

Shame on me

Written component of master project

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Affidavit

I hereby declare that I have written this thesis independently, have used no sources or aids other than those indicated, and have not made use of any unauthorized assistance. I further declare that this thesis has not been submitted in any form as an examination paper either in this country or abroad (to an assessor for evaluation) and that this copy corresponds to the assessed work.

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Abstract

This written component examines shame as a social and political mechanism that regulates bodies, sexuality, and identity. It approaches shame as a cultural technology that disciplines individuals through the internalisation of social norms embedded in institutions, media, and everyday interactions.

The research combines theoretical analysis, artistic research, and a curated archive of cultural material and lived experience. This hybrid approach allows different layers of the topic to be addressed simultaneously: institutional frameworks such as religion, colonial moral systems, and capitalism, alongside everyday practices of exposure, ridicule, and self-surveillance. Contemporary consumer culture and digital media are also analysed as sites where shame is produced and monetised through idealised bodies, gender norms, and lifestyle expectations.

The artistic work, developed through the project Shame on Me, investigates embarrassment and bodily exposure through performative strategies that confront viewers with their own reactions to socially regulated behaviour. It draws on an anonymous collection of narratives, forming a montage-like archive that informs the work.

Rather than separating analysis and practice, the thesis operates through their entanglement. Shame appears as something that is both structurally produced and continuously reproduced in everyday social exchanges through practices of judgment, exposure, and correction. The research asks how artistic practice can intervene in these dynamics by making shame visible and negotiable, and how that can be a crucial part of dismantling contemporary regimes of the body. It suggests that working through shame can expose the mechanisms through which bodies and identities are regulated, opening space for alternative forms of relation and self-perception.

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This could be called the book of contradictions, and when you are fishing for contradictions, it's almost indecent not to be caught in some yourself.

1 PERSONAL SHAME

1.1 Shame on me?

The deadline for my multimedia class was approaching and I was unable to find a model for my artistic idea. All of my friends were like “ah, I am too shy for the camera”, “I don’t know, will I be able to do it”, “What will others think when they see this”, and so on. Without having any other choice, I decided (for the first time in my life) to be both, behind and in front of camera at the same time.

This was a door-opener to performance art that during that time I did not even know what it was. I will never forget that it took me at least 24 hours to see what I recorded. Growing up, neither my mother nor my father were telling me that I was pretty, or that anything about me was special. When I started my dating career I was just jumping from dumpster to dumpster, thinking that I don't have a right to choose and that I should be happy with whatever I get. Having my self-confidence on the rock-bottom was definitely not an over estimation.

Still not being brave enough to cultivate this newly discovered desirability by the infinite horniness of strangers, I started publishing erotic stories, because it took me some time to arrive to the meat market. The number of readers was growing astronomically, but not as much as my urge to fully transfer to the dark side.

Fast forward: Here I am on some primitive streaming platform. Of course, your uncle was there, almost getting a heart attack, watching how my clothes slowly fell down on the floor, piece by piece. But to my surprise, strangers were not predominantly guys like your uncle. I remember user "otter444". He was my regular one. If he wouldn't be in my audience, he would be the perfect athlete for a marathon, reaching to his fifth orgasm during some sessions, like it was as simple as saying "Mit Karte, bitte" at BIL-LA.

Jumping back to my early youth, the time I started training to become an actor in the local theater, I felt like I was naked every time again when stepping on the stage. So you would think that I was prepared? But no, training would never make you prepared for the last piece of shame that you need to strip away from yourself. The only regret that remains is that streaming platforms in that time and age still weren't monetized. Only fans, they were only that, your fans. I know that your heart is broken, my dear otter444, but I figured out there is no worse prison than repetitiveness, darling.

Through all of this years trying this and that, I never stopped photographing myself. This was what I found most exciting. It's still me. It's still my body. But this transformative power of the body stretching from art to being a sexual object is infinite. I felt significance of seeing my body change through time. Here and there, there is a newly born scar, there are wrinkles, there are even canyons, the always evolving human appearance, but still being myself.

One day, I stumble upon news of a young Spanish artist. Saying that, after numerous paintings that were censored on his social media, Jorge is launching his own platform supporting all artists creating erotic photography, as well as other artistic mediums. And so I used it as my personal archive, at the same time offering my artistic portfolio of erotic photography to a selected audience. At first I didn't know what to expect.

I was just happy to be able to see all of my colors, all my shades in one place, and day by day more artists would join me in this celebration of my body.

I am not suggesting that you should follow my way, but remember that, whenever searching for a model, you should find it in yourself. I saw sorrow, suppression, self-hatred, frustration and pain in the lives of so many, with whom I would never ever change the place. And, maybe it's not a universal truth, but all you need to do to become the best version of yourself, is to get rid of your shame. No shame on anyone!

1.2 DNA of your shame.

John Gray, a British political philosopher, argues that progress is a myth. He suggests that while science and technology advance, human nature holds steady. Slavery, wars, and genocides persist even after the Enlightenment.

According to Gray, we are not truly improving; rather, we keep conquering, consuming, and comforting ourselves with stories—just at a faster pace.

We remain as authoritarian and violent as before, repeating old patterns. Unlike many thinkers, Gray offers no comfort or solutions.¹

The body does not only carry DNA—it carries history.² When we look in the mirror, we see more than biological matter. We see ideas, norms, and projections. Our bodies are written upon by culture, politics, and the gaze of others. Representations of the body have a lineage. So do viewers. Everyone brings their personal and historical baggage to the act of seeing.

Shame did not come from within. It was put there.

1.3 How dare you?

Let's consider how context shapes our reactions to the same visual information. At the beach, we rarely question or notice the nearly naked bodies around us. Swimwear is increasingly revealing. Yet, we feel comfortable sharing the space. We don't shame others or consider them inappropriate. Nor do we shield children's eyes. Now, imagine someone arrives at the office the next morning dressed similarly. HR would be overwhelmed. Such conduct might result in someone being fired, sued for indecency, or accused of sexual harassment. If the person is a teacher in an elementary school, the response is even harsher. This example shows how identical behaviors can be accepted or condemned based on context. We will explore our feelings toward nudity and sexuality later in this research. For now, I want to highlight this contrast. These examples show how our responses are conditioned by learned behaviors, no matter how much we claim to be independent thinkers.

One day, I got a message from a friend. She sent a photo of a man in his mid-50s who'd sent her an explicit image on a dating app and labeled him a creep. She forgot that, just a week earlier, she was delighted to receive and share a nude from a younger, attractive man. She called it a jackpot. I noticed that my reactions also varied depending on my attraction to the sender. If I found the person unattractive, I felt

¹ John Gray, **Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals** (London: Granta Books, 2002).

² Mikhail Bakhtin, **Rabelais and His World** trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

disgusted and asked, 'How dare he...' Both of us say that consent is always required before receiving such pictures. Yet, in practice, our reactions proved far less consistent.

These two examples may differ, but they lead to the same point. We love making social contracts and rules to follow. But in reality, these rules are often contradictory, as in the first case, or ignored when they don't serve us, as in the second.

Once, my mother shared negative experiences with anal sex. When I told my close friend, he said she was the coolest parent ever. By some people's standards, this would be considered a boundary violation and unacceptable. They would judge our relationship as unconventional, and my mother would face moral criticism. This demonstrates how much our behavior is shaped by social expectations, which would be harmless, except that it can be dangerous. Our social roles set rules that often suppress our authentic selves, and on a broader scale, this leads to unhealthy outcomes.³

If kids are not learning from their parents, and sexual education still struggles to become essential, we are in danger. Young people may find incorrect information and accept a distorted reality. The cyber world offers immediate but often misleading answers to any question we ask.

1.4 Urinators of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains.

First of May in post-Yugoslav countries is not a joke. Did it become overly commercial and capitalistic? Did we lose awareness of what we celebrate and why? Workers' rights have been at a historical low since feudal times. Maybe. But in Serbia, it is still one of the most significant holidays. "Tradition" says: grab your close friends and go to nature. Bring meat, potatoes, mushrooms for grilling, and tons of alcohol. Make a fire and start the endless drinking. One moment from honoring the tradition stays with me forever. Back in the days, we were too young to be employed by anything else than trouble but too old to share our universe with elders. I had a blast with two female friends in the deep forest of a small town in western Serbia. I will spare you all of the details. They're entertaining, but irrelevant. On our way back, we stopped at a deserted playground. I needed to pee. Wanting to be polite, I searched for a spot out of sight. As soon as I was hidden, I answered the call. Just as I was closing my zipper, I looked up. My eyes caught a group of ten men drinking beer in front of the local store. All of them stared at me in shock. Embarrassment was unavoidable.

1.5 The rhythm of the night.

Millions of years later, I was employed in a hostel, just ten steps from the sea, having a miraculous experience. My boss was about my age, we had a similar worldview, and she is also a singer with completely the same playlists as me. So, one night after a tough work day, we decided to chill in our lovely garden below the orange tree. Since her battery was dead, we switched to my phone and listened to our favorite songs, because, as I mentioned, our tastes totally match. After a few hours, it was time to get to bed; work was waiting early the next morning. Dear reader, I don't know about you, but sometimes the shortest and most efficient way for me to fall asleep is masturba-

³ Norbert Elias *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* , trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

tion. And as soon as I started growing and moaning, my phone started getting messages from my boss. Apparently, I was still connected to the Bluetooth speaker. In any other design, with any other boss, I would probably be fired and instead start my regular shift in the morning, pack my stuff, and leave, hoping nobody would ever find out what happened. Her messages and clever choice of emojis, as well as her teasing the day after, prevented me from dying of embarrassment.

1.6 Shitty artist.

Once in high school, our drawing professor took us to the city park and told us to try to create a composition in this chaotic environment. Almost all of my colleagues chose to sit on a bench or to stand while drawing. However, I wouldn't be myself if I didn't go, almost 1 km away from everyone, and find a small spot where I can sit in isolation, with total focus, and do my drawings. When I finished, I started going back to rejoin my colleagues. Very soon, I started hearing laughter, and shock was visible on my friends' faces. Apparently, all of the time I was sitting in somebody's shit, I felt so embarrassed, especially because this was not the last class I needed to attend this day, and to be able to go back to school, I needed to walk approximately 2 km. I found a public Fontaine and started washing my pants to get the shit out.

1.7 Bloody Hell.

Another example from my elementary school days, one of my classmates, Marija, was dressed completely in white. We had a lunch break, and I saw all the girls around her speaking in a very suspicious manner, because I was a boy who was always hanging out with girls. I was naturally allowed to come closer and see what was happening, and that was when I saw blood all over Marija's pants, and she was mentioning the word that I had never heard before, called menstruation. I felt ashamed to ask what it was about. The only feeling that I had was fear that something really bad had happened to her. I waited until the classes were over to run home and ask my mother. I enter the living room full of my mother's friends, barely catching my breath. I started loudly asking my mom what menstruation Marija had today, and all of my mother's friends were just laughing their asses off.



Fig. 1

2.1 Criminality of the beauty.

Or - Whose story deserves to be believed?

Physical appearance becomes part of this assessment, even when it is never explicitly stated. It structures whose suffering appears plausible, whose story appears authentic, and whose body appears “eligible” for harm. And the most dangerous part of this social deviation is the gendered asymmetry that is rooted in the perception.

For men, attractiveness tends to increase perceived legitimacy, intelligence, and moral complexity. While for women, beauty simultaneously increases visibility and media interest, but decreases perceived innocence and increases sexual availability. A woman whose body fits dominant sexualized beauty norms is more easily interpreted as provoking, complicit, and strategically performing victimhood.

This is why the same visual trait (beauty) operates in opposite moral directions depending on gender.

In sexual violence and abuse discourse, women are expected to perform two incompatible scripts: Script A - the desirable body and Script B - the respectable victim. The more successfully one performs Script A, the harder it becomes to be accepted within Script B.

This produces a credibility double bind of attractiveness. If a woman is not conventionally attractive - her claim is often dismissed as implausible (“Who would want you?”). If a woman is conventionally attractive - her claim is reframed as provocation,

opportunism, or manipulation. This is not a contradiction. It is a disciplinary mechanism. Both paths function to protect existing power relations.

Let's look at the other side, how appearance works in favor of men who are young, attractive, articulate, culturally coded as modern or sensitive, even when they are the most cold-blooded psychopaths committing the worst crimes imaginable. Those men like Ted Bundy, or milder and more contemporary examples, Luigi Mangione (Fig. 4), are more easily framed as complex, misunderstood, emotionally troubled, rather than violent. This does not erase guilt, but it repackages it into narrative ambiguity. Without aesthetic capital, the same act would not generate interpretive generosity.

But, for fairness's sake, if I provided examples of perfect perpetrators, I should give one of the perfect victims so you can visualize them and see how disproportionately they are.

For me, Monica Lewinsky (Fig. 1) is analytically useful⁴ not because she was beautiful, but because her body and age allowed the public to stage a specific narrative conflict: youth, heterosexual desirability, femininity, and institutional power asymmetry. She fits the aesthetic and narrative requirements of a "perfect victim" because: the power imbalance is extreme and undeniable, her vulnerability is visually readable (age, gender, position), and her body can be mobilized symbolically against a clearly superior political body. At the same time, her sexualization also enabled ridicule, moral punishment, and spectacular shaming.

Unlike perfect perpetrators, the perfect victim is not protected from shame. The function of appearance-based credibility is not only belief allocation. It is a shame distribution. Shame is produced when the victim's body is positioned as: wrongly visible, wrongly sexual, wrongly available, or wrongly ambitious. In this sense, shame does not correct violence. It corrects bodies. The aesthetic economy of victimhood does not aim to prevent harm. It aims to regulate which bodies may claim harm without social punishment.

Examples like the MeToo movement did not simply reveal hidden violence. It revealed a conflict between two social regimes: a legal-political regime of testimony, and a visual-cultural regime of credibility. Many accusations fail socially, not because evidence is absent, but because the accuser's body fails to perform the culturally required image of victimhood. This is why phrases such as "look at yourself", "why would anyone want you," and "you're doing this for attention" are so central. They are not insults. They are credibility refusals based on bodily evaluation. What becomes devastating is when we arrive on Epstein's island, we can see day by day that even if they are not considered attractive, men will be protected by their power, money, and connections, and their actions will rarely be punished accordingly. While women, even as fatal victims of the horrible crimes, have almost impossible narrow spaces to ever be just what they are - victims.

Recently, I watched an African American stand-up comedian making a joke about how her only hope if she were killed by a man was the hope that he would at some point kill the white girl, as her only hope that anyone would be accountable for mur-

⁴ Monica Lewinsky, "The Price of Shame," TED Talk, March 2015, https://www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame.

dering her. It's dark humor, but nevertheless, we should never exclude the big role of race or class in different societies.

Let's broaden the scope and continue to dissect beauty as a currency.

Beauty operates as a paradoxical social currency: it increases access to visibility, mobility, and symbolic value, while simultaneously undermining moral credibility and narrative legitimacy. But only for women, this gets bizarre, while they are socially required to be beautiful, but at the same time, structurally punished for fulfilling this requirement. In this sense, beauty functions as both a ticket to participation and a preemptive disqualification from being trusted. This is not a contradiction. It is a regulatory mechanism.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

The recurring public interpretation of Melania Trump (Fig. 3) illustrates this logic well.⁵ Without entering the factual truth of her relationship, the dominant narrative refuses the possibility of complex motivation. Her beauty becomes sufficient explanation: she must be a gold digger. Attractiveness is treated as a complete causal account. What is denied here is not morality, but agency. Beauty collapses intention into calculation and desire into strategy. The beautiful woman is rendered legible only as someone who trades her body for status. Any other narrative becomes socially unintelligible. This shows that beauty does not humanize women. It simplifies them.

⁵ The Guardian "Invisibility and opportunism make Melania Trump a first lady like no other," February 11, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/11/melania-trump-first-lady-profile>.

On the contrary, Brigitte Macron (Fig. 2) is unfit to serve social expectations; whether we are uncomfortable with her age or attractiveness, we are negating the possibility that some generally considered attractive men could choose her. Recently, I heard a new term, “transinvesting,” which was the most commonly used tool to discredit Brigitte. From almost the same root and with almost the same tactics as Michelle Obama, Brigitte Macron became a victim of widespread conspiracy theories⁶ trying to prove that she was not born as a biological woman. Having a small gossip around town is one thing, but when influential internet personalities take this story to everyone’s attention, it becomes almost undeniable. All that is left for you to do is to laugh it off or, as Macron has done, take legal action, which sadly doesn’t have any power to change stories anymore. Truth doesn’t take any chances against beliefs.

But to get back to the role of beauty in controlling our bodies, we must mention the so-called “beauty industry”.

The cosmetics industry has long played a pivotal role in shaping societal perceptions of beauty, capitalizing on feelings of shame and embarrassment to drive consumer behavior. The beauty industry often manipulates fears of social rejection by promoting unattainable beauty standards. Advertisements frequently target normal biological processes, such as aging, body hair, and skin imperfections, framing them as flaws that must be fixed. This practice contributes to the internalization of shame, especially among women, pushing them to conform to the idealized standards to avoid perceived unattractiveness.

Cosmetic companies amplify insecurities through product marketing, turning the fear of non-conformity into a profitable venture. This dynamic between shame and consumerism not only affects psychological health but also reinforces societal norms that equate worth with appearance.

So to say that women even today have freedom of choice and agency over their bodies would be absurd. Not because other choices are not made by some, or because they are nonexistent, but because anything other than what is socially desirable brings a challenging life, full of exclusion and insecurity, and a lack of social credit to achieve fulfilling life goals. It’s inspiring and brave for women and other misfits to decide to swim upstream, but having the freedom of choice would mean you are not paying the price in suffering.

And to further challenge your freedom of choice, I’m asking you to return to your childhood. Think about fairy tales and romantic narratives that consistently train girls into a highly specific visual economy of love and social mobility. In *The Frog Prince*, the girl’s task is not the transformation of herself, but emotional labour toward an undesirable male body that is secretly valuable. The reward is male elevation. In *Beauty and the Beast* (Fig. 5), the asymmetry is decisive: the male body is permitted to be monstrous, violent, and socially unfit, while the female body must remain beautiful in order to redeem him. The reverse story - an ugly woman redeemed by a beautiful man - is almost unthinkable within the canon.

The narrative grammar is clear: male value may be hidden beneath a repulsive surface, female value must be visible from the beginning.

⁶ Le Monde, “Brigitte Macron’s never-ending fake news nightmare,” October 25, 2025 https://www.lemonde.fr/en/m-le-mag/article/2025/10/25/brigitte-macron-s-never-ending-fake-news-nightmare_6746763_117.html.

Cinderella radicalizes this logic. Her poverty is narratively acceptable only because it is paired with beauty. The story would collapse if she were poor and unattractive. Social ascent requires aesthetic eligibility.

This is a crucial point: poverty can be temporary, class can be corrected, but unattractiveness cannot be compensated within the romantic economy of recognition. What rescues Cinderella is not resilience, competence, or ethical integrity, but visual exceptionality. Beauty is presented as the only legitimate bridge between marginality and social reward.



Fig. 5

The fairy tale, therefore, teaches a deeply political lesson: you may be poor, but you must not be ugly if you want to prosper.

These narratives produce a long-lasting structure that later reappears in adult public life. Women are expected to continuously invest in their attractiveness to remain socially legible and economically competitive. At the same time, this investment becomes a liability in contexts of conflict, testimony, or accusation. Beauty generates a credibility double bind: If a woman is not attractive, her claims are often dismissed as implausible or compensatory. If a woman is attractive, her claims are reframed as strategic, manipulative, or attention-seeking. In both cases, the body is evaluated before the narrative.

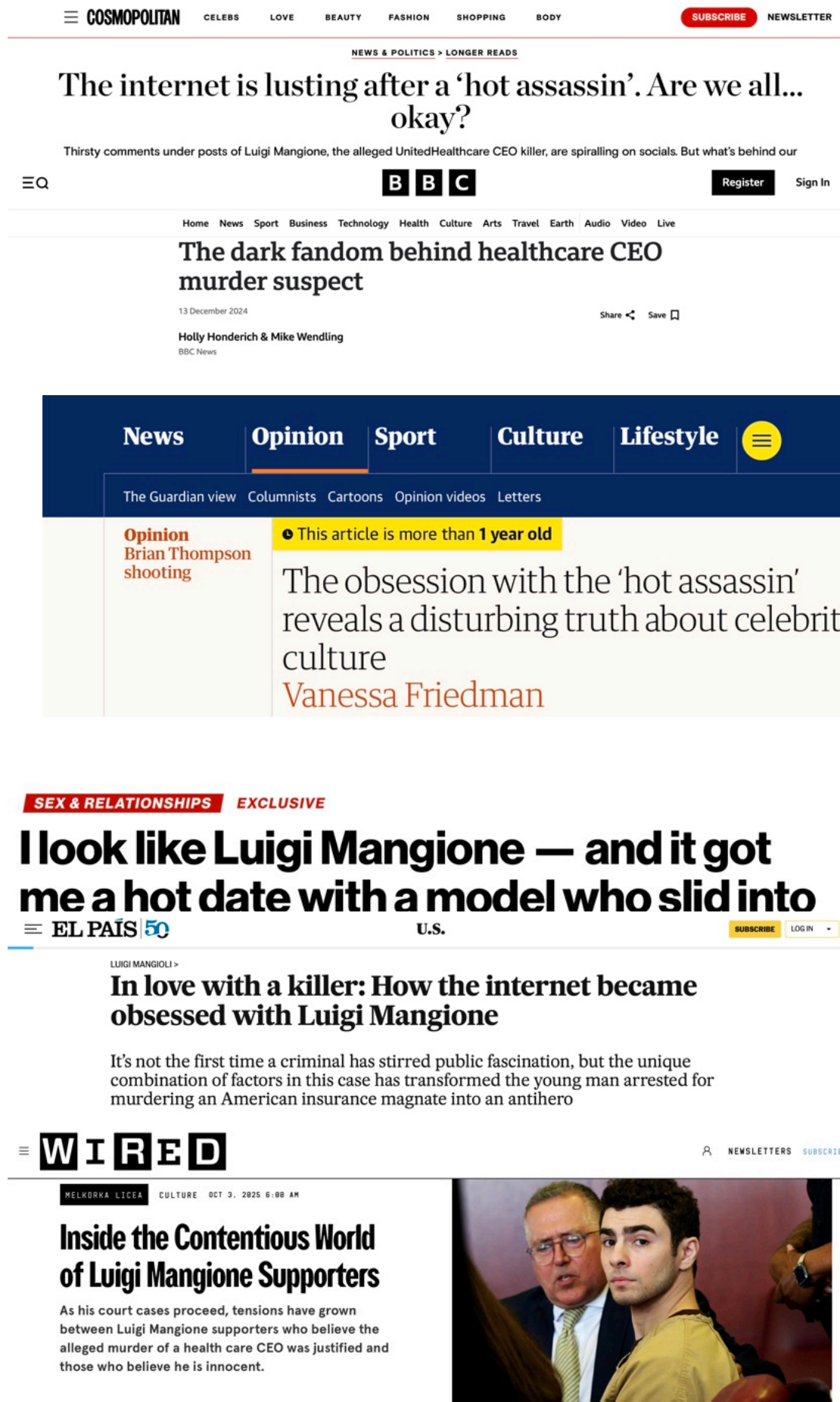


Fig. 4: Jennifer Savin (Cosmopolitan), Holly Honderich & Mike Wendling (BBC), Vanessa Friedman (The Guardian), Shane Galvin (New York Post), Guillermo Alonso (El País), Melkorka Licea (Wired)

Beauty is not merely a cultural ideal. It is a technology⁷ that distributes social opportunity while simultaneously organizing distrust. The demand that women be beautiful produces a permanently unstable subject position: one must be visible to gain access, yet this very visibility becomes grounds for suspicion, moral judgement, and narrative disqualification.

Shame operates here as a corrective mechanism. It does not punish failure to be beautiful. It punishes women for attempting to use beauty as social capital, a capital that they were, from childhood onward, instructed to accumulate. This is precisely how aesthetic discipline reproduces gendered power without appearing coercive.

Contemporary capitalism does not merely respond to existing needs. It actively produces new deficits in the subject. In the field of beauty, sexuality, and self-presentation, demand is generated through the systematic cultivation of dissatisfaction, fear, and comparative anxiety. The ideal body, the ideal lifestyle, and the ideal intimacy are intentionally constructed as unattainable or permanently unstable. Their function is not to be reached, but to remain slightly out of reach. This produces what can be described as a structural economy of insecurity.

Consumption is sustained not by desire alone, but by the continuous experience of insufficiency. Insecurity is not a side effect of this system. It is its central affective infrastructure.

The subject must remain: not thin enough, not young enough, not desirable enough, not sexually competent enough, not confident enough, and not authentic enough.

The multiplication of self-optimization industries - beauty, wellness, fitness, dating platforms, cosmetic medicine, and influencer economies - depends on the permanent postponement of self-adequacy. A satisfied body is economically unproductive.

The continuous internalization of personal deficit displaces attention away from structural inequality. Social frustration is redirected onto the self in private labour.

Instead of asking: Why are certain bodies systematically disadvantaged? The subject is encouraged to ask, "What is wrong with me?" This is a classical depoliticizing move. The effectiveness of this system relies on a very specific threat: social invisibility and social exclusion.

To fail aesthetically, sexually, or affectively is not merely to fail at attractiveness. It is to risk symbolic expulsion from intimacy, employment, recognition, and belonging. Crucially, this threat does not need to be enforced from above. It is anticipated and self-administered. People regulate themselves in advance to remain socially acceptable. Shame is the effect that translates market norms into self-discipline. Because access to recognition, intimacy, and opportunity is mediated through these same norms, openly questioning the value system becomes risky. To challenge beauty regimes, sexual competitiveness, or productivity ideals is to risk being read as lazy, resentful, undesirable, or socially incompetent. Critique itself becomes stigmatized. The system remains stable not because people believe in its values, but because their social survival increasingly depends on performing them.

⁷ Michel Foucault, **The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure**, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); Michel Foucault, **The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self**, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

Beauty is weaponized by the system of oppression to maintain the most lucrative order. But this choreography is well rehearsed, and, sadly, because of colonialism and later globalization, there is barely a body that isn't dancing to it every day. Of course, at different times and places, prescribed standards vary, and almost all are unachievable.

Renaissance artists, such as Michelangelo (Fig. 6), deliberately departed from anatomical realism; their idealization was not intended to frustrate imitation but to produce a normative image of human value. The elevated body functions as a visual standard through which moral, political, and social legitimacy are naturalized. Contemporary beauty regimes inherit this logic of bodily normativity, but detach it from political symbolism and reinsert it into consumer economies, where unattainability becomes economically productive.

2.2 Dangerous games.

Leni Riefenstahl made *Olympia* (Fig. 7) in 1938 about the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.⁸ It is one of the clearest historical moments where the classical ideal body is explicitly turned into a biopolitical instrument. The opening sequence is already a theoretical statement. Ancient Greek sculptures appear, and then dissolve into living athletic bodies. This visual operation performs an extremely precise operation: the classical ideal body is presented as the natural ancestor of the contemporary German athletic body. The message is not spoken. It is shown as continuity.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

⁸ Leni Riefenstahl, **Olympia**, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (1938; Germany: Tobis Filmkunst, 1938), film.

So what in Antiquity and the Renaissance functioned as an aesthetic and moral norm becomes, here, a biological and political one. In *Olympia*, ideology is not argued. It is embodied. The film builds a world in which symmetry, strength, control, endurance, and visual harmony appear as self-evident indicators of human value. The athletic body does not represent the nation. It legitimizes the nation. This is extremely important: power no longer needs language when the body itself is staged as evidence.

Riefenstahl's innovation is not only technical (slow motion, extreme close-ups, sculptural lighting). It is political. The film makes discipline look beautiful.⁹ Training, endurance, pain, control, and self-overcoming are presented as erotic and sublime. The ideal body is not shown as imposed. It is shown as desirable. If the ideal body becomes the visual proof of belonging and worth, then non-ideal bodies automatically become signs of deficiency. In the Nazi context, this logic is not symbolic. It is material and lethal. But structurally, the mechanism is already visible: the hierarchy of bodies is produced aesthetically before it is enforced politically. In Riefenstahl's film, the ideal body disciplines from above (state, nation, ideology). In contemporary beauty culture, the same grammar disciplines from within (self-surveillance, optimization, comparison).

But the affective mechanism is continuous: shame marks the distance between one's body and the norm. The only difference is the authority that defines the norm.

⁹ Ibid.

3.1 Hysterical history.

Sometimes authority causes unimaginable suffering that, at some point, will bring us unimaginable pleasure.

In the 19th century, "hysteria" was a commonly diagnosed condition in women, characterized by symptoms like anxiety, depression, and various physical ailments¹⁰. Physicians believed that these symptoms stemmed from a "displaced" uterus or sexual repression. The term "hysteria" itself derives from the Greek word "hystera," meaning uterus. Physicians would often use manual stimulation as a treatment for hysteria. This involved pelvic massage to induce "paroxysm" (an orgasm), which was thought to relieve the symptoms of hysteria¹¹. The treatment was time-consuming and physically demanding for the physician. The first electric vibrators were developed in the late 1800s as a solution to the labor-intensive manual treatment¹². In 1880, American physician George Taylor patented an electric vibrator that was intended for medical use. Other inventors, such as Joseph Mortimer Granville in England, also developed electric devices for the same purpose. These early electric vibrators were marketed to physicians as medical instruments designed to treat hysteria. They were often bulky and resembled other medical devices of the time, reinforcing their image as tools of healing rather than instruments of pleasure. By the early 20th century, some vibrators were marketed for home use, often advertised as health and beauty devices that could promote relaxation and vitality. Advertisements emphasized their ability to relieve tension, improve circulation, and enhance overall well-being. Despite their emerging popularity, vibrators were still shrouded in stigma. Women who used them often kept their use private, fearing societal judgment regarding their sexuality. The sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s brought about significant social change¹³. Feminists began advocating for women's sexual rights and pleasure, challenging the traditional narratives surrounding female sexuality. With increased discussions about sexual health and empowerment, vibrators began to be reframed not merely as medical devices but as tools for sexual pleasure. Feminists and sex educators promoted their use as a means for women to explore their own bodies and sexuality without shame. As vibrators became more accepted, they appeared more frequently in popular culture, including TV shows and movies. This visibility helped normalize their use and shifted perceptions toward a more positive view of female pleasure.

The establishment of sex shops in urban areas provided a space where vibrators were openly sold and discussed. These shops often promoted vibrators as products that encouraged sexual empowerment and exploration rather than shame. Today, the vibrator market is diverse and inclusive, with products designed for all genders and

¹⁰ Helen King, *The Disease of Virgins: Green Sickness, Chlorosis and the Problems of Puberty* (London: Routledge, 2004), 15–20.

¹¹ Rachel P. Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 3–18.

¹² Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm*, 20–45.

¹³ Lynn Comella, *Vibrator Nation: How Feminist Sex-Toy Stores Changed the Business of Pleasure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

sexual orientations. Body-safe materials and innovative designs have become the standard.

Modern vibrators often incorporate advanced technology, such as app connectivity and remote control features, further blurring the line between medical devices and sexual objects. This reflects a broader acceptance of sexual pleasure as a vital aspect of health and wellness. The transition of vibrators from medical devices to sexual objects is a testament to changing societal norms regarding sexuality, gender, and health. As cultural attitudes evolved, vibrators became symbols of sexual empowerment rather than mere medical tools connected to the dark context from which they were created, reflecting a broader acceptance of female pleasure and sexual exploration in contemporary society.

3.2 Hard evidence.

One notable study exploring the link between homophobia and sexual arousal to gay erotic content was conducted by researchers Mahaffey, Bryan, and Hutchison.¹⁴ The study involved 178 heterosexual participants (87 men and 91 women) and aimed to investigate how their attitudes toward homosexuality influenced their physiological responses to sexual stimuli. The researchers discovered that only those participants with openly homophobic attitudes exhibited significant sexual arousal when exposed to gay erotic content. In contrast, men who had no issues with homosexuals did not show similar arousal patterns. The study employed physiological measures, such as startle responses, to gauge the affective reactions of participants toward various sexual stimuli, including images of gay and heterosexual couples. Similarly, one study by researchers from the University of Georgia¹⁵, which examined the arousal responses of heterosexual men to various types of sexual content, including gay male pornography, had the same findings. In this study, heterosexual participants were split into two groups based on their levels of homophobia. Both groups were shown videos depicting heterosexual sex, lesbian sex, and gay male sex. Interestingly, while both groups showed arousal to the heterosexual and lesbian content, only the homophobic group displayed physiological arousal (measured by increased penile circumference) to the gay male content. Despite this physical reaction, many of these men reported not being sexually attracted to the material, highlighting a disconnect between their self-reported feelings and their physiological responses. Oxford had yet another one with a similar outcome, and so on...

You would conclude that there is enormous miscommunication with their own bodies and sexual identities, but instead of focusing on that, they mastered the game of deflection, diverting attention from themselves to others to avoid confronting their true self.

But what is this man that men must be? Let's try together to find some clues in our collective history.

¹⁴ A. L. Mahaffey, A. Bryan, and K. E. Hutchison, "Sex Differences in Affective Responses to Homoerotic Stimuli," **Archives of Sexual Behavior** 34, no. 5 (2005): 537-545.

¹⁵ X. Henry E. Adams, Lester W. Wright Jr., and Bethany A. Lohr, "Is Homophobia Associated With Homosexual Arousal?," **Journal of Abnormal Psychology** 105, no. 3 (1996): 440-445.

Blue is for girls, pink is for boys. No, I did not make a mistake here. These colors were assigned for the first time as you read it. Blue, as a gentle color, was considered feminine, and pink, as a color coming out of red, was imagined as violent, and because of that, it was associated with boys.

Should we search for more? Heels, skirts, wigs, and makeup were all associated with being masculine. From the eyeliner in Egypt, showcasing power, to nail polish and even lipstick in Rome, showcasing status. King Louis XIII was the first to wear a wig to hide his balding. Persian soldiers wore high heels in the 15th century, and they later became popular at the French courts in the 17th century. Skirts were worn by men as early as prehistoric times. But even today, Scottish men are not losing their manhood and masculinity by wearing skirts, nor are approximately half of the male population on the planet, where clothing culture is traditionally different, like men in the Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, or even the pope.

But that's different, right? Or we just decided to call it different to be able to continue to ignore the weakness of our westernized ideas of the real man.

Our current idea of masculinity in relation to male clothing derives from industrial times and the perspective of the longevity of Western culture.

This also affected all queer cultures to be built around some level of protest as part of their identity. Modern sexual and gender identities emerge inside regulatory regimes that define what is normal, healthy, legal, and respectable. As Foucault demonstrates, sexuality functions as a key site through which modern power organizes populations, bodies, and intimacy.¹⁶ Queer cultures, therefore, do not merely oppose dominant norms from the outside; they are produced inside systems of surveillance and discipline and develop counter-practices in response.

This is crucial when we look around us, or at ourselves in the mirror, and observe the relaxation not only of our aesthetics but also of our behaviors. In queer and trans contexts, what can look like conservatism from the outside is often not simply conservatism at all. A body that is constantly asked to explain itself may learn to become more readable, more acceptable, more safely placed within the binary order that harms it. The apparent preservation of heteronormative codes should therefore not be understood as a failure of protest, but as a survival strategy shaped by intensified institutional and social demands to appear legitimate, intelligible, and safe. Gay and bisexual communities, on the other hand, while carrying undoubted progressive values, still reproduce deeply rooted beliefs in masculinity and femininity as realities rather than as social constructs that should be dismantled. Sexual dissidence here does not necessarily translate into a deeper dismantling of gender itself. The furthest distance from this toxic prison, and the most significant contribution to the liberalization of the body, can be observed in lesbian communities.¹⁷ Feminism would be unimaginable without lesbians, and this is the key. As the entire queer community challenges systems of oppression and body control in different ways, lesbians used the power of political articulation and did not ask for permission to be part of the conversation. They did not merely request inclusion within existing symbolic orders,

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, **The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction** (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

¹⁷ Sophie Robinson, "Sisterhood, Separatism and Sex Wars," in **Lesbian Feminism: Essays Opposing Global Heteropatriarchies**, ed. Niharika Banerjee et al. (London: Zed Books, 2019), 17-32.

but actively rewrote them.¹⁸ Inside their own borders, they developed a separate grammar for female sexuality, attractiveness, and beauty standards. They moved away from the male gaze not only because its function is to please men, but also to avoid male judgment and its continuous disciplinary evaluation of women's bodies. What they focused on was the recognition of women's complexity, creativity, and bodily beauty as internal to women's social worlds, rather than as granted by male perception. This does not mean that there are no lesbians who fit traditional patriarchal aesthetics, or that there are no lesbians who are attracted to women who look that way. But what we should have in mind is that one part of our collective went furthest with understanding that we can not defeat oppressive systems by playing by their rules.¹⁹ What is challenged is not individual taste, but the monopoly over who has the authority to define desirability. Pistone was nicely investigating this lesbian separatism, not as attempt to define what lesbians are, but to imagine what they could become outside the structures of patriarchy.²⁰ It is crucial to consider the role of shame, which pushes even people in progressive and liberal societies to perform gender identity as a form of protection against oppression. Shame operates as a silent mechanism of adaptation: it teaches the body how to behave before punishment becomes necessary. Not everyone is born with a biological or embodied predisposition that allows them to meet unrealistic normative expectations. Bodies differ in their capacity to approximate dominant ideals of gender, beauty, youth, health, and desirability, and these differences translate directly into unequal exposure to humiliation, exclusion, and violence.

When we speak about this, we cannot avoid addressing the pathological potency of suppression. If the only way to survive is to perform something we are not, we embody an internal conflict that can cause serious psychic damage. From a Jungian perspective, this conflict would not be limited to sexuality²¹ but would concern all dimensions of identity and would demand the integration of the shadow. The first step is acknowledging that there is a man in your head who controls your decisions, from what you say to what you wear, constantly reminding you of the consequences of non-compliance. This internal voice is not a personal weakness; it is a learned technology of self-regulation. The second step is harder: understanding that this man is a fascist. Not metaphorically, but because the principles guiding his voice are rooted in political systems that aim at total control over individual capacity for self-definition, deviation, and bodily autonomy. Whether we speak about communism, capitalism, or fascism, every oppressive system has one fundamental enemy: unpredictability. Power operates through standardization, classification, and risk management. Unpredictable bodies, desires, and forms of life resist statistical management, legal codification, and economic forecasting. You cannot rule chaos efficiently. You need monoculture - carefully engineered to survive under harsh conditions while continuing to gen-

¹⁸ Sara Ahmed, "Lesbian Feminism," in **Lesbian Feminism: Essays Opposing Global Heteropatriarchies** ed. Niharika Banerjee et al. (London: Zed Books, 2019) 281-298.

¹⁹ Audre Lorde, "The Masters Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in **Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches** (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 110-113.

²⁰ Amy Pistone, "Lesbian Nation Is Amazon Culture': Lesbian Separatism and the Uses of Amazons," **Journal of Lesbian Studies** (2024).

²¹ C. G. Jung, **The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious** trans. R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed., *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, vol. 9, part 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

erate profit. Political architects from Roman times to today have learned that the most efficient way to govern large populations is to train people to regulate themselves through fear, guilt, and anticipation of punishment. Only capitalism dared to claim that it could profit from individualism by turning the entire world into a resource and playground. Statistics show that this strategy works - precisely because insecurity, self-optimization, and personal inadequacy can be endlessly monetized.

While you scrutinize yourself for being too emotional, too fat or too thin, not beautiful enough, competent enough, rich enough, white enough or young enough, the world around you constantly mirrors your fears and insecurities and returns them to you as personal failure. And every second, someone is receiving money from your pain.

4 POLITICAL SHAME

4.1 Hit me, baby, one more time.

Shame is not a private emotion. It is a public mechanism of control. Despite often being experienced in intimate, solitary silence, shame is socially taught, enforced, and circulated. It works on the body like an invisible weapon - guiding posture, silencing voices, bending desire to fit acceptable narratives.

Shame is not simply a symptom of repression, but an actively constructed and politically charged structure, upheld across institutions like religion, capitalism, and colonialism.

In *Laughter and Ridicule* (2001), Michael Billig draws a sharp distinction between shame and embarrassment, a distinction²² central to this research. Embarrassment, he argues, is often fleeting and socially navigable - it arises when one's public image is compromised, when attention is focused, when expectations are broken. Shame, on the other hand, is deeper and more enduring. It does not require witnesses. It marks the self as wrong, failed, unworthy. This distinction is critical. While embarrassment can humanize us and even create shared social understanding, shame isolates and polices us. It is a form of emotional surveillance we internalize until we become our own jailers. Billig also addresses humor as a double-edged sword: it can soften the sting of embarrassment, allowing social recovery, but it can also be used as a weapon of exclusion and ridicule. Jokes, sarcasm, and mockery are often subtle tools for enforcing norms.

Embarrassment can serve as a social signal, fostering connection and empathy among individuals. When someone shares their awkward experiences, it can create bonds and reduce feelings of isolation. Shame can reinforce social norms and ethical behavior. It may lead individuals to consider the impact of their actions on others, promoting a sense of responsibility. Experiencing embarrassment can motivate individuals to address their insecurities or improve their skills, whether in terms of sexual performance or body confidence. Changing the way one thinks about embarrassment can be helpful. Viewing it as a normal and common human experience can reduce its intensity. Recognizing that many people share similar feelings can foster a sense of solidarity. Self-compassion encourages treating oneself kindly in moments of embarrassment, reducing harsh self-criticism. Gradually exposing oneself to situations that provoke embarrassment (e.g., discussions about sexuality, nudity) can reduce sensitivity over time. This can be done through workshops or group settings focused on sexuality. While embarrassment often occurs in public and may be fleeting, shame tends to be more deeply rooted, involving a feeling of moral or ethical failure. Shame can result from societal pressures, especially when one's personal identity conflicts with cultural or religious values. Humor allows individuals to address embarrassing situations in a non-threatening way, turning moments of social tension into acceptable interactions. However, it can also be a tool for ridicule, heightening embarrassment or shame. This dynamic illustrates the dual nature of humor as both a social lubricant and a weapon. Power dynamics play a critical role in who gets to feel embarrassed and who can laugh at others' embarrassment. This has implications for understanding class, gender, and racial dynamics. The interplay between humor and em-

²² Michael Billig, **Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour** (London: SAGE Publications, 2005).

barrassment reveals much about vulnerability. Humor can be a defense mechanism, a way to mask discomfort, or even an aggressive tool that highlights others' vulnerabilities.

4.2 Monetizing demonized.

The rise of platforms like OnlyFans, alongside the proliferation of pornography in the digital age, complicates traditional understandings of shame and vulnerability. On the one hand, these platforms challenge societal norms around sexuality, creating spaces where individuals can openly embrace and monetize their bodies and desires. On the other hand, performers must still navigate the stigma associated with sex work, confronting the public and private shame that often accompanies such roles.

Capitalism exploits shame with surgical precision. Advertisements function as shame machines, constantly manufacturing feelings of inadequacy - about body, status, success, desirability - then selling relief in the form of products. Shame becomes a driver of consumption. To not have is to lack, to lack is to fail, and to fail is to be seen. In a capitalist society, shame is not just emotional - it's economically productive.

Pornography and digital platforms complicate this dynamic. The rise of OnlyFans, for instance, has been hailed by some as a space of empowerment, especially for those whose bodies or sexualities are not represented in mainstream culture. But these platforms also operate within capitalist logic: exposure becomes currency. Visibility becomes monetized. The commodification of intimacy risks reinforcing the same.

Hierarchies appear to be a challenge. While some creators may reclaim agency through these platforms, the overarching system still privileges the performance of sexuality for public consumption. The tension between liberation and exploitation is not easily resolved. The pressure to perform, to produce, to please remains. Digital visibility does not dissolve shame; it simply dresses it in new aesthetics.

4.3 Adidas Ababa.

Though my own position is European, this research cannot be confined to a Eurocentric frame. Shame is a global phenomenon - but its global spread is anything but neutral. Colonialism exported Western values of decency, modesty, and bodily control to societies that previously operated under different cultural logics. One striking example comes from a BBC documentary on contemporary Congo. In it, a tribal man, still living in a semi-traditional hunter-gatherer context, appears dressed in a mix of tribal ornaments and a pair of Adidas shorts. Among the rest of the group, his genitals are the only ones covered. This image is a brutal metaphor for what colonization left behind - not just cultural trauma, but emotional residues like shame. Pre-colonial African societies, including many Congolese groups, did not associate nudity with immorality. Bodies were bodies - natural, ceremonial, celebrated. The arrival of Christian missionaries and European colonial powers brought with them not only clothing, but the idea that nakedness is shameful, that the body is inherently obscene. These moral codes were imposed, often violently, and have lingered long after formal colonization ended. This example is not anecdotal - it's systemic. Shame has been institutionalized globally through colonial education, religious conversion, missionary interventions, and media imperialism.

4.4 DICKtatorshits.

Political ideologies, especially authoritarian ones, have historically manipulated sexual shame to serve state power. In *Male Fantasies*, Klaus Theweleit analyzes how Nazi ideology constructed two opposing types of bodies²³: the erect, hard, militarized Aryan body versus the soft, flaccid, radicalized Other. The German fascist ideal was not just about racial superiority - it was about bodily dominance, control, and symbolic potency.

The Jewish male body was rendered weak, bent, non-masculine - a threat to the imagined purity of the nation.

These narratives didn't just produce stereotypes - they reprogrammed desire. Bodies became symbolic machines. To be a good citizen was to embody a certain kind of sexual posture: heterosexual, strong, productive, invulnerable. Shame was used to punish any deviation from this model. This tactic continues today. We see echoes of it in anti-queer rhetoric, anti-fat discourse, and the fetishization of "clean" aesthetics. Whether in politics or pop culture, the message is consistent: bodies must be managed, contained, improved. And shame remains the most effective way to enforce that discipline.

We didn't invent anything; if I hadn't mentioned that these are examples from the Soviet Union in the 70s and 80s, it could easily be read as USA 2026. Vichaslav Maslov from the All-Union Research and Treatment Center for Sexopathology claimed that homosexuality was caused by childhood upbringing, specifically blaming overly affectionate mothers. Which is a bit better than the following quote by Mr. Borodinkov in the article 'Suffering Without Tears': Why do these people exist among us? Why do they not become extinct after a time? Why, even in our country, where not only the promotion of, but the very fact of homosexual contact is punishable by the law, the number of homosexuals is rising? What is it - an illness, lack of discipline, a criminal act? What is to be done: Do we treat them, educate them, persecute them without mercy, or learn to live with them as with an unavoidable evil? In what ways do they harm society? And, probably, the most important thing: Can we protect our children from this disaster?

Then let's not neglect the women and read what sexologist Naum M. Khodakov has to say in his manual *For Young Spouses*, published by Academy of Medical Sciences: A frigid women who is not satisfied with her sex life may attempt to compensate for her dissatisfaction by striving to take a leading position in society, prove herself as an administrator, a scientist or a politician. Such women are generally power-hungry and strive for positions of visibility.

Let's jump together from these dark ages to our dark times and see how most often dictators get born. Bolotnaya Protests (2011-2012) were a reaction to widespread fraud during the December 2011 parliamentary elections in Russia. Thousands of demonstrators took to the streets, demanding fair elections and an end to Vladimir Putin's (Fig.8) grip on power. The protest represented a growing middle class's frustration with corruption, economic stagnation, and political repression.

²³ Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies**, vol. 1, **Women, Floods, Bodies, History**, trans. Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

The movement peaked when, after Putin's controversial return to the presidency in 2012, public anger intensified. These protests, however, were eventually suppressed by the state. In response, the Kremlin initiated a crackdown on civil liberties, NGOs, and free speech. This period marked a pivotal moment for Russia's retreat into a more conservative, authoritarian regime.



Fig. 8

Putin's government began emphasizing traditional values, framing those who protested or supported liberal ideas as foreign-influenced and unpatriotic. This conservative pivot also concluded the passage of the 2013 "gay propaganda" law, which targeted the LGBTQ+ community as part of a broader move to consolidate political power by appealing to Russia's conservative and nationalist base.

And now, let's travel to Hungary to see a perfect example of the moral police's morality. When Orbán's Fidesz returned to power in 2010, József Szájer was appointed to chair the drafting committee for Hungary's new constitution. He personally led much of the work and even joked that he wrote parts of it on his iPad while traveling. The 2011 constitution included socially conservative elements, such as explicitly defining

marriage as between a man and a woman and reaffirming traditional family roles - positioning Hungary firmly on the conservative side of social policy.

In November 2020, during strict COVID-19 lockdowns in Belgium, Szájer attended a private gathering in Brussels that violated local pandemic restrictions. Belgian police raided the event.

Reports described the gathering as a sex party with around 20 people, and when police arrived, Szájer attempted to flee - climbing out of a first-floor window and sliding down a drainpipe, reportedly injuring his hands. He was identified after initially not carrying ID and later apologized for violating COVID-19 rules. He denied having taken drugs, although narcotics were found in his backpack. The scandal was deeply embarrassing because Szájer had been publicly associated with conservative and anti-LGBTQ+ politics in Hungary - including his work on the constitution - yet was caught at an event reported as a gay sex party, prompting widespread accusations of hypocrisy.

4.5 Ken cannot.

Another example that perfectly illustrates how shame intersects with consumerism and gender construction is the history of Barbie and Ken (Fig. 9). In *Private Parts: In Hiding and on Display*, the author recounts how Barbie was modeled on the German “Build Lilli” doll—a mini sex toy for adult men. Her exaggerated proportions—large breasts, thin waist, and long legs - reveal a clear sexualization of the female figure, yet one acceptable for children because it’s rendered as stylized innocence.



Fig. 9

When it came to Ken, the designers were panicked. Several prototypes of Ken's crotch were tested - one completely smooth, one slightly rounded, and one vaguely suggestive. Executives chose the middle version, then insisted it be covered with painted-on underwear. Even the hint of male sexuality was seen as threatening. Barbie could be a hyper-feminine sex symbol, but Ken had to be sexless. Masculine shame, unlike feminine sexualization, was managed through erasure. This paradox reveals how deeply shame shapes gender expectations. Barbie can display, Ken must conceal. Women's bodies are consumed, men's bodies are controlled. The lesson is clear: performance is permitted, reality is not.

Even language participates in this topic. The shift from "impotence" to "erectile dysfunction," for example, reframes sexual inadequacy in terms of productivity and performance. It's no longer about pleasure or intimacy - it's about technical success. Viagra promises restoration not of feeling, but of function. Shame, in this case, is tied not to intimacy but to failure in capitalist, masculinist terms. Shame is not an emotional accident, but a deliberate social mechanism. Across religion, advertising, politics, and empire, shame has been used to discipline bodies and standardize desires.

4.6 Womansphere.

A few years ago, I was teaching English to predominantly Japanese students and a few students from neighboring countries. One of them was a Taiwanese woman in her mid-thirties. In one class, where we were practicing conversation, she chose the topic of feminism. She was describing in detail her experience as a woman across Southeast Asia. She was highlighting how having a powerful woman as the country's leader affected her and other women. Women in Taiwan have the best educational and emancipatory foundations, which have led to the best job opportunities and very significant salaries. This process pushed women to develop an extremely low tolerance for men attempting to get their romantic attention. She was describing several examples of how men were easily disqualified in her own experience. The moment they were mistreating her, not satisfying her needs, not being able to follow her direction, she would just dump them. It was fascinating to hear about how independent women are in some places and how much change can be achieved by eliminating dependence on men.

The author Chanté Joseph recently wrote a viral essay: "Is Having a Boyfriend Embarrassing Now?"²⁴

In the piece, she argued that in contemporary social media culture, being single has become more socially desirable and "cool" than publicly presenting yourself as someone in a committed romantic relationship. In other words, posting about having a boyfriend feels less appealing in the social media attention economy than presenting yourself as independent or unattached. The essay noted that people, especially young women today, are less eager to post about romantic partners online, or when they do, they tend to do so subtly (e.g., partial shots, blurred faces), rather than with a public "hard launch" of a relationship. This shift was interpreted as reflecting a cultural fatigue with "boyfriend content", as well as a desire not to let one's relationship status define one's public identity, and a social hierarchy where independence is more val-

²⁴ Chanté Joseph, "Is having a Boyfriend Embarrassing Now?," *The Guardian*, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com>.

ued than coupledness. The piece wasn't just read - it exploded across TikTok, Threads, Reddit, and Instagram because it tapped into a deeper shift in how relationships, identity, and social validation intersect today. People online responded because it seemed to put language to a feeling many had experienced but couldn't describe. The essay suggested that in the attention-driven world of social platforms, being single signals autonomy, self-possession, and freedom, while being coupled can look like dependency or diminished individuality. So "single" becomes a brand asset, a way to maintain a curated, high-status identity online. Even though the piece was framed as light cultural commentary, it reflects deeper structural trends. One is that people are increasingly thinking about their personal lives in terms of optics and how things will be perceived.

In an economy where personal brand is social currency, being seen as independent, unattached, and self-contained becomes a kind of status signal. But whether single or partnered, individuals are navigating relationships not just as private experiences but as public performances, and this changes how they think about intimacy, desirability, and self-worth.

Let me immediately connect this viral trend with yet another viral phenomenon. Netflix series *Adolescence* became a global hit in 2025²⁵ - pulling in tens of millions of viewers and leading discussions in schools, parliaments, and media worldwide about its themes. The show revolves around a 13-year-old boy, Jamie Miller, who is arrested for stabbing a female classmate, and then gradually reveals how his online engagements with misogynistic subcultures influenced his worldview. Critics and cultural commentators pointed out that *Adolescence* doesn't simply dramatize a crime; it uses that crime to explore how online spaces, gender norms, isolation, and identity interlock in young lives today.

"Incel" stands for involuntary celibate. Originally, it was created as a term for people who cannot find sexual or romantic partners and feel alienated because of it. The more radicalized parts of this culture are tied into what's called the "manosphere", these are networks of forums, influencers, and content that build grievance identities like: "Women have all the power." "I'm rejected because of society." "Feminism and modern dating structures are stacked against men."

In *Adolescence*, Jamie doesn't start as a violent extremist. He's socially awkward, excluded, and lonely - a condition many teens experience but rarely articulate. That sense of exclusion and internalized inferiority is exactly what draws him toward explanations that give him a diagnosable place in a community - even if that community is toxic. Jamie feels left out, rejected, invisible, and inadequate. This is not a superficial feeling; it's a core deficit of recognitional dignity. He thinks: I should be desired, but I am not. This is the breeding ground of shame. This is not accidental. Psychological analysis of incel communities indicates they develop around profound interpersonal rejection, social anxiety, identity uncertainty, and attachment struggles that are communicated through a collective narrative of not measuring up sexually or socially. Rather than seeing rejection as a personal experience, the narratives offered by incel communities provide a sense-making story: It's not your inadequacy, it's society's fault. Women are to blame. You are being cheated by modern culture.

²⁵ **Adolescence**, created by Jack Thorne and Stephen Graham, aired 2025 (Netflix).

Who is Andrew Tate? The self-proclaimed misogynist influencer

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Influencers Andrew and Tristan Tate face UK rape and trafficking charges

Latest charges come as self-styled 'misogynist' brothers face separate human trafficking case in Romania.

Fig. 10: Author unknown (BBC), Vadim Ghirda (The Conversation), Author unknown (Aljazeera)

Once shame is externalized as collective grievance, it loses its internal destabilizing role and becomes a rallying identity, a subculture of comparative superiority through victimization. This is exactly the emotional logic shown in *Adolescence*: instead of feeling inferior, Jamie is taught to feel wronged, which is a crucial psychological shift.

Adolescence hit a nerve not because of graphic violence, but because it dramatizes something recognizable: loneliness amplified by social media, rejection staged as personal failure, shame internalized, then externalized, digital echo chambers that tell you your pain is unique and you are right to be angry. Media and algorithms shape how teens learn about social value and relational worth. Young people are not socialized by community and families as much as by algorithmically curated feeds that reward certainty, us-versus-them thinking, grievance, and simplified narratives of blame. In that sense, depression, loneliness, and shame are not just personal feelings; they are political feelings, shaped by social infrastructures.

A key driver for many young men who consume content from Andrew Tate (Fig. 10) and similar influencers²⁶ is a felt failure in areas long associated with masculine worth, such as physical desirability, dating success, economic success, or social status. When these are missing, the individual shame of inadequacy becomes the collective shame of masculinity being under attack. Tate's rhetoric transforms: from "I am inadequate" into "I am denied my rightful place by society." This externalization is what gives followers a story about their feeling of exclusion, someone to blame, and a purpose narrative. And this is exactly how shame functions politically: it gets turned outward into grievance rather than inward into reflection. In many manosphere and incel circles, what followers get is not positive self-development, but belonging, identity, and recognition, even if it's rooted in anger. Anthropologists describe this as identity provision: the community says, "you are not alone; you are part of a group that validates your experience." For vulnerable young men who are socially isolated, uncertain about their place after women's increasing autonomy, or struggling with the competitive social metrics of platforms, this feels like cultural rescue. Scholars analyzing Tate's rise emphasize the role of algorithms, pushing short-form, sensational clips to millions of young users because they generate engagement, not because they are true or healthy. This matters because it shows that bodies and emotions are no longer private. On the other hand, affect, especially strong affect like anger and resentment is currency, while algorithms reward affective intensity, regardless of social cost. So the same mechanisms that made reality TV addictive, exposure, comparison, and emotional arousal, are now spreading toxic identity narratives. Andrew Tate is not important because of what he says. He is important because of the kind of emotional infrastructure he provides. Structurally, his message always performs the same operation: from pointing to problems of feeling sexually invisible, economically irrelevant, and socially disposable, this gets reframed as you are suppressed, you are robbed, and you are betrayed by women and liberal society.

This is a classic shame conversion. Private inadequacy turns into public injustice. This is why Tate does not mainly recruit confident men. He recruits men who already experience themselves as failed subjects.

²⁶ "Influencers Andrew and Tristan Tate Face UK Rape and Trafficking Charges," **Al Jazeera**, February 27, 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com>.

Historically, men did not need to be emotionally competent, desirable, communicative, or reflexive to be socially necessary. They were necessary because of breadwinner positions, monopolization of skilled labour, institutional authority, or legal and economic dependence of women. Women's emancipation and labour-market transformation removed this structural guarantee. Not symbolically. Materially. For many young men today, there is no clear social function that requires them to do so. This produces a very specific kind of shame, not "I am bad" but "I am not required." That is a much deeper injury to subjectivity. This is exactly the terrain where Tate becomes effective. He offers symbolic necessity, heroic framing, and an imagined battlefield. Shame is suddenly replaced by mission. Adolescence does something very precise sociologically. It does not portray a monster. It portrays a boy who has no recognizable route to value. What the series shows very clearly is a constant social comparison, sexual hierarchies made visible through platforms, and humiliation through invisibility, not bullying. The boy is not primarily angry. He is ashamed of being socially unplaceable. The manosphere narrative enters exactly at that point. It gives him a name for his failure. This is crucial. Before ideology comes, shame already exists.

Another missing piece is the disappearance of credible male transitions. Earlier, masculinity was organized around stable entry into the workforce, military service, early family formation, and local male hierarchies. These were not nice. But they were legible. Now the passage is individualized, aestheticized, and algorithmic with the need to self-optimize, brand yourself, perform confidence, and perform desirability. Failure becomes private, silent, and internalized. Shame no longer has collective ritual processing. It becomes a personal defect. This is the perfect precondition for radical online identities. It's crucial not to forget that not everyone can perform desirability. Not everyone has the body, the affective skills, the social confidence, or the emotional literacy. For men who fail in the visibility economy, another path opens: a grievance economy.

In 2024, about 137 women and girls are killed every day by someone close to them²⁷. Over the period 2010-2023, more than 80,000 women were murdered each year internationally, most by partners or relatives, and these figures are likely undercounted due to reporting gaps. And we can read these numbers in different ways, but what we can't ignore is that violence is not simply an overflow of desire, but a reaction to status loss. Across regions where femicide has increased, one pattern is stable, and it is that men are not necessarily the poorest, but they are increasingly less necessary. This connects directly to rising women's economic autonomy, erosion of male provider roles, and collapse of male monopoly over authority. The problem is not that men are poor. The problem is that the social contract that once guaranteed male relevance has dissolved. And that is experienced affectively as shame. In gender violence research, shame rarely appears as a variable, but it is structurally central.

Shame here is not embarrassment. It is the experience of being socially downgraded. For many men, intimate relationships become the last arena where control still feels achievable. So violence becomes a last instrument of recognition.

²⁷ UN Women, "Every Day, 137 Women and Girls Are Killed by Intimate Partners or Family Members," press release, November 24, 2025, https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/11/every-day-137-women-and-girls-are-killed-by-intimate-partners-or-family-members?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Today, men not only experience loss privately. They experience it publicly through dating apps, social media hierarchies, influencer masculinities, and constant sexual comparison. Desirability is no longer abstract. It is quantified. You see who is chosen, who is visible, who is desirable. This produces algorithmic humiliation. For men who already feel structurally downgraded, platform visibility intensifies the shame of being unwanted. This is the emotional background that Tate-style narratives exploit, incel culture articulates, and violent entitlement sometimes acts out. As I already wrote: visibility is dangerous. For many men today, women's visibility: economic, sexual, social, becomes unbearable because it mirrors their own invisibility. That feeling produces shame. And shame seeks closure. Sometimes through ideology. Sometimes through domination. Sometimes through violence. All of these strategies are just attempts at re-masculinization through control. After all, shame is not only internalized, it is politically and materially organized.

How far this feeling can escalate and become a pathological deviation tells us a story of Gisèle Pelicot, who became internationally known in 2024 after one of the most horrific sexual violence cases in France was uncovered. Between 2011 and 2020, her then-husband, Dominique Pelicot, repeatedly drugged her and used her unconscious body to facilitate rapes by dozens of men, men he met online and invited into their home in the south of France. Investigators uncovered a massive archive of more than 20,000 photos and videos, meticulously catalogued, documenting the assaults on her unconscious body over nearly a decade. Police identified at least 92 separate rapes by 72 different men, of whom 51 were charged and convicted along with Dominique. The scale and systematic nature of the abuse, spanning almost ten years, is what made the case particularly horrifying to the public and media worldwide. Dominique Pelicot and the other men were found guilty of aggravated rape. Dominique received the maximum 20-year prison sentence. While many of the other men were sentenced to between three and 15 years. Throughout the proceedings, Pelicot was one of the few openly acknowledged public rape trials in French history, partly because Gisèle chose to waive her anonymity so that "shame could change sides" - shifting public attention from the victim to the perpetrators. Her decision to go public and confront the men in court was widely seen as a moment of symbolically reclaiming agency, denying the shame that abusers often hope to impose on victims. As a rape survivor, for me, these heroic words that shame is changing sides were the most powerful and healing experience in recent years.²⁸

Shame has consistently operated throughout history as a tool of social organization. It is not merely a private emotion; it is a regulatory interface between bodies, visibility, and power.

Ultimately, these phenomena are clear. Shame is both a symptom and a mechanism of structural power. It disciplines, punishes, and orders social relations, shaping who is valued, who is visible, and who is expendable. Recognizing this dynamic offers a radical possibility; by interrogating and redirecting shame, we can destabilize hierarchies, reclaim autonomy over bodies and narratives, and cultivate modes of visibility that empower rather than punish. In a world increasingly defined by exposure, freedom lies not merely in what is seen, but in who controls the gaze.

²⁸ Gisèle Pelicot: The Woman Who Made Shame Change Sides, " *BBC News*", December 2024, <https://www.bbc.com>.

4.7 Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.

There is a very powerful misconception in modern society between religion and sexual freedom. The majority of them are not very open, and they are keen on manipulating their religious scriptures to maintain the stability of power structures. But Christian, Protestant, or Jewish countries are generally thought of as more progressive and tolerant, and especially Muslim ones are considered to be the worst nightmares of human liberties.

However, digging deeper, we can learn that classical Islamic cultures had erotic poetry, sexual manuals, open discussion of pleasure, literature on same-sex desire²⁹ (especially male homoerotic poetry), unlike any of the previously mentioned “progressive” traditions.

Islamic traditions historically regulated sexuality primarily through legal and social norms embedded in communal life, rather than what their subjects are doing in their privacy. Therefore, contemporary forms of sexual control in many Muslim societies are better understood as the outcome of modern state power, post-colonial identity politics, and reformist moral movements, rather than as a direct continuation of classical Islam³⁰ ethics.

From the mid-20th century onward, reformist and revivalist movements emerged that emphasize visible morality, regulate dress, regulate gender mixing, emphasize sexual purity, and frame sexuality as cultural identity.

This is not classical Islam. It is modern political Islam. And in this context, sex becomes a symbolic battlefield against Westernization.

So, what we can speak about here is not continuities but rather ongoing political and cultural wars, weaponized with different tactical strategies. Both of these streams, just like in linguistics when we talk about the English and Arabic languages, can be seen as imperial ideas. However, the first group is playing a transformative card, similar to other modern Western strategies; capitalism rules even here as a dominant idea. In modern Islam, profit is hidden behind protectionist ideas of preservation, of your identity as a believer, and of their power as religious structures to keep profiting off your affiliation.

When we are on this topic, I cannot help but ask you, did you watch *Fleabag*?³¹

I will not do any spoilers, but I will say that even for highly progressive and predominantly atheist people, this series opened some sexual fantasies about priests.

Recently, I stumbled upon some speculation that caught my attention about a secret Vatican strategy (Fig. 11) to attract younger generations who are increasingly uninterested in religion.

²⁹ Marya Hannun, “Islamic Poets Wrote Their Own Crude Irreverent Satire, Centuries Before Charlie Hebdo,” *The Washington Post*, February 5, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

³⁰ Joseph A. Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); see also Ayman Kreil, Lucia Sorbera, and Serena Tolino, Des., *Sex and Desire in Muslim Cultures: Beyond Norms and Transgression from the Abbasids to the Present Day* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022).

³¹ *Fleabag*, created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, aired 2016-2019 (BBC Three/Amazon Prime).

There are numerous examples of priests who have become social media personalities with followers in the tens or hundreds of thousands. And their content often blends spiritual reflections with everyday life, pets, exercise, music, humor, and relatable lifestyle posts. These figures are sometimes described in the media as “hot priests” because their physics-friendly content and charismatic online persona attract a large younger audience, though the Church itself talks about this as evangelization, not “marketing.”

One of these influencers, Alberto Ravagnani from Milan, recently left the priesthood due to the requirement of celibacy. Ravagnani stated that the rule was not merely an abstract theological discipline but something that affected his “body and identity,” making it difficult to reconcile his human desire for intimacy with the institution's expectations. His public confession quickly went viral, highlighting the broader contradiction between religious systems that attempt to regulate sexuality and the lived realities of the bodies they seek to discipline. So if it could be fair to say that even the church realized that sex sells, they didn't see the danger in creating the weapon that would sooner or later hunt them back.

In the end, what these examples reveal is not a simple conflict between religion and sexual freedom, but a recurring struggle over who has the authority to define and control the body. Across different cultures and historical moments, sexuality repeatedly becomes a symbolic terrain on which institutions defend their legitimacy, mobilize fear, and stabilize power. Whether framed in terms of protecting tradition, moral purity, or spiritual discipline, the regulation of desire often serves political and economic interests that lie far beyond theology itself. What appears to be a moral order is often a carefully maintained architecture of control. And yet the body remains an unreliable subject: it desires, contradicts, leaks, and refuses to fully obey the narratives imposed upon it. The viral confession of a priest who admits that celibacy conflicts with his own embodied experience is therefore not simply a personal story, but a small crack in a much larger system. One that reminds us that the bodies institutions attempt to govern are never entirely governable.

Vatican to host 'hot priests' influencers who spread word of God to younger faithful as numbers slump

By Shane Galvin

Published July 26, 2025, 11:34 p.m. ET

59 Comments

m+ Christianity is sexy now! How 'hot priest' influencers are drawing young people to the church in their droves

- Handsome priests across UK and US on social media draw Fleabag comparisons
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By KATE NG and ELMIRA TANATAROVA, ASSISTANT LIFESTYLE EDITOR

PUBLISHED: 16:17 GMT, 28 July 2025 | UPDATED: 16:56 GMT, 28 July 2025

BELIEF

Thou Shalt Not Scroll Past a Hot Priest

From handsome priests to Vatican influencer summits, the Catholic Church looks to a new generation of charismatic clerics to halt its decline. But can viral aesthetics translate into lasting credibility?

Religion

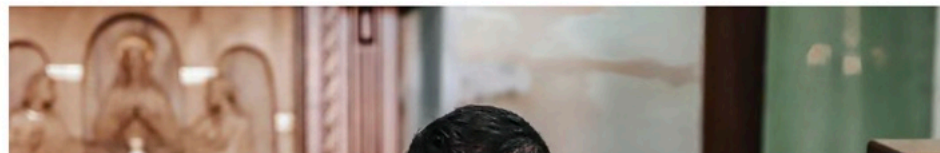
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'No long sermons': how influencer Catholic priests are spreading the word of God online

Vatican invites 1,000 social media missionaries to digital jubilee conference

Angela Giuffrida
in Rome

Tue 22 Jul 2025 17:33
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'Hot Priest' Responds to NSFW Comments After He's Accused of Posting Thirst Trap on His Church's TikTok Page

Many commenters compared Father Jordan to Andrew Scott's Hot Priest role in 'Fleabag'

By Zoey Lyttle | Published on August 26, 2025 11:09AM EDT

Fig. 11: Shane Galvin (New York Post), Kate Ng & Elmira Tanatarova (Daily Mail), Maggie Phillips (Tablet), Angela Giuffrida (The Guardian), Zoey Lyttle (People)

5 POPULAR SHAME

Fun and not-so-fun facts.

5.1 What reality shows actually show?

Sometimes I try to think about why reality TV is so successful. Not just mildly popular, but globally addictive. And the more I think about it, the more it seems that shame is doing a lot of the work.

Reality shows basically turn shame into a shared public resource. They take exposure, embarrassment, emotional breakdowns, awkward bodies, bad decisions, and redistribute them onto visible people on the screen. The audience then stabilizes. Watching others fail helps us regulate our own anxiety about how we are supposed to behave, look, feel, and desire. And when we watch these shows, we are not just passively observing intimacy. If we are honest, we are actively waiting for mistakes. We are fishing for them. Someone screams, cries, cheats, drinks too much, says something stupid, humiliates themselves, and suddenly a quiet thought appears in the viewer's head: Well, at least I'm not like that. It's a small moral upgrade. I would never behave like that. I am more mature. More controlled. More respectful.

What happens here is actually quite simple: when a group observes someone who fails, the group does not only judge the person. The group refreshes the rule. The rule of how one should behave, feel, desire, and control oneself.

Reality shows basically industrialize this process. And this works especially well in contemporary capitalism, where most people have very little control over the big structures shaping their lives: work, housing, borders, institutions, and even how bodies are allowed to exist in public space.³²

People feel powerless in many areas of life, but they still need some sense of competence. Reality television offers a cheap substitute. You might not control your life conditions, but you can still feel morally superior to someone on TV.

This is probably why humiliation-based entertainment becomes particularly popular in times of crisis or economic insecurity.

Reality TV also works like a kind of shame buffer. Instead of dealing with our own insecurities, bodily anxieties, sexual confusion, relational failures - all those uncomfortable things - they get exported onto the participants. The people on the screen become containers for collective embarrassment.

The audience gets a temporary feeling of emotional cleanliness. Social alignment. Safety. And that relief from shame can be strangely addictive. Watching someone else fail reduces the feeling that I might be the deviant one. It stabilizes identity. It reduces anxiety about being socially misaligned.

³² On humiliation-based entertainment, see **The Bachelor** (ABC, 2002-present), **Jersey Shore** (MTV, 2009-2012), **Love Island** (ITV, 2015-present).

But there is another layer to this. When recognition in society becomes unstable, people begin to develop strange strategies to cope with invisibility. You see things like compulsive self-presentation, oversharing, performative intimacy, attention hunger, constant posting, and the inability to tolerate being unseen.

At some point, the need to be exposed becomes something else: the need to confirm that one exists socially.

Exposure is not only sexual. Often it's simply a way of entering the symbolic order, of saying: I am here, I exist, I am visible to someone. When recognition becomes weak, people sometimes try to force visibility. Through scandal, confession, humiliation, oversharing, and public intimacy.

Pathology, in this sense, just exaggerates something that already exists in everyday life. Even in clinical cases, the pleasure is rarely about nudity itself. The pleasure is about producing a reaction in someone else. Being seen. Being noticed. Creating an effect.

So exposure is not really about the body. It's about the social impact of visibility. And this is why wanting to be seen should not immediately be dismissed as vanity. Sometimes it's closer to a defense against social erasure. But here's the contradiction: we want to be seen, yet we also want to control the conditions under which we are seen. Reality TV offers a kind of fantasy solution to this contradiction.

In everyday life, visibility is risky. Being visible can mean shame, reputational damage, cancellation, and judgment. But in the media fantasy, visibility means meaning, narrative, identity, and value. So psychologically, we end up in a strange double bind. We are trained to fear exposure and, at the same time, trained to desire visibility. This is why the same person can happily watch humiliation on television while secretly fantasizing about becoming visible themselves. You can also see this shift by looking at figures like Kim Kardashian, Paris Hilton, or Pamela Anderson.

In these cases, the famous sex tapes were not simply scandals. They worked more like visibility accelerators. What mattered was not really the sexual act itself. What mattered was circulation. Moral outrage. Media discussion. Curiosity. Sex is extremely efficient at triggering attention because it already carries a heavy social charge. It is morally regulated, tied to reputation, and historically connected to control of bodies. So when sexual exposure becomes public, it automatically produces scandal, narrative, and controversy. Which means that sex can generate massive circulation even when there is no particular competence, talent, or achievement involved.

This is why sex tapes could function as a substitute for cultural capital. Not because sex is powerful in itself, but because sexual transgression is extremely easy for society to read and react to. In some ways, you could say this was an early prototype of influencer culture.

Back then, visibility still passed through gatekeepers like studios, tabloids, and television networks. Today, visibility is produced directly inside platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or OnlyFans. But the underlying logic is basically the same: exposure brings attention, attention brings circulation, and circulation eventually brings value.

The big difference is that the gatekeepers have mostly disappeared. Fame no longer needs institutional approval. Algorithmic amplification is enough. In older celebrity

culture, you usually still had to be attached to something: acting, music, modeling, or performance. In influencer culture, the content itself can be almost empty. The self becomes the commodity.

Not personality as talent, but simply the availability of the private self for continuous consumption.

Influencers are not primarily selling content. They are selling access, access to intimacy, daily life, emotions, routines.

In the attention economy, the question slowly changes from “What can I produce?” to “How can I become visible?” Competence is slower than exposure. Recognition itself is also reorganized. It is no longer granted by institutions or peers but measured through numbers: likes, views, followers, engagement. Visibility starts to feel like legitimacy. This is why the desire for fame without traditional talent is not necessarily narcissism. It can simply be a rational adaptation to a system that rewards circulation more than contribution.

Sex tapes in that sense introduced a new type of public subject: intimate, scandal-prone, emotionally readable, narratively consumable. Later, this subject evolves into the influencer. Influencers don’t need spectacular scandals anymore because platforms have normalized continuous micro-scandal: constant self-exposure, curated vulnerability, personal storytelling, controlled authenticity. Influencer culture is basically a maintenance system for visibility.

Then something interesting happens with platforms like OnlyFans. Influencer culture had one big problem: visibility was abundant, but money was unstable. OnlyFans solved that by creating a direct conversion. Exposure turns into intimacy, intimacy turns into subscription, subscription turns into income.

From a sociological perspective, this is not simply a “porn turn”. It is just the stabilization of something that influencer culture had already normalized: the self as content, the body as interface, intimacy as commodity.

The important change is ownership of visibility. Many creators move from platform-dependent attention to directly monetized attention. Instead of being an advertising object, they become small entrepreneurs of their own exposure.

Another fascinating thing is happening at the same time. For the first time on this scale, men are also subjected to continuous erotic evaluation. Their bodies, desirability, aesthetics, and emotional performance are constantly measured by audiences. Historically, masculine values have been associated with production, authority, protection, and institutional power. In these new platforms, sexual economies masculine value shifts toward surface, affect, availability, and desirability.

When men become sexually commodified inside the same infrastructures as women, objectification suddenly becomes visible as labour.

It doesn’t abolish patriarchy, but it destabilizes the old ideological story that women are objects and men are agents. In these economies, both become laboring bodies.

One particularly interesting phenomenon is how many male creators identify as straight but intentionally cultivate homoerotic appeal. They optimize for the male

gaze, queer circulation, and ambiguous desirability. The reason is very simple: the most reliable paying audience for male erotic content is men. So sexual identity and sexual address start separating. Straight men learn to perform softness, vulnerability, and visual intimacy while still identifying as heterosexual.

You could call this a quiet queering of masculinity, not necessarily at the level of identity, but at the level of economic behavior.

At the same time, women's economic and sexual autonomy has already removed two historical guarantees of male relevance: being the provider and controlling sexual access. Many men today are no longer structurally necessary as economic anchors or social authorities. This creates something like a crisis of male usefulness.

Influencer and erotic economies offer a new answer to the question: Why am I needed? The answer slowly shifts from 'I provide, protect, and lead' to 'I attract, stimulate, entertain, and reassure'. Authority becomes desirability. And men entering these economies suddenly have to learn skills that were historically feminized: emotional labour, audience sensitivity, vulnerability performance, aesthetic self-management, and intimacy as work.

In that sense, the sexual platform economy becomes a strange training ground for post-patriarchal masculinity. And men are now learning something women have known for a very long time: visibility is necessary, but visibility is also dangerous. Exposure brings attention, but it also brings ridicule, shame, suspicion, and social punishment. Shame still works as a regulatory technology. It quietly decides who is allowed to appear, under what conditions, and at what cost.

The result is a culture in which the body, intimacy, and personal life increasingly function not only as expressions of identity, but as resources within an economy that rewards being seen.

5.2 Colonization of the asshole.

Procedures like anal bleaching are less about hygiene or medical necessity and more about aesthetic conformity. They show how deeply visual expectations penetrate the body. Even areas that historically belonged to privacy are now drawn into the regime of optimization. The body becomes a surface that can always be improved, corrected, brightened, filtered. In that sense, this is not simply a strange beauty trend, but a small symptom of a culture in which visibility reorganizes how we experience, judge, and manage our own bodies.

At first glance, it looks like a niche cosmetic procedure, almost absurd in its specificity. But when you think about it, it reveals something about the pressures created by hyper-visibility. Bodies today are not only seen in everyday life but constantly imagined as potentially visible, photographed, recorded, and circulated. Pornography, aesthetic filters, and platform culture have quietly standardized what even the most hidden parts of the body are supposed to look like.

The ideal of brightness, smoothness, and "cleanliness" has long historical roots in colonial and racial hierarchies where whiteness was associated with purity, civilisation, and desirability, while darker bodies were coded as primitive or excessive. When people begin modifying even the most hidden parts of their bodies to appear lighter

or more “perfect”, it quietly echoes those older hierarchies. In this way, contemporary beauty culture not only reflects the pressure to be visible; it also carries the lingering visual logic of colonialism, in which bodies are continuously measured, corrected, and ranked according to inherited ideals of purity and value.

5.3 Shame industry.

Today, roughly 5–10% of the gaming industry is directly connected to adult content. From dating sims and visual novels to modded mainstream games and immersive VR experiences. For many players, these games are not just about sex but about escapism: exploring intimacy, relationships, or fantasies in a controlled digital space.

Interestingly, the audience is no longer only male. As games began to include romance, emotional storylines, and diverse perspectives, a growing number of women also entered this space.

Adult themes in games are actually not new. One of the earliest examples is *Leisure Suit Larry*, in which a slightly pathetic middle-aged man navigates the dating scene in a cartoonish, satirical way. But things changed dramatically with the arrival of VR and AR in the 2010s. Suddenly, adult games could simulate presence, touch, and interaction, creating immersive environments that mimic real intimacy much more closely.

At the same time, another strange industry started booming: AI companionship. Today, it is already worth billions. Millions of people interact with AI chatbots, virtual partners, and even robotic companions. What once sounded like science fiction, falling in love with software like in the movie *Her*, is slowly becoming a normal part of digital life.

Apps like Replika allow users to build emotional or romantic relationships with an AI that learns from conversations and adapts its personality. Other platforms offer customizable virtual girlfriends or boyfriends, while products like RealDoll X combine robotics and artificial intelligence to simulate companionship and intimacy in physical form. Market analysts project that AI-driven personalization and virtual reality experiences will drive much of the industry’s growth through 2030.³³

For this research, I investigated how these technologies work. On various platforms, I found the most praised app called Kindroid, so I gave it a try. Although it rapidly became boring, I was able to understand why it has such an appeal. Especially thinking of queer and female audiences, it seemed like a big change. I’m not speaking only about the possibilities of creating your partner based upon your preference, mental, aesthetic, and physical, but even heavily curated, they seemed like they were preserving some level of their agency, which makes them bizarrely human. However, sooner or later, they will fall into dominant male gaze sexual patterns. And sadly, this is even in the early development of feminist porn, proven to have the biggest orgasmic potential based on users’ preferences.

But maybe the most interesting part about all of this is that the adult industry has historically been one of the biggest drivers of technological innovation. As media analyst Steve Parker Jr. notes, adult entertainment industry “has clearly utilized these inno-

³³ AInvest, “AI-Driven Content Moderation and Monetization in Adult Entertainment Sector,” October 2025; Technavio, “Adult Entertainment Market Growth Analysis 2026-2030,” March 2026.

ventions to their advantage and does drive technological advancement” across video streaming, electronic billing, DRM, affiliate marketing, and geo-location software.³⁴

In the 1990s, the demand for online adult videos helped push the development of streaming technology, compression methods, and content delivery networks, an infrastructure that later made platforms like YouTube and Netflix possible. Adult websites also pioneered secure online payments, privacy protections, and subscription models that later became standard in e-commerce.

The same pattern continues today. Adult platforms experiment early with HD video, VR, AI recommendation systems, cryptocurrency payments, and even NFTs. What starts as niche infrastructure for erotic content often ends up shaping the broader digital economy. In other words, the adult industry has repeatedly functioned as an experimental laboratory for technologies that eventually become mainstream: from streaming video to virtual reality and algorithmic personalization.

5.4 The economy of shame.

Okay, so here’s a crazy fact: the global adult entertainment industry is worth somewhere around \$71,6 billion in 2025. To put that in perspective, the music industry clocks in at about \$31 billion. Yup, porn is more than twice bigger than music. The market is projected to reach nearly \$110 billion by 2030, driven by subscription-based platforms, technological innovation, and increasing mainstream acceptance of adult wellness products.³⁵

The U.S.³⁶ still dominates the market, holding approximately 38% of global market share, hosting the biggest adult companies like Aylo (formerly known as MindGeek, yeah, Pornhub and the rest) and leading the subscription-based platforms like OnlyFans, which pull billions from creators and subscribers worldwide. Americans also grabbed the lead in VR porn, holding roughly 40% of the global market, basically pioneering immersive, high-quality adult experiences.

But let’s skip the U.S. for a sec. Germany³⁷ collects roughly €1 billion in taxes annually from brothels and registered sex workers alone, money that goes to public health, social security, and other welfare programs. China³⁸ produces 70-80% of the world’s sex toys, and e-commerce platforms like Alibaba make sure those exports funnel millions back into the national budget. And then there’s Amsterdam’s Red-Light District, which is basically a cash cow for tourism, feeding hotels, restaurants, and local taxes.

³⁴ Steve Parker Jr. , “What We Can All Learn From The Porn Industry’s Innovations In Advertising And Digital Media,” MediaVillage, April 26, 2011; Fox News, “Porn: The Pioneer of Tech Advances,” Fox Docs, September 2, 2014.

³⁵ The Business Research Company, “Adult Entertainment Market Report 2026,” Research and Markets, January 2026, <https://www.researchandmarkets.com> ; Technavio, “Adult Entertainment Market Growth Analysis 2026-2030,” March 2026.

³⁶ Technavio, “Adult Entertainment Market Growth Analysis 2026-2030,” March 2026.

³⁷ On legalized sex work taxation in Germany, see “The Economics of Prostitution,” German Federal Ministry of Economics, 2022.

³⁸ “China Adult Entertainment Market (2025-2031),” August 2025.



Fig. 12

What's interesting here is that all of this isn't just about money. It's deeply tied to the so-called "epidemic of loneliness". People crave intimacy, connection, and exploration, and the adult industry, whether games, VR, chatbots, or sex toys, taps into that. It becomes a tool not just for pleasure, but also for social relaxation, learning, and personal empowerment.

Fantasy spaces are anarchic by nature: imagination runs wild without rules. But the trick is how these fantasies start shaping real life. If we guide them with consent, ethics, and inclusivity, these virtual spaces can teach us about freedom, respect, and community.

Of course, there are risks. That's why researchers keep calling for a mix of strategies - legal frameworks, awareness campaigns, mental health support, media literacy, and tech regulation - to ensure that, as people explore intimacy and fantasy, they don't get exploited or harmed.

5.5 Shame, shame, shame!

One moment that really reveals how shame works in public culture is what happened to Britney Spears (Fig. 12) in the mid-2000s.³⁹ Looking back now, it's uncomfortable to even remember how openly her mental health crisis was consumed as entertainment. But at the time, we didn't really have a shared language for trauma, burnout, or psychological collapse. What we had instead was spectacle. Distress was moralized, turned into gossip, and circulated as content.

Only later did the interpretation shift. Once conversations around conservatorship, paparazzi harassment, and mental health became more developed, people suddenly started feeling ashamed for having watched, laughed, or shared those images. Not because the facts changed, but because the frameworks changed. What once looked like a scandal began to look like exploitation. That shift reveals something interesting about how shame circulates collectively: first, it is imposed on the vulnerable subject, and only later redistributed to the spectators once the harm becomes visible.

Feeling ashamed about participating in that moment can actually be ethically productive. It means recognizing that harm took place. But there is also a danger here. Retrospective shame can easily turn into self-absolution. Saying "we didn't know better" can quietly replace harder questions about media accountability, legal responsibility, and the gendered structures that made the spectacle possible in the first place. Our shame should probably be examined, not celebrated.

A lot of the public justification back then relied on familiar moral anesthetics. She was rich. She was famous. She had already been sexualized by the media. The logic went something like: if she once consented to visibility, then she must consent to it forever. This reasoning is not very different from the logic behind slut-shaming or victim-blaming. It turns visibility itself into permanent permission.

At a deeper level, shame is powerful because it eventually no longer needs direct force. Once shame is internalized, the body learns to regulate itself. Public humiliation becomes a transitional technology between accusation and control. Instead of constant punishment, exposure alone is enough to discipline behavior.

Psychological research shows that shame rarely leads to ethical reflection. Instead, it collapses a person's actions into their entire identity. Once someone is reduced to being the mistake, there is no room left for repair or dialogue. What follows is usually withdrawal, silence, or rage. In that sense, shame is less a moral emotion and more a political technology. It produces compliance, fragmentation, or retaliation, but rarely accountability.

For women especially, shame is often already culturally installed through body surveillance, sexual moralization, and respectability politics. Public shaming does not introduce shame; it simply amplifies it. And interestingly, the crowd rarely polices the

³⁹ *Framing Britney Spears*, directed by Samantha Stark (2021; FX/Hulu), streaming; see also Britney Spears, *Blackout* (2007, Jive Records).

crime itself; it polices visibility. Once your body becomes the evidence, punishment becomes sexualized, public, and exemplary. The goal is less justice and more social warning.

You can see this logic very clearly in fiction as well. One of the most disturbing scenes in *Game of Thrones* is the “Walk of Atonement” (Fig. 13) of Cersei Lannister.⁴⁰ After being imprisoned by the religious authority known as the Faith of the Seven, she is forced to walk naked through the streets of King’s Landing while a nun rings a bell behind her, repeating the word “Shame”. The crowd joins in, throwing insults, filth, and sexualized mockery.

What’s striking about the scene is that the punishment is not physical torture. It is social annihilation. Her dignity, privacy, power, and identity are dismantled in front of everyone.

The moment works so powerfully because it shows shame operating exactly as Michel Foucault described in *Discipline and Punish*.⁴¹ Power does not need to harm the body directly. It only needs to make the body visible. The city becomes a stage, the crowd becomes an instrument of authority, and the repeated word “shame” slowly rewrites how the subject sees themselves.



Fig. 13

⁴⁰ “Mother’s Mercy,” *Game of Thrones*, season 5, episode 10, directed by David Nutter, aired June 14, 2015 (HBO).

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

Importantly, the ritual is presented as purification rather than revenge. Violence disguises itself as moral care. Historically, this mirrors religious confession rituals where sexual sins were treated as threats to the social order.

And notice what is actually being punished: not only what Cersei did, but what she represents - a sexually autonomous woman who exercised power without moral submission. The crowd comments on her body, her sexuality, her age, and her motherhood. The ritual reinforces a brutal message: once a woman violates moral expectations, her body becomes public property.

The unsettling thing is how familiar this structure feels today. We replaced bells with notifications, public squares with comment sections, and mobs with algorithmic feeds. But the logic remains the same: exposure equals justice, shame equals accountability, visibility equals truth.

Yet just like in Cersei's story, public humiliation rarely produces moral transformation. More often, it produces silence, fragmentation, or revenge.

Which is why shame should probably not be mistaken for justice. It is better understood as a political technology, one that disciplines bodies, regulates sexuality, and performs power in public. And when societies confuse humiliation with accountability, the result is not healing but the quiet reproduction of violence.

Therefore, shame is rarely about justice. It is mostly about control. Whether it's a pop star's breakdown, a fictional queen forced to walk naked through a city, or someone dragged through a comment section online, the mechanism is always similar: exposure replaces understanding, and the crowd becomes the instrument of discipline. The body becomes evidence, visibility becomes punishment. And once shame is mistaken for accountability, society stops asking harder questions about power, responsibility, and the systems that produced the spectacle in the first place.

5.6 Criminalization of shame.

One of the darker side effects of all this technological acceleration is something we are only beginning to confront: deepfake pornography and AI-generated sexual abuse. The legal system is clearly struggling to keep up. Technology moves fast, legislation moves slowly. Governments are now trying to patch the gap.

In the United States, the DEFIANCE Act (2024) was introduced⁴² to give victims a federal way to sue people who create or distribute non-consensual deepfake pornography. In the European Union, the GDPR provides some protection through the "right to be forgotten," which allows victims to request the removal of harmful online content. But many legal scholars keep repeating the same thing: the pace of AI development is far ahead of that of regulation.

Researchers are also noting that the damage is not distributed evenly. In her paper *Configuring Fakes: Digitalized Bodies, the Politics of Evidence, and Agency*, Britt Paris⁴³ describes how AI manipulation disproportionately targets women, people of

⁴² DEFIANCE Act of 2024, S. 4123, 118th Cong. (2024).

⁴³ Britt Paris, "Configuring Fakes: Digitalized Bodies, the Politics of Evidence, and Agency," in *The Oxford Handbook Digital Media and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

color, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. One disturbing case involved the Indian journalist Rana Ayyub, who was harassed through manipulated pornographic images circulated online. Another case targeted Malaysian politician Azmin Ali with fabricated videos accusing him of homosexuality in a country where such accusations can carry serious danger.

Psychologically, the impact on victims is severe. Studies show patterns of objectification and dehumanization, often leaving people with anxiety, shame, social withdrawal, or symptoms similar to PTSD. But the broader damage is also cultural. As deepfakes spread, they slowly erode trust in images, videos, and digital evidence. When everything can be manipulated, distinguishing reality from fiction becomes harder.

What makes the situation even more complicated is how accessible the technology has become. Today, anyone with basic software can swap faces in videos or photos. Some apps, like Reface, make it almost effortless, while more advanced tools, like DeepFaceLab, allow highly realistic manipulations. These tools obviously have creative uses, but they also make non-consensual pornography frighteningly easy to produce.

Part of the appeal is psychological. Deepfakes offer a strange sense of control: the ability to manipulate reality and create scenarios that match personal fantasies, often involving celebrities or people of interest. For many users, the motivation is simple sexual gratification, but the technology quietly turns real people into raw material for fantasy without their consent.

A particularly disturbing example of how these dynamics can escalate was the Nth Room scandal in South Korea in 2020. Secret Telegram chat rooms distributed non-consensual sexual material, including videos of minors and adults who were blackmailed into performing degrading acts. Access to the content was sold using cryptocurrency. The public reaction in South Korea was explosive. Massive protests demanded stronger laws against digital sex crimes.

The government responded with the “Nth Room Prevention Law,” which increased penalties and required platform operators to report illegal digital content. Courts handed down life sentences to key organizers like Cho Ju-bin. The case dramatically shifted public awareness about digital sexual violence and pushed tech companies to take moderation more seriously.

What these cases reveal is that AI and digital platforms are not only changing how intimacy, fantasy, and visibility operate, but they are also reshaping how violence, humiliation, and power circulate online. Deepfakes show how easily the body can be turned into a weaponized image in the attention economy. And once again, shame becomes the mechanism through which control is exercised: through exposure, humiliation, and the permanent circulation of images that were never meant to exist in the first place.

6 ARTISTIC SHAME

6.1 Show it to me, Rachel!

What was once unspeakable becomes ordinary through repetition. Representation slowly erodes the cultural mechanisms that attach shame to bodies, transforming visibility into a tool of liberation.

The visibility of hidden bodies and experiences appears in art and media, which, through repeated representation, reduces shock and taboo, eventually leading to slow integration.

How many years of attempts and failures through first illegal, then underground art, then underrepresented subcultural phenomena, highly polarized, were necessary for *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) to be born as one of the earliest widely successful mainstream films⁴⁴ portraying a romantic relationship between two men with emotional seriousness? Imagine how much life-changing it was for me as a teenager living in a conservative society, where only representations of queer identities were negative ones, to watch with my mother *Will & Grace* (1998–2006)⁴⁵. One of the first globally popular sitcoms to center on openly gay characters. Its humor and familiarity helped normalize queer presence in everyday domestic narratives.

The economy of shame over the years became multifaceted. Structures that profit from maintaining shame are competitors of structures that profit from fighting against shame.



Fig. 14

⁴⁴ **Brokeback Mountain**, directed by Ann Lee (2005; Focus Features, 2006), DVD.

⁴⁵ **Will & Grace**, created by David Kohan and Max Mutchnick, aired 1998–2006 (NBC).

Although I was born in the last century, I'm not 100 years old; my childhood was not that long ago, yet what I am seeing today was impossible for me to imagine back then. Pop culture during that period in the 90s and early 2000s was almost exclusively representing anorexic female bodies as the highest form of beauty, having someone like Lizzo today, not only existing as an overweight pop star, but actively promoting and celebrating other bodies⁴⁶ with unapologetic confidence. You can now think about Adele⁴⁷ and say that she was there before and even more successful. But Adele's body was never accepted (Fig. 14); it was only partially ignored or "forgiven" because of her spectacular talent.

There are millions of examples of these "door openers", constantly bringing new guests to the table who were never historically invited to participate.

Oscar-winning film *Moonlight* (2016)⁴⁸ brought us beautiful portrayals of black male vulnerability, tenderness, and queer desire, countering stereotypes that equate masculinity with emotional repression.

Highly popular series *Sex Education* (2019-2023)⁴⁹ openly discusses masturbation, sexual dysfunction, queer identities, and bodily insecurity among teenagers. By combining humor with explicit educational dialogue, it dismantles generational taboos around sexual knowledge.

But not exclusively representing reality gets the space; artistic justice is done by retelling history in a way that was not possible before. A great example is the series called *Pose* (2018-2021).⁵⁰ Centered on ballroom culture and trans communities in the 1980s-90s, the series foregrounds bodies historically marginalized by shame (queer, trans, Black, and HIV-positive) while celebrating their resilience and beauty.

Some things didn't age well and got new forms. Highly celebrated *Sex and the City* (1998-2004)⁵¹ openly discussed female pleasure, masturbation, and sexual independence, challenging norms that framed female sexuality as passive or morally suspect. But over time, we started seeing how much stereotypical and problematic narratives were being spread. Then we got Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012-2017)⁵². The show became notable for showing non-idealized bodies and awkward sexual encounters, deliberately dismantling the polished sexuality typical of television.

Male bodies are also getting detached from traditional masculine roles. They are increasingly being portrayed as vulnerable, emotional, and exposed rather than dominant and invulnerable.

⁴⁶ Lizzo, "Cuz I Love You" (2019, Atlantic Records); Lizzo, "Special" (2022, Atlantic Records). See also Lizzo, "Body positivity and self-love advocacy," Instagram and TikTok, 2019-present.

⁴⁷ Adele, public discourse on body image surrounding albums "21" (2011, XL Recordings), "25" (2015, XL Recordings), and "30" (2021, Columbia Records).

⁴⁸ "Moonlight", directed by Barry Jenkins (2016; Lionsgate, 2017) DVD.

⁴⁹ "Sex Education", created by Laurie Nunn, aired 2019-2023 (Netflix).

⁵⁰ "Pose", created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals, aired 2018-2021 (FX).

⁵¹ "Sex and the City", created by Darren Star, aired 1998-2004 (HBO).

⁵² "Girls", created by Lena Dunham, aired 2012-2017 (HBO).

By regularly appearing in dresses and traditionally feminine clothing, Harry Styles⁵³ (Fig. 15) destabilizes rigid expectations of masculine presentation and reduces stigma around gender-nonconforming fashion. Pedro Pascal's⁵⁴ popularity is partly tied to his public display of emotional warmth and vulnerability, reflecting a cultural shift toward alternative models of masculinity. This can be linked to a cultural shift seen in the "performative male" (or "matcha male") phenomenon. This is a 2025 social media trend describing men who adopt a specific, curated aesthetic, matcha lattes, tote bags, and visible feminist engagement, often considered an inauthentic performance designed to attract progressive women. There is a suspicion of a predatory aspect of this, getting adaptive to survive, but not necessarily changing your beliefs.

At the same time, women, queer creators, and marginalized groups increasingly control representation rather than being objects of representation. Streaming television, pop culture, and digital platforms have dramatically expanded the visibility of sexuality and bodily difference. The cultural dismantling of bodily shame no longer occurs only within avant-garde art. In the 21st century, it increasingly unfolds within mass entertainment, where repeated exposure to vulnerable, diverse, and sexualized bodies gradually destabilizes the normative structures that once regulated them.

Let me, with a heavy heart, conclude my fascination with popular culture with the last example: RuPaul's Drag Race⁵⁵.

The show celebrates drag performance while transforming historically stigmatized queer expression into mainstream entertainment. At the same time, it exposes how shame and rejection shaped queer communities historically. Niche culture show went so far as changing mainstream language. Words such as shade, tea, and serve became widely used in online culture after being repeatedly featured on the show.

Now, imagine me starting my art education with this fascination and entering the world of performance art. Learning about Vagina Painting by Shigeko Kubota⁵⁶, Interior Scroll by Carolee Schneemann⁵⁷, or Rhythm 0 by Marina Abramović⁵⁸, that are all related to many of the themes mentioned in this research (reclaimed female agency of the body and sexuality, dismantling gender norms, and exposing the dangerous side of voyeurism and collective shame).

From those and various other early performance art projects, we can highlight the following: making the hidden body visible, forcing viewers into uncomfortable participation or witnessing, and transforming taboo experiences into sites of knowledge, critique, or empowerment.

⁵³ Harry Styles, cover of *Vogue* (December 2020), wearing a Gucci dress, sparking public debate on masculine presentation.

⁵⁴ Pedro Pascal, interviews and public appearances, 2023-present; see also "The Internet's Daddy: Pedro Pascal and New Masculinity," *The New Yorker*, 2023.

⁵⁵ *RuPaul's Drag Race*, created by RuPaul Charles, aired 2009-present (Logo, VH1, MTV). See especially season 5, episode "Snatch Game" (2013).

⁵⁶ Shigeko Kubota, "Vagina Painting," performance, 1965.

⁵⁷ Carolee Schneemann, "Interior Scroll," performance, 1975.

⁵⁸ Marina Abramovic, "Rhythm 0," performance, 1974.



Fig. 15

And this is crucial for my work, that performance better than any other form can function as a laboratory for unlearning shame, exposing the social mechanisms that regulate bodies and sexualities.

Male performers also had their part in this radicalization of the body. An example like *Seedbed* by Vito Acconci⁵⁹, in which he hid beneath a gallery ramp and masturbated while speaking fantasies about visitors walking above him. By exposing male sexual desire in a vulnerable and uncomfortable setting, the performance confronted audiences with the usually hidden mechanics of male sexuality and voyeurism.

⁵⁹ Vito Acconci, “Seedbed,” performance, Sonnabend Gallery, New York, 1972.

A different example is *Imponderabilia* by Ulay and Marina Abramović⁶⁰, in which two artists stood naked, facing each other in a doorway, so visitors had to squeeze between their bodies to enter the gallery. The piece forced audiences to confront bodily proximity, shame, and gendered vulnerability.

Finally, by combining acting methods with performance art strategies, this artwork was born. *Shame on me* is therefore my most ambitious project, where I'm finally allowing myself to make peace with and fully integrate the conflicting sides of myself and start owning my full potential. I'm leaving behind all those voices of first professors, and later curators and artists, I listened to over the past 20 years of my career, telling me how to stay in the safe zone of the so-called high arts' elitism.

It's not like I did everything before this with less than maximum effort and honesty; this work is definitely not rootless or a deviation from my practice, but it is the first time I'm feeling full, unlimited freedom while creating. I'm highlighting this because, throughout the entire process of writing and creating this work, I was focused on what others could get out of it, trying to be selfless and being powerful only through the submission to others' stories and experiences, letting myself be a vehicle, not predicting that it would also drive me to a very special destination.

In 2015, I produced a video performance that was later exhibited more than fifteen times across several continents, from the United States to Bulgaria to Saudi Arabia, where it was even curated by a Saudi princess. When the work was first shown in Belgrade, the art historian collective *Impost* wrote the critique that, for the first time, made me realize that my art could resonate with people beyond my own experience. At exhibition openings, viewers often approached me with similar reactions: "I know exactly what you mean." "I feel the same way." "Can I tell you my story?" Even when I wasn't offering solutions, the work seemed to create a space where people felt less alone.

This realization became even clearer when I made the film *Portrait of an Anonymous Artist* together with my mother about my father. The story felt extremely private, and we assumed that no one would relate to it. Yet each time it was exhibited, people responded deeply, often sharing their own personal connections to the narrative. That experience confirmed something important for my practice: the more specific and personal the story, the more universal it becomes.

A turning point came with the work *Description of the Sea by a Memory*, which explored personal questions of home and belonging. The conversations that followed this exhibition pushed me to shift my approach and turn the camera away from myself for the first time.

This led to the *Places We Love* project, in which I gave participants full creative control. I allowed each person to use their language, choose a location, an activity, and a storytelling style, while I remained simply a recording device. Through this process, I discovered a new role for myself, not as the central subject, but as a platform through which others could share their realities. I filmed around twenty people and never once regretted a story entrusted to me. This long-term project reached its peak in

⁶⁰ Ulay and Marina Abramovic, "Imponderabilia," performance, Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Bologna, 1977.

2025 with an UNESCO award for best documentary for the newest project I developed on this topic, called Long, longing, belonging.

The artistic outcome of this research continues this trajectory. But the difference is that for the first time, I collected anonymous confessions through an encrypted survey where people could share their most shameful or embarrassing experiences. While gathering these stories resembled a sociological study, I treated them only as material for performance. Returning to my acting training, I began embodying these testimonies, translating them into performative narratives. So in some sense, I found the way to tell the stories even from those who are not ready to share them themselves.

So. Is “Shame on me” performance art or contemporary acting? I don’t care! The only thing that is important to me in this project is to be in the service of the stories that must be told and to allow others to help themselves by listening to them. And the goal of this project is not for everyone to feel everything. The goal is for each of us to have at least one story that hits home and makes us confront feelings we’ve suppressed. I am hoping that, in this process, we get liberated, even if it is only an inner monologue echoing: I am not the only one! Most, if not all, social constructs survive by feeding on our feelings of being alone in our struggle. Representation can mean the world to those who the world doesn’t give enough space to fully be themselves.

No matter whether we are speaking of Vito Acconci, Valie Export, Shigeko Kubota, and my mentor Marina Abramovic, or we speak about Viola Davis, Charlize Theron, Isabelle Huppert, or even Al Pacino⁶¹, the tactic is the same: transmitting the stories and creating a mirror for people to see themselves in all of their colors. Only then can we start dismantling the socially constructed walls that keep us from our true selves.

6.2 CreActing Shame on me.

Few days ago I cried throughout entire 2 hours of a movie Hamnet in the cinema. After coming home I wanted to learn more about it, and I stumbled upon a Golden Globe speech of movie director Chloé Zhao. In her speech, she is quoting male lead actor Paul Mescal, that told her - that making Hamnet, made him realize the most important thing of being an artist is learning to be vulnerable enough to allow ourselves to be seen. For who we are, not who we ought to be, and to give ourselves fully to the world. Even the parts of ourselves that we’re ashamed of, that we’re afraid of, that are imperfect. So that people that we speak to, they can also learn to see themselves, and fully accept themselves.

For my artistic practice I always thought that it’s a perfect fertile ground to test our social soil and grow new meanings by challenging conservative ideas of preserving status quo’s by repeating same old knowledge. By staging situations in which shame becomes visible and negotiable, this project explores whether artistic practice can disrupt the disciplinary function of shame and open space for critical reflection.

⁶¹ Charlize Theron, interviews on Hollywood and beauty standards, Isabelle Huppert, interviews on acting and vulnerability; Al Pacino, method acting and emotional exposure.

Practices of ridicule, exposure, and public judgment continue to reinforce dominant norms surrounding sexuality, gender, and bodily appearance, demonstrating how deeply these mechanisms are embedded in contemporary culture. This is especially visible in the collection of anonymous stories I received and used as a base for developing *Shame on me*.

In a recent interview with CBS, Viola Davis said, “Uncomfortable. It’s the first thing you learn in acting. The beauty of discomfort. The beauty of being private in public.” And for her, this is the key to healing and a gateway to connection, and she is concluding: “That’s how we make the greatest discoveries in life, is when something costs us a little something.” In many aspects of life, we are blinded by what we might lose, failing to see how great what we can gain is.

No matter how different our training was, her journey was linked to the American theatre canon, and mine was based on Russian theatre standards; how different our methods and ways of preparation are, at the end, we are both servants of the story.

Once, I watched a documentary about the great Serbian writer Borislav Pekic. There, I learned that for one of his novels, he bought a cabinet with a full set of drawers and labelled each with the protagonists' names. Every time he would learn new things about them, he would write them down and put them in. Viola wrote biographies for each of the characters she played, including around 100 pages for an 8-minute scene in the movie.

As spectators, we are seeing only what is displayed. But for someone to exist in art, whether it is a movie, novel, or something else, they must be born, grow up, have a history that, as artists, we have to inspect and understand to be able to tell their story as our own. Acting, in particular, is not about portraying someone but rather about becoming someone.

From the first stories people decided to share with me, I didn’t read them as a recipe for cherry pie but as my own confession, suppressed for far too long and needing to explode. In the story of a boy humiliated at religious class, I blushed, cried, and felt the warmth of urine running down my legs while reading it. In the story of a girl not being able to match the sexual expectations, I was riding on the dick of her ex, more bored than I am while watching the sports segment of the news program, imitating orgasm, simultaneously dying of cringe inside my head.

Once in an improvisation class in theatre, I was given the role of a mother who lost her child in a car accident. I didn’t ask how; I didn’t believe it was impossible for a teenage boy to play something I had no experience with.

I’m sharing all of these details to hopefully showcase why I chose this exact methodology and approach for the artistic part of my thesis. And this is only the beginning; I intend to continue this project as a long-term artistic journey. I strongly believe in the power of giving people who feel powerless a voice to share their stories openly and liberate themselves from the pressure and prison they face, as long as the cost of sharing still seems too high for them to pay.

Sometimes, we don’t even know that a chapter of our past isn’t closed because of the power of fear and the talent we all master to avoid every truth that is too heavy and painful to accept. I remember 10 years ago going to the local bakery, and on my way,

suddenly the thought of my first boyfriend came to me, everything about our first meeting so vivid it felt like it was yesterday. I thought of my friends, asking myself: What if it were happening to Nevena, or Aleksandar, or Natasa? Immediately, I felt frozen under the hottest August sun. A low voice in my head whispered: For the fuck sake, you were raped!

I don't remember what triggered this realization, but in this work, I am attempting something like that, using the power of representation to trigger others to face their shame and finally start healing themselves.

I found it perfectly suited to insert a few of these stories here:

Monday mornings in primary school had this special kind of cold to them. Not weather-cold exactly. More like... the air in the room already knows you're going to be ashamed before you've even done anything wrong. We had religious education first thing, and our teacher was this priest who felt like he had been old forever. Proper old-fashioned. Conservative in that quiet, heavy way where even a small thing—like how you hold your hands—suddenly feels like it matters. He wore the same look every week: patient, disappointed, certain. That morning, he didn't even start with a greeting. He just stood at the front and said something along the lines of: "Everyone who was at church on Sunday may sit down. It was a simple instruction, but it sliced the class into two groups in a second. Chairs scraping, the "good" kids settling into their seats. And then the rest of us—still standing—left in this strange upright silence. Like we were being displayed. I remember how quickly my body understood what my brain hadn't fully caught up with yet. My throat tightened. My face went hot. The room suddenly felt too bright. I was staring at the floor because looking anywhere else felt dangerous. Then came the second part. If you didn't go to mass, you had to explain why. Not in a gentle way. Not as a conversation. More like... confession, but without the privacy. I hadn't been to church. I don't even remember the reason anymore—maybe my parents didn't go, maybe we were away, maybe it just didn't happen. But in that moment, it didn't matter. The "why" didn't feel like a reason. It felt like a defense. Like the world was asking a six- or seven-year-old child to justify their moral worth out loud. And I got scared. Not normally scared. Full-body, trapped-animal scared. I could feel the panic rising, like a wave that starts in your stomach and climbs your chest. My thoughts went all messy. Something in me kept repeating: Don't cry. Don't speak wrong. Don't look stupid. Don't make it worse. And then... it happened. At the very beginning, still standing, before I even said a word, I peed myself. It was instant and unstoppable. Warmth spreading, then dripping, and then—this is the part that still feels unreal—there was so much that it reached the floor. I could hear it. A thin, terrible sound that somehow felt louder than anything else in the room. Time did that weird thing where it stretches. I stood there, frozen, while the puddle grew. I couldn't move, because moving would admit it. I couldn't speak because my voice was gone. I couldn't look up, because I knew there were eyes. And then the panic did what panic sometimes does: it tried to save me by making me lie. I remember trying to frame it as something else. Like, if I could name it differently, it wouldn't be what it was. I mumbled something—something about Coca-Cola. As if a spilled drink could explain the wetness, the smell, the way my trousers clung to my legs. As if everyone would just nod and accept this little story, and the moment would dissolve. But my pants were soaked. There was no real way out. That's the strange part about shame. It isn't just "I did something embar-

rassing.” It’s the feeling that your body has betrayed you in public. That you have become a scene. An object. Something other people will remember as a story, while you’re still inside it, wishing you could disappear. Even now, when I think back, I can feel it in my skin. That helplessness. That urge to explain yourself perfectly, and then the body saying: No, you won’t be perfect. You’ll be human—loudly, visibly, in front of everyone. And I guess that’s what stuck: not the priest, not even the church part, but the lesson my body learned in that room. That sometimes the fear of being judged is worse than the judgment itself. And sometimes shame doesn’t wait for you to do anything wrong. It just arrives first.

I fell in love with a man. The physical experience was extreme, to the point I could not sleep, work, or eat. I survived with small amounts of ice cream because it was the only thing I could swallow, and even that was difficult. I told him about my feelings. We went on a date that lasted for an entire day, held hands, and kissed on the cheeks. We had deep conversations about our lives, and at some point, he confessed that he forced young women to sleep with him when he was a teenager. He seemed to regret it, but that didn’t change my reaction. I left and never came back. To this day, I’m still ashamed that I felt such strong feelings for someone whose past goes against everything I believe in. It’s as if my body betrayed me.

When I was younger, I was ashamed every time my menstrual blood made an appearance during intercourse. One time was particularly shameful for me, as I was smuggled into a hotel room in a city where I did not live (so I could not have gone somewhere else in case it didn’t work out) to have sex with a guy much older than me. We met abroad and started an affair, which was difficult to maintain because we had to take trips to see each other. So, Hotel: I thought my period was over. News alert: When you think it’s over, it rarely truly is. I was riding this undeserving person on top; in this position, my menstrual fluid slowly oozed out of my vagina on his privates and the bed linen. I wanted to ignore it and just swiftly apologize, trying to brush it off. He thought, answered: “It’s not really that sexy anymore, is it?” This reaction startled me completely and proves, once again, that shame is trained and not inherent. I was so overwhelmed by discomfort and confusion that I started crying. I easily cry. Crying made the shame even worse because now I was ashamed of crying in that situation, too, instead of staying cool. The guy didn’t console me; he really didn’t know what to do with me. Unable to either empathize or himself too ashamed to have caused this reaction, he awkwardly went to shower. I had to spend the night, of course. He was so worried about the stained sheets, as - remember - he smuggled me in! He’s on a business trip, and his employer shouldn’t be notified of his private amusement during a work trip, after all. So the next morning, I had to hide on the balcony of the room when the room service came in to check on whatever... I felt horribly ashamed of my actions and decisions, but most of all my “immaturity” during those long minutes in the cold on the balcony. We said goodbye with a quick kiss. It was the last time I would ever see him, and I kinda knew in that very moment. It broke my heart. I kept texting him for a year or so. He ghosted me.

Aside from shame in desiring a person or a situation that didn't fit the prescribed or shame in wanting to be audaciously flirtatious and provocative (but instead abiding by the 'good girl' rules of social behavior, of clothing, etc), I think much of the sexual shame I've experienced has been about not being 'good enough' in bed. I can recall a situation I got into several times when I was 21 or 22 with this guy, Fred, with whom we'd been friends (flirtatiously sending music back and forth via Skype), and then one day we kissed, and since then I've completely fallen for him. We started seeing each other, as in I'd go to his place and after some beer we'd eventually go to have sex, and I remember finding myself dissociating while he was on top of me. I'd basically have my legs above my head, but I'd feel kinda nothing really that exciting, though moaning in support of his enthusiasm. I remember he'd twist me around once he'd get tired, and I would be on top, but I had no idea how to move in order to feel pleasure, and I therefore felt... pretty much...totally inadequate, and that would cause me to dissociate while shutting down that option that maybe I could also be deserving of pleasure. In essence, I then actually surrendered - defaulting back to him being on top, cumming, and me 100% of the time faking it. Very importantly, I was owning my shame, but I was also not allowed to show it. Each time I left, I was left with immense negative tension everywhere in my body. The thing that would make me satisfied was that they didn't seem to notice. The relationship with Fred, a person I was infatuated with, soon collapsed, of course. We stopped going on dates, and he started fucking his very sexually free-er housemate. The news was not just heartbreaking but made me feel even more shame, including shame for feeling shame. I blamed myself for all of it and carried that burden of shame for many years - which btw kept evolving, having different facets, shame of not being better at sex, of not being freer to explore, of not confronting that person about it, of not being truthful to neither myself nor them, of not being accepting of myself, of being insecure and of being flawed as a person. I carried the shame as if it were abnormal and bad, where badness meant I was invaluable, unlovable, forever stuck in a life lacking joy, pleasure, and love. What a mess.

The film *Shame on Me* serves as a narrative collage, weaving together five distinct stories gathered throughout this research. Selecting these specific narratives was a challenge, as many others were equally deserving of inclusion. By recording each story in a public setting, I created a deliberate juxtaposition against their private, often whispered origins. My approach was to act as a vehicle for these voices; rather than aiming for a total transformation, I leaned into a parodic aesthetic guided by an intuitive search for the essence of each individual. While the process was often physically and emotionally demanding, rarely captured in a single take, it was a vital exercise in vocalizing the silenced.

Moving forward, the archive of stories will continue to grow, evolving into new artistic formats. This written thesis will be adapted into a book as I persist in my commitment to dismantling shame as a political tool of social control.

Biography

Dejan Markovic (aka. Dejan Klement) (b. 1989, Belgrade, Yugoslavia) was educated at the Marina Abramović Institute and the Faculty of Contemporary Arts in Belgrade, where he graduated from the Painting Department. He primarily works in the fields of poetry, performance art, pornography, and painting. Since 2008, he has actively exhibited his work more than 60 times in more than 20 countries in solo and group exhibitions, as well as at art festivals.



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Appendix

Fig. 1:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/d/dd/Bill_Clinton_and_Monica_Lewinsky_on_February_28,_1997_A3e06420664168d9466c84c3e31ccc2f.jpg/1920px-Bill_Clinton_and_Monica_Lewinsky_on_February_28,_1997_A3e06420664168d9466c84c3e31ccc2f.jpg (2026-03-22, 04:20)

Fig. 2:

<https://dims.apnews.com/dims4/default/6dcd32e/2147483647/strip/true/crop/5048x3366+0+0/resize/819x546!/format/webp/quality/90/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fasset.s.apnews.com%2Ffe%2Fae%2F28bb02c84374807a232f12ceda68%2F8ad-ce2fd388745baad7b4e36c52c17e3> (2026-03-22, 04:21)

Fig. 3:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/76/Donald_and_Melania_1999.jpg/960px-Donald_and_Melania_1999.jpg?_=20190211171950 (2026-03-22, 04:22)

Fig. 4:

<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/reports/a63157734/luigi-mangione-memes-too-far/cp8nk75vg810> (2026-03-22, 04:23)

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/dec/12/the-obsession-with-the-hot-assassin-reveals-a-disturbing-truth-about-celebrity-culture> (2026-03-22, 04:24)

<https://nypost.com/2024/12/29/lifestyle/i-look-like-luigi-mangione-and-it-got-me-a-hot-date-with-a-model-who-slid-into-my-dms/> (2026-03-22, 04:25)

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<https://www.wired.com/story/inside-the-contentious-world-of-luigi-mangione-supporters/> (2026-03-22, 04:27)

Fig. 5:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/46/Beauty_and_the_Beast%2C_by_Henri_Rousseau%2C_c._1908%2C_oil_on_canvas_-_Scharf-Gerstenberg_Collection_-_DSC03890.JPG/1920px-Beauty_and_the_Beast%2C_by_Henri_Rousseau%2C_c._1908%2C_oil_on_canvas_-_Scharf-Gerstenberg_Collection_-_DSC03890.JPG?_=20160105112122 (2026-03-22, 04:28)

Fig. 6:

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/bb/%27David%27_by_Michelangelo_Fir_JBU004.jpg/960px-%27David%27_by_Michelangelo_Fir_JBU004.jpg (2026-03-22, 04:29)

Fig. 7:

https://germanhistorydocs.org/media/volume-7/image-5144/27253_ca_object_representations_media_4175_frontend.jpg (2026-03-22, 04:30)

Fig. 8:

<https://s2.r29static.com/bin/entry/36e/68ox816,80/1774335/image.jpg> (2026-03-22, 04:31)

Fig. 9:

https://www.telegraph.co.uk/content/dam/films/2023/07/25/TELEMMGLPIC-To00343803742_16902964532620_trans_NvBQzQNjv4BqpVlberWd9EgFPZtcLiMQfoR-f_Wk3V23H2268P_XkPxc.jpeg?imwidth=1280 (2026-03-22, 04:32)

Fig. 10 :

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-64125045> (2026-03-22, 04:33)

<https://theconversation.com/influencer-andrew-tate-is-charged-with-a-raft-of-sex-crimes-his-followers-will-see-him-as-the-victim-257805> (2026-03-22, 04:34)

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/5/28/influencers-andrew-and-tristan-tate-face-uk-rape-and-trafficking-charges> (2026-03-22, 04:35)

Fig. 11:

<https://nypost.com/2025/07/26/world-news/vatican-to-host-hot-priests-influencers-who-spread-word-of-god-to-younger-faithful-as-numbers-slump/> (2026-03-22, 04:36)

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<https://people.com/hot-priest-responds-to-nsfw-comments-11795614> (2026-03-22, 04:40)

Fig. 12:

https://akns-images.eonline.com/eol_images/Entire_Site/2017116/rs_634x774-170216084604-634-Britney-Spears-Umbrella-J1R-021617.jpg?fit=around%7C634:774&output-quality=90&crop=634:774;center,top (2026-03-22, 04:41)

Fig. 13:

[https://ew.com/thmb/PcmWplotYfMyjdH5kiA6y4VI_7c=/1500x0/filters:no_upscale\(\):max_bytes\(150000\):strip_icc\(\)/cerseilannister_o-2000-7341492b93bf4331b147b1f0f37c46a7.jpg](https://ew.com/thmb/PcmWplotYfMyjdH5kiA6y4VI_7c=/1500x0/filters:no_upscale():max_bytes(150000):strip_icc()/cerseilannister_o-2000-7341492b93bf4331b147b1f0f37c46a7.jpg) (2026-03-22, 04:42)

Fig. 14:

<https://www.thesun.co.uk/fabulous/10680293/adele-weight-loss-thin-shaming/> (2026-03-22, 04:43)

Fig. 15:

<https://images-prod.dazeddigital.com/1281/azure/dazed-prod/1290/9/1299171.jpg> (2026-03-22, 04:44)

