Shame and desire. Intersubjectivity in Finnish visual culture

Laine, T.K.

Citation for published version (APA):
Sitting with One’s Legs apart

As we have seen in our analysis of Freud, the equation of ‘true’ femininity with passivity played no small role in the construction of oedipal gender categories. It was, and continues to be, central to the theoretical defence of the principle of sexual difference identified with heterosexual complementarity. So let us undertake one last act of reversal, at least to begin deconstructing the terms of polarity between activity and passivity.¹

Jessica Benjamin, In the Shadow of the Other
Gender, Sexuality and Bodily Intersubjectivity

As has been stated throughout this thesis, intersubjectivity is a connection of the subject to the world; a commitment in which the world is not ‘projected’ or ‘created’ as being, but in which it is encountered as being. As I have hoped to show, the manner in which film epitomizes this intersubjective bonding, and the manner in which the film spectator relates to the film in an intersubjective relationship, can serve as a basis for gaining insight into the socio-historical dimensions of a national cinema and the modes of engagement of the spectator. In this model, shame is viewed as an intermediary of one’s relationship with the world as illuminated by intersubjective interaction. Yet in order to understand how the subject can engage with others in the world, one needs a concept that goes beyond the concept of consciousness (since the world is not a Cartesian projection) and that concept is the body. It is the subject’s body that has internalized the values of a specific culture; it is the body that expresses and reacts to the cultural values, for instance through shame. As Gail Kern Paster puts it:

The interaction between bodily self-experience and its discursive realization, then, takes place in and through culture. (...) Society’s cumulative, continuous interpellation of the subject includes an internal orientation of the physical self within the socially available discourses of the body—an orientation in terms of current standards of (...) acceptable behaviours and also in terms of current standards of bodily self-mastery and internal regulation.2

But how does the interaction between the body and culture take place? In Sartre’s thinking, the body is not simply a physical object, but an intentional subject that
can see as well as be seen, and touch as well as be touched. Furthermore, the body is a means of understanding the human order: the actions of the body can be interpreted by others and that experience teaches the subject what it is. Awareness of self is inseparable from awareness of others, and, in part, our sense of embodiment (the ontological state of being and having a body) assists us to understand the self or the Other.

As I have shown, shame is an emotion that is profoundly embedded in the social. Shame promotes continuous, dynamic exchange between the ‘outside’ (the social) and the ‘inside’ (the personal) of the subject’s world, shame is a mode of embodying the social world. But precisely for this reason, shame is also a possibility for re-negotiating one’s relation with the social world. This, however, necessitates special motivation, for instance films that challenge the intersubjective limitations of a given culture. According to Sartre, art that leads to reflection reveals the images which society tries to hide from itself: “If society sees itself and, in particular, sees itself as seen, there is, by virtue of this very fact, a contesting of the established values of the regime. [The artist] presents [the society] with its image; he calls upon it to assume it or to change itself.”

In this chapter I shall show how shame can serve as means for the spectators to reflectively direct their attention from the film to the conditions of apprehending the film through a close reading of Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s video installations, especially her If 6 Was 9 (1996). I shall show how this reflection is essentially bodily in its nature, and thereby a reaction to the established and internalized cultural values of female sexuality.

*   *   *

In order to understand the socio-corporeal logic of shame, then, we need another kind of subjectivity apart from the concept of a conscious subject: a bodily subject. According to Sartre, it is the body that is the subject of
consciousness, a point of view in the world and a centre of all action and encounter with the world. To be a point of view in the world, to be a conscious being, one must be in the world as a bodily subject. Furthermore, the body is the locus of both objective (social) and subjective (personal) space through which the subject experiences and acts in the world. This involves the subject’s awareness of him- or herself as an actor in the social world. There can be no consciousness of the world without consciousness of oneself as embodied in the social world. It is within this objective and subjective space that the Other as object appears, but the subject also appears as an object to other subjects: “My body as a thing in the world and the Other’s body are the necessary intermediaries between the Other’s consciousness and mine.”

Our existence as subjects and objects, as lived bodies and bodies touched and looked at, is intertwined in the world where we are located; and the body is the fundamental connection with the Other that is constitutive of each consciousness.

At first sight, the Sartrean ‘bodily subject’ seems to resemble the Freudian/Lacanian ‘bodily ego’. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud argues that the ego is “first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface.” The bodily ego is derived from bodily sensations that are projected onto the surface of the body, and integrated into the bodily life. This means that, as in Sartrean thinking, our subjective experience always originates from and is mediated by the body. This bodily ego, according to Lacan, comes into existence in the mirror stage, where the infant makes an imaginary identification with his or her bodily reflection in the mirror. This identification with one’s mirror image is the first of many ego-structuring identifications through which the subject acquires his or her identity with respect to others, either through similarity (the principle of the self-same body) or difference. It is here that we can see the difference between Sartre, Freud and Lacan: while in
psychanalytic thinking the bodily ego is most importantly a focal point for the subject's visual identity within a Symbolic order which makes the concept of body constituted by and constitutive of cultural hierarchies, the Sartrean body is an *intentionally lived* body that rules the subject's relations with the world and that signifies his or her engagement with the world.

In psychoanalytic film studies the question of bodily ego is worked out in terms of visibility and representation, identification and performance, where the emphasis lies for instance on studying body images in films, on calling the culturally accepted notions of ideal bodies into question, or on the way in which the body is constructed in society through certain technologies (i.e. the way in which we internalize the bodily images in the cinematic experience and act upon them). By comparison, the film scholars that have adopted the phenomenological model strive to find the *intentional* bonds between the spectator and the film, the same bonds that connect the subject with the situational world. In this model, the body cannot be explained through (inner or outer) causal relations. This means that the body is not seen separately from the world, but as a phenomenon that reaches out to the world and the other bodies in it. For instance, Vivian Sobchack has convincingly taken on the phenomenological concept of bodily subjectivity (which is, however, based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty and not on Sartre) in her theory of cinema spectatorship. According to Sobchack, a film is an expression of experience by experience. The film makes itself emotionally and intellectually manifest by making itself seen, heard, reflexively felt and understood. This means that the relationship between the spectator and the film unfolds on two levels: on the conscious level (where the spectator perceives the cinematic expression knowing that it is 'only fiction') and on the bodily level (where the body of the film and the body of the spectator meet in the cinematic
experience; the spectator comes to embody the cinematic expression):

The film presents an analogue of my own existence as embodied and significant. It is perceptive, expressive, and always in the process of becoming that being which is the conscious and reflected experience of its own expressed history.10

For Sobchack, the relationship between the film and the spectator is based on the mutual capacity for and possession of experience through common structures of embodied existence, through similar modes of being-in-the-world that provide the intersubjective basis of objective cinematic communication:

The film experience, therefore, rests on the mutual presupposition of its intersubjective nature and function, based on the intelligibility of embodied vision. Its significance emerges from a shared belief and from shared evidence that the substance and structure of cinematic perception and expression (however historically and culturally qualified) are inherently able to reflect the universality of specific scopes of experience.11

Sobchack considers film thus to be more than merely a viewed object, namely a viewing subject. Even though film has been objectively constituted as a technology (the cinematic viewing subject does not mean the same as a human subject), it also has been subjectively incorporated, enabling a perceptual mode of embodied ‘presence’ and/or ‘agency’. In its existential function, film shares a privileged equivalence with its human counterparts in the film experience. The film manifests a competence equivalent in structure and function to that same competence performed by human subjects.

Furthermore, the film is able to make visible the
invisible intersubjective structure and foundation of the encounter of the spectator and the film, in a specific cultural framework by which the spectator’s vision is informed and charged, and through which the film appears intelligible.

The idea of the film as a viewing subject allows or invites us to recognize the cinematic look (film as a subject of its own vision) on us, as a look of the Other that is present as ‘visibly absent’. Although the film spectators cannot see film as a viewing subject, they can see its presence. The cinematic look does not visibly appear as ‘the other side of vision’ but as a vision lived through intentionally; emotionally and visually embodied. The intersubjective relationship between the film and the spectator is thus twofold: even though the cinematic Other is not ‘me’ (in the sense that it does not live my body nor occupy my situation), it is not entirely Other either (like other seeing persons) since its vision (and significance) is given uniquely to me from within, from the ‘inside out’. This means that the spectators are able to experience the cinematic look as their own, even though it is not performed by them (nor do they believe that it is):

[T]he film is engaged by our vision directly, as the intersubjective and intentional experience lived by an other. Thus, the film is never contained in our vision as merely the significant object of our sight, but is always also significant and signifying as the intentional subject of its own sight.12

It is necessary for the spectators to embody the cinematic vision in order to experience it from within, but this does not mean that the spectators mistake the cinematic vision as their own (as it was assumed in apparatus theory). Instead, the purpose of cinematic communication is to share—to share the sight, to share the emotions—but there is always a distance between the spectator and the
film that necessitates communication in the first place and subsequently sets up the dialogue between the two types of vision. The spectator is inserted into a shared operation of visions of which neither the film itself nor the spectator is the creator. Instead, the spectator and the film co-exist through a common world, just like the subjects exist in the world always and already together with other subjects.

I would like to extend Sobchack’s theory by arguing that the realm of intersubjectivity is also the origin of (cinematic) emotions. In his book *Emotions*, Sartre teaches us that it is through an emotion that the bodily subject encounters the world. Emotion is not entirely subjective but an all-embracing phenomenon: through emotion the bodily subject reaches out to the world in its entirety: “[W]ith our body (...) we live and undergo [the] signification [of an emotion], and it is with our flesh that we establish it. But at the same time it obtrudes itself; it denies the distance and enters into us.” But emotions are not given from without—even though they might be experienced as ‘external force’—since they arise from within the self: the subject is filled with emotion by its individual, psychological force. The emotional experience is therefore not to be found in the external world or in the ‘essence’ of the subject, but in the texture of the whole intersubjective operation. This means that self, emotion and meaning are always and already both external and internal phenomenon: it is through emotion in and through which the subject and the social world intertwine: “The behaviour which gives emotion its meaning is no longer ours. (...) Simply, the first magic and the signification of the emotion come from the world, not from ourselves.”

Yet in most readings of Sartre’s theory, emotion is considered as a form of consciousness. Or better, emotion is seen as a transformation of the world, a ‘magical act’ that originates from the subject’s inability to tolerate a certain (changed) situation in the world. For instance, the emotion of joy is a magical behaviour,
which tends by 'incantation' to realize the possession of the desired object:

The joyous subject behaves rather like a man in a state of impatience. (...) It is because his joy has been aroused by the appearance of the object of his desire. He is informed that he has acquired a considerable sum of money or that he is going to see someone he loves and whom he has not seen for a long time. But although the object is 'imminent', it is not yet there, and it is not yet his. (...) [W]e shall never get to the point of holding [the object of our desire] there before us as our absolute property. (...) [Through joy] the object of or desire appears near and easy to possess.\textsuperscript{15}

According to some scholars, the problem of this theory is the role of consciousness in it.\textsuperscript{16} The centre of emotion is the transformation of the world, which is fundamentally a change of consciousness. Sartre indeed sometimes makes it sound as if consciousness was something disembodied, but he is not a solipsist. Consciousness, for Sartre, is essentially relative and it refers to the world from the start: "all our personal determinations suppose the world and arise as relations of the world."\textsuperscript{17} How? Through the human body that is the subject of consciousness. Without the body consciousness could have no relation at all with the world. Consciousness is always directed toward the world; in fact, human consciousness is always consciousness of the world as perceived through the senses. But consciousness does not have senses. Consciousness is present to the world through the senses, and the world has meaning to the consciousness with the body as a centre of reference: "Thus to say that I have entered into the world, come to the world, or that there is a world, or that I have a body is one and the same thing."\textsuperscript{18}

Emotion, then, is indeed a form of consciousness, but one must note that it is a bodily form of conscious-
ness. The body is not merely an ‘aspect’ of consciousness in Sartre’s theory of emotions; it is through emotion that consciousness is being embodied. This means that consciousness is rooted in the body, yet consciousness cannot be reduced to the body or vice versa; instead consciousness and body are fully embedded in each other. Through his or her emotions the subject reaches out to the embodied foundations of his or her self: emotion is a form of bodily consciousness of the world. The subject that undergoes an emotion is bound to the affective object in the world in an inherent symbiosis; the bodily subject unreflectively knows or anticipates what kinds of emotional responses and bodily actions are now expected from him or her, and therefore emotion is a certain way of apprehending the world. Furthermore, emotions gain their significance in the context of social life, being a synthesis of personal psychodynamics on the one hand and a socio-historical framework on the other.

The psychic interiority of the bodily subject, then, is necessarily dependent on the subject’s bodily exteriority (the subject’s ‘social being’). There is no strict separation between mind and body, self and Other, as the body is the limit for both the subject’s perceptual (social) outside as well as his or her most intimate (psychic) inside. This means that the subject and the social world must exist and appear for each other: the relation between the subject and the world is reciprocal, and not determined by either one of them. The bodily subject is, on the one hand, an object in the world, but on the other hand something directly lived by consciousness, in a dialogical relationship with the world. Through his or her lived body, the subject has a position in and relation to the world, and emotion is a way to ‘bind’ the bodily subject to the world in an “indissoluble synthesis.” The ‘magical act’ in the state of emotion is then the act of the bodily subject who, in a new situation, adjusts his or her relation with the social world. In emotion, the subject ‘sets up the magical world’ using
the body as a means of ‘incantation’. And since the body has a twofold ontology—on the one hand it is an object in the world, on the other hand it is something directly lived—an emotion is not merely a projected affective signification onto the world, but an intentional phenomenon through which the subject assumes his or her subjectivity and forms a relationship with the world. For Sartre, experiencing an emotion is thus to apprehend and to live the world in bodily action; in emotion the world becomes part of the bodily subject at the most inward level.

**Inside/outside**

Through emotion the subject exists in the world ‘internally outside and externally inside’. This means that, through emotion, the subject assumes him- or herself a subjectivity separate from the outside world at the same time as the subject embodies the outside, social world from the inside, as a bodily subject. In a state of emotion, the subject experiences a bodily sensation, but the significance of emotion arises from without the subject, in the context of social life. This texture of bodily subjectivity unfolds in the cinematic experience as well. In the following, I shall analyze the way in which the films and video installations of Eija-Liisa Ahtila shape this interaction between the inside and outside, in order to show how the bodily model of intersubjectivity can be applied to the cinematic experience in general. In this model, cinema is a means of relating to the world, and cinematic emotions arise from the intersubjective conditions of human existence.

Eija-Liisa Ahtila is a Finnish artist who describes her video installations as ‘human dramas’, fictional narratives (even though her work often adopts the techniques of documentary film) about human relationships and the powerful emotions that underlie them. The
relation between the ‘self’ and the ‘Other’ is often investigated in her work as the spectator is invited to engage with the mind of a subject caught in a moment of psychological and emotional vulnerability. For instance, her three audio-visual narratives Me/We, Okay and Gray (1993) re-define the borders of subjectivity through collision of visual and aural information. These three short films—each approximately 90 seconds long—have been presented both as independent works at galleries, as trailers in cinemas, and on various television channels between advertisements and programs.

The first of the narratives, Me/We, studies the balance of attachment and detachment of the individual identity in society: in this case a father in a four-person nuclear family. The story is told through a monologue, a stream of consciousness narrated by the father that is partly voice-over, partly diegetic voice. The stream of consciousness extends to the visual level as well: a lot of point of view shots are used, which are then interrupted with sudden changes of viewpoint. The father mirrors himself through his family members. When he tries to see them, he sees himself instead, and allows their voices to speak in and through him, embodying his family. But at the same time he sees himself from the outside point of view, as a separate subject from his family members, uttering the words from Maurice Blanchot’s short story Who: “Somebody looking over my shoulder (me perhaps) says: ‘You will return to that faraway time when you took your high school exams.’—‘Yes, but this time, I will fail.’” As he is addressing his words to the viewers, and simultaneously allows them to see from his point of view, the film is playing with the borders of subjectivity and identity both inside and outside of the film. The spectators are invited to engage with the father’s point of view, to experience the film from the inside, but they are also detached from the film into the role of the outside observers.

As in Me/We, in Okay the protagonist speaks in the voice of the opposite sex. A woman walks back and
forth in her room, telling a story about her sexual relationship, which involves both physical and psychological violence. The story is told in the first person, but as the story progresses, the voice changes, and the female protagonist is suddenly made to speak in a male voice. The desires and frustrations in the sexual relationship are uttered with various voices through a single person in order to dissolve both the subjectivity and the gender of the protagonists. According to Kari Yli-Annala, this is a characteristic feature in the world of Ahtila’s imagery:

[T]he relationship between the self and the Other is not one of fixed differentiation, but one that is caught up in a process of spillage and mutual exchange. Someone else’s words and thoughts seem to be put in the character’s mouth, portraying the manner in which power is wielded in human relationships.\(^{21}\)

At the same time the characters in *Me/We* and *Okay* address the camera directly, acknowledging the process of narration in the film and thereby transcending the cinematic screen. This results in the dissolution of the boundaries of subjectivity both within and beyond the frame: the borderline that separates the spectator outside the world of fiction is crossed and the spectator is invited to interact with the film beyond the inside/outside dichotomy.

*Today* (1997) deals with the relationship of a father and a daughter after a dramatic event: the father has accidentally run over and killed his own father by car. The narration consists of three episodes titled *Today, Vera, and Dad*, divided in three screens on three sections of a rectangle in a dark space, and they run in a continuous loop (but not simultaneously) on each of the screens. First we see the film on screen one. The daughter is throwing a ball in the yard, the father is crying in the bedroom. The daughter’s monologue
—which is alternatively simultaneous on-screen sound and non-simultaneous, off-screen voice over—tells about her father, her grandfather, and their relationship. In the second episode, on screen two, an elderly woman expresses her views of contemporary society. And in the third episode, on screen three, the father is conducting a dialogue with the camera, re-living his relationship with his father and his daughter, recognizing that he is both a child and a parent at the same time. Ahtila herself has described this work as exploring the concept of self and Other through time: seeing one’s own movements in the gestures of other family members dissolves the borders between the self and the Other. The first episode ends with the daughter asking whose father it actually is that is crying in the bedroom: “Maybe it’s not my dad who’s crying—but somebody else’s dad. Sanna’s dad, Mia’s dad, Marko’s dad, Pasi’s dad—or Vera’s dad. I’m in an armchair. I have a boyfriend. I have something on my lap. I am 66 years old.”

The next episode, Vera, begins with a medium close-up of an elderly woman sitting in an armchair, smoking, with an ashtray on her lap, talking to the camera. Her monologue ends with the sentence, “A rattling tram pronounces my dad’s name,” which brings us to the last episode, Dad. According to Taru Elfving, this jump means that the daughter embodies the self that is in constant flux, always already gone or about to come, embodying the future (Vera), the past (Dad) and the present (Today): “The girl situates herself as older, creates a bridge—or maybe she creates the future, as if it were another simultaneous layer of her being.” But the girl is ‘becoming’ in the figure of the father as well, thereby inhabiting the border space between the self and the Other, the inside and the outside. As the father proclaims in the last episode of the film: “I have a daughter. She throws a ball and asks me to watch. And these throws look like the anger I had swallowed. And I don’t know whether to run towards her or away—or whether to teach her what’s good and what’s bad. When
Sitting with One's Legs apart

I ask her, 'how do I look?'—she says, 'you look like a dad.'"

As in Me/We and Okay, in Today the spectators are drawn into the world of fiction beyond the screen that separates them from the film; in fact, in the gallery space the spectators are expected to occupy the ‘fourth wall’ of the installation. This contributes to the function of the spectators to bring closure to Ahtila’s words and images. It is the spectators who have to act as a bridge between the ‘speaking selves’ in Today: it is the spectators’ embodiment of the cinematic expression and their emotional reactions to it that makes the encounter of the ‘girl’, ‘Vera’ and ‘dad’ possible. As a result, the physical time and space occupied by the spectator is fused with the fictive time and space of the installation.

Like Me/We, Okay, and Today, the film installation Consolation Service (1999) mirrors the twofold nature of bodily subjectivity as a site where the self and the Other, the inside and the outside interact, but through experiencing and expressing emotions. The installation is a two-screen projection. The story unfolds through two adjacent images: the screen on the right takes the story forward while the screen on the left concentrates on showing the emotions (through reaction shots), scenery, and other details relevant for the story. Since the adjoining images are non-linear, and since the spectators are refused one privileged point of view, they are invited to take the position of an active observer towards the film, making choices from the audio-visual material. As a result, the spectators’ reaction to the film are multi-dimensional, more complex than in a ‘conventional’ narrative film: on the one hand they are encouraged to recognize the ‘cinematic Other’ as visibly absent, beyond the level of perception, but on the other hand they are invited to embody the cinematic expression through their emotional reactions: the spectators reach out to the cinematic world by reacting to it emotionally, incorporating the cinematic expression to their own bodily presence. And at the same time the spectators remain
also aware of the gallery space and the people walking in and out of the room.

*Consolation Service* is a story about the divorce process of a young couple, Anni and J.P., told in three parts. The story is told from Anni’s point of view, but it is narrated by their ‘neighbour’ who exists within the diegetic world of the film, but who nevertheless ‘creates’ events in the process of narration. As J.P. explains the narrator’s function to the therapist: “Our neighbour is the babysitter—the one who is writing this story.” The first part of the film takes the spectator to a counselling session, where the couple tells to their therapist that they have decided to break up. Their relationship has reached the point where they cannot have emotional intimacy with each other anymore. They cannot encounter each other, but are both absorbed in their own emotions. As Anni explains to the therapist: “I feel like some enormous breast that has to take care of everything.”

When the therapist encourages the couple to express their feelings toward each other, they are only able to quarrel or to bark at each other like dogs, until Anni collapses. We hear her voice as a non-simultaneous distant cry; as a kind of internal diegetic sound that invites the people from the waiting room to come to her help. Neither the couple, nor the therapist can ‘see’ these people; they are ‘transparent’—only the narrator is able to comment on their presence: “The therapist, Anni, and J.P. cannot see them. The people are transparent.” This blurs the boundary between the diegetic (the world within the film) and the non-diegetic (the world beyond the film), inviting the spectator to inhabit that in-between space.

In the second part the couple is at a birthday party. Later they leave for a restaurant across frozen water, but while they are walking the ice breaks, they fall into the water and drown. In this part, Ahtila deliberately confuses the inner psychic life of Anni’s character (‘fantasy’) with the material outside world (‘reality’), since the drowning in the icy seawater takes
place only in Anni’s imagination. Only her inner monologue—uttered in a voice over while in the image we see either her drowning or an underwater shot from ‘her’ point of view—suggests that the drowning illustrates the way in which the couple has turned numb to each other like in death: “For the last time we show each other how we lost contact. I don’t care. And you pretend not to notice. (...) There is nothing, time does not pass. Can we still say that this won’t do? Can we still put a stop to it, quit, leave? What kind of fingers undress us here?”

In the last part, Anni’s husband J.P. appears to her as a hallucination. J.P.’s materialization and his bowing gesture to which Anni responds enables her to finally give up the relationship—hence the consolation service. Here the woman’s fantasy has the function of preventing the metaphorical death of the couple in the second part of the film, as Yli-Annala has argued. Yet the fantastic and hallucinatory elements in Consolation Service seem to suggest that intimacy with the Other as another subject is not possible; it is not accomplishable to encounter the Other as another subject, but only as a hallucinatory projection. It would seem to me that Ahtila’s later work examines the question what happens to the subject when his or her relationship to the world and the others in it is permanently disturbed, but that is a topic to explore in another study.

In this kind of displacement of the self/Other and the inside/outside in Ahtila’s work, then, it is the structuring function of the spectator that keeps the multidimensional structure together. In Ahtila’s later work, especially in her installation Anne, Aki, and God (1998) and her film Love is a Treasure (2002) the multiplicity of the cinematic ‘flows’ starts to live its own autonomous life, which the spectator cannot absorb in a linear fashion, but is forced to experience as a delusion. According to Daniel Birnbaum, in Anne, Aki, and God there is “clearly a question of a severe breakdown of the mental apparatus as a whole. This is madness.” The
installation "pushes things further and clearly represents a kind of mental disintegration," producing "a multi-layered and mazelike narrative, or rather a maze of narratives, that transgresses the mental capacities not only of so-called normality but more radically (...) of finite subjectivity." The co-existence and the intimacy of the self with the Other has become impossible and madness is a consequence of this and, in a sense, Anne, Aki, and God as well as Love is a Treasure can be seen as a logical development of the theme in Ahtila's work.

**Shame as reflection**

The intimacy between the self and the Other is disturbing in another way in Ahtila's earlier work If 6 Was 9 (1996), because it has been epitomized through the emotion of shame. In this film installation she deals with sexual fantasies, habits, activities and wishes of five teenage girls during their 'metamorphosis' into adult women as sexual beings. If 6 Was 9 is based on interviews and empirical research: as a result the touch of documentary and direct cinema is apparent in the film, but the realization and the stories told by the girls are nevertheless fictional. Like Today, If 6 Was 9 is structured as a triptych: three aurally and visually non-linear, adjacent images create an audio-visual flow on three enormous screens (figure 18). The non-chronological, non-linear narrative fabric unfolds in both parallel and contrasting movement across the screens. The three screens may show a different perspective on the setting, or they may converge in order to form a single screen. The sound is projected from where it appears to emerge, and the soundtrack follows the horizontal, simultaneous movement between the three screens of the triptych. In the gallery screening, the screens together with a comfortable sofa are organized so that the three screens and the spectators, sitting on the
Figure 18. *If 6 Was 9* (1996) projection space. (Courtesy of Crystal Eye)

Figure 19. The gallery screening. (Courtesy of Crystal Eye)
sofa, form a four-cornered space (figure 19). Since the audio-visual flow on the three screens is often non-simultaneous, the spectators are again refused one privileged point of view. But through the size and the organization of the screens the spectators are compelled to absorb the audio-visual flow not only aurally or visually, but also with their whole body.

The film begins with an empty, black screen; only lines that refer to sexual acts and that are spoken by immature voices of young girls can be heard. On the screen, nothing can be seen, not even the owners of the voices, which penetrate into the consciousness of the spectator, thereby breaking the barrier of distance between the spectator and the film. The spectator is invited to share the subjective experiences of the narrator from the inside. But in a split second, the intimacy between the spectator and the film is disrupted as images of everyday life occupy the screen, combined with voices that articulate a seemingly meaningless stream of consciousness in the following fashion:

When I was not yet at school age I used to play a game. I went under the cover and played doctor. Alone. I was a patient, and the doctor examined my bottom. I had to open my anus while they stood around... the doctor, nurse, and maybe some other people. The doctor cured me by sticking me in the ass, in the middle of the hole. And I twisted and turned under the cover, sweating all over.

The following passage makes use of a documentary/interview style, inviting the spectator into yet another relationship with the film. On one screen, a young girl is sharing her masturbation fantasy/memory with the spectator in a close-up, sitting on a cosy chair and looking directly at the camera, in the mode of a confession. Yet this familiar convention of documentary—'safe intimacy from a distance'—is in contradiction
with the fact that it is a young girl who is sharing ‘her’ sexual, almost pornographic fantasy—and it is here that the emotion of shame sets in, reminding the spectators of their own sense of shame about their sexuality. Indeed, as Leon Wurmsen has noted, “shame about exposing one’s sexual organs, activities, and feelings (...) is of such cardinal import that in most Western languages shame is practically synonymous with sexual exposure and the sexual organs themselves.” In *If 6 Was 9*, during the ‘sexual confession’ two other screens ‘open up’; screens that are divided into a point of view shot of the young girl, and an establishing shot of the whole setting (figure 20). The spectators occupy all these three perspectives at once, not only on the visual level but also on the subjective level, through the emotion of shame. As many theorists of shame, including Sartre, have shown, in the emotion of shame there exists a consciousness of self as existing for oneself and for others: shame makes the self present as an object in the world, as an object for the Other. Shame involves consciousness of the self that has been exposed for others to see as an object in the world from an outside, objective viewpoint which the subject can recognize as him- or herself (even though that objective dimension of oneself, the being-for-others, essentially escapes the subject). But at the same time shame is a shameful apprehension of something and this something is the subject self: “I am ashamed of what I am.” Shame, therefore, realizes an intimate relation of oneself both to oneself and to others; an *exposure* of oneself to others.

This means that shame is not originally a phenomenon of self-reflection, but the subject’s original apprehension of the two modes of his or her being (existing for oneself and for others) occurs pre-reflectively. But a reflective consciousness can always direct itself upon emotion, upon shame. In this case, shame appears as a structure of consciousness. So while shame as pre-reflective consciousness is directed toward something other than itself (shame of what one is and of
what one is for the Other), shame as reflective consciousness shifts its attention to itself and becomes consciousness of an act of consciousness (consciousness of shame of what one is and of what one is for the Other). Sartre has shown us that emotion (i.e. shame) is a state of consciousness of the world in a state of emotion, the subject is immediately and spontaneously connected with the social world, and it is precisely this unreflective condition that constitutes the possibility for the reflective consciousness the subject has of him- or herself.

This reflection, however, is rare and necessitates special motivation, because reflective consciousness involves both a unity and a duality at the level of reflection. According to Sartre, on the one hand there must be an absolute unity of reflective consciousness with the consciousness on which it reflects, but on the other hand “the reflected-on must necessarily be the object for the reflective; and this implies a separation of being.”28 In shame I am conscious of myself as an object of values for the Other, but there is a separation between me and that object, since I cannot take the Other’s point of view on that object (duality). In reflection, my consciousness of consciousness is separated from the consciousness reflected on by a nothing that it itself (duality within unity). This is a complicated matter (if there is no ‘self’ at the pre-reflective level to be found, how is that self-consciousness? If consciousness is always of something and implies a separation of being, how can the reflective be that which is reflected on?)
and, according to Kathleen Wider it cannot be thought without taking the level of bodily intentionality into consideration.29

According to Sartre, all consciousness is self-consciousness, we all have a deep-rooted intuition on whatever we do both at the level of pre-reflective and reflective consciousness. Even at the level of pre-reflective consciousness (awareness of, say, a glass on the table) I am conscious of my state, but this consciousness does not occur reflectively (I am not ‘positionally’ conscious of my state, my attention is not directed towards my state). Consciousness of an object is consciousness of being conscious of an object. Thus, ontologically all consciousness is self-consciousness. According to Wider, this is a question of processing a bodily data. At pre-reflective level, my self-consciousness is present in processing a bodily data, blending the ‘input’ from both self and the social world. At reflective level, my self-consciousness shifts its focus from processing a bodily data onto the self-input only (the bodily feelings and sensations). According to Wider, this interpretation preserves Sartre’s belief that all consciousness is self-consciousness, and that in reflection there is a unity within a duality: reflective consciousness is and is not separated from its object since it simply involves a shift in focus: “nothing would divide consciousness from what it reflects on, because as Sartre says, consciousness is the body, and reflective self-consciousness is the body’s reflective awareness of itself.”30 This does not mean trying to attempt the bodily input from a third-person point of view (the so-called ‘impure reflection’), but attending the bodily input as lived, not objectified.

The cinematic experience is primarily pre-reflective: in my engagement with a film I am conscious of it, I perceive it as external to my body while all my attention is directed towards it. My emotional response is a result of apprehending the film, a mode of consciousness of the film at the pre-reflective level. By experiencing shame as a result of the returned look of
the Other in the film, I become conscious of myself as the object for that Other at the pre-reflective level: I am not conscious of my shame, my consciousness is shame. At the reflective level, in my engagement with the film I am still conscious of it, and my emotional response is still a result of apprehending the film, but the focus of my attention is on my emotional response (I am conscious of my shame).

In *If 6 Was 9* it is intriguing to notice how the film invites the spectators to reflect their emotional experience through allowing the spectator to direct their attention to understand the conditions of apprehending the film. This is done by addressing the spectator and inviting them to experience the film from within at the pre-reflective level (at the level of bodily intentionality), and simultaneously encouraging them to observe that lived experience from without (duality within unity). In one scene in *If 6 Was 9* one of the girls is telling her memory of a children's toy called the view master and the *Piper* fairytale she used to watch with it. In this scene, the triangular space of three screens consists of a close-up, point of view, and the establishing shot. In the scene, the girl addresses the spectators with the following lines: “I heard that the Piper led children inside a mountain, which then closed. I run the pictures back and forth. First there was an opening, then there was no more. It was amazing. It was equally amazing to see in a porn magazine that men had no hole behind the testicles.”

The three screens—where the images are projected in an alternating order—and the sound of the changing images in the background resemble the childhood experience of changing the images of one’s view master (figure 21). Suddenly this cozy memory, which the spectators have been able to ‘experience from the inside,’ is disrupted by a pornographic image portraying male sexual organs. The shock of the sudden encounter with the pornographic image is equivalent with the sudden appearance of the Other’s look which the subject experiences as the revelation of the existence
of his or her body as an object for the Other, and is experienced as shame. Why? As pornography usually is defined in terms of visibility (and not of vision) and the spectator’s implicit desire for (visual) mastery, why is it that the spectator here lacks the mastery and becomes an object of the look? Because the sudden encounter with the pornographic image is humiliation, an attack aimed at the way in which notions of male and female sexuality are ordered and defined in Finnish culture. Or better, it is humiliating, because it touches on one’s uncertainties about one’s gender and sexuality that are being too strictly defined through opposing positions (woman as a projection of man). The pornographic image is humiliation, an attack at gender-bound intersubjective relations whose meanings male and female bodies carry, and mark the limits of male/female relations: women are not allowed to be openly curious about male sexuality or even about their own.

In this way, the pornographic image functions as the look of the Other, returning the spectators’ look and giving their lived experience an outside. The pornographic image disturbs the spectators’ relation with the film, the shame sets in at the pre-reflective level, and the spectators apprehend their presence in the social world (my consciousness is shame of my presence in the social world). The shock of sudden disruption with a pornographic image throws the spectators out of balance, out of their taken-for-granted sense of being in the world, and enables the spectators to shift their
attention from their presence before the image to the shame itself (I become conscious of my shame). The reflective shame crystallizes the dialectical elements of human subjectivity that the subject normally experiences as aligned. Reflective shame, then, is a moment of clarity that separates the inner and outer dimension in human subjectivity that ordinarily appear as unified, but that in reflective shame can for a moment be perceived separately. As Sartre has taught us, shame stands between the self and the others, but neither simply inside, nor simply outside, since the reference to other people in shame arises from within. In *If 6 Was 9*, reflective shame simultaneously engages and distances the spectators from the viewing experience allowing them—through contrasting images—to experience from the inside and to perceive from the outside, and vice versa.

In this revelation, the subject’s body is not merely lived, but this lived experience becomes “extended outside in a dimension of flight which escapes me. My body’s depth of being is for me this perceptual ‘outside’ of my most intimate ‘inside’.” The experience of one’s body as an object for the Other is made in and through shame. Shame means that the subject is intensely and constantly conscious of his or her body for the Other, seeing his or her body as it is through the Other’s eyes, learning his or her social being through his or her relation with others. The body, then, has two ontological dimensions: I exist for myself as my body, and I exist for myself as a body known by the Other. The world has meaning to me with my body as a centre of reference, but my body can be ordered from a radically different point of view, the point of view of the Other, in the context of the social world. Women, for instance, often experience their bodies not existing in their own right as desiring bodies, but ordered from a social (male) point of view. In this order, female sexuality is split into two opposing complementarities: a sexually promiscuous ‘slut’ and a decent, sexually inactive ‘virgin’ that limit
women’s possibilities to fulfil their sexuality as active, desiring subjects.

This phenomenon is deeply rooted in the values and the basic structures of systems of gender, economics, and society in the Western world. In Finnish culture, the historical background of slut/virgin polarization lies in the ideology of family and the nation: in Finland, sexually ‘pure’ women have traditionally been acknowledged as unifiers of the nation. According to Arja-Liisa Räisänen, all the social questions of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century were in one way or another tied to the question of gender relations. A woman could achieve subjectivity by subjugating her sensuousness into a sense of duty towards the common good (either at home or at work), or by surrendering to it. By existing their body, Finnish women existed the whole nation. This polarization is characteristic of Christian thinking, in which women’s agency and active sexuality is seen threatening to the cultural order and that has to be controlled through collective shaming and labelling. As a ‘virgin’ a woman has to sacrifice her own sexuality, as a ‘slut’ she loses her social face. This polarization based on Christian-heterosexual ideology has not ceased to exist in Finnish culture. There is no culturally accepted model of woman as sexually active that would exist outside a man/woman relationship (woman as a projection of man). The project of sexual liberation in the 1960s and 1970s seems from the 1990s onwards to have become an attempt to deregulate commercial sex and pornography. However, this trend seems to advance the slut/virgin polarization in the Finnish culture, since one now defines what kind of (female) sexuality is culturally acceptable against the background of commercial sex and pornography. In any case, women’s bodily relation to the social world (inside) is still defined from a male point of view (outside).

It is this interaction of the inside and outside in female subjectivity and sexuality that the split images in If 6 Was 9 mirror, the interaction that manifests itself in
the emotion of shame and that is epitomized through sexuality and sexual norms. In *If 6 Was 9* the girls’ curiosity about sexuality is in conflict with societal, (masculine) sexual norms, and this conflict between inside and outside, private and public, is apparent in the emotion of shame. Indeed, everything about the film is about that conflict, thereby telling the story of the inside of a woman’s body. By embodying the installation, the spectator embodies the interior of the female gender.  

The film ends with a series of close ups showing girls’ hands holding scissors, cutting images from pornographic magazines and fashion journals, making a collage. In one screen, a girl addresses the spectator, saying: “A couple of years ago I read an article about Helsinki. It showed 24 places around the city where people make love outdoors. In every picture a couple showed how to do it in public places.” By making the pornographic images their own and by giving the images a female face, the girls forcibly re-define the concept of female sexuality and bring this newly defined concept into a public sphere from where it has been excluded (this is also suggested in the film through contrasting shots of the girls that mostly take place in an indoor setting with a series of establishing shots of the city of Helsinki). In this way, *If 6 Was 9* moves from the realm of ‘sexual visions’ to that of spatiality, cultural anatomy of the space, and the way in which gender shapes one’s spatial imaging. Ultimately, the film demonstrates Giuliana Bruno’s argument of film as a practice of representation written on the body map, a corporeal process that produces space negotiated over a woman’s body.  

Reflective shame in *If 6 Was 9* is the subjective element in film that invites the spectators in between themes of distance and proximity, inside and outside, allowing them to realize the intersubjective texture of subjectivity. Reflective shame is created through a tension between the content and the form: familiar environments like cosy living rooms or impersonal
shopping malls are contrasted with a detailed and objective pornographic dialogue coming from the mouths of the young girls, who are at the same time playing a piano, eating, or varnishing their toenails. Private sexual fantasies are being brought into a public sphere, and the spectators are placed into the crossroads of these spheres. On the one hand, the spectators are invited to share the girls’ intimate sexual fantasies. On the other hand, Ahtila’s experimentation with images and sounds—confusing the author, the narrator and the characters by putting stories where adult women (including the artist herself) recall their sexual awakening into the mouth of teenage girls; multiplying the voices and separating them from the images; interrupting the linear representation—renders the concept of stable spectatorship incoherent. The spectators are compelled to remain outside of the representation at the same time as they are invited to experience it from within. The spectators are made conscious of the contradiction between the private nature of the fantasy and the public context in which it is told. The spectators’ shock about entering into a relationship with the film in which they are invited to experience a private sexual fantasy and to observe it at the same time enables reflective shame to emerge, in which one’s body is lived perceptively, as well as engaged intentionally with the world. With this technique, Ahtila examines the texture of selfhood in relation to others, which is then given a socio-political dimension as well: the critique on the cultural taboo of female body and sexuality. As one of the girls, sitting on a banister with her legs apart and shot from a low angle declares: “Here I sit with my legs apart like a small girl who has not learned anything about sex. Who has no idea of the fact that a woman must hide her private parts and lust.”

The straightforward manner in which the girls talk about sexuality is a way to re-interpret female sexuality from a third position which exists outside the negations of masculinity—lacking, passive—through
which femininity has traditionally been described. For Elfving, the third position is ‘the Girl’ that resists the systems of representation based on negation:

The girls actively look, think and speak this imagery of thresholds, constantly reinterpreting them, and themselves. The signification of female sexuality and the subjectivity of the Girl as lack(ing) is spatialized, repeated (…) until it is loaded with meanings and dynamics of its own. (…) [This] allows for endless associations and wild leaps that create ground for difference and for the new to emerge.40

In the same way, reflective shame in If 6 Was 9 can be seen as a third position that is able to bridge the dialectical poles of subject and object, self and Other, active and passive, seer and seen, inside and outside in the cinematic experience. Reflective shame can be seen as constituting a new kind of intermediate position between the spectator and the film, a position that maintains the tension between the self and the Other, the inside and the outside, rather than attempts to incorporate the Other (woman) within the self (man). In this way, If 6 Was 9 invites the spectator in a creative process where the spectator’s body becomes a transitional space through which the representation emerges inter-subjectively. This means that it is the bodily self of the spectator that encounters the film in a dialogical interaction, as an active subject, through establishing an emotional relationship with it while remaining aware of the tension between the inner and the outer.

By confronting the spectator with sexuality and reflective shame, If 6 Was 9 creates a subject position for the spectator to enter into that reproduces the original moment when shame arises: the moment when the social network of the subject has disappeared. But as shame is based on the subject’s bodily capacity for and possession of experience through cultural structures of inter-
subjective existence, in shame the subject nevertheless remains embedded in the social network. In shame the subject is at the same time ‘transparent’ and (re)orienting his or her body towards the world; in the case of If 6 Was 9 towards ‘new’ female sexuality beyond the negations of masculinity: an active, energetic, and self-determining sexuality that is not being carried out through the Other (male, nation). According to Sartre, this kind of reflective consciousness can be properly called a moral consciousness, since it cannot arise without at the same time revealing social values: “It is obvious that I remain free in my reflective consciousness to direct my attention on these values or to neglect them.”

Shame is a possibility for reflective reorientation to the social world precisely because of its ambiguous relationship to the societal values: on the one hand shame interrupts the subject’s bond to the community; in shame the subject experiences alienation from the community. On the other hand, it is through shame that the communal norms and values make their return, offering the subject a chance to re-articulate them. As a result, the unbearable transparency in shame paradoxically becomes a way of recognizing one’s indebtedness to other subjects in the world and re-negotiating one’s position in the social network.

---

4 Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness: An essay on Phenomenological
10 Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, p. 143.
11 Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, p. 5.
12 Sobchack, The Address of the Eye, p. 140.
14 Sartre, The Emotions, p. 86. Maurice Merleau-Ponty shares this view when he writes that “If I try to study love or hate purely from inner observation, I will find very little to describe: a few pangs, a few heart-throbs, in short, trite agitations which do not reveal the essence of love or hate.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Primacy of Perception. Trans. C.W. Cogg. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 52.
17 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 415.
18 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 419.
19 Here Sartre criticizes psychologists who assume that, after the emotion has been set up by cognition, it is fed by the same cognition, and is absorbed into itself and withdrawn from the object towards which it is directed. For Sartre, on the contrary, the emotion returns to the object at every moment and is fed there.
20 Sartre, The Emotions, p. 52.
Sitting with One's Legs apart


22 The psychoanalytic explanation of why this should be so is that the development of objective self-awareness predisposes the child to integrate the parental criticism of sexual censure through the sense of shame. Leon Wurmser, The Mask of Shame. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 32. But linking sexuality and shame is in no way an invention of psychoanalysis: it appears in recorded (Greek/Judaean-Christian) history at least as early as Genesis in the Old Testament. In Plato and in classical Greek (physical) sexual desire was considered shameful and degrading (in contrast to platonic love). The seventeenth and eighteenth century English Puritanism made moral abstinence a core virtue. (See Silvan S. Tomkins, “Shame.” In Donald L. Nathanson (ed.) The Many Faces of Shame. (New York: Guilford Press, 1987), p. 133-61.) And in Finland, controlled sexuality was a direct continuation of the national-romantic movement. See Juha Siltala, Valkoisen äidin pojat. (Helsinki: Otava, 1999), p. 438.


24 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 301.

25 “It is certain that my shame is not reflective, for the presence of another in my consciousness, even as a catalyst, is incompatible with the reflective attitude; in the field of my reflection I can never meet with anything but the consciousness which is mine. But the Other is indispensable mediator between myself and me. I am ashamed as I appear to the Other.” Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 302.

26 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 213.


30 On shame, pornography, and humiliation, see Robert J. Stoller,

Simone de Beauvoir had a similar starting point in her famous work, The Second Sex, in which she worked with the idea that women are the Other for men and that woman is not born, but made. See Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex. (New York: Vintage, 1997).


Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 461.

Arja-Liisa Räisänen, Onnellisen avioliiton ehdot. Sukupuolijärjestelmän muodostumisprosessi suomalaissa avioliitto- ja seksuaalivalistusoppaissa 1965-1920. (Vammala: SKS 1995), p. 67-73. There are, of course, countless examples of how notions of female body are influenced by the nation. Often a literary metaphor (like Helen of Troy), the woman is a symbol of nation: when she is strong, the nation is strong; when she is weak, the nation is weak; when she is raped, the nation, too, has been invaded and violated. In colonialist discourse, ‘virginity’ underlines the ‘availability’ of the land, calling for an inseminating ‘penetration’. Against the background of these male-produced paradigms, women have conceived their gender and sexuality, either happily fulfilling their communal duties, or feeling exploited by the nation, but never existing in their own right as desiring subjects. See, for instance, Jan Jindy Pettman, Worlding Women: A Feminist International Politics. (London: Routledge, 1996); Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media. (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 137-70.


A viewing position which, ultimately, is not reserved to female viewers only. As Tania Modleski convincingly has shown in her reading of Hitchcock’s Rebecca, male identification with a female position is possible, because of the male infant’s original identification with the mother. See Tania Modleski, The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory. (London: Routledge,
1988).
41 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 146.