The Flapper’s Ontological Ambivalence: Prosthetic Visualities, the Feminine and Modernity

Liz Conor

Modernity’s mos: characteristic symptom is the subjection of live event to representation.¹

Across Western nation states in the 1920s, the flapper was both an identity locale and a cultural form which came to prominence within certain conditions of visibility. She was witness to and positioned herself within modernity’s transformation of everyday life into spectacle. Yet this was not a simple matter of appearing within certain conventions of display and visual style within an historically contingent, perceptual field. Rather, the flapper potentially describes a reconfiguring of subjective formation through appearing and acting as an object within this perceptual field, through appropriating modernity’s scopic conditions (technologically enhanced visual conditions) and relations as the stage on which to position the self, and through the association of the modern feminine to visual technology, illusion and artifice. It seems the flapper was interpreted, and may have interpreted herself, as a practice of the modern feminine self through modernity’s iconisation of the feminine.

In this article, I want to discuss modernity’s particular scopic conditions through the concept of prosthetic visualities – or vision extended through industrialised and popularised communication technologies – and their cultural attachment to the feminine. While these visual forms were characteristic of the shared experiences of modernity throughout Western nations, through both its modes of production and modes of self-representation, I focus on the particular meanings these assumed in Australia – for example with its anxieties about national boundaries projected onto the feminine – while retaining a view of modernity’s common perceptual field. I hope to set out the possible relationship of women to these visual conditions as mobile spectacles and as subjects who acted through appearing. My argument is that appearing was constructed as a subject position for some women, particularly young, white women, through the conditions of their visibility in modernity.
To begin, what was this perceptual field? Modernity’s spectacularisation embraced imaging techniques developed throughout the nineteenth century which became, in the early twentieth century, subject to the logic of industrialised modes of production, namely Taylorism. The division of labour corresponded with a segmentation of vision which met the requirements for a modern subject, who could be productive within industrialised economies. This spawned a rationalisation of vision, which was invested with regulatory effects and deeply implicated in systems of knowledge surrounding a human subject, who was increasingly characterised as an observer. These imaging techniques were also adopted within an increasingly homogenised commodity culture. The spectacle of modernity underwent a dual movement of both standardisation and proliferation, situating the modern subject both within and before a startling new cultural stage.

Scopic devices developed from the 1820s and their later co-option into entertainment forms coincided with the steam train, and architectural innovations in space, light and height, all creating new perceptual and spatio-temporal fields. The vantages of the modern spectator were dramatically altered, changing the nature of people’s everyday encounters, their world view and ways of life. The mobility and height of these vantages seemed to alter and distort the immediacy of the real and its relation to truth; modernity was associated with these experiential innovations through the apparently illusory magic of the photographic and cinematic chimera, in spite of their uncanny veracity and realism.

As the spectacle came to prominence in the landscape of modernity, the key popular tropes of the modern – technology, metropolis, novelty and youth, spiralling progress, decay, moral degeneration and artifice – were often displaced onto the urban feminine. The flapper was an icon for all of these terms and as a modern cultural object – an anonymous, generic, representational convention of modern femininity or type could provide a fixed visual term for recognition, surveillance and control. As a subject, or what I will call ‘appearing woman’, her meanings were less containable.

To continue I need also to explain my use of the term prosthetic visualities and how these techniques of looking constituted the feminine object as subject or the flapper as appearing woman. Although it is perhaps some theoretical distance from the flapper, ‘prosthesis’ is a term that Donna Haraway put forward in advocating partial perspectives and situated knowledges as being necessary to feminist knowledge practices. She pits her political and epistemological manoeuvring of scientific objectivity against the disembodied, infinite vision of Western knowledge claims that ultimately, through the disappearance of their apparatuses of knowledge – be they military or industrial – could not be historically located and therefore could not be called to account. Haraway calls such knowledge practices, whose traditional authority rests on claims to a disembodied and neutral objectivity, ‘irresponsible’, ‘an illusion’ and ‘a god-trick’. Significantly, it is through the metaphor of vision that Haraway sees knowledge as embodied, or ‘the view from the body’, as ‘[vision is always a question of the power to see], that is, its vantages are always from social and political formations. She writes:
The “eyes” made available in modern technological sciences shatter any idea of passive vision; these prosthetic devices show us that all eyes, including our own organic eyes, are active perceptual systems, building in translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life.\textsuperscript{5}

Haraway’s prosthesis calls into view the material bodies of both the scientific observer and the object to be known, and resitutes them in a relation of dialogue. For my purposes, I am calling upon Haraway’s prosthesis of vision particularly for the ways in which it positions the object of vision, as an object – agent, or ‘material-semiotic actor’.\textsuperscript{6} This actor – object is neither discovered by, nor pre-exists the vision of the observer, but rather is constituted and constitutes itself through the mapping practices of the observer’s prosthetic vision, which establishes its ontological boundaries. Are appearing women or flappers, objects which are embodied through prosthetic visualities? I am thinking of the embodiment of flappers as object – subjects of modernity’s prosthetic visualities, who were looked into being through its constitutive gaze. And yet these visual technologies also seem to have a particular discursive attachment to the feminine. This attachment may offer ways to think through the peculiar ontological ambivalence of appearing women, of women who are culturally figured as both object and subject – as was the flapper.

So, how did modernity’s prosthetic visualities configure the object? For theorists of the modern spectacle, such as Guy Debord, there is no scope for any subjective embodiment of the spectacle. He argues that the modern spectacle is also ‘a negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself’.\textsuperscript{7} For Debord the spectacle ‘reigns’ over and conclusively determines the experience of modern society, not merely as a manifestation of new scopic technologies, but as the extension of relations of production as appearances into all social relations as illusion. In this Marxian analysis of the spectacle as capitalism’s ‘own peculiar decor’,\textsuperscript{8} Debord defines it as contrary to the individual and to dialogue. Ultimately, in its reduction of dominant modes of production to signs and of class relations to appearances, the spectacle is contrary to, or ‘freezes’ the historical dialectic itself. It is ‘heir to all the weaknesses of the project of Western philosophy, which was an attempt to understand activity by means of the categories of vision’.\textsuperscript{9} Yet in this reduction of all history to appearances, Debord’s spectacle, as a function of his claims, seems to dematerialise in history. It becomes a floating signifier of ‘the locus of illusion and false consciousness’,\textsuperscript{10} and although a specifically modern spectacle, it seems ‘unsituated’ within modernity’s perceptual field and thus unable to account for the objects it materialised, such as the flapper. To understand her emergence, it is worth looking into the origins and realisation of modernity’s visual domain through its prosthetic visualities, with particular attention to how they related to the feminine.

Optical apparatuses, particularly the camera obscura of the 1800s\textsuperscript{11} are said to have disembodied the gaze of the observer. This gaze was interiorised, as objects were perceived as being arrayed across an exterior field, yet the act of seeing was sundered from the corporeality of the observer, as he or she was no longer a perceivable part of the representation – the look of the observer was supplanted by the look of the machine. As Jonathan Crary argues, in his work on the historical construction of vision, this relation is ambiguous in that:
On the one hand the observer is disembodied from the pure operation of the device and there is a disembodied witness to a mechanical and transcendental re-presentation of the objectivity of the world. On the other hand, however, his or her presence in the camera implies a spatial and temporal simultaneity of human subjectivity and objective apparatus.¹²

It is through this simultaneity that, I am arguing, modernity's vision was prostheticised. In this process the image underwent a spatial separation from the object, which laid the ground for the radical schism between object and subject in positivism. But I want to draw attention away from the observer and back to the object. The object is passive to scrutiny and agency resides within the replicating machinery and its operation. If the object is looked into being, it seems almost discarded against the interest and fascination turned to its image. To some extent the object is disembodied and rematerialised within a replication – often thought of as a shadow or even a death of sorts¹³ through which its truth could then be deciphered. The object takes on curiously illusionary effects in spite of its realism.

The later, scopic technologies of the nineteenth century ordered the eye through the hegemonic ideals of positivism. The camera, as Scott MacQuire wrote,¹⁴ not only removed the observer from the scene of the image, but bypassed the, by now, documented vagaries and irregularities of human vision, 'seizing' reality through its incontestable replication and through the regular, universal laws of chemistry and optics. The 'carnal density of vision'¹⁵ was deposed by a 'photographic retina',¹⁶ which seemed able to meet the requirements of positivism for a fully rationalised, disembodied objectivism in which the equivalences of image to object, replication to reality and image to truth went undisputed.

Again, to turn back to the object, there is a curious investment of ontological constancy invested in the seen object through positivism's quest for veracity. While the human eye had become too subjective to be accurate and the ongoing evolution of the camera must have involved some admission of its shortcomings, the object viewed is certainly passive, but also self-contained. Since positivist traditions were hardly about to admit to looking their objects into being, or constituting their boundaries – as the object's autonomy is long part of positivism's landscape – nevertheless the very quest for absolute verisimilitude by positivism, and its reliance on optic devices to secure it point to a peculiar easiveness of the object. Its eluding of visual capture showed up the human observer as inadequate and the camera, though startling and even magical, was still less than perfect. A relay of comparisons between the object, the observer's apprehension and the separate visual effects of the photograph posed incommensurabilities between the three terms. Indeed, the very thing attempted – correspondence – was winked back from the opaque object.

As such, the object is assuming the traits of impenetrability, while simultaneously its distinct image has taken on the qualities of magic and illusion. The impenetrability of the object of knowledge, particularly as nature, has been well documented as having been paradigmatically aligned with the feminine.¹⁷ In addition, in terms of the prosthetic visualities of modernity, the
notion of illusion creates certain cultural resonances between the spectacle and the feminine, particularly through prevalent anxieties about artifice, and the concomitant loss of a feminine essence.

In a letter signed ‘Old Fashioned’ in *New Idea*, the ‘revolting spectacle’ of the ‘semi-woman’ smoking, drinking and disregarding the ‘true man’s ideal of womanhood’ is described in terms of ‘standardisation and the dearth of individuality’ and ‘imitation’.¹⁸ These anxieties, in Andreas Huyssen’s estimation, derive from the significatory ‘mesh’ of nature and feminine sexuality with technology. He writes:

although woman had traditionally been seen as standing in a closer relationship to nature than man, nature itself, since the 18th century, had come to be interpreted as a gigantic machine. Women, nature, machine had become a mesh of significations which all had one thing in common: otherness.¹⁹

Technologies of mobility, such as the car and the aeroplane, facilitated a gaze that, as correspondingly mobile and bereft of the virtues of contemplation, seemed promiscuous.
It is here that we see the conjunctions of technology, prosthetic visualsities and feminine sexuality that discursively attached to the flapper as ‘fast’. In Kenneth Yellis’s thoughts on the flapper, he notes that her ‘aesthetic was motion, her characteristics were intensity, energy, volatility’. I would add the motion or ‘fastness’ of the flapper was construed through this play of looks and their attachment to ideas of the modern through the vantages technology created. To a certain extent this motion rendered her gaze and apprehension fleeting and she represented the anonymous interchange of voyeurised glances so wonderfully encapsulated in the ‘1920s’ slang, the ‘Gladd Eye’. The car as private, mobile space also set in motion three kinds of looks; the unchaperoned proximity through which the flapper could slip between joy rider and amateur, the attention women motorists attracted as mastering this potent symbol of the modern and thirdly, the way in which women took spectator seats within the panorama through which they moved as themselves part of the social landscape.

The flapper also seemed the most amenable description of the aviatrix ‘Johnnie’ Amy Johnson, who was described as a ‘Flapper-Ace’, and who took, on her 1930 flight from London to Darwin, ‘a vanity case and mirror there/ And grit in a Feminine Breast’.
The aviatrix becomes the modern flapper as technologically proficient, as achieving modernity's dream of the diminishing of space and the conquest of distance but, I would also argue, as prosthetised and mobile spectator and spectacle.

Fig.13:3 The aviatrix (Amy Johnson) as the Flapper-Ace: technology and the feminine. 'Here's Johnnie!' Sydney Girls Amateur Sports Association, 1930. Mitchell Library, Sydney, New South Wales.

Not only in Australia in the 1920s, but insofar as these prosthetic visualities instituted 'normative systems' of looking and appearing throughout Western nation states, the feminine had a seeming commensurability with the representational intangibilities of modern technologies, both as their icon, but also in terms of the anxieties surrounding technology, such as standardisation and artifice. Perhaps it was Andreas Huyssen's 'mesh of significations', as well as a utopian ideal of harnessing nature with technology, which produced images of speed as a force of idealised femininity, reminiscent of the feminine type of Victory. Similarly, an idealised feminine-electric signified a harnessing of nature, technology that was then able to materialise as feminine. In Australia, this feminine ideal literally stands between technology and light as
an imaginary force\textsuperscript{27} – as in this illustration – perhaps implying the domestic applications of electricity.

Fig.13:4 Australian electricity as illusionary feminine, *Bulletin*, 5 April 1923. La Trobe Newspaper Collection, State Library of Victoria.

Critically, in these posters and advertisements the feminine is specifically figured as illusion.

The flapper was amenable to this association of illusion with the feminine. As sexological, psychiatric and criminological discourses brought into view the sexuality of young women, the flapper’s gregarious distortion of the natural self through artifice and sexualised display intensified anxieties about the reliability of visual evidence to divulge the essence of the feminine accurately. For instance, *Truth* newspaper placed Havelock Ellis among ‘scientists of worldwide reputation’, who attributed women’s artifice and love of finery to ‘betraying the instinctive desires of the flapper’. And yet, the author warned
that the ‘passive sexual role’ of women meant that such ‘pretty provocative lures’ could not be equated with the sort of direct expression of ‘sensual longings’ to be found in men; for while ‘the fascinating flapper displays an inge-

![Image](image-url)

**THAT’S THE SORT OF GIRL, ETHEL IS.**

**BERTIE:** "What kind of a girl is Ethel?"

**ETHEL:** "Oh, you know, old-fashioned—don’t effeminate, I think."

Fig.13.5 The loss of feminine essence and feminine visual indeterminacy as modern...*Bulletin*, 19 May, 1927, La Trobe Newspaper Collection, State Library of Victoria.

nuity in accentuating her sexual attractiveness that is positively uncanny...[it] cannot always be accepted as camouflage to conceal the carnal longings of flapperdom. In short, nothing can be known from the flapper’s attenuated display; she may or may not be experiencing (moderate) desire. The loss of distinctions between good and bad girls also undermined the flapper’s knowability through her visual affects – she was an impenetrable object (in at least this sense). This loss of essence was also manifest in the mutability of the feminine within modernity, as in the above illustration. For historian Rita
Felski, it is, 'through its very artificiality, (that) femininity was to become the privileged marker of the instability and mobility of modern gender identity'. The new agency young women seemed to possess over their inconstant and versatile femininity, through facade and artifice, associated the flapper with popular ideas of the spectacle as feminine and illusory.

As a representational and cultural form, the flapper also came to visual prominence in Australia at a time when the cinematic modes of audience reception were being transformed from what film historian Tom Gunning has named 'the cinema of attractions'. This cinema drew attention to itself as an apparatus of magical illusions, thrilling and shocking the audience over previous perceptual thresholds, yet transformed in the 1920s to narrative cinema which drew the spectator into a voyeuristic relation to the image, eliding the cinematic apparatus from the text to achieve the classic realism of the Hollywood system. However, narrative films in America and Australia were still in fact being interspersed with 'flesh and blood' acts in the 1920s, including beauty competitions, to diversify audiences and offset the huge costs of the picture palaces. Arguably, attention was drawn back, in this manner, to the cinema as spectacle in itself through its framing by vaudeville acts which placed its illusory affects in the foreground instead of hiding its prosthetic apparatuses from view. As cinema's 'star' feminine spectacle may have evoked a certain fascination as illusory, resonating with the commodified imagings above of a feminine ideal (proximate to the star) as illusion.

In Australia, these narrative films prostheticised feminine spectacle within distinct corporeal boundaries, because they were mostly block distributed from America. A weekly national audience of some two and a quarter million white Australians ('native' Australians were banned from film screenings in 1928) were watching features, ninety-four per cent of which were American. Through the formation of 'the combine' in 1912 – 1913, the distribution firm, Australasian Films, contracted with the rapidly multiplying picture palaces (numbering 1,200 in 1928) and forced a system of 'block' booking of films whereby theatres could not secure top releases without showing a set number of lesser American releases. American flapper classics such as Flapper Wives (1924), Sinners in Silk (1924) and Our Dancing Daughters (1928) overshadowed Australian renditions of femininity such as Girl of the Bush (1921) and director Charles Chauvel's films Moth of Moombi (1925) and Greenbide (1926).

In Chauvel's films the Australian town/bush divide is marked out over the bodies of the heroines who move to the city to be exploited by parasitical men, or move from the city out of boredom with 'eternal seaside sheiks and Hotel Lounge Lizards' to marry the 'real man -- a cave man' she could count on finding in the Australian bush.

American films were rather less self-conscious about the local particularity of their representations of women. As historian Nancy F. Cott argues, American cinema not only exposed a diverse American population to 'unprecedented forces of cultural uniformity in the 1920s' but also 'operated to carry the American image abroad'. Americanisation through celluloid, an omen of modernity's globalising effects, is said to have occurred first on the simple level of 'a fascination with movies, soaring towers, powerful machines,
and speeding automobiles. But behind this was a growing recognition that the USA was providing the world with a new model of industrialism.\textsuperscript{36} Both the economic ties and the American model of mass culture greatly irked the fiercely nationalist and Anglophile \textit{Bulletin} which named it 'sickening piffle

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Charles Chauvel's Greenbide (1926): Margery Patton looks for 'a real man...a cave man' in the Australian bush out of boredom for 'seaside sheiks'. National Film and Sound Archives Still No.7}
\end{figure}

and pornography' and 'American slop'.\textsuperscript{37} This anxiety about a cultural colonisation through American films turned again and again around the figure of the flapper who was said to have got all her cues from American films and movie stars. Returning to the notion of 'situated' prosthetic visualities, it seems that cinema did indeed map the boundaries of femininity, yet hardly in 'dialogue' with women-objects. The requirements for beauty were so exclusionary that this mapping becomes a process of surveillance over increasingly standardised corporeal boundaries. In giving evidence to the royal commission set up
in 1927 to enquire into the Australian film industry, film-maker and columnist Gayne Dexter stated that Australian young women simply failed the motion picture’s tests of beauty. He and a leading Melbourne dentist could find only one set of perfect teeth in this nation ‘barren of beauty’ and their ‘owner’ came from Western Australia. He continued:

The screen requires perfection of minor points, in addition to a beautiful face, perfection of hands, wrists and ankles. In our girls there is a tendency toward premature development and even where the physique is correct, they lack the art of making the most of themselves. They have not been trained to walk in beauty.38

If the feminine representational icon of the motion picture star is looked into being, and her corporeal boundaries ‘mapped’ through the prosthetic visualities which figure her, it is crucial to recognise the homogenisation of these parameters. For she is white, young and ‘beautiful’, and in this account not ‘Australian’ for as such she ‘belongs to an ugly race’.39 That is to say, her corporeal parameters which are mapped by socially contingent visual practices, are racially determined, with film demanding a certain kind of beauty which also in turn defines nation within racial and feminine parameters. That the objects looked into being are in fact racially homogenised constitutes another area of discussion,40 but for now it is important to think of how this might apply to the flapper, in terms of her uses to type the modern, and to symbolically figure Australia’s anxieties and self-definition as a modern nation state. As an object materialised through prosthetic visualities, the flapper was only culturally looked into being as white and young. If cultural access for women had become organised in part around visibility it is important to ask who were the women who could enact and position themselves as visible and thereby as modern.

If the flapper was looked into being within these conditions of visibility and was herself an icon of these conditions, how might this unravel what I believe was the dual occupancy by ‘appearing women’ of the status of object and subject? I am developing the notion of appearing as a practice which positioned women as technicians of gender41 through their participation and involvement at the sites where meanings of modern femininity were produced – the twin cultural sites of mass culture and their own bodies. The bodies of ‘appearing women’ and discursive localities of femininity thus became mutually producing. Appearing became a literal positioning of one’s body into discourse, women’s bodies becoming intensified sites, not just for the inscription of cultural imperatives, but for the production of these discourses. Through this category of appearing women, I am arguing for the importance of ways to think about the relation of women to cultural forms, through interpolating cultural form into a practice of the self. My attention has turned to the flapper as an historical figure which through modernity’s conditions of visibility, and its association of the feminine with spectacle, inaugurated an ontological ambivalence, wherein the flapper sits on the cusp of representation and subjectivity.42 This ontological ambivalence is the primary structural formation of appearing women in modernity.
I want to consolidate these claims about the flapper as appearing woman within the perceptual field of modernity, through the work of cultural explorer and author, Walter Benjamin. For I believe that it is helpful to think of the flapper as a corresponding, though an ontologically non-coinciding and historically dissociated, term to Benjamin’s flâneur. And this can be done through her commensurability with his notion of the lost aura of the reproduced or re-presented object of modernity, described in his influential work, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, which I will discuss in detail below. I am interested to ask: if flânerie was the mobile and distracted gaze induced by spectacularised modernity, could the flapper as a corresponding term to the flâneur, provide avenues through which to theorise the ways women positioned themselves in public space as spectacle, rather than spectators?

Benjamin’s trope of the flâneur described the nineteenth-century Parisian, distractedly strolling through the panorama of the city. Flânerie was the distracted gaze of the ambling metropolitan dweller through a cluttered and indistinct landscape of proliferating signs and meanings. Benjamin’s subject of modernity is largely defined through their experience of the distractions of mass spectacle and the city, an effect of historically situated vision.

Yet in Janet Wolff’s estimation the flâneur, and any of the figures which move through public space, are men. She writes; ‘[T]he dandy, the flâneur, the hero, the stranger – all figures invoked to epitomise the experience of modern life – are invariably male figures’. Wolff argues that the formation of the ‘new public world’, of business, political, financial, social and cultural establishments ‘could only be constituted as a particular set of institutions and practices on the basis of the removal of other areas of social life to the invisible realm of the private’. As such, the presence of women to public space is believed to be antithetical to the transformations wrought by nineteenth-century modernity. Wolff sees the equation of modernity with the public sphere and preoccupation with this realm in the texts of authors such as Benjamin as rendering women invisible, an elision from which Wolff casts her ‘Invisible Flâneuse’. Yet Wolff also writes of modernity ‘breeding’ categories of female city-dwellers, in its literature, such as ‘the prostitute, the widow, the old lady, the lesbian, the murder victim, the passing unknown woman’. While she does not speak of these feminine identity locales as modalities of visibility, she notes them against the flâneuse, or female flâneur, whose literary presence was ‘rendered impossible by the sexual division of the nineteenth century’.

I am not arguing with Wolff or rejecting her advice that ‘[T]here is no question of inventing the flâneuse’ in attempting to think of the flapper in concert with Benjamin’s flâneur. Rather I am thinking of the cultural placing of the flapper as spectacle as symptomatic of the gendered modernity she describes and I believe this gendering is evident in Benjamin’s work. In addition, the flapper came to visual prominence in a different metropolitan scene, that of the 1920s, by which time women may still have been invisible to literature (since this is Wolff’s study), but were certainly visible as metropolitan spectacles. Yet despite this historical non-convergence, women in public space were still inheriting the meanings of the publicly visible woman as
transgressive and sometimes as sexually deviant, which seems also to apply to the categories of female city dwellers in the work of Benjamin. What is of interest is the apparent articulation of sexual difference in these identity categories through scopic relations. Men act as modern subjects through looking; women appear.

This appearing of women in such guises seems to have also informed Benjamin’s idea of the modern subject being fragmented through an excess of spectacle. He wrote of the fragmented nature of modern perception and its transitory and overlapping nature, so that the modern observer, bombarde by stimuli, underwent an experience of shock which ‘transformed the spatio-temporal register of sense perception’. When women, such as the flapper, later entered this scene as spectacles were they, then, ‘shocking? Can publicily visible women be thought of as more than shocking spectacles through Benjamin’s work, not just in terms of observing subjects, but in terms of appearing subjects, women who act as modern subjects through appearing?

In ‘Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, photography and film as capitalism’s attendant technologies of image reproduction, have removed the presence of the object from itself, and from the viewer. This constitutes the loss of the object’s ‘aura’ for Benjamin, in which a system of equivalences between artworks or human beings as objects exemplifies their commodification. Furthermore, as Paul Kelly and Susan Lord argue, Benjamin’s aural object corresponds to a cartesian individualist subject, in that it is woven through with the strands of “authenticity”, “uniqueness”, “singularity” and “authority”. As such, the loss of the aura, Benjamin writes, ‘reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject’. This subject however, is the observer. Yet Benjamin does, nevertheless, discuss the object of lost aura in terms of an appearing subject, in relation to a distinction he makes between the stage and screen actor, to which I will return.

This altered nature of the modern observer’s subjectivity created a noted ambivalence in Benjamin toward mass culture. Patrice Petro argues that this ambivalence to mass culture was ‘expressed through reference to the metaphorical figure of a woman (a figure that stands for modernity as much as it does for the continually renewed search for a lost plenitude)’. Benjamin links this modern feminine, through the figures of the prostitute, lesbian and masculinised woman, to mass culture and commodity production. In doing so, he was again, as with the lost aura, concerned with a radically fragmented subject. For Petro, while Benjamin’s disquiet regarding mass culture may have been expressed through his notion of the incorporation of women into commodification, it was in fact a fear of threat to masculine subjectivity, induced through the erotic aggression of ‘masculinised women’. It is striking to me that these women are, in the scheme of things, sexually deviant, and that this deviancy is read principally through visual codes and through a scopic taxonomy of women in public space.

The division of gender is brokered by a play of looks in Benjamin’s work. The collector and flâneur are principally lookers, the whore and lesbian – and I would add the flapper – are looked at. Returning to Haraway, if these masculine subjectivities are enunciated through a position of looking, are the boundaries of his feminine metropolitan types correspondingly materialised
on their apprehension? I believe there is scope to think of the flapper, who as an appearing woman was a feminine subject looked into being and imaged into a mass and commodified panorama, in terms of Benjamin’s auratic object. For the flapper, as I argued above, is looked into being through prosthetic visualities which, through the loss of the object’s aura, separates the image from its referent. This is the tension between representation and subjectivity that the flapper embodies as appearing woman and is the basis of her ontological ambivalence.

In his discussion of the object’s lost aura through its reproduction, Benjamin writes of the screen actor, who unlike the stage actor must forego the aura of his whole living being, through the camera, since ‘aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it’. This loss of an individual’s aura is compelling in thinking through the flapper’s ontological ambivalence, as both representation and subject, for Benjamin is thinking through the subjective effects of interpolating the self into cultural form. He quotes the novelist Pirandello:

The film actor feels as if in exile – exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels an inexplicable emptiness; his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noise caused by him moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence...The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera.

Here objectification through prosthetic visualities is not the ‘mapping practice’ of Haraway; rather it refers back to a ‘seeming’ death, the emptying of subjectivity that was a common perception of early cinema audiences. Although Benjamin is clearly bothered by film’s ‘shrivelling’ of the ‘unique aura of the person’ and reconstituting it into ‘the phoney spell of the commodity’, he still does not claim that such imaging is a process of complete liquidation of the subject. And I would argue we are witness again to the anxiety Petro analysed in Benjamin over a threat to masculine subjectivity, in that this ‘shrivelling’ screen actor is in fact male. It begs the question: do screen actresses shrivel? It seems as spectacle women are more likely to shock, to be sexually deviant or to become aggressive. It is questionable whether we can argue from this that female spectacles, unlike men, manifest as subjects through their prosthetised imaging. What we can take from Benjamin comes from his consideration of the capabilities for modern subjects to interpolate themselves into a visually prosthetised landscape, through viewing films and photographs, in which they are assured, he says, of ‘an immense and unexpected field of action’. Moreover, prosthetic visual techniques figure the subject in ways that enable an apprehension of self that is entirely unprecedented. He writes:

With the close up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended. The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject.
It is this new formation of subjectivity that I am proposing in the flapper as an appearing woman. It is a formation constructed through the conditions of visibility of modernity. The ontological effects of appearing within the landscape of modernity brought about the emergence – through a cluster of discursive commensurabilities, namely the feminine, technology, artifice, visual technology and imitation – of the flapper, an object-agent who quested for objectification precisely for the ways that it mapped her into the social landscape as a modern subject. The flapper participated in the particular technologies of gender in the 1920s, meeting the requirements for an intimate and meticulous awareness of the production of femininity as a performative and visual affect. Her appearance/appearing was a procedural production of the feminine body through discourse. It is this that describes 'a new structural formation of the modern subject'. Appearing within a prostheticised gaze, the flapper could be thought of as an entity separated from her 'unique aura'. However, my contention is that this separation of image and object brought about through prosthetic visualities did not empty the flapper of subjective potential, for she resolved this ontological rift or ambiguity, particular to modernity, by incorporating her representational form back into her subjectivity. The flapper, as an appearing woman was a materialised and representational subject, through the prosthetic visualities of modernity.

Notes


4. Martha Banta discusses typing as 'the rhetoric of symbolic classification' tied to a 'casting of women into symbolic forms', which could then be adapted to universal abstractions, such as progress and virtue, envisioning and idealising a 'perfected nation as feminine'. Banta's book is concerned with the process whereby the image of a type, that is the American girl is 'looked into being' through a 'community of viewers'. See Martha Banta, Imaging American Women: Idea and Ideals in Cultural History, Columbia University Press, New York, 1987, pp. xxvii, 21 – 2.


6. Ibid., p. 200.


8. Ibid., p. 121.
9. Ibid., p. 17.
10. Ibid., p. 12.
12 Ibid., p. 41.
13. See Maxim Gorky's evocations of 'the Kingdom of Shadows', describing his first encounter with the spectacle of cinema (rather than the film footage itself) at Lumière's screening in Paris at the Aumont café after 1895. He writes, '[B]efore you life is surging, a life deprived of words and shorn of the living spectrum of colours - the grey, the soundless, the bleak and dismal life'. Quoted in Gregory J. Edwards, The International Film Poster: The Role of the Poster in Cinema, Art, Advertising and History, Columbus Books, London, 1985, pp. 17 – 8.
15. Crary contends that the requirements of industrialised vision, for a productive observer, resituated perception in the body, and through knowledge of this visionary body (optics), was able to subject them to systems of power which regulated and governed this individual body. Crary, op. cit., p. 150.
16. This phrase comes from the astronomer P.J.C. Janssen in 1888, quoted in MacQuire, op. cit., p. 37.
22. Dunlop used the improbability of women drivers to advertise their tyres, with snapshots of Mrs G. Sandford and Miss S. Christie in 1927, on their transcontinental trip from Sydney to Perth, Darwin, Melbourne and back to Sydney. See the Bulletin, 4 August 1927. In spite of this, the terrain of cars seems to have been marketed as urban and emphasised as comfortable and convenient through women drivers, against previous constructions of adventure and frontierism through men drivers. See Virginia Scarff, Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1991.
23. The 'Song of the Flapper-Ace' appears in the Sydney Girl's Amateur Sports Association fundraising publication, "Johnnie You're a Bird", 1927, Mitchell Library, Sydney. The seventeen-year-old American Elinor Smith, who broke the record for a solo endurance flight in 1929, was also known as 'The Flying Flapper'. This caption appeared under her photograph in the Australian Woman's Mirror, 16 July 1929, p. 11.
24. The phrase 'normative systems' comes from Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treischler and Lawrence Grossberg, 'Cultural Studies: An Introduction', in their Cultural Studies, Routledge, New York and London, 1992, p. 15. Their discussion of modernity 'as a structure of experience and identity', which rearticulated 'normative systems based on race, class, nationality, sex and sexuality', is helpful when thinking through the particular cultural resonance of western visual technologies such as block distributed American films, in the Australian context.
25. See the poster by Massias for Gladiator Bicycles, c.1905, Musee des Arts Decoratifs; also the poster by Henry Bellery Desfontaines for Richard-Brazier automobiles, 1904, Paris, Musee des Arts Decoratifs.
26 See the anonymous poster for Zenith electrical appliances and light bulbs, c.1930, showing femininity embodying harnessed nature, technology and illusion, Treviso, Museo Civico Luigi Bailo, Salce Collection.


28 The Fascinating Flapper, Truth, 8 November 1919, p.5.


33 Bertrand, op. cit., pp. 70 – 5.

34 M. Ruth Megaw, ‘Happy Ever After: the Image of Women in Four Australian Feature Films of the Nineteen Twenties’, Journal of Australian Studies, no. 7, 1980, pp. 67 – 9. To be fair, many Australian films about urban women were produced, such as The Woman Suffers (1918) and Know Thy Child (1921), a film about illegitimacy and social injustice; however, aside from the McDonagh sister’s films (which were criticised as un-Australian), these women were often troubled.


36 Peter Wollen, ‘Cinema/Americanism/the Robot’, in Naremore and Brantlinger (eds) op. cit., p. 42. The American filmmaker, D.W. Griffith, was quite explicit about cinema and Americanisation, asking ‘Are we not making the world safe for democracy, American Democracy, through motion pictures?’, quoted in Kern, op. cit., p. 209.

37 Bulletin, 15 September 1921, p. 7.


39 Ibid.

40 The issue of these bodily parameters’ being racially determined and circumscribed by age and ideals of beauty is discussed in my PhD thesis (in progress), The Modern Woman as Appearing Woman: Feminine Visibility and Modernity, La Trobe University.

41 I am referring here to Teresa de Lauretis, Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1987, in which she writes that ‘the social representation of gender affects its subjective construction and that, vice versa, the subjective representation of gender – or self-representation – affects its social construction’, p. 9.

42 I am indebted to Joci Brooks for this formulation.


46 Ibid., p. 45.

47 Ibid., p. 41.

48 Ibid., p. 47.

49 Ibid.

50 Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, pp. 150 – 2.

51 This is not quite the same claim as John Berger’s famous axiom, ‘men act and women appear’, though it does rely on it. See his Ways of Seeing, Penguin, London, 1972, p. 47.

58. Luigi Pirandello, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 231.
Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:
CONOR, LIZ

Title:
The flapper's ontological ambivalence: prosthetic visualities, the feminine and modernity

Date:
1997

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/34457

File Description:
The flapper's ontological ambivalence: prosthetic visualities, the feminine and modernity

Terms and Conditions:
Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.