

Sacred, Sinful, Sold: Can the female form exist within a patriarchal society without being subjected to pornographic or fetishistic gaze?

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Wary, Dog Woman 1994, Paula Rego

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Abstract:

This dissertation asks whether the female form can exist in patriarchal society without being subjected to a pornographic or fetishistic gaze. The answer, explored through art, literature, and culture, is no. From religion to media, objectification is entrenched, but feminist artists challenge these narratives. Change is only possible by disrupting the systems that perpetrate this control.

AUTHORS DECLARATION: *I declare all the material debated in this essay is my own work.*

Can the female form exist within a patriarchal society without being subjected to a pornographic or fetishistic gaze?

To explore this complex question, I will begin with an evaluation of the religious roots of patriarchy and an analysis on how their ideologies shaped western views of women starting with Sandro Botticelli's *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (1487), to analyse how notions of purity and virtue were constructed and fetishized under the male gaze. Additionally, I explore how these ideals are embedded in literature, focusing on William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* and its portrayal of women's roles as shaped by societal norms. By connecting historical frameworks with enduring cultural influences, this study aims to shed light on the persistent impact of patriarchal thought.

A critical part of answering this question is understanding what patriarchy is. Simply defined, a patriarchal society is one dominated and controlled by men. Examining a few global statistics can help explain the gender imbalances indicative of patriarchal systems today. According to the *Global Gender Gap Report 2024* by the World Economic Forum, women only account for 22% of leadership roles worldwide, and just 29% of senior managerial roles (World Economic Forum, 2024). Beyond economics, structural power imbalances manifest in statistics of safety and representation. For example, 1 in 3 women worldwide experiences physical or sexual violence in her lifetime. (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024) Meanwhile, women hold just 26.9% of parliamentary seats globally, limiting their ability to shape laws and policies affecting gender equity. (UN News, 2024)

Long story short: we are in a patriarchy now and have been since the earliest codifications of male authority. I will further investigate the patterns that are not only visible today but have shaped history, embedding systemic inequalities into institutions and influencing how women are portrayed, treated, and exploited. By investigating the intersection of objectification and purity, with an analysis of the historical significance of the witch trials through the lens of Silvia Federici, alongside the works of Carolee Schneemann and Joseph Beuys. These artists explore animality, domination, and the patriarchal tendency to eliminate what it fears. Practices like deer culling serve as a modern metaphor for this need to destroy the uncontrollable. This historical exploration transitions into an examination of the modern era, where I will analyse how patriarchal systems have adapted, employing new methods of control, including beauty standards, pornography and advertising. Through the works of artists such as Sarah Lucas and Vito Acconci, I will consider how the female form continues to be objectified and commodified today, and the often-blurry line between objectification and reclamation. I will explore how have artists have both contributed to the normalisation of this narrative as well as resisted it, and ultimately, how the female form has been shaped by patriarchal structures, questioning whether it is truly possible to escape the pornographic and fetishistic gaze or if adaptation to these systems is the only option.

Chapter 1: The Female Form in Religion, SACRED VS OBJECTIFIED.

To begin with one of the most iconized women in history, not because of who she was but because of what she represented, the divine feminine, a symbol of purity, modesty and motherhood, the famous virgin who carried God's son; Mary. The Virgin Mary has been introduced to us in many cultures in many forms throughout history and remains a symbol of purity. Mary's modesty, reflected in her humility, obedience, and quiet submission to God's will, became symbolic of the ideal Christian virtues and the paradox of purity and motherhood despite the obvious contradiction (Carroll, 2021, p.6). Mary stands as a symbol of obedience and passivity for God's plan and therefore it could be argued that that in our earlier history and art, and idolisation of this representation of purity, the Virgin Mary acts as a blueprint for some of our earliest fetishisation of femininity. This idea can be explored through the analysis of the portrait of the Virgin Mary by Sandro Botticelli, *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (1487) (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1: *Madonna of the Pomegranate*, Botticelli, 1487

In *Madonna of the Pomegranate*, Botticelli portrays the Virgin Mary cloaked in blue, with a delicate cloth draped over her head, cradling her child, the infant Jesus, who holds a pomegranate. As noted by George Ferguson in *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art 1954*, the pomegranate carries symbolic meaning. Its abundance of seeds signifies fertility, while its associations with immortality and resurrection add layers of spiritual depth. Through this symbolism, Botticelli underscores Mary's fertility, positioning her at the centre of a circular frame, a common motif in spiritual art that conveys wholeness and balance. This composition naturally draws the viewer's gaze to the heart of the painting. The use of circular frames in spiritual art often mirrors the form of a halo, reinforcing themes of divinity. Above Mary, a golden oval encircles her head, suggesting her angelic nature or a likeness to an angel. Behind her, a muted crowd holds books, their subdued tones contrasting with Mary's presence. She appears pale and glowing, a characteristic frequently associated with Mary in artistic depictions, as Ferguson explains, aligning with early Christian ideals that linked fairness with purity.

The Male Gaze theory, introduced by British film theorist Laura Mulvey in her seminal 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, critiques how visual media, particularly film, depict women from a predominantly masculine and heterosexual perspective that centres male pleasure. Mulvey argues that women are often portrayed as passive objects for an implied male viewer, existing to be observed and controlled. Although rooted in the 1970s, this framework remains relevant for analysing media across different eras and has been explored by many artists and theorists in various contexts.

When applying the gaze to Botticelli's portrayal of Mary, she becomes less of an individual and more of a constructed archetype of femininity: pure, maternal, subservient. These qualities, deeply ingrained in patriarchal ideals, offer a deeper insight into the persecution and idealization shaping womanhood of the era. By using this iconized figure as a template for femininity we can further explore the premise of this potential fetishisation, through the male gaze. In *Madonna of the Pomegranate*, Mary's serene pose and expression, coupled with the symbolic themes of purity and fertility, position her as an object of angelic perfection. This depiction reflects not an inherent truth, but a male defined ideal of 'divine feminine' as interpreted by male artist. Mary, according to Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, becomes an object to be visually consumed under the brush of Botticelli, sanctified yet controlled through the very values celebrated in her imagery.

Artists like Sandro Botticelli, operating within a male-dominated cultural and religious framework, present Mary as a constructed ideal of femininity and her depiction then reinforces patriarchal ideals, emphasizing traits like submission, motherhood, and purity, as well as being modest and untouchable. (Obelisk Art History, n.d.) This portrayal creates a contradiction: Mary is venerated as a religious icon while also being

consumed as an idealised, unattainable image. This duality, idolisation and fetishisation, which involves elevating Mary into an exaggerated, objectified symbol of unattainable ideals, form a patriarchal outline for womanhood rooted in modesty and self-sacrifice, beginning with early Christian iconography and continuing through Western art history.

An example of this cultural mindset, over a century later is evident in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1600), which explores themes of love, deceit, and societal expectations, particularly through the story of Claudio and Hero. Claudio, misled by Don John, suspects his fiancée Hero of unfaithfulness, reflecting early Christian concerns with chastity and the patriarchal fetishisation of female purity. This ideal, like such previous stated iconography, enforces the notion that women should remain "pure" for marriage, with their value tied to perceived modesty. Hero's fate, considered more redeemable dead than dishonoured, exemplifies the extreme consequences of these gendered expectations. Despite being written centuries ago, the play echoes the enduring legacies of cultural pressures in womanhood. The scene depicting Hero's confrontation is illustrated in Peter Simon's *Hero Fainting in Church*, 1789 (**Figure 2**), an etching that visually captures a key moment in the story, where Hero faints after being publicly confronted about her chastity. The etching dramatizes a key confrontational moment in the play, visually aligning with the themes of female purity and societal judgment.



Figure 2: Hero Fainting in Church, Simon, 1789

‘Give not this rotten orange to your friend’ (Much Ado About Nothing, 4. 1. 31) spoken by character Don John amidst this conflict symbolizes a woman who appears pure but is suspected of having a 'scandalous' past. This reflects longstanding societal beliefs that women should remain untouched and pure until they are corrupted by male interaction, reinforcing a deep-seated cultural narrative where female virtue is scrutinized and judged based on perceived purity (Shaw, 2017). This same idea is echoed into contemporary advertisement, where women's bodies are commodified and marketed, presenting them as objects of desire meant to 'ripen' and be consumed (Adams, 2020). Much like the 'rotten orange', the portrayal of women's purity in these contexts is linked to how society expected them to maintain an idealized image, only to be judged harshly if they didn't abide, a cycle evident in Shakespeare's literature and one that can be explored through feminist theory such as Mulvey's concept of the male gaze.

Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, like all creative works, reflects the cultural, social, and religious values of its time. Creative expression is always shaped by the context in which it is produced, and this play is no exception. The religious and societal beliefs of Elizabethan England particularly the emphasis on gender roles, honour, and morality, are woven into the narrative and themes of the play. (Smith 2016, P.23), This context reinforces the idea that art and literature are inherently influenced by the realities and ideologies of their era which reinforce this historical pattern of misogyny. Ritualised, and normalised through art and literature. The association of fruit with temptation and sin has deep roots in early Christian symbolism, particularly the story of Adam and Eve where the fruit, often depicted as an apple, symbolizes temptation and knowledge, marking the link between women and sin. (Hodge, 2010; Taylor, 1993) As noted in George Watt's *The Fallen Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1993), the "fallen woman" archetype, represents women who transgress societal norms as "fallen" from purity and Eve's act of eating the fruit has traditionally been interpreted as succumbing to temptation, positioning women as morally vulnerable and susceptible to corruption. This dual symbolism, purity before consumption and sin after, reinforces a cultural narrative where women are expected to remain pure yet are simultaneously sexualized, turning their bodies into objects of fetishisation and control, with their identities continually shaped by these conflicting projections.

Additionally, Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990) explores how patriarchal forces shift focus to the beauty industry as feminist movements challenge traditional norms, using these historical representations to maintain control over women's bodies (Wolf, 1990). This modern manipulation of beauty standards and bodily control can connect back to religious iconography like the Virgin Mary, this comparison reveals how the objectification and dehumanisation of women persist in both cultural narratives and societal practices. So how does this blueprint set women up for a 'fall' as we progress into the evolution of modern patriarchy, capitalism and by correlation, the witch trials?

Chapter 2: TAMING THE WILD BEAST

To explore the historical roots of patriarchy in the west, I will draw on the literature of Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) as my frame to examine key works in art and history. Federici provides critical insights into how modern capitalism emerged through the subjection of women and nature and the inherent disconnect from it, driven by the combined forces of religion and male dominance. This literature reveals how these systems not only devalued women and commodified their labour but how they remain today.

A key example of these themes is Joseph Beuys' performance *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974) (**Figure 3**). In this performance, Beuys confines himself in a New York gallery space for three days with a wild coyote. Wrapped in felt, he observes the animal, which gradually grows more comfortable with him, eventually engaging with the artist directly. The performance culminates in a moment of mutual understanding and peaceful interaction. This piece critiques American culture and politics, with the coyote representing Indigenous communities and their resistance to the Western colonial influence. Full of symbolism, the performance aims to reconcile the fractured relationship between humans and the natural world, while highlighting the violent histories that severed those bonds (Tisdall, 2008).



Figure 3: *I Like America and America Likes Me*, Beuys, 1974

Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* offers a parallel perspective, as she explores how women were historically aligned with nature and subsequently targeted during the witch trials, a process she links to the broader colonisation of lands and people. This connection is evident in Beuys' performance, which examines the patriarchal mindset that seeks to control what is feared or not understood. By considering Federici's perspective on women as untamed and deeply connected to nature, we can equate the treatment of land, nature, and women within a patriarchal framework. This lens also resonates with the observations of scholars such as Gerda Lerner, who traces patriarchy's origins to the need to dominate perceived threats and own land.

Romani people, like witches and tribal communities in regions such as Africa, have historically embodied lifestyles that challenge patriarchal and capitalist norms. As Ian Hancock discusses in *We Are the Romani People* (2002), the language used to describe Romani communities often carries animalistic undertones, reflecting a dehumanising patriarchal fear of the "untamed." This aligns with Gerda Lerner's analysis of patriarchy's historical roots in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986), where she highlights how land ownership became a cornerstone of patriarchal and capitalist structures. As travellers, Romani communities inherently reject the principle of land ownership, placing them in direct opposition to these systems. This fundamental conflict helps explain the colonisation and historical hostility aimed at such groups.

Similarly, colonisation and the Westernisation of African tribal societies represent an extension of this patriarchal agenda. Many of these communities, which lived closely with the land and maintained egalitarian practices, were dehumanised, fetishised, and forced to conform to Western norms. Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann, in her article *Under Imperial Eyes: Black Bodies, Buttocks, and Breasts* (2012), highlights how women in these societies were sexualised and objectified, further cementing their "otherness." This systemic destruction of cultures that exist beyond Westernisation reveals the patriarchal system's deep fear of what it cannot control, be it women, nature, or communities that resist its ideals. This need to regulate and discipline the 'untamed' whether land, animals, or the female body reflects a long-standing patriarchal tendency to assert dominance over what is seen as wild or ungovernable. As Federici and other scholars suggest, women's association with nature and fertility rendered them a perceived threat within these systems, a notion further explored through the witch trials and their enduring impact on modern societal norms.

This framework of taming extends beyond Beuys' performance into practices such as deer culling in the UK, where human interventions cause ecological imbalance, necessitating "corrective" violence. (Lewis and Parr, 2023) This is an example of man-made solutions to man-made problems in a man-made society. Because humanity eradicated the deer's natural predators, humans now assume responsibility for population control through more violence; an approach that mirrors the events in the

European witch trials, which, as argued by Federici, saw women's bodies, sexuality and power inherently threatening, leading to their punishment and elimination.

The witch...as the embodiment of a world of female subjects that capitalism had to destroy: the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone, the Obeha woman who poisoned the master's food and inspired the slaves to revolt.
(Federici, 2004, p.1)

Federici argues that during the rise of capitalism, women's bodies and reproductive labour were controlled in the same way as land and natural resources. Deer, managed and culled due to the absence of natural predators, are similarly "domesticated" by humans for environmental management, (Lewis and Parr, 2023) mirroring how women were "managed" to serve patriarchal and capitalist systems. Federici's ideas align with this perspective in that women were seen as resources for producing children, subject to restrictive societal roles that mirror how animals are bred and culled for human needs. This perspective highlights how patriarchal systems devalue both women and animals, treating them primarily as tools for men's benefit. The consumption and control of both women and animals draw clear parallels, particularly in terms of edibility, where women's bodies, much like animals, have been commodified for their reproductive and sexual function. As we move toward the analysis of fetishisation and the pornographic gaze, these historical forms of control connect directly to how women's sexuality is objectified, this sets the stage for examining works like Carolee Schneemann's *Infinity Kisses*, (**Figure 4**) where these themes are explored in more depth.

Infinity Kisses (1981-1987) consists of a series of photographs of the artist being awoken by her cat, these often-undistinguishable photographs are displayed in glass and capture a type of intimacy often dismissed as taboo. (Thackara, 2018). This exploration into interspecies communication is discussed in an interview by Thackara, where Schneemann discussed her lifelong intimate bond with her cats and the disturbing historical context of the witch trials, where women were subjected to horrific torture methods, including a method where a kittens would be used to harm women internally. Schneemann stated in this interview with Thackara in 2018 that 'Cats were cast as feminine surrogates, because they were 'monstrous, powerful, and beyond male control.' This association reveals the deeply ingrained gendered symbolism attributed to animals like cats, which have long represented the patriarchal fear of the untamed and uncontrollable feminine. (Thackara, 2018).



Figure 4: *Infinity Kisses*, Schneemann, 1981-1987

Schneemann's work aligns with feminist discourse that examines the recurring motif of control within the patriarchy. Like Joseph Beuys, whose performance sought to challenge humanity's assumed dominion over nature, Schneemann's art resists the idea that man lies above nature. Instead, she embraces the kinship between women and animals, highlighting shared histories of subjugation and resilience.

Schneemann's *Infinity Kisses* not only acknowledges this shared struggle but also reclaims the bond between women and animals as a source of strength and defiance.

The writings and art of our culture are held accountable for reflecting the time, place, and values in which they were created. Art reflects the artist, their environment, and the dominant ideologies of their era. For instance, in early periods when commercial art was largely a male and religiously dominated field (Hessel, 2023, P.4), the art that emerged epitomized the male gaze, reinforcing patriarchal narratives. These works tell us the stories of those who held power, often sidelining other perspectives. The role of the artist has always been to reflect their surroundings and engage with the truths of their time. As John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing*, (1972) "Art, when really understood, is the province of every human being." This idea democratizes the role of the artist, framing them as facilitators of universal truths rather than elite creators. It positions art as a tool to question, challenge, and ultimately reshape cultural norms. Female artists, like Schneemann, throughout history, particularly during various waves of feminism, have embraced this role to resist systems of control and objectification over their bodies.

As an artist who incorporates feminist theory into much of my practice, I find the work of artists like Schneemann invaluable. Her ability to directly confront patriarchal oppression is instrumental in changing the language through which such systems are critiqued and understood. How can we expect to exist within a patriarchy while also easily accessing unbiased information that exposes it, when such critique inherently threatens the system itself? Artists like Schneemann create spaces for these critiques by reclaiming the feminine gaze and embracing labels like the "crazy cat lady". These identities, often dismissed or underestimated, allow their work to exist undetected as a form of defiance. It is through these acts of resistance that we challenge the systems that restrict us, fostering new ways of seeing and understanding that inspire others to do so too.

To further examine the connection between women and animals in patriarchal narratives, and the depiction of women as 'beasts', Paula Rego's *Dog Women*, 1994 (**Figure 5**), portrays a woman in a dog-like pose, confronting the fetishised and submissive female archetype. As discussed in *The Art of Story* (2019) by Deryn Rees-Jones and Rego this portrayal acts as a pointed critique of the systems that perpetuate and enforce these roles. Rego's deliberate choice of animalistic imagery challenges

traditional representations of women, subverting expectations and reclaiming agency within these narratives.



Figure 5: *Dog Woman*, Rego, 1994

Paula Rego's *Dog Woman* reflects on domesticity through raw, animalistic poses modelled by her husband's nurse. These gestures challenge traditional portrayals of women, presenting them as untamed and instinctual rather than submissive. Rego's muted colour palette enhances the stark emotional weight of the piece, contrasting with its primal intensity. Tied to her broader critique of societal structures, *Dog Woman* stands out for its depiction of power and resistance within the domestic sphere. The snarling, growling expression of the figure draws attention, capturing the

grotesque and animalistic traits that dominate the painting. This creates a powerful connection between woman and beast. Rego's women communicate their narratives through body language, as Deryn Rees-Jones notes (*Rego and Warner*, 2019). The crouching and sprawling poses express unspoken stories of resilience, subjugation, and rebellion. These physical gestures reflect the silent struggles women face in domestic life, adding significant depth to the work.

From the religious template to the art and literature explored, we see recurring themes of control aimed at what society fears: animals, nature, women, and communities deeply connected to these. Methods of control such as capitalism, the witch trials, colonisation, domestication, and even culling have historically been used to assert dominance over all four, shaping societal norms to reinforce a hierarchical system. This framework extends to the pornographic and fetishistic gaze, where women and animals are commodified and marketed for their "edibility" or usefulness. Both are objectified, consumed, and reduced to products of desire, reinforcing the idea that they are "less than" and subject to domination. This gaze perpetuates a worldview that dehumanizes both, conflating the animalistic with the feminine and continuing the cycle of fear-driven control and exploitation.

Essentially, by analysing events such as the witch trials alongside the arts of Schneemann and Beuys we can come to the conclusion that by existing within a patriarchy, anything that challenges the foundations of this order is subject to this kind of objectification. The pornographic gaze arguably is a way in which man objectifies what it fears, and the fetishistic gaze follows these subservient blueprints set up by society and ingrained through art and literature. These frameworks help to maintain patriarchal power by reducing women and animals to mere objects of desire, reinforcing their roles within a hierarchical structure. This setup contributes to a worldview that devalues autonomy and perpetuates cycles of control and exploitation.

Chapter 3: PERFORMING FOR THE GAZE, From Canvas to Clickbait

Having explored the historical roots and impacts of an extreme version of misogyny, we can now proceed to examine how that may transfer to society today. Fetishistic gaze remains deeply ingrained in modern society, as Naomi Wolf explains in *The Beauty Myth*, (1990), feminism often spurs counter patterns of distraction such as the beauty industries focus on unattainable ideals to control women. For example, during the suffragette's movement of the 1920's, when women achieved significant progress with voting rights (Crawford 2023) the 'flapper girl' ideal emerged, emphasising a slim figure associated with the jazz age (Konstantinovsky, 2022).

In contrast, the 1950's there was a strong societal push towards domesticity, reinforcing the archetype of the housewife following World War 2, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) critiques this era, detailing how women were pressured to conform to traditional roles, leaving their jobs to focus on family life and home management. This era's beauty standard celebrated fuller hourglass figures, and adverts for weight gaining pills were gaining popularity, an example of one of these adverts, from 1948 (**Figure 6**) depicts a woman, smiling at the camera, hands on waist with a speech bubble detailing her desire to appeal to a male gaze. By the 1960s, feminist progress began to challenge these norms, bringing some advancements like more equitable pay and workplace rights. This period also marked a cultural shift towards thinness as the new beauty standard, with models like Twiggy rising as fashion icons (Omnia, 2020; Retrowaste, 2019). Advertisements from this time increasingly targeted weight loss, using, commonly, bizarre claims about weight control, such as sugar increasing energy and suppressing appetite, illustrating how weight loss became a tool of control once again (Vintage News Daily, 2022). This cycle illustrates how societal progress for women often coincides with thinness and new forms of oppression tied to beauty. And so, the pattern presents itself.

With this pattern in mind, we can examine a modern example: the rise of Ozempic use among celebrities in 2024, which has popularized rapid weight loss. (Manavis, 2024) This trend signals a return to the infamous 1990s "heroin chic" aesthetic, where extreme thinness was glorified. (Tweedy, 2024) The timing of this shift is significant, coinciding with political events such as the re-election campaign of Donald Trump in America and the resurgence of fourth-wave feminism through movements like #MeToo. (Simmons, 2024) These shifts in beauty standards often emerge during times of feminist progress, or protest, suggesting a recurring pattern of control over women's bodies as a reaction and a distraction to their increasing empowerment.

Globally, the fight for women's rights remains urgent. For example, in Afghanistan, bans on women speaking in public spaces and restrictions on education exemplify the broader issue of controlling women's autonomy. (Limaye, 2024) This connects directly to Naomi Wolf's analysis in *The Beauty Myth* (1990), where she argues that beauty

standards are weaponized to distract women and suppress their pursuit of equality. When feminism begins to make strides, societal structures push back, using bodily control as a subtle but pervasive method of suppression. (Wolf, 1991)



**MEN
WOULDN'T
LOOK AT ME
WHEN I WAS
SKINNY**

but...

**Since I Gained 10 Pounds
This New, Easy Way
I Have All the Dates I Want**

NOW there's no need to be "skinny" and friendless, even if you never could gain an ounce before. Here's a new, easy treatment that is giving thousands attractive flesh—in just a few weeks!

Doctors for years have prescribed yeast to build up health. But now, with this new yeast discovery in little tablets, you can get far greater tonic results—regain health, and also put on pounds of firm flesh, enticing curves—and in a far shorter time.

Not only are thousands quickly gaining beauty-bringing pounds, but also clear skin, freedom from indigestion and constipation, new pep.

Concentrated 7 times

This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is made from specially cultured brewers' ale yeast imported from Europe—the richest yeast known—which by a new process is concentrated 7 times—made 7 times more powerful.

But that is not all! This super-rich yeast is ironized with 3 special kinds of iron which strengthen the blood, add energy.

Day after day, as you take Ironized Yeast tablets, watch flat chest develop, skinny limbs round out attractively. Skin clears to beauty, new health comes—you're an entirely new person.

Results guaranteed

No matter how skinny and weak you may be, or how long you have been that way, this marvelous new Ironized Yeast should build you up in a few short weeks as it has thousands. If you are not delighted with the results of the very first package, your money will be instantly refunded.

Special FREE offer!

To start you building up your health right away, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body," by a well-known authority. Remember, results are guaranteed with the very first package—or money refunded. At all druggists, Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept. 288, Atlanta, Ga.

Posed by professional model

Figure 6: Weight Pill Advertisement, 1948

The 4B feminist movement, which originated in South Korea in 2019, offers a compelling case study. It arose in response to digital sex crimes, such as spy-cam scandals and AI-generated pornography, (Jung, 2023) and has gained momentum as a critique of patriarchal control. In 2024, the movement has seen renewed relevance amidst fears of restrictive laws targeting women's rights in the U.S., such as those regarding reproductive freedom. This illustrates the cyclical battle for autonomy: when women gain power, society retaliates with measures to reassert control, whether through legislation or societal pressures like beauty standards.

These patterns echo historic forms of control, such as the witch trials and restrictive religious iconography, where women's bodies and voices were sites of surveillance and suppression. Today, this control manifests in more subtle yet pervasive ways, shaping societal expectations to align with fetishistic and pornographic ideals. Naomi Wolf's insights underscore the intersection between body politics and power, framing extreme thinness as a tool for maintaining dominance over women's agency. This leads us to a critical modern revelation: advertising. Ads are omnipresent and profoundly influential, shaping public perceptions of beauty and power. They function as a key mechanism in reinforcing societal control through aspirational imagery and unattainable ideals (Adams, 2003). Carol Adams' *Pornography of Meat* (2020) explores how advertising objectifies women in ways that parallel how it commodifies animals. This concept is central to her analysis of the use of women's bodies in marketing, which dehumanizes them, turning them into objects akin to meat, consumable, disposable, and devoid of agency.

In this discussion, I will explore two controversial advertising campaigns from Burger King and Arby's from 2009 that exemplify the use of sexual innuendo to objectify women, even in the absence of their physical presence. These campaigns will be analysed using Carol J. Adams' framework of the pornographic gaze and contrasted with Sarah Lucas's *Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs* (1996), a feminist artwork that directly confronts such objectification. Lucas's work challenges the commodification of women's bodies by juxtaposing them with food imagery, critiquing the reduction of women to mere objects of desire. Through this analysis, I aim to highlight how advertising campaigns and art alike can perpetuate a culture of objectification and control, and how feminist perspectives like Lucas's provide important counter-narratives to these pervasive messages.

A Burger King advertisement, from 2009 (**Figure 7**) features a woman, mouth ajar, about to eat a burger the brand uses overt sexual innuendo, particularly with the exaggerated keyword "BLOW," the red lips, the surprised expression of the woman, and the intentional angle of the burger. This composition encourages viewers to interpret the advertisement through a pornographic lens, framing the product in a way that merges sexual desire with consumption. "Sex sells", as a concept, explains how these visual



Figure 7: Burger King Advertisement, 2009



Figure 8: Arby's Advertisement, 2009

cues bypass rational thought, embedding themselves in our subconscious to reinforce a cultural association between women and sexualized consumption. (Reichert and Lambiase, 2013)

This theme blends into the cultural background, normalizing the treatment of women as consumable objects. According to Adams, this is not accidental: such imagery connects the fragmentation of women's bodies to the commodification of animals, perpetuating a hierarchical structure where both are dehumanized and reduced to products.

In the second campaign, from Arby's, (2009) (**Figure 8**) we see a similar approach. This advertisement goes further by replacing the female form entirely with food. Two burger buns are positioned to resemble breasts, and the accompanying text uses suggestive language alongside the colour red, a frequent tool in advertising to direct attention and evoke desire (Reichert and Lambiase, 2013). While the ad lacks an actual woman, the use of food to mimic the female body continues the "sex sells" ideology. This substitution reinforces the idea that food and women are interchangeable objects for consumption, an argument Adams explores in *The Pornography of Meat* (2020). She notes that such imagery links the exploitation of women and animals, where both are stripped of individuality and displayed as fragmented, sexualized parts, ready for consumption.

These advertisements can be contrasted with Sarah Lucas's *Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs* (1996) (**Figure 9**), a work that also uses food and the female form but in a way that confronts, rather than conforms to, the male gaze. In this piece, Lucas sits slouched in a chair, legs spread wide in a traditionally masculine pose. Her androgynous hairstyle, the casual placement of a cigarette pack beside her, and her direct, unwavering gaze subvert traditional depictions of femininity. Over her chest, Lucas has placed two fried eggs, mimicking breasts in a crude, humorous way. This composition challenges the fetishisation of women's bodies, mocking the absurdity of such objectification. Unlike the advertisements, which use food to reinforce the commodification of women, Lucas's work uses food to expose and ridicule the same dynamic.

The differences between these approaches are important. In the Arby's campaign, the burger buns are positioned to resemble breasts, reducing the female form to an object of desire that exists solely for consumption. In Lucas's self-portrait, the fried eggs parody this reduction, highlighting the absurdity of treating women's bodies as fragmented, consumable parts. Similarly, while the Burger King advertisement isolates a woman's mouth, Lucas presents her body as whole and autonomous, a direct challenge to the fragmentation that is central to the pornographic gaze. Her direct, confrontational stare asserts agency, forcing the viewer to confront their own assumptions and biases, whereas the advertisements rely on this passive consumption to sell a product.



Figure 9: Self-portrait with Fried Eggs, Lucas, 1996

Lucas's work is significant because it draws attention to the very mechanisms by which objectification becomes normalized, creating based on her observations of the world around her, holding a mirror to the themes that slip into the subconscious through media and advertising. These campaigns, subtle as they may seem, reflect a broader societal issue: the normalization of the pornographic gaze and its impact on the perception and treatment of women.

This critique can also be extended to the work of Vito Acconci, whose performance piece *Seedbed* (1972) (**Figure 10**) confronts the voyeuristic power dynamics inherent in the gaze. In *Seedbed*, Acconci collapses the boundary between observer and observed, forcing his audience to confront the fetishistic underpinnings of their engagement. Both Lucas and Acconci reveal how entrenched these power structures are, not only in art but in everyday media, such as advertisements. While artists like Lucas create spaces to resist and subvert these dynamics, campaigns like those from Burger King and Arby's perpetuate and reinforce them, embedding the pornographic gaze further into societal norms.



Figure 10: *Seedbed*, Acconci, 1972

Ultimately, this analysis underscores the importance of feminist art in challenging the normalization of objectification in patriarchal media. By confronting these dynamics head-on, Lucas and others expose the mechanisms of control and commodification that advertising often seeks to conceal.

The relevance of Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* lies in its exploration of the relationship between artist and audience, a dynamic that is often overlooked. (Jones, 1998). In this performance, Acconci positioned himself beneath a ramp in a gallery space, concealed from the audience's view. While hidden, he masturbated and whispered his sexual fantasies about the visitors above him. This created an intensely unsettling atmosphere, forcing an uncomfortable sense of intimacy between the artist and the viewers, who were unwillingly implicated in his performance. By placing himself in a submissive position, Acconci simultaneously ceded and asserted power, transforming the gallery into a space of discomfort, voyeurism, and blurred boundaries.

This performance mirrors tensions present in contemporary society, particularly on platforms like OnlyFans. OnlyFans, a subscription-based platform marketed as shifting power from the adult entertainment industry to individual sex workers, (University of Sunderland, 2021) and parallels *Seedbed* in its interplay of voyeurism, performance, and power dynamics. While Acconci's sexual performance critiques societal norms, models on OnlyFans actively curate and perform their sexuality, ostensibly in pursuit of empowerment. This raises the critical question of whether this helps women in escaping the pornographic gaze, or simply an adaptation to a system that will sexualize them regardless?

Unlike the passive objectification of women in advertising, OnlyFans models maintain a degree of control over how their image is presented. However, this control does not necessarily equate to liberation (University of Sunderland, 2021). Instead, platforms like OnlyFans may reflect a repackaging of patriarchal structures in which the burden of navigating the gaze has shifted onto women themselves. This creates a discourse around empowerment versus objectification, but the boundaries between the two are murky. Both creator and consumer are locked in a relationship of voyeurism, highlighting the persistent influence of the pornographic gaze. As a method of adaptation to these patriarchal dynamics, platforms like OnlyFans may seem functional; as a method of distraction, they are equally effective, offering the illusion of agency while reinforcing the systems they claim to subvert.

To conclude and answer the question: Can the female form exist within patriarchal society without being subjected to a pornographic or fetishistic gaze? The short answer is no. As demonstrated through art and culture across history, intentional or unintentional control over women has been a recurring theme. From the origins of Christianity and the iconography of Mary, representing purity and submission, to Shakespearean literature, we see the persistent themes of control, fetishisation, and an obsession with purity. These ideas present into the artwork and representations of their respective periods.

Religious fixations fuelled phenomena such as the European witch trials, where control over land, power, and women intertwined with patriarchal interpretations of doctrine. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* helps us understand the role of artists in reflecting their time, exposing the biases and gaze of the creators themselves. This persistent ritualization of the female form in art, history, and representation has undeniably reinforced this objectification. Through the literature of Silvia Federici, Naomi Wolf, and Laura Mulvey, alongside, articles on colonisation outside of West, it becomes clear how the global, patriarchal treatment of women parallels the historical treatment of animals, hunted, domesticated and exploited. While Wolf critiques the beauty industry as a male-dominated enterprise perpetuating control. Mulvey's analysis of the male gaze further reveals how media sustains this objectification.

Artists such as Paula Rego explore the animalization and domestication of women through pose, Sarah Lucas confronts and consequently protests the media's construction of femininity, and performance artists like Joseph Beuys and Vito Acconci explore social dynamics and their broader cultural implications. Carolee Schneemann, in particular, emphasizes the connection between the exploitation of animals and women, tracing these practices back to the origins of . Ultimately, under a patriarchy, women are continually subjected to objectification and fetishisation. This stems from systemic structures that equate women with pornography and animal likeness, as depicted through art, media, and commonly today, advertisement, which can be seen as a major tool for exploitation. While historical treatment of women has been extreme, it is inspiring to see the female artists that reject these narratives and reclaim their representations through their work. Thus, confirming that it is only through disrupting these patriarchal systems that the female form might one day exist free from these harmful gazes.

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