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Domesticity Stripped Gracious:
Reading between the Lines in *Calendar Girls*

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Abstract

This article proposes *reading between the lines* as a tool that can be self-empowering for women and in particular for women whose domestic moorings have trained them to inhabit interiors – their home as much as their psyche – of drab existence and conditional worthiness. To demonstrate my working hypothesis, I examine the British comedy *Calendar Girls* (2003), a film inspired by real events, to probe into the characters' understanding of the underpinnings and outcome of their decision to pose nude for a charitable calendar. I argue that their implicit reading between the lines of patriarchal and bourgeois sensibilities is empowering for the characters who perform it not only in the short run, by offering them the means to attain their goal, but also in the long run, by enabling them to “re-form” (Kenneth Clarke) both their corporeal self-image as middle-aged women and their self-worth as perceived by themselves and by others too. On the other hand, their means of self-empowerment is double-edged, for it retains that which it hijacks and parodies: women's nudity. My interpretation is inflected by art critical theorisation of nudity and seeing, gender theory and Linda Hutcheon's theorisation of “de-doxification” (defamiliarisation of social consensus).

Keywords: *Calendar Girls* (dir. Nigel Cole), reading between the lines, women's self-empowerment, domesticity, “en-gendering” (Teresa de Lauretis), nudity vs nakedness (Kenneth Clarke), “ways of seeing” (John Berger), “de-doxification” (Linda Hutcheon)

Winner of British Comedy Award for Best Comedy Film in 2003, *Calendar Girls* (2003), directed by Nigel Cole and written by Juliette Towhidi and Tim Firth, is inspired by a true story whose protagonists the

end credits acknowledge gratefully (01:43:11). What strikes me as a remarkable story of empowerment can be read on the website of Blood Cancer UK (“The History of the Calendar Girls”), on which I have drawn for most of the facts behind the script, but *not* also on the website of Women’s Institute, the association to which the Calendar Girls belong(ed).

The Calendar Girls’ Story

When 54-year-old John Baker died in 1998 of non-Hodgkin lymphoma, to help his wife Angela out of distress by giving her a purpose – as she confesses (qtd. in LaCamera n. p.) – their friend Tricia Stewart proposed to raise funds for a new sofa in the waiting room of the oncology ward. As both ladies were members of the Rylstone and District Women’s Institute (henceforth, WI), Tricia suggested a twist on their traditional calendar to increase sales and pay for the sofa: to forgo images of local landscapes and use instead their nude images. Eleven members of the local WI agreed to pose to a local artist, Terry Logan (whose own artist wife, Lynda, participated in the project), and the calendar was launched on 12 April 1999, to sell an incredible 88,000 copies in 1999 alone. Indeed, the success story continued even after the three-week headline-making in the national newspapers: voted Women of the Year, the Calendar Girls presented calendars to Queen Elizabeth II and the Queen Mother. When the calendar was published in the US in 2000, it sold 240,000 copies, which persuaded the ladies to continue to pose for calendars in 2004, 2005 and 2007, for a recipe calendar in 2008 and also for a ten-year anniversary edition in 2010. The Blood Cancer UK website also mentions the artistic outcome of the story: the comedy film *Calendar Girls* (2003), Tim Firth’s stage adaptation of the same title (2009; published in London in 2010), and Gary Barlow and Tim Firth’s *The Girls: The Musical* (2015), which has toured Britain to tremendous success in fund-raising for the medical organisation. What Blood Cancer UK does not mention is its honouring of Angela Baker (now Knowles) as a trustee (2006-2013) and subsequently as its honorary president (Roe n. p.), and Queen Elizabeth II’s appointment of Angela as an MBE (Member of the Most Excellent Order

of the British Empire) in 2019 “in recognition of her contribution to fundraising efforts” (Roe).

Women’s Institute: Behind the Scenes

“This film is inspired by a true story but is not intended to be a literal portrayal. No resemblance between any character in the film and any actual individual should be presumed” (*Calendar Girls*, 01:43:23). Notwithstanding, the film’s disclaimer cannot contain the spectators’ wonder at how the original protagonists may have felt about their calendar’s (or rather calendars’) skyrocketing sales and especially about addressing their own nudity physically, cognitively and emotionally, especially in the early days of the project and within their family, acquaintance and WI circles.

Let us remember that the real calendar project debuted in 1999 in a rural English corner, Rylstone, under the auspices of the community-based nation-wide Women’s Institute. Rylstone is a North Yorkshire village whose cultural fame owes to William Wordsworth’s narrative poem “The White Doe of Rylstone; Or, The Fate of the Nortons” (1815), St Peter’s Church (1852-53) and . . . the Calendar Girls of Rylstone and neighbouring hamlet Cracoe (“Rylstone”). The WI describes itself – in March 2026 – as “a unique organisation shaped by its members,” whose agenda has been “to give women a voice and to be a force for good in the community” (WI, “About Us”). Its vision, as mentioned on the WI website, aims to connect, support and empower women, to “create a world where women come together to learn, share skills and work together to become active citizens, influencing change to improve lives in their local, national and global communities” (WI, “Our Mission”). Such phrasing overlooks the low societal ranking of skills shared by women, even as it names empowering goals. In what follows, I look at the WI campaigns advertised on the official website to document the 1990s’ (and later) climate in which the Calendar Girls conducted their self-appointed mission. My critical review acknowledges the merits of WI efforts to bring real change into women’s lives and in their participation to

community life, whilst probing the WI's own reporting of its work for any patriarchal allegiance.

To begin with, the WI website proclaims:

Our campaigns tackle issues that matter to women in their communities. From equal pay to climate change, mental health and violence against women, over the past 100 years we have embraced a diverse set of challenges. The WI has brought about real change – and we are just getting started. (WI, "Our Campaigns")

However, the overall account is vague. There is no hint either at other organisations that may have campaigned for these goals or at the effectiveness of (some of) its campaigns and resolutions, e.g. of the "resolution calling for 'equal pay for equal work'" proposed by Bures WI in Suffolk West Federation in 1943 (WI, "History of WI Campaigns"). The WI centenary report too ignores the outcome of various WI campaigns, e.g. in the later twentieth century, "for marital rape to be recognised as such under the law, for funding for battered women's shelters, to increase the severity of rape sentences, to adequately define domestic violence under the law so that women and children in the home were protected, and to make sure survivors of domestic violence were able to access justice through the courts" (WI, "The WI at 100" 8).

Narrowing down to the years before the *Calendar Girls* initiative, I could read in the WI "History" for the 1980s only "voting for more information to be made available to the public around HIV and AIDS" (in 1986) and "campaign[ing] to raise awareness on the immunodeficiency virus"; for the 1990s, "establish[ing] partnerships with other organisations." Not a whisper about the *Calendar Girls*, for the latter decade, but only, for the 2000s, about the film: "It is only three years later [after a 2000 speech of PM Tony Blair] that the WI once again attracts the attention of the media when the movie 'Calendar Girls', starring Dame Helen Mirren, is released." Completely decontextualised through its severance from the actual events, the film is mentioned as a magnet for media attention to the WI, and the argument works as a non sequitur, suggestive, I argue, of the WI's disowning of the *Calendar Girls*, in life more than in the film. However, a quote from *The Observer* of 13 June

1999 in the WI centenary report draws attention through its layout as a self-standing, all-capital column. Its content *may allude* to the Calendar Girls, nowhere mentioned explicitly in the report (as Rylstone is not, either): “LET’S TRY SOME WORD ASSOCIATION. WOMEN’S INSTITUTES: BRAMBLE JELLY, SINGING JERUSALEM, VICTORIA SPONGE CAKE? WRONG. THINK ECO-WARRIORS, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, PROSTITUTION, THIRD-WORLD DEBT, CHILD ABUSE, NUDE CALENDARS, DRUGS” (WI, “The WI at 100” 14). Acknowledgement or target?

Looking at the WI timeline after the first alternative calendar’s publication and after the film release can reveal the mindset of the organisation after the challenge. The 2000s saw the “Care not Custody” campaign, which “demand[ed] alternatives for prisoners with severe mental health problems,” and “resolutions urging reduced packaging to minimise waste and to further research the plight of bees.” The latter resolution, for all its likely topicality, is reminiscent of the film’s monthly WI lectures on topics which bore its protagonists to death.

The WI Annual General Meeting in 2012 broke two records, rather than just one (as advertised in the official WI “History”): “breaking the world record for the most people knitting simultaneously” – redolent of the pre-industrial age, when rural womenfolk did together various house chores, including textile work; and, I argue, the record of a women’s organisation’s conservativeness, in the 2010s West, with respect to patriarchally sanctioned feminine roles extolled publicly. The decade also witnessed WI campaigns on domestic violence against women, mental health and other social and environmental issues, as well as the establishment of the first WI inside a women’s prison, in the “hop[e] to improve their inmates’ mental health”: the film’s Chris would knit her eyebrows regarding the effectiveness of the latter measure. The only one campaign – of the “variety of campaigns” (WI, “History”) – of the 2020s mentioned explicitly is “Thinking Differently.” Intended “to raise awareness of Autism and ADHD in women and girls and to take action to improve the diagnosis process” (WI, “Thinking Differently”), the 2022 campaign was grounded in the WI members’ vote “to fund research” (WI, “History”) on the issue. Funding medical research is also what the original

Calendar Girls continued to do after their early success,¹ which WI never mentions, yet Blood Cancer UK acknowledges from the first line: “a group of amazing women raised over £6 million for blood cancer research” (“The History of the Calendar Girls”).

At its inception in 1915, the WI aimed pragmatically “to revitalise rural communities and encourage women to become more involved in producing food during the First World War” (WI, “History”) – to aid war effort at the time of submarine blockades, not to urge for political and economic improvements in women’s condition. Established during the First Feminist Wave, at a time when suffragism had not yet triumphed in the UK, the WI was at the time and has arguably remained rather conservative vis-à-vis the patriarchal *en-gendering* of roles (Teresa de Lauretis’s term),² as its timeline demonstrates. Various twenty-first-century WI campaigns may have brought some of women’s issues to the fore (e.g. domestic violence against women), yet, in certain cases (e.g. “Thinking Differently: Autistic and ADHD Women and Girls”), they may have ignored the deep embedding of psychic issues in the social-familial context, at least ‘because’ autism and ADHD are not gender-specific.

No wonder *Calendar Girls* features the WI as particularly patriarchal, indeed reactionary, when it keeps women in their ‘place’ by focusing their attention on “plums and jam” (01:06:28-01:06:30), as the film’s Chris (based on Tricia Stewart) summarises the traditional understanding of the WI agenda. Marie, the film’s local branch chairperson, retorts to the journalists in terms of “not only” (jam and *Jerusalem*)³ – “the ladies are usually known for” (01:07:08-01:07:12), as the news narrator too says – “but also” (education) (01:04:02-01:04:07). Ironically, the characters’ lines and the film’s WI festival seem to foreshadow the opening of the WI Cookery School at Denman College in 2009 (WI, “History”). The WI website is silent about the beneficiaries’ gender or Denman’s relation to the WI as the latter’s spin-off for adult education of WI and non-WI members alike (“Denman College”). Cookery lessons may be pre-eminently useful, but when they are offered under the WI auspices, could there be many male students? Likewise, the argument about the 2003 “resolution calling for practical food education for children to fight obesity related illnesses and unhealthy habits” (“The

WI at 100” 16) sounds like a non sequitur which deliberately obliterates the WI context (which pins women to the traditional role of house cook). The centenary WI report juxtaposes the finding that currently “88% of WI members believe that traditional domestic skills, like cooking a meal from scratch, are being lost” (6), the statistically vague observation about WI members’ awareness that “in the past society may have policed domesticity in ways that were restrictive for women” and that domestic skills can be regarded even now “as a burden” (16), and the resolution’s call for women to hand down ‘traditional’ cooking skills to their children. Were many children in the early 2000s eager to learn to cook, when they regarded fast food chains as handy suppliers and/or took their mother for granted as the caregiver? Were overburdened women able to make time for such education in “vital knowhow” (16), in a society which subliminally still associated women with cooking and domesticity,⁴ despite the rising fame, since the 1950s, of TV cookery shows featuring both female and male chefs?⁵

How did such WI campaigns impact on their members and in particular on the women from Rylstone and Cracoe who used both their wits and their bodies to seemingly endorse the patriarchal objectification of women so as to raise money for a purpose beyond themselves and their families? Whilst I do not purport to answer this question, I raise it as a useful reminder that the original Calendar Girls were neither feminist activists nor women who blindly acquiesced to the status quo.

Calendar Girls (2003): An Introduction

In *Calendar Girls*, the female protagonists are shown as neither committed professionals⁶ nor full-fledged housewives trapped by domesticity (as second wave feminists viewed housewifery). Nor do these women seem to have much entertainment of their own either, save what their WI membership imparts them.

Who *are* these women and what drives them? When John Clarke (John Alderton) dies of leukaemia, his wife Annie (Julie Walters) and their friend Chris Harper (Helen Mirren) think of a donation to the hospital, in his memory: a settee to replace the uncomfortable one in the

relatives' room. They hope to raise the money through the sales of the WI annual calendar; however, experience shows that the 'pious' topics of the traditional calendar's images hardly bring any proceeds, and likewise that Marie (Geraldine James) is unlikely to renounce her conservatism. Their project seems doomed from the start. Yet, the film – and the real women who inspired it – cannot accept defeat. It dawns on Chris what sellable images they *can* use only when she sees her teenage son's interest in porn magazines and the porn Pirelli calendar in the mechanic's garage, which she *borrow*s to show to her friends. Subsequently, Chris turns her persuasive and administrative skills truly entrepreneurial to create that which has traditionally sold best: images of naked women. Hers is hardly an uncontroversial proposal, though, including within the ranks of her friends, already from the project's launch (00:22:10-00:23:09).

The film's construal of these women's self-empowerment, I contend, derives from how especially Chris, Annie and Jessie (Annette Crosbie) engage in *reading between the lines* in a peculiarly feminine fashion. Re-styling the WI calendar is Chris's major breakthrough and the film's first and foremost instance of reading between the lines; all the subsequent others, hers or her friends', are but derivative. To anticipate, these women make the most, pragmatically, of an opportunity, but they first 'read' it correctly as an opportunity. They hijack ideas from the least imaginable sources to promote their own charitable agenda. And they imaginatively and resourcefully misread patriarchy's entrenched beliefs about women, to repurpose them such as to serve their own ends, rather than feeling offended and abused.

Who's Afraid of What Can Be Read Between the Lines in *Calendar Girls*?

What does Chris actually read *between* the lines? The lines being, arguably, *sex sells under patriarchy* and *middle-aged women lack lustre*, Chris realises that she can repurpose the patriarchal 'order of things' to serve their charitable goal, even as this entails selling their body image. She adroitly further reads between the lines: not quasi-complete frontal nudity – as in the nude genre and porn images alike – works for them, but,

as respectable WI members posing for a respectable WI calendar, nudity concealed behind domesticity. Yet, the possibility of baring their bodies before the camera sounds positively distasteful and horrific to the middle-aged women of (the fictional) Knapeley, Yorkshire, intent on raising funds through ‘decent’ (read: Christian, patriarchal, bourgeois) approaches. Ruth Reynoldson (Penelope Wilton) eventually names the outcome *pornography* (00:53:23-00:53:25) – as some others may think of it too and as her husband takes offence in being shown.

To persuade her alarmed friends about how to handle the issue in practice, Chris appositely turns her kitchen into a makeshift stage for a demonstration (00:23:51-00:24:43) of how simultaneously to reveal and hide her breasts behind a bowl of fruit. Ironically, when Chris shows what the calendar viewers are going to ‘consume’ (00:24:13-00:24:14), the visuals recall Mrs Ramsay’s description, in *To the Lighthouse*, of the dish of fruit as having curvaceous lines (Woolf 259), themselves reminiscent of women’s curves gracing the nude genre (Ciobanu 149-152). Chris upends titillating high art, including religious iconography of the Temptation (i.e., covering genitalia and Eve’s breasts with leaves and flowers), into titillating pop art as a fundraiser. Imperceptibly, porn consumerism turns charitable! Unfortunately, the demonstration is interrupted by her son, Jem (John-Paul MacLeod), who returns home with his friend, Gaz (Marc Pickering), and finds Chris posing bra-less before her lady friends and Celia’s (Celia Imrie) hand-held camera (00:24:17-00:24:40).

Much later, afraid that their project will be vetoed locally, Annie proposes disassociating it from the WI name (00:53:09-00:53:11). However, as Chris retorts, this would defeat the very purpose of their calendar, which would show but “a load of middle-aged women mysteriously standing naked behind fruitcakes” (00:53:14-00:53:18). The prospect frightens Ruth: “Oh, my God, it would look like pornography” (00:53:23-00:53:25). Ruth the puritan articulates more than *her* personal horror of visual or behavioural impropriety: her line, I argue, also indicates her unconscious understanding that each *form* of rendering the human – but especially the female – body depends on a specific “way of seeing” it (in Berger’s terms).

Art critic John Berger's phrase couches *understanding* paintings (and more broadly visuals) in terms of *seeing*. Drawing on, but departing from, Kenneth Clark's distinction between the naked and the nude, which I will address later, Berger assigns to each category a distinct way of seeing by (or available to) the beholder. The naked invites processual mutual intimacy (Berger et al. 60); the nude, static material possession by "the spectator-owner" (56), who is the true protagonist of the painting, the one for whom the painting exists and for whose flattery the female sitter is reified (54-64). For Berger, the nude, which is not confined to art forms and photography, but extends, for instance, to gestures, "is always conventionalized – and the authority for its conventions derives from a certain tradition of art" (Berger et al. 53): that of the European oil painting nude genre.

The conventions which underpin the "ways of seeing" theorised by Berger are also addressed by Beth Eck in what she identifies as the four "frames that help one understand nude images": art, pornography, information (e.g. medical texts) and "the commodified frame of advertising" (692). Whilst "[t]he content of an image is important," its meaning "is importantly aided by the context" to such extent that "frames come to adhere to images" (Eck 692). All four frames have informed, to various degrees, the en-gendering of the onlooker and the one looked at, so that, as the literature reviewed by Eck suggests, "men and women have a certain facility with viewing images of nude women but lack the same vocabulary and comfort level looking at men" (694). Such framed looking may explain acceptance responses to painted nudes of total strangers, I would add, but not to the live presence of one's mother, as is Jem's case in the film.

Whilst the sight of his quasi-naked mother will haunt Jem throughout the film and engender both endless inconclusive talks with Gaz about her "weird" conduct (00:23:15-00:23:50), ever since Chris found Jem's porn magazine, and also his blasé sniffing of the 'wrong' drug, which leads to his brief arrest (01:12:23-01:13:50), the photo taken accidentally in the kitchen will be revelatory in unsuspected ways. Chris will soon experience, if on a minor scale in the studio where she had her film developed, how correct she was about the power of nakedness to

elicit interest (00:25:44-00:26:13). Chris's partial nudity must have caused a "slight shock" (00:26:29) to the photo shop assistants, after a series of fifteen flower arrangements, Ruth teases (00:26:28-00:26:33). This moment, when Chris shows her friends the accidental photo, also triggers Jessie's cogent remark and the point of departure for further debate: "Look. What we have to ask ourselves here is this: What is the difference between this [pointing to the accidental snapshot of Chris topless in her kitchen] and the Venus de Milo?" (00:26:39-00:26:46). Celia tentatively answers: "The cooker" (00:26:49), which speaks ironic volumes about the patriarchal stereotyping of women as *of* and *in* the kitchen. Jessie resumes brainstorming the group about the *differentia specifica*: "Both feature women with their breasts exposed. What makes one a work of art?" (00:26:50-00:26:56). When Annie answers "An artist" (00:26:59), Chris finally gets the key to the success of their project: they need a photographer. Henceforth, the women will champion the difference between "naked" and "nude" – occasional doubts notwithstanding – and implicitly the power of artist and intent in art.

This repartee will soon be mirrored in Annie's 'commitment-demand' speech to Cora (Linda Bassett) (00:29:18-00:29:23) and also in their dialogue with Marie at the next WI meeting. Marie, who has heard disquieting rumours, enquires about any upcoming activities. Chris and Annie reveal their plan (00:34:36-00:34:44): a calendar for John as a fundraiser, "with us on it" (00:34:57), Annie proudly announces. Marie explodes:

Marie: Naked!
Cora: Not naked, nude.
Marie: What's the difference?
Celia: Art! (00:35:13-00:35:17)

The calendar idea catches: when Chris announces they are a few months' short of models, other WI members eagerly join them. On the way home, some enquire whether special preparations are necessary. Chris: "Oh, no, no. These pictures are going to be us, girls, as we come. Grey hair, cellulite, the lot" (00:36:12-00:36:17). Yet, concerned about their image, they go to the hairdresser's (Jessie), tanning studio (Chris) or gym (Celia),

check an old tattoo in the mirror (Cora) or start dieting (Annie), for “[w]e are immediately disturbed by wrinkles, pouches, and other small imperfections, which, in the classical scheme, are eliminated. By long habit we do not judge it [the body] as a living organism, but as a design” (Clark 7). The living body and the individual’s – especially the woman’s – relationship with it is thus always already *framed* (Eck’s concept), i.e., seen through art-related and consumer-culture conventions alike.

Jessie’s brainstorming about the distinction between the naked and the nude virtually draws on Clark’s, in his seminal book *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (1956/1972):

To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word “nude,” on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone. The vague image it projects into the mind is not of a huddled and defenseless body, but a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed. (3)

The embarrassment of nakedness which Clark mentions is social-religious and therefore shame-ridden. In the film, it is Victorian, Christian *and* tacitly gendered feminine – and implicitly integrated in the notion of the demure, pious and devoted middle-aged wife. The confidence of the nude body – where the nude itself is “not the subject of art, but a form of art” (Clark 5) – is a different matter altogether: it is the confidence of the young male body in ancient and Renaissance times, in the latter period “re-formed” indeed through re-birth of the ancient ethos and *aisthesis* beyond (or against) Christian strictures.⁷ What about the confidence of the female nude body? Not until Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) – and the scandal caused by the non-disguised identity of its sitter, a well-known prostitute, at the 1865 Salon – did the fine arts (re)present a confident, even diffident, nude woman, rather than one mystified as Venus, reclining languorously, perhaps asleep, and offering herself to be consumed visually by the male connoisseurs.

Before I examine how the Calendar Girls – as a group and individually too – are *re-formed* in their nudity, especially since their confidence needs strenuous building, two interrelated aspects are worth

noting. One is Clark's observation about how the body can be represented in art. The other concerns high art's "policing the boundaries" (Nead 325) of the female nude genre, lest art be confounded with pornography. "The body is not one of those subjects which can be made into art by direct transcription" (5), Clark contends, momentarily oblivious of Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (1866), whose metaphorical title's indirectness barely announces the gynaecological depiction of the nude. Indeed, Courbet's painting encapsulates the paradox of the position of the nude in art – both of the genre and of the sitter (her posture and social standing alike). As Lynda Nead cogently writes, the nude genre is both central – ever since Renaissance humanism – and marginal in high art, for "it risks losing its respectability and spilling out and over into the pornographic," given the two categories' shared representation with "a certain degree of sexual explicitness" (325). Accordingly, "through a process of mutual definition, the two categories keep each other and the whole system in place" (Nead 326), with art systematically "protected from being engulfed by pornography in order to maintain its position as the opposition to pornography" (325-326). Such is the advent of "the erotic and the sensual . . . as middle terms in the system – defining what can or cannot be seen, differentiating allowable and illicit representations of the female body, and categorizing respectable and nonrespectable forms of cultural consumption" (Nead 326).

As if loyal to art critics' efforts to disentangle art from pornography, *Calendar Girls* deploys a domestic conceit – to show the women engaged in household activities, including bourgeois home entertainment (or pious devotion) through piano playing – capable of simultaneously turning their nakedness into nudity and partially concealing the nude (or rather just naked) body. The former *re-forms* both body and mindset to achieve self-confidence; the latter undoes the former. Lawrence's (Philip Glenister) visual ruse is deceptively simple: "At first glance, it should look like your classic WI calendar. You know, all your jams, cakes, sewing and all that. You know, everything you'd expect. Except for one tiny thing. The person doing it is, uh . . . naked" – and he produces the first sketch from his portfolio (00:31:23-00:31:29), the woman behind fruitcakes. Relieved to see their consent, he produces the

other sketches and explains: “A different girl for every month in a different guise” (00:31:39-00:31:43), followed by an enumeration of traditionally women’s activities.

Furthermore, whilst Lawrence’s photographic compositions enable shunning “direct transcription” (Clark 5), they conceivably move into the realm of artistic vision. “Consciously or unconsciously, photographers have usually recognized that in a photograph of the nude their real object is not to reproduce the naked body, but to imitate some artist’s view of what the naked body should be” (Clark 7). Intent on alleviating sex-shame, Lawrence’s compositions straddle, I would argue, the nude genre and an Archimboldean universe of fruit-and-vegetable body-without-human-borders. The sitters hide their frontal nudity behind fruitcakes (Celia), the palette in hand for easel painting (Cora), plants (Kathy [Georgie Glen] and Ruth) or the cider press (Chris); within the dress she is knitting (May [Angela Curran]); or by just turning three-quarters to the piano to play *Jerusalem* (Annie) – before hiding behind their score sheets in the collective carol singing for December. Originally shy and half-frightened, the women gradually assume cheerful and/or elegant poises with each new click of the camera and feel elated – *re-formed* (in Clark’s sense). Their calendar – especially when shown as a work in progress, with Lawrence’s many takes of coyly-to-fully-smiling women – becomes a work of art.

All of a sudden, domestic drudgery yoked to charity becomes glamorous and the object of a luring calendar, but especially an artwork. Its glamour may seem coterminous, I contend, with that of the scene, in Disney’s *Cinderella*, when, as the protagonist scrubs the floor, image and voice start getting multiplied in a superb visual and choral arrangement (00:26:37-00:27:41) to sublimate oppression. There is danger in such glamorising of domesticity, just as there is opportunity – at least in *Calendar Girls*. Indeed, beyond the pragmatic purpose it serves, domesticity, here hijacked, in parodic vein and with artistic intent, reverses not only the patriarchal view of middle-aged married women, but also art’s hijacking of women’s intimacy for the male gaze. These are women fully aware of their high-end, not just pop culture, artistic precedent: both Venus de Milo and porn magazines or Pirelli calendars

drive their imagination in playfully subversive ways. Their approach *de-doxifies* (in Linda Hutcheon's sense), i.e., *defamiliarises*, the bourgeois public consensus⁸ about both what counts as nudity or nakedness and what middle-aged women are worth. As to the latter aspect, the alternative calendar confirms John's insight, in his WI lecture on Yorkshire flowers (which he did not live to deliver): "The flowers of Yorkshire are like the women of Yorkshire. Every stage of their growth is more beautiful than the last. But the last phase is always the most glorious. Then very quickly they all go to seed" (00:16:43-00:17:15; delivered by Chris: 00:18:15-00:18:27). Such *de-doxification* – performed in tandem by John's lecture and the calendar – accounts for the socially successful *re-forming* of the unglamorous middle-aged housewife's body by the Calendar Girls.

True, the ladies' subversive de-doxification of stereotypes can at times backfire, for de-doxification entails the "simultaneous inscription" of that which it defamiliarises (Hutcheon, *Politics of Postmodernism* 4), in the mode of "complicitous critique" (9-23), just as parody does in relation to what it parodies (Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody* 76-83).⁹ When, as part of their Hollywood contract, the Calendar Girls are invited to pose quasi-naked for a washing powder commercial, Annie grows uncomfortable and an argument with Chris ensues (01:28:26-01:32:50). With that request, "western capitalist culture has also shown [its] amazing power to normalize (or 'doxify') signs and images, however disparate (or contesting) they may be" (*Politics of Postmodernism* 7), in this case to reinforce the association between women, on the one hand, and nakedness, self-display and domesticity, on the other.

Reading the Calendar Girls between the Lines

What can the *spectators* read between the lines, in the women's hesitations or eagerness to embrace Chris's solution? Ruth is the most consistently vocal of the 'nay-sayers' for virtually the entire preparation period and squarely refuses to commit herself to the calendar project. She would not hear Chris telling her either "Course you've got a body worth looking at" (00:30:12-00:30:13) or "Look, none of us have got a body worth looking at" (00:30:20-00:30:22). Through her apparent non sequitur

– “We’re not all Chrises in this life. Some of us are Ruths” (00:30:27-00:30:30) – Ruth indicates that she prefers her social comfort zone to reforming her body and mindset: her participation in the project would entail an abdication from her bourgeois principle of virtuous demeanour qua marital fidelity and social respectability. Yet, she soon yields – in an afterthought after her husband leaves for a week, without allowing her to join him (00:37:05-00:37:24) – and sits for the calendar, aided by a bottle of vodka (00:45:38-00:46:45). How ironic! Her husband does not share her values: he has been cheating on Ruth for a long while but will repudiate her because of the calendar. Accordingly, her subsequent decision to continue to contribute to the calendar – by going to Hollywood – starts as a vindictive reaction to her husband’s infidelity which evolves to full-fledged self-empowerment through an acquired sense of self- and body-worth. Ruth is the literalist reader of societal norms and marital relationships who converts under emotional duress.

At the other end, Chris – in her address to the WI’s national council to ask for approval for their alternative calendar – boldly announces that if the end (leukaemia research) justifies the means (nakedness), she would gladly act as Lady Godiva. Her rhetorical speech starts confessionally: “Look, I hate plum jam. (*Laughter.*) I only joined the WI to make me mother happy. I do, I hate plum jam. I’m crap at cakes, I can’t make sponge” (00:56:35-00:57:14). She would withdraw from WI, she admits, were it not for her sudden decision to raise funds in John’s memory, and to do that she’s “prepared to take me clothes off for a WI calendar” (00:57:07-00:57:10). Chris concludes: “If it means that we get closer to killing off this shitty, cheating, sly, conniving bloody disease that cancer is, oh, God, I tell you, I’d run round Skipton market naked, smeared in plum jam, wearing nothing but a knitted tea cosy on me head and singing *Jerusalem*” (00:57:23-00:57:41). The pathos of her heart-felt speech tips the scales, for the chairperson resolves to refer the project back to Marie, rather than disallow it (00:58:16-00:58:30).

In between these poles emerge various reactions to nudity. When, in her ‘commitment’ scene, Celia confesses: “It’s the whole showing-your-breasts issue that concerns me” (00:29:38-00:29:41), Chris reassures her: “I think the whole point is that we don’t properly” (00:29:42-

00:29:44). Yet Celia retorts: “I know. That’s what concerns me” (00:29:45-00:29:46). Coup de théâtre! Similarly, 55-year-old Cora pledges herself to the calendar project, asking Annie rhetorically: “If I don’t get them [her breasts] out now, when will I?” (00:29:29-00:29:32). Celia’s and Cora’s ‘baring’ discourse may be construed as a metaphorical baring of long repressed desire – theirs, individually, as much as women’s, collectively – to escape the confines of respectability and domesticity, the Victorian bourgeois legacy. Jessie too commits easily, if with certain restrictions: “no front bottoms” (00:29:59-00:30:10), not out of prudishness, but simply for having reserved such views for one particular person – and not her husband, at that. Unsurprisingly, when the ladies prepare themselves for the shooting session with a drink or two, some confess to their body non-exposure (00:38:55-00:39:59). Celia has never appeared naked before her husband: “we approach nudity on a strict need-to-know basis” (00:39:06-00:39:08). John had not seen Annie naked until the spring of 1975, when a lizard entered the shower block – but others too could see her naked that morning (00:39:12-00:39:26).

My interpretation may have wrongly suggested a linear progress of the ladies’ discourse and acceptance of nudity. Actually, no sooner has Cora committed to the project, than she starts worrying about their *male* photographer (00:31:56-00:32:00). Although, as Jessie argues, they “won’t actually be showing anything” to the *camera*, hence to the *calendar beholders* (00:32:01-00:32:03), nevertheless, as Cora insists, they will be posing nude before Lawrence (00:32:04-00:32:07), which worries Celia too. The argument is hilarious – and drives Lawrence out of the room:

Chris: He’ll have to be in the room to take the photos.

Cora: With us naked.

Annie: Well, nude.

Chris: Listen, an art photographer doesn’t see a naked woman. He sees a life model.

Annie: Yes, nudity isn’t important.

Jessie: Easy to say when you’ve got your knickers on.

Annie: He’ll be looking at us as an artist. (00:32:10-00:32:30)

Their end may be noble, but the means to achieve it is nerve-wracking, for in practice – i.e., beyond any mental and societal construct – nudity is indistinguishable from nakedness. Annie proposes a practical solution: “Lawrence will set up the photo, leave the room, dressing gowns come off, and one of us will click the shutter” (00:33:15-00:33:24). However, expelling Lawrence from the room backfires: not only is it difficult for the sitter to adopt the requested pose, but his keyhole peeping at her – from an angle to see her modestly hidden (00:42:44-00:42:52) – for postural instructions echoes the voyeurism of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’s *Turkish Bath*. Tense after unsuccessfully trying to achieve the enigmatic Mona Lisa smile which he expects, Celia bursts out: “For God’s sake, get bloody Botticelli in here!” (00:42:53-00:42:55). Henceforth, Lawrence will be actively involved in the shooting.

All these reactions to nudity, whether the characters embrace or shun it, are symptomatic not so much of their position as middle-aged women from rural England. (Lawrence himself is tense.) Rather, such attitudes testify to an ingrained implicit rhetoric of the body in the West, ambiguous and multimodal through its conflicting Judaic and Greek legacy, and embedded in a discourse about the nature of human existence (Barcan 2-6). For Ruth Barcan, “[u]neasiness with nudity is, in part, related to unease about sex” (3), as demonstrate both their automatic association in many people’s minds and the deployment of nudity, in consumer culture, “at least in part as a sign for sex” (3). Furthermore, as Barcan cogently notes, the notion of sex can “operate as a mode of discipline by which ‘correct,’ ‘ordinary,’ ‘deviant’ or privileged versions of masculinity and femininity are constructed,” and thereby identity is formed and regulated (3).

Barcan’s remarks may explain why Jem is shocked by his mother’s interest in porn images and subsequently by her nude photographing in the kitchen, or why her friends grow embarrassed by his return home. As Gaz’s veiled explanations about post-menopausal changes indicate, Jem cannot gauge his mother’s identity any more, especially socially. What he cannot probe, in fact, is the value he too assigns to the body – here, to Chris’s maternal body. Indeed, if Jem associates nakedness with sex of the pornographic kind, as he has learnt

from the porn magazine he consumes, *seeing* his mother *naked* actually entails stripping her of her identity and worth as a respectable mother. He would never be able to see/frame that early kitchen image as the *nude body*¹⁰ which Chris was *re-forming* hers to be, a body *worth looking at* and which deliberately offered itself to the male gaze for proceeds aimed to serve a noble cause.

Conclusion

Artistic intent and artist *re-form* (in Clark's terms) the naked woman partially or demurely hidden behind domestic activities and their implements as glamorous nude – as a woman confident about her body worth displaying (for a charitable purpose) and about her self-empowerment to effect change in society. Whatever “ways of seeing” frame the understandings of the calendar available to its beholders – and some of these beholders are disempowered, even terminally ill, women – such *seeing* now *matters*, i.e., it can be life changing, as is the case with both the Calendar Girls and many of their female beholders (01:04:45-01:05:51).

Nonetheless, the concealment conceit is double-edged: whilst it may send positive messages to other women to play with domesticity, to accept their ‘naked’ age and to empower themselves too, it also maintains women in their traditional position as the object of the male gaze and commodifies them via the calendar. Like all parody and all de-doxification, as Hutcheon has argued, the conceit of *Calendar Girls* is at once *empowering*, for it offers women an arena to express themselves and also become agentive and financially dependable, and *disempowering* too, through recourse, however parodic and humorous, to the old tropes of patriarchal stereotyping.

Notes:

¹ Six of the original Calendar Girls, who now call themselves Baker's Half Dozen, “continue to raise money from talks and personal appearances” and donate all their film royalties and calendar sales proceeds to the Leukaemia Research Fund (LaCamera n.p.).

² For de Lauretis (1-49), identities and roles are *en-gendered*: they are generated and/or performed according to gender-‘appropriate’ social expectations.

³ *Jerusalem*, a hymn composed in 1916 by Sir Hubert Parry (to William Blake’s poem) as an anthem during WW1 inspired Millicent Fawcett, the suffragists’ leader, to adopt it for the women’s suffrage movement; in 1924 it became the WI anthem. The WI women’s jams (and fruit and vegetable preserves) contributed to the WW1 effort and subsequently became proverbial (“Jam and *Jerusalem* Explained”).

⁴ Domesticity – an ideology which legitimates the “new gender inequalities” that emerged with the advent of industrialisation in the late eighteenth century – both *feminises* the private sphere and *naturalises* women’s domestic duties, centred on women’s “sole[] . . . responsibilities as wives and mothers” (Gillis and Hollows 3-4). Class and race differences became major contributors to the shaping of domesticity in the nineteenth century (5).

⁵ Many theorists have noted the gender differential in the programmes’ ‘recipe.’ Thus, Jamie Oliver’s *The Naked Chef* on BBC fostered a new attitude to cooking in both men and women: “Thanks to Oliver’s influence, men could feel manly in the kitchen, tearing up herbs with their bare hands, and women started longing for their honeys to cook them up something for dinner” (Cahn n.p.). *MasterChef* (2005-) on BBC, with its “impetus and emphasis . . . [on] professionalism and fine dining cuisine as a career opportunity,” is appositely “framed in a hyper-masculinised and industrialised way” (Packham 84). By contrast, Nigella Lawson, the beautiful amateur cook of *Nigella Bites* (Channel 4, 2000-2001), *Nigella Express* (BBC, 2007), *Nigellissima* (BBC, 2012), *Simply Nigella* (BBC, 2015), *Nigella: Cook, Eat, Repeat* (BBC, 2020) and others, may appear to be “returning women to a domestic situation”; “alternatively her portrayal, underscored by an emphasis on fun, self-fulfilment and enjoyment, could in fact be considered powerful in light of a post-feminist context with a sex-positive emphasis on agency and the freedom of choice” (Packham 84). See Hollows on Nigella’s construal of the “domestic goddess” and Sanders on how Nigella performs “the relationship between domesticity, femininity and feminism in contemporary popular food culture” (151).

⁶ Chris, the calendar mastermind, is involved in administering their Flower-Power family business; Jessie is a retired teacher; Cora, who owns a shop, is their church organist and WI piano player.

⁷ In both cases (nakedness and nudity), the theorisation concerns the white race by default.

⁸ Linda Hutcheon has “adapt[ed] Barthes’s general notion of the ‘doxa’ as public opinion or the ‘Voice of Nature’ and consensus (Barthes 1977b: 47)” to argue that “postmodernism works to ‘dedoxify’ our cultural representations and their undeniable political import” (*Politics of Postmodernism* 3).

⁹ “Parody is normative in its identification with the Other, but it is contesting in its Oedipal need to distinguish itself from the prior Other” (Hutcheon, *Theory of Parody* 77).

¹⁰ Here I am drawing on Ruth Barcan's interrelated observations that "naked bodies take their meaning from particular contexts" (4) and that "[w]hatever it is, the nude body is never naked, if naked means stripped of meaning, value and political import" (9). The former echoes Eck's theory of the frame.

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