

Rosalind Krauss. Cindy Sherman 1975-1993
New York: Rizzoli, 1993

1. *Film Stills*

SOME PEOPLE HAVE TOLD ME THEY REMEMBER THE MOVIE THAT ONE OF MY IMAGES IS
DERIVED FROM, BUT IN FACT I HAD NO FILM IN MIND AT ALL.¹

Cindy Sherman

Here is a curious story: an art critic writes an account of Cindy Sherman presenting her work to an art-school audience. She shows slides of her *Untitled Film Stills*—the black-and-white photographs in which as both director and actress she projects a range of 1950s screen images—and next to each, he reports, she presents stills from the movie on which her images were based. What emerges through this comparison, he says, is that “virtually every detail seemed to be accounted for: right down to the buttons on the blouses, the cropping of the image, even the depth of field of the camera.”²

Although he is upset by what this comparison reveals about the slavishness of Sherman’s procedure—the stroke-for-stroke meticulousness of the copy, so to speak—he is certain that what Sherman is after in any case is a recognition of the original, although not as a source waiting to be replicated, but rather as a memory waiting to be summoned. So he speaks about the viewer of the normally unaccompanied Sherman Still “starting to recall the original film image.” And, he says, “if it wasn’t the actual film” the viewer recalled, “then it was an ad for it; and if not that, then it was a picture from a review in a newspaper.”

On its face this story is amazing. Because in a Sherman Film Still there is no “original.” Not in the “actual film,” nor in a publicity shot or “ad,” nor in any other published “picture.” The condition of Sherman’s work in the Film Stills—and part of their point, we could say—is the simulacral nature of what they contain, the condition of being a copy *without* an original.

The structure of the simulacrum, along with Sherman’s exploration of it, is clearly something that needs to be examined. But even before doing so, it is worth staying with the story of the slide show and its putative unveiling of an “original,” which is to say the story’s blatant, screaming, *Rashomon*-like, mis-recognition.

Did Sherman ever show real movie stills next to her own work? And if so, to what end? Since her own images manage to project an array of stereotypical Hollywood or New Wave heroines, along with the very atmospheres through which they are cast—the *film noir*’s hard-bitten denizen of the night, one of Hitchcock’s plucky but vulnerable career girls, the B-movie’s small-town innocent swamped by Metropolis, a New Wave vehicle of alienated despair—and yet do all of this from a kind of intense, generalized memory, what would a comparison of, say, a still from a Douglas Sirk film and a Cindy Sherman Film Still mean? Could it indicate that the sense that the two images intersect—no matter how distant their actual details might be—derives from the way *both* Sherman and Sirk (in

1. Lisbet Nilson, “Q & A: Cindy Sherman,” *American Photographer* (September 1983), p. 77.

2. Richard Rhodes, “Cindy Sherman’s ‘Film Stills,’” *Parachute* (September 1982).

addition to Sirk's actress) are each imaginatively focused on a remembered fantasy—the *same* remembered fantasy—of a character who is “herself” not only fictional, but, like Emma Bovary, the creature as well of fiction, a character woven from the tissue of all the romances she has ever consumed? Could it mean that with the stereotypes projected by these fictions, with regard to the creatures of this fantasized romance, could it mean that these boxes-within-boxes of seeming “memory” always produce what appears to be an authentic copy, even though there is no “real” original to be found? So that Sirk's copy and Sherman's copy uncannily overlap like two searchlights probing through the night toward the same vaguely perceived target? Let's speculate that this is why Sherman would show her own image alongside, say, Sirk's.

But why would the critic mis-recognize the comparison, designating one a copy and the other an original: Sherman, the artist, copying the “real” of the Hollywood film? Roland Barthes, the French structuralist critic, would have a word with which to explain this strange hallucination, and that word would be *myth*. The art critic who “saw” the comparison as replication—Untitled Film Still = image taken from real film—was in the grip of myth, consuming it, Barthes would say.

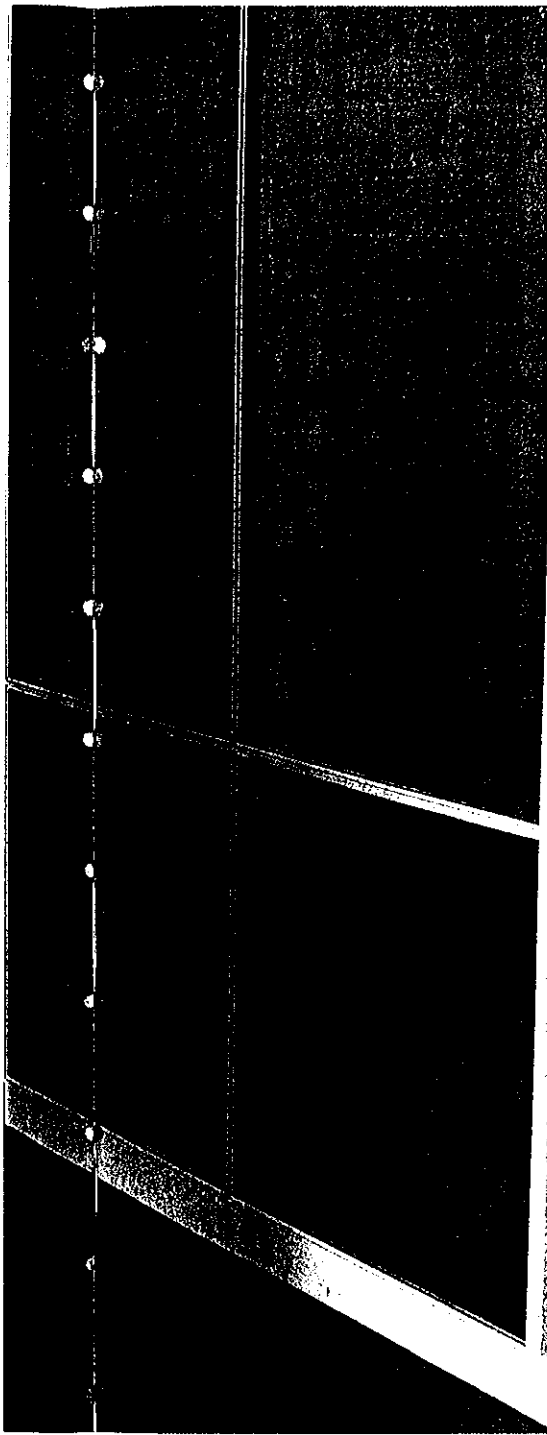
Barthes would, of course, be using the term *myth* in a somewhat limited, rather technical way. And if it is useful to explain how he deploys the term, it's because myth is also what Sherman herself is analyzing and projecting in Untitled Film Stills. Although not as a myth-consumer, like the critic; but rather as a mythographer, like Barthes—a demystifier of myth, a de-myth-ifier.

To consume a myth is to buy a package along with the salesman's pitch. The salesman's pitch names it, and the buyer, never looking under the hood, accepts the name, is satisfied (or suckered) by the pitch. The somewhat more technical analysis involves the terms signified and signifier, form and content. In Barthes's explanation of myth, it goes like this: a schoolchild reads in a Latin grammar book, *quia ego nominor leo*.³ The signifiers of this string of words are the letters—the material component through which each sign (as here, each word) is made up; the signified is the lion and its name—the idea that is articulated by the units cut out by the signifiers: “because my name is lion.” At the level of the individual sign the relation between signifier (letter) and signified (idea) and their conjunction would be represented as: Sd/Sr = Sign.

But this sign, or string of signs, is found in a grammar book and thus “because my name is lion” is not left at what could be called the denotational level, where it is pointing to lions, to their habitats, or to their strength, as in, let us say, “If I have taken the prey from my weaker fellow animals, it is, among other reasons, because my name is lion.” Rather the Latin phrase is being used as an example, a mere instance of the grammatical agreement between subject and predicate. And as such an instance, the richness of the sign—the lion, its strength, its habitat—is itself divided from within. And a second layer, parasitical on the first meaning, is installed.

This second layer is formal; it is the subject/predicate structure of the sentence, in which grammatical agreement is at stake—*any* instance of agreement, lions, snakes, butterflies, no matter. This formal layer constituting the phrase as “mere” example

3. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), pp. 109-159.

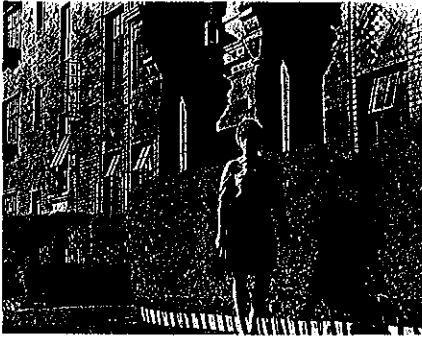


is thus empty. But it preys on the fullness of the layer of the sentence understood as meaning. And Barthes's argument is that for myth to work, it *must* prey on the richness of the "instance."

So what is myth? Myth is depoliticized speech. Myth is ideology. Myth is the act of draining history out of signs and reconstructing these signs instead as "instances"; in particular, instances of universal truths or of natural law, of things that have no history, no specific embeddedness, no territory of contestation. Myth steals into the heart of the sign to convert the historical into the "natural"—something that is uncontested, that is simply "the way things are." In the case of "because my name is lion," the myth is the combination of meaning and form into the content that reads: "this is the principle of agreement in Latin." But beyond that, the mythical content conveys the importance of order and regularity that is the structure of Latin, as well as one's sense, as reader, of belonging to a system of schooling in which many children like oneself are also learning this principle, and the idea that this principle is addressed to oneself, meant for oneself: "See! This is what 'grammatical agreement' looks like." This is what Barthes calls the *interpellant* aspect of mythical speech.⁴ It is addressed to its readers, calling out to them, asking them to see and agree to the way this example confirms this principle, at one and the same time fading before the principle's authority—"this is just an example"—and filling that authority with a kind of subservient but needed specificity—"See! Nature is brimming with just the thing this means: 'because my name is lion.'"

The more famous example Barthes uses in his analysis of mythical speech is closer to Sherman's Film Stills, since it is not composed of letters and words but of a photograph and its depictions. A magazine cover of *Paris Match* shows a black soldier giving the French salute. The photograph—as physical object, with its brute areas of dark and light—is the signifier; the depicted elements through which we assign meaning to those lights and shadows are the signified. They combine into the sign: a black soldier giving the French salute. That combination then becomes the support for the mythical content, which is not just a message about French Imperialism—"France is a global nation; there are black subjects who also serve it"—but a message about its supposed *naturalness*, as the signified of the first order of the mythic support is called up as an example to fill up and instance its mythic contention: "Imperialism is not oppressive; it is natural, because we are all one humanity; you see! examples of how it works and the loyalty it engages can be found everywhere, anywhere, for example, in this photograph where a black soldier gives the French salute." The "you see!" part of the message is, of course, the interpellant part. It is the myth summoning its consumer to grasp the meaningfulness of the first order sign—the photograph-as-signified—and then to project his or her conviction in that unitary, simple meaning into the more complex, hazy, insinuating level of the contents of the myth.

But back to Sherman and the *Rashomon*-factor: the critic sitting there in the darkened auditorium of the School of Visual Arts, looking at a set of slide comparisons and believing something about their replicative relationship, believing this to be the case because, after all, Sherman's work, he is certain, takes us back in any event to the real film we ostensibly remember. What is crucial here is that he has bought the salesman's pitch but never thought to look under the hood. He has taken the first order sign as a composite,



Untitled Film Stills, #18 and #19, 1978

5. Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 43–44, 47.

6. In invoking the metaphor of the used car salesman and the buyer who does or doesn't look under the hood, I am perhaps implying that the myth's manipulation of signifiers and signified is somehow concealed. But it is important to emphasize that it is wholly visible, out in the open. As Barthes says: "This is why myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden—if they were hidden, they could not be efficacious—but because they are naturalized" (*Mythologies*, p. 131).

7. Another similar series, not sequential in a narrative sense but simply grouped around the same costume—is comprised by Stills #17–20.

8. Judith Williamson, "Images of 'Woman,'" *Screen*, vol. 24 (November 1983), p. 102; she quotes Jean-Louis Baudry, "The Mask," *Afterimage*, no. 5 (Spring 1974), p. 27.

a signifier and signified already congealed into a finished meaning—actress X in film Y—and he has completed the mythical content. Here it would be something like: Cindy Sherman is an artist and artists imitate reality (Universal Truth No. 1), doing so through their own sensibilities, thus adding something of themselves to it (Universal Truth No. 2). The formula he arrives at was penned by Emile Zola. It goes: Art is important; it gives us a piece of nature seen through a temperament. Nature in the Sherman case would be of a somewhat technological kind, namely, the original film role, which Sherman would pass through the temperament of her own memory and projection; she would externalize this observed and felt bit of the world, and her work of art—the externalization of these emotions—would be her expression, with which we as viewers can empathize: Art = Emotion relayed through nature. That's the myth, and that's why the critic has to produce—no matter through what process of self-deception or hallucination—the "original," the bit of nature, the filmic heroine in her role. That's what it's like to be a myth-consumer. To buy the pitch. To fail to look under the hood.

What, then, is under the hood?

What is always under the hood is the signifier, the material whose very articulation conditions the signified. And further, working away under the hood, either *on* or *with* the signifier, is the effort perhaps to limit the possibility that it might produce a multiplicity of unstable signifieds and promote a "sliding," or blurring among them or, on the other hand, to do the reverse and welcome or even facilitate such sliding. Limitation is the work of realism in novels and films: to every signifier, one and only one signified.⁵ Conversely, sliding and proliferation of meanings have always interested the anti-realist (what used to be called the *avant-garde*) artist.⁶

Work on the signifier is perfectly available for observation in Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. Take the group of images that includes #21, #22, and #23 (pages 29–31). Sherman wears the same costume, a dark, tailored suit with a white collar and a small, straw cloche pulled over a mop of short blond curls. But everything else changes from one still to the next: in the first, #21, the register is close-up taken at a low angle; in the second, #22, a long-shot posits the character amidst a complication of architectural detail and the cross-fire of sun and shadow; in the last, #23, the figure is framed in a medium-shot at the far right side of the image against the darkened emptiness of an undefined city street and flattened by the use of a wide-angle lens. And with each reframing and each new depth-of-field and each new condition of luminosity, "the character" transmogrifies, moving from type to type and from movie to movie. From #21 and the Hitchcock heroine to #23 and the hardened, *film noir* dame, there is no "acting" involved.⁷ Almost every single bit of the character, which is to say of each of the three different characters, is a function only of work on the signifier: the various things that in film make up a photographic style.

It was just this that Judith Williamson, one of the first feminist writers to embrace Sherman's work, described when she said that in the *Untitled Film Stills*, "We are constantly forced to recognize a visual style (often you could name the director) simultaneously with a type of femininity. The two cannot be pulled apart. The image suggests that there is a particular kind of femininity in the *woman* we see, whereas in fact the femininity is in the image itself, it *is* the image."⁸

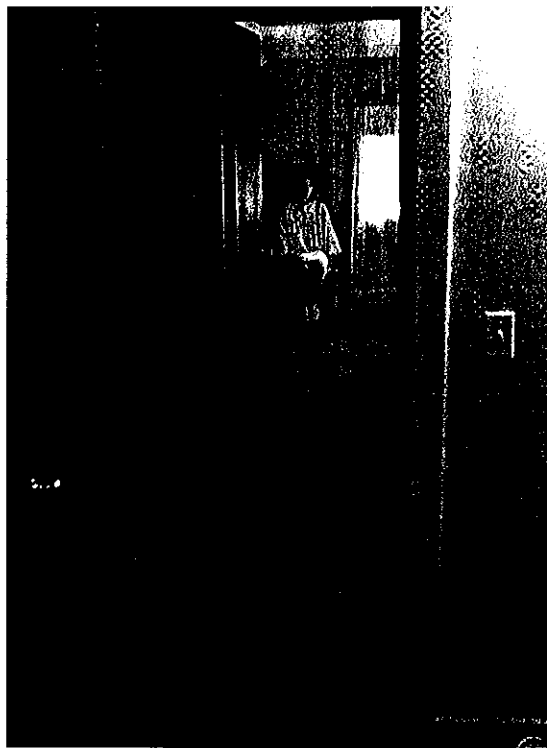
That there is no free-standing character, so to speak, but only a concatenation of signifiers so that the persona is released—conceived, embodied, established—by the very act of cutting out the signifiers, making “her” a pure function of framing, lighting, distance, camera angle, is what you find when you look under the hood. And Sherman as de-myth-ifier is specifically allowing us, encouraging us to look under the hood. Even as she is also showing us the tremendous temptation to buy into the myth, to accept the signified as finished fact, as free-standing figure, as “character.” Thus there is the tendency when speaking of the Film Stills to enumerate their personae, either the roles—“a woman walking down a dark street at night; another, scantily clad, with martini in hand, peering out the sliding glass door of a cheap motel”⁹—or the actresses who project them—Gina Lollabrigida, Monica Viti, Barbara Bel Geddes, Lana Turner. . . .

That neither the roles nor the actresses are free-standing, that all are, within representation, effects—outcomes, functions—of the signifiers that body them forth is what Barthes labored to demonstrate in his extraordinary book *S/Z*, an analysis of the inner workings of literary realism. Showing that each “character” is produced through a concatenation of separate codes—some the signifiers or operators of difference, whether of gender (male/female) or age (young/old) or position (rich/poor); others the operators of references to general knowledge keyed into the text by the merest aside (“. . . as in the Arabian Nights”); still others the operators of the puzzle that drives the narrative forward towards its Truth (who is? what is?)—Barthes makes clear that when a name finally arrives to refer to or denote a character, that name is buoyed up, carried along, by the underlying babble of the codes.¹⁰ The name is thus the signified—the character—that the author slides onto the codes to produce realism’s appearance, in which for every name there is a referent, a denotation, a unified empirical fact. What is being masked is that the name, rather than pointing to a primary entity in the “real,” is an effect of the vast already-written, already-heard, already-read of the codes; it, the denotation, is merely the last of these codes to be slipped into place. The consumer of realist fiction, however, buys the pitch and believes in the “character,” believes in the substance of the person from whom all the rest seems to follow as a set of necessary attributes—believes, that is, in the myth.

In 1981, when Sherman had her first one-person exhibition, there was a small group of critics who were prepared to receive work that focused on the media production of reality and the disappearance of the artist’s “persona” behind the mask of the stereotype. For this reason, these critics welcomed the vehicle Sherman was using because photography was itself the very medium of the image world’s production of the stereotype, and so photography, shorn of its associations to the “fine print” and dragging its relations to mass-culture behind it, breached the walls of the art world in a revolution that belonged to Sherman’s artistic generation. Barthes’s own vaunted notion of “the death of the author” had informed the universe of this critical dialogue, and Sherman, an artist who had come to New York in 1977 directly from majoring in art at SUNY, Buffalo, could be seen to address the very issues Barthes raised in his “mythology.” But this initial reception, forged in the pages of little art magazines, soon paled in the face of a larger, more massive enthusiasm for the young artist’s work. And it is in that massive, popular-press embrace, that Sherman, the de-myth-ifier, is reconsumed as myth.

9. Lisa Phillips, *Cindy Sherman* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1987), p. 14.

10. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974): “What gives the illusion that the sum is supplemented by a precious remainder (something like individuality, in that, qualitative and ineffable, it may escape the vulgar bookkeeping of compositional characters) is the Proper Name, the difference completed by what is *proper* to it. The proper name enables the person to exist outside the senses, whose sum none theless constitutes it entirely” (p. 191).



Most of these later critics who have written about the *Untitled Film Stills* acknowledge that Sherman is manipulating stereotypes and that though these are being relayed through a generalized matrix of filmic portrayals and projections, there is of course no real film, no "original," to which any one of them is actually referring. So the myth-consumer of my opening anecdote is something of an exception and in that sense a straw man. And yet we have not far to look to find other versions of myth-consumption, or the direct connection to the signified-as-instance.

One form of this that can be found in the mountainous literature on Sherman's work is to assume that each of these signifieds is being offered as an instance of Sherman's own deeper self—the artist (as in *Universal Truth No. 2*, above) becoming the vehicle through which the fullness of humanity might be both projected and embraced in all its aspects. Peter Schjeldahl, for example, understands the individual *Film Still*'s signified to be Sherman's "fantasy of herself in a certain role, redolent usually of some movie memory," with all the different characters resonating together to form the totality of the artist's selfhood in her oracular role as "our" representative:

Sherman's special genius has been to locate the oracle not in the "out there" of media bombardment but in the "in here" of her own partly conditioned, partly original mind—a dense, rich sediment of half-remembered, half-dreamed image tones and fragments. . . . She has mined this sediment for ideas, creating an array of new, transpersonal images that spark across the gap between self and culture.¹¹

The mythic content Schjeldahl then consumes from these instances of the self-as-oracle is that it is in the nature of the artist to organize "messages that seem to tell us our nature and our fate."

11. *Cindy Sherman*, Whitney Museum, p. 8.

Another, more subtle form of myth-consumption, continuing to buy into the "character," is to see the multiplicity of these roles as various forms of what Arthur Danto seems to like to call "The Girl." He provides his own roll call of these variants: 'The Girl in Trouble, The Girl Detective, The Girl We Left Behind, Daddy's Brave Girl, Somebody's Stenographer, Girl Friday, The Girl Next Door, The Whore with the Golden Heart. . . . But his point is that "the Girl is an allegory for something deeper and darker, in the mythic unconscious of everyone, regardless of sex. . . . Each of the stills is about The Girl in Trouble, but in the aggregate they touch the myth we each carry out of childhood, of danger, love and security that defines the human condition."¹² Although Danto turns here to the term *myth*, he uses it not in the manner of the de-myth-ifier, but as the unsuspecting myth-consumer: buying into the signified of every variant of The Girl, as an instance of the myth that there is a shared fantasy, or what he himself provides by way of mythic content as "the common cultural mind."

. . . IT IS NECESSARY TO FLY IN THE FACE OF SHERMAN'S OWN EXPRESSLY NON-, EVEN ANTI-, THEORETICAL STANCE.¹³

Laura Mulvey

Not surprisingly, given the fact that Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* focus exclusively on women, on the roles women play in films, on the nature of those roles as pre-set, congealed, cultural clichés—hence their designation as "stereotype"—and, by implication, on the pall that the real-world pressure to fill these roles casts over the fates of individual women, feminist writers have embraced Sherman's art, seeing it as "inseparable from the analyses—and the challenge—of feminist work on representation." But even as they have done so, they have been disgusted by its consumption as myth. For such consumption, they point out, inverts the terms of Sherman's work, taking the very thing she is holding up for critical inspection and transposing it into the grounds of praise.¹⁴

Arguing that there is, however, a logic—no matter how perverse—behind such a transposition, feminist photography critic Abigail Solomon-Godeau sees a mechanism at work there to re-cut Sherman's art by exchanging what is dismissed as the narrow, somewhat threadbare cloth of feminist investigation for the more noble garments that drape the artist who addresses "the common cultural mind." This, she reasons, is necessary to the art world's promotion of Sherman to the status of major artist, and as such is something incompatible with a feminist understanding of her enterprise. Therefore, as an apparatus of promotion (in both the media and museums) has supplanted other kinds of writing about Sherman, the mythical reading of the meaning of her work has followed. And thus it is no accident that Danto, for example, would need to recast the import of the *Film Stills* by insisting that they "are not in my view merely feminist parables."¹⁵

But it must be said that within feminism itself the import of the *Stills* has also been recast. For if Judith Williamson's early treatment of the *Film Stills* had appeared under the title "Images of Woman," Solomon-Godeau eight years later transposes this to "woman-as-image," and signals to the reader the importance of this distinction.¹⁶

12. Arthur Danto, *Untitled Film Stills: Cindy Sherman* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 14.

13. Laura Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The Work of Cindy Sherman," *New Left Review*, no. 188 (July/August 1991), p. 137.

14. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Suitable for Framing: The Critical Recasting of Cindy Sherman," *Parkett*, no. 29 (1991), p. 112.

15. Danto, *Untitled Film Stills*, p. 14.

16. Solomon-Godeau, p. 115.



Indeed, almost two decades of work on the place of woman within representation has put this shift into effect, so that a whole domain of discourse no longer conceives of stereotype as a kind of mass-media mistake, a set of cheap costumes women might put on or cast aside. Rather stereotype—itsself rebaptized now as “masquerade,” and here understood as a psychoanalytic term—is thought of as the phenomenon to which all women are submitted both inside and outside representation, so that as far as femininity goes, there is nothing *but* costume. Representation itself—films, advertisements, novels, etc.—would thus be part of a far more absolute set of mechanisms by which characters are constructed: constructed equally in life as in film, or rather, equally in film because as in life. And in this logic woman is nothing but masquerade, nothing but image. Feminist filmmaker and theorist Laura Mulvey has described this shift:

The initial idea that images contributed to women’s alienation from their bodies and from their sexuality, with an attendant hope of liberation and recuperation, gave way to theories of representation as symptom and signifier of the way problems posed by sexual difference under patriarchy could be displaced onto the feminine.¹⁷

It was Mulvey’s own 1975 text, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” that most formatively set out that latter argument, in which woman is constructed as spectacle and symptom, becoming the passive object of a male gaze. Which is to say that in her essay a relation is set up among three terms: (1) the observation that there are gender distinctions between the roles that men and women play in films—males being the agents of the narrative’s action; females being the passive objects or targets of that narrative, often interrupting the (masculine) action by the stasis of a moment of formal (feminine) opulence; (2) the conception that there is a gender assignment for the viewers of films, one that is unrelentingly male since the very situation of filmic viewing is structured as voyeuristic and fetishistic, its source of pleasure being essentially an eroticization of fetishism—“the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly,” she writes; (3) that these assignments of role are a function of the psychic underpinnings of all men and women, since they reflect the truths about the unconscious construction of gendered identity that psychoanalysis has brought to light: “Woman . . . stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command, by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.”¹⁸

17. Mulvey, “Phantasmagoria,” p. 139.

18. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* (1975); republished in Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1989), p. 15.



19. The sequence of texts in which Freud develops this scenario begins with "Infantile Genital Organization of the Libido" (1923), "The passing of the Oedipus-Complex" (1924), and "Female Sexuality" (1931). In the 1925 essay, "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Differences between the Sexes," the scenario takes a different form, for it stresses the sense in which meaning does not arise in the presence of the visual field but is only retrojected on it as a result of a verbal prohibition: "When a little boy first catches sight of a girl's genital region, he begins by showing irresolution and lack of interest; he sees nothing or disowns what he has seen. . . . It is not until later, when some threat of castration has obtained a hold upon him, that the observation becomes important to him: if he then recollects or repeats it, it arouses a terrible storm of emotion in him and forces him to believe in the reality of the threat."

20. In their introductory essays, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose present the development from the scenic event described by Freud to its subsequent semiological elaboration by Lacan: *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1982).

21. Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," p. 14.

In that last sentence, which slides from the domain of filmic representations to the universal condition of how "woman stands in patriarchal culture," there are packed a large number of theoretical assumptions that knot together around concepts about the unconscious, castration, and the import of structural linguistics for psychoanalysis. Insofar as Sherman's work is implicated in those assumptions and the analysis about woman-as-image that flows from them—the Film Stills, for example, repeatedly presented as either a text to be explained by this analysis and/or a consequence of it—it is necessary to unpack these assumptions, no matter how schematically.

The psychic economy that drives men to activity and speech and women to passivity and silence is an economy that also separates looking from being looked at, spectator from spectacle. And that economy is organized, according to this reading of psychoanalysis, around castration anxiety, which is to say in terms of an event through which the child is made aware of sexual difference and, in one and the same moment, socialized by being subordinated to parental law. And if difference and the law converge in a single psychic configuration, they do so in relation to a visual event in which the possibility of absence is verified in the body of the "castrated" mother, the woman from whose genitals the phallus can be seen to be absent.¹⁹ Siding with the paternal law, the child chooses speech, for which the master signifier is now the emblem of difference itself: the phallic signifier, the signifier as phallus.

It is in this sense that Mulvey refers to the male as maker of meaning in contrast to woman as bearer of meaning, a bearer now because the lack she is seen as manifesting on her own body, insofar as it sets up the phallus as signifier—which is to say a differential function through which the play of meaning now operates—this lack is necessary to the social system of order and sense to which Mulvey gives, following Jacques Lacan, the name Symbolic.²⁰ Thus she writes, "An idea of woman stands as linchpin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies."²¹

If the economy of sexual difference sets up a division of labor in relation to language, it also produces a separation of roles, it is argued, in relation to vision.²² On the one hand cinematic pleasure is scopophilic, voyeuristic: it wants to see and to control its objects of sight—but at a distance, protected by its own remove in the dark and at a point of vantage that perspective triangulates for it, the occupant of this point guaranteed, through this visually unified position of control, a sense of its own (phallic) mastery. On the other hand this pleasure is put in jeopardy by the very image of the woman it wishes to master insofar as that woman is marked as well as the bearer of the threat of castration. Thus it is necessary for this spectator to convoke the psychic mechanism of denial, for which the classic psychoanalytic instance is fetishism: the male child entering a perversion in which he sees the proof of sexual difference but continues nonetheless to believe in the woman as “whole,” not-castrated: the phallic mother. The fetish constructed through this mechanism of denial thus restores to her body what is known to be “missing.”

If film works constantly to re-create woman as a symptom of man's castration anxiety—thus silencing her—it also works, and here even harder, to situate her as eroticized fetish: the image of lack papered over, the emblem of wholeness restored. Woman is in this sense skewered in place as an image that simultaneously establishes her as other than man—the Truth that it is he who possesses the phallus—and at the same time the fetishized image of the whole body from which nothing is missing.

Stephen Heath describes this visual scenario from the point of view of the gazing male subject—“Everything turns on the castration complex and the central phallus, its visibility and the spectacle of lack; the subject, as Lacan puts it at one point, ‘looks at itself in its sexual member’”—and then for the consequences for the woman secured as spectacle:

What the voyeur seeks, poses, is not the phallus on the body of the other but its absence as the definition of the mastering presence, the security, of his position, his seeing, his phallus; the desire is for the other to be spectacle not subject, or only the subject of that same desire, its exact echo. . . . Fetishism too, which often involves the scopophilic drive, has its scenario of the spectacle of castration; and where what is at stake is not to assert that the woman has the penis-phallus but to believe in the intact, to hold that the woman is not castrated, that nothing is lost, that his representation, and of him, works. Always, from voyeurism to fetishism, the eroticization of castration.²³

It is with this theoretical armature in place, then, that Laura Mulvey herself looks at the Film Stills, understanding them to be rehearsing this structure of the male gaze, of the voyeurist constructing the woman in endless repetitions of her vulnerability and his control: “The camera looks; it ‘captures’ the female character in a parody of different voyeurisms. It intrudes into moments in which she is unguarded, sometimes undressed, absorbed into her own world in the privacy of her own environment. Or it witnesses a moment in which her guard drops as she is suddenly startled by a presence, unseen and off-screen, watching her.”²³

22. Stephen Heath, “Difference,” *Screen*, no. 19 (Autumn 1978), p. 89.

23. Mulvey, “Phantasmagoria,” p. 141.



Untitled Film Stills, #39, 1979; #81, 1978; and #36, 1979



Edgar Degas, *Posed Ballerina*. Positive and negative versions, c.1895. Bibliothèque nationale, Paris.

And yet, we could say, it is this very theoretical armature that operates in such a description to put a mythic reading of the *Untitled Film Stills* in place, one that is not taking the trouble, indeed, to look under the hood. Judith Williamson had seen the constructed filmic role emerge in the *Stills* as a consequence of the signifiers through which any filmic image must be built—"the two cannot be pulled apart," she had written; Laura Mulvey, on the other hand, is buying into a signified-as-instance, a congealed sign, the semantic totality that reads "woman-as-image," or again, "woman as object of the male gaze."

Sherman, of course, has a whole repertory of women being watched. From the very outset of her project, in *Untitled Film Still*, #2, of 1977, she set up the sign of the unseen intruder. A young girl draped in a towel stands before her bathroom mirror, touching her shoulder and following her own gesture in its reflected image. A door jam to the left of the frame places the "viewer" outside this room. But what is far more significant is that this viewer is constructed as a hidden watcher by means of the signifier that reads as graininess, a diffusion of the image that constructs the signified—the concept of distance—a severing of the psychic space of the watcher from that of the watched and of the camera's concomitant construction of the watcher for whom it is proxy. In *Untitled Film Still*, #39, of 1979, it is not so much the grain of the emulsion that establishes the voyeuristic remove, with its sense that one is stealing up on the woman, as it is a kind of nimbus that washes around the frame of the image, repeating in the register of light the sense of barrier that the door frame constructs in the world of physical objects.

But in *Untitled Film Still*, #81, of 1978, there is a remarkably sharp depth of field, so that such /distance/ is gone, despite the fact that doorways are once again an obtrusive part of the image, implying that the viewer is gazing at the woman from outside the space she occupies. As in the other cases, the woman appears to be in a bathroom and once again she is scantily dressed, wearing only a thin nightgown. Yet the continuity established by the focal length of the lens creates an unimpeachable sense that her look at herself in the mirror reaches past her reflection to include the viewer as well. Which is to say that as opposed to the idea of /distance/, there is here the signified /connection/, and what is further cut out as the signified at the level of narrative is a woman chatting to someone (perhaps another woman) in the room outside her bathroom as she is preparing for bed.

The narrative impact of these images tends to submerge the elements through which the situation is constructed, elements such as depth-of-field, grain, light, etc., which, it would seem, are too easy to dismiss as merely "formal" integers, whereas they function as signifiers crucial to the semantic effect. That Sherman is concentrated on these aspects is made very palpable in the one *Film Still* that seems inexplicable within the series as a whole: *Untitled Film Still*, #36, of 1979. Of all the *Film Stills* this one is so severely backlit that nothing can be seen of the character's face and almost nothing of her body beyond its silhouette. Standing in front of a curtain through which the powerful backlighting is dramatically diffused, she extends one of her arms upward, almost out of the frame; the other bends to grasp the elbow of the first in what could be a gesture of washing but remains radically ambiguous. As pattern, her body reads black on the white of the ground, and her garments—the bodice of her slip and the stiffened film of a crinoline—parted slightly from her

body, create the only area of modulation or middle tone in the image. To a far greater degree than almost any other in the series, this work is deprived of narrative implication.

A few months prior to the making of this Film Still, an image—or rather two images—remarkably like it were published: two photographs by Edgar Degas (page 56) of a ballerina dressed in a low-cut bodice, her skirt a diaphanous crinoline, standing in front of a luminous curtain and reaching with one arm upward, her other arm bent inward at the elbow. These photographs, published by a critic who just a few months later would launch Sherman in an essay called “Pictures,” an article providing the first serious critical context for her work (Sherman’s first solo exhibition was still one year away), are related to one another through an extraordinary ambiguity with regard to light.²⁴ For having solarized the negative of his photograph to create reversals between negative and positive areas within the image, Degas then created both a negative and a positive print. And the dark/light reversals that arise from this treatment constitute the dancer as a phantom whose existence can be located nowhere. As the critic Douglas Crimp described:

In the print in which the right arm and torso of the dancer appears to be normally positive, the shadow of the arm on the wall she grasps appears as a streak of light. Her face, also apparently in shadow, and her “dark” hair are registered as light. At this point, obviously, language begins to fail. How can we any longer speak of light and dark? How can we speak of a white shadow? a dark highlight? a translucent shoulder blade? When light and dark, transparency and opacity, are reversed, when negative becomes positive and positive, negative, the referents of our descriptive language are dissolved. We are left with a language germane only to the photographic, in which the manipulation of light generates its own, exclusive logic.²⁵

And in the publication of the twinned Degas photographs, the same dancer turns to confront her own mirror image as, flipped from negative to positive, she is also flipped left and right. Folded in a way almost impossible to imagine around the axis of her own body, that body is folded as well around a ghostly condition of luminosity that produces it now as solid, now as if in X ray.

Sherman’s *Untitled Film Still, # 36*, has the aura of this impossibly folded Degas dancer, turning in a light that has no focus, and indeed no possible external point of view. Perhaps in its condition of being *hors série* the Film Still was addressed, imaginatively, to Crimp; but such an address has nothing in it of the theorization of “the male gaze” and the psycho-politics of sadistic control.

If anything, it may have been a personal form of acknowledgment of the importance of the emergent discourse on postmodernism—within which Crimp was a significant voice—a critical discourse that would recognize her work so quickly and make a place for it in which it and the effect of certain newly adopted critical terms—“death of the author,” “simulacrum”—would soon become synonymous.

Further, as we will see, the kind of backlighting in *Untitled Film Still, # 36*, and all that it does to fragment the gaze, will emerge as a crucial element—or signifier—in Sherman’s work of the early 1980s. But that is to anticipate somewhat, getting ahead of our story.

24. *Pictures* was the title of an exhibition organized in the fall of 1977 by Douglas Crimp for Artists’ Space, New York, which focused on work structured around the issue of replication—work which thereby could bring notions of representation into question. The five artists included Troy Brauntuch, Jack Goldstein, Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, and Philip Smith. Crimp’s connection to these issues continued and issued in an essay that enlarged the circle of “pictures” artists to include Cindy Sherman. See, Douglas Crimp, “Pictures,” *October*, no. 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 75–88.

25. Douglas Crimp, “A Note on Degas’s Photographs,” *October*, no. 5 (Summer 1978), p. 99.

2. Centerfolds

THE ONLY THING CINEMASCOPE IS GOOD FOR IS TO FILM SNAKES AND CORPSES.²⁶

Jean-Luc Godard

The Untitled Film Stills had been a laboratory for exploring the range of signifiers that go together to produce the look of a given filmic genre or director and thereby to construct a "character," sealing it as the "real" of denotation, which in Barthes's terms, as we've seen, is only the last of the cinematic, connotational codes to be slipped into place. It was from this varied testing ground that Sherman then began to select out a single signifier, so as to concentrate on it.

First, in 1980, this signifier was the special effect of backscreen-projection with its resultant fissure in the image-field: the split it sets up in the experience of density and substance between the three-dimensional character and her flattened, factitious-looking scenic surrounds. Color, which entered Sherman's work at this moment, heightened this distinction.

Then, in 1981, a different signifier, put in place in a series triggered by a commission for a centerfold for *Artforum* magazine, emerged as the central concern.²⁷ That signifier is point-of-view. And in this group of images that viewpoint, consistent through most of the series and stridently adopted by the camera, is from above, looking down. It is as though the extreme horizontality of the image's format had suggested a corresponding horizontality in the image-field. From being a projection of the viewer looking outward toward a visual field imagined as parallel to the vertical of the upright body of the beholder and his or her plane of vision, the view now slides floorward to declare the field of vision itself as horizontal.

But if this in fact has happened, it has never been registered in the writing that greeted this phase of Sherman's work. Still firmly fixed on the signified, the projected roles—"In several of these, a girl is seen in a state of reverie, daydreaming—we automatically presume since we subliminally recall so many scenes like these from movies and television—about her prospects for romance"²⁸—the accounts of the series go straight for the mythic content: Sherman's ability to "get inside her characters"—"What is instantly recognizable in Sherman's new pictures is the universal state of daydream or reverie, the moments of harmless, necessary psychosis that are a recurring mechanism in anyone's mental economy. These are moments when consciousness dissolves back into itself, when wish and reality, personal and collective memory are one and the physical world ceases to exist."²⁹

Mulvey, also, focuses on the characters and their interiors:

"The young women that Sherman impersonates may be daydreaming about a future romance, or they may be mourning a lost one. They may be waiting, in enforced passivity, for a letter

26. Godard puts this in the mouth of Fritz Lang, in the film *Le Mépris*.

27. Having been so commissioned, Sherman found her submission rejected by *Artforum's* editor, Ingrid Sischy, who thought that the images she submitted "might be misunderstood." Accordingly neither these, nor Sherman's second idea for the centerfold, the series of herself in a red bathrobe, were published by the magazine.

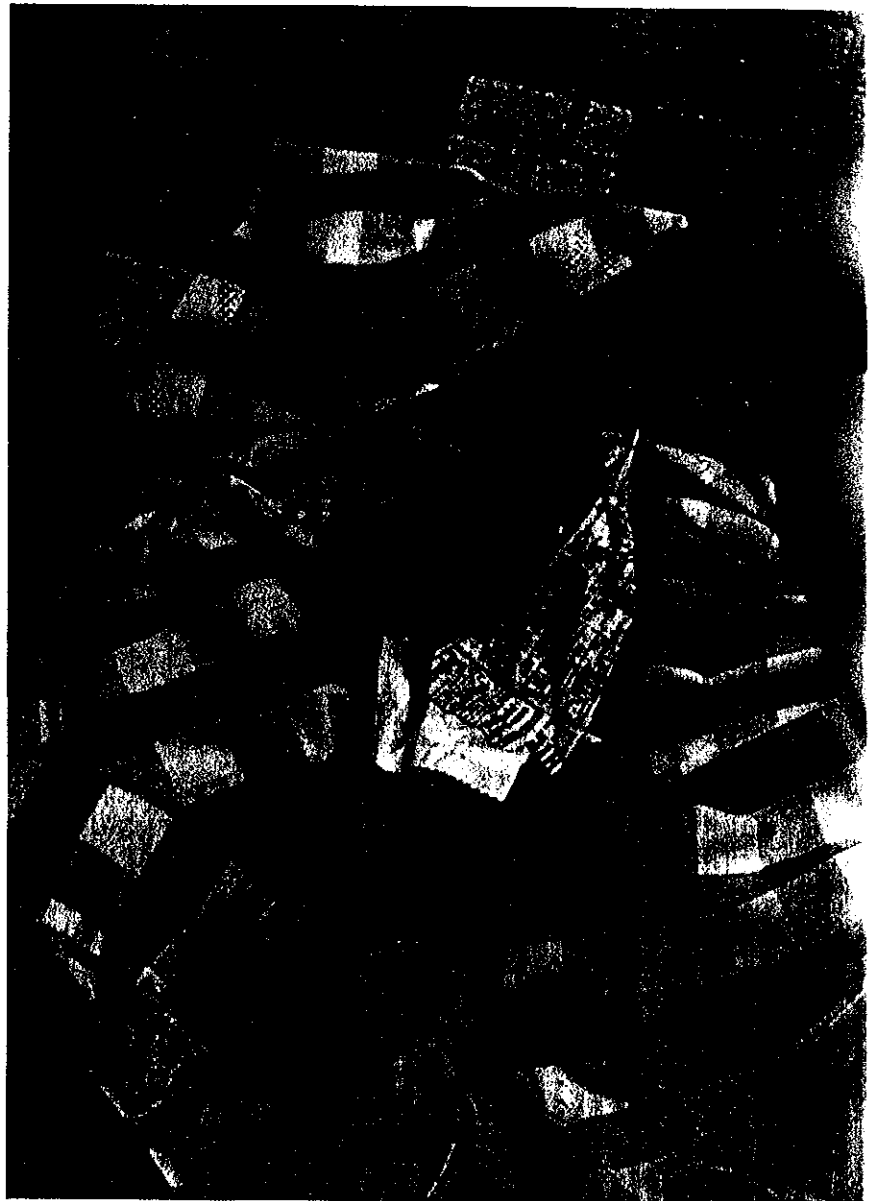
28. Ken Johnson, "Cindy Sherman and the Anti-Self: An Interpretation of Her Imagery," *Arts* (November 1987), p. 49.

29. Peter Schjeldahl, "Shermanettes," *Art in America* (March 1982), p. 110.

or telephone call. Their eyes gaze into the distance. They are not aware of their clothes, which are sometimes carelessly rumpled, so that, safe alone with their thoughts, their bodies are, slightly, revealed to the viewer." Referring to this effect as "soft-core pastiche" and associating the horizontal format of the images to the shape of a cinemascope screen, Mulvey's reading returns to the woman-as-image question, the construction of the eroticized fetish. "These photographs reiterate the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of femininity," she writes, pointing to the way the connotations of intimacy both at the level of emotion (daydream, fantasy) and of setting (the bedroom) combine to exude a strong sense of sexuality. And even though the voyeuristic place of the spectator is not marked here, as it has been in the *Film Stills*, she says, the issue of woman-as-spectacle, woman-as-symptom, has not changed. It has merely been reconditioned to concentrate on the mechanism of masquerade: the posturing projected outward from an empty center. It is in this series, she writes, that the works "start to suggest an interior space, and initiate [Sherman's] exploration inside the masquerade of femininity's interior/exterior binary opposition."³⁰

30. Mulvey, "Phantasmagoria," pp. 142-143.

31. Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 290 (translation modified).



It was in his essay "The Meaning of the Phallus" that Jacques Lacan had formulated masquerade as this desperate binary, pronouncing: "Paradoxical as this formulation might seem, I would say that it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of femininity, namely all its attributes via masquerade."³¹ Thus, if femininity is unconsciously constructed—insofar as it is projected as lack, as what is missing and in this sense as symptom of the man—as an essential absence, Lacan describes woman as rejecting that absence, and thus her own "essence," in order to assume the masquerade of wholeness, of the nothing-missing of the fetish. The dance of her "to-be-looked-at-ness" is a veil covering over this nothing, which Lacan elsewhere designates as "not-all"—*pas-tout*.

It is in this same text that Lacan had cautioned that the phallus in being a signifier could not be seen as either a phantasmatic object or a physical organ: "Nor is it as such an object (part, internal, good, bad, etc. . . .) in so far as this term tends to accentuate the reality involved in a relationship. It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, which it





symbolizes.”³² Instead, as signifier it opposes the signified, and—as in the relationship described by structural linguistics—it “has an active function in determining the effects in which the signifiable appears as submitting to its mark, becoming through that passion the signified.”

It is, of course, the human subject who in this sense emerges as “submitting to its mark,” emerging as the material through which language itself speaks, “his nature woven by effects in which we can find the structure of language.”

Spoken thus by this chain of signifiers, which operate to cut him out as their effect, their signified, the human subject is, then, the subject of this system. In another essay Lacan formulated the rule of this linguistic subject as: $\forall x \Phi x$ —which reads, *all x is a function of the phallus*, with phallus understood here as the master signifier in the linguistic chain.³³ It is a formulation that announces once again the sense in which the human subject is not its own master but is organized elsewhere, in the place Lacan designates as Other and is occupied by the unconscious, by language, by social law.

But it is also the case that every human subject has an ego, or sense of (autonomous) self, which wants to hold out against that formula and would instead organize itself in other, directly opposing terms: $\exists x \Phi x$ —which reads, *there is an x that is not a function of the phallus*. This protest is an insistence that there is something that “I really am”—“beneath my surfaces and roles and socializations, beyond my sex and my childhood, away from everything that conspires to keep me from saying what [it is].”³⁴ For Stephen Melville, writing on Lacanian notions of the subject, the combination (or rather the togetherness-in-opposition) of these two formulations “seems to capture something of the primordial and constitutive alienation that Lacan takes to characterize human being.”

32. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

33. These Lacanian “mathemes” appear in *Encore*, Lacan’s 1972 Seminar and are published in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, p. 149. Here the mathemes for the female subject are also given: $\exists x \Phi x$ (there is no x that is not submitted to the phallus); and $\forall x \Phi x$ (not all x are submitted to the phallus). As Stephen Melville points out, it is from this matheme, which says the “same” thing as does the matheme for the male ego (there is an x that is not submitted to the phallus), but does so indirectly, without the same existential insistence, that Lacan derives the definition of the woman as “not-all”: *pas-tout* (see note 34, below, p. 355).

34. Stephen Melville, “Psychoanalysis and the Place of *Jouissance*,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 13 (Winter 1987), p. 353.

Now if the ego can insist that "there is an *x*—me!—that is not a function of the phallus," it is because, Lacan argues, that ego has first constituted itself in relation to an image of wholeness, a unitary figure or gestalt, that it has seen in a mirror. And that ego will continue to find instances of wholeness with which to reconstitute the "there is . . ." throughout its existence, one example of which is, of course, the setting up of the woman as fetish, as *pas-tout*. In a certain way this securing of the ego in relation to the confirming instance takes a form that is very like what Barthes had called the interpellant function of myth, the "You see! Here is . . ." Which is to say that if the subject is no longer the *source* of his own meanings in the field of the symbolic (the chain of signifiers), the very production of meaning generated out there in the field of representation will itself project an image of wholeness (the sign as unit) that will be mirrored back to him as an interpellant fiction. And this will set him up as the unified, although imaginary, recipient of the "You see! . . ."

Now, if I have been rehearsing these theories, so central for the feminist theorization of woman-as-image, it is in order to get a sense of what the mechanisms are that prevent a critic like Mulvey from looking under the hood. It is to be able to speculate on why a certain meaning of the group I will be calling Sherman's "horizontals" would have remained invisible, namely, the one marked /horizontal/.

Yet all we have to do is to focus on the insistent verticalization inscribed by all the metaphors that circulate through the Lacanian universe of the subject—the vertical of the mirror, the vertical of the veil, the vertical of the phallus as instance of wholeness, the vertical of the field of the fetish, the vertical of the plane of beauty—to sense why the horizontal is forced to recede from view when one's eyes are fixed on this theory.

Wherever Sherman's eyes are in relation to this or any theory, they are certainly attuned to the givens of her own field of operations, which is to say both high art and mass media. And in that field vertical and horizontal are exceedingly over-determined. If the vertical is the axis of painting, the axis in which the picture orients itself to the wall, it is also, as we have seen, the axis of the plane of vision. That plane, which the Gestalt psychologists characterize as insistently "fronto-parallel" to the upright body of the viewer, is as well, they tell us, the plane of *Prägnanz*, by which they mean the hanging together or coherence of form. Thus the very drive of vision to formulate form, to project coherence in a mirroring





35. Freud's discussions of man's assumption of an erect posture as the first step toward culture and as making possible a sublimated visually are in "Civilization and Its Discontents" (1930), *Standard Edition*, vol. 21, pp. 99-100; and "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1905), *Standard Edition*, vol. 7, pp. 156-157. The Gestalt psychological interpretation of the upright posture is from Erwin Straus, "Born to See, Bound to Behold: Reflections on the Function of Upright Posture in the Aesthetic Attitude," in *The Philosophy of the Body*, ed. Stuart Spicker (New York: Quadrangle, 1970), pp. 334-359.

of the body's own shape, will already mark even the empty vertical plane as a reflection of that body, heavier at the bottom, lighter at the top, and with a different orientation from right side to left. And conversely any location of form—of shape or of figure—will assume its place in an axis that is imaginatively vertical, even if we confront it on the page of the magazine we hold on our laps or in the tiles of the mosaic that lies under our feet.

Further, this vertical dimension, in being the axis of form, is also the axis of beauty. That is what Freud adds to the Gestaltists' picture: in that period in his evolution when man finally stood up, he left the world of sniffing and pawing, with nose pressed to genitals, and entered the world of vision in which objects were now experienced from a distance. And in this distancing his carnal instincts were *sublimated*, Freud writes, reorganized away from the organ world of the horizontal and into the formal



world of the vertical, which is to say, of the beautiful.³⁵

It was not just modernist painting, which formed part of Sherman's heritage as an artist, that insisted on this verticality—and its effect of sublimation; it was also the media universe of movies and television and advertising that declared it. And these two fields, so seemingly inimical to one another, had a bizarrely complementary relation to this effect of sublimation. If the media's fetish occupied the axis of the vertical, that very axis had itself become the fetish of high art.

During the 1960s and 1970s, however, a series of blows had been struck against this fetish. There were, to take only one example, a group of readings of the work of Jackson Pollock—that work itself a dominant emblem of the sublimatory condition of the vertical, optically conditioned, pictorial field—by means of which Pollock's

36. For the argument about Warhol's and Morris's reading of the horizontality of Pollock's mark, see my *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993); for the discussion of Ruscha's *Liquid Words*, see Yve-Alain Bois, "Thermometers Should Last Forever," in *Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993).

37. The logic elaborated, for example, by Stephen Heath, slides from the phallus as signifier—as thus a wholly differential, non-positive diacritical mark—to the phallus as form, which is to say gestalt or image. Heath marks this by replacing references to the phallus with the composite "penis-phallus," all the while acknowledging the problems this gives rise to. See, Heath, "Difference," pp. 55, 66, 83, 91.

painting was defiantly reinterpreted as horizontal. This was true of Andy Warhol's *Oxidation* paintings, through which Warhol read Pollock's dripped pictures as the work of a urinary trace (as though made by a man standing over a supine field and peeing), thus insisting on the way Pollock's canvases are permanently marked by the horizontality of their making. It was also true of Robert Morris's felts and scatter pieces, through which Morris reinterpreted Pollock's enterprise as "anti-form," by which he meant its condition of having yielded to gravity in assuming the axis of the horizontal. It can also be said that it was true of Ed Ruscha's *Liquid Word* pictures, with their reading of the significance of the drip technique as opening onto the dimension of entropy and "base materialism."³⁶

If this sequence is invoked here it is to give one a sense of the connotations of the /horizontal/ within the field of the avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s as certain artists opposed the /vertical/, within which is inscribed all forms of sublimation, whether that be of *the beautiful* or of *the fetish*. It is to see the work already in place on the pictorial signifier once it operates in terms of the failure to resist the pull of gravity, of the pivoting out of the axis of form.

In the "horizontals" Sherman's work is joined to this tradition. That de-sublimation is part of what she is encoding by means of the /horizontal/ will become unmistakably clear by the end of the 1980s with what are sometimes politely referred to as

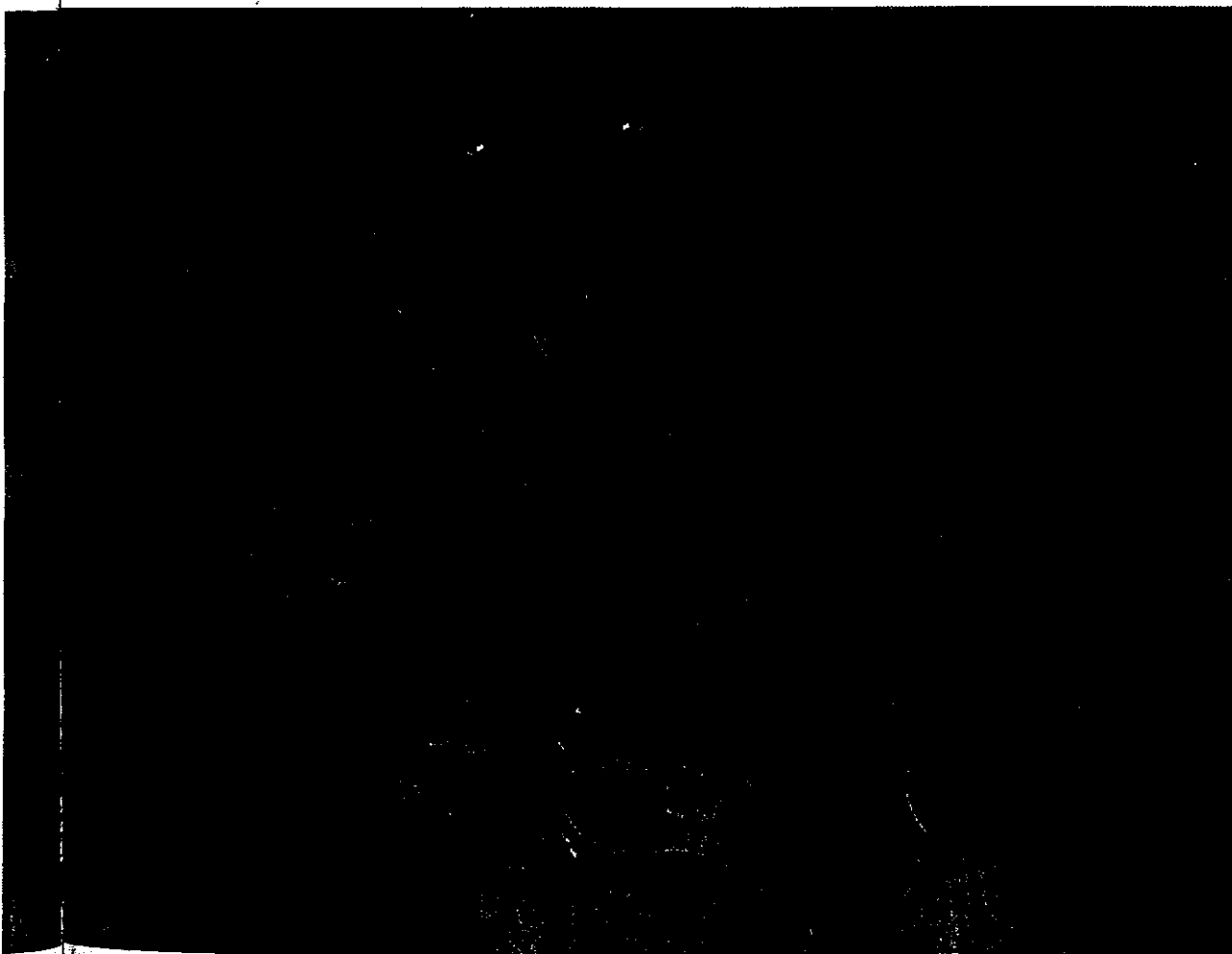




Untitled, #91, 1981

the "bulimia" pictures, images in which the horizontal plane occupied by the point of view is forcibly associated with vomit, mold, and all forms of the excremental—"base materialism," indeed. But in these works of 1981 it is already clear that the view downward is desublimatory. In *Untitled, #92* (page 88), the narrative operated by this signifier is not that of "vulnerability" via a pose that is "soft and limp," but rather of animality, the body clenched in a kind of sub-human fixation. And in *Untitled, #91*, the network of cast shadows that grids the body and face of the woman projects over the image a sense of decay and of death. It is as though something were working against the forces of form and of life, attacking them, dissolving them, disseminating them into the field of the horizontal.

The theory of the "Male Gaze," even as it moves from an analysis of the operations of the representational field—movies, paintings—to generalizations about the structure of human consciousness, has had to blind itself to its own fetishization of the vertical. Which is to say that it has had to blind itself to anything outside the vertical register of the image/form.³⁷ It is because of this that the theorists of the Gaze repeat, at the level of analysis, the very fixity they are describing as operating the Male Gaze at the level of its social effects. And the symptom of this repetition is the constant submission to the meaning-effect the system generates, a submission to be found, for example, in Mulvey's steady consumption of Sherman's work as myth.



3. *Gleams and Reflections*

IN SHORT, THE POINT OF GAZE ALWAYS PARTICIPATES IN THE AMBIGUITY OF THE JEWEL.³⁸

Jacques Lacan

In the view of its theorists, the Male Gaze can do its work of continually putting the fetish/form in place even in the absence of any identifiable image. Victor Burgin, for example, argues that the effect of the gestalt's delineation and boundary can be generated by the very surfaces of media artifacts, such as the glossiness of the photographic print, with its high resolution and its glazed finish.

And Mulvey follows Burgin in this argument. For even while she reads the "horizontal" in terms of "the 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of femininity," she also admits that there is a contradiction between the limpness she sees in Sherman's poses—"polar opposites of a popular idea of fetishized femininity (high-heeled and corseted erect, flamboyant and exhibitionist)"—as well as the limpness of the image—"Sherman's use of color and of light and shade merges the female figure and her surroundings into a continuum, without hard edges"—and the sharp definition characteristic of the fetish. But fetishism, she argues, "returns in the formal qualities of the photography. The sense of surface now resides, not in the female figure's attempt to save her face in a masquerade of femininity, but in the model's subordination to, and imbrication with, the texture of the photographic medium itself."³⁹

This texture, "in keeping," as Mulvey writes, "with the codes and conventions of commercial photography," is glossiness, the product of a kind of reflective veneer. It is this shiny surface that Burgin had related to the fetishized *glanz*, or gleam, that Freud had described in his essay outlining the unconscious mechanics of the construction of the fetish.⁴⁰

Now while it is true that shininess functions as a certain kind of support for media images—and not just those of photography but even more insistently of backlit advertising panels and film and television screens—it is also true that Sherman performs specific work on this phenomenon. Just as she had taken a horizontal format—borrowed both from centerfold photographs and from cinemascope screens—and worked on it to produce a signifier that (in opposition to the meaning of the /vertical/) would cut out a specific signified—the /horizontal-as-lowness, -as-baseness/—so, here as well, the gleam is submitted to her sustained investigation.

One of the last of the "horizontal," Untitled, # 95, had announced this attention to the gleam. It is of a woman sitting upright on a bed (and thus no longer aligned with the horizontal axis of the format), caught in a strong glow of backlighting, so that her hair, now reconfigured as an intensely luminous nimbus, displaces the focus away from her face. As Sherman's work advanced into the 1980s she repeated this kind of

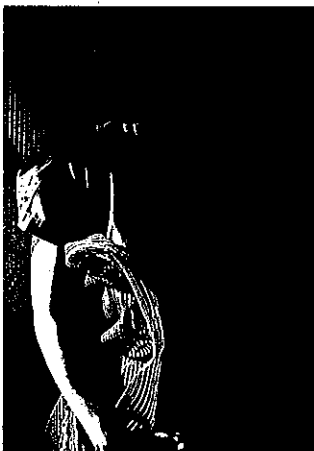


Untitled, #95, 1981

38. Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 96.

39. Mulvey, "Phantasmagoria," p. 143.

40. Victor Burgin, "Photography, Fantasy, Function," in *Thinking Photography* (London: MacMillan, 1982), pp. 189-190.



Untitled, #139, 1984; #110, 1982; and #149, 1985

41. In two instances of the publication of this work, different "interpretations" of its meaning are registered by means of the different ways the image has been printed. In *Cindy Sherman* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1982) the work's darkness and obscurity is respected; whereas in the Whitney Museum's catalogue for Sherman's retrospective the image has been more lightly exposed to force its values upward and thus to reduce its uncanny effect.

42. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 94.

backlighting, forcing a glow to emerge from the ground of the image, to advance toward the viewer, and thus to disrupt conditions of viewing, producing the figure herself as a kind of blindspot. We find it again, for example, in *Untitled*, #139, of 1984.

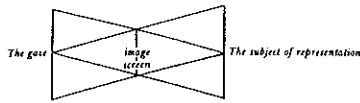
Although backlighting is a very direct signifier for this sense of a diffracted and dispersed visual field, it is not the only means to produce it. Indeed it could be said that a certain effect of "wild light," the scattering of gleams around the otherwise darkened image as though refracting it through the facets of an elaborate jewel, will also create this corrosive visual dispersal. An early example of such wild light immediately followed the last of the "horizontals," in *Untitled*, #110, of 1982, where Sherman concentrated on creating a sense of the completely aleatory quality of the illumination. For while the lighting plunges three-quarters of the field into total blackness, it picks out the arm and draped edge of the figure's garment to create a glowing, knotted complex of near unintelligibility.

Another instance of wild light is *Untitled*, #149, where head and upper torso, given in enormous close-up, are plunged into a darkness only violated by the backlit fragments of a bit of hair and one shoulder, and—building the eerie significance of the work—the reflected gleam of a pupil that emerges from the obscurity of the rest of the face like an utterly opaque, black marble.⁴¹ This contrast between the opacity of the figure's look and the quality of light beaming out at the viewer from dispersed parts of the rest of the image, sets up a condition that can be generalized to other parts of this series (which I am calling "gleams and reflections"). It is a condition that I would like, now in my own turn, to use the work of Lacan to illuminate; although unlike the theory of the Male Gaze, this condition of the uncanny gaze, which Lacan qualifies as "the gaze as *objet à*," works against the effects of sublimation.

In setting up the model of this gaze as *objet à*, Lacan specifically contrasts it with the ego-model, itself linked to the vantage point of the perspective diagram, through which the "it's me!" of the subject, escaping from the dispersed condition of the Symbolic (the chain of signifiers) into the unified gestalt of the Imaginary, projects itself as whole. This projection is used in the Male Gaze theory to link the institution of the fetish to the very conditions of vision, understood as mapped by perspective's optical pyramid.

In his four lectures devoted to the question of the gaze, Lacan, however, is intent on restricting this optico-visual model, which he terms "geometral," to the realm of an idealized, abstracted, Cartesian conception of space. In the place of this spatial conception, he wishes to set a more fundamental condition of visibility, namely, that of light. Contrasting this luminous surround to the model of linear perspective, he says that we encounter the visual "not in the straight line, but in the point of light—the point of irradiation, the play of light, fire, the source from which reflections pour forth."⁴²

Such an irradiation beaming at the subject from everywhere in space, bathing and surrounding him or her, cannot, then, be assimilated to the mirror image in which a gaze looks back at the subject in an imitation of the single point from which the subject sees himself seeing. Instead, to depict this luminous gaze, which makes of the subject a *speculum mundi*, Lacan turns to the model of animal mimicry, which his old friend Roger Caillois had described back in the 1930s as the effect of space at large on a subject(-insect) who,



The visual cone. From B. Taylor, *New Principles of Linear Perspective* (London, 1715).

Diagram from Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1977).

43. See Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *October*, no. 31 (Winter 1984).

44. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 99.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 99. Joan Copjec's essay, "The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan," is an extremely important analysis of the distinction between film theory's "male gaze" and Lacan's "gaze as objet à." Her understanding of this point in Lacan's argument diverges from mine, however, since she interprets the "itself" not as the subjectivity of the mimetic entity but as a kind of in-itself that might lie behind the picture and which Lacan is, of course, refusing. But Lacan's use of *lui-même* rather than, for example, *en-soi*, makes her reading rather difficult. See, Joan Copjec, "The Orthopsychic Subject," *October*, no. 49 (Summer 1989), pp. 69–70.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

48. That this function of the unlocatable gaze already conditions the subject's visual dimension in the same pattern of splitting, with the Imaginary already pre-figuring the Symbolic, is articulated as: "Here too, we should not be too hasty in introducing some kind of intersubjectivity. Whenever we are dealing with initiation, we should be very careful not to think too quickly of the other who is being imitated. To imitate is no doubt to reproduce an image. But at bottom, it is, for the subject, to be inserted in a function whose exercise grasps it" (p. 100). Jacqueline Rose addresses this visual, Imaginary pre-figuration of the symbolic, stressing its beginning in the rivalrous, aggressive aspects of Lacan's description of the Mirror Stage; see, Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 181–182, 188, 192–194.

yielding to the force of this space's generalized gaze, loses its own organic boundaries and merges with its surrounds in an almost psychotic act of imitation.⁴³ Making itself into a kind of shapeless camouflage, this mimetic subject now becomes a part of the "picture" of space in general: "It becomes a stain, it becomes a picture, it is inscribed in the picture," Lacan insists.⁴⁴ But if Caillois had been describing animal behavior, Lacan elaborates this effect for the human subject as well. Telling an anecdote about himself being caught in an indefinable beam of light reflected off a sardine can, Lacan draws the conclusion:

I am taking the structure at the level of the subject here, and it reflects something that is already to be found in the natural relation that the eye inscribes with regard to light. I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped. No doubt, in the depths of my eye, the picture is painted. The picture, certainly, in my eye. But I, I am in the picture.⁴⁵

The sliding back and forth between Caillois's insect and Lacan's "I" in this discussion of mimicry is important to what Lacan wants to get at by this notion of Gaze. For Caillois had insisted that the insect cannot be shown to assume its camouflage for purposes of adaptation—and thus what could be seen as coming from an intentional, subjective ground (no matter how instinctual or unconscious)—but simply as matter flowing into other matter, a mere body yielding to the call of space. Lacan joins this same position when he says, "Mimicry reveals something insofar as it is distinct from what might be called an *itself* that is behind," which is to say, distinct from a subjective ground of the subject.⁴⁶ Rather, we pass into the "picture" as mere "stain," which is to say as physical matter, as body. And here Lacan also refers to Merleau-Ponty's position in *The Phenomenology of Perception* that our relation to space, insofar as it makes us the target of a gaze constituted by the free-floating luminosity that surrounds us—a light that catches us in its beam from behind our backs as well as from in front of our faces—founds our perception not in the transparency of a conceptual grasp of space (as in the "geometral") but in the thickness and density of the body that simply intercepts the light.⁴⁷

It is in this sense that to be "in the picture" is not to feel interpolated by society's *meaning*—"It's me!"—is not to feel, that is, whole; it is to feel dispersed, subject to a picture organized not by form but by formlessness. The desire awakened by the impossibility of occupying all those multiple points of the luminous projection of the gaze is a desire that founds the subject in the realization of a point of view that is withheld, one(s) that he or she cannot occupy. And it is the very fragmentation of that "point" of view that prevents this invisible, unlocatable gaze from being the site of coherence, meaning, unity, gestalt, eidos. Desire is thus not mapped here as the desire for form, and thus for sublimation (the vertical, the gestalt, the law); desire is modeled in terms of a transgression against form. It is the force invested in desublimation.⁴⁸

Nowhere is the notion of having become "the picture" more searingly evoked than in Sherman's *Untitled, # 167*, where the camouflage-effect is in full flower. The figure, now absorbed and dispersed within the background, can be picked out only by a few remnants still barely visible in the mottled surface of the darkened detritus that



Untitled, #167, 1986; #168, 1987; and #176, 1987

fills the image. We make out the tip of a nose, the emergence of a finger with painted nail, the detached grimace of a set of teeth. Horizontalized, the view downward mapped by the image puts the signifier of the dissolution of the gestalt in place. But as it reaches the bottom edge of the image, the spectator's view encounters a gaze that projects toward it from within this matrix of near-invisibility. Reflected in the tiny mirror of a discarded compact, this gaze cannot be identified with any source in the image. Instead it seems to join all the other gleams and reflected points of light in the image to constellate the signifier for the /unlocatable/, and thus for the transgression of the gestalt.

Throughout the late 1980s Sherman continued to figure this field of the unlocatable gaze by means of her "gleams and reflections." And now the bouncing light of these opaquely slippery, arborescent signifiers is more consistently married to the /horizontal/, both combining in a drive towards the desublimation of the image. In *Untitled*, #168, a glowing but imageless television screen joins the repertory of gleams. In *Untitled*, #176, the refractive surface of water sparkling upward to meet the downwardly focused view of the spectator projects the multiple points of light with all the ambiguity of the jewel that produces not the beautiful of sublimation but the formless pulsation of desire.

