**Invisibility and Power in the Digital Age: Issues for Feminist and Queer Narratology**

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**ABSTRACT**

This essay examines the continued assumption that representational visibility equates to power, in the digital age. It considers the tension between the image as a form that captures what already exists and the image as a future possibility in the era of the mantra ‘You cannot be what you cannot see’ and growing recognition of gender fluidity. After re-examination of Peggy Phelan’s reminder about the power of the unmarked, I turn to Ali Smith’s 2014 *How to be both*, a novel with an interchangeable Renaissance narrative and contemporary story in a palimpsestic structure, to propose a formula that could be described as the *becoming-simultaneous of narrative sequence*. In conceiving the ’unnarrated’ as both a gap in what was represented in retrospect in an existing storyworld but equally as a narrative future, I link the unmarked to political possibility, and conclude that you can’t always see what you can be.

**KEYWORDS**

Ali Smith; Peggy Phelan; Feminist Narratology; Identity Politics; Gender.

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‘If representational visibility equals power’ Peggy Phelan wrote in 1993, ‘then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture.’[[1]](#endnote-1) This outright challenge to the equivalence of visibility and power, for all its power and wit, has not managed to dislodge what is a settled assumption in much feminist theory, and in more general thinking about the relationship between representation and politics: that representational visibility is a positive value in itself. There is, in other words, an established view that the question of visibility itself is more basic than questions of how something is represented since visibility itself confers membership of the known universe on a particular social identity. To be able to see something or someone, in the sphere of representation, is to know that it is possible within what Phelan calls the ‘boundaries of the putative real’ (p. 1). This is an assumption that underlies many feminist positions, slogans and popular injunctions that take visibility as a political issue. A contemporary example is *Miss Representation*, an internet project with the explicit aim of increasing the number of women working in positions of power, in science, technology, commerce and industry, which upholds the view that aspirational possibility is founded in representational visibility under the formula ‘You can’t be what you can’t see.’[[2]](#endnote-2) Marian Wright Edelman’s mantra is used more widely in social media to apply to the representation of other marginalised groups, to inspire the isolated individual and show her that she is not alone in her sexuality, race, interests, or professional ambition. Her slogan is aspirational; it is postfeminist, in appealing to the individual’s motivation to achieve, rather than feminist, which would consider the structures of oppression that prevent her from doing so. It establishes a basic equivalence between what is possible and what can be seen, but it also, crucially, places a responsibility on the makers of the image to present the marginalised in a good light, as role models, and so avoids the crude equation of visibility and power. This tension between representational visibility itself and positive value, which was at the heart of Phelan’s project in 1993, will be a framework for the discussion of contemporary fiction that follows. I use Ali Smith’s 2015 novel *How to be both* to propose a new dimension to the dynamic relationship between narrative and sexuality of spatialized form, whilst simultaneously reconsidering Phelan in the current digital era.

It might be argued that the equivalence of visibility with power belongs to a new presupposition that pervades the internet, and which inverts the relationship between events and their representation. ‘Pics or it didn’t happen’ is the more banal cry of the Instagram era, which declares that without visual documentation on social media an event didn’t occur at all.[[3]](#endnote-3) Like Edelman’s call, it affirms the power of the visible; what can be seen is what matters, what can be seen is what is real. In the classical concept of mimesis, reality comes first and representation follows, but the power bestowed on the representation of the visible in the internet age seems to distort or challenge this order. ‘Pics or it didn’t happen’ encapsulates a strange inversion of events and representations that has become a refrain in literary and cultural theory concerned to show that words, and representations in general, construct rather than reflect social reality. But no theory is involved, no structuralist linguistics or performative speech acts needed, in this statement of the primordial visual image. It evokes Derrida’s account of the archive, as something which produces as much as it records the event, or Stiegler’s account of the originary externalization of memory, but it does so at the level of the snap, on the platform of social media.[[4]](#endnote-4) The tension between representation and aspiration in Edelman’s statement ‘you can’t be what you can’t see’ can also be understood in these terms, as a tension between the image as a form that captures what already exists, and the image as a future possibility (i.e. you cannot become what is not visible in representation). The tendency in the visual image to point backwards and forwards, the queer temporality that inverts the relationship between the before and after, surfaces in various ways in the analysis of vision and visibility below. In different ways, the issue of visibility’s equivalence to power is transformed by this temporal queerness, into a question about which comes first, or more specifically, whether visual representation can produce, as well as reflect, political power.

**I. The Unmarked**

Phelan is not, of course, arguing against media representation of marginalised groups, but outlining the problems of any straightforward belief that heightened visibility might lead to social inclusion or power. One such problem is the assumption that visual appearance has the power to represent a coherent community or social identity at all. In a recent interview, Maggie Nelson illustrates this problem in what we might call the Caitlyn Jenner paradox: ‘[t]he most shocking thing about [Caitlyn Jenner](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/caitlyn-jenner) is that she’s a Republican. That’s proof alone that it’s not clear what politics stem from certain gender and sexuality arrangements.’[[5]](#endnote-5) Jenner is a high-profile transgender woman, whose attendance at Donald Trump’s Inauguration prevents feelings of kinship from most other transgender women. This self-evident multiplicity of things, the heterogeneity of entities and identities, nevertheless continues to trouble the representation of marginalised groups whose composition by individuals and differences is so often erased by what Phelan refers to as ‘identity politics’. The paradox that comes into view is that the recognition of an identity or community in the public sphere erases the composition of that identity by individuals, while any undue emphasis on individuality will fragment, factionalise and weaken the collective identity that is addressed.

These are old and familiar problems in the logic of sameness and difference for political action. Phelan’s main argument with the simplifications of identity politics concern sight, what can and cannot be seen, what can and cannot be known. We cannot necessarily see a category of person. We do not always recognise a community. We cannot necessarily categorise a person. If we quite cannot always see another’s gender, sexuality, race or politics, Phelan argues, it is ‘unmarked’ and there is therefore no ‘smoothly mimetic’ (p. 7) link between representation and identity. Instead, Phelan claims that each of these ‘presumption[s] reflects the ideology of the visible, an ideology which erases the power of the unmarked, unspoken, and unseen’ (Ibid.). Phelan’s aim is to unpick the perceived ‘binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility’, to assert the ‘real power in remaining unmarked’ and point out that ‘Visibility is a trap […]; it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession’ (p. 6). In this argument then, the equivalence between power and visibility is displaced by the opposite view, that invisibility might be a locus of power. For Phelan, ‘you can’t be what you can’t see’ equates that which is real with that which is visible, fixing the identity into one flawed image.

Phelan asks us to recognise just how unorthodox a thought this is - that we might value the immaterial or the invisible - in the current climate. It is exactly this unorthodox alignment of power with the invisible or unmarked that I want to develop and amplify here. The urgency of this plea has, in my view, only increased in the twenty-first century, in the context of a culture that relies ever more heavily on visible representation and affirms the visible as that which is real. In her article on trans narratives for the *London Review of Books*, Jacqueline Rose notes of Caitlyn Jenner’s famous *Vanity Fair* cover that ‘[i]t’s as if […] the photographic session, rather than hormones or surgery, were the culmination of the process (though Liebovitz herself insists that the photos were secondary to the project of helping Caitlyn to “emerge”).’[[6]](#endnote-6) In this sense of the true self being fixed and externalised in the realm of representation, rather than in the interior of the subject, we find the same inversion of the before and after, and the same entanglement of reality and its image, that preside over the question of visibility and power.

**II. Feminist Narratology and the Unseen**

What can be seen, who is seen and who sees, have long been questions of concern to feminists. Groundbreaking work in theories of spectatorship (by Mary Ann Doane, Laura Mulvey, Jacqueline Rose) employed psychoanalysis to posit a male gaze as the default position in film, and even culture at large. But in her 1996 essay on looking and *Persuasion*, Robyn Warhol claimed that ‘narratology has not made as much use as it might of the notion of the “gaze” as it has developed in film studies.’[[7]](#endnote-7) This was all the more surprising for the fact that, as Warhol went on to say, ‘the gaze in film and the focalization of verbal texts are similar in their function’ (Ibid.). In the volume of essays Warhol and Susan S. Lanser edited in 2013, *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, Lanser, reflecting upon developments in feminist narratology since her 1986 inaugurating essay, ‘Toward a Feminist Narratology’, demonstrates that her gendered theorising of focalization (who sees) and narrative voice (who speaks) are the significant achievements of this strand of post-classical narratology;

A still queerer lens might suggest that when a heterodiegetic narrator’s gender is unmarked, heterodiegesis becomes the very emblem of gender indeterminacy. We’re all doubtless familiar as teachers with the students who say, “in this novel *it* says…”; perhaps that is not simply a sign of ignorance, as I have certainly lamented on more than one occasion, but a sign of queerness, and historical instability, of heterodiegesis itself.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Lanser’s graduation from working toward a more feminist narratology to working toward a queerer narratology since 1986 reflects the rise of queer theory and growing recognition of the need for intersectionality in that time; no longer can a single identity category stand as a satisfactory means of investigating experience and representation. The notion of gender fluidity, signified in Lanser’s account by the pronoun ‘it’ in narrative, has also become more prominent, even mainstream, in the 21st century. Does ‘it’ represent the power of Phelan’s unseen? What problems does ‘it’ therefore present for mimetic representation?

One optimistic reading of Lanser’s account is that there is no problem: that what texts and readers have always already known is now being disclosed and foregrounded by narratologists and gender theorists. For Lanser, ‘heterodiegesis [may be] the very emblem of gender indeterminacy’ (Ibid.). Thus, the narrative representation of fluid genders is as old as the novel itself, in the sense that novels have always recognised and dramatized social aspects of voice, including gender indeterminacies, that may not be fully acknowledged or understood in the ‘outside’ world. The novel, in this sense, may always have been at work on the complications of gender fluidity and the unmarked voice in ways that affirm again the basic thesis that the representations might, at times, be thought of as anterior and not posterior to the behaviours they describe or the actions they imitate.

I would like to propose that a step can be taken in the same direction with the help of what might be called ‘spatialised form’: a kind of dynamic movement between spatial arrangement and narrative sequence, that, like indeterminate gender voices, queers the distinction between space and time. The becoming time of space and becoming space of time is, I would like to propose, with Martin Hägglund, an inherent property of narrative sequence, exploited by novels for particular thematic purposes.[[9]](#endnote-9) My interest in this dynamic conflation is that it can be taken as another core formal property of narrative, and one which co-operates with the entanglements of voice, sometimes in the service of a kind of queering. In the remainder of this essay, I would like to explore, in particular, Ali Smith’s 2014 novel *How to be both* to develop the idea that spatialized form can contribute to our understanding of the erotics of narrative, and at the same time specify the ways in which a novel itself can conduct an enquiry into the topic of visibility and power.[[10]](#endnote-10)

**III. *How to be both* and spatialized form**

Ali Smith’s novel *How to be both* is composed of two parts, which have become known as ‘Camera’ and ‘Eyes’, after the line drawings which precede each respectively. The camera is a surveillance camera; the eyes are on a stalk, extracted from a painting of St. Lucy by the Italian Renaissance painter, Francesco del Cossa (1430-1477). ‘Camera’ tells the story of a present-day teenager, George (short for Georgia), who lives in Cambridge and whose mother Carol has recently and suddenly died. Shortly before her death, Carol, fascinated by an image painted by del Cossa that she stumbled upon in a magazine, took George and her brother Henry to see it ‘for real’ in Ferrara (p. 233). ‘Eyes’ gives a fictionalised account of del Cossa’s life, in which ‘he’ is a woman disguised as a man to enable a career as a painter. In this outline, the thematics of vision can already be understood in their Shakespearean relation to gender, but also in the historical zoning of the novel’s action between the Renaissance and the digital gaze.

Another level of vision is foregrounded by *How to be both*, namely the act of looking at words on a page. Readers, especially those who are unfamiliar with modernism, can find Smith’s prose challenging exactly because her books are visually striking: sometimes words are presented as concrete or pattern poems, with puzzling typographical significance and / or onomatopoeic resonance. Here is an example from page 4:

just caught my (what)

on a (ouch)

dodged a (whew) (biff)

(bash) (ow)

(mercy)

On first sight, there appears to be a lot of white space on each page, even when a narrative sequence rather than a poetic pattern is given; closer investigation reveals that this is partly because the text is not justified, typographically aligned. Words are not broken up and hyphenated to fill a line and the text is not therefore dense or full. This unusual presentation is enhanced by a range of other visual and graphic properties. There are no inverted commas around speech but there is a space before as well as after a colon, and many colons are used;

and that over there, that’s him, isn’t it? Never

seen it before but it’s him : yes : ah : it’s a beauty :

and that one there’s him too, is it? (p. 9)

Our experience of reading then, is to be struck by visual differences, some of which we cannot initially explain. Whilst the absence of speech marks is readily identified, the unjustified text is not. I would argue that Smith’s spatial presentation makes us see what is usually present but is absent in her texts; the blank spaces perform the power of the unseen.

These are typographical features of all Smith’s books since *Hotel World* in 2001, but what is most surprising about *How to be both* is that it was printed in two formats; it is entirely accidental whether the reader gets ‘Camera’ or ‘Eyes’ first.[[11]](#endnote-11) Each part is labelled ‘One’, so even if a reader is unaware that chance has determined the order in which she receives the book, reaching another part ‘One’ half way through indicates a challenge to linear chronology. Each part ‘One’ has the quality of a palimpsest to the other; Francescho (sic) haunts ‘Camera’, watching George, whilst ‘Eyes’ may have been focalised or written by George (as hinted by the different spelling of the artist’s name and the repetition of the anachronistic teenage idiom ‘just saying’ throughout). These connections and the absence of sequence resulting from the two part Ones inspire the reader to re-read the book at least one more time to understand the links; thus an ending is perpetually deferred and the beginning and ends of each section overlap. Within each part, chronology is further disrupted: in ‘Camera’, George’s memories of her mother and her current life are presented simultaneously; Carol is both dead and alive. As I shall show, there are countless instances of doubling and simultaneity, of bothness, throughout. In the interchangeability of the Renaissance narrative with the contemporary story, and in the palimpsest structure, the novel places the before and after of chronology into a dynamic relation that conflates the then and the now of historical time, in a formula that could be described as the *becoming-simultaneous of narrative sequence.*

The visual surface of language constantly comes into view as part of the thematics of before and after in *How to be both.* At the start of the ‘Camera’ version (i.e. that half of the print run that begins with Camera), there is a scene focalised by George in which she recalls a conversation with her mother, Carol, in the present tense. They are in the car in Italy ‘last May’ on the way to visit the Ferrara frieze. Carol, who is the anonymous author of ‘Subverts’, politically subversive texts which pop up on art websites and artistic texts which pop up on political websites (one of the many examples of simultaneity in the novel), asks George a question about moral integrity relating to del Cossa’s demands for a higher rate of pay for what he believes is superior painting. George does not respond to the issue but criticises her mother’s grammatical inaccuracies leading to a conversation in which Carol holds the position that ‘language is a living growing changing organism […] which follows its own rules and alters them as it likes’ (pp. 195-6) and George is accused of pedantry for wanting to uphold its rules. Carol, on the side of flux, appears to be on the approved side of the binary; focus on grammar is an evasion by George of the serious topic of conversation which is at first about value and reward, then about binaries themselves. She demands more information:

Is it happening now or in the past? George says. Is the artist a woman or a man?

Do either of those things matter? her mother says.

Does either, George says. Either being singular.

Mea maxima, her mother says.

I just don’t get why you won’t commit, ever, George says. (p. 193)

Before this remembered conversation, at the very start of the ‘Camera’ section, George reveals that grief has dissolved her grammatical rigidity, her pedantry:

At least they’ve used an apostrophe, the George from before her mother died says.

I do not give a fuck about whether some site on the internet attends to grammatical correctness, the George from after says. (p. 191)

The comic incongruity between grammar and death, the visual surface of language and its content, is part of an enquiry here into the differences between visual and verbal interpretation. But grammatical pedantry also signifies an interest in fixity and fluidity that goes to the heart of the novel’s interest in gender. George’s mother’s death has thrown her into chaos - an unwelcome form of fluidity - but there is a subtext to the earlier conversation about art and value indicated not just by the strength of the closing plea but by the fact that when her mother describes language as a living ‘organism’, the image of a book that she used to own ‘How to Achieve Good Orgasm’ (another grammatically inelegant phrase) is spontaneously evoked for George. George is curious, perhaps prurient, about her mother’s friendship with a woman called Lisa Goliard. Her desire for her mother to ‘commit’ seems freighted with much more weight than a request for grammatical accuracy, just as the strictures of binary linguistic constructions impose cruelly on those who wish to live outside of them.

The tension between fixity and fluidity is part of the novel’s interest in structures of looking, in art and sexuality, and in the interaction of its two historical periods. In the storyworld, George’s desire for things to be known and fixed is presented as symptomatic of her age (adolescence) and the age (‘pics or it didn’t happen’). When she explains to her counsellor that she and her mother wondered if her mother was under surveillance, if Lisa Goliard was a spy, Mrs Rock explains the etymology of the word ‘mystery’; it ‘originally meant a closing, of the mouth or the eyes. It meant an agreement or an understanding that something would not be disclosed’ (p. 258). George ponders this idea of things remaining unrevealed, unmarked. During the visit to Ferrara, and thus after the conversation above, George confesses to her mother that she once replied to Lisa as her mother on her mother’s mobile phone, telling Lisa that she was too busy with her family to see her. Carol is highly entertained by this, and explains that:

even though I suspected I’d been played [by Goliard], there was something. It was true, and it was passionate. It was unsaid. It was left to the understanding. To the imagination. […] And most of all, my darling. The being seen. The being watched. It makes life very, well I don’t know. Pert. […] Seeing and being seen, Georgie, is very rarely simple, her mother says. (pp. 308-9)

Here being seen, witnessed, is pleasurable precisely because it was not explained, spelt out and thus fixed in language. It was complex rather than simple. Carol’s declaration calls to mind Phelan’s ‘Memory. Sight. Love. All require a witness, imagined or real’ and in doing so provides context for George’s behaviour in scenes which are presented earlier in the narrative but which occur later chronologically.[[12]](#endnote-12) Carol has explained her own pleasure in the relationship with Goliard, but the conversation seems strangely neglectful of George’s feelings. Carol describes her gratification in being watched as feeling ‘permitted […] Like I was *being allowed*’ (p. 310). She does not spell out the ways in which she is being permitted but the most obvious seem to be as a sexual being, experiencing same-sex desire (she and Lisa share a passionate kiss) and as a political activist (the Subverts are anonymous). She is being seen as she wishes to be seen; her secret identities are being witnessed, and Lisa Goliard is the spectator who provides ‘self-authority, assurance, presence’ in the story that Carol tells.

The erotic division of labour between the subject and the object of the gaze is linked to power here by associations with surveillance and subversion, but the link is also visible on the surface of language. At the level of referential content, the narrative presents issues of surface and depth, the glamorous secrets of having a lover and being an activist, which are independent of Carol’s known public identities of mother and wife. At this level, the relation between truth and lies also has the temporal dimension, since secrets belong to the life of adults, the adulthood that George approaches. In the service of this theme, after Carol’s death, George’s father is angry when she talks about the possible surveillance, believing it to be an adolescent fantasy of Carol’s to distract her from her life; ‘and how do you think that makes me feel, George?’ (p. 283). Lisa Goliard may not have been a spy, but she does not seem to be the artist she said she was. And this is what can also be seen on the surface of language: as George tells us, she is a liar, and the word ‘liar’ is embedded in her name, nested graphically in the word ‘God’, the symbol of ultimate surveillance. That her name contains the word ‘liar’ indicates her role in the text as a signifier of uncertainty, the unsettling power of that which cannot be known. And yet it is the combination between what cannot be seen or known and godlike omniscience that seems to confer bothness on Lisa. In contrast to her husband’s slight, Carol’s failure to commit seems more an expression of maturity; her response to George’s assertion that ‘It can’t be both. It must be one or the other,’ the question ‘Why must it?’ (p. 194) is a refusal to be fixed into a single identity.

At every stage, the linguistic surface, both its visual surface and its grammatical conventions, co-operate in this way with the enquiry into what can be seen and what is unmarked. Smith’s stub of a title, intrigues in its incompletion: how to be both what and what? That the ‘b’ of ‘both’ is not capitalized suggests that ‘both’ is functioning here as an adverb or adjective rather than a pronoun, but even if read as a pronoun, of course, there is no sense of what two elements it is standing for. This is one of the uses of the pronoun in everyday discourse; to stand in for something the speaker does not want to spell out or pin down but instead imply – ‘he’s one of *those*’, ‘do you think they’re doing *it*?’ – especially with reference to the unknown, titillating or taboo of sexuality. As a pronoun on its own ‘both’, paradoxically, suggests twoness, duality, two things perhaps two people, something impossible. The grammatical incompletion of Smith’s title embodies *and* emphasises the impossibility of its proposition, but it also invests its two missing, invisible words with a considerable power. It achieves and retains the power of the unmarked.

**IV. Invisibility and Blindness**

The value of ‘bothness’, for this novel, is in the becoming simultaneous of things separated in time, which is the very essence of del Cossa’s frieze of the seasons, and yet this becoming space of time is never quite separable from, because it is the structure of, gender ambiguity: as a representation of all twelve months in one frame, the frieze is an emblem of an impossible and unsettling spatial co-presence, or spatialization of time. Carol’s love of bothness, of ambiguity, is the key to her love of the Ferrara frieze, the first thing that has made her happy since her friendship with Lisa Goliard mysteriously (to her) ended. In it she finds ‘constant sexual and gender ambiguities running through the whole work’ leading to her claim ‘[o]n this alone I could make a reasonably witty argument for its originator being female, if I had to’ (p. 297). Here maleness is certainty, being female is ambiguous unfixed Otherness. In that moment, George scoffs at the lingering influence of her mother’s art history and women’s studies degrees, but there is a case to be made for George as author of ‘Eyes’ – the anachronisms, the misspellings of Franchesco – enacting her mother’s beliefs, telling the story of del Cossa as a woman not a man. In adolescence, George is left without a mother; her actions and behaviour instead are shaped by recent memories of Carol and the profound questions she asked. This happens perhaps in her choice of school project but also happens in terms of George’s own sexuality and identity as female.

Phelan’s assertion that ‘the desire to be seen is also activated by looking at inanimate art’ is given credence throughout the novel, here in Carol’s delight. [[13]](#endnote-13) The memory of her pleasure in ‘being seen’, which was at least partly about sexual desire and identity as a sexual being, as well as her death, provides a context for George’s subsequent behaviour. These issues are at their most visible in those sections of the novel that deal openly with pornographic representation. Deciding that not having had sex and not having seen any porn were ‘like doubly being a virgin’ (p. 217) – another doubling – George takes her iPad into the garden, away from potential discovery by her younger brother, and watches some. The films that intrigue her are described in the diegesis through the focalisation of her innocent curiosity. The first film features a younger woman led by an older woman, both stylishly dressed, into what looks to George ‘like a gym’ but which we recognise as an S&M dungeon. The older woman drops a blinding liquid into the eyes of the younger woman so that she can’t see what is to be done to her (she is the passive object of the gaze, the acted upon rather than active as conventional pornography prescribes); George sees only flashes of ‘extreme-looking moments’ since the full film is only available upon subscription (flashes are all that a young person knows about sex). The passage is full of sight metaphors, reflecting the structures of looking and watching that characterise pornography. But a slip in time from ‘Eyes’ into ‘Camera’ provides insight into what is happening to George as she views. In ‘Eyes’, Franchesco, as ghost, watches George watching pornography and states ‘this is a girl with a very strong eye’ (p. 67). Franchesco means that the scene is extreme or disturbing, but the phrase has the homophone of ‘I’: this is a girl with a very strong I, a strong sense of self? Grief and adolescence mean that George does not seem to have a strong sense of self, but she is engaged in a process of self-discovery as to what it means to be female, and a sexual being, in western society. When George asks whether the blinding of the young woman in the film is permanent, she calls to mind a Shakespearean plot, other elements of which might be the cross-dressing of ‘Eyes’, or the gender confusion when Franchesco’s ghost realises of George ‘this boy is a girl’ (p. 65). The scene refers to St Lucy, of whom it is said variously that her eyes were gouged out and she was raped in a brothel as punishment for refusing to burn a sacrifice, or that she removed her own eyes to avoid the gaze of a suitor.

The film thus draws together many of the novel’s tropes and allusions. But whilst it seems only to intrigue George, another profoundly disturbs her, and seems to do so through the identification of eye and I that women experience in watching conventional pornography. As Phelan describes, ‘[t]he process of self-identity is a leap into a narrative that employs seeing as a way of knowing’ but ‘[t]aking the world in is a process of loss: learning to see is training careful blindness.’[[14]](#endnote-14) The ‘careful blindness’ has yet to be learnt by George; the one which will shield her from the pain of identifying with the victimized female. The third film that is described in the diegesis concerns a girl who ‘looked about twelve’ (p. 221). George’s naivety seems to allow her to hope that the girl ‘must have been sixteen because of legality’ (Ibid.) but the film disturbs her even so. The girl looks drugged and is discomforted; her abuser is an older man. Once seen, George cannot unsee the girl:

Afterwards when George tried to watch any more of this kind of sexual film that girl was there waiting under them all.

More. George found that the girl was there too, pale and pained with her shut eyes and her open o of a mouth, under the surface of the next TV show she watched on catch-up.

She was there under the YouTube videos of Vampire Weekend and the puppy falling off the sofa and the cat sitting on the hoover. (Ibid.)

Thus haunted by the film, George decides to watch it every day to bear witness to its horrors and the terrible things that happen everywhere on a daily basis. She wants her actions to form a kind of penance for the girl. This sweet childish gesture begins while her mother is still alive, but George is caught watching the film by her father after Carol has died. It is significant that this is one of the very few scenes in the novel in which her father appears; the next is also a monitoring of her sexuality. His exasperation, anxiety, grief perhaps lead him to make a very poor attempt to console, one which fails to convince and illuminates the degree of loss that George has suffered in her mother dying. He says of the abused girl ‘[s]he was probably very well paid for it’ (p. 224), unfortunately aligning himself with the wrong side of the binary which pits male power and capital against the vulnerable female slave. George struggles to explain to her father why her viewing is different but he responds that these repeated viewings online will only serve to raise the film’s popularity, raising it to the top of whatever search led George to it in the first place. In the world, George’s actions which were forged with the best intentions will encourage replication of the crime. But her repeated viewings of the film must be read as the response to and attempt to resolve a trauma.

These questions of vision and power are explored, characteristically for Smith, in associative and tropological ways, in a way that is never quite separable from her concerns with the visual surface of language itself. But the enquiry is also never distant from the ideas that it encodes so suggestively, or from the more discursive expression of critical and philosophical debates. In remembering the trip to Ferrara, George recalls one such debate which irritated her at the time. Carol told George that after a flood had damaged the frieze, restorers discovered pictures below that were different to those on the surface. Asking which came first, the frieze or the sketches underneath, Carol muses:

But the first thing we see […] and most times the only thing we see, is the one on the surface. So does that mean it comes first after all? And does that mean the other picture, if we don’t know about it, may as well not exist? (p. 289)

Carol is asking her daughter to think about history; her conversation turns to the executions that happened during the First World War in the square in which they sit. Poignantly, as it turns out, she is asking for remembrance. But the question has clear parallels with concerns about visibility and identity. (‘Memory. Sight. Love. All require a witness, imagined or real’). In repeatedly watching the rape of the girl, George is refusing to forget her and the many victims like her. For George, the internet parallels Carol’s frieze; she cannot unsee what is underneath, the girl and her trauma, when looking at the trivial entertainments on the surface. She sees both. Her mother asked her to bear witness and she does. In ‘Camera,’ there are several scenes which draw attention to the simultaneities and repetitions afforded by the internet; in one, George watches a programme about the Flying Scotsman on two screens, from half-way through on tv and from the start on her laptop. What can be seen on screens now, the simultaneous, endless transmissions of many pasts is the visual representation of memory. The image here is partly that of the multiplicity that comes from simultaneity, but it also evokes the basic time structure that runs through the novel and my argument, of uncertainty in relation to the before and after. And many of the novel’s details work in the service of this same ambiguity or temporal inversion, often in ways that return us to its central concern with being both man and woman, such as the performance of *As You Like It*, that Shakespearean tract on gender ambiguity, that George watches in the wrong order, first from middle to end, then from start to middle, so superimposing the technological issues of recording once again onto the Shakespearean motif, and in the process enacting the duality of its own form as a novel.

Sometimes these interests in visibility and abuse read like straightforward warnings about the dangers of recording and surveillance in the ditigal age. It is not only grief, one form of love, which unmoors George. She falls in love with Helena Fisker, a bold girl at school, who saves her from one of the many humiliating forms of bullying enabled by technology. The year 9 girls loiter in the school toilets to record the sound of other girls urinating, on their phones. These sound files are then distributed to boys whose disgust is particularly strong for those who are deemed to wee loudly. The surveillance of female bodies happens everywhere. George was being filmed coming out of a cubicle when Helena snatched the phone from the filmer and dropped it into the toilet. George wonders if the phone’s memory has survived, because if so ‘it meant that there was a recording of her somewhere and in it she was looking straight over their heads into the eyes of Helena Fisker’ (p. 264). Once they are friends, as a further test of their compatibility, George tentatively asks Helena if she believes that her mother might have been under surveillance. They are in Carol’s study at the time. As an affirmative answer, Helena lists the kinds of monitoring that we are all under, concluding as a sexual overture that she would monitor George. (Through her watchfulness, she has already saved George from the unwelcome surveillance in the school toilets). In this conversation and in George’s pondering about the survival of the phone’s memory, seeing is for the girls, as for Carol, a declaration of sexual desire and of identity. Mr Cook has been standing at the door, has overheard this conversation (again monitoring her sexuality), and rather than address what really concerns him (the girls’ relationship) requests that they leave Carol’s study, metaphorically amounting to an expulsion from her mother’s space, perhaps her mother’s sexuality. Nevertheless, as witness, he is the spectator who determines it.

**V. Unmarked flashes of the Future**

Towards the end of her part of the novel, ‘Camera’, George’s pedantry returns; she corrects Helena’s grammar. It is not the case that a realisation of her own homosexuality leads her to happily embrace ‘they’ and grammatical fluidity. As for Maggie Nelson in the memoir of her relationship with fluidly gendered Harry Dodge, instead, love is asserted through rigour. Remembering feminist study, reading Irigaray, a theorist whose analysis of the ‘sex which is not one’ seems germane to a theory of bothness, Nelson expounds:

It’s easy to get juiced up about a concept like plurality or multiplicity and start complimenting everything as such. [Eve Kosovsky] Sedgwick was impatient with that kind of sloppy praise. Instead, she spent a lot of time talking and writing about that which is more than one, and more than two, but less than infinity.

This finitude is important. It makes possible the great mantra, the great invitation, of Sedgwick’s work, which is to “pluralize and specify.” (Barthes: “One must pluralize, refine, continuously.”) This is an activity that demands an attentiveness – a relentlessness, even – whose very rigor tips it into ardor.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Towards the end of ‘Camera’, George cycles to the outskirts of Cambridge, by Addenbrooke’s Hospital where her mother died, and along the DNA cycle path which is marked at each end by a sculpture of the double helix. The path is marked by 10,257 coloured rectangles which stand for the components of the human gene. She cycles from one sculpture to the other, precisely the length of the gene, and from that distance photographs the sculpture at the other end. She sends the image to Helena. To George, the springlike twist of the sculpture represents that which cannot be repressed, a shout which is ‘real’ history. The helix’s double twist is a description of the two parts of the novel. The scene, like the novel itself, is richly overdetermined. The cycle path and the sculptures magnify with precision that which cannot be seen, a form of knowledge which is recently known. It speaks of scientific precision but to George signifies an emotion, the revolutionary spirit of ‘real’ history. Within the novel, the scene literalises the metaphor of distance with which George has needed to travel to gain perspective. She first saw what looked like a helix from the window of a train, then cycles out of Cambridge to see that it really is a sculpture of the form, then cycles to the end of the path to photograph it and send it to Helena, the girl who represents her future, or the possibility of future that grief denied her to this moment:

That’s when she sensed, like something blurred and moving glimpsed through a partition whose glass is clouded, both that love was coming for her and the nothing she could do about it.

The cloud of unknowing, her mother said in her ear.

Meets the cloud of knowing, George thought back. (p. 358)

The last few pages of ‘Camera’ contain flashes of future scenes. In one, George corrects Mrs Rock’s grammar from ‘their’ to ‘his or her,’ in another George sits in front of del Cossa’s portrait of St Vincent Ferrer in the National Gallery, London, which she has taken to doing daily. Another woman looks at the painting and George realises it is Lisa Goliard. In the final scene, which hasn’t happened yet – ‘none of the above has happened’ (p. 371) – she has followed Goliard home and sits on the wall opposite her house watching and photographing.

Another kind of ‘unmarked’ presents itself in this scene in the form of that which cannot be known: not the invisible or the socially excluded, but that which lies ahead, in the realm of the not yet. I want to conclude by considering this notion – of the unmarked as an invisible future – as a possible way in which feminism and queer narratology might reattach the invisible to power, in the form of possibility. This is a prominent theme in Smith’s earlier novels, most notably *There but for the*, which consistently images the future as a blocked telescope, or that which cannot be seen from any distance.[[16]](#endnote-16) Like Warhol’s very productive narratological concept of the unnarrated, the unmarked has a potential to speak of narrative gaps and blindnesses, and so connect narrative to representational visibility, but as Phelan makes clear, to yoke power to the visible is somehow to relinquish a different power that resides in the invisible.[[17]](#endnote-17) Both the ‘unmarked’ and the ‘unnarrated’ display the tendency that I ascribed to the image in the opening section, to point both forwards and backwards. Hence the ‘unnarrated’ can be conceived as a gap in what was represented in retrospect in an existing storyworld, but equally as a narrative future, or as that which lies ahead, like the missing words of Smith’s title. This is what might help us to link the unmarked to political possibility, or blindness to power, since it is what does not already exist in representation that most clearly defines the realm of possibility, and the opportunity to usher in a future as other and not as the same, or new possibilities which do not exist in representations of what already exist. This is, unquestionably what is at stake in Smith’s novel, not only in its engagement with history, or in its flashes of the narrative future, but in its palpable, graphic interests in formal innovation itself. The political significance of this kind of formal invention might then be something like a retort to *Miss Representation*’s slogan ‘you can’t be what you can’t see’, and which I take to be the core of Phelan’s argument (a retort that comes in advance): that you can’t always see what you can be.

1. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Attributed to Marian Wright Edelman in Jennifer Sibel Newsom, dir. *Miss Representation* (2017). <http://therepresentationproject.org/film/miss-representation> [Date accessed: 4 July 2017]. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See for example: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/feb/26/pics-or-it-didnt-happen-mantra-instagram-era-facebook-twitter> [Date accessed: 4 July 2017]. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See: Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) and Bernard Stiegler, ‘Memory’ in Mark B.N. Hansen and W.J.T Mitchell (eds.), *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 64-87. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Paul Laity, ‘Interview with Maggie Nelson’, *The Guardian*, 2 April 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/02/books-interview-maggie-nelson-genders> [Date accessed: 4 July 2017]. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Jacqueline Rose, ‘Who do you think you are?’, *London Review of Books*,9.38 (2016), p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Robyn Warhol, ‘The Look, the Body, and the Heroine of *Persuasion*: A Feminist Narratological View of Jane Austen’, in Kathy Mezei (ed.), *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 21-39 (p. 25). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Susan S. Lanser, ‘Toward (a Queerer and) More (Feminist) Narratology’, in Robyn Warhol and Susan S. Lanser (eds.), *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), pp. 23-42 (p. 30). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Martin Hägglund, *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ali Smith, *How to be both* (London: Penguin, 2015). Page numbers are for an edition of the novel which begins with ‘Eyes’. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. If you have an e-book version, a statement alerts you to the two forms of the paper book and invites you to make your own mind up about whether to read ‘Camera’ or ‘Eyes’ first, which is a responsibility and thus a different experience entirely. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Phelan, p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. p. 4, p. 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (London: Melville House UK, 2016), pp. 77-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ali Smith, *There but for the* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Robyn R. Warhol, ‘Neonarrative; or, How to Render the Unnarratable in Realist Fiction and Contemporary Film’, in James Phelan and Peer J. Rabinowitz (eds.), *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 220-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)