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The Duel of the Gazes

Male Gaze on Women vs Female Self-Gaze in Raymond Carver and Robert Altman

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Introduction: Subtle resonances and vivid particularities

The visual quality of Raymond Carver's prose is an issue that has already been studied thoroughly¹. In particular, that male characters who look at themselves show self-reflecting qualities is an interpretation that has gained scholar consensus (Decker 2004). On the other hand, Robert Altman's adaptation of nine stories and a poem written by Carver has often been criticized, mostly because of the filmmaker's dealing with the theme of 'visuality' and its objectifying effect (Boddy 2000; Demory 1999). Yet, what could add to the discourse of 'looking' both in Carver's prose and Altman's films, is an inquiry into the twofold issue of male gaze on women and female self-gaze in the works of these authors. Namely, I believe that a viewpoint of this kind is useful since it helps to identify the unique declinations of power related to the activity of 'gazing' in Carver and Altman, and because it highlights 'carverian' resonances within the specific medium of the latter. In point of fact, it could be argued that an objectifying gaze on women does exist within Carver's male protagonists. This aspect, together with its nuances, will be explored with the aid of gaze theory and narrative theory in the stories "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?", "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" and "The Fling" in the first chapter of this dissertation. The second chapter will illustrate that women characters counteract powerfully in these gender relations when they engage in self-visualizing activities. Such a statement will be supported by the analysis of the stories "Fat", "So Much Water, So Close to Home" and "Fever" by means of narrative theory, sociology and feminist criticism. Then, a brief outline of recent adaptation theory will serve to create the grounds for the second half of this dissertation, in which I will examine the same issues of (self) gaze in Altman's works. Namely, a close look at some specific cinematic devices will reveal that *Short Cuts*

¹For instance by Ayala Amir in *The Visual Poetics of Raymond Carver*. As Kasia Boddy as well notes, "If Carver was interested in moving from the image into narrative, his stories have had a tendency to inspire their readers to translate them back into images. This was initially a critical tendency, as parallels were frequently drawn between Carver's stories and the paintings of Edward Hopper, and the paintings and sculptures of Photo Realists such as Duane Hanson, Richard Estes and Ralph Goings" (Boddy 1).

(1993) presents male gaze on women in a way that resonates with Carver in terms of complexities, and that the filmmaker varies on these complexities by taking them to the extreme. Also, the final chapter will take into consideration the 'women performers' in *Nashville* (1975) in order to explore the workings of their public/private self-gazes, and thus to help create a perspective on the performative and assertive female figures in *Short Cuts*. Because of the impossibility to draw neat parallels between Carver and Altman's works, the present analysis develops an approach that adopts but also questions aspects of feminism, gaze theory, and cinema theory. Also, and precisely in virtue of such a variety, this dissertation seeks to enlighten the subtle resonances between Raymond Carver and Robert Altman, to explore the vivid particularities of each of them in terms of to genre power relations from the perspective of gaze, and to point to the specific issue of 'marginalized' identities as a field for further study of these two American authors.

1.1 Carver and vision: Cinematic gaze(s)

As Christof Decker insightfully points out, “Carver’s stories must be carefully differentiated with regard to the question as to what are the characters looking at, how their gazes are qualified and what they see” (39). Decker then isolates types of looking that are particular for their self-reflecting quality, and goes on to argue that the activity of looking thus delineated points to a hierarchy of the senses within the literary world of Carver County. As a matter of fact, from Decker’s analysis it emerges that the activity of looking, together with other forms of haptic communication, dominates over language as means of self-knowledge, self-expression and communication, and ultimately as metaphor for artistic creation. Other critics as well, such as Amir, Boxer and Phillips, have pointed to the complex role and understanding of visuality in Carver’s *oeuvre*, and to its nuances and meaningfulness². Yet, surprisingly, all these studies have paid very little attention to the specific aspect of how women characters are visualized and or if there are any women characters'-specific ways of looking.

In order to start shedding a better light on the complex role of women characters in Carver's prose, I intend to focus in this chapter on the issue of how these are visualized by their male counterparts. Such an exploration takes as its basis what Decker cautiously posits as cinematic³ gaze, i.e. a gaze that Carver’s characters assume when looking on “mundane scenes and activities” (42). The reason for choosing such a perspective is not only the realization that all Decker's cases of

² Amir, for instance, in her short essay “I don’t do Motion Shots” has focused on the “snapshot” quality of the images present in Carver’s stories. Thus, analyzing disrupted images of body movement, she has pointed to the meta-literary statement that, in this author’s prose, continuity, meaningfulness and realism are intrinsically undermined by his mode of representation. We must point out, however, that Boxer and Philips, with their article “*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?: Voyeurism, Dissociation and the Art of Raymond Carver*”, were among the first critics to take into consideration the aspects of visuality and eros in Carver’s shorter and earlier stories. They have argued that “[l]ooking itself becomes experience, not merely vicarious experience. It is a transforming act, one which changes the character of that which is seen”(79). In other words, they have argued that the voyeuristic act of looking helps the characters achieve an otherwise unattainable idea of themselves.

³ The Merriam – Webster dictionary defines 'cinematic' as follows “1: of, relating to, suggestive of, or suitable for motion pictures or the filming of motion pictures < cinematic principles and techniques > 2: filmed and presented as motion picture < cinematic fantasies >”. What is worth highlighting about this term as particularly suitable is, therefore, that it conveys the concept of quick motion and alternation of visual detail, suggestive of cinema *montage*.

'cinematic gazing' have male (transforming) characters as looking subjects, and women characters as objects of this gaze, but also the preparatory function that this standpoint provides for further research relevant to this paper. A definition and the individuation of the functions of the 'cinematic gaze' in Carver's prose will serve for a better understanding of the relationship between the writer's work and Altman's cinematographic adaptation. Also, it will help unpack the multifaceted and contradictory features of visualization of/by women characters. Arguably, women characters in Carver's stories are endowed with an empowering self-gaze (an aspect to which I will come back in the next chapter), but they are also objectified by the gazes of their male counterparts. To expand the latter thought further, we should take into consideration several aspects: whether the activity of looking which invests women can actually be called a cinematic gaze, the evaluation of if and how women are "framed" by this looking, and how this perception/gaze functions within the broader diegesis of the texts under analysis.

A first passage which highlights the 'intricacies of looking' in Carver's work and which suggests that the activity of looking on women might be defined not merely a gaze but a cinematic gaze as well, is provided by "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?". In this story Marian and Ralph are a married couple who face a crisis due to Marian's bringing about the issue and confession of her one-night infidelity. After the confession Ralph spends the night wandering and getting drunk, yet he returns to his home and wife eventually. A significant passage for the issue of gaze takes place early both in the diegesis and in the text, as Ralph reminisces the honeymoon "vision he would always remember and which disturbed him most of all" (165), i.e.

[Marian's] hair was long and hung down in front over her shoulders, and she was looking away from him, staring at something in the distance. She wore a white blouse with a bright red scarf at her throat, and he could see her breasts pushing against the white cloth ... the whole incident put Ralph in mind of something from a film, an intensely dramatic moment into which *Marian could be fitted but he couldn't*. (165-166) (emphasis added)

Namely, apart from being a scene that reminds the narrator of 'something from a film', the passage mentioned above is noteworthy as it shows that Ralph's vision is generated by what could be technically called 'gaze'. In fact, there is a strong parallel between Ralph's observation of his neo-

wife and Lacan's description and analysis of the gaze in the mirror-stage development in the human psyche⁴. Elaborating on the lacanian terms suggested by Mulvey (836), that is to say that the subject/Ralph reaches self-realization by observing another object/human figure in a given environment: as Marian is leaning on the ironwork balustrade of the Guadalajarian *casita* and he is coming up a dusty road, Ralph realizes that this is a setting 'into which Marian could be fitted but he couldn't' (165-166), i.e. that she represents a condition which he feels psychologically excluded from, and from the very beginning of the story. Moreover, Ralph's looking is not only a gaze according to the most 'fundamental' definition of the term, but it also presents, as already mentioned above, traits of a cinematic gaze. A first hint at this is to be found in the visual focus of the description, which shifts like the motion of a camera from one detail to another, and in a quite fluid movement from the woman's head to her chest. Additionally, as the above quoted realization shows, the narrative voice/protagonist is placed within the narrative mode of the "figure in a landscape" (Mulvey 839). As a matter of fact, the narrator's visual exploration of the space is here a fundamental trait of the cinematic gaze. Also, this feature is present in other parts of this story, and is characteristic of other and shorter stories as well. As far as "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" is concerned, for example, it is noteworthy that Ralph's gaze and the gaze of the reader correspond in particular when it comes to moments of emotional climax for the protagonist. An instance is Ralph's fixation (which turns quickly into an oneiric visualization, yielding escapism) on the black coaches depicted on the tablecloth in the moment when Marian foreshadows her confession (170); or the highly disoriented series of gazes Ralph throws around the kitchen just at the climax of Marian's relation "...his eyes skipped around the kitchen – stove napkin – holder, stove cupboards, toaster, back to her lips, back to the coach in the tablecloth" (171).

This mode of narration, which is characterized by the male protagonist's visual exploration of the setting, and rendered through detailed descriptions, is greatly present in the story "What Do

⁴ Mulvey summarizes Lacan's concept of the 'mirror-stage' as follows: "[t]he mirror phase occurs at a time when the child's physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous in that he imagines his mirror image to be ... more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with mis-recognition ... it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification [with others], and hence of the first articulation of the "I," of subjectivity". (836)

You Do in San Francisco?” as well. Particularly relevant is here the scene wherein the protagonist/postman meets the young beatnik mother and relates the rumors circulating about her presence (and image) within the space of the 'conservative' city where she dwells temporarily with her husband. Yet another instance is the story “The Fling”, in particular as the protagonist, during a brief meeting with his father at the airport, observes through the crowd a random customer of the bar that starts dancing. Notably, at the end of this performance “she stayed there on the floor a minute, head bowed, taking long breaths ... she licked the hair that clung to her lips and looked around at the faces” (46). After this scene, which is detailed in color, movement of the images, and rhythm, the narrator realizes something as well: his own empathic impediment to relate to his father’s story about the cheating on his mother. Yet, this same quote is significant also for its sexually charged content ('taking long breaths', 'she licked the hair' etc...), which would make of the cinematic gaze depicted a distinctly male cinematic gaze: it lingers on and emphasizes elements which at least signify sexuality, and the woman’s performance is presented in the context of a man’s reaction to this event. It is worth noting at this point the presence of a similar slightly objectifying feature in Ralph’s 'honeymoon reminiscence' as well, as in 'he could see her breasts pushing against the white cloth'. Arguably, though, these objectifications, although partially present, do differ significantly from previously established (feminist) theories on the male (cinematic) gaze applied to various narrative media. In particular, a close reading of the objectifying visualizations of several women characters, together with an analysis of the diegetic function such images hold, will provide a partial subversion of the power asymmetry within the male gaze as posited by theorists such as Mulvey, and show the richness of its declinations in Carver’s work. In order to expand these statements further, in the next section of this chapter I intend to take into consideration the archetypal dichotomy of love and hate that surrounds the way Ralph visualizes Miriam in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”, while the last section will be devoted to the pinpointing of the nuances in terms of plot and visualization that the cinematic gaze can acquire in Carver’s prose.

1.2 “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”/ Will you please look at me, please?

I have argued that the protagonist of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” visualizes his wife in what could be called a distinctly male cinematic gaze. In this section, I intend to explore the extent to which such a gaze can be considered objectifying, and its effect on the broader diegesis. Arguably, the objectifying effect is partly countered by the existence of a 'powerful threat' implied in the coexistence of a visual eros/thanatos dichotomy, and by a number of narratological devices.

The archetypal dichotomy eros/thanatos is hinted at as early in the story as in Ralph's 'honeymoon reminiscence' quoted above. This passage is, namely, as already noted, sexually charged not only for the self evident reference to Marian's breasts against her blouse. The allusions to red as only color in the scene (“[s]he wore a white blouse with a bright red scarf at her throat” (253), or the reference to the dark/red wine Ralph holds), next to other sensual details, such as Marian's hair covering her face and shoulders, do also add to the erotic implications within the text. To a certain extent, therefore, it appears that “[t]he male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action” (Mulvey 839), while the female figure appears as an icon. More to my point, though, it could be said that subtle countering elements of 'elementary psychology' are also already present in this reminiscing. In this perspective, therefore, the feelings of exclusion and inadequacy the protagonist experiences for the first time in that 'intensely dramatic' moment gain importance, for they appear to be a constant feature in his existence as married man. Taking a step back then, it should be remembered that from the very incipit of the short story the marital life is qualified as a 'mystery' for this couple (“[t]hey ... pledged to preserve forever the excitement and the mystery of marriage” [165]). Also, these perceptions are brought to an apex towards the end of the story, as in the famous line “how should a man act, given these circumstances?” (179). Moreover, this quote introduces another crucial 'psychological' element, i.e. a vague perception of threat/thanatos⁵ as well. In point of fact, and quite

⁵ I intend here eros/thanatos in a broad sense: not in the strictly Freudian sense of "opposition between the ego or death instincts and the sexual or life instincts" (Freud 45). Rather, elaborating on this dichotomy and terminology, I mean to point to opposite tendencies within one and the same instinct, tendencies of (sexual) attraction on the one

pertinently to the concept of cinematic gaze already delineated, the exploration of the setting in which the self (Ralph) finds himself in is here significant. More precisely, Ralph's being "secretly appalled by the squalor and open lust he saw" (165) is quite telling both of his vision and of his emotional state. The fact that his wife could fit in such an environment, while moreover "looking away from him, staring at something in the distance"(165), is helpful to place the threat not only in the environment, but in his wife as well, and this despite her (or maybe, more appallingly, in virtue of her) sexual connotation. And, as Camille Paglia would put it, in this case "[w]e cannot hope to understand sex and gender until we clarify our attitude toward nature" (1). A last, general note to be made on Carver's dealing with this female figure in the broader tradition of American literature is precisely the issue brought about by Paglia's quote. For the relationship between nature and sexuality is for instance a trademark of Hawthorne's narratives, such as *The Scarlet Letter*. Also, both the latter and the tale about the creation of (American) identity that is "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" have as pivotal element the dichotomy and fusion of the colors black and red. Finally, as additional frame of reference within the American literary and cinematographic tradition, the Western cinematographic genre⁶ can be remembered as a parallel: the last scene of the motion picture *Duel in the Sun* (1946) displays cathartically and in a multi – layered fashion the duel of the sexes, where the initiator of the deathly battle which takes place in the characteristic southern desert is a woman dressed in black and red.

The above outlined cinematic visualization of Miriam is constant within the story "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?", and while its presence objectifies the woman character, making of her an impossible-to-connect-to icon, such a vision also appears to imply a source of power which threatens the insecure/inadequate male character. As a matter of fact, Miriam is gazed at in an objectifying way by her husband in all the salient moments of their marital life which are reported. Apart from the honeymoon scene, this mode of narration is proposed again at the moment of the

hand and (life-threat induced) repulsion, which can translate itself in violence, on the other.

⁶ It would be worth exploring the extent and modes of the Western literary and cinematographic influence on Carver and Altman. A good starting point for such an examination would be a comparison between the American foundation and education genre and the two contemporary authors in terms of 'role of nature and the color'. But this analysis has to be undertaken elsewhere.

crisis, when Miriam confesses her infidelity to her husband. While she confesses, in fact, Ralph “[w]atched her hips under the plaid woolen skirt ... she smoothed her palm down over her skirt, then begun tucking in her blouse. He wandered if she wandered if he were watching her” (168), but also

She sat forward, resting her arms across her knees, her breast pushing at her blouse ... she hurried on, and he [...] watched her lips ...he felt a peculiar desire for her flicker through his groin ... and then he wanted to call *stop* ... Thou shalt stop! (169-171)

Again, in both cases the cinematic gaze is characterized by visual body details that stand for sexuality (like the skirt) or by more explicit sexual impulses. And once more, in both instances of the marital crises the protagonist makes the reader/audience participate to the mixed feeling of threat and attempted containment (in the imperative, puritan resonance of '*stop, thou shalt stop*', emphasis added); to the feeling of power his wife exercises on him ('he wandered if she wandered if he was watching her'); and to the violent instincts or death perceptions as well (like the sexual desire for her in a moment of anger). As already pointed to, the element of threat only partly counters the 'classical' objectification process in these instances: the aspect of threat makes the 'woman-icon' differ from the sexual object figure; nevertheless, it still also partly contains the female image within an archetypal medusa-figure. Yet, it is worth noting here briefly one last 'countering' element in the 'cinematic gaze' on Marian in Carver's story, i.e. the narratological function and effect associable to her visualization. To borrow from Kaja Silverman, in her book *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, Silverman argues that female authoriality tends to be impeded in classic narrative cinema by containing female characters to roles of lesser knowledge within the diegesis, of which the lack of omniscient female voice-over narrator is one instance (47). According, and conversely, to this, Marian, apart from being in a more powerful working condition ("Marian was offered a post as a French and English instructor at the junior college ... and Ralph had stayed on at the high school" [166]), for a great deal of the diegesis she also 'knows more' about her own cheating as well. Also, a certain degree of authoriality in Marian's role is to be found in the way this female protagonist brings about and controls her own

decision to 'tell the story of her infidelity', i.e. to confess. Finally, an assertion of authoriality and power on Marian's part might be found in the fact that, in all the salient moments above depicted, this female character does not return the gaze of her 'examining' husband, which appears to create frustration in her male counterpart (“[h]e wandered if she wandered if he were watching her” [168], “she was looking away from him, staring at something in the distance” [127], “[h]ad she stood at that window watching for him?” [179]). Therefore, Marian retains a more powerful position, an intimidating one, despite (or in virtue of?) the fact that she is only partially displayed, only partially knowable, both visually and 'inwardly'. While this makes her partly a 'fixed' icon on the one hand, on the other it also endows her with the fluidity of an unpredictable 'mystery'. Or, from a specular perspective, it might be argued that Marian acquires to a certain extent the features of an uncanny idol, a sort of pagan divinity at ease with her own existence, yet unable to dis-veil her own mystery to the others; for why does she, for instance, decide to bring about the issue of her own infidelity?, why does she appear to be unable to articulate in speech the explosion of her own impulses (“I don't know *why* I went, Ralph. It was an impulse” [169]), while on the contrary Ralph insistently 'knew' they were there? (“But you've always been that way, Marian!’ And he knew at once that he had uttered a new and profound truth” [169]). Leaving to ambiguity its own rightful state, it could be said that, most importantly, these are all elements of Marian's persona, to use Paglia's term, that Ralph eventually accepts and surrenders to. Quite significantly, even the resolution of the marital conflict, with Ralph's acceptance of this discovery about his wife and himself, is reported in visual terms:

For an instant he resisted the wish to look at her She was sleeping, her head off the pillow, *turned toward the wall* She was on her side, her *secret body* angled at her hips. *He stared*. What, after all, should he do? (179) (emphasis added)

With a final revelation of the almost mystical aura of Marian's body, the images acquire a persistent suggestion in Ralph's final reconciliation as well:

He held himself, he later considered, as long as he could. And then he turned to her. *He turned and turned in what might have been a stupendous sleep*, and he was still turning, marveling. (181) (emphasis added)

These images, blurred in visual definition yet suggestive of abandonment and acceptance, finally appear to invoke a return to a maternal womb, ultimately qualifying Marian as encompassing embodiment, or even archetype, of the most ancestral mystery of femininity, that of maternity.

To sum up, while Marian's image, subjected to a male cinematic gaze (sexually charged on the one hand, but threatening on the other) plays a crucial role in highlighting her husband's turning point in self – knowledge, it is precisely in virtue of the almost mystical quality which her (images) come to signify, together with her diegetically influential role, that she maintains a position of power. Other variations of the use of the cinematic gaze in Carver's stories, though, produce different effects and different women characters, an analysis of whom is useful for a better understanding of the issue of women in Carver's prose.

1.3 Other women, other men, other gazes

In the previous sections of this chapter I have tackled the issue of visualizing women in Carver's prose by defining and identifying a type of cinematic gaze/mode of narration in one of the longer and more complex stories of his first collection. From this analysis of "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" it appears that the female protagonist is visually represented in an objectified way, yet only partially in line with the 'traditional' male gaze as defined by feminist theory and criticism. In other words, her visual sexually charged image is counterpointed by an equally strong, even if subtle, visual sexual threat and psychological un-knowability. The latter two elements in particular, together with a dominant diegetic position, appear ultimately to endow this female character with a 'secret' and partly 'mystical' uncontainable power. By taking a closer look at two other stories, I intend now to explore further possible variations of female visualization in Carver's prose.

"The Fling" is a story about a father and a son who meet at the airport during a stopover of the latter. The encounter serves to the father to confess – hoping for empathy – details of his long

time past cheating on the protagonist's mother. The protagonist, though, is unable to feel empathy and leaves distressed because of this revelation about himself. Little happens to distract the two men from each other and the conversation for the time of their encounter. Significantly, one interruption is the fact that “[w]e moved out of the way as a group of nuns, flushed and talking excitedly, headed for the boarding area” (39), while the other, quite in opposition, is “[a] woman in her late thirties, red hair, wearing a white knit suit” (39) sitting not far from them at the bar in the airport, who

[s]uddenly ... slid down off the stool, took a few steps toward the center of the floor, and commenced to dance. She tossed her head from side to side and snapped her fingers on both hands as her heels hit the floor. *Everyone in the place watched her dance.* (46) (emphasis added)

Again, we might quite safely say that what we are reading is actually a male cinematic gaze – mode of narration. Indeed, both the visual exploration of the setting through the focus of the male narrator and the visual details that portray the dancing woman work in this direction. These visual details are fragmentary body images (“her long red hair pulled loose and fell down her back” [46], “[s]he was surrounded by men now, but above their heads I could see her hands and her white fingers, snapping” [46]) with a strong sexual connotation, as “she stayed there on the floor a minute, head bowed, taking long breaths ... she licked the hair that clung to her lips and looked around at the faces” (46). Also, this lengthy scene holds 'visual'/perceptive parallels with the descriptions reported by the cinematic gaze in “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”, because a certain attraction appears to be caused by the 'mystery' and 'exoticism' of the dancer's image. As a matter of fact, it should be born in mind that the woman is performing to a latino music with a characteristic dance (characterized by staccato stamping of the heels and yips, in an almost 'savage' dance), and that this performance leaves her 'dazed' as after a mystic trance, with a vacuum gaze which 'looked around at the faces'. It might be argued that it is in virtue of this wilderness on the one hand, and because of her gaze on the other that the narrator states that he was “at first fascinated, but a little horrified and embarrassed for her, too” (46). Therefore, the tension between sexuality and threat/repulsion is, in this case, quite explicit and consciously elaborated by the narrator. More precisely, the performance of this 'occasional' female character is aptly perceived by the narrator who desires to have a better

look at her, but who also, and despite the distance, feels, fears and states her destabilizing potential. Quite contrarily to this clear statement of his, we as readers might only speculate on the reasons and feelings of the woman behind this performance, an element which I will only allude to here. For in the story there is another woman performer who also wears strong colors, much like the 'dancer', that is to say the "slender pleasant girl in a red and black dress [who] came to take [the] order" (40). So the question to be asked is, why does not this woman, who is also in the act of performing only a part of her identity, that is to say her job as waitress, why doesn't she leave a sign in the consciousness of the narrator? Why is she not the object of his gaze? A possible answer is that there might exist an element of self-awareness and willfulness in the way the dancer projects her self-image for the gaze of the others. Yet again, because of the lack of insight into the female characters here, the wilfulness to project a certain image of the self is an element that will be taken more closely into analysis when considering female self-gaze in Carver and Altman's 'female performers'. Finally, though, when speaking about the male protagonist's consciousness, we might also evaluate the broader context and diegetical impact of this 'dance' scene within the narration of the protagonist. For the last relevant point to be made here is that, despite the fact that, unlike the waitress, she is in the center of the male gaze in the story, this woman dancer holds a lesser degree of power in terms of diegesis than the protagonist of "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?". Her visualization, namely, appears to acquire meaning since it is in a row of contrasting female images/archetypes: the passing nuns, the mentioned mother figure, the recount of the cheating with another woman. The nameless dancer, in point of fact, the only female figure described in detail, eroticized yet destabilizing, appears to have the function of highlighting the divergence and un-empathy between father and son: the two might have felt similar tensions towards their female counterparts (in particular this iconic type of 'dancer-woman'), but are unable to communicate and share them fully.

Although the dancer in "The Fling" is visualized as active, unpredictable in her gesture, eroticized yet feared, she lacks a diegetically powerful role different from that of being functional

for male self-realization. Yet another nuance of the issue of visualizing women with a cinematic gaze is to be noted here, i.e. that of women who are more demonized than sexually characterized by the gaze. An example is produced by the story "What Do You Do in San Francisco?". Here a postman narrates what he sees of the brief permanence of a family from San Francisco in his town Eureka, a permanence which he associates at the beginning of his narrative with some crime news about an uxoricide. As a matter of fact, the story is somehow based on the feeling of empathy the postman experiences towards the unemployed, and probably non-corresponded, man of the beatnik couple, a feeling that he expresses in: "[s]he's no good, boy. I could tell that the minute I saw her. Why don't you forget her? Why don't you go to work and forget her?" (88). The cinematic gaze is present once more in the way the postman presents in sequential detail his encounters with the couple, the events to which the reader is made to participate, and the description of the beatnik woman as attractive. Yet, from the descriptions of the latter it is inferable also that she is a "bad" mother who slaps and then hugs her children, that she is generally un-approachable (as she never smiles to the postman), and excessively powerful in comparison to her husband (it is noteworthy that during the first encounter with the postman "she was just coming out the front door with a cigarette in her mouth, wearing a tight pair of white jeans and a man's white undershirt" [83]). What prevails, therefore, in her visualization, is an unappealing/scary eccentricity. Most importantly, though, and as Libe García Zarras has noted, "even though this woman is located in the subject position of the gaze when painting, she herself becomes a representation, since she does not possess any power to control how her image is constructed" (23). That is to say that the reader never hears her 'voice' within the diegesis: small-town rumors depicting her/her character and her actions are reported by the postman-narrator. Contrarily to the previous stories, and more to my point, "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" testifies to the perception and creation of a female image which is to a certain extent demonized by the gaze of a broader community. Therefore, in Carver's stories the cinematic gaze might oscillate from eroticism, to exoticism, and to demonization in its visual depiction of female characters. Also, while a degree of objectification is necessarily present in these

processes, other countering elements (mostly the diegetic function or subtle visual, thus psychological, threats) might turn tables and render the objectified female characters more powerful than their male counterparts.

Such multifaceted and contradictory role of the cinematic gaze in Carver's prose is relevant to attempt to define its place within the already established theoretical framework of cinematic gaze-theories, but it is also preparatory for the second part of this paper, which will explore male gaze on women in Altman's adaptation. Before taking this step, though, in the next chapter I intend to take into consideration the other side of the coin. The analysis of the issue of how women visualize themselves in Carver's prose (and in Altman's films) will be useful in order to give a better understanding of the issue of gaze and visualization of/by women in the works of the two artists.

2.1 Carver's self-visualizing subjects

In the previous chapter I have pointed to the fact that the male (cinematic) gaze on female characters in Carver's stories retains a conspicuous degree of objectification, despite the fact that the latter is partly subverted as well. As conclusion, for instance, I have argued that the female protagonist of the story "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" is presented as eccentric from a visual perspective. Yet, she is also considered with suspicion by the actors within the broader diegesis; thus, she loses control over her own 'image', and is partly objectified in the rumors surrounding her. In the present chapter I intend to take into consideration the other side of the coin, i.e. the various strategies and outcomes of female self-gaze in Carver's short stories. More precisely, it could be said that the ways women look at themselves within Carver country are varied and often characterized by an empowering effect of self-consciousness. As a matter of fact, this empowering effect of the self-gaze emerges from the (female) self-perception within a 'concrete' reality and social dynamics (social self-gaze), but also from what might be called a dialectic⁷ approach between imagination and reality (or oneiric and artistic gaze). In order to provide a better understanding of the issue of female self-visualization, my critical tools will include not only literary theory, but they will be extended to broader interpretative frameworks as well, thus including also sociological theory on self-gaze and aspects of feminist criticism on Carver. This standpoint seeks therefore to suggest a complementary analysis to the issue of 'male gaze on women' in Carver's prose, and to provide a further connection to the examination of the 'women performers' in Altman's films.

⁷The Collins Dictionary defines the term dialectic as "disputation or debate, especially intended to resolve differences between two views rather than to establish one of them as true". On the false-line of this definition, I use the term here to mean an interactive and negotiating process between two stances (for example, between physical appearances, sexes, and features, and ultimately between reality and imagination).

2.2 The power of the social self-gaze

The social self-gaze might be defined as the resulting attitude of being aware of one's own image in a public sphere, i.e. the act of visualizing oneself in the social order and behaving in a way that negotiates one's intimate image of oneself with that projected onto the outside. This process can be considered a feature of the psyche of any human being and one which might assume different degrees according to the context and to what we chose to consider the 'outside order'. For instance, the *Oxford Reference Dictionary* suggests for the entry 'self –looking' the concept of 'looking-glass self', which it defines as

[a] term introduced by Cooley⁸ to refer to the dependence of our social self or social identity on our appearance to others, especially significant others. Our self-concept or self image—the ideas and feelings that we have about ourselves—are seen as developing 'reflectively' in response to our perception and internalization of how others perceive and evaluate us. This concept is also associated with symbolic interactionism.

Starting from this assumption, of particular interest are here Carver's stories that deal with this activity, i.e. stories that help to focus how the self-gaze transmits assumptions and information about the 'inner developments' of the self-viewer/self-viewed.

For instance, the above outlined 'social self-gaze' is an underlying feature of the short story "Signals". Here, the woman of a couple out for dinner appears to hold a greater degree of power in comparison to her frustrated husband. This is because, despite being a prostitute, she feels, behaves and is treated as a respected member within the high-class society of the restaurant where the narrative takes place. In other words, she perceives herself as 'worthy' of such a restaurant despite being an *habitué* because in the company of her clients, and because she is treated as 'worthy' as well, quite differently from the way her husband feels about himself and behaves. An instance of his perception of unworthiness takes place when he replies to her:

"I don't know too much about champagne. I don't mind admitting I'm not much of a connoisseur. I don't mind admitting I'm just a lowbrow". He laughed and tried to catch her eye ... "Not like the group you've been keeping company with lately. But if you wanted Lancer's," he went on, "you should have ordered Lancer's". (160)

⁸ American sociologist (1864 – 1929), best known for his widely accepted conceptualization of the 'looking glass self', which reflects on the way a person's self is generated.

Yet, because female self - visualization is not thematized in this story, I do not intend to take it here into further consideration. What is important, though, is the possibility within Carver's prose of these processes as attributed to female characters.

In point of fact, another declination of 'the social self-gaze' is to be found in the peculiar character of Eileen from the story "Fever". She is an absent character, meaning that she appears only obliquely within the diegesis, that is to say through phone calls, letters or drawings she sends. Yet, she is a central character as well, since the narrative revolves around these 'sideways incursions', and around Carlyle, Eileen's husband, i.e. the one who answers the phone calls and who is the recipient of the letters. Such a structure of the story, finally, articulates Carlyle's attempts to overcome Eileen's decision to leave him and their two children for another man, and in order to pursue her artistic talent. Therefore, Eileen embodies in "Fever" the shift of a female character from her social role of 'family member' and 'mother', to the social role of 'artist'. I referred previously to this woman character as 'peculiar' because of the complex and slightly contradictory nuances of Eileen's phone calls/self-portraits, i.e. because of the way she self-visualizes and represents herself and her social shift. For on the one hand, Eileen partly appears as a powerful subject, and as a subject who is aware of her own new image within a social order. On the other hand, questions might be raised regarding the extent to which Eileen develops a negotiating attitude and a self-consciousness in this self-visualizing process. In order to explain this friction, the following passage should be noted:

[o]ver the summer, Eileen had sent a few cards, letters and photographs of herself to the children ... In one of the envelopes there was a photograph of her in a big, floppy hat, wearing a bathing suit. And there was a pencil drawing on heavy paper of a woman on a riverbank in a filmy gown, her hands covering her eyes, her shoulders slumped. It was, Carlyle assumed, *Eileen showing her heartbreak over the situation*. (164) (emphasis added)

This quote testifies to Eileen's activity of looking at herself in order to represent a certain image of herself to the 'outside'. More precisely, the passage highlights Eileen's creation of a new social self-image, that of an artist ('there was a pencil drawing of a woman ... showing her heartbreak over the situation'). Also, this female protagonist appears to be aware of the reasons behind the choice to

identify with this new social milieu, since “[i]n college, she had majored in art, and even though she'd agreed to marry him, she said she intended to do something with her talent” (164). In this perspective, a certain empowered stance appears to have been accomplished in Eileen's new self-image. Moreover, she seems to be negotiating her two roles of 'family member' and artist throughout the story. As a matter of fact, she wants to “keep all the channels of communication open” (168) with her husband, as the sideways incursions show. Also, it is Eileen who arranges the presence in her former household of a successful babysitter, Mrs Webster. Yet, a quite contrary set of circumstances appear to emphasize that Eileen's shift in her social roles has turned her actually into a distant mother and dis-empathic former companion, or even, into a subject who doesn't really 'look at herself', at least not with self-awareness. For instance, it could be noted that, in one of the late phone calls she makes, Eileen states

[t]ell [Keith and Sarah] I'm sending some more pictures. Tell them that. *I don't want them to forget their mother is an artist.* Maybe not a great artist yet, that's not important. But, you know, an artist. It's important they shouldn't forget that. (167) (emphasis added)

It is interesting here to note Eileen's request of being remembered by her children for her new social role, and not for instance for her 'self' or for her 'personality'. The request is the more striking as it appears as a peculiar variation on a 'motherly' phrase that might possibly be 'I don't want them to forget that I am their mother'. Also, Eileen does arrange the presence of Mrs Webster in the house, yet the latter is (only) a surrogate mother figure to whom Eileen actually delegates the cares and caring for her husband and children. In this perspective then, and taking a step back, the way this female protagonist sees and represents herself as a 'woman on the riverbank in a filmy gown' appears as slightly distorted as well. From such a standpoint, the above quoted passage casts some doubt on Eileen's artistic talent by means of the skeptical tone implied within the filter of the male protagonist's consciousness, i.e. 'Carlyle assumed'. This skepticism is present also in the descriptions of the images themselves ('filmy', 'slumped shoulders ... showing her heartbreak' etc...). In other words, it might be said that Eileen's self visualization is the result of a gaze 'pre-directed' on how the social 'type' of artist 'should look like' (for she is 'filmy' and 'showy'). And, as

already mentioned, this is a process which makes of Eileen a strikingly anti-maternal figure and dis-empathic ex-wife ('I don't want them to forget their mother is an artist'). Eileen's character demonstrates a lack of awareness according to Vasiliki Fachard as well. For the critic, the reason behind this feeble self-consciousness is the fact that Eileen's new voice and attitude incorporate some of the stances of the feminist ideology of the 70's and 80's, and the fact that these are not fully elaborated by the character yet (Fachard 13). While I do agree with the mentioned idea that Eileen's new personality can be considered a 'mirror' response to certain emancipatory stances present in the society of the era, I would also suggest as conclusion that there is an additional uncanny and slightly surreal aspect of Eileen's already complex and somehow contradictory self-visualization and self-representation. As a matter of fact, Eileen's phone calls are characterized by a new 'crazy tone of voice' which Carlyle struggles to identify as a familiar one ("he longed to hear her voice – sweet, steady, not manic as it had been for months now" [166]). This *unheimlich* quality of her voice and her presence in the household through vicarious self-portraits contribute to configuring Eileen as an almost dis-embodied entity. Interestingly, it is through this 'disembodied presence' only that Eileen manages to suggest, and eventually bring, the surrogate Mrs Webster into the life of Carlyle and her children. Equally important, though, is the content of Eileen's conversations as well, since "Carlyle knew ... even if Eileen answered the telephone, she might launch into something about his karma" (166). The element of 'karma', in point of fact, might suggest a pyramid structure: Eileen does not only manage to have a certain control over the life in her former home, but she also appears to believe that her own life (and self-vision?) is governed by 'karma', an aspect which is omnipresent in her reasoning. In other words, Eileen appears to represent herself as a vicarious presence of an even greater, more ungraspable, and undefinable entity than she herself is. Yet, I suggest this 'uncanny power of the social self-gaze'-perspective only as an additional layer and as possible reading of this character's multifaceted and contradictory self-visualization. Also, it could be noted that the above outlined process of 'developing 'reflectively' in response to our perception and internalization of how others perceive and evaluate us' on the one hand, and the declination of this

process in peculiar terms on the other, are both trademarks of Altman's 'performer figures' (to the different outcomes of which I will come back later). Finally, in order to develop the issue of female self-visualization further, in the next section of this chapter I intend to take into consideration the 'imaginative' female self-gazes in Carver's stories. These are particularly significant as they appear to point to an idea of response to the 'outside order' that is empowering because it is not only in process, but an actively creative one as well.

2.3 The power of the 'imaginative' self-gaze

In this section I intend to take into consideration another type of self-looking that female characters present in Carver's *oeuvre*. As a matter of fact, some of Carver's women characters do not 'look at themselves' within the 'concrete' sphere of social roles only, but they also envision themselves in intangible and imaginative 'other' circumstances and selves as well, which turn out to be effective strategies in terms of self-awareness. In this respect the above mentioned term 'eccentric subject', coined by Teresa de Lauretis, might be a useful critical tool. She defines the term as

excessive critical position ... attained through practices of political and personal displacement, across boundaries between sociosexual identities and communities, between bodies and discourses. (qtd. in García Zarraz 22)

This concept might be useful to reevaluate some female characters in Carver's prose, and in particular their manner of looking at themselves in an empowering and imaginative way, with what might be called an oneiric/artistic self-gaze. For example, Clair, the protagonist of "So Much Water So Close to Home"⁹ embodies the peculiar way in which Carver's woman characters visualize themselves both through the eyes of society, and in a re-elaborative and in-process approach to these social gazes. Significantly, when Clair's husband Stuart relates to her that he had found the corpse of a girl during his fishing trip with friends, and that he had told the police about it after their excursion was over, the events are reported in Clair's first-person narration as follows

⁹ I refer here to the extended version of the story, as published in *Beginners*.

[o]ne of the men, I don't know who, it might have been Stuart, he could have done it, waded into the water and took the girl by the fingers and pulled her, still face down, closer to shore ... all the while the flashlights of the other men played over the girl's body. (116)

What is striking in this passage is the amount of visual details ('took the girl by the fingers', 'while the flashlights ... played over the girl's body') that appear to emerge not so much from Stuart's narration, as from Clair's imagining the scene, as if she too had been an eye-witness to it. Also, Clair keeps on being exposed to and interested in the vicissitude of the girl for the whole duration of the story, both by means of newspaper articles ("eighteen to twenty-four years of age ... body three to five days in the water ... rape a possible motive ..." [117 - 118]), by watching television, and eventually by taking part in the dead girl's funeral, in what appears a crescendo in terms of her 'sensorial' and witnessing involvement. On the other hand, Clair's reaction to witnessing these events is striking as well. As a matter of fact, she reacts by displacing herself 'across boundaries ... between bodies and discourses', an instance of which is her famous visual imaginative identification with the dead girl: "I look at the creek. I float toward the pond, eyes open, face down, staring at the rocks and moss on the creek bottom until I am carried into the lake where I am pushed by the breeze" (120). The complementarity of this vision to the above quoted passage which describes the girl in the water is striking, and the effect is that Clair is an eye-witness both from the inside and the outside of the scene. Within the diegesis, the result of such self-visualizations is Clair's gaining an 'excessive critical position', but also her engagement in further imaginative/creative self-visualizations. In other words, Clair realizes through this event that on the level of society, gender issues, and in her own marital life, her position as woman is a critical one. She comes to be highly aware of the way she is visualized by her male counterparts (as in the gas-pump station scene and green-truck scene), and that this situation is difficult to be changed. This becomes evident in Clair's reasoning that "we will go on and on and on ... as if nothing had happened" (120) with the risk that "we will grow older, both of us, you can see it in our faces already, in the *bathroom mirror*, for instance" (121) (emphasis added). Yet, as the emphasized phrase of the last quote shows, Clair reacts also by envisioning herself creatively in different options, which arguably can have her be

included among the 'figures of resistance' as explained by Patricia White in her introduction to Teresa de Lauretis' essay

“figures of resistance” captures the way certain figures refuse to accede to prevailing orders and modes of knowing, as well as the way the figural properties of language (or representation more generally) *always* resist a purely referential approach to the world. (9) (qtd. in García Zarraz 24)

In this perspective, Clair acts as a 'figure of resistance' by seeing herself in unconventional ways. For instance Clair asks her hair dresser “Millie, did you ever wish you were somebody else, or else just nobody, nothing, nothing at all?” (126). That the question is asked to the hairdresser preparing Clair for the dead girl's funeral, while Clair is likely to be looking at herself in a mirror (“How's that look?” “That looks fine” [126]) highlights Clair's envisioning attempt not to conform to a 'prevailing order and modes of knowing' and to displace herself across 'political and personal boundaries'. Also, such self-envisioning continues further with Clair's preparation for the funeral, as later at home she “tr[ies] on a hat that [she hasn't] worn in years and look[s] at [herself] in the mirror. Then [she] removes[s] the hat, appl[ies] a light makeup” (127). Therefore, Clair's ability to look at herself in imaginative ways gives this female character both the possibility of perceiving herself within the society and marital life, but also of creatively imagining herself in new and transgressive situations. Finally, these constant imaginative self-visualizations in disparate ways (from the dead girl, to her nothing at all, to new looks) don't only make of her an ec-centric and resistant subject, but an empowered one as well, as she eventually and decidedly changes her role within the marital life by 'refusing' her husband emotively and physically.

One last incidental point that can be made about the self-visualization in this story is the 'transparent mind' of the female narrator. I borrow the term from the title of Cohn's study of the paradoxical “mutual dependence of realistic intent and imaginary psychology” in narrative realism (6). In her book, Cohn discusses several modes of rendering the inner lives of fictional characters and their consciousness, together with the implications these modes reveal in terms of narrative effect and authoriality. Despite the fact that none of the techniques Cohn identifies for the rendering of consciousness can be directly applied to Carver's stories (as her study covers only novels and up

to the first half of the 19th century), this study still provides useful hints and terminology. Bearing it in mind, as a matter of fact, what becomes apparent in the story “So Much Water So Close to Home” is a consonance between the figural narrator's consciousness and that of the author. In Cohn's terms, this means that “the first-person narrator has [little] free access to his [or her] own past psyche” (144). Moreover, as important implication of this, it should be noted that the artistic detail with which Clair reports her self-visualization (such as the above quoted description of the dead girl in the water) is an integral part of her narrating voice, and in this sense the protagonist/first person narrator is made into an artistic-narrator/ artistic-mind herself¹⁰.

A similar feature of 'consonant' first person narration and description is quite relevant in the less obviously 'social' story that is “Fat”. Relatively to this short narrative, García Zarraz has pointed out that “[the protagonist's] dreaming of an excessive body works as a subversive strategy if we consider feminist theories on the female grotesque”¹¹ (22-23). Yet, as development of this argument, a closer look at the trigger and quality of this subversive 'dreaming' (or imaginative self-visualization) could be taken. It could be said that the protagonist's envisioning herself as fat in the moment of intimacy with her husband (“I feel I am terrifically fat. So fat that Rudy is a tiny thing and hardly there at all” [4-5]) can be considered as synthetic response to her perceiving (artistically) positively the 'other grotesque body' within the text, i.e. the fat client. Therefore, an analysis of the exchanges of the two of them can shed a better light on the later 'synthetical' vision of the woman protagonist and on its creative aspect. For in point of fact, the narrator's colleagues perceive the fat man's physical peculiarities as show - worthy oddities (“you got a fat man from the circus out there” [3]), as a reminder of weaker subjects (“Rudy says, I knew ... a couple of fat guys ... when I was a kid ... I don't remember their names. Fat, that's the only name this one kid had ... the other was Wobbly ... everybody called him Wobbly except the teachers” [4]), or to be regarded in a quite patronizing tone (“Who's your fat friend? He's really a fatty” [1] or “How is old tub-of-guts doing?”

¹⁰ A parallel of this type of artistic perception transferred from author to figurative consciousness is to be found in Cohn's analysis of the 'consonant third-person narrator' in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

¹¹ In particular, García Zarraz draws on Mary Russo's argument that there is a quality of process, becoming and change intrinsic in the grotesque body, as opposed to the static quality of 'normative' classical bodies.

[3]). Contrarily, the connotation of 'positively charged other' as related to the protagonist's description of the 'fat man' should be noted, as in

[t]his fat man is the fattest person I have ever seen, though he is neat appearing and well dressed enough. Everything about him is big. But it is the fingers I remember best ... I first notice the fingers. They look three times the size of a normal person's fingers – long, thick, creamy fingers. (1)

This first description the (consonant) narrator gives of her client is striking for the visual sensitivity in the description of his features: the long thick creamy fingers are in this respect both significant for the sensorial detail used to define them and as recurring element in the characterization of the client¹². Additionally, the protagonist's implication that there is a 'normal' finger-size for 'normal people' qualifies early in the short story the fat man as 'other', while his dressing and general appearance also present him as pleasant. Incidentally, the 'otherness' is consolidated by the peculiar way that the fat man has of referring to himself in the plural form (“I think we will begin with a Cesar salad, he says” [1]), while the “way of speaking – strange ... [with] a little puffing sound every so often” (1) punctuates his expressions with a further surreal tone. The narrator's curiosity and almost sexually-driven interest into the man is translated into action in various ways: she affectionately takes care herself of his dessert, gives him extra portions of food, and explains in response to his apologies for the quantity of food ordered and consumed that she likes “to see a man eat and enjoy himself” (2). Also, the narrator does not only perceive positively the excesses and eccentricities of a subject that is otherwise contained by the 'broader society', but she also wants to nourish and propagate this eccentricity through herself: she re-creates imaginatively around herself the visual qualities pertaining to the fat man. Therefore, my arguing that this female character is empowered in visualizing herself as increasingly fat is based on the fact that this self-vision of hers appears as a synthesis of the way she has perceived the fat man throughout the story, i.e. in a highly sensitive way as a positively excessive and ec-centric body.

To sum up the first part of this dissertation, an analysis of the way woman characters are visualized by their male counterparts has helped unpack the presence of a cinematic male gaze in

¹² For an in depth study on the erotic undertone of the fingers of the 'fat man', I reference here Vasiliki Fachard's essay “What more than Rita can we make of Carver's parts in 'Fat'?”

Carver's prose which, despite perpetuating certain culturally-inherited ways of representing women, also shows the presence of potentially weak and intimidated male subjects. On the other hand, the 'third wave Carver criticism'¹³ has provided both the terminology and the frames of reference to be applied to the present 'visual' analysis of Carver's prose. Such feminist criticism, together with sociological notions and literary theory, has revealed the subversive strategies that female self-gaze can assume: the processes of being able to see oneself in a context, of imaginatively envisioning oneself in different circumstances, or reporting the experience of 'the other' and attributing it to the self, all attest to the possibility of powerful and often creative strategies female self-perception acquires in Carver's prose. While these perspectives add to the already rich reading-layers of Carver, they are also functional to an analysis of the same issue of visualization of/by women in Altman's *Short Cuts*, but in his other movies as well. Before reevaluating Altman's female figures' (self) gazes in 'comparison' to Carver's, though, another necessary element is to be taken into consideration; that is to say that the issue of how visualization/self visualization and consciousness work in the two different media of prose and cinema will be under analysis in the next chapter.

¹³ I refer here to critics such as Fachard, Miltner, Fabre-Clark, García Zarraz, who are part of the research of Carver's 'female voices from a purely feminist perspective' (Fabre-Clark 1). Surprisingly, this wave of criticism has not considered the 'visual aspect' of gender relations in Carver yet.

3. From Raymond Carver to Robert Altman

In the last sections of the previous chapter I have highlighted that in Carver's stories the realistic psychology of the characters is strictly linked to the graphic element of the visual descriptions. For example, this was the case of the artistic self-gaze of the protagonist of "Fat", who imaginatively incorporates a positive 'other' in her self-vision. Additionally, the 'subjective realism' with which for instance Ralph, from the story "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?", visualizes and reacts psychologically to his wife Marian has turned out to be a fundamental aspect to decode his gaze. Conversely, though, it should be remembered that Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993) has received quite negative critic response to the filmmaker's dealing with the theme of 'visuality'. For instance, Martin Scofield argues

[q]uestions are, as it were, alluded to here about the difference between artistic nudity and real nakedness; between the kind of horror we feel at images in horror films and our real horror at images of violence and mutilation in real life; between private sexual fantasy and 'public' voyeurism. But the questions are merely alluded to ... and never explored. (390)

Moreover, by close – reading single narrative strains in *Short Cuts*, Scofield highlights the lack of 'changing awareness' in Altman's characters (394). Also, and somewhat more specifically to the issue of gaze, Pamela Demory states about *Short Cuts* that

[t]he film does participate in the time-honored Hollywood tradition of objectifying women's bodies, but it does so in a self-conscious way that at first seems to offer a critique of the same objectifying gaze. (98)

Quite obviously, these quotes are significant as they question Altman's treatment of the theme of visualization by stressing: a general critical 'flatness'; the visual objectification of women characters; and the characters' non - evolving psychology or identities. Such considerations emerge from Kasia Boddy's essay "Short Cuts and Long Shots" as well. Here the critic highlights the points of divergence between Carver's stories and Altman's film (i.e. location, class and 'inner lives' of the protagonists), and their consequences¹⁴. Also, despite the statement that a "reading that conflates

¹⁴More precisely, according to Boddy's reading, by placing his narrative in the suburbs of Los Angeles, with characters (allegedly) denied of any interior life and belonging to the middle-class stratum, in the process of adaptation Altman

[Carver and Altman] is one that fails to do justice to either” (5), Boddy's essay refers to Altman's film with terms such as 'defense', 'distortion' or 'deprivation'. These quotes, and especially the latter ones, show clearly that what is contested to Altman's adaptation is also the 'in-fidelity' of his transposition from one source medium (or text, in this case narrative short stories) to another medium (or text, here cinema)¹⁵. It could be said, though, that such a questioning of the role and rightfulness of the adapter might indeed obscure medium – specific and/or filmmaker – specific strategies to deal with certain issues, in this case the theme of 'visuality'. Consequently, an outline and some considerations on adaptation theory will here be preparatory for the next chapters' analysis of both Altman's relationship with Carver's texts, and of the female (self)-visualization in the filmmaker's work.

3.1 On adaptation

As already mentioned above, the concept of 'fidelity' in adaptation theory has been questioned by a number of critics in recent decades¹⁶. For in point of fact, and as Linda Hutcheon would put it,

Knowing audiences have expectations – and demands. It may be less, as Béla Balázs tried to insist, that “a masterpiece is a work whose subject ideally suits its medium” and therefore cannot be adapted (qtd. in Andrew 1976: 87), than a case of a “masterpiece” being a work a particular audience cherishes and resists seeing changed. (122)

As the passage explains, a certain type of resistance is difficult to wear off in the mind of an

creates a 'Carver soup'. With the latter term Boddy means that the filmmaker levels up Carver's stories and deprives them of their particular trademark fragmentary form, thus conflating his own poetics with those of Carver and distorting inevitably the writer's work (9).

¹⁵ Merz's and Bluestone's studies have been highly influential for establishing semiotic fidelity as the basis for adaptation, and/or for positing the un - adaptability of literary works to the audiovisual medium. The argument supporting these statements was the definition of literature as conceptual and linguistic only, and of the cinema as perceptual and visual only. This frame of reference is still perceived in some studies of (post)structuralist scholars as well, such as Brian McFarlane who “after acknowledging that film draws on a combination of visual, aural, and verbal signifiers ... nevertheless designated the novel linear, the film spatial, the novel conceptual, and the film perceptual” (Elliott 2).

¹⁶ Robert Stam, Kamilla Elliott, R. Barton Palmer are some of the critics who promote the idea that the theory of adaptation should discharge 'fidelity' notions when dealing with (literary to cinematic) adaptations, in order to focus on the material differences between the two media.

audience that experiences the adaptation of a work they are already familiar with. In order to dismantle the bias against other aspects of an adapted text that such a resistance contributes to, Hutcheon defines adaptation as follows

- ≡ An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works
- ≡ A creative *and* an interpretative act of appropriation/salvaging
- ≡ An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work. (8) (Hutcheon's emphasis)

In other words, the critic insists on adaptation as 'palimpsestuous' process and product of cultural, historical and geographical contexts. Therefore, for instance, the fact that Altman's movies belong to a specific tradition within the history of cinema gains importance. Also, the critic suggests the use of the terms 'translation' or 'paraphrases' (i.e. "necessarily a recoding into a new set of conventions as well as signs" [16]) to define the process of change from a medium to another, as these terms help highlight the feature of 'repetition with variation' that adaptations imply and require. An example of this issue might be the transposition of Marian from Carver's "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" from an indefinite social class position and a small town area into a Los Angeles middle/high class painter. While this 'transcoding' means on the one hand that Altman endows the female character with the 'power of the gaze', this variation can still repeat 'carverian' gender archetypes. Most of all, the aspect of both loss and gain that comes with the interpretative and creative transcoding that is 'adaptation' is acknowledged in Hutcheon's definition, and the 'fidelity'-charged terminology can be discharged. Finally, and as E.H. Gombrich insightfully points out, it should be remembered that

[i]f an artist stands before a landscape with a pencil in hand, he or she will "look for those aspects which can be rendered in lines"; if it is a paintbrush that the hand holds, the artist's vision of the very same same landscape will be in terms of masses, not lines. (65) (qtd. in Hutcheon 19)

This passage is particularly suitable to convey the concept that different media place emphasis on different (narrative) aspects in virtue of their specific technical means. To explain this concept further, while in Carver's prose psychological realism is the pivotal element to decode his characters' gazes, in Altman other elements than 'character subjective point of view'¹⁷ might be

¹⁷ Although, incidentally, it should be remembered that "in a multitrack medium, everything can convey point of view:

bearers of meaningful resonances and stances. This can become even more apparent when considering *Short Cuts* in the context of Altman's other films, their cinematic devices for rendering (self) visualization, and their understanding of character 'personality' as well.

As conclusion, and to go back to the above quoted critics, it might be said that the objections moved to Altman's adaptation named *Short Cuts*, i.e. of contributing merely to the objectification of women characters, of depicting characters deprived of inner life and development, and of generally not providing an in depth analysis of the theme of visualization might be to a certain extent revisited. Also, as I have outlined in this section, such a revisitation needs to set forward both from an attentive decoding of the signs specific to film as medium, but also from a different frame of reference than 'fidelity' when talking about adaptation. Therefore, with the aid of the above outlined critical tools, an analysis of Altman's theme of female (self)visualization will be the subject of the next chapters of this dissertation.

camera angle, focal length, music, *mise-en-scène*, or costume (Stam 2005b: 39). What is more important than thinking in terms of first or third person narration, argues Robert Stam, 'is authorial control of intimacy and distance, the calibration of access to characters' knowledge and consciousness'"(2005b: 35) (qtd. in Hutcheon 56).

4.1 Altman and vision: Unintentional objectification?

As already anticipated in the previous chapter, I intend to take into consideration *Short Cuts* according to Hutcheon's definition of adaptation, within the broader context of Altman's work (for the issue of visualization is recurrent in Altman), and by paying particular attention to his 'cinematic language'. Such a perspective will not only highlight the thematic strains that originate in Carver's stories, but it will also add to the readings of Altman's work(s) from the perspective of female self-visualization, and female visualization by their male counterparts.

To begin with the latter, in *Short Cuts* Altman appears to acknowledge and thematize the objectifying quality of the male gaze on women. For instance, several scenes depict men in the act of observing voyeuristically other female characters. An example of this is when Jerry, the pool-keeper, spies on Zoe undressing and jumping into the pool; or when Bill, a make up artist, takes pictures of his girlfriend made up as if she had been beaten up brutally or even as if she was dead, etc All of these instances, though, are parts of longer narrative strains which, eventually, develop heavy implications. Therefore, Altman's thematization of the male gaze on women focuses on the extreme forms and effects of this gaze, thus partly subverting the 'heterosexual male pleasure' in looking at the objectifying images it may produce. While I intend to take into consideration Altman's male gaze, its internal eros/thanatos dichotomies, and nuances later on in this chapter, I will first take a closer look at another specific aspect that constitutes the filmmaker's 'subversive' thematization of 'the gaze'. As a matter of fact, *Short Cuts* provides an example in which it is the woman of a pair who holds the power of 'the gaze', since she is a painter: this is the case of the 'Marian and Ralph narrative' (played by Julianne Moore and Matthew Modine, respectively). The reason for focusing first and foremost on this portion of the film is the fact that it has been argued that, in this 'overthrowing' thematization operated by Altman,

the subverting of traditional images doesn't quite come off. Despite its self-conscious awareness of the problems inherent in representing women's bodies, the film remains within the bounds of

classical Hollywood filmmaking, as described by Mulvey. It constructs images that appeal to a heterosexual male spectator. (Demory 99)

Or, as Demory implies, Altman contributes to the objectification of women on screen. When stating this, Demory refers in particular to the 'Marian's confession' scene. This sequence is constructed so that the confession is provoked by Ralph; the monologue during which Marian explains her infidelity is almost identical to the monologue in Carver's story, yet this female character relates the episode in a frenzy; during the discussion she spills some wine on her skirt, takes it off to wash it and dry it, and does all these last actions while wearing nothing at all below her waist. It is precisely the nudity of her body the element with which Altman's film, according to Demory, contributes to the degradation of the female body on screen. In particular, Demory writes about the scene

[b]ecause of this threat of castration, Mulvey continues, cinema tends to either demystify her [i.e. the woman] and then punish or save her, or else turn her into a fetish object so that she becomes *reassuring instead of dangerous*. Here, Marian is both fetishized – made into the object of the gaze, and thus made more reassuring, something “we” can cope with – and also *punished*, made to submit to our, the spectator's, gaze and made to confess by her husband. (101) (emphasis added)

While I do believe that Marian's suddenly-half-naked presence on the screen does create puzzlement in the viewer of either sex, and as a consequence runs the risk of 'blurring' the words Julianne Moore pronounces, I also believe that a look at the diegetic preparation leading to this scene, its internal rhythm, and some technical aspects of its filming can suggest a different perspective than Marian's eventual 'reassuring' objectification and final 'punishment'. Moreover, this 're-evaluation' might be an interesting starting point to explore further the nuances of the subversion/objectification that is Altman's thematization of the male gaze, be it 'either intentional or not'.

4.1.1 Marian and Ralph: The artist and the doctor in the story

To begin from the diegetic point of view on the story, it could be said that the relationship

between these two characters is constructed on the opposition between Ralph's attempt to contain his wife, and Marian's power to exclude her husband. These dynamics are present in almost any of the scenes which depict them together, and are amplified gradually throughout the film. As a matter of fact, this interaction is represented in a nutshell from the very first time the couple appears on screen: during a concert, Marian notices a celebrity sitting some seats behind her, and points the celebrity to the woman sitting next to her. Thus, Marian starts up a connection with her seat – neighbors, and invites them to dinner. The scene is significant as it introduces that it is Marian the one who possesses 'the power of the look' and the power to act; on the other hand, her husband is presented in the act of rebuking Marian, in a half pleading, half patronizing tone of voice, for her unruliness during a public event (“Marian, please!”). Such dynamics are developed further in later scenes as well, with a clearer focus on the fact that what Ralph is frustrated by and attempting to contain is Marian's own domain: her art, her femininity and her instinctual sexuality. To begin with the latter, this is an element hinted at also as early as in the 'concert scene': while Marian reassures Ralph to “relax, relax” in regard to her inviting the seat – neighbors over for dinner, the image which we are shown while hearing her voice¹⁸ is the face of the celebrity she was pointing to earlier, as he apparently returns her the look. Yet another scene reinforces the suggestion that Marian's art and femininity overlap, and that these are a domain in which Ralph is either in *jeopardy* and/or excluded from: as Marian is painting a nude of her sister posing for her, Ralph arrives home and stares around slightly embarrassed. Significantly, neither of the women looks at him, since Marian's sister keeps her eyes closed for her pose, and Marian is intent in her work, until the latter says eventually: “What are you doing at home, you are not supposed to be at home now ... I'm going at Sherri's for dinner ... But you don't want to come, do you? Do you?”. An additional comment to this scene is its closure, for as soon as Ralph leaves Marian and Sherri burst into 'olympic laughs', with alternate close-ups of their faces; these frames, in other words, seem to consolidate their 'feminine' union and to create a parallel with Marian's paintings. On the other hand, Ralph expresses

¹⁸ Hearing a character's voice while looking at other diegetic images, i.e. the 'voice off' technique, is an important element of this narrative, to which I will come back in the next section.

his frustration and jealousy because of this condition in more than one occasion. For instance he leaves without answering 'bye' when he doesn't manage to catch Marian's attention, or picks up the phone when she is already talking on it.

While from this outline of the diegesis it is clear that the dynamics of this couple do not run on the lines of eros and thanatos tension, they still do question the power (a)symmetries linked to the activity of looking/gazing. For Altman's Marian, being a painter, is empowered in her relationship with the environment around her: she observes it and 'shapes' it actively. On the other hand, she is also somewhat 'objectified' in the diegesis. In point of fact, Marian is slightly demonized because of her instinctual/unpredictable sexuality, but she is related to the 'threatening mystery of femininity' as well (through the relationship with her sister, their god – like – laughter, and through her own paintings). On the other hand, Ralph is actively excluded yet actively containing as well towards these same elements which bring him frustration, and at points jealousy. Therefore, the two characters have different sources of both power and fragility. In other words, there are in this Altman's story some slight resonances with Carver's "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?", where the woman character was partly objectified, while the male protagonist had signs of 'weakness' as well. All the elements characteristic of the two characters in Altman's narrative are eventually brought to an apex (visual and in terms of dialogue) in the quarrel/confession of infidelity scene. While this sequence might partly objectify Marian's body, her nudity could also be considered as consistent with her complex and contradictory diegetic role. Finally, the analysis of other elements constituent of the scene, i.e. the bodies in the space and the voice off technique, might suggest that the 'confession' depicts an unresolvable conflict of gender – powers between Marian and Ralph more than it produces a 'punished' and 'reassuring' Marian.

4.1.2 Marian and Ralph: Voices, bodies, and gazes

Being a technique of shooting, voice off displays 'power' in a different way than the plot or the characters do. In fact, voice off could be defined as “deviation from the rule of synchronization” (Silverman 46), in as much as it consists of the impossibility to locate on screen the source of a voice in the moment of its emission; the viewer is shown, instead, other diegetic images. According to Kaja Silverman, this technique of disruption of 'perfect unity' between body and voice/sound has the effect of reinforcing the unity of space within the diegesis (showing the audience that the diegetic space is a potentially unlimited one), but also, and most importantly, of privileging the voice over the body presence¹⁹(46). Such a technique is not necessarily related to character-specific point of view, yet a disembodied voice does convey power: it highlights the uncanny essence of voice and it undermines the conviction that voice and a specific body, with its specific features, coincide in some neat way. Therefore, voice off also implies the presence of a higher, omnipresent entity. Despite the fact that its use is of brief duration (as, generally speaking, almost always is) it is significant its association both with Marian and Ralph in the scene under analysis. The effect so reached is consequently that of placing the quarrel/duel between the two protagonists on a different level, i.e. on the level of an essential gender conflict, an effect to which the visual construction of the scene, or the protagonists' bodies in the space, contributes as well.

To explore the latter, and as already hinted above, the 'ambiguous' aspect of this scene is that for a part of the 'confession' Marian remains naked from the waist below, while talking. Another interesting feature of the sequence to be noted here, though, is the fact that for the time before the 'confession', Marian is followed by the camera, which may be her husband's gaze, while constantly moving around the setting that is the living room (she fetches herself a drink, moves to another

¹⁹ Doane attests the process of synchronization between body image and voice in early talkies as an attempt to avoid the public's fear of deception on the part of the new medium, and as an effort to meet the public's reverse demand for realism (34). The consequences of such a unification were manifold. For instance, dialogues acquired the dominant role as a space in which the relationship of two body images could take place. Also, these bodies had to be highly specific as a means for the public (self) recognition (36). On the other hand such belief in the self-evident cohesion between body and voice contributed to the creation of specific body images for the female voices. Conversely, the association with women characters of techniques that disembodied voice, such as the voice off, is particularly relevant.

room, takes off her skirt and goes to wash it, takes a hair-drier to dry it and puts it back on). Contrarily, for the whole duration of the discussion, Ralph is sunk in an armchair in the middle of the room. Such opposing bodies in the space appear to add to the many - sidedness and complexity of the gender – roles here displayed. For on the one hand Ralph's stiffness, his impossibility to move, and his following gaze do contribute to the containment of Marian's (for a moment naked) body and persona, while Marian partly does lose 'the power over her gaze' in this instance. On the other, she still expresses herself through 'fluidity', unpredictability, and assertion of herself/her own vision (through her own narration of the events, and her nude paintings, which are always in the background). These features appear as ungraspable to her husband, or even as the cause of Ralph's impossibility to move. In other words, the scene epitomizes through body opposition in terms of stasis and movement the essential characteristics of the two protagonists. Moreover, the use of the voice off technique does create the final effect of a gender - conflict of powers on an even footing, even though ultimately unresolvable. More precisely, for instance, Ralph starts in mid shot the argument by saying “I want you to tell me about that night with Mitchell Anderson”, while for the time preparatory of this confession - inducing sentence the camera had been following Marian and her movements around the room with Ralph's voice in voice off. Nevertheless, when Marian, who has already taken her skirt off and is drying it, starts her confession, we have a parallel mid shot from her waist above, and most of all, she finishes her discourse dressed and in voice off (the camera is focused now on Ralph's petrified facial expression) as she equally threateningly asks “Is that all? Is that all you wanna know? Is that all? Is that all?”, closing thus the argument. In other words, the characters display in this sequence highly opposing body positions, yet equally power - charged vocal expressions, which do not bring to an end their plot -linked opposition.

To sum up, in his narrative concerning Ralph and Marian's relationship, Altman subverts the power of the gaze in terms of plot detail and protagonist – characterization: Marian is an empowered looking subject, with certain archetypal features reminiscent of Carver's female protagonist of “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?”, while her husband is decidedly frustrated yet

containing. Yet, a consideration of the cinematic devices as various as disembodied voices, bodies in space and *mise-en-scène* suggests that this narrative deals with an unresolvable (gender) conflict based on equal powers, wherein Marian's nudity holds an ambiguous position. While this analysis has been useful to shed a light on the more or less subversive devices and effects with which 'gaze' can be represented by Altman in his medium, yet other nuances in terms of eros/thanatos in the filmmaker's thematization of the male gaze will be the subject of the next section of this chapter

4.2 Nuances of eros and thanatos

A first example of the fact that the eros and thanatos dichotomies are present in Altman's dealing with the issue of gaze, with an extreme mode in comparison to Carver's, is to be found in the story between Bill (Robert Downey Jr.), a make up artist, and Honey (Lili Taylor) his girlfriend, which is partly modeled on Carver's "Neighbors". For there is a brief sequence depicting them which sticks in the mind of the audience hauntingly because of its quality of suspense and reversal of audience expectation, while the dialogues complete the atmosphere and its disturbing effect. As a matter of fact, the viewer is presented with the images of a girl, who has apparently been beaten up, as she looks at herself in the mirror. Moreover, the first shot of her is filtered through a fish tank, which creates a blurry view and an aura of mystery at least. The girl's activity is shortly and suddenly interrupted by a figure, we realize from the mirror reflection it is Bill, who throws her violently on the bed. Yet, it is only as he puts a brush on her face that the viewer can realize the 'playful' aspect of it all, i.e. that Bill had been using Honey as a model for his make – up exercises. While at this point the tension in the audience expectation has been released, as already anticipated, the dialogues proceed as follows

Bill: Now look like somebody really hurt you, like Earl [her father] beat you.

[shoots a picture while standing over her on the bed]

Honey: Shut up!

Bill: Did he? [...] What else did he do? What do you think about when you think about Earl?

As the male protagonist pronounces these lines, the viewer sees a frame of Bill holding a camera in front of his face, or rather, a faceless Bill, a metonymic camera – eye only, and the dialogue continues with counter – shots on Honey's 'beaten up' face

Bill: why don't you undress for this one, a little bit [...] come on, just for me.

Honey: I don't want to do this anymore, I've been very patient.

Bill: I could well I could have done it just my quick version: just crunch! Crunch! Hooker! Whore!

But I didn't because I love you so.

Honey: [laughs] I love you too.

Bill: Why did that excite me? [...] That's a little weird.

These dialogues within such a scene are indicative of the fact that Altman develops the argument that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (Mulvey 309) (qtd. in Demory 99). Nevertheless, Altman's development is characterized, as both the editing and the dialogues/acting point to, by a mixture of 'playfulness' (considering the fact that what is depicted is a private moment of a couple) and 'gravity' (considering the actual underlying content of the scene), and by the fact that both these elements are brought to an extreme. Yet, it is in virtue of this extremity that the (negatively) critical effect regarding the issue of 'male gaze' surfaces. Therefore, the (disturbing) excess comes forward not only from the previously created and released suspense, but also from the fact that Bill becomes playfully one and the same with the camera. More precisely, he stands physically over Honey, shapes her outlook and asks of her how to behave, becoming the active director of the gaze in his own setting/environment. Moreover, Honey's acceptance of Bill's 'playful' requests becomes the more distressful as much as it clashes with her evident discomfort and resistance. It is precisely her reactions that highlight the 'grave' aspect of Bill's gestures (for instance Honey drops heavily out of Bill's 'game' at the mentioning of her father), for a full consent on her part would have made the scene resonate with a BDSM²⁰ practice. To expand this thought further, these dynamics within the scene appear to point to the fact that Bill's mixing his own dominance and pleasure towards his female counterpart is not so much related to his psychological relationship with Honey, but it is

²⁰ The UrbanDictionary defines the term as abbreviation coined in the late 60's early 70's for a variety of erotic practices, including role – playing of dominance and submission and other consensual interpersonal dynamics.

rather directed to his own purpose and excitement. In this way Bill's lack of empathy with Honey, or rather a sort of 'psychological' abusiveness towards her, surfaces as well. The lack of 'empathy' in the psychology of this character is arguably yet another device that has a twofold effect. For one thing, as a matter of fact, the eros/thanatos dichotomy becomes focused on the more specific aspect of eroticism (and abusiveness), with a consequent focus on the 'playful' and visual aspect of it. In this perspective, therefore, the suspense of the scene, its *mise-en-scène*, etc ... appear as an instance in which 'form follows function'. On the other hand, though, it is precisely in virtue of this slight connection between Bill's psychological insight and his playing with 'camera and death' that what is highlighted as well is the ordinariness of such an activity, the above outlined interpersonal dynamics as acceptable, and the realistic aspect beneath this interaction. In other words, the emphasis of the whole sequence is placed so that it explores the extent to which a game / play carries with itself culturally-inherited dynamics, on the depth to which eroticism and abusiveness (both visual/physical and psychological) can easily sink and melt together, by means of the specific theme of gaze as conveyor of eros and thanatos.

While it is worth noting here that such an exploration of the male gaze on women (on the lines of eroticism vs abusiveness, or on the 'playful' mode) is not present in Carver, it is still of interest to take a closer look at the incipit of the Bill and Honey scene once again. For the frame in which we see Honey through a fish tank looking at herself in a mirror, quite interestingly, is reminiscent of Carver in two highly condensed yet distinct and precise ways: the fish tank signals the fact that Bill and Honey are at their neighbors' house and using it for their own (erotic) purposes (as in Carver's "Neighbors"); additionally, the 'water filter' of the tank with a beaten girl looking at herself in a mirror behind it resonates interestingly with the self - visualizing theme and characteristics of Clair from "So Much Water, So Close to Home". Yet, Altman's shot, despite resonating with Carver on multiple levels, doesn't develop further neither the voyeuristic and queer aspects of "Neighbors" nor the social self – gaze aspect of "So Much Water ...". Rather, as the above analysis shows, Altman's narrative takes on its own meanings and a new direction, a practice

in line with the understanding of 'adaptation' as palimpsestuous process of appropriation/salvaging. Indeed, Altman's dealing with the dichotomy of eros and thanatos, or more precisely, of eroticism and abusiveness within the male gaze, is developed with still other layers and nuances in other narrative threads of *Short Cuts*. One instance is Jerry (Chris Penn), a pool-keeper modeled on the protagonist of "Tell the Women We're Going", who is a voyeur in some sequences, in others a frustrated husband and eventually a killer out of sexual frustration; another example is the relationship between Clair and her fisherman husband; some brief sequences which reference photography might also be of interest to explore further Altman's specific dealing with the eros/thanatos dichotomy in *Short Cuts*. Nevertheless, examining as last example of this chapter the last sequence of *Nashville* (1975), i.e. the killing of the star singer Barbara Jean (Ronee Blakely), will be useful on various levels, as it will help place Altman's theme of gaze as linked to eros and thanatos in the wider scope of his corpus, and provide the transitory example to the next chapter's analysis of female self-visualization in terms of 'performer figures'.

Similarly to *Short Cuts*, *Nashville* is constructed around the narratives regarding several characters, of which Barbara Jean is an emotively fragile country singer, the star and sweetheart of the city of Nashville. Also, Barbara Jean is supposed to sing at a concert shortly before the state's presidential primary for a candidate running for President of the USA on the Replacement Party ticket. This concert constitutes the final scene of the film and it reaches its climax as one of the characters reveals himself as morbid individual who pulls a gun out of a violin case, and shoots on Barbara Jean while she is on the stage. This crucial scene, among other layers of meaning, presents yet another declination of Altman's dealing with the issue of gaze in terms of eros and thanatos. As a matter of fact, *Nashville* is a movie that in great part deals with people who attempt to acquire success (public visibility) in the show business, and with show business and success in general. In this perspective, Barbara Jean, or her public image, is both shaped by the show business, but also made by the show business into the public catalyst at the stake of the mass for the opposing tendency of acceptance /rejection. Moreover, the killing scene focuses on the acceptance /rejection

in the specific terms of eros and thanatos within the mass/male gaze. Indeed, in the public, right next to the 'guy with the violin case', there is a Vietnam soldier, whose ambition in life is to protect Barbara Jean. Also, the singer is completely dressed in white, in sharp contrast with the red carpet of the stage and, right before the shooting, she is singing a song about the love for parents. In some way, therefore, as the symbology of the color and the content of the song suggest, she is presented as the apotheosis of innocence and, as mentioned earlier, of fragility to the point of (female) helplessness. The act of killing in this perspective appears as a 'degenerative' form of eros mixed with thanatos. In other words, here the theme of gaze is developed on a broad social and a symbolic level, yet again with a focus on its extreme and 'bitter', yet realistic, implications and consequences. While I mention this scene here incidentally to show an oblique declination of gaze and its dichotomies in 'social' terms as well, its full impact will be made clearer in the next chapter's focus on the 'performer figures', with a closer look at *Nashville* as well. Nevertheless, the sequence contributes to the wide range of possibilities in which the issue of male gaze on women, in terms of eros and thanatos oppositions, can be declined and developed in Altman's work.

Or, to rephrase the issue at stake as a summary, male gaze on women in Carver appears as an index of more or less 'weak' male personalities (because, despite being objectifying, it is also inherently subverted) and of their psychological realism. Male gaze in Altman, on the other hand is developed in extreme, amplified, or in its own directions, despite resonating at times with Carver in nutshell images or at times in archetypal 'models'. Namely, after having emphasized the importance of the specific cinematic means in order to engage in the debate of (unintentional) cinematic objectification, the analysis of this chapter has focused on the fact that Altman's dealing with the issue of male gaze is often subversive, critical or cynical: the portrayal of women characters in power of the gaze, the exploration of the 'degenerative' forms of the latter, such as the mixing of eroticism and abusiveness or of the social act of admiration/appropriation can be, all testify to the variety of nuances in which this issue and its implications can be declined in indeed realistic scenes in Altman's *oeuvre* and within his (rightful) adaptation. Despite this discrepancy

between Altman and Carver in the direction and function given to the theme of male gaze on women, the final chapter's analysis of Altman's dealing with the issue of female self visualization will both complete a better understanding of the filmmaker and of his connection to Carver.

5.1 Altman's 'women performers'

At the beginning of his discussion entitled "Acting by design in Altman's *Nashville*", Robert T. Self explains,

"I want to hear a little more Haven this time," says country-wester singer Haven Hamilton (Henry Gibson) in a recording session at the beginning of *Nashville* (1975). This request for more volume in his recorded voice reflects an intersection of personality, public persona, and mediated presence shaped by the controlling authority of electronic playback. Haven's assertion establishes a paradigm for the representation of character in Robert Altman's modernist film as a site where the force of acting, the demands of script, and the design of direction compete and cohere. The film further develops a sense of *personality as a construct of public performance, private subjectivity, and cultural politics*. (126) (emphasis added)

Despite the fact that Self's argument goes on to explore the question of how acting itself contributes to the representation of character and personality within a specific cinematographic tradition, his introduction is significant since it suggests an interesting perspective in which to consider (female) self-visualization in Altman's work, i.e. in terms of 'performance'. Within a modernist understanding of character, in point of fact, Self emphasizes that

Nashville ... centrally explores the relationship between public performance and the personal persona behind that performance. Performance constantly emerges out of a complex mix of public persona, personal "reality", and the politics of individual moments. As usual in the musical, this tension reflects the onstage/backstage dichotomy involved in the generic structure of putting on a show. (129)

Elaborating on Self's comments, therefore, it could be said that looking at oneself is a feature characteristic of Altman's protagonists, and that this is an element particularly mediated through the motive of 'performance/performers'. In other words, (female) self-visualization in Altman's film is best evident in the characters who are indeed highly aware of having an 'image', since they are performers. This statement becomes evident for instance in a brief scene, to which I will return later, depicting the aspirant singer Sueleen Gay (Gwen Welles). Here, the woman rehearses in front

of a mirror a song she will shortly perform, and at the same time she shapes her own image for that performance, namely by placing extra rags in her bra. Moreover, the consideration that “all forms of human interaction are in one sense stagy and that notions of 'character', 'personality' and 'self' are merely outgrowths of the various roles we play in life” (Naremore 3) (qtd. in Baron, Carson and Tomasulo 4) makes it possible to expand the perspective of the 'performer figure' beyond Self's analysis of *Nashville*, to include in the present analysis characters from *Short Cuts*, and/or other movies as well. As a consequence, for example, a waitress from *Short Cuts* (Doreen, played by Lily Tomlin), can be included among Altman's 'women performer' because she deals with male customers who gaze irreverently at her and, at the very same time, with the assertion of her own roles as woman, waitress and wife. Therefore, the above outlined definition of 'woman performer' will serve here to help emerge the multiple declinations of female self-visualizing activities and outcomes in Altman's women characters. Also, such an examination will create the grounds to explore the connection of these to Carver's self-visualizing subjects and their strategies in power relations.

5.2 Cracked mirrors and distorted reflections

The self-images/self representations of Altman's 'women performers' can be promoters of liberating stances of self-assertion, but they can also turn out to contribute, with different degrees and nuances, to a type of (self) objectification. This is the case of the 'star' of the film, Barbara Jean, and of minor characters revolving around her as well, such as Sueleen Gay.

To begin with the latter, Sueleen Gay (played by Gwen Welles) is a waitress at the airport bar in Nashville, who writes songs and arranges herself performances with the objective of becoming a star like Barbara Jean. However, her most important performance during the film takes place at a gentlemen fundraising event where she stripteases after she is booed for her singing

qualities. A couple of 'nutshell' scenes are significant in this 'short' narrative as a means to emphasize that Sueleen's self visualization, and later self presentation of her image, are a product of a 'dis-oriented' or 'pre-directed' self-gaze, with consequences out of this character's control. For, as already anticipated, even before the gentlemen's club scene takes place, Sueleen does shape her image on the model of a seductive woman: rehearsing in her room her own song and accompanying gestures ("I will now sing you a song about a girl who never gets enough"), Sueleen exercises while looking at herself in a mirror. In addition, she is dressed in a bright provoking suit and filling her bra with extra rags, i.e. she is in the act of shaping her own image. However, this private self-gaze and this negotiating construction of identity as an appealing singer encompass two important features: for one thing, by shaping her image on the lines of the socially constructed model of 'provoking' singer, Sueleen appears to fail to acquire a full understanding and a full awareness of her personal self and of her own connotations. For in point of fact, Sueleen is not able to acknowledge what her friend Wade (Robert DoQui) tells her "You can't sing. Sueleen, you may as well face the fact you can not sing. You are never gonna be no star, I wish you gave it up. I mean, they are going to kill you ... they are going to walk on your soul girl". In other words, Sueleen's rehearsal in front of the mirror in the private space of her room might partly be the result of a self-visualization conflating the gaze and expectations of an invisible (male dominated) audience. Secondly, Sueleen gives in her control over the social image she has thus constructed. It is during her very first public performance of her rehearsed song that, while people in the audience shake disappointedly their heads at listening to Sueleen, the manager of the bar where the scene takes place notices her physical appearance, and suggests her for the gentlemen event, where Sueleen's 'giving up' is sanctioned. Yet, what is worth noting in the gentlemen's club scene is that Sueleen, despite a certain degree of distress (for the booing and, arguably, for the request itself), accepts to perform under the promise that, in return of the striptease, she would have the chance to sing with Barbara Jean the day after. Therefore, it could be said that Sueleen does not only display a 'dis-oriented' self gaze privately, but she also accepts to become an object for her male public in order to

pursue the blinding ambition of becoming a 'star'. More precisely, the dynamics of the striptease scene appear to point to the fact that Sueleen has been all along a 'puppet' at the request of her commissioning audience, and in this perspective hypotheses might be advanced as to the identity of the 'puppeteer'/the director of her 'distorted' gaze. Regardless of the outcome of the suppositions, though, it could also be noted that Sueleen's performances do emphasize the fact that her (self) image is a product of both a personal and a public gaze, yet these performances also stress that she doesn't become a self-aware agent in this process. In this perspective, but also because of the puppet/puppeteer dynamic, therefore, Sueleen's vicissitude somehow resonates with Eileen's narrative of 'possessions' and delegations in "Fever", although the tone here is less surrealist and the two narratives are not related in terms of 'adaptation'.

While Sueleen's narrative is the most explicit one in terms of 'degrading' outcome of the self-visualizing process which being an actual performer requires and implies, Barbara Jean's character develops a more complex and contradictory example, which I will shortly outline here. The sweetheart of Nashville is explicitly more involved in the mechanisms of the show business and less in control of her own image than Sueleen on the one hand. On the other, her actual performances testify more powerfully and painfully to the clash between public and personal gazes. To explain these concepts further, Barbara Jean is very much the product, and again, a 'puppet', of the entertainment business that is best embodied in her husband Barnett (played by Allen Garfield), a feature that becomes evident in the 'hospital scene' after her first breakdown at the airport. For while the couple is at Barbara Jean's hospital room, they have an argument during which Barnett asserts: "Did I ever tell you how to sing? *Don't tell me how to run your life*, I've been doing pretty good with it" (emphases added). Moreover, the whole scene is centered on Barbara Jean as fragile, both physically and psychologically, and as complainingly quiescent towards her husband. In addition, Barnett is not only in charge of her public activities and appearances, as the quote shows, but he also privately bullies and patronizes Barbara Jean ("Now where is Barnett going? Hm? And why am I going there? ... And who am I doing that for? Now what do you say as I walk away? You

say bye bye”). On the other hand, though, as already mentioned before, a somewhat despairing type of 'subversion' to such a controlling public/private agency appears to emerge from Barbara Jean's performances. From this perspective what gains importance, for instance, is the singer's public appearance at the Opryland USA, where she sings two songs and is later escorted from the stage as she starts rambling anecdotes from her childhood instead of singing, apparently in yet another breakdown. As a matter of fact, the anecdotes which interrupt the show exacerbate publicly a personal distress. For Barbara Jean does arguably, although in a painful and uncontrolled outburst, attempt to re-present to the audience the narrative of how she sees herself:

I'm thinking of, you know, the first job I've ever got. My grandma [...] taught my mama how to sing and my mama taught me. One day [...] she brought me down to the store and there was this man advertizing a record around, and my mama told him I knew how to sing and he said “If she really does learn this tune and comes down and sings it to me, I'll give you a quarter.” So mama and I went home and then I think yeah we went home and I learned both sides of the record in half an hour [...] So I sang him both sides of the record and he gave us 50 cents [...] Ever since I've been working, I don't ... I think that ever since I've been working and supporting myself. (emphasis added)

It is precisely this anecdote that highlights Barbara Jean's desperate attempt at, and failure in, taking authority and authoriality over herself. In other words, such a monologue in the context of a social event emphasizes the breakdown of the negotiating attitude between private and public as far as this female performer is concerned. Such a clash is emphasized further by the construction of the scene itself, with its alteration of Barbara Jean's energetic singing, followed by the attempt/failure of negotiation, and by the eventual 'containment'. The final effect is that Barbara Jean's performance appears as the reflection in a tragically cracked inner self-mirror: she is in control over her private energy/public image only when she (manages to) sing(s), for otherwise she is 'kept together' by the controlling agency of her husband. Or, to rephrase the concept, although Barbara Jean's narrative never explores specific reasons behind her 'condition', yet it still manages to represent the liminal declinations of self-visualization. Ultimately, Barbara Jean, much like Sueleen, remains a victim of the entertainment 'system', and the performances of both these female characters end up in objectification: as already stated, Sueleen gives up the control over her body image in order to

achieve an (improbable) image of herself as a singer, while Barbara Jean becomes the innocent victim of the eros and thanatos dichotomy caused by the projection of her public persona.

The driving force and function of these two examples is to convey a critical standpoint towards the 'debasement' effects produced by the show business politics and by politics in general, a theme which *Nashville* explores at large. In fact, Barbara Jean's tragic death and Sueleen's striptease appear only as a part of *Nashville's* mosaic of 'women performers'. For instance Linnea (Lily Tomlin) is another character of this 1975 film who mediates between the stacy roles she plays in her life. In addition, by testifying to the presence of protagonists who negotiate their own (social/public) images in a 'rewarding' and successful way, this character's analysis will add to the variety of (female) self-gazing strategies present in Altman's work.

5.3 Stacy turns of life

Linnea appears as the female character in *Nashville* whom the audience experiences in the greatest variety of social and personal situations, in all of which she results as successful although, or perhaps in virtue of the fact that, she doesn't get psychologically involved into the show business reality. As a matter of fact, the first time she is shown on screen, early on in the film, Linnea is singing in a recording studio with a gospel choir. Shortly afterwards, this female character is a dedicated mother of two deaf children, as she listens attentively to her son's recount of his swimming-class, or as she teaches her children how to sing. In addition, Linnea manages to be also the lover of the star singer and womanizer Tom (Keith Carradine), without turning into a 'psychological victim' of his, contrarily to his three previous 'conquests'. Or, in other words, it is she the one who has an affair with him, becoming in some way she herself 'the conqueror'. It is perhaps the phone calls Tom makes at Linnea's house that help emphasize best this female character's 'stacy' in negotiating her multiple social and private roles in an effective way. For instance, the

first time Tom calls, their dialogue proceeds as follows:

Linnea: Tom? ... Tom who?

[...]

Tom: I'd like to see you.

Linnea: Well why don't you come to my house. The children would love to meet you.

Tom: It's not exactly what I had in mind...listen I find you very attractive and I'd like to meet you.

Linnea: I think it would be fine if you could come here at the house to have dinner. I don't believe you've ever met my husband Del.

And after Tom hangs up, Linnea tells to her inquiring husband she was talking about some notes she left at the recording studio. Such a scene, though, is not only an account of a wife/mother who is 'skillful' in creating the grounds for her cheating. Arguably, in point of fact, this passage establishes also her self-controlled attitude to Tom/the affair ('Tom? ...Tom who?'). This statement might be supported also by the fact that, after the affair, Linnea walks away from Tom's room without mannerisms. Yet, what should also be acknowledged here is the little insight into Linnea's psychology, and as a consequence it is not possible to reach neat conclusions on the reasons and effects of her actions. However, her quiet self-confidence appears to “suggest depths of both personal and imagined reality” (Self 136). Additionally to showing a 'positive performer', Linnea's example provides a transition to 'performative' women characters in *Short Cuts*, who deploy similar 'negotiating' attitudes between various life-roles, although in a more 'thematized' way.

Indeed, *Short Cuts* presents a variety of female characters who do perform 'stagy' roles in their life effectively, such as Doreen (again, Lily Tomlin) the waitress modeled on the protagonist of “They're Not Your Husband”; Lois, who sells phone sex for work; and Clair (Anne Archer), elaborated on the protagonist of “So Much Water, So Close to Home”, who works as clown at children birthday parties.

A particularly interesting instance of the 'stagy aspect of female life' is the scene, early in the film, in which Doreen is at work and serves her customers, among whom there are a group of fishermen and her husband Earl (Tom Waits). Significantly, while performing her job as waitress, Doreen still pays a caring attention to her husband in whispers, without unmasking herself (“[the

boss] is watching, don't order anything you can't pay for”, “So what are you going to order”, “That's a breakfast! Have a steak and some eggs ...”, “You are not drinking, are you?”), and thus plays the double role of wife and 'worker'. Moreover, and at the same time, she, or rather her bottom, is the object of the irreverent looks of the group of fishermen, who repeatedly ask Doreen/the waitress for more butter from the lower drawer in order to take a better look under her skirt as she bends down. The apex of the scene is reached at the moment in which Doreen realizes the 'game' of the fishermen, and reacts by stating “We are out of butter!”. Therefore, what is interesting in this brief and segmented scene is the fact that Doreen plays simultaneously various roles, but also her decided reaction to being made the object of the 'teasing' gazes of her clients. In other words, Doreen is forced to acknowledge her own image, yet once she becomes aware of its effect, she reacts by asserting herself. Lily Tomlin's character is interesting as she conveys still more roles throughout the narrative: she fights with a former alcoholic husband and with his drunken pretensions about her look; she is a mother, and (in her knowledge of the events) a potential murderer of a child. Taking these elements into consideration, what could be noted is a character not dissimilar from Carver's self-gazing subjects. For instance, although Doreen's self assertive reactions (in relation to the fisherman's, but later on, to her husband's gazes as well) are brief and not so deep in terms of psychological consequence, these dynamics do resonate on some level with Carver's Clair (“So Much Water, So Close to Home”), and the latter's emotive and physical reactions. Finally, there is another scene in *Short Cuts* which brings together women and men, and which is of some relevance to conclude the issue of female performance, and the gender duel that comes with it.

At what turns into an alcohol soaked party at Marian and Ralph's house, in which take part their newly acquired acquaintances Clair, the clown – woman, and her husband, Stuart the fisherman, the two couples entertain themselves with Clair's clown make up. More precisely, Marian and Clair enter the scene dressed like clowns and carrying balloons; after performing a children song in such a guise, they invert their male counterparts, and start making them up as well, while the dialogue proceeds as follows:

Marian: Come on!

Clair: It's your turn, now a little makeup! A little costume.

Stuart: No no.

Clair: This is all what it is about ... Don't look at me like that, Stuart. There's always me underneath. I can change, but I can always go back to me [takes off her clown wig].

Ralph: And you Marian? What have you got underneath?

Marian: You know Ralph, nothing!

Clair [to Ralph]: So what do you want to be?

Ralph: I want to be nothing!

Marian [to Stuart]: And I'm going to make you a pussycat.

...

Clair [to Ralph]: Well, since I don't know how to make 'nothing', we are just going to erase your face! [singing] as I sat down in woods, a little man by the river stood, he saw a girl come floating by, and he heard her cry [Stuart and Clair exchange looks] "help me, help me!" she said.

Stuart: He couldn't help her, she was dead!

As the combination of dialogue and *mise-en-scène* indicates, the two women stage a 'playful' situation ('It's your turn now!', 'Come on!') which actually allows them to show to and on their male counterparts what it means to wear a 'mask', and, therefore, to play various negotiating roles ("I can change, but I can always go back to me"). In addition, the sequence also appears to emphasize a type of inability on the part of Ralph and Stuart to conform to this, almost symbolic, game of double-roles directed and shaped by their 'masked' wives, as is emphasized by Ralph's statement "I want to be nothing!" and Clair's response "We are just going to erase your face!". Moreover, the scene has indeed the function of highlighting the tensions in the narratives of each of the marital couples. Interestingly, this tension within the couples is not only obtained through the dialogues and the 'clowns' device, but it also emerges from the fact that the women invert their male counterparts in painting them; thus, the side-gazes that in particular Stuart and Clair exchange in this scene are emphasized and contribute incidentally but curiously to the 'dueling' atmosphere. In such a conflicting context, ultimately, it could be said that this specific scene qualifies the two female protagonists as self-assertive initiators of (either performing or negotiating) actions, and the male counterparts as ineffective or passive figures ("He couldn't help her!", "I want to be nothing").

Notably, in addition, Robert T. Self suggests a similar reading of *Short Cuts* when he states:

[t]he ambiguous intermingling and overlapping of the film's divergent stories are centered by the story, original to the film, of mother and daughter musicians, one a jazz vocalist, the other a classical cellist. *Performance emerges out of the pain of their lonely and marginal lives and the pain caused by the film's array of absent, self-absorbed, dishonest, unfaithful, and ineffectual fathers*. Like jazz, the narrative plays variations on the fiction of Carver; it riffs on the splintered sites of society and the subject. (xxviii – xxix) (emphasis added)

In other words, Self acknowledges a couple of interesting points to be made as conclusion. For the critic emphasizes that in *Short Cuts* women characters might lead 'marginal' lives, yet also that male characters (in particular, the 'fathers') appear as 'ineffectual'. Additionally, by stressing the variation this movie 'plays' on Carver's stories, Self also introduces here, much like in his first quote of this chapter, that Altman's film(s) belong to a post-realist/modernist understanding of 'society and the subject'. Self's definition implies that, contrarily to the classical Hollywood tradition, which creates whole unified worlds and character-identification as the basis for its realism, Altman's modernist films create a documentary-like elevated sense of realism, where the protagonists are personalities in a centerless and splintered life rather than characters in a fiction (127). Within such an understanding of character, Self also emphasizes the fact that Altman's films “thus create[s] real if minimal surfaces that may only be types but that also suggest depths of both personal and imagined reality” (136). The last aspect appears as fundamental to gain a full understanding of the filmmaker's (women) characters. For in point of fact to acknowledge 'depths of personal and imagined realities' behind for instance Barbara Jean's public breakdowns or Marian and Clair's make-up game is important to tone down the assumption that Altman's characters, as opposed to Carver's, are devoid of inner self-awareness (cf. Chapter 3.1).

Thus, a broader spectrum of medium specific means and various works have been taken into consideration to assess the relationship in terms of 'female (self) visualization' between the two authors who belong to different media and, within these, to different chronological traditions. In this perspective, as I have shown in this chapter, a definition such as 'women performers' has helped

unpack the fact that Altman's self-visualizing women characters convey the concept that identity/self is a product of both personal and public gazes, and in virtue of this, that their self images carry a conspicuous degree of negotiating attitude and of liability to changes. From such a standpoint, also, it has become apparent that Altman's 'women performers' can resonate with aspects of Carver's self-gazing subjects, but that they have other distinct features as well. Indeed, the analysis of *Nashville's* wanna-be stars and singers has explored the 'challenging' aspect of having to negotiate public and personal images of the self within a context dominated by a 'higher entity', i.e. show business. Moreover, the examination of this same film has helped emerge also figures that effectively manage to assert decidedly different roles (and self images) in various contexts, much like 'women performers' in *Short Cuts* do. In the latter film in addition, despite being little involved in self-reflecting activities, women do perform stage stances of awareness of their various roles/images, which contributes to making them more effective/active than their male counterparts. In other words, Altman's 'women performers' often duel both with themselves and to assert themselves, yet with a great range of strategies and outcomes, much like Carver's self-gazing subjects, and each in their own reality.

Conclusions: Recapitulation and further study

In this dissertation I have used the double perspective of male gaze on women and female self gaze to take into consideration a number of Raymond Carver's stories, and Robert Altman's films *Nashville* and *Short Cuts*. Drawing neat parallels between Robert Altman's and Raymond Carver's works from this standpoint has proven challenging. As Carver's stories are characterized by what is called minimal realism, they allow us to focus on their strong visual quality. On the other hand, Altman is a post-realist/modernist director, and his films are often engaged in the issues of 'visibility' and 'visuality'. As a consequence, the functioning of the theme and the mode of rendering (self) gaze is different in the narratives of the two authors. Namely, Carver's visual descriptions of body parts are often a means to construct psychological realism in his fictional characters, thus an in-depth analysis of their 'humanity' is essential. Conversely, Altman's sketched protagonists serve frequently within a larger work to hint at the extremity in which the theme of (self) visualization can be declined in realistic psycho/social terms. However, it is the 'challenges' imposed by putting side by side two different media in order to analyze the theme of (self)gaze that have been stimulating and rewarding, and both uniqueness and resonance between the two authors have been unpacked. As a matter of fact, with the use of gaze theories, it has emerged that Carver's male protagonists do visualize their female counterparts in an objectifying way. Yet, an exploration of the narrative constructions of the texts and of the 'elementary psychology' of the male characters therein depicted has revealed an intrinsic weakness behind these gazes and a converse power of the visualized 'women-icons'. The male protagonist of "Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?" is the quintessential example of the objectifying agency of male gaze and of its subversion, while other nuances and power-relations in the male gazes have emerged from the analysis of "What Do You Do in San Francisco?" and "The Fling". In addition, Altman's depiction of the 'objectifying gazes' on women has resulted as subversive as well. This is because women characters are endowed with the same power as men in terms of narrative and cinematic devices, as in the 'Marian and Ralph'

narrative, or because the 'carverian' eros/thanatos dichotomy is negatively depicted in visual and narrative extremes (i.e. in the 'Honey and Bill' narrative). Secondly, Carver's female self-visualization has emerged as often surrealist in tone and mode (cf. "Fever" and "Fat"); however, the aid of critical tools such as those of sociology, feminist criticism and literary theory has emphasized the empowering and subversive effect of the often creative self-gaze of Carver's women; an example of this is Clair from "So much Water So Close to Home", and her eventual psycho-physical resistance to her husband. Also, Altman's 'women performers' have shown that managing public and private images of the self can lead both to dramatic pitfalls, as in the case of Barbara Jean, and to self-assertion; this latter aspect is more evident in *Short Cuts*, for instance in the figure of Doreen, or in the cases where male figures are passive/ineffective. Next to emphasizing the great variety of nuances in which these two authors decline and develop the dueling tendencies and power relations intrinsic to the issue of male gaze vs female self-visualization, this 'double perspective' has also served to help emerge the fluidity of the resonances between Carver and Altman and their two media. In this perspective, for instance, Altman's adaptation/adoption of "So Much Water So Close to Home" and his shot of a 'beaten up' Honey behind a fish tank gain importance; or the 'uncannily' similar dynamics that characterize Sueleen Gay's and Eileen's ("Fever") self-visualization become intriguing. Finally, it is precisely the presence of slightly liminal figures such as Barbara Jean or Clair from "So Much Water So Close to Home" that points to the exploration of 'marginal(ized)' identities, in terms of extreme 'psychological' situations, as field for further studies on these authors. In this perspective, then, narratives such as Carver's "Blackbird Pie", "Neighbors", "So Much Water So Close to Home" and Altman's Barbara Jean or *3 Women* for instance, might be a first trigger in this direction as well.

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