

“VISUAL PLEASURE” AND LENA DUNHAM’S FEMALE CHARACTERS

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Figure 1: Lena Dunham, *Tiny Furniture*, 2010. Film still. Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2012.

In the beginning of Lena Dunham’s *Tiny Furniture* (2010), Aura (Lena Dunham), a recent college graduate, is called down to her mother’s studio after returning to her childhood home. A camera clicks, we see the back of a woman as she takes a photograph, and Nadine (Grace Dunham)—Aura’s sister, who we soon find out is being photographed by their mother—says, “Look, my feet really, really hurt. You know I’m not good on high heels.” Aura and Nadine’s mother, Siri (Laurie Simmons, Dunham’s real-life mother), responds, “We’ll be done in one minute. Just one more roll.” The film then cuts to a long shot that reveals Nadine as the subject of Siri’s photograph (Figure 1). Nadine creates a destabilizing contrast between the version of femininity constructed for Siri’s camera and the broader reality constructed for the film: Nadine wears her hair in a messy bun, little visible makeup, a loose flannel shirt tied up over a gold-sequined skirt, tights, and heels; her bottom half is depicted alongside miniature furniture for the photograph. When Aura asks, “How come you never use me in any pictures?” Siri replies, “You’re never here!” and Nadine adds, “Plus

my legs are longer and more supple.” The camera cuts across the axis line to a reverse shot that reveals the front of Siri’s camera. In facing and mirroring the gaze of her camera, the shot indicates that only the bottom half of Nadine—the skirt, tights, and heels—is included in Siri’s photograph (Figure 2).¹ From the outset, representing and troubling the camera’s gaze and illustrating what Siri’s photograph does and does not capture, *Tiny Furniture* engages the gaze theory outlined in Laura Mulvey’s 1975 paper “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In particular, this scene’s focus on Siri highlights the power of the artist, or gazer, to shape our understanding of the subjects she captures. Similarly, Dunham—the filmmaker—invites scrutiny of her own autobiographical details to inform readings of the perspective from which *her* film was captured.²



Figure 2: Lena Dunham, *Tiny Furniture*, 2010. Film still. Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2012.

This scene’s attempt to destabilize the male gaze (by which I mean Mulvey’s concept of a cinematic dynamic in which the onscreen female’s role is based in providing visual pleasure to both male characters in the film and the projected male viewing subject) reflects a larger driving goal of *Tiny Furniture*. Throughout the film, Dunham demonstrates the force of the male gaze on her primary female characters as they struggle against it, with Aura, Siri, and Nadine all oscillating between the subject and object positions. While, as in this scene, the women often style themselves to embody traditional norms of femininity that constitute what Mulvey

calls “*to-be-looked-at-ness*,”³ Dunham emphasizes their artistic work, as well, throughout the film. In so doing, Dunham models the deployment of composition and language—Siri’s art-making and Nadine’s verbal complaints in this scene, for example—as strategies to trouble the rigid hegemony of the male gaze. As I will argue, *Tiny Furniture* underscores its female characters’ repetitious toggling between subjects who observe and objects who are observed, making slippery the fraught distinction between male agency and female passivity. By highlighting these persistent bidirectional shifts, the film strives to make its viewers suspicious of the dynamic that presents characters—particularly female characters—as exclusively object or subject. The film’s relentless concern with showing Aura, Siri, and Nadine as they produce and comment on their own artwork—as well as the specific nature of this artwork, which expresses the repercussions of being gazed at—poses challenges to the cinematic tradition of representing women in the object position and accompanying concealment of their unique perspectives, while simultaneously illustrating the influence their visual appeal (or lack thereof) has on these perspectives. Ultimately Dunham’s work elicits an ambivalence that manifests contemporary anxieties about complicating the female object role in visual media.

Since the 2012 debut of her hit TV show *Girls*, Dunham’s work has received an extraordinary amount of attention from both popular media and academic sources. *Rolling Stone* cites *Girls* as “the most zeitgeisty show about young people since, like, ever,”⁴ and Faye Woods, in *Critical Studies on Television*, argues that “the industrial hype and dense swirl of cultural commentary surrounding *Girls*” treats the show “like a generational document.”⁵ In their “Commentary and Criticism” section, *Feminist Media Studies* notes that because the journal had an unprecedented number of submissions for their call on *Girls* they cut their introduction to allow space for more articles on the subject.⁶ Much of this discussion confronts the show’s depiction of privilege and its feminist politics. I will use this critical conversation as a point of departure because it explicitly reveals the politics *Tiny Furniture* sets out to engage.

Dunham’s self-constitution, expressed through her body, allows her to critique the character she plays in *Tiny Furniture*; she turns her body into a target to elicit criticism, just as she places her character in the specific context in which Dunham was raised—female-centric, privileged (both culturally and financially), artistic—to highlight how these forces shape

the subjectivity from which the film emerges, inviting the viewer to question artistic subjectivity more generally. Dunham's authorial self-constitution—a self-fashioning that works through an imperfect mirroring of the fictional text's author—invites her autobiography, and the signifiers of privilege that accompany it, to inform analyses of her work.

Many critiques focus on *Girls'* lack of diversity and depiction of privilege. Roxane Gay's review asserts that the "stark whiteness of the cast, their upper middle class milieu, and the New York where they live, forces us to interrogate our own lives and the diversity, or lack thereof, in our social, artistic, and professional circles."⁷ Since the criticism surrounding *Girls'* lack of racial diversity, Dunham has written more characters of color into the show,⁸ a decision that deserves its own article. Dunham's character and the environment she inhabits become sites upon which contemporary cultural anxieties are prompted, examined, and ultimately processed. In the role of Aura, Dunham plays a character whose background provides financial protection: she lives off of Siri's money. Dunham calls forth and highlights the privileged position of the film's protagonist and the fact that Dunham herself plays the part of Aura invites the viewer to critique the position from which *Tiny Furniture* was made. When Aura interviews for a hostess job, for example, she forgets to inquire about the pay, and Charlotte, Aura's friend who informs her of the job, tells her, "I wouldn't get too excited about that paycheck," mentioning that "after a while, I just stopped picking mine up." Aura then quits the job after receiving her first check.⁹ *Tiny Furniture* is peppered with moments like this, which I suggest operate to amplify institutional positions and, in the process, challenge them.

Another cultural anxiety that Dunham's self-constitution brings to the fore and reexamines is that of onscreen female bodies. Her work is particularly useful today because it demonstrates the continued relevance of Mulvey's article, which celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2015. *Girls'* feminist politics are often marshaled to critique the normative female body types that Dunham so often refuses to reproduce. As Emily Nussbaum observes,

there was another thing to notice about *Girls'*: Lena Dunham's body, which she had placed, quite deliberately, in the spotlight.... Dunham films herself nude, with her skin breaking out, her belly in folds, chin doubled, or flat on her back with her feet in a gynecologist's stirrups. These scenes shouldn't shock, but they do, if only because in a culture

soaked in Photoshop and Botox, few powerful women open themselves up so aggressively to the judgment of voyeurs.¹⁰

Moreover, Dunham corroborated the connection between her work and Mulvey's theory in a 2016 social media post. She captioned a photograph of herself in a shirt covered in drawings of her *Girls* character in various states of undress: "That moment when you're trying to process the boundaries of art, rape culture & the male gaze then suddenly realize you're wearing a t-shirt with your naked self on it."¹¹ Though online articles often make reference to the male gaze in discussions of *Girls*,¹² a comprehensive academic reading of Dunham's early work through "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" does not exist. This analysis remedies that oversight.

In her article, Mulvey famously declares her intention to "analyz[e] pleasure, or beauty," in order to "destroy[] it" and thereby "make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film."¹³ She uses psychoanalysis as a "political weapon"¹⁴ to expose film's scopophilic appeal to the heterosexual male subject.¹⁵ The subject is endowed with agency in looking based on the separation between subject and object—in Mulvey's words, "the active/male and the passive/female"—which results in "the determining male gaze project[ing] its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly."¹⁶ "Man" thus "live[s] out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman," who is an object in her position as a "bearer of meaning," as opposed to a subject who acts to "make[] meaning."¹⁷ Mulvey's analysis is of "obvious interest" to feminists because "it gets us nearer to the roots of our oppression, it brings an articulation of the problem closer, it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language...while still caught within the language of the patriarchy."¹⁸ "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" situates the male gaze as a fundamental component of cinematic logic.

Mulvey's contemporary scholarship examines the import of the female filmmaker, offering the directorial position Dunham occupies as a potential solution to the concern of "Visual Pleasure." In 2015, Mulvey asserted that the female filmmaker "challenges male cultural domination by making films in a cinema dominated by male directors both globally and historically."¹⁹ During that year, seventeen percent of television directors were

women and three percent were minority women.²⁰ There is another story to be told about Dunham's capacity to represent herself in the male-dominated film industry, as she obtained a directorial position in large part because her parents could fund *Tiny Furniture*, another testament to the narrow range of perspectives for which this industry allows.²¹ Nevertheless, in representing her subjectivity, a female director combats the normative gaze logic outlined in Mulvey's essay.

In *Gendered Frames, Embodied Cameras*, Cybelle McFadden asserts that the "lack of parity" in directorial positions "means that women are all too often absent from the production of meaning about their own bodies."²² "If women have been historically and theoretically denied the status of subjects," she inquires, "what occurs when women start creating and constituting themselves as subjects through their work? Why do they want to show this process in their work?"²³ *Tiny Furniture* shows the process of constructing a female subject at its beginning. Before the film shows Nadine, it depicts Siri in the act of photographing, and we see its effect on her daughter (when Nadine says, "it hurts"); next, while the film depicts Nadine's body in its entirety—an indication of the subject position—we see the process of taking the photograph (Nadine's outfit) and the normative response it elicits (when Nadine responds, "my legs are longer and more supple").²⁴ These characters become Mulvey's "maker[s] of meaning"²⁵ as they discuss their bodies.

The beginning of *Tiny Furniture* demonstrates McFadden's "production of meaning"²⁶ in exaggerating through both shot composition and dialogue the shift from subject to object. Nadine is initially framed as a subject who looks out onto the scene herself, and who possesses subjective desire, and then she is portrayed as an object of Siri's camera's gaze. Dunham depicts Nadine as a "maker of meaning"²⁷ before she is portrayed physically—we just hear her voice as she complains about posing for the photograph; while she speaks, we see a close-up of Siri as she photographs Nadine—and she remains a subject during the first glimpse of her body, in a long shot of her full figure as she continues speaking. But she becomes a "bearer of meaning"²⁸ in the next shot, which shows only her styled legs and feet and represents her as an object of Siri's camera's gaze. This early scene sets up a pattern: the female object position is portrayed in shots that fragment the body, and the object is silenced during these shots, coinciding with what Mulvey calls the "silent image,"²⁹ but as the female object

speaks, she shifts to the subject position, and Dunham visually indicates this change by representing the woman's entire figure. Such scenes challenge the female object position in depicting the subjectivity behind these fragmented bodies.



Figure 3: Lena Dunham, *Tiny Furniture*, 2010. Film still. Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2012.

Tiny Furniture also uses extreme close-ups of female body parts to situate women in the object position during subject-object shifts. One of these extreme close-ups shows Siri's bottom half. She is seen wearing heels, tights, and foundation undergarments used to slim the figure. Nothing covers the undergarments (Figure 3). Like the extreme close-up of Nadine's legs in tights and her feet in heels, this shot places Siri in the object position: she is styled to fit feminine conventions, by which I mean conventions that style women, on screen and off, to have erotic allure for the heterosexual male viewer. In this scene, however, Siri moves from the object to subject position, instead of the reverse. Siri's body is fragmented—she is depicted as an object—as she unwittingly walks into a room where Aura has told Jed, a man she invites into the apartment, he can sleep. As a cheerful “What’s up?” from Jed escapes from the room, Siri slams the door, and we watch her legs as she storms out in silence. She retreats from the camera, and once she reaches Aura’s room, her entire body becomes visible. After the film cuts to a shot from Aura’s perspective that looks up at Siri’s face, Siri’s subjectivity emerges: “You get him out of our house,” she says. “I want him out of my home.”³⁰

Siri's anger at the situation—she originally had told Aura that she would not allow Jed to stay in the apartment—is exacerbated by the fact that Jed has now seen her in the undergarments that both reveal her body and her process of styling herself. Siri here prepares herself in a manner that Mulvey's essay tells us is the classic exhibitionistic role of women, in which they “are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.”³¹ Though Siri intellectually critiques the expectation of “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” to the point of campy mockery in the exaggerated Nadine photograph, its quotidian influence is clear; she grooms herself to fit its conventions, bundling the subject and object positions together (she grooms herself, an action that declares agency, at the same time that she turns herself into an object of the gaze). In showing the stylization necessary to achieve “*to-be-looked-at-ness*”—and the humiliation that accompanies failing to meet the expectation—Dunham troubles its cohesiveness.

This scene emphasizes the film's concern with feminine stylization and exposes the quotidian influence of these norms on *Tiny Furniture's* female characters. Dunham shows Aura and Nadine spending time in different scenes in front of mirrors—Aura does her hair and Nadine plucks her eyebrows—and another scene depicts Aura struggling to fit herself into foundation undergarments.³² “Visual Pleasure” elaborates on this process in the analysis of the gendered subject-object distinction in Hitchcock's films (*Rear Window*, *Vertigo*), but in *Tiny Furniture*, Aura, Siri, and Nadine occupy both the subject and object positions. In Mulvey's words, the female object's “exhibitionism has already been established by her obsessive interest in dress and style, in being a passive image of visual perfection,” and the male subject's “voyeurism and activity have...been established through his work as a photo-journalist, a maker of stories and captor of images.”³³ Aura, Siri, and Nadine are exhibitionists *and* artists, and *Tiny Furniture's* focus on these dual roles challenges the rigid distinction between male subject and female object.

The interaction between shots in this scene works in the same fashion as the scene I discussed in the beginning of the film: a close-up of the woman's legs in heels that exaggerates her object position before moving to a long shot in which the character expresses her discomfort to another female character. Siri is styled in the extreme close-up to such an extent

that she uncannily resembles one of the dolls in Laurie Simmons's "Walking & Lying Objects" photographs.³⁴ Dunham here treats Siri like Siri treats one of the dolls she photographs, as an artistic object. In doing so, Dunham upsets the conventional erotic display of cinema. "Traditionally," Mulvey points out, "the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen."³⁵ Aura, Siri, and Nadine act within and against these functions. Though they serve at times "as erotic object[s] for the characters within the screen story"³⁶ they also serve as artistic objects for each other in Dunham's narrative. During the film, Siri poses Nadine, Nadine recites a first-person poem, and Aura films herself, all acts of expression that confer the agency of an artist.³⁷ Through their art, these characters comment on each other, adding layer upon layer of subjectivity.³⁸

Dunham further emphasizes female subject-object oscillation by using all three women as artistic objects in her film. Aura, whose return home sparks the chain of events that constitutes the film, "controls the film phantasy,"³⁹ and this control is reflected in Dunham's directorial position. In contrast, when Siri's body is fragmented, she serves "as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" and then disappears offscreen as she enters the room where Jed sleeps, signifying her function "as erotic object for the characters within the screen story."⁴⁰ Dunham's depiction of this shift, as Siri moves from the center of the screen to offscreen, exhibits, and expands, Mulvey's "shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen."⁴¹ Through her shot composition, Dunham shows the dynamic nature of Siri's subject-object status—and how she can embody multiple positions simultaneously—based on the perspective from which we view her. Siri's dialogue also presents a contrast that acts in the same way as the shot composition in this scene. The shift from the collective "our" pronoun to the individual "my" pronoun in her statement rhetorically highlights her specific subjectivity to the viewer: "You get him out of our house. I want him out of my home." Through these distinctions, the film establishes Siri as an artistic object for the filmmaker (Dunham), an erotic object for the male characters (Jed), an erotic object for the spectator, and an agential subject who expresses her disapproval.

Mulvey asserts that images that fragment women's bodies like this one have a reductive purpose. "Conventional close-ups of legs," she contends,

“integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism. One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen.”⁴² Dunham appears to follow suit when she conveys such “flatness”⁴³ in the shot of Siri’s legs, which is in alignment with the wordless object position. Once Siri reaches Aura’s room, however, her whole body is displayed, and after a series of shot/reverse shots between the two women, the film switches to another shot of Siri’s full figure. Siri is initially portrayed as a wordless cutout, but when the full shot of her body turns her into a subject after crossing the threshold into Aura’s room, she suddenly has words and agency. Moreover, like Nadine during her switch from subject to object, Siri seems highly uncomfortable in this scene.⁴⁴ Both characters convey in language the anxiety that accompanies objectification to other women, and through this relentless commentary, Dunham illustrates the detriment that object status brings.

Displays of artwork throughout the film further emphasize the intellectual subjectivity of Aura, Siri, and Nadine. Aura is a filmmaker, Siri is a photographer, and Nadine is a poet, and their artwork is so deeply a part of each scene that, like a consistent sound that one tunes out over time, it becomes discreet as the film goes on, an apt commentary on the women’s subject status: even in moments when it is not pronounced, they are always gazing. Siri decorates the interior of her home with her own photographs, Nadine recites a poem she wrote, and there are several scenes in which Aura reads Siri’s diary aloud.⁴⁵ In this persistent display of their creative output, Dunham frames Aura, Siri, and Nadine as what Mulvey calls “maker[s] of stories and captor[s] of images.”⁴⁶

Though filmmaking and photography are premised on the act of gazing—the camera structures the artist behind the viewfinder as a gazer—poetry writing is not. It comes as no surprise, then, that the sole poem Nadine reads in the film recreates, almost ekphrastically, the acts of watching and being watched. The poem is as follows: “I know that you like to look at me, since sometimes, in the middle of the night, I see you watching me. Well, I don’t see you, but I see your shadow, moving back and forth in the square of yellow light that is your window. Not like you’re going somewhere, but like you’re moving to move.”⁴⁷ The narrator is androgynous—their gender is unclear—as is the person to whom the poem is addressed. In a similar fashion, the subject-object positions of the narrator

and addressee are ambiguous, as they both see and are seen. Nadine depicts the narrator functioning as both a subject—"I see you watching me"; "I see your shadow"—and an object: "sometimes I see you *watching me*." The poem's narrator is articulated through this gaze—"I know that you like to look at me, since sometimes...I see you watching me"⁴⁸—but unlike Siri, the narrator is not styling herself or himself. Nadine's poem structures the first-person narrator as both the gazer and the gazed, a depiction of looking that causes the viewer to be suspicious of pure voyeurism, or clear subject-object distinctions. The poem renders voyeurism shadowed by exhibitionism to reveal an object always already influenced by an awareness of being looked upon.

Echoing its emphasis on the ability of subject-object shifts to shape experience, the poem's refusal to settle upon the speaker's gender resembles the light-dark distinction Mulvey establishes in her paper, in which the object of the gaze occupies the light and the subject sits in the dark. As she claims, "the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium... and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation."⁴⁹ The narrator of the poem is not a perfect voyeur, because while the poem takes place "in the middle of the night," it is not clear whether the narrator's lights are on or off. Even so, the light in question situates the addressee as an onscreen object. The narrator depicts the object of his or her gaze as a "shadow" that "mov[es] back and forth in the square of yellow light" that is the addressee's "window."⁵⁰ These aesthetic elements coincide with the "brilliance of the shifting patterns of *light* and *shade* on the screen" that "help[] to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation."⁵¹ Nadine's depiction provides a literal representation of the voyeuristic fantasy Mulvey describes: "conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world."⁵² Nadine's poem structures the interaction between the narrator and the addressee as if it is this scene but ultimately troubles the light-dark/object-subject distinction. The window of the addressee, the "square of yellow light,"⁵³ can be read as the movie screen, a window into a private world. However, the narrator is aware of being watched. Nadine's poem troubles the distinction between object and subject; the addressee watches the narrator as he or she watches a movie.

Dunham turns the camera on herself to further destabilize the object-subject distinction. In returning to the female body, she thwarts the

expectations we have internalized and come to expect from the male gaze: she shows herself reading and being read—turning from subject to object—as opposed to functioning only as an object of male appraisal. Furthermore, in representing this shift, Dunham reimagines the cinematic tradition of depicting women in the object position. Interpreting her directorial choices through Martha Nussbaum’s “Objectification” illuminates the mechanism by which Dunham, in representing her body, converts the female object position into a force that decomposes itself. Nussbaum’s article not only explores the historical underpinnings of objectification and its repercussions for women, but also provides examples of situations in which pure objectification can be troubled. Though she illustrates objectification’s historically negative connotations, she also asserts that “objectification has features that may be either good or bad, depending upon the overall context.”⁵⁴ Nussbaum thus opens up a theoretical pathway through which Dunham’s self-objectification—which bundles the object and subject positions—turns the process’s original framework on its head.

Nussbaum outlines “notions” that are “involved in the idea of treating (a human) *as an object*,” and these notions both expose context’s importance in the process of objectification and determine how objectification can be undermined for feminist means. Though there are seven notions,⁵⁵ Dunham most explicitly interacts with four of them: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, and ownership. The defining features of each are as follows: instrumentality is defined by “the objectifier treat[ing] the object as a tool of his or her purposes”; denial of autonomy is defined by “the objectifier treat[ing] the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination”; inertness is when “the objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity”; and ownership is when “the objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.”⁵⁶ An analysis of Dunham’s engagement with these notions illuminates how she constructs an onscreen persona that both opposes the male gaze and exposes its relevance today.

In order to illustrate the development of Dunham’s persona, I turn to earlier work that positions her body as a central site for contesting scopophilic objectification. Dunham’s 2007 short film *Hooker on Campus* depicts her wandering around the Oberlin College campus dressed in tights, a black lacy top, a short skirt, and red lipstick. Her character accosts students as they navigate campus, a role that, in its offer of sex and invasion of pe-

destrian space, mimics both a prostitute and a catcaller. The dynamic that results between her character and the unwitting students exposes anxieties about troubling the pure object position. At the film's beginning, she calls out to a heterosexual couple holding hands: "Hey, are you guys interested in a good time?" The woman says, "What do you mean by that?" to which Dunham responds, "You know, whatever you want to do, I'll do." The man replies, "Really," and the woman says, "No," before looking up at him and exclaiming, "Jack!" He continues, "How much? Two—" but the woman cuts him off, saying, "Come on, let's go." This barrage of unbidden exchanges from Dunham continues as innocent pedestrians become targets of the film's critique. For instance, Dunham calls out, "And if you hear of any people who want a roommate, the dorms seem really nice, and you know, I'll pay a little bit." When a new man approaches Dunham's character and asks if she wants to get dinner, she says, "You seem like you just... want to talk... I mean, maybe I could find you later? I have to make a little money today." Dunham's character manifests her institutional position—her reliance on these students and her outsider status—as she asks people for tastes of their food, whether she can be let into a dorm, and whether she can be swiped into the cafeteria. It is unclear whether or not any of these reactions were scripted.⁵⁷

In an interview conducted in 2012, Dunham revealed the impetus behind *Hooker on Campus*: "When I look at the shorts I made now," she said, "they feel so overtly political." She explained that when *Hooker on Campus* was made, "there was no sense of... I want to explain to college-aged men the way they make women feel commodified." She continued, "I can sort of project all of that on it now, but at the time, I was like, 'I have this weird top, I have this weird skirt, they make me feel like a prostitute. I want to see these reactions, and once I see them, I also want to film them for posterity.'" ⁵⁸ Just as in *Tiny Furniture's* sole sex scene, which I will examine later, Dunham styles herself as an imperfect object of the male gaze, wearing messy, gaudy makeup and clothes that don't fit her properly; her hair is tangled, and she is chatty, in contrast to Mulvey's "silent image."⁵⁹ But here, she pushes imperfect object status further in portraying a failed sex worker. Dunham turns her body into a mirror that reflects the students back onto themselves; her behavior is unaltered by the array of reactions.

While this article doesn't have the capacity to examine the film's thorny depiction of sex work, which is only complicated further by its presence on

an elite liberal-arts campus, *Hooker on Campus* manifests the process by which Dunham uses her body as a tool. She invokes this strategy—albeit, more subtly—in her later work, as well. In styling herself as a sex object, Dunham embodies several notions of Nussbaum’s, but in treating herself as an object, an assertion of subjectivity, she puts pressure on its traditional understanding. Through instrumentalizing her body, Dunham confronts the failure of her feminine form to meet the demands of a perfect object of visual pleasure, leveraging what Dunham cites as political critique of quotidian commodification based on gender. She also denies her character autonomy in making salient her reliance on Oberlin students for food, housing and money through sex. In embodying a prostitute and treating herself as someone whose body can be bought and sold, Dunham asserts her character’s lack of agency, while also invoking Nussbaum’s notion of ownership.⁶⁰ The ambivalent commentary Dunham elicits through her exaggerated embodiment of the female object position helps to further challenge the male gaze in Dunham’s choice to capture these reactions on film. Dunham’s character forces the subjects of her performance art to view their own anxieties through their reactions, which invites the spectator to consider how they themselves would act as an unwitting pedestrian, and how their reaction might reflect anxieties about imperfect objects. It is as if *Hooker on Campus* is watching to see how the spectator of the film might react; the film imbeds within itself a critique of its own viewership. Through her enactment of an imperfect object of visual pleasure, Dunham turns her film into a viewing subject.⁶¹

In *Tiny Furniture*’s portrayal of Aura as a filmmaker—and in showing her directing and commenting on short films like *Hooker on Campus*—Dunham also displays reactions to Aura’s imperfect object status, and these reactions illustrate anxieties of disturbing the tradition of pure object and subjecthood. Two scenes incorporate another of Dunham’s short films, *The Fountain*, which she made when she was an undergraduate,⁶² and in the process engage with the concept of “silent image of woman”⁶³ while underscoring Aura’s subjectivity, a move that puts pressure on the distinction between the gazer and gazed. In one scene, Aura and Charlotte view the film together and discuss the online commentary on Aura’s body, and in a second, they watch and discuss it in a public setting. Such emphasis on their viewing experience establishes a female gaze that differs, in experience and effect, from that of the male viewing subject.

The Fountain appears for the first time fifteen minutes into *Tiny Furniture*, when we see a close-up of a film with little context. Though it is possible to interpret the image as a computer screen from the file name "Annotations Editor" that appears in the upper frame, the shot is too tight to determine its source definitively. The close-up shows Aura standing next to a fountain, stripping down to a two-piece bathing suit, and climbing into the fountain. Next, a series of shot/reverse shots depict Aura and Charlotte as they discuss the short film: Charlotte says, "This is so funny," and Aura responds, "You think so? I think it's so stupid. It's, just, like, me in a bikini in a campus fountain while my ex-boyfriend watches." Charlotte replies, "I fucking love it—look how many views it's got! It's got all these comments, as well." Once Charlotte begins reading the comments, the film cuts to a reaction shot of Aura as she listens to the dramatization: "Ahoy mateys, whales ahead," Charlotte reads, "what a blubber factory. Put on some pants, or a burlap sack...no, her stomach isn't huge. It's just that her boobs are really small—it's an optical illusion." Aura turns her head down and Charlotte says, "Oh you can't possibly take these seriously, Aura." "I do sometimes," Aura replies, adding, "I kind of want to take this offline, anyways."⁶⁴ Though it remains unclear whether the comments Charlotte reads in this scene are real-life reactions to *The Fountain*, Dunham's interview with the *The New Yorker* suggests they may have been taken from the short film's posting to YouTube in 2007: "There were just pages of YouTube comments about how fat I was," she explained, "or how not fat I was, or saying, 'That's not a fat girl—go to Detroit and see a *real fat girl*.'"⁶⁵

Although this scene of female subjectivity emphasizes Aura's and Charlotte's gazes as film spectators and reviewers of other spectators' commentary, this scene also suggests that the male gaze inevitably shapes their positions as viewing subjects. In reading these comments, Charlotte demonstrates that Aura's lack of erotic allure locates her as an imperfect female object, one who does not belong onscreen. Dunham exaggerates Aura's subjectivity to include the assault that troubles her female object position as well as her pained reaction to that assault; the scene combats the short film's "silent image of woman"⁶⁶ by portraying Aura as a speaking subject behind the screen. Her body is read through the male gaze, disturbing viewers' expectations and highlighting their reactions; we also see the injurious consequences of imperfect object status from Aura's perspective. Moreover, Aura's response to such comments provokes empathy:

we watch the film just as she does. The shot composition aligns our gaze with Aura's as she watches *The Fountain* and then cuts to depict her as she responds to the commentary, and this alignment followed by a reaction shot invites the viewer to empathize with Aura and acknowledge her subjectivity. In so doing, Dunham shows the insidious nature of the male gaze: the assault that accompanies its subversion, the humanity behind those who have been reduced to flat cutouts onscreen, and a female subject who exhibits the dynamic's influence on her experience. Through Aura's words, Dunham illustrates her subjectivity alongside her silent body, and the responses Charlotte reads demonstrate the anxieties inherent to troubling the distinction between male subject and female object.

This scene proves challenging to other tenants that Mulvey expounds upon in "Visual Pleasure," as well, namely the process of identification that is said to occur through a male protagonist. Through representing Aura as she views herself onscreen, the film situates her in the second "pleasurable structure[] of looking in the conventional cinematic situation" that "comes from identification with the image seen."⁶⁷ For Mulvey, the male spectator enjoys this pleasure, but Aura usurps that position, and, in contrast to the male spectator, Dunham does not portray identification as enjoyable for his female counterpart. For the female viewing subject, Dunham suggests, onscreen recognition can be a path to insult and injury.

Later in the film, *The Fountain* appears in a different context. Charlotte includes Aura's short film in a gallery, and as they approach the show, we cut to a close-up of *The Fountain*, but this time the short film appears on a television screen. Aura appears in her bathing suit brushing her teeth in the fountain. Aura and Charlotte converse about it in the background: Charlotte says, "Doesn't it look great?" "I don't know," Aura replies, "there's no sound." As we have seen often before, the film then cuts to a shot from behind the characters that shows them watching the movie.⁶⁸

In *Tiny Furniture*, the two scenes that make use of *The Fountain* similarly depict female characters watching the "silent image of woman"⁶⁹ to engender a female gaze. Aura's silence in the short film seems to place her in the object position, as does her nudity. Both scenes begin with a close-up of the video screen itself, allowing us to share Charlotte and Aura's gaze, before cutting to shots of the women watching, which troubles the notion of an objective gaze and highlights subjective experience. Their ongoing

commentary further establishes their subjectivity, which is provided in both scenes. Aura is never silent when she watches her body, and through her words, Dunham offers a counter-signification and counter-meaning to the visual grammar of her objectified onscreen image.

Dunham's body again problematizes the object position in *Tiny Furniture's* sole sex scene, which occurs near the end of the film. Aura and Keith have sex outside in a construction pipe: Keith calls Aura a "bitch," pushes down her head, and she gives him oral sex, after which she positions herself on all fours.⁷⁰ Dunham's direction favors Aura's subjectivity in this scene, allowing her to initiate the exchange and effectively utilizing language to activate her subjectivity. Aura tells Keith to "boss me around a little bit."⁷¹ While Aura styles herself to be an object of Keith's desire—she mentions that Charlotte dressed her and she is wearing much more make-up than usual—Dunham does not style her protagonist to be an object of the spectator's gaze: her tangled hair flies into her mouth; her lipstick is smeared; she is clothed. Her imperfect styling defies beauty standards and lacks the maximum visibility of the pornographic image,⁷² choices that make salient, instead of fulfilling, the viewer's expectations for a sex scene. Recalling the exaggerated style of Dunham's *Hooker on Campus* character, Dunham's ill-fitting clothes and prominent makeup during the film's sex scene—ostensibly the climax of erotic fixation for the male spectator—drive home Aura's status as an exaggerated but imperfect object for the viewer of this film. Coupled with the lack of visibility of both the male and female characters, these choices prevent the pure voyeuristic pleasure we have come to expect from cinematic sex scenes.

The composition of the shot of Keith and Aura having sex further disrupts visual pleasure. Instead of a one-way voyeuristic relationship between viewer and character, Aura stares at the camera, confronting the viewer's gaze, and Dunham's choice to frame Aura in a pipe conceals her body. But the camera peeks into its opening just as a photographer peeks through a viewfinder or a Peeping Tom peeks through a keyhole, a visual cue that calls the viewer out on their voyeurism. The implication becomes clearer after the next cut to an extreme long shot of the construction pipe, which eerily mimics a phallus, as it trembles from the sex happening inside of it in a closed-off lot. The shot appears from behind the fence, again assigning the viewer a voyeuristic perspective.⁷³ Here, the thrusting pipe that contains Aura recalls the male gaze she inhabits throughout the scene. Al-

though Aura is a subject, we read her through a phallic viewfinder, just as she looks out of one. The pipe also indicates the possibility for a feminine valence to phallic scopophilia: unlike a phallus, it has an inside. The visual rhetoric of this scene bolsters the film's suggestion that female subjectivity does not exist outside of the male gaze, or that if it were to try to emerge, it would still be circumscribed by it. As Mulvey argues in her essay, "a politically and aesthetically avant-garde cinema is now possible, but it can still only exist as a counterpoint."⁷⁴ Dunham's relationship to cinematic female representation and the alternative cinema's relationship to Hollywood remain analogous; both act as two sides of the same coin. Though Dunham's work provides a counterpoint, her characters indicate that like their bodies, and like Aura and Keith's pipe, the expectations for cinema established by the male gaze still influence—and in many ways capture—the experience of both the onscreen female character and the viewer who watches her.

After this (anti)climactic scene, an upset Aura retreats home. She showers first, cleaning off all of her makeup, and climbs into Siri's bed with wet hair and acne-ridden skin. Aura tells her mom that she met up with Keith, and her mother asks for the details. When Aura reveals that they had sex in "a pipe in the street," her mother asks if she got cold, then she asks if she used protection, and when Aura says that she did not, Siri replies, "I really, really want you to be careful." Aura scrunches her face as if she is about to cry and says, "I'm really tired, Mom. I just have to go to sleep." Siri then invites Aura to sleep with her.⁷⁵ This scene resembles Nadine's and Siri's subject-object reversals in showing Aura as she retreats to a female family member to express her injury after serving as a styled object. In the film's final scene, Dunham expresses the power of words to assuage injury and assert agency.

Tiny Furniture highlights subject-object shifts in its female characters to destabilize the female object position famously articulated in Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In pairing shots of Siri, Nadine, and Aura posed in what Mulvey calls the "silent image"⁷⁶ alongside their words and artwork, Dunham illustrates the assault and discomfort of female object status and simultaneously underscores female subjectivity. The repercussions of troubling Mulvey's male subject and female object distinction can be seen in the spectator responses to Dunham's persona that Charlotte and Aura discuss. In presenting her body in a similarly unflattering light as on *Girls*, Dunham elicits public reactions⁷⁷ that manifest con-

temporary prejudices about what kinds of female bodies should be shown onscreen, ultimately complicating the expectation of female characters to provide visual pleasure and forcing spectators to articulate, view, and reflect on these anxieties. In doing so, she envisions an outlet for processing and combating them as a culture. Granting language to *both* women onscreen and the spectators who watch them “make[s] way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film.”⁷⁸ Dunham’s work, in representing these words, “brings an articulation of the problem closer.”⁷⁹

NOTES

- 1 *Tiny Furniture*, directed by Lena Dunham (Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2012), DVD.
- 2 Laurie Simmons, the mother of Lena and Grace Dunham, is a photographer whose work has represented sexualized female body parts in domestic spaces, and the film was shot in the Dunham family’s apartment. Rebecca Mead, “Downtown’s Daughter,” *The New Yorker*, November 15, 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/15/downtowns-daughter>.
- 3 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 11.
- 4 Brian Hiatt, “Lena Dunham: Girl on Top,” *Rolling Stone*, February 28, 2013, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/lena-dunham-girl-on-top-20130228>.
- 5 Faye Woods, “Girls Talk: Authorship and Authenticity in the Reception of Lena Dunham’s *Girls*,” *Critical Studies in Television* 10, no. 2 (2015): 38.
- 6 *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): 355.
- 7 Roxane Gay, “Girls Girls Girls,” *The Rumpus*, May 3, 2012, <http://therumpus.net/2012/05/girls-girls-girls>.
- 8 “Lena Dunham Addresses Criticism Aimed At ‘Girls,’” *NPR*, May 7, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/05/07/152183865/lena-dunham-addresses-criticism-aimed-at-girls>.
- 9 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 10 Emily Nussbaum, “It’s Different for ‘Girls,’” *New York Magazine*, March 25, 2012, <http://nymag.com/arts/tv/features/girls-lena-dunham-2012-4>.
- 11 Lena Dunham, Instagram post, June 28, 2016, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BHLcVPfgUiD/?hl=en>.
- 12 See, for example, Nat Guest, “Lena Dunham and *Girls* Is a Triumph for Real Nudity,” *The Independent*, January 17, 2013, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/lena-dunham-and-girls-is-a-triumph-for-real-nudity-8454498.html>; Soraya Roberts, “Lena Dunham Is Not Putting Her Clothes on Anytime Soon, so Get Used It!,” *Dame Magazine*, January 13, 2014, <http://www.damemagazine.com/2014/01/13/lena-dunham-not-putting-her-clothes-anytime-soon-so-get-used-it>; and Clementine Ford, “Why Critics Can’t Come to Terms with Lena Dunham’s Nudity on ‘Girls,’” *Daily Life*, January 12, 2014, <http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/dl-opinion/why-critics-cant-come-to-terms-with-lena-dunhams-nudity-on-girls-20140112-300d7.html>.

- 13 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 8.
- 14 Ibid., 6.
- 15 Several works challenge Mulvey's heterosexual male gaze. See, for example, Mary Ann Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator," *Screen* 23, no. 3-4 (1982): 74-87; bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115-131; and Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
- 16 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 11.
- 17 Ibid., 7
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Laura Mulvey and Anna Backman Rogers, eds., *Feminisms: Diversity, Difference and Multiplicity in Contemporary Film Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).
- 20 Nell Scovell, "How to Get More Women Into the Director's Chair," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/17/opinion/sunday/how-to-get-more-women-into-the-directors-chair.html?_r=0.
- 21 Hiatt, "Lena Dunham."
- 22 Cybelle H. McFadden, *Gendered Frames, Embodied Cameras: Varda, Akerman, Cabrera, Calle, and Maïwenn* (Lanham, Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014), 4.
- 23 Ibid., 6.
- 24 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 25 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 7.
- 26 McFadden, *Gendered Frames*, 4.
- 27 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 7.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 31 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 11.
- 32 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 33 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 16.
- 34 Laurie Simmons, "Walking & Lying Objects (1987-1991)," *Laurie Simmons*, <http://www.lauriesimmons.net/photographs/walking-and-lying-objects>.
- 35 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 11-12.
- 36 Ibid., 11.
- 37 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 38 According to Mary Ann Doane, glasses worn by a woman indicate active gazing. The glasses Siri and Nadine wear underscore their roles as watchers and artists, reinforcing their subjectivity. Doane, "Film and the Masquerade," 83.

- 39 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 12.
- 40 Ibid., 11.
- 41 Ibid., 11–12.
- 42 Ibid., 12.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 45 The prop is Laurie Simmons’s actual diary from the 1970s. Mead, “Downtown’s Daughter.”
- 46 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 16.
- 47 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 48 Ibid., emphasis mine.
- 49 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 9.
- 50 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 51 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 9, emphasis mine.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 54 Martha C. Nussbaum, “Objectification,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24, no. 4 (1995): 251.
- 55 The seven notions are instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. Ibid., 257
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 *Hooker on Campus*, directed by Lena Dunham (2007; Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2012), DVD.
- 58 *Creative Nonfiction: Introduction* (Irvington, NY: Criterion Collection, 2012), DVD.
- 59 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 7.
- 60 Nussbaum, “Objectification,” 257.
- 61 For a description of the dynamic through which a film can act as a viewing subject, see Vivian Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye*. As she argues, “A phenomenological description of the act of viewing inevitably leads to an *embodied viewer*—not visible *in* the act or its productions but generative *of* the act and its existentially directed and diacritical structure. This viewer is not transcendently located, however invisible it is in vision. It is only through *reflection* that the viewer can be ‘seen,’ that is, intended as an object of vision. As Lacan and Merleau-Ponty have suggested, in human body-subjects this reflection is most concretely accomplished through an engagement with a mirror, and, later, more generally accomplished through the linguistic shifter, ‘I.’ While often making use of the concrete mirror encounter, the film’s activity of reflection on its own existence has also tended to take more general and mature forms of *reflexivity*. In both instances, however, reflection and reflexivity are merely ways of making *explicit* what exists *prior to* reflection and reflexivity and, indeed, provides their grounds. Just as there is a primordial human subjectivity that anonymously provides the ground upon which Self can figure in a relation that is reflective and interpersonal, so also is there a primordial and anonymously lived cinematic subjectivity that provides the ground upon which a self-conscious cinema can figure as a reflection upon and interrogation of the nature and function of its own being.” Vivian

- Carol Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 135.
- 62 Mead, "Downtown's Daughter."
- 63 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 7.
- 64 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 65 Mead, "Downtown's Daughter."
- 66 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 7.
- 67 Ibid., 10.
- 68 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 69 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 7.
- 70 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
- 73 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 74 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 8.
- 75 *Tiny Furniture*, Dunham.
- 76 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 7.
- 77 See, for example, Schrodt, "Lena Dunham's Body Is Funny"; Kerr, "Dunham in the Nude"; and Krantz, "Enough About Lena Dunham's Ass!"
- 78 Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," 8.
- 79 Ibid., 7.