



Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism

Karen Beckman

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With the help of mirrors, trap doors, elevators, photographs, and film, women vanish and return in increasingly spectacular ways throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Karen Beckman tracks the proliferation of this elusive figure, the vanishing woman, from her genesis in Victorian stage magic through her development in conjunction with photography and film. Beckman reveals how these new visual technologies projected their anxieties about insubstantiality and reproducibility onto the female body, producing an image of "woman" as utterly unstable and constantly prone to disappearance.

Drawing on cinema studies and psychoanalysis as well as the histories of magic, spiritualism, and photography, Beckman looks at particular instances of female vanishing at specific historical moments—in Victorian magic's obsessive manipulation of female and colonized bodies, spiritualist photography's search to capture traces of ghosts, the comings and goings of bodies in early cinema, and Bette Davis's multiple roles as a fading female star. As Beckman places the vanishing woman in the context of feminism's discussion of spectacle and subjectivity, she explores not only the problems, but also the political utility of this obstinate figure who hovers endlessly between visible and invisible worlds. Through her readings, Beckman argues that the visibly vanishing woman repeatedly signals the lurking presence of less immediately perceptible psychic and physical erasures, and she contends that this enigmatic figure, so ubiquitous in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century culture, provides a new space through which to consider the relationships between visibility, gender, and agency.

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