



# Naked

## EXHIBITIONISM



GENDERED PERFORMANCE  
AND PUBLIC EXPOSURE

EDITED BY  
CLAIRE NALLY AND ANGELA SMITH

IB TAURIS

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**I.B. TAURIS**

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# INTRODUCTION

*Angela Smith and Claire Nally*

***Exhibitionist***: One who exhibits their skills or material produce.  
(1821)

One who displays a tendency towards extravagant behaviour;  
one who has a psychosexual disorder characterised by exposure  
of the genitals to strangers. (2011)

*(Oxford English Dictionary)*

Whilst the nuances of meaning attached to the label exhibitionist have changed from neutrality in the early nineteenth century to a disapproving medicalisation in the twentieth, the cultural practices of exhibitionism are recorded as far back as Ancient Greece by Herodotus (1998: 119). Despite this, exhibitionism has received relatively little critical attention in gender studies and indeed in popular culture: extant published material approaches bodily exposure as a pathological, medical and/or psychological disorder (David W. Allen 1988, and Daniel J. Cox and Reid J. Daitzman 1980), but less attention has been paid to such matters as cultural practice. Similarly, although the rise of 'postfeminism' in the 1990s has brought with it a critical reassessment of feminine identity, and arguably a retrenchment in terms of the role of women in the home, the workplace and the public eye, less scholarly debate has been forthcoming in terms of the specific development of exhibitionism since the mid-twentieth century. Thus the current volume, *Naked Exhibitionism*, explores the naked, celebratory and

carnal body, in theatre, literature, popular culture and media from the Second World War to the modern day. Several interdisciplinary essays (from media, literature, film, linguistics, and sociology) build on the research expertise of the editors and essayists, and escalating interest in the areas of performativity, neo burlesque, gender transgression (male-to-female and female-to-male), and postfeminism as problematic sites of cultural representation. In particular, this collection will show how notions of exhibitionism have changed over the course of the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, a context that includes social factors such as changes in the obscenity laws in Britain as well as the wider social context of gender equality and the effects of second wave feminism from the 1960s onwards.

The naked, exhibited female body has been a staple of culture for several centuries, with varying ideological inflections. Predominantly a feature of medieval religious buildings, the Sheela-na-gig is often but not exclusively found in Britain and Ireland, and is essentially a stone carving of a woman exposing her genitalia. Whilst her genitals are represented to suggest a nubile fertility, her head and chest are skeletal, suggesting age. Scholars are divided on the exact role of these figures, as they may be a warning against lust, good luck charms, or part of pagan ritual, but the naked female form clearly exerted both reverence and fear: clergymen frequently destroyed or removed the figures from church buildings, whilst 'archaeologists tended either to ignore them altogether, or to label them as lewd, barbarous, or repulsive. Museums kept them locked safely away from public scrutiny' (Barbara Freitag 2004: 1). Appropriated for the twentieth century, P J Harvey's song 'Sheela Na Gig' (released from her debut album, *Dry*, in 1992) features a female speaker who is rejected by her lover on the basis of her nakedness, her 'unclean' body with its exhibitionist tendencies. Arguably, the song reveals the way in which patriarchy, and also society at large, polices and manages what is acceptable for women to reveal and conceal.

Rodin's *The Kiss* (1889) scandalised early viewers who thought such an open display of eroticism unsuitable for public consumption (resulting in the withdrawal of the sculpture from public view at the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago). With the increasing

sexualisation of the public sphere in advertising, commodity culture and popular branding (*Playboy* for instance), the exhibited body has become progressively more visible. Brian McNair (2002: 7) remarks how consumerist displays of the body have been approached by commentators as inherently negative, but continues to suggest that '[w]hat any particular image means, and what it may predispose, provoke or persuade someone to think or do are as much the product of that individual's personal circumstances (an infinitely complex amalgam of individual and familial history, education, cultural tradition, and all other elements which shape and contrast a person's existence and conscious being) as they are of the image-content' (Brian McNair, 2002: 7–8). For instance, the infamous picture of Sophie Dahl by Stephen Meisel, advertising Yves Saint Laurent's 'Opium', attracted '730 complaints about the picture from members of the public who had found it too sexually suggestive and unsuitable for display on the streets' (*The Guardian*, 19 December 2010). Indeed, the image, deemed by some to be degrading to women, highlights the double-bind in which modern feminism finds itself. Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1998) notoriously stages a graphic investigation into the female body's hidden geography, with discussions around genital hair, orgasm, pregnancy, lesbianism and domestic abuse reflecting the exhibitionist potential of the second wave. The reclamation of the sexual body from patriarchal value judgments, as Luce Irigaray theorises in her seminal *This Sex Which Is Not One*, is foundational to any feminist enterprise (Luce Irigaray 1985). Indeed, if we consider Marc Quinn's statue 'Alison Lapper, Pregnant' (Rachel Cooke, *The Observer*, 18 September 2005), unveiled as part of the temporary series of exhibits on the 'fourth plinth' in Trafalgar Square, London, we are forced to confront the issue of female nakedness, aesthetics and positive public art. Part of a series of commissions, and juxtaposed with other plinth statues representing the masculinity of military achievement (such as Charles Napier and Henry Havelock), the staged site of the sculpture challenges the invisibility of women's achievement through the revelation of the naked torso. Born with no arms and no legs, heavily pregnant Lapper was sculpted in twelve tons of marble, curiously emulating classical Greek models, whilst simultaneously drawing critical attention to the

absence of disabled motherhood in cultural representation. The notion of public display, the exhibition of the specifically gendered body, is consistently informed by ideological signs, judgments and viewpoints. It is heavily invested in the viewer's perspective, but also its originary cultural moment and compositional intent.

In the context of ideological value judgements, one might consider the most famous case of exhibited black femininity, Saartjie Baartman, whose body was co-opted for a pseudo-scientific discourse in which her physicality was deemed abnormal and therefore subject to the public gaze (Rachel Holmes 2007). She had an elongated labia and steatopygia, or unusually large buttocks, both genetic characteristics of Khoikhoi women. She left her native Cape Town in 1810 to go to London, where she was deployed as an entertainment for the general public:

Shortly after Baartman's arrival in London in 1810, at no. 225 Piccadilly, members of the public were invited to view the 'Hottentot Venus' for two shillings. Advertised as possessing the 'kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen', she wore a 'dress resembling her complexion' and so tight that her 'shapes above and the enormous size of her posterior parts are as visible as if the said female were naked... the dress is evidently intended to give the appearance of being undressed'. She wore beads and feathers hung around her waist, the accoutrements associated with her African ancestry, and, on occasion, would play a small stringed musical instrument. The show took place upon 'a stage two feet high, along which she was led by her keeper, and exhibited like a wild beast; being obliged to walk, stand or sit as he ordered.' (Sadiah Qureshi 2004: 4)

The spectacle of the sexual body (as Venus, with tight dress to reveal her shape) conflates with the overt gesture of the 'keeper', rendering visible, not just colonial power structures but how these are enacted on the body (being like a 'wild beast', her body becomes the subject for 'legitimate' public scrutiny). To complicate the power dynamic of this performance further, Baartman allegedly consented to being exploitatively exhibited in Europe in exchange for financial reward. Whilst her enlarged vulva

was not exhibited when she was alive, following her death in 1815 (after having a career in France as a prostitute when public fascination declined), her skeleton, brain and genitals were on display in Paris's Musée de l'Homme until 1974. What is markedly repellent and fascinating about Baartman's case is her transition from performer in a nineteenth-century ethnological show to a case study of natural history and medicine. In the public scrutiny of her body after death, Baartman's most intimate interior finally became a curiosity for display. The imperial judgments enforced by France and England on colonized peoples reflect in the grotesque exhibition of this woman of colour: 'degenerate' physical features, theorised by Cesare Lombroso in the study of criminals, and later by Max Nordau, became justification for the political domination of racial 'others'.

Perhaps the most famous 'naked exhibitionist' is the legendary Lady Godiva, the medieval English noblewoman who is supposed to have ridden naked through the streets of Coventry as a forfeit for her husband's repeal of unfair taxes on the city's poor. Whilst the legend of Godiva has largely been proven to be fictitious, the fact that this has been retold and reinterpreted over the centuries makes this woman one of the most famous (or infamous) in history. As Daniel Donoghue shows, Godiva has been variously represented as the virtuous, subservient wife (particularly in the Victorian period), or as the playfully erotic exhibitionist. This latter interpretation came about particularly in the early twentieth century when Freud alluded to the Godiva legend as an illustration to his argument which medicalised exhibitionism as the instinct to put one's body on display.

As Donoghue notes, the Godiva legend had been appropriated by various poets and writers in the course of the nineteenth century, including subtle allusions in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857) and the long narrative poems of Tennyson (*Godiva*, 1842) and Leigh Hunt (1850), all of which idolise the figure of Godiva as good and virtuous. Early feminists also drew on the Godiva legend and, as Donoghue observes, from the middle of the nineteenth century, Godiva's exhibitionism came to be seen as an example of how 'the woman's body, even as it is eroticized by patriarchal authority, becomes a means to challenge that authority and change society' (Daniel Donoghue 2006: 94). For many Victorian women writers, the



legend of Godiva allowed them to place themselves in the arena of public opinion despite conditions imposed by the patriarchal society that required middle-class women to exhibit modesty and virtuousness rather than their actual bodies.

The timing of this appropriation of the Godiva legend can be seen as an example of the incitement to speak about sexuality in the Victorian era that Michel Foucault refers to (1978). According to Foucault, this was stimulated by this era's desire to regulate, classify and control sexual subjects. Foucault's work in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1978) identifies how different discourses came to produce and frame what was known as 'sexuality'. These discourses also served to concentrate compelling transfers of power, influencing the social order. Of course, as Foucault points out, where there is power there is resistance, and it is these points of resistance that many of the chapters in this book seek to explore. Sexuality, for Foucault, becomes a 'dense transfer point for the relations of power' (Michel Foucault 1978: 103), where power is seen as a network of forces rather than being confined to the individual. In Niall Richardson's discussion of this:

These forces are not simply random but occur in specific historical contexts in which certain groups of people or factions do have control or dominance. Foucault argued that modern power does not function through repressing sexual desire but instead by classifying, marginalising and morally ranking these various sexualities. (Niall Richardson 2009: 19)

Thus any discussion of sexuality and gendered performance must be viewed with an eye to the power structures at play. The essays in this book point to the power structures behind the various exhibitionist performances, where disapproving views of various performances need to be read in conjunction with the context of their production and the motivation behind this. Foucault's analysis highlights the multiple locations of power:

Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And 'power', insofar as it is

permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement. One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (Michel Foucault 1978: 93)

Foucault's powerful influence on gender theorists is marked in the shift away from centralised blocks of power, such as the state and law, towards more dispersed sites of power which are conceptualised as flows and specific convergences and consolidations of talk, discourse and attentions (Angela McRobbie 2009: 13). With specific reference to sexuality, Foucault also points to the various ways in which these power-wielding discourses could be transferred, identifying the:

... wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing and redistributing what is said about it; around sex a whole network of varying, specific, and coercive transpositions into discourse. (Michel Foucault 1978: 34)

The mid-twentieth century starting point for the chapters in this collection allows for an exploration of these powerful discourses relating to sexuality and gender, many of them highlighting the various devices that appeared at this time as a means for dispersal. Beginning with the appropriation of female exhibitionism by Hollywood in the mid-twentieth century, we seek to show how the latter part of the twentieth century brought about a reappropriation of gendered performances, then how exhibitionism can be performed in a postfeminist era. As contemporary feminists such as Imelda Whelehan and Angela McRobbie have argued, the postfeminist era is exemplified by the notion of 'choice', but this is curtailed by an impetus to revert to certain modes of traditional femininity. Laura Mulvey's best-known

work, 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema' (1975) sets out her argument that classical Hollywood cinema puts the viewer in the position of a male spectator, with the women on screen there 'to be looked at' as the object of their desire. This 'male gaze', according to Mulvey, operates in two distinct modes. These are the 'voyeuristic', in which the women are there to be viewed as 'whores', and the 'fetishistic' in which the women are to be viewed as 'madonnas'. As Martin Shingler (this volume) demonstrates, this 'to-be-looked-at-ness' became the trademark of many female stars of the 1940s and 1950s. The male gaze, as we will see in various chapters in this volume, came to be appropriated in the latter part of the twentieth century, particularly in the postfeminist era, where this was played with a knowing glance by women. However, as chapters by Rina Kim, Claire Nally, Angela Smith and Linda McLoughlin (this volume) show, this is problematic on a number of levels, particularly in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century where developments in feminism (discussed below) saw the apparent appropriation of the male gaze by women.

As many of the chapters in this collection show, visual exhibitionism is often closely aligned with the language used to describe it. What is deemed acceptable for public performance is something that has become enshrined in law in many countries. Early fears of moral decline led to the 1737 Licensing Act in Britain which made it a legal requirement for every play performed in the City of Westminster to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's Office, effectively meaning every play was censored for profanity, blasphemy and other 'morally objectionable' aspects of content. This was not abolished until the 1968 Theatre Act came into law. Although no such formal practices were in operation in the United States, censorship could operate at other levels. For example, Edward Albee's best-known play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, was selected for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1963 but the award was withheld by the trustees of the board (at Columbia University) as they objected to what they saw as the use of profanity and sexual themes. (This accounts for the fact that there was no Pulitzer Prize for Drama in that year.) The opening scene of this play references the film *Beyond the Forest*, a film which, as Shingler (this volume) explains, was controversial for its star's bodily exhibitionism; her 'naked ugliness'.

These changes in attitudes in the world of the arts in the 1960s can be linked to wider issues in Western society. Closely aligned with the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960s, second wave feminism emerged as a political force on both sides of the Atlantic. There is a huge amount of scholarly work that offers a history of this reaching across many disciplines, particularly sociology and linguistics. For example, Sara Mills (1995) describes how the re-domestication of American society in the decade following the Second World War had sought to realign men and women into traditional gendered roles. The cult of the 'perfect housewife' of the 1950s is one that has been emulated through costume (see Nally, this volume) and behaviour (Smith, this volume). At the time, though, this led to consciousness-raising groups being formed in the 1960s when women began to question then reject the entrenched traditional housewife roles. Elsewhere, this unprecedented social revolution brought into the spotlight social roles in areas such as politics, religion, war, as well as gender. This led to huge changes in society for women, who in the 1970s saw laws introduced to remove discrimination in the workplace, in wages, and in employment rights. The so-called 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s sought to establish a more egalitarian society that rejected traditional models of male-female relationships, and also the slower changes in society that led to greater equality in respect of same-sex relationships.

Second wave feminists also drew attention to the need to avoid mapping gender onto sex, questioning the simplistic allocation of all behaviour presented by men and boys as being 'masculine' and all behaviour by women and girls as 'feminine'. Throughout our lives, we are conditioned, cajoled and prompted to behave in ways that are meant to be acceptable in terms of our gender, and thus our behaviour is aligned with our ascribed sex. Drawing on Ann Oakley (1972), Mary Talbot (2010) cautions us that this mapping of gender onto sex stems from the assumption that 'socially determined differences between women and men are natural and inevitable' (2010: 9). This 'biological determinism' leads to justifications for traditional models of male power and privilege and female nurturing and submissiveness. Many of the essays in this collection directly challenge these long-established deterministic roles, particularly in regard to sexuality.

Following Judith Butler (1990), we will see how gender can be socially constructed, that gender is something we *do* rather than something we *are*. Many writers at this time sought to challenge the literary canon, and as Rina Kim, Anna Watz and Andrew Webb (this volume) show, writers such as Sarah Kane, Angela Carter and Allen Ginsberg can be seen at the vanguard of such challenges.

If the campaigners of second wave feminism strove to achieve equality in terms of employment and pay, then it was left to their daughters to assess what was left. From the 1980s on, feminists started looking back at the achievements of the second wavers and found something lacking. Rachael Moseley and Jacinda Read (2002) have suggested that the achievements of second wave feminists are now largely taken for granted and there was no longer the political motivation to achieve equality through abandoning femininity and being 'one of the boys'. This was a group of young women:

for whom feminism exists at the level of popular common sense rather than at the level of theoretical abstraction. This is a generation who have found that despite the best effort of feminists, you cannot just wish femininity away, relegate it to the dustbin of history as the bad 'other' of feminism. This is a generation for whom 'having it all' means not giving things up but struggling to reconcile our feminist desires with our feminine desires. (Rachael Moseley and Jacinda Read 2002: 238)

This legitimated rediscovery of femininity is aligned with a confidence gained through the achievements of second wave feminism's equality campaigns. As several chapters in this book show, an assertive female sexuality leads to the making public of previously gendered performances. The 'meanings of choice and individual freedom', Robert Goldman et al. suggest, 'become wed to images of sexuality in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because it suits their liberated interests' (1991: 338). This may be in the hyper femininity of the burlesque performers, as Nally explores, or in the appropriation of traditionally male forms of sexual assertiveness in the guise of the *ladette* (see Smith, this volume).

As many feminists claim, patriarchy has not 'gone away'. The reopening of London's Playboy Club in 2011 clearly corroborates the repackaging of stereotyped femininity for the consumption of men. The club recruited women aged between 19–40 (including one aspirational academic called Sarah), with the trademark bunny costume for croupiers still very much at the forefront. Whilst the club maintained '[w]e are not a gentlemen's club, we welcome male and female members', the reopening of the Playboy Club does signify a retrogressive cultural shift in our ideas of femininity (Debabani Majumdar 2011). The appeal of 'glamour' and 'vintage' which the new bunnies identify as a motivating factor suggests a move towards a bygone age of strictly gendered values (see Nally, this volume), and indeed two women's rights groups, UK Feminista and Object, have launched a campaign dubbed 'Eff Off Hef' against the club's opening (Debabani Majumdar 2011). They claim: 'The Playboy Club degrades women as fluffy animals who are marketed as sexual playthings for men' (Debabani Majumdar 2011). This sexualisation of women in the public sphere has been charted by several recent commentators, including Imelda Whelehan (2000) and Natasha Walter (2010). They go so far as to suggest that the 'liberated interests' of women in the twenty first century, leading to powerfully sexualised behaviour amongst other things, is actually part of a patriarchal scheme to provide for the male gaze. Nally and McLoughlin (this volume) interrogate this claim, whilst elsewhere we can see a resurgence of protests about the sexualised images of women in the public sphere. The second wave feminist movement undoubtedly achieved success in limiting the scope of advertisers to use sexualised images of women (see Michèle Barrett 1982), and we mentioned earlier the infamous Yves Saint Laurent Opium advertisements that provoked formal complaint, however a more grass-roots objection to perceived sexist images remains. In the early part of the twenty first century, a chocolate manufacturer's campaign in both Britain and Australia showed a naked woman sprawling across a piece of chocolate, apparently saying 'I'm in Chocolate Truffle Heaven'. Across the world, feminist guerrilla graffiti appeared over this poster, to the effect of adding a further quotation for the naked lady: 'I'm in far too little clothing'. The product name was



Figure 1. An example of feminist guerrilla graffiti on an Australian billboard.

also changed to 'Sexism Heaven' in many posters (see Figure 1). This appropriation of public space images of women was something primarily associated with second wave feminism, as is the witty nature of the graffiti.

Whilst feminists continue to highlight examples of sexualised exhibitionism in the public sphere, the law has also grappled with the nature of public exposure. In Britain, the Criminal Law Act does not limit its definition of indecency to sexual indecency. Instead, it more vaguely defines it as to include anything 'an ordinary decent man or woman would find to be shocking and revolting' (see the Law Commission Consultation Paper no. 193, 2010). The notion of 'public' is also widely defined to include 'exhibitions in all places to which the public have access with as of right or gratis or on payment', the 'public' here generally taken to be two or more people. This law is often called upon in cases where local residents object to plans to open lap-dancing clubs in their neighbourhood. It also links very closely with

the complaints television and film producers receive about the content of their broadcasts, where such complaints are couched in terms of 'taste and decency'.

In Britain, issues of 'taste and decency' in the media were taken up in the 1960s by many social campaigners, most famously Mary Whitehouse, who were concerned about a perceived moral decline in the wake of the civil rights movement. In 1965, the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA) was founded by Whitehouse to campaign against broadcast media content that it considered to be harmful and offensive, particularly in terms of profanity and sex (BBC online, 2001). Whitehouse's figurehead role in campaigning for the NVALA gained a powerful political ally in Margaret Thatcher, whose socially conservative government policies were in tune with the NVALA's stance. Constant lobbying from Whitehouse and others in the NVALA led to changes in various broadcasting laws, including the Video Recordings Act (1984) (which was commonly referred to as the 'Video Nasties Act' owing to its regulation and classification of content with particular reference to sex and violence) and the extension to the 1990 Broadcasting Act which led to the establishment of the Broadcasting Standards Commission to oversee 'taste and decency' in British terrestrial media. Elsewhere, Whitehouse was also influential in legislation relating to sex shops, primarily through the 1981 Indecent Displays (Control) Act. The NVALA itself continues, although it changed its name in 2001 to mediawatch-uk shortly after the death of Whitehouse, who had by that time become a figure of fun. By aligning the campaign with the Conservative government of the 1980s and 1990s, Whitehouse herself became seen as a site for resistance of power with many comedians drawing on her moral campaigning for satirical observations. However, it is clear that conservative attitudes towards gendered performances, particularly as we discuss them in *Naked Exhibitionism*, are predominantly geared towards preserving a (mythical?) status quo.

Thus, whilst our contributors engage with differing theoretical and critical positions in a range of cultural texts, the focus on bodily display and the concomitant potential for ideological censure, containment or celebration remains a recurring feature of each article. Martin Shingler,



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