



Feeding the Appetites: Nan Goldin's Movie Obsessions

by Hillary Weston (September 10, 2020)



In the four decades since she began her career in Boston as a photographer, Nan Goldin has used her own life as the narrative arc of an ever-evolving body of work. Searing in their intimacy and deeply influenced by cinema, her color-saturated photographs document her world and the friends and lovers in her circle, depicting the dramas of relationships both affectionate and abusive, the everyday lives of the LGBT community she has long been closely associated with, and the harrowing realities of the AIDS epidemic and the opioid crisis. Goldin remains most famous for *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, a series of 700 photographic portraits that she originally presented at underground venues like New York's Mudd Club as an improvised live performance and slideshow, set to the music of the Velvet Underground and Maria Callas. When the project was shown at the 1985 Whitney Biennial, Goldin became an art-world star. But while she has earned her place in the canon of American photography, she has long dreamed of becoming a filmmaker.

This summer, New York's Metrograph theater put the spotlight on Goldin's recent film and video work, presenting the digital debut of her found-footage short *Sirens* and making her the first guest curator of its new streaming platform, where she programmed personal favorite films by Vivienne Dick and Michael Roemer. An exploration of the ecstatic pleasures of addiction, *Sirens* is an assemblage of clips from the work of Jack Smith, Henri-Georges Clouzot, Kenneth Anger, Lynne Ramsay, Michelangelo Antonioni, and other filmmakers, woven together by Mica Levi's haunting score. Just as *The Ballad* metamorphosed over a period of time, so too has *Sirens*. A new, reedited version is coming to the Metrograph's site this weekend, presented by Goldin alongside a secret film selection.

On the occasion of *Sirens'* release, I got the chance to speak with the artist about her memories of moviegoing in a bygone era of New York and the ways that her lifelong passion for cinema has helped shape her vision.

Do you remember the first film that made you fall in love with the movies?

I saw *Blow-Up* for the first time when I was fifteen, and it's why I decided to become a photographer. I have scenes from that movie embedded in my brain forever, especially the one with David Hemmings and Veruschka. Years later I photographed her, but it didn't come close to that scene! I saw it with my father, who didn't get it. Around that time I also saw Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, which was revelatory for me and still is every time I see it. I actually just saw it again two nights ago.

Did you go to the cinema often when you were growing up?

Yeah. I lived in a hippie commune and went to a free school. Basically we didn't have classes, and we went to the cinema almost every day. In Cambridge there was the Brattle Theatre and the Orson Welles Cinema, which showed three movies at a time. I grew up on double features—I'm still not used to the single feature. We would also go to all-night screenings.

Cinema was the major art form in my life, and at that age I wanted to be a filmmaker when I grew up. I ended up doing photography because it was easier, and it's taken me a long time to respect it as one of the serious mediums, like painting and filmmaking. I've never taken it as seriously. I think of my slideshows as films made of stills, and recently I've started working with moving images.

Do you see your film and video work now as an evolution of the *Ballad of Sexual Dependency* slideshows?

The Ballad of Sexual Dependency is my magnum opus, and it continued to evolve from 1980 to 2015. I continually changed it, so I don't see it as only historical—it's a live work. I just did a major show in London where I presented three new pieces. One of them is a three-screen video piece on Salome with disco music, and another is called *Memory Lost*, which I hope to screen when Metrograph reopens. They're companion pieces: *Sirens* is about the pleasure and euphoria of drugs, and *Memory Lost* is about the darkness of addiction. I have another analog slideshow called *The Other Side*, which is related to the book of the same name and features drag queens and trans people I've lived with since the seventies and up until 2011.

I'd love to know more about your early days in New York. What was your experience of the downtown film scene like?

When I moved to New York in 1978, it was the week the Mudd Club opened, and that scene was very much alive. People were also showing each other their films at St. Marks Cinema and Theater 80, which was another venue on St. Marks. One week it would be Vivienne Dick, another it would be John Lurie and James Nares or Eric Mitchell or Amos Poe. Some of the films were works in progress and we'd see them in different edits over time. The audience was made up of people who were in the films, like Lydia Lunch and James White of the Contortions. That was a big part of my life at the time. Then there was a place called the O-P Screening Room, run by a man named Rafik, and that's where I first started showing *The Ballad*. Jack Smith had a night there, and Vivienne showed there. That continued until the mid-eighties.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

In the series you put together for Metrograph, you programmed two of Vivienne Dick's films, *Liberty's Booty* and *Beauty Becomes the Beast*, alongside *Sirens*. I'm curious about the connection between her work and yours.

I would have never made *The Ballad* without Vivienne. She showed me a whole new way of making work and taught me about the relationship between music and editing. I started using slides as a way to show my work and editing music segments together as a narrative voice. She opened me up to that. Her work is seemingly so fragmented and visceral but is still very tightly done. Her films are never didactic, even when they are dealing with topics like prostitution or childhood trauma. She's someone who works out her struggles in her films. I love to see somebody's psyche on the screen. She also gives one of the truest views of the Lower East Side at the time, which everyone wants to imitate so badly now. And the people in the films were always her friends. Like *The Ballad*, her narratives are also driven by the music.

On the Criterion Channel we're showing a series of Bette Gordon's films, including *Empty Suitcases*, which has that amazing scene where you and Vivienne are trying on clothes and taking photographs.

I love seeing all our outfits from then, including Vivienne's famous green dress. It's about the female gaze . . . whatever that means. I think that's probably Bette's greatest. Of course I have a warm spot for *Variety*, since it was shot in my bar.



Variety

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

I actually fell in love with your photographs from the set of *Variety*, such as *Variety booth*, *New York City* and *Cookie at Tin Pan Alley*, which I stumbled on before I even saw the movie. So watching that film for the first time was like seeing your work come to life. It was a magical experience for me. How does it feel to look back on that film now, especially the scene set in Tin Pan Alley, the bar you mentioned?

Variety has some of my closest friends of that time in it, like Cookie Mueller and Suzanne Fletcher. It takes place at the bar I worked in, so I wanted it to be as real and true to life as possible. Of course it's a narrative, so it's not exactly real, but it's close. The actual plot of *Variety* is not as important to me as the scenes in the bar, with the conversations between friends. I wanted the film to feel like what it really felt like to be in that bar at that time. That was my home for five years; I lived there. The woman who owned the bar was extremely supportive of my work—she was the first person to tell me, in 1980, that *The Ballad* was political. She was very curious about the downtown scene and had live performances and screenings at the bar.



Variety

When you first began photographing the people in your life, you said you were inspired by old Hollywood, Hitchcock films, and stars from bygone eras. Can you tell me more about the periods in film history that have had an influence on your work?

I was interested in the whole history of cinema. We would go to the Harvard Film Archive and see all of the films with Marlene and Marilyn, all of Douglas Sirk's films, all of Joan Crawford and Bette Davis—all of the Hollywood goddesses we were obsessed with. I saw a lot of European cinema: Antonioni, Robbe-Grillet, and Jacques Rivette. I've also been very influenced by Andy Warhol's films since I was a teenager.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY



Variety

I've absorbed cinema so fully that the work has unavoidably been influenced by it. The way Warhol focused on people and turned them into goddesses still has an effect on me. Antonioni, Visconti, the colors of Sirk—they still have an effect on me. Cassavetes is actually the common denominator in many periods of my life.



Variety

But I'm not thinking about cinematic imagery when I do my work, which comes out of my relationships and experience. I never try to mimic anybody, but the movies I love are deeply imprinted on my brain and in my view of the world. *Sirens* is the first work I've made from existing footage. It's my ode to movies. But all the other pieces I've made are from my own images and life.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

What sparked the idea for *Sirens* and how did you go about assembling the footage?

As I was researching that Salome piece I showed in London, I came across this footage of Donyale Luna in a bizarre version of *Salome* by Carmelo Bene, which appears at the beginning and ending of *Sirens*. In this footage I could see that she was high, and I got an idea. I was also working on *Memory Lost*, about my own addiction. So I thought, wouldn't it be great to show the euphoria of being high, with this beautiful actress as the embodiment of that?



Sirens

Donyale frames the piece. She died of an overdose at thirty-three, but she had an incredible life. She was a mythomaniac who said she was an Egyptian princess. She lived in Rome and was involved with Brian Jones, and then she ended up dying in Italy. She was also the first Black supermodel in the world. I looked through everything I could find about her and went deep into other work that I felt also spoke about what it's like to be high. I wasn't going after particular films or filmmakers so much as looking for films that spoke to that feeling. I'm making a new version of *Sirens* even as we speak, and it has Warhol screen tests in it.

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Sirens

You often talk about these larger-than-life stars you love, such as Marlene Dietrich or Greta Garbo . . .

I recently rediscovered Judy Holliday. She should have been a bigger star. So luminous on-screen, with a surprisingly deep voice and perfect comedic timing. She was from a political family and was called up in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee. She was on the right side of history. Barbara Stanwyck is my favorite, actually, though she was virulently anticommunist. She was really tough, her women were always tough, and they moved through the world independently. They're beautiful, she was beautiful, and the narratives are always fabulously complicated. She's a comedian as well. My favorites are *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* and *Ball of Fire*.



Sirens

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She's the kind of star whose presence leaves a mark on you the second you see her on-screen. I feel like the subjects of your photographs also have that quality because you frame them with such emotion and power. Is this an effect you're consciously creating, or is it more the result of the magnetism of the people you gravitate toward?

The drag queens I lived with in the seventies, who are depicted in my early black-and-white photographs, had personas based on these movie goddesses. Every night we went to a bar called the Other Side and they lip-synced to Marlene or Marilyn or Judy Garland. They were the embodiment of those stars for me, and for themselves. As I've gone on, I've found the people I'm attracted to emotionally and physically. I never photograph anyone I don't find beautiful. I guess if you photograph someone enough, they achieve a kind of star magnitude. They become a star in the movie of my life.



Sirens

I read an interview in which you said you often watch *Imitation of Life* so that you can cry. I was struck by the way you phrased that, and it made me wonder if this kind of catharsis is something you frequently seek out in cinema.

Yes. It's not easy for me to cry, so I love finding a film that makes me do it. I watched *Nothing But a Man* again last night and cried. Certain documentaries like *How to Survive a Plague* or *Crip Camp* make me cry. *Imitation of Life* made me cry for many years. It's a film that's racially charged, but it was the relationship between mother and daughter that really made me cry. Films that have relationships between fathers and daughters make me cry. There's a film called *BPM* that makes me weep. I recently sobbed while watching *Bohemian Rhapsody* on a plane. It's not dependent on the quality of the film. What triggers me is revisiting the dark days of AIDS we lived through.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

You selected *Nothing But a Man* for your Metrograph program. I'm wondering what your connection is to that film.

I first saw it so many years ago, but it still has the same effect on me. I always carry DVDs with me, and this is one of them. I just think it's one of the greatest movies. It's interesting that this film was made by a Jewish man [Michael Roemer] who escaped the Holocaust. It's from that period during the civil rights movement when there were a lot of white Jewish people involved in it. There's something in the film about the relationship between the Jewish diaspora and Black Americans. He entered a world he didn't know at all and represented it with such depth and clarity—that's remarkable.

As Michael Roemer says himself, it was a time when there weren't many Black filmmakers. After a certain point, he didn't need to make films anymore because more Black people were making their own. Roemer shows his characters in all their humanity with great tenderness. He's showing them in a way I don't often see men depicted, regardless of color. The way it's filmed, you see every hair growing on their faces. It's so stark and beautiful. It's also the first film about race in the history of American cinema that celebrates Black men. It was Malcolm X's favorite film. The acting is superb. It's a very brave film, and I think Roemer was extremely compassionate.



Nothing But a Man

What are some of the other films you carry with you?

I carry an Argentinian film by Lucía Puenzo called *XXY*, about a young trans person growing up and her relationship with her father. I carry *Nights of Cabiria* with me.

Oh, I know what else makes me cry: *La strada*. The end of that film is about existential loneliness on such a profound level. I carry Lukas Moodysson's *Lilya 4-ever*, about a young girl sold into prostitution. I carry Cassevetes's films with me. I carry Visconti. I carry William Klein. I carry Bresson. And I carry Samuel Fuller's *The Naked Kiss*, and also his *White Dog*, one of the darkest films about racism.

MARIAN GOODMAN GALLERY

Given our current inability to indulge our cinephilia at a movie theater, I'm curious what your viewing habits have been like?

At the beginning of the pandemic I watched *Contagion* over and over again, as well as *Outbreak*. I watched *Children of Men*, which I love. Then I became absorbed in all of the TV series that have come out, like *The Outsider* and, of course, *Tiger King*. *The Plot Against America* is a terrifying warning of what's coming if Trump gets reelected. I watched John Oliver, who gives me the real news. I watched *I May Destroy You*, which I think is so smart. A friend moved in and for a while we were watching two movies a day like I used to. It was like a course in film history for her. We've had a Barbara Stanwyck series, then a Hitchcock period and a Buñuel period, then we started all of Sirk's films, and a lot of comedies from the forties, like those of Preston Sturges. We went through some periods of European cinema and then did a Cassavetes series. Especially since I started working with Jake [Perlin] at Metrograph, I've been watching political documentaries. These times seem almost too serious for fiction. He turned me on to the perfect film for these days, called *Now*; the soundtrack features "Hava Nagila," sung by Lena Horne and with lyrics demanding for racial justice, on top of clips of police brutality. I have ultimate respect for Laura Poitras and Arthur Jafa; I watch Jafa's films over and over. My appetite for film is endless.