LOOKING AND TOUCHING, DESIRE, CLOSELY

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I
Giving and withholding

Seduced by gold strings, they pluck it like a harp. History returns in short, metallic sounds that flow and then pierce, the body and the skin. I can hear it, but also feel it, touch it.

Their shared instrument is a rectangular strip of gold-flecked netted fabric. Costume history catalogues it as an Egyptian *assuit* shawl, named after its place of production, the Asyut region in Egypt, which thrived as a textiles hub during the nineteenth century, helped by the flow of the River Nile. Known as 'tulle bi telli' throughout Egypt (Arabic for 'net with metal'), the fabric is created by threading flat strips of metal through cotton or linen netting, before flattening and rolling the material to achieve a smooth sheen and light drape. Hungry for the 'Otherness' of the Orient, European and American travellers ate up these delicate goods in the late nineteenth century.

The popularity of the assuit shawl soared again during the 1920s, as Egypt-fever infected fashion, film, furniture, and dance, following the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922. Clara Bow famously wore an assuit shawl as a backless dress in the 1925 silent film *My Lady of Whims*. It slipped down the lines of her pale flesh, in a masquerading show of sex, femininity, and snatched exoticism. Stitched through with colonising escapades, the history of the garment spells 'stolen'.

Across the expanded years of the fin-de-siècle, these stolen shawls also grazed the chilly shoulders of wealthy western women, displaying flashes of their flesh as they roamed the city streets. In the gaps between flesh and fabric, fragments of sexed bodies emerged as 'erotic portion[s]', as Roland Barthes would write in his 1973 text on pleasure.[1] Woven into see-through squares, the assuit shawl hides and disguises, gives and withholds – much like the erotic veils of striptease.

It was Barthes of Cherbourg, and later Paris, who wrote that French striptease 'is based on a contradiction: Woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked'.[2] When 'the whole spectrum of adornment' is finally flicked off, the erotic is exorcised.[3] This is perhaps why the veil, by the virtue of its visual capacity to obscure, keeps sex in play, upholding the binary codes of sexual difference. For the French writer Octave Uzanne, the veil defines the feminine, inasmuch as it is consumed by the masculine, desiring gaze. In his 1902 illustrated book on female fashion, *L'art et les artifices de la beauté*, he writes: 'I know of nothing more troubling, more cajoling to the eye, more soft, more adorable… than these light, sparkling, transparent veils'.[4]

II
An invitation

Strung up suspended, the shawl that the two girls of the photograph pluck like a harp is closer to the dictionary definition of veil: ‘a piece of fine material worn by women to protect or conceal the face’. But unlike the objectifying lens of the male photographer or novelist, the female subjects and objects of this image touch the veil on their own terms, with unwritten, and hidden, sexual desire. Cut from the Latin noun *vela*, meaning ‘sail, curtain, covering’, this veil glides through space, in permanent free-fall, a space of dreaming. It is a covering, a bedtime comforter, which cares for pleasures we cannot always see.

Getting pleasure from what Emily Apter terms ‘manic collectomania’,[5] the eternal adolescent artist who made the black-and-white photograph no doubt picked up this jewelled treasure in a New York flea market towards the end of the 1970s. Like me, she was a vintage addict, lovesick for Parisian pasts, collecting Colette, Claude Cahun, Victorian fashions, and photographic techniques that began in nineteenth-century France.

Her name is *Francesca*—an Italian name—the country of her bohemian family holidays and her artistic schooling. When put to the feminine, the name would seem to translate as ‘“French lady,” or *Frenchesque*, or perhaps even a *free*, or freeish girl’, as the poet Ariana Reines has beautifully essayed.[6] I want to unravel her French-sounding freedoms.

Even her surname, manly on first listen, is symptomatic of the bucolic pleasures of French rococo. I think of the girl on Fragonard’s arboreal swing: ecstatic in lace.

Ghostly fragments of lace dominate the blissfully grey photographs of Francesca Woodman, which she took across the years 1979 and 1980 while trying to earn her living as a young artist. There is flight and suspension in these images, as clothing moves through time. ‘Trying [her] hand at fashion photography’,[7] Francesca (I use her first name for its ‘French-ness’) abstracted silk; illuminated folds; gathered fur into surreal, Méret Oppenheim-influenced assemblages, in her own distinctive reading of the fashion photograph. Many works were staged in anonymous, domestic spaces: between day and night, past and present, Paris and New York (the location of the photograph I *touch with my eyes*).

It is captioned ‘*Untitled, New York*, 1979–1980’, and is small enough to slip in my pocket. Without name, it is suggestive of preliminary experimentation, a sketch for something yet to come—the full extent of which can never be known. After she jumped to her death from a Manhattan building on 19 January 1981, aged only twenty-two, Francesca is now absent; but her work is undying, like this photograph, which finds freedom without a name, renewing itself. The absence of a title is an invitation: to look and touch the unwritten folds of desire, against the linear grain.

III
So close

Sailing, draping, falling, and flying, across the central horizon of the photograph, the veil hangs off-kilter, spatially and materially *wayward*. It is only this thing—this see-

through veil—that separates the two young girls who stand beside each other, facing opposite directions, heads turned slightly to the offside. As a shortening of the obsolete *awayward*, meaning 'turned away', the etymology of 'wayward' invokes a splitting of time and space, to and from the body. Uncontrollable bodies (like adolescents) are often called wayward as a result of their 'unpredictable or wilful behaviour'.

But waywardness also offers a way out, as Saidiya Hartman has imaginatively opened up through archive photographs, writing *for* (caring for) the young black women in early twentieth-century America who dreamt and experimented with alternative ways of living, in opposition to the 'new forms of servitude awaiting them'.[8] 'Waywardness: the avid longing for a world not ruled by master, man or the police', writes Hartman.[9] Her subjects were dispossessed in a particularly violent way, different to Francesca. But Hartman's close inhabitation of their lives has opened my eyes to waywardness.

I'm groping for wayward figures across time, as I look at the photograph so closely, feeling it, emotionally and physically. I write with the warmth of a caress; as I zoom in, get up close and personal. My temperature increases; I feel the image on my skin, as if I am wearing it. Is this wayward looking: the perverse slippages of perception?

For more than is normal, I stay looking at a lingering hand and suspicious wedding finger. I wonder where her deviant paw has wandered during acts of infidelity—which flesh or fabric it has touched, including her own. As Renu Bora writes in the essay 'Outing Texture' (1997): 'The emergence of tactility usually involves thrills of the manual, the embodiment of touch'.[10] Bodily arousal fizzes through the tips of her fingers. Plucking and clicking.

With *care* (a caress), the artist operates all her tools manually, be it veil or camera. The hand could belong to Francesca herself (though she never married). Obscured by the gauze, I will never fully know if it is her or not, unlike the companion (whom she likes, is *alike*) in the sombre-grey photograph.

Their silk-slipped bodies are angled towards one another; erotically close, but also apart—the intimacy of siblings. I pluck at Juliet Mitchell's text in my encounter with them: 'Looking at siblings is looking anew at sex and violence. Bringing in siblings changes the picture we are looking at'.[11] Thus I shiver at the enticing near-graze of a shoulder, which is how the scratchy veil also works, with its skin-tickling, time-ticking loose threads. It is only the grainy texture of the fragile fabric that divides them, as they enfold its folds, bringing it closer to their skin in haptic contact, one echoing, pleasing (or pleasuring) the other, as girls are wont to do.

Flaunting unwashed blonde hair tied in a wayward knot, the girl on the left turns her back on me; she wears a black silk, long-sleeved dress, with metallic embroidery framing the garment's low 'V'. Stitched in gold thread, and dotted with beads and sequins, the detailing recalls high ocean breakers, foaming at the beach (or at the mouth we cannot see), releasing pleasure in its climax. Her back is white and smooth, while her hand is freckled by the sun. She must have sunbathed on her back on those lazy summer days, eyes closed, vanishing into dreams and the sky,

as her face also vanishes here. She plucks her antique mesh covertly from behind, in the corner of the lens: the secret areas of the room.

IV
The desire for desire

Francesca's cheeks once blushed with shame; worried she was 'very feminine in the pink and lacy fashion', way too wayward for cold conceptual art.[12] To the critics of the time, the artist was invisible. Later, many would dismiss her work for being dangerously nostalgic, as frivolously feminine as she once feared. I mourn her fear. Francesca's nostalgic appetite for wayward bodies and second-hand clothes is also a longing for sickness *like* hers: the hysterical mania for fabrics, which spread through the modern city of Paris.

As an object of the medical imagination, nostalgia was once considered a psychopathology, wherein a sentimental attachment to 'home' (synonym for the past) turns excessive and painful. Originating from the Greek compound of *nóstos* (meaning 'homecoming') and (*álgos*), meaning 'pain' or 'ache', the symptoms of nostalgia curiously fused bodily fevers and melancholies of the mind. Perhaps the ache that Francesca feels for the past (its estranged objects) is akin to the ache of desire, for a (French) home that she dreams of, through the gauze of woven things, while stranded in New York.

The punks of 1970s Manhattan made a claim for Paris, too—from Richard Hell adopting Lautréamont in his lyrics, to Patti Smith's devotion to Baudelaire—but for Francesca it was different. It seems to me that she wasn't interested in the scruffy hedonism of modernist, male poets, but the wayward women written out of modernist history, the ones who moved *between* the crowds, deviantly desiring sartorial goods, which they snatched and then hid, in the slits and gaps of their dresses. Following Susan Stewart's textured theorising in *On Longing* (1984) that 'nostalgia is the desire for desire',[13] I am therefore reaching (across time) for Francesca's own nostalgic desire, for the overlooked, haptic perversions of the past.

V
Even closer

As the yang to her friend's yin, the girl on the right of the photograph wears a spaghetti-strapped, white silk slip: a stealthy object for beneath the sheets (or behind the veil). It is creamy and pure, like an antique undergarment gleaned second-hand, feigning first-time innocence. In French, the word is *negligé*, which rolls off the tongue as it slips down the body. ('Slip' as noun and verb: I slip between them (bodies and words)).

She burrows her head into her armpit, tripping out on adolescent-sweat perfume, which mixes with the musty odour of that second-hand construction. It is the thrill of invading a stranger's body: the pre-owned object. Fallen eyelids skew her vision, smudging her mascara. And so other senses come into play. The desires of smell, touch, and sound combine, in day-to-night-dreaming fantasy.

From shoulder to clavicle to chest, her skin is exposed, but the veil shades it, makes it fuzzy. What if the veil is not here to conceal the prized object, but actually *is* the prized object? It is no wonder that the two girls of the photograph mutually desire it, in this shared, autoerotic encounter, which lives out a desiring, entangled relation between human and thing. Cut off in close-up, the full-length of the veil is mysteriously out of sight. Where does fabric end and body begin? Maybe such divides are illusory, when the girls merge with their things, and flesh becomes fabric, in *touching desire*.

VI
Closer still

By looking perversely close, I have touched upon the touching desire of 'female fetishism': a 'subversively erotic practice, thoroughly "perverse" in its own terms', writes Apter, which gets its heat from clothing, fabric and texture.[14] But in the late nineteenth century, women were instead deemed pathological when they obsessed over things, going so far as to steal them in the sensuous department stores: where ribbons gushed, silks tumbled, laces teased, and 'muslins, gauzes, guipures flowed in light ripples,' to name just one of Émile Zola's fabric-lists in his 1883 novel *Au Bonheur des Dames [The Ladies' Paradise]*.[15] All for 'the pleasure of seeing and touching them,'[16] swatches began to disappear from these palaces of modern consumption, first in Paris at Le Bon Marché (where Zola did his research), and then in London and New York. There was tantalising evidence of a shoplifting contagion. The doctors called it kleptomania.

As a medical term, it was not a wholly new discovery. The Swiss doctor André Matthey coined the term *klopémaniè* in 1816 as a means to describe the impulsive urge to steal—either useless items, or things that could be easily paid for. But as the department stores waged their war of influence on women, and criminologists began to gender the kleptomaniac crime as feminine (class it as bourgeois), doctors swarmed to case study such women suffering from shoplifting fever. Much like hysteria, kleptomania was thought to be an outcome of feminine weakness, a sick neuroses, which could be caused by the bloody, auto-toxic phases of menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause, in a strange, sexist merging of body and mind.

In 1910, for example, when adding cases of kleptomania to his 1908 study 'Women's Erotic Passion for Fabrics,' the French psychiatrist Gaëtan Gatian de Clerambault (who also showed a colonising desire for cloth in a gigantic volume of photographs made in Morocco during the aftermath of a wartime injury) emphasised sexual deviancy of a masturbatory kind as driving his patients' silky encounters. Focussing on autoeroticism as an effect of their kleptomaniac hysteria, de Clerambault decided that it was the tactile qualities of fabric, over 'shine, smell, and sound', which got his patients hot.[17] But never would he allow them the lofty, masculine entitlement of perversion, judging instead that 'women are passive in their contact with silk. […] Their jouissance is genital, but it is so self-sufficient that one could almost call it asexual'.[18]

Going against the passive drape of de Clerambault, and the psychoanalytic belief that female fetishism is a contradiction in terms, the clothing fetishists plucking at gauze offer a perverse, powerful way out. There is agency and desire in their wayward touch.

Eyes closed or head turned; they are together, but separate, as they pluck the sheer thing. With care I call it kleptomania. Looking closely and carefully—maybe even dangerously (still a mode of care)—has helped me to touch it.

Laterally aligned, the two girls appear as siblings: two masturbating girls, feeling solitary pleasure as they touch through, and with, their rough, fraying thing. (I too want to tug on the wayward thread hanging loose at the bottom right of the picture.) The veil falls between them, cast-out in liminal space. Echoing the indecisive flux of adolescent desire, they are figures *in-between*: spaces, sexualities, textualities, and temporalities.

The queer complexity of the girls' touching desire dazzles through the veil. Perverse threads move through the untitled gaps in the weave. They are dreaming of difference, of pleasure: connecting with the wayward kleptomaniacs of the past. I have touched them; but they have also touched me, grazing my eye, plucking my skin, helping me to imagine other ways to feel.

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1 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1998 [1973], p. 9.
2 Roland Barthes, 'Striptease', in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, London: Vintage Books, 2000 [1957], p. 84.
3 Op. cit., p. 85.
4 Octave Uzanne (1902) cited in Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-century* France, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991, 88.
5 Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish*, p. 102.
6 Ariana Reines, 'An Hourglass Figure: On Photographer Francesca Woodman', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 4 April 2013, accessed: https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/an-hourglass-figure-on-photographer-francesca-woodman/, date accessed: 3 December 2019.
7 Francesca Woodman, *I'm trying my hand at fashion photography, Providence, Rhode Island*, 1977. Vintage gelatin silver print on two-sided postcard.
8 Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social* Upheaval, London: Serpent's Tail, 2019, p. xi.
9 Op. cit., p. 227.
10 Renu Bora, 'Outing Texture', in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1977), p. 117.
11 Juliet Mitchell, *Siblings: Sex and Violence*, Cambridge: Polity, 2003, p. xvi.
12 Woodman cited in Reines, 'An Hourglass Figure'.

13 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, p. 23.
14 Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish*, p. 106.
15 Èmile Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise*, trans. by Brian Nelson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1883], p. 398.
16 Op. cit., p. 110.
17 Gaëtan Gatian de Clerambault (1910) cited in Leslie Camhi, 'Stealing Femininity: Department Store Kleptomania as Sexual Disorder', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 5:1 (spring 1993): 40.
18 Ibid., 41.