

~~An image of a house (ruins?)~~

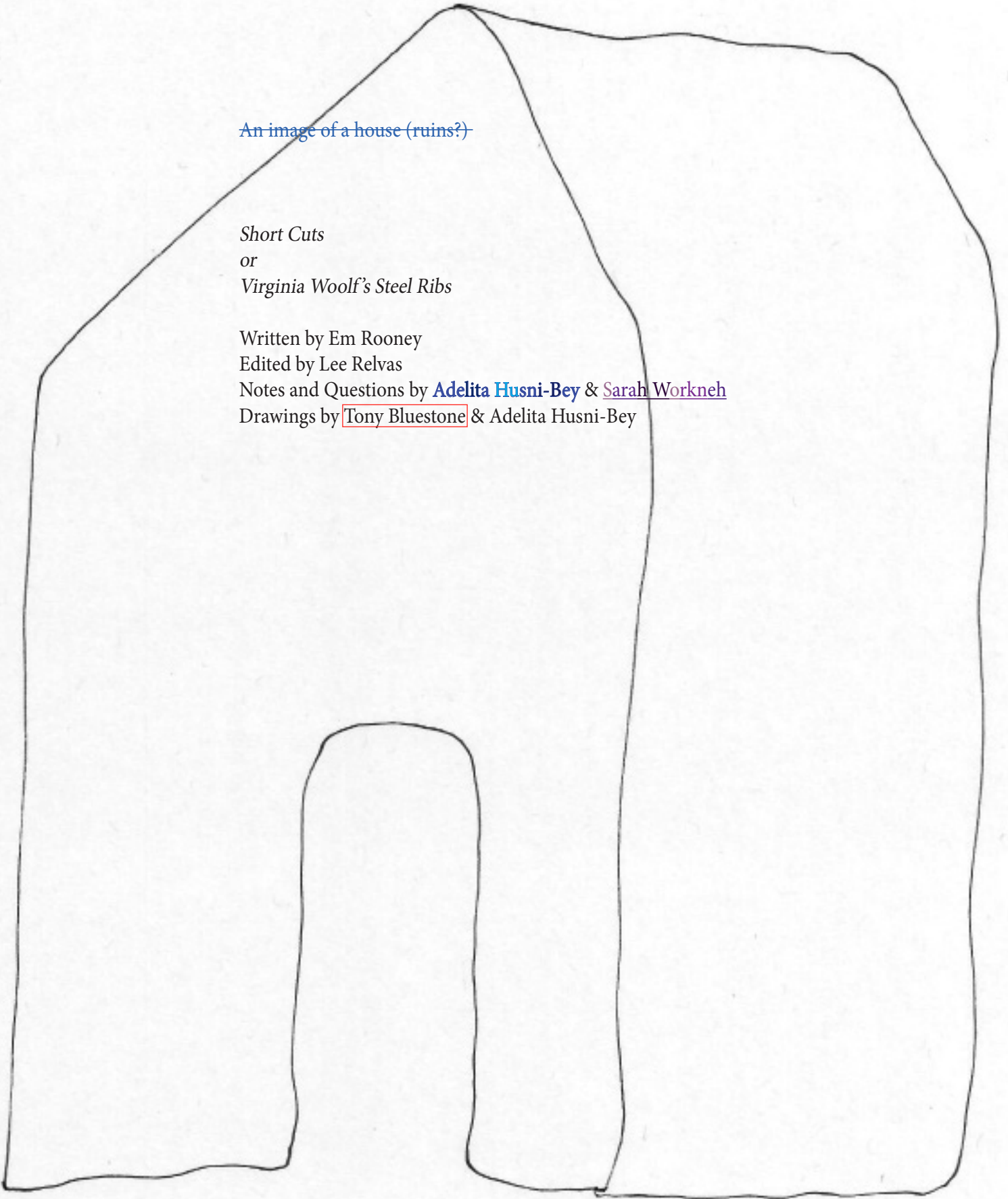
Short Cuts
or
Virginia Woolf's Steel Ribs

Written by Em Rooney

Edited by Lee Relvas

Notes and Questions by [Adelita Husni-Bey](#) & [Sarah Workneh](#)

Drawings by [Tony Bluestone](#) & Adelita Husni-Bey



(1) Moten & Harney: what happens within the enclosure to resist the surround

(2) daughters, mothers?

(3) depends on how large the enclosure is and what other enclosures lie in relation to it

(4)

1. this depends on how one understands a position within the enclosure...again Moten & Harney but also traditions like the Maroons— choked off from the world through their own resistance but within the enclosure a communal existence rooted in solidarity.

2. what is statelessness?

3. not to romanticize the “enclosure” but so long as capitalism, colonialism (post-colonialism exists in name but not in legacy) neoliberalism exist as organizing principles, oppositional culture within the enclosure is necessary

(5) hooks, feminism is for everybody:

As women, particularly previously disenfranchised privileged white women, began to acquire class power without divesting of their internalized sexism, divisions between women intensified. When women of color critiqued the racism within the society as a whole and called attention to the ways that racism had shaped and informed feminist theory and practice, many white women simply turned their backs on the vision of sisterhood, closing their minds and their hearts. And that was equally true when it came to the issue of classism among women.

(6) why call this sisterhood at all? the enclosure is also exclusionary.

(7) hmmm...can we make the assumption that the category of “women” is enough...is not enslavement and servitude, and “Africanness” its own category of otherness that encloses the enclosure of gender?

(8) now we are talking

(9) but if the stories are the construction of men, and maybe even if the containers are crafted by men, where within this do we, (ME as a woman) understand that truth is often not truth (described as hysterical, depressed, self harming, vacant, sadistic) and also that the container, albeit with great risk, could be permeable and if not, at least a category formation that can hold different opportunities for power and transcendence.

I’m interested not just in women in film, but also in their cages. It is **the repeating materiality of enclosure** (1) (1); the stuff of it; the organic, the inorganic, the clothes, and the architectures that define and describe these real and metaphorical prisons. This piece of writing considers the depiction of white middle-class or upper-class European women in a few famous films and the ways in which their prisons were obtained through their very class privilege and used against them. Within this broad range of economic realities (the working-poor with cultural privilege, college educated with blue collar jobs, people who are income-less within comfortable domestic situations (2), and many realities in-between all represented as bourgeoisie in film) there is no homogenous whiteness (3), there is however a repeating materiality of enclosure. These women inhabit **powerful and oppressed roles** (2), trapped with no relation to the world except through white male power (4). **This shuttered positioning deflects their own power-mobility away from culpability in the oppression** (5) **of their Black and non-white sisters** (6) (3).

The films discussed in this essay are by and large made by men. In these films, women are destroyed and rebuilt. Women function both as constructed symbols of the violence of global capitalism and as currency. Their bodies are used as set pieces in the architecture of the filmmaker’s self-hating, destruction fantasies. Their degradation symbolizes pillaged land and resources (in Almodovar’s *The Skin I Live In* his villain protagonist is misusing lab animals, and scientific research, Pasolini’s Oedipus refuses self examination thus perpetuating the plague tormenting Thebes, while the characters in *Juliet of the Spirits* are waited on by lowly servants, and slaves, in Denis’ films often Africa is the continent whose resources are in question (7),) yet I am attracted to these moments of barbarity because of the cleft opened between fantasy and reality.

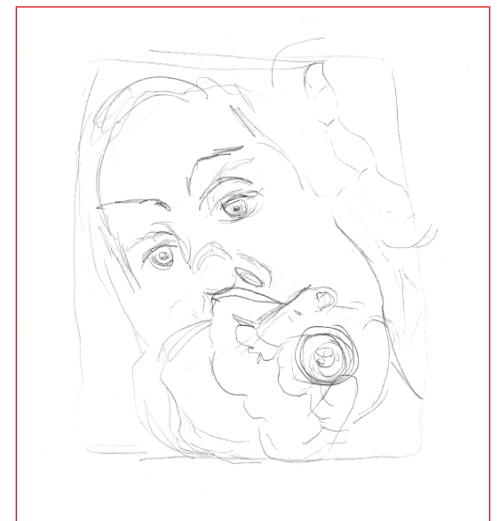
It is my visual obsession with death and destruction, and the god-like yet suppressed power of those who identify as women to wreak havoc within the systems (8) meant to control them, that link many of these films together. Men’s existentialism, dread, violence, and nihilism are afforded the expansive “human condition,” while women’s conditions, containers, their imprisonment, and their eventual/rare liberation are the result of manipulation, character defects and weakness. Women’s conditions are not “human conditions,” rather they are prisons, carnivals, and chaos made by men wherein women are hysterical, depressed, self harming, selfish, vacant or sadistic (9).

(1) https://www.angelo.edu/faculty/kboudrea/general/formulas_nomenclature/Formulas_Nomenclature.htm

(2) “Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic tells the story of two independent “self-consciousnesses” who encounter one another and engage in a life-and-death struggle. The two self-consciousnesses must struggle because each one sees the other as a threat to itself.”

Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic: the search for self-consciousness by J.D. Feilmeier ‘92

(3) This part made me reflect on a book I read in the summer of 2016, James Baldwin’s *The Devil Finds Work*. In the book Baldwin reflects on the racial politics of movies which have shaped the American imaginary. When describing home of *The Brave* (1949) directed by Mark Robson “[...] It became a grave, a tragic matter, on the North American continent, where white power became indistinguishable from the question of sexual dominance. But the question of sexual dominance can exist only in the nightmare of that soul which has armed itself, totally, against the possibility of the changing motion of conquest, surrender, which is love.”



(10) when can camp exist as a red herring or as its own mode of opposition? drag? ballroom?

(11) if men, certain men (what are the categories of THESE men- Almodovar, Pasolini, Mastroianni), are creating characters that are women, who reside within the conditions of capitalism, are they able— camp or otherwise- to serve as a reliable narrator, pointer, meaning makers, critics? their own enclosure (capitalism, european history) already pre-determines their understanding.

(12) not sure what this means, and not sure i like it, lol. who determines who is culturally poor and what culture is?

(13) YES

(14) as long as she exists in culture, celebrity, history— when does it end? her enclosure isn't just that of her fathers or legalities...

(15) What is the difference between GIVEN power and TAKING power?

(16) I don't think I agree with this...maybe privileged women tend to see themselves that way

In her 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," Sontag formulates camp as a scenario with two meanings; an obvious one, and one impossible to understand by outsiders. Within many of her examples she describes camp as a way of looking at and creating images of women that hover in the space between real meaning and real artifice, a place of fantasy and longing (therefore cheesy and nostalgic), but also where Sontag's idea of replica is challenged ("Camp... makes no distinction between the unique object and the mass produced object. Camp... transcends the nausea of the replica.") Camp therefore does not numbly reproduce itself, it embraces the superficiality of the surface, imbuing said shallowness with a type of self-awareness (10). Although by Sontag's standards each of the films in this essay are probably "too good," and perhaps more relevantly they are often too self-aware to be camp. I would argue that they all utilize camp gaze (11), in their exclusionary and exaggerated view of women as a condition of capitalism.

Sontag frames camp primarily as a privileged and privileging way of looking and being; it is not something poor, or at least it is not something culturally poor (12) people have access to. In the films under discussion in Sontag's essay, women access camp only within the confines or roles made for them by men, like Anita Ekberg playing herself in *La Dolce Vita*, or Bette Davis in *All About Eve*. I want to take a more incisive look at what camp gaze does to women, how its point-of-view, that of the *flâneur*, according to Sontag, (primarily man who look at the world, look at women, with dignified playfulness and distance), reifies its place within the very systems and binaries it supposedly, radically, apolitically laughs in the face of (13). **Camp gaze is a misogynistic gaze, employing parody that repeats itself without interruption (4).** Camp gaze is what, in a contemporary example, allows someone like Brittany Spears to be reviled and revered simultaneously.

Inside of the Brittany Spears media spectacle is not only an opportunity to examine camp gaze but also an opportunity to look at the type of materiality that interests me. Despite the girl-next-door character she represented in the media landscape of of late 90's, the American cultural obsession with Spears could be described through a pile of hair on the floor, running eye make-up, a Mercedes-Benz, an umbrella, the sunny fruit tree veranda where she painted, and the enclosed dance space where, based on her social media presence, she appeared to spend a lot of time during her thirteen years of court-ordered conservatorship. Spears' particular class identity—poor and white turned rich and white—**her subjectivity as a woman, that she was deemed unfit as a mother, that her postpartum depression was ignored, invisible and misdiagnosed, and that she ended up in her gilded cage, has exactly to do with the type of powerful and oppressed role many white women play in the real world and in film (5).** Spears' "I'm a Slave 4 U" (2001), inadvertently speaks to her perceived position in relationship to white male power, despite the lyrics' flimsy empowerment. This shrouded orientation deflects her **power-mobility (6).** Given her lengthy, recently ended (14), exploitation and abuse might this positionality have changed?

Women given (15) power, however restricted, tend to see themselves only in relationship to the privileged class (16), thus separating themselves from all others who do not have real or fictional access to the "human condition," even without acknowledging that their suffering is not, actually, just *ennui* but various forms of torture.

An image of steel ribs?

(4) how do the notion of abjection and camp interact in your reading?

(5) I wonder if you we could speak about alienation here too, in being alienated from the product of one's labor, its process, from the self.

(6) you've used this term a few times, could you expand on it? I'm thinking about how it resonates with discourses about upward and downwardly mobile classes. Can power be lost and gained the same way, generationally, people slip out of the class positions their parents held?

(17) but again, I think its important to distinguish who is doing the speaking...a term typically afforded TO white men BY white men and consumed perhaps by white men and white women....if the conversation isn't acknowledged in the public domain, it doesn't mean that I am having my own conversation about the human condition in other spaces, with other people

(18) I haven't seen any of these films in long time but I feel like the women in Blow Up are simply the vehicle through which the man's psychology is explored...they are just props— and it doesn't necessarily feel like in my memory, that there was a solid critique against that....

(19) hmmm i think this is a question around how the categories are arranged.... are we not to assume that some women—irrespective of their location within the enclosure and/or as a part of their hierarchical location determined by class—aspire to greed informed individuality & self-determination? (one could argue that none of us can escape the capitalist aspirational path).

(20) well this gaze must also be investigated

For three of the most-acclaimed auteurs in film history, the directors Antonioni, Fellini, and Pasolini, born in 1912, 1920, and 1922 respectively, the “human condition” (a term typically afforded only to white men (17)), was firmly situated in an Italy that had been defeated in World War II and lost much of its African colonial territory in the process. Their famous films of the late 1950s through the 1960s – *8 1/2*, *La Dolce Vita*, *Juliet of the Spirits*, *Red Desert*, *BLOWUP*, *La Notte*, *L'eclisse*, *La Ventura*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Pigsty*, and *Theorema* – all examine bourgeois culture through its material artifacts, and commit their women characters to haptically elaborate purgatories or morally bankrupt hells.

An image of a table (empty?)

Antonioni's built worlds are less ornate than Pasolini's, or Fellini's, in part because they do not veil or exaggerate but rather they are strategic devices meant to point, often coldly, to the character and their **lack of true connection with the things and people in their environs** (7). Instead of a coat rack hung with baroque capes, his are the magician's props inside their shelving; a top hat, a wand, a bunny. And although in his later films, specifically the English language films *BLOWUP*, *The Passenger* and *Zabriskie Point* (18), Antonioni aligns himself more with the type of criticality employed by the directors within the American Film Renaissance, and less with the cabaret of failed empire of other Italian films made around the same time, the director's reproach of colonizers, the bourgeois; his reproach of his own class, is harder to decipher in his earlier films. Antonioni's women seek a frivolity they find hard to access, despite the freedom their class affords. Within their desire their characters are pulled towards colonized people with lustful disdain. We think Antonioni casts a critical gaze on the failed colonial/capitalist project, but he does so by fortifying a long-existent trope that women — the paralleled other — are equally responsible, through their vacuous want, for the suffering generated by greed (8) (19). Within this false dyad the desires of women characters carry more weight. By making men oblivious, and earning income off-screen, their acquisition of wealth is made neutral, and inevitable while their female companions, regardless of the academic or otherwise distinguished backgrounds, are no more than parvenus.

In Antonioni's *L'eclisse*, we are introduced to Monica Vitti's character, Vittoria, as she is in the process of leaving her boyfriend Riccardo. he earliest scenes in the film take place in Riccardo's apartment as Vittoria silently moves objects around on a table surface, seeming to play with the antiques, treasures, and artworks owned by her lover. The long scriptless moments between them, in combination with the camera's focus on the objects seem to indicate that Riccardo's possessions and wealth are the only things standing in the way of her leaving him, as she admits she no longer loves him. After returning to her spare apartment for some listless solitude her next stop is the stock exchange where her mother works, and where she immediately meets her next lover; a young stockbroker. Later in the film she visits her Africa-obsessed neighbor. Together inside her neighbor's apartment they pause to look at photographs of women in traditional dress. After a sequence of the images on the walls, zoomed in on and broken out into their own separate frame (like a mini-documentary (20)), the film cuts abruptly to Vittoria with darkened skin (not just blackface, but also with brown makeup all over her arms and legs), in a huge brass choker and a wearing a sheet with her legs spread, up on her toes to exaggerate her butt dancing to tribal music, with a spear in her hand.

(7) Today I watched France (2021), by Bruno Dumont, where a young woman tv anchor - supposedly also an allegory for the country's bruised ego - suffers from the same fate of the bourgeois characters you describe. Yet I would insist on thinking about her, and some of the roles you describe below, as alienated characters, as well as 'caged'. I'd like to offer this parallel reading, so as to take into account the cultural question of alienation posed by Pasolini in the 'Scritti Corsari', and importantly Pasolini's insistance on the historical rise of consumerism in Italy in the 50s as an alienating ideological force.

(8) What is the relationship between greed and heterosexual lust?

(21) hmmm why is Vittoria relegated to a victim in this? yes, a man wrote this character and made her choices for her, but again there are hierarchies in which a white european educated elite can in fact place the same weight of objecthood onto others as were put upon her

and the viewer is who in 1962? and what questions of this kind of telescoped awareness of violence were raised at the time?

the men— the filmmakers— may have contempt for women but the women may also have contempt for those who exist in social stratifications (race, class, immigration) below them

(22) i need to think about lidia and the dancer in opposition to each other—what one represents that the other can't and how in Mastroianni seems them maybe as representing two sides to the same coin....

(23) i feel like this warrants expanding

The reverie lasts until a third, and disapproving, friend appears telling them bluntly to “stop playing negroes.” Here, Vittoria is center stage playing dress-up like a little girl wistfully dreaming of a material world, that as a literary editor (not a baron or a banker herself), she should have no place in. For Vittoria, and any redeeming qualities she might possess, camp gaze is there, sketching out an idea of a woman we all know, but the sketch is only between the viewer and the filmmaker; Vitti (too close to it to see it) and her character are left out of it completely (21).

In *La Notte* the two main characters, played by Marcello Mastroianni and Jeanne Moreau, arrive at a nightclub, radiating the chilliness earlier scenes have already established between them. They sit impassively as a performer, a scantily-clad Black woman demonstrates feats of elasticity while dancing to slow jazz, intermittently joined by a Black man wearing loincloth-like underwear. The dancer is performing right in front of them on an only slightly raised dance floor and Mastroianni’s character, Giovanni, keeps his eyes on the performer. Lidia, bored, nurses a drink (the liquid hardly touches her lips), walks her index and middle finger over to the jewel stitched into her clutch, brushes her fingers along her gloves rest-

ing on the table to Giovanni’s thumbs his cuff-attention away saying “remember that never get resolved as plies “you’re distract me.” ber” we imagine links were a gift iniscing, but as a

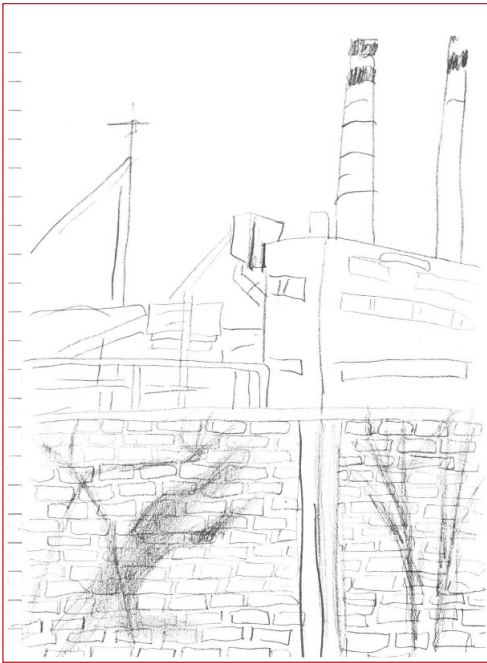


and then over wrist where she flink pulling his from the dancer ber...” a phrase finished or Giovanni re-really trying to With “remember that the cuff worthy of rem-follow up to her

disinterest in the performers, the shots of her purse, and her gloves, “remember” also becomes a doorway into a past life for both characters, dissatisfied with their intellectual bourgeois status, wishing instead to be in the class of the millionaire whose party they will attend later in the evening. “Every millionaire wants his own intellectual. You must be his choice,” Lidia says to him as she climbs out of the bathtub leaving behind the implied, follow-up judgment; “and every intellectual wants his own millionaire,” that might have been lobbed at either of them by the other. The camera closes in on the dancer, her costume, the glass of wine she drinks with no hands while in a backbend, and at one point a close-up flashes the outline of her vulva, seen clearly through the tight satin of her costume. As the performance ends Moreau’s character is withholding something she keeps trying to say to Giovanni but chooses not to. In the context of the high-end erotic dance they’ve just witnessed Lidia appears unable to achieve the “simple pleasure” status of the sex object on the stage, and unable to freely express herself intellectually or emotionally (22). Even in the last scene of the film in which she is finally able to get out what she’s been trying to say, that she (like Vitti’s character in *L’Eclisse*) doesn’t love him anymore her sentiment is immediately smothered by Giovanni’s feverish and desperate kissing. The movie closes with a long backward tracking shot, of her stuck underneath his squirming body on the green of a golf course with her arms pinned to her chest like a bird caught in a hand (23).

In Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits*, the material reality of Julieta (9), a housewife played by the director's wife Guilietta Masina, begins to warp and expand when she discovers her husband may be having an affair. Set in Fregene, a seaside town outside of Rome where all of her glamorous friends and family appear to be on summer vacation, Juliet is the happiest at home; when she wakes up in the morning, or when she prepares for her husband's arrival, sitting in front of the TV with him, or stringing peppers from her garden on a line to dry. She is more concerned with the personal lives of her servants than of her friends. Her contentment at home seems to require no escape; however her home-life is frequently invaded by friends and strangers who bring her to witch doctors and seances and swingers parties. Her simplicity is dismissed as dullness by her husband, laziness by her glamorous mother and sister, and childishness by her wild neighbor who serves as her guide through the waking world of her growing, time-traveling, melting spirits. There is a treehouse, a mansion filled with hippies, water slides, a sage in a canopied bed, rooms entropically overtaken by vines and flowers. Places and characters coast in and out of Juliet's reality, including a psychiatrist who is there and not there, coaxing her out of denial that her husband has taken many other lovers. Within the many opulences (24) on display, Fellini situates her front and center in a purgatory occupied by her grandfather and his mistress, members of a traveling circus, animals and fruit sellers, and perhaps most significantly, slaves, who she watches, in wonder and apparent hallucination, carry her extravagant neighbor out of the ocean. In the climactic sequence of the film, she is returned to the world of her Catholic girlhood; during the school play, where she is sacrificed on the altar, then pulled from paper flames by her furious grandfather, a disruptive heretic, who jumps out of the audience to save her. Juliet's troubles are passively maintained by her dependence on her husband. The clamoring drum beat of hysteria is not her own, but one fabricated for her. Again, it is unclear if Fellini does this self-consciously or not. Antonioni, though raised in an upper class family, always had a stated interest in the proletariat (25), so while his female characters are trapped, we trust, to a degree, that he is pointing to that trap and attempting to paint it in a negative light. Fellini, in his later films, more concerned with the wildness of the mind relies on farce—in which he centers himself—and uses women as props to dissect his self-loathing. Juliet's husband in *Juliet of The Spirits* bears a striking resemblance to Fellini himself.

(24) opulence...you own everything
(paris is burning)



(25) I always wonder who is included in the term "proletariat" (white men? certain white women? the west? certainly not the enslaved, nor the colonized or the post-colonized)

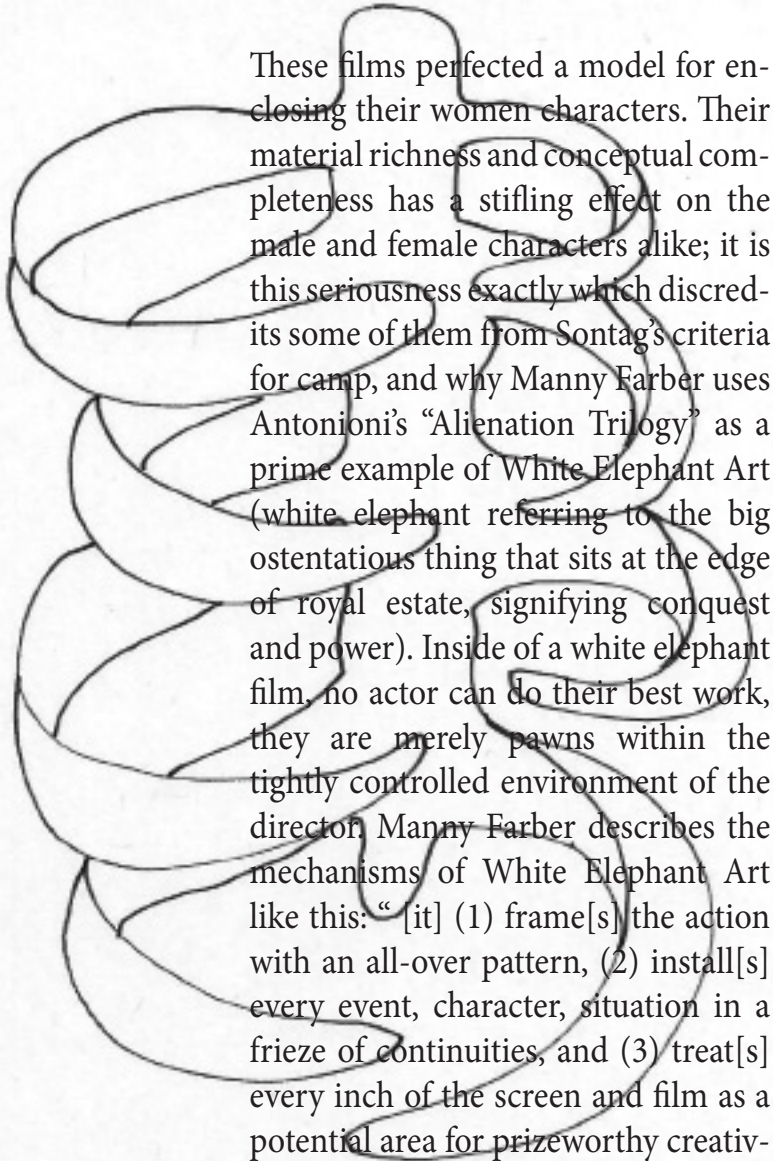
(9) March 12,2020.
I am sitting with my mother in our living room in Milan. Everything around us has ceased to work the way we remember it, except our relationship, now playing out within the confines of our home. She has less than 3 months to live. I shoot a short video of Julieta on my phone as she appears on our TV screen (we chose to watch Fellini that day, as our afternoon treat) - it's the scene where a disturbing cast of characters appear on something reminiscent of a raft. A shot of the raft, where people are engaged in debauchery, a counter-shot of Julieta's face, as she looks towards the raft from the beach, in disbelief.

If in the films discussed so far in this essay Antonioni's characters are forced inward by the burden of wealth, while Fellini's protagonist is besieged by outside forces and drawn toward excess, Pasolini's Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex* is concerned with the action of returning. Jocasta seems to have some preternatural knowledge of Oedipus as her son, and with this recognition of a long absence filled, she welcomes him back into her womb. Jocasta and Oedipus's magnetic attraction to each other is brought to the fore by the bare and brutal set design and the sculptural quality of Pasolini's costumes. For Pasolini each costume is its own precarious and burdensome world, drawing our attention, broadly, to the weight, self-anointed or thrust upon, of each individual life. Oedipus is sweat-covered and red, carrying head-dresses made for God not man, while Jocasta is dry and cold, her face caked with white foundation and dark eye makeup, her pristine body hidden under heavy costumes with hundreds of folds, and large metal clasps, signaling her chastity. She rests in a stone cave; kept cool, waiting for Oedipus to devour her—her yawning emptiness longing to be filled. When Oedipus first comes to Jocasta (she is his reward for killing the sphinx), his father's blood is still on his hands. As their voracity for each other grows, Oedipus becomes sick with greed and rage, sensing the impending doom.

Jocasta holds the power of the church, and she is Oedipus' religion, she belongs not to the people, but only to Oedipus. Their fate foretold, her power over Oedipus is stoppable only by her own destruction. Pasolini, in casting the magnetic Silvana Mangano to play Jocasta, brings forth the most genuine honoring of women than any of the other films discussed so far. He bestows Mangano's Jocasta with the the power of the earth, something ancient, occult, and pagan while cloaking her in the riches of the Church, referencing Italy's long history in which Catholicism, feudal lords and the bourgeois worked together oppress peasants and the working masses. His materialism is satirical, a heretic's reappropriation of flesh and blood pointing more toward witch hunts than Christ on the cross. The predicament under examination here is, in many ways, reflective of real life—then and now—in which women (especially Black, Brown, queer, trans, non-reproductive etc) take the fall for men's failures (26). Jocasta will die, though she is just as guilty as Oedipus, who lives. The question, as with all of the films mentioned above is where, within this framework, is the representation of women put in their own hands, and where is it controlled completely by male filmmakers struggling with their own implicity within the oppressive structures they critique.

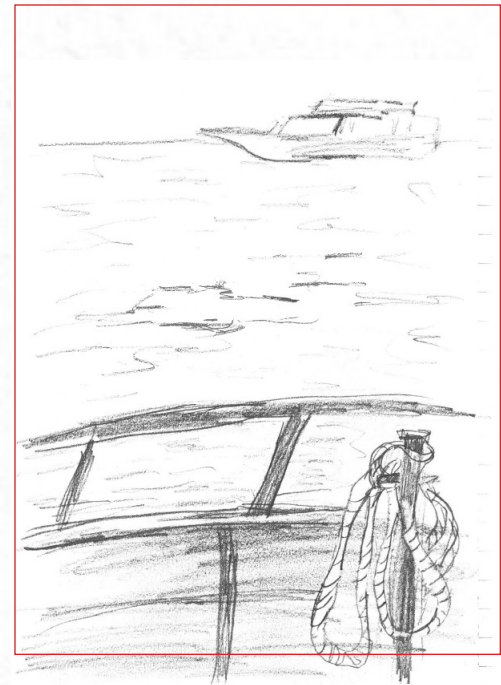
(26) again-- it is where the boundary is set...black, brown, queer, trans, non-productive take the fall for men and women's failures....

An image of a ribcage. How does it feel next to the steel ribs?



These films perfected a model for enclosing their women characters. Their material richness and conceptual completeness has a stifling effect on the male and female characters alike; it is this seriousness exactly which discredits some of them from Sontag's criteria for camp, and why Manny Farber uses Antonioni's "Alienation Trilogy" as a prime example of White Elephant Art (white elephant referring to the big ostentatious thing that sits at the edge of royal estate, signifying conquest and power). Inside of a white elephant film, no actor can do their best work, they are merely pawns within the tightly controlled environment of the director. Manny Farber describes the mechanisms of White Elephant Art like this: "[it] (1) frame[s] the action with an all-over pattern, (2) install[s] every event, character, situation in a frieze of continuities, and (3) treat[s] every inch of the screen and film as a potential area for prizeworthy creativity." He goes on to say "Antonioni's specialty, the effect of moving as in a chess game, becomes an autocratic kind of direction that robs an actor of his motive powers and most of his spine", and that his "aspiration is to pin the viewer to the wall and slug him with wet towels of artiness and significance." His female leads are also pinned to the wall tethered to only the worst realities of their time and place, or worse, an erstwhile (27) time and place. We know that camp is nostalgic, but camp gaze locks female characters into a chest of memorabilia, rendering them unable to do what at the very least we want from them; to put on a

(27) erstwhile maybe not, though still possible to understand films as historic documents...like is the cultural critique offered by the film (and the contemporaneous critiques of the critique of the film) located in a default whiteness that we understand a little differently today?



(28) this seems barely consensual.

my friend told me a story of when he was a little boy when he and his aunt were walking alone and she told him “let’s try not to get raped but if we do, try to enjoy it.”

In the work of two directors in the next generation of filmmakers, Pedro Almodovar and Claire Denis, born in 1949 and 1946 with careers beginning in the 1980s, the material enclosure imprisoning women is the material of their own bodies, their own flesh. The concept of woman-as-flesh is literalized in Almodovar’s *The Skin I Live In*, providing a typically Almodovarian convoluted plot. The skin of the title is that of Vera Cruz, played by Elena Anaya, a woman invented by her captor Robert (played by Antonio Banderas), a famous plastic surgeon. Robert became a widower after his wife jumped out of a window, to her death, while recovering from a fire that left her badly disfigured. We first meet Vera as Vincent when he rapes Robert’s mentally fragile daughter while he is high on amphetamines at a wedding. Re-traumatized by the rape, Robert’s daughter commits suicide, while recovering at a psychiatric hospital using the same method as her mother. In an act of revenge Robert kidnaps Vincent and performs a painstakingly meticulous sex reassignment surgery on him, starting with a vaginoplasty. The surgeries attempt to remake Vincent’s body into a replica of Robert’s deceased wife.

Once transformed, Vincent, now Vera, is imprisoned in Robert’s house in a locked room, enclosed in a suit she must wear at all times to preserve her new skin. Almodovar lets us believe that she finds some kind of inner freedom through opium, yoga, and art inspired by Louise Bourgeois. This temporary sanctum is breached by Robert’s estranged brother



(29) I mean the layers of problems with this premise is deep. It is misogynist and transphobic. even as many times as he portrays trans characters in his films- and while he was radical in this in the early films, this portrayal of transness as punishment, freakishness, a body as a repository for rape or even as if it were consensual as though one’s sexual orientation is heterosexually ascribed to their gender...

(30) this is the choice of privilege and westernness and whiteness and class, this is not everyone’s choice

Zeca, who is in the act of raping Vera when Robert bursts in and kills him. Vera then gives in to Robert’s advances, barely avoiding a second instance of non-consensual penetration in one day (28). She convinces Robert to set her free and in return she agrees to never leave him. Robert is now in love, and the memory of Vincent’s existence becomes nothing but a deranged nightmare, utterly disconnected from the existence of Vera.

The morning after Robert kills his brother and wakes up in love with Vera, Robert’s mother Marila clutches her midsection, saying that her two insane sons were grown in the sickness of her womb. In the end, Vera kills Robert and his mother, escaping from her prison to return to her own mother as Vincent, dressed in a frilly dress and heels.

Almodovar seems to love women, or at the very least he creates lovable women from his characters. At every turn he seeks to articulate their divine power but like the gods

themselves, inevitably they always turn towards chaos. Throughout the film, Almodovar is sympathetic to each woman, and every man is made simple by their vile evil, however he fails to honor the female characters with their own fantasies. Instead they live, suffer, blossom, and/or are destroyed by the fantasies of the men around them (his film *Parallel Mothers*, may be a recent departure from this theme). Further, there is a misogynistic pleasure Almodovar indulges in, and invites us all to indulge in as viewers, when he takes Vincent’s dick away and replaces it with a vagina—the horror—as though the ultimate torture of being born with a vagina can only be made worse by imagining it as a man-made lack via castration. In every tweezer-pulled piece of flesh and every perfect suture Almodovar seems to wager that all women might secretly want to be destroyed and rebuilt as Elana Anaya, that we might all want to be recreated in the glaring operating room light of male gaze’s beauty (29).

Any and all glamor associated with perfectible female flesh is stripped away in Claire Denis’ *Trouble Every Day*. Vincent Gallo and Beatrice Dalle play two characters, Shane and Coré, trapped by the same fate: they are sexually addicted to human flesh. Unlike Almodovar’s complicated backstories, Denis leaves the reason for their affliction ambiguous; they might have been products of a lab experiment gone wrong. (Like Adam and Eve they are siblings in this shared consequence of passion.) Yet although they are both driven to commit acts of insane cannibalism, it seems to have no effect on Vincent Gallo’s leisurely economic status; he’s on vacation in Paris with his wife. But Coré lives a marginal existence; her husband has imprisoned her behind hastily installed 2x4s over the door frame of her bedroom of her house. In one scene Coré seduces a trespassing man, getting the intruder to break through the provisional cage. She reaches climax while biting through his neck and sticking her fingers inside the hole she made with her teeth. While initially seeming to revel in the same phalocentric horror as *The Skin I Live In* (the creation of a cunt) *Trouble Every Day* creates rape scenes so violent and grotesque they have likeness only to the most extreme of fetishes. This horror is so complete it permits no fantasy of reconstruction. And like *Original Sin*, their murderous kink for flesh is a constant unfolding of atrocities beyond their control. In the end Coré sets herself and her house on fire. It is the only viable act of protest against the inescapable **violence of her own reality (10)**. Denis shows the true brutality of the pictorial, cultural and filmic landscape she has inherited as a woman and as a filmmaker, in which women are given the choice between chaos they create or passive reproduction. It is no choice at all; any alternatives bring only ennui, insanity, isolation or death (30).

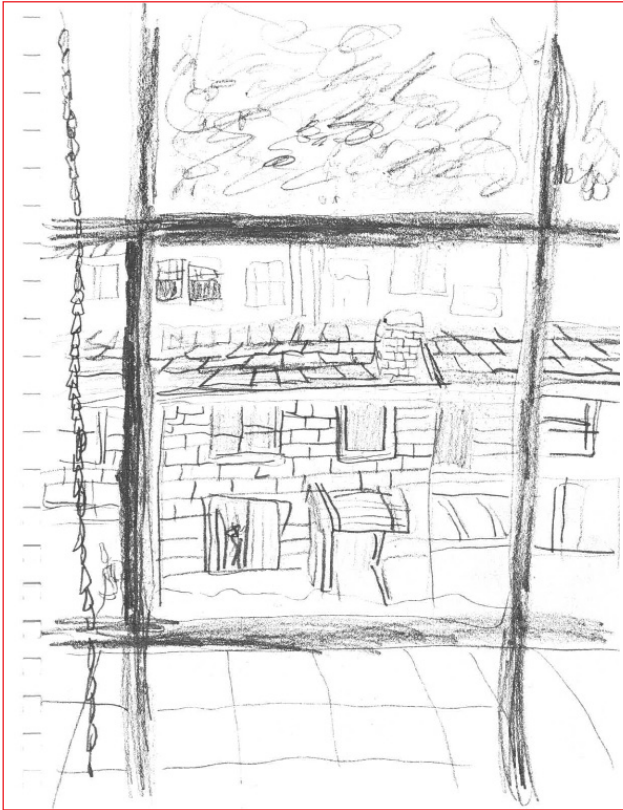
(10) I was reminded here of ‘White Material’, a 2009 film by Claire Denis, where an owner of a failing coffee plantation - played by Isabelle Huppert - refuses to leave, as an unspecified war breaks out in the unnamed ex-colony in africa. As the war encroaches the white family becomes increasingly paranoid and isolated. A veil descends between the white family, portrayed as refusing to flee because of the mother, and the lives of those who work for them on the farm, until the reality of their position as settlers erupts into their life violently.

I am thinking about it also in relation to materiality or the materiality of cages, containers, containment and the material of the cage that denis describes, race as a white construct.

(31) this is a dangerous term, i think. though again, there are hierarchies within hierarchies

I am not in favor of a social or otherwise realist depiction of women, or anything. I don't want anyone's real to be defined by the conditions that are most outwardly visible, or worse someone else's projection of what is only inwardly visible, or known only to one's self. When we — producers of images — try to represent, we fail, no matter our intentions towards empathy. The best that can be done is a sketch of the shape of the things around a character. A sketch of the way their voice sounds in space. An outline of their actions and reactions to other characters in space and time. **A heat map, maybe (11).**

I think part of what I like so much about these films, for all their flaws, is exactly their emphasis on material. This material often sits like caked makeup on the



cheekbones and foreheads of each filmic structure like Silvana Manganò's white-face mask, playing Jocasta, but also in her roles in *Theorema*, *Death in Venice*, *The Witches* and many others. Manganò, through the actual brilliance of her face (and its ability to act), seems to be the only one of these restricted characters that is in on camp gaze. Raised poor and only half-Italian (the other half was English), her commitment to her razor thin eyebrows, and white painted-on face around heavy dark eyes, seemed to parody the supremacy of a culture she was able to access because of her skill and extreme looks, but never to actually assimilate into. The fact of her poor upbringing and less-than whiteness (31) was parodied in Luchino Visconti's section of *The Witches* titled "The Witch Burned Alive" through the gossipy side banter of a dinner party. "She comes from the basest background imaginable, a mutt," "She's below sea level she's so base." "Poor thing, it seems she's a bank clerk's daughter. There is nothing wrong with being a pauper, or with being a prince, it's the in-between that's disgusting, the middle class."

In a later scene in *The Witches*, Manganò's character faints while dancing and the jealous women at the party

remove her sequenced tarboush, hair net, eye-slanters, and mink eyelashes under the thinly veiled guise of making her more comfortable while actually desperate to see 'the real' woman underneath layers of sublunary stuff. I love these compelling material outlines--Antonioni used airplanes to actually paint the landscapes in *Red Desert*; in *BLOWUP*, his characters' uncomfortable romp is made wholly unsexy by the crunching, torn and tearing, photo backdrop paper behind and eventually enveloping them in a bed made dry by the main character's actual hatred of women. In Almadovar's films, women set beds and bedding on fire and dump water on it to put it out, drink a messy concoction of gazpacho mixed with sleeping pills, gazpacho spilling down their chins, tend to balcony chickens and plants, remove dangly earrings before using the rotary phone. Whatever the directors' intentions, all these filmic details **exemplify a reliance on material indicators in the face of the actual inability (32) to know or represent women, or anyone (12).**

(32) aren't the material indicators part of the character and how the directors' create the falsehood of the women or anyone?

Looking through film space, maybe, instead of at it, the way you might look at a magic eye poster, shapes begin to emerge that remind us of shadows of things touched and felt. Women's interiority is hidden by these **elaborate velvety prisons (13)**. Their utterly inaccessible interiors opens up space in my imagination. In my fantasy, these women do not have some special quality that allows them to transcend their filmic circumstances; rather they are raucous, swirling black holes, shadowy spaces between **oppressor and oppressed (14)** where their subjectivities, and in turn mine, can imagine radical acts outside of the comforts that contain them.

(11) A heat map would be great :) but how would it gaze? are you advocating for a gaze without gazers? can cinema operate outside of the positionality of its authors?

(12) how do the materials imply a possible subversion? the actresses tugging back at the messiness of their own depiction?

(13) how do they also escape?

(14) "The teacher presents himself to his students as their necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the teachers existence—but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher."

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970

