

First published by O Books, 2009  
O Books is an imprint of John Hunt Publishing Ltd., The Bothy, Deershot Lodge, Park Lane, Ropley,  
Hants, SO24 0BE, UK  
office1@o-books.net  
www.o-books.net

Distribution in:

South Africa  
Alternative Books  
altbook@peterhyde.co.za  
Tel: 021 555 4027 Fax: 021 447 1430

UK and Europe  
Orca Book Services  
orders@orcabookservices.co.uk  
Tel: 01202 665432 Fax: 01202 666219  
Int. code (44)

Text copyright Nina Power 2009

USA and Canada

NBN  
custserv@nbnbooks.com  
Tel: 1 800 462 6420 Fax: 1 800 338 4550

Design: Stuart Davies

ISBN: 978 1 84694 241 9

Australia and New Zealand

Brumby Books  
sales@brumbybooks.com.au  
Tel: 61 3 9761 5535 Fax: 61 3 9761 7095

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations  
in critical articles or reviews, no part of this  
book may be reproduced in any manner without  
prior written permission from the publishers.

The rights of Nina Power as author have been  
asserted in accordance with the Copyright,  
Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Far East (offices in Singapore, Thailand,  
Hong Kong, Taiwan)

Pansing Distribution Pte Ltd  
kemal@pansing.com

Tel: 65 6319 9939 Fax: 65 6462 5761

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available  
from the British Library.

Printed by Digital Book Print

# One-Dimensional Woman

Nina Power

O Books operates a distinctive and ethical publishing philosophy in  
all areas of its business, from its global network of authors to  
production and worldwide distribution.



BOOKS

Winchester, UK  
Washington, USA

Work is an effective occasion for the emancipation of women in the face of male oppression, albeit within the limits set by the hierarchical organization of work. Thanks to the level of generalized precariousness, which has been transformed into a structural element of contemporary capitalism, 'work which becomes a woman', is tantamount to saying that the fragmentation of the service provided and the complexity of the dependence/absorption which women have experienced at various times in the labor market, ends up becoming a general paradigm irrespective of gender. In this sense, it can be maintained that the figure of social precariousness today is woman: in cognitive capitalism precariousness, mobility and fragmentation become constituent elements of the work of all persons irrespective of gender.<sup>24</sup>

All work has become women's work, even that of men. No wonder the young professional woman beams down at us from real estate billboards as the paradigmatic image of achievement. As Virno puts it 'correctly understood, post-Fordist "professionality" does not correspond to any precise profession. It consists rather of certain character traits.'<sup>25</sup> At this point in economic time, those character traits are remarkably feminine, which is why the pragmatic, enthusiastic professional woman is the symbol for the world of work as a whole.

## 1.1 You're Like an Advert for Yourself

This feminization of labor is also a feminization of the search for labor. If men and women are at all times supposed to be a kind of walking CV, constantly networking, constantly advertising themselves, then this 'body' is the prime locus for any understanding of the way in which the logic of employment overcodes our very comportment. From the top to the bottom of the employment pool, whether one is a jobseeker being retrained for work or a CEO manipulating contacts, your bodily existence at work comes to coincide with the CV that neatly summarizes where you've been and how you made profitable use of your time. Even those at the very bottom of the rung – migrant laborers hired to perform a particular menial task, say, must demonstrate their willingness to work, to 'sell themselves', all the more so if a large army of reserve labor is waiting to take your place.

Clearly, anything you have on your side, whether you've worked/studied/paid for it or not, is part of your job-seeking arsenal. Far from being something to keep in reserve, or relevant only to those on close terms, one's looks, manner and appearance are all. This is not simply a matter of 'looking smart' for work, but rather a matter of being in a position where everything counts, up to and including one's most basic subjective and physical attitudes. Everything is on show, everything counts.

From the boardroom to the strip-club, one must capitalize on one's assets at every moment, demonstrating that one is indeed a good worker, a motivated employee, and that nothing prevents your full immersion in the glorious world of work.

If we accept the argument that the division between 'free-time' and 'labor time' has become extremely blurred in recent years, there is something potentially revealing about what individuals choose to do in their 'spare time', especially in moments of 'extreme' leisure such as the American tradition of Spring Break, a kind of beach-based sex 'n' booze free-for-all, documented from time to time by the 'Girls Gone Wild' franchise, whose basic modus operandi is to visit college towns, filming girls in stages of drunkenness and clothelessness. When the 'Girls Gone Wild' team hand out hats or t-shirts in exchange for a shot of breasts, or the performance of a snog with another woman, the logic is right out in the open: we'll give you something obviously crap in exchange for a kind of performance that reveals that there is nothing subjective, nothing left, hidden behind the appearance, that you simply are commensurate with your comportment in the world. You are your breasts.

All of this marks a very serious transformation in the relationship between women and their bodies. Far from flaunting their assets in the hope that the refracted attention will filter back to their person as a whole (in Sartre's example of *mauvaise foi*, a young woman out on a date treats her hand as a dead object when it is reached for by her lascivious beau, and speaks instead of 'elevated' matters in order to temporarily and deliciously suspend what she knows to be true – that the young man desires her sexually), it is the 'assets', the parts, that take on the function of the whole. The all-pervasive peepshow segmentarity of contemporary culture demands that women treat their breasts as *wholly separate entities*, with little or no connection to themselves, their personality, or even the rest of their body. All autonomous, organic agency of a moral, rational or egoic nature is dissolved

into auto-objectivization.

*They*, the breasts, and not their 'owner', are the centre of attention, and are referred to, with alarming regularity, as completely autonomous objects, much as one would refer to suitcases or doughnuts. Constantly fiddled with, adjusted, exposed, covered-up or discussed, contemporary breasts resemble nothing so much as bourgeois pets: idiotic, toothless, yapping dogs with ribbons in their hair and personalized carrying pouches. These milkless objects of bemused scopophilia (frequently and explicitly 'fake', as is the fashion) are described over and over as if possessed of their own will and desire, separate from that of their owners ('Oh no! It slipped out of my top! Again!'). It is as if plastic surgery and the concomitant bloodletting did not expunge a malevolent spirit, but insert one. The thing to say upon first glance is no longer 'you look nice' but 'are those real?' A. A. Gill writing of Abby Titmuss, puts it thus: '[she] speaks of her breasts' inability to remain covered, as if they were a medical condition she had to live with, with as much good humor, and stoicism as she could muster. The outbreaks of exhibitionist sexuality were like eczema attacks: disgusting, unsightly but not her fault.'<sup>26</sup> The jokey male hypothetical question to lesbians ('don't you spend all day playing with your breasts?') has literally come true. They are 'assets' in the physical and economic senses simultaneously and as much use as possible is to be extracted from them – their role in breastfeeding is perversely secondary to their primary function as secondary sexual characteristics.

What the autonomous breasts and the concomitant becoming-CV of the human means is that the language of objectification may not be useful any longer, as there is no (or virtually no) subjective dimension left to be colonized. The language of objectification demands on a minimal subjective difference, what Badiou quaintly identified in the realm of personal relations as 'the intangible female right ... to only have to get undressed in

front of the person of her choosing.' In the realm of work we could call this the right not to have to lay bare one's entire personality and private life. In effect, this is what the world of work increasingly demands – that one is always contactable (by email, by phone), that one is always an 'ambassador' for the firm (don't write anything about your job on your blog), that there is no longer any separation between the private realm and the working day (Facebook amalgamates friends and colleagues alike). The personal is no longer just political, it's economic through and through.

Perhaps a further sign of the death of the objective/subjective opposition comes in the form of a parodic historical inversion. It's relatively acceptable for women to make general (usually whiny) claims about men, or to say that a man has a 'cute arse', even at work, because it's so obviously a toothless parody of the sexism of decades past. Objectification implies that there is something left over in the subject that resists such a capture, that we might protest if we thought someone was trying to deny such interiority, but it's not clear that contemporary work allows anyone to have an inner life in the way we might once have understood it.

The blurring of work, social, personal and physical life is almost total. If feminism is to have a future, it has to recognize the new ways in which life and existence are colonized by new forms of domination that go far beyond objectification as it used to be understood.

## 2.0 Consumer Feminism

I did this interview where I just mentioned that I read Foucault. Who doesn't in university, right! I was in this strip club giving this guy a lap dance and all he wanted to do was to discuss Foucault with me. Well I can stand naked and do my little dance, or I can discuss Foucault, but not at the same time.

– Annabel Chong, 1999

Contemporary feminism has attempted to provide answers to a wide range of questions – work, sex, porn, family. And if we take the answers at face value, the future looks bright! Books like *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* and *Full-Frontal Feminism* aim to capture the youth feminist market with seemingly endless amounts of 'sass' and breathless confidence-building. It's a strange but relatively successful form of self-help, which takes its cue from books like Gloria Steinem's 1992 *Revolution from Within: A Book of Self-Esteem*. In these books, the political and historical dimensions of feminism are subsumed under the imperative to feel better about oneself, to become a more robust individual. As a response to the 'I'm not a feminist, but...' pose it's very successful. Almost everything turns out to be 'feminist' – shopping, pole-dancing, even eating chocolate. This section attempts to demonstrate the remarkable similarity between 'liberating' feminism and 'liberating' capitalism, and the way in which the desire for emancipation starts to look like something wholly interchangeable with the desire simply to buy

## 2.2 Consumer Culture: Girls on Film

What does contemporary visual culture say about women? Here a thought experiment comes in handy: The so-called 'Bechdel Test', first described in Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, consists of the following rules, to be applied to films, but could easily be extended to literature:

1. Does it have at least two women in it,
2. Who [at some point] talk to each other,
3. About something besides a man.

Writer Charles Stross adds that

if you extend #3 only slightly, to read 'About something besides men or marriage or babies', you can strike out about 50% of the small proportion of mass-entertainment movies that do otherwise seem to pass the test.<sup>39</sup>

Once you know about the test, it's impossible not to apply it, however casually. Stross is right – huge quantities of cultural output (possibly even more than he suggests) fail. Several questions emerge from the test:

1. What is so frightening about women talking to each other without the mediation of their supposed interest in men/marriage/babies?

2. Does cinema/literature have a duty to representation such that it is duty bound to include such scenes, as opposed to pursuing its own set of agendas? Why should literature/cinema be 'realistic' when it could be whatever it wants to be?
3. Does reality *itself* pass the test? How much of the time? Can we 'blame' films/TV for that?

Vera Chytilová's *Daisies* is one of the few films that basically passes the test throughout, and it's clear that it disturbs as much as it charms. This 1966 Czech film features two young women who dedicate their lives to spoiling everything in increasingly surreal ways, with seemingly little rhyme or reason. Who are these irresponsible young women who find it more amusing to play with each other, and occasionally with men, but only so they can return to each other and be yet more 'spoiled' (as in ruined, rather than pampered, of course)? The formal inventiveness of the film would undermine its claims to 'realism', but this is all the better. For all the male 'coming of age' stories in the world, it makes sense that their rare female equivalent would have to be as bizarre as possible. Contemporary mainstream cinema seems, on the whole, retrograde compared to its earlier incarnations, as if a possible space for such things has been closed off for good. But let's not get too nostalgic.

There is something strange about the absence of women talking from cinema. Aren't women supposed to always be talking? Of course, they're not meant to be talking about anything *important*, which is presumably why the camera only turns to them when men are mentioned. Kant in his *Anthropology* (1798) is quite bothered by women's 'loquacity', mentioning it several times, particularly when it goes 'wrong':

Amentia (*Unsinnigkeit*) is the inability to bring one's representations into even the coherence necessary for the possibility of

experience. In lunatic asylums it is women who, owing to their talkativeness, are most subject to this disease: that is, their lively power of imagination inserts so much into what they are relating that no one grasps what they actually wanted to say.<sup>40</sup>

Too much talking prevents even the possibility of experience – no space/time for you, girly, you just sit there in the corner and babble crazily to yourself! It's not that women think just about men, it's that they think about everything, madly, all the time. How could cinema possible deal with *that*?

Films that appear to be 'all about women', such as *Sex and the City* are paeans to a curious combination of ultra-mediation and a post-religious obsession with 'the one'. You go to 'the City' in search of 'labels and love'; the one mediating the other – the nicest thing your boyfriend can do for you is have a giant wardrobe installed for all your 'labels'. Drinks with 'the girls' are dominated by discussions about whether he is 'the one' or not. What does this obsession with 'the one' mean? The bourgeoisie may have drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation, as Marx and Engels observed, but certain religious motifs are harder to shake than others. The 'one' as the transcendent culmination of an entire romantic destiny demonstrates a curious mélange of the sentimental ('we were always meant to be together!') and the cynical (if there's a 'one' then the 'non-ones' don't count; the sex with them is of no importance, there is no need to behave even moderately pleasantly towards them). Marriage, for example, for many is still something other than a mere contract. But this strange mix of sentimentality and pragmatism – ideology, if ever there were a definition – reproduces itself seemingly spontaneously, in culture and conversation.

There is no emancipation here, if all effort is ultimately

retotalized onto the project of 'the one'; if all discussions with 'friends' are merely mediating stepping-stones in the eschatological fulfillment of romantic purpose. Contemporary cinema is profoundly conservative in this regard; and the fact that it both reflects and dictates modes of current behavior is depressingly effective, and effectively depressing.

Perhaps the only thing worse than wondering about what women are talking about is seeing them actually do it, at least as far as *Sex And The City* goes. If cinema tends to show women talking to each other only about men (or marriage, or babies) perhaps the most important aspect of this is *brevity*. An entire film given over to such things would be obscene according to the logic of mainstream cinema, which can barely tolerate a few minutes of such footage, even in its 'unambiguously flattering' mode. I think this is indicated by the common observation that men feel alienated and frustrated by an hour or so of *Sex and the City*. A winsome few moments of love-lorn anguish shared between two friends is ok, lengthy discussions of fellatio are not.

Mainstream cinema mediates the relationship between men through the odd woman, who rarely gets to mediate anything at all through anyone or anything else. But in the 'real world' do women mediate their relationships through discussion of men? One could ask a similar question about make-up and fashion. Prettifying for the boys or warning signs for the other ladies? Obviously the idea that straight women are constantly 'competing' for men is an awful one, but they are most definitely supposed to, according to the crazy logic of scarcity that consumerism depends upon. He's the one! That handbag is the one! Hands off my bag/man!

Between the world of work and the consumerism of contemporary culture, and the feminism that justifies it, lies an industry that best synthesizes the two, and it is to this that we now turn. Of all the industries most symbolic of the death of interiority and the centrality of sex, pornography is the one that stands out most,

or at least got there first. The 'pornification' of contemporary life has often been noted, but too often the discussion takes place in moral terms. It is much more interesting and relevant to think of pornography as a particular kind of work, indeed, as a paradigmatic mode of work.

## Endnotes

1. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 25.
2. Paolo Virno, 'Post-Fordist Semblance', *SubStance*, Issue 112 (Vol. 36, no. 1), 2007, p. 42.
3. Lindsey German, *Material Girls: Women, Men and Work* (London: Bookmarks, 2007), p. 148.
4. Zillah Eisenstein, *Sexual Decoys: Gender, Race and War In Imperial Democracy* (London: Zed Books, 2007), p. xviii.
5. See Eisenstein's argument that 'poor black women make up the greatest numbers of people living below sea level without cars' in the affected region. *Sexual Decoys*, p. 80.
6. <http://www.lacan.com/jampalin.html>
7. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/sep/12/sarahpalin.feminism>
8. See Katharine Viner's 'Feminism as Imperialism': <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/sep/21/gender.usa>
9. Sarah Palin fever has prompted a surge in sales of the shoes, spectacles and even wigs needed for her 'look". See: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/uselection2008/sarahpalin/2826084/Sarah-Palin-fever-boosts-wig-sales-as-women-go-for-her-look.html>
10. Laura Bush decries Taliban 'brutality', BBC, 17/11/01.
11. Katha Pollitt, 'After Iraq and Afghanistan, Muslim Feminists Are Leery of Seeming Close to the West', *The Nation*, 23/06/07.



12. Katherine Viner, 'Feminism as Imperialism', *The Guardian*, 12/09/02.
13. Ibid.
14. Alain Badiou, 'Behind the Scarfed Law, There is Fear', <http://www.lacan.com/islbad.htm>.
15. David Aaronovitch, 'Please Don't Rub My Face in Your Faith', *The Guardian*, 17/06/03.
16. 'Behind the Scarfed Law, There is Fear', op. cit.
17. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), section 9.
18. Charlie Ball, Hecsu labour market analyst, quoted in <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4929958.stm>
19. <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdffdir/lmsuk0808.pdf>
20. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7357509.stm>
21. '100% of the ability, 60% of the pay: agency targets top women looking for flexibility', *The Guardian*, April 23 2007.
22. Cristina Morini, 'The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism', *Feminist Review*, 87, 2007.
23. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 103.
24. Ibid.
25. Virno, 'Post-Fordist Semblance', p. 44.
26. 'I'm a celebrity, get off with me' [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/tv\\_and\\_radio/article524635.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/tv_and_radio/article524635.ece)
27. From 'Up The Revolution!', Jessica Valenti, *The Guardian*, 18/04/07.
28. Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (Free Press, 2005), p. 5.
29. FCP, p. 200.
30. Jessica Valenti, *Full Frontal Feminism: A Young Women's Guide to Why Feminism Matters* (Seal Press, 2007), p. 1.
31. Ibid., p. 8.
32. Ibid., p. 14.
33. Ibid., p. 34.

34. Ibid., p. 39.
35. Ibid., p. 43.
36. Quoted in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 58.
37. <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/Story?id=2467150&page=2>
38. 'Why Women Should Fake Orgasms', Fay Weldon, *Daily Mail*, 07/09/06.
39. [http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/2008/07/bechdels\\_law.html](http://www.antipope.org/charlie/blog-static/2008/07/bechdels_law.html)
40. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 2006), p. 109.
41. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 56.
42. Andrea Dworkin, 'Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography and Equality', *Feminism and Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 25.
43. Wendy Brown, 'The Mirror of Pornography', *Feminism and Pornography*, p. 208
44. Angela Carter, 'Pornography in the Service of Women', *Feminism and Pornography*, p. 342.
45. Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (Grove Press, 1991), p. 261.
46. There's something both curious and creepy about the way in which porn exercises the taxonomical drive. As a student I lived with a guy who let me use his computer. What amazed me about his extensive collection of pornographic pictures culled from the net (mostly fluffy stuff like girls in velvet cuffs dressed in Santa Claus outfits) was the amount and time and effort he'd put into cataloguing his pictures (e.g. single woman: blonde: bra: heels or two women: brunette: blonde: whip, etc. etc.). Obviously, the enjoyment he derived from porn was intimately connected to the collecting itself: had the hours he put into such an enterprise been spent on his course he would have done very well, instead of dropping out. He later joined the police force.

47. Alain Badiou, 'Sex in Crisis', *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Polity, 2007), p. 75.
48. Alain Badiou, 'Philosophy and Cinema', *Infinite Thought*, trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 116.
49. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 223.
50. 'Red Face for Fischer's Friend',  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/feb/23/worlddispatch.jonhenley>
51. 'US fears of teen "pregnancy pact"',  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/7464925.stm>
52. 'The Pain of Being Black': Bonnie Angelo interviews Toni Morrison, *Time*, 22/05/89.

Contemporary culture has eliminated both the concept of the public and the figure of the intellectual. Former public spaces – both physical and cultural – are now either derelict or colonized by advertising. A cretinous anti-intellectualism presides, cheered by expensively educated hacks in the pay of multinational corporations who reassure their bored readers that there is no need to rouse themselves from their interpassive stupor. The informal censorship internalized and propagated by the cultural workers of late capitalism generates a banal conformity that the propaganda chiefs of Stalinism could only ever have dreamt of imposing. Zero Books knows that another kind of discourse – intellectual without being academic, popular without being populist – is not only possible: it is already flourishing, in the regions beyond the striplite malls of so-called mass media and the neurotically bureaucratic halls of the academy. Zero is committed to the idea of publishing as a making public of the intellectual. It is convinced that in the unthinking, blandly consensual culture in which we live, critical and engaged theoretical reflection is more important than ever before.