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“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity…” Ecclesiastes 1:2

Introduction

Paul Verhoeven directed Showgirls twenty years after Laura Mulvey published “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in 1975. The latter was a manifesto about the powerful seductions of the cinema. For Mulvey, film has a visual language of its own, and the way that it produces images is reflective of the ways that we are always looking, and the ways that we are positioned by the society around us. At the center of this argument is the image of a woman, who makes possible the spectacle of the cinema by lending her body to it. The image of woman is what makes up the reconnoiter of the cinema whose visual field is always a battleground for meaning. Meaning is wrought through the woman image as the source of desire rendered visual and the drive for diegesis. The image of the woman is always the iconic impetus for male action. An early woman image, Helen of Troy: “the face that launched a thousand ships”...¹ And when Showgirls was released in 1995, it appeared to be mostly in concert with these concepts Mulvey uses to describe the cinema. The film was there to show girls. This was not news. The divergence of this film from the usual pleasure of cinema is in its exhibition. If cinema was once the place where the flattened spectacle of the woman could encompass the whole concept of film-watching, then with Showgirls this position of the male spectator towards the female spectacle shifts; the image of Nomi Malone (Elizabeth Berkley) does not seduce us but hooks us just the same, in some ways repeating the experience of visual pleasure. In Showgirls, visual pleasure is always foregrounded instead of being routed seductively and seamlessly into the spectator’s experience. Showgirls knows about the voyeurs and the narcissists who watch movies, and it identifies the structures of pleasure as we have known them by creating Nomi Malone, the

protagonist-spectacle who produces an abyss of the woman image where the spectacle no longer attaches itself to the watchful eye of the male spectator. It does so by creating an interference of the story of man with the image of woman – it is an unpleasant hybrid that preys upon all of the same cinema conventions that we are used to, and we are hooked.

I. The Alphabet of Visual Pleasure

Cinema is its own language, and it creates visual pleasure by encoding its structures of space and time with specific values. The film is there to be seen. At heart we probably know this as filmgoers, but we are often under the impression that the film is there for "me", and as soon as we recognize the false "I" that cinema seduces with, I am alone at the cinema and I can find my desires there onscreen. This is the illusive assurance of the movie spectacle, and this illusion is what constitutes visual pleasure. Laura Mulvey has written that this pleasure always needs a woman in order to make itself visible and thus proprietary to the viewer: she "holds" our "look" so that we, in turn, can have the illusion of possessing her. According to Mulvey, this woman image must be available to us in two distinct ways: through scopophilia and through narcissism.

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3 Ibid 837.
A. Scopophilic Pleasure  
Movie-watching begins by finding pleasure in the world of the film, because “looking itself is a form of pleasure”. This is a space from which the audience is necessarily separate. For Mulvey, this is the world that is “hermetically sealed”, and whose action “unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience”. This distance achieves a “voyeuristic separation” of the audience from what is happening onscreen – this separation is the beginning of our pleasure through a private act of watching in which we are positioned as unnoticed and unmitigated in our voyeurism. The audience’s distance from the screen also creates an individual viewing experience instead of a collective one: “the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation.” In the dark, we watch Rita Hayworth’s illuminated dance onscreen, culminating in a closeup shot: “One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen.” She is there not to make anything happen but to just be, to appear in a fragmented state that prevents her from being and intensifies the primacy of her as image rather than body. This fragmentation reflects the representational aspect of the woman onscreen: Rita Hayworth’s tousled hair and face are a metonymy for the rest of her that isn’t included in the frame. The appearance of the woman is the symbolic substitution for the entire film-watching experience: “the film is there to be seen…”, she is only there to be seen, and yet this condition of our viewing of her and it is lost through the separation of the film watching experience. In order to see her at all we must be in the dark and disconnected, looking out from perceptual reality into the one that appears onscreen.

This act of exclusion creates the fundamental separation that makes possible the invitation of the cinema to scopophilia. This invitation of movie-watching, Mulvey argues,

4 Ibid 835.  
5 Ibid 835.  
6 Ibid 838.
"depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world...lt is her
lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack
that the phallus signifies." For Mulvey, the cinema gives us our pleasure through a symbolic
image from which we are separated; our being is never seen to be part of her meaning, but the
two are always mutually constitutive, "the film is there to be seen"...Castration is held out as a
threat insofar as it appears and is signified by the woman, but it is suspended from interfering
with visual pleasure in most films.

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*Showgirls* includes this distance between spectator and screen as part of its symbolic
order – it entertains visual pleasure in the ways that we are used to, with that addition which is
also the lack that makes up castration anxiety. When entertain our desire to watch when we
watch *Showgirls*, it necessarily implies a cut because of the way its pleasure works. There is an
exclusion of Us from It, and this is the castration anxiety of film watching: the phantasmal image
onscreen is crystallized by the woman who is to appear both in this image and as this image,
which is to say that the woman appears as the manifestation of a symbolic order. Woman is the
image of man's desire, and so she becomes an anxious root of the symbolic order, always
referring to a loss, which is the absence of a meaning that has been replaced by the impulse to
signify. Physical reality, the act of going to the movies and sitting alongside other people and
watching with them in the dark, is superseded by the spectral screen and its illuminated
representations of the human form. This is the paradox of signification. The image of the woman
onscreen is not just an example or imagistic representation of this structure but also, more
importantly, its true composition and theoretical basis. It is not that we must actually first see
Rita Hayworth or some other woman there to embody or refer to these ideas but that the image
of woman in an abstract sense constitutes the entire film experience. So, Rita Hayworth in *Gilda*

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7 Ibid 833.
is an example of certain ideas at work. But to call this image an ‘example’ is to say that she signifies an abstract concept of desire rather than actually being it – the reality of the cinema is such that we think it presents images which “appear to be” onscreen rather than the perceptual reality of the theater that is seen to simply “be”. Where these always-gendered ideas of appearing and being meet for Mulvey is in the argument that we are always in a world of images. But that is not to say that the image is just another word for something that “seems” or that “appears to be” and is thus patently false; the image constitutes both the perceptual reality belonging to the movie theater and the one that we see onscreen.

The distance we experience between ourselves in the theater and the image onscreen is the same distance we experience when we enter into the symbolic order, saying the word “I” to refer to ourselves: “[I]t is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the ‘I’ of subjectivity.” Narcissism, seeing the image of ourselves reflected in a pool of water or onscreen, is how we identify ourselves; it is where we constitute the idea of an “I” in the first place. Narcissism is primary in our conception of ourselves because all understanding requires

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8 Ibid 838.
In the language of narrative cinema, narcissism is an image onscreen not simply of a body but of a body that acts and structures the diegesis. Identification does not just mean we want to see ourselves reflected in the films that we watch – it actually founds or sustains the idea of self-representation to begin with, and it is an articulation of a subject “I” in the first place. Glenn Ford looks down at supine Rita Hayworth as she looks offscreen in a publicity still for *Gilda*. The scopophilic object is Hayworth, but we are only granted access as actors in her objectification by the surrogate “I”, Glenn Ford, the protagonist of this film. Note it is Ford’s supplicant pose, his gazing worship as scopophile that grants us our entry into the image. The object makes the subject possible; the other constitutes the “I”. This is the tension between scopophilic pleasure and narcissistic pleasure: the scopophile ejects himself from his own agency, but the scopophilic base of cinema is what allows us to enter it as protagonists in the first place.

The transitive property in narcissistic identification: the thrill of going from A to Z in one simple step – the structure of this kind of pleasure, separate from scopophilic pleasure, in the cinema obscures all of the distances and misrecognitions, i.e. the difference between something and its reflection, which the child recognizes as the heightened version of itself, in order to feel ourselves be onscreen, seamlessly. This is also the thrill of narrative, which, as Mulvey points out, is an anthropomorphic idea itself wherein we recognize through the image of the male protagonist his command over the symbolic order – his ability to do things, to act.

The complication of identification is that it demands that we sacrifice our own agency as actors to become spectators – scopophilia is itself a castration in the service of agency that has been reinvested elsewhere, in a dominion over a world of images. Once we have all given ourselves over to the act of film-watching, we are asked by cinema to be made in its own image – the protagonist, like the mirror, articulates its own “I” through a language distinct from perceptual reality:
As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. A male movie star’s glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror. The character in the story can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor coordination. 9

The human form makes up the film image not only as the object of desire but as a representation of likeness that excites a narcissistic engagement with the screen. Cinema recounts a “visible presence of the person in the world” that brings the narcissistic aspect out of scopophilia. 10 Another paradox: to signify this presence and to register that meaning is to refer to the absence of its physical reality and the primacy of the symbolic order, whose domination is always anchored by a lack that has been obscured. We use the word lack to describe the impulse by which the symbolic order works because it “appears to be”, as a substitution rather than a constitutive reality in itself. In the darkness of the movie theater we begin to “appear to be” and have been obscured to ourselves to the extent that the screen foregrounds the primacy of the image and the symbolic order in our understanding even of ourselves. The anxiety of the absence of being, castration, impels us to inscribe elsewhere into a meaning and into the image, so as to really ‘write off’ this perceptual anxiety and write in the symbolic.

When we go to the movies, we necessarily give ourselves over to the screen in exchange for scopophilic and narcissistic pleasure. Identification, like scopophilia, is always a vector and a procession of symbol, rather than a stand-alone, self-securing primordial truth. Which is to say that narcissistic identification is a secondary action that needs a symbolic structure, just like scopophilia, to shore itself up.

9 The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child’s physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognised is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated

9 Ibid 838.
10 Ibid 836.
subject, which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others."\textsuperscript{11}

C. Two Kinds of Pleasure The language of narrative cinema asks us to recognize ourselves as being made in its image, which first presents the desire of the scopophile, the darkened theater where we are seated, and then the desire of the narcissist who invests it not in his own body but in the image of the protagonist which the cinema has provided for him. The latter is only seamlessly available to male viewers for whom the recognition of the progenitor of the diegesis, the phallus-wielding protagonist, is designed for him alone. Female spectators have no place in this formulation. The look, we remember is pleasurable to us as a form but not a content.\textsuperscript{12} As a source of action – to be looked back at, acted upon – the look is threatening because it disrupts the illusion of invisibility for the scopophile and the identification of the narcissist. This makes us realize that the two kinds of pleasure are at odds with one another, being the difference between two pleasures: one constituted by the absence of the self as active scopophilia and the other by its dominating presence in the narrative as narcissism. These both inevitably refer us back to castration because the scopophile allows himself to be consumed by his looking and the narcissist by his looking at himself – ultimately the film watcher is the one who gives himself over to the looming possibility of castration that constitutes the symbolic order:

Desire, born with language, allows the possibility of transcending the instinctual and the imaginary, but its point of reference continually returns to the traumatic moment of its birth: the castration complex. Hence the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallizes this paradox.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid 836.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid 837.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid 837.
II. Argument: The Show-girl Example and her Stake in *Showgirls*

Mulvey mentions the show-girl as an aside, being a particular example of the structure of visual pleasure:

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. For instance, the device of the show-girl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. For a moment the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a no-man's-land outside its own time and space.\(^\text{15}\)

The show-girl is an image whose availability to scopophilia elides the distance between spectators in the film's narrative and the spectators in the theater. This is familiar to us: the show-girl instantiates the threat of a "no-man's-land" through her pausing of the diegesis that is actually set up to be the opposite – Nomi Malone (Elizabeth Berkley) is our protagonist and our

\(^{14}\) Paul Verhoeven, Director, *Showgirls*, 1995.
\(^{15}\) Mulvey, 838.
show-girl, in this case made to be included in the story itself. This is not news to us: narrative by its nature justifies its own momentary sublimation into the moving image of the show-girl rather than the moving narrative, the domain of the phallus. What is the difference? The latter is not outside cinema but central to the way that it pleases us: this is the spectacular escape and timeless, spaceless oblivion that, in fact, does not eliminate narrative at all. This oblivion invites us, but it also threatens us as Other. She is the silent collusion of body and image – "the imagised and the eroticized" onto which language wants to appropriate desire. Desire is the single property belonging to the image of the woman: "she holds the look". The structure of this ownership is impossible because its very law, the language, regulates the image and determines the "look" of desire. But, if desire has indeed been born tangent and simultaneous to language, we remember that desire is always called upon to secure and justify language, seamlessly.

The hyphen Mulvey inserts to break up the portmanteau, "show-girl", argues against the fantasy of this lack of a seam. The spectacle of Showgirls' is that its every frame is made up of the show-girl who is both an acting protagonist and the spectacle of a woman image. We will see this in the way that Nomi Malone moves her body. Its cinematic language foregrounds visual pleasure rather than making it just that momentary image "to-be-looked-at"; that aspect of "to-be-looked-at-ness" is realized as the hallmark of the cinematic experience. It is the duration of the Showgirls exhibition of the show-girl that matters, because it shows us that visual pleasure can be a nightmare. Which is not to say we cannot get pleasure out of Showgirls at all; on the contrary, Showgirls delivers fantasy like every other film does. Critics of this film wrote that this was supposed to be the film of exhibitionism, but where was it? Exhibition becomes a foregone conclusion in that the woman’s exhibition is the narrative.

If the experience of watching a film promises an interior space, first as voyeurism and then as identification, then exhibition is Showgirls' complication. Mulvey writes that the
challenge of breaking with the usual codes of visual pleasure is in “freeing the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment”.  

Showgirls does not go into a time and space without illusions but into a landscape where pleasure has been thrust out into the diegesis. This may bother us at first because the look becomes part of the film’s content, but the spectacle of the woman remains “to be looked at”, the viewer experience detached from what is happening in the diegesis but still part of its form. In this sense, Showgirls withholds, but never in the service of the viewer’s seduction. The difference is that Showgirls does so in the service of extending the look into an expository content which is the crisis of our spectatorship. So, the landscape of visual pleasure in narrative cinema has not changed, it is our position as viewers that has; no longer in it but “into dialectics, passionate detachment”.

There is a passion of Showgirls: we watch visual pleasure as we knew it and we watch it be withheld from us before our very eyes!

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16 Ibid 843.
17 Ibid 844.
III. The *Showgirls* Exhibition

The poster for the film is a good way to begin the nightmare of signification in *Showgirls*. The woman becomes her own Edenic “beast in the field”, and she invites us. The serpent woman promises to us herself. In Genesis, God asks “Who told you you were naked?”, *Showgirls* adopts nudity as a name for the woman – the exposed, cutaway, shown, and referential.\(^\text{18}\) Reference is the eternal problem for psychonanalysis because it is always coming back to us through representation, which is to say that the cinematic forms of showing will always have to signify the threat or the nightmare of the cut, too. The violence of the symbolic order becomes the crime that *inheres in* the body of the woman. More obviously, this is a poster that cuts away at her image. Subtraction, the threat of the cut being foregrounded as, in a very funny way – we are going to see an NC-17 film wherein we

will find the rest of Nomi’s body parts, assembled and complete, the poster being the first corporeal installment, the rest of the body to come later. The rub is that we have always seen bodies like this as incomplete: the close-up shot of Rita Hayworth produces a visual invitation that collapses space and forgets time. This poster functionally exists to whet the appetite, and this language becomes psychoanalytically motivated in this case because the spectator’s desire undergoes a sharpening – the threatening reference to the castration not as the woman who was once cut but who is now, before our eyes, misshapen, serpentine, and the object of erasure. Erasure instead of fullness – the vacuum of being that Showgirls hacks at desire in this image. This is not the seduction of “withholding” or “foreplay” – both of which would want to align with Mulvey’s notion that the show-girl image is itself the no-man’s-land that suspends narrative and defers its resolution. Instead we find a systematic, fetishistic cut of the woman who, in the symbolic order that always is always in want of the castration complex in order to make sense of itself, has already been cut off.

We do not dissolve our desire and our image into the cinema, we watch it as it has been cut up onscreen. Our Scopophilia and narcissism remain as the objects of spectatorship, the things onscreen which are now under castrating scrutiny; we scopophiles look at this body through a keyhole only to realize a stupidly violent truth, that the body has been cut into the shape of the keyhole in the first place – this is the scopophile’s nightmare. Which is to say that the procedure of visual pleasure has survived and still has the power to signify, but what has gone awry is that the viewer of the show-girl has been in one way ousted from Mulvey’s notion of him. Shunted from his seamless position with respect to his cinematic world, the scopophile has been delivered to a no-man’s-land. This place is not a momentary interruption of narrative (we are reminded that the normal appearance of the show-girl interrupts time and space), with the show-girl to be enjoyed by the ease of its relation to narrative as a distinct component of diegesis, only ever meaningful in and of itself. Instead we cross into a world that has been composed entirely of seams where desire has been overlaid onto narrative language, and it is
through its coming into cinematic language that we are now made to see, because the film is always there to be seen, the remnants of the cut that signification needs to make itself visible, except the cut itself is still visible. Woman is the image of the wound, the one who identifies her own nudity, the one who endures exposure, and that is the show-girl's original formula. Mulvey writes her as the show-girl because it is a term that signifies: her hyphen being placed there, right down the middle (cf. the Showgirls film poster) to create her meaning. This gesture implies a structural violence in the very name of the show-girl her mangled body parts together and to be inserted to describe this violence —desire and language work the same way, as a portmanteau held together by the violence done by the symbolic order to make itself whole. The gore was there from the beginning of the show-girl's appearance in cinema. It's just that we begin to see it in Showgirls, and that is where nothing has actually changed in the filmgoing experience and you feel like you are watching any other movie. All of the signifying structures are still in place.

Why do we not run screaming out of the movie theater when we go to see Showgirls? Because I have gone too far — the status quo of visual pleasure in narrative cinema
is not, at its base, the fear of castration. While castration anxiety plays a part in film watching, it is seen not to disrupt pleasure at all but to shore it up. No one would ever go to the movies, much less see Showgirls if castration were always the answer. Showgirls does little to interfere with the overarching structure of film spectatorship as Mulvey has identified it — all of the institutions of narrative cinema are put through a Showgirls treatment rather than. Novelty is not operative in the sense that we think we recognize Showgirls when we first look at it; that’s something we know from the beginning from even the most superficial understanding of the film. Based on the old Hollywood movie, All About Eve (1950, Mankiewicz), Showgirls is a backstage drama, a story about American individualism, Las Vegas, vaulting ambition. It also pays tribute to that “oldest profession in the world”, both in reference to the whoring typical of the entertainment business and to real prostitution. The spectator remains in his seat because he has been glued there by the narcissistic identification that still operates as usual in this film and takes hold of his desires. The scopophilic and narcissistic features of film watching as we knew them still remain, except it feels like we are watching it happen before our very eyes and for the traumatic first time. We are reminded of Mulvey again:

“Sexual instincts and identification processes have a meaning within the symbolic order which articulates desire. Desire, born with language, allows the possibility of transcending the instinctual and the imaginary, but its point of reference continually returns to the traumatic moment of its birth: the castration complex” 19

The dual birth of desire and language happens over and over again in each frame wherein we see this woman, and the violence of the symbolic order is again foregrounded. Nomi bats at everything — eyelashes, men, oncoming traffic — there is no opponent too great for the abyss of the castration complex. Showgirls wields castration instead of smothering it with the symbolic order — this is a film fantasy at which man is not at the helm, but he is still the one watching the film. What appears in his stead? Nomi Malone is the film’s protagonist, and she appears as a lynch pin between the pleasure of identification and the pleasure of objectification. In this sense

19 Ibid 837.
the order of film watching has not changed a bit. This is what we see when we watch the naked woman dance in high heels, whipping her body across the body of her spectator and this moment, repeated so many times over in many different ways, is what's so special about *Showgirls*. Meaning is not obscured in the darkness that we experience both in the cinema as scopophile-narcissists – we watch under the bright lights of Las Vegas and not in the darkness of a lack – a lack of signification. The world is still phallocentric, and the emptiness that lends its force to the phallus is now exposed. The exposure of exhibition supports *Showgirls* bringing pleasure to the fore instead of casting it into darkness, out of Eden.

**IV. 1 Narrative Looking**

"The look, while pleasurable in form, is not in content..." Nomi performs a lapdance. *Showgirls* performs the look as content. In the first lapdance we see Nomi perform, man is the object of fantasy instead of being its practitioner. The procedure of the lapdance is laid out: "One at a
time, no women". This is consistent with usual film viewing practices as laid out by Mulvey. Cinema is the spectacle made for men of the private dance of the show-girl. It originates in the strip-tease as a perceptible reality, and is then transferred to the screen to divorce the spectator further from the female Other into cinema’s own laws of scopophilia that carve out a space and time on behalf of the viewer:

Woman as representation signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat. None of these interacting layers is intrinsic to film, but it is only in the film form that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction, thanks to the possibility in the cinema of shifting the emphasis of the look. It is the place of the look that defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it. This is what makes cinema quite different in its voyeuristic potential from, say, strip-tease, theatre, shows, etc. Going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself. 20

This is a scene in which we expect the scopophile onscreen will stand in for the scopophile offscreen. The lapdance is already complicated because the narcissist will have to watch himself in the act of being pleased. The scopophile is not safe at home in the theater – his pleasure is addressed not to us as viewer but to the visual field as it is surveyed by the camera.

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There is an added complication in the lapdance which is that Zach (Kyle MacLachlan) is not the only one who it has been performed for. Cristal Connors (Gina Gershon), Nomi's would-be dance mentor and who notably is the one to pay for the lapdance, is also in the room and the camerawork goes back and forth between the two of them. The female spectator character is a presence that can be quickly explained away as non-threatening because her pleasure is non-threatening. She has a straightforward position in this scene; she is only asked to practice scopophilia. However, Cristal does not fulfill a satisfying subject position for the viewers of Showgirls because that is still beyond the purview of this narrative cinema; which is to say that her pleasure is that of the masochist.\footnote{Ibid, 842. Section III C2.} There is another spectator – James (Glenn Plummer), another would-be dance mentor to Nomi who becomes the only true scopophile in the scene. Nomi affords no one this mentorship position; these are all the people who diegetically should be able to possess her because they have more money, pull, dance education, experience, etc. The scene is a barrage of looks, but their complexity begins and end with Nomi's balancing of them as scopophilic and narcissistic. Seeing James places the look into the diegesis Nomi is at the helm of our pleasure and the pleasure foregrounded in the diegesis. Is it possible to identify narcissistically with the show-girl performing a lapdance? We first have to work through our entrypoint into visual pleasure, the male spectator, before this question can be answered.
IV. 2 Problems with Identification Mulvey argues that males cannot be objectified onscreen because it moves their position away from the production of meaning. Here, his vulnerability to pleasure has been patently rendered into diegesis. His pleasure is not given over to the audience in the dark but made to be seen and effectively withheld from the viewer. Now it is the scopophile himself that is “there to be seen”, not the image that bears pleasure as its meaning but as a structure to its narrative. There is no seduction of meaning in this, and the scene is barren of voyeuristic pleasure. The image of man’s pleasure is still circuited through the spectacle of Nomi Malone’s presence in the scene, and this is what complicates the process of identification. There is a fantasy at work, but without the possibility of our fantasizing. Nomi rocks her body roughly against the male spectator’s, culminating in an enormous thrashing movement and Zach ejaculates in his pants. It is not that Nomi’s threat as wielder of pleasure and proprietor of her own image reflects a wholeness where we want to see a lack – her threat is still primordial and made out to be an origin story for the production of pleasure through the

\[22\] Ibid, 838, Section III B.
male-dominant symbolic order, and in this way male fantasy has survived Showgirls’s treatment of it. The privilege of the false invisibility of the scopophile at the movies is now foregrounded in the narrative. At the same time, the image of the showgirl has been unstuck from its station at the signification of desire. The symbolic order is exposed to be legislative, controlling, and brutish – Nomi’s thrashing shows us the tyranny of pleasure. The project of Showgirls is not to diegetically destroy this pleasure but to expose it as mechanism that answers to the authority of castration anxiety.

But that’s not all – there is still the problem of identification in this scene to reckon. If scopophilic pleasure has been effectively obliterated by virtue of its appearance onscreen, identification is relocated in the same way, even though narcissism requires this very presence where scopophilia wants to assert its absence. Identification wants an interior space within which pleasure can be made manifest but it is more extensive than scopophilia. Meaning: “he is a figure in a landscape” who “demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror-recognition in which the alienated subject internalised his own representation of this imaginary existence”.23 If narrative cinema operates under the assumption that women are not entitled to be but can only appear onscreen as figures for desire, then Showgirls tries to thrust its protagonist into the narcissistic landscape of surrogate being – this is instead of the abyss of objectification wherein she has no footing. When Nomi lapdances it is not really a performance or a simulation of sex or pleasure, it is all there: she dry humps Zach by thrashing her body against him until he climaxes, whether he likes it or not. The force of Nomi’s movement is what controls the dissemination of pleasure in this scene, and its distribution is unlike that Mulvey identifies as typical. Zach is not entitled to desire – there is no distance between himself and the supposed object of his desiring look, we cannot identify with him because he is powerless.

The primacy of his look is not challenged just by the appearance of Nomi (that would be discounting her as a “strong female lead”, which assumes we can and should be involved in the

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23 Ibid, 838 Section III, B.
same practice of identification, just transposed onto the female body) but Nomi's performance onscreen as the mechanism of pleasure itself, which is composed of two kinds of looking that a male figure would normally be entitled to, both of which "have to be attached to an idealisation" in order to invest meaning.\textsuperscript{24} To attempt identification with Zach's look is to acknowledge it as a narcissistic attachment or a way of affixing ourselves to the screen — we are deceiving ourselves if we see it only as our means to control the dimensions of what we see onscreen. It is the difference between understanding filmwatching as an instrument for privileged vision and being viewers sutured to this instrument:

"The camera becomes the mechanism for producing an illusion of Renaissance space, flowing movements compatible with the human eye, an ideology of representation that revolves around the perception of the subject; the camera's look is disavowed in order to create a convincing world in which the spectator's surrogate can perform with verisimilitude."\textsuperscript{25}

\textit{Showgirls} makes this suture undesirable by virtue of its being revealed. We are always designed in the camera's image. Idealisation comes to the viewers through the way the camera determines space. Cinema as we have known it relies on a privileged perspective (what Mulvey identifies as Renaissance space) that intrudes into depths, which is invested in the subject rather than the all-seeing possibility of the camera as mechanical apparatus, which we might now see as a mobile practice rather than a perspectival fixity. In this way we always relegate camera movement to the realm of the iconic, even when it is in the service of the diegesis. We can take Mulvey's description of the woman icon as representative of the film experience itself as flattening: "conventional close-ups of legs (Dietrich, for instance) or a face (Garbo) integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen." The non-narrative spectacle of pleasure is what constitutes the structure of \textit{Showgirls}, before narrative. The spectacle of the

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 837. My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{25}Ibid, 837-8.
lapdance is fragmented not just into a series of looks (because that would only multiply them like something out of a scene from Porky's) but into a fragmented perspective on visual pleasure itself wherein man no longer dominates his own fantasies, with no protagonist to light the way into desire. Visual pleasure now is without perspective, as dimensionless as the close-up image of Rita Hayworth and her hair.

This lapdance is an anatomy lesson in which we are taught that the meaningless mechanisms of the body have been divested of the pleasure we have come to expect. This is made possible because pleasure is the identification of something lacking rather than an illusion-experience of sexual pleasure. The rules of lapdancing as Nomi had laid them out earlier in the scene: "I can touch you but you can't touch me." This is exactly what happens; Nomi is untouchable, unlookable, and yet remains in the frame, "to-be-looked-at", being that there is nowhere else to go, no other landscape other than this one which comes to us not from a private privilege of looking but a mechanical thrashing out of the look from its object. Zach is ousted from the scene, converted into a symbolic lack by virtue of his mechanical ejaculation. Thrashing is the modus operandi of Showgirls: a separation wrought by a mechanical means, divested of pleasure as its coding.
IV. 3 The Body of Showgirls Criticism

The lapdancing scene typifies what the critics named “vulgar” when they were trying to describe this movie. In her New York Times review, Janet Maslin bemoaned “not so hot.” In New York magazine David Denby wrote “My enjoyment froze.” Denby’s review in particular is illuminating because it is clear about his own sense of voyeurism as a moviegoer: “We can laugh, but anyone who actually sits through the movie can’t help feeling a voyeur. The crumminess may be intentional, a way of forcing complicity on the audience...Okay, we admit it, we’re hooked...” What unites all Showgirls criticism is a position on vulgarity. Showgirls is always seen on an axis of vulgarity, which translates to a critical revulsion, that one would think culminates in a complete dismissal of the film, but Denby nails it – we are “hooked” by Showgirls.

28 Ibid 79.
but not because of the pleasure it gives us. We are hooked because Nomi Malone has nailed our pleasure to the wall and now we are watching it. Which is to say: the way she moves and behaves and appears onscreen is cognizant of visual pleasure as always portending a threat of unpleasure. Vulgarity is another name for the limits of a film’s exposition when it is seen to go “too far”, to the point where we no longer desire to see. Film scholar Chon Noriega theorizes the problem of vulgarity as it exists in Showgirls: “We end up with a rupturing of cinema’s sign system: character without characterization, method acting without interiorized motivation, and the blurring of realist and histrionic acting styles. The effect is disturbing when put into relationship with the film’s baroque visual style (vivid colors, a symbol-laden environment), not to mention the subject matter...Viewers do not get to have it both ways, the narrative justifying the erotics. Instead they get neither; hence, the critical heteronormative rage as blood drained from erections...”29 We viewers, being always male since the subject position isn’t available to woman, are disturbed by Showgirls because it cannot fulfill our desires – not because it is a “bad” film or because it fails. Vulgarity appears here as a vacuous collection of symbols – the vivid colors, symbol-laden environment – make Showgirls look like the promise of grandeur where there winds up being filth. The critics call it vulgar when they are asked to watch Nomi Malone make a man come in his pants or when they watch the moral compromises she chooses to make as the film’s protagonist that ultimately lead her nowhere but out of Las Vegas and onto the next frontier, Los Angeles, with no victories under her diegetic belt.

V. The Name of Identification: Nomi, The Sphinx Without a Secret

When we see Nomi seated in front of the sphinx in Vegas, she is oblivious to it. Her oblivion is what fastens the scene together. Her pose: she is turned away from the sphinx, refusing the act of supplication which is also the act of Oedipal inquiry that drives after signification. She is turned away and she does the sphinx without even knowing it. No-mi. She does not know! That is what is so scary about her. Nomi. There is no secret to her name except that there’s no name in there. This naming takes the Oracle at Delphi, “Know thyself” and changes the imperative – know me – to become an invitation to both identify this protagonist, to recognize her as an image and as the object of a carnal knowledge of the cinema, visual pleasure. Nomi is another portmanteau like “show-girl”, but the violence is in the emptiness of her meaning and the forcefulness of her being – the imperative, “Know me!” The difference between “Show girl!” and “Know me!” is great, but we have to remember that they are structurally the same – the tyrannical force of visual pleasure concurrent in the grammar of one and the force of the other as part of a diegesis, the name of the protagonist. To call the name of the protagonist we have to say “Know me”, “No me”, “No, me”…not just an imperative but also a negation, the trickery of
Odysseus' "My name is No-man" extended to bounce back at Odysseus himself, plucking his own Cyclopean, narcissistic eyes out. There is still room in this theater for the scopophile, and the narcissist – *Showgirls* hasn't tried to exclude us or cut us out of the play onscreen to make us really feel the loss that lurks behind the cinema screen – if we were being punished by this film, it would mean that we were being stripped of our desire, but it's still there as a relic and as an overarching structure of the filmwatching experience.

We are not just are looking at a show-girl, but a No-me. This complicates the structure of identification in this film because we have known the character in the story to be the one who "can make things happen and control events better than the subject/spectator, just as the image in the mirror was more in control of motor coordination." The mirror that *Showgirls* presents does not constitute the subject in the same way. When she describes the position of the protagonist in narrative cinema, Mulvey writes, "He is a figure in a landscape." We are reminded that Las Vegas is the name for Meadows, the grassland which was turned to desert when it became a frontier for scopophilic and narcissistic exploration: the spectator is "fascinated with the image of his like set in an illusion of natural space, and through him gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis." *Showgirls* has a landscape that is littered with the woman – she is the grass and the desert, the foreplay promise of pleasure and the doom of castration. This is not news in the world of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". It is the totality invested in the lack of the woman that makes up the material of the whole of the cinema experience. Through looking, we get a body to have to ourselves, the invisible body of the protagonist, and a visible woman body that has been held out for the purposes of our taking it. One, and then the other. The motion sickness we experience when we watch Nomi thrash during her lapdance is the tension between these two cinematic bodies becoming both perceptual and divested. This is the horror again of seeing the woman through the keyhole, only

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30 Mulvey 838.
31 Ibid 838.
32 Ibid 839.
to realize that it has been filled with an inch of cut flesh instead the image of a whole person. Horror is not the end of Showgirls, though, and it is not the end of this experiment. When we watch Showgirls do we leave, contented to say “I was reminded that I was watching a film, that none of it was real and that the simulation’s appearance interrupted my pleasure” ? No – this is what we could say about most films that try to tip their hand, to refer to the idea of reference as a way to create meaning. This is another void. Showgirls sees the landscape in the void and carves it out for the audience, taking its footing where all cinema has stood before in the usual structures of visual pleasure.

Thought is rendered Vegas-Egyptian, and this is made clear through the collection of images that the long shot collects. Nomi’s pose comes first. It looks like a vague appropriation of images on the dollar bill – the eye, the desert, the flesh, the pyramid. This is a scenic image that considers tableau or assemblage as its principle rather than the thrust of narrative or a dialectic thematization that melodrama usually promises – Nomi alone up against the world, the world against Nomi. Before it was that the Hollywood still had the power to realize what look like indices of ‘real life’ or ‘the lifelike’ through spectacular displays of verisimilitude – So what is the theme? Precisely, what is Nomi thinking or feeling? Where is the meaning? Forget it! No-me, no secret, no investment in a meaning beyond the exhibition. The style of the Showgirls exhibition is what we see when we watch Lap Dancer’s Delight: a show that is never private, an experience that is hardly privileged in its perspective. It’s both too much and too little to argue that the pleasure has been “returned” to Nomi, appropriating the identification mechanism to the shown female body instead of the male one – identification is something the viewer holds out for, but when this film disappoints that expectation the spectacle of woman survives, but she is no Helen.

Las Vegas is a desert, and it is also the lit up city in the desert – empty and bright, absent and promising. This is a trite overdetermination, and what is unique about the setting of
Showgirls, while plenty of films have been made about Las Vegas before and have been since, Las Vegas is really a great big nowhere in Showgirls. Nomi ponders in front of the Sphinx outside the Luxor hotel. We know it's Las Vegas, but we also remember Thebes. Showgirls renders Oedipal knowledge into its mise-en-scene, but without any informative irony — the irony of knowing what she doesn't know — there's nothing there. In this image is discovered the "sphinx without a secret", an irony that suggests its own vacuity.33

VI. Conclusion: Thrash-Girls

Showgirls reflects not the fantasy of identification but visual pleasure as a visible phenomenon. We are unsettled, rocked, pushed, by Nomi's performance as image of female scopophilic image and as the male protagonist of narcissism. Both of these ideas become part of the film's diegesis instead of being tucked away into the constant narrative cinematic tendency to silently screw these phenomena into the audience experience. Cinema delivers us into the pleasure of surrogacy, wholesale. Desire appears in the form of a woman onscreen; she represents visual pleasure and makes up its means of production. Long before Showgirls and afterwards, "cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself".34 Showgirls forces the interference of the spectacle of woman with the landscape of man, where Nomi Malone becomes the icon of the abysmal possibilities of camera movement that compromises the pleasure of the restricted space of the cinema. She is to-be-looked-at, but in what landscape, by whom? Paul Verhoeven's camera:

Identification appears in the form of a man in a fantasy landscape which is the other half of the contract of film watching. Deliver yourself over to the theater and put yourself in the hands of the cinema-mirror so that you can become the man in the landscaped frontier, at the edge of some material experience that is being represented. The trick of Showgirls is that we have been


34 Mulvey 843.
consumed by the abyss of this landscape that it has paraded out in front of us. Nomi in front of the sphinx. Showgirls isn't the charade of frustrated desire alone but the truth about film watching by presenting the image of our desire rather than routing it into our perceptual experience of seeing the film. Nomi does a pilgrimage to the Sphinx incidentally and has nothing to ask it, No-me. She turns away from meaning, and where is she looking out to? No ob-scene offstage, the hidden place of the castration anxiety, but a palpable look. The show-girl's look becomes the gateway out not to probe our desires or to question them but to recognize them as the violent keyhole cuts that they are. The No-me turns all of this down as it is presented to her onscreen, the contract of visual pleasure is suspended, and the woman remains an icon not through her show but now through her thrash, the mechanical separation of visual pleasure.
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