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Looking (Im)Properly:
Women Objectifying Men’s Bodies in Contemporary Australian Women’s Fiction

By Katherine Bode

Traditionally, although “women have always written about men,”¹ men’s bodies have been dealt with circumspectly, if at all. Hence, facial features and general size and comportment are often described and used as aspects of characterization, but men’s bodies are rarely depicted and explored in any particular or extensive way. Peter Brooks ties the customary scarcity of men’s bodies in women’s fiction to gendered divisions within visual culture, asserting, “vision is a typically male prerogative, and its object of fascination the woman’s body, in a cultural model so persuasive that many women novelists don’t reverse its vectors.”² Recently, however—and along with the increasing visibility of men’s bodies in popular culture—there has emerged a growing tendency for women writers (and artists) to depict men’s bodies.³ This paper explores a significant example of this paradigm shift occurring in contemporary fiction by Australian women,⁴ focusing on three representative texts: Last of the Sane Days (1999) by Fiona Capp, The Architect (2000) by Jillian Watkinson, and Miranda (1998) by Wendy Scarfe.

These novels foreground men’s bodies, and centrally explore interactions in which female characters look at these bodies. Such visual relations are explicitly portrayed in terms of objectification, but in ways that extend far beyond commonplace, popular understandings of the term. Instead, these texts consistently evoke the specific con-

ceptualization of the relationship between spectator and spectacle elaborated within psychoanalytic feminist film theory, particularly as it is described in the most cited piece of scholarship in this field, Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” What might at first seem to be an idealistic and simplistic notion of linkage between recent Australian fiction and a theory of film first published more than thirty years ago is, in fact, a deliberate and deliberate proposition. More than a useful framework for interpretation, Mulvey’s theory of visual relations is engaged with, and indeed, strategically evoked in these novels. Yet these novels do not merely concur with this version of the patriarchal visual economy. Rather, attuned to and descriptive of the objectification of men’s bodies—a possibility and a power dynamic that Mulvey specifically denies—they construct and consider gendered visual relations in ways that both support and challenge her assertions, often in highly theoretical ways. Specifically, although gender reversals function as central sites/sights of anxiety in all these novels, depictions of women looking at, and objectifying, men’s bodies are neither inevitably subversive, nor entirely recuperated into normative power relations. Instead, what matters in determining the meaning of these gendered visual relations is whether male visibility and female vision are ultimately disavowed, or whether the anxieties this conjunction creates are maintained and explored in ways that produce new and innovative models for understanding and theorizing gender, vision, and corporeality. Thus, although these novels engage with issues of vision and visibility that have long occupied feminist theorists, they do so in ways that complicate, and reinvigorate, established feminist arguments.

Before exploring the theme of gender reversal, the centrality of Mulvey’s article to these contemporary Australian women’s novels necessitates a brief overview of the arguments proposed in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” For Mulvey, the impossibility of both a male spectacle and a female spectator is intrinsic to the workings of the patriarchal unconscious: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, sexual pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly.”5 Within this “world,” male spectacle is impossible: “According to the principles of the ruling ideology and the psychical structures that back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. … A male movie star’s glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego.”6 Voyeurism and fetishism allow the male spectator to project his anxieties and fantasies onto the female body-object, and in so doing, to control his sexual anxieties regarding female lack, as well as his associated fear of castration. The voyeuristic gaze does this by allowing the male spectator to create a distance between himself and the female object, and thus to enact a fantasy of being able to see while remaining unseen. The resulting feelings of omnipotence allow the male spectator to investigate and demystify the female object, and thereby expose her lack. In contrast, the closeness and identification between the male spectator and the female spectacle demanded by the fetishistic gaze allows the male spectator to deny castration by over-valuing the female star’s beauty, and aligning her beauty with the phallus.7

In contemporary Australian women’s fiction, voyeuristic and fetishistic modes of vision are repeatedly invoked and described when female characters look at male characters’ bodies. Capp’s *Last of the Sane Days* is motivated by, and gravitates around, Rafael’s terrible abdominal pain. Due to this (stereotypically feminine) ailment, Rafael is forced to abandon his career as an airforce fighter pilot. The novel describes the journey he subsequently undertakes to Europe in response to and in an attempt to overcome his pain. Rafael’s godmother, Hilary, is also in Europe, a place that evokes in her painful memories of her long-enduring yet unrequited love for Eva, Rafael’s mother. Meeting coincidentally, Hilary and Rafael embark on a forbidden affair, the end of which—combined with Rafael’s despair at the continuance of his pain and his eventual abhorrence of Hilary’s objectification of his body—leads to his suicide.

Hilary’s objectification of Rafael’s body is insistently presented in fetishistic and voyeuristic terms. The erotic displacement essential to fetishism emerges in the way Hilary desires Rafael because she ascribes to his body the desirable qualities of his mother’s. This is evident from the moment they meet in France: Hilary is excited because, if she “looked at him quickly, there were moments when he might be Eva.” Shortly afterwards, “thinking of Eva” Hilary is “[s]urprised by the sudden urge to stroke Raf’s fresh-shaven cheek” (89). When Rafael later comments on the beauty of Hilary’s eyes, she can only “star[e] over his shoulder …. In front of her, Raf was just a blur. … all she could see were Eva’s green eyes” (132). While Hilary is implicitly masculinized by her fetishistic perspective, her displacement of Eva’s body onto Rafael’s explicitly feminizes his male body; indeed, her desire for Rafael is completely aligned with, and emerges only as a result of, his feminization.

In the second half of the novel, Hilary’s fetishism becomes an increasingly sinister surveillance, evocative of Mulvey’s description of the voyeuristic male spectator. One night, for example, Hilary secretly follows Rafael when he goes for a walk. She makes a great effort to avoid being seen, keeping “a good distance behind him, the snow muffling her steps,” and later seeming panicked by the idea that she has “nowhere to hide,” he “only had to turn … to see her” (146). While Hilary remains hidden, her gaze becomes increasingly focused on exposing Rafael; thus, she searches his rooms for his diary, and sees him constantly in her dreams and imaginings.

While less extensive or definitive than Hilary’s objectification of Rafael, Donna’s gaze at Jules’s body in Watkinson’s *The Architect* contains notably voyeuristic elements. *The Architect* begins with a motorcycle accident in which the protagonist, Jules, is severely burnt. As well as horribly scarring his body (except his hands and face), these burns result in him losing his right arm and most of the use of his left. While ostensibly motivated by his struggle to overcome physical suffering—and the mental pain arising from it—much of the focus of the novel is on visual relationships between Jules and female characters.

Donna (his nurse in the burns unit of the hospital) objectifies Jules’s body during their first meeting. Detached and distanced, she sees him only in terms of urine output, oxygen saturation, and heart beat. This sense of Jules as a passive and de-humanized object under Donna’s active gaze is strengthened by her repeated references to Jules as “just

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8 Fiona Capp, *Last of the Sane Days* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 84. Further citations will be included parenthetically.
another burnt body.”9 The gender reversal implicit in these descriptions is reinforced by Donna’s assertive role during Jules’s initial treatment—a role that specifically involves her acting on his body. Donna’s activity directly opposes the role Mulvey ascribes to the woman on screen in Hollywood cinema, whose presence “tends to work against the development of a story-line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation.”10 Instead, Donna occupies the position Mulvey attributes to male protagonists, one of “advancing the story, making things happen.”11 This gendered division is echoed by a female doctor’s activity and a male doctor’s passivity when confronted with Jules’s body. The male doctor is inept: Donna shouts orders at him, deriding his “tendency to be conservative” and overruling him in diagnosing and treating Jules (7). Donna expresses relief when the female anaesthetist—“confident. Always aggressive” (8)—arrives. The feminization of Jules’s body in the hospital (manifested in his semi-conscious state and prostrate position) is compounded by repeated descriptions of his body as abject.12 His flesh “weeps,” “leak[s]” (80), “ooze[s]” (160), and “break[s] down” (122). He is injected14 and constantly plagued by “infection[s]. Another and another and another.”15

Scarfe’s *Miranda* also depicts a female character objectifying and adopting a masculinized role in relation to a feminized male body. This novel begins with Miranda discovering a wounded young man—John/Helios16—washed up on a reef. The book subsequently describes her artistic development, the focus of which is John/Helios’s body. At first, however, believing the young man dead, only Miranda’s voyeuristic curiosity—her desire to see “what he looked like” (4)—stops her from simply “walk[ing] away or shift[ing] down wind” (2). In contrast to her own desire to see, Miranda is intrigued by the possibility that, “[t]urned from me, his face might indeed by as eyeless as an old statue”(4): that John/Helios, like Mulvey’s description of the cinematic woman, cannot look back.

When Miranda discovers that John/Helios is alive, her voyeurism transforms into fetishistic closeness. To check his pulse, Miranda lies “on him like a lover” (6). Experiencing his body as merely an object for her pleasure, she feels “no guilt for the exhilaration of her feelings” and “desires” (5). Fetishism is also implied by the way Miranda overvalues John/Helios’s physical appearance. So enraptured is she by his beauty that she says, “[i]f it were possible I would have cradled him in my hand, holding him and turning him, marvelling at his perfection” (7). This sense of ownership or possession (and overvaluation and diminution) is reinforced by Miranda’s identification of John/Helios as her

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12 Abjection is frequently identified as antithetical to the ideally closed, bounded, and hard male body that supports the hegemonic male subject; see Calvin Thomas, *Male Matters: Masculinity, Anxiety, and the Male Body on the Line* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 1996.
15 Watkinson, *The Architect*, 44; see also 35, 64, 80, 115, 155.
16 Wendy Scarfe, *Miranda* (Henley Beach: Seaview, 2002). Further citations will be included parenthetically. The young man cannot remember his name. Miranda calls him Helios, after the sun god, while her husband names him John, having “in mind [Jesus’] youngest disciple” (50). I call him John/Helios to represent these two—notably dichotomized—elements in the text; and to hint, in turn, at John/Helios’s position between the poles of masculinity and femininity as they are signified in the text.
“inexplicable and wonderful … discovery” (7). Miranda’s assumption of ownership culminates in extreme fetishistic closeness and possession: lying on him she kisses and sucks his body, “again and again” (7), oblivious to the fact that he requires medical attention. At one point, she even bites him, “laugh[ing] and shout[ing]” with joy when she saw her “teeth marks flame into tiny red spots” (7).

As well as through his position as the object of Miranda’s desire, John/Helios’s body is variously feminized. Like Jules in The Architect, his body is abject, open to the world in a way that traditional images of men’s bodies resolutely are not. Thus, his wounds “seeped a pale frothy red” (1), and Miranda “would not have been surprised,” when she stands on him, “if [her] weight had squeezed salt water from his pores” (5). John/Helios is further feminized by his depiction as a beautiful, sexualized and visually available object. His clothes have been “torn from most of his body” and his buttocks emerge, “rounded, perfect” (1), from the shreds of his trousers. Miranda’s repeated admiration for John/Helios’s buttocks,¹⁷ combined with descriptions of his abjection, suggests that her desire seeks out, or is motivated by, the feminized elements of his body.

John/Helios’s visual availability is further emphasized by his amnesia: when he awakes in hospital, he cannot remember where he came from and there is no report of a shipwreck to suggest his origins. Unfixed in history, his body is preeminent.

Numerous theorists have identified depictions of men’s bodies—especially when wounded and/or eroticized, and particularly when looked at and/or represented by women—as subversive of patriarchal conventions and relations. The theoretical bases for this assertion are well rehearsed. Some argue that representations of (especially wounded) men expose the incommensurability of the penis (the male bodily organ) and the phallus (the symbolic source of masculine power).¹⁸ Others contend that the marking of men as a particular raced and gendered subject—through depicting their bodies—challenges the power (white) men accrue as universal subjects.¹⁹ Many such commentators further insist that the disruptive potential of depictions of men’s bodies is compounded when it is women who are representing and/or looking at such bodies. Hence, Lucia Bozzola identifies “a man for women’s eyes” as a “gender category breaker,”²⁰ and Diana Wallace claims that “[a]ny attempt to construct a man … especially by a woman, threatens the

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¹⁷. Scarfe, Miranda, 5, 8, 10.
perceived authority of the masculine as natural, the norm, the universal subject.” In transgressing the confines of the patriarchal linguistic and visual economy, women representing and/or looking at men’s bodies are said to produce and proliferate instabilities, thus providing space for a reconstitution of gender relations.

Certainly, male visibility emerges as a significant site/sight of anxiety and instability in these novels. In The Architect, the visibility arising from the loss of his arm makes Jules intensely anxious. Due to his mutilation, “strangers stare. Or look quickly away from the flapping sleeve. ... the maiming grows bigger and I grow smaller” (32). In the distress of hyper-visibility and diminution, Jules perceives the obliteration of his identity: the newly “asymmetrical shadow ... blots out [all] other images of Jules van Erp” (40). Male damage and visibility functions as a similar locus of anxiety for Rafael in Last of the Sane Days. Thus, he travels largely to escape his visibility in relation to the medical establishment: his position as “just the patient, a recalcitrant body to be prodded and probed” (62).

In Miranda, anxiety about male visibility is manifested in Miranda’s husband, Alfred. Male nudity and its vulnerabilities arouse in Alfred deep anxiety, anger and fear. For example, when he and Miranda collect John/Helios for church one morning and find him “half naked” (78), Alfred is enraged. It is not John/Helios’s partial nudity in itself that angers him, but Miranda’s witnessing of it. He jumps between Miranda and John/Helios and “flung his arms wide as if warding off an assailant ... a wall between [Miranda] and the horror on the bed,” eventually becoming “hysterical” when Miranda refuses to leave the room (78). Alfred’s anxiety about male nudity is demonstrated throughout the novel: for example, when his mother confronts him saying, “God made us naked,” he refuses to agree, screaming, “No! Not without clothes!” (138). The emer-

gence, and explicit positioning, of male wounding and visibility as a site/sight of anxiety in these novels seems to support the view that women looking at and/or representing men’s bodies subverts, and even collapses, gender norms.

Despite the logic of this proposition, gender reversals in these texts do not always denaturalize, and in some cases actually reinforce, normative power relations. This is true in *The Architect*, where anxieties around male visibility are quickly resolved through the introduction of discourses and conventions that deflect and defuse Donna’s gaze, mitigate Jules’s visibility, and in that process, enable his remasculinization. One such discourse emerges in the medical context framing Jules and Donna’s interactions. Although staging gender reversal, this context simultaneously disavows Jules’s position as a visually available object by supplying a pragmatic and decidedly non-erotic reason for his visibility: he is visible because he is wounded and needs medical attention, not for the purpose of display and scopophilia. Correspondingly, although Donna’s voyeurism renders her gaze implicitly desiring, medical conventions enlist her (potentially) erotic look for pragmatic purposes. Thus, while her view of Jules’s body in terms of input, output, and percentage of skin burned dehumanizes him, it simultaneously denies his position as an erotic object.

There is also a sense in which the medical framework mitigates the troubling consequences of a female character looking at a male character’s body precisely by emphasizing, rather than negating, Jules’s feminization and Donna’s masculinization. Such is the strength of the conventions that align masculinity with the medical gaze, and femininity with disease or pathology, that instead of denaturalizing the association of masculinity and the male body, and femininity and the female body, the medical framework renders Jules’s feminization and Donna’s masculinization *unnatural*. In other words, femininity, not Jules, is pathologized and objectified, and masculinity, rather than Donna, is affirmed as central, healthy, and in control. In turn, the feminization of Jules’s body protects masculinity, in general, from being tainted by the demeaning implications of display. The unnaturalness of Jules’s feminization and Donna’s masculinization thence facilitates Jules’s (re)masculinization and Donna’s (re)feminization—gender transformations that appear as reassertions of a natural order.

Similarly, while Jules’s wounds seem to challenge and disrupt hegemonic constructions of the male body as invulnerable and whole, this framework also mitigates the violation of conventional looking structures entailed by his visibility. As Melody Davis asserts: “the only way [the] specular male may be born by conventional standards is to reinstate control in an implied third party who forces passivity upon the male figure. This passivity traditionally comes in the form of physical suffering, extreme as a punishment and an absolution for passivity.” Given that the victimizer in this scenario is “presumed to be male,” Davis argues that the representation of wounded male bodies reincorporates the feminizing effects of passivity into a structure that is wholly masculine—“a triad of

22. Lehman analyses the ways in which medical/scientific discourses control and limit the subversive potential of male visibility; Peter Lehman, *Running Scared*, 131-46.
masculinity—viewer, viewed, and third, active party.” Jules is wounded when a truck hits his motorbike. The impact of these two very masculine symbols creates a homosocial relation which, to use Davis’s phraseology, absolves his passivity. Indeed, surviving such a terrible accident actually affirms Jules’s masculinity.

Not only is Donna’s gaze defused by the medical context in which she looks at Jules, and positioned as secondary to the homosocial structure through which he is damaged, but Jules is able to reject and reorient her gaze. Thus, although she initially views him as “just another body” (5), as soon as Jules speaks, Donna feels compelled to “take a proper look at the unburnt part of him” (6). In turning her gaze away from his burnt body to his unburnt face and hands, Donna not only stops objectifying him, she enacts the “proper,” or socially appropriate, form of the woman’s gaze at a man. And what Donna sees when she looks at Jules properly invokes such pathos in her that, instead of handing in her resignation as planned, she remains to care for Jules, and later becomes his home-nurse. The intense sympathy invoked in Donna—and encouraged in the reader—by the sight of Jules’s damaged body resonates with another conventionalizing framework for controlling the troubling implications of male visibility, identified by Abigail Solomon-Godeau in relation to Neo-classical French art. According to Solomon-Godeau, the trope of wounded male bodies in such art existed without upsetting the visual and economic codes of that society because it invoked the “rhetorical sign of pathos.”

By elevating weakness to tragedy and passivity to stoic suffering, a similar framework of pathos rescues Jules from pure visibility.

Jules’s gaze subsequently becomes pre-eminent in their interactions—not only negating but replacing Donna’s voyeurism. When Jules looks at Donna following her “proper look,” his gaze asserts itself to the point where she feels, “[h]is gaze is too bright. It imprisons me” (6); he “holds my gaze as if he is delving into some secretive place” (7). The visual power Jules exerts over Donna reasserts his masculinity. Returning and disabling Donna’s gaze counteracts, in other words, the possible feminizing effects of his passive and debilitated position. In this way, not only is Jules rescued from a position of visibility, he is recuperated into a patriarchal narrative of male triumph. The triumph and transformation of Jules’s visible and feminized body is reflected in the very literal containment of his abjection. As The Architect progresses, Jules’s body is increasingly sealed: first, within a “heavy compression jacket” (44), and later, a full body cast (111). In the end, he is described as “mummified in hard, tight, shining scars” (216), suggesting a completely inviolable body. Not only is his permeable body managed and sealed—thus offering the reassuring spectacle of an endangered masculinity triumphing—his recovery actually allows Jules to become even more firmly bounded and impermeable than he was before the accident.

Another central relationship in The Architect is between Jules and Chloe, a blind woman who loves him. Chloe’s blindness allows Jules to deceive her about his body by denying the amputation of his right arm—a common signifier of emasculation. This deni-

manifests what Silverman describes as a time-honoured affirmation of masculinity: specifically, the way that women are summoned “to uphold the male subject in his phallic identification by seeing him with her ‘imagination’ rather than with her eyes” (47). Even when Jules is forced to tell Chloe that he has only one arm, he refuses to let her touch his right side. In “avoiding her seeing touch” (83), Jules continues to conceal his amputation and, in the process, to continually and performatively remasculinize himself. Significantly, whereas Donna’s objectification of Jules’s body is quickly foreclosed, Jules’s visual dominance over Chloe continues throughout The Architect.

The rejection of an objectifying female gaze is perpetuated in Jules’s relationship with a third female character, Jan, who is specifically characterized in terms of not looking. As Jules notes, “It is as if, in her contentment, she has stopped seeking, and so from the corner of her eye … she sees more” (191). Unlike Chloe and Donna, who want to see Jules’s body but are either unable to or prevented from doing so, Jan’s way of not looking directly at Jules is rewarded by his love. The various ways in which women’s looks are deflected from Jules’s body suggests the archetypal romantic narrative of beauty and the beast. As Lehman notes, this plot delivers not a humanist message, as is often supposed, but a gendered one, namely, that while a woman must be beautiful to find love, she “must learn to stop looking and seeing the male body while falling under the sway of powerful words and actions.”

Thus, in The Architect, the challenge posed by male visibility and female vision is recuperated into a traditional romance framework, and used to support a narrative of male triumph over adversity. This text thereby confirms that inversions in traditional gender codes do not always denaturalize, and in some cases actually reinforce, their own normative counterpart. Indeed, the treatment of gender and vision in The Architect indicates why many scholars reject gender reversal as even a potential route for politically productive activism and theory: namely, they perceive that gender reversals maintain the dichotomized conception of subjectivity that underlies and enables patriarchal discourses. In other words, whether it is a man or a woman who is feminized (or masculinized), masculinity remains the site of activity, desire, and the gaze, and femininity the realm of passivity, desirability, and visibility.

The potential of gender reversals to facilitate the reassertion of normative power dynamics and discourses is central to another common narrative trope, in which anxiety is created around male vulnerability and powerlessness (couched in terms of feminization), only (or perhaps in order) for that anxiety to be reassuringly alleviated (through remasculinization). The large number of analyses that chart this trope and its strategies

indicate its prevalence. As in The Architect, various conventions and discourses supply a non-erotic reason for male display, thus displacing potentially desiring gazes onto another economy and denying the position of the hegemonic male body as an object of display. In this context, gender reversals, rather than disrupting patriarchal power dynamics, enable and perhaps even promote conventional and reassuring narratives of male triumph.

Certainly, if the presence of frameworks identified as conventionalizing averts the troubling implications of male visibility, then the explicit youthfulness of John/ Helios and Rafael’s bodies must be understood as normalizing their exposure, erotization, and feminization. Both historically and in contemporary advertising contexts, overwhelmingly young, rather than mature, men’s bodies are depicted and eroticized. This tendency is said to protect real (mature) men from the demeaning implications of display because, as Judith Kegan Gardiner puts it, contemporary society “define[s] being a man not only in opposition to being a woman or a male homosexual but in opposition to being a boy.” Following this logic, Rafael’s and John/ Helios’s youth sustains—or, at most, blurs but does not subvert—traditional power relations.

Analyses which demonstrate the ways in which apparently subversive representations of male corporeality and female vision instead work to support normative power relations are important and prudent, not least for the way they demonstrate the incredible malleability and pervasiveness of patriarchal discourse. After all, if representations of damaged or disenfranchized (or even eroticized) men inevitably indicated a general loss of male power, then patriarchal society would have collapsed long ago. Nevertheless, it can sometimes seem as if almost any representation of masculinity or male corporeality (and female vision and desire) can be shown, in one way or another, ultimately to reinforce, reproduce, or be accommodated by, patriarchal conventions. This tendency entails and institutes a pessimistic view of the potential of representations of masculinities and/or men’s bodies to produce, or even to signal, changes in gender relations. Yet as Kenneth MacKinnon asserts, the continual critical insistence on the strength of the conventions surrounding and apparently determining representations of men’s bodies constitutes, in certain circumstances at least, “a peculiarly academic form of disavowal.”

31. See Solomon-Godeau, Male Trouble.
33. Judith Kegan Gardiner, “Theorizing Age with Gender: Bly’s Boys, Feminism, and Maturity Masculinity,” in Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 91. The persistence of traditional power relations created by the sexualization of only young men’s bodies is ironically evident in Greer’s The Boy, in which she asserts that, “The boy is the missing term in the discussion of the possibility of a female gaze. Women may not frankly evaluate a man’s physical attractiveness but a boy is in no position to object” (228). While Greer’s argument shifts the terms of the patriarchal visual economy, it maintains the same power dynamics. Indeed, Greer’s statement, though apparently liberating, actually presents the absence of adult men from a visual economy in which women might look as an unchangeable fact.
The potential for such disavowal makes it important to attend to the particular ways in which narratives like *Last of the Sane Days* and *Miranda* employ, but resist being captured by, what are generally seen as conventionalizing methods of depicting male bodies and female vision. Although Rafael’s and John/Helios’s bodies are explicitly youthful, and depicted in relation to frameworks that mitigate the demeaning implications of Jules’s visibility, in these novels such frameworks do not occlude, and in fact can be seen to realize the transgressiveness of exposed, eroticized, and feminized male bodies. In particular, through extended focus on female characters’ gazes at male characters’ bodies, *Last of the Sane Days* and *Miranda* present new ways of imagining male corporeality and desirability, and female desire and vision.

Like Jules’s, Rafael’s body in *Last of the Sane Days* is rendered visible in the context of pain and the medical establishment, operative through a female character’s gaze. Yet rather than rendering Rafael’s visibility pragmatic and non-erotic, Hilary’s medical gaze is explicitly and repeatedly sexualized, and is in fact constructed as the epitome of voyeurism. Medicine, for Hilary, offers the opportunity “to expose … to reveal” the inside of bodies (15). Such panoptic entry into bodies enables enormous knowledge—“answers to questions most people did not dare to ask, answers to the secrets of life and death, encoded in the flesh” (17). Hilary’s decision to specialize as a gynaecologist is also visually motivated, and occurs when she sees Gustave Courbet’s painting, *The Origins of the World*—a painting depicting “the lower half of a woman’s body dominated by the mound of her pubis and its dark thatch of hair, the pink lips of the labia just showing through” (23). This association of medicine with the exposure of female genitalia—and with a visual intrusion into, and knowledge of, the secrets of bodies—offers a very strong analogy for Mulvey’s description of the male spectator’s voyeurism.

In providing a vehicle for, and emphasizing the sexualized nature of, Hilary’s gaze, medicine actualizes rather than mitigates the subversive implications of Rafael’s visibility, feminization, and eroticization. Indeed, far from protecting Rafael from disempowering medical visibility, his relationship with Hilary extends and exacerbates these anxieties. Meeting Hilary not only returns him to the position of patient, but the over-determined intimacy in their relationship (arising from her position as his godmother, doctor, and lover) extends the medical gaze into all aspects of Rafael’s life.

Additionally, whereas medicine ensconces Jules’s body within a narrative of cause and effect, thus reducing the extent to which his visibility is pre- eminent, the medical establishment (including Hilary) can offer no reason for Rafael’s pain. As well as producing a silence that foregrounds Rafael’s corporeality, the ways in which he attempts to inspire Hilary’s belief in his pain—by repeatedly damaging his own body—further heightens the sense of anxiety surrounding male visibility and damage in this novel. Thus, he smashes a shop window, thrusts his bloody fists in Hilary’s face and screams.
“Do you believe me now?” (230), desperate that she affirm the reality of his pain. The text offers no resolution—outside of Rafael’s suicide—for the anxiety he experiences as a result of visibility.

Rafael’s longing for Hilary’s gaze is not restricted to his attempts to gain her belief in his pain. Although the pressure of her continual surveillance contributes to, and perhaps even causes, his suicide, Rafael feels “swamped” by “a nameless dread, an overwhelming sense of loneliness” (217) when Hilary looks away. At the same time, he makes various attempts to resist and reject her gaze, believing that his “dependence” on her is “at the root of his sickness and deterioration” (240). Rafael’s ambivalent position in relation to his own visibility—his oscillation, in a sense, between masculinity and femininity in response to being looked at—destabilizes the polarity of those positions as well as their naturalness (their correspondence, in other words, with naturally sexed bodies). In this way, Rafael’s visibility produces a representation of gender that challenges established dichotomies, suggesting an alternative not only to the construction of male bodies as masculinized, but to difference as it is imagined within patriarchal discourse, where “everything that is not … in line with traditional masculinity is autonomically considered other, that is, feminine.”

Despite this gender ambivalence, the fact remains that for most of the novel Hilary and Rafael’s relationship is portrayed in terms of objectification. This strategy rejects the notion of men as subjects, and women as objects of the gaze, as well as the easy assumption that female desire and vision is necessarily positive and subversive. But it offers no solution to the hierarchies of power that Mulvey describes. In the middle of the novel, however, vision and visibility are reimagined when Hilary and Rafael’s relationship briefly becomes one of reciprocity and equality.

When Hilary makes a sexual relationship between them a possibility, Rafael’s visibility (previously created by Hilary’s fetishistic gaze) becomes an offering as he abandons all concealment to the point where “she did not recognise him at first. His unruly shoulder-length hair had been cut sharp around his ears and shaved close to the skull at the back, leaving him nowhere to hide. He wore a crisp, new shirt open at the neck, his Adam’s apple visible beneath its taut layer of skin. Eager yet tentative, he stood before her as if offering a gift” (103). In this passage, male exposure and vulnerability are clearly evoked. However, instead of provoking anxiety they are figured anew: the tautness of Rafael’s eager skin renders him vulnerable, but promises surprise and pleasure if and when this gift is accepted. Moreover, the allusion to a (taut, eager) penis in this description of Rafael’s body rejects a conception of his visibility in terms of feminization at the same time as it refuses a narrative of powerful remasculinization.

Descriptions of their sexual contact during the train journey they take across the French Alps similarly transform notions of male vulnerability and visibility in the portrayal of an equitable relationship. Lying next to Hilary, “Raf slowly uncoiled, his eyes pursuing her with disbelief. … Lifting his bruised fists to her lips, Hilary kissed every knuckle before uncurling his fingers and sucking them to the back of her throat. She put her hands on his naked chest and moved her lips over his body, tasting every part, even his tears” (113). In contrast to the general cultural and literary pattern, wherein women’s bodies provide the focus in portrayals of sexual intimacy, Rafael’s body is the source of

desire. Although Rafael’s exposure occurs concurrently with the depiction of his body as bruised, naked, and crying, rather than compounding his pain, Hilary’s touch alleviates his suffering: while their sexual relationship endures, Rafael “slept so well he felt he had satisfied a terrible thirst and now not even the pain could touch him” (103). As well as alleviating his pain, Hilary’s touch encourages Rafael’s, which produces her reciprocal exposure:

Then he was crouching on the floor, his head moving toward her open thighs. From that wolfish curve of his lips came the tender pink of his tongue. Hilary lay back clutching his head as he hungrily made up for the time he had lost.

Their world shrunk to the size of a cabin, to the size of two bodies in a knotted embrace where nothing else mattered. (113)

Presented in terms of the creation of another world, this image of their knotted bodies reinforces the equality and reciprocity of their relationship. In turn, male damage, vulnerability, and visibility become, not a source of anxiety or a way of reasserting male power and privilege, but a means of imagining heterosexual equality. This refiguring of female vision and male visibility is arguably only possible due to the destabilization of patriarchal dichotomies and hierarchies created by the portrayal of Rafael’s previous and subsequent state of objectification.

It could be argued, nonetheless, that the sexual relationship between Hilary and Rafael corresponds to another archetypal romance plot, whereby damage disables male superiority and enables love between equals. This trope of heterosexual rapprochement—of which the equality produced between Jane and Rochester in Jane Eyre due to his blinding is an oft-cited example—has been celebrated by some feminists for its imaginary transcendence and collapse of gender inequality. Yet this plot necessarily individualizes and de-politicizes solutions to social problems: love and care between an individual man and woman become the means through which liberation is figured and, as a result of which, existing social inequalities are occluded. In Last of the Sane Days, however, Hilary and Rafael do not live happily ever after: when their train journey ends, Hilary resumes her objectification of Rafael. At the end of the novel, he commits suicide and she reverts to sexual relationships with women. Accordingly, their sexual relationship might be more accurately understood as a vision of what might be possible if men and women were equal, while acknowledging such inequality as insoluble within the current gender order. Relatedly, while Hilary’s objectification of Rafael’s body functions as the means by which his body can be figured as desirable, and her gaze as desiring, within current constructions of gender, vision, and desire, his suicide represents an unqualified criticism of such ways of seeing and being.

The same process—whereby gender reversals are not recuperated, but instead function to destabilize and challenge patriarchal dichotomies and discourses—occurs in


Miranda, again through a focus on, rather than a disavowal of, both women representing and/or looking at men’s bodies, and the anxiety this conjunction creates within the novel. John/Helios, like Jules and Rafael, is presented in the context of damage—he becomes visible to Miranda, and to the reader, because he is washed up, wounded on a reef. Yet as in Last of the Sane Days, John/Helios’s wounds do not mitigate the subversive implications of—or provide a pragmatic reason for—his visibility. Instead, his abjection evokes sexual desire in Miranda, while the aesthetic signifiers of femininity informing the portrayal of his body emphasize rather than detract from the erotic connotations of his visibility. Moreover, the lack of pity Miranda expresses for his wounded body is exaggerated to such an extraordinary degree that the narrative is entirely removed from the realm of pathos.

John/Helios’s wounds heal. Yet in contrast to the containment of Jules’s abjection in The Architect, male healing in Miranda is not coterminous with the deflection of the female gaze from the male body. Rather, Miranda repeatedly imagines, draws, and sculpts John/Helios’s body, continually re-creating and re-presenting John/Helios’s body in ways that specifically privilege movement, ambiguity, transformation, and multiplicity. As no static image of John/Helios’s body emerges, the reader is continually required to re-imagine his body too, thus proliferating the act of (women) representing and looking at a man’s body. The multiple sites/sights of John/Helios’s body in the text—and the related portrayal of looking relations in terms of performative interactions between bodies, gazes and meanings—remove Miranda’s vision of John/Helios from the realm of objectification, and suggests a different way of conceptualizing seeing and being seen. That is to say, although objectification initially functions as the means by which Miranda begins to imagine and desire John/Helios’s body, the dichotomies of power manifested in objectification are quickly rejected as other ways of looking and representing are explored.

This process of interpretation of and engagement with John/Helios’s body—performed by Miranda and required of readers—is also depicted in the responses of the women spectators to Miranda’s sculpture of John/Helios at a women’s art show. Before the women’s creations are shown to the men of the community, the women are permitted a private exhibition. When Miranda’s sculpture is unveiled, the women, normally silent except when voicing their husband’s opinions, interpret and discuss Miranda’s sculpture in ways that both echo and exceed her own—and the readers’—constitutive perceptions of John/Helios’s body:

“It’s a man.”
“No it’s not, it’s a woman.”
“A woman? Don’t be silly. Women don’t have . . .”
“A man with a . . .”
“A woman with breasts.”
“Just like my little boy when I bath him. So soft, like a tiny mushroom.
Men don’t know we know.”

“How clever of you, Miranda. It’s a woman nursing her baby boy, both in the same body.”

… “How clever of you, Miranda. You’ve never been a mother. How did you know?” (119-120)

This passage dramatizes a group of women responding eagerly and imaginatively to the sight of a man’s body. There is no meaning inherent in the body on display—it is not intrinsically good or bad, oppressive or subversive, or even male or female. Instead, the women perceive and interpret Miranda’s sculpture of John/Helios’s body in different ways, bringing their own experiences and history to it, and constructing meanings and knowledge accordingly. The women urge Miranda to take her sculpture home, agreeing that, “‘Men don’t know what we know about life.’ … ‘They wouldn’t understand. So limited, poor things’” (120). Later, Miranda describes the art show in terms of “sisterhood” (134), thus elucidating the way in which her gaze at and re-presentations of John/Helios’s body provide the impetus for the creation of a separate and subversive female (and possibly feminist) community, one that mirrors, and offers meanings for, the interpretative community evoked extra-textually.

This image of women crowding around and variously interpreting a beautiful male body symbolizes an ideal vision of escape from patriarchal meanings and restraints. Yet, as with the portrayal of heterosexual love in Last of the Sane Days, the (f)act of women looking at and/or representing men’s bodies does not offer unconditional escape from patriarchal power dynamics. When the men of the community, and Miranda’s husband in particular, find out about the sculpture, they are enraged. The fate they intend for Miranda—internment in “the madhouse” (162)—can be interpreted as a specific punishment for transgressing the normative division between male spectator and spectacle. The “madhouse” is a place where visual agency is destroyed, where patients are “stolen away from the light and the sun, deprived of choice, of power, of creativity, condemned for ever to a place where dreams were chained to impotence. There I would be entombed in stone and silence. Not the sculptor any longer but the face imprisoned in the matrix, never to be released” (157). Thus, the utopian space of the art show is tempered by this portrayal of a suppression of women’s creativity and interpretative freedom as a real consequence of women’s position within patriarchal society.

While Miranda manages to avoid the “madhouse,” the terms of her escape are highly ambiguous. Nevertheless, in mocking the anxiety produced by male visibility in the text Miranda offers another form of escape. Specifically, such mockery exposes male corporeality as a real weakness in patriarchal society—one that can be exploited simply by women looking at men’s bodies and engaging (humorously, creatively, or subversively) with what they see. I described above Alfred’s “hysterical” reaction when he and Miranda arrive to collect John/Helios for church and find him half naked. This reaction—like his insistence that Christians are born fully clothed—is so extreme as to be absurd.

40. Miranda is offered and accepts passage on an American whaling ship—an archetypal male domain. Although America functions less as a country than a symbol of possibility and escape—a place where Miranda can imagine her “carved figures … irradiated by light which bounded from a sun shining more brightly than in Australia” (142)—it could be that Miranda is merely swapping one form of oppression for another: as she cannot leave except with the help of men, her escape is tinged with the possibility of new restrictions and submissions.
The excess and absurdity characterizing Alfred’s reactions to male nudity are similarly evident in his response when he is told about the sculpture of John/Helios Miranda presented to the women at the art show. Calling her a “Jezebel,” he screams to the community, “she has copulated with the Devil. So that we’ll all burn. Burn in Hell” (147). He then attempts to strangle her. Alfred’s reactions are violent and frightening. But at the same time as they depict the material effects of gender inequality, their excess is intended to evoke the readers’ laughter—a laughter which undermines the seriousness of such enactments of masculinity, and the authority men exert through violence.

As well as mocking anxiety about male nudity, various comments in Miranda seem designed to expose such anxiety as a ruse for maintaining male power. Following Alfred’s insistence that Christians are born with clothes, his mother’s aside to Miranda—“His father must have influenced him in such silliness” (80)—associates a fear of male nudity with patriarchy. Similarly, Miranda’s comment on naked men—“Everything is revealed really” (137)—might be seen as an allusion to the common theoretical argument that exposing the penis undermines patriarchal (or phallocentric) discourse because it reveals that “the actual organ fails to carry its symbolic weight”. The applicability of this idea to an understanding of the crisis evoked by male nudity in Miranda is suggested by the male community’s extreme aversion to Miranda’s sculpture of John/Helios’s naked body, and explicitly encouraged by Miranda’s description of the lighthouse as both a “penis” and a “phallus,” a conflation she subsequently identifies as a “mad parody of power” (41). Accordingly, the comments of the women at the art show demonstrate the subversiveness of differentiating penis from phallus. Pondering Miranda’s sculpture of John/Helios’s naked body, one woman says, to general agreement, “Just like my little boy when I bath him. So soft, like a tiny mushroom. Men don’t know that we know” (119-120). If the male community’s anger at Miranda’s sculpture signifies an attempt to maintain the conflation of penis and phallus, the women’s comments suggest the belatedness of such an endeavour.

Hence, while gender reversals do not automatically subvert patriarchal dichotomies, neither do they inevitably leave them unchallenged and unchanged. Rather, the effects of reversals depend on the treatment of the anxieties and instabilities they create. In The Architect, Jules’s feminization and Donna’s masculinization predominantly function as a premise for reasserting normative gender relations. Yet in Last of the Sane Days and Miranda, the anxieties and instabilities around male visibility and female vision remain operative and productive, destabilizing traditional gender formations and offering new ways of thinking about and portraying gender, corporeality, vision, and desire.

A fundamental reason for the complexity of the effects of women looking at and/or representing men’s bodies in these fictions is the intensely and disruptively paradoxical position of male visibility. Male visibility is so apparently (and often actually) threatening because the site/sight of the male body signifies a (or even the) central paradox of patriarchal society: white, heterosexual men must be highly visible and entirely invisible for gender inequalities to continue. It is in this sense that Dyer describes the hysteria of male display, arising from the need to make the male body visible as a symbol of the phallus and of masculinity, while simultaneously denying the demeaning implications of such visibility. Due to this paradox, instances of male visibility that are not recuper-
ated within normative conventions potentially emerge as reformulations of, and perhaps even unrecouperable challenges to, the dichotomous gender system underlying language and society.

The paradoxical position of male visibility within patriarchy may be why Mulvey’s theory of visual relations is so repeatedly evoked in and ironically useful for understanding both these fictions and other depictions of women representing and/or looking at men’s bodies. Although seldom noted, remarkable similarities exist between the function and position of the male body in psychoanalytic and patriarchal discourse. Although both discourses—psychoanalysis explicitly and patriarchy implicitly—refuse even the possibility of male spectacle, such spectacle is central to both paradigms. In psychoanalysis, the penis’s visibility is the precondition of sexual difference, and hence, of subjectivity. The perpetuation of patriarchal society similarly relies upon the naturalization of male dominance enabled by the visibility of the hegemonic male body. Accordingly, psychoanalytic models most accurately (though unintentionally) capture the paradox of male visibility: the fact that, although the male body is a necessary presence in the visual sphere—required (as Mulvey asserts in relation to the male movie star) to signify “the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ego ideal”—patriarchy itself “cannot bear” the “sexual objectification” of this body. Patriarchal power, like psychoanalysis itself, is so enmeshed in the signifying power of the male form (and vice versa) that when that body is objectified, both are undermined.

Another reason for the continuing relevance of arguments such as Mulvey’s to contemporary discussions of men’s visibility and women’s vision is that there are no readily available terms to substitute for the dichotomies she employs and defines. And not to heed, for example, the feminization that wounded male bodies undergo, or the masculinization to which a female body-builder is subject, is to ignore the fundamental ways in which bodies and gender are socially produced and inscribed. At the same time, employing theories like Mulvey’s makes it difficult to respond other than reductively to the various ways in which bodies, gender, and vision emerge and interact in linguistic and visual texts. Yet when the texts themselves evoke and engage in (what we customarily see as) theoretical ideas of gender, there seems to exist a real potential for gender relations to be figured anew. Certainly, the representation of male bodies in the contemporary novels by Australian women discussed here signal the need for feminist and masculinity scholars to attend to the myriad ways in which men’s bodies are being represented, rather than continually rehearsing the idea of the invisibility of the male body and the impossibility of the female gaze.

I have only discussed the ways in which women look at and represent men’s bodies in a handful of fictional texts. But the ideas explored in, and challenges presented by, these fictions resonate with a new and increasingly prominent social tendency, one that emerges in popular culture as well as in women’s creative practices throughout the West-

43. Despite being predicated on the impossibility of a male spectacle, Mulvey’s analysis is the framework for most discussions about women representing and/or looking at men’s bodies; see Catherine Summehayes, “Who in Heaven? Tracey Moffatt: Men in Wet-Suits and the Female Gaze,” JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory 33.1 (2003): 72-6; Parpart, “Cowards, Bullies, and Cadavers”; Tanner, “Death-Watch”; and Macdonald, “Regarding the Male Body.”
ern world. The transnational trend of women looking at and representing men’s bodies has significant implications for understanding and theorising the contemporary era. While historical taboos against this practice continue—as evidenced by the virulent condemnation to which women representing or discussing men’s bodies are often subjected—the fact that women’s representations of men’s bodies are increasingly prevalent suggests not only that language and representational codes for such practices are being created, but that the representations of men’s bodies in recent women’s literary and artistic practices are recognizable by or intelligible to society as a whole. In other words, what can be imagined and discussed regarding masculinities and male bodies—as well as male desirability and female desire—is expanding. The treatment of male visibility and female vision in *The Architect* warns us not to see this trend as unproblematically subversive. Nevertheless, the depiction, in *Last of the Sane Days* and *Miranda*, of alternative versions of female vision and male visibility implies that this recent trend has positive implications for feminist politics and practices and deserves considerably more critical attention.

45. In this sense it is notable that the novels I have discussed in this paper are oriented towards an international, rather than a particularly ‘Australian’ sphere. In *The Architect*, Jules is repeatedly described as “an international person” (264): he was born in Asia, educated in Europe, and lives in Australia. *Last of the Sane Days* is set in Europe, and contains only peripheral references to Australia. While *Miranda* may be set in Australia, the place and time is unspecified and ambiguous, and the novel ends with Miranda’s migration to America.