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The Monstrous Woman Goes Grey: Film, Performance and Feminism

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Abstract

In both *The Waterway* (2014) by the International Institute for Important Items and *Under My Skin* (1975) by Suzanne Lacy, performance is not used as a tool to challenge binary notions of gender, as is frequently the case in contemporary performance art, but, rather, to dissect and critique the shared experiences of those who identify as 'woman'. Their works respond to a patriarchal, humanist model of subjectivity that, "in so far as difference spells inferiority", continues to subjugate the social "Other" (Braidotti 2013, 15), who in the case of the aforementioned artworks is the ageing woman. Both Lacy and the I.I.I.I challenge this model with respect to the cinematic representations of woman that have defined their working periods, namely the "prominence" of female Draculas in the 1970s for Lacy (Creed 1993, 59), and the history of human-nature relationships in science-fiction for generation Xers Hervé and Maillet. In doing so, the artists explore the process and effects of embodying the spectre of woman, a figure who emerged in the gap between cinematic representation and 'real life', to deconstruct the lure of what science-fiction calls "immortality" (Hervé and Maillet 2014a) and the beauty industry calls a 'youthful glow'.

As *The Waterway* and *Under My Skin* make clear, the silver screen has, historically, been devoid of silver stars; simply put, the older woman has been "shut off", to quote lacy (2010, 154), from cinematic, and thus socio-cultural, representation. Filmmakers such as Agnes Varda and Chantal Akerman, who reasserted the presence of the female gaze in cinema, have engendered an increasing shift towards inclusive on-screen representation over the last fifty years. However, it is necessary to examine, building upon the writings of Laura Mulvey, to what extent cinematic language can be used to challenge patriarchal, humanist notions of the subject, time and transition.

Key words: ageing, feminism, male gaze, performance art, post-humanism

The Monstrous Woman Goes Grey: Film, Performance and Feminism

In both *The Waterway* (2014) by the International Institute for Important Items and *Under My Skin* (1975) by Suzanne Lacy, performance is not used as a tool to challenge binary notions of gender, as is frequently the case in contemporary performance art, but, rather, to dissect and critique the shared experiences of those who identify as 'woman'. Their works respond to a patriarchal, humanist model of subjectivity that, "in so far as difference spells inferiority", continues to subjugate the social "Other" (Braidotti 2013, 15), who in the case of the aforementioned artworks is the ageing woman. Both Lacy and the I.I.I.I challenge this model with respect to the cinematic representations of woman that have defined their working periods, namely the "prominence" of female Draculas in the 1970s for Lacy (Creed 1993, 59), and the history of human-nature relationships in science-fiction for generation Xers Hervé and Maillet. In doing so, the artists explore the process and effects of embodying the spectre of woman, a figure who emerged in the gap between cinematic representation and 'real life', to deconstruct the lure of what science-fiction calls "immortality" (Hervé and Maillet 2014a) and the beauty industry calls a 'youthful glow'. Lacy does so by calling attention to the ways in which cinematic imagery "embed[s]" "true-life" "memories of violence" within a woman's body (Frieling, Sanromán, Willsdon 2019, 55), whilst the I.I.I.I do so by taking apart the fragile boundary that separates the real and the fantastic.

This relationship between on and off screen worlds is the subject of Laura Mulvey's *Fetishism and Curiosity*, in which the writer states that cinema "materialise[s] both fantasy and the fantastic", that it is "phantasmagoria, illusion and a symptom of the social unconscious" (1996, xiv). Cinema allows, indeed engenders, slippage between on and off screen, earthly and extra-terrestrial, real and imagined, reflecting both the aspirations and the implicit assumptions of the society in and through which it is borne. With respect to the performances under discussion, both of which explore the otherwise unexamined intersection between cinema, performance art and the monstrous woman, this refers to a desire to quell the rise of the Woman's Liberation Movement in the 1970s and, in the 2000s, a desire to celebrate technological advancement in the name of scientific and socio-cultural human progress. In both contexts, an assertion

of the dominance of "institutions of patriarchal capitalism" (Creed 1993, 61) and the recognition of "white, European, handsome, [young] and able-bodied" Man, whose presence is eternal and universal, as "the measure of all things" (Braidotti 2013, 13).

Consequently, as both *The Waterway* and *Under My Skin* make clear, the silver screen has been and continues to be devoid of female silver stars; that is to say, it is evident that the older woman has been "shut off", to quote Lacy (2010, 154), or rather shut out, of cinematic, and thus socio-cultural, representation. Simply put, cinema has traditionally represented and reinstated the authority of 'the Man'. Taking into account the mass appeal and ideological power of cinema, it is necessary to consider how Hollywood has shaped cultural imaginations of woman, and to examine the extent to which it has delimited understandings of what woman can, or rather should, be.

To begin we return to 2014, the year in which the International Institute for Important Items, an artistic duo formed of Chloé Maillet (President), who trained as an anthropological historian, and Louise Hervé (secretary), who trained as an artist film-maker, release *The Waterway*. In the sci-fi film, Hervé and Maillet grapple with their protagonist's seemingly innate fear of 'growing old', a paradoxical fear in itself, to deconstruct the notable (lack of) representation of elderly women in euro-centric (visual) culture. In doing so, the artists unpick how the female body has become a site of "immortality", with women expected to maintain a 'youthful' glow that far exceeds their 'youth'. In *The Waterway*, the I.I.I.I create a "visionary…former biologist" named Ondine (the protagonist) (Liverpool Biennial 2014), who uses her own body to experiment with a rejuvenating concoction of genetic material that transforms her into a carp and thus grants her eternal youth. This narrative is interwoven with other "lives affected by watery interactions" (Liverpool Biennial 2014), who each seek a cure to overcome the inevitable process of ageing. In *The Waterway*, the I.I.I.I pose the question: why is woman, who is part of a natural ecosystem, afraid of growing old?

Their work clearly proposes a cyclical alternative to rational notions of measurable, mechanic time that have come to shape euro-centric conceptions of ageing and to represent patriarchal systems of control. It is notable that, in this system, there is never enough time to become, only enough time to be, an issue at the heart of both the I.I.I.I and Suzanne Lacy's work. Both artists embrace the eternal because it allows them to break free from the unity of the humanist, clock-work subject. Instead, and this is most explicit in the work of the I.I.I.I, the artists explore time as an immeasurable and continuous flow that, in the spirit of Bergson, looks to measure the duration of life outside of the "invention" of time (Bergson 1922, 361), even outside of what may be deemed reality.

However, Suzanne Lacy also bites back at (anti-)ageing with a more ominous edge in 1975 in *Under My Skin: A True-Life Story*, an approach that reflects the activist vigour of her tuition under Judy Chicago not to mention the urgent need for a renewal of women's civil rights in 1970s America. In the performance, Lacy shows the pernicious ways in which the beauty industry frames the older woman as that which "society shuts off in its flight from death" (Lacy 2010, 154); because the older woman reminds Man of his mortality she is constructed as the "abject" (Kristeva 1984, 40).[i]

Breaking with this cinematic tradition, both artists explore the subtler, seemingly natural attributes required to perform woman by omitting the colour red, which in horror films, famously *Carrie* by Brian De Palma (1976), is used to connote the "abject" female body. This omission challenges essentialist (readings of) feminist performance art, which frequently rely on biological signifiers of the abject female body (e.g. Carolee Schneeman, *Interior Scroll*, 1975 or Judy Chicago, *Menstruation Bathroom,* 1972), to look beneath the surface signifiers of the (monstrous) woman. In *Under My Skin: A True-Life Story,* Lacy's disturbingly prolonged unpeeling of a paste facemask as if her own 'skin' suggests that her female identity is signified by the process of "peeling" itself. As Frieling, Sanromán and Willsdon state in *We Are Here*, this deconstructive action "suggest[s] psychological states such as humiliation of exposure or the experience of confinement" (2019, 65), which recall belittling and traumatic experiences that, as Lacy's wider-oeuvre testifies, have historically united those who identify as woman, or simply "Other" (Braidotti 2013, 15).[ii] By omitting the colour red, Lacy turns the viewer's attention to the otherwise invisible psychological signifiers of her female identity: the "shadows and horrors and pathos" of "a true-life story" in which "only the monsters are questionable" (Frieling, Sanromán, Willsdon 2019, 55).

Conversely, in *The Waterway* this omission is driven by the I.I.I.I's desire for a scientifically accurate portrayal of life underwater, or 'beneath the surface', as red light waves are the first to disappear when the depth of a body of water increases (Hervé and Maillet 2014b, 9). By filtering out red light, the artists conjure a subaquatic world, presented in sci-fi films as "an underwater city" in which the "citizens of Atlanta" are "preserved" by water (Hervé and Maillet 2014b, 10), and in archaeology as "miraculously conserv[ing]" artefacts (Hervé and Maillet 2014b, 9), on land. This

allows the I.I.I.I to think beyond rational, humanist understandings of life and thus to probe at two key ideas: firstly, that outward signs of ageing do not correspond to the life time of an object or subject; and, secondly, that going underwater could propose a cure for eternal youth.

Further breaking with cinematic tradition, the I.I.I.I's critique steps beyond Kristeva's notion of "the abject", that being "the state of being cast off" (1984, 40), because Ondine leaves the human world when she becomes a fish: Ondine is hyper-natural, not supernatural. That is to say, Ondine seeks to integrate herself into a sub-aquatic eco-system through calculated scientific invention rather than to transcend laws of nature or science, which would be supernatural. The I.I.I.I remind us of this with her name, which references the mythical "invisible…counterparts of visible Nature" named Undines (Ondines in French), who "resembl[ed] human beings in shape" but existed in a "world unknown to man" (Hall 2007, 288). In doing so Hervé and Maillet highlight what Lacy calls "older women's cultural invisibility" (2010, 154), because the ageing Ondine is also located on the verge of a "world unknown to man" (Hall 2007, 288). That is to say, as she continues to age, she becomes unseen because invisible to the interests of the patriarchal society in which she lives.

In comparison, Lacy confronts the issue of "invisibility" head on by framing *Under My Skin* within the confines of a small television monitor ('We Are Here', SFMoMA, 2019), which situates her horror one step closer to reality. She removes her 'skin' in a different temporal space to the viewer, but the world in which she exists is not a fictional, cinematic space as imagined by the I.I.I.I; rather, the household television and 8mm home-film format ground her performance in the everyday, void of the grandiose sets and costumes that evoke 'reality' in cinema. This format, not to mention the unexceptional idea that a woman might use a face mask, blurs the boundary between Lacy's performance and the monstrous everyday techniques used by women to achieve and maintain a 'youthful' appearance. Lacy dissolves the "sense of separation" that Mulvey, in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', claims cinema fabricates between on and off-screen worlds (1975, 13), because Lacy's performance questions at what stage the normal becomes the monstrous and vice-versa.

Indeed, both Lacy and the I.I.I.I use cinematic tropes to expose how the image of woman has been constructed and performed through Hollywood screen-culture, an issue brought to the fore by Mulvey in the aforementioned text. In the infamous essay, Mulvey states that "it is the place of the look that defines cinema, the possibility of varying it and exposing it", to the extent that "cinema builds the way [a woman] is to be looked at into a spectacle itself" (1975, 17). Therefore, it is not surprising that the contemporary woman is expected to perform for the gaze; she is expected to repeat that which appears on screen: to wear make up like a second skin, to follow a beauty routine and to resist showing any signs that she is, in fact, mortal, because that would be to undermine the spectacle that her filmic, transcendental identity demands. As we know, a film star never really dies.

However, Mulvey's statement that "cinema builds…" also makes clear that, by using cinematic language, Lacy and the I.I.I.I are able reconstruct the gaze from the point of view of the ageing woman. That is to say, by taking the camera into their own hands, both artists construct their own female gazes which, critically, expose that the very essence of identity is construction. This enables the artists to reveal the now normalised techniques used by the film industry, to quote Lacy, to "shut off", or rather shut up, older women. In classic Hollywood cinema, women are subject to an erotic and objectifying gaze; if a woman is any-thing other than young, passive and 'beautiful' the camera refuses to see her, which is exactly the space that Lacy and the I.I.I.I harness in their respective works.

As Roberta Sassatelli notes in her "Interview with Laura Mulvey: Gender, Gaze and Technology in Film Culture", "Mulvey is…[also] acutely aware that the moment of visual representation is crucial in the formation of gender identities" (2011, 124), which has been complicated, as Lacy and the I.I.I.I reveal, by the slippery boundaries separating actress, on-screen identity and star persona. This is most obvious in Lacy's portrayal of the female Dracula which, in euro-centric visual culture, has served to solidify woman as an outwardly erotic and by extension 'submissive' imagination of Man. In *Under My Skin*, Lacy deconstructs this image to unpeel the performative layers of her female identity, finally revealing that, under her skin, she is a vampire at her core. In doing so Lacy, like the I.I.I.I, proposes that performing the gender identity assigned to her by popular cinema can be a form of emancipation, because it allows her to attain that which she must only ever aspire to be: "doubly dangerous", the immortal image of female beauty "and-like Count Dracula-a seducer *par excellence.* As well as transforming her victims into blood-sucking creatures of the night, she also threatens to seduce their daughters of patriarchy away from their proper gender roles" (Creed 1993, 61). Lacy performs both the monstrous spectre of woman and the sharp-witted feminist showing that, under her skin, woman has the potential to challenge the status quo so long as she dares to bite back.

For Lacy, this means embracing a female identity which recalls Bergson's statement that "to exist is to change, to change is to mature" and "to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly" (Bergson 1922, 8). That is to say, when Lacy bites back she shows that to "mature" into one's womanhood, traditionally represented in the Dracula film by the process of becoming vampire, is not to close the chapter of one's youth but, rather, to recognise that one's identity is a necessarily uncertain and evolving amalgamation of "potentially contradictory" experiences (Braidotti 1994, 4). This allows the artist to resist humanist notions of the knowable, unified subject because we know that Lacy isn't really a vampire in the scary movie sense of the word, but the threat that she poses to "institutions of patriarchal capitalism" (Creed 1993, 61) is just as frightening because it signifies change.

Furthermore, in *Under My Skin*, which Lacy reminds us is *A True-Life Story,* the artist explores how the "male gaze" is routinely embodied through rituals, such as using a face-mask, to expose the patriarchal ideals of beauty that have shaped the construction of (contemporary) woman's identity. For Lacy, this isn't just a horror story, this is a "true-life" "embed[ding of]…memories of violence" within a woman's body (Frieling, Sanromán and Willsdon 2019, 55); it is violent because it enforces a standard of beauty and eternal youth that struggles against the inevitable changes that her body will undergo over time. Like a star on the silver-screen, she is expected to be timeless and unchanging.

Indeed, the "violence" that Lacy references in *Under My Skin* is both *metaphorical*, taking into account centuries of woman's maltreatment, and *literal*, echoing the violation, albeit staged, of Lacy's body during her anti-ageing treatment. This sense of separation between youth and old age, or between growing up and growing old, puts the ageing woman, which biologically speaking is all women, in constant conflict with her body. The patriarchal paradox is complete: like the female Dracula, woman is sexually awakened from her youth but must then dedicate her life, at all costs, to the fulfilment of her desire for eternal youth. Lacy's performance as both woman and vampire, the monster that resides 'under her skin', draws upon the hyperbolic, monstrous imagery associated with the ageing woman to show that if a woman is to keep up with patriarchal beauty standards her body will always be a battleground.

By playing with the trope of the female Dracula, Lacy subverts the sexually and socially submissive role that woman was/is expected to perform. She embodies the predator rather than succumbing to being prey. In doing so, Lacy destabilises the hegemony of the "male gaze", addressing the camera eye-to-eye and reclaiming fangs not as a symbol of erotic male fantasy, as seen in (1970s) horror films, but to assert that she is part of a movement that will not be hidden in the shadows…or behind the kitchen sink. Though her performance is seemingly every-day, Lacy's final toothy reveal shows that that which is normal is not 'natural' and that which is 'natural' is constructed.

Consequently, it appears that Hollywood cinema created a space in which woman was forced to confront gender roles because it revealed, seemingly accidentally, that identity could be a performance, a façade. In euro-centric visual culture the spectre of woman as an erotic and submissive imagination of Man forms an interesting parallel to Rosi Braidotti's "subject 'woman'", who contrary to the former "is not a monolithic essence defined once and for all, but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experience" (1994, 4). The "subject woman" both requires yet defies the existence of binary gender identification, because she cannot exist within, yet cannot exist as a subject without, the rational (read patriarchal) notion of the unified subject. In contrast, the cinematic spectre of woman is simply another "monolithic" masterwork of "Man". Yet, through performance Lacy and the I.I.I.I show that woman can resist this, and thus humanist notions of subjectivity, by performing both herself and her spectre, revealing that He already asks Her to be two.

This crossing of borders is enabled by the "contradictory" nature of the viewing of woman as "a spectacle itself" (Mulvey 1975, 10-17), because the female viewer at once conflates herself with the spectre of woman on screen, if only because of their shared cultural gendering, yet recognises the difference that is roused in her by the fact that she will never fulfil her cinematic representation. In herself, woman (not to mention man, but that's another issue) already exists beyond that which is possible as human(ist); her identity is necessarily mutable and shifting; she is at once defined and set free by the spectre that she is expected to be.

The I.I.I.I interrogate this possibility through a pseudo-documentary, science-fiction lens, which allows the artists to explore notions of post-humanism and the technological 'advancement' of the beauty industry. In *The Waterway*, Ondine attempts to embody the spectre by "using technological intervention upon…living matter", namely the distillation of the carp's genetic material, to "reverse the ageing process" (Hervé and Maillet 2014). However, rather than simply "reformulat[ing] present issues of post-humanity", as Liverpool Biennial state in 'In Focus...(The Waterway)' (2014), the I.I.I.I question whether the post-human is that which goes beyond the human body, or that

which goes beyond humanist definitions of the subject. Ondine's final reintegration into a system of waterways, home to both fish, like Ondine-as-carp, and their predator fishermen, suggests that to be post-human is still to embody humanist, patriarchal cadres of 'scientific progress' and 'advancement'. Within any humanist framework there is always a Man with a hook. Thus, for Ondine, or indeed any woman who buys into "ideals of bodily perfection", "to mutate completely" is still to fulfil the humanist desire for eternal beauty and scientific advancement (Braidotti 2013, 13). Evidently what is important is to embody the "complexities and paradoxes" of womanhood (Braidotti 2013, 13), rather than to seek their total transgression.

Hence, for Lacy "what's important is to politicise yourself as a person and then learn to integrate those politics into everything you do" (2010, 152), in order to avoid internalising dominant patriarchal ideologies. In *The Waterway*, Ondine's perfectly coiffed bob, satin-like complexion, twin set pearls and powder blue cardigan all allude to her internalisation of these patriarchal values. Her appearance implies bodily (not to mention political) control and conservativism, showing that, for Ondine, to grow old is to lose possession of one's body and to give in to genetic programming: a notably anti-humanist prospect. Through this, the I.I.I.I suggest that to grow old is to embody a politics of contingency, which means not knowing what the future holds.

Therefore, for both artists, performance is not used to challenge binary notions of gender identity, per se, but rather to propose that these notions, in their very embodiment and enactment, necessitate fluid, "shifting" identities. In *Under My Skin*, Lacy does not shy away from signifiers that connote her female identity (i.e. her skincare routine); instead, she brings to light the fragile relationship between the spectre of woman and the actuality of keeping that spectre alive. In *The Waterway*, this relationship is further interrogated to expose the absurdity of the beauty industry's quest for eternal youth and the importance of not knowing what the future holds. Indeed, both artists consider female identity as continuous transition, which radically distinguishes their work from feminist (readings of) performance art that treat(s) transition as a categorical change in identity rather than a temporal mutation within an already infinite and at times "contradictory" identity (Braidotti 1994, 4). This allows the artists to think outside of patriarchal, humanist notions of ageing, and indeed being, enabling them to embrace the creative potential of becoming. In doing so, both the I.I.I.I and Suzanne Lacy exploit the image of the spectre of woman to show that, in its very embodiment, the spectre forces the difference that exists within those who identify *as* and that which we *call* woman to come to light. Consequently, their works ask the viewer to embody a politics of contingency because they make clear that we may think we know who woman is today, but we cannot know who she will be tomorrow.

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[i] Lacy's performance, in which the artist peels off a clear facemask as if her own skin, predates Julia Kristeva's Powers of Horror (translated 1982), and more pertinently Barvara Creed's application of Kristeva in The Monstrous Feminine (1993), but equally serves to expose how "abject" imaginations of woman have been shaped and transformed by Hollywood cinema.

[ii] It is worth noting that these feminist issues are frequently brought to the fore in gothic horror films and novels.

Author biography

Kathryn Cutler-MacKenzie is an art historian and artist who is currently undertaking an MA Fine Art at The University of Edinburgh. Over the last year she has studied at LUCA School of Art in Brussels and at The Sorbonne: Paris 1. She has recently exhibited her collage work at The Talbot Rice Gallery in Edinburgh and R.E.M Space in Istanbul, as well as authored a film curation entitled 'Looking at Women: a 101 of feminist cinema' for Neon Eye Productions.

Her research focusses on the relationship between gender, visual culture and translation, which she explores, primarily, through collage, installation and academic writing. This has recently included an examination of the use of translation in the films of indie-wood director Wes Anderson; a survey and analysis of the 'monstrous woman' in cinema and performance art; and a material study of love from the eighteenth century to today.

Cutler-MacKenzie has recently received funding to co-direct an exhibition entitled *Love Line: unfolding love*, which will open in April 2020 at Edinburgh College of Art. The exhibition will bring together a diverse range of artefacts from Edinburgh University's collections with historic and contemporary artistic responses to love.