

Nineteenth-Century Contexts

An Interdisciplinary Journal

ISSN: 0890-5495 (Print) 1477-2663 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gncc20>

Victorian erotic photographs and the intimate public sphere

Rachel Teukolsky

To cite this article: Rachel Teukolsky (2020): Victorian erotic photographs and the intimate public sphere, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, DOI: [10.1080/08905495.2020.1733321](https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2020.1733321)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2020.1733321>



Published online: 02 Mar 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 32



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Victorian erotic photographs and the intimate public sphere

Rachel Teukolsky

Department of English, Vanderbilt University, Nashville TN, USA

This essay analyzes some ambiguous forms of female eroticism offered by the late-Victorian stereograph.¹ While nineteenth-century photography marketed explicit sexual content almost from its inception, I focus instead on the titillating softcore imagery that began to be mass-produced with the expansion of stereoscopy in the 1880s and 1890s. These scenes are almost laughably tame to contemporary eyes, and might not even be recognizable to us as erotic. Yet they produce a revealing vision of late-Victorian sexual desire and mores – a vision complicated by the rise of late-century feminism and female economic power. Illicit scenes of women showing off their legs in boudoirs might seem to appeal directly to the male gaze, as women expose their bodies for a presumed masculine viewer. But the specter of female agency also haunts these scenes of a softcore imaginary, in the form of female actors, implied female viewers, and the same-sex eroticization of the domestic space.

The stereoscope was a “philosophical toy” that used photographs to cater to visual and tactile pleasures. The device was first invented in 1838 as a scientific experiment proving the binocularity of human vision, but it quickly became a mass-market sensation.² Users inserted a stereograph, twinned photos of a slightly discrepant image, into the machine and then peeped into the eyepiece, where the image leaped into startling three dimensionality. The dual photos approximated human binocular vision by imitating the distance between the human eyes, and so created the depth illusion. Stereographs typically depicted places, as I have discussed elsewhere; the volumetric illusion was well suited to creating the you-are-there effect of virtual travel (Teukolsky 2020). But all types of photographic imagery were reproduced in stereographic form, from portraits, to scientific specimens, to artworks, to pornography. Stereographs were produced in the millions in the nineteenth century: they were the era’s most widespread, popular vehicle for photography. Given that they created pleasurable depth effects grounded in bodily sensations, stereographs also complemented erotic and pornographic subjects, enhancing their titillating effects. Charles Baudelaire made the link in his well-known 1859 rant against photography:

It was not long before thousands of greedy eyes were glued to the peepholes of the stereoscope, as though they were the skylights of the infinite. The love of obscenity, which is as vigorous a growth in the heart of natural man as self-love, could not let slip such a glorious opportunity for its own satisfaction. (1980, 87)

Baudelaire speaks both literally and metaphorically: the act of peeping at an obscene stereograph becomes the fitting symbol for bourgeois narcissism, voyeuristic self-love.

Mildly erotic or obscene stereoviews were cheap, mass-produced objects that have received little scholarly attention.³ Yet I will argue that they evoke some of the dramatic political and economic transformations upending late-Victorian gender relations. My approach takes its cue from Lauren Berlant's *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997). Berlant studies American conservatism of the 1980s and 1990s by focusing on the throwaway, ephemeral objects of modern visual culture, what she calls a "counterpolitics of the silly object" (1997, 12). She defines an "intimate public sphere" as the place where sexuality, privacy, and citizenship intersect. Personal life took on newly political dimensions in the 1980s, Berlant argues, with the rise of Reaganism and identity politics. But scholars of nineteenth-century England and America will recognize many of the phenomena she outlines, as the domestic realm of the earlier era was also fraught with political force fields of contention and constraint. The Reagan era in fact shows striking similarities to the Victorian: Berlant's book "asks why a conservative politics that maintains the sacredness of privacy, the virtue of the free market, and the immorality of state overregulation contradicts everything it believes when it comes to issues of intimacy" (5). The Victorian era, too, celebrated free trade and sanctified the domestic realm, even while it intensely policed behaviors of sex and gender.⁴ This essay will likewise trace some of the complicated ways that conservative, erotic visual tropes in the stereoscope produced unexpected channels of female intimacy and female agency.

The "silly object" of the comic, domestic stereoview needs to be seen through the lens of the hard truths for women in the late nineteenth century. These included complete disenfranchisement; the difficulty of divorce; lack of access to the professions; unequal and limited educational opportunities; few avenues for income; shocking numbers of prostitution; and a population imbalance creating "the redundant women" who would never be supported through marriage (see Marks 1990; Jeffreys 1997, among others). These pressures expressed themselves in bawdy pop-culture humor, in media objects largely produced by men. Times of political ferment have often inspired low-culture responses in both humor and pornography, from the French Revolution to the English radical moment of the 1820s (see Hunt 1993; McCalman 1988). A comic stereoview featuring a woman's legs, or a wedding gone wrong, might seem cheerfully harmless. But the blunt force shaping Victorian gender behaviors became starkly visible in the era of militant feminism that directly followed, when women campaigning for the vote committed acts of riot, property damage, and arson, went on hunger strikes and endured forced feedings in prison, broke shop windows and stabbed paintings in museums. This violent future points back toward the implied brutality undergirding the Victorian gender system: its coming haunts the laughing, perverse scenarios depicting men and women in the 1890s.

The essay first explores some critical paradigms for understanding the exposed female leg in the nineteenth-century photograph, from Laura Mulvey and Abigail Solomon-Godeau to the female observer theorized by Linda Williams. While women baring their legs in comic bedroom scenarios apparently catered to a male heterosexual gaze, these images overlapped with proto-feminist New Woman scenarios, suggesting a more complicated picture. The Western tradition of the fine-art nude defined acceptable softcore female imagery, but even here the exposed female body drew the wrath of conservatives, who became anxious at the thought of vulnerable women gazing on the uncovered bodies of other women. The painted nude came to life in the 1890s mass entertainment of the tableaux vivant or "Living Pictures," which offered titillating re-enactments of racy

paintings with women in body-stockings and stilled immobility. Like the leg-stereoview, this attraction also seems a strange site for feminism. Yet in all of these cases, conservative visual tropes of erotic femininity surprisingly opened onto new sites of female cultural power. Technologized erotic mass spectacles of women implied the presence of a female observer, one who dared to look at previously censored imagery of other women. Some stereoviews directly portrayed a newly empowered female character, exposing her legs while acting as a New Woman dominatrix. Other stereoviews asked the perilous question, “Is Marriage a Failure?,” moving through comic genre sequences whose trajectory toward dissolution and reversal dramatized the fault lines underlying the late-Victorian battle of the sexes. These diverse visual examples show how scenes of women exposing themselves, which to our eyes seem objectifying and limiting, in fact signified differently for Victorian viewers, pointing to a new, fraught era in female spectatorship and female autonomy.

Female intimacy and the male gaze

The Library Company in Philadelphia holds a set of stereographs made by the American photographer William Rau in the late 1890s, many of them stamped with the date 1897. Published by the American company Griffith and Griffith, the images would have been sold in pharmacies, tobacconists, and other photographic venues in America, Britain, and Canada. The series was typical of images being produced on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1890s. It featured women posed in faux-candid boudoir scenarios, offering a voyeuristic glimpse of how women supposedly behaved behind closed doors. Voyeurism was a mode especially suited to the stereoview, whose visual act always entailed a lone viewer peeping into a magically enhanced, three-dimensional world. In “What Size Do You Take?” (Figure 1), a woman has pulled up her dress and exposed her leg, draping it across her female friend’s knee, ostensibly to have her garter size measured. The friend lovingly wraps the tape measure around the exposed thigh. The image is dominated by the exquisite horizontal of the bared leg, with its stocking and high-heeled shoe. A Japanese screen in the background implies that these ladies are “advanced” in taste and morals. All of the images in the Rau series offer flimsy pretexts for women to lift their skirts and show off their legs. In “A High Kicker” (Figure 2), two women hoist their skirts while dancing, one of them standing on a chair. In “How the Girls Get Undressed,” two laughing women in white nightgowns take off their long socks in a bedroom, one sitting on the bed, the other on the floor. In “When!!!” (Figure 3), two women in underclothes loll unconscious next to empty wine bottles and glasses, their stockinged legs conveniently exposed.

How to understand the erotics of these images? First, we must acknowledge their resolutely heterosexual frame, as women perform for a putative male gaze. Female homoerotic and homosexual scenarios were – and are still – staples of a pornographic imagination aimed at men. The playful shenanigans of women in private, dancing, drinking, undressing, are all staged for the benefit of a voyeur positioned to consume the erotic spectacle of women’s bared legs. The imagery conforms to paradigms outlined by Laura Mulvey, in film theory, and Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, in studies of pornography. These theorists established classic feminist accounts attacking hegemonic, male-dominated structures of visibility – as in the conclusion to Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and



Figure 1. “What size do you take?” Stereographic photograph by William H. Rau, distributed by Griffith & Griffith, 1897. The Library Company of Philadelphia.

Narrative Cinema,” which calls for the destruction of “the satisfaction, pleasure, and privilege” of film’s voyeuristic spectator (1989, 26); or in Dworkin and MacKinnon’s attacks on pornography as a form of rape. As Lisa Sigel summarizes these anti-porn critiques, “pornography teaches men to think of women as objects, to subordinate women, and to use violence to control women. As such, pornography not only creates violence against women but is in itself a form of violence” (2002, 5). These early incarnations of feminist film theory and feminist anti-pornography theory today seem somewhat monolithic, as more recent scholars have suggested, and as I will pursue below. But the patriarchal structures governing the production and implied spectatorship of Victorian photographs still need to be acknowledged, especially for scenes in which women perform erotically for an omnipresent, voyeuristic observer.



Figure 2. “A high kicker.” Stereographic photograph by William H. Rau, distributed by Griffith & Griffith, 1897. The Library Company of Philadelphia.



Figure 3. “When!!!” Stereographic photograph by William H. Rau, distributed by Griffith & Griffith, 1897. The Library Company of Philadelphia.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s 1986 essay “The Legs of the Countess” studies the titillating meanings of the bared female leg in the nineteenth-century photograph. She presents a classic feminist account describing how early photography starkly objectified women, especially through their legs. While hemlines rose and fell around the foot, she notes, “no expanse of leg was ever normally exposed, a protocol as applicable to women agricultural laborers as to aristocrats and bourgeois” (87). In fact, the only female legs regularly exposed before the twentieth century were those of dancers or entertainers (88). The ballet attracted audiences with an erotic “bazaar of legs,” offering a “panoply of potential mistresses” (88). In the ballet, women of lower-class backgrounds exposed their legs and also offered up their bodies for sale, inevitably linking the dancer to prostitution – and imbuing the leg itself with fetishistic connotations. The exposed leg signaled that a woman was a pure feminine object available for purchase. Her leg became a kind of synecdoche for her sexual self, ready to be consumed. For Solomon-Godeau, female exposure produced absolute female objectification.

In particular, the objectification and fetishization of the leg occurred through its sheathing with tights. “Tights were virtually the prerequisite for the transformation of carnal flesh into the sublimated, sculptural form of aesthetic, albeit eroticized, delectation,” writes Solomon-Godeau (74). When we look closely at the Rau stereographs, we can see that almost all of these women are wearing white tights, in approximation of bared flesh. Many of them wear dark stockings *over* tights that imitate flesh. In fact, unmentioned by Solomon-Godeau, tights were crucial items in photographs of women because they demarcated the line between legal erotic imagery and illegal, pornographic imagery. As Lisa Sigel explains,

The legal [photographic] postcards, in which models wore body stockings, lingerie, or a great deal of white powder, used many of the same devices and visual elements as the proscribed ones but followed the strict code of covering women’s pubic hair, genitals, and nipples. They hinted at what the illegal postcards showed. (2002, 123)

Tights worked as a kind of airbrushing, generalizing and abstracting the body away from the taboo realities of skin and its blemishes.

Not coincidentally, tights also made the female body bear closer resemblance to a classical statue. Classical sculptures were originally painted in bright colors, but eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archaeologists unearthed them largely stripped of paint, and aligned the white marble with a racist notion of “pure” Greco-Roman bodies. White-marble classical sculpture came to symbolize a generalized Western culture uniting modern Britain with ancient Greece and Rome, and connoting European superiority over its colonized others (see Potts 1994, among others). These associations infuse Baudelaire’s ironic comments about women, tights, and sculpture in *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863):

[A]nyone can see that the use of rice-powder, so stupidly anathematized by our Arcadian philosophers, is successfully designed to rid the complexion of those blemishes that Nature has outrageously strewn there, and thus to create an abstract unity in the colour and texture of the skin, a unity, which, like that produced by the tights of the dancer, immediately approximates the human being to the statue, that is to something superior and divine. (1964, 33)

Baudelaire is being ironic by celebrating cosmetics, whose artifice was traditionally denigrated in nature-based aesthetics. But his praise of tights, modeled by the unblemished legs of the dancer, reflects a normative link between high art, abstraction, whiteness, and the erotic female nude. The “divinity” of the sheathed white leg alludes to the classical sculpture, celebrating a (faux) whiteness as a kind of celestial, disembodied embodiment.

The whitened legs of the women in the Rau stereographs, then, focuses our attention on the racialized milieu of the white English or American boudoir. That milieu also comes into sharper focus when we contrast it with erotic photographs of foreign or colonial subjects, whose “pubic hair, genitalia, and nipples” were allowed to “pass by censors” without rebuke, as Lisa Sigel notes (2002, 123). Photographs of “natives” portrayed them in “harem scenes, landscapes, and huts,” their skin uncovered, their genitals fully on view (Sigel 2002, 125).⁵ These images of nakedness appeared on legal postcards sent through the mail in both America and Britain. They reflected a pseudoscientific, anthropological perspective aligning the foreign, colonial body with “nature,” imperfect and desexualized in its nakedness, but also highly sexualized in its erotic assumptions about native peoples. In photographs of the white boudoir, then, women had to wear tights to signal their place in the nineteenth-century hierarchy of bodies, a hierarchy that was challenged by more explicit pornographic imagery where white women stripped bare and showed their skin.⁶

The female leg sheathed in white tights signified racially and also aesthetically. Nineteenth-century erotic imagery of women was deeply inflected by high-art traditions, in part because sellers of naughty pictures justified sales, and avoided prosecution, by invoking the respected realms of high art. Stereographs of fine art nudes offered popular, legal avenues for viewers to peruse the unclothed female form. In both America and Britain, Hiram Powers’ sculpture *The Greek Slave* – a smash hit at the 1851 Great Exhibition – became a shorthand in the erotic imaginary, with its neoclassical, white-marble portrayal of a naked woman in a demure posture chained to a pedestal (Figure 4). In 1877, the *London Times* (Aug. 2) reported that police had seized pornographic images from a stall that was advertising its wares using photographs of the *Greek Slave*.⁷ The sculpture embodied the desirable, submissive femininity of the Western nude tradition – a striking contrast, in fact, with the comic women of Rau’s stereoviews, laughing, drinking, and

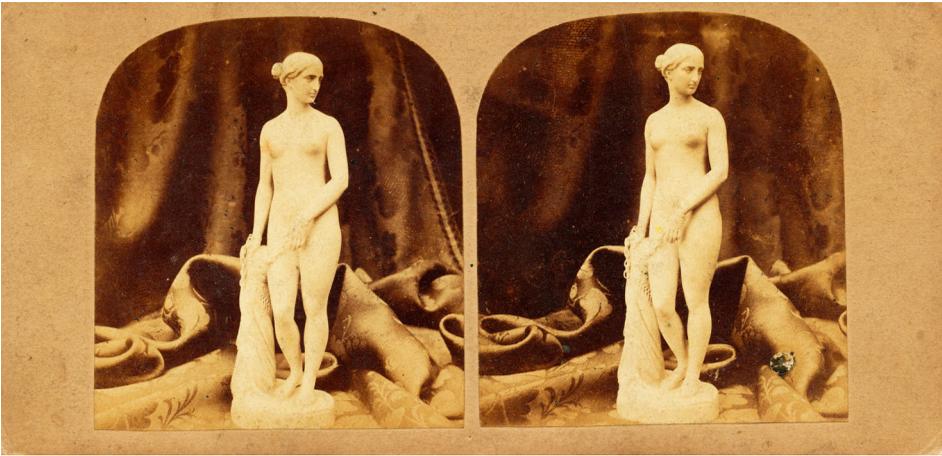


Figure 4. Unknown maker, ‘Greek Slave’ (printed on the back of the card), mid-nineteenth century. Stereoscopic photograph (two albumen prints from wet collodion on glass negatives, glued on card). Collection of Patrizia Di Bello.

dancing. The high-art nude tradition would seem to offer a stark counterpoint to the low, comic genre scene, with its hints of theater and the burlesque. Yet I would like to delve into some perhaps surprising alliances between the passive female nude, her eyes averted, and the comic erotic genre scene, as both invoked the specter of a nineteenth-century female observer.

Theorizing the female observer

In *Techniques of the Observer* (1990), Jonathan Crary influentially proposed the idea that a new “embodied observer” emerged in the nineteenth century. His study argued for a moment of rupture around 1800: in the earlier era, a Cartesian model of vision imagined a dematerialized observer hovering omnisciently over the external world. With the advent of the nineteenth century, however, vision scientists realized that the eyeball was mortal, flawed, caught in a body that was itself material and contingent. The new, embodied observer blurred the boundaries between the body and outside world, and between the body and its prosthetic visual devices. Crary’s account challenged the old master-narrative that saw film as the teleological product of newly-invented realisms unfolding smoothly from the Renaissance to the twentieth century: instead, modern technologies of vision signified a radical break from previous philosophical traditions. A crucial aspect of Crary’s argument was to link high philosophy to low culture, especially in the stereoscope. It was the stereoscope, with its tantalizing depth illusion, that epitomized modernity and signaled the observer’s new embodiment. Yet Crary himself did not pursue the stereoscope’s ties to mass culture. Espousing high-art values, his discussion omitted any mention of what stereoviews actually depicted, instead tracking the embodied observer to proto-modernist painters like J. M. W. Turner and the French Impressionists. Likewise, he also neglected to consider how gender might have informed questions of nineteenth-century spectatorship – even though, with his focus on embodiment, his theory seems deeply suggestive for the erotic or pornographic photograph.

Linda Williams takes up these possibilities in her 1995 essay, “Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the ‘Carnal Density of Vision.’” She ponders what it would mean to consider questions of gender in nineteenth-century spectatorship, especially in the case of pornographic images whose interpretation has been dominated by monolithic theories of the male gaze. Feminist scholars like Mulvey and Solomon-Godeau, says Williams, operate out of a simplistic paradigm whose roots can be traced all the way back to Plato. According to classical iconophobia, images are seductive lures whose realism must be ripped away to expose a dark truth, whether of patriarchy or bourgeois individualism (1995, 8). The dark models of vision posited by feminist scholarship leave no room for nuance, for diverse and multiple visual pleasures, or for an idea of a female spectator. Yet Williams argues that a nineteenth-century female observer is implied by the sex panics that attempted to control her gaze. In Britain, the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 banned dirty literature, and empowered police to raid pornographic shops and studios. In America, the 1873 Comstock Laws outlawed the circulation of obscene materials. Much of the nineteenth-century rhetoric attacking impure words and images surrounded the possibility of women as readers or viewers. In fact, acts of nineteenth-century censorship were the most “strenuous” around women, who desperately needed to be “protected” from evil content: “It is remarkable how little these women spectator-observers have been considered given how much censorship has taken place in their name,” writes Williams (1995, 21).

From this promising position, however, Williams’s actual pursuit of the nineteenth-century female observer is somewhat disappointing. She argues that hardcore pornographic imagery, in particular, held the most potential for encoding an agential female observer, since it featured men and women equally, and emphasized action and agency rather than passivity. Yet she provides no concrete historical account of female spectatorship for these images. And she makes no mention of one potential obstacle, which is that hardcore pornographic images were illicit and tightly controlled, and therefore less likely to find their way into the hands of women. By contrast, the legal, erotic photograph – the subject of my study – Williams rejects as holding no potential for female spectatorship. She dismisses the erotic photograph as “passive,” featuring “quasi-academic erotic poses of nude or semi-nude women” (1995, 23), and concludes that “it may be safe to assume” that these images were “predominantly for heterosexual men” (22). Yet nineteenth-century erotic imagery entailed more than merely academic nudes, as the archive of stereoviews reveals. And even the academic nude courted controversy, when detractors suspected that a woman was looking.

The actual scandals surrounding the unauthorized female spectator in the nineteenth century brings this elusive figure more sharply into view. For example, debates raged throughout the century surrounding the propriety of the painted female nude. In the 1880s, social purity activists targeted nude paintings as improper manifestations of vice. Letters to the *Times* worried that obscene paintings were being seen by defenseless women. In “A Woman’s Plea” (*Times*, May 20, 1885), the author declares that “no picture [at an exhibition] should find place before which a woman may not stand hanging on the arm of father, brother, or lover without a burning sense of shame.” The female spectator is imagined as fragile and vulnerable before the alluring picture of a female nude. Purity debates around paintings fixated on women: critics worried that female models were being led astray under corrupting influences; that the unprotected virginal eyes of female spectators were being sullied; that female artists were engaging in vice

for wanting to work from live, naked models (see Smith 1996). (It was only in 1893 that female artists at the Royal Academy were granted this privilege, and even then, the models were required to be partially draped) (Nochlin 1988, 159). The nude spectacle itself seems to have been less troubling than the idea that women were looking at it. Specters of the libidinous female gaze haunted even the most hetero of purity anxieties, which were being triggered by women looking at the erotic display of other women.

“A British Matron” signs the indignant 1885 letter to the *Times* about nude paintings, but the letter’s actual author was a man, J. C. Horsley (Smith 1996, 227). His female pseudonym enabled him to claim the moral authority arrogated to Victorian women, and also allowed him to be a mouthpiece for the claims of purity. The purity campaigns of the 1880s were largely helmed by women, and I would argue that purity policing itself constituted another form of powerful female spectatorship, even though purity campaigners worked to shut down erotic spectacles. The twisty gender allegiances of the late-Victorian sex wars show how difficult it is to impose contemporary sensibilities on the earlier era. Feminists organized groups such as Josephine Butler’s Ladies’ National Association, Laura Chant’s Social Purity Alliance, and Ellice Hopkins’s White Cross League; they supported the efforts of the National Vigilance Association, founded by William C. Coote (see Bristow 1977; Bland 2001). Purity campaigners were instrumental in abolishing the Contagious Disease Acts, which allowed police to accost any suspicious-seeming, unchaperoned woman on the street to test her for venereal disease. While the purity activists secured changes to Britain’s legal system that empowered women, such as raising the age of consent and liberating prostitutes from police actions, purity feminists also operated out of conservative definitions of womanhood and sexual sin. Women vigilantly policed the erotic gazes of other women, and in doing so defined the terms of eroticism and taboo.

An especial target of the purity campaigners – and one deeply relevant to a consideration of the erotic stereoview – was the mass entertainment of the *tableaux vivants*, also known as *poses plastique* or “Living Pictures,” which became a craze in the 1890s. *Tableaux vivants* had been a private, aristocratic entertainment in the eighteenth century, but emerged in the 1840s as a low, public form of bawdy license. In 1893, the Palace Theatre reintroduced the *tableau vivant* as a daring, middle-class mass entertainment, using new lighting technologies and a rotating stage to enhance the effect.⁸ Female performers struck an artistic pose within a massive gold frame, wearing flesh-colored tights or body-stockings, their breasts often lacquered by plaster of Paris. As the stage rotated before the music-hall audience, the women remained immobile, imitating the postures of well-known paintings with erotic themes. Greek statuary, myths, or orientalist nudes offered popular sources for suggestive female imagery. An 1894 *carte-de-visite* of “The Three Graces” depicts the *poses plastiques* performers in white classical drapery, with slits at their thighs exposing white, tights-sheathed legs.⁹ The show was accompanied by music, while cutting-edge lighting effects created the illusion that models “were cut from marble” (Faulk 2004, 155). A 1907 publicity spread depicting “La Milo” (Pansy Montague) portrays the *tableau vivant* as a transformation of the high-art female nude into erotic mass entertainment (Figure 5). The Living Pictures occupied an uncertain terrain between high art and sensationalist entertainment, justifying an erotic female spectacle through allusions to high culture and the classical tradition.

Comic stereoviews of women in a boudoir again might seem more transgressive than *tableaux vivants*, as the former depicted women as playful agents engaging with each

"La Milo"

THE "HUMAN STATUE," WHO IS NOW APPEARING AT THE PAVILION



As the Brown Venus

A "new ancient statue" which recently aroused much interest in New York as the supposed work of Praxiteles



As Hebe

The Goddess of Youth, and Cup-bearer to the Immortals



"La Milo" in modern guise



Photos

As Oenone

The nymph-prophetess who tried to dissuade Paris from going to Troy



Dover Street Studios, 38, Dover Street, Mayfair

As Electra

The enchantress of the Modern Age

"La Milo" claims most nearly to approach in figure the ideal of classical sculpture. She is at present giving representations at the London Pavilion of some of the best-known statues, some of which are here shown. "La Milo" (whose real name is Miss Pansy Montague) is an Australian, the daughter of an English army officer, and art, not commerce, is admitted to be the motive of her stage career

Figure 5. Tableau Vivant: "La Milo: 'The Human Statue,'" c. 1907.

other, while the latter drew on more retrograde traditions of the female nude, passive and silent. Yet both of these racy visual phenomena of the 1890s shared striking commonalities. Both presented a simulacra of flesh in the use of tights, foregrounding the bared female leg as fetishistic spectacle. Both used miniature narratives to frame and justify female exposure. These narrative ploys might seem slightly absurd in retrospect, but their enclosure was a necessary step to keep mere titillation from spilling into outright vice. Comic stereoviews framed the exposed female leg as the unwitting result of humorous accident, a narrative frame that was unthreatening and disarming. Tableaux vivants positioned the undressed female body within the safe narrative bounds of high art and aesthetic privilege. Both offered a stilled moment within a larger arc of visual storytelling, juxtaposing spectacular immobility with dramatic effect and incipient action. Both mass visual formats, too, have been linked to the rise of film, whose invention in the mid-1890s made the new film technology coterminous with the stereoview as well as the tableau vivant – indeed, “Living Pictures” was one of cinema’s early monikers (Faulk 2004, 156). The first films went on to appear in music hall venues of the late 1890s, some of them portraying women in erotic scenes of dancing or disrobing. A 1903 Mutoscope film, “The Birth of the Pearl,” depicts an almost-nude Venus rising from a clam shell – a scene taken straight from the *tableaux vivants*, writes Lynda Nead, “complete with stage set and costumed assistants who pull aside the curtains to reveal the mythological picture” (2007, 78). At the *fin-de-siècle*, a range of illusionistic visual technologies produced spectacles of simulated female nudity, both titillating and unreal.

The popularity of tableaux vivants at the Palace Theatre invites further speculation about the existence of the nineteenth-century female observer, consumer of erotic spectacles of women. The tableaux vivants were targeted almost from their inception by purity campaigners; in 1893 Lady Henry Somerset, head of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, used the Living Pictures as the basis to challenge to the Palace Theatre’s liquor license (Faulk 2004, 168). In the ensuing debate, both attackers and defenders mobilized the inflammatory fact that ladies sat in the audience. George Bernard Shaw, praising the tableaux for their artistry, recommended that “every father of a family who cannot afford to send his daughters the round of the picture galleries in the Haymarket and Bond Street, to take them all (with their brothers) to the Palace Theatre” (Shaw 1894, 444).¹⁰ That women patronized the Living Pictures reflected the broader transformation of music halls in the later nineteenth century, as variety theaters became more respectable, more inviting to middle-class or upper-class patrons, and more open to women. Theater historian Viv Gardner (2000) theorizes the emergence of a late-Victorian “invisible *spectatrice*,” a new female theater-goer positioned to take advantage of the new public venues catering to women, from department stores to tea shops to clubs and theaters. The spectatorial power of the female observer depended on her mobility, as she passed through city streets without drawing attention. Gardner quotes George Augustus Sala’s characterization of the elusive female London spectator: “[u]nobtrusive, gentle, womanly, she is just the person to slip through a crowd unobserved, like one of those grey moths in the evening which come and go on their way, unseen by men and undevoured by birds” (Sala 1859, 148; quoted in Gardner 2000, 38). The invisible *spectatrice*, the unseen female observer, contrasts with the conspicuous visibility of the leg-baring female performer. But both female identities functioned as part of the same late-nineteenth-century phenomenon, as women gained cultural power through new positions of erotic performance and new possibilities for erotic viewership.

A surprising conclusion, then, is that women consumed the erotic spectacle of other women within a heterosexual paradigm that was still progressive and challenging to certain norms. A key endpoint to this phenomenon was the erotic dance of Maud Allen, whose act replaced the Living Pictures at the Palace Theatre after the show was finally shut down by the National Vigilance Association in 1907. Allen offered a daring interpretation of Salomé's dance, innovating from Oscar Wilde's controversial play to create a one-woman show. Clad in a scanty, "oriental" costume, Allen performed a modern dance routine that culminated in a lustful encounter with John the Baptist's severed head. The dance was onanistic, provocative, and wildly popular, especially among women, who attended a special afternoon matinee (Walkowitz 2003, 360). In 1918, reacting to news that Allen would be performing in a private staging of Wilde's *Salomé*, a right-wing newspaper accused Allen of inciting a "Cult of the Clitoris." When she sued the paper for libel, the resulting trial created a sensation, effectively ending Allen's career.¹¹ Historians of sexuality have compared Allen's trial with that of Oscar Wilde: just as Wilde's trial brought male homosexuality into unprecedented visibility, so too Allen's trial brought lesbianism into the public eye, inventing a conservative hysteria surrounding same-sex female eroticism (see Doan 2000, 32). "The Cult of the Clitoris" stands as one endpoint for the tame-yet-titillating erotic spectacles of women in the 1890s, indicating the presence of a female observer with a desiring gaze increasingly troubling to conservative authorities. Female homoeroticism itself came to stand for broader freedoms of body and gaze, as women occupied ambiguous positions as both subjects and objects of erotic desire.

"Is marriage a failure?": the new woman in the stereoscope

The intimate public sphere of the later nineteenth century comes into focus in stereoviews that dramatized the fraught relations between men and women, or between women and each other, in genre scenes set in the home or bedroom. Photographs of women laughing together in private and exposing their legs might seem to conform to predictable versions of a heterosexual male fantasy. Yet these images participated in a larger erotic revolution of the 1890s, as I've been describing, opening onto new possibilities for female spectatorship and female license. In fact, the comic series of female boudoir leg scenes overlapped with other comic-erotic subjects in the late-century stereoview, especially scenes featuring the New Woman. In "The New Woman Barber" (Figure 6), a woman in a petticoat bares her leg and brandishes a razor, preparing to shave a terrified male victim. The scene once again offers the erotic spectacle of the exposed female leg, whose whiteness (in tights, of course) is accentuated by a black garter. But this time the leg's exposure is directly linked to an intimidating female power, visually signaled by the woman's elevated position over the man. If the figure of the New Woman emerged from newly available jobs, from typist to shop girl, then this stereoview takes the logic into absurdist terrain, imagining the rise of female barbers bearing razors.¹² A sense of incipient vengeance informs the man's frightened look. When this image is viewed in a stereoscope, the razor leaps forth alarmingly. Barbers had connoted radical politics ever since Beaumarchais's eighteenth-century *The Marriage of Figaro*, as the intelligent servant-barber triumphed over his oppressive master. The razor might be the tool of a servant, or, alternatively, the weapon of an



Figure 6. “The new woman barber.” Stereographic photograph by William Rau, 1897. The Library Company of Philadelphia.

insurgent. In the photograph, the exposed blade, exposed leg, and exposed neck all come together in a delirious, comic triangle of violent eroticism.

Other comic scenes in the stereoview also mocked the New Woman and her victims, eroticizing her as a dominatrix while showing off her legs. In “Have Dinner at One Dear,” another 1897 photograph by William Rau, the New Woman instructs her husband to have the meal cooked by the time she returns from a bicycle ride. The unhappy spouse, in rolled shirtsleeves, washes laundry while children play unattended on the floor. The photograph foregrounds the erotic spectacle of the woman’s body, attired in newfangled bicycle bloomers that show off her legs (Figure 7). In a similar vein, another photograph has the New Woman announcing to her seated husband and child, “Sew on Your Own Buttons, I’m Going for a Ride” (Figure 8). Again, the woman stands in the foreground, dominating with her bloomers and stocking-clad legs. Genre scenes of the New Woman often featured woman bicyclists, generating a *frisson* with



Figure 7. “Have dinner at one dear.” Stereographic photograph by William H. Rau, distributed by Griffith & Griffith, 1897. The Library Company of Philadelphia.



Figure 8. “Sew your own buttons, i’m going for a ride.” Stereographic photograph by B. L. Singly, distributed by Keystone View Company, 1896. The Library Company of Philadelphia.

the leg-baring outfit. The exposed female leg was crucial to both late-Victorian feminism and late-Victorian eroticism. The stereotypical New Woman bicyclist, wearing her bloomers to allow her to ride, showed off her legs as a sign of her new, independent mobility.

When the New Woman figures as the object of desire in the photograph, this vexed scenario complicates the idea that female display was organized merely for the delectation of a presumptively male viewer. For Solomon-Godeau, the sight of a dancer’s leg was the *sine qua non* of female objectification. But the exposed leg in the late-Victorian stereoview reflected a strange combination of inside and outside, the home and the stage: it expressed the paradoxes of the intimate public sphere, signifying the junction at which the private realm of the body became the visible locus of politics and power. The leg beneath the petticoat was a primal Victorian site of gender difference. While (of course) both men and women possess legs, the Victorian woman disguised her legs beneath coverings to signify her quintessential femininity. When women bared their legs – in “breeches roles,” in burlesque theater, or in bloomers, to ride bicycles – they approached a disturbing similarity to men. A bared leg might, therefore, release a woman from strict forms of femininity, approaching “mannishness” – an accusation often hurled against the New Woman. The mannishness of the New Woman is highlighted in comic stereoviews such as “The ‘New Woman’” (Keystone View Company, 1899), in which the New Woman buries her face in a newspaper, her bloomer-and-tights leg pushed provocatively into the foreground; her bicycle leans against the door, while her husband in the back gloomily does the laundry. Female objectification and the fetishization of the leg here accompanies a mocking accommodation to new female power – critiquing gender-role-swapping as comic disorder, while also glorying in some of its upside-down, erotic possibilities.

These thoughts cast even the most normative of late-Victorian stereoview genre series into a questioning light. In the “wedding set,” produced by all the major photographic companies in Britain and America, a sequence of twelve, eighteen, or even twenty-four stereocards narrated the sequence of a couple’s meeting, courtship and marriage. A “marriage plot” for genre photographs, views depicted the wedding march and ceremony, as

well as the wedding breakfast; the series typically arrived at the bridal suite on the wedding night, with the caption “Alone at Last!” Here the groom embraced the bride, who usually wore only a petticoat. While these scenes did not feature legs – and lacked the saucy comedy of the erotic scenes I analyze above – they still titillated with their narrative thrust toward the nuptial union, arriving at a climax both normative and taboo. Equally popular – or, likely, even more popular – were stereoview sets of the 1880s and 1890s operating under the title, “Is Marriage a Failure?” These series again consisted of twelve, eighteen, or twenty-four scenes, using comedy and battle-of-the-sexes themes to undercut the saccharine marriage plot. The basic tale is the same across various versions: a suitor engages eagerly in courtship, looking forward to the sexual promise of a new wife – only to be freighted after marriage with screaming babies and a nagging spouse, who won’t let him go out with friends anymore. In “Realization – Married Life as He Found It” (Figure 9), the woman stands over the man in an accusatory rage, while he slumps, defeated, in his armchair. The old “ball-and-chain” theme is a familiar, misogynistic motif portraying women as buzz-kills and strait-laced enforcers of a limiting status quo for men.

Yet again, however, while the series rehearses familiar gender stereotypes and binds its erotic scenes within a safely heterosexual familial arc, the views embed unconventional possibilities. For all of the overt anti-woman narrative, these views were consumed by both men and women within the stereoscope’s domestic realm, adverting to the perils of heterosexuality for both genders. The series’ title – “Is marriage a failure?” – is a startling proposition within a Victorian context, reflecting how a sacrosanct institution was being thrown into question by late-nineteenth-century gender upheavals. In fact, “Is Marriage a Failure?” was a question asked in 1888 across numerous popular periodicals in both Britain and America. In Britain, *Pick-Me-Up* polled readers and offered prizes for the best answers, which touched on problems of finance and in-laws; the *Daily Telegraph* received more than 27,000 letters responding to the question in a mere seven weeks (Marks 1990, 50–51). *Punch* published a cartoon



Figure 9. “Realization – married life as he found it (words without music).” From the series “Is Marriage a Failure?” Distributed by Underwood & Underwood, 1901. Collection of the author.

captioned “Marriage Evidently Not a Failure” (15 Sept. 1888) in which a country wife lovingly ties the shoes of her husband, who is too stout to tie them himself. While the cartoon seems to affirm the worthiness of the marital bond, it still churns with anxious undertones, as a helpless, emasculated man is rescued by a laboring wife. If marriage is indeed a failure, we might ask, then for whom is it failing? The stereoview sequence takes the perspective of the man, who experiences marriage as a grand deception leading to his imprisonment. But in reality, of course, marriage was more onerous for the woman, even after the 1882 Married Woman’s Property Act (a revision of the 1873 act) granted women the right to keep their own profits and property within marriage. Women still bore the brunt of domestic labor, child-bearing, and child-rearing. The stereoview sequences took a male point of view, but they also granted a grudging, bewildering power to women, who had now somehow become the shot-callers and heads of their respective households. In “Married Life as He Found It,” the woman again stands above the man, controlling his behavior and commanding their coupleddom.

What all of these stereoview sequences share – from licentious leg scenes of women in boudoirs, to marriage sets culminating in disillusionment – is a sense that sexuality is a primal force with the potential to upend the social world. Erotic-leg stereoviews and marriage-failure stereoviews alike see sexuality as an attraction that challenges and destabilizes the marriage plot – breaking up heterosexuality with adultery or homoerotic attractions, or breaking up social class hierarchies with affairs across classes. In another favorite comic-erotic sequence, a new French cook is hired in the household, attracting the master’s attention. The adulterous husband is quickly found out, usually because the wife discovers two incriminating floury handprints on the back of his coat (Figure 10). The series ends with the cook fired and domestic harmony restored; the husband humorously escapes consequences for his actions, while the wife blames the servant. (She’s French, after all.) Conservative gender stereotypes come up against scenes in which sexuality unleashes an upside-down, carnival world, where masters seduce maids and the marriage plot is overturned, at least temporarily. Eroticism is a force



Figure 10. “Good Heavens!” from the series “Mr. and Mrs. Newlywed’s new French cook.” Distributed by Underwood & Underwood, c. 1900. The Library Company of Philadelphia.

that can undermine the heterosexual power relations of the household. Men might even come to seem superfluous, in scenes where women happily fraternize in the bedroom alone. The stereoviews open onto illicit pleasures behind closed doors, a perverse domesticity and intimate public sphere showing the fault lines in the late-Victorian gender wars.

“Is Marriage a Failure?” was a question asked in the midst of distinctive late-Victorian transformations, including the public visibility of alternative modes of kinship, provocative same-sex interactions, and new forms of female economic independence. These changes registered in popular visual culture in stereoviews that used conservative gender stereotypes to channel both anxiety and desire. The Mulvey-era feminist critique of women losing their agency when objectified as sex objects ultimately seems inadequate to the complexity of late-nineteenth-century paradigms. What looks to us like pure objectification and male fantasy was deeply alarming to Victorian conservatives, who worried about the idea of a female observer witnessing another woman’s bared leg, or naked body. The scene of a woman’s homoerotic gaze came to connote a new liberation for women, even in contexts that were apparently normative and heterosexual. The “cult of the clitoris” encompassed exactly this possibility, not merely alluding to a taboo sex act but also reacting against the politics of female gazing, female self-sufficiency, and the radical possibilities inherent in women enjoying themselves alone in the bedroom.

Notes

1. Thank you to Jennifer Green-Lewis and Richard Stein for inviting me to contribute to this forum. I’m also grateful to Patrizia Di Bello, who shared with me a scan of *The Greek Slave* from her personal stereoview collection.
2. Stereoviews could be purchased at stationary shops, merchandise stores, jewelers, opticians, and tourist destinations; they were also sold via mail order catalogues, such as that of the London Stereoscopic Company. Darrah (1977) provides details of stereoscopy’s production and consumption; see also Crary (1990), Davis (2015), and Schiavo (2003) for important, contrasting accounts.
3. One exception is Melody Davis’s excellent study, *Women’s Views: The Narrative Stereograph in Nineteenth-Century America* (2015). I follow Davis in privileging a female spectator of stereoviews, even for images that seem patently misogynistic. One key difference, however, is that Davis organizes her book around chapters dividing “marriage,” “the erotic,” and “the New Woman,” whereas I argue that all of these motifs are not easily separable in the 1890s.
4. In fact, the Victorian root to Berlant’s archive is implied by the title of her book, though she doesn’t observe it. “The queen of America goes to Washington city” refers to a moment reported in Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), when a slave reading a newspaper believes that the U.S. has a queen—who goes to Washington, D.C. to protest slavery by fighting with the President (Berlant 1994, 14–15). The idea of an American queen is one obviously inherited from Britain.
5. Colligan (2006) pursues the link between sexuality and exoticism in British pornography.
6. Sigel also makes the important point that definitions of obscenity shifted throughout the nineteenth century, depending on who was looking. Male artists were allowed to look at photographs of naked bodies without prosecution. Police were more likely to arrest sellers if their images were being consumed by working-class people, women, or children (2002, 4–5).
7. Cited in Di Bello (2016, n.p.) Di Bello explores many of the numerous, diverse photographs of the *Greek Slave*.

8. For the history of 1890s tableaux vivants see Faulk (2004, 142–187); and Walkowitz (2003, 348–350).
9. The photograph of “The Three Graces” performers is visible on the “Footlights” website of John Culme: <https://footlightnotes.wordpress.com/2014/04/19/marie-studholme-1872-1930-constance-collier/>.
10. Shaw’s comments are discussed in-depth in Faulk (2004, 173–175). Faulk analyzes the high-art, aesthetic aspects of the tableaux vivants, along with their targeting by purity campaigners.
11. Walkowitz (2003) provides an in-depth account of Maud Allen’s life and Salomé dance, along with an assessment of her 1918 libel trial.
12. For more on the New Woman see Ledger (1997) and Jeffreys (1997).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Rachel Teukolsky is Associate Professor of English at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of *The Literate Eye: Victorian Art Writing and Modernist Aesthetics* (2009). Her second book, *Picture World: Image, Aesthetics, and Victorian New Media*, will be published by Oxford UP in 2020. Her essays and criticism have appeared in *PMLA*, *ELH*, *Victorian Studies*, *Artforum*, and elsewhere.

References

- Baudelaire, Charles. 1964. “The Painter of Modern Life.” In *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne, 1–40. London: Phaidon.
- Baudelaire, Charles. 1980. “The Modern Public and Photography.” In *Classic Essays on Photography*, edited by Alan Trachtenberg, 83–89. New Haven: Leete’s Island Books.
- Berlant, Lauren. 1997. “Introduction: The Intimate Public Sphere.” In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 1–24. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bland, Lucy. 1995. *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality, 1885–1914*. London: Penguin.
- Bristow, Edward J. 1977. *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain Since 1700*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Colligan, Colette. 2006. *The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley: Sexuality and Exoticism in Nineteenth-Century Print Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Crary, Jonathan. 1990. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Darrah, William C. 1977. *The World of Stereographs*. Gettysburg: W. C. Darrah.
- Davis, Melody. 2015. *Women’s Views: The Narrative Stereograph in Nineteenth-Century America*. Durham: University of New Hampshire Press.
- Di Bello, Patrizia. 2016. “Photographs of Sculpture: Greek Slave’s ‘Complex Polyphony,’ 1847–77.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 22, n.p. doi:10.16995/ntn.775
- Doan, Laura. 2000. *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Faulk, Barry J. 2004. *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Gardner, Viv. 2000. “The Invisible Spectatrice: Gender, Geography and Theatrical Space.” In *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies*, edited by Maggie B. Gale, and Viv Gardner, 25–45. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Hunt, Lynn. 1993. *The Invention of Pornography, 1500–1800: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Jeffreys, Sheila. 1997. *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880–1930*. London: Spinifex Press.
- Ledger, Sally. 1997. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Marks, Patricia. 1990. *Bicycles, Bangs, and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.
- “Marriage Evidently Not a Failure.” *Punch* (Sept. 15, 1888): 130.
- McCalman, Iain. 1988. *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1989. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 14–26. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nead, Lynda. 2007. *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c. 1900*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Nochlin, Linda. 1988. “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971) In *Women, Art, and Power, and Other Essays*, 145–178. New York: Harper & Row.
- Potts, Alex. 1994. *Flesh and the Ideal: Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sala, George Augustus. 1859. *Twice Around the Clock; Or the Hours of the Day and Night in London*. London: Houlston and Wright.
- Schiavo, Laura Burd. 2003. “From Phantom Image to Perfect Vision: Physiological Optics, Commercial Photography, and the Popularization of the Stereoscope.” In *New Media, 1740–1915*, edited by Lisa Gitelman, and Geoffrey B. Pingree, 113–137. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Shaw, George Bernard. 1894. “Pictures at the Palace.” *Saturday Review* April: 442–444.
- Sigel, Lisa Z. 2002. *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815–1914*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Smith, Alison. 1996. *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality, and Art*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. 1986. “The Legs of the Countess.” *October* 39: 65–108.
- Teukolsky, Rachel. 2020. *Picture World: Image, Aesthetics, and Victorian New Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Walkowitz, Judith. 2003. “The ‘Vision of Salomé’: Cosmopolitanism and Erotic Dancing in Central London, 1908–1918.” *American Historical Review* 108 (2): 337–376.
- Williams, Linda. 1995. “Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the ‘Carnal Density of Vision.’” In *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, edited by Patrice Petro, 3–41. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.