

“Nomi Malone is what Las Vegas is all about!”:

Phallic women in *Showgirls*

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“Nomi Malone is what Las Vegas is all about!”: Phallic women in *Showgirls*.¹

Elizabeth Hendy

Showgirls (1995) was a high-budget, high-concept Hollywood movie that immediately bombed at the box office. Despised by audiences and critics, *Showgirls* was considered lowbrow and sleazy due to its abundance of female nudity. The film’s negative critical reception overwhelmingly focused on the film’s star Elizabeth Berkley’s performance and sex appeal, which Chon Noriega described as being “suspiciously violent”, effectively ending Berkley’s career overnight.² Noriega attributed these critiques – and the authors’ dissatisfaction - to a particularly “heteronormative rage as blood drained from erections”.³ *Showgirls* was marketed towards an adult-only audience with its NC-17 rating. This strategy, Kevin S. Sandler notes, promised audiences “forbiddenness and raw sexuality”, yet it failed to provide eroticism or even to “please its viewers in the manner promised by Hollywood cinema”.⁴ Instead, they were punished for expecting to be gratified through the male gaze.⁵ Critics and audiences felt cheated out of sufficient imagery of breasts, nudity, and a portrayal of heterosexuality that would provide guilt-free pleasure.⁶ Ethan Alter suggests that *Showgirls*’ bold critique of “the distinctly American capitalistic pursuit of fame and/or fortune” functioning instead as “a form of prostitution” proved too controversial for American audiences.⁷ These seemingly negative elements, however, later found an appreciative audience through home video rentals, drag shows, late-night screenings in cinemas, and in academic discourse on trash cinema.⁸

Showgirls, love it or loathe it, presents viewers with a troubling social commentary on women’s struggle for power in modern America. With its hyper-stylised format, considered cinematography, and campy performances, *Showgirls*, perhaps inadvertently, presents viewers

with an ambivalent and, therefore, queer subjectivity through its protagonist Nomi Malone (Elizabeth Berkley). While Nomi appeases others with a hetero-sexualised feminine performance, she simultaneously harnesses phallic power with her nude body. These multiple and fractured constructed selves are contradictory and ultimately flawed. However, *Showgirls* also exposes how success under a capitalist heteropatriarchy requires such a multifarious identity – at once hypersexualised and coded for male pleasure, but also subsumed in phallic power. And by openly playing with and parodying these expectations, *Showgirls* presents Nomi’s subjectivity as torn and fractured, but inherently queered.

Woman Split

Somewhere between Joe Eszterhas’s writing and Elizabeth Berkley’s performance Nomi Malone emerges, a complex and somewhat bizarre character who resists traditional Hollywood characterisation. She is a protagonist we are encouraged to root for, yet her insolence, partly channelled through Berkley’s heightened performance and glaringly expressive body movements, makes her an obnoxious antihero. Nomi’s story transports us through familiar narrative conventions. She begins as a “star on the rise” travelling to Las Vegas in pursuit of a dance career and, while she begins as a stripper, she eventually makes it to the starring role of the Goddess show. Yet, this moment of glory is fleeting. Playing on the tropes of the fallen woman narrative, Noel Burch highlights that “just as she has gained access to the world of wealth”, Nomi’s dreams are ruined when her “sinful past catches up with her”.⁹ Jeffrey A. Brown also highlights elements of *Showgirls* - and other stripper movies – drawing similarities with the rape-revenge genre, as Nomi seeks vengeance on behalf of her friend who gets raped towards the end of the film.¹⁰ What brings these genres together, the star on the rise, fallen woman, strippers and rape-revenge is the representation of – often working-class – women being scorned by the patriarchy in one way or another. Nomi’s story connects with the

recognisable motifs of “woman scorned” narratives, yet the film redirects these storylines in ways that trouble our expectations of how Nomi’s journey should develop. Embodying an intersection of gendered, sexual and classist oppressions that are archetypal of classical Hollywood’s “fallen woman” trope, Nomi - as a sex worker facing these oppressions- marks a significant shift from the sexual purity of the young female star on the rise in old Hollywood tradition.¹¹ Further, by defining Nomi’s will to achieve her selfish ambition as a distinctively American capitalist condition, *Showgirls* brazenly satirises this same Hollywood tradition.



Figure 1: Nomi and her reflection. Paul Verhoeven, *Showgirls*, 1995.

A woman with neither innocence nor a sexuality that comes from her own sexual desires, Nomi splits herself into varying performances that she uses to attain her goals. These multiple sides of her character are repeatedly signalled by the omnipresence of mirrors that dominate her scenes in *Showgirls* (figure 1). Further emphasised by Berkley’s performance and the cinematography, Nomi is revealed to have remarkable physical command over these multiple presented selves and the environments they occupy. Depending on her surroundings and desires, Nomi’s characterisation starkly transitions from charming and bubbly, to outright chaotic (a point derided by critics, who imagined this purely as Berkley’s failure as an actor).

As we observe these interactions with her surroundings, close-up shots linger on Nomi's calculated facial expressions and bodily movements. And in shots where we 'see' the world from Nomi's perspective, she is distanced and calculating. Here, Nomi is often filmed from behind and framed in medium to long shots, frequently off-centre, which – from her point of view – expresses a purposeful sense of detachment from the world she seeks to manipulate and control. For example, figure 2 features three shots of Nomi watching the Goddess show for the first time: shot from the front so we can see her facial reaction; shot from behind her to see the Goddess show and theatre in the Stardust hotel; and finally, a shot where Nomi is mimicking the dance moves of the show's star.





Figure 2: Nomi witnessing the Goddess show. Paul Verhoeven, *Showgirls*, 1995.

This sequence shows Nomi's arrogant ambition as she does not allow herself to blend into the passive audience in the theatre. Rather, in her imagination, she transports herself from the audience to the leading role of Goddess.

The Goddess show at the Stardust hotel is highly regarded by Nomi and her contemporaries as she spends most of the film trying to get the lead role. Yet, for the audience watching *Showgirls*, the Goddess show is perhaps more so an inadvertent piece of camp irony. The contemporary dance show features an abundance of female nudity, sexually explicit costuming, and gaudy set designs that make it nothing more than elevated stripping. This, despite the many references and comparisons to Broadway made by other characters, further highlights the Goddess show as devoid of any pretentious artistic expression. Therefore, the Goddess show is a satirical take on the chintzy shows from Las Vegas and, more broadly, on representations of women's bodies in American culture.

As we see Nomi interact with each new environment, we understand her subjectivity is continuously adapting. Gail Weiss suggests that "the very notion of embodiment suggests an

experience that is constantly in the making, that is continually being constituted and reconstituted from one moment to the next”.¹² Applying this perspective to Nomi’s characterisation troubles the traditional, and arguably, essentialist development of female characters in the “woman scorned” films that *Showgirls* references. She is not sexually pure, nor is she passive; rather, she is arrogant, and, despite her appearance, she does not follow a pre-determined feminine script. Instead, as she adapts to her surroundings, Nomi begins to undermine those she views as being in positions of power.

Showgirls’ presentation of Nomi’s fractured self and her calculated pursuit of capitalist gain echoes Nick Salvato’s theory of “tramping” as a “queer parody”.¹³

“Tramps are defined by their emotional detachment; so also does the tramp sensibility inform a mode of parody that lacks camp’s affective complexity – and that substitutes for it a calculated and mercenary attitude toward its source text. Where the camp performer is motivated by empathy, the tramp coldly uses his or her material for whatever cruel humor can be mined from it.”¹⁴

Adapting Salvato’s thesis slightly, Nomi’s interpretation of “tramping” results in her utilising her parodied material for capitalist and narcissistic gains.

“Nomi Malone is what Las Vegas is all about” is a phrase that gets repurposed in the cyclic narrative and visual storytelling in *Showgirls*. Initially used in Cristal Connors’ (Gina Gershon) television debut introducing her as the star of the Goddess show, the phrase is used again when Nomi steps into the coveted role of Goddess at the Stardust hotel in Las Vegas, during a sequence that visually mimics the TV spot that Cristal originally starred in, through costume,

performance, set design and cinematography. Nomi has reached this point because she has parodied and manipulated her contemporaries, adapting herself into what she believes is the Las Vegas ideal. Nomi's reconstitution of herself can be understood, as Weiss suggests, "in response to a patriarchal social system in which women internalize and respond to the (imaginary and real) responses of (imaginary and real) others to their bodies before, during, and after their action".¹⁵ Nomi does this in response to phallogentrism and capitalism (one inextricably contingent on the other), opening herself to opportunities to exchange power with male patriarchs, even at great risk. However, as Weiss suggests, to overcome the "splitting of the subject", the "invisible and omnipresent male gaze" which "women continually find themselves subject to" must be challenged and overcome, but for Nomi in Vegas, this is seemingly impossible.¹⁶

Queering the Phallus

Jeffrey A. Brown suggests that the symbolic nature of the phallus for female characters in stripper films is twofold: on one hand, the women seem "passive" and "phallicised" by male onlookers gazing at their nude bodies, but on the other, these women are actively phallic, as they wield "castrating power [...] as seductive objects".¹⁷ Nomi's performances as a dancer/stripper are about the expression of sexuality, but, importantly, they are not necessarily about the enactment of her own sexual desires, as the (hetero) masculine gaze might fantasise. Her acts of dancing and stripping engage with and utilise the power gained through being looked at so that her body becomes a site of worship – at the onlooker's peril.¹⁸

By using herself as a seductive object, Nomi becomes actively phallic, which, in turn, reappropriates and queers the signification of the phallus. Judith Butler theorises that to queer the phallus is to disrupt the repetition of the phallus as a (masculine) "privileged signifier", and

through this “deprivileging” it is to allow alternative sites (bodies) for the phallus to be symbolised through and upon.¹⁹ By using her nude female body to appropriate and queer the phallic object, Nomi embodies the “lesbian phallus”, disavowing the masculine signification of either “*having*” or “*being*” the phallus.²⁰ By embodying the lesbian phallus, Nomi subverts phallic power, thus revealing what Butler refers to as the “displaceability of the phallus”.²¹

However, as Debra Roth notes in her critique of Butler’s theory of a lesbian phallus, the phallus is always at risk of “the *resignification* of the phallus’ heterosexual, masculine privilege” that it has long been defined by.²² The phallus’ displaceability is, for better or worse, precarious. Therefore, Nomi cannot overcome the patriarchal framework in Las Vegas by resignifying the phallus, as she does not have the powerful resources of “a phallogocentric ideational framework” at her disposal like her male counterparts.²³ Yet, her fleeting subversion of the phallus seems to afford her just enough power to attain her personal goals.

Next, I consider how Nomi uses her body to manipulate Zack (Kyle MacLachlan), the entertainment director for the Goddess show. Using heteronormative performances of sexuality, or hetero-sexy, shown through erotic dance, Nomi creates a power exchange with Zack. Nomi utilises this exchange to satiate her desires for fame and fortune, not sex. This detachment suggests the ambiguity of Nomi’s sexuality as while she can easily manipulate men with hetero-sexy performance, she struggles to engage in this same power play with Cristal, who is coded as queer throughout their interactions in the film.

The “Private Dancer” and “The Swimming Pool” are two scenes where Nomi uses hetero-sexy performativity to exchange power with Zack as she uses her nude body as an instrument of sexual power to seduce him. The camera’s static, wide-angle shots do not move over parts of Nomi’s body to emulate a leering male gaze; instead, there is a blatant and perfunctory nature

to her nudity as she coldly displays herself for Zack. Nomi's control over the male observer's gaze is shown through her physical command over her body. With a dancer's grace, her seduction in the strip club and later in the swimming pool are clearly choreographed as no more than a skilled performance.

In the "Private Dancer" scene, close-up shots linger on Nomi's anxious expression as she is initially reluctant to perform a lap dance for Cristal. When she later agrees to dance for Zack instead, a subtextual queer desire emerges between Cristal and Nomi. Nomi's manipulation of the phallus for her hetero-sexy performances cannot easily be translated to a performance for a woman. Cristal represents a physical lack, as being a cis-gendered woman, she has no phallus for Nomi to displace. Further, Cristal already holds the position of power that Nomi aspires to (as Cristal is the Goddess at the Stardust), so there is less of an opportunity for a power exchange between them because Nomi wishes to replace Cristal altogether.

Reworking the lap dance scenario to her advantage, then, Nomi performs a lap dance for Zack while Cristal watches. The resulting sequence becomes a visual interplay of looks and the holder of those multiple gazes, Nomi, is completely in control of both Zack and Cristal's desire for her, shown through still shots on their individual expressions, edited to follow their eyeline. As the pace of her dance quickens, the diegetic music also increases in pace to match Nomi's dance routine. Her performance becomes more rapid as she straddles Zack's lap and simulates sex, thrusting and grinding on him until he ejaculates. Yet, Cristal's queer desire is never fulfilled through intercourse, real or imitated, because queer desire is completely out of place in such a phallogentric setting. Therefore, any queer desire Cristal, or even Nomi may feel can only exist in subtext because it would otherwise threaten the phallogentric order of the Las

Vegas showgirl scene. Yet, by stifling this queer desire, the regulatory workings of sexuality and gender are exposed and can be scrutinized.

Displaying her sexual prowess through the erotic dance routine, Nomi's nude body becomes phallic, and she uses it for her own gain instead of being passively objectified by the male gaze. From this power exchange, she receives an audition for the chorus line in the Goddess show. Later, at Zack's mansion, Nomi's next power play unfolds.

"The Swimming Pool" sexual encounter begins with a wide shot revealing Zack looking at Nomi walking towards the pool. Stopping and looking back at him, she removes her dress. Just like in the strip club, Nomi removes her dress in the same motion, rolling it down her body, taking a pause after revealing her breasts and then continuing down to the floor before stepping out of it. Nomi's command over the space she occupies, conveyed through these controlled movements, reflects her calculated and domineering nature as she reveals her weapon of heterosexual allure. Walking seductively towards the pool and making an expert dive into the water, Nomi showcases the graceful motions of her body. The shots, as in "Private Dancer", follow the characters' eyeline. Through close-ups and medium shots, we see Nomi assessing Zack's gaze. Holding his gaze, she continues her performance, assessing his pleasure at her movements, until they begin to have sex. As his thrusting becomes more rapid, she recreates the grinding movements she made during the lap dance. This repetition signposts how Nomi has precisely constructed and honed this performance. Yet, by the time it is repeated in the swimming pool, this performance reaches ridiculous extremes as Nomi looks as if she could drown. She dips her head under the water below extravagant dolphin fountains, tossing her body almost violently with Zack's movements. Soon after, Nomi receives the role of Goddess understudy – a monumental step on her path to fame and fortune. As a result, it becomes clear

Nomi does not necessarily gain sexual pleasure from these encounters but instead utilises a hetero-sexy performance to gain her own version of phallic sexual power.

Conclusion

In *Showgirls*, Nomi Malone recognises the phallogentric order of her route to stardom and harnesses the symbolic power of the phallus by using her nude body to achieve her dreams, whatever the cost. When appropriated by women, the resignified phallus can attempt to challenge existing male structures of power. Nonetheless, it is doomed eventually to fail as the phallus, lesbian or not, is always at risk of being displaced. Therefore, the phallus in its imagined glory, is, ultimately, dissatisfying.²⁴ In the case of *Showgirls*, the use of phallic power, both from men and women, intentionally fails on its promises of eroticism, power, and pleasure, leaving viewers flaccid and deflated, relegating this film to the lower regions of trash cinema, the only location where a film such as *Showgirls* can fully satirize the moral bankruptcy of its subject matter. A point missed by negative critics, as they gazed upon the exposed breasts, was that *Showgirls* is a boner killer, and rightly so.

Notes

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- ¹ *Showgirls*, directed by Paul Verhoeven (1995; England: Pathé, 1999), DVD.
- ² Akira M. Lippit, Noel Burch, Chon Noriega, Ara Osterweil, Linda Williams, Eric Shaefer, Jeffrey Sconce, "Round Table: Showgirls," *Film Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2003): 35-41.
- ³ Lippit, et al. "Round Table: Showgirls", p. 37.
- ⁴ Kevin S. Sandler, "The Naked Truth: 'Showgirls' and the Fate of the X/NC-17 Rating," *Cinema Journal* 40, no.3 (2001): p. 77-78.
- ⁵ In her polemical essay, Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of the "male gaze" as an influential standpoint from Hollywood cinema that sought to objectify women in film, in order to satisfy an imaginary male audience. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): p. 11.
- ⁶ Sandler, "The Naked Truth", p. 76.
- ⁷ Ethan Alter, *Film Firsts: the 25 movies that Created Contemporary American Cinema* (Oxford: Praeger, 2014), p. 111.
- ⁸ Lippit, et al. "Round Table: Showgirls", p. 37-38.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.35.
- ¹⁰ Jeffrey A. Brown, "If Looks Could Kill: Power, revenge, and stripper movies," in *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in Film*, ed. Martha McCaughey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), p. 56.
- ¹¹ Jeffrey A. Brown, "If Looks Could Kill", p. 35, 41.
- ¹² Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 43.
- ¹³ Nick Salvato, "Tramp Sensibility and the Afterlife of 'Showgirls'". *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 4 (2006), 636.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 637.
- ¹⁵ Gail Weiss, *Body Images*, p. 49.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49-50.
- ¹⁷ Jeffrey A. Brown, "If Looks Could Kill", p. 66-67.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- ¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 55.
- ²⁰ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 51, 56.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- ²² Debra Roth, "Engorging the Lesbian Clitoris: Opposing the Phallic Cultural Unconscious". *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 8, no. 1-2 (2004): p. 183.
- ²³ Debra Roth, "Engorging the Lesbian Clitoris", p. 178.
- ²⁴ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, p. 28.

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