THE CITY GIRL: APPEARING IN THE MODERN SCENE

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During the early changes being made to the cinema in the 1920s, the Russian film experimenter and theorist of montage, Lev Kuleshov, made an observation germane to this article. He spoke of the possibility of using these new visual technologies, particularly the technique of montage, to edit into being ‘a new geography, a new place of action’, adding:

What I think was more interesting was the creation of a woman who had never existed—I shot a scene of a woman at her toilette: she did her hair, made up, put on her stockings and shoes and dress—I filmed the face, the head, the hair, the legs, the feet of different women, but I edited them as if it was all one woman, and thanks to my montage, I succeeded in creating a woman who did not exist in reality but only in cinema.¹

In 1925, the Australian screen star Lotus Thompson went to Hollywood to pursue a film career, not unlike many young ‘screen struck’ hopefuls. Using precisely the technique of montage that Kuleshov had eulogised for its creative potential, her legs were filmed and attributed to other actresses. In a poignant and desperate protest against her perceived treatment within these new conditions of women’s public visibility, Thompson poured corrosive acid over her legs.² If Kuleshov had succeeded in compiling an illusory new woman who ‘did not exist’, Thompson’s response to being made spectacle, or to her spectacularisation within these new visual technologies and techniques, suggested that being the image gave her something of a different ‘take’ on his new woman. In withdrawing her fragmented limbs from similar editing techniques, she drew attention to the relation between visibility, feminine subjectivity and her experience of herself as image. At the very least, she reminded viewers that the process of spectacularisation within the modern scene was not one where one’s image could be cast off like a shed skin, separate and incidental to one’s subjectivity. Rather, becoming a spectacle was deeply implicated in the parameters of modern subjectivity—of cultural presence, of public visibility, of participation in the circulation and exchange of looks in the urbanised and commodified modern scene.

It seems Kuleshov did indeed edit into being a ‘new geography’, specifically of the feminine body, as a new ‘place of action’ in the modern visual field. His spatial metaphor aptly describes a relocation of feminine identity within an altered social field—the modern visual scene—for it was as visual, or spectacularised, that women could appear as modern to themselves and others. Through what I will term techniques of appearing—the manner and means of execution of one’s visual effects and status—women’s own bodies became a place
of action in modern visual culture. Kuleshov created the image of a ‘new woman’, and insofar as his woman was created from images, she would coincide in important ways with representations of the New Woman as a type of the modern feminine.

The New Woman was contemporaneous with a number of feminine types constituted within the visually intensified field of modernity. These types emerged through the visual field of modernity as specifications of feminine identity, as it was being visually constituted. They produced new locations of identity through their descriptive opportunities for the modern feminine. In the ‘low’ cultural forms of the 1920s, these feminine types were labelled the City Girl, Screen Star, Beauty Contestant and Flapper, and each was implicated in (and potentially implicated other women in) the conditions of the modern perceptual field. But, in its discussion of the City Girl, this article will attempt an approach that conceptualises the spectacularisation of women as more than their objectification, with its association with the loss of self-determination. It will posit an alternative term—‘appearing’—to investigate the impact of representations of women on the production of a new modern feminine subjectivity, ‘the appearing woman’. Further, it will argue that the modern, as an altered visual scene replete with spectacles, modified the category ‘woman’ in ways that invite an analysis of the relation between feminine visibility and the production of a new feminine subject position—the modern appearing woman.

**Appearing to be Feminine**

During early twentieth-century modernity, feminine visibility extends from the entrance of women into public space—particularly that of the metropolis—to their iconisation through the popularisation of cinema and within the conventions of display in commodity culture. This modern scene effectively provided new conditions for the feminine subject. To appear within it was to literally make a spectacle of oneself, to configure oneself as spectacle, to apprehend oneself and be apprehended as image. Types of the Modern Woman which emerged at this time—such as the Screen Star, Beauty Contestant and Flapper—were manifestly, though not solely, constructed around their visibility. The Modern Woman was spectacularised, and arguably, for women to identify themselves as modern, the performance of their gendered identity had to take place within the modern spectacularisation of everyday life. I intend to develop the term ‘appearing’ to argue that the changed conditions of feminine visibility in modernity necessitated or invited a practice of the self which was centred around one’s visual status and effects. The emergence of a new feminine subjectivity within the changed conditions of feminine visibility in modernity inaugurated the appearing woman.

As an altered visual field, modernity interpellated gendered subjects into its representations through their self-representations. There are three aspects of this process. The first is the conditions of women’s visibility, or the perceptual field in which modern women appeared. This includes the newly emerging metropolis; visual technologies such as popular cinema, professional and domestic photography and print media; and commodity culture with its proliferating strategies of display.
The second aspect of the process is the expanding range of representations of women that were produced within these visual conditions. Women were represented as local favourites within the silent productions of the nascent and already struggling Australian film industry. They were cast as Screen Stars within the flood of block-booked American silent productions, already homogenising within the incipient Hollywood studio system. They began to appear as pin-up girls on postcards, posters and calendars. Indeed, the Australian swimmer and health advocate Annette Kellerman is credited with being the first pin-up girl.\(^3\) They were represented as vaudeville and stage stars, and decorative motifs on popular sheet music covers. Women were represented as product advocates and appeared as *mannequin vivants*, replica mannequins and visual designs in advertising hoardings and print images. They were photographed in studio portraits and household ‘snaps’, and they appeared in the increasingly ‘illustrated’ print media in countless guises, from motoring pioneers to Rexona-Girls. Types of the New Woman were targets of humour in thousands of black and white drawings and cartoons.

The third, most significant aspect, is the potential impact of these representations on the relation of feminine visibility to feminine subjectivity—or what I have termed ‘appearing’. Understanding this impact requires posing a series of simple questions. What do representations of women say about what it meant to be visible for women? What did it mean for women to appear as spectacles? Did appearing as such necessarily discount a woman’s status as subject through positioning her as object? The modern is a spectacular age, and the significatory scene of the twentieth-century West is one which privileges the visual. Through a discursive web that includes commodity fetishism, the mechanical reproduction of images, illusion and visual scandal, the modern feminine has been spectacularised. What are the consequences of this visual privileging in the production of feminine subject positions? Appearing is a mode of gendered performativity,\(^4\) but a particularly visual practice within the significatory ‘scene’ of modernity.\(^7\) ‘Appearing’ can be used to assess the visual as a critical element in the production of subjects, through historically contingent significatory systems.

**The Modern Scene**

Analyses in social theory and cultural histories of modernity have prompted claims that the modern is ‘specular’ or ‘ocularcentric’.\(^8\) Modernity is thought to have a spectacular logic—not purely because of the proliferation and reproduction of images, its ‘promiscuous range of effects’ or the rationalisation, or fordism of its gaze, but because its visual field inaugurated a new ontology of observing and, I would add, of appearing.\(^9\)

People’s world-view and everyday encounters were dramatically altered through the advent of mass-communication technologies and modernity’s spectacularisation of daily life. Developments in architecture and transport wrought new vantages from which to see.\(^10\) Modernity ‘oversaw’ the industrialisation of the reproduced image, through the commercial availability of mass-produced Kodak cameras in 1888, along with pre-packaged film one year
later, the production of the picture postcard and the reproduction of photographs in print media through the invention of the half-tone block. Miriam Hansen notes 'the term "spectator" implied a shift from a collective plural notion of the film viewer to a singular, unified but potentially universal category, the commodity form of reception'. Commodity culture itself was prolific in modernity's 'frenzy of the visible'.

These accounts focus on the viewing positions of modernity and techniques of observation as being crucial to the modern subject. They are important in 'setting the scene' for the conditions of modern feminine visibility. But it is appearing, that is, 'becoming' image, and being looked at rather than only looking, that remains barely theorised in writing about women in the modern scene. The identification of self-as-image was central to 'the value of the modern' for women.

For many modern commentators, the value women placed on their public visibility was indeterminate in meaning and, in many respects, threatening. The public appearance of women within the metropolis and through visual technologies required evaluation for its impact on heterosexual rites and gender relations. As the visibility of women proliferated through their public presence and in reproduced imagery, its meaning needed to be ordered, classified and subjected to the regulatory discourses that were increasingly intruding into women's lives. The visibility of women became subject to the logic of typing, which was itself a response to the anonymous metropolitan crowd and the fleeting, transient gaze that oversaw its every movement.

Walter Benjamin has written of the mobile and distracted gaze induced by the spectacularised modern city in terms of flânerie. Movement through the city via public transportation meant that people were now in a position of 'having to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without having to speak to each other'. This deflected contemplation, which threatened the new conventions of anonymity, was not 'pleasant'. It was the reason that 'interpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the activity of the ear'. Such a visual predominance lent further credence to the necessity or desire to rely on an ocular taxonomy of women as types in such proximitous spaces, in order to construct the significance of their presence, movement and visual style. The elevated eye and its need to grasp the crowd's significance, sometimes at a passing glance, sometimes in prolonged and averted proximity, led to the emergence of a new observer, 'The Flâneur'. This type belonged to the emerging literary genre of physiologies of urban types, some seventy-six extant in France by 1841.

In Martha Banta's immense study of images of turn-of-the-century American women, she finds a new investment in images of women, in that 'favoured types' assuming 'national values were female in form'. This cultural typifying was so prevalent, in Banta's findings, that it 'systematically transformed the American female into a set of powerful iconographic signs'. The New Woman and Modern Girl gained particular prominence within this scene. They emerged within a visually replete urban landscape which altered the nature of the
modern public sphere. But how might the placement of women as spectacle have impacted on what it meant for women to become visible in the modern scene? The process of self-spectacularisation enabled the entrance of women into new categories of the feminine as they were being imaged through modernity’s representational systems. As such, these images undertook their cultural work from two key sites: the aestheticised feminine caught under the spectacular logic of commodity fetishism, but also the presentation of self within representational systems—the consumption and production of the self as image.21

Representations of women circulate meanings about what it is to be visual, what it is for women to ‘appear’. This begs the question: how did such representations impact on women’s encounter with, and participation in, the modern? The analysis of representations of the feminine, and the meanings they constructed of feminine visibility, can elucidate their involvement in the emergence of types of the Modern Woman, and the significance of the practice of appearing within the definition of these types. Below, I turn to one type—the City Girl—and examine the meanings constructed around her public visibility. The desire of young women to appear, and the intervention of their behaviour into ideas of the modern, was written through these representations. Together, they demonstrate the extent to which the public visibility of the Modern Girl or New Woman was both inscriptive of her modernity, and constitutive of her specification into diversifying types.

The City Girl
The entrance of women into the industrialised workforce and their movement into the growing metropolitan centres played a significant role in the construction of the Modern Woman as a metropolitan presence and the emergence of urban types such as the City Girl, Office Girl, Business Girl and Factory Girl. The City Girl illustrates the cultural intersections forged between ideas of the metropolis, the entrance of women into public, masculinised space and altered perceptual relations on the street. The meanings that accrued to feminine visibility on its pavements and in its offices were often filtered through notions of the urban spectacle, such as the commodity object, and then displaced onto constructions of urban feminine types. The type of the City Girl was discursively negotiated alongside older feminine street presences, such as the whore, and this association was played out in changing perceptions of commodity exchange, traffic, movement, contemplation and visual distraction.

The freeing-up of women into metropolitan space was instrumental in representations of popular feminine types who were perfectly happy not to be at home in the home, relished being part of the urban traffic, and the ambiguities this created around their sexuality. These types of the Modern Woman were represented as marked by a desire to enter into modernity’s urban perceptual field as more than spectators—they wanted to be part of the scene as spectacles.22 Their pleasure in the city was in attracting attention, in appearing before an anonymous and fleeting gaze. The pavements and offices were a theatre to these types of the City Girl, where she distracted, displaced and visually over-powered men, and this was
Plate 1: ‘How she got the Notion to Shorten her Skirts’, Aussie (15 May 1929): 35.
represented as being her specific means of partaking in the adventure of the city, the adventure of heterosexual attraction, anonymous display and urban style.

Through their partaking in and their confusion with street traffic, city types upset notions of appropriate heterosexual economy (that is, the appropriate places to attract a prospective husband). The territory of the street was undergoing a spatial upheaval wherein public and private experience were being resituated and redefined. Physical proximity, romance, pleasure and captivation were all privatised experiences available to the individual alone within the crowd. In popular culture, the City Girl represented a response to the partial collapse of the dichotomy between masculinised and desexualised productivity, and the highly sexualised and feminised pursuits of mass entertainment, with its associations with the constant reproducibility of images and commodities. It was a separation between production and reproduction which seemed to rely on a recognisable and culturally-shared taxonomy of women on the street, who merely by their presence on the pavements, coupled with their modern visual style, befuddled men who did not know how to assess them visually and therefore morally [Plate. 2]. For some, merely the presence of women on city streets was confusing enough. Writing of the unprecedented attention given to young women in the street, one American commentator said ‘people still are amazed by seeing women anywhere except in the time-honoured places’. Percy Puller was fined two pounds in 1922, when he mistook a Melbourne shop girl for a street prostitute while she was walking towards the Cooee cafe on Swanston Street to have her tea break. When he whistled at her, she turned and invoked the conventions of crowd anonymity by saying, ‘how dare you whistle at me. I don’t know you’. Puller must have thought his appraisal of the girl was more accurate than her own, because he persisted in offering her money, which she refused. Truth newspaper described Puller as a ‘Street Pest’. In its view, ‘a respectable young girl is molested and insulted in a main street in broad daylight’. But the fact that the mistaken shop girl was identified as ‘a young girl with hair down her back’ and not typed as a bob-haired Flapper was instrumental to Truth’s sympathetic account.

Truth was more in character when it feigned moral offence in order to voyeurise a ‘smart young Yankee tourist’ who appeared on Melbourne’s Bourke Street. The story reported that a ‘bare-legged belle ... paraded the streets in an extra short skirt, and with her stockings rolled down below the knees’. When questioned by a constable, she was said to have exclaimed indignantly: "Why, in New York City everyone is wearing bare knees. It is fashionable to have them rouged and tattooed". This perhaps extrapolated version—which has the young woman then take out a powder puff to demonstrate to the gathering crowd—is accompanied by comic sketches detailing the vagaries of powdered knees. While the constable moved the above onlookers ‘hastily’ along, depriving the young woman of the audience she seemed to wantonly solicit, Truth readers were invited through the comic sketches into a more prurient scopic encounter. The images of anonymous women on the street in popular journalism created the social distance needed between girl and onlooker for
more prolonged voyeuristic fascination. But in face-to-face encounters on the street, such scopic interactions were regulated by systems of spatial control—in this instance, the policeman guiding the crowd on, keeping the city ‘moving’ and the gaze mobile and fleeting, rather than proximate and disruptive.

The appropriate spaces for feminine display and a prolonged reciprocating male gaze were carefully set out in this cartoon appearing in *Aussie* magazine in 1928 [Plate. 3]. On the street, such display outraged the women and left the surrounding men limp shouldered and helplessly agog. Again, it took a policeman to keep his wits about him, and his cap rim pulled firmly over his eyes, to break up the scene and keep people, and their relations of looking, moving on.

During this period, *Truth* newspaper—which was particularly engaged in the struggle to define modern feminine types—made a regular feature of tales of ‘skirted footpath philanderers’, ‘Precocious Pavement Perts’, ‘Giddy Girleens Who Take to the Town’ and ‘flighty flappers on parade’.27 Indeed, the newspaper argued that ‘these semi-nude hot natured little sirens who roam the city thoroughfare at all hours of the day and night’, these ‘street strolling strumpets’ are ‘mantraps’ and should be ‘severely smacked with a good sized leather strap and sent off home’.:28 *Truth* was stretching colloquialism to its limits in an effort to place and type the urban woman. It wrote that ‘the skirted footpath philanderer is more difficult to classify’ than men loiterers or ‘greasy gutter-guns and fag-sucking "sports"’.29 Whereas the ‘vacuous-minded, if worthy matron’ was classed as ‘a necessary nuisance’, holding up pedestrians while captivated by the commodity spectacle, a certain ‘type of flapper’ draws a more direct relation between street presence and moral transgression. For her:

contact with the opposite sex—even chance contact—affords a pleasure. It is flappers of this type who form obstructive groups on the footpaths of crowded thoroughfares, and who persistently defy the "keep to the right" injunction. Sex hunger, subconscious perhaps, but a yearning, nevertheless, for the vicarious satisfaction afforded by the bumping and squeezing of passing males.30

As *Truth* drew on a salient cultural repertoire of promiscuity, danger and contagion in the city, it instated the City Girl as an icon, or as representative of metropolitan modernity. New ways to represent feminine sexuality worked in with an association between the city and the feminine. Through the street presence of the City Girl, sex was seeping like a vapour from under the privatised doors of domesticity. It invaded and colonised public space like a contagion, through the dangerous new proximity of the sexes in the city. ‘Coupled’ with this sexual overextension or omnipresence were gains in popular knowledge of women’s potential for sexual pleasure, through the work of sexologists such as Havelock Ellis31 and more, their claims to the right for sexual pleasure, through Marie Stopes’ *Married Love*.32 The British sexologist, Bernhard A. Bauer MD, wrote of young women becoming overwhelmed by what he called ‘the concretive impulse’ wherein previously sexually neutral

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Plate. 3: 'And Yet if This Happened — !!!', Aussie (15 February 1928): 14.
parts of the body acquire sexual sensibility, and erotogenic zones ‘awaken’ a woman’s ‘voluptuous feeling’. Again, the accidental gender proximity of public space is the *mise-en-scène* for this new sexual potential of women:

Whereas, previously, a girl or woman noticed nothing remarkable when shaking a man’s hand, or in any other intentional or unintentional contact between her body and a man’s, now such contact causes quite a disturbance in the woman, send the blood to her head, flush her cheeks, and for the first time produce something like a tumult of the senses [sic].

The involuntary responses of the irrational feminine body set in motion a chain of involuntary responses on the street, libidinally destabilising an increasing reliance on crowd disengagement and indifference to counter this gendered proximity. Representations of the City Girl’s petting antics with ‘roving young men in automobiles’, in darkened picture palaces, on campuses and in the offices of bosses, feminised public space through its sexualisation. Here, and in *Truth*’s account, we are witness to the ‘intended’ sexual contact that is deliberately sought by young urban women rather than accidentally generated. If the street spatially ordered a kind of disengaged flow for men, types of the City Girl derailed this purposive and impersonal conduit and reinstated the intimate proximity of contemplation. She was the disordering and distracting spectacle that lured men from their preordained destination, not unlike the whore or commodity object. Her flagrant disregard for the channels of male productivity was posited as a corporeal contamination, a conflation of her body with the street itself. The City Girl bodily forced innocent passing men into fleshy frottage and unintended tactile encounter. *Beckett’s Budget* reported on the trial of three young women in 1928, whose behaviour of raising their skirts and giggling to passing men literally caused several men ‘to step off the pavement in order to pass by’. The Sergeant (who admitted that he had to take up a strategic position to watch the girls) reported to the court that ‘it was impossible for a man to pass without being accosted’. The ‘Pavement Nymph’ seemed to provocatively lap at men until finally, in frightening proportions of anonymous, massified feminine flesh she ‘floods’ the streets:

Each morning, like a mighty iridescent river, there flows into the city a huge volume of gaily dressed, sparkling young womanhood, on the way to office and shop, careless of everything else but what the day will bring forth in the way of amusement. A big percentage of the women have no need to work and devote the money earned to dress and pleasure. Many are totally ignorant of the rudiments of housekeeping and could not be trusted to boil an egg.

The urban woman was identified with the commodity through her placement in traffic as distracting, through her modes of economised visual exchange, and through her signifying the mobile spectacle. She stood in the middle of the street, holding up and being the traffic, causing the accidents of desire.
THE DANGER ZONE

A Visitor’s Impression of Melbourne

The City Girl's intended and self-conscious practices of appearing were constructed as integral to the realisation of young women of their modern identity. Mobility, sexual agency, consumer power, but particularly visual street presence placed them as part of the modern landscape. Through popular representations of feminine visibility in the metropolis, to appear within this landscape was constructed as the action of a modern feminine subject.

The emergence of the City Girl as a type of the modern woman is commensurate with Felski's argument where accounts of the modern 'achieve some kind of formal coherence by dramatising and personifying historical processes; individual or collective human subjects are endowed with symbolic importance as exemplary bearers of temporal meaning'. Types of the spectacularised Modern Woman show a new engagement between women and cultural forms. 'Appearing' can be a helpful way of historically imagining the ways that women not only lived within the modern visual taxonomy, but perceived themselves as images within their culture's perceptual horizon and came to occupy the images offered to them within the modern scene. The relationship between women's subjectivity and cultural forms has attracted immense interest over recent years in cultural studies, film theory and film history, particularly in terms of women's spectatorship. The meanings that accrued to the visibility of women in terms of increased numbers of women entering the space of modernity's public sphere and becoming spectacles—that is, objects—within its panorama, provides another avenue of inquiry. Appearing provides an opportunity to read images of women in ways that interpret the meanings of visibility being constructed, and the cultural spaces that images invited women to occupy. Such imagery is implicated in the processes of subjectivity. However, practices of appearing were invested by power with the potential to assign cultural inclusion or exclusion through visibility and invisibility.

Developing a theory of the practice of appearing is important in the quest to understand the relationship between visibility and subjectivity, and the complex interplay of power into cultural forms. Rather than visibility being consigned to a secondary status in the arrangement of subjectivity around psyche, sexuality, corporeality and ideology, or to an enactment of a construction already in place, instead the mutability of that construction of subjectivity—its being in process—is effected in part through self-representation. In the modern teleology of the subject, the 'field of vision' becomes foundational.

The modern is, to some degree, dependent for its own meaning on its images of women, as well as being their condition of possibility. By contemplating its visions of women as part of women's self-perception as modern, we can imagine how gendered representations became embodied. The modern appearing woman was not distinct from modernity's symbolic systems, but was textually inscribed within its panorama; as in this black and white drawing from the Green Room Pictorial [Plate 6]. She was emblematic of the pictorial life of the Australian modern scene. The picture formed part of her, and she formed part of the picture of modernity. Of the many and diverse meanings that did accrue to feminine
visibility—including artificiality, heterosexual appeal, celebrity, commodity display, metropolitan presence, fashion, whiteness, youth and scandal, there is one overriding significance of the new cultural visibility of women: that of the modern.


2 Thompson was a comedienne who began working in plays for Fuller’s circuit and later joined J.C. Williamson’s theatre company before debuting in Australian film in 1921. She had been appearing in American films for two years when she garnered enormous publicity through the acid incident. In her history of Australian women in cinema, Andree Wright writes of this event occurring in 1926. However, Everyones, a magazine directed at Australian film distributors, reports that they received cables of the news in the first week of February 1925. See Andree Wright, Brilliant Careers: Women in Australian Cinema (Sydney: Pan Books, 1986), 18 and Everyonês: Incorporating Australian Variety and Show World, 11 February 1925, 16. (Note: Everyonês passed through a number of incorporations with other journals as well as variations in name during the period researched.)

3 An unadmitted prerequisite for entry into the type, the New or Modern Woman, was being white. In other research related to the work this article is drawn from, the construction of Australian Aboriginal women as primitive was effected through their failure to appear modern.

4 Within this article I will use the term ‘feminine visibility’ to refer to the entire range of women’s capacity to be seen and cultural presence: from self-apprehension in a mirror; to being seen in public space; to becoming an image through the mechanical reproduction of modern visual technologies such as the camera. I will use the term ‘visible’ to refer to the capacity of being seen, including self-apprehension; whereas I will use ‘spectacle’ to refer more specifically to being exhibited and exhibiting oneself to a public gaze, including through mechanically reproduced imagery to being seen in public space.

5 Kellerman was the first Australian to play the lead in an American film, yet her fame accrued from diverse sources. She was a physical culture pioneer, an international swimming champion and a vaudeville artist. When arrested by Boston police for wearing a one-piece bathing suit, she was seen as a women’s rights advocate for her belief in dress liberation. Her film stunts included diving eighteen metres into a pool with five crocodiles, diving from the wing of an aeroplane, and many ‘scandalous’ nude scenes. Interestingly, while insurers refused to insure her life, she instead insured her ‘shape’ for £250,000. She was also popularly remembered as ‘the first pin-up girl’. See Wright, 20.

6 The term ‘appearing’ has its precedent in the work of feminist theorist Judith Butler. ‘Masquerade’ and ‘appearing’ are instrumental designations in Butler’s influential theory of gendered performativity. Butler is committed to a theory of subject formation that posits sex as ‘a cultural norm which governs the materialisation of bodies’, i.e. the subject becomes culturally intelligible through the assumption of
a sexed body. Within her work, the subject is formed ‘by virtue of having gone through such a process of assuming a sex’. Butler’s subject is thus embedded in significatory systems, or produced and made intelligible within discourse, since gender is itself an organising principle of discourse. The problematic of the subject, as a substantialising effect, needs to be located within practices of signification so that ‘rule-governed discourses that govern the intelligible invocation of identity’ become apparent as the scene of the signifying of these identities. The context of any signifying field is thus crucial in the enactment of the subject. Yet what is the nature of the significatory scene that, through repetitive acts, becomes the site of the subject’s generation, regulation and intervention? In Butler’s own words, signification is a ‘scene’ in which the play of gender as an ‘act’ is open to ‘hyperbolic exhibitions’ of the mirage of the pre-discursive subject. I want to take an eye to Butler’s significatory scene in order to ask: if the visual is a privileged part of the modern significatory scene, in which the feminine subject is both generated and intervening, could ‘appearing’ become a particularly visual performance? See Judith Butler, ‘Lacan, Rivere, and the Strategies of Masquerade’, in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990), 43-57, 143, 147; Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.

This is not to argue that the visual can exhaust the multi-sensory scope of any context in which gender is performed. It is simply to single it out for analysis.

`Specular’ is a term used by a range of theorists of modernity to refer to its visually-intensified scene and particularly the techniques of the observing subject within this scene. However, the term has two meanings: one, pertaining to vision or sight; and the other, having mirroring, reflective properties. This latter use has particular use in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Identification with an idealised image is formative of the ego in his 1949 essay ‘The Mirror Phase as Formative of the Function of the "I"’, New Left Review, no. 51 (1968): 71-7. In this sense, the Lacanian subject is specular through identification with an idealised, totalising, specular image. The term also has central significance in the work of French feminist Luce Irigaray. She uses ‘specular’ to refer to this mirroring process in psychoanalytic theory in which the castration of the girl-child and the direction of her desire to the penis reflects ‘a desire for the same’ back to the male subject. Indeed, through the placement of the feminine in ‘The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry’, as she titles one of her chapters, her sexual difference potentially evades the logic of visibility—of something to be seen which signifies that difference. Since I make reference to the work of Irigaray, I will avoid confusion between these two uses by using ‘spectacular’ in describing the perceptual modern field and ‘specular’ only as it is used specifically in the psychoanalytic sense. See Luce Irigaray, Speculum of the Other Woman, trans., Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).


McQuire, 55.


While this is the title of Linda William’s book on hardcore pornography, the phrase was coined by materialist historian Jean-Louis Comolli, who wrote that the second half of the nineteenth century ‘lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible … of the social multiplication of images; ever wider distribution of illustrated papers, waves of prints, caricatures, etc … of a geographical extension of the field of the visible and the representable … The whole world becomes visible at the same time as it becomes appropriatable’. See Jean-Louis Comolli, ‘Machines of the Visible’, in The Cinematic Apparatus, eds. Teresa de Lauretis & Stephen Heath (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1980), 122. Cited in Linda Williams, Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’ (London: Pandora Press, 1990), 36.

These viewing positions referred not only to the newly-constituted spectator before visual technologies such as photojournalism, the camera and cinema, but also to the vantage of the train, electric light, and the high rise building. See Schivelbusch.

See Crary.

Typing was also symptomatic of the self-consciousness of the modern as a distinct historical epoch and the consequent historicisation of the individual. Part of this modern self-consciousness can be attributed to people’s altered experience of time. Edward Soja, in his analysis of modernity in terms of ‘the formative dimensions of human existence; space, time and being’, defines it as ‘the specificity of being alive, in the world, at a particular time and place; a vital individual and collective sense of contemporaneity’. Edward Soja, ‘History: Geography: Modernity’, in The Cultural Studies Reader, ed. Simon During, (London: Routledge, 1993), 135-151.


Ibid.

Benjamin believed the genre of physiologies declined after this year, to be overtaken by physiologies of the city, Paris by Night etc., then nations and animals. Types of the Modern Woman that I made the motifs of my PhD thesis show that the cultural effects of this genre lingered for some time, although when applied to women they were less ‘innocuous’ and ‘bonhomie’ and more classifying and normative. Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, 35.


Rita Felskalso addresses these issues in, The Gender of Modernity (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
It seems the siren call of the city to young women to appear in its scene was even heard within the rural centres of Australia. Young women who identified as Flappers, described the Friday night promenade as necessarily taking place on the main street: ‘that’s the only street that people were interested in’ because the open shops meant that ‘the whole place was lit up’—like a theatre perhaps. Interview with Sally Murray, NSW Bicentennial Oral History Project, oral track 2301, interview 34, Australian National Library.

Indeed, in one American account a Flapper causes the narrator to swerve on the footpath and he felt that ‘it would not surprise her over much if I stepped to the very edge of the gutter, and removed my hat as if apologising for trespassing on preserves that belonged to her’. G. Stanley Hall, ‘Flapper Americana Novissima’, Atlantic Monthly, 129 (June 1922): 772.


Ibid.

‘Mashers and Maidens’, Truth (29 April 1922): 5.

Ibid.

Ellis named the arguably social-distancing device of genders in public space—chivalry—‘an unhealthy ideal ... according to which a woman was treated as a cross between an angel and an idiot’. Havelock Ellis, The Task of Social Hygiene, 2nd ed. (London: Constable, 1927), 58.


Felski, 1.
