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Transgressive Intimacy

**Liberty, Lust
and Longing
in the City**

by Patricia Pisters

T New York, 1900. A nurse from the
E Knickerbocker hospital arrives on her bike.
N Her agile, freely moving yet uniformed body
T seems to merge with the city architecture.
A One of the surgeons, who is sitting in front
C of the building, observes her inquisitively. He
U is exhausted and recovering from a bloody
L emergency operation that he conducted while
A on cocaine. Later, she will find him waiting
R for her where she left her bike. Now she is
T observing him. Her gaze is telling.

C Beijing, the 2010s. A housewife stands in the
U window of a high-rise apartment. The city below
L is reflected around her face. Her husband and
A child have just respectively left for work and
R kindergarten. She has an extended day ahead
T of her, which she will spend lost in thought,
H longing. The city moves to the background as
I we enter the inner, psychic space of her most
N intimate desires, drawing us into an erotic
K encounter with a sensual, ghostly figure. Her
I body is speaking to us.

R SEX IN THE CITY

T Steven Soderbergh's television series *The*
H *Knick* (2014–15) brings us to New York at the
I turn of the 19th to 20th century. Inspired by real
N locations, events and characters, the drama
K is set around the Knickerbocker hospital in
I Harlem. Yang Lina's independent film *Longing*
N *for the Rain* (2013) takes us over a hundred
K years forward in time, to the 21st century, to a
I well-to-do middle class setting in contemporary
N Beijing. Within very different historical and
K urban contexts, the narration and formal,
I aesthetic dimensions of these works explore
N the realm of female lust and longing; the
K various liberating and transgressive dimensions
I of female perspectives on erotic desire, played
N out against the modern and global cityscape.¹

1. As a two-season drama series of ten episodes each, *The Knick* holds an incredible array of interesting and important storylines related to racism, feminism, modernity and modern medicine. These go beyond the scope of this essay. Barry Jenkins and André Holland are working on season 3 with Soderbergh stepping back into the role of executive producer.

In *The Knick*, we see the modern city slowly emerging: electric light replaces candles and petrol lamps; horse-drawn ambulances are substituted by the cranking of motor cars; the New York underground is developed; Edison demonstrates voice recordings on a wax cylinder phonograph; film cameras and X-rays enter the hospital; modern surgery advances by trial and error; the talking cure has its stumbling beginnings. Lucy Elkins (Eve Hewson) arrives in New York from her native West Virginia where her father is a priest. City life will be a transformative experience on many levels, igniting an erotic flame that will change her.

Longing for the Rain captures a hypermodern global city, full of highways, shopping malls, anonymous high-rise residential areas, mobile phones, as well as some preserved landmarks such as Tiananmen Square and the Lama Temple, and the hutongs of the inner city.² Fong Lei (Zhao Siyan) is clearly at home here. She lives in a comfortable apartment with her husband and small daughter; she moves easily through the immense metropolis in her luxurious car, goes shopping with a friend, takes her aunt on a tour through the city, visits her grandmother-in-law. Her fondness and amiable attention for her environment does not prevent her from longing for a sexual encounter that will devour her.

The laidback movements of both women within the city merges with the arousal of their sensuality. The way this sensuality is depicted is remarkable and expresses a contemporary perspective on intimacy and gender.

A MATCH BURNING IN A CROCUS

To understand how contemporary this viewpoint on female erotica is, let us first briefly return to history. The early 1900s marked the emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis.

2. Parts of this article have appeared in Patricia Pisters, *New Blood in Contemporary Cinema: Women Directors and the Poetics of Horror*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2020.

In essence, psychoanalysis is based on a theory of (repressed) sexuality. And, while many of Freud's patients who installed themselves on his famous couch in Vienna to speak about their unconscious desires were female, it is clear that psychoanalysis is rooted in a masculine model of heteronormativity. The central idea of the Oedipus complex describes the little boy's secret desire for his mother and the rivalry he feels towards his father that he will eventually overcome by finding his own wife. Female desire and sexuality are less evident, as Freud declared: 'We know less about the sexual life of little girls than of boys. But we need not feel ashamed of this distinction; after all, the sexual life of adult women is a "dark continent" for psychology.'³

Of course, Freud's work has to be regarded in the context of his own time: the discovery of unconscious, libidinal drives was revolutionary. And the idea of women as unknowable creatures was rather common, as reflected by cultural representations in Hollywood films. Much has been written about the stereotypical role of women as either virgins or whores, mothers or *femme fatales*.⁴ Typically, women are 'to-be-looked-at,' objects of desire that can be integrated into their societal role as wives and mothers, or they are there to give pleasure and nothing else; idealised and fetishised or punished.⁵ In the late 19th and early 20th century, the idea of a woman having any sexual desire at all was a shocking thought – enough

3. Sigmund Freud, 'The Question of Lay Analysis', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XX (1925-1926)*, trans. James Strachey, Hogarth Press, London, 1959, p. 212.

4. Laura Mulvey is one of the psychoanalytic feminist theorists who challenged this limited role of women as object of desire and danger without autonomous agency. See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18. Frantz Fanon demonstrated how psychoanalysis explains how desire is also grounded in racism, where the racial 'other' is relegated to a place of unspoken fascination and fear. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Markmann, Grove Press, New York, 1962. In *The Knick* the experience of the blatant racism of metropolitan New York in 1900 is embodied by Dr Algeron Edwards (André Holland), the hospital's first black doctor.

5. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' p. 10.

to declare her hysterical and warrant carrying her off to the 'madhouse'. In her writings from the 1920s, Virginia Woolf could only refer to female erotic feelings in metaphorical terms such as a 'match burning in a crocus' or a 'little ball bubbling up and down on the spray of a fountain.'⁶

It was not until the 1960s that women were able to break these rules of sexual passivity and normative chastity. By bringing explicit female sensuality to the screen, they bypassed patriarchal rules of concealment and restriction. One of the most notable artists of this era I wish to briefly recall here, renowned for her taboo-breaking artworks and films, is Carolee Schneemann.

Featuring herself and her boyfriend James Tenney engaging in sexual intimacy, her erotic film *Fuses* (1967) received as many prizes and laudations as incendiary calls for censorship. Schneemann began filming *Fuses* in 1964 on a borrowed wind-up Super 8 Bolex camera that allowed for thirty seconds of film time for each lovemaking scene. The film material was reworked (scratched, coloured, filtered) and the result is an abstract and poetic depiction of an erotic encounter that displays explicit and abstract shots of both the male and the female genitals, capturing and expressing the 'fusing' quality of lived sexuality. The equity between the partners – the eroticism of their bodies that merges with the tactile quality of the images – still stands out today. However, *Fuses* was met with flamboyant protests, most infamously during its premiere in Cannes when 'a group of forty men went berserk and tore up all the seats in the theatre, slashed them with razors, shredded them, and threw all the padding around. It was terrifying, and peculiar,' Schneemann would later recall.⁷

6. Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, Penguin, London, 1992 [1925], p. 35; Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999 [1937], p. 369.

7. Scott MacDonald, 'About Fuses. Interview with Carolee Schneemann', Documents: *Cinema/Comparative Cinema*, vol. 4, no. 8, 2016, p. 10.

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On many other occasions, the film has stirred up intense emotions from its audiences. In film history, *Fuses* is unique as perhaps one of the first intimate, non-fetishised representations of the female body in a sexual encounter.

PAINLESS AND PERFECT

While *The Knick* contains many storylines that are developed over the twenty episodes of its first two seasons, the attention to the position and experiences of women is extraordinary and sheds light on the historical gender conditions of the 1900s. Although our perspective from the 21st century doesn't change those historic conditions, we do get a glimpse of that vast continent of feminine desire that was not possible to express at the time.

Returning to Lucy Elkins – in the very first episode of the show, 'Method and Madness,' Lucy is instructed to fetch Dr John Thackery (Clive Owen) for an emergency operation. We have already seen that Thackery is fearlessly determined to advance medical technology and surgery but sleeps on opium and works on cocaine (which then was legally available). When Lucy enters Thackery's home, she finds him in withdrawal from cocaine. The only way to get him back on his feet is to inject him – due to the lack of any other suitable veins – in his urethra. Lucy asks the Lord for forgiveness and gives him the shot of cocaine in his genitals. In the next scene, they are in the operation theatre and he commands her to prepare a spinal needle with a hypodermic cocaine solution for the patient, addressing her as 'Nurse Elkins.' It is as if nothing happened; as if she did not see him moments before in a complete state of withdrawal, shaking and sweating; and as if she has not seen his exposed body and penis. He notices her confusion and asks her: 'Or are you not familiar with this substance?'

But the seed of intimacy and arousal has been planted and, over the course of the series, we

see this seed growing. With every day she spends in the city, every shift she completes at the hospital and with each moment that she observes Thackery, Lucy's naivete wanes. She follows him to Chinatown, to the opium den of Ping Wu (Perry Yung), and watches him being comforted in the arms of a prostitute. In episode five, 'They Capture the Heat,' one day after work, Lucy finds Thackery standing at her blue bike, where they share another close encounter. Matching his inquisitive gaze, she tells him the bike comes in different colours and adds: 'I like riding in the city. It makes me feel like I'm part of it.' He says: 'I saw you on it this morning. You did not look like you were part of anything. You looked free. I quite envied you.' She then teaches him how to cycle.

One of the most remarkable episodes of the first season, 'Get the Rope,' opens with race riots. The conflict is ignited by an incident where a black man is forced to defend his wife who is taken for a streetwalker and offered to make some money for the local gang leader. When the pimp ends up in hospital and does not survive, the white mob blames any black man on the street and storms the hospital in rage. All wounded black patients and the hospital's black doctor, Algeron Edwards (André Holland), have to be rescued. They are taken on a perilous ambulance journey to a black hospital further uptown, where the staff of *the Knick* helps to operate on the wounded in a chaotic emergency situation.

After the last patient is treated, very late at night, Thackery takes Lucy home. She tells him that her room-mate has already gone to work, and he can come in. While lighting the petrol lamp she offers him her virginity by asking, 'will it hurt?' He assures her that he will make it 'painless and perfect.' The following scene is at daybreak. In the soft morning light, we see Lucy alone, sitting on the bed, using the pitcher for ablutions, observing her expressionless face in the mirror. These actions are interrupted by flashes of the night, entangled bodies close-up and dimly lit, broken ampoules of cocaine on

the floor. She dresses and brushes her hair, which is intercut with more flashbacks. She then sits with a cup of tea at the table, a smile on her face meeting the sunlight. Her roommate comes in and immediately remarks that something has happened. Lucy covers a soft laugh with her hand and looks with glowing eyes to her friend.

This scene is deeply moving because we have witnessed all the moments, glances, gazes and gestures that led up to it. Throughout the show, we remain close to Lucy's perspective: her initial shock as a religiously educated girl from the province entering the wildness of the city, her sense of liberty, her rising sensual curiosity and her agency to act on these feelings. So, this moment of transgressive intimacy arrives perfectly naturally, paralleling her comfortable movements through the busy streets of New York. We are with her, smiling, closely connected to her erotic initiation that defies all norms of 'good girl' behaviour.

Over the course of the series, we will discover that she is as addicted to Thackery as he is to cocaine. When there are supply shortages, she is ballsy and resourcefully finds him the 'ocean of cocaine' that he asks for, dousing their sex (quite literally) in it. When Thackery becomes increasingly dysfunctional, paranoid, cold and distant, she transforms into a streetwise woman. She hooks up with Ping Wu and captivates Henry Robertson (Charles Aitken), the wealthy hospital owner's son, with her cocaine ruses in bed. Her father, who gives her a heavy beating for indecent behaviour, ends up in *the Knick* after a heart attack in a brothel. While administering him a lethal injection, she wishes him a 'good trip,' denouncing his hypocrisy and taking control over her own life. She may face disappointment in love and lust, but she refuses to be preyed upon and instead becomes the predator. From virgin, she becomes a *femme fatal*. As the audience, we intimately witness the steps that lead to this transformation between the two only options available for women in the 1900s; and the path

Lucy chooses to keep some of her freedom that her cycling in the city initially embodies.

HE WILL TAKE YOUR SOUL

Documentary filmmaker Yang Lina's first feature film *Longing for the Rain* takes us into the most intimate spaces of a woman's longing for sex in the form of a ghost story. Yang's style combines realistic, handheld camerawork and ethnographic portrayals with visual poetry and spectral abstraction to present the story of Fang Lei, a woman in her early thirties in Beijing. Fang is a perfect wife and mother. Her husband compliments her on the great wontons she makes him for breakfast, she is a dedicated mother, and an ideal daughter-in-law who takes care of her husband's demented grandmother by simply adjusting to her needs; when the grandmother does not want to shower, she simply strips naked and takes a shower with her; they have fun, even if the grandmother has no idea who she is, calling her 'Goddess of Mercury' and 'Queen of Dreams.'

Loving, caring and sensitive, Fang is at the same time full of unfulfilled desires. Obsessively drawn into his digital games, her husband spends more time touching his tablet than his wife. And so, while by herself in her apartment, we feel her loneliness and longing seek liberation. Her silhouette stands in front of the large window, blurring together with the pink curtains and red flowers, becoming ethereal and ghostlike. In a dreamlike way, desire creeps into the images, constantly interchanging with contrastingly realistic shots. Fang begins having vivid dreams of sexual encounters with an unknown man that she cannot see or touch but can feel intensely. These encounters are filmed in fragmented close-ups, bringing the spectator completely into her erotic reveries that seem to comingle her body parts with those of the unknown man.

When Fang wakes up, her husband is lying with his back turned towards her. She becomes

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absent-minded. Her husband complains that he must eat bread for breakfast and wants her wontons back; they do not come back. In a hilarious scene that takes place in her car parked at a shopping mall lot, her best friend (Xue Hong) gives her a present: a pink dildo with pearls that glow in the dark. Giggling, she tells Fang that she has been suppressing her urges for too long. Her friend has a new lover, but they break up and to help her get over the separation, the women go out drinking with some young boys. In a kind of inversion of Freud's complaint about the enigma of feminine desire, Fang's friend cries on one of the boy's shoulders, saying that she really does not know what men want and that they certainly do not know the price women pay for love. Fang mentions her ghost-lover who seems to visit her increasingly often, taking possession of her, and the pair decide to go on a quest for an explanation and a solution.

They visit all kinds of religious and spiritual officiators, and these meetings are shot in a documentary style (there are no professional actors in the rest of the film, except for Fang and her best friend). First, they ask advice from a Taoist priest who tells them that a spirit has come to take Fang's soul: 'between 100 days and 3 years from now he'll have taken your soul away,' he warns. He then performs some rituals and gives her a talisman for protection. Of course, his explanation is speculative and yet it sends shivers along our spines. Fang is devastated and tries to stop dreaming, which proves not to be easy. The women then visit a fortune teller who declares that the ghost is a husband from a previous life who wishes to reconnect and does not necessarily mean her harm. We share her relief, but when she throws away the priest's protective talisman, there is a foreboding sense of alarm. Sure enough, her spectral lover then takes over one afternoon when she is with her daughter out in the woods. They are both taking a nap in the car, but when, after an extremely realistic erotic dream-encounter, Fang wakes up, her daughter is gone.

This leads to an existential crisis and the disintegration of her marriage. Her mother yells at her on the phone insisting that she see a psychiatrist, exclaiming that she should have taken a normal lover, not a ghost. Her aunt takes her to a Buddhist retreat, where monks give consultations to desperate women (another beautiful ethnographic moment in the film) and where she battles her ghost with a mantra, which the women sing and dance to all night. However, with the enigmatic Buddhist wisdom 'we seek six realms of existence in dreams, but only wake up to one boundless universe' the film remains with Fang's desires. At the end, she seems to have fallen in love with one of the young Buddhist monks whom she sees outside through the window. From afar, he is a blurry orange haze, like another erotic ghost entering her spirit, this time freeing up not only the imaginary but also real space for her desire.

Through its frank portrayal of female sexuality that includes nudity, masturbation and sex toys, Yang's film seems to be unique in Chinese cinema. When asked about this, the director replied that women's sexuality has always been there but is never discussed openly even if, in recent years, sexuality in China has become quite liberated:

I want to express women's contradictory emotions and (repressed) sexuality. It is not like once society becomes open in terms of sex; everybody enjoys it without any concerns... Such freedom is a delusion. A rather ungrounded freedom. For example, it seems [that] now in China people can talk about homosexuality, unlike in the old days. It has become a trendy topic but in terms of legalising equal marriage, people are not that enthusiastic or allowed to argue.⁸

8. Lia Xu and Kevin B. Lee, 'CinemaTalk: Interview with Yang Lina, Director of *Longing for the Rain*,' *Degenerate Films*, 24 May 2018, <https://www.dgeneratefilms.com/post/cinematalk-interview-with-yang-lina-director-of-i-longing-for-the-rain-i/>; accessed 10 January 2021.

Produced as a Hong Kong film, *Longing for the Rain* has not yet been shown in mainland China, which seems to prove her point. Nevertheless, by combining spectrality, sexuality and social realism, Yang has made an intimate, ghostly film, exploring longing and lust and the dangers with which they are associated, thus giving us a glimpse into hidden, inner psychic experiences and the anonymity of the global city.

TWISTED LOTUS

The two women in *The Knick* and *Longing for the Rain* signify how conceptions of female sexuality have changed since the restricted normativity of the 1900s and the violent reactions to Schneemann's *Fuses* in the 1960s. These depictions of desire do not stray from historical conditions, surrender and renunciation. Lucy Elkins lies, pretending that she got the money to buy substances for her lover, when in fact she gives Ping Wu her 'golden lotus' services (pleasuring him with her feet). This act allows her to transform herself into a deadly woman with sexual power over men. While this reference to the lotus is a perversion of its sacred meanings in Buddhism, the connotations of the flower – which grows in muddy water – could refer to the 'rising and blooming above the murk,' allowing Lucy to achieve a twisted form of enlightened sexual liberation and agency.⁹ In *Longing for the Rain*, Fang Lei ends up in a Buddhist monastery outside Beijing where she continues to find freedom through her erotic fantasies, looking out of her window at the ghostly orange figure of the monk. She has also paid a price, having lost all of the familiar people and places in her life. It is unclear if her soul has indeed been taken, or if she is on her way to discovering it through rebirth, which would be another twist of the symbolic meaning of the lotus. Both Lucy and Fang's presence on screen emanates transgressive intimacy, shedding light on that 'dark continent' of feminine sexual desire that Freud deemed invisible and unknowable.

9. See <https://www.umafdojo.com/blog/2018/4/4/the-meaning-of-the-lotus-flower-in-buddhism>; accessed 13 January 2021.