

The Woman-Object's Glorious New Clothes

Liz Conor. *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004. ISBN 0 253 21670 2.

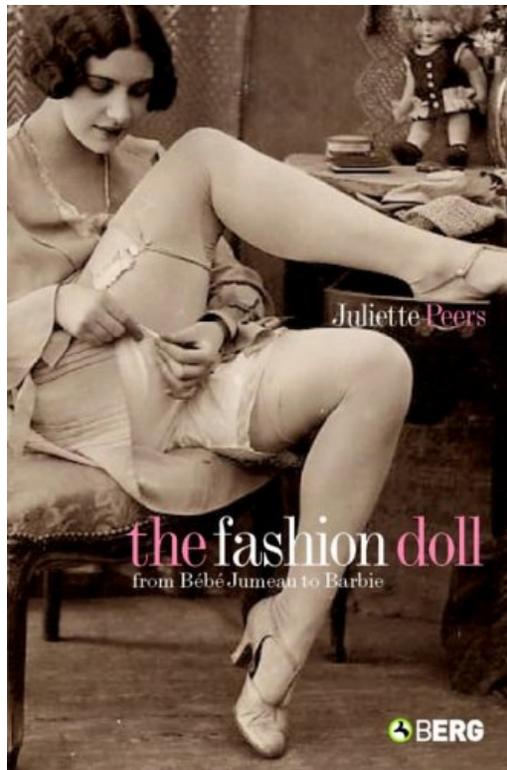
Juliette Peers. *The Fashion Doll: From B  b   Jumeau to Barbie*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004. ISBN 1 85973 743 9.

Robyn Walton

“Dolls raise so many issues about the representation and cultural positioning of the feminine in society,” writes Juliette Peers in the “Introduction” to her book *The Fashion Doll* (Peers: 8). Liz Conor might well have begun her text about feminine visibility by using the same statement, substituting for “dolls” the words “mass media images of women.” “Appearance” and “appearing,” in their multiple meanings, are also key words for both authors. Peers’s primary interest is fashionably dressed dolls’ appearance (looks) and appearance (emergence) in the market-place, while Conor elaborates on the emergence of the “new formation of subjectivity” she calls the Modern Appearing Woman in the technologically enhanced ocular field of the 1920s.

Discussing these two books in terms of their covers is a temptation not to be resisted since each text is so much about representation. Appropriately, a photographic image of a woman or an inorganic 3D representation of a woman occupies each cover. The front of Peers’s book shows a stylishly dressed young woman ostensibly adjusting her underwear in the company of an up-to-date doll; the front of Conor’s is occupied by the glamorously painted face of a store display dummy or mannequin. Accord-

ing to captions within the texts, the sepia-toned picture of the young woman was reproduced on a French postcard during the 1920s while the face belongs to a replica of a 1920s mannequin.¹ It is disappointing that neither author went out of her way to date and contextualise her image more precisely. (I date both as c.1927.)² However it has to be conceded that intentionality raises its head here: it is likely that final cover image decisions were made by overseas publishers and may not have coincided with the authors' preferences for what are effectively their own store window displays. Nevertheless, both images have plenty to say to browsers and serious readers of cultural history, visual sociology and gender studies about how the feminine was (and is) represented in Western market economies.



On Peers's cover the postcard has been cropped so that the pert doll propped up on the dressing table is relegated to a corner, the focal point of the image then becoming the crotch of the young woman completing her toilette in the supposed privacy of her boudoir. Sitting with one knee raised high and the heel of her Mary Jane shoe supported by a pulled-out drawer, the woman inspects the hem of her knickers. There is a naughty display of the bare flesh above her stocking tops and a teasing shielding of the geni-

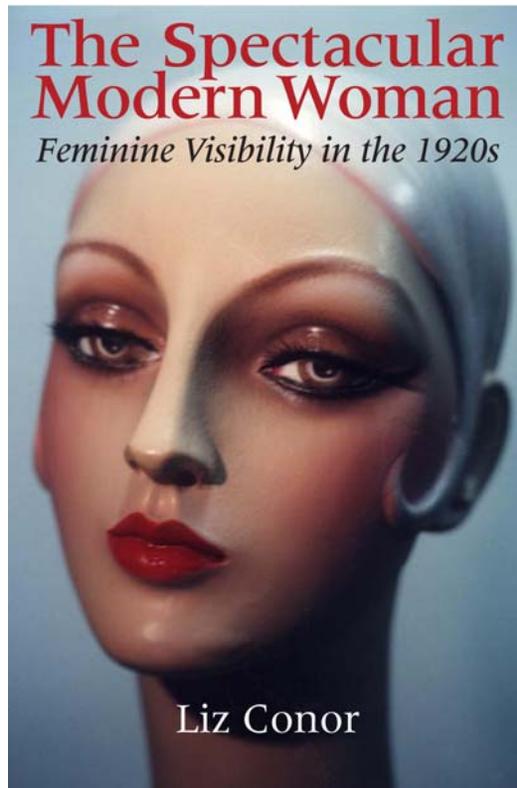
tals by means of fabric and hand. Is this a case of bait and switch packaging by Peers's publishers? The strategy is perhaps defensible on the ground that it demonstrates how an alluring image works to engage the senses, provoking the casual browser to pay attention, touch or imagine touching, and ultimately buy a product or service. Any adult viewer of the Peers cover image must be aware of the longstanding association of desirable women with lovely dolls and the implied suggestion that women may be rated in terms of their attractiveness and cuteness.³ Postcards like the one on Peers's cover, along with others more risqué, had a lineage extending back to the Second Empire,⁴ and inevitably the boundaries of the populations of intended purchasers and intended or incidental viewers were at times blurry.⁵

The figure of a child or young woman with a doll also has things to say to the viewer about his or her bodily sense of self, the natural versus the invented child, and the child as representing one's interiority, the deepest place inside, the self perhaps lost or repressed. A doll may function as a person's infant, confidante, alter ego, pet substitute, fantasy/sex object, decorative feature or sign of somewhat precious sophistication or patriotic loyalty. To the extent that the fashionably dressed, cute doll was a stylised, infantilised miniature of its owner, it invited a diminishing reading of the owner and her peers. And it was a sign of its times. Nineteen twenties dolls, for instance, were "the annunciatory angels of popular culture," as Peers nicely puts it (Peers: 134). They were offered in the market-place alongside scores of doll-like toys and partial dolls incorporated into household items – all variously sentimental, comical, whimsical and grotesque. "These novelties were a vernacular expression of the vastly different outlook and experience of postwar society, and the supercession of the moods and demeanour of the Edwardian and Victorian eras," Peers summarises in a sentence typical of her prose style here (Peers: 130).

By the 1920s adolescent and girl consumer demographics were increasingly differentiated from each other and from the adult market, with increasing sexualisation of childhood and precocious adoption of quickly changing fashions. Conor's book surprised me with the complementary information that many of the Flappers were teenagers or even children. The Flapper's tubular body shape was informed by that of the lanky premenarchal girl, and her movements were characteristically youthful, rapid and reckless, "like the whirring movements of a clockwork toy, or even the spasmodic jerks of a just decapitated creature," as Australian author Dulcie Deamer put it (Conor: 215).

Peers notes the links in the 1920s between dolls, graphics in the popular media and the new art form of animation. She mentions cartoon charac-

ters such as Felix the Cat being reproduced in all manner of materials, but omits the most commercially successful representation of a human female, Betty Boop.⁶ On and off during the 1910s and 1920s it was fashionable for adults to wear doll motifs in accessories, to carry dolls or teddy bears, to decorate house and car interiors with dolls, and to feature novelty toys and childish fancy-dress in social gatherings.⁷ Peers does not allow herself the space to thoroughly account for this faux juvenileness but briefly refers to the horrors of the Great War, the destabilisation of European society and the dissident expressiveness of Dadaist and Surrealist artworks which incorporated mutilated and disassembled dolls and mannequins in shocking ways.⁸



Transferring our gaze to the mannequin on Conor's cover we open ourselves to a close-up demonstration of how to apply the coloured cosmetics that were coming into everyday use in the 1920s, ceasing to be luxuries as women's discretionary purchasing power increased, mass production lowered prices and international trade in non-essentials picked up, and ceasing to be morally objectionable as Victorian attitudes relaxed.⁹ Did

the costly, rigorous and time-consuming self-care routines of beauty culture constitute a re-subduing of the so recently and incompletely emancipated woman? Was women's autonomy being channelled into obsession with conforming to new bodily ideals, thereby producing a form of self-oppression at odds with general feminine aspirations to acquire still greater latitude in the public domain? To her credit Conor grapples with differing responses to such questions, especially in her chapter on the Flapper.

The finely modelled and coloured head on Conor's cover wears a haunting expression and is intriguingly layered with cultural references. The lean face has a cool, immaculate beauty. The skin appears poreless, sealed against intrusion. Although the mannequin's irises are not blue, her arching, symmetrical eyebrows and perfectly straight nose are true to a stylised northern European ideal of beauty. A pleated white covering resembling a turban fits closely to the mannequin's head, while curls kick up on her cheeks with the geometric precision of chorus dancers' legs.

It is probable that the demeanour and overtly cosmeticised look of Conor's mannequin was a replication of what was being popularised on screen in the second half of the 1920s. These woman-objects were not the winsome Cinderellas and ingenue-vamps of the early 1920s. They represented women in transition, becomingly presented women becoming more independent, which is very much Conor's theme.¹⁰ This facial look persisted through into the talkies of the 1930s, although lips thinned, mouths widened, and Garboesque hauteur and inferred spirituality increased.¹¹ Obviously the dark-ringed eyes and strongly coloured lips which had served a practical highlighting purpose on male as well as female actors in the early days of silent moving pictures (c.1912) were not going to be rapidly abandoned, since additionally they drew attention to secondary sexual characteristics.

If window shoppers did not read an impeccably groomed mannequin like this one as an acceptable model for everyday girls,¹² then they may have regarded it with trepidation as a worldly, out-there New Woman in full possession of her own house keys, motorcar keys and cigarettes.¹³ To those with a resistant attitude to stand-alone women this mannequin could even have represented a chilling, cruelly self-involved goddess-matriarch from an occult-scientific new world order, a descendant of those devastating femmes fatale conjured up in the nineteenth century. With her flattened, elongated body, the Art Deco fantasy female could look almost androgynous, a fusion of the phallic and the feminine, of machine-made straight lines and sharp points with convexities and concavities. Inevitably, consciousness of mechanisation was provoked in the viewer, especially since such abstracted simulacra were being made by way of new technological

know-how which was reported to the public and some of which was known to be owned and operated by women.¹⁴

Now that we have looked at the front covers, what can be observed about the other elements framing and shaping these two texts? How effectively do they guide the reader into these books' densely packed assemblies of (arguably trivial) historical facts, factoids and opinions?

Peers's succinct encyclopaedic survey of fashion doll production, merchandising and consumption spans more than one hundred and fifty years, from mid-nineteenth century Paris to twenty-first century USA. Her subtitle, *From Béb  Jumeau to Barbie*, undersells in that coverage begins before the Jumeau firm (founded 1843) made its first B b  in 1876 and continues for almost forty-five years beyond the launching of Barbie in 1959. In her closing pages Peers notes the booming 2002 Australian sales figures for a then new US doll range, Bratz, alongside the Mattel corporation's struggle to update and create successors for the aging Barbie. Mattel's new lines at that time were the My Scene dolls ("think Spice Girls and Japanese animation," i.e. larger head, almond-shaped eyes and numerous accessories) pitched to young girls in the KGOY (kids growing older younger) category, the Modern Circle dolls pitched to older girls and the young women who were fans of television shows such as *Sex and the City*, and the multi-ethnic Fl vas range (Peers: 192-3).¹⁵ As it has turned out, the large, up-to-date and quite sexy Bratz range has stolen so many sales from Barbie that had Peers been releasing her book now and directing it to the rising generation of readers she might have considered sub-titling it *From B b  Jumeau to Bratz*.

Assuming a readership sufficiently fascinated by doll history to contend with 200-odd pages of closely worded prose with only about 20 scattered black and white illustrations, Peers does not spend time justifying her choice of subject. In this she differs from the author of another recent book on dolls, A. F. Robertson, an American anthropologist. Robertson tells her readers she persevered with her inquiry into porcelain dolls and the women who collect them despite one colleague's comment that her subject was "nauseating," another's that "everything about these dolls is a lie" and a third's that "[I] could never bring [my]self to care about what seems to be a relatively arbitrary feature of western U.S. culture in the late twentieth century."¹⁶

Peers characterises her work here as empirical historicism. Her trajectory, she writes, was shaped opportunistically rather than by a pre-

determined methodology or theoretical framework. She proceeds chronologically without any overarching theory or even a suite of conclusions. Readers hoping for a sustained attempt to integrate critical theory with selected data will appreciate more Conor's book.

While limiting her scope to those areas of doll culture which can be described as "white Eurocentric cultural experience," Peers does mention two-way East-West trafficking in dolls and the modification of North American dolls for Asian and South and Central American markets (Peers: 4-5, 12-3, 192-3). She acknowledges that her narrative could have been extended to take in ethnicity, postcolonialism and Othering, just as – space permitting – it could have covered the erotic, censorship, early childhood education, body image, collectors' psychology and numerous other issues. One aspect Peers does include is women's agency in doll production and related businesses. Her positively toned emphasis on women's commercial creativity and entrepreneurship leaves little room, she acknowledges, for those negative feminist critiques of doll culture that spell out "harsh, reductive lessons for oppressed females" (Peers: 9).

Peers's literature review readily shows there is space for an academic treatment such as hers. Her sharp comments on collectors' limiting range of interests ("narrow, arid codified knowledges") parallel Conor's frustration with 1980s feminism's failure to recognise "underlying questions about the relation between visual representation and gendered identity" (Peers: 5; Conor: xiv). So far as theorising goes, Peers all but dispenses with it. Roland Barthes's writing on French children's socialisation through toys finds its way into the text, but only within an epigraph from an American academic's essay on Barbie; and Walter Benjamin's writing on collecting is referred to in a footnote dealing with another author's work (Peers: 97, 196-7). Susan Stewart's thoughts on collecting would have been apposite since she concentrates on leisure and fantasy areas often dominated by girls and women (doll houses, models, souvenirs, fairies, manikins and dressed-up children) in relation to nostalgia, longing and conservatism.¹⁷ Performance is another aspect that is under-played. Typically Peers mentions it only when it appears in others' publications – for example, the "performance of high fashion amongst young [French] children" as deplored by the British-Australian authors and illustrators of a 1903 book (Peers: 85-6).

Now that the philosophy and performance of beauty have made a strong return to the area of feminist inquiry readers might expect the abstract terminology of aesthetics to recur in Peers's text. It does not. Rather, Peers stays with historic instances. The index entry "Woman as sign of the 'beautiful'" takes us to the nineteenth-century Béb , "radiating supreme, compelling beauty," and to similar images in painting. Peers highlights peri-

ods when girls' admiration of and desire to emulate certain publicly lauded beauties were of indisputable cultural significance and had long-term repercussions. For example, in Second Empire France the Empress Eugénie – frequently photographed and painted – not only raised standards of personal attractiveness and stylish dressing but inspired the ongoing creation of dolls with beautiful faces and haute couture wardrobes (Peers: 56-7).

“Sign” is a word favoured but loosely used by Peers. Various dolls are said to be signs of class distinctions, excess, the city, order, status, Second World War atrocities and the Other. Fashion can be a sign of class difference, female transgression and the modern. Haute Couture (French) is a sign of femininity, humanity and Paris. The removable tight sweaters and short skirts of Lilli, the German predecessor of Barbie, could be valued aids for men who wanted “a sexual come-on to randy girl friends,” according to a male commentator, yet – Peers adds – they could also be deplored for suggesting “foolishness or excess in ... women,” such preoccupation with fashion being “a sign of women’s unsuitability for public life” (Peers: 140).¹⁸ “Barbie, and women as falsehood” in Peers’s index refers to an article by Wendy Varney in *Arena* in which, according to Peers’s reading, the Barbie doll is associated with femininity and frivolity. “[F]emale insufficiency, consumerism, fashion and Barbie” are regarded as mutually interchangeable: “each is a sign of the other and each is to be resisted equally” (Peers: 101).¹⁹ Evidently Varney, if not Peers herself, runs the risk of collapsing categories.

“Woman as unstable” takes us to several tendentiously toned discussions. After quoting some mid-nineteenth-century male commentators’ objections to dolls which they regarded as a moral hazard to impressionable young women and girls, Peers remarks: “Often those who define or calibrate an ‘appropriate’ level of sexual content in a given doll are masculine, as with the department store buyers who rejected Barbie in 1959. Perhaps the issue being protected is male privilege as much as female purity?” (Peers: 64).

In the early Victorian period, according to Peers, there was a blurring of existential assumptions. In texts and visual narratives the inanimate doll took on lifelikeness. It was regarded as living, in need of nurture, and capable of possessing other cultural artefacts and functioning independently in its own (fantasised) sphere (Peers: 28). Although Peers does not mention Baudrillard here, the reader may think of the applicability of his notion of the hyperreal to dolls, as well as to toys, gadgets, anime and online entertainments.²⁰

A parallel discussion opens up the question of a possible gender divide within doll making and designing. Peers cites cases to refute this sup-

posed divide, but then credits women with being responsible for “the most dramatic technical advances in doll construction and the most extravagant placement of the doll as an object of beauty, serving the gaze and visual pleasure.” In fact the entire history of commercial doll making and marketing has been shadowed, Peers tells us, by anxieties about women’s potential neglect of home and mothering, anxieties summed up in the “tension between differing functions of the doll as maternal trainer for domestic duties and the superficiality of the luxurious doll, whose *raison d’être* is to wear glorious clothes” (Peers: 35-6).

Conor goes to eastern-states Australian periodicals for the majority of her archival material illustrating 1920s public representations of women, but also crosses the Pacific to the USA and occasionally alludes to the British experience. Each keyword in her title and subtitle – spectacular, modern, woman, feminine, visibility – carries a weight of referents. Inevitably some questions are begged, observations selectively invoked, interpretations skewed, oppositions left unexplored. For example, if we accept that there was noteworthy feminine visibility in the 1920s – that “roaring” decade popularly identified with the visual emblem of the slim young woman dancing, smoking, drinking, partying, nightclubbing, motoring, diving, playing sports and generally seizing the day and night – then we may immediately wonder: what of masculine visibility? And was there “feminine invisibility” before the 1920s?

Within her text Conor proves ready to address the second of these questions by pointing to the new technologies which made possible or enhanced public visibility of women and things gendered feminine in the 1920s. But male visibility remains beyond her scope – which is not to say that males are excluded from these pages. Of the many 1920s cartoons, advertisements, films, newsreels, theatrical productions, artworks, merchandising displays, photographs, verses, lyrics, prose fictions and pieces of journalism cited in relation to female visibility, a majority were created, edited and promulgated by men. The male viewpoint is everywhere in this book, as is male intervention. Much as Conor is keen to celebrate 1920s women’s increasing public presence, she is frequently obliged to contend with obstructive and mocking male opinions from that time and to acknowledge certain men’s crucial roles in facilitating women’s progress into public participation.

Subjectivity, identity, modernity, appearing, performance, image and objectification are collapsed together here in a way which, to my mind,

makes this book's argument circular, and I was still finding it difficult going when I reached Conor's "Conclusion." A return to the more colloquially worded, self-reflective "Preface" helped me disentangle Conor's thesis. Conor begins by noting the popular – but, according to her, little examined – assumption that feminine visibility has political significance. She asks: "When did the visibility of women become important?" before discussing her own conflicting experiences during the 1980s, when she dressed in retro glamour style.

When, why and even whether Conor specifically chose to research the 1920s remains unclear, as does what she was initially looking for in the 60-odd periodicals she studied. The closest she comes to explaining is to allude to her "hunch" that "the modern industrialised production of images ... forged a new relation between feminine visibility and public visibility." Modernity, she believes, intensified the visual scene and spectacularised women within it. In a "dramatic historical shift," 1920s women were "invited to articulate themselves as modern subjects by constituting themselves as spectacles." Consequently, feminine subjectivity came to be increasingly performed within the visual register (Conor: xiii-xvi).

These statements are best read in conjunction with a few sentences in Conor's "Conclusion": "This book was intended to be not an argument for the importance of visibility, but rather a cultural history of how visibility became important. [Film pioneer] Lev Kuleshov was prescient when he stated ... that modern image production had enabled him to create a new woman. But this new woman was more than a composite of montaged body parts: she represented the newly emerged subject position of the modern appearing woman, who was produced, as Kuleshov's [film] woman was, within the altered visual conditions of the modern perceptual field" (Conor: 254).

This dating and line of argument will doubtless appeal to those focused on the early twentieth century and on cinema and other visual media; however those with greater knowledge of nineteenth century cultural history will think of earlier phenomena which constitute stumbling blocks to Conor's claims for the exceptional character of the 1920s. Too many of us have been unduly influenced by the plethora of American research focusing on the early twentieth-century products of US capitalism, Hollywood films in particular.

Once Conor gets into her fine collection of media material her writing becomes less congested. Despite her introductory disquisition on "appearing," Conor does not in fact directly substitute "appearing" for "spectacularisation" in the chapters that follow, possibly because the un-English phrase "the appearing of women" would not play. And whoever made the final decision on her title has opted – wisely I think if sales matter – for the lively

wordplay of “Spectacular Modern Woman” over “Modern Appearing Woman.”

Conor’s organising principle in the body of her text is the typology, although she concedes the approach has its shortcomings. We are all familiar with snappy lists presented in the popular media, and Conor gives a 1919 instance from the prurient *Truth* newspaper, in which “Tarts about Town,” young single women living unsupervised in the city, are characterised as Flappers, Love Birds and Privateers (Conor: 53, and 268 n. 56). We are also familiar with academic studies structured around purportedly representative types, and again Conor mentions an instance, Pamela Niehoff’s description of the New Woman under four headings, the flapper, the modern leisured woman, the thinking woman and the resourceful woman (Conor: 267 n. 40). However, it is to a third kind of list, the physiology of urban types, that Conor admits indebtedness.

The male flâneur having been one early type, Conor gives space to the ongoing quest to retrospectively identify female equivalents. She cites Anke Gleber’s conclusion that only inside cinemas could women enjoy spectatorship, and in an endnote refers to “the invisible status of the female flâneur in the literature of modernity” as an outcome of females’ “excessive spectacularisation as woman-on-the-street” (Conor: 15-8; 258 n.1; 259 n. 10). It is surprising that in the course of her reading Conor did not come across sufficient cases of female spectatorship to question Gleber et al. In the course of my background reading for this essay I noticed a few women who might be described as flâneurs and one (in Paris in 1912) who was later explicitly described as “a born flâneuse or saunterer” by her companion of the time.²¹ My working conclusion: go to female writers of the past for recognition of fellow out-and-about women as observers rather than objects for ogling and censorious comment.

A first glance at Conor’s own typology suggests she has separated out five types of actual women (the so-called City Girl, Screen-Struck Girl, Beauty Contestant, Flapper and Primitive) and one artificial, the store Mannequin. However, when we reflect that Conor’s examples of the first five types are all drawn from media depictions, we realise that in fact she is presenting six representations. So far, so reader-friendly. The closest typology to Conor’s that I know of is in Barbara Sato’s *The New Japanese Woman* (2003). Sato’s chief source of information is Japanese women’s mass-circulation magazines of the interwar period. She uses evidence from these periodicals to argue for the emergence in Japanese cities in the interwar years of certain new representations of women similar to those already recognised in Europe and America. She concentrates on three modes of self-presentation, “each of which offered Japanese women new

identities in the 1920s.” They are: “the bobbed-haired, short-skirted modern girl (*modan gāru*); the self-motivated housewife (*shufu*); and the rational, extroverted professional working woman (*shokugyō fujin*).”²²

Conor’s use of typing is strengthened by the fact that she places each type in a setting. She uses the performance-related, Butlerian term “scene” in preference to alternate metaphors such as field, area or arena. The Metropolitan, Cinematic, Commodity, Photographic and Heterosexual Leisure scenes, each lightly sketched in, fit with Conor’s visual and transformational emphases; but the formula wobbles when it comes to placing representations of Indigenous Australians, East Asians, people of African descent and other supposed “Primitives” in the diffuse and time-delimited “Late Colonial Scene.”

Conor’s scenes are outside the home (or, in the Indigenous case, at a physical and/or psychological remove from the home territory). Her high functioning urban subjects have acquired the psychological freedom and earning capacity to be out-and-about. One factor facilitating this transition was access to trustworthy, mass-produced and easily purchasable (if expensive) sanitary protection. Conor devotes the opening six pages of her second chapter to this development, which worldwide made women’s physical participation in public activities far easier. However, she concentrates on product origins and the need for inconspicuousness, relegating to an endnote the fact of “women’s new mobility in the public realm as travelers, professionals, students, consumers, shop girls and factory hands.” Unless one reads attentively, then, one is left puzzling why this material is being presented at all (Conor: 265 n. 2).

Another reservation – which applies more generally to both books – concerns the question of whether religion-related taboos were easing as Western society became more secular. Did the greater freedom of participation facilitated by sanitary pads coincide with lessening of religio-cultural restrictions on menstruating women? Both authors seem to assume conditions of increasing secularisation, or at least religious nominalism, without weighing the importance of this trend in permitting greater feminine visibility (and audibility), relaxation of dress codes and rising purchasing power. Clergy and Christian denominations are mentioned fleetingly as wowers or voices of social conscience, depending upon the commentator’s point of view – for example, Peers reports a claim that the Salvation Army was amongst groups critical of the New Look after the Second World War, and Conor reports Australian clergy joining in campaigns against the influx of American films promoting liberal values (Peers: 145, quoting an anonymous writer; Conor: 84) – but there remains room for more to be said.

For painterly illustrations of women’s progress out of (idealised) interi-

ority, I recommend the catalogue of the National Gallery of Australia's 2004 exhibition of Edwardian artworks. While many of the women subjects are placed indoors and decoratively rendered, there is in the later paintings – particularly those by women – an absence of costly staginess. Vanessa Bell's *Virginia Woolf* (1911-12), Laura Knight's *Self-portrait* (1913), Kathleen O'Connor's *Two café girls* (1914) and Norah Simpson's *Studio portrait, Chelsea* (1915) convey the vividly immediate and yet flat, banal character of everyday activities.²³ Susan Sidlauskas dates the demise of the home interior as analogue of self to about 1914-15, when wartime bombing raids were destroying or unroofing and exposing in cross-section previously snug houses and when Freudians were bringing the unconscious to popular attention. If a woman's material surroundings could no longer be relied upon and no longer constituted her universe, her sense of self might have to become internalised. Alternatively subjectivity might be described as becoming decentred, displaced onto the external flow of experience.²⁴

Conor effectively cuts in at this point to give her reading of how, rather than withdrawing inward or becoming merged with and dispersed through the outside world, women's subjectivity self-consciously stepped out into the postwar streets in novel forms. Peers's doll history then modifies the story's trajectory through an account of the post-Second World War period when there were pressures for women to leave paid employment and concentrate on childbearing and homemaking. It was against this later backdrop that many girls, products of the resultant baby boom, were presented with their first stylishly dressed and groomed Barbies (or in the UK Sindys) or cheaper chain-store equivalents in the early 1960s. Did these Barbies function as inspirational models of womanhood or were they symptoms of pernicious consumerist excess and suppression of non-mainstream behaviours? Peers gives more weight to the former point of view. She also points to how comprehensively the later Barbies and Sindys and their sisters have reflected, if not influenced, popular trends in women's dress, employment options and civic participation rates.

Despite general care with chronology, neither Peers nor Conor makes clear precisely what she means by "modern," "modernism," "modernity" or "modernisation." Each author is seemingly keener to get into the pleasures of her detailed material. Perhaps bristling in anticipation of such a remark, Conor quotes Jim Collins on the tendency of commentators to make fascination antithetical to critique: "fascination has been made to mean uncritical acceptance, promiscuity, lack of rigour" (Conor: 305 n. 89). Peers's understanding of modernity stretches back as far as Adelaide Huret's innovative dolls of Second Empire Paris; Conor, paralleling this, alludes to women's entrance into metropolitan space in the 1850s as "indicative of the modern"

(Peers: 48-9; Conor: 47). Yet on her final page, dealing with the year 2003, Peers writes of “modern life” and “modern fashion,” while in her “Preface” Conor aligns herself with “Western feminists and modern women across the [twentieth] century” and later mentions the University of Washington’s Modern Girl Around the World Project, which claims on its website to be investigating “a figure who appeared around the world ... in the early to mid twentieth century.”²⁵ Clearly all of us writing about the last 150 years in Western societies face comparable difficulties. The lesson would seem to be to address formal and colloquial usage differences, definitions and shades of meaning early on.

Difficulties of terminology and interpretation are compounded when an author is looking at representations of both white and non-white women in transition between cultures and socio-economic strata. Conor implicitly connects events in the lives of an Aboriginal housemaid and a white Australian actress [*sic*] to point up how a novel experience of confronting her own visual image disturbs a woman’s self-perception – but she judges the two experiences by different criteria.

In Hollywood in 1924, through the use of the new montage technique, the filmed legs of Lotus Thompson were grafted onto the filmed bodies of other women on screen. Thompson, “in a poignant and desperate protest [*sic*],” responded by pouring acid over her legs (Conor: 1). Thompson’s reaction could be read in diminishing terms: as commercially and technologically naïve, as self-punishing and self-defeating, or as the acting out in an impetuously self-dramatising fashion of conventional resistance to and suspicion of new devices and technologies that might harm or steal one’s self/spirit or yield a picture very different to one’s pre-existing mental self-image. The use of the images of Thompson’s legs could be read as objectification causing loss of self-determination. However, since the innovation was quickly adopted by the commercial movie industry, and later generations of actors willingly agreed to their images being distorted in various ways, Conor takes the pragmatic path of finding the good in the situation. She chooses to read Thompson’s reaction positively as an assertion, a reclamation, an intervention, a showing of “ownership of her own spectacle,” and the filmmaker’s actions as helping to facilitate “the production of a new modern feminine subjectivity.” As a result of her reaction Thompson received enormous publicity, her notoriety leading to new screen roles: she “achieved the status of Screen Star” (Conor: 3 and 257n. 2).

In the other case, an Aboriginal girl who had been taken from her people at the age of twelve and given the Anglo name Irene saw her (non-distorted) reflection in a full-length mirror for the first time. She reacted with fright and disbelief, having, according to the lady of the household, “thought

that she was much more handsome" (Conor: 175). Aboriginal and Islander women, Conor writes, were perceived to lack modern people's capacity to imagine themselves as under an appraising gaze and to self-consciously stand before a mirror and adjust/manage the visual effect presented; and if these women did attempt to act and see in the modern Western manner, the result was comically or abjectly inept (Conor: 175-6). Conor does not envisage Irene resisting or making some calculated intervention on her own behalf; Irene remains an object captured by the gaze, "unable to transcend the racially inflected space of mimicry." Conor seems to assume Irene's subsequent life was as fraught with difficulties as were the lives of many other Indigenous women newly encountering Western technologies and techniques: "failing to appreciate the meaning of her reflection ... destined to fail ... failure to believe in themselves." Such a woman or girl was emphatically "not modern" (Conor: 176-8).

Gayatri Spivak puts it differently: in her reading the figure of the third-world woman disappears as she is shuttled between tradition and modernisation, patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation (Conor: 200). It is at this juncture in her discussion that I think Conor could have capitalised on the overlaps in interest between women's and post-colonial studies; instead she merely touches on some postcolonialist insights, effectively perpetuating a deficiency to which Rita Felski admitted in her *The Gender of Modernity*.²⁶

Another instance of problematic reasoning associated with terminology occurs in chapter 7 of *The Fashion Doll* when Peers suddenly makes an astounding claim: dolls, she states, "are inherently postmodern rather than modern." Further, dolls "suggest that postmodernist values have existed in albeit simple forms and parallels during earlier eras and beyond the academy" (Peers: 169-70). Here I would query Peers's logic; the subject of dolls may be well suited to a postmodern style of analysis without all dolls that have ever existed being recast as indicators of postmodernity. Cultural theorists have tended to emphasise art as commodity within an environment of flux, overlap and fluidity, and Peers follows their lead here. "[P]resentations of elite design in doll form make perfect sense," she claims, in a "cultural climate" characterised by "hybridity, the creole, the transitional, [and] the crossover." The (alleged) increase in imbrication of art and commerce, the increase in honesty about artworks' status as tradeable commodities, and the breaking down of barriers between fine arts and items of popular and juvenile taste are all factors favouring a more mature analysis of the doll. But need each shift in intellectual outlook necessitate re-labelling of the object of attention and the values prevailing at its time of production? A doll is still a doll.

Overall, each of these two authors stays close to her factual materials and the immediately obvious issues they raise. And each invariably leans toward defence of the fascinating woman-object (the fashion doll, the representation of the progressive young woman) when hostile critique threatens. If both treatments are skewed by authorial enthusiasm, this is a relatively minor failing in light of the substantial contributions they make to cultural studies.

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NOTES

¹ Peers, p.132; the uncropped version of the postcard is reproduced on the same page. Conor, p.107; Jeremy Ludowyke is credited with the photography.

² My limited research places the Peers image as having been created in the 1925-27 period and the original of the Conor mannequin as c.1927.

Peers identifies the doll as a rag doll possibly by Raynal or Venus (132). Raynal produced felt and cloth dolls advertised as of a "new kind" in Paris from 1925, and the short curly-all-over hairstyle first became common on dolls in 1924, according to Dorothy S., Elizabeth A. and Evelyn J. Coleman, *The Collector's Encyclopaedia of Dolls* (London: Robert Hale, 1968), pp. 276, 518. A mail order catalogue put out by David Jones Ltd, Sydney, in 1926-27 offered the fuzzy-haired, solidly proportioned French novelty doll "Gaby" at a reduced price suggestive of a bulk purchase of a line that was being discontinued. The pleated, dropped-waist style of dress worn by the young woman was fashionable around 1927: Ruth S. Countryman and Elizabeth Weiss Hopper, *Women's Wear of the 1920's* (Studio City, CA: Players Press, 1998), p. 2.

I went out to try to inspect the Conor mannequin in the 'flesh.' Conor's "Acknowledgements" directed me to the Melbourne Visual Merchandising department of the David Jones retail chain, where I learned the face belonged to a display head rather than a complete human form. It had been inherited along with others when David Jones had taken over the venerable Buckley and Nunn business, and it had recently been disposed of. The trail led me to a shop premises once leased to a fashion designer, then to a temporary outlet where the designer was selling off stock and fittings. For a second time I was just too late: the elusive head had been sold again and there was no record of the buyer. My investigations also took me to David Jones's Sydney archive, which I knew had acquired some of the old artefacts from the Melbourne Buckley and Nunn store and therefore might be holding onto some comparable mannequins. No luck there, although I was able to study advertisements, mail-order catalogues and other records from the early twentieth century. The closest counterpart to the Conor mannequin I found was in a photograph of a 1927 David Jones, Sydney window display; the mannequin had a boyish crop with a triangular forelock leading the gaze down to enormously ex-

aggerated brows and big-lidded, slanting eyes. My thanks to David Jones's Archivist, Barbara Horton, in Silverwater, Sydney, and to Sue Roennfeldt in David Jones Visual Merchandising, Melbourne.

- ³ On connotations of the words "attractive" and "cute" in relation to the appearance of dolls and human females, see A. F. Robertson, *Life Like Dolls: The Collector Doll Phenomenon and the Lives of the Women Who Love Them* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 162-8, 193-205.
- ⁴ See Elizabeth Anne McCauley, *Industrial Madness: Commercial Photography in Paris, 1848-1871* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), p. 8, pp. 156-7; Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets, and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), pp. 149-53, p. 161, and p. 229, n. 26.
- ⁵ For instance, Peers points out that in the 1920s and 1930s new fashions in European underwear were marketed by way of newsreels using an erotic mix of bou-doir dolls and partly dressed live models; these were viewed by both females and males in cinemas. Peers, p. 133.
- ⁶ Boop's sassy image (still available on merchandise, and popular with young Asian buyers) reflects that of the real-life performers on whom she was modelled: bos-omy, wise-cracking Mae West and the singer Helen Kane. However, when first drawn in 1930 Boop had floppy ears and a black button nose and was the love in-terest for a dog. By 1932 she had taken fully human form, and by '34 Fleischer Studios, producer of the Boop cartoons, was suing a doll manufacturer for infring-ing its copyright. Anon, 'Betty Boop History', http://www.pathcom.com/~dsk/betty_boop.htm (accessed 27-11-2005). Anon., 'Boop in Court', *Time*, 19 Feb. 1934, <http://www.time.com/time/archive/printout/0,23657,746979,00.html> (accessed 27-11-2005).
- ⁷ Novelty dolls with adult appeal had become popular before the First World War, most notably in the form of Rose O'Neill's Kewpie (based on her press illu-strations), the big-eyed, side-glancing "googly" doll, and character dolls based on Wilhelm Busch's stories. Peers, pp.130-131. Rose O'Neill conceived of the Kew-pie as a naked male Cupid-Elf able to be held in a child's hand and resisted early manufacturers' attempts to alter the model's dimensions and face. Later Kewpies were feminised and further infantilised. She watched adults taking Kewpies home from resorts ("A great number of the elves were carried about with no wrapping, just for the fun of it") and carrying Kewpies in city trains. See Rose O'Neill, *The Story of Rose O'Neill: An Autobiography*, ed. Miriam Formanek-Brunell (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1997), chapter 4, particularly pp. 94-5, 104-9, and also the "Intro-duction" by Formanek-Brunell. Also see Robertson, *Life Like*, p. 167.
- ⁸ Peers, pp. 131, 133-4. Anne Marsh reproduces one such artwork, from a series by Hans Bellmer, in her *The Darkroom* (2003). Bellmer's series is said to have been inspired by a performance of Offenbach's opera *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, based on three of E.T.A. Hoffmann's stories. Act One of this opera features a man fitted with rose-tinted glasses becoming infatuated with a beautiful "woman" who, disintegrat-ing after dancing, proves to be a mechanical doll. The ballet Coppelia was based on the same Hoffmann story. Anne Marsh, *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 2003), pp. 184-5 and Fig. 36; cf. Peers, p. 8 and p. 195 n. 3.

- ⁹ Foundation, powder and rouge are simulated, also eyebrow pencil, eye shadow, kohl eyeliner and mascara or false eyelashes, although eye make-up was not generally accepted daywear in the 1920s. "By 1948, 80 to 90 percent of adult American women used lipstick, about two-thirds used rouge, and one in four wore eye makeup." Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan, 1998), p. 245.
- ¹⁰ For a study of "the despotic face of white femininity" in recent American contexts see Camilla Griggers, *Becoming-woman* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997).
- ¹¹ Cf. Roland Barthes' early essay "The Face of Garbo," in Susan Sontag, ed., *Barthes: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Fontana, 1982), pp. 82-4.
- ¹² Star-struck women imitated not only actresses' make-up and hair styles but their clothes and accessories, as evidenced locally by newspaper reports of the Cinema Fashion Shop opened within David Jones's main Sydney store in 1933 to sell knock-offs of the latest screen outfits: David Jones's Archive contains publicity cuttings from *The Telegraph* [Sydney], 15 September 1933 and *The Sydney Sun & Guardian*, 8 July 1934. Metropolitan and regional newspapers and periodicals also carried fashion advice attributed to Hollywood stars, with cross-promotion to coming movies.
- ¹³ On terminology see Conor, p. 47. The term "New Woman" is generally agreed to have been in circulation from the 1880s through to the 1910s and 1920s. On the rise of the femme nouvelle in 1880s France, one English-language source is Debora L. Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology, and Style* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989), chapter 4. Also see *The New Woman and her Sisters: Feminism and Theatre 1850-1914*, ed. Viv Gardner and Susan Rutherford (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), pp. 2-6.
- ¹⁴ Conor reports that in 1925 in America a Mrs Stubergh's mannequins were said to be capturing the market because they were moulded from real women (Conor: 279 n. 16). An Australian firm, Wilkin & Jones, developed papier mâché figures "after the design of Vogue" in response to David Jones Ltd's desire for "animated and life-like" replacements for its wax dummies (*Sunday News*, Sydney, 7 March 1926, p.12). A number of American women founded cosmetics and toiletries businesses prior to the 1920s, when the growing companies tended to be taken over by male managers – see Peiss, *Hope*, pp. 106-13. Peers notes that European and Euro-American women founded and retained control of a number of doll manufacturing enterprises.
- ¹⁵ The quote about My Scene is from Claire Morgan and Alexa Moses, "Bratz Takes on Barbie in Push for Girls." *The Age* [Melbourne], 16 December 2002, p. 7. A BBC television documentary released since Peers finalised her text reported that the Flåvas line (misspelled by Peers) flopped; it "look[ed] like Beach Boys trying to do rap," according to toy industry analyst Sean McGowan. See *Barbie's Mid-Life Crisis*, BBC, 2004.
- ¹⁶ Robertson, *Life Like*, pp. 226-7. On other objections to fashion dolls see Robertson, pp. 218-9 and Peers, pp. 105-7.
- ¹⁷ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984; reissued Durham: Duke

UP, 1993).

- ¹⁸ The commentator is G.Wayne Miller; see his *Toy Wars: The Epic Struggle Between G.I. Joe, Barbie and the Companies Who Made Them* (New York: Time Books/Random House, 1998), p. 68.
- ¹⁹ See Varney, "Pink Paradoxes on Nevsky Prospect," *Arena* 62 (2002), pp. 41-3.
- ²⁰ See, for example, Michel Valentin, "Transformation/Trance/In-formation: Rubik's Cube and Transformer Toy," *The Montana Professor* 1.2 (1991) <http://mtprof.msun.edu/Spr1991/trans.html> (accessed 13-05-2005).
- ²¹ O'Neill, *The Story of Rose O'Neill*, p. 99.
- ²² Barbara Sato, *The New Japanese Woman: Modernity, Media, and Women in Interwar Japan* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), p. 7. Dina Lowy's recent research leads her to identify certain types or stages, including a tendentious category, the True New Woman. Dina B. Lowy, *The Japanese "New Woman": Contending Images of Gender and Modernity, 1910-1920* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 2002).
- ²³ Susan Hall (ed.), *The Edwardians: Secrets and Desires* (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2004), pp. 142, 183, 200, 227.
- ²⁴ Susan Sidlauskas, *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), p. 146, drawing on Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1989), p. 465. Also see review of Sidlauskas's book by Elizabeth Mansfield, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 1.1. (2002), http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/spring_02/reviews/mans.html. (accessed 23-12-2004).
- ²⁵ See *The Modern Girl Around the World* project, Institute for Transnational Studies, University of Washington. <http://depts.washington.edu/its/moderngirlmain.htm> (accessed 14-05-05). This project is a welcome corrective to those studies by junior America-centric scholars who write as if unaware of international antecedents to modernist/feminist developments in the USA in the 1920s and who attribute subsequent international developments solely to American cultural influence.
- ²⁶ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1995) pp. 211-2. Felski has provided the endorsement at the back cover of the Connor's book.