

**Hannah Bonner**

## **Fixed in a Moment of Fierce Attention: 13 Ways of Looking at Claire Underwood**

*How will they feel the erasures erase them?*

*Who will they resemble when they're done with resemblance?*

—Jorie Graham, “The Guardian Angel of Self-Knowledge”

- (1.) My penchant for compulsive list making and my (re)current viewing of *House of Cards* became inextricably linked last week when I wrote, among other things to do that day, *go for a run (like Claire Underwood)*. The urge to exercise was parenthetically eclipsed by the urge to embody Claire Underwood’s ethos. Since the Netflix original series debuted in 2013, Claire has become my *idee fixe*. I channel her when steeling myself for an interview. Over endless hours of watching, I adopt her economy of movement. My taste in clothes now cottons towards her monochromatic wardrobe, a sartorial nod to keeping her (house of) cards close. Upon brewing a pot of morning coffee, I lift the mug lightly to my lips, my pinkie finger rising like the Texan debutant Democrat she most definitely is.
- (2.) Leaving a screening of Hollis Frampton’s minimalist movie “Lemon” (1969), filmed in a single seven-minute take, I fall to reverie: light drifts across Claire’s face in extreme close-up, her pores like a fine sieve. In (re)imagining Frampton’s short, I crave a love affair with the long take, a love affair with Claire’s duration. This ellipsoid fruit is even tonal. In my remake, Claire would deliver Grace Kelly’s double entendre *Do you want a leg or a breast?* with lemony astringency. My mouth purses in preparation.
- (3.) Mark Doty models the craft of close reading, close-up, in his slip of a book *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon: On Objects and Intimacy* (2002). He writes, “Lemons: all freedom, all ego, all vanity, fragrant with scent we can’t help but imagine when we look at them. . . . And redolent, too, of strut and style. Yet somehow they remain intimate, every single one of them: only lemons, only that lovely, perishable, ordinary thing, held to scrutiny’s light, fixed in a moment of fierce attention. As if here our desire to be unique, unmistakable, and our desire to be of a piece were reconciled” (9).

Read this passage several times. Underline everything, redact nothing. Fix in a moment of fierce attention on Claire. But Doty's singular moment of ferocity festers in me for four years. I determine that my desire to be of a piece, or to be a piece of Claire, is reconciled. If not reconciled, then required. Not past tense, but infinitive: *unmistakable*.

- (4.) For years, I didn't give a fig (or a lemon) for Robin Wright. Besides a memory of her melancholy in *Forrest Gump* (1994), my opinion of her was as nondescript as her now lopped-off locks—blond, bland. Twenty-three years later, I stratify my day in accordance with the proclivities of her TV personality, when I might view her next. I would aerially scan Claire's topography, like a re-envisioning of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), lost in the contours of her body or coolly coifed retorts.<sup>1</sup> I would glut myself not on Smithson's gleaming pools of water, but on an expressionless glance that could signal the approval of murdering a journalist or the tacit, unspoken agreement to have a threesome with her husband and a secret service agent, just as only a glance generates marital strife in Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) when Alice (Nicole Kidman) confesses to husband Bill (Tom Cruise) that she would have left him and their daughter in an instant after fleetingly locking eyes with a handsome naval officer. Whereas Kidman delivers the lines with flagrant fervor, Claire would no doubt be the fulcrum between utter restraint and seething contempt. While devouring Wright's filmography, I am dizzy with the succession of mediocrity, until Claire stops me still—a rupture in the reel.
- (5.) In his book *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004, the Joy of Cooking* (2010), Tan Lin writes, "What is the relation between an ordinary person and a celebrity? Repetition" (141). But in recurrently viewing Robin Wright, I find I am further away from an ontological understanding of her than ever before. When she stumbles in stilettos throughout *She's So Lovely* (1997), I increasingly look at other objects on the screen or in the room until I inventory everything except Wright's body, face, or voice. Claire embodies Doty's *strut and style* in her high heels, a spondee to her step. I could watch her walk down a corridor a dozen times and never notice the wallpaper. It is in

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<sup>1</sup> "Do you regret not having children?" Hannah Conway casually asks in Season Four. Barely blinking, with nary a wrinkle in her starched dress, Claire pointedly replies, "Do you regret *having* yours?"

everything where Robin Wright is not Claire Underwood that I stop watching Robin Wright.

- (6.) In writing this piece, I avoid Wright's oeuvre all together. Here is a list of some films that I do not revisit, or even watch at all: *The Princess Bride* (1987), *Moll Flanders* (1996), *The Pledge* (2001), *White Oleander* (2002), *Beowulf* (2007), *Moneyball* (2011), and *Everest* (2015). The act of not watching becomes a productive act; the absence of image becomes the furrow this line fills. My discriminant viewing practices go noticed by no one. Yet I sift through her filmography like a diligent scholar, stratified in the school of Claire. They say the Surrealists would often enter a theater in the middle of a film, leaving after only a few minutes to frequent another theater, midway through another film. I try this same exercise when watching *Hurlyburly* (1998) until I am only idly aware of its filmic white noise. When *The Congress* (2013) cuts to cartoon, I, too, cut to washing dishes, reshelving books. Even the fragments do not sate me. I can't have just a piece of Robin Wright—I must have Claire whole.
- (7.) In "Unguided Tour" (1977), Susan Sontag similarly struggles for when to look, what to look at, and for how long. During her travels, an unnamed companion states, "But you did see the famous places. You didn't perversely neglect them," to which Sontag essays, "I did see them. As conscientiously as I could while protecting my ignorance. I don't want to know more than I know, don't want to get more attached to them than I already am" (30). Perhaps this is the problem with the close reading of an icon—we protect our ignorance, which is really just protecting the vision we think we still want to see.
- (8.) This thread of seeing but seeing nothing seizes hold of me. When Claire dons her molten dress for the dinner with President Petrov, the sight torches my heart vertical. A sensation I feel but cannot touch: Claire, whom I see, and Robin Wright, whom I increasingly cease to see.
- (9.) Tan Lin meditates on the unnoticeable, the sights we glaze over, the practice of aimless observation. He writes, "Like the ocean or stop sign the film should be the most generic of surfaces imaginable. Because it is true, it should not be about seeing but about the erasure of things that were seen. . . . Not looking at something is the highest compliment the eyes can pay to a landscape or a face" (139). Like Sontag,

Lin eschews fixed attention, if not perverse visual neglect. But what we optically attend to is no longer the monument, or the spiral jetty, or the way Claire cranes her neck when wishing her husband good luck, *heels crossed*. Lin opines on the generic surface—Robin Wright’s repertoire, pre-*House of Cards*—is that generic surface. *An indecipherable cause*.<sup>2</sup>

- (10.) On YouTube I watch interview after interview with Robin Wright. I watch the one where she dances with Jimmy Fallon and delivers various accents on cue, the one where she talks for forty-five minutes and twenty-three seconds with Insight Dialogues about conflict in the Congo and her career, her Golden Globes acceptance speech and her Q&A afterwards. I watch all of them more than once. Soon, I’m returning to that Surrealist exercise, abbreviating one link to click on a new tab, to click on another skeuomorph directing me to *play*. But none of these are the Robin Wright I want, which is to say that none of these are Claire. I feel like both the petulant child and the patient parent explaining, *you can’t have it all*.

I’d settle for Claire’s colorless voice against a blank screen, like Margaret Honda’s documentary *Wildflowers*. In the three-minute short, a man narrates the species of Southern California wildflowers that Honda originally photographed. Yet, because the piece was filmed on Kodachrome, expired film stock, it has deteriorated into a featureless image. You sit for the film’s duration watching only a scratched white screen. In her description of the piece, Honda writes, “The film is a record of something disappearing on something that has already disappeared.” This sentence is the summation of watching Robin Wright: watching her becomes a record of Clair’s disappearance, Claire’s erasure, until I see neither Claire nor Robin Wright, but nothing at all. The image’s possibility is irrelevant. Claire has not even been born. To watch Robin Wright is to be *entredeux*—she’s the before and after, never *the present*.

- (11.) I’d even settle for a silent montage, a visual monologue: Claire running through a graveyard, folding paper cranes, savoring a cigarette—chronic gestures that I cling to. Claire elevates the quotidian into the sacred. *The feeling that she gives of a whole nature in use*.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, I would modify Tan Lin: looking at something most of us

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<sup>2</sup> From Wallace Steven’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1954), <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/45236>.

<sup>3</sup> From Virginia Woolf’s *Diaries, Volume I*—a description of her sister, Nessa.

don't want to linger on is the highest compliment one can pay to a landscape or a lemon—or to Wright's face.

- (12.) Could my modification of Tan Lin's theory be what Wayne Koestenbaum dubs *fingerfucking the dialectic*?<sup>4</sup> I'd settle for fucking, fingers or otherwise. The dialectic I've already exhausted.
- (13.) A few months ago, a colleague e-mailed the department where I was completing my master's in film studies, inviting us to join his class for a viewing of Anthony McCall's immersive 1973 film "Line Describing a Cone." I went to avoid grading essays, which is to say I couldn't write another sentence that stated, *You need more textual analysis to substantiate your claim*. I needed something to fill that space between reading and responding, the space of passive observance. The smoke machine set off the fire alarm, but, unheeded, my friend and I entered the cavernous sound studio whereupon, if we drifted more than three feet away from one another, the smoke enveloped us.

*The air is more ponderous than fire*, Ovid writes in *The Metamorphoses*. In this room we had the index of fire, the smoke as signifier. In this way, the suggestion of fire became more ponderous as a hypothetical presence. I walked slowly into the smoke, hands slightly extended, evoking not Claire but Monica Vitti in the industrial landscape of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964), tentative and tenuous, shot with a telephoto lens. Without the green coat or her gleaming red hair, I blended effortlessly, like wall-to-wall carpeting, into the room. When my friend reached for me I was not there, but when he spoke my name I was: an aural recognition, a call and response.

The instructor shut off the alarm, and a hoard of undergraduates poured into the room. After a brief introduction, he cut the lights. I had a perverse preoccupation that someone might touch me inappropriately and it would be too dark to identify the source of a physical offense. Later, my male companion confessed he'd hoped for such deviance, the anonymous sexual thrill. For a while the room was shrouded in black, the 16mm projector emitting a lone, weak light, its metallic clatter an aural announcement: the ascension of something churning into being. Against a black

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<sup>4</sup> From Wayne Koestenbaum's *Our Deep Gossip: Conversations with Gay Writers on Poetry and Desire* (2013).

scrim, on the opposite side of the room, a sliver of light perforated the canvas, thin as an eyelid. It trembled, but it did not abate.

For ten to fifteen minutes the cone was not there, and then for ten to fifteen minutes it was. The body of light solidified from a point to a sphere. Students wove their hands through the lucent lines. Some sat inside the cone, as it were. Some, including myself, drifted our fingers across the fluent curve as if palming the suggestion of the cone could rearrange the air, tilting our heads until they almost touched our shoulders, peering into the eye of the projector until the light pierced our gaze shut. There was very little talking. A colleague came up behind me and leaned close. *It's like touching an eclipse*, he whispered. When I returned to my office, I wrote his words on a scrap of paper, then promptly remembered not what I had seen but what I had heard. The image became meaningless: the intimation of touch, everything.