sherman might be, but provides few answers. However, it does reveal a fiction and a storyteller. The circling indicates that the action is ongoing, the conscious act of individuating, and that it belongs to the author. Sherman is the author of the self, however changeable, and she is the writer of the text, "That's me,". This is the me that links all the iterations of me, the me beyond and the sum of the objectifications of me, the subject who is me. I am.

Figure 17. *A Cindy Book*, 1964–1975, 26 color and black and white photographs, green marker, paper, staples. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York. Cindy Sherman as a teenager.

Conclusion

Across this essay we have identified certain characteristics in the ever-evolving questioning of the representation of women in film and in art. We have noted the disruption of established codes of form and content in the works presented and in the visual repositioning the male and the female subjects. It is important to note that the examples provided have been

drawn from exhibitions occurring at a particular era in film and art history at the Venice Film Festival and at the National Portrait Gallery in London. The clash between the newer work and the history and the traditions of those institutions have offered a context for comparison and contradiction. The clash that results causes an upheaval, especially because the upheaval comes to re-explore the position of women within those traditions. What's more, the newer work acknowledges the productions of a cis gender white woman and the contributions of transgender and global women. The excellence and courage of the works themselves is on view here, as well as is the efforts of the curatorial committees at the Venice Film Festival and the National Portrait Gallery. What is seen in these exhibitions and in our discussion is an awareness of the importance of women speaking, and the future of equality in authorship for women worldwide.

Notes

1. Irigary, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother."
2. Dulchin, Personal discussion. August 7, 2019.
3. Bogosian, Personal interview. 28 May 1987.
4. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 875.
5. Tartaglione, "Ecstasy".
6. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," 6–18.
7. Said, *Orientalism*.
8. Wilson, *The Reclining Nude*. Wilson describes the convention of the reclining nude in European art and the return of that figure in certain contemporary films. It is interesting to see some of these elements also on view in *Ecstasy*.
9. Bazin and Gray, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," 4–9.
10. Dika, *The (Moving) Pictures Generation*.
11. Crimp, *Pictures*.
12. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*.
13. Dika, *The (Moving) Pictures Generation*, op. cit.
14. Oudart, "La Suture, I and II."
15. See note 8 above, op. cit.
16. See note 4 above, op. cit.
17. Williams, *Hard Core*.
18. Moorehouse, *Cindy Sherman*.
19. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 20.

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