Liz Conor: *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004

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1 Contrary to what the catchy title of her study may suggest, Liz Conor in *The Spectacular Modern Woman* argues for a reconsideration of women's increased public visibility in the 1920s which does not relegate women to the object position of the "spectacle," but probes into the ways in which visibility invests women with a "newly emerged subject position" (16) that is based on modern woman's new agency to "execut[e] [...] [her] visual effects and status" (2). Her term for this new formation of feminine subjectivity, produced by the "visual conditions of modernity" (2), is the "Modern Appearing Woman." To buttress and structure her argument, Conor extends Butler's notion of the "scene" of linguistic performativity to the modern visual scene and proposes "that in a cultural field that privileges the visual, the visual itself might become privileged in repetitive signifying acts that constitute gendered identity." (6) Hence, her study is divided into six chapters that focus each on women "appearing" in one modern visual "scene." As "[i]mages of women were increasingly homogenous" (30) due to the technologized and commodified visual field, she focuses on visual "types" within these scenes: "The City Girl in the Metropolitan Scene," "The Screen-Struck Girl in the Cinematic Scene," "The Mannequin in the Commodity Scene," "The Beauty Contestant in the Photographic Scene," "The 'Primitive' Woman in the Late Colonial Scene," and "The Flapper in the Heterosexual Leisure Scene." Through the term "appearing" she effectively describes a new, and ambivalent, practice of the female self and investigates whether and how this new female subject position may challenge the gendered subject/object and spectator/spectacle divide.

2 Conor evidently sympathizes with 1920s women who intentionally "managed" their looks and tried to conform to certain types of standardized beauty. However, the greatest achievement of her study is that she does not jump to straightforwardly award those women with agency. Rather, she maintains the ambivalence of the "appearing woman" as objectified spectacle and as agent of her own identity, and carefully moves back and forth between visibility's two-fold potential. While Conor's rhetorical insistence on the "ambivalent uses," "contradictory meanings," (255) or the "complexity" (256) of female "appearing" can become a little repetitive at times, I find her manoeuvring argument more convincing than arguments that claim to be about ambivalence, but in the end cannot resist to bend into one direction.

3 In each chapter, Conor details first the material conditions and technologies that

enabled women to become "visible" in a specific scene at all, and in a second step shows which technologies, beauty standards, regimens and methods of self-scrutiny and comparison were available to women to make themselves "appear modern" or appear as a modern "type." The chapter on the "Beauty Contestant," for example, includes an analysis of the interplay between the emergence of mass circulation dailies - dependent upon the technological innovation of the rotary press - , the introduction of half-tone block necessary for the reproduction of photographs, the commercial need for reader participation and identification with a daily, and the concomitant burgeoning of beauty contests. This analysis of the material conditions is followed by a survey of the verbal and visual presentation of contestants, readers' responses and judgements, expected beauty norms and their developments during the 1920s, as well as women's attitude towards their own identity as a contestant. One of the study's merits, which also makes for its great readability, is that Conor pays very close attention to her varied material - from popular movies to fashion ads to letters to the editor - but always manages to tie her results closely back to her larger argument. The same is true for her somewhat eclectic use of theoretical concepts from Althusser to Irigaray: she introduces them quickly when she needs them, but does not overload her text with theoretical lingo.

4 Conor claims that the formation of modernity's visual economy is a "global phenomenon" and that the "Modern Girl" was "the first cultural figure to travel along the multi-directional flows of transnational capital" (7). Her study itself is an exercise in globalizing cultural studies and de-centering it from its strong base in and focus on the US and Great Britain: published through Indiana University Press and with no mention or "justification" of a specific local origin of the material used, the study may lead the complacent Western reader on to believe that s/he is dealing with a US or British 1920s context. Instead, Conor takes all her material from Australian popular periodicals and draws frequent comparisons to studies on US and British contexts - and thus silently reminds us that the recent transnational turn in cultural studies should not encourage US and British scholars to subsume other cultural discourses under their own, but instead means to radically destabilize the centers and peripheries of scholarly inquiry.

5 While *The Spectacular Modern Woman* is an original and thoroughly researched contribution to our understanding of the emergence of Western ocularcentric culture and its consequences for female subject formation, some points of criticism should be noted. Conor opens her "Introduction" by relating the story of the Australian actress Lotus Thompson who "went to Hollywood to pursue a film career [. . .] [H]er legs were filmed and attributed to other actresses. In a poignant and desperate protest against her treatment within these new

conditions of women's public visibility, Thompson poured acid over her legs" (1). Conor argues that Thompson's "desire was not to become *invisible*, but rather to achieve mass visibility within contemporary terms of fame," because Thompson could secure better roles due to "the notoriety resulting from her acid protest" (3).My concern here is that because her book is about the ways in which women, *within* the confines of beauty standards and *within* circumscribed technologies to make their bodies visible, may assume some form of agency -it is not particularly useful to open the text with the only example of what could be read as a violent protest against female spectacularization, beauty standards, and the commodification of the female body. In addition, the case of Thompson also shows that, perversely, the only way for women to de-objectify themselves may have been self-mutilation or even -annihilation. Secondly and more importantly however, Conor's reading of the Thompson case is symptomatic of her lack of consideration of women who did not conform to modern beauty standards for reasons other than their age, financial status, bodily condition or inability to learn the necessary "techniques." For Conor, women could use their public and publicly controlled visibility as part of the formation of their subjectivity, or could fail to do so - but she grants them no agency to consciously situate themselves outside the ocularcentric logic of what Conor calls "modernity," which is, I would argue, what Thompson tried to achieve through her acid protest.

6 Conor's tendency to ignore the possibility of other ways of subject formation becomes most problematic in her chapter on "The 'Primitive' Woman": "Aboriginal women," she writes, "neither occupied the space of the commodity spectacle nor were able to performatively enact a consumerist subjectivity." (184) Because the "Primitive" Woman cannot appear as a modern type, and does - to the eye of the white, modern beholder - not intentionally manage her appearance, she remains pure object or spectacle in Conor's account, with no subjectivity of her own. The very last paragraph at least takes note of an aboriginal women's dance company, the "Merry Singers and Dancers of Cummeragunga," who in their shows conformed to "modern techniques of appearing" (208). Again, however, Conor does not allow for a third subject position of women towards their own visibility - and thus virtually denies aboriginal women any agency at all in the "modern scene."

7 This myopia in Conor's argument results from one major weakness in the theoretical set-up of her study: a homogenous, one-dimensional, naïve concept of "modernity." Everything and everyone in the 1920s, according to Conor, must be "modern" - if not, she or it must be described as "old-fashioned" and as a failure to adapt to "modernity." While she sometimes mentions critical positions toward women's visibility, such as "social purity

movements" (230), she assumes that these are external to women's subjectivities, and that they are not part of modernity. Conor's concept of modernity certainly does not seem to be one of a multiplicity of new and conflicting cultural formations in the 1920s - however, Conor is silent on her definition of "modernity" and "modern," apart from the casual statement that her "book relies on a definition of modernity that emphasizes the alteration of human perception" (14). Given the expansive scholarship on meanings and configurations of the "modern," the "modernist," and "modernity," Conor would have been well advised to reflect on this issue which is central to her study. In addition, her argument's implication that there is no agency that can operate outside the confines of what she terms "modern visibility" could have been avoided. Despite these shortcomings, Conor's study substantially contributes to the field of cultural and gender studies through its profound analysis of the interrelatedness of gendered visibility and subjectivity in the 1920.