

## Skewing Lines: On Pervs, Pearls and Sex Dolls

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**T**he warm afternoon light strokes the ends of her dimly lit legs. They are thin, small, soft, and fitted with a pair of violent heels, obviously too large for her tiny feet. Her naked prepubescent body takes up the greater half of the photograph. She is open to view, exposed—besides those heels, a string of pearls too heavy for her fragile neck to carry, and an umbrella, open, pointing up into the air, ready for use. She is hard and soft, part joyful, part menacing, both coy and direct.

The girl in the photograph, the naked girl at the bottom of the steps with the umbrella, the girl wearing the pearls, is me at age five. Like most five-year-old girls (and some boys) I used to love playing dress-up with my mother's clothes. The only variation from the norm, from the standards of good taste, was that I preferred her accessories against my nude body instead of her actual clothes. I found the photo posted on my mother's vanity mirror next to a classically beautiful close-up of my sister. Embarrassed then—no, not embarrassed, mortified—by my budding sexuality (why is it that the sound of that word “sexuality” makes a girl want to cringe and blush at the same time?), I yanked it down. I distinctly remember tearing it into pieces smaller than the pearls around my neck and hiding those pieces, like shadows of a secret, under the sofa, only to find them magically recomposed on my mother's dresser the next morning. A fragmented photo of a five-year-old femme fatale.

I doubt I quite knew what a femme fatale was when I had my first self-aware encounter with Helmut Newton's work, though her archetype seemed to stare right at me through every photograph. When I was thirteen, my mother and I had just moved to Israel, and I had developed a tradition with my new friends of creating elaborate birthday gifts for one another as a sort of excuse for a group art project. Shir's birthday was coming up, and we had decided to re-create the images of her favorite photographer, Helmut

Newton, using our own bodies and our own sense of story and immediacy to create an aesthetic of poverty. The result was a set of twenty-four postcards of Newton's photographs back-to-back with twenty-four photographs of our own. At the time, none of us had breasts or hips or even pubic hair, but somewhere below our linear, cerebral minds we knew that these pictures were about us, for us, of us. Image upon image of women: women in hotel rooms, strangling headless, suited men, laughing violently; women in pain, indifferent to pain, indulging in pain; women in private moments exposed to an observer's eye, part aware, part oblivious, part aroused at the play of voyeurism taking place; women on the verge of an unknown, in shadows, in heels, in love, in loss; women. I wonder what about these images so foreign to a thirteen-year-old girl who had yet to experience the violence of sex or the melancholy of desire—spoke to me, to them, to us, so directly. These women's bodies, their flesh, their erotica—what about them seemed so natural that four teenage girls on the brink of sexual awakening were made to feel at home playing with those images?

Catherine Deneuve speaks of Newton's photographs in a film by Adrian Maben: "Helmet's photos always expose something but remain mysterious at the same time. . . . That's why women love them so much." In the film, Deneuve speaks of women's fascination with Newton's photographs; she explains that women are eager to be photographed by Newton, exposed by him, seen through the lens of his fascination with their beauty. And Deneuve is not alone in this contention; women are the primary consumers of Newton's books. This fascination coincides with his fashion work, which is meant to address the rich women who are the main consumers of the products he represents in his photographs. And yet, his photos—depictions of strong, naked, predominantly white, big-breasted women in compromising situations—are subject to many feminist claims that they objectify women, treat them as beautiful, unexplainable things rather than as living, breathing, emoting beings. This claim, in which I cannot help but see merit myself, is supported by the facial expressions of the women in Newton's photos; there is little to no connection between the "emotion" of the woman in the photograph and the situation she seems to be in. For the most part, she remains indifferent, cold, distant, but at the same time, she invites the onlooker to keep watching, dares to arouse the imagined voyeur—as if to say: "Come look as close as you desire. There's no danger. I wouldn't let you touch me."

Surely this is not accidental, fortuitous, or unplanned. If one thing can be said with certainty about Newton among the various dichotomies that make up the body of his work and personality, it is that he is a perfectionist and a

planner, priding himself most on the precision of his execution. Almost everything about his photographic images is carefully planned before the first click of a shutter. Though the ideas or fantasies that prompt working on a particular shot may remain a mystery, once the shoot is set in motion, Newton tackles his work without a tinge of coyness; he directs his models from the quality of their gaze to the exact angle of their elbows. In Maben's film, another of his beautiful starlets, Sigourney Weaver, talks about working with Newton. She explains that once he finds the exact pose that he wants, he asks no further improvisation of his model, taking well over fifty shots of the same exact position (*Frames*). As I watch this professional voyeur create his own personal keyhole through which he (and we) may peep, it is evident that the man knows something that I don't—"he knows exactly what he wants" (*Frames*).

The knowledge that Newton knows what he wants is somehow reassuring to a girl who hopes his erotica is not just a realization of the fantasy of an old perv. While I may take a deep breath, resting assured that the man knows what he's doing, he does not make it easy to define exactly what that is. For through the string of motifs and interminable anomalies that make up his work, I find two things to be true. The first is his own contention that his "girls are always victorious," (as if these "girls" are the ones in charge) (*Frames*). The second is that he is a man photographing his own idea of what the perfect woman should or could or would be.

Perfection, perfect women, and perfect sex (as if such a thing exists) may be Newton's medium, his outer preoccupation, his aesthetic obsession, but they are not the subject of his work. "There are two dirty words in photography," expounds Newton in a press conference. He looks to the side as if to check to see if someone in the audience already knows the butt of his joke (and I don't think he is going to say pussy). "One is art and the other is good taste" (*Frames*). He calls himself "a gun for hire," but the artist in him is always evident in the photographs. Many of his photographs are commissioned works for *Vogue*, *Playboy*, and other commercial publications. He is noted for an androgynous, sexually-charged photograph of two women in a dimly lit Parisian street corner for Yves Saint Laurent, and photographs of a semi-nude Charlotte Rampling lavished in furs, pearls, or diamonds, never without heels. These images express the age of hedonism and sexual perversity in which they were created, the 80's, that is already making its return to grace the pages of *Vogue* and to influence my generation's style—as my mother whips out the furs that she neatly stowed away during politically correct 90's. No doubt Newton's images are responsible for celebrating these hedonistic ideals and selling furs and pearls to rich women around the world.

Though seeming to idealize the world of the upper class through his promotion of an aesthetic of luxury, Newton does not turn a blind eye to the harsh realities of a society in which one can and does buy one's desire without regard for the weak, the poor, who suffer under this system. Newton's depictions of the envy-admiration relationship between the woman of the house and her servant girl or the erotic fantasies of upper class orgy parties represent a glamorously "unethical" society. However, even in his depiction of these scenarios, even in his glorification and frivolous celebration of class struggle, Newton does not impose an outer morality on what goes on behind the closed doors of the rich. He is of the same material world that he depicts (women, hotel rooms, money), and he "find[s] more mystery in the things [he] knows well than in some kind of exotic unknown place" (*Frames*). He does not pretend that the poor don't exist and that they don't suffer at the hands of the rich, but he is not responsible for righting this injustice. Newton, his subjects, and the consumers he targets live well in (and help perpetuate through art and consumerism) the world they've helped create.

Newton is certainly not the first to realize that sex sells and to use this knowledge to his advantage, but somehow I cannot believe that his photographs are only commercial, only for profit—that they sell sex at the expense of artistic integrity. But if his visions of strong naked women in heels are only a ploy to sell a pearl necklace to some bored middle-aged woman in Monaco, I wonder how my sense of him is reliable. I have this image in my mind of that photograph of myself, naked, in heels, an open umbrella over my head, and when I connect it with the feelings of embarrassment (almost shame) that I once felt about it, I wonder whether a naked girl in heels might be an expression of something other than sexual perversity or aesthetically veiled obscenity. Is such a woman always selling something to her viewer, to her buyer, to herself? Or is there something natural in this image, an inherent misunderstood, underdeveloped icon, a stereotype, or perhaps, may I go so far as to say, an archetype of womanhood?

I am not sure if Newton was fully conscious of the archetype he was revealing in his photographs, but his images surely surpass the confines of a "gun for hire" mentality. Though I find myself questioning his viability as an "artist" over a prevailing notion that his work is merely the documentation of an old man's kinky fantasies made legitimate through aesthetic prowess, I can't help notice that despite my own feminist notions and anti-consumerist ideals about art, my mind cannot override the visceral sensation that there is something more important going on inside that mind of Newton's and in the photographs themselves.

Did Newton really believe that *Playboy* would publish his shot of a naked, siliconed sex doll reclining open-legged on a couch, her “pussy” fully exposed? What commercial mould could that photograph possibly fit into? It is too creepy for the average white male to masturbate to, too explicit for a fashion publication. What is he doing when he gives us such an image? When he says that “art” and “good taste” are dirty words, he (whether he is fully aware of this or not) does not imply that neither of these concepts applies to his work; rather, he wishes to confound our sense of what is “good” taste or high “art.” Or to put this more bluntly, Newton can make perversion an integral part of his work without fostering it. His doing so blurs the distinction between what is art and what is not, making it difficult for us to tell the difference.

I can't help thinking of an incredibly witty and insightful dirty young man from a few generations before Newton. Though I don't dare assert that Newton rises to Oscar Wilde's level of genius, we can imagine that the two might have been great friends had they lived in the same era. In his essay “Obscenity: A Celebration,” Wayne Kaustenbaum celebrates Wilde's so-called perversity, his belief in the importance of “the individual's desire” at the cost of social order. Wilde's beliefs and his public expression of those beliefs cost him his freedom. (He was sentenced to two years in prison for engaging in homosexual sex) (90). “Art is most important,” asserts Kaustenbaum in Wilde's name, “when it approaches the obscene; when it defies community standards of good taste; when it stops our ordinary patterns of knowing, and replaces them with disturbing queries that may, in time, turn into delirious habit” (92). Could this be what Newton is trying to do in his own way? Perhaps the trouble of interpreting Newton in this light is that his formalism—the highly directed shoot, the meticulous detailing of set, the choice of “perfectly” sculpted women—obscures the deeper question about good taste.

While Wilde promoted something akin to anarchy, Newton gets off on control and seems quite comfortable lounging on the cushion of bourgeois life afforded to him by profit. Was Newton making concessions to his “art” in order to appeal to a wider audience, refusing to take responsibility for the social effects of his images? Or is it quite legitimate for an artist to “question the standards of good taste” without risking the comforts of his own lifestyle? Perhaps all of this boils down to an underlying question about exploitation. Is Newton freeing or exploiting his “girls”? Are they in fact as “victorious” as he wants to see them, or are they losing all the time, frame by frame, article of clothing by article of clothing, until they are stripped of everything but a pair of heels, that parody of a woman's strength in post-feminist society?

I think back to my friends and our naked bodies at age thirteen; back to what drew us to Newton in the first place; back to our initial attraction to this man and the beautiful women in his photographs. Through the clutter of beautiful bodies and pearls and furs and large breasts and perfect, distant cold faces and melancholy lighting and dark hotel rooms and obscene images and high high heels, were we taken in by the male-dominated ideal of what a woman should be, craving a fantastical experience of our own that we then knew little about? Or, in our innocent and impressionable state, were we able to sense something true and real and beautiful that my cynicism today does not allow me to so easily express in words? Did these images empower or exploit us?

I wish I were able to tell more precisely the difference between empowerment and exploitation, to give my reader (and myself) a clear-cut answer. But I feel that most likely, his images both empower and exploit. Perhaps we couldn't know at age thirteen that these images in sexually charged glory and sensual, fantastical perversion hold within them a certain truth about the pain inherent in womanhood. The heels are a weapon, perhaps against others, but also against ourselves. The distant cold faces hold within them the trace of pain, of lost love, of a harsh realism. And their form—the perfection, the pearls, the all too aesthetically pleasing quality of these photographs—evokes the illusion of beauty within this inevitable pain. Perhaps it is this dichotomy between a beautiful form and the painful content in Newton's work that makes his images so compelling to us; this dichotomy embodies the inconsistency and complexity and contradiction associated with being a sexually charged woman. Although the photographs may well confound the male-driven ideals of beauty prevalent in our society, Newton compels us to question whether we actually do tend to fall in love with our desire to be victim and victorious all at the same time, to fall in love with the image of woman, to fall in love with an image of ourselves—to love and to lose and to linger in the world of our own pussies—in ways imagined by men, realized by women, glorified by Newton.

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