Indecent Desires: Constructing Deviance and Morality in Doris Wishman's Wide World of Sleaze

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Indecent Desires:
Constructing Deviance and Morality in Doris Wishman’s Wide World of Sleaze

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
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Endless thanks to my mom for reminding me how to take care of myself these last three years, to my psychic twin Miles Emanuel for putting me on Doris, to my dad for putting me on movies, to the group chat for being the receptacle for every thought that passes through my thick skull, to Sherry and Kat for all the “sprog sessions” that were really just eating vegan chili and watching *Inuyasha*, to Gus for your love and your faith in me, to Ed Halter and Thomas Beard for your patience and the miraculous feat of getting me through this paper, to myself, and to Doris Wishman!
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My initial introduction to Doris Wishman was a measly YouTube link, texted to me by a friend, accompanied by some unremarkable caption to the effect of “Watch this right now if you know what’s good for you!” Today, as a weathered Wishman completist, for the sake of this prelude and in accordance with my sentimentalist tendencies, I would like to think that the depths of the internet from which this particular link was unearthed—the double-digit-view-count arena of cultural obscurity—was a fitting home for Doris’s movies, some sort of 21st century simulacrum of the scrappy, pre-Disney-store Times Square that her pictures and audiences once inhabited. Then, it was just another rabbit hole, a curiosity to dust off and survey, a worthwhile enough way to occupy an evening. The link took me to a 1983 slasher flick called *A Night to Dismember*, a tidy 68-minute number that played out more like a clumsy middle school play than any film I had ever encountered. Naturally, I was hooked. I would come to understand *A Night to Dismember* as a career outlier for Wishman—blood and gore were never her particular cup of tea—but the film is undeniably emblematic of the delicious chaos of her filmmaking; it’s the ultimate gateway into the cavernous depths of her body of work. Men and women kiss like beginners on garish furniture, cries of pain come out more like gasps of pleasure, cough syrup blood trickles down unidentifiable body parts, the camera fixates salaciously on platters of limp luncheon meat. The plot itself, a convoluted web of family murders and half-hearted flirtation, seemingly designed only as a vessel for the cheap gore and softcore sex, concludes with an expository note from the narrator: “If you were wondering how I came upon all these intimate details, the Kent family had one thing in common: they all kept diaries”—an entirely unnecessary assurance that what we have just seen has basis in reality. This baffling cocktail of
pointedly sloppy gimmicks and puzzlingly earnest attempts at storytelling is one of the most compelling features of Doris’s filmmaking, and one that persists throughout her entire filmography (which, it should be noted, is extensive, making her the most prolific woman in American cinematic history, though that is not why she is worth talking about). The particular feeling of patchwork and assemblage in *A Night to Dismember* is integral to its intrigue, as it comes attached to a myth of its creation—it is said that the original cut of the film was partially destroyed in a fire, or by a disgruntled Movielab employee, and so the remaining product is a compilation of stock footage and whatever she had on hand. Wishman herself said of the project: “I had about sixty percent of the original film, and the rest were outtakes. It was very difficult to concoct another story that made any sense.”¹ The notion of assembling a film from outtakes and releasing it to audiences, shamelessly making public your imperfections as an artist, is rather extraordinary, and certainly symbolic of Doris’s attitude towards her craft. As much care as she took in writing her stories, inserting easter eggs and cameos, and delivering on her promises of sex, violence, and depravity, she never invested an ounce of effort in seamlessness or the erasure of the medium from the product; she allowed her stories to be stories rather than simulations of reality. This results in a body of work teeming with personality and raw tenderness. Doris Wishman allowed traces of herself, imperfections and all, to leak into her work, with the naive brilliance of a child handling a video camera for the first time. Her technical skills, though unorthodox, should not be underestimated, but what truly makes Doris a worthwhile subject (not to mention a creative inspiration) is the singular blending of her films and herself—Doris Wishman is her films, and they are her.

For this reason, the intent of this thesis is to look upon Doris Wishman through the lens of her work, and to look upon 20th century American middle-class morality through the lens of Doris Wishman. She may seem like a less than apt representative of mass consciousness, considering the indecipherable strangeness and tendency towards the outrageous in her filmmaking, but Doris was no ostentatious sexpot, even if she directed pornography and worked in a dildo store in the last years of her life. At her core, she was always just a nice Jewish girl from Queens, and that shows up in her work, particularly in the tone her films assume while handling topics like queerness, class, womanhood, sex, and race. The dual fascination and discomfort with otherness is central to her work, and representative of the period of immense social change during which she produced her filmography, from 1960 to 2002. I will specifically examine dynamics of gender and sexuality, which were Wishman’s particular fascination. However, I must denounce the popular dialogue surrounding Wishman in recent years, which classifies her as an uncomplicatedly feminist filmmaker—in fact, the representations of women and femininity in her body of work suggest an outright alienation from the experience of being a woman, creating a gender dynamic that extends far, far beyond simple feminist ideology, and into the realm of queerness, an unintentional and nebulous trans-ing of the filmic voice and the eye of the viewer. Encapsulated in these dynamics is a battle between a woman and the culture that raised her, an unceasing ebb and flow of subversion and assimilation.

This thesis is by no means a comprehensive discussion of Wishman’s work—her mammoth filmography would necessitate volumes upon volumes of analysis to even scratch the surface. Nevertheless, I intend to use the following pages as, at the very least, an ardent declaration of respect for Doris’s artistry, without even a shadow of irony. Even as her mid-career
“roughies” have come to garner a meager amount of highbrow appreciation (*Bad Girls Go To Hell* is, as I write this, featured on the Criterion Collection’s streaming service), Wishman herself is still regarded largely as a punchline, a necessarily untalented old woman who stumbled into her spotlight. Yet, it is the mark of an auteur to subvert the rules of their medium, and thus, Doris should be applauded for disregarding the rules altogether, demolishing convention and rebuilding it from the ground up. This is, above all else, a love letter to her.
Doris Wishman at the bookends of her career: on set with a camera in the 1960s (left) and on screen with a boy toy in her 2001 film *Dildo Heaven* (below).
Part One. The Saleswoman as Auteur, and a Career Retrospective

“Every film is an exploitation film, because once you advertise something, you’re exploiting it.”

For a viewer only marginally familiar with Doris Wishman, particularly one without a developed taste for sleaze, it may be easy to dismiss her films as undignified and sloppy exercises in philistinism, the kind of flicks you would put on at a party to relentlessly mock, worthy only for the spectacle of their failure. A Wishman completist, on the other hand, has the good fortune of witnessing the stylistic patterns of an auteur in her work. The spatial awkwardness and technical flaws characteristic of her films are not mistakes, careless casualties of hack-job filmmaking, but, in fact, the internal language and logic of her art. The question at hand, then, is not whether Wishman wielded a formidable toolbox of auteurist techniques—she certainly did—but where exactly these techniques originated, how they were honed, and whether Doris herself was conscious of her artistry.

If we are to take her word for it, Doris was staunchly against the suggestion that her films were art. Throughout her career, she took care to shield herself from the disapproving eyes of film critics by relentlessly asserting, with the humble air of the frail Floridian nonagenarian that became her lasting image in the twilight of her life, that her only reason for making films was to support herself financially after the death of her first husband, Jack Abrams, in 1958. Prior, she had worked in film distribution, circulating various French and Italian pictures throughout the American South, including the racy Brigitte Bardot vehicle And God Created Woman (1956),

2 “Fred Olen Ray and Doris Wishman.” The Incredibly Strange Film Show, directed by Andy Harries, 1989. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hb3KBwUJvLY
perhaps Doris’s catalyzing introduction to overt female sexuality on screen. This early experience in the film industry might suggest a lifelong cinephilia, but, as one of her defining characteristics as a director, Wishman seems pointedly disinterested in films other than her own. The manner in which she refers to her contemporaries implies that, not only does she view her own films as monetary objects, she seems to evaluate every film she watches with a similarly dismissive air. In a 1994 interview, filmmakers Peggy Ahwesh and M.M. Serra attempted to get Doris to speak on her personal taste in film, asking her opinion on several other sexploitation directors of the era. According to her responses, Doris Wishman may as well have been any elderly untrained eye, referring not once to the specifics of filmmaking, but rather tersely indicating whether or not she liked the pictures. Of Radley Metzger, she says, “Do you know where he is? I would love to see Radley. We were friends.” Of Dave Friedman, “I haven’t seen any, but I don’t think I’d like it.” Of Andy Warhol, “I think he’s a disgrace… I only saw one film of his. I don’t remember the name of it, but it was shot in a closet, a very small closet, I’m sure. I think it’s wrong. I think it’s like stealing. We paid about six or seven dollars to see it.”

Regarding her own decision to begin making films, she explains that it was simply meant as a distraction after the death of her husband, something to engage in half-heartedly, like someone might take up gardening or needlepoint. A personal friend of Wishman’s, the musician Bill Orcutt, commented on her relationship with her medium in an interview with the Miami Rail following her death: “I would try to ask her questions about cinema history, like who was her favorite director. ‘Do you like Citizen Kane?’ I was just trying to figure out where she was coming from and what her background was. She had no interest at all in the history of cinema. It

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was just all her own creativity. She did not see herself as being part of history." Doris was an artist in a medium that she did not regard as art—as far as she was concerned, she was just going through the necessary motions to create a marketable product.

The result of this assembly line approach, however, is a vast and intricate web of connectivity and embedded psychological symbolism throughout Wishman’s massive body of work. She is singular in the remarkable cohesion of her 30+ filmography, using the same directorial flourishes in her few 21st century films that she did in the 1960s nudist pictures that made her name. In the pages to come, I will examine Wishman’s final works in conversation with her fresh-faced “nudie cuties,” in an effort to identify the lasting techniques that would become signature to her work and to distill the essence of her auteurism. In order to approach this comparison on level ground, though, I would like to begin by outlining the span of her formidable career, so as to unpack her toolbox of techniques and understand her singular approach to filmmaking as a saleswoman, a moralist, and an unwitting outsider artist.

The three defining qualities of Doris Wishman’s sexploitation are her unyielding commitment to frugality, the stifling negative space that inhabits her atmospheres and images, and her obvious discomfort with sex. Doris’s own aversion to the erotic is integral to her early films in particular (though her ostensible sexual illiteracy continues to show its face even in her hardcore pornography of the 70s). Once again, she claims that her decision to make nudist pictures was financially motivated—they make money almost as reliably as an office job, provided that you deliver on the promise of unclothed young women, plus you can save money on costuming! This choice appears to affirm the idea that all of her choices were extremely

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calculated, particularly considering her lack of interest in the very content with which she was dealing. She describes arranging to shoot at a nudist camp for the first time: the camp director insisted that she and the entire crew be nude per the guidelines of the resort, but Doris was far too modest, and nearly gave up on the idea. Eventually, they allowed her to wear a halter top and shorts. As her contemporary David F. Friedman explains, “Doris was… very embarrassed a lot of times. Particularly when the men would come out with nothing on, Doris would avert her face! Doris was not like the girls who inhabited these nudist camps, she was a very respectable, nice little lady who worked at an office, and came down there and was just really shocked at what she was doing.”5 Considering the films that would come out of her in the following decades, the image of Doris as a blushing virgin or a sheltered housewife sounds like an embellishment on Friedman’s part, but her inexperience and disinterest in sex is no myth (her 2002 New York Times obituary even concludes with a quote on the matter: “I’ve had two husbands and a lover, and that’s my quota.”)6 However, even as a beginner to the film industry without a particular attachment to sex as a subject, this career move is unquestionably savvy—the nudist film was a cinematic form best left unaltered and un-innovated, the film itself a largely irrelevant shell for the tantalizing product within. The 1954 film Garden of Eden set the precedent for the genre, which reliably cast nudism as an un-erotic (even anti-erotic) alternative lifestyle, a wholesome return to nature that was tragically misrepresented in mainstream culture as a hotbed of loose sex and depravity. But, despite the saccharine moralistic coating, nudist films were designed to attract a viewer in search of a cheap thrill. Her nudie-cutie era, which made up the first half of the 1960s, is the most straightforwardly profit-driven—her third film, known best as Diary of a

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5 “Fred Olen Ray and Doris Wishman.” The Incredibly Strange Film Show, directed by Andy Harries, 1989. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hb3KBwUlyLY
Nudist (1961), was also advertised under the titles Diary of a Girl Reporter, Diary of a Naturist, Girl Reporter Diary, Nature Camp Confidential, Nature Camp Diary, and Nudist Confidential, following a tradition as old as the exploitation film genre of rebranding the same film several times in order to maximize attendance. A new title might attract an audience that had seen the same film months earlier, and there was rarely any backlash, as the promise of female nudity was still fulfilled. This era also marked the introduction of one of the hallmarks of Wishman’s filmmaking: a dual trend of referencing her own films outright and recycling her own footage inconspicuously. Though these practices would become undeniably intentional and stylistic in her later films, their origins are clearly practical, if slightly tongue in cheek. As early as her second film, Nude on the Moon, Wishman had her characters driving past a local cinema and commenting that the film advertised on the marquee, Hideout in the Sun, had been a real blast. Considering the fact that Doris was not credited for Hideout in the Sun, but did put her name on Nude on the Moon, this does not indicate a conscious effort to craft a distinctive auteurist filmography, but a businesswoman’s
attempt to draw attention to her merchandise. The practice of shot recycling, which would come
to serve as a sort of Wishman-lover’s inside joke, was equally logistical in origin—an extensive
shot of a nude woman underwater in a swimming pool appears in almost all of Wishman’s nudist
films almost as a signature, yet it is doubtful that Doris imagined her films would ever be
watched en masse, and so the only possible purpose it could have served in the early years of her
career was to save resources on reshooting, and to get her money’s worth from a shot that may
have cost extra to produce.
To analyze Wishman’s films as a product, one must examine them like a product, beginning with the packaging, the writing on the outside of the glossy box. Understanding the presentation of these movies is integral to understanding Wishman’s psychology as a director—if production is all about making money, then attracting paying customers and getting them to stay, getting them to return, is the most important part of the process.

Remarkably, Wishman did not give herself directorial credit on many of her films, though, even more intriguing, this is not a consistent trend. Although she tended to credit male pseudonyms for directing her films, the name Doris Wishman would appear elsewhere in the credits, often as Producer. Evidently, Doris was not disguising her name to disassociate from her films, exercising the social conservatism often credited to her, but to advertise them to male audiences as being male-directed—essentially, she wanted men to feel as though they were looking through the eyes of another man, a subject who would be equally desirous of the female objects. This packaging of her work as by men, for men is another
primary source of dissonance in her films, inadvertently forming a sort of queer lens through which to view sex, desire, and womanhood, a topic that will be discussed further in part two.

Almost all of Wishman’s films, in a trend spanning quite literally from her first film to her last, begin with an opening credits sequence set to an original song composed by her niece, Judith Kushner. This music sets up a remarkable tonal dischordenance from the first few seconds of the film—without fail, the songs are hyper-commercial, indistinguishable from a jingle in an advertisement, and never hinting even slightly at the sexuality inherent in a nudist film or a work of sexploitation (that is, until her 2001 film *Dildo Heaven*, which has a jingle so overtly sexual in content that it is devoid of eroticism—a sort of sterilization through overexposure). Take, for example, the second film in Doris Wishman’s body of work, *Nude on the Moon*, certainly one of her more well-known pictures. Though it is not necessarily indicative of the majority of her nudist films, it highlights her stylistic choices excellently, as one of the higher-budget, higher-effort works of the first two decades of her career. The song that opens the picture is, inexplicably, a love ditty sung by a crooning male singer to a woman, already a puzzling choice for a film designed to attract straight male audiences in search of the spectacle of the nude female form. Backed by lethargic jazz piano, the singer outlines the plot to come: “I’m mooning over you, my little moon doll, with a sad and broken heart. I’m mooning over you, my little moon doll, for soon, the time will come to part. I’m crying over you, my little angel, who lives high in the sky. I’m crying over you, my little angel, for back to earth I soon must fly.” This is indicative of one of the hallmarks of Wishman’s filmmaking, particularly her nudist films—her denial of the sexuality fundamental to her films, and the constant balancing of erotic intrigue and moral affirmation. In *Nude on the Moon*, as outlined by the song, two astronauts voyage to the
moon and discover a nudist colony of non-verbal aliens, led by a beautiful queen, with whom one of them falls in love—true love, it seems, unmotivated by lust. She is, as the song puts it, little more than a child’s doll, unable to communicate and unaware of her nakedness, a sex toy with no sexuality. Eventually, the lovestruck astronaut is forced to leave the alien woman, but, upon returning to earth, he is finally able to feel affection for his beautiful assistant, who happens to resemble the queen. Of course, it would be impossible for him to be coupled with the nudist—as the nudism in these early films was an overt metaphor for interpersonal intimacy, and the coupling always led to true love and marriage, rather than sex or even mere suggestion—but the assistant is a worthy object of affection because, at the beginning of the film, she indicated a desire to be married, and specifically to upgrade from a working woman (an astrophysicist, no less) to a homemaker. The emphasis of the nuclear family in these nudist films seems entirely contrary to Doris’s marketing instinct—after all, what sort of man would want a side serving of conservative morality with his naked women? However, by carving out this niche for herself as a purveyor of wholesome sexploitation, it is possible that Wishman was able to eliminate some of
the guilt her audience might feel about watching a nudie picture, thus breaking down the psychological barriers that would keep more “upstanding” viewers from returning regularly. In her own distaste for sex in her films, Wishman crafted a complex gimmick that straddled the lines of madonna and whore, fulfilling the promise of nudity alongside a healthy dose of good, old fashioned middle class morality.

In 1965, Doris’s style shifted radically with her best-known film and the first of her “roughies,” *Bad Girls Go to Hell*. As with many of Wishman’s artistic choices, the transition to a new genre was likely practical—she had been living in Florida with her sister Pearl for years after the death of her husband (nudist camps abound in Coral Gables!), but now, with the streets of Forest Hills, Queens as her backdrop, Doris’s films adapted to their surroundings, becoming far more dark and violent, both visually and thematically. Logistically, she would approach these films with a similar knack for corner-cutting, adhering to a reliably predictable plot with each picture. This films of this era, which have been referred to as “horror films for women,” tend to follow a similar storyline of a young woman, new to New York, gradually losing her pure, middle-American morality, being corrupted and turning to sex work in her desperation for money, and/or repeatedly facing attacks from men. Still, despite the subject matter, Wishman’s films never lost the distinct sterility that lingered from the stiff tableaux of her nudist films—*Bad Girls Go to Hell* is striking in its indecipherable barrenness. How do you make Central Park look flat, unpopulated, constructed of cardboard? As her unbending frugality dictated, nothing insignificant could appear on screen, whether a background extra or the clutter of a lived-in apartment. Where the nudie-cuties often consisted of pure atmosphere, the roughies feel entirely devoid of atmosphere, as if each shot is a blinding spotlight cast upon a single subject, though
the subjects do vary significantly in narrative weight. Bad Girls marks the beginning of Doris’s strange obsession with the banal and tactile. Her roughies are populated with unassuming set pieces that seem to easily distract the camera—potted plants, kitchy paintings, ashtrays—yet each item stands as an arcane totem, holding grave, if incomprehensible, importance. In this meticulously sparse set dressing, Wishman reduces the human body to a malleable object, emphasized by her treatment of seemingly random props as erotic images, given the same sexual weight as the people themselves. In Another Day, Another Man (1966), which follows the moral
downfall of an upstanding middle class couple after the wife turns to sex work to support her ill husband, Wishman peppers the film with fleeting shots of various houseplants and home decor, a showerhead here and an ashtray there, charging the objects with harsh sexual energy and draining the actors of their distinct filmic significance. In *Bad Girls Go to Hell*, a woman gives a kiss to a framed drawing of two kittens, right before giving a kiss to her husband, mirroring the relationship the audience is meant to have to the same visual symbols. These moments of perspective distraction are displayed without innuendo, treated merely as images equally as compelling as any of the men and women who populate the film, thus reducing those men and women to objects in their own right—not sexual objects, but cinematic objects, toys for Doris to play with. This eroticization of the object creates a fascinating rigidness within her films, stripping her actors of personhood and transforming them into pure image. By far, the most extreme example of this idea in her work occurs in the semi-documentary *Let Me Die a Woman*, a career outlier from 1977, in which Wishman has real trans people clumsily reenact their own lives, from sex to therapy to bodily trauma. This entirely removes feelings, thoughts, and authenticity from the individuals’ experiences, turning them into puppet versions of themselves, which can no longer experience complex emotional truth.

The puppetry extends, also, to her treatment of language. Beginning most noticeably with her roughies, which were ostensibly more plot-laden than her nudies, Wishman erases meaningful language from her depiction of people, furthering the notion that the actors are useful only as isolated bodies. Rather than achieving this effect through overexposure, in the manner of notable contemporary Andy Warhol, allowing her performers to speak unceasingly to the point that the viewer has no choice but to revert to selective hearing and turning the speech into a sort
of background drone, Wishman removes dialogue altogether whenever possible. This is likely yet another stylistic flourish born of technical concerns, as most of her films were dubbed after filming to make shooting as uncomplicated as possible, yet the result is a pointed lack of emphasis on thoughts and language. Often, we will watch a couple having a conversation, but the content of their words is revealed only in narration, as if the manner of speech, the intonation, the word choice—all elements which reveal personality and uniqueness in a person—are irrelevant to Wishman and the stories she wishes to tell.

While much of Doris Wishman’s filmmaking remains remarkably consistent throughout her multi-decade career, there are certain tonal shifts that occur in her films, drastically altering the relationship between her work and her audience. The nudist films and roughies are both inhabited by characters who may as well be paper-dolls, utterly without personality or definition. The nudies generally revolve around a singular spectator-proxy, newly enamored with nudism, wandering through the camp as if on a theme park boat circuit, pausing for several minutes at a time to observe nameless, voiceless bodies on display. The roughies, on the other hand, give identities to the people on screen, but they tend to be as nondescript as “secretary,” “husband,” “prostitute,” “boss,” with those archetypes defining the entirety of their being. Wishman’s early films are blank so that we may project onto them our understanding of ourselves; her films possess an element of self-insert beyond the emotional projection that art is meant to inspire. This is spawned most jarringly by her subversion of conventional shot-countershot grammar (it need not be said, another product of her cheapness). Where, traditionally, the person speaking is shown on screen, and the countershot begins when the next person speaks, Wishman tends to show the person being spoken to instead, whether or not their reaction is of any importance. By
disembodying the voices of her characters, she turns them into proxies for the viewer, so one can imagine that the voice of, say, the husband chastising his overly affectionate wife, is coming from their own mouth. This effect is intensified by the immense neutrality of most of Wishman’s characters—they are so simple and archetypical that they allow for the audience's imagination to take control, molding the husbands and wives into people they recognize. This means that within each Doris Wishman film, there are thousands of films which are created in the minds of each and every viewer, manipulated by the realities in which each audience member resides. While such a phenomenon is true of all art, Wishman’s pictures seem tailor-made for that purpose, like coloring books that the audience may cognitively embellish as they please.

This notion of characters, scenarios, and even images existing more tangibly in the mind of the viewer than in the literal space of the movie is taken to the extreme in the next, short-lived era of Doris’s career. In 1966, and then again in 1969, Wishman purchased completed films by two different Greek directors, had the audio track dubbed over with an original English script, and sold it to American audiences—with her real name credited as the director, which was not a given at any point in her career. With these two films, *The Hot Month of August* and *Passion Fever*, Doris unwittingly challenged the very integrity of the cinematic image, overlaying her own constructed narrative atop an existing reality. This undermines one underlying philosophy of cinema, that the moving image is reality preserved, and reinterprets the expressions, gestures, and emotions of the people on screen to reflect only her own understanding. Additionally, to return to the subject of Doris Wishman’s psyche, this practice of purchasing another director’s films is distinctly anti-auteurist, yet it indicates a remarkable, singular dismissal of the importance of filmic representation that is, itself, brilliant in its anti-intellectualism.
The narrative blankness of the first decade of Wishman’s career never vacated her work entirely, but with the twilight of the 1960s (and, not insignificantly, the dawn of her second marriage), her films began to take a turn for the outrageous—and the unblinkingly erotic. In 1968, the naive chastity that had characterized her early films, and had since morphed into a detached and sterile fascination with sex as a concept, though not a visual subject, took an unexpected nosedive with the release of Love Toy, a pornographic movie of most perverse order. Beyond the shock of Love Toy being Doris’s first foray into hardcore porn, the film demonstrates a deliciously depraved fascination with its own medium, with the kind of unsophisticated enthusiasm of a repressed teenager finally experiencing sexual liberation. In accordance with Wishman’s treatment of sex as something equivalently foreign and fascinating, she takes care to dabble in every form of kink that she could think of, resulting in an almost procedural journey through deviant sexualities, a neat showcase of the perverse. As a blurb for the film puts it, “the film promptly becomes a catalog of perversion, wallowing in domination, humiliation, fetishism, voyeurism, masturbation, lesbianism, spanking, bondage, blowjobs,

A teenage girl rides an old man like a horse, one act in an overly-erotic parade of the obscene—so extreme in its horniness that it reads almost as comedy.
incest, and more.” In her enthusiasm to expand her collection of onscreen kinky scenarios, Doris displays her singular sexual ideology, which, in her admitted inexperience, equates such topics as queerness and incest on a level playing field of immorality, yet simultaneously refuses to condemn either. Her voracious attempts to prove her degeneracy backfire in their enthusiasm, resulting more in a feeling of clinical curiosity—a desire to witness, to experience, rather than to truly partake in the pleasure. This is just to say that, as a pornographic debut, *Love Toy* epitomizes Wishman’s relationship to sex, as something, like cinema, that exists as much in individual perception as it does in physical reality, if not more so.

After *Love Toy*, which was intentionally shocking but otherwise earnest in its eroticism, Doris’s career entered a state of coy self-reflexivity that would persist for much of the remainder of her career, and come to define her 21st century films. Her next film, not accounting for the aforementioned appropriated Greek film *Passion Fever*, was a wonderfully absurd sexploitation thriller called *The Amazing Transplant*, in which a man undergoes penis enlargement surgery, only to find that his new cock compels him to murder women who wear large shiny earrings. At this point in Wishman’s career, the sincerity of her early films was abandoned entirely—this premise reads like a parody of a sexploitation picture, and it wears that self-aware title with pride. Perhaps her 1960s films are more straightforwardly auteurist, due to the strict regimen she held herself to in order to save money and maximize profit, but these mid-career sexploitation flicks, often overlooked, showcase Doris at her most fun—these films, I’d like to think, were the sorts of films she truly enjoyed making. *Keyholes Are for Peeping* or *Is There Love After Marriage?* was her next film, made in 1972; equally boisterous and tongue-in-cheek, a

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7 [https://letterboxd.com/film/love-toy/](https://letterboxd.com/film/love-toy/)
patchwork of pornographic vignettes held together by the loose concept of a man who spies on his various sexually adventurous neighbors through their keyholes. Whether intentional or otherwise, this is Doris most straightforwardly in conversation with the medium of film, particularly the sex film, and the voyeurism inherent in her work. The short erotic sequences are cast in colored filters, so they appear not as life, but almost like pop art, or pieces of gummy candy, existing only to be looked at or consumed in small, sweet doses.

The viewer and the view... cinema of voyeurism! (Keyholes are for Peeping, 1972)

Next came a trilogy of genre films, Deadly Weapons (1974), Double Agent 73 (1974), and The Immoral Three (1975). The first two starred burlesque legend and anatomical anomaly Chesty Morgan, who boasted an astounding 73 inch natural bust, as a super spy with secret cameras implanted in her breasts. The third followed the daughters of Double Agent 73 seeking to avenge her death after she is killed on the job. With these films, Doris returned to her practice of cash-grab filmmaking—these are the most exploitative of her exploitation films, in that they possessed a singular valuable commodity, Chesty’s chest, around which everything revolved. Contrary to every other trailer that Doris edited to advertise her films, the trailers for Deadly
Weapons and Double Agent 73 reveal nothing of the plot, and feature no clips of the sex and drama within; rather, they merely hint at the spectacle, publicizing Chesty’s dimensions but never her image. In the style of a carnival freak show, the only way to catch a glimpse, to see it with your own eyes, was to pay the price of admission.

Following two more hardcore porn films, Satan Was a Lady (1975, not to be confused with the 2001 film of the same name, which will be discussed further in the following sections), and an erotic ghost story unbelievably titled Haunted Pussy, or Come With Me My Love (1976), Wishman released Let Me Die a Woman, her only work of nonfiction. The film, in a disturbing mixture of compassion and condescension, examines the lives of transgender people through crude reenactments of real trauma. This work is central to Wishman’s filmography, alternatively considered a masterwork and a blemish on her legacy. A rich text in its dealings with queerness, Let Me Die a Woman will be discussed at length in the following chapter of this thesis.

After Let Me Die, Doris’s filmmaking drive seemed to wane, and she took a five year break before making the aforementioned horror film A Night to Dismember. When interviewed in 1994, she seemed particularly haunted by the documentary, feeling, for the first time, that her exploitation may have gone too far. In the Ahwesh/Serra interview, Wishman says of Let Me Die,
“The people I worked with, they were great. They were very sad, and very unhappy, and that made me unhappy. So because of that I paid them better than I did anybody else… I didn’t follow {the film} at all. I wanted to forget about it.”

Further, after the disastrous Movielab incident that resulted in the loss of much of the original cut of *A Night to Dismember* in 1983, Doris stopped making movies altogether, going into a period of retirement that she likely thought would be permanent. By the 1990s, she had found newfound notoriety, not in the realm of cinema, but as a beloved local character in Coral Gables, Florida, an elderly employee at a local sex shop called the Pink Pussycat boutique. It was here where Doris’s urge to make movies would have a resurgence, resulting in the production of three, wildly underrated, late-career masterpieces: *Satan Was a Lady* (2001), *Dildo Heaven* (2001), and the posthumously released *Each Time I Kill* (2002).

*Satan Was a Lady*, entirely unrelated to the 1975 porno of the same name (I would wager that, like with her recycling of the iconic swimming pool shot in her nudist films, Doris just had a particular fondness for the title and wanted to milk it for all it was worth), is arguably the least “Doris Wishman” Doris Wishman film. Tonally, it’s a lot less spare than the work that preceded it, with the customary empty space populated by diegetic musical numbers performed by a perpetually crooning blues singer (who is killed partway through the film, at which point the music becomes extradiegetic). This stylistic choice feels much more akin to something like Alan Rudolph’s 1976 Altman-esque ensemble film *Welcome to L.A.*—given Wishman’s disinterest in cinema, I do not mean to suggest that this was actually an influence, but it does mark a particular shift in her filmic priorities. *Satan Was a Lady*, like its protagonist, revels in excess, with

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pointedly charming details included for pure aesthetic atmosphere (a guitar-playing Lou Reed lookalike, a cat with a broken arm) which seem to exist only to occupy negative space. The titular “lady,” a sex worker, dominatrix, and petty criminal named Cleo, is the opposite of the generic, archetypical “good girl gone bad” of Wishman’s earlier work, particularly the “roughies” that made her name. Cleo is inherently deviant and grotesque—qualities that are implied by her enjoyment of sex work and highlighted by her amplified love of eating. This furthers the important questions of Wishman’s notions of womanhood and morality that were initially introduced in *Bad Girls Go to Hell*. Are our sympathies meant to lie with the slutty, scheming leading lady, are we intended to watch her downfall with righteous glee, or is there something more complex at play here—perhaps a misguided effort towards relatability in the modern era? If we are to understand the protagonists of the roughies as audience proxies, maybe Cleo is designed to represent the new generation of women, and appeal to a changing world that Doris may have struggled to understand.

The trio of women in *Dildo Heaven* are certainly meant to be everyman-types. Despite the delightful title, the film involves dildos only peripherally, instead focusing on the three young roommates’ attempt to seduce their bosses (a desire that is presented as universal, evoking questions of labor and class dynamics—is this a career move or an urge motivated by the inherent attractiveness of a man in power?). At this point, Doris’s filmmaking had a distinct air of self-awareness. As the film opens, two of the women are watching a scene from Wishman’s *Love Toy* on television, in which an old man forces a teenager to slurp milk from a bowl as she roleplays as a kitten. One of the friends scoffs at the image, saying, “That’s cute stuff.” Though this reads as humility on Wishman’s part, it also indicates the creation of a personal canon, a
newfound understanding of herself through the lens of auteurism, with a body of work that is internally in dialogue with itself. There is a bittersweetness to the tone of *Dildo Heaven* as a penultimate film, as this understanding of her legacy comes with the dual understanding that she was not and still is not taken seriously as a director. Wishman’s humble sense of humor overshadows a genuine pride she had in her work, and the choice to use herself as a punchline certainly makes the movie enjoyable to watch, but it further calls into question her opinion of her art and her relationship with film.

A scene from *Love Toy*, discovered whilst channel-surfing, is much too silly and vanilla for the sexually liberated women of the 21st century.
Doris Wishman’s final film, which was completed after her death, resumes the admirable earnestness of her earlier work, displaying a dedication to her concept that indicates the true passion driving her later career. *Each Time I Kill*, Wishman’s only venture into fantasy storylines, follows a frumpy high schooler who discovers that she can assume a physical characteristic of each person she murders by using a magic locket she finds in a haunted house. Though somewhat childish both in outline and execution, the film is a personal favorite of mine—it demonstrates, with a unique clarity, Doris’s thesis on the meaning of womanhood, and the result is an inadvertently chilling examination of both femininity and queerness. This film will also be discussed at length in the following section, “Constructing Queerness and Wishman’s Feminine Ideal,” as it proposes radical notions of transness and the ability to manipulate oneself through image that are indirectly in dialogue with *Let Me Die a Woman*, and, further, questions of filmic femininity in general.

With the extensive groundwork laid, I would like to proceed into a narrower discussion of Wishman’s psyche, politics, and morality through her first and last films. With an eye specifically trained to the nudist films and her three 21st century works, I intend to look at Doris Wishman’s particular understanding of her gender and sexuality, and how that reflects her cinematic depictions of women, queerness, and the world she inhabited.
Part Two. Good Girls and Bad Girls: Constructing Queerness and Wishman’s Feminine Ideal

The modern scholarly dialogue surrounding Doris Wishman’s films generally regards her as a proto-feminist trailblazer, centering around her “roughies” of the late 60s, which make a spectacle of the sexual trauma and physical violence inflicted upon young women by men. Looking through a narrow viewfinder at this short segment of her career, detached from the context of her personal politics, and colored by a 21st century liberal lens, it makes sense to read Bad Girls Go to Hell and the other films of the period as brutally honest portraits of the world’s cruelty towards women. It would be comforting to believe that the woman staging these assaults, beatings, and killings did so out of compassion for her sex, or even a sort of hardened solidarity. On the contrary, however, these films must be put into the same category as her nudist films and her hardcore pornography of the 1970s—they are as exploitative of both their subjects and their audience as any male-directed film of the same caliber, and any ulterior motives behind their creation were certainly not feminist, at least in a way that we would understand and accept today. In fact, Wishman’s entire filmography, because it is so expansive, so interconnected, and so woman-centric, creates its own mythology of femininity, revealing the cultural understanding of womanhood at the time, as well as Doris’s own particular notion of a woman’s role, and what happens when she deviates from it.

Furthermore, to speak of Doris Wishman’s conception of gender is to speak also of the elements of queerness, intentional or otherwise, that factor into her work. These topics are inextricable, as my alignment of her films with queer canon has no basis in Wishman’s own sexuality or gender identity—as far as I can tell there are no grounds to call into question her
personal identification as a heterosexual, cisgender person, aside, possibly, from the
dispasionate way she addresses her romantic history with men. Rather, the gender dynamics that
I classify as “queer” have more straightforward origins, such as her use of male pseudonyms and
her choice to produce films for male audiences in the first place. Such quirks in her directorial
history, while logistical in practice, blur the gender dynamics not of the films’ subjects, but of the
viewer themselves—for example, the reality of being a queer woman viewing the bodies of other
women through the lens of what a straight woman imagined would appeal to a straight man is
undeniably complex, and specific to Doris, as the only notable woman director in the world of
sexploitation. With the addition of Wishman’s own fascination with queer people, as
demonstrated by Let Me Die a Woman, as well as the abundance of softcore lesbian moments
that populate the roughies, her work is rife with queer themes, even if their queerness exists
outside of the reality of their creator.

To begin, it is crucial to outline Wishman’s understanding of sex itself. In her 1966
feature Another Day, Another Man, Wishman contrasts the sexuality of a loving husband and
wife with the encounters between female sex workers and their clients, yet both appear utterly
devoid of truth, authenticity, and desire. Though there is never an explicit sex scene between the
married couple, their sexual relationship is implied—however, this presumed bond seems to be
suspended in a sort of blank psychological space, untethered to the heart or the body. In the very
first scene, the wife and the husband meet in the park, greeting one another with tender
enthusiasm from several feet away. Then, an expansive silence as they walk unhurriedly towards
one another to embrace, letting their words hang in the air, awkwardly, for a beat too long. This
is not meant to intentionally cast doubt on their love and desire for one another—these are the
tragic heroes of the film, we are supposed to cherish their relationship as much as they do—but rather, it begs the question of Wishman’s own understanding of sexuality. Further, the actual depictions of sex in the film, inexplicit as they are, are similarly devoid of action. Two twin sex workers seduce, attack, or assault a man (the lines are intentionally blurred), yet the sex consists only of the two women, half clothed, giggling unendingly and crawling over the man’s body, with no apparent end goal other that the thrill of the full-body contact. Puzzlingly, this approach has significant similarities with the practices of Doris’s actual queer contemporaries, such as the experimental filmmakers Andy Warhol and Jack Smith. For instance, films like Warhol’s *I, a Man* and Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* portray sex in an almost identically strange manner; as a frenetic and constant presence, unconcerned with climax—a result of the redefinition of sexuality within the queer spaces Smith and Warhol occupied, as well as substance use. Author and professor Juan A. Suarez writes about the phenomenon of nebulous and unending sex on screen as a product of amphetamine usage: “Studies at the time showed that speed increased desire while delaying, even inhibiting, orgasm, and that it promoted ‘diffuse object relations’ and intensified tactile sensation. For some users, the jumpy excitement triggered by amphetamine was actually equivalent to sex, especially for the mainlines who compared the flash of the drug to an ‘all over body orgasm’ and eroticized the act and implements of shooting up. In some cases, speed could mean sex without genital fixation: a cutaneous intensity distributed over the body and spreading over adjoining spaces, props, and materials.”

Certainly, Doris Wishman’s work was not influenced by drugs, but it is remarkable how similar Suarez’s language resembles Wishman’s depictions of sex—amphetamines suppressed interest in traditional penetrative sex.

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yet turned the entire world into a playground for foreplay, at once eliminating sex and
heightening sexuality, and Wishman understood sex in almost exactly the same terms. For this
distinct erotic philosophy to exist dually in the work of Wishman and the overtly queer and
experimental artists who were working during the same years show remarkable synchronicity,
and suggests a unifying quality in the work—perhaps in the act of redefining gender, whether for
personal or professional reasons.

In an alternative approach to sex in Wishman’s work, the is the climactic scene of
Another Day, in which the loving wife, having turned to sex work to support her ill husband, is
discovered by him with a john. The sex is jarringly stagnant. She sits upon the client’s lap in a
staged tableau as the husband looks on—they appear far more tragic and menacing in their
stillness than they might had the onscreen sex been active and animated, as if the wife is not
participating in a physical act, but mentally paralyzed by her desperate choices. This idea of sex
being an act one person performs on another, rather than a mutual experience, is perpetuated
even in her semi-documentary, Let Me Die a Woman (1977). Uncharacteristically, the film
contains gratuitous nudity, a well-intentioned but ultimately tasteless and fetishizing examination of transness that puts queer bodies on display like a freakshow. Despite her willingness to show off nudity and queer sex (that is, to her, pre-surgery trans sex), Wishman uses her tried and true methods of depicting straight sex (post-surgery), with a montage of the man’s hands groping the woman’s body, not violently, but certainly possessively. Here, sex is about feeling or being felt, which implies autonomy belongs to one participating individual alone, while the other is reduced to a sex object to be manhandled. Throughout her career, Wishman’s notion of sex as a one-sided act with a subject and an object remains concretely in her filmmaking—yet, two notable exceptions to the rule of Wishman depicting sex as stagnant and frigid are the brutal sexual assault in Bad Girls Go to Hell and a few of the queer sex scenes in Let Me Die a Woman. In the former, the assault the protagonist experiences is as graphic and visceral as censorship codes would allow, making it all the more harrowing—if one has become accustomed to the sexless sexuality of her films, it is intensely jarring to watch the main character’s attacker grab her and pin her down, with a terrifying lust and bodily strength that none of Wishman’s other characters seem to possess. In Let Me Die, Wishman stages a sex scene between a cis man and a trans woman, unceremoniously shooting their flaccid penises side by side on the bed, as if queer sex is
so inately different than straight cis sex that it is not sex at all, rather some sort of science experiment or inexplicable, grotesque phenomenon.

Understanding Doris Wishman’s approach to sex as a general topic reveals much about her dealings with queer ideology, so, if I may speculate about her motives, what element of her personal psyche could have inspired the sterile sex in her sexploitation? In the 1994 interview Ahwesh and Serra conducted with Wishman, it is rather clear that, in her personal life, sex and romance did not particularly concern Doris as anything more than an intellectual curiosity. Of her second husband, she said, “I wasn’t in love with him, but it was so exciting. And we eloped. It was real sixteen-year-old stuff. So I married him, what the heck!” There is something reminiscent of her filmmaking in this casual statement, in the idea that the love affair was worthwhile not because of affection or attraction, but because of the scenario it created: two middle-aged people behaving like sixteen-year-olds. Perhaps Wishman’s inability to make sexual and romantic connections during the course of her career stems from the way her career originated: as a time-killing hobby after the untimely death of her first husband. Doris is rather guarded about this tragedy—she mentions Jack frequently in the Ahwesh/Serra interview, but it is difficult to determine how much weight these anecdotes hold to her. There is a tragic irony to the idea of making sex films to cope with the loss of a lover, which may be why each of her films is marked by a stark vacancy, as if she has unconsciously compartmentalized relationships in her grief, separating real love and warmth from sex. Maybe the obsession with sex as a subject was a form of exposure therapy for Doris, a way to make intimacy feel meaningless, thus dulling the pain of losing it. This, perhaps, also explains the aforementioned outliers in Bad Girls and Let Me Die, which, to her, seemed inherently devoid of intimacy, and therefore could be depicted
with more candor. Furthermore, her potential lack of sexual enthusiasm could explain the way her films themselves slip in and out of queerness—if sex and eroticism are both detached from lived experience, and instead exist purely as fodder for gimmicks or some sort of intellectual curiosity, it would be harder to remain within the boundaries of traditional sexuality. Wishman’s nebulous classification as a maker of queer films is born from, if not a personal queerness in the literal sense of the word, a sort of “queered” perception of sex as something both entirely distant from her being and surrounding everything she does—distinct from straight mass consciousness regarding sex, queer in its otherness.

That said, literal queerness is not absent from Doris’s films. *Let Me Die a Woman* is an obvious example, but she was also known to include lesbian scenes and characters in many of her films, specifically the roughies and the films that would follow in the 1970s. Within the sexploitation genre, this is not at all specific to her—all of her male contemporaries also included lesbian sex in their films, though the women partaking were rarely lesbians (rather, it was an indication of a desire to perform for men or a general attitude of sexual depravity). Though Wishman tried her best to appeal to the male gaze in her films, it appears that her inclusion of lesbians was not exactly in line with that agenda. In the Ahwesh/Serra interview, Doris argues that there was no particular reason for the displays of sapphic desire—Peggy prompts, “But you just thought, maybe it was a turn on for guys to see women together?”, to which Doris quickly responds, “No, no. I wasn’t thinking about turn-ons. I was just going with what I had to work with.”\(^\text{10}\)

statement she is making by including it, the quote does not make much sense as an explanation, and reads more like an obfuscation. Earlier in the interview, when Ahwesh asked about a lesbian scene from *A Taste of Flesh*, Wishman tersely claimed not to remember it—despite the fact that the main characters of the film are a lesbian couple. Rather, it seems that she was embarrassed about her use of queerness, a shame that may come from her devout Jewish faith and traditional upbringing. Wishman was known to avoid topics she found unsavory, even from her own work (in her interview on *The Incredibly Strange Films Show*, she refused outright to describe the plot of *The Amazing Transplant*). It is true that her dealings with lesbianism seem more complex than an attempt to appeal to men or a thrifty resource-saving choice. As mentioned, *A Taste of Flesh* centers around an established lesbian couple who’s apartment is invaded by hitmen attempting to assassinate a patron of the hotel across the street. In this film, it seems that the women are shown to be queer not to amplify their depravity, but to establish a sense of innocence and purity, as if love between two women is something childlike and naive, which can be disrupted all the more horribly by the lust of a man. *Bad Girls Go to Hell* also includes a lesbian encounter as one of the tribulations the protagonist faces in the big city, a direct point of contrast to the many
relationships she has with men. She quickly chooses to move out of the lesbian roommate’s apartment, despite it being by far the most secure, loving, and fulfilling relationship she has; the roommate says, “You know that I love you,” and the protagonist responds, “I know. I love you too. That’s why I must go.” This posits that sexual and romantic relationships between women are not steamy and immoral, as Russ Meyer or Radley Metzger might suggest, but something sweet yet unsustainable—one may dabble in queerness without guilt, and it may feel better than any straight relationship, but it will never last, and never be meaningful. Obviously, this is just as exploitative as using lesbians as a gimmick, but it is interesting to consider where this alternative conception of queer relationships came from—perhaps Doris’s own experience with men caused her to idealize same-sex partnership, while her religion and upbringing disallowed her to entertain the idea as anything concrete.

A lion’s share of the implied queerness laced throughout Wishman’s films comes from the mere fact of her choice of genre. By definition, there is a queering of the eye that occurs when a woman, presumably one without an attraction to other women, attempts to create images and scenarios that sexually cater to male audiences. This is further amplified by the particular clunkiness of Wishman’s attempts. Beginning with her nudes, Doris seemed uniquely sexually illiterate, refusing to depict any erotic scenarios, and instead making statues of the nude bodies, which move like rusty animatronics, if they move at all. These stiff tableaux drain any sexuality from the scenes, once again resulting in a queerness that is not queer in the literal sense, but characterized by an alternate approach to the otherwise familiar topic of sex. In her status as a proper, modest Jewish housewife, Doris managed to remove sex from a scene that, to her audiences, should have been innately, unquestionably sexual. In her nudist films, even a shot
populated by countless topless women could feel alienated from its subject matter, warping the viewer’s notion of eroticism and the body.

In her roughies, Doris began to engage more directly with sex as a subject, but her attempts to simulate the male gaze often fell flat in their heightened enthusiasm. Her earnest efforts at capturing the female form as lecherously as her straight, male counterparts feels clumsy—her camera fixates obsessively on various body parts, holding their focus for so long that the overexposure to sexual imagery becomes sterile in itself. It is fascination without desire. Because Doris tries so ardently to capture what the male viewer would wish to see, there is no room whatsoever for personal choice, for the illusion of reality, or any other atmospheric factors that elevate sexual material from clinical to erotic. Once again, the destruction of genuine sexuality within an image of sex is, in itself, a queering of the image (to rely on the overused language of academia). This is only heightened in her later work, which ventures into questions of voyeurism and provides proxy characters for male audiences in the form of peeping toms—in
her penultimate *Dildo Heaven*, an ostensibly pseudo-pornographic scene in which a dildo extending from behind the camera floats menacingly over the sleeping protagonist is followed up by a sexual fantasy about having two penises from the mind of the pitiful voyeuristic neighbor. At this point, Doris is outright mocking male desire, simultaneously providing the fantasy and destroying it in the same breath.

Curiously, it is Doris’s last film, *Each Time I Kill*, that is most defined in its queer thesis, though that is likely just as unintentional as any of its predecessors. Ellie Saunders, a high school student with an unflattering haircut, blemished skin, and a severe overbite, discovers that she has the ability to swap her physical characteristics with those of people she murders. This begins a killing spree, as Ellie targets the prettiest girls at her high school, becoming more and more traditionally feminine and beautiful with each kill. Fantasy storyline aside, this plotline understands femininity as something physical and inherent, yet the actual imagery of the film completely disproves this theory, showing that attractiveness—and further, gender—exist only in performance. Though Ellie believes she needs black magic to become pretty and feminine, the
elements of her transformation are purely cosmetic, and partially internal. All she requires to change from a rather sex- and gender-less body into the talk of the town is new hair, a new wardrobe, and dental surgery, and the rest—though this is not acknowledged in the film—comes from within her, as her confidence and flirtatiousness grows. This follows a clear narrative of transgender theory. There is no radical difference between the original Ellie and her new persona, and the change that occurred suggests that gender, or any element of a person’s identity, is not fixed or innate—everyone is performing gender, and any gender can be assumed by any person, as easily as wearing a costume in a movie.

Ellie, before and after her transformation.
Conclusion

It is difficult to locate an end to a project that is, by definition, endless. In numbers alone, with approximately thirty feature films to her name, Doris Wishman is a beast to attempt to capture in any amount of pages, and the scale of her career only multiplies when her many genre shifts, vast catalogue of personalized gimmicks, and dual visual sparseness and ideological density are accounted for. I can say with confidence that, for a viewer wishing to develop a nuanced understanding of Doris Wishman, there is no film in her multi-decade career that can be skipped, as every single work, no matter how formulaic the plot or uninspired the structure, nevertheless contains a glimmer of individuality, born from both her instinct to entertain and her singular philosophies on her life and her art. It is no wonder why there is still very little scholarship published about her films—to become acquainted with Doris Wishman is to become obsessed with her, and the size of that obsession, in my personal experience, can be daunting! My fascination with Doris does not end here. While writing this, I was confronted with further question regarding her ideas surrounding notions of race and her construction of whiteness—nudist films of the era are virtual catalogs of white bodies, and Doris’s particular nudist tableaux read dually as idealized cinematic tapestries of white skin, at least to a viewer in the 2020s. There are also fascinating labor dynamics at play in the nudies and roughies, which almost all center around women working in nondescript offices and attempting to impress their male bosses, sexually or otherwise. The office is fundamental to Wishman’s work, to the extent that she would find any reason to write it into her scripts—in *The Prince and the Nature Girl*, the prince takes a job in an office (“in case of a revolution”) so that he can also act as the
protagonist’s boss. This is just to say that, without a doubt, this is not the end of my exploration of Doris Wishman.

I believe that the most fitting way to send off Doris is with her own words. As she was known to quip, almost as a late-career catchphrase,

“When I die, I’ll make films in Hell!”
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