

# Vanishing in Plain Sight

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## ABSTRACT

Playfully negotiating the historical constructs of theatrical vanishing and its disturbingly female trappings this paper centers on the creation of Bautier de Kolta's *l'Escamotage D'une Dame*, an illusion used to screen the anxieties of the male British populous, irked by a buoyant surplus in unmarried, white, middle class women, in the late 1880s. Introducing texts such as W. R Greg's *Why are women Redundant?* This paper makes ever more apparent the political, violent and sexual connotations of the female body in magical feats of performative disappearance. From the photographic curios of hidden mothers to the dark room of the séance, the conversation unfurls around the many forms of female vanishing, culminating in a discussion of the contemporary artwork *Escamotage* (Grace A Williams, 2015) that takes the Persian rug as both a motif of magical vanishing and a tool for the exposure of form.

This paper was originally delivered as a performance from within a 'Zig-Zag' illusion box, in collaboration with artist David Cheeseman. The first critical analysis of women's role within magical illusions, delivered by a female artist from within a magical prop that continues to dismember female bodies for entertainment in the contemporary magic market.

## KEYWORDS

Magic, feminism, vanishing, mediumship, hidden mothers, fine art

'RUBINI in his great feat. Beheading a Lady! Every evening at 8, Wednesday & Saturday at 3 & 8, Admission one shilling.'<sup>1</sup>

It was during a visit to the V&A museum in late 2011 that I first came across the strikingly humorous poster for a performance by the magician Rubini. A riot of green, black and red, it perfectly depicts the grotesque morbidity of taste in the era of the Egyptian Hall. A woman's freshly decapitated torso flails elegantly, draped in rich white satins, close to spoiling from the rubies of dripping blood falling from her severed neck. Next to her, the sophisticatedly suited Rubini fixes the viewer with a magnetically charged gaze, clasping his victim's forlorn head in his right hand and the sickle-ended blade of execution in the other. This caricatured drama is typographically framed by the announcement of available daily viewings, each evening at the genteel time of eight. The gleeful manner of presentation makes it difficult to imagine an alternative scenario in which the mutilation of a female body could similarly be promoted as entertainment, other than in the field of magic.

There are few who would struggle to conjure the typical image of a magician's glitter-clad assistant, whether sawn in half, levitated, decapitated or vanished she is a sight of beauty and calm, a symbol of female submission and male dominance. The violence towards the female body in magical illusions is both spectacular and unique, yet it remains a lesser-studied segment within feminist critique. The social and political issues that led to the creation of some of the most famous vanishing illusions play an important role in beginning to unpick the gendered trappings of magical artifices, and none more so than the creation of Bautier de Kolta's *l'Escamotage D'une Dame* which when first performed in 1886, confidently established vanishing as a female scenario.

## VANISHING AS SPECTACLE

In 1803 Robert Malthus published an extended version of a pamphlet he had written on the principles of population. In its final form entitled *An Essay on Population* he endeavoured to illustrate that the identity of a populace was shaped by the relationship between the social body and a contemplation of its waste. It was Malthus's belief that individuals could greatly reduce the problem of over popularisation by actively contemplating the waste they autonomously produced. But in Malthus's eyes waste consisted not only of abject bodily fluids but excess procreation, particularly in what he denoted as the 'abject poor', (Beckman, 2003 p. 23) those members of society who were unable to work or provide for themselves or any dependants. The removal of the abject poor from the social body through death

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<sup>1</sup> The headline of a poster advertising a performance by the magician, Rubini, performing his great feat 'Beheading a Lady' at the Egyptian Hall, London. Typographic and pictorial printed 3 colour poster, in black, red and green ink, 1869. Printed by J.W Last, on display at the V&A Theatre & Performance, room 106b. Museum number S.5-1983. Viewable at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O158279/poster/>. [Accessed 2 December 14]

was for Malthus an idealised solution, solving the problem of too many bodies, whilst valorising the health and situation of the remaining populous. Of course, this hypothetical eradication also posed a problem. It was duly noted that to fully understand itself the population required the visibility of its own waste (Kristeva, 1982, p. 3).<sup>2</sup> The surplus of society suddenly became a spectacle and Victorian Britain first experienced the power of 'vanishing *as* spectacle' (Beckman, 2003 p. 23).

The problems of over popularization that prompted Malthus' polemic succeeded particularly in emphasizing the role of desire in civilization. Malthus understood the importance of reproduction as a necessity for the continuation of the human race but took exception to excessive consumption due to a lack of ability to control sexual desire; a desire he thought particularly prominent in the female sex. He advocated the image of the virtuous woman who abstained from all carnal activities prior to marriage and went even further in denouncing marriage as a modern female necessity. Instead Malthus projected the view that women who remained unmarried and worked throughout their life were in fact more positively contributing to society;

She has really and truly contributed more to the happiness of the rest of the society arising from the pleasures of marriage, than if she had entered into this union herself, and had besides portioned twenty maidens with a hundred pounds each. (Malthus, 1992, p. 272)

Through women remaining unmarried and working they were, in Malthus's opinion, not only reducing the excess waste of the population but also financially aiding greater causes in society through a distribution of their wealth. Astonishingly, in the decades that followed there was a surge in the number of females who appeared to adhere to Malthus's model of the virtuous woman and brought her to fruition. A noticeable abundance of surplus unmarried women suddenly showed in society and the once positively acknowledged course of behaviour swiftly became a point of crisis. The austere figure of an independent woman of means created an atmosphere of trepidation that pierced the souls of the male population and the question of how to reduce such a surplus became a point of discourse.

### **WHY ARE WOMEN REDUNDANT?**

Solutions to this unexpected quandary came from all directions but perhaps the most famous and disastrous of them all were the ideas of W. R Greg in his 1869

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<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An essay on Abjection* further elaborates on the importance of the visibility of waste as a sign of health and life, it is only through these visible bodily products that we know our bodies are functioning 'Such wastes drop so that I may live' Kristeva, J. (1982) *Powers of Horror: An essay on Abjection*. New York; Guildford: Columbia University Press, p.3.

publication *'Why are women redundant?'*<sup>3</sup> In this delightfully entitled paper Greg provided a possible solution for the desired diminishment of the surplus female population via a mass emigration of women to the colonies.

We must redress the balance. We must restore by an emigration of women that natural proportion between the sexes in the old country and in the new ones, which was disturbed by an emigration of men, and the disturbance of which has wrought so much mischief in both lands. (Greg, 1869, p. 15)

Though it seems laughable, the evident fantasy of Greg's solution was not immediately apparent. The failure to acknowledge the physical and corporeal mass of the female population instantly rendered the scale of emigration as a magical feat, but Greg was not wholly ignorant of the dilemmas created by the implementation of his plan. The issue most cloying to his palette was a fear for the safety of so many displaced British women, the active exposure of the gentrified female mass to the "otherness" of the colonies' (Beckman, 2003 p. 29). Of course, all voiced concerns paled into insignificance when faced with the physical means required to transport thousands of female bodies to the colonies. The realisation slowly dawned that the scale of such an operation would have taken almost a decade to complete and that was without taking into account any further additions to the female population, which would naturally occur over such a long period of time. Vanishing in reality is never without material trace; the corporeal problems of disappearance always leave behind a residue.

Although Greg's plan was without doubt unrealistic it brings to the fore the overwhelming desire for a form of magical disappearance. The surplus women of Britain continued to be deemed threatening to white male supremacy and although a disappearance into the colonies provided a viable option, it was definitely without its positives.

Britain did want its surplus women to disappear into the space of the colonies, but it longed for a disappearance that would not have to deal with either the materiality of the body or the violence inherent to disappearance. In short, it wanted magic' (Beckman, 2003 p. 35)

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<sup>3</sup> This article by W.R Greg was successfully countered by the feminist author and member of the Langham Place Circle Jessie Boucherett, who argued that the problem of surplus women was in fact a male construct that had very little to do with physical statistics; instead she believed that it stemmed from a traditional male view of women as essentially surplus in all respects see *How to provide for Superfluous Women* by Jessie Boucherett reprinted within Butler, J. (2010) *Women's work and Women's Culture: A Series of Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 27.

The violence that only magical vanishing can escape took on a very different reading following the events of the Indian Rebellion in 1857 and in particular the disastrous occurrence of the Cawnpore massacre. It is from this single event that the sudden change in accoutrements and the site of magical female vanishing can be better understood.

## THE VIOLENCE OF VANISHING

It is with some uncertainty that the birthplace of magic can be assigned to India<sup>4</sup> but throughout the nineteenth century it is clear that the trappings of early stage illusion were heavily referencing the clothes and textures of foreign origins. The first magic feats performed throughout Britain were by Fakirs<sup>5</sup> and even established British magicians chose to utilise props or settings that spoke of magic's mystical origins. But, this all changed after the Indian rebellion<sup>6</sup> and in particular the events of the Cawnpore massacre.

The Indian rebellion to recapture Delhi from the English produced one particular event that resulted in an eruption of anger and fear within the British male population. The massacre at Cawnpore occurred on July 15 and resulted in the brutal slaughtering of two hundred European women and children imprisoned in Cawnpore's *bibighar*, a building that had once held the Indian mistresses of white European men. The violence of the *disappearance* of this number of women and the abject material traces it left, blood, hair and limbs, enraged the male European populous who had for so long created their power and stance as the gentlemanly protector and defender of women. (Beckman, 2003 p. 31-9) The already present layer of fear was thickened by an unnerving anxiety that the position of the white European male could also become as superfluous as the female bodies mutilated in the event at Cawnpore. It is at this point that we can clearly define the role of stage illusion, in particular the vanishing Lady act, as a historical public screen onto which the British population projected their anxieties. (Beckman, 2003 p. 42)

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<sup>4</sup> See the introduction to Hopkins, A. A. (1991) *Magic: Stage Illusions, Special Effects and Trick Photography*. New York: Dover Publications Inc.

<sup>5</sup> A Fakir is a Hindu ascetic who lives by begging and whose religious practice often includes the performance of extraordinary feats (Encarta English Dictionary UK).

<sup>6</sup> The cause of the Indian rebellion of 1857, is widely acknowledged as being due to the introduction of a new bullet cartridge covered in animal fat, that had to be bitten open in order to release gun powder. The use of pig and cow fats, highly offensive to those practicing the Hindu and Muslim religion caused an increasing anger amongst soldiers. It was known as the Lee-Enfield cartridge. This sparked three regiments on May 10, 1857 to kill their officers and begin a rebellion against the English to recapture Delhi. There is also some contention over the use of terminology around the Indian 'rebellion' or 'massacre'. Britain throughout all coverage referred to it as a massacre and the Indian authorities maintained its status as a rebellion see Said, E. (1993) *Culture and imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus, as well as Beckman, K. (2003) *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*. United States of America: Duke University Press, p.31-39.

Following the tragedy at Cawnpore the styling and setting of magic acts took a radical turn away from the references of India and instead cemented the magician as a uniquely British enterprise. The mystical robes and orientalist settings were left behind and the illusion acts moved to the domestic space of the parlour<sup>7</sup> as well as the theatres of Europe. Through this re-appropriation of the magician we first come into contact with the stage illusion *The Vanishing Lady* and now knowing a little of the political circumstances rife during its creation, we can begin to untangle the symbolic references it holds, whilst also questioning the gender problematic of its strictly female trappings.

Bautier de Kolta's *Vanishing Lady Act* took Europe by storm in 1886 and established the trick of vanishing as exclusively female. (Beckman, 2003 p. 49) At the request of magicians Maskelyne and Cooke the trick was performed within the non-orientalist setting of the drawing room and heavily informed by the current problems of the unmarried female surplus, the *victim* of the disappearance was a young unmarried woman, of built stature<sup>8</sup>, called Mademoiselle Patrice. Once placed onto a chair, under which a sheet of newspaper would be positioned, the female sitter would be covered with a red silken shawl (the only remaining emblem of the non European origins of the trick) that when dramatically pulled away would reveal the empty chair. The room would then be astonished to hear Mademoiselle Patrice call out from the audience 'here!'

As a constructed illusion this trick does more than just *vanish* a lady and it is through the dissection of its parts that we may see its political value. As we have already noted Mademoiselle Patrice plays an important role in highlighting the corporeal nature of disappearance, as she is described as a woman of no slight proportions, but also that she is unmarried. Her disappearance through a sheet of newspaper is a unique emblem of Bautier de Kolta's design; the paper itself was in fact made from the new material India rubber and it is through this revelation that we can read Kolta's disappearing lady as in fact vanishing into the colonial spaces of India 'without even making a dent in the news of the day'.<sup>9</sup> Alongside this is the

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<sup>7</sup> This move to within the domestic space of the household parlor takes on enhanced meaning when we speak of the magic act *The Vanishing Lady*, it could in some respects be seen as a site already haunted by the disappearance of the female body, once married many women would be confined to within the space of such household rooms and so the notion of a double disappearance is continually ignited.

<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on the build and weight of Mademoiselle Patrice in most articles of the time was most certainly an acknowledgement of the power of the *Vanishing Lady* as an act, perhaps even a reference to the impossible plans of W R Greg. But the excessive corporeality of Mademoiselle Patrice was of no consequence to the male illusionist who could conjure her and vanish her at any given moment regardless of her weight.

<sup>9</sup> This also echoes W R Greg's desire to vanish mass numbers of the female population with little effect, see Beckman, K. (2003) *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*. United States of America: Duke University Press, p.55.

disappearance without return of the red silken scarf which vanishes forever the last reference to the oriental origins of magic.

The “superior” British magician carefully separates the spectacular female body, about whose well-being we actually care, from the less visible traces of British colonized space, traces of which disappear along unnoticed with the lady but never come back. (Beckman, 2003 p. 59)

The Vanishing Lady thus acted as both a screen to the political anxieties of the day as well as working as a form of therapy, restoring power and authority to the re-born British conjuror.

An interesting aside to this reading of Bautier de Kolta’s trick was formulated in a recent discussion I had with the magician and illusion builder Scott Penrose. When attempting to re-build de Kolta’s chair from original designs and drawings, Penrose had discovered that none of the outlines were correct and any version of the chair built following Kolta’s instructions, would in fact prevent the female sitter from disappearing through the concealed trap door, she would instead be imprisoned in her position. In particular this was caused by a small piece of wire that ran across the front of the assistants knees, possibly an asrah form designed to keep a bodily shape under the silken shawl. Perhaps this detail was a clever diversion by de Kolta to protect the secrets of his design but it once again re-enforces through practical means the impossibility of the magical disappearance of the female body, echoing the problems of earlier plans by W.R. Greg.

## A SUBSTITUTION

Taking this newly framed context for the vanishing lady illusion, much can be said of differing sites of the vanishing woman. It is evident that in the latter half of the nineteenth century the profusion of illusionists performing the Vanishing Lady act eventually led to disinterested audiences.<sup>10</sup> Many would think that the demise in context of the vanishing Lady would render its appearance in new genres obsolete and yet this is not the case. Slowly disappearing from the stage the new site for the vanishing woman was film.

When Georges Méliès created his silent short film called *The Vanishing Lady* in 1896, he recreated in detail Bautier de Kolta’s magical illusion with all its props intact but instead of simply disappearing and reappearing the lady Jehanne d’Alcy, also Méliès wife, he added a step. Before returning the vanished female body he first conjures a charred skeleton in her place, in what he coined the *substitution trick*. The violence of

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<sup>10</sup> This in itself could be seen as a comment on the general feeling towards women at the time, Vanishing as spectacle attracted audiences across Europe who all desired to see an easy solution to the unrest that was so prevalent.

this new addition, reminds us of the materiality of disappearance, as well as the brutal history of vanishing, such as the massacre at Cawnpore. But, since the political status of the female body as a sign for surplus had somewhat subsided, it is significant that the victim of vanishing illusions remained predominantly female. The argument shifts from a political reading of the female body to a discussion of the gender relationship between the conjuror and assistant, which so often revolves around 'a male magician performing acts of wonder upon a female subject' (Fischer, 1979, p. 30).

Méliès' film belongs to an era of cinema that is often referred to as pre-narrative, it is built around spectacle and action but not a progressive narrative, it belongs to what Tom Gunning explains is 'the cinema of attractions', (Gunning, 1990, p. 56-62) in *The Vanishing Lady* the spectacle is the female body and this highlights the important relationship between the conjuror and his female assistant. She is reduced to a decorative object, a superfluous creature that can be manipulated masterfully by the male conjuror. For Lucy Fischer Méliès plays an important role in determining the image of women in cinema but she also acknowledges his original role as an illusionist and that his fascination for vanishing derives from 'theatrical magic' (Fischer, 1979, p. 30) it is not fair to equate all magical illusions with damning sexism but the relationship between conjuror and assistant is something that is persistently critiqued in her writing,

The act of the male magician conjuring women is simply a demonstration of his power over the female sex. Woman has no existence independent of the male magician; he can make her appear when he wants her and disappear when (to paraphrase de Beauvoir), he wishes no longer "to contend" with her. Woman is thus a function of male will. (Fischer, 1979, p. 31-2)

The conjuring and disappearing of female bodies is a point that Fischer goes on to extend into a discussion that views male magicians as envious of the female ability to reproduce. The magicians role of disappearing and conjuring at will, all manner of objects including the female body, lacks only one wondrous feat, the ability to give life; this argument is demonstrated by using the example of one of the most basic of magic tricks, pulling rabbits out of a hat. When placed in context this is an intriguing point but it can't be universally stated that vanishing on film is uniquely female, in many pre-narrative films disappearances of all kinds, male, female and objects occur in fast succession and this is a point made by Linda Williams in a response to Fischer's article;

Fischer is quite right to stress the significance of magic which exerts power over women's bodies, de-corporealising and reducing them to the status of a decorative object. But it is simply not accurate to privilege the



disappearance of women in Méliès films, any more than it would be to privilege her magical appearance. (Beckman, 2003 p. 67)<sup>11</sup>

The medium of film brought to the Vanishing Woman act a new lease of life, as well as a new platform in which to critique the gender partiality of magical illusions. However, it is also questionable whether the medium of film *reduced* the power of theatrical vanishing. Méliès' trick substitutions may have drawn from the original vanishing illusions of the stage but they could be seen as presenting a falsified vanishing, due to its location in a non-physical synthetic medium such as film. It is this changing space of vanishing and its movement into alternative media that opens up a much wider understanding of the different ways that female bodies have been hidden, momentarily displaced or vanished entirely.

### THE SPACE OF VANISHING

The disappearance of women through the spectacle of vanishing is not exclusive to the field of magic, although much is owed to its origins for building its status as a spectacular feat. The many curious ways in which female bodies have been concealed or *non-violently* wiped out makes for a thought-provoking discourse and one that shares unique, if not slightly bizarre, collective motifs. The physical space of vanishing is something that has drastically changed over time. In Victorian England, for example, an audience would be far more impressed by the disappearance of a body in a larger space, compared to the more contemporary marvel of a body disappearing into the smallest space conceivably possible.<sup>12</sup> These changes to the physical framework of disappearance has manifested in the various boxes and contraptions that govern the vanishing space, yet these props are not exclusive to traditional stage magic, verging into occultist territory traditional séance cabinets are not too far removed from such conjuring containers. However, the necessities for vanishing in many methods involve one prominent yet often overlooked feature. Whether hidden behind a curtain, draped in a carpet, spewing forth cheesecloth<sup>13</sup> or surrounded by heavily swathed interiors, the female body vanishes in many circumstances in the heavy folds of textiles.

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<sup>11</sup> Linda Williams instead views Méliès's films as a kind of simulation machine, through which the continual reproduction of identical female bodies enhances the idea of the body being mastered and infinitely reproducible; see Beckman, K. (2003) *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film and Feminism*. United States of America: Duke University Press, p.67

<sup>12</sup> Caveney, Mike; Steinmeyer, Jim; Jay, Ricky. (2013) *Magic. 1400s-1950s*. Edited Noel Daniel. Germany: Taschen.

<sup>13</sup> This is a reference to the mediumistic practice of producing 'ectoplasm' by swallowing and regurgitating small quantities of cheesecloth, see Stanley De Brath. *Ectoplasm*. *Quarterly Transactions B.C.P.S.* PP. 14-26. Box. 19, Folder 14 T.G Hamilton Archive, Elizabeth Dafoe Library, University of Manitoba.

## SPECTACLE & CONCEALMENT

'If to perceive means to unfold, then I am forever perceiving within the folds.' (Deleuze, 2006, p. 107)

The use of fabric within acts of magical deception perhaps appears too obvious to declare and it is most certainly theoretically unacknowledged, much like the purloined letter hiding in plain sight it becomes unnoticeable or unworthy of discourse due to its obviousness. Yet, its role within the genre of vanishing seems intrinsically linked with the gendered nature of magical disappearance. As Deleuze outlines if perception is in fact an act of unfolding, then the body under swathes of fabric immediately becomes a point of contention.

The covering of the female body with fabric during the performance of an illusion is a somewhat standardized element of traditional stage magic and as we have seen in Bautier de Kolta's vanishing act, it holds further symbolism when the design and patterning is of oriental origin. Yet, the surrounding furnishings of the spaces in which the vanishing of women often took place, provides yet another misdirection. If we return to the Rubini poster with which our discussion of vanishing began, we can see that in the far right hand corner is an ornate drapery of oriental design, further echoed in the loose resemblance of a patterning on the floor and wall above the female victims decapitated head. This domestic style interior undulates with the heavy patterning of Persian rugs, damask curtains and silken stretched wall coverings. The rooms in which these female bodies vanish are tented, fit to rival the Charlottenhof palace of Potsdam<sup>14</sup> and this is in no way an isolated case. The use of heavily draped domestic interiors visually echoes a double vanishing, not only does the lady vanish but her disappearance is into the domestic space, a timely reminder of the angel of the house. As Marina Warner describes,

There is nothing more startling incongruous than the photographs of heavily furnished and furbelowed domestic interiors, in which everything and everyone is draped, swirled, tied and bundled. (Warner, 2012, p. 295)

Of course the type of fabric in which female bodies vanish varies but the repetitive use of pattern to supposedly flatten form is something that takes us onto the highly bizarre yet prevalent photographic genre of Hidden Mothers.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The Charlottenhof Palace in Potsdam, Germany re-designed in 1826-29 by Karl Friedrich Schinkel is famous for having a 'tent room' an interior bedroom designed to recreate a Roman Caesar tent, in which all the walls and floors are covered in a bold blue and white stripe fabric.

<sup>15</sup> For an extensive overview of Hidden Mother photographic collections see: Nagler, L F. (2013) *The Hidden Mother*. London: Mack.

## BODIES IN THE FOLD

The unique collections of photographs that make up the *Hidden Mothers* genre are undoubtedly some of the most visually descriptive depictions of a woman's status within the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The haunting figures buried under heavily patterned carpets, behind pieces of furniture and hidden below drapes provide a bizarre simultaneous moment of concealing and revealing. Although widely acknowledged as a practicality to keep children still for the long exposure times of traditional photography. It cannot be denied that this intriguing solution resulted in far more than a simple family portrait. In many cases the body of the sitter is covered in a weightily decorative rug, often of Persian design echoing once again the disappearance of the female body into the domestic space but also referencing, perchance unknowingly, the foreign origins of magic as well as playing on puns such as 'the magic carpet'.<sup>16</sup> The variety of images that exist in this vein display a wide context for this unusual act, not only prevalent in studio photography, images exist of mothers in external situations practicing the art of hiding.

Of course the body hidden in the folds of fabric is not unique, as the wearing of daily clothing would easily dismiss, but the draping of the female body has persistently taken on a curiosity, whether it be culturally see for example Irving Penn's famous photographs of Rissani women,<sup>17</sup> or within the context of illusions, the female body under cloth is a riot of the ridiculous and the erotic.

## DISEMBODIED REPRESENTATION ~ ESCAMOTAGE

The discussion so far has developed how the use of fabric and in particular the Persian rug, has been intrinsic to the art of vanishing and it is through drawing on these contextual references that the photographic series '*Escamotage*', (2014) took shape. Taking the Persian rug as a direct motif for vanishing, the images in this series reflect the historical confines of the domestic space as a site for magical disappearance, whilst simultaneously appropriating the images of *hidden mothers* in form and composition. The series focus was to pictorially interweave the visual reference points associated with female vanishing, in a manner that performed with a suspended sense of time. Creating a type of disembodied representation, the viewer is not aware if a body – any body- is present; it is the potential of a body created by the fabric that creates form.<sup>18</sup> The body is undisclosed and the only

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<sup>16</sup> The Persian Rug is also widely associated with Harry Houdini's stage illusions; he often used it as a misdirection to cover the trap door through which he escaped. It was the elasticity of carpet, or the fold of the fabric, which in fact made his illusions possible. Thus the Persian rug is synonymous with vanishing. See Houdini, H. (1953) *Houdini on Magic*. New York: Dover Books.

<sup>17</sup> Irving Penn. *Three Rissani Women with Bread*, 1971. Platinum palladium print printed 1978. Available to view at <http://phillips.com/detail/IRVING-PENN/NY040114/113> [Accessed 2 December 14]

<sup>18</sup> A discussion of the body draped is succinctly expressed in relation to the writing of Deleuze on the Baroque in Galvin, A. (2009) 'The Matter with de Clérambault: On the Baroque Obscene' in *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*, Volume 7, Number 1, March 2009, pp. 56-67.

method to discover the 'truth' through *touch*<sup>19</sup> is withheld from the viewer by the two dimensional nature of the image. The importance of touch in opening up the body to its infinite possibilities brings to the fore the tactility of fabric and the skin. The importance of sensuality so eloquently expressed by Jean Luc Nancy,

With the body, we speak about something open and infinite, about the opening of closure of itself, the infinite of the finite itself ... the body is the open. And in order for there to be an opening, something has to be closed, we have to touch upon a closure. To touch on what's closed is already to open it. Perhaps there's only ever an opening by way of touching or a touch. And to open – to touch – is not to tear, dismember, destroy. (Nancy, 2008, p. 122)

The represented body therefore takes on the notion of a closure, an infinite confined within a finite. The fabric acts as a dressing to the untouchable body, its folds both concealing and revealing the possibilities. Much like Leibniz's monad as a one-multiple, the surface of the fabric contains infinite possibilities that must be connected, must 'touch' all other monads. (Deleuze, 2006, p. 24-30) The images when installed are projected onto a black surface - a reference to the singularity of vanishing without return - they appear contemporary but carry the weight of appropriation, clouding any direct relationship to a historical moment or practice. The ephemerality of projection further enhances the sense of the liminal; there is a haunting quality that derives from not knowing what is present, the shadowy thrill of an inanimate object coming to life or the discovery of a body vanished. Although not overt within the images, the contemporary relevance of female vanishing still remains sadly prevalent and is echoed in the recent political abduction of more than two hundred girls from a boarding school in Chibok by Nigeria's militant Islamist group Boko Haram.<sup>20</sup> The vanishing of female bodies whether magical, theoretical or performative continues to produce an inescapable violence that captures the attention of the population, a screen to the projection of social anxiety. In a strange reversal of W.R Greg's disappearance of women to the colonies, the desire is for a magical return, avoiding the singularity of both violence and vanishing.

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<sup>19</sup> The privileging of touch in relation to truth is most famously denoted in the biblical story of Doubting Thomas. The need to physically touch the wound of Christ in order to prove his existence. John 20: 19-31.

<sup>20</sup> Farouk Chothia "Will Nigeria's abducted schoolgirls ever be found?" 12 May 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-27293418>. [Accessed 2 December 14]

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