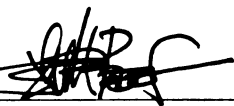




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NOTHING MORE TO SEE: THE ROLE OF *SHOWGIRLS*  
IN THE DESTRUCTION OF THE EROTIC FEMALE NUDE

By

Michelle Veenstra

A THESIS

Submitted to  
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## ABSTRACT

### NOTHING MORE TO SEE: THE ROLE OF *SHOWGIRLS* IN THE DESTRUCTION OF THE EROTIC FEMALE NUDE

By

Michelle Veenstra

In the 1995 film *Showgirls*, which tells the story of a young woman who travels to Las Vegas to be an erotic dancer, director Paul Verhoeven offers an in-depth examination not just of Vegas strip shows but of the role of female nudity in Hollywood cinema as a signifier of erotic desire and revelation. By focusing so persistently on the undressed female body and the assumption of its erotic power as a contrast to dominant male power, Verhoeven's film reveals that nudity is not inherently erotic or seductive, but is instead a man-made construction. Contextualized with a brief historical discussion of the nude as a figure in Western art and culture, his revelation of the artificiality of nudity helps hasten the destruction of the nude as both a symbol and state of erotic power in contemporary American culture.

The 1995 film *Showgirls* tells the story of Nomi, a young woman who travels to Las Vegas to be a dancer. She begins at a seedy strip club and works her way up to become the star performer of the topless casino dance show “Goddess,” a position she achieves from both her relationship with and her deliberate sabotage of Cristal, the previous lead dancer, and from her sexual relationship with Zack, the Entertainment Director. Once her name is in lights, she realizes the inherent corruption of Vegas shows and leaves the city of sin to hit the road again, this time headed for Hollywood. This story of one woman’s attempt to empower herself by controlling and profiting from the performed revelation of her body, illustrated with abundant footage of topless and naked women, examines the treatment of female nudity both in Vegas shows and, by comparison, in the film itself. It also explores the relationship between this nudity and the elite collection of powerful men who, always at a profit, produce, manage, and direct the various shows of bodily display.

In one scene of this film, Cristal (still the lead performer at this time) tries to restart her relationship with Nomi over lunch, acting as mentor by giving advice and describing her own humble beginnings as a showgirl. Not always the woman she is now, “Cristal” has renamed herself after the glamorous champagne she consumes, leaving behind her previous identity as a normal woman who had a boring name, mousy brown hair and small breasts. This transformation is possible because, as she says with a wry smile, “It’s amazing what some paint and a surgeon can do.” Her confessional statement apparently reveals the artificiality of her constantly displayed body and her borrowed, pseudonymed persona. On one level her comment refers not just to her own fake nudity but to that of all the other numerous female bodies that have been painted, altered and

displayed thus far in the film. But on another level, Cristal's comment is itself a partial lie because Gina Gershon, the actress who plays the character of Cristal, displays real, unaltered breasts, raising a disparity between the claim of having a constructed body and the reality of her unenhanced breasts. This interpretation of the naked female body, whether surgically enhanced or not, as a man-made construction (so to speak), occurs more than halfway through the film and solidifies the conclusion that the visually-satiated viewer has been formulating all along: although the many nude female bodies may have been titillating at first, they quickly degraded into something so contrived that they are finally a laughable sight completely devoid of any power to evoke desire.

This image of nudity as an unappealing, false construction helps to explain the financial failure that *Showgirls* experienced at the box office in 1995, a failure due in large part to its advertised claim to be an erotic thriller more intense than *Basic Instinct*, the previous film by director-writer team Paul Verhoeven and Joe Eszterhas. This hype was epitomized in the marketing slogan, "last time they took you to the edge; this time, they're taking you all the way." As it turns out, however, taking the audience "all the way" resulted in revealing too much, leaving nothing to be desired visually or narratively and producing only a profound sense of disappointment. Instead of creating erotic bodies or a titillating narrative, *Showgirls* focuses obsessively on the basic component of sexuality and narrative – the revealed body – and quickly strips nudity itself of any of the eroticism, desire, or power that it once held. Situated at a time when the prevalence of naked flesh is becoming an increasingly inherent aspect of mass culture, *Showgirls* raises many questions about the assumed traits of nudity and the relationship between female bodies and male power. Perhaps the most pointed of these questions is whether nudity,

especially female nudity, still has any ability to function as a position of alternative, seductive power when it is so frequently exposed for observation and dissection.

Before discussing the cultural significance of nudity in both Western society and American film, it is important to define this concept. From a linguistic perspective, the term nudity itself requires clarification since it is often used interchangeably with nakedness. While nakedness is generally related to a natural state of bareness, nudity amplifies and contextualizes such nakedness as an erotic state that is frequently the subject of artistic rendering. Hence, strip clubs advertise nude women and classical sculptures depict nudes and not naked; but one is naked when showering alone at home or when unexpectedly caught and seen without clothing. The nude body retains a culturally-determined layer over the naked flesh that can not be stripped away and so creates a constant desire for further disclosure from the viewer. It is inherently linked to the idea of revelation, desire, and thus power through its ability to either satisfy or frustrate the viewer's desire, or perhaps to do both at the same time. This link to revelation establishes nudity as a key tool in narrative, since it signifies the entire process of creating desire, prolonging desire, and finally revealing just enough to satisfy that desire without showing everything.

Evaluating the history of the nude as an artistic subject, Kenneth Clark introduces his comprehensive work on the subject by pointing out that the fabrication of the nude began in the fifth century when the Greeks "invented" the nude as an art form. (4) Clark offers that, "It is widely supposed that the naked human body is in itself an object upon which the eye dwells with pleasure and which we are glad to see depicted." (5) But, he argues, the truth is that the naked body holds no such natural charm. "In our Diogenes

search for physical beauty our instinctive desire is not to imitate but to perfect,” (12) a search that results in a constructed image of beauty that reflects and heightens the desire for something beyond nature. Clark does well to emphasize the distinction between the naked body and its idealized form as a nude, and goes on to examine a variety of approaches to the human body. But his analysis, while thorough, is biased in its almost complete refusal to discuss gender despite the clear differences of perspective toward the male and the female nudes throughout the more than 1500 years of art history he has researched.

Briefly addressing the topic at one point, he offers one explanation for the change from male to female nudes that begins in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century and has continued to the present, admitting that other factors may be involved. Clark argues that the slow reduction in male subjects is no doubt “connected with a declining interest in anatomy (for the *écorché* is always male) and so is part of that prolonged episode in the history of art in which the intellectual analysis of parts dissolves before a sensuous perception of totalities.” (356) Without fully acknowledging that he is viewing female and male nudes differently, Clark reveals a distinction between the two based on erotic power. The male nude, from the works of ancient Greece through the Renaissance, is the product of an intellectual curiosity about the body’s construction and the desire to perfect that image, reflecting the aspiration to improve one’s own physicality. In a word, it is utilitarian. The female nude, however, is a study that abandons details and reflects the inherently sensuous qualities of the appealing feminine form. The desire to represent and view the female body is not educational but pleasurable, and a temptation that it is difficult to resist.

The depiction of the female form is further eroticized as a signifier of the desire for revelation, the need to see this sensuous naked flesh that is hidden beneath clothing or other veils. Mario Perniola posits that it is precisely the state of transit, a movement from clothing to nudity, that imbues the body with a quality that makes the viewer yearn for a glimpse of more flesh. In his essay "Between Clothing and Nudity," Perniola examines several Renaissance art works that depict figures caught at an ephemeral moment at which the covering over the flesh is fluttering or slipping away, or in which the veiling material merely serves to contrast with and accentuate the skin underneath or adjacent to it. This transitional stage – frozen in time and captured in art – imbues the naked body with an erotic quality by maintaining the desire to see more of what has begun to be revealed. While Perniola examines numerous pieces of art that display this trend, he does not acknowledge that, save for two crucifixion images, all of these eroticized works focus on women subjects, an omission that, like Clark's defensive explanation above, reveals the naturalized assumption of the female nude in art.

Perniola's emphasis on the inherent link between transition and the eroticized naked body indicates the seductive quality of nudity as a position defined by constant change; it can only be achieved by movement from one position (clothed) to another (unclothed). The "stark naked" body contains little erotic power because it is an absolute and offers no possibility of being anything other than undressed. While Clark sees female nudes as static and sensuous, Perniola's nudes are erotic because they highlight the layers necessary for the creation of nudity and suggest the possibility of removing all those layers until the bare body has displayed all of its secrets. This promise of future

revelation creates and captures the viewer's desire, thus establishing nudity as an enigmatic, powerful state of corporeality.

The ultimate performance of the eroticization of the naked body is found in striptease. Although generally viewed as a narrative performance based on desire (the desire to see flesh), striptease is in fact a process that creates desire as a product of the act of unveiling. As Roland Barthes argues in his essay on the subject, "Striptease – at least Parisian striptease – is based on a contradiction: Woman is desexualized at the very moment she is stripped naked." (84) Thus striptease depends on the addition of props and ritual actions that signal to the audience, both visually and narratively, that the final product of the striptease, the nude body, is an erotic, sexual object of desire. This meaning is possible only because the nakedness of the stripper is contrasted with the clothing and other accoutrements used by the stripper in a predictable process of unveiling.

The narrative of unveiling is a crucial component of all narratives since it functions to draw the reader or viewer in to a performance that, hopefully, will produce something for the hungry audience. Yet these narratives are only successful in procuring an audience as long as the desire for further revelation is maintained. Once the mystery is solved, there is little motivation to continue following the story, a problem exemplified in hard-core pornography's graphic display of sexuality and nudity that leaves nothing to be discovered. In these films, the general lack of plot is clearly linked to the lack of clothing and the abundance of revealed, naked bodies. Although not classified as hard core, *Showgirls* follows this trope of visual bodily excess, while the plot suffers under the burden of working against the desexualized, unrevealing bodies that thwart its progress.

No longer able to hint at future revelation, these bodies, devoid of erotic power, are no longer nudes.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault draws a clear relationship between bodies and the dominant forces of power. His theory imagines an ever-proliferating network of power created through a variety of discourses that, while by nature oppositional, exist and function simultaneously, constantly creating more power and more relationships. (44-45) Since Foucault's definition of power derives from his conception of a socially regulated sexuality, he also views power as working on and through bodies or presences, and specifically the surfaces of these bodies. "The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments." (44) The body then constitutes a point of contact for power, a visible site where boundaries are established and violated, where power itself can be made visible. Bodies provide a location for the challenge from and response to power, and the naked body provides a blank slate on which to inscribe any number of power relationships.

While Foucault focuses specifically on the necessity of bodies to speak their deviant sexuality in confessionals and other dialogues with a dominant, normalizing power, his focus on the "electrif[ied] surfaces" indicates that the flesh itself becomes eroticized due to its connection with power. The nude body becomes connected with sexual practices and other activities that are forbidden, and consequently comes to signify desire and thus to acquire erotic power over those who view it. Thus the nude wields a different kind of power – desire – to which even the forces that created it are subject. Assuming, as Foucault does, that this creation of the erotic nude has occurred within the

boundaries of a heterosexual patriarchy, the erotic power is thus identified as typically female/feminine or homosexual. This view of gender, nudity, and power is evident in our earlier discussion of Western art in which the erotic nude is already assumed to be female, whether in the plastic arts or in the living performance of striptease. This feminine erotic power of the nude, therefore, is both dependent on the dominant patriarchy that gives it the power to signify forbidden desire and is capable of seducing and subverting this power by revealing its flawed assumptions (of natural sexuality or gender roles, for instance).

The use of the female in this manner, as a seductive threat to established power, can be found as a key component of narrative due to its ability to act as a subtle, progressive force within the larger narrative. The visual nature of cinematic narrative provides a useful illustration of the interplay between male and female power while revealing the tendency to combine feminine erotic power and nudity, often assuming that they both work in the same way. Director Paul Verhoeven, with his visually dynamic (and often excessive) style, highlights the relationship between narrative assumptions and visual signifiers. This aspect is especially notable in his American films, which also rely on the connection between female seduction and male figures of patriarchal power.

Although his first films,<sup>1</sup> made in the Netherlands, contain darkly realistic portrayals of interpersonal relationships and of his home country's social problems, his American productions show a shift in his film-making technique to cater to an audience that is looking primarily for visual entertainment and dynamic action. Starting with

*Robocop* in 1987, Verhoeven established a directorial style of visual excess and action-packed plots. These traits continued in his other works, as he directed *Total Recall* (1990), *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Showgirls* (1995), *Starship Troopers* (1997), and most recently *Hollow Man* (2000).

The plots of many of his films employ female characters who act as lures to progress the narrative, seeming to lead the main (typically male) characters in one direction or towards one answer then revealing themselves (as the end points of the plot) to be something else. The women in *Total Recall*, *Basic Instinct*, and *Showgirls* in particular represent this erotic power of desire and revelation, and their bodies as sexual objects (whether naked or not) are crucial to this representation. By examining these three films in chronological sequence, a trend emerges that suggests Verhoeven was exploring this use of the erotic female as a component of filmic narrative, gradually progressing toward a more explicit depiction of this erotic power via the nude female body. Since he returns to his earlier genre of action-adventure films after his work on *Showgirls*, it is evident that this film marks a point at which the relationship between erotic female power and nudity has been fully exploited and offers no further revelation of meaning.

While Verhoeven's representation of female bodies reflects the clear relationship between bodies and power depicted by Foucault, it also explores the possibilities of a specifically female power that functions differently than the firmly entrenched patriarchy. Jean Baudrillard argues that this feminine power is that of seduction, a powerful force

<sup>1</sup> *Turkish Delight* (1973), *Spetters* (1980), and *The Fourth Man* (1983)

that operates on the strength of uncertainty and the distance between signifier and signified. Characterized by its ability to reverse or disrupt oppositional structures such as feminine/masculine or powerful/powerless, seduction “must be interpreted in the terms of play, challenges, duels, the strategy of appearances.” (7) Seduction plays with the nature of signs, mocking the inability of any signifier to represent definitively a single meaning, and so can be clearly demonstrated through the surfaces of bodies.

For Baudrillard, nudity is not a stable position to be manipulated by power. While his understanding of nudity seems to acknowledge the inevitable use of the body by power, this relationship provides a structure in which nudity can play without reaffirming or being defined by power. Unlike Foucault, who imagines that power uses bodies based on their internal attributes (evoking from them confessions of sexuality or gender identity), Baudrillard focuses on the surface of the naked body as an unlimited signifier that can not be dominated by power. “Nudity will never abolish seduction, for it immediately becomes something else, the hysterical enticements of a different game, one that goes beyond it. There is no degree zero, no objective reference, no point of neutrality, but always and again, stakes.” (43) Despite its appearance to the contrary, nudity is not a neutral “degree zero” of the body but a signifier of endless signification. As a superficial representation of the body, which is a location at which power is enforced, nudity provides a site of play and seduction where stability or neutrality is assumed. In this manner, the female nude retains her erotic power despite (and because of) the efforts of various patriarchal establishments to limit such power.

Verhoeven’s cinematic exploration of this relationship between male power and feminine seduction tests Baudrillard’s assumption that nudity can in fact always remain a

seductive force. The films *Total Recall*, *Basic Instinct*, and *Showgirls* progress from depicting women as seductive but mostly veiled bodies to increasingly associating that seduction with their nudity. By exploring the inner workings of female strip shows and constantly displaying female nudity in *Showgirls*, Verhoeven attempts to equate seduction with nudity and reveals that Baudrillard's model may be flawed. Baudrillard seems to forget that, as Foucault and the art historians mentioned above clearly established, the eroticism of nudity (and therefore its seductive power) is in fact a layer of signification that has been constructed by the dominant, patriarchal power system to cover the naked body.

In *Total Recall*, Doug Quaid, the character played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, is seduced simultaneously by two women who pull him towards two alternative identities and realities. On Earth, he is seduced by his "wife" (Lori, played by Sharon Stone) to accept one reality in which he is a construction worker, an identity that has been fabricated for him and implanted by Rekall, Inc. In his dreams, he is seduced by a mysterious brunette (Melina, played by Rachel Ticotin) who ultimately leads him to return to Mars, where he not only finds Melina to be real but also indirectly recovers part of his former, original identity as a government operative. Both women represent different realities for Quaid and for the viewer, a dichotomy of representation emphasized by their physical differences as blonde and brunette. In addition to this personal seduction, the key location of the film is the Martian brothel/bar Last Resort, where women prostitutes of all sorts (mutants, dwarfs, etc.) provide a cover for the real function of the bar – gateway to Kuato, the leader of the Martian underground resistance movement. At the Last Resort, the prostitutes seduce characters and viewers towards

accepting the surface reality of the bar by emphasizing appearances, particularly that of their bodies which are in various states of nudity. This deceptive action is exemplified by the three-breasted woman who constantly shows her unusual chest in an effort to snag prospective customers and convince them of the superficial function of the bar.

Verhoeven's use of the unveiled female body as a seductive tool is fairly limited in this film, focusing instead on the promise of further revelation. Throughout the film, women seduce by offering an image that ultimately turns out to be the first step toward achieving something more significant. At the end of the film, Quaid is clearly the hero, having created a breathable, oxygen-rich atmosphere for Mars *and* gotten the girl of his dreams, yet none of his adventure would have occurred if he had not originally sought to find this woman whose image seduced his subconscious. In fact, at the end of the film, Quaid remains in doubt as to whether he has finally found his real identity or if it is all "just a dream." He, like the viewer, remains caught by the strength of seduction, unable to tell if the events and people in his life are indeed what they seem to be. Despite his obvious physical strength, his power remains inferior to the feminine seduction of the narrative and of his girlfriend, who does not show distress about his fear that this narrative is all a dream but urges him instead to kiss her before he wakes up. The final shot of the film enhances Quaid's weakness and the uncertainty of this reality by panning back from the kiss between Quaid and Melina to reveal the backdrop of a huge, intimidating and artificial-looking Martian landscape.

In *Basic Instinct*, the element of female seduction becomes the basis of the plot, relying frequently on scenes that offer glimpses and calculated revelations of the seductive female flesh to emphasize the eroticism and danger of women's sexuality and

bodies. As in *Total Recall*, there remains some ambiguity about the true identity or function of the seductive female characters despite the increased scrutiny of their nudity. Contrary to some expectations, in fact, the prevalence of female flesh heightened the erotic element of the film and helped make it a smash success at the box office. The main character of *Basic Instinct* is Detective Nick Curran, a police officer investigating the violent murder of a former musician who has been killed precisely in the manner described in a book recently written by his current lover, Catherine Tramell. Due to this connection, Catherine seems the clearest suspect, but she denies having any involvement and maintains an attitude of confidence that is difficult to interpret as either innocence or guilt. While Nick and the viewer assume throughout much of the film that Catherine, the sexy blonde seductress who flouts her (bi)sexuality and her nakedness, is the author of her crimes in both fiction and reality, she is eventually proven innocent. On the contrary, Curran's ex-girlfriend, psychologist Dr. Beth Garner, seems to represent the mentally stable woman but turns out to be the obsessed copy cat murderer who mimics the fictional crimes depicted by Catherine.

The infamous scene of this film, in which Catherine uncrosses her legs to reveal a short but unhindered look at her bare crotch during her police interrogation, provides the ultimate example of the seductive power of her character and her nakedness. Prior to bringing Catherine to the police station, Nick postulates that she will not resist the questioning, stating, "I don't think she's going to hide at all." Catherine herself confirms this in the interrogation room by repeating, "I have nothing to hide." This sense of hiding versus revelation takes on greater significance when she clearly chooses to expose her genitalia to the five male police officers who are interrogating and observing her. By

hiding nothing, both physically and verbally (she answers all their questions and takes a polygraph test she suggested), Catherine demonstrates her innocence, her “lack” of ability to deceive the clever men who are in charge while simultaneously revealing herself as a distinct threat to their power because she is so easily able to evoke desire.

Her candidness is unnerving because neither Nick nor the viewer knows how to decipher it, even at the end of the film when Beth Garner is proven guilty of the murders. As with *Total Recall*, the final scene functions as a seductive one that prohibits a sense of closure or certainty. Catherine and Nick enact a sex scene that is similar to the beginning sex/murder scene, in which Catherine, like the naked blonde of the first scene, sits on top of the man and reaches back with her hand, as if to grasp something, as they both climax. While the first scene shows the woman reaching for an ice pick with which she repeatedly stabs her victim/sexual partner, Catherine remains empty-handed. In afterglow, she and Nick exchange some banter about living happily ever after together, and Catherine reaches under the bed as the music swells to a tense crescendo; but she again comes up empty-handed. They kiss passionately as the scene fades to black. But then the scene fades in again from black and pans from the couple, still feverishly kissing on the bed, down to the ice pick on the floor underneath the bed, the constant threat behind Catherine’s peculiar sexuality. The scene fades to black a final time.

Again the film ends with a passionate kiss between the lead male and female characters meant to signify a happy ending and a sense of stability, but some ambiguity remains about the true identity of the woman. While Detective Curran has solved the case and thus has a justifiable claim to be the hero of the film, his power is questionable in the light of Catherine’s seductive and erotic powers. In addition to her control over

Nick's life as a potential murderer, she controls Nick's career, having provided the trail of clues that led Nick to discover Beth as the murderer. Yet Nick cannot resist her body, her sexuality, her nudity that he glimpsed so many times, both before they began their sexual relationship and afterwards. Seeming to hide nothing under constant scrutiny and interrogation, her nude body conceals all her secrets from him because he chooses to view it as indicative of her honesty and realness. Her clear revelation of lack is ultimately her most erotically powerful move since she does in fact have something to hide and keeps it hidden throughout the film. Her nudity is the sign of her irrefutable inscrutability and thus of her permanent threat to Nick's masculine power. (The ice pick is merely a secondary, explicitly phallic threat.)

In both *Total Recall* and *Basic Instinct*, the story ends with uncertainty that is clearly linked to the main female characters. The seductive threat remains as the male protagonists, ostensibly having achieved or reclaimed positions of clear power, are unaware of their true relationship to their female partners. By equating Catherine's erotic power with her nudity, *Basic Instinct* lived up to its billing as an erotic thriller, leaving the audience only partially satisfied and largely suspicious that, despite the amount of flesh displayed, there is something left to be revealed about this woman. Satisfied by the great success of this film, Verhoeven and Joe Eszterhas agreed to collaborate on another project that would, as *Basic Instinct* did for *Total Recall*, take the erotic element of female nudity to an even more prominent position. To achieve this goal, *Showgirls* featured an altered narrative structure in which the lead character is a woman instead of a man, hoping to promote the erotic power of the woman to a position that would allow still greater scrutiny.

As the narrative of Nomi's relatively quick rise to fame in the world of Vegas shows, *Showgirls* seems to depict the story of a woman who has empowered herself by choosing to profit from the display of her nudity. She has made a place, a name for herself on the stage. She has power, she is the "goddess" of Las Vegas. However, this narrative is not the true message of the film as received by the audience. The erotic power of the female body is no longer in the background as an accent to the stable, dominant patriarchy. The roles are reversed, and men now occupy the margins, sitting securely in their offices where all the important decisions are made, while women are brought to the forefront and forced to reveal the secret power of their erotic, nude bodies. Upon examination, this power dissolves (or migrates elsewhere) since nudity is not synonymous with the naked body but is an invisible layer of signification. Instead of allowing the constant display of nudity to retain its reference to something else, *Showgirls* forces nudity to signify itself and thus renders the women on screen truly naked and erotically unappealing.

One example of this stripping of nudity occurs when Tony Moss walks down the line of three hopeful showgirls (including Nomi) and states, "Show me your tits." In answer to their questioning looks, Moss declares, "I've got a topless show," explaining that his interest in their chests is not one of sexual desire but of functionality; seeing and judging "tits" is simply part of his job. The women comply and remove their tops, but there is little erotic appeal to this revelation for two reasons. First, the viewer has already seen plenty of breasts in the film and become somewhat bored with the spectacle. Second, the contextualized significance of the bare-chestedness of the women as a fundamental part of show business equates the display with only what is clearly visible,

the naked female anatomy. These women are not truly nude since their bodies refer to nothing other than their corporeality.

Viewers and critics alike blasted *Showgirls* precisely for its inability to provide any erotic appeal in its plot or its depiction of female bodies. On its release in 1995, *Showgirls* met with numerous critiques, mostly centering around its general failure to fulfill any of the viewing audience's expectations. While part of this reaction was due simply to the film's bad acting, weak dialogue and overabundance of female nudity, the disappointment was also heightened by the enormous amount of publicity MGM/UA launched before the film's release in order to pique the interest of an audience who might have reservations about seeing an NC-17 rated film in the theatre. To overcome the stigma attached to the rating that had recently replaced the daunting X rating, the studio saturated the market with advertising for the film.<sup>2</sup> While some of this advertising material included explicit representations of the film's sex and nudity, a large portion of it downplayed this graphic content to reach a wider audience. Hence, when viewers finally saw the movie, they often saw both much more and much less than they anticipated. As Verhoeven himself admitted, "The trouble was, audiences went looking for thrills and emerged unaroused and that made them hate the film." (quoted in Sandler 83)

<sup>2</sup> Among other marketing strategies, MGM/UA convinced theatre owners to show the movie by wooing them with an eight-minute trailer to emphasize the film's respectability and sex appeal; it created multiple versions of the trailer to be shown for audiences of all ages in theatres and procured late-night airtime for the trailer on three of the major network TV stations; it offered a more explicit eight-minute trailer for rental in major video retail stores; it secured newspaper ads by keeping the art suggestively sexual, proving wrong those who thought that major newspapers would not run ads for NC-17 films; and it created a popular website with "nude photos, a dialogue simulator with the performers, and a link to the Playboy Website." (Sandler 78-82)

Linda R. Williams, in a review in *Sight and Sound*, criticized the film precisely for its complete lack of seduction, dismissing it for its inability to titillate its viewers with either sexual or narrative longing. Arguing that “revelation of the unknown is one of the spurs of narrative, of suspense, of sex,” Williams concludes that *Showgirls* fails because “nothing is hidden and there is nothing to find: there is never an unknown to be revealed.” (30) By clearly depicting the multiple sexual relationships, the various levels of manipulation, and the exploitation of women’s naked bodies, the film removes the possibility of any ambiguity about the nature of the characters or of Vegas show business. Prompted by the ubiquitous advertising material to expect more depth than what the various preview glimpses had afforded, many viewers were quickly disappointed to discover that there truly was little more to be revealed of anything – narratively or physically. Full female nudity appeared on screen 20 minutes into the film and never seemed to go away, allowing the focus on bodily surfaces often to take precedence over narrative.

It seems that Williams’ critique, while clearly justified in her claim that neither the female viewer nor the male viewer walks away from the movie satisfied, points to a significant success of the film. By de-eroticizing the nude body, specifically that of Elizabeth Berkley/Nomi, this film performed a feat that feminists have been attempting for years: to reveal the ways in which female nudity is constructed to be used by the established power hierarchy of patriarchy and capitalism. Williams confirms this result by arguing that the nudity in the film is “gratuitous” and “serves *no* purpose, least of all arousal.” (30) While Verhoeven attempts to capture a behind the scenes look at the life of a showgirl by displaying the glamour and the torridness of a business based on the

spectacle of sex, his product delivers something even better: a clear look at the spectacle of female flesh in Hollywood cinema. While less explicit movies, such as his earlier films *Total Recall* and *Basic Instinct*, still generally include and often largely depend on the image of woman as a desirable object whose secret or skin is somehow revealed to the viewer, this depiction is rarely the basis of the entire plot. By bringing such a depiction to the forefront of the film, Verhoeven confronts the viewer with a narrative that is nothing other than the revealed woman as object of desire. The failure of this film to arouse thus highlights that there is nothing about the female body that is naturally desirable or satisfying to the viewer; bodies function as sex objects only when arranged in a narrative that imparts such significance to them. Somewhat surprisingly, Verhoeven's showgirls are all stark naked.

While mainstream audiences largely rejected the film – it ended up grossing just over \$20 million in the US, half of its production cost (Sandler 82) – its success at treating nudity as nakedness appealed to those who enjoyed mocking the failure of classic Hollywood tropes. Various customer reviews at Amazon.com include the following statements: “It wasn't erotic...it was hilarious!” (anonymous reviewer) “There was a constant display of breasts .... It got to a point where it wasn't even sexy anymore, just kind of funny.” (Brandon S.) These reviews indicate the success of this film at exposing naked bodies as not inherently arousing, and highlight the odd appeal the film holds for alternative audiences. Similar to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), midnight showings of *Showgirls* that included audience participation and costumed drag performers attracted a following in New York and Los Angeles in 1996. (Sandler 85)

Despite this cult following, the economic failure of *Showgirls* established a precedent for the marketing and release of subsequent films with similar sexual content. Released in 1996, less than a year after the box-office bombing of *Showgirls*, *Striptease* followed a markedly different approach to sell its story of a working mother who strips to support herself while trying to win custody of her daughter. Shying away from explicitness, the film featured no sex or full nudity, securing a safe R rating. While the poster for *Striptease* shared something with that of *Showgirls* (both featured the lead female character fully undressed but without revealing any critical areas), the marketing scheme emphasized the dark humor of the story instead of the stripping, “[t]o make sure consumers don’t dismiss it as *Showgirls II*.” (Miller 18) In *Striptease*, female nudity was contextualized again in a safe, comedic narrative of a woman who fights against the patriarchal establishment by working within it as a stripper. However, despite this altered tactical approach toward the stripper narrative, *Striptease* likewise bombed at the box office, grossing \$32.8 million domestically, a figure not even three times that of Moore’s exorbitant \$12 million salary. The similar plots – both women strip to get power of a sort – resulted in similarly mocking reactions as well. Audiences hated it, but this time instead of laughing at the gratuitous nudity, many viewers felt that Demi Moore’s nudity was the only worthwhile part of the film. No longer made so explicit, the nude female figure propelled *Striptease* to retain somewhat more erotic appeal than *Showgirls* precisely because the nudity was a secondary focus. But the commercial failure of *Striptease* indicates the difficulty of reestablishing the nude as an erotic object of desire once it has been revealed as a manipulated construction of nakedness.

Verhoeven's film has created a narrative of the way in which female nakedness is transformed, at the hands of men, into erotic nudity. By so doing, he has destroyed the power of the nude by making it explicit and revealing that the lust for nudity is a constructed desire forced upon the viewer by a handful of men who sit back and cash in on the production and sale of nudity. Not only that, but the bodies themselves are presented as artificial creations that require paint and decoration before becoming nudes. The failure of *Striptease* and other subsequent "erotic" R-rated films indicates that Verhoeven's film signals a change in the interpretation of nudity. Unable to see it as a natural signifier of erotic desire, viewers are forced to look elsewhere for narrative and visual titillation. Desperate to find a substitute, mass media has included an increasing number of male nudes as seductive objects. This trend begins in *Basic Instinct*, when Michael Douglas's display of full rear nudity created a stir from both women and men viewers. Yet male nudity does not carry the same significations in a culture that is still mostly patriarchal. Images of men created by (heterosexual) men naturally cannot create any desire, since these depictions more likely mimic the nudes of ancient Greece discussed by Kenneth Clark. Instead of treating the male body as a sensuous form, male image-makers depict it as an idealized version of their own bodies. Thus positive depictions of male nudes, usually not fully displayed, still signify physical strength, exemplified by Arnold Schwarzenegger's image, while other male nudes are humorous, a treatment illustrated by the close-up of Tom Greene's butt in *Road Trip*, or utilitarian, as in various non-erotic shower scenes.

The destruction of the erotic female nude, and the failure of the male nude to replace it as a signifier of desire, leaves a gaping hole in the semiotic structure of

American culture. If even female bodies are seen as constructions, either through actual physical enhancement or as cultural creations, we are faced with a loss of the ability to represent desire and an increasing sense of artificiality about any kind of revelation.

Perhaps the prevalence of so many “reality shows” in contemporary television is one answer to this loss of illusions, and the hope that there is still something real to be discovered underneath the veil of representation if only we look hard enough. But even so, Verheoven’s experimental and successful denuding of nudity leaves a sense of uncertainty that any further examination of “reality” can truly restore the fundamental component of desire to American culture.

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