

# McKenzie Wark Femme as in Fuck You

e-flux journal #102 — september 2019 McKenzie Wark  
Femme as in Fuck You

My relationship to who I was is tenuous. Is this true of all people? This is why it seems important to me that all people create, make art, practice their imaginations, exercise beauty. When we fill the world with artifacts of what we dreamed we begin to learn from who we wanted to be, an imagined people who might know enough to stop making the same mistakes.

– T Fleischmann, *Time Is the Thing a body Moves Through*, 2019

I don't exactly know how I heard about Jessie Jeffrey Dunn Rovinelli's film *So Pretty*.<sup>1</sup> It was probably through Twitter. Jessie and I became mutuals there, and traded a few messages, before I even saw it. And after. And then we became friends. And then Jessie adopted me as one of her trans "daughters."<sup>2</sup> In both her art and life I saw a glimpse not just of the trans woman I wanted to be, but of a shared world to which such a trans woman might want to belong. I'm too old to ever become a pretty woman, but I might still want to believe and work, and play, in a pretty world.

Before I met Jessie, I saw her, at the New York premier of *So Pretty*. She was rather fetching, in a black see-through sheath dress over simple black underpants, her breasts bare, her slender frame pedestaled on giant platform shoes, which I would discover soon enough were her trademark. It might seem, let's say, problematic, to be discussing how a woman looked rather than what she said about her film, or the film itself. But maybe one of things at stake, for some trans women and femmes at least, is the right to claim to appear in our beauty at all. A beauty the cis world hardly knows how to acknowledge.

Maybe pretty is a better word than beautiful. *So Pretty* is adapted from a Ronald M. Schernikau novel, known as *So Schön*.<sup>3</sup> One might translate that as *So Beautiful*, but here as elsewhere Rovinelli transforms the source into something of her own. The pretty might be one of what Sianne Ngai calls the minor aesthetic categories: equivocal, diffuse, although I want to propose that one can still justify the pretty as an aesthetic, and that it can, in a low-key way, connect to a kind of action in the world.<sup>4</sup> Making things pretty might, in a low-key way, hint at the utopian.

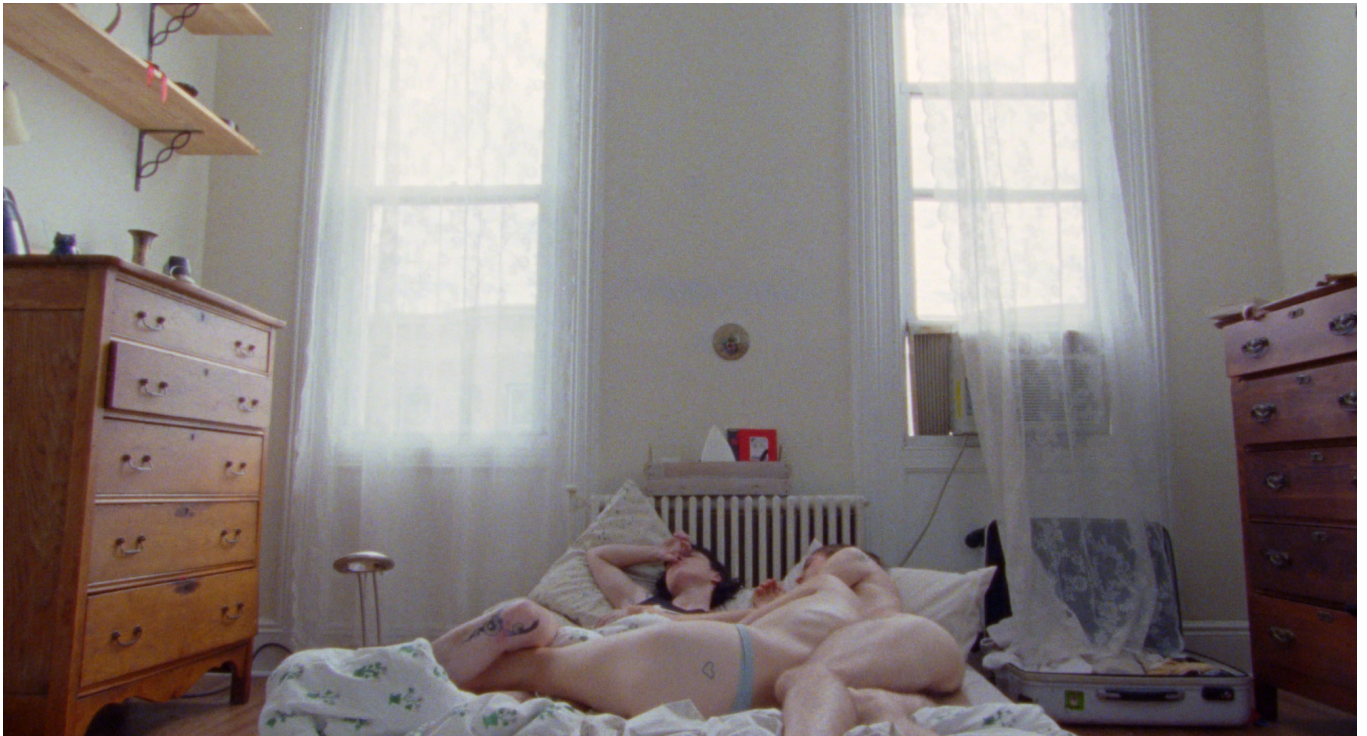
Here is the story, such as it is: Tonia arrives in New York and reunites with her lover Franz, and is introduced to Franz's circle. She meets Paul and Erika, who are also sort of a couple. They hang out, they go dancing. In the end, Tonia



Jessie Jeffrey Dunn Rovinelli, *So Pretty*, 2019. Filmstill from movie. Courtesy of the artist.







will be with Erika, and Franz with Paul. Along the way, we meet Paul's mother, Gera, a curious and caring older onlooker. And we meet Helmut, who involves them in a political demonstration, where Paul will get arrested and injured. Meanwhile, Paul makes photos, Erika makes music, and Tonia makes a staged reading of the Schernikau book in which they have all become characters, including herself as Tonia, rather than Tonio, as it is in the book.

Rovinelli reimagines Schernikau's world as inhabited by trans people. Schernikau's was a world of gay men, in the eighties, in Berlin, and yet a world with a lot of femininity in it – gay male life can have its femme side. A world I know a little about: had he lived, Schernikau would be my age now. For a while I tried to inhabit that femininity that was sometimes present and often disavowed in that eighties gay world.<sup>5</sup> To take the femme latent there as trans can be controversial in a gay world, but for we transsexuals, it's a reclaiming of some of our own pasts, lives, culture.

Except Helmut, who reads to me as a trans man, all of the characters are femme in some sense. Tonia and Erika are trans women. We learn near the end of the film of Tonia's transition; if you are trans you might clock a vial of injectable estrogen in Erika's room. Paul and Franz read to me as cis men with a femme side to their style and movement. On the way to a demo, Tonia will say that she used to think of herself as someone who could survive getting arrested, but not anymore. Helmut replies that while in principle he thinks Tonia should go to a women's prison, he does not particularly want to end up in the men's. Transition has changed the relation of their bodies to political possibility. To be trans is to flee a particular kind of violence, but to put oneself in the path of several others.

Everyone in *So Pretty* is so pretty. I'd like to say that even Helmut is pretty although it is not a thing one would say to a trans man. The time has long passed when one could call men as well as women "pretty." It's a word with German roots, with Dutch and English derivatives, that used to mean brisk and clever, maybe a bit tricky. Over centuries, it became more gendered. The tricky quality is related to a lack of strength, smallness, to getting by with one's wits, but then also with crafted and crafty appearances. The pretty may have elements of beauty but is perhaps not beauty in its pure or intrinsic form. It isn't a classical harmony of form and content. It may have elements of attractive form that hide a content that doesn't quite match appearances.

The word "pretty" is pretty trans. The sense of the pretty as duplicitous connects to a particularly hostile attitude to trans women: that we are traps. That our pretty faces and bodies

might hide dick. (The full Freudian catastrophe.) But what if this sense of the pretty was reversible? Perhaps what is pretty is not trying to hide anything. Perhaps what is pretty is instead displacing this whole idea of appearances as a cover for some essence.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps what is pretty need not be seen as hiding something, as damaged goods, but as a gift, as offering the possibility of stepping outside of exchange value.

Let's risk the idea that the changing valence of the pretty has an historical connection to the rise to dominance of a commodity economy: Before, a pretty man might be tricky, but need not be diminished by that association. It's an active quality, for one thing. But when the commodity displaces chivalrous codes of honor, the commodity itself becomes what is pretty, and it is not so much tricky as a trick, or a trap. Its pretty form hides its calculating essence. It lies in wait, in the market, in all apparent passivity, to hook the buyer with its charms. The pretty commodity is feminine; the pretty becomes feminine, and exchangeable – and suspicious.

Perhaps there's a shiny glint of the utopian in the pretty, even so. If only the pretty could be something other than a trap for men's desires, snaring their thirst for possession, for things that they might buy, own, abuse. Things that inevitably disappoint those desires, when put under close scrutiny. What if those pretty objects really did have agency, and danced?<sup>7</sup> The pretty might then be a bit utopian, but only to the extent that certain kinds of violence could be kept at bay. And only when they dance together.

After some texting went back and forth, Jessie and I met for coffee on the Upper West Side, in a café that flew the pride flag but which still felt like it was in enemy territory. It was a long conversation. One memorable thing was when Jessie said she had read Sianne Ngai's book on minor aesthetic categories. The most memorable was when Jessie declared that she thought all cinema is based on rape, and that she wanted to make a cinema that precluded the possibility of rape. That caught my attention.

The film business is rape culture. There's ways in which this is literally true. The #MeToo movement against rape culture partly started there.<sup>8</sup> But there's a way in which it is true in another sense, in terms of film form, film narrative, what the camera does and doesn't do. One thing it does a lot in the more rapey cinema is that it pries. It might begin by setting up for the viewer a fascinated gaze, at pretty things, at pretty women – but it must investigate! Like a buyer in the market; like a man on Tinder.

Sometimes, when the camera looks at a woman, there's a gap between what it shows in a longer shot of her pretty figure and what it shows when it comes in for the close-up on her wrought





face. The edit cuts away her body, reducing it to a face, and the face is supposed to betray some inner turmoil, some feeling that is hidden inside, to prove there's a heart there, or something. You could call it the male gaze. But sometimes also it's the cis gaze: checking to see that what's advertised as woman is female all the way through.

There might even be a cinema that's almost aware that it's doing this, but does it anyway. Let's call it meta-rape cinema: Antonioni's *Blow-Up* comes to mind, as does Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* or Brian De Palma's *Body Double*, or Chuck Jones's *Duck Amuck*. These are all films in which there is a double of the filmmaker within the film, whose work-practices we see. These are films that are fascinated with their own fascination with penetrating the mystery of the female body, with the pry and cut that reveals, beneath the vivacious surface, the dead thing.

I asked Facebook friends to suggest movies that might fit in a meta-rape genre. The four I chose here as examples are winnowed from a very long list. The rapey quality of cinema is abundant. While the thread was going, I sent a link to the *So Pretty* trailer to Adrian Martin, who sent me this Facebook message. "Sounds fascinating! btw Jacques Rivette said of his film *Amour Fou* in 1967 that 'cinema is necessarily fascination and rape' – and that is also a film-within-the-film, documenting theatre psychodrama. When I put that quote in my last book, an anonymous reader for Amsterdam Uni Press strongly requested that it be removed, for being so offensive in 2018!"

*So Pretty* attempts to invert the genre of the meta-rape film. Tonia comes to town to make a project. One assumes it's the staged reading in the park of *So Schön*, which recurs throughout the film. We see her in the milieu of Franz and his friends, but also directing them. It is different to meta-rape cinema. She is not investigating, exposing, revealing. What is she doing? What is involved in the production of the image of what is pretty out of the milieu in which it arises? It can't help but be contradictory. A film is still a commodity, and all that. A director still directs others, requests, requires, or persuades other people to do things, even in a cinema committed to a practice of consent. Tonia, like pretty much every filmmaker I know, is a social top.

Once Tonia joins the world of Franz and Erika and Paul and their friends, the camera tends to move sideways, tracking across rooms. It isn't interested in prying into any discrepancies between these pretty bodies and their hidden souls. It's not interested in isolating them as individuals with their separate "journeys." It is interested in how their bodies connect, or not, to each other, to the surfaces of the rooms where

they flourish, to the objects and art and books in those spaces. Those spaces are filled with artifacts through which to dream, and practice, another habitation for another life.

This is a utopian cinema, then. To the extent that this is possible. The first principle of utopia as a genre is the exclusion of violence.<sup>9</sup> That means that the violence is contained and neutralized, but still there. This is a place or a time, a constructed situation, where it is kept at bay, so something else might flower. In this situation, what can come into being is something femme, something trans, and something queer. Maybe it's so pretty because it brings together those three different but overlapping sensibilities, all of which might be pretty in different ways, different from each other and from the more conventional suspicion of the pretty as a trap.

It's a question of the viewer in relation to the point of view of the camera. It isn't controlling or exposing. The camera does not assert itself as the primary agent in the scene, nor do scenes appear to be staged to please the camera. It's as if the camera was just another point of view among a group, rather than the most (self-)important person in the room. This camera is not terribly interested in, or interesting for, the "male gaze." It doesn't much care for what one might call the straight gaze either. I suppose one ought, as a matter of manners, to describe the intimacy of Tonia with Franz, or of Erika with Paul, as heterosexual. (Trans women are women; trans women dating men of any kind are in hetero relations.) Then Paul ends up with Franz; Tonia with Erika. Gender is neither here nor there. They are all, in some sense, femme. Call it queer cinema if you like, but I don't think that exhausts what may be attractive in it.

I would not want to reduce *So Pretty* to being a trans film or Rovinelli to being a trans filmmaker. It's so much more than that. But it was what drew me to it. And that drew me back into a love of the cinema I thought I had lost, forever. The cinema I once loved was where you see and hear and feel things that are the gestures you want to draw into your own body, so as not to keep making the same mistakes.

It's not the usual trans film, though, as most of those seem not to break too much with what one might now have to call cis-cinema. Trans films still tend to be fascinated with transition itself. That's not of much interest here. The trans characters simply are. Their world simply is. Rovinelli asks what trans films usually don't: What if what had to transition was the world? It's a pretty image, delicately colored, of a little world as what could be.

Trans art sometimes has a problem with genre. Our lives are formatted into narratives





whose genre is romance or tragedy, where we get characters with whom to identify who are heroes or victims. Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager suggest satire instead, a genre without political optimism, that sees a world that is always less than itself.<sup>10</sup> Torrey Peters suggests the fantastic, as a form which hesitates between the uncanny and the marvelous, highlighting rather than poo-pooing the marvel of the world. Being trans is to not quite know whether gender is as cis people think it is, or something altogether more strange.<sup>11</sup> Or, a third genre option: Grace Lavery brings together Janet Mock's realness as accepting the truth about oneself with psychoanalysis and the genre of literary realism to suggest the possibility of a trans art of self-care that moderates "beautiful fantasy."<sup>12</sup>

The satiric and the fantastic are two poles: the art which shows the reality we think we know to be less than it seems; and the art which shows that reality as being suspended in unknowability. Perhaps realism is on an axis that crosses that one. It's an art of knowing which cuts fantasy down to the size of the world. Perhaps it needs its complimentary pole, the utopian: the art of editing together a world as expansive as our dreams. Within that matrix, *So Pretty* is a utopian film.

If the utopian is to be more than a momentary illumination, it has to be organized.<sup>13</sup> How to organize love? We see Erika read from Tonia's translation of *So Schön*. This is the problem the reading sets up. The love of these characters is already organized in the couple form. Any utopian project, of reorganizing love beyond it, finds its internal limit in the persistence of the couple, in the violence of its exclusivity. Like a lot of cinema, *So Pretty* pictures the problems of the individual and the couple, but it nests those problems, as an internal tension, within a utopian possibility.

Tonia talks to Franz about a translation question hinging on the slippage between the sense of togetherness and the sense of two-ness. They are on their way to go dancing. Tonia and Franz are arm in arm. So are Paul and Erika. But Tonia is looking at Erika. Later, the camera shows us Tonia and Erika, cuddling in an armchair. It lingers just for a beat, and then tracks sideways, across the room, and shows us Paul, Helmut, Franz, and Gera playing rock-paper-scissors. The couple form lives in tension with a polyamorous one. It's not resolved, but neither is the latter torn open, pried into, to show the inevitability of the couple.

It's early morning. We see Tonia, in a black skirt, big black boots, at the Forest Avenue elevated M train subway stop, in Ridgewood, Queens. The setting for *So Pretty* is mostly a kind

of imaginary double of Bushwick in Brooklyn and the adjacent Ridgewood section of Queens. However compromised – by precarity, by race, by the rent being too damn high – it wants to suggest that there could be another city for another life, to be glimpsed in moments, in this one.

One could say it is a privileged milieu. One imagines some of these characters as educated: Franz makes a protest sign that says "This art historian kills fascists." Helmut, on the other hand, is a bit of a chancer. *So Schön* took as its milieu those who worked in the incidental trades of the German postwar consumer economy. *So Pretty* seems more to evoke the milieu of those who work in incidental capacities in the information economy, but would rather make their own art. In psychogeographic terms, this is Brooklyn, including that part of "Brooklyn" that is actually in Queens.

Manhattan appears only as a site of protest and police. We glimpse the brand names of some Fifth Avenue stores, selling coercively normative designer beauty.<sup>14</sup> There probably cannot be a counter-economy of the beautiful, for the beautiful in this world can only be expensive, exclusive, and driven by envy: fascist fashion. But perhaps there can be a counter-economy of the pretty. In its utopian form, the pretty leaves the subtle violence of normativity behind. It isn't interested in norms at all. To be pretty is to offer a gift of the specificity of one's art of the self, gratis, to all. Of course, the pretty isn't egalitarian, as it has to remain rare. And it's still connected to youth, eroticism, and the fleeting – *So Pretty* abounds in flower motifs.

Flowers are one of the gifts offered, by Franz to Tonia, when he comes calling. She makes a salad for him, which he picks at while she makes it, before she shoos him away. He takes a pickle from the fridge instead. He made a gift of his bed to her at the start of the film, but now there's no reciprocity between them. The thing about gifts is that they can't really be returned, or can't be returned in the same form, or can only be offered on to someone else. *So Pretty* is full of gifts, of sharing, but this utopia is always incomplete, always changing, there is always some gift unreturned.

What makes the utopian side of the pretty possible is an at least partial escape from the commodity. In *So Schön*, Franz comes to the shop where a friend works to steal with his complicity. In *So Pretty*, Franz gets Paul to let him into the cinema where Paul works for free. Later, Franz calmly tells Paul an extraordinary story about being present in the grocery store when it is robbed, admiring the style of the robber, and himself making off with a loaf of bread. It's a scene that gestures to a tension in



utopia's relation to violence. Violating the violence of property might be what enables utopia's distance from all other forms of violence. The utopia of the gift occupies exactly the same space as the commodity economy and depends on it. It just keeps twisting it into little situations where something pretty might arise.

When the utopian holds violence at bay, even momentarily, the utopian can then become a situation in which to explore other tensions, between what has to be specific and what could become, let's say, generic, a shared quality. From *Schernikau*, the film takes the simple gesture of making coffee as a kind of metonym for shared life, for care. And yet when Tonia offers Erika water rather than coffee, it's a flirtation, an invitation to couple, rather than to commune. The same tension runs through sexuality: while Helmut whips the asses of Franz and then Tonia for fun, Paul takes pictures, while Erika is distracted by her phone. The group never succeeds in subsuming everyone into it.

Not even politics unites them. Helmut organizes the group for an anti-fascist demonstration; Erika complains to Paul that they've been sucked into some white bullshit. Race, among other things, cuts across utopian promise. When Franz declares his love for Paul, Paul responds: "You can't love me. I'm a corpse." It's hard not to read it in terms of black social death.<sup>15</sup>

The group makes signs for a demo, but Erika does not come. Tonia's says: FEMME AS IN FUCK YOU. And yet it is not so much opposition, to fascism, to whatever, that binds them. At another demo, Paul and Erika kiss, then Helmut and Erika kiss. There's a tension between being unified through negation, because they fight fascism together, and when they can be connected, partially, serially, by affirming something else.

The tension between the specific and the generic passes through aesthetics as well. Paul is a photographer; Erika is a musician. Their art seems solitary; removed from, or even taking from, the group. Writing might also be solitary too, but Tonia takes *Schernikau*'s text and embeds it into what is shared. She directs a group performance of her version of the text.

Here this viewer steps out of the film and into a tension between the film and the world of which it is the utopian double. Rachika, who plays Erika – I met her at a party – like her film double also makes music and rides a motor bike. I went to a rave with Phoebe, who plays Helmut. They are gender nonconforming rather than a trans man. Jessie's friend Razor, who appears in a kitchen scene in the film, lives in the house that served as the main filming location, and gives their real name in one scene. And so on.

The performers are choreographed into their scenes, together with the movement of the camera. They are not exactly acting, as they are themselves but not themselves.

Writing is a rather solitary art. It's good for those of us who lack qualities, who are not the life of the party. Films, like love, are organized. Organizing takes qualities. But which ones? Rather than qualities, one could also say gifts. Jessie Jeffrey Dunn Rovinelli is listed as the writer, director, editor, colorist, and coproducer of *So Pretty*, as well as playing the role of Tonia. She layers herself into this work, giving herself up to it, and yet at the same time, taking herself. To return to the whipping scene: Tonia is both the whipped and whipper in this scene. It reminds us of what can be consented to, and by whom. The flinching of those girls' asses under the whip – is real.

Once, when I got to the point at which hormone therapy was destabilizing my emotions and making it all but impossible for me to write, I reached out to Jessie in her capacity as my trans "mom." She told me she was in something like that tenuous state when she made *So Pretty*. So to the list of tasks she is undertaking, in *So Pretty*, one can add the transformation of her own body. It was such a gift for me to know this: Well if you can do all that through the turbulent phase of hormones, I can pull it together enough to just write. This essay on *So Pretty* isn't a critique – as if I could be a universal unmarked subject, making aesthetic judgements on par with those of others of my unmarked kind. It's not disinterested, it's motivated. It's a little gift for a pretty friend.

Transition doesn't come up much in *So Pretty* at all. But it does in the third-to-last scene. Tonia sits next to Helmut on a park bench. She talks about her feelings for Franz. She says that when she looked at herself, in the mirror, "I was so unclear on what I was seeing and what was looking back at me." Franz was her anchor, a constant in the world. "And as my body changed, I could at least compare that body to him. That someone would keep seeing me through different bodies. Now that I feel that's probably gone, I feel really – lost. I feel like I'm losing track of my body and I feel like I'm losing track of the way people see me." She rests her head on Helmut's shoulder.

This, to me, is the feeling of becoming a woman. Maybe it is for others who have tried it too. I honestly don't understand why cis people imagine they know something about gender when they have only ever been one of them. The feelings, through transition, well – sometimes they are not pretty. Here they are not hidden. Nor are they sublimated into an aggressive demand to show and know, as in so much cinema the cis

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make about us. Even at its most interesting: Fassbinder's *In a Year With 13 Moons*, Almodovar's *Bad Education* – cinema wants to fuck us. Well, fuck you.

A cinema without rape is probably impossible. Maybe even an illusion. But that doesn't mean cinema has to be made by rapists. Perhaps it could be organized by those who are pretty, meaning also those who are rape-able – to exclude it. Even if rape remains present in the form of its exclusion. Even if it remains in the world. What is so pretty in art, like what is so pretty in others, or even in oneself, even on a good day, is an illusion. And yet it is glorious to believe, not in the illusion, but in the possibility it augurs.

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All film stills from Jessie Jeffrey Dunn Rovinelli's *So Pretty* (Aspect Ratio Films, 2019).

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1  
So Pretty, directed by Jessie Jeffrey Dunn Rovinelli (Aspect Ratio Films, 2019). Here is the trailer <https://vimeo.com/350369453>.

2  
Not to be confused with house mothers (and fathers) in the culture of queer and trans people of color. In this instance, a mom, also sometimes called a big sister, is someone older in trans years with whom someone earlier in transition can meet, to talk about practicalities and emotions associated with transition, among other things. This is perhaps also a good place to mention that trans culture is as segregated as the rest of American culture, and that the categories of gender as we now endure them are a product of an intertwined history with categories of race and practices of racial violence. See C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), and: Whitney Terrell and V. V. Ganeshanathan, "C. Riley Snorton and T. Fleischmann Talk Gender, Freedom, and Transitivity," *Lithub*, March 7, 2019 <https://lithub.com/c-riley-snorton-and-t-fleischmann-talk-gender-freedom-and-transitivity/>.

3  
So Pretty is (freely) adapted from *So Schön* (Verbrecher Verlag, 2012). Originally published in 1982, the full title of this small work is: *und als der prinz mit dem kutscher tanzte, waren si so schön, daß der ganze hof in ohnmacht fiel: ein utopischer film*. Schernikau is not much known in English. Here's an introduction to his life and work, with links to extracts of an earlier work in translation: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/i-embrace-you-all-ronald-m-schernikau-and-the-queer-left/>.

4  
Adam Jasper, "Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai," *Cabinet Magazine*, no. 43 (Fall 2011) [http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper\\_ngai.php](http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php). See also Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard University Press, 2015).

5  
See José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009). A book I cherish and to which this essay is indebted, but whose handling of the femme element in queer culture this femme does not find congenial.

6  
Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (Palgrave, 1991). While one might leave some of its quaint ideas about gender behind, there's an idea in this text about the connection between the femme, the pretty, and the

seductive that refuses to be held accountable to being penetrated down to a supposedly more real essence.

7  
Just playing here with a famous image by Marx about the commodity: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/commodity.htm>.

8  
See *Where Freedom Starts: Sex, Power, Violence, #MeToo* (Verso, 2018) <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2773-where-freedom-starts-sex-power-violence-metoo>.

9  
On the "Utopian Enclave," see Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* (Verso, 2005). I'm gently dissenting from some of its theses.

10  
Andrea Long Chu and Emmett Harsin Drager, "After Trans Studies," *Trans Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (February 2019).

11  
T Fleischmann and Torrey Peters, "On Trans Essays," *Essay Daily*, January 4, 2016 <https://www.essaydaily.org/2016/01/t-clutch-fleischmann-and-torrey-peters.html>.

12  
Grace Lavery, "Trans Realism, Psychoanalytic Practice, and the Rhetoric of Technique," *Critical Inquiry*, forthcoming.

13  
To me, this is the enduring relevance of Charles Fourier. See McKenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (Verso, 2013).

14  
See Otto von Busch, "Ways to Make Fashion Work For Us," *Our World*, July 8, 2018 <https://www.ow-ourworld.nl/ways-to-make-fashion-work-for-us/>.

15  
Frank B. Wilderson III, "Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption," *Humanities Futures*, Franklin Humanities Institute, October 20, 2015 <https://humanitiesfutures.org/papers/afro-pessimism-end-redemption/>.