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Article

Vermeer's Curtain: Privacy, Slut-Shaming and Surveillance in 'A Girl Reading a Letter'.

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Abstract

This essay brings a Dutch old master and a subreddit into provocative apposition to argue that 'Creep forum'-type slut-shaming does not represent a new cultural formation. Moreover, by using art history to attune ourselves to slut-shaming's historical emergence, we gain new insights into the present-day dynamics of this mode of inspection and regulation. Presenting a historicised analysis of Vermeer's painting, 'A Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window', alongside a contextualised approach to the construction of 'sluts', this article recalibrates our understanding both of the importance of shame within the surveillance canon and specific modalities of female experience of asymmetrical inspection. Finally, responding to recent calls by Hille Koskela, Kirstie Ball and others for a more explicitly gendered approach to surveillance, I offer a hybrid methodology that brings together (slut-)shame and surveillance discourse in relation to paradigms of discipline.



Figure. 1. Johannes Vermeer. c. 1657—1659. *A Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window* (*Brieflezend Meisje bij het Venster*). Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.

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Introduction

Revealed by a pulled-aside green curtain, the ringleted subject of Johannes Vermeer's 'A Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window' (*Brieflezend Meisje bij het Venster*; fig 1), circa 1657, is caught in the act of studying what may well be an illicit love letter. Modern guides point us to the cut peach, which rolls from the fruit bowl on the foregrounded table, for the moral symbolism widely agreed to determine the canvas's meaning. But if Vermeer appears to be engaging in what, in modern parlance, might be called public 'slut-shaming', then the painting itself presents the issue of women's privacy in more complex ways. I wish to argue that the canvas—read as a conflicted whole—complicates the simple allegory it at first appears to offer. 'Girl Reading a Letter', indeed, seems acutely, *presciently*, aware of the complex dynamics of surveillance and privacy within which girls who read letters find themselves, then and now.

Women, Leora Tanenbaum (2015) points out, are routinely 'photographed, tracked, and monitored overtly and covertly within social media'.¹ The internet has given rise to extensive communities of users who post photos of women taken without consent in public places. Popular Twitter accounts such as @CreepBJ and @alldayicreep (also @Creepshots, banned from the platform in 2012), as well as the site CreepShots.com, reach large audiences through hashtags such as #creepshots and #sluts, which also produce results across social media, including Instagram, Tumblr, Reddit, Google+ and Pinterest.² The December 2015 archives for the subreddit '/r/CandidFashionPolice' (affiliated to CreepShots) contain numerous 'up-skirt' photos, 'cleavage shots' and images of partially naked women.³ These 'pics', typical from Creep forums, feature women who are usually unaware that their image has been captured let alone posted as a topic for comment, and present an asymmetrical viewing paradigm similar to that in Vermeer's painting.

The approach I propose argues for the value of art histories in developing an understanding of surveillance that is calibrated to both recognise and situate slut-shaming as a gendered form of surveillance. Hille Koskela, Kirstie Ball and Yasmeen Abu-Laban have been instrumental in recognising that women have always sought to resist the strictures of social and moral norms imposed by modes of inspection that preceded modern surveillance but were also analogous to it in 'their own forms of interpersonal monitoring' (Ball et al. 2009; Koskela 2012; Abu-Laban 2015). However, as Shoshana Magnet (2016), Simone Browne (2015) and Mark Andrejevic (2015) point out, the specific implications of longstanding surveillance practices in terms of gendered bodies have often been overlooked in surveillance discourse. My own approach seeks to build on these theorists' insights by bringing into productive apposition two discourses, two customarily separate bodies of theoretical work, around shame and surveillance. My aim is twofold: to read that hybrid theory into Vermeer's painting, and to explore how that subtly troubling composition, through its resistance of Vermeer's slut-shaming, is itself already *reading out* to us key insights about gendered surveillance. As Vermeer's painting allows us—to see, distinct modalities of shame induce similar processes to Panopticism (subjection and normalisation) since shame, similar to surveillance, engenders an internalisation of the gaze. Although we tend to de-historicise incidents of digital slut-shaming, the act of connecting the painting of a Dutch old master to a subreddit enables us to see that slut-shaming of the Creep forum variety is by no means a new cultural formation. Moreover, that both painting and

¹ Tanenbaum introduces websites such as CreepShots.com as forms of slut-shaming. She also notes that the Reddit forum Creepshots is now defunct, see *I Am Not A Slut: Slut-Shaming In The Age Of The Internet* (2015); see also—CreepShots (2015) *Reddit*, previously available at: <http://metareddit.com/r/CreepShots/>.

² @CreepBJ is the handle for the part-owner of CreepShots.com. @CreepBJ, @alldayicreep and the subreddit /r/CandidFashionPolice have, at the time of writing, over 250,000 followers combined (with 50,000 of those gained between February 2016 and August 2016 alone).

³ Michael Brutsch, aka 'Violentacrez', was revealed as one of the main figures responsible for Creepshots. Reddit moderators were quick to ban subsequent subreddits containing the word 'creep', but left Brutsch's CandidFashionPolice active (Alfonso 2014). See also CandidFashionPolice (n.d): <http://metareddit.com/r/CandidFashionPolice/>; and *Candid Fashion Police's Monthly Archives* (2015): <http://candidfashionpolice.com/2015/12/>.

subreddit shed mutual light allows us to adjust our understanding of the surveillance canon in light of art history, specifically the female experience of this mode of asymmetrical inspection.

1. Painting Out Privacy

If the cut fruit depicted in ‘Girl Reading a Letter’ presents an easily understandable code for a fleshly fall (Schneider 2004), an equally important element of the composition—one whose heuristic significance would have been equally legible to the painting’s original viewers—is the red curtain that the girl has flung over the opened casement, ostensibly to allow more reading light. However, this cast-aside curtain, which lets in the sun that illuminates letter and subject, is not even the most discussed drapery in the canvas: more critical attention has been given to the conventional green curtain Vermeer uses as a *repoussoir* to open the scene up to the viewer.⁴ Indeed, other than brief references to the red window-curtain’s presence as a marker of middle-class affluence, the cloth has escaped developed commentary altogether.⁵ To the modern eye, perhaps the image of the singular curtain jars; unpaired, it disturbs any baroque aspirations to classical symmetry, and has a negligible decorative purpose (Flanders 2014). At any rate, we miss the fact that its function and significance in the famous painting lie in relation to privacy.

Modern commentators, usually via Michel Foucault’s pioneering work, routinely invoke the Panopticon—a conceptual prison hypothesised by philosopher and jurist Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)—to make the point that those who suspect they are being watched tend to modify and self-regulate their behaviour (Haggerty 2006; Haggerty and Ericson 2000; Abu-Laban 2015). But we rarely consider ways in which art and literature prior to Bentham’s age can also inform modern debates around surveillance. Nevertheless, perhaps it is precisely here where we should be looking (Marggraf Turley 2014, 2017). Early insights from art historian Donald Preziosi (1989: 36) that the ‘epistemological and synoptic position’ of both the art historical subject and the position of the subject in the Panopticon are analogous, invite us to recognise the potential of art history in developing our understanding of surveillance. The observation site for both panoptic and artist subject ‘confers upon the observer an invisibility and detachment from the objects of surveillance’ (Preziosi 1989: 36) and, as such suggest that art offers a compelling point at which to intervene into issues of visibility. Indeed, I argue that ‘Girl Reading a Letter’ articulates an ‘attempt to deal with issues of social visibility and invisibility’ in a way that valuably correlates with our contemporary understanding of regimes of visibility (Brighenti 2010: 137). As Andrea Smith (2015), Magnet and Rachel Dubrofsky (2015) have recently shown, purposeful surveillant practice brings certain bodies into the light while occluding others, and as such issues of hypervisibility and visibility should be at the core of surveillance studies. Smith’s (2015) articulation of the way in which state surveillance strategies throughout colonial history policed gender and sexual boundaries, crucially recognises that the focus of Surveillance Studies should not be limited to examining the modern, organised state. Inflecting Smith’s critique, I suggest that part of developing our understanding of historical gendered surveillance requires that we take account of art historical scholarship. Vermeer’s painting, we’ll see, subtly codes many issues of gendered surveillance that detain us today, and represents to us shame and slut-shaming as a perniciously gendered form of surveillance that ‘help[s] to reinforce sexual norms by creating pressures for self-regulation’ (Koskela 2012: 49).

⁴ This device is used in other of Vermeer’s compositions, including ‘A Painter in his Studio’ (c. 1666) and ‘Allegory of the Faith’ (c. 1672). Available at:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5e/Jan_Vermeer_-_The_Art_of_Painting_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg;

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/19/Johannes_Vermeer%2C_Allegory_of_the_Catholic_Faith%2C_The_Metropolitan_Museum_of_Art.jpg.

The curtain as a *repoussoir* also features in a large number of Gerard Dou’s works including ‘Still Life with a Candlestick and Watch’. Available at: <https://www.pubhist.com/works/02/large/2688.jpg>.

⁵ On affluence, see Christiane Hertel’s *Vermeer: Reception and Interpretation* (1996).

'Girl Reading a Letter' leads us towards resonant insights into issues around privacy raised by the growing popularity of window-curtains. The advent and swift popularity of the window-curtain in the 1600s had significant implications for privacy in the domestic sphere, as Judith Flanders briefly acknowledges in her recent study of the evolution of house to home.⁶ Flanders notes that until 1650, town inventories for Leiden contained only two records of window-curtains, yet by 1660 inventories from the House of Orange and the Brederode archives reveal that in that ten-year space such curtains had become commonplace not only among the rich of Leiden, but also of Delft and The Hague (Flanders 2014; Wijzenbeek-Olthuis 1996). There is no documented reason for the curtain's sudden popularity, but its adoption appears to have been due less to changing decorative tastes or matters of practicality than to the desire for privacy (Flanders 2014). Such window-curtains appeared exclusively on the apertures of ground floor rooms on the front of houses and they typically covered only the lower portion of a window, rendering them useless for the purposes of blocking light (Flanders 2014). If curtains represented a boastful exhibition of wealth, or an opportunity to pay homage to the nation's growing textile trade, then it seems odd, as Flanders (2014) points out, that they did not also feature in upper-storey windows. The adoption of the window-curtain, then, seems to have expressed the new desire of inhabitants of Dutch towns to screen their home and domestic life from the social bustle of ever more densely populated urban areas. Additional statistics appear to confirm the causal connection: thinly populated areas were slow to adopt the curtain compared with cities (Flanders 2014; Wrigley 1983).⁷ In its depiction of the red curtain, then, 'Girl Reading a Letter' expresses its connection to privacy discourse.



Figure 2. Gerard Dou. c. 1650. *Man Smoking a Pipe (Self Portrait)*. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

⁶ While Flanders' research is not directed specifically at Vermeer (2014: 10-11), her findings focus on the area around Delft, which Vermeer loved to depict. She does make very brief reference to Vermeer's *The Concert* (1658-1660) and its lute as a 'symbol of erotic love'.

⁷ Eighty-seven per cent of rural dwellers did not own curtains compared with eighty-one per cent of city-dwellers who did (Flanders 2014).



Figure 3. Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden's (SKD) reconstruction of Vermeer's 'A Girl Reading a Letter by an Open Window'. 2010. © Thomas Scheufler.

What's more, if Gary T. Marx is correct in his assertion that acts of 'blocking' or masking (physical or digital interventions which obstruct a channel of communication) 'call explicit attention' to a surveillant desire to read a subject (Marx 2016: 155), then implicit in the green and red curtains of 'Girl Reading a Letter' is an important message. They code not only the painting's engagement with issues of privacy but also reflect the tacit desire of the painter and his audience to scrutinise a young woman in her home environment. Put simply, while surveillance discourse in today's culture of 'high technology' (Marx 2016: title) often revolves around complex resistance strategies, achieved through electronic countermeasures such as signal jamming devices (Fu et al. 2015), the act of drawing a curtain across a Dutch townhouse window in the 1650s has similar meaning. In Vermeer's canvas, however, the subject is precisely unmasked by the open curtains, and left exposed. The composition's red and green drapes bring the young woman into the light, compromising her privacy.

It is worth thinking about the painting's two curtains in more detail, since as we'll see neither really make sense. In terms of compositional function, things are clearer: the curtains signal the two points from which the painting's subject is made available. The green curtain, which draws our focus to a frontal view of the scene, is most likely an illusionistic drape, or as Philip Steadman notes, a *repoussoir*, whose function is to foreground the audience's view of the scene by creating a sense of depth (Steadman 2001). The technique was used widely by Dutch painters, although the *repoussoir* in Vermeer's hands differs slightly from its use in the work of contemporaries: while Gerard Dou in his self-portrait (circa 1650) at least positions his *repoussoir* in front of a window, offering a fillip to realism (fig. 2), Vermeer's green curtain, which hangs in the middle of the room, is apparently unconnected to furniture or structural features, and is in one sense preposterous (Steadman 2001). The Dresden Academy of Fine Arts' 2010 recreation of the scene (fig. 3) accentuates this peculiarity by demonstrating that the curtain would need to float mid-air to achieve the effect seen in the painting.⁸ The unnatural position of the green curtain draws the audience's attention to the

⁸ See the SKD Museum website for further details on the replication of the room pictured by Vermeer: <http://www.skd.museum/en/special-exhibitions/archive/the-young-vermeer/>.

fact that they are intervening into a 'private' scene. As Rodney Nevitt Jr suggests, our participation in this scene implies that 'as viewers of Vermeer's paintings, our gaze merges with that of anyone we might imagine to have an interest in these women: husbands, parents, or *vrijers* [suitors] (licit or illicit)' (Nevitt Jr 2001: 107). The 'girl', that is, is clearly and intentionally the object of voyeuristic surveillance.



Figure 4. Johannes Vermeer. c. 1657-1661. *The Little Street (Het Straatje)*. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

If our gaze 'merges' with that of Nevitt Jr's interested viewers, then we must also consider who is likely to be situated outside the window—just as Vermeer appears to consider this issue. A marker of privacy, the red curtain reveals the window as an important secondary point of observation, clarifying that the young woman is not merely exposed to those in her immediate vicinity, but also to the gaze from the newly urbanised community of Delft (Kaldenbach 2002). For some indication of what may lie outside the window, we need only look to Vermeer's 'The Little Street' (*Het Straatje*, circa 1658) (fig. 4). This co-textual painting places the maid, the elderly woman busy with her needlework, and—in the original version—a third woman subsequently painted out, in close proximity, framing and advertising their 'privacy' through the alleyways and windows they inhabit (fig. 4) (Snow 1979).⁹ In this way, 'The Little Street' already hints at women's experience of, and participation in, coveillance (communal surveillance) within the domestic sphere. Even the buildings—tightly packed together as was typical of houses in Delft in the 1650s—facilitate the lateral gaze (peer monitoring) (Andrejevic 2005; Bailey 2002). Outside the window, always potentially looking in, is a society on the advent of the domain of 'common concern', as theorised by Jürgen Habermas (1996); a society, that is, ever-concerned with private matters. 'The Little Street' offers one (co-textual) possibility of what Vermeer might have imagined lay outside the young woman's window in 'Girl

⁹ The third woman's ghostly figure is revealed by infrared reflectography, which shows her to have been seated in the passage, as discussed by Janson (2016).

Reading a Letter', but it is the cast-aside red curtain that points to this world. It forms part of a visual code that suggests the woman is available, and more urgently represents a point of entry for the gaze.¹⁰



Figure 5. Detail of right-hand corner of Johannes Vermeer's 'A Lady Standing at a Virginal' (Staande Virginaalspeelster), c. 1670-1673. National Gallery, London.



Figure 6. Otto van Veen. 1608. *Perfectus amor non est nisi ad unum*, engraving.

Vermeer's subject reads what is possibly intimate correspondence in full view of the street outside, subject to the gaze of her neighbours. The artist makes her available. Vermeer commentators generally agree that she is reading a love letter, though often, like Lisa Vergara (2003: 51), ignore the issue of invaded privacy,

¹⁰ Gaze here is understood in the Mulveian sense. Where Mulvey suggests that the film camera is employed to invite audiences to inspect and examine women's bodies (1975), I recognise the curtain in Vermeer's painting as a device that does much of the same work: it invites viewers of the painting to scrutinise the young subject.

simply noting the ‘thoughtful [...] intensity’ of a young woman reading correspondence from her *vryster* (sweetheart). The ‘love letter’ reading is supported by X-ray analysis, which reveals that a painting of cupid previously hung from the wall behind the young woman. Subsequently painted out, the portrait appears instead in Vermeer’s ‘A Lady Standing at a Virginal’ (see fig. 5). If retained, the cupid would have featured at the vanishing point of ‘Girl Reading a Letter’, and would have drawn the eye and cemented speculation about the letter’s amorous resonances. This information, however, possibly clouds Vergara’s critique (2003), which risks reading ‘Girl Reading a Letter’ as it used to be, rather than as it exists in finished composition. Where Vergara merely sees young love, Norbert Schneider (2004) recognises that the painting has morphed into one that introduces the motif of infidelity. Further, Eddy de Jongh (1967) proposes a connection between Vermeer’s cupid and an engraving in Otto van Veen’s *Amorum Emblemata* (1608) (see fig. 6) that similarly depicts a cupid holding a tablet (this one inscribed legibly with the Roman numeral ‘I’, accompanied with the caption ‘*perfectus amor non est nisi ad unum*’: ‘a lover ought to love only one’) (Nevitt Jr 2001). The cupid emblem in ‘Girl Reading a Letter’ provides, as de Jongh’s analysis suggests, damning evidence of the young woman’s infidelity. Absent the painting of cupid, however, ‘Girl Reading a Letter’ becomes subtler; all that really remains as an indicator of illicit love, or physical passion, is the fruit, which cascades out of the bowl on the table, hinting at extramarital relations through the symbolism of peaches and apples that code Eve’s fall (Schneider 2004; Ferguson 1961).¹¹ The girl’s private affairs, then, advertised by the cast-aside curtain to the painting’s ‘outside’ world, are also publicised to the painting’s spectators—through the ages—by the fruit bowl. To informed viewers, she becomes still more available.

The painting, however, is self-complicating. Resisting Vermeer’s straightforward allegorical framework, the composition raises its own questions, articulates its own discomfort around the double erasure of the woman’s privacy. The flung-aside red privacy curtain draws attention to itself, since it is as nonsensical as the green drape. If the curtain’s historical function was as a tool for privacy—in today’s terminology, a blocking device—then why would it have been thrown aside? If Flanders is right that curtains were installed in the service of privacy, and if traditional readings of the letter’s illicit status are also correct, then the idea that the girl herself would have removed the curtain to gain more reading light is preposterous. The arrangement makes more sense if the curtain has been moved by Vermeer. In that act, the painter has denied the girl an opportunity to shield herself from prying eyes and moral censoriousness.

2. Shame and Surveillance

In the light of this re-contextualisation, Vermeer’s painting proves a useful tool for (re)examining our own experiences of close-observation. As subjects of today’s mass warrantless surveillance, we also find ourselves in front of open windows with our own red curtains flung aside. In 2013, then-UK foreign secretary William Hague acted in concert with his counterparts from other ‘five-eyes’ nations (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States) to downplay the significance of the Edward Snowden revelations. Faced with growing concern about government spying programmes such as PRISM, XKeyscore and Tempora (Wyszynski 2016), leaders drew on a well-worn aphorism: those with nothing to hide had nothing to fear. In Hague’s words:

If you are a law-abiding citizen [...] going about your business and your personal life you have nothing to fear. Nothing to fear about the British state or intelligence agencies listening to the content of your phone calls or anything like that.¹²

¹¹ A whole peach would symbolise virtue, but halved, the fruit points to, or at, a woman defamed through immoral action. See ‘The Hidden Symbolism of Fruit in Western painting’ (n.d.).

¹² Hague was speaking in defence of the so-called ‘Snoopers’ charter’—Draft Investigatory Powers Bill—and to allay fears about the extent of GCHQ spying, see Hague (2013).

As Dubrofsky points out—building on Rachel Hall's (2015: 9) conceptualisation of the 'aesthetics of transparency'—today's surveillance society operates on the basis that 'if there is nothing to hide, then the body can be freely put on display' (Dubrofsky 2016: 185). Hall's and Dubrofsky's theories help us to recognise Vermeer's subject as similarly exposed to a surveillant machinery that expects she will perform transparency. If the girl has nothing to hide she will willingly submit to such exposure, just as airline passengers today must 'perform voluntary transparency' and display their own willingness to submit to inspection and monitoring (Hall 2015: 111).

Both the well-worn phrase used by Hague and the 'aesthetics of transparency' inscribe a sense of shame into the desire for privacy (Hall 2015: 9). The assumption is that a subject should be at ease with being watched; further, that this ease becomes a means of attesting innocence. Hague's reassurances and modern surveillance discourse, then, have further traffic with Vermeer's painting. 'A Girl Reading a Letter' already problematises the co-identification of 'anythings' that are 'hidden' and 'anythings' that are 'shameful'. The red curtain, that is, is already engaged with the wide belief in the Netherlands in the 17th century that 'good Calvinists [had] nothing to hide' (Flanders 2014: 85). In an increasingly social era in the Netherlands, the humble curtain quickly became a potential symbol of impropriety, as it bore the cultural connotation of shame. Abner Sanger (1739-1822), a New England colonist, even referred to his neighbour Major Willard's new, and newly drawn, drapes as 'whore curtains' (Ekirch 2006; Sanger 1986: 409). In blunt terms, those who needed curtains had something to hide. Although Vermeer's white female may at first appear a 'safe' and transparent body (Dubrofsky 2016: 185), the curtains indicate that she is not a willing and docile subject and therefore, as with 'opaque' bodies who cannot perform their innocence to airport security because of either age, religion, race, disability or citizenship status, the girl represents a threat that must be further inspected and controlled (Hall 2015: 75).

To put things still another way, Vermeer's painting is in tension with itself. One strategy for better understanding the red curtain is to read it in the context of what we might call 17th century 'slut-shaming'—whose modern valencies recognisably form part of the surveillance canon. What we begin to see in 'Girl Reading a Letter' is the connivance of an aesthetic in a politics that sought to regulate and constrain female agency and sexual self-determination. Vermeer's work precisely marks the *gendered* aspects of peer scrutiny and shame, and develops concepts conjured by earlier artists such as Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516), whose *The Seven Deadly Sins* (c. 1505) indicates what Graham Sewell sees as 'the pre-modern concept of surveillance in pursuit of social control' (Sewell 2012: 309). The painting forces us to recognise how 17th century art was already registering the emotional and gendered pressures of surveillance that resonate anew in our own age of #sluts. It is only through examining the conjunction between historic and present-day visual media, media which is implicitly a component of 'an objectifying process that has particular implications for gendered bodies' in Dubrofsky and Megan M. Wood's terms (2015: 93), that we can further recognise aspects of the disciplinary gaze and the role of shame in surveillance.

As a practice, slut-shaming not only defames and stigmatises women but, as Jessica Valenti (2008: 15) argues, also aims to police their bodies and their actions.¹³ The goal of regulating and constraining female agency and sexual self-determination is achieved through self-surveillance, which slut-shaming (a form of lateral surveillance) encourages. But if we are to understand the finer ways in which slut-shaming engages in regimes of discipline, we need to arrive at a clearer sense of how shaming punishments operate and succeed. As June Price Tangney and Rhonda L. Dearing (2002: 2) recognise, shame is a supremely 'self-conscious' emotion, and arises from our self-consciousness that others might consider our behaviour indecent, offensive or ridiculous (Tangney and Dearing 2002: 2). More specifically, shame comprises part of what Eric Jaffe (2013: para 11 of 29) terms a 'social alert system', which works quickly to regulate morally questionable behaviour. The body's visceral experience of shame signals to the individual that their actions are unacceptable and potentially pose a threat to their social bonds with others (Eisenberger et al.

¹³ Definition of slut-shaming compiled from: Tanenbaum 2000; Valenti 2008; White 2003.

2003). In particular, women's experience of shame is rooted in the discomfort that comes from breaching a societal norm; self-regulation becomes a strategy to avoid future transgression (Clark 1999). Shame ensures obedience as efficiently as any external controlling forces, which Koskela also recognises as Foucauldian (Koskela 2004). It functions as a device that induces self-criticism and acute self-awareness because it is an emotion conjured when 'the self is thought of as being observed disapprovingly by others, so that even when alone the individual feels scrutinized' (Lutwak and Ferrari 1996: 891). The experience of shame and the act of shaming have an important role within modern surveillance, 'help[ing] to reinforce sexual norms by creating pressures for self-regulation' (Koskela 2012: 49). Shame provokes a similar response to the panoptic gaze, 'permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action' (Foucault 1977/1991: 201). Taking her inflections from Foucault but specifically addressing female experience of surveillance, Kruks realises that while both Panopticism and shame entail subjection 'to a gaze one cannot reciprocally return' (2001: 62), it is shame that initiates self-discipline and thereby enables the power of the gaze. It is this parallel between disciplinary gaze and the 'regime of shame', in Koskela's terms (2004: 207), that reveals the role of shame in surveillance discourse.

My claim is that shaming-punishments function to normalise behaviour just as Panopticism does. Castigations such as Vermeer's shaming of the letter reader lead to what Thomas Fuchs terms 'corporealizing effects' (2003: 225), in which shame turns the 'lived-body' into the corporeal and in doing so induces an acute 'self-perception from the standpoint of others' (2003: 229). The 'cold, scrutinizing, contemptuous or voyeuristic gaze', he adds, to which an individual is subjected after behaving improperly, "'corporealizes" the lived-body and throws the person back on [their] own body'; it 'captivates and subjects' them (2003: 226). In other words, in situations where one is exposed to the gaze of others—as typically occurs during slut-shaming—an individual is made self-consciously aware of their actions and responds by imposing 'intrasubjectival surveillance' (Marggraf Turley 2017: np) on him or (often more acutely) herself. In Foucauldian terms the self-surveilled individual becomes a docile body 'that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' (Foucault 1977/1991: 136). 'A Girl Reading a Letter' helps to deepen our understanding of this fraught juncture between slut-shaming and surveillance by evidencing how Vermeer does more than merely humiliate his subject. As the painting's carefully choreographed sight lines reveal, Vermeer's blushing subject is intentionally exposed to the communal gaze. The painting signals to female viewers that sluttishness will be exposed. It is complicit in an historical aesthetic that sought to unmask, control and determine the contours of female agency. Annotating the intersection of early regimes of shame and surveillance, 'A Girl Reading a Letter' extends our understanding of women's experience of surveillance in our own age.

3. Slut-Shaming and Structures of Visibility

The specific modality of public shaming in process in 'A Girl Reading a Letter' deserves to be identified as an integral, dynamic component of surveillance discourse. But where surveillance practices more broadly aim at engineering conformity to behavioural norms (Nettle et al. 2012), the act of public shaming, particularly of women, goes further, and is concerned precisely with defining and policing those norms. 'Sluts' are situated within a frame (literally, in the case of Vermeer's painting) that posits them as subversive elements to be contained and controlled. Communities take responsibility for these normative conventions, scrutinising and monitoring each other's behaviour, with especially pernicious outcomes for women. In other words, shame brought about by online communities places the object of their gaze as 'agentic' in a surveillance context (Bandura 2001: 1). Today, such responsabilisation might take the form of discussions by online communities about selfies—discussions that may be said to have what Anne Burns terms a 'regulatory social function', and which reflect 'contemporary social norms and anxieties, particularly relating to the behaviour of young women' (Burns 2015: 1716). Online communities single out 'abnormal' members deemed to have betrayed an agreed or implicit social convention, which identifies them as 'legitimate targets' for exposure and correction (Foucault 1977/1991: 183; Burns 2015: 1717). For instance, a recent *Seventeen* article takes aim at those who post selfies with 'too oily' skin (Addams Rosa 2014: 6);

offenders are encouraged to address and correct this imperfection before posting again. More worryingly, perhaps, such attempts to control and shame ‘transgressive’ individuals often involve the active stripping away of women’s privacy, as in Vermeer’s painting. A prime example here is the phenomenon of creep shots—images taken of an individual, usually a woman, without her consent or often her knowledge, and shared online. The practice, early identified by G. T. Marx as ‘covert “upskirt and down blouse” surveillance, has resulted in many women, including law enforcement officials, opting to wear trousers rather than skirts when out in public (Marx 2003: 379).

Before the subreddit was closed down, the administrators for CreepShots asserted that the right to view, or inspect, trumps a woman’s expectation of privacy: ‘When you are in public, you do not have a reasonable expectation of privacy. We kindly ask women respect our right to admire your bodies and stop complaining’ (CreepShots 2015). While American law does not mandate for any ‘reasonable expectation of privacy’ in public spaces, it could equally be argued that the Fourth Amendment was not originally designed to facilitate people’s ‘right to admire [women’s] bodies’ (CreepShots 2015).¹⁴ On the contrary, it was created to prevent warrantless searches as well as ‘freedom from arbitrary governmental intrusions’, protecting people’s ‘right to privacy’—their right to be left alone.¹⁵ In the case of CreepShots, the administrators have repurposed the Fourth Amendment as an excuse to justify public-observation of women through non-consensual image capture (CreepShots 2015).



Figure 7. Creeper card arrangement from 29C3, Hamburg.¹⁶

¹⁴ In reference to American law specifically as Reddit is an America based company. See also: Cornell’s definition: Expectation of Privacy (n.d.).

¹⁵ See Cornell on Fourth Amendment (n.d.).

¹⁶ Image included in Asher Wolf’s ‘Dear Hacker Community – We Need To Talk’ blogpost. Available at: <https://www.fsinf.at/dear-hacker-community-%E2%80%93-we-need-talk>.

Post-CreepShots, Asher Wolf's incisive post (2012) 'Dear Hacker Community' drew attention to the complex valencies of 'creeper cards' in debates around the observation and visibility of women on the internet.¹⁷ Wolf shrewdly identified the juncture of shame and surveillance in ways that recall the internal debates of Vermeer's painting. Creeper cards, which first appeared in 2011, are small, colour-coded, wallet-sized cards that women can hand out to male interlocutors at conferences, hackspaces and other public events. Green rewards 'respectful and mindful' behaviour, yellow reprimands 'mildly inappropriate' behaviour and red is reserved for 'wildly inappropriate behaviour' (Crowell 2011: para 3). The cards are intended as 'a non-confrontational way of engaging with harassment' (Crowell 2011: para. 4), but ironically represent the use of shame as a punishment—those who are 'carded' are publicly embarrassed.

Wolf's post addressed the appropriation of creeper cards at the 29th annual gathering of German hacker collective, the Chaos Computer Club, where a delegate collected cards and arranged them into the image of a headless, naked female body (Wolf 2012; fig. 7). Although the visual statement was subsequently owned by a female user with the handle 'Mirromaru' (2013), at the time the arrangement of cards seemed to Wolf to send out a very clear but 'implied message' from the assumed male perpetrator: 'creeps will exist, wherever and when-ever and despite the initiative you take, your efforts will be subverted, and all your efforts will be subjugated to place the focus back on your body, your gender' (Wolf 2012: 89). Mirromaru claimed to respect the card as a tool for those unable to communicate, but clarified that her intention was to problematise a situation in which people were unable to arrive at a resolution through discussion. Regardless of intent, the striking image of the exposed—and, crucially, headless—female body had the unwelcome effect of shaming women for imagining they could be anything other than objects under observation. Further, Mirromaru's arrangement of the creeper cards locates shame within surveillance discourse by reminding women that to be female is to be monitored—something that Vermeer's piece perhaps achieves more subtly.

'A Girl Reading a Letter' prefigures today's internet-shaming culture and codes the issues surrounding visibility that continue to detain us. Whereas in contemporary selfies or creep shots the *individual* is the target of peer scrutiny, in Vermeer's painting the girl reading is (and possibly more powerfully) a representative rather than an individual, whose anonymity helps to spread shame to the group to which she belongs. Slut-shaming as perpetrated by online users does the same work: it reminds women that they are under surveillance at the same time as it aims to alter behaviour. Slut-shaming is overwhelmingly deployed against individuals who are perceived to disrupt traditional gendered roles. Online 'creeper' communities make a significant contribution to identifying the range of activities, attitudes and appearances used in categorising a woman as 'slut', and in confirming her as someone who 'deviat[es] from the sexual behaviors of her peers' (Tanenbaum 2015: 46).¹⁸ Observing as it seeks to alter female behaviours, slut-shaming acts within regimes of discipline and surveillance as an 'eye of power' (Foucault 1988: 146). If Kruks (2001: 64-5) is correct to suggest that shame is most productively considered 'a primary structure of a woman's lived experience', then shame must also be considered crucial to the enforcement of discipline on the *female* self in particular. To be 'feminine' is to subscribe to a discipline that dictates appearance and justifies the constant observation of the body by others (Bartky 1998; Tanenbaum 2015). The ideology of femininity effectively supports the moderators of CreepShots in their promotion of the view that women should, in theory at least, 'respect' the right of others to 'admire' their bodies (CreepShots 2015). To be a woman is to experience shame as a primary structure that facilitates submission to such ideology. Tanenbaum, like Kruks, proceeds to correlate shame with Foucauldian power constructs when she relates the role of shame in feminine ideology to the function of the prison guard in the Panopticon: 'because women are rewarded

¹⁷ See also A. Massanari (2017) for in-depth discussion of newer media practices and gender on the internet, namely surrounding GamerGate and The Fapping.

¹⁸ See also J. Burgess and A. Matamoros-Fernández (2016: 79) who identify the platforms used by creeper communities, such as YouTube, Twitter and Tumblr, as avenues which not only provide 'the stage on which public debates play out' but also shape 'their topics and dynamics'.

for compliance, they police themselves as if they lived within a supervised prison' (Tanenbaum 2015: 116). Shame in itself becomes a form of 'self-surveillance' that maintains ideology.

Vermeer's painting, then, is clearly engaged—implicated—in similar power structures to those governing the contemporary digital realm. The painting begins to show us how women, as conventional subjects of paintings, found themselves being 'shared' and shamed in a way that resonates in our digital age. It explains to us that just as women today are targeted on the internet by what the *Guardian* describes as 'dismissive trolls', women in the 17th century were exposed to similar strategies of inspection and regulation (Gardiner et al. 2016: para 3).¹⁹ In its presentation of the female subject as 'slut', the painting maintains what Burns refers to as 'gendered power relations' by 'perpetuating negative female stereotypes that legitimize the discipline of women's behaviors and identities' (Burns 2015: 1716). Through its own acts of resistance, however, 'Girl Reading a Letter' forces us to (re)consider these governing concepts at the heart of the construction of nation states—namely, in Foucauldian terms, discipline and the 'discursive construction' of the gendered subject (Burns 2015: 1717). The painting's moral resonance has become muted over time; added to which, modern audiences might miss altogether the subtleties of symbolic elements such as the curtains. Nevertheless, re-historicised this mid-17th century painting also allows us to recognise the selfie and related visual-media examples of modern day slut-shaming such as CreepShots as epistemologically contiguous instances of surveillance.

Conclusion

By examining pre-20th century art and literature in relation to modern shame discourse, we are able to locate analogous women's experiences of surveillance in far earlier epochs than our own. What is more, we can point to a politically intriguing, multi-layered self-reflexivity in such works as 'Girl Reading a Letter' towards issues around coveillance and the lateral gaze. Vermeer's painting, I have argued, generates a vital rapport between the historical narrative and our modern understanding of lateral surveillance. The painter's allegory attempts to publicise the subject's sluttish indecency by pulling aside her red privacy curtain. But we need to be clear that this act is emphatically the (male) artist's, not the woman's own, since public self-exposure of this kind makes no historical sense. Shame theory, applied in conjunction with more familiar heuristic paradigms, enables us to recognise the complexly arranged nodal connections between surveillance and early modern regimes of shame, which in turn help us to understand more fully women's experience of surveillance in the 21st century.

More than this, through the painting's self-critique of Vermeer's slut-shaming—conveyed through its apparent consciousness of the nonsensically positioned red curtain—the composition already engages some of the major issues animating our own struggles with gendered surveillance. In particular, it raises searching questions about visual media and the objectification of gendered bodies that, as Dubrofsky and Wood argue (2015), deserve our attention in the context of surveillance discourse. Additionally, the intersections of gendered surveillance with class, race and disability throughout history remain undertheorized, as Magnet (2016) compellingly points out. The hybrid methodology I have outlined represents a first attempt to demonstrate art history as a valuable lens into the epistemology of surveillance, and to correct what Robert Heynen and Emily van der Meulen (2016: 5) identify as society's more 'present-centric tendencies that see surveillance as dramatically new'. The intersection of shame and surveillance discourse affords an opportunity to sharpen our collective awareness of historical female experiences of the asymmetric gaze.

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¹⁹ See also, H. Gladfelder (2001).

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