A woman is burying the body of her boyfriend, who has killed himself. She has managed to keep his death a secret. She has carried his body in parts in a backpack across a hilly golden meadow. Her face registers little, but her headphones suffuse her in a world of feeling—bad feeling, somewhere near the emotional territories of loss, denial, shame. She turns off the music and scans down across the grassy textures of the meadow with her eyes. She hears her own rustling, and the sounds of birds and insects are amplified and enveloping. When her work is finished, she dances lightly through the fields, marking out the space with her movements. She looks so closely at the tips of a tiny tree branch that her eyes almost cross (fig. 1). She looks down. She sees some waterbugs, and the soundtrack animates them with bright, mysterious sounds. She reaches into a small puddle to touch a worm. She is feeling her way through the scene, literally feeling it with her tactile brush across the landscape, with her reach into the puddle, feeling for worms with her hand. She is also having feelings, reaching emotionally and somewhat unsuccessfully, feeling for some kind of contact with this unlikely object choice, a sentient, creeping little grub.

I want to look at ways in which this affective and affecting scene from Lynne Ramsay’s extraordinary 2002 art-house film Morvern Callar exemplifies certain new possibilities in feminist filmmaking. I want to look at possibilities that have emerged since the mid-nineties, new strategies for narrating desires that are expansively polymorphous and unexpected and also deeply shot through with feeling. Perhaps perversely, I am especially interested in bad feeling. Critics have noted Morvern Callar’s absorptive, highly tactile “candy-colored anomie” and made observations about the “affectlessness” of the title character, beautifully rendered by Samantha Morton (Hoberman 2002). I would argue, though, even if...
Morton’s performance is extraordinary exactly for its reserve, that rather than seeing the character and the film as affectless it makes more sense to discuss them as absolutely flooded with—and traumatically overwhelmed precisely by—affect.

Although bad feeling may not be an obvious site of inquiry for finding “positive” or useful feminist images, I wish to position, as critically powerful and usefully feminist, films that take advantage of the expanded range that the contemporary moment offers for working with and through negative affect. I want to look at ways in which recent cinematic explorations of negative affect are opening exciting, eccentric, polymorphous, and, in many respects, queer ways of narrating women’s desires. Thus the films I will look at here show desire as shot through with bad feeling, but they also show bad feeling as producing its own unexpected desires.

The bad feelings that structure Morvern Callar are established from its first shots—as is the film’s striking visual register. We see fragments of Morvern’s face in extreme close-up, alternating with fragments of her boyfriend’s dead body, alternating with pulses of darkness produced by a nearby string of flashing Christmas-tree lights. She lies on the floor with him and reaches out, tracing his corpse with her hand, all at an intimate proximity, a lover’s focal length. The camera simulates the close, familiar gaze that he can no longer offer in return. Morvern is cut loose, destabilized, and traumatized by the sudden removal of her structuring partnership, and the film is fundamentally structured, narratively and visually, around the crisis presented by the removal of his returned look, the loss
of his engagement. In ways that I want to explore here, this broken circuit of exchange structures both the character’s dramatic problem—how or whether to relieve her isolation—as well as Ramsay’s confident temporality and visual grammar.

Helpful here, precisely for thinking about Morvern’s isolation, is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1995) work on the negative affect shame. Sedgwick argues that negative affects function on a spectrum of engagement and disengagement and that interest and shame are intricately bound together. She draws on Silvan Tomkins’s phenomenology of shame to suggest that “the pulsations of cathexis around shame, of all things, are what either enable or disable so basic a function as the ability to be interested in the world” (Tomkins 1963, 245). Tomkins theorizes shame as “a specific inhibitor of continuing interest and enjoyment. Like disgust, it operates ordinarily only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and it inhibits one or the other or both. Hence any barrier to further exploration that partially reduces interest or the smile of enjoyment will activate the lowering of the head and eyes in shame and reduce further exploration or self-exposure powered by joy” (1963, 123). This polarity describes and structures Morvern’s oscillations and actions throughout the film, as she moves back and forth in unexpected directions between mute, isolated reticence and moments of engagement and interest. After an initial effort to immerse herself in the public isolation of an Ecstasy-fueled dance club, Morvern puts on her headphones, enveloping herself in a private soundtrack. The music she plays simulates an embrace from her dead lover, who has left her a Walkman and a mix tape as a Christmas present. So absorbed, she can remain thoroughly isolated, disinterested, and disengaged at her supermarket job. Visually, too, the film signals shame and its isolations, showing Morvern walking through the aisles, avoiding eye contact, and staring overhead at cardboard signs or down at the produce. Working in the produce aisle, Morvern has already lowered her head and eyes when a coworker notices her sadness and tries to comfort her. This attention causes Morvern to assume an even more dramatically withdrawn posture of shame. This posture of a shamed woman—head down, eyes averted—is nothing new to cinema and hardly inherently feminist. But Morvern Callar gives us a new angle, a reverse angle, showing us what Morvern’s downward gaze sees: her refusal of human contact, her scrutiny of the vegetables, the extreme close-up of proximate objects as the visual experience of shame. We share her shamed vision of a maggot on a carrot, see what she sees as she feels and pokes it with her finger (fig. 2).

Visually, much of the action of Morvern Callar takes place precisely in these acts of looking from a place of depressive lassitude. If the film has
been criticized for its slow pacing, I would argue that its success is precisely in using temporality to mobilize Morvern’s looks as action. Morvern looks promiscuously at anything she can, at the cigarette lighter her lover has given her for Christmas, at the hole in her sock, at the hairs on the Flokati rug, at maggots and worms and cockroaches. The film links the reach of her eye to the reach of her hand, merging the senses of seeing and feeling in her efforts at contact and engagement. She reaches into puddles to touch worms. In fact, she touches everything she possibly can. Like the film’s other oscillations between engaged reaching out and withdrawn isolation, Morvern’s efforts to touch often fail. At several points in the film, Morvern reaches out to touch but ends up staring at her own hand, gesturing toward contact and then withdrawing into a way of treating her own reaching hand as an alienated object of visual inquiry. What starts as an effort to touch becomes focused back on herself, more like the familiar feminine inspection of one’s own manicure, almost a surprising, alienated kind of autoeroticism.

1 In The Skin of the Film, Laura Marks cites Gilles Deleuze, who has also addressed ways in which a particular cinematic image of the hand “doubles its prehensile function (as object) by a connective function (of space),” suggesting that, from that moment of grabbing “it is the whole eye which doubles its function by a specifically ‘grabbing’ one” (Marks 2000, 171). Marks finds this doubling of seeing and touching unnecessary in terms of evoking a sense of touch in cinema. Morvern Callar is certainly highly tactile, even without the identifiable possibilities presented by the image of the reaching hand. Nevertheless, I think it is important in terms of this film’s unusual emphasis on reaching out, on touching with both hand and eye, as the diegetic action.
What is remarkable about the film’s treatment of Morvern’s gaze, and the longing for a circuitry of returned gazing that it both avoids and expresses, is that throughout the camera sees from the perspective of the worm, or the Flokati rug, a perspective enabled by the conventions of cinema to return Morvern’s unreturnable looks. That is, almost every shot in the film is literally photographed from the point of view of the nearby objects at which Morvern stares. The film is shot from the point of view of the cigarette lighter, of the worm, of the dead lover, of the hole in Morvern’s sock, of her fingernail. The film’s striking visual style, with its bright colors, reliance on extreme close-up, and omnipresence of Morvern’s enveloping musical soundtrack, reads, at least on the surface, something like the aesthetics of music video. But it also functions as wish fulfillment and defines the primary gaze of the film not as Morvern’s but as that of the impossible reverse angle, the point-of-view shot of an ant. Throughout, the film mobilizes Morvern’s gaze at and attachment to proximate objects, animating the inanimate and imbuing with desire the incidental objects at which Morvern stares.²

**Shame and its ways of seeing**

I would like to think about these unusual visual dynamics—mobilizing a downward look as action, animating the reverse shot from the point of view of a worm—and to link them specifically to a phenomenology of shame. Embedded in Sedgwick’s literary scholarship on shame are highly visual observations that can be drawn out usefully for thinking about cinema. Much of Sedgwick’s work is based on Tomkins’s aforementioned phenomenology of shame, which posits a concrete relation between looking and the experience of bad feeling. I would like to consider ways in which the relay of looks that Tomkins posits for shame offers new possibilities for thinking about certain cinematic operations of looking. Where psychoanalytic models of film theory have been enormously helpful for thinking about those operations, so have they been helpfully criticized by feminist, queer, and critical race theorists for their limited and homogenizing assumptions about identification.³ I resist the way that psychoanalytic femi-

² Although there is not space for a full treatment here, this animating of inanimate objects seems to me diegetically to enact some of Vivian Sobchack’s claims about the phenomenology of film in *The Address of the Eye* (1992), in which she emphasizes the reversibility and reciprocity of looking in cinema, foregrounding precisely the force of the film as itself looking.

³ José Muñoz’s introduction to *Disidentifications* (1999) offers an excellent analysis of many of these criticisms.
nism has presumed how cinematic operations of looking must inevitably function. Nevertheless, I think many psychoanalytic claims about cinematic looking make it possible to think about other ways that subjective attachments work, and about how films both look and feel. Despite a usefulness for thinking about visual dynamics, however, many psychoanalytic models have been rightly criticized by phenomenological film studies for positing that the image is a trick that inevitably trades in bad faith because of the putative lack at its center, universally and transhistorically reinscribing traditional understandings of sexual difference. Phenomenological criticism has proposed a more contingent model of embodied spectatorship, one in which a more legitimately intersubjective transfer of feeling is possible. I suggest that the phenomenology Tomkins describes for shame, while by no means offering a universal model for thinking about all narrative film syntax, is useful in the films I will consider here for thinking about certain operations of looking that are themselves highly contingent on the stories the films are telling. The visual dynamics embedded in this phenomenology of shame are generative within these shame-inflected films, and I want to think about the eccentric desires that those operations of seeing and feeling can produce.

Like most narrative film grammar, the language of **Marvern Callar** and the other two films I discuss in this essay hinges on the reverse angle and the traditional shot structures that supplement it to produce a sense of a coherent world. This grammar also functions by way of the “eyeline match,” the convention by which we understand that, when we see a character looking outside of the frame, in the next shot we are likely to see what she is looking at. Psychoanalytic feminism has allowed us to see how this grammar produces suturing effects that link the viewer to certain subjective perspectives. We see the protagonist, and then the shot reverses to show us what she sees. Sometimes we see from the point of view of her interlocutor in dialogue; sometimes we see from a disembodied “master shot” that suggests the possibility of a powerfully omniscient narrative vision. We are offered the pleasures of seeing her, as well as the pleasures of seeing from her perspective. But instead of assuming that these operations inherently take place in a world of universal drives and prohibitions, voyeurisms, and inevitably disavowed fetishisms, I argue that, in relation to shame and its ways of seeing, it is possible for these same formal strategies to render very different kinds of narratives and to yield very different subjective attachments.

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4 As Sobchack writes, “The lived-body gestures language as a fullness and presence to the world, not as a substitute for being, but as an extension of it” (1992, 56).
If the Lacanian mirror stage that has been so important to psychoanalytic film theory depends on a relay of looks that produces a moment of misrecognition, shame depends on a relay of looks that produces a moment of nonrecognition, a moment of understanding the self to be embarrassingly alone and isolated from the ego-stabilizing smile of the parent. In this moment, “the circuit of mirroring expressions between the child’s face and the caregiver’s recognized face . . . is broken, the moment when the adult face fails or refuses to play its part in the continuation of mutual gaze; when for any one of many reasons, it fails to be recognizable to, or recognizing of, the infant who has been, so to speak, ‘giving face’ on the basis of a faith in the community of this circuit” (Sedgwick 1995, 211). It is this moment of recognition that has proven so generative for queer theory. The shame response, still founded in a circuitry of looks, is defined by the loss of feedback rather than by a misrecognition that is founded and foundering in universal reinscriptions of sexual difference.

Just as shame is founded in a primary circuitry of looks, its later manifestations in shame-prone subjects are also signaled visually, and I would like to bring these observations to bear directly on visual practice. Sedgwick has noted that you will know shame when you see it by codes like blushing or “downcast eyes,” by the avoidance of what Tomkins calls “interocular interaction” (1963, 180). Tomkins is himself sufficiently invested in these “blazons” that signal the experience of shame that he writes of social scientific attempts to measure shame response in human subjects according to the extent to which they look down, attempting to chart the intensity of shame by the “apparent horizon level” for a given subject (1963, 127).

I want particularly to draw out the implications of Tomkins’s and Sedgwick’s visual claims. I would add to their observations the following: not only does shame look a certain way, but shame may also have associated ways of seeing. For my argument, it also bears asking, what do you see when your eyes are looking down? If onscreen eye contact is the glue that holds together the cinematic suture, what holds together a cinema infused with shame? How might an averted gaze resonate with looks that can also be characterized as singular, resistant to or against normativity, confounding the erotics of looking usually marked by the reverse angle, producing a language that sees from and hinges on an antiromantic, perverse angle? What kinds of spectatorship might be produced by shame’s perverse angle? What is it like for a spectator to see with and through an affect that produces and reproduces isolation and disidentification?

This relay of looks associated with the experience of shame—downward looks designed to avoid or diminish expected social contact and human
interest—closely parallels the onscreen looks in *Morvern Callar* and in the other shame-inflected films I address here. These looks are of particular interest for feminist inquiry because of the strange desires that this visual logic itself yields. As is the case with Morvern’s promiscuous looking, the shamed gaze seems itself to produce new interest. This visual logic and the temporality that gives so much weight to her practices of looking register Morvern’s attachments and engagements to nonhuman, inanimate, polymorphous objects as her primary investments—strange object choices indeed, and far afield from almost any scripted model for thinking about human sexual identity.

These engagements that come from her lowered gaze also lead to the film’s most manifestly sexual, human erotic encounter. In one amazing scene, Morvern is sitting alone on the balcony of a modernist hotel in Ibiza, in the “Youth Med” resort to which she has traveled with her friend Lanna. Preferring to remain alone and blankly isolated, she sees and hears the sights and sounds of a party emerging from the hotel facing her. Her downward glance catches on a cockroach, which crosses under the door into her hotel room. Interested, she follows the roach through her room and into the hallway and ends up at a random hotel door through which she can hear the sounds of a man crying. She knocks on the door, and the man inside tells her that his mother has died. In a negotiation of intimacy and privacy, isolation and interest, they bounce around and off each other in ways that eventually end in sex, an act that quiets the musical soundtrack that has been associated with Morvern’s isolating headphones. They then retreat into sadness. There is an intensity to the scene, not only because of its depiction of a sex act but because it is shot through with mutual grief, shared isolation, extremity of need, and temporary relief. The presence of this intimacy—initiated through Morvern’s interest in a cockroach—produces not romance but perhaps an even more intense shame response. When she wakes in the stranger’s embrace, Morvern panics at the intimacy, finds Lanna, and drags her out of the hotel and out of the town in a taxi. Staying in motion seems to suggest the possibility of maintaining Morvern’s incomplete circuits of looking. At the film’s end, she asks Lanna to run away with her, leaving their town behind and setting off for adventure. With this friendship that is not sexualized and intimate only in bounded ways, Morvern hopes to maintain the one relation within which she can comfortably negotiate her isolated posture, offering her company without insisting on too much contact, drawing out interest but not too much interest, completing a circuitry of looks but also offering moments of inattention, nonrecognition, and looking away. Her proposition to Lanna can neither be called lesbian nor *not*
lesbian. Here, I am interested exactly in this unexpected and indeterminate attachment that falls precisely between legible categories.

**Feminist film, queer film**

My concern is not so much to claim Morvern Callar as a lesbian or to claim the film for queer cinema. I am more interested in reading recent feminist films through the historical possibilities enabled by queer cinema, feminist films that I see as having common goals with queer films and that are in some ways beginning to blur the distinction between queer and feminist film. I want to think about the feminist, and certainly weird, if not queer, possibilities that working with and through shame and desire has offered, not just in *Morvern Callar* but also in Denise Gonçalves’s short film *Sound of Steps* (1996) and Catherine Bécail’s suppressed first feature, *A Real Young Girl* (1976). These filmmakers may not even be self-consciously interested in feminist projects, but they nevertheless constitute an independent cinema that I am willing to call feminist because of the ways they imagine unexpected possibilities for women’s desire.

The surprising turns in these films’ renderings of women’s desire remind me of ways in which the experimental and independent gestures of the early nineties’ new queer cinema reverberated with the frisson of seeing representations that moved beyond expected scripts for identity and desire. I see the queer films of that period, as well as the more recent mainstreaming of gay and lesbian images, as providing particular historical ground for these new films of women’s desire and bad feeling. Whether or not it has raised our wages any, high-profile images like Hilary Swank’s Oscar-winning turn as Brandon Teena in *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), the likable gay guys on *Queer as Folk* happily doing it in the anonymous back rooms of Pittsburgh nightclubs, or the recent star-powered lesbian kisses in *The Hours* (2002) have had a real, palpable effect on the broad, mainstream visibility of some kinds of gay identities and acts, which are moving out of subcultural markets and into the broad reach of the U.S. media. The expansion of international markets for gay and lesbian cinema has also helped to produce queer film worldwide, with new gay and lesbian features emerging not just from Hollywood and the West but also from Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Together with other kinds of political work, these images have had a hand in moving marginal or unacceptable sexual identities and acts closer to a broadly accepted center. Although the backlash against this mainstreaming seems to be building as I write this, this movement away from the margins was perhaps most significantly marked by the “centrist” U.S. Supreme Court in its June
2003 reassessment of contemporary sexual mores in *Lawrence v. Texas*, which legalized sodomy for both straight and gay people.

As particular gay and lesbian images have become more appealing to mainstream markets, the possibility of imagining and seeing on screen something that might be called “normative” gay and lesbian lifestyles has emerged. For example, in 2002, *The Hours* and *Queer as Folk* both offered similar scenes of moneyed, child-raising white lesbian couples ordering from a catering service, to say nothing of Bravo’s 2003 series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, in which five gay men teach heterosexual men how to be better shoppers. These newly possible scenes of “normative” gay lifestyles function not so much to resist normative scripts for identity and desire as they do to shift the terms of that normativity.5

Lisa Henderson has characterized “positive images” as having a context-specific quality—positive to whom? Under what circumstances? She writes, “Positive no longer means portraying members of historically marginalized groups in mainstream or high-status positions, or simply rewriting the rules about who can and cannot be represented as a member of the social and symbolic club” (1999, 41). The independent gestures of the early 1990s seem to me to constitute important historical grounding for expanding repertoires of queer desire. And if I am not prepared to say that representations of mainstream gay shoppers in this recent blossoming of gay and lesbian film are themselves adequate as “positive images,” they nevertheless certainly constitute an important grounding for contemporary images of identity and desire that do surprise and—importantly—help to build confidence that many markets may be prepared to accept representations of new desires, of new sexual identities and acts.

Linda Williams has recently described a “new European cinema” that breaks down the “firewall” that has historically separated scenes of explicit sex acts from scenes that deal with “philosophy, politics, and emotion” (2001, 23). She argues that, by breaking down this division, these films are “forging new ways of presenting and visually experiencing cinematic sex acts” (23). Although the films I consider are not limited to European ones, I understand the films that I am reading here to be part of this phenomenon, for they bring together treatments of desire and (negative)

5 In the contemporary flush of broad-market gay and lesbian programming, I am much more prepared to understand as “positive images” work like Cheryl Dunye’s *Stranger Inside* (2001), an empathetic and beautifully performed piece narrating the concerns and desires of a group of African-American lesbians in prison, or HBO’s popular *Six Feet Under*, in which the bickering gay couple is the most nearly normative pair in a fictional world that posits no particular standards of normative romance, coupling, or stable sexual identity.
emotion. Although it is not her focus, Williams also notes her surprise at seeing desire paired with bad feeling; she describes herself as “shocked” (22) to see Patrice Chereau’s Intimacy (2001) pair certain very common heterosexual sex acts with emotions related to need, sadness, melancholy. Her characterization of her own surprise is hardly a puritanical one; indeed, she is surprised not at the explicitness of the sex act but rather by its simultaneous transmission of bad feeling. Her surprise is precisely at seeing unexpected and expanded possibilities for women’s desire.

Where Williams usefully reads these films against the “alternative universe” of pornography, for my purposes it is more useful to read them against the historical ground and common projects of recent queer cinema. If gender and sexuality have long been tightly linked together, these films have truly begun to problematize a distinction between queer and feminist film. I wish neither to characterize these films as lesbian nor to diminish the importance of work that is lesbian. But I want to look at the ways in which recent feminist films are pushing at a sexual terrain that is not really charted, in which identity and desire are destabilized and unexpected and, while not homosexual, seem to me most certainly queer in their polymorphous, autoerotic, or otherwise truly nonnormative erosics.

Shame and women’s not-to-be-looked-at-ness: Denise Gonçalves’s Sound of Steps
When Gonçalves’s short film Sound of Steps appeared on the international festival circuit in 1996, much of its unexpected intensity registered as a poetic sexual explicitness, which one U.S. festival catalog chalked up to a “Brazilian openness” to sexuality. While national cultures certainly differ importantly in their constructions of sexuality, I would also argue that, at least in the United States, it may not be the modest explicitness of the film that is surprising. Rather, it is exactly the film’s insistence on telling a story in which bad feeling resonates throughout the protagonist’s attraction to the obscure objects of her desire and throughout the sex act that the film depicts. Based on a story by Clarice Lispector, Sound of Steps is tonally beautiful and shot in 35 mm, high production values that are often financially out of reach for feminist short films. Its visual field seems lushly sentimental, and the film surprises when it proves to be un- or even anti-sentimental and instead steeped in negative affect. In extreme and elegant ways, its field of vision is cinematically structured by exactly the kinds of nonrecognition that provide the visual foundations of shame.

The film’s protagonist, Mrs. Candida, is positioned both within and outside of a stabilizing heterosexual identity. She has outlived her husband,
and at the age of eighty-one, she has become fundamentally unseecable, invisible, an impossible object within the circuitry of desire that her own looks repeatedly initiate. If much of feminist film practice and criticism has concerned itself with the task of resisting women’s objectification, here Gonçalves’s desiring subject is in crisis precisely over the world’s refusal to treat her as a sexual object. The film opens with an over-the-shoulder shot of Mrs. Candida standing on the porch of her house, looking out into the landscape. Convention suggests that the next shot should be from her point of view, but instead of a wider shot opening out into the distant landscape we see extreme close-ups of caterpillars on nearby leaves. These shots are long in duration and suggest her languid attention to these insects. As in *Morvern Callar*, they are the visual terrain of the immediately proximate, of what can be seen through downcast eyes. Mrs. Candida is, from the film’s beginning, in search not just of an object for her desiring look but of a subject to return the circuitry of gazes configured across the cut, a circuitry that is, throughout, unavailable to her. But if *Morvern Callar* is shot mostly from the perspective of insects and nearby objects, in *Sound of Steps* there is no such satisfaction. If these insects can even be thought of as sentient, they fail to complete the circuitry of looks required to sustain desire across the reverse angle. Instead, they point back to the protagonist’s isolation, her shame precisely over her not-to-be-looked-at-ness.

As if to emphasize Mrs. Candida’s invisibility, the camera shortly thereafter positions her in the backseat of a car, unseen and unheard by her daughter in the front seat, her own eyeliner rolling dreamily back into her head rather than out of the frame in the manner that traditionally anticipates a reverse angle. We see her glance rest on landscapes outside the car window and also understand her interior gaze to be making associative links, seeing not in the present but in memory or fantasy. Her eyes fall on the bouquet of flowers in her hands, which reminds her of things she saw or might have seen while shopping: a bountiful display of roses fills the frame, and the camera smoothly pans as if to represent the movement of her eyes across the display. As though overwhelmed precisely by the fullness and excessive presence of that image and destabilized by the inability of the roses to return her desiring gaze, Mrs. Candida faints, and the image cuts to black. This failure of vision seems to acknowledge that shame puts the subject in crisis, to acknowledge the impossibility of sustaining a stable point of view, an identity, in the absence of a circuitry of looks—that is, in the presence of shame’s nonrecognition.

When Mrs. Candida wakes from her faint, the flower vendor offers her a glass of water, and their hands touch incidentally, in close-up and slow
motion, as he passes her the glass. The lingering of her vision here shows her wish not just for visual or “interocular” contact but for actual contact, sexual contact, for touch. In another scene, a thorn prick from a flower brings her back to the register of touch and sets off a metaphoric sequence in memory or fantasy, a scene of wildly bridling mares seen, ultimately, from the point of view of a constrained horse penned separately away from the others, hidden from view. In the absence of any available object, Mrs. Candida’s gaze, as well as her touch, is turned back on herself, and we see her thin, wrinkled body as she dries herself after a shower. In a series of close-ups, her hand passes between her legs. She reaches for her own back, her hip, sexualizing different areas of her own body as a reluctant autoerotic attachment.

Throughout, Mrs. Candida remembers her absent husband fondly, but the film is careful to position her longing as neither mourning nor melancholy. Her desire for touch is not limited to a desire for his touch. Flashback images of their marriage are resolutely schematic, unlike the eccentric specificity of her longing glances at insects and plants. She sees herself with her husband in a tableau akin to a wedding photograph, or underneath him in bed, her face impassive, neither especially happy nor unhappy—and seen always from a third-person perspective. She remembers desire; perhaps she even remembers pleasure. She seems to remember the possibility of the returned look, the returned touch, not as pure pleasure but perhaps as preferable to the invisibility produced by her age.

This understanding that her longing is not so much for her husband as for the abstract reciprocation of her loose desire is cemented when Mrs. Candida goes to the doctor. She asks him when this unspeakable objectless desire will go away. He acknowledges her in language, replying, “I’m afraid sometimes it never stops,” validating the pain of her unfulfilled desire and her unreturned look but still not offering a returned look. The director positions the shot over the doctor’s shoulder, so we never see his face, nor do we see from his perspective in ways that might instantiate the more usual narrative erotics of looking.

In recognition that she is and will continue to be possessed of this painful desire, the next scene slowly pans to reveal Mrs. Candida in her bed, masturbating in long shot. Intensely bound to her subjective position, even in this omniscient view that has no reverse angle, the scene is full with her own understanding of this act. It is a source of sexual pleasure, to be sure, but a kind of pleasure that is thoroughly infused with pain, shame, and compromise and narrated in such a way as to be singularly hers (fig. 3). It is exactly this singularity within the narration of desire and depiction of a sex act, its infusion with affects, especially shame, and
the possibility of desiring outside the confines of the character’s presumed and understood sexual identity—of showing her fantasmatric, polymorphous attachment to insects, flowers, horses, and parts of her own body—that seems to me so productive for feminist inquiry.

While it seems possible that part of the impact of Sound of Steps comes from its appeal to prurient interests, I find that its engagement is much different than a pornographic one. The film’s impact comes less from its explicitness than from its novelty, offering an erotic narrative treatment of old, wrinkled flesh and an unfamiliar story that is not a romantic script shifted onto new players but actually a different story of desire, realized in large part through shame’s particular optics. And like Morvern Callar’s, Mrs. Candida’s desire is not at all gay but rather queer in ways that, like queer cinema, expand repertoires for thinking about desire.

What happens when shame sees? Catherine Breillat’s A Real Young Girl

Breillat’s suppressed first feature, A Real Young Girl (1976), belongs as much to the time of its production as it does to the contemporary conditions of possibility that I argue have been produced by recent queer cinema. Produced in 1976, during the period in which France established
its X-rating system, the film is in many respects a product of the same cultural moment that offered the conditions of possibility for films like Last Tango in Paris (1972) (in which Breillat performs), Salò (1975), and In the Realm of the Senses (1976). These films collectively pushed contemporary boundaries within cinematic treatments of sexuality, and their shared controversial receptions began to mark out the difference between what kinds of representations can be imagined by a filmmaker within a historical moment and what kinds of representations can be more broadly socially accepted and understood as legible. Remembering this period, Breillat shows herself to have long been interested in the questions I am taking up here, questions of seeing desire as shot through with shame and bad feeling:

Twenty years ago, I had lunch with Roberto Rossellini. He asked me, “What would a woman’s vision add to the vision of love in cinema?” At the time I had made only one film, Une Vraie Jeune Fille (A True Young Girl). I answered him very resolutely, “A woman would add the point of view of shame, which men are incapable of having.” . . . When you’re a woman, you have to say things that have never been said before. You can see that those things that have never been uttered before are in each one of us, but have been hushed up and shut down. (Sklar 1999, 25)

In the nearly thirty years since shooting A Real Young Girl, Breillat’s fearlessness around sexual explicitness has combined in inflammatory ways with her insistence on “adding the point of view of shame,” causing repeated controversies with each new film release around the putatively pornographic, degrading, obscene, and antifeminist effects of her work, perhaps most famously around Romance, her 1999 chronicle of female masochism. A Real Young Girl first caused controversy when Breillat tried to release it in 1976. She argued her case before the French censorship board and convinced its members that the film was “not a ‘sexy’ film in the sense of making men masturbate” but rather that “it was a film on the shame of sexuality” (Weigand 2001). Although Breillat prevailed with the censorship board, she was unable to win the same argument with public opinion. Critics, distributors, and even her own backers agreed that the film was unacceptable to the public taste of the time. This suppression rendered the film literally unwatchable for twenty-six years; it was finally released in the cinema in 2000 and is now also available on video and DVD.

Thus, I want to argue that, while the film is in many ways a marker of
the sexual and film cultures of Europe in the seventies, it is in many ways also a marker of the possibilities of the present moment. Recent changes in the media landscape—not only those produced by queer cinema but arguably by Breillat herself since 1974—make *A Real Young Girl* comprehensible, watchable in the present for the first time. Although the film stands out for its sexual explicitness, I am more interested in it for its sexual precision, for the specificity of the protagonist’s unexpected desire and attachments.⁶

Consistent with Breillat’s stated intentions, the film depicts specific desires in their fullness, including the ways in which they resonate with shame. Like Sedgwick, Breillat is not using shame morally, either as a threat about what happens to bad girls or as something to be overcome. Rather, shame functions as an element of experience that can be explored. For Breillat, since shame and other “taboo” or degraded elements and affects are integral parts of the fullness of sex acts, the exploration and engagement of those elements may themselves work toward restoring “female dignity” (Sklar 1999) not so much because the exploration removes shame but because it acknowledges and spends time with shame. It becomes possible to look more precisely not just at the sexually explicit acts of Alice, the film’s young protagonist but also at her very precise desires, not only for men but also for zones of her own body, for insects, and for a range of nonhuman objects.

Breillat’s is a highly self-aware cinema, sometimes critiqued as “too theoretical” and certainly aware of and influenced by French feminist theory and doubtless many of the premises of psychoanalytic film theory. (She currently even teaches a course on “developing a female gaze.”) Breillat’s own descriptive language often runs to notions of transgression and taboo, suggesting that she is responding to and defying critical prohibitions around women’s desire. In one early scene, for example, Alice is subject to the watchful eye of the schoolmistress in her dormitory, who

⁶ Both popular and academic writing about Breillat have tended to focus on the controversy surrounding the sexual explicitness of her work, and there is a clear role for Breillat in feminist discussions of porn and the representation of sex acts. Although this discussion has an important function, for the last thirty years it has been impossible to move beyond seeing *A Real Young Girl* in terms of a pornography debate; its images appeared so inassimilable that it has been impossible to discuss them in any terms other than ones related to shock, obscenity, and their relation to women’s empowerment and women’s oppression. But for my purposes here, I wish to bracket that discussion in favor of one that I believe to be both newly possible and more interesting for the present, one that involves a more thorough engagement with Breillat’s actual treatments of shame.
physically removes Alice’s hand from its location under the blanket and between her legs. When the schoolmistress leaves the room, Alice defiantly writes her name on the mirror near her bed with the fluids from her vagina, an almost literal *écriture féminine*, foregrounding a relation to a self-consciously feminist project and staging a desire that is at least in part produced by its prohibition.

Brillat engages prohibitions that she may understand to pertain to women as a category of people, or, if not all women, at least women of Alice’s kind—pubescent petit-bourgeois white girls in Charles de Gaulle’s France—who are likely to be subject to a similar set of prohibitions. While I feel that there is much that is useful in this feminist strategy, I also want to look at ways in which the film simultaneously produces specificity—a wonderful singularity of Alice’s attachments—through the articulation of shame affects. Shame may not always be linked to defying prohibitions, nor may it only be linked to defying prohibitions, but in this film, for Alice, it often is. Sedgwick reminds us that shame, “like other affects, is not a discrete intrapsychic structure but a kind of free radical” that “in different people and also in different cultures attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of—of almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behavior, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity, a script for interpreting other people’s behavior toward oneself” (1995, 237). If Alice’s shame seems to attach primarily to the prohibited desires that dominate her imagination, and that are prohibited not only to her but to a larger category of French women, I want to argue that Alice’s vision as it is inflected by shame is precisely what opens up possibilities for the specificity of her strange attachments.7

For example, in one very clear instance of prohibited looking and desiring, during what is probably but ambiguously marked as Alice’s fantasy, Alice looks down and sees her father’s penis hanging out of his pants. The shame of seeing this causes her to further avert her gaze: in the next shot we see an extreme close-up of her head turning away, her eyelids closing. The film then associatively cuts to a shot of Alice sitting on a fence near a train track, looking down at herself. She exposes herself to

7 I am interested here in imagining a kind of singularity that is not individualistic and never outside of ideology. I am particularly interested in Muñoz’s recent work (2000) on affect, which historicizes and racializes affect itself for the purposes of minority inquiry. I believe that the kind of singularity I am imagining here is both particular enough to contest the violently homogenizing assumptions of psychoanalytic claims about identification and also possibly general enough to be grounded in history, nation, and race.
a passing train, and the film makes clear that, when she is looking down, one of the things she can see is, in fact, her own genitals. The next series of shots pictures her sitting on the train tracks, bored, alternately engaged and disengaged, picking up rocks and putting them in her vagina (fig. 4). In the logic proposed by this sequence, prohibition produces desire, to which shame attaches. As in Morvern Callar and Sound of Steps, shame produces looking down, a position from which one can see a certain range of proximate objects. If this vision, this act of looking down, holds its own interest and engages the subject in new attachments and desires, Breillat is taking the logic even further than the other filmmakers I have considered. Here, the erotic and polymorphous attachment is the most literally sexualized, and these proximate objects literally become sex objects.

Throughout, the film oscillates between scenes of desires that are produced by prohibitions and ones that are produced by shame itself. In the film’s first five minutes, Alice arrives at her parents’ home from boarding school and, in the manner of a sullen teenager, avoids contact with her parents, resenting the enactments of authority and prohibition that her parents represent, disengaged from their efforts at conversation and eye contact. Her mother remarks directly on this disengagement: “You could try talking to us.” Alice’s gaze lands on other things as she avoids meeting her parents’ looks. She sees dead flies trapped in the flypaper and stares at her teacup, stirring it with a spoon. During this visual engagement
borne of an averted gaze, the spoon itself becomes a desired object. Alice
drops it on the floor, and in the process of picking it up, slips it inside
her underpants under the table, all the while maintaining her modest
downward glance over the table.

While the film is in many ways an attempt to give a precise account of
Alice’s inculcation into heterosexual desire, the narrative is nevertheless
located at a moment that is not fully about an engagement with desire
for men. The film lingers on autoerotic, abject, and fetishistic desire.
Alice’s attachment is for the most part not really to men but to parts of
her own body, her own fluids, to objects like a spoon or a bicycle seat.
And when the attachment is to a man, it is precisely to treat him as a
fetish object rather than as a desiring subject. Scenes of unreturned gazing
proliferate: Alice stares at a man tapping a tree for syrup, at her father’s
employee Jim while he works in the lumberyard, at Jim as he kisses a
woman at the fair. She conceals her own looking in ways that resonate
both as inversions of the assumption that only men can practice voyeurism
and as a shame-prone wish to efface herself, recede, detach, and vanish—
that is, a wish to repeat and reverse the broken circuit of looking that
characterizes shame.

Equally, the occasions in which men do complete this circuit of looking
are both horrifying and threatening to Alice. To her great dismay, she
discovers that, in an ambiguously real or imagined moment, she is seated
on a roller coaster next to a flasher, who opens up the briefcase on his
lap to show her his genitals, proving that the averted gaze does see and
cannot always produce a safe disengagement. She is disgusted by a boy
she has been openly staring at in a café, who avenges his objectification
by chasing Alice on a bicycle and pulling up her skirt. She is horrified and
looks down to inspect what he has seen, noting, “Hairs were curling out
of my panties. I wished he’d die.”

One of the film’s most memorable and sexually explicit scenes stages
and negotiates exactly this problem. We see Alice involved in her own
masochistic fantasy with Jim, which even as she imagines it is shot through
with shame. She lies naked and spread-eagle on a deserted road, and her
perspective controls the scene. Her gaze, while averted from Jim, lingers
on barbed wire, on the sky. We see fragmentary, extreme close-ups of her
face looking away from and then at Jim as he inserts a worm into her
vagina and then puts ripped-up worm parts on her pubis. When she finally
meets his gaze, he is laughing at her. Her sustained look straight into his
eyes, ultimately, reverses the shame and causes him, momentarily, to stop
laughing.

The final third of A Real Young Girl involves more direct engagement,
either in fantasy or perhaps in reality, between Alice and Jim. Although these scenes play out interesting ideas about Alice’s control and lack of control in the erotic situations that she either imagines or experiences, they are less interesting for my inquiry. For me, more interesting is her engagement with her own underpants, or a teaspoon, or her own earwax, or her fetishistic fantasies that may involve men, not in their traditional role as desiring romantic subjects but rather as fantasmatic attachments. These are among the strange attachments that shame produces and facilitates, the curious and idiosyncratic, even singular ways of subjects venturing away from normally understood—and even simultaneously functioning—scripts for sexual acts and identities.

Shame’s contagion and spectatorship
My thinking here shares with psychoanalytic feminist film theory an interest in the operations of looking, considerations of ways in which cinematic structures can produce certain subjective attachments, even if I want to point to very different mechanisms by which these attachments take place or to effects or affects that are not specifically structures or mechanisms at all. In ways that are similar to my inquiry into the visual dynamics of shame, Laura Mulvey’s influential “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) locates these dynamics in three different cinematic looks. She considers the look of the characters, the look of the camera, and the look of the audience. For my inquiry, perhaps the most significant of the looks she addresses is the third one, having to do with the audience’s spectatorial looking, which, for my argument, also bears on the question of spectatorial feeling. I want to ask: What do we make of the look of the audience as it watches the film? How does the audience see shame, and see with shame? How do viewers look at and with feeling, and in this case, with bad feelings?

If much of Mulvey’s iconoclastic proscriptions have to do with the refusal of absorptive spectatorial engagement, it is also possible to imagine a spectatorship that functions exactly through its affective fullness in the films I have described. Yet I see these films producing an affective response that works much differently than the identifications imagined by psychoanalytic feminism. How might one think of identification in a film flooded with shame, an affect in which the originary moment of nonrecognition depends in basic ways on moments of failure within a circuitry of looking? How might this failure be paralleled in cinematic spectatorship, in which the viewer does not, generally, fail to look at the movie screen?

One of the most important claims of Sedgwick’s work on shame is that
shame is curiously contagious, that seeing shame itself provokes a shame response: “One of the strangest features of shame—but perhaps also the one that offers the most conceptual leverage for projects like ours—is the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment by someone else, someone else’s embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me—assuming I’m a shame-prone person—with this sensation whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable” (1995, 212). Just as shame is isolating and individuating for the subject who feels it, so does it also flood the person who may simply witness its signs and semaphores. Certainly cinema is flooded and flooding with affect; its absorptions move the viewing subject, to tears or laughter or fear or sadness, and shame is no exception. But if shame is so individuating, so contagious, what are the negotiations by which we can actually look at a movie that involves shame and negative affects? Why do we not spend the whole movie suffused in isolation and embarrassment, lowering our eyes and head to reduce further exposure, looking down? If a movie shows us shame, why do we not look away?

I would argue that this question points exactly to a clash between a sensuous embrace of affective fullness that I see operating in these films and the iconoclastic, antipleasure aesthetics proscribed by psychoanalytic feminism. Visual pleasure feels good, and in the films that I have discussed, which work with and through this contagious negative affect, visual pleasure is necessary and useful precisely for its ability to sustain a spectatorial desire to look at the image that is strong enough to act in

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8 If the towering presence of this renunciatory stance is strong enough in feminist film studies, its power in different generations of feminist culture more broadly should not be overlooked. These aesthetics of renunciation remain a problem for contemporary feminism, which is both enabled by and saddled with the memory of the seventies. The period of the women’s movement was a time when revolution was actually imaginable. In the very different moment of the present, the strategies of movement politics, including and perhaps even especially gender and sexual politics, are often remembered and misremembered, even caricatured, as oppressively doctrinaire gestures of speaking truth to power and saying “no” to pleasure, especially by women who have no experiential memory of the seventies. Efforts at negotiating between the so-called second and third waves have seemed necessary, and recent attempts have focused not only on the recognition of differences among women but also on these real and imagined memories of renunciation, with books like *Manifesta* tactically asserting that you do not have to give up your MAC lipsticks and hip-hop records to be engaged in feminist struggles (Baumgardner and Richards 2000). If the films I discuss here seem to fall clearly on the side of sensual, absorptive aesthetics, it may also be part of why they do not necessarily seem obviously or self-consciously feminist.
tension with the affective strength of the desire to look away. Maybe Morvern Callar’s anomie, to be seeable at all, must be candy-colored. In addition to the other registers of affective force that the cinema offers, in its absorbing soundscapes and the affecting registers of acting, it may be precisely through visual pleasure that the narration of these negative affects and their related attachments becomes affectively bearable, possible. The lush production values of Sound of Steps, the tactile pleasures of looking engaged in by A Real Young Girl’s Alice as well as the considerable pleasures of looking at Alice, the high-chroma close-ups of Morvern Callar’s cinematography and its fulfilling animation of inanimate gazes—these pleasures may be exactly what sustain the possibility of the film in tension with the contagious properties of shame and its attendant inclination to avert the gaze.

In the films I have discussed here, shame and its disidentifications may produce effects that have something in common with the goals of a Brechtian alienation effect, though they function through radically different aesthetics.\(^9\) They are full of feeling instead of drained of it, absorptive instead of alienating. In Mulvey’s call for the destruction of visual pleasure, she lays out the terms for more acknowledgment of both the logic and operations of the camera and for a materialist reflexivity that destroys absorption and the “satisfaction, pleasure, and privilege” of acting as an “invisible guest” while under the “spell of an illusionistic world” (1989, 26). She calls for filmmakers to “free the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment” (26). By “passionate” detachment, it is clear that Mulvey did not imagine a detachment that actually works by way of passion. She did not mean a detachment that works by way of the absorptive flooding in of affect but rather one that works against it. But perhaps, in the case of negative affects in these films, it is exactly a negotiation between the spectator’s passionate attachment and an equally passionate detachment, that is, an affectively driven mode of disidentification. The individuating force of shame may, for spectators of these films, produce not a dialectics of detachment but rather a simultaneity of absorption and disidentification. This simultaneity may function not simply to reinscribe dominant relations of gendered power nor to reproduce

\(^9\) What I mean here is not exactly the same as Muñoz’s enormously useful sense of the term *disidentification*, nor is it the same as in other models of “oppositional reading,” though disidentifications in his sense of the term may also be at play (Muñoz 1999). Here, though, by *disidentification* I mean a particular reaction to seeing shame that is at once a recognition (I see shame, and I see with the vision of shame) and a refusal (I am not that kind of abject subject; I do not wish to see or be near that).
infinite chains of negative affect. Rather, through this simultaneity shame can be understood as a type of enabling knowledge by which to see and feel desires and attachments, even weird ones, with a kind of singularity that demands neither identification nor repulsion, that functions, perhaps, more like empathy.

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