POPULAR INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

POPULAR CULTURE AND FEMINISM

Volume 2 / 2022

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AND FEMINISM
2022

Popular Inquiry: The Journal of the Aesthetics of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture is a peer- and double blind-reviewed open-access online journal dedicated to the study of the philosophical aesthetics of popular culture. We publish annually one spring and one fall issue. All issues consist of a minimum of an editorial and four articles. The articles can also be interviews with distinguished scholars or popular culture intellectuals. From time to time we also publish special issues. We are thankful to Aalto University for making possible the publishing of this journal and to Svenska Kulturfonden for funding the development process. Special thanks to David Lewis and Kevin Tavin. Logo(s): Martina Obertova.

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ISSN 2489-6748

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EDITORIAL[1]

Dominika Czakon, Stefano Marino and Natalia Anna Michna

Popular culture surely represents a fundamental aspect in our time and hence an important phenomenon to be investigated also for contemporary intellectuals (including philosophers, art theorists, sociologists, cultural anthropologists, fashion theorists, scholars of cultural studies, etc.). This is due to popular culture's role in compelling us to broaden and rethink a part of the vocabulary and conceptuality of certain academic disciplines, its leading role in shaping our taste preferences and aesthetic criteria, and – more generally – its undeniable impact and influence on people's ideas, opinions and choices, including aesthetic, ethical and socio-political views at a global scale. Popular culture definitely deserves a serious attention at various levels, including a philosophical level, inasmuch as philosophy (also profitably intersected with different research approaches in the social and human sciences) has often proved to be able to offer significant and fruitful conceptual tools to decipher in original ways these and other defining phenomena of our time.

The implications and consequences of all this are manifold, ramified and diversified, and they also include the relation between contemporary popular culture and feminism. For example, as noted by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser in their book *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019), today feminism "risks becoming a trending hashtag and vehicle of self-promotion, deployed less to liberate the many than to elevate the few" (p. 10), and also popular culture can sometimes play a role in this process. For Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, in the modern age "norms of gender and sexuality [have been] broadly diffused, including via colonialism and mass culture, and they [have been] widely enforced by repressive and administrative state power. […] The mainstream media continues to equate *feminism*, as such, with *liberal feminism* [that], far from providing the solution," for these critical theorists is rather "part of the problem" (ibid., p. 35). At the same time, it is clear that a feminism that aims to reach attention of the many, and not only of the few, cannot help trying to spread its message through all the available instruments. These instruments may include nowadays –

[1] For Stefano Marino this work, as co-editor of the present issue of *Popular Inquiry*, represents one of the outcomes of his participation – as a member of the Research Unity based at the University of Bologna – to the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN) entitled "Italian Feminist Photography: Identity Politics and Gender Strategies," funded by the Italian Minister for University and Research (MUR), and guided by Prof. Federica Muzzarelli as Principal Investigator.

beside academic works, journal articles or other publications – pop-rock music, film, TV series, comics, fashion etc., and also the extraordinary impact of social media on our everyday life.

This evidently creates a problematic but at the same time stimulating dialectics between the power and potentialities of popular culture today, on the one hand, and the aims of contemporary feminism (including its most radical, coherent and politically committed versions), on the other hand. This kind of dialectics becomes even more intriguing if we consider how certain leading figures of contemporary feminism (Angela Davis, Judith Butler, and others) have acquired in the last decades the status of veritable "icons" or "stars" of our time. A decisive role, in the process of "popularization" of these and other feminist theorists, has been played by various forms of popular culture (as in the famous examples of the songs dedicated to Angela Davis by rock stars such as John Lennon or The Rolling Stones) and, again, by the widespread diffusion and impact of social networks in the last years.

In the present issue of *Popular Inquiry* on the topic "Popular Culture and Feminism" we aim to offer our readers a collection of original articles dealing with a wide range of experiences and practices that characterizes the universe of popular culture today. The specific focus of the present volume concerns the question of the relation between popular culture and feminist issues, and especially the question as to whether popular culture can contribute to the critique and the overcoming of male chauvinist and antifeminist prejudices, stereotypes and negative situations that are sadly still very present in our time. On this basis, we have encouraged our authors to seek original perspectives on the broad topic of popular culture and feminism. In planning this issue of *Popular Inquiry*, we were interested in articles that could address this topic in innovative ways, including both historical and theoretical approaches. We have thus invited authors from various research fields to submit articles related to (but not limited) questions and issues such as: the role that popular culture played in disseminating feminist ideas also beyond feminist organizations and activism; the place of feminist theories within contemporary popular culture; what can feminist theory learn from popular culture and vice-versa; how feminism transformed popular culture form the 1960s until today and vice-versa; the different ways in which feminist theories have engaged with popular culture; the concept of popular feminism as an expression of the wider circulation of feminist ideas across the popular culture; the question of domestic femininities in contemporary popular culture; the modern portrayals of gender in popular culture; the figures of girl, female teenager, young woman and old woman in popular culture; the image of feminist activists in popular culture.

The present issue of *Popular Inquiry* on the topic "Popular Culture and Feminism" is basically structured in two parts: Articles and Interviews. The first part of the volume includes

six articles by likewise authors, characterized by different backgrounds and research fields but animated by the same interest in contemporary culture and, above all, the same belief in the decisive importance of feminist questions, debates and struggles today. This part of the volume includes the original articles written by Federica Muzzarelli, Danae Ioannou, Stefano Marino, Abigail Klassen and Maria Grazia Turri: while the first four articles are specifically focused on the relation between feminism and certain arts, practices and experiences that belong to the field of popular culture broadly understood (respectively: photography, fashion, pop-rock music), the last two essays are more particularly focused on the question of asexuality and the importance of the recognition of its status in current debates, and finally on the significant role played by the human virtue of kindness for a critical rethinking of human culture and of feminism itself. The second part of our volume includes three interviews, realized by researchers in philosophy and human sciences (Valentina Antoniol, Chiara Tessariol, Anna Preti and Francesca Todeschini), with some distinguished scholars of philosophy, politics, art and fashion (Marina Calloni, Eugenia Paulicelli, Federica Muzzarelli) apropos of their views on feminism and on the role that contemporary culture can play to support the emancipation of women and, more generally, of *all* the subjectivities that have suffered and still suffer from patriarchal and gender-based oppression, discrimination and violence.

It may seem that the contemporary world has become familiar with feminism, that feminist ideas have penetrated deeply into universal consciousness and spread through popular culture, but we believe that there is still a lot of work to be done. Moreover, we believe that philosophy and cultural studies can significantly contribute to the growth of social awareness and a real change in people's attitudes and behavior. No change and emancipation are possible without changing one's mind. No matter how simple or banal it may sound, we believe that promoting a radical change in thinking, discourses and spreading ideas is one of the most important challenges of modern societies. This is the role of philosophy, which initiates changes and questions, and stimulates thinking and critical reflection about the world. However, we are also aware that philosophy alone is not enough today. Hence the interdisciplinary approach to feminist issues proposed in this volume takes into account contemporary popular culture. It is popular culture that has the greatest impact on mass reception. We are all immersed in mass culture today. Popular content reaches us all the time through the media, the Internet, advertisements and publications. Therefore, in working at this issue of *Popular Inquiry* we thought that a reflection on the relation between feminism, philosophy and popular culture can be creative and reveal new contents and ideas that are needed today to support feminist ideals of inclusiveness and equality, regardless of gender, orientation, race, ethnicity, class or age, to finally become a tangible reality.

ANNEMARIE SCHWARZENBACH AS A WOMAN PHOTOGRAPHER AND A FASHION ICON

GENDER POLITICS AND ANTI-NAZI RESISTANCE[1]

Federica Muzzarelli

Abstract
This essay focuses on the existential and artistic story of Annemarie Schwarzenbach, the Swiss photographer who as a photojournalist in the early decades of the 20th century chronicled the world through a lens that, among other courageous undertakings, allowed her to document the tragic assimilation of the Nazi dictatorship in Europe. Schwarzenbach herself, however, was also the subject of many photographic portraits that friends and fellow travelers took of her. Thanks to those photographs a sort of biography in pictures has been built up over time featuring the peculiarities of an original testimony of an unconventional identity and a lesbian chic gender choice. Thus, by means of her clothes and style, photographed and thus potentially reproducible, Annemarie Schwarzenbach laid the foundations for an operation of visual concretization of her own legend, i.e., the possibility of becoming a fashion mass icon. In recent years major fashion designers have drawn on her story and those of other non-conformist and politically engaged female photographers as inspiration for their collections. As a result, they break out of elitist academic and research circles and paradoxically become pop and fashion icons. Characters digested by the glittering world of fashion, certainly generalized and simplified in meaning, but at the same time with the possibility of a spatial and temporal extension of a truly global diffusion that would otherwise be impossible to achieve. The essay is divided into three sections: the first section introduces the question of the translation made by fashion of transgressive figures transformed into fashion icons; the second and third sections focus on the relationship between Schwarzenbach and photography, and how this relationship forms the foundation for the two elements of inspiration and translation operated by pop and fashion cultures on her: gender politics and anti-Nazi resistance.

Keywords
Annemarie Schwarzenbach. Photography. Lesbo-Chic Style. Fashion and Pop Icons. Anti-Nazism. Gender Politics.

1. Photography and Mythography. From Gendered Icons to Fashion Icons

When Italian designer Antonio Marras decided to pay homage to the style of a Swiss writer and photographer named Annemarie Schwarzenbach for his first prêt-à-porter collection in fall/winter 1999-2000, the life and works of this original protagonist of early 20th-century culture was still little known. Commenting on the imagery used by Marras, the journalist Antonio Mancinelli argued that in her the Italian designer had found the dual attraction of a tormented soul, wandering both physically and in her identity: in addition to the real journey, "her figure kindled a passion for another journey, the one between the two sexes" (Mancinelli 2006)

Fig. 1a

Fig. 1b

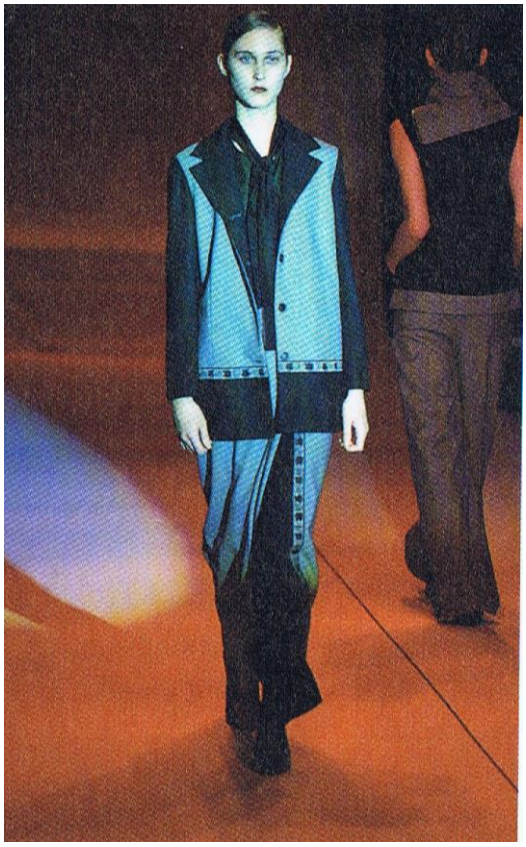

Fig. 2a

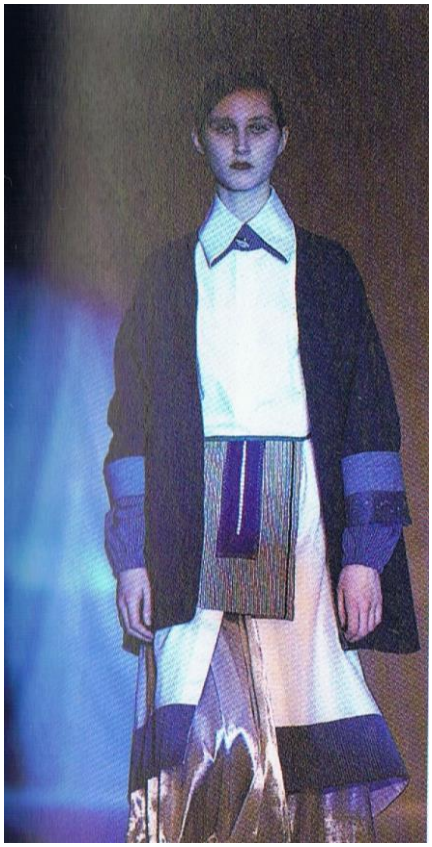

Fig. 2b

Twenty years later, for the spring/summer 2019 collection, it was the international brand of Givenchy, in the person of its artistic director Clare Waight Keller, who drew on Schwarzenbach's fascinating, controversial history as creative inspiration:

I was researching silhouettes, and came across this spectacular looking woman, Annemarie Schwarzenbach, who dressed sometimes as a man and sometimes as a woman but always in a modest, elegant way. It spoke to me, as it aligns perfectly with what we're doing at Givenchy. I find the idea of not being defined by a gender in the way you express yourself through clothes extremely modern. Her sense of freedom in the way she would present herself as a different character from one day to the next is highly inspiring. I also love the message about acceptance and tolerance her story gives: she was at peace with her androgyny, and so many years later, it still inspires people like me to keep on colliding codes.[1]

That is to say, what Marras and Keller considered decisive in Annemarie Schwarzenbach appears to be her ability to have been an early icon capable of interpreting instances of gender identity through choices that are both existential and related to clothing. But as will be seen below, above all Schwarzenbach played an important and original role in journalistically and photographically documenting the spread of National Socialist sentiments and the actual advent of Nazism, executing and supporting resistance and sabotage.

Quite recently, another artist and photographer who was a contemporary of Schwarzenbach, the Frenchwoman Claude Cahun, whose work was virtually unknown until the 1980s, underwent this transformation from counterculture rebel icon to pop fashion icon thanks to Maria Grazia Chiuri's tribute for Dior. In an article online significantly titled *Who was Claude Cahun, Muse of Dior's Pre-Fall Collection?* Chiuri herself explains the reasons for her fascination with Cahun:

> Speaking on her decision to pick Cahun as a muse, Chiuri told *Vogue*, "I think in some ways [Claude Cahun] was the birth of the modern woman." Though it's important to question that statement by noting that Cahun did not identify as a woman – rather, they "adamantly rejected gender" altogether – Chiuri's sentiment is still noteworthy, particularly when made on behalf of a house historically known for its rigid view of the ideal feminine silhouette.[2]

Thus, as in the collections dedicated to Schwarzenbach, Cahun's non-conformist choices, her androgynous style, her feminism inherent in being a modern woman who also implemented forms of resistance to the prevailing heteronormative categories (in her own words, "neutral is the only gender that fits me"). And, like Schwarzenbach, Cahun's life was marked by radical anti-Nazi political choices: isolation on the island of Jersey during the occupation of France, anti-military sabotage actions, imprisonment, a death sentence and, fortunately, liberation in April 1945.

The question one might now ask is: what do two such powerful and extreme figures, two existential adventures so limpid in their political commitment and so courageous in witnessing their diversity, have to do with the narcissistic, disengaged and superficial world of fashion and luxury?

This would obviously be a very naive question: fashion has always been, and today is more than ever, an extraordinary vehicle for disseminating content and constructing mass images. Which of course can lose something in purity and rigor when, as McLuhan taught us, they arrive encoded through the generalist message of fashion. But which precisely because of that message metabolized and remastered by the fashion system can count on such an impact and extension that perhaps only the language of music can keep up with it in terms of dissemination power. There is therefore no need to be surprised or to adopt snobbish attitudes: fashion can do a lot and the most intelligent of fashion designers are so aware of this that – like Maria Grazia Chiuri's other openly feminist initiatives – they are increasingly promoting socially and politically committed actions that were quite unthinkable even just a few decades ago.

However, let us return to Cahun and especially Schwarzenbach, to add something about the fact that what took place in their lives was also a special synergy between their identity needs and a new cultural landscape where the emergence of a feminism that was now determined not to hide itself (where the demands of the homosexual community were included) was combined with the presence of an ideally perfect tool for recounting oneself and taking action in the world: the medium of photography. Christine Buci-Glucksmann has described this exceptional moment in an exemplary manner, a moment when dawning technological modernity was the driving force behind the cult of images and their dissemination that we are still immersed in today:

> Of this we can be certain: the image engraved upon the flâneur's body, the Baudelairean passerby barely glimpsed in the intoxication of large cities, this multiplicity of emotions are only specific examples of what is characteristic of modernity: the cult of images, the secularization/sublimation of bodies, their ephemeral nature and reproducibility (Buci-Glucksmann 1984, p. 85).

Modernity, therefore, is the fertile territory where the parallel paths of fashion and photography can create the right conditions for one of the most characterizing phenomena of our era to originate: the fashion mass icon (Muzzarelli 2022). Between the mid-19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, fashion began to acquire the physiognomy by which we understand it today: from a phenomenon that substantially distinguished high social classes to a mass phenomenon (Calefato 1996) based not only on distinction, but also on imitation permitted by the presence of technological instruments (photography and then cinema above all) capable of allowing the new taste and fashion to be conveyed, spreading far and wide.

Among those who sensed the "myth-making" power of photography, the process that Edgar Morin called "starification" (Morin 1957) and by which multiplying one's image photographically potentially builds one's future mass icon, making oneself eternal and identifiable forever, are Claude Cahun and Annemarie Schwarzenbach. Here the matter comes full circle when it is fashion, which has powerful channels to spread its messages, that re-appropriates distant, once marginal and avant-garde events and makes them definitive examples of pop and mass icons. On the one hand contributing to their generalist cannibalization, and on the other to the rekindling of interests beyond academic and research spheres.

2. Annemarie Schwarzenbach: The Photographic Gaze as an Existential Choice

Over the last decade, the life and work of Swiss journalist and photographer Annemarie Schwarzenbach (1908-1942) have stimulated interest and fostered important studies and publications, largely thanks to the documentary and archival work of Regina Dieterle and Roger Perret, but also of Alexis Schwarzenbach's on his family's memories. Her unconventional and tragic biography "contributed to the shaping of Schwarzenbach into a cult figure" and built an "obsession with her biography" (Decock 2011, p. 111). Indeed, shaped by psychological torment and a countercultural lifestyle, Schwarzenbach is best known for her narrative works (novels and short stories), while the images of the numerous photojournalism projects she carried out across the world have received less critical attention. She travelled extensively in her brief arc of art and life, to the point that "unhappiness and travel became a personal program" (Georgiadou 1998, p. 117), through such regions as Asia Minor, Russia, Persia, the U.S., Germany, the Balkans, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Belgian Congo, and Morocco. Her literary and photographic production – quite extensive, considering her untimely death – is housed at the Swiss National Library. The scope of this essay is to investigate her choice to adopt a nonconforming attitude, which translated into radical existential and aesthetic choices, and into political resistance in the fullest sense.

Before doing so, it is important to understand why her photographic catalogue cannot be considered only as historical documentation, neutral and impassive, but rather as the bearer of an anti-dogmatic gaze, both participatory and passionate, conditioned and guided by non-heteronormative life choices and experiences of resistance.

The first challenge Annemarie Schwarzenbach had to face was the environment she was born into. Although her mother Renée (daughter of a general who commanded Swiss armed forces during WWI) cultivated openly lesbian relationship at home and in the presence of her children (first and foremost, with singer Emmy Krüger), once her daughter Annemarie began to make openly homosexual choices, a deep and irremediable divide opened between these two

different incarnations of female masculinity: the one represented by a pro-Nazi aristocratic wife, and the other by a traveler anti-Nazi journalist.

The Schwarzenbach family was wealthy, tied to silk production and commerce, and politically pro-German. Rich, then, and already endowed with the ambiguous magnetism that struck everyone who met her, Annemarie enrolled at the University of Zurich (among the first of the very few women to do so at the time) to study literature. There she made the encounter that would transform her life, in an existential and political sense, in December 1930. She attended a conference delivered by Erika and Klaus Mann, the children of German writer Thomas Mann. The two young Germans became friends and role models who would profoundly mark Annemarie, for better or for worse. Erika became a pillar of anti-Nazi convictions and a guide in the common process of resistance to the unstoppable spread of fascism and its injustices across Europe (we need only recall her untiring commitment to the anti-Nazi cabaret known as *Pfeffermühle*). Annemarie would forever nurture a deep attraction to and love for Erika. She was bound to Klaus by friendship, cooperation, travel, and – unfortunately – the addiction to morphine and self-destructive tendencies that would drive him to suicide. It was due to a cabaret evening organized by Erika, during which a member of the powerful Schwarzenbach family was mocked, that Annemarie was forced to take sides; in aligning with the Manns, she alienated herself from her mother and family irredeemably, pursuing thereafter a life of perpetual physical and psychological nomadism. Despite this rupture, and despite the many written and visual testimonies of her opposition to the violence and aggression of German politics, Annemarie was never able to be so extreme as Erika Mann. Perhaps because of her social background, or perhaps her intellectual honesty, Schwarzenbach always sought to look at reality critically, without prejudice, seeking to understand the deep historical and social reasons for that tragedy that was about to engulf Europe and the world. She reasoned over why the Nazi ideology was able to take root in an impoverished, disillusioned cultural substratum; and how the role of intellectuals was to denounce and resist, ensuring that their work provided an outline for understanding reality and creating new awareness. This awareness probably came from the effort she applied to herself, first and foremost, to the gender identity that conflicted with the codes and stereotypes her family had established for her. Her rejection of norms, and consequent choice of a free, transgressive life, must have profoundly influenced her way of seeing the world through a photographic lens. As with other leading female figures in 18th- and 19th-century photography, for Annemarie Schwarzenbach media became a means of imprinting her autobiographical and existential choices on reality.

As mentioned above, she soon decided that the gilded life of Bocken – the Swiss town where she lived with her family under her mother's possessive control – was not what she desired or felt suited her. After graduating from university and trying her hand at writing, she

embarked on a series of long journeys that took her to far-off nations and continents, reached by driving cars thousands of kilometers through inhospitable terrain, often alone or paired with one other travel companion, at most. In 1933 she made a trip to the Pyrenees with photographer Marianne Breslauer, a student of Man Ray, who taught her the craft of photojournalism (Dieterle and Perret 2001, p. 15). Writing and photography would become the two languages that enabled her to describe the world and leave a trace of her emotions and political positions. Photography also accompanied her life from another perspective: as the instrument of her visual autobiography. Indeed, Annemarie became the subject of photographic portraits by Marianne Breslauer as well as other travel and life companions. This ample collection of portraits stands as a virtual photo album that still communicates her style and visual identity. This sort of visual biography/autobiography – for it is easy to imagine that, as a photographer herself, Annemarie actively participated in the construction and portraiture choices of the friends eager to depict her – constitutes a discourse that identifies in the Swiss writer and photographer the first conspicuous example of a visual icon of the then-emerging lesbian-chic style. The twenties and thirties, when Annemarie acquired awareness of herself as an emancipated woman and lesbian, were years in which, in his analysis of the Paris of the Second Empire and the symbolic presence of female bodies in the new stage of modernity, Walter Benjamin defined the lesbian as "the heroine of modernity" (Buci-Glucksmann 1984, pp. 91-99), asserting her individual dress and visual code (Ganni, Schweppenhäuser and Tiedemann 2006, p. 168). This was the lesbian-chic dress code: masculine jackets and trousers, shirts, jumpers, unisex ties and shoes, and monocles and short hair, naturally. No makeup nor jewels. Yet this was also the dress code in which Annemarie Schwarzenbach allowed herself to be photographed for numerous portraits over a long stretch of time, so intensely as to encapsulate a very clear message: directed at the world she lived in and all those who would look, even many years later, as we do today, at her lesbian-chic style. The allure that emanated from this condition was exactly the objective that she set for herself, using photography as an eyewitness and in complicity with the women who photographed her.

Some women photographers working across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including British photographer Lady Clementina Hawarden (1822-1865), French writer and photographer Claude Cahun (pseudonym of Lucy Schwob, 1894-1954), German Dadaist Hannah Höch (1889-1978), and Annemarie Schwarzenbach (1908-1942), also adopted the new technology as an opportunity to express a form of voyeuristic fetishism, visualized through cross-dressing, new dandyism, and ambiguous sexuality. Photography was an opportunity to narrate the female body and its relationship with the world, whether behind or in front of the camera. This pioneering awareness of a new aesthetic contributed to redefining artistic categories radically (Muzzarelli 2018, p. 2).

In this, Annemarie Schwarzenbach tuned in to the precise need for visibility that women of the era were demonstrating in increasingly clear ways. The new woman, the *garçonne*, the flapper undertook the process of female emancipation at the beginning of the 20th century by passing through a visible change in their way of dressing, accompanied by a renegotiation of gender identity that discovered in the androgynous look aesthetic terrain for new forms of resistance and political demands. The image of the new woman was a mix of criticism of the rigid, binary division of gender and of the demand for the recognition of diversity and gender-bending visibility. Clothing became a fundamental tool for defining identity, a special instrument that at once reflected and communicated the game of cross-dressing, useful for both gay self-proclamation and the heterosexual androgynous choices that characterized the first historical period of feminism. Some symbolic elements of clothing and behavior were common to both the new women and lesbian chic, including cigarettes (in 1925, French photographer Jacques-Henri Lartigue dedicated a series of images to *Les Femmes aux cigarettes*) and monocles (symbol of the Parisian and Berlin lesbian circles of the 1920s that Brassaï portrayed in many images, including *Le Monocle*). Between literary characters and real lesbian-chic icons, there were many female figures who interpreted modern women and their gender issues: Victor Margueritte's *La garçonne* (1922), which portrayed the newly emancipated and sexually free woman, and the protagonists of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Both published in 1928, the two novels used literary characters to render the possibility of gender fluctuations concrete. In real life, as well, some artists testified their resistance to social conventions through their conduct and visual identity: the painter Romaine Brooks (who also painted Una Troubridge, the British sculptor and writer companion of Radclyffe Hall, in boyish look,) created self-portraits in men's clothing and employed clothing to stage her gender identity in the photographic portraits featuring her. The French writer Colette loved to dress as a man and be photographed with a cigarette trailing smoke, using all possible seductive interpretations of the homosexual aesthetic.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the choice to wear men's clothing was, therefore, a characteristic emblem, perhaps one of the most interesting, of "something modern" (Doan 2001, p. 110). Photography was the technological medium that offered this unique period the ideal dimension for the demands that the new women who laying before the world. Photography was able to satisfy the need for the reconstitution of identity, testimony, and awareness of gender issues that was expanding in the realm of the imaginary and flight from stereotypes. "The photographic lens, more than anything, was responsible for creating a new way of seeing and a new style of beauty for women in the 20th century. The love affair between black-and-white photography and fashion is the modernist sensibility" (Wilson 1985, p. 170). Women who used the means of reproduction to disseminate and communicate their countercultural choices showed

that they understood how necessary this was to implementing political choices (Muzzarelli 2009, p. 98). In particular, the doubling effected by lesbian love found in photography an instrument of insurmountable practicality and maintenance to identarian and visual reappropriation. With this choice, women refused homologation and adopted a non-heteronormative gaze, escaping the rule of being exclusive objects of male attention and voyeurism.

Annemarie Schwarzenbach was therefore not alone in her choice of portrait photography as existential, political, and identarian testimony. What distinguished her experience from others' was this consistent, continuous submission to the camera, knowing that she was telling the story and leaving a trace of her homosexuality and the appeal that so struck those who knew her (and these certainly included Thomas Mann and Carson McCullers, the American author of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, a novel she dedicated to Annemarie).

She had a face that I knew would haunt me to the end of my life, beautiful, blonde, with straight short hair [...] She was dressed in the height of simple summer fashion, that even I could recognize as a creation of one of the great Paris couturiers (Miermont 2006, p. 235).

Photography proved a means of affirming and visualizing her gender identity as early as her frequenting of the Fetan student residence in 1925, where photo albums displayed her masculine haircut and style. Biographies also record that her photographs were the object of a fetishistic cult among her female classmates; when her first novel, *Freunde um Bernhard,* came out, someone broke the window of the bookshop where a copy of the book was on display just to obtain the photographic portrait of her that the publisher Amalthea had chosen for the cover. "There is in Annemarie a subversive charge, a disturbing anomaly that makes her an icon with an unforgettable face to this day" (Dieterle and Perret 2001, p. 19). Marianne Breslauer, to whom we owe most of her portraits, photographed her during her stay in Berlin from 1931-1932: Annemarie was completely engrossed in the nightlife of the German capital, frequenting the gay clubs where her lesbian-chic style met with great success. She dressed with extreme elegance, in masculine jackets and unbuttoned white shirts.

In Schwarzenbach's case, both her life and media image offered a testimony of a photographic practice identified by some pioneering interpreters of this shared poetics – see Cahun and Höch – as being most suited to interpreting instances of identity construction and the display of different styles from the accepted norm. Having lived in Paris and Berlin, two of the capitals where the lesbian subculture emerged in the 1920s, Schwarzenbach was capable of transposing these new demands for visibility and recognition into her adopted style, later documented through photography. Particularly in Berlin, she discovered the lesbian clubs around Nollendorf Square, like Maly und Igel, where her men's shirts and her *garçonne* haircut were greatly appreciated (Muzzarelli 2018, pp. 10-11).

During a 1932 trip to Venice with Erika and Klaus Mann, she chose to be photographed in men's clothing, smoking a cigarette, or wearing a swimming costume to flaunt her ephebic body and intriguing sexuality. Another aspect of her life was also much-photographed: her encounters with Claude Clarac, second secretary at the French embassy in Persia and a homosexual like Annemarie, whom she married, obtaining a diplomatic passport. She likely experienced some interludes of her life with this refined man, though always punctuated by hospitalization due to drug addiction and suicide attempts. In some of the photos taken during their travels, even in the company of friends, Annemarie is always photographed in her androgynous, sporty style, to the extent that the couple appears to dress identically. The photographs testify to desert crossings, hunting trips, dips in the pool, visits to archaeological digs: in all of them, she represented herself as an androgynous chic lesbian. "From her slender body, from her pensive face, illuminated by the pallor of her forehead, she exuded an allure that infallibly acted on those who feel attracted to the tragic grandeur of the androgynous" (Maillart 1987). What is striking is that her allure did not diminish, and perhaps even increased, when the signs of physical and psychological suffering were visible on her face, or even when her wrists were bandaged, as after a stay in a Samedan clinic in 1935. Although she was always very elegant, the dark circles under her eyes became more and more evident in photographs, contrasting with the childlike air of her face. "Chic, dressed in grey, so thin as to be almost ethereal": with these words Ella Maillart, the famous travel writer, described her during their first meeting in Zurich before her departure for Prague (Maillart 1987, p. 81). The two women continued to write to each other and finally decided to embark on a journey, financed by magazines and publishers interested in their writing and photography, from Afghanistan to India. For Maillart, the trip was an important experience (she enjoyed a lengthy stay in an Indian ashram). For Annemarie, however, it concluded early: she returned to Europe in January 1940, suffocated and pursued by disease and mental instability (Georgiadou 1998, p. 175).

Two years of departures (the USA, the Congo) and return trips followed. Of sufferings and utopian impulses. Her photographs are what she left behind, to tell the story of herself and the world she could see.

You should only live with questions and restlessness; that is the best part of you. I would like you to remain forever thus, ready to blossom; you should not submit so easily to a law, nor rest on what already exists. You should never feel completely satisfied (Ruina 2015).

3. Anti-Nazism as a Photographic Practice and a Political Choice

Annemarie Schwarzenbach's entire photographic production, the images she brought back from her adventurous and demanding journeys to the two ends of the world, still stand today as the special

visual testimony of a woman whose view was neither stereotyped nor codified. The many photographs with which she recounted non-western peoples, customs, and behaviors were complementary to the many newspaper articles and prose compositions that grew out of the same nomadic experiences. The drive for social, cultural, and political narratives, which will be discussed in a moment, and the value of the photographic act as an exercise in mediation with the world coexisted in this oeuvre: for her, photography was a way of establishing empathetic contact with things and people, a dimension that was always a source of great distress during her brief existence.

The Middle East would become the place par excellence for her to confront herself and the world. Here, where the history of European culture begins, she celebrated her separation from Europe. Annemarie Schwarzenbach was soon no longer a mere traveler to Persia, not just a visitor, but a woman who reflected upon and mourned the downfall of her native continent in the country's vast expanses and deserts. The Persian mountains were the grand backdrop for her lack of a homeland, and her uprootedness. These feelings of estrangement dominated even her journalistic accounts of the East (Georgiadou 1998, p. 116). It should be remembered how other women, special women, had already used photography throughout the 19th century to assert their identity, autonomy, and professionalism in the field of journalism, especially in America. The pioneering examples of Benjamin Frances Johnson and Alice Austen, followed by Marion Post Wolcott and Dorothea Lange, are worth mentioning. But other great pioneers of photojournalism brought the female gaze to this decidedly masculine environment in the same years as Schwarzenbach: in Europe, the wartime activity of Gerda Taro in Spain and Lee Miller and Margaret Bourke-White in the territories devastated by Nazi ferocity are worth recalling (Sullivan 1994; Lebart and Robert 2020). Having established that, the Swiss photographer's contribution to the imaginal description of a part of the world undergoing a transformation under the Nazi aegis will be explored here. One characteristic of her poetics was how her photographic eye did not dwell only on the imposing parades and other striking aspects ushered in by Nazism. Indeed, she was often attracted to unique and small things: anonymous details that often represented the most incisive evidence of revolutionized daily life. In this, too, she enacted resistance that was perhaps less ideological but very transparent and honest. She let objects and people speak for themselves, allowing the monstrosity of what was happening to reveal itself naturally through photography. Indeed, as Leena Eilittä underlines "despite the apparent neutrality of Shwarzenbach's reports, there is no doubt about her critical attitude toward the spread of National Socialism which also reflect the expectations of the majority of her Swiss readers" (Eilittä 2010, p. 102). Moreover, and a closer reading, both her photographs and her reports, through an apparently neutral style, convey her criticism and resistance towards the spread of

National Socialism in Europe, thanks to the capacity of focusing her lens on grotesque details of expressions, behaviors and clothing especially of young people (Eilittä 2010, pp. 105-106).

Of her vast photographic oeuvre, her 1937-1938 journeys bore witness to an aversion to the progressive expansion of Nazi occupation and, at the same time, demonstrated her ability to seek out a non-trivial and non-stereotypical explanation in social and cultural environments for the surge that was about to devastate the world. As discussed above, her work always intertwined photography and writing. She carried them out as complementary and homologous actions. Her articles and photo stories were lucid, tragic descriptions of the events she witnessed, leaving no doubt of her anti-Nazi position. They were always accompanied by an attempt to overcome appearances and facile conclusions and discern the mechanisms underlying a madness that was—and one must always remember this—aided, abetted, and hailed enthusiastically by so many. As mentioned above, Annemarie took a public stand against her family's pro-Nazi tendencies (in particular, that of her uncle Ulrich Wille, a colonel in the army corps). She had to accept the painful hypocrisy of Switzerland's policy of neutrality, going so far as to define it, in the title of one article, "the country that never fired a single shot" (Georgiadou 1998, pp. 74-75). Upon returning from her first trip to the U.S. in 1937 and delivering a radio lecture on the prospects of democracy in America, she set off by train to see for herself the impact of the Reich's advance in Germany, Poland, and the Baltic States. Arriving in Gdansk (Guernica had recently been bombed), she was shocked to find a city completely decked out in flags in honor of Goebbels, who was visiting to attend the Congress of Culture.

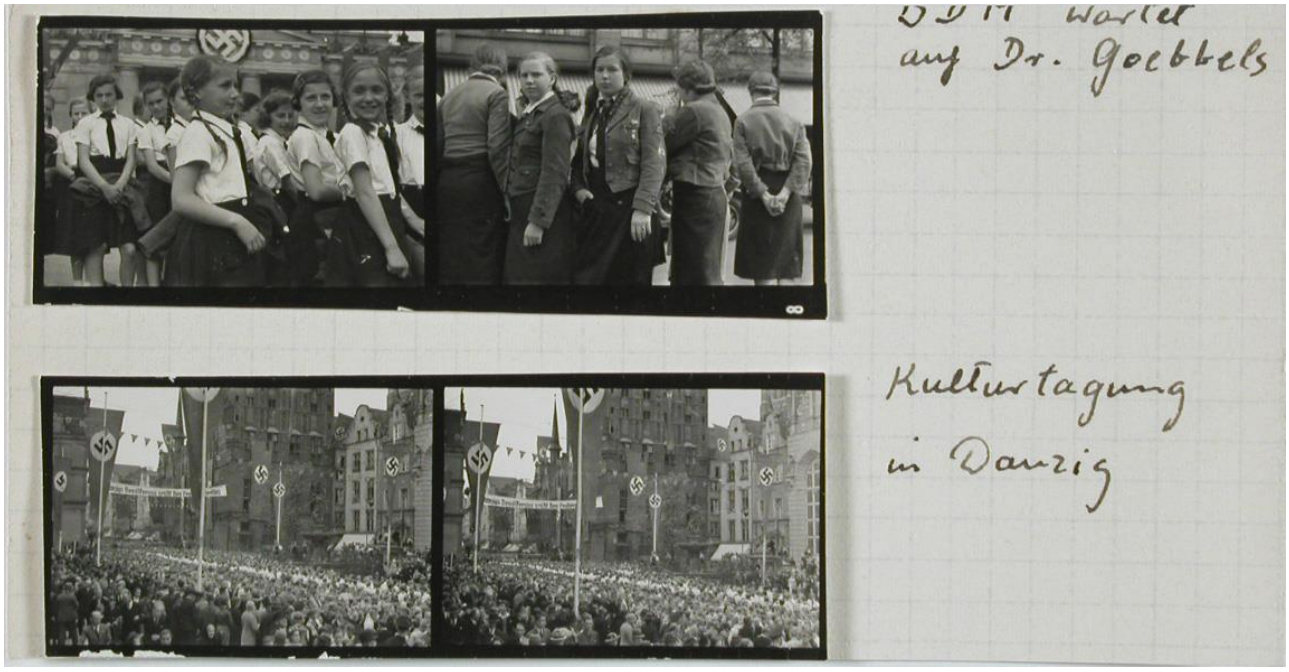

Fig. 3

Fig. 3b

"The next day, I learned the cultural congress's schedule from the hotel porter: SA (assault units) parade, SS (protective militia) parade, HJ (Hitler Youth) parade, BDM (Hitler Girls' Organisation) parade, and the parade of the Arbeitsdienstler, the compulsory labor service" (Schwarzenbach, "Conference of Culture," in *Brief Encounters in Germany*, a 1937 typescript, reprinted in Dieterle and Perret 2001, pp. 118-119). She wrote of the staging of *Don Carlos* at the Civic Theatre in honor of Goebbels, "At this very moment, there in the theatre, the Marquis of Posa is

uttering the most beautiful words Schiller ever wrote about freedom" (2001, p. 120). In the streets, Annemarie photographed buildings covered with flags bearing hooked crosses, shop windows displaying Nazi symbols, jubilant groups of Hitler Youth, and boys and girls parading or proudly displaying their Nazi uniforms.

Fig. 4a

Fig. 4b

She often wrote annotations, long captions, and legends on the photographs (there are negatives and positives in the collection, but not always both). In one photo, a small symbol can be glimpsed in the corner of a windowpane. The annotation specifies that the window was located in a small fishing village outside Gdansk and that the symbol was typically found in the windows of large shops in the city: save for those run by Jews. Already, the eagerness to declare oneself Aryan had contaminated everyone.


Das Schwarze Korps
Der Stürmer
Preußische Zeitung
Nachtausgabe
12 Uhr
Filmwoche
DIE WOCHE

Fig. 5a; Fig. 5b

In another image of Gdansk, Annemarie noted that the signs outside of public buildings denounced the true condition of a city that was no longer free: she underlined how the German Nazi Party exercised the main role in civic politics and "Forster is the leader of the Nazis in Danzig, being the real ruler of the 'Free Town'." The same logic applied to photos of newsstands and columns of posted notices in which, she argued, it was clear that Nazi censorship was at work as no newspaper or magazine unaligned with Third Reich policy was ever sold or posted. The information embargo had clearly penetrated even "free" Gdansk.

Fig. 6a

Fig. 6b

In the typescript entitled "Brief Encounters in Germany," she wrote: "I would simply like to relate what I have heard here and there from the common man. Mine, therefore, is not intended to be a critical analysis of events and the situation, of certain principles and their consequences within the Third Reich. To do this one would need to critically examine and compare the statements I have collected." With the aim of reporting on the dramatic situation and exasperation of the workers she interviewed, Schwarzenbach then compiled a precise list of everything one would need to listen to, read, and understand in order to really form an opinion on what was being discussed: statistics, trade regulations, criticism of the policies of national governments. She meant that this

was not always the case in the day-to-day craft of journalism: an admission that not everyone would be willing to make, then or now. She observed that "the Jewish timber merchant, travelling salesman, and farmer all have a right to be heard. From their voices and that of their *Volksgenossen*, what any democracy calls 'public opinion' is born. It should not be forgotten that despite the levelling of social life and oppression, these voices exist even in the Third Reich and will one day be heard loud and clear" (Dieterle and Perret 2001, p. 117). She did not hesitate to place herself at risk and enter a club near the railway station – known as a hangout for "suspicious persons" – to try to meet the people of Gdansk. Yet she also asked himself if "seventeen-year-old girls, schoolgirls, and housewives are all 'politically educated'," is it possible they cannot keep even a corner of their soul intact […]?" (2001, p. 128). Annemarie then continued on to the Baltic countries (Riga, Tallinn) arriving in Moscow at the end of May. In "Beyond the Corridor" (in *Baltic Diary,* a 1937 typescript, published in two magazines that same year), she wrote that "since I left Gdansk, I have continued seeing flags with the hooked cross, white banners with election inscriptions and slogans, processions of children in uniform, the typical bustle of SA men in small cafés" (2001, p. 132). In Kaunas, "nationalism borders on nationalist arrogance. […] In Lithuania, people are exceedingly xenophobic, and not only towards Germans. […] The hatred is directed above all against the minorities living in Lithuania, including the Jews" (Kaunas was the capital of the "first generation" in *Baltic Diary,* typescript published in a magazine: 2001, p. 137).

In the autumn of 1937, Annemarie returned to the USA for the second time, accompanied by Barbara Hamilton-Wright. They travelled through a number of southern states. During this short but intense period, she wrote and photographed extensively, denouncing the racist and violent positions of the Ku Klux Klan from a point of view that Thomas Mann described as "extremely socialist and sympathetic to Roosevelt" (Letter of 25 August 1938 to Ferdinand Lion; reproduced in Miermont 2004, p. 182). Although not the specific subject of this essay, it is worth noting that Schwarzenbach portrayed the misery and poverty shared by many sharecroppers and workers so powerfully in her photographic work during this trip that its visual impact was comparable only to that of the FSA photography campaign of the same period, which other great photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Marion Post Wolcott contributed to, although she was distinguished from them in working on commission. The Farm Security Administration (FSA) was a government agency planned by Franklin Roosevelt since 1935 with the aim of documenting, through pictures, the miserable situation of people caused by the Depression era. The American experience was a crucial stage for Schwarzenbach from a stylistic point of view: she embarked upon social and documentary photography thanks to the direct access to FSA archives that Director Stryker had granted her (Georgiadou 1998, p. 155). Above all, it raised her awareness of how photography could serve as an instrument of politics and resistance. Yet even in a

context so fraught with sentimentality and demagogy, she maintained her unfailing critical spirit and intellectual honesty, wondering to what extent a photograph could really change the lives of the downtrodden ("Lumberton. Notes," in Perret 2004, p. 116). Thanks to this fundamental experience, more and more involved in the Jewish and resistance cause, both her photographic gaze and her writing evolved to become drier and more objective, and in doing so more capable of visualizing the violence atmosphere for which the Nazis were responsible.

Fig. 7a

Fig. 7b

The Europe that Annemarie returned home to in February 1938, together with Klaus Mann, was now in an unstoppable race towards grim Nazi domination. On March 12, 1938, the *Anschluss* handed Austria over to the Reich. A few days later, the Swiss photojournalist crossed the border into Austria on a 'secret mission' which was a sort of tribute to her friendship with the Mann

siblings. She plotted with them to help a mutual friend, Magnus Henning (pianist and co-founder of the *Pfeffermühle*), escape, as well as to seek contacts among the Austrian resistance and German refugees. During her journey by car to Vienna, through Innsbruck, Kitzbühel, and Salzburg, she was horrified by what she witnessed: the country was all but besieged, with troops everywhere, hotel rooms impossible to find, and Nazi uniforms on parade (Figure 9). She wrote of her visit to Landegg that "the whole town has turned into a garrison; trucks, tanks, and motorized field artillery are constantly streaming down the Arlberg pass" ("Austria has changed radically," 1938 typescript, in Dieterle and Perret 2001, p. 197). In Salzburg, "you see sentries with steel helmets and erect bayonets. […] And in the square (named for) Adolf Hitler, columns of young Nazis march. They still wear the green tunics and white wool stockings of regional costume, but discipline, obedience, and even panic have already hardened the features of their young faces." (2001, p. 198). But she also saw the ranks of unemployed who received benefits from the German militia.

She described the rows of Jews forced by the Brownshirts to sweep the streets and clean the barrack latrines. In Vienna, Hitler's face hung on walls and small swastika flags hang or fluttered on the roadside, ready to be hoisted. And when she took photos of the SS men, she is successful in "Introducing a striking contrast" between "the guilty of the SS men and the ongoing political misery that was about to destroy the valuable cultural traditions of Vienna (Elittä 2010, p. 111). No doubt at great risk, Annemarie sought to make contact with the local population, ask questions, and engage in conversation, hoping to gain useful information. In particular, she visited the Ottakring district, where Dollfuss had opened fire on the communists in 1934. She entered a tavern bearing the inscription "Guaranteed German, Aryan house. Exclusively Aryan service," ordered a beer, and asked questions about the Nazis to try to gauge the reaction of some of the waitresses and understand their thinking. She also had a list of addresses to visit in order to build bridges between the resistance and refugees (the addresses were printed on celluloid sheets so as to be easily erased should she be stopped at a Nazi checkpoint). In a posthumously published article entitled "Mass Arrests among Austrian Officers. Nationalism without a Mask," she recounted two unsuccessful missions. In one case, the revolutionary socialist she was to talk to had already been arrested by the SS (Dieterle and Perret 2001, p. 200). In the other, she learned more about the driving forces allowing Nazi expansion to take root. The man she spoke to, of whom she had requested information to report to a comrade in Switzerland, replied:

> Comrade. Comrades no longer exist. You have to adapt […] I had been unemployed since 1934. I was a tram driver. Under the 'black government' I was an outcast. Now I have my job back. My wife […] is leaving tomorrow on a Kraft durch Freude train for Munich. Holidays, a nice trip, all paid for. The only condition is that I cut off relations with my old comrades (Schwarzenbach 1938).

Thanks to her diplomatic passport, Annemarie was able to help several Austrian antifascists escape to Switzerland. Yet once back in Switzerland, she fell into the crisis of drug addiction and yet another admission to the Samedan clinic. However, the more she felt her strength failing, the clearer it became that the antifascist resistance was the main objective of her life and work.

Fig. 8a

Fig. 8b

On 19 September 1938, she took a plane to Prague, then under tremendous pressure as the Third Reich, having annexed Austria, was eager to take over the Sudetenland. Annemarie was part of a contingent of international journalists stationed at the Ambassador Hotel. Her support for Czechoslovakia, in opposition to Hitler's policy, was clearly expressed in an article in which she condemned "the monstrous and indecent way in which the art of lying, the alteration of the truth and the pure invention of facts is practiced" ("Involuntary Strike of the Prague Correspondents," a 1938 article published posthumously in Dieterle and Perret 2001, p. 218). Communications were cut off

and the journalists trapped without external contact for 48 hours. By then, the situation was out of control; even the electricity was cut off: "No, Prague was cut off from the world. Only the official state lines worked: in London, Paris, New York, Bern, Stockholm, you only found out from the official radio what was happening that night in the heart and crux of Europe" (Dieterle and Perret 2001, p. 219). A few days later, she boarded a Swissair flight for the repatriation of Swiss journalists. Though the mission was quite brief, Annemarie managed nonetheless to write a number of articles and take numerous photos. Among the most disturbing are those in which she captures families of women and children with bundles on their shoulders, trying to escape the horror.

Then there were the refugees the Red Cross and communist organization Solidarity tried to shelter. The start of the war was now very close. Annemarie Schwarzenbach returned to the manuscript she had abandoned, *Death in Persia*, the new version of which she entitled *The Happy Valley*. She then managed to make a series of challenging journeys, including one with Ella Maillart through Persia to India, then the USA, and finally the Congo and Morocco. She also planned to join de Gaulle's Resistance forces. He died in a stupid way, falling off her bicycle, probably due to the fragility of her exhausted body. The chasm between Annemarie Schwarzenbach and her mother could not be bridged even after her death, when her mother and grandmother (a direct relation of Chancellor von Bismarck) ignored her wishes and destroyed documents and letters that might embarrass the family. Although her will was not honored, with her diaries, correspondence, and compositions all destroyed, her work and testimony nevertheless survive at the SNL in Bern. Her literary, journalistic, and photographic endeavors provide one of the most interesting examples of a woman in a world in crisis: mirroring the crisis she suffered in her personal life, which despite the tragic nature of her existence and the times she lived in, she was able to interpret with the courage to adopt a different outlook, a lucid position of resistance, and nonnormative perspective.

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[1] This work represents one of the outcomes of my participation – as a member of the Research Unity based at the University of Bologna and also as Principal Investigator of the whole project – to the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN) entitled "Italian Feminist Photography: Identity Politics and Gender Strategies," funded by the Italian Minister for University and Research (MUR).

[2] See https://www.anothermanmag.com/style-grooming/10806/annemarie-schwarzenbach-clare-waight-keller-interview-givenchy-ss19-muse.

[23] See https://www.vogue.com/article/claude-cahun-gender-muse-pre-fall-2018-christian-dior.

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WOMEN AS OPEN WOUNDS: FEAR, DESIRE, DISGUST AND THE IDEAL FEMININE IN THE WORKS OF ALEXANDER MCQUEEN AND JOHN GALLIANO

Danae Ioannou

Abstract
Starting from the notion of the Ideal Feminine, this paper discusses the representation of trauma and the portrayal of women as open wounds in the designs of Alexander McQueen and John Galliano. Particularly, I explore how the McQueen's *Deadly Woman* and Galliano's *Doll* question the boundaries between mortality, sexuality and decay. By examining the relationship between fear, desire and disgust in the aesthetic representation of the wounded fashioned body, I argue that in their works disgust functions as an empowering emotion, contributing to the perception of the aversive fashioned body as a feministic act.

Keywords
Femininity. Wound. Disgust. Aesthetics. Body.

1. Introduction

The depiction of grotesque female figures in the contemporary history of fashion is a phenomenon related to the changing perception of female sexuality and body. Alexander McQueen and John Galliano are the most characteristic examples of the deviation from the traditional, sexualized representation of femininity. In this essay, I examine the notion of the Ideal Feminine in the works of McQueen and Galliano in the context of Feminism and Negative aesthetics (as part of Everyday Aesthetics). The Ideal Feminine is a protean term that refers to the "perfect" versions of femininity, which evolve through the years and are based on social, cultural and aesthetic standards. This notion is mainly related to the portrayal of woman in her most idealized form, in terms of beauty and attractiveness. The designers, who were inspired by the violated bodies of women, their fear, their sexuality and their wounds, question the ideal feminine, by using disgust as a reaction to the well-established stereotypes of femininity. My aim is to explain how the designers contributed to the construction of the imagery that depicts femininity and, by association, women as open wounds. The wound, usually an external opening on our traumatized body, is strongly associated with the danger of infection and the emotion of disgust. Nonetheless, wound as an opening is also associated both with fear (internal organs, death) and desire (the female genitals, the idea of

penetration). In addition, the feeling of disgust towards the wound is related to decay and the fear of death, an emotional reaction to the inevitable of human mortality (Nussbaum 2004, p. 91).[1] The questions that I attempt to explore are: (a) how the notion of the ideal Feminine is approached by Alexander McQueen and John Galliano, (b) how fear, desire and disgust are related to the female body as an aesthetic locus and (c) how the aesthetic violation of femininity by McQueen and Galliano is seen as a feministic act.

The relation between fear, desire and disgust is applied in the framework of Aurel Kolnai's idea of *macabre allure* (Kolnai 2004, p. 42). Kolnai states that, while disgust is an emotion that evokes repulsion, at the same time draws our attention. The earliest source that refers to the appealing nature of disgust is Plato's Leontius (Rep. 4.439e ff.). Plato describes the repulsion that Leontius felt as he was not able to take his eyes off the executed corpses (Lateiner and Spatharas 2017, p. 11). Efi Kyprianidou, in her analysis of macabre allure states that what is naturally disgusting "traps" the attention, intrigues the curiosity and attracts the subject. Disgust has a paradoxical and ambiguous relation with its object, as fear is an avoiding behavior that alienate us from the disgusting object, while disgust avoids the disgusting object but stays attached to this (Kyprianidou, forthcoming). Sara Heinämaa also refers to the connection between desire and disgust, explaining that "disgust alternates between repulsion and attraction and is able to combine instantaneous, even violent rejection with persisting fascination" (Heinämaa 2020, p. 9). The feministic perspectives of this triangle are found in the work of Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (1980), where she explores the relationship between the female body and the *abject*. Explaining the connection between the fear of the violation of our physical boundaries, the disgust that this violation evokes and our desire to stare at it, Kristeva reinforces the idea that the wound with blood does not signify death, but it is "what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (Kristeva 1982, p. 3). Following the feministic approach, Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* also engages the emotion of disgust in the understanding of the sexuality of the young girl, arguing that disgusting practices are linked to her fear of male dominance and her sadomasochistic tendencies (De Beauvoir 2008, p. 492). The aesthetic perception of the wounded body is explained in the context of Richard Shusterman's Somaesthetics, in which he states that the "purely corporeal can be uncanny," an idea related to the female body as a wound and its feministic perspectives. Particularly, in his essay *Somaesthetics and "the Second Sex,"* Shusterman explores the relationship between the aesthetics of the body and the feministic theory of de Beauvoir, explaining that the female body belongs to the woman but, at the same time it is strange to her (Shusterman 2003, p. 124). Martha Nussbaum in her book *Hiding from Humanity* discusses the emotion of disgust in relation to specific groups (such as women, homosexuals, Jews et al.), that are attributed with animalistic characteristics

in an attempt of privileged groups to "step further away from being animal and mortal themselves" (Nussbaum 2004, pp. 107-108). In addition, she argues that there is a specific type of "misogynistic disgust"; femininity is associated with disgust, fear and desire through sexuality. Caroline Evans in *Fashion at the Edge* analyzes the concept of wound in the context of fashion, explaining the aesthetic function of trauma, the pleasure derived from the repulsive imagery of femininity and the relationship between disgust, the traumatized woman and clothing as a protective armor (Evans 2003, p. 145). She also analyzes the relations between mortality, "interiority" and the female body, quoting Jonathan Sawaday and stating that "the body's interior is a Medusa's head that speaks directly of our own mortality and that, regardless of the sex of the body, interiority is first feminized and then sexualized in representation" (Evans 2003, p. 224).

Alexander McQueen's and John Galliano's careers centered around darkness, violence, abuse and controversy. McQueen was born and raised in London. During his school years, he faced many difficulties because of his appearance and his homosexuality. Just like Galliano, his upbringing was homophobic and violent, as his father was against gays and his sisters were victims of abusive relationships. Both designers studied in Central Saint Martins and, while they shared a common British heritage, McQueen disagreed with the theatrical attitude of Galliano's style. McQueen's design identity had been shaped by abuse, murder, fetishism and pornography with lots of historical references. What was important for him was people to know that there was a reasoning behind every design, every garment and every collection -every collection had a story to tell. When he became creative director of Givenchy and moved to Paris, the fashion community there was not satisfied by the savage way he approached couture. In McQueen's philosophy, individuality was more important than being accepted. While his brand thrived, McQueen struggled with obesity, anxiety and drug abuse. On February 11, 2010 he was found dead in his apartment in London. What he inspired him was what he destroyed him and vice versa.

John Galliano, raised in London too, was, unlike McQueen, a "superstar" and a "party animal." He belonged to one of the coolest gay fashion movements, the New Romantics, in which dressing with extravagant costumes and posing outrageously were part of their identity. His life was balancing between creation and overindulgences. His career was characterized by several ups and down, as Galliano became fashion's "enfant terrible." He abandoned London as he believed that fashion was dead there and moved to Paris. Almost immediately, he embraced the French culture and the French audience loved him. As he became the creative director of iconic fashion houses, Givenchy and Dior, the designer was trying to stay real and at the same time loyal to the brands' identities. His "couture in steroids" was inspired by mental illness, dark themes and women portrayed in the most sexual way possible. The designer gave great emphasis to the presentation of the dominating side of the sexualized woman. He did not just dress women

with very sexy clothes: he highlighted the role of the desirable woman in the framework of pleasure and seduction by exploring her different sides.

Overall, Galliano, by romanticizing oversexualized types of women, and McQueen, by resolving the victimization of them, presented alternative versions of feminine ideals. The body lives in a tight symbiosis with the dress and, as a result, the depiction of wounds on the dress is inevitably associated with the wounded femininity. The wound is the result of trauma, an opening, a hole, a cut, a gap, a source of bleeding. In what follows I examine how the models, as the representation of femininity on the catwalk, do not only bear those wounds but they are portrayed as wounds themselves in the designs of McQueen and Galliano.

2. McQueen's Deadly Woman

The purpose of McQueen was to redefine the way femininity is perceived through fashion. For McQueen, women seem to become stronger by facing what are traditionally taken as "weaknesses," being their body, their sexuality, their vulnerability, their bodily products, and by adopting masculine characteristics. Their sensuality remained subtle, while their sexuality was not directly linked to any kind of satisfaction. Eroticism in McQueen's work is more associated with fear, since his clothes' purpose was not to conceal femininity but to make women less vulnerable to men, by using their sexuality as an armor. The concept of wounded femininity is a theme that characterized his work since his personal life was scarred by abuse and violence. McQueen's heroines were survivors of violent and deadly events, strongly associated with Deathliness and trauma. His women were usually portrayed as victims of rape (see *Highland Rape* collection), warriors, horror heroines, asylum inmates or dreadful hybrids.

The idea of the wounded female body in McQueen relates to the themes of deathliness, sexuality and aversion. The wound in the work of McQueen functions as *memento mori*, a reminder of our mortality and the inevitability of death. For the designer, death was a part of life, melancholic and romantic at the same time. Ana Finel Honigman mentions that McQueen preferred to repel than just attract; in McQueen's words "I am about what goes through people's minds, the stuff that people don't want to admit or face up to" (Honigman 2021, 72). In addition, she states that his garments had "an internal hourglass, where their fading beauty represented all of our waning vitality" (Honigman 2021, p. 86).

A characteristic example of the representation of woman as an open wound is two outfits from Alexander McQueen's Spring 1996 collection named *Hunger* and inspired by the erotic vampire movie of the same name. The first one is a pencil, semi-transparent white dress with an upright cut from the bust to the hips. The cut is exaggerated by a black, fog-like print around it, which exposes the skin under the dress's opening. In the same collection, another outfit of

McQueen is provocative enough to elicit disgust; a see-through, worm-filled bodice. The bizarre top seems to keep the worms trapped in place between the skin and the garment, while the bright red leather skirt underlines the connotations of blood.[2] Both looks remind us of a wound that got infected and, in the end, decayed. In 2021, the brand of Alexander McQueen released the Anemone Collection, which was inspired by the anemone flower. Particularly, a white dress with an abstract anemone print gained controversial feedback about the depiction of the flower, since many people commented that it seemed like bloody wound. Among others, a user of Twitter platform claimed that "it's distasteful and gives me slavery vibes of a woman being raped or having a fucc'n abortion or something. That's all!" (@madetherealone, November 21, 2021). Indeed, the dress resembled a bleeding wound and for this particular reason was heavily criticized.

McQueen rejected the representation of woman as fragile, wearing frilly, fancy dresses: he was interested in "the woman whose sexuality was dangerous, even deathly, and for whom, therefore, male desire would always be tinged with dread" (Honigman 2021, p. 145). Her portrayal as an open, decaying wound and, in the end, as a decayed body full of worms is a reaction to the traditional representation of sexuality in fashion. In this context, the female body does not represent a wound, rather than it becomes a wound itself. The designer places the audience in front of their biggest fear, which is not Death itself, but the body in putrefaction. The see-through white dress with the "black" opening in the center reveals the details of the female figure, but the attention is drawn to the cut. The figure is not sexualized in conventional terms; Judith Watt in her analysis of the outfit comments that "the overlayer (of the dress) is cut away vertically and surrounded by black, bearing more than a passing reference to female pudenda" (Watt 2012, p. 59). The cut, being a reference of female genitals or an open wound, leaves the body exposed for any kind of penetration or contamination. Moreover, the worm-filled top is an imagery of the uncanny: it is disturbing, causing aversive responses, since the body is in actual touch with worms, which are traditionally associated with the decomposition and the idea of the corpse. In the case of the Anemone dress, the red flower print in the waist area is, according to creative director Sarah Burton a reference to "the healing powers of nature…Anemones are the most ephemeral flowers." Furthermore, the concept of the ephemeral can be interpreted in the context of the wound and the fear of death. The vulnerability of the (human) body is associated with the decay, which is represented by the wound and is considered as the source of the abjection. It has been argued that disgust (in this case the disgust provoked by the wound) functions as a coping mechanism of the fear of death (Terror Management Theory), which contributes to the repression of stressful thoughts related to mortality, decay and death (Rozin 1987; Nussbaum 2004; and Kyprianidou, forthcoming).

McQueen characterized himself as a hopeless realist. He had a peculiar, almost obsessive relationship with death. Dana Thomas comments that he loved surreal violence, but his purpose was not to belittle women. The designer himself stated that he was trying to "promote women as leaders" (Thomas 2015, p. 236). The fear of death has been the inspiration behind the image of the powerful female. The women that faced death, in McQueen's eyes, have been identified with deathliness. The signs of death were marked on their skin and their clothing, in a "theatrical staging of cruelty," as it is described by Evans. In addition, she refers to the armored body and the compulsion to repeat the trauma (Evans 2003, p. 237). Based on that theory, the female body is armored because it has to be protected from violent masculinity; but the victims' bodies were not always shielded, and their previous wounds remain present.

Deleuze, analyzing the three types of women described by Masoch in *Venus in Furs*, refers to the figure of the cold woman, who is between the opposites of pagan sensuality and sadistic sensuality and was considered by Masoch as the ideal female (Deleuze 1991, p. 52). The hybrid of the Grecian woman, a paganistic prototype of the hetaera or Aphrodite and the sadistic woman is a female that does not deny the existence of feelings but disavows the sensuality and tends to ice-cold sentimentality. Deleuze states that the trinity of the masochistic dream is constituted by the cold/icy, the maternal/sentimental and the severe/cruel (Deleuze 1991, p. 51). In McQueen's work, the ideal female was close to Masoch's ideal: she was portrayed as someone that "men wouldn't dare lay a hand on her," cold and distant while she was balancing between hetaerism and sadism (Deleuze 1991, p. 50). She was not a sexual object nor a sexual predator and her sexuality was a weapon against men, not a way to seduce them. Her beauty and her femininity were overshadowed by the fear that she evoked. According to Masoch's theory, the medium between the concepts of Hetaerism and Sadism is the woman torturer, "a mixture of fear, revulsion and attraction" (Deleuze 1991, p. 50).

McQueen's woman is evolved to a dreadful subject, whose purpose was to keep men at a distance and not to attract them, by using her sexuality as a defense. The dominance of woman was the outcome of the transition from prey to predator and, at the same time, the conversion from being afraid to being fearful. Femininity in McQueen's designs was concealed: his ideal woman was macabre, an echo of the fears that the designer wished to exorcise. Most of all, she was an allegory of Death, and a threat to masculinity.

3. Galliano's Doll

Galliano presented female sexuality as a tool of pleasure that could be used in favor of women. The designer replaced the idea of woman as a sexual object with the concept of the desirable woman that takes advantage of her sensuality and sexuality. Galliano's themes evolved around

sexualization with lots of fetishistic connotations, with models dressed like prostitutes and dominatrices. Similar but not identical to McQueen, he used the representation of trauma/wound usually as a reminder of the power of sexuality. In his collection *Freud/Fetish* presented among others a bleeding Antoinette (a beloved persona as we will see later) and a "hanged" woman holding her own hanging rope (a very psychoanalytic outfit) with distinct indication of trauma around her neck. His intention was to present a distorted version of feminine ideals (the doll, the queen, the romantic heroine), challenging the standards of beauty and elegance.

Galliano's perspective on the ideal female is actually a critical response to the representation of the female body as a sexual object. The oversexualized images of Galliano's women have a common characteristic: their faces and their postures are similar to those of dolls, with their porcelain skin and their rigid movement. The doll, as a concept, refers to an idealized version of the woman, which is so perfect as unattainable in reality. For Walter Benjamin, fashion created a dialogue between carnal pleasure and the corpse; the mannequins, standing as dead bodies, functioned as a symbol of the perversity of fashion and were identified with the provocative exposition of female sexuality (Benjamin 1999, pp. 62-63, 694). Benjamin, quoting Henri Pollés, states that "Mannequins become the model for imitation and the soul becomes the image of the body" (Benjamin 1999, p. 78). Behind doll's perfection is its uncanniness: while the doll-like female is beautiful, her image is distorted. According to Freud, the uncanny is usually associated with fear, since it is unfamiliar or unknown (Freud 1919, p. 2). In his essay *The Uncanny* from 1919, Freud mentions that an example of uncanniness is the doll, as it has the form of living human beings, but it lacks life (Freud 1919, p. 5). Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* refers to the doll in the analysis of childhood toys. She explains that the young boys use their phallus as an alter ego to explore their subjectivity, while girls have not an embodied alter ego. Therefore, the young girl uses the doll as an alter ego and takes care of it, in the same way she wishes to be taken care of (De Beauvoir 2008, p. 401).

What evokes the feeling of uncanniness is the sense of uncertainty that the doll creates, as it is a familiar image in an unnatural concept. In addition to that, Freud also linked the uncanny with repression. For him, "the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that undergone repression and then emerged from it" (Freud 1919, p. 15). In Galliano's work, the female sexuality seems as a strong counterreaction to the masculine fantasies. Almost ironically, Galliano's women seem to have come from a sexual fantasy, yet they are no longer a part of it, since their appearance is twisted, uncanny. Their outfits are sensational and made them desirable but their faces, painted as porcelain dolls with ruined make-up, created a weird atmosphere. What makes these looks uncanny is the contradiction between the woman, as she is fantasized and idealized by men, and the way Galliano presented her.

John Galliano's Spring 2006 collection was inspired by the French Revolution. A blood- and gore-spattered drama was unfolded during the catwalk as the models were covered with blood-red satins or with white muslins splattered with red spots. Among those looks, there are two that graphically represent the female figure as a bleeding wound. The first look is a red, semi-transparent veil that covers the head, shoulders and breasts of the model, with a white pair of trousers, embellished with red stones in the hem, resembling blood stains. The garments imply a heavy injury in the head, bleeding and covering the model with "blood." The second look is an extravagant gown, with lots of layers of satin and muslin in blood red color, creating an image of a woman showered in blood. What is particularly interesting is the detail of the accessory: a necklace chocker with three series of pearls that are partially red and with series of red stones hanging on the side. The necklace, designed to seem like dripping blood, is a direct reference to guillotine and the decapitations of the French aristocracy.

The distortion of romanticized ideas has been the signature of Galliano. His garments are sexually charged but they also have a twisted side, with strong violent meaning. His dark fantasies with the decayed, sensual heroines had a theatrical side, but they could be interpreted as something more than the object of male desire. Their image, being bathed in blood (blood stains, red embellishments, dripping red pearls), establishes the connection between the idea of the bleeding wound, the female sexuality and the traumatized femininity. His desire to dress them in a way that men would like to have sex with them ["When a man looks at a woman wearing one of my dresses, I would like him basically to be saying to himself – I have to fuck her" (Bancroft 2012, p. 59)] could be the fulfillment of the woman's desire to be desirable. Woman's desire does not seem focused on men, but it could be associated with her feeling of being attractive, to be the stimulus of lust. In other words, Galliano's woman may be dressed in such a way that men want to sleep with her, but her satisfaction comes from the fact that she is in control of her sexuality, being a sexual *subject* and not an object in the first place. For Evans, healing the trauma through the pleasurable display could explain the importance for the body to be desired (Evans 2003, p. 159).

The oversexualized image of Galliano's living dolls is an expression of the continuous repression of female sexuality. Galliano's aim was to convert femininity from women's vulnerability, as it was considered such during the previous centuries due to hysteria and the religious associations between female sexuality and the evil forces, to a representative of seduction that could benefit them. According to Galliano's associates, "John understood women and what women wanted to wear" (Thomas 2015, p. 172). Taking this idea into account, Galliano's intention to reinforce the lustful side of female body could be interpreted as an attempt to balance the wounds of the body and the woman's desire to be beautiful. Men's reaction to this image (their desire to have sex with these women) is not an end in itself -in the same body could co-exist lust and fear, pleasure and disgust.

4. A Dialogue between the Deadly Woman and the Doll

The female body has been an object of social control as femininity is considered a cultural construction, according to Marianne Thesander (Thesander 1997, p. 8). McQueen and Galliano used the body as a mean of expression, where aesthetics and traditional morality were altered and challenged. The designers, by escaping from the conventional idealization of the female body, presented a distorted and, at the same time, darkly romanticized image of women, far from the fertility and motherhood models (ideals). The identification of women with their bodies plays a major role in the relation between fashion and femininity: clothes, such as the corset, used to be a way of restriction in the past but became a liberating act in the present, since their symbolism changed over time and content (Thesander 1997, p. 13). McQueen used the concept of deathliness as a form of resistance against misogyny and the objectification of women: his women were not human but human-like creatures, who experienced death and fear, and therefore they became dreadful to protect themselves. Galliano, with the concept of sexualization, presented women in the most erotic way possible by dressing them with sensual costumes, embedded with sexual connotations and fetishistic symbols. While sex used to be associated with the passive position of women, the designer emphasized the seduction and the pleasure that women could derive from sex.

The concept of wound and particularly the wound as inspiration for fashion garments is a theme found in the work of both McQueen and Galliano. Fashion pieces, that cover (or reveal) part of the female body and remind us of somatic traumas, are a characteristic example of the combination of fear, desire and disgust in the context of fashion. These garments are *symbolic*, aiming to deliver a message to the audience, to shock or to provoke negative emotions. In the work of McQueen and Galliano, fear, desire and disgust are not two separate ideas, but the two sides of the same coin. Fearful figures have also a latent desirable side while the desirable figures have a latent dreadful side. In other words, this dipole/duality seem to complete rather than collide with each other. The connection between fear and desire is also an exploration of the way that these feelings are interacting with each other and the female body. It could be said that, where there is a representation of fear, there is also a hint of desire and vice versa.

Alexander McQueen, in his own words, commented on his creative perspective and Galliano's identity "John's a hopeless romantic and I've become a hopeless realist…" Galliano's romantic heroines and McQueen's warriors were quite different, but their symbolic function had the same meaning: the empowerment of femininity. For Dana Thomas, biographer of the designers and journalist, "if Galliano was a romantic, McQueen was a pornographer" (Thomas 2015, p. 5). Of course, the characterization of McQueen was more associated with his brutal representation of sexuality and the provocative images that made his audience uncomfortable. Still, the way that he deals with female sexuality and his intention to make women so powerful that

men would be afraid of them ["I want people to be afraid of the women I dress" (Bolton 2012, p. 64)] could also imply an aggressive version of pleasure. The dreadful woman is desirable, even if her image is fearful for men. Fear does not negate desire: especially in sado-masochism, a source of inspiration for both designers, fear of punishment or/and pain intensifies desire (Deleuze 1991, p. 88). Galliano's romantic perspective follows a similar pattern. The sensual images of femininity seemed to conceal a latent dreadful aspect. Colin McDowell commented on the projection of a "libidinous female image," which could also imply a hidden fear of femininity: "…John, we are told, loves women, but it is not easy to avoid the thought that, within that love lurks a fear…the suspicion that it is a love so intense it also encompasses a degree of hatred" (McDowell 1997, p. 117). In this case, the female figures, behind their frilled skirts and tight-laced corsets, were shaped by the contradiction between their sensuality and their distorted image, which created the feeling of uncanniness.

In *The Fashioned Body*, Joan Entwistle suggests that "the body is a highly restricted medium of expression since it is heavily mediated by culture and expresses the social pressure brought to bear on it" (Entwistle 2015, p. 37). Indeed, in the work of both the designers, among the more personal associations, there are comments on morality, femininity, independence and other concepts that are constructed by society. Alison Bancroft underpins the body-as-a-gap that marks the focus of the desire in couture, however I argue that the designers added different layers of meaning on the female body, beyond its erotic function (Bancroft 2012, pp. 66, 89). Without denying that the female body is inevitably a sexual body, as both Bancroft and Entwistle state, in my case studies it is also "invested with power" (Entwistle 2015, p. 40). In McQueen and Galliano, whose aim seems to be female resistance, the body is dressed with powerful, meaningful clothes that serve the purposes of the women: to be feared and to be desired. The female body is actually enclosed by power, and this power (the power of dress) is what makes women capable of overthrowing male dominance.

5. Disgust and the Fashioned Body

Dark sensuality, brutality and the unconventional ideals of beauty that they represented Horror and romance, death and life, lightness and darkness were the principal dichotomies that created a balance between the beautiful and the grotesque character of McQueen's and Galliano's designs. In their works, the boundaries between the "horrifyingly" beautiful and the "horrifyingly" ugly became blurry. The designers' work was characterized by this duality and made it difficult for people to understand whether their purpose was to victimize their subject, or to empower it. For McQueen, the beauty and the originality of his clothes was veiled by the violence of his show. His provocative approach had as a result the disgust of the audience, and Thomas refers that

"people were furious and shocked…they thought he was terrible" (Thomas 2015, p. 152). McQueen's fashion could not be revolutionary without being politically incorrect. Galliano, on the other hand, through the use of historical references, succeeded in presenting stereotypes of female sexuality as a way to empower women. For Kim Johnson, "provocative dress is considered as stimuli" and is more likely for the wearer to use sex for personal gain (Johnson and Rudd 2014, 2p.). Also Rebecca Arnold, commenting on the corsetry and the eroticized body, mentions that "this offered women the opportunity to take pleasure in the sensuality of fashion and its display of the body" (Arnold 2001, p. 63).

Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* illustrates the interconnections between pleasure, fear and repulsion and the role of the body (especially the female one) in the definition of purity, sin, abjection and death (Kristeva 1982, p. 28). Nevertheless, she does not consider death as the source of disgust, since we are not afraid of death in particular, rather the idea of the corpse, a decayed body that crosses the boundaries between the living and non-living stage. Heinämaa, exploring the connection between Kristeva's theory of abjection and Jean Paul Sartre's *Nausea,* notices that both Kristeva and Sartre consider disgust as the anxiety about human mortality or vulnerability, "It is a more complex aversion that concerns disproportional intertwinements of life and death" (Heinämaa 2020, p. 9). In terms of fashion, Bancroft states that "it emphasizes the gap, it turns the body itself into a cut, and besides accentuating the partiality of the *corps morcelé* (mean. fragmented body) in contrast to bodily unity, it also creates the erotic function of body-as-gap" (Bancroft 2012, p. 66).

In the case of McQueen's cut dress, the body *is* the cut, the wound, the pudendum. But why this image provokes negative reactions? First of all, the relation between female sexuality and filth (natural and moral) has its roots in the Christian religion. Evans comments that McQueen had an almost perverse way to bring together "sexuality, death and transgression in an image in which disgust…bears the imprint of desire" (Heinämaa 2020, pp. 6-7). The female genitals, along with their secretions, are considered as dirty and capable of contamination, similar to an open wound with blood and pus. Nussbaum argues that the misogynistic disgust is related to woman's secretions, which are too physical and are related to decay (Nussbaum 2004, p. 113). De Beauvoir writes that when the flesh drips-similar to an old wall or a corpse-it does not seem like secreting fluid but looks like being liquified, a process of decomposition that causes horror (De Beauvoir 2008, p. 532). Heinämaa, quoting Sartre, also refers to repulsion generated from "substances between two states," emphasizing in slimy (*viscuous*) textures that "are between solid and liquid, sticky and sleazy (Heinämaa 2020, p. 7). In McQueen's garments, the boundaries between eroticism and disgust become blurry. The associations of the opening/wound are those that evoke disgust and not its image as such; it is the violation of bodily

boundaries that renders the dress as uncanny. The splitting, the idea of an opening on the body that can be violated or contaminated is interpreted by Bancroft, "McQueen turns the body into *coupure*, the gap, that marks the aim of desire" (Bancroft 2012, p. 89).

The image of the wound/gap on the dress and, as a result, the fashioned body is sexual, threating and disgusting, since it incorporates the characteristics of the garment. The decay of the dress denotes the decay of the body, but in the case of the worm-filled corset, the body is presented as rotten, while the garment functions as a window to the internals. The trapped worms behind the transparent top touching the bare skin of the model is abject, since this image "undermines or endangers the division between life and the non-living" (Heinämaa 2020, p. 5). The absence of proper boundaries between the flesh and the organisms is the source of disgust. Heinämaa in her analysis of Kolnai's views on disgust, states that the focus on disgust is "the extravagant life that feeds on the body and multiplies without boundaries or directions" (Heinämaa 2020, p. 8). According to Kolnai, the superfluous fertility and the excessive growth of the maggots are the source of disgust and not the corpse itself. As a result, the worm-filled bodice is disgusting for two reasons: first, the idea that the worms, a lower form of life associated with decomposition, touch the skin thus potentially contaminating it and second, the abject image of a body (even symbolically) is rotting in front of our eyes. The Anemone dress is the representation of fashion's *allure macabre*. Kolnai states that disgusting things have the ability to evoke repulsion and, at the same time, to draw our attention (Kolnai 2004, p. 102). In the context of the "poetically disgusting" garment, the idea of an open wound is linked to the danger of contamination; at the same time, this black and red area that reminds us of fear, pain and death, is the center of our attention. This image has an almost theatrical character: the model is "bleeding" a flower (the anemone). The aversive side of the dress is related not to the wound itself but to the association between the abdominal area of the body and the internal organs. The "wound" of the dress reminds us that there are no boundaries between the external and the internal. Evans argues that "women's bodies, their internal and external parts, that have come to represent the space of danger, desire and unconscious fears about both sexuality and mortality" (Evans 2003, p. 224).

The concept of the bleeding wound is also found in the creations of Galliano, since both designers merge the forces of horror, pleasure and repulsion. Fear and desire leave a disgusting mark on the female body. Evans states in the analysis of the bodily trauma in fashion that the physical wounds or the psychological pain is eroticized "Terror bleeds into Eros" (Evans 2003, p. 106). For Galliano, the designs were like "slicing yourself open and letting the whole world see, warts and all, what you're about, what you're thinking, what your attitude to women is" (Thomas 2015, p. 93). There is a particular interest in exploring what is underneath the surface, meaning under the dress (and the skin), inside the body. The body's interior is a symbol of our

own mortality; first it is feminized and then sexualized in the representation (Evans 2003, p. 220). Galliano's looks are more subtle in the way that portray the wounded femininity. The red piece that covers the model from head to waist creates a graphic image that resembles decapitation or a heavy traumatized head that bleeds. In this case, the disgust has not only to do with the wound itself, but the violence that caused it. The Antoinettes of Galliano are the representation of the violated femininity; the brutalities of the French revolution are embedded on the blood dripping pearl necklaces of the models.

6. Aesthetic Violation of the Female Body: A Feministic Act

Evans mentions that "as the inside of the body can be presented as a crypt, so too may the spaces around it, in and between its parts be creatively revealed" (Evans 2003, p. 230). The visceral disgust that the garments of McQueen and Galliano are related more to defilement rather than deathliness. The horror of an "opened" body is associated both to femininity and female sexuality; in Elizabeth Wilson's words "dread as well as desire; the shell of chic, the aura of glamour, always hide[s] a wound" (Wilson 2003, p. 246). The wound as part of the dress becomes also part of the female body. The body coexists with the dress, both changing form and meaning through the process of wearing. The bodies of McQueen and Galliano are imperfect, a disarming attempt to present all the potentials and alternative realities of the feminine soma. The distorted, violated imagery of femininity is not an attempt of the designers to degrade it, but a rather paradoxical way to prove its dominance.

Shusterman refers to the body as a mean to overcome the repressive ideologies (Shusterman 2000, p. 281). The grotesque, wounded female bodies are an answer to the traditional male gaze. The perfect, sexualized figures are replaced by horrific heroines that bleed to death. The wound as a somatic characteristic, functions as an affirmation of decay. Despite of this repulsive image, the fashioned body remains an aesthetically pleasing body. Imperfect, disgusting, repulsive without the need to idealize or beautify the wound, the bodies of Galliano and McQueen are unapologetically feminine. For Arnold, "the powerful feminine of their designs seems rather to flaunt her mortality, and revels in the fears it provokes" (Arnold 2001, p. 59). Indeed, the way femininity is portrayed in the designs is empowering since the emotion of disgust functions as an armor; the fashioned body is armored with the grisly feeling of repulsion. De Beauvoir explains the relationship between femininity and disgust, stating that the young girl enjoys anything repulsive: insects, dirty pards, blood from wounds and abrasions. Especially during puberty, the girl is repulsed by her very fleshy body, her menstrual blood, the sexual practices of the adults, the male that she intends to (De Beauvoir 2008, pp. 491-492). The philosopher highlights that these disgust-related practices are an exordium of the sexual experience and,

simultaneously, a protest against it-through these practices the girl punishes herself with the excuse that her future lover will not do anything more horrifying to her than what she does to herself. For De Beauvoir the relationship between disgust and femininity do not only start in a very early age, but it also defines the sexual nature of the woman. Based on these observations, the designers' works seem to have a deeply feministic interpretation, since femininity is identified with the sexual and horrific nature of repulsion.

The garments of McQueen and Galliano are a representation of the repulsive fashion: the disgusting dress and, by association, the disgusting, wounded body does not negate the value of the female body or the designs. There are different philosophical perceptions of disgusting femininity -the repulsion is usually associated with female vulnerability and the abject imagery of the female soma. Nevertheless, I argue that the distorted female body and dress can still be an aesthetically feministic act without being conventionally beautiful or losing its sexual and feminine character. Shusterman, in his somaesthetic analysis of *The Second Sex*, mentions, quoting de Beauvoir, that young girl's sexuality "is experienced as something strange, disgusting, inhumanly and animal." He highlights that the female sexual organs are "unknown" to the woman, almost an autonomous part of herself, characterized as "mucous, humid…sullied with body fluids" (Shusterman 2003, p. 124). He also argues that women by familiarizing with their bodies and recognized them (and, by association, their desire) as their own will be more understandable and will become less disgusting, threating and disempowering (Shusterman 2003, p. 125). Nussbaum also states that women are associated with certain disgust properties such as stickiness, sliminess and decay. She argues that misogynistic disgust is a product of fear and shame as menstrual blood, contamination through sex (women are considered as receivers of semen, a disgusting and distressing idea for males) and giving birth are all sources of repulsion related to female body. In general, femininity is perceived as entirely animalistic and sexual, and "it is in effect the man's animality, from which he unevenly tries to distance himself," since it is a constant reminder of his mortality (Nussbaum 2004, pp. 111-112). Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* refers also to the slimy nature of femininity. Particularly, he analyzes the relationship between male and female stating that the later "give us at first the impression that is a being which can be possessed […, but] at the very moment when I believe that I possess it, behold by a curious reversal, it possesses me" (Ablett 2020, p. 61). This existential approach of the power relations between male and female defines femininity as something untamable. Sara Ablett mentions Sartre's theory that "slime and feminine show as what we are" (Ablett 2020, p. 62). The controlling nature of disgust and femininity is the center of the female dominance. In the paradigms of McQueen and Galliano, their ideal Feminine embodies the very idea of Sartre: a female so powerful in her wounded, fragile body that is able to "consume" everything through her repulsive

nature. The wound is not a weakness but a proof of resistance, power and survival- blood and deathliness function as reminders of the female resilience.

6. Conclusion

McQueen and Galliano are known for the controversial portrayal of femininity in their works. For them, the fashioned body is a horrific creative locus but, at the same time, a liberal act against the moral and sexual conservatism. Sexuality, sensuality and power are merged in the context of disgust. The designers present their own versions of womanhood, which are repulsive, dreadful, horrific and grotesque. The distortion of the Feminine Ideals aims to empower women and redefine the way femininity is perceived. The wound on the creations becomes an armor that protects females by keeping males at distance. The representation of femininity as an open wound (through the dress) has a lot of interpretations; it is a *memento mori* of mortality and animality, a potentially contaminating opening that threatens manhood, a sexual connotation, a reminder of the abjection and the lack of boundaries between life and decay. The wounded fashion bodies are an exploration of the emotion of disgust in relation to fear and desire. Repulsion contains both dread and pleasure (*macabre allure*); the image of a decaying body is horrific and erotic at the same time. As disgust is placed between mortality and sexuality, the fear of death and its relation to femininity is central. The dangers of animality and vulnerability are projected on the traumatized body, who becomes the corpus of disgust. In the end, the aversive fashioned body is a feministic statement. The wounded woman, through her sticky, slimy, abject and consuming nature, becomes powerful by changing the definition of femininity herself.

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1 Nussbaum mentions in her chapter *Disgust and our Animal Bodies* that "human disgust reactions are typically mediated very powerfully by the awareness of death and decay. In developing a disgust toward bodily wastes, a young human is reacting against 'the fate as well of all that is physical: decay and death.'"

2 Honigman, referring to *memento mori*, states that "a material obtained through creature's death, leather, is a constant *memento mori* and our everyday connection to mortality." It is interesting to notice the way that leather (the skin of an animal) is associated with death; it is the disgusting nature of the leather (flesh) that "protect" us from our mortality (for Terror Management Theory see also Kyprianidou, "On Moral Disgust in Art: Imaginative Resistance and Empathic Engagement," forthcoming).

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POPULAR MUSIC, FEMINISM AND THE "POWER OF THE BODY" IN THE PERFORMANCE: SOME REMARKS ON ADORNO, SHUSTERMAN AND PEARL JAM[1]

Stefano Marino

Abstract
In this article I investigate the relation between popular culture and feminism through the specific example of popular music (and more precisely, within this field, pop-rock music). In the first two sections of my article I mostly focus on such aspects as the form/content relation in an artwork, the commodity status of contemporary popular culture, the role of standardization in the musical material used by pop-rock musicians, and the relation between aesthetic dimension and political potential, drawing on the stimulating insights offered by the critical theorists Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse but also trying to critically rethink some of their ideas. In the third section, shifting my attention from Adorno's critical theory to Richard Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics and somaesthetics, I introduce the theme of the important role played by the dimension of performance in pop-rock music and, within the musical performance, by the somatic component of the musician's use of his/her body, sometimes also to spread certain politically committed messages, as in the case of songs that aim to support feminist ideas and struggles. In the fourth and final section I try to exemplify some of the ideas emerged in the previous sections through a selective and specific reference to the grunge subculture of the 1990s and its relation to feminism, with a special focus on the rock band Pearl Jam and also in connection to some ideas expressed by the feminist theorist Angela Davis.

Keywords
Aesthetics. Popular music. Feminism. Theodor W. Adorno. Richard Shusterman. Herbert Marcuse. Angela Davis. Pearl Jam.

For Karin Enrica, my mother, with love and gratitude:
Everything I feel returns to you somehow.
Sufjan Stevens, *The Only Thing*

1

The domain of *popular culture* is very broad, complex and articulated. It includes a variety of different aesthetic practices and experiences, ranging from photography and film to commercial fiction novels and comic books, from fashion and design to videogames and popular music. In the present contribution, as already happened in some of my previous works on this topic, I will focus my attention more specifically on *popular music* and try to exemplify in this way (namely, by focusing on this particular and delimited field) some of my ideas about popular culture, in general, and about the relation between popular culture and *feminism*, in particular. The guiding

question at the center of my article is whether popular culture (and, in the specific case examined here, popular music) can address in a serious way important and urgent ethical-political issues such as those concerning feminism, and whether it can contribute in a positive and non-superficial way to draw the people's attention to such issues, thus offering a potential contribution to the development of a critical consciousness and a more feminist-oriented worldview.

Of course, depending on one's views about feminism and especially on one's views about popular culture, the possible answers to the abovementioned question can be different, ranging from an enthusiastic and doubtless "Yes" to a disappointed and resolute "No." In my view, the most promising and, so to speak, well-balanced answer to the abovementioned question is a sort of pondered, cautious and reasonable "Yes, but it depends." As we will see, my use of the simple words "it depends" in this context is referred, among other things, to such factors as: the different ways in which different artists may use even the same musical materials; the different kind of performances that it is possible to experiment and develop; the manifold and complex relations between form and content that may characterize even in radically divergent ways different works of art. From a theoretical point of view, my ideas about this aesthetic question mostly derive from my interpretation of the different (but nonetheless, in my opinion, comparable and to some extent compatible) accounts of popular culture offered by Theodor W. Adorno and Richard Shusterman, influenced by their general aesthetic theories that are respectively connected to the philosophical traditions of critical theory of society and pragmatism.

In short, and anticipating now some of the ideas that will be furthered and deepened in the next sections, I think that we can agree with Herbert Marcuse (another outstanding critical theorist) in claiming that perhaps "[a]rt cannot change the world," but anyway "it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world" (Marcuse 1979, p. 32). As Marcuse also argued elsewhere, "[a]rt itself, in practice, cannot change reality" (i.e., it cannot make a revolution, even when it talks about a revolution, as in the famous song by Tracy Chapman *Talkin' 'Bout a Revolution*), but anyway "art can and will draw its inspirations, and its very form, from the then-prevailing revolutionary movement – for revolution is in the substance of art" (Marcuse 1972, p. 116). However, if this is a real potential that, *in principle*, artworks surely have, the question concerning whether this potentiality is able to realize itself and become actual or not is a question that, as I said, *depends* on many factors. Among these factors, following Adorno, one may legitimately mention fundamental moments and dimensions of the artwork such as form, content and what he called – with reference to both "serious music" and "popular music" (Adorno 2006, pp. 280-284) – the "musical material". In short, influenced by Adorno's aesthetics, what I would like to suggest is that a work that aims to offer an adequate expression of a certain content should be also adequate at the level of its form,

and reciprocally a work that aims to reach a high formal level should also pay attention to the contents that it expresses. In fact, as Adorno explains, "[f]orm is mediated in-itself through content [...] and content is mediated by form" (Adorno 2002, p. 356).

Anyway, for Adorno (and also for some contemporary critics of popular music who apparently aim to follow in his footsteps but, unfortunately, are not equipped with the unsurpassed musicological knowledge that Adorno could benefit from, as a pupil of Alban Berg and a composer himself), *all* popular music is undeniably and unavoidably defined *only* by negative features such as commodification, standardization and pseudo-individualization. For Adorno, these features radically condemn popular music to be a sort of "social cement" (Adorno 2006, pp. 315-319). Like *all* other products belonging to the "culture industry," also popular music is understood by him as a sort of agent of "mass deception" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94-136). As has been noted, "[p]opular art has not been popular with aestheticians and theorists of culture": "[w]hen not altogether ignored as beneath contempt," it has been "typically vilified as mindless, tasteless trash" (Shusterman 2000a, p. 169). Indeed, "until recently, the interdisciplinary field of aesthetics [...] was either silent about, or hostile to, popular culture," on the basis of the predominant – and often merely prejudiced – idea that the latter "is aesthetically impoverished" (Gracyk 2007, p. 6). However, the fact that probably "an enormous quantity of popular music is precisely what Adorno claimed" (Leppert 2002, p. 345), does *not* imply that *all* popular music, with no exceptions, corresponds to what Adorno claimed – also considering that, for Adorno, even *all* jazz music belonged to the field of standardized and pseudo-individualized popular music, apropos of which he even dared to speak of "pseudo-improvisations," thus assimilating jazz music to a form of *pseudos* (see Marino 2018).

Philosophizing in a dialectical and critical way *with* Adorno but at the same time *against* Adorno, I rather tend to think that a vast and not at all irrelevant part of the catalogue of songs in the popular music of the last decades has been capable to develop brilliant musical solutions with regard to both form and content, notwithstanding its status of commodity and notwithstanding its use of musical materials that, in principle, can be probably defined as "standardized" (major/minor chords; regular time signatures; habitual structure of the song and instrumentation; etc.). Drawing on some stimulating insights offered by Shusterman's pragmatist and melioristic account of popular culture, I thus suggest that it is worth defending "the aesthetic legitimacy of popular art": the latter "deserves serious aesthetic attention" and is often able to offer "a radically revised aesthetic with a joyous return of the somatic dimension which philosophy has long repressed" (Shusterman 2000a, pp. 177, 184). On this basis, in some of my previous contributions on this topic I have suggested to use the notion of "self-transcending commodities" (Marino 2019, p. 53) to basically account for what I define the non-standardized

use of standardized musical materials in songs or recordings that are surely characterized by a commodity status but are also capable of immanently transcending this status by virtue of their aesthetic quality. This is something that, in my view, one can find in many artists and many works in contemporary popular music.

Despite what recent critics of mass culture and popular music have polemically claimed – such as, for instance, Alva Noë (2015, p. 172), according to whom "pop music [...] looks like music, but it isn't" – the history of popular music in the last fifty or sixty years shows that many musicians, many songs and many events have been capable to escape what Adorno called the "power of the banal [that] extends over the entire society," and have been capable to fulfill the "flight from the banal" (Adorno 1991, p. 34) that he considered the task of *all* music in our age. In certain cases of radical experimentation by some unique figures in the recent history of popular music, my interpretation key based on the idea of a non-standardized use of standardized musical materials can be also connected to what the musicologist Richard Middleton once recognized as the seemingly paradoxical but nonetheless real existence of "avant-garde commodities – a combination which, according to Adorno, is impossible" (Middleton 1990, p. 43). Indeed, musicians and bands like The Velvet Underground, Pink Floyd, Soft Machine, King Crimson, Brian Eno, Frank Zappa, Laurie Anderson, Sonic Youth, Einstürzende Neubauten and many others have probably proved to be capable "to bring chaos into order" (Adorno 2005, p. 222) – which Adorno considered the task of *all* art in our age.

2

As I said, *popular music* is only one among the various fields that form the constellation of contemporary *popular culture* in general – and, together with cinema, it has surely been one of the most representative and most successful fields in this context, at least since the beginning of the 20th century. In turn, however, also the field of popular music is not narrow and simple, but is vice-versa broad, complex and articulated, as simply testified by the well-known existence of a great variety of different genres and subgenres that form the realm of contemporary popular music. In this realm, what we may generally call *pop-rock music* has surely represented since many decades one of the leading trends and traditions.

A quick look at the history of popular music in the last decades shows how the question concerning ethical and political commitment (that also includes the phenomenon of feminism, which is of our specific interest here) has played a relevant and sometimes absolutely decisive role. In this context, let me simply remind the readers of such events as the festival of Woodstock (1969), the *No Nukes* concerts (1979), the *Live Aid* (1985) and *Live 8* (2005) benefit concerts, the *Human Rights Concerts* in favor of Amnesty International (1986-88), or the *Tibetan*

Freedom series of concerts (1996-2012). In the same context, it is also possible to mention famous and useful examples such as the several *engagé* pop-rock songs written and/or performed by relevant musicians like Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, Jefferson Airplane, Peter Gabriel, Bruce Springsteen, Sting, Simple Minds, U2 and many others. In a previous contribution of mine, entitled *Writing Songs after Auschwitz* (Marino 2016), I had examined the case of System of a Down, a famous heavy metal band that, through some of their songs (characterized by an original mix of different musical styles), has proved to be able to spread information and raise the awareness in a very broad audience about the 1915-1916 Armenian genocide, succeeding in the achievement of this aim through a well-balanced combination between the aesthetic potential and the political dimension of those songs.

On the basis of what has been said until now, how should we conceive of those popular culture products (like songs, recordings or concerts, in the specific field of popular music) that dare to confront themselves with dramatically serious problems like war, misery, genocide or, in the particular case that is of our interest here, the oppression of women (and of *all* the subjectivities that suffer from gender-based discrimination and violence) in a patriarchal society? Does the commodified status of these products and their use of standardized materials necessarily imply that also the content or message of the song will be commodified, and hence that a tragic event (which, as such, would deserve the most serious and tactful attention) will be reduced to a purchasable commodity that is only good for consumption and "reception in distraction" (Benjamin 2008, p. 40)? If so, what are the implications and consequences of such a problematic process? Once again, I think that a well-balanced, reasonable and defensible answer to such questions is an answer that, following a suggestion by Shusterman (2000a, p. 177), avoids "the [opposite] poles of condemnatory pessimism and celebratory optimism," and rather admits that "it depends." Namely, an answer that does *not* take the form of totalizing claims, but rather aims to differentiate between various combinations of form and content in different works that may thus lead in different directions and arrive at different achievements on an aesthetic level and also an ethical-political level (conceiving of these levels as intertwined with each other, and not as abruptly separated from each other).

Anyway, let us first take a look at a potential Adornian answer to the abovementioned questions. Due to biographical reasons (Adorno, as is well-known, died in 1969), we don't have at our disposal explicit statements of Adorno on the specific examples that I have made (and I will make) reference to in this contribution. However, beside the traces that he left in many of his writings on popular music, we can also hear from his own voice his thoughts about some politically committed rock songs that dealt with a question that was of the greatest interest and of tragic actuality in the 1960s: the Vietnam war. In fact, a short fragment of an interview with

Adorno, apropos of a certain kind of *engagé* popular music that was typical of the 1960s, is highly representative of his position, for example when he argues that *all* attempts

> to bring political protest together with "popular music" – that is, with entertainment music – are [...] *doomed from the start*. The *entire sphere* of popular music, even there where it dresses itself up in modernist guise, is to such a degree inseparable from the *Warencharakter*, from consumption, from the cross-eyed transfixion with amusement, that [all] attempts to outfit it with a new function remain *entirely* superficial. And I have to say [Adorno adds] that when somebody sets himself up, and for whatever reason [accompanies] maudlin music by singing something or other about Vietnam, [...] I find this song *unbearable* (*nicht zu ertragen*), in that by taking the Terrible or the Horrendous (*das Entsetzliche*) and making it something *consumable*, it ends up wringing something like consumption-qualities out of it.[2]

For Adorno, a popular music hit song, with its commodity character, was a merely "consumable" – and, in his own words, "unbearable" – product, due to its standardized musical *form* (which, in its dialectical relation with the dimension of the artwork's *content*, represents one of the most important aspects of Adorno's entire aesthetic theory) and to its standardized musical material, eventually undergoing the process of manipulation by the culture industry known as "plugging" (Adorno 2006, pp. 290-298). For this reason, according to him, a work of this kind eventually proved to be capable of turning *everything* it delivered as content or message into something consumable: that is, capable of extorting consumption-qualities from *everything*, be it the Vietnam war, a genocide, global hunger or, in the specific case that we are examining here, also feminist struggles. So, from what we may call an orthodox Adornian perspective, writing one of those "unbearable" pop-rock songs on serious issues like the abovementioned ones logically implied to make those issues run the risk of being commodified and thus falsified, deprived of their seriousness and of their power to shock us and to enhance our critical consciousness and critical attitude towards the real. In my essay *"Angela Davis as a Commodity?"* (Marino 2019) I examined the particular example of songs written and performed in the 1970s by The Rolling Stones, John Lennon and other musicians in support of the critical theorist and feminist activist Angela Davis, who had been unjustly imprisoned in 1970. In that context, focusing my attention on that particular example, I had argued that, from an orthodox Adornian perspective, one should draw the conclusion that writing a pop-rock song on someone, like Angela Davis, who aims to protest against the growing commodification of culture and life, actually commodifies the critical theorist's figure and eventually deprives her thinking of what we may define its negative-critical potential and its truth content, turning it vice-versa into an affirmative-apologetic and untrue product.

However, as I have explained before, I rather tend to favor what we may call an unorthodox Adornian approach. Although Adorno was surely one of the greatest philosophers of music of the 20th century, it must be admitted that his "critique [of popular music]" is probably "less dialectical than is the case when he addresses art music" (Leppert 2002, p. 331) – as happens, for example, when he addresses in a masterful and rigorous dialectical way the different phases of Beethoven's or Schönberg's musical *oeuvre*. In his relevant *Briefwechsel* with Benjamin in the 1930s, Adorno sometimes raised the objection of "loss of dialectical consistency" and "simplification which undermines [...] its fundamental truth" (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, pp. 105-106) against Benjamin's concept of image and aura. As Adorno critically wrote to Benjamin in his famous letter from March 18, 1936: "What I should like to postulate [...] is *more* dialectics" (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, p. 131). Anyway, also Adorno's treatment of the serious music/popular music distinction sometimes seems to suffer from a similar loss of dialectical consistency and simplification. In fact, Adorno meritoriously set free this distinction from the mere "complex music/simple music" criterion (Adorno 2006, p. 284), and he also offered some of the most penetrating analyses of the use value/exchange value relation, the commodity character and fetishism in contemporary culture: nonetheless, his distinction between serious music and popular music was often traced back by him in a reductive way to the sole criterion of standardization, i.e., to the idea of popular music's (and, in general, mass culture's) *totally* standardized character. This unfortunately prevents Adorno from recognizing that, just like we usually differentiate "good serious music" from "bad serious music" (Adorno 2006, p. 284), in a similar way we should be able to "distinguish better from worse instances of popular music" (Gracyk 2007, p. 133). As I said, sometimes the same problem also occurs with contemporary critics of pop-rock music who dualistically and dichotomously claim that, "[w]hereas the classical musician displays the music in his or her performance, the pop musician displays himself or herself" (Noë 2015, p. 182), as if *all* classical music and *all* popular music were of the same kind and same level.

As noted by Shusterman (2000a, p. 231), much popular music "claims to be creative" and, contrary to what Adorno would accept, it rightly "insists that originality can be manifested [also] in the revisionary appropriation of the old," and not only in the avant-garde search for *das Neue*. A search that anyway, after Duchamp and Warhol, has perhaps reached today the stage of what has been emphatically called "the end of art" (Danto 1997) or the mere triumph of "art in a gaseous state" (Michaud 2003). By the way, also critics like Noë must eventually admit the existence of at least some phenomena in the field of pop-rock music that cannot be adequately grasped if we limit ourselves to the abovementioned dualistic and reductive interpretive patterns. With regard to this, the fitting example used by Noë is that of Radiohead, a pop-rock band that for him – and also for me (see Marino and Guzzi 2021) – fascinatingly occupies "a sort of

in-between place, a position in the world of pop while at the same time consistently concealing themselves behind their music, creating music that commands attention and fascination *as* music" (Noë 2015, p. 175). However, if this is true in the case of Radiohead (and of course it is, so that I fully agree with Noë on this point), then it is hard to find plausible reasons to limit this observation only to Radiohead and not consider it equally valid for (and extendable to) other significant pop-rock musicians, such as David Bowie, Peter Gabriel, David Byrne and many others, in their most fruitful attempts to combine commercial success and musical experimentation.

3

Let us now focus on feminism. *Flawless* is a Billboard top-peaking song by Beyoncé from 2013. The song is structured in two parts, divided by some passages from the speech *We Should All Be Feminists* delivered by the renowned Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie at a conference (and later published as a book-length essay in 2014). The example of Beyoncé's song – although to some extent problematic and controversial, as the critical opinions of Annie Lennox, bell hooks and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie herself testify – is just one among the many examples that one can mention apropos of the relation that popular music may establish with feminism. A relation that is arguably aimed to support the struggle for a progress in women's emancipation and to provide these struggles with a wider audience, a broader accessibility and an enhanced visibility.

In this context, the example of a great songwriter, poet and also feminist activist like Ani DiFranco is surely a significant one: many of her songs deal with the exploration and explanation of difficult and problematic aspects that characterize the women's condition in the present world, aiming to contribute to the development of a critical consciousness towards this situation. A critical consciousness that, following Marcuse's maxim that I cited before, perhaps cannot lead to a revolution, but nonetheless can have the power to change some sad and deep-rooted stereotypes and attitudes in our society. The underground, subcultural "Riot grrrl" movement from the 1990s, that originally combined feminism and punk music, is surely another famous example in this field (see McDonnell and Vincentelli 2019). A recent article published on the Italian edition of the famous magazine *Rolling Stone* has also recalled the importance and impact of some songs and records from the 1960s-1970s on the Italian feminist movements of that time (Zuffanti 2022).

These are some examples (indeed, just a few) among the many different examples that could be mentioned to document the relation between pop-rock music and feminism. However, as I said, a pop-rock song is basically a commodity (produced and sold by the culture industry, and often composed with standardized musical materials): so, following Adorno, it is legitimate to ask oneself if, despite their best intentions at the level of the contents and messages expressed,

such products of mass culture do not run the risk of commodifying feminism itself, ultimately reducing it to a cliché, a momentary trend, or a slogan to be sung and then to be quickly forgotten. Faithful to the open and pragmatic way of thinking that I summarized in the first section with the simple formula "It depends," I would like to answer the abovementioned question – i.e., the question if, despite their best intentions, the products of mass culture do not run the risk to commodify feminism itself and reduce it to clichés or slogans – by suggesting: (1) to differentiate (in a very Adornian way, in a sense) between the figure and personality of the artist himself/herself, on the one hand, and the specific features and aesthetic qualities of his/her artwork as such, on the other hand; (2) to differentiate between different products or works that, due to their different aesthetic level, are also capable to achieve different results at the level of their ethical and political implications.

So, for example, I personally tend to be skeptical about the aesthetic quality and artistic merit of Beyoncé's song *Flawless*, and I fear that, despite the singer's intentions, it may contain the danger of turning the feminist message into a mere form of harmless MTV-entertainment.[3] Vice-versa I greatly admire DiFranco's poetic achievements throughout the decades and, at the level of the musical material, her experimentation with an original kind of folk-rock style that, in various records, has also incorporated punk, alternative-rock, funk, hip hop, jazz, soul and electronica sounds. In a comparable way, notwithstanding her great difference from DiFranco or the "Riot grrrl" punk bands in musical terms, it is also possible to cite the outstanding singer, pianist and songwriter Tori Amos, who offers a highly relevant and representative example in the present context, because she is undoubtedly a significantly original (and hence definitely non-standardized) artist in the field of recent pop-rock music, with different influences incorporated in her compositions that range from classical music to jazz to pop, and because of the relevance of her music and her figure in terms of the relation between popular music and feminism (see Roberts 2020). Beside this, the examples of DiFranco and Amos are significant in this context because of the fact that they first came to prominence in the early 1990s: namely, exactly in the same years in which, as I will explain later with reference to such (male) bands as Nirvana and Pearl Jam, certain forms of connection between pop-rock music and feminism became clearly visible and influential, also in relation to a critique, by those male musicians, of a certain usual but sad idea of men's identity ("I've always had a problem with the average macho man – they've always been a threat to me. […] I definitely feel closer to the female side of the human being than I do the male – or the American idea of what a male is supposed to be," reportedly said Kurt Cobain [cited in Howden 2014]). So, in a recent article on Tori Amos' last record (*Ocean to Ocean*, from 2021) it has been observed:

> The music industry has always had an issue with women who know their own minds. And those coming through in the 1980s and 1990s had it as tough as anyone. […] [Tori] Amos was at the forefront of a generation of female artists who broke though in the 1990s talking frankly about their sexuality and the patriarchal forces that had shaped their world. […] "There can be with women in music this double standard, where, when we are doing something, they call it 'cathartic.' And then guys are unzipping their skin, it's called poetry and art." […] But perhaps things have changed. It is just about possible to imagine an audacious record such as *Boys for Pele* receiving a fairer hearing today. It must give her hope to see artists such as Phoebe Bridgers, Billie Eilish and Annie Clark, aka St Vincent, take on the entertainment industry on their own terms? "Of course, it gives me a lot of hope. I know Annie personally. Her position wasn't given to her. She had to work very hard to be where she is. And to stand her ground. It's not right for me to tell her story. She's had to make her choices, decide who is on her team, who will help convey her vision. That hasn't changed since the women in the 1990s. We've had to work to be where we are" (Power 2021; the words cited in inverted commas are by Amos).

As I tried to briefly explain in the previous sections, the approach that I tend to favor in my analysis of the aesthetic level of pop-rock music is an approach that, with Adorno/against Adorno, mostly concentrates on the *form/content* relation and on the *non-standardized* (i.e., original, unusual, not banal) use of musical materials that may also be standardized in principle. In this context, it is important to add that an important role in pop-rock music is played by the component of *performance* and, within the performance, of what I like to call the "power of the body." My investigation of this feature of popular music is not theoretically indebted with Adorno (as happens with other aspects of my conception), but is rather guided by some stimulating insights that can be derived from Shusterman's pragmatist and somaesthetic approach to art and aesthetics – including popular music (Shusterman 2000b, pp. 35-95).

As has been observed by Erika Fischer-Lichte, the theorist of "the aesthetics of the performative (*die Ästhetik des Performativen*)" (Fischer-Lichte 2004), a performance comes into being through the bodily co-presence of "actors" and "spectators."

> Performances, thus, essentially differ from texts and artifacts. The latter are products that exist separately from their creator(s); they are not tied to the bodily presence of their creators. […] In contrast, a performance has very different *medial conditions*, stemming from its reliance on bodily co-presence. […] [Especially] improvisational performances require the willingness and openness of spectators to experience others and themselves as *embodied minds,* strongly present in the here and now. This is [a] *radical concept of*

> *presence*. It emerges when a performer brings forth their phenomenal body and its energy, so that they appear as an *embodied mind*. In the presence of the performer, the spectators experience both self and other as an *embodied mind*. The circulating energy is perceived as a transformative power. […] The energetic exchange between performers and spectators affects everyone present and, thus, creates the performance (Fischer-Lichte 2021, pp. 160, 163).

In my view, it is *firstly* impossible to understand a great part of the value and fascination of our aesthetic experience with pop-rock music without adequately taking into consideration the centrality of the dimension of "embodied performance" in it. *Secondly*, it is also important to take into account the fundamental role played by the "power of the body" in order to properly understand the relevance and efficacy of the message conveyed by certain forms of politically committed pop-rock music of our time that aim to protest against oppressive political regimes, violations of human rights, racism, sexism, etc.

Paying attention to the somatic dimension of aesthetic experience is obviously interesting in itself, but I think that it becomes especially important when one stops limiting the aesthetic discourse to the sole paradigm of a philosophy of the fine arts (a paradigm that had been predominant from Hegel to Danto, in short [see Andina 2012]) and rather rediscovers a broader idea of aesthetics as a philosophical theory of the aesthetic as such. Namely, a philosophy of the *aisthesis* that focuses on the realm of the sensible, the perceptual and also the affective (see Matteucci 2019). From a certain point of view, this revaluation of the sphere of the *aisthesis* in its broadest sense corresponds to a rediscovery of some of the original impulses that had led Alexander G. Baumgarten, in the 18th century, to found a new philosophical discipline, precisely baptized by him with the name *Aesthetica*. However, "in pursuing Baumgarten's broad practical vision of aesthetics," Shusterman's pragmatist aesthetics surely goes a step further, "by also embracing a crucial feature that Baumgarten unfortunately omitted from his program," namely the "cultivation of the body" (Shusterman 2000a, p. 263). This, in turn, can easily and coherently lead (1) to a development of this theme on the specific field of the significance and value of performance, and (2) to a rediscovery of (and, indeed, a new and intensified philosophical interest in) the human body, viewed as the original source and root of the sphere of the *aesthesis* in its complete significance for human life. As noted by Shusterman in *Pragmatist Aesthetics*,

> the senses surely belong to the body and are deeply influenced by its condition. Our sensory perception thus depends on how the body feels and functions; what it desires, does, and suffers. […] Concerned not simply with the body's external form or *representation* but also with its lived *experience,* somaesthetics works at improving awareness of our

> bodily states and feelings, thus providing greater insight into both our passing moods and lasting attitudes (Shusterman 2000a, pp. 265, 268).

Shusterman's pragmatist and somaesthetic rediscovery of the aesthetic dimension in all its breadth and significance – thus including sensory perception and also such fundamental components of human life as emotions and feelings, understood as related to the body as their original locus – is obviously based on a philosophical idea of the body that does not conceive of it in a scientistic and reductionist way, but rather conceives of it "as both subject and object in the world," as a *soma* phenomenologically involving the aspects of both *Körperhaben* and *Leibsein* (Shusterman 2019, p. 14). Such a pragmatist and somaesthetic idea of the body can be stimulating and fruitful also for the specific and limited purposes of the present contribution. In this context, a passage from Shusterman's book *Body Consciousness* can be especially interesting and useful. In the fourth chapter of *Body Consciousness* Shusterman quotes a long passage from Wittgenstein on the crucial role of the body in music, and then adds that this recognition would need "to be taken a step further in a pragmatic direction": in fact, "if one's body [...] is capable of being more finely tuned to perceive, respond, and perform aesthetically," then it is probably reasonable to try "to learn and train this 'instrument of instruments' by more careful attention to somaesthetic feelings" (Shusterman 2008, p. 126). For Shusterman, "[m]ore than guitars or violins or pianos or even drums, our bodies are the primary instrument for the making of music," and also "more than records, radios, tapes, or CDs, bodies are the basic, irreplaceable medium for its appreciation": in general, "our bodies are the ultimate and necessary instrument for music" at all levels (Shusterman 2008, p. 126), both in theory and practice.

In my view, although (as Shusterman rightly observes) the body is *always* involved in *all* kinds of musical creation and musical enjoyment, nonetheless in the case of certain forms of musical performance the crucial role of the body appears in a particularly evident and powerful way. This is the case, for example, of pop-rock music, whose aesthetic experience "can be so intensely absorbing and powerful that it is likened to spiritual possession," up to the point that "[e]ven rock's severest critics recognize the passionately real potency and intoxicating satisfactions of its experience" (Shusterman 2000a, p. 178). Beside this, it must also be noted that the defining nature of pop-rock music has always been characterized by the equal importance, beside the purely musical dimension, of the component of behavior, attitude, style, physical presence and use of one's body in the performance – ever since the time of Elvis Presley, the founding father of the aesthetics of pop music (Mecacci 2011, p. 147). This aspect is also important for the aims of a philosophical reflection on the relation between aesthetic dimension and political potential in pop-rock music. In fact, in the context of musical performances of this genre, if the aim is to express the need and the struggle for some form of liberation and emancipation (as

happens, for instance, in the case of songs concerning feminist issues), then the achievement of this aim also passes through a specific use of the performer's soma ("our bodies are the primary instrument for the making of music," as argued by Shusterman).

For this reason, I suggest that especially (although obviously not only) in pop-rock music what I called the "power of the body" has often proved its aesthetic force and, at the same time, its socio-political relevance. There are countless examples of self-conscious, careful and often strategic use of the body, by many great performers and politically committed artists in pop-rock music, that can clearly testify this fact. Limiting myself to just one example, it is probably impossible to conceive of the efficacy of Rage Against the Machine's radical political commitment (as expressed in their powerful songs that originally mix hard-rock, funk and rap, and in their electrifying live performances) without associating a part of their impact to Zack de la Rocha's and Tom Morello's physical presence on stage and their captivating use of the body during the performance. Such songs by Rage Against the Machine as *Bombtrack*, *Killing in the Name*, *Bullet in the Head*, *Know Your Enemy*, *Wake Up*, *Freedom*, *Testify*, *Guerrilla Radio*, *Sleep Now in the Fire* or *Born of a Broken Man* – songs that have had the meaning of veritable hymns to emancipation and resistance for more than one generation – would not have had the same impact without this somatic and performative component. Although with differences due to their different "somatic styles" (Shusterman 2011), *mutatis mutandis* this holds true also in the case of many other pop-rock performers, such as Patti Smith, Bruce Springsteen, The Clash, Sting, Bono, Nick Cave, Michael Stipe, Thom Yorke, Tori Amos, PJ Harvey and many others. It is probably impossible to dissociate the ethically and politically committed contents of some songs by these and other musicians – and hence their attempt to express, through their songs and/or their live performances, some ideas and feelings that aim to protest against oppressive social conditions, forms of control of our bodies, limitations or repression of human freedom, etc. – from their particular and indeed strategic use of the body.

If viewed from this perspective, I would even suggest that at least a part of the tradition of pop-rock music, on the basis of the important role played in it by the dimension of physical performance, could be included in contemporary "body art" broadly understood: namely, in the group of those modern artistic practices that are based on a specific use of the performer's body to achieve certain expressive aims. Just like some "body artists" and "actionists" have pushed the experimentation with one's body to its most extreme limits, in a different but nonetheless comparable way some performers in pop-rock music have radicalized the use of one's body in the performance, for example in those (sometimes extreme and even dangerous) practices such as "stage diving" and "body surfing," in which the musician's body actually arrives to merge with

the thousands of bodies of his/her fans in order to symbolically form a sort of unique dancing and pulsing organism of huge dimensions.

Of course, appreciating the variety of uses of the performers' bodies in pop-rock music must *not* lead us to be naive, so to speak, and to deny that such transgressive uses of one's body can sometimes be only functional to the commercial purposes of the culture industry. From this point of view, it is surely possible to raise some criticism and to observe, with Marcuse, that pop-rock music often "loses its radical impact" and "tends to massification [...]. True, in this spectacle, the audience actively participates: the music *moves* their bodies, makes them 'natural'. But their (literally) electrical excitation often assumes the features of hysteria. [...] And the identical gestures, the twisting and shaking of bodies which rarely (if ever) really touch each other – it seems like treading on the spot, it does not get you anywhere except into a mass soon to disperse" (Marcuse 1972, p. 115). However, an honest recognition of this fact must *not* necessarily lead us to accept the Adornian idea of "popular music, in all of its many varieties," as being only "a somatic stimulant" (Adorno 2002, p. 116), in a superficial meaning of this term. In fact, as observed by Shusterman:

> Critics of popular culture are loath to recognize that there are humanly worthy and aesthetically rewarding activities other than intellectual exertion. So even if all art and aesthetic enjoyment do indeed require some active effort or the overcoming of some resistance, it does not follow that they require effortful "independent thinking." There are other, more somatic forms of effort, resistance, and satisfaction. Rock songs are typically enjoyed through moving, dancing, and singing along with the music, often with such vigorous efforts that we break a sweat and eventually exhaust ourselves. [...] Clearly, on the somatic level, there is much more effortful activity in the appreciation of rock than in that of high-brow music [...]. The much more energetic and kinesthetic response evoked by rock exposes the fundamental passivity of the traditional aesthetic attitude of disinterested, distanced contemplation – a contemplative attitude that has its roots in the quest for philosophical and theological knowledge rather than pleasure, for individual enlightenment rather than communal interaction or social change. Popular arts like rock thus suggest a radically revised aesthetic with a joyous return of the somatic dimension (Shusterman 2000a, pp. 183-184).

4.

In the fourth and final section of my article I would like to exemplify some of the ideas that I have tentatively sketched in the previous sections by making reference to the specific example of a famous pop-rock band of our time and, in particular, to one of their performances from the early 1990s that was characterized, in my opinion, by a high musical quality, a powerful somatic-

performative component, and an emphatic expression of feminist contents. As some readers might have noted, the subtitle of my article is: *Some Remarks on Adorno, Shusterman and Pearl Jam*. So, after having mostly focused my attention on Adorno and Shusterman in the previous sections, it is now arguably the time to talk about Pearl Jam. In fact, the particular pop-rock performance that, as I said, I will use here to exemplify some of my ideas, is a famous live version of Pearl Jam's song *Porch*: a song originally included in the band's first album (*Ten*, 1991) that is still present in a regular way in the band's setlist for live concerts.

Pearl Jam have been defined sometimes as the "grunge survivors," "the only major Seattle band to survive the '90s intact" (Ridder 2002). In fact, the history of pop-rock music has been surely an exciting history of joy, energy, power, success, satisfaction, enthusiasm and happiness, but at the same time (and unfortunately not to a lesser degree) a tragic history of sadness, misery, weakness, failure, dissatisfaction, addiction, excesses, suffering and death. These general observations are particularly true and tragic in the case of the "season" of grunge and the so-called "Seattle-style," as the existential vicissitudes and tragic deaths of the lead singers of some of the most iconic and famous grunge bands clearly and dramatically testify: Kurt Cobain (1967-1994) of Nirvana, Layne Staley (1967-2002) of Alice in Chains, Scott Weiland (1967-2015) of Stone Temple Pilots, Chris Cornell (1964-2017) of Soundgarden, Mark Lanegan (1964-2022) of Screaming Trees. However, quoting the refrain of the band's first hit single (*Alive*, 1991), Pearl Jam are luckily "still alive," have been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2017 and have undoubtedly established themselves as one of the greatest rock bands of the last 30 years, recently returning to live concerts with their exciting American and European tour in 2022.

Beside being famous for their recordings and for their captivating and engaging live concerts, Pearl Jam have also acquired a widespread notoriety and reputation at a global level thanks to their commitment to ethical, social and political awareness campaigns ranging from feminism to environmental issues, up to anti-war stances – especially during the George W. Bush presidencies (see Moulton 2021). Every fan of Pearl Jam knows the famous version of *Porch* recorded for their MTV Unplugged concert from March 16, 1992. The relevance of the performative component, in this case, is particularly evident, not only with regard to the aesthetic power and success of the musical performance, but also with regard to the efficacy in spreading a precise political content or message. In fact, during the long and partially improvised instrumental section of the song, at the end of a mind-blowing guitar solo by Mike McCready, Eddie Vedder suddenly stands atop his stool, pulls out a marker, writes an explicit "Pro Choice!!!" message on his arm, and eventually introduces a new section of lyrics in order to further emphasize his point. These added lines were probably improvised by Vedder during the performance (or simply written soon before the concert) and, to my knowledge, they are neither

available in Pearl Jam's official website nor in the liner notes of their CDs. However, after a repeated listening of the 1992 unplugged version of *Porch*, and on the basis of a comparison of the suggestions of various fans that can be found on Internet, it seems reasonable to suggest that Vedder's added lyrics to that section of *Porch* are: "There's something / There's something in my mind / There's a choice in our time / I don't think we're changing it / And I could die to make a change for it / There is something else to do / I know how I want to dress / I want to live / I want to choose" (or, alternatively: "There's something / There's something I don't mind / There's a choice / In my time / I don't think / Changing it / I could die / To make a change for it / There is something that's different / I know how I want to dress / I don't want to live / I don't want to choose" see Givony 2020, p. 110). After thirty years, precisely in the year in which the US Supreme Court has sadly upended the landmark "Roe vs. Wade" case and has ruled that there is no constitutional right to abortion in the US (Glenza, Pengelly and Levin 2022), Vedder's explicit "Pro Choice!!!" message, transmitted by using his own body as a somatic-performative medium, still keeps on reminding us that there is always "much to be done" in many fields of our life, including the defense of women's rights ("This is no time for depression or self-indulgent hesitance / This fucked up situation calls for all hands, hands on deck / [...] Much to be done," as Pearl Jam's recent song *Seven O' Clock* emphatically claims).

In this context, it will not appear surprising that Vedder, during Pearl Jam's recent European tour (in the Imola concert from June 25, 2022), has explicitly mentioned and criticized the US Supreme Court's overturning of the "Roe vs. Wade" case[4]. Previous examples and proofs of Vedder's commitment to feminist ideas and struggles include, for example, his support to the movement "Ni una menos" that campaigns against gender-based oppression and violence, during a Pearl Jam concert in Argentina, delivering a short speech before playing the song *Leaving Here*. A song, the latter, whose lyrics say: "Hey, fellas, have you heard the news / Yeah, the women in this town have been misused [...] All you fellas better change your ways / Yeah, leaving this town in a matter of days [...] The love of a woman is a wonderful thing / Yeah, the way you treat 'em is a crying shame" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-Clqsy7P3Y). In the first months of 2022 there was also a short controversy and heated exchange between Vedder and another rock star, Nikki Sixx, after Vedder had attacked Sixx's band (Motley Crüe) in an interview to the *New York Times* for both musical and feminist reasons. In fact, in his interview Vedder explained that the heavy metal bands "that monopolized late-'80s MTV," like Motley Crüe, were bands that "[he] despised": "I hated it," Vedder said, "I hated how it made the fellas look. I hated how it made the women look. [...] [O]ne thing that I appreciated was that in Seattle and the alternative crowd, the girls could wear their combat boots and sweaters, and their hair looked like Cat Power's and not Heather Locklear's – nothing against her" (Lewry 2022).

Beside this, at a purely musical level, every fan of Pearl Jam knows that it has always been characteristic of this band (which is formed by five male musicians) a form of songwriting that also includes a few important songs narrating the stories of female figures and/or written from a woman's perspective. These songs typically focus on the troubles that affect the female protagonists of the song in their relations with family members, partners, and society as a whole. Songs like *Why Go*, *Leash*, *Daughter* and *Better Man* can be mentioned in this regard, and especially *Better Man* is highly significant in this context, because of the particular relation between form and content (i.e., between music and text) that characterizes it. In fact, as has been noted,

> [t]he woman at the heart of Pearl Jam's "Better Man" is trapped. She has committed herself to a relationship that makes her miserable, but she can't seem to escape it. […] The song's lyrics present a psychological vignette in which a woman contemplates the trap her life has become for her in the context of an abusive relationship. While she waits anxiously for her man to return, she "practices [the] speech" she'll use to leave him, but she never gives it – when he finally comes home, she pretends to sleep instead and avoids confrontation. The chorus is a repeated expression of despair that also hints at a complex set of emotions ranging from the hopeful to the violent […]. Musically, after its instrumentally simple opening, the song bounds into an energetic, up-tempo rocker that ends in a playfully extended jam. While the bouncy ending might seem to be at odds with the story the lyrics tell, the sheer joy of it speaks to the possibility of a dangerous sort of hope. […] The lyrics tell the story of someone who is trapped, but the music is the sound of the trap opening, with all of the hope and fear that might entail (Bernhardt 2021, pp. 79-81).

Returning to the abovementioned unplugged version of *Porch*, it has been observed apropos of the effect that Vedder's performance had on the audience in 1992:

> As the band eases into the briefly mellow bridge, Vedder flips himself and his stool over onto the floor. He laughs at himself, turtled on his back, then rights it, first balancing on his stomach like he's paddling out to catch a wave, then clambering up to stand on the padded seat. He pulls out a Sharpie as the band kicks into overdrive, writing in bold letters on his bare left arm the words PRO CHOICE!!! (yes, with three exclamation points). He ends the song with added new lyrics about the "choice in our time." Like a lot of kids whose first exposure to grunge came via MTV, I was only vaguely aware of riot grrrl bands, and I certainly had never seen a dude so determined to make a point about abortion rights in the middle of what might otherwise merely have been a proto-coffeehouse acoustic rock performance. To put this now almost ancient history in context: In 2020, Vedder joined Instagram to encourage mail-in voting. In 1992, the year *before* Ruth

> Bader Ginsburg was named to the Supreme Court, he was standing on a stool in a Queens soundstage, ruining the curve for white male feminist rockstars. This was the beginning of Pearl Jam's career, and like their Seattle comrades Nirvana, they were less concerned with risking a big commercial radio success than challenging the first Bush presidency conservative politics – or being branded sell-outs. Both bands played Rock for Choice benefit concerts, started by L7, that raised money for abortion-rights organizations. […] Vedder even wrote an essay for *Spin* magazine a few months after the *Unplugged* performance that detailed the larger political landscape of international abortion access and the threat groups such as Operation Rescue posed to Roe v. Wade (Krochmal 2020).

More in general, apropos of the relation between the grunge subculture and feminism, one of the things that have been emphasized is the important role played in the early 1990s by such (male) bands as Nirvana and Pearl Jam to support feminist struggles (in close connection with the abovementioned "riot grrrl" movement) and to promote a change in the traditional conception of men/women relations and in certain usual views about men's own identity. The significance of this cultural change in the world of pop-rock music can be stimulatingly connected to the idea of what Angela Davis called "alternative forms of masculinity" (Davis 2016, p. 28), and is probably revealed in a very clear way by a critical comparison between, on the one hand, Cobain's or Vedder's unmasked manifestation of a male identity that is also characterized by fragility, emotionality and vulnerability, and, on the other hand, the infamous "macho man" model of male identity that had been sadly predominant in the pop-rock scene of the previous decades (especially the 1980s). As has been noted,

> [f]eminism and rock music always had, at best, a spotty relationship. There was the horrific Led Zeppelin "mud shark incident," 1980s hair metal (all of it), and even punk – with its ideal of complete inclusion – has had an awful history of misogyny. Unfortunately, there hasn't exactly been a ton of music that counteracts this ugly strand of rock's history. Very few rock songs that have championed women's empowerment have become bonafide hits. […] What's often forgotten, however, is that Nirvana and Pearl Jam were feminist through and through. As the years go by, their very public attacks against sexism in the early 90s look even more remarkable than they did at the time. They were the two biggest bands in the world and they stood up for feminism in ways that today would set the internet on fire. And they were men! But they welcomed the challenge, practically egging on anyone who disagreed with them. Although they're mostly remembered for destroying hair metal and making mainstream rock respectable again, they should be recognized for using their platforms as the two biggest bands in the world to stand up for

> women's rights. No one else on that big of a stage has come close in rock history. [...] Pearl Jam's performance of "Porch" on MTV's *Unplugged* is one of the most famous moments in the series' legendary history. [...] Eddie Vedder made one of the most famous pro-feminist proclamations in popular music history by writing "pro-choice" on his arm in magic marker. This may not seem like a big deal, but remember the absolute media sensation Beyoncé caused by simply having the word "feminist" displayed behind her at the 2014 VMAs? Imagine how impactful Vedder's performance was 25 years ago, when abortion was infinitely more taboo than it is now. Equally important as the *Unplugged* moment were Vedder's lyrics themselves, which regularly dealt with feminist issues. As one writer puts it, "songs such as 'Why Go,' 'Daughter,' and 'Better Man' are as feminist as anything Bikini Kill ever put to tape." Vedder was known for singing songs from the perspective of women, as he tried to present their point of view in an empathetic light. Even though men trying to tell the stories of women can be problematic – and this was a point of contention around the Riot Grrrl movement – Vedder's sensitivity to feminist issues and his desire to place them in the public eye should be applauded (Reyes 2016).

In conclusion, after having attempted to provide in the previous sections some basic notions that may be useful for an aesthetics of popular music (form/content relation; question of standardization and commodification; role of the performance and somatic component in it), in the last section of my article I have referred to various features of the music and activities of Pearl Jam to try to exemplify some of my ideas. Although I recognize that, as mentioned in the last quotation that I have just cited, the example of "men trying to tell the stories of women" – and hence of an entirely male band, like Pearl Jam, committed with feminist struggles – "can be problematic" for many people (Reyes 2016), nonetheless it is also true what a leading feminist thinker and activist like Angela Davis says: "With respect to feminist struggles, men will have to do a lot of the important work" (Davis 2016).[5] If feminism, as I believe, is a project and movement of real and universal *human* emancipation, this means that, of course, *women* (and more generally, as I said, *all* the subjectivities that suffer from gender-based oppression, discrimination and violence in patriarchal societies) are in the first instance the interested subjects and the protagonists of this form of social and cultural change; however, it also means that the *humankind* as a whole may benefit from this development and change, and hence *every* human being (including *men*) has an interest in, and a duty to, the actualization of these potentialities. Having started my reflection on these topics with a quotation from Marcuse about the political potential of art and aesthetics, it is probably not a bad idea to also end my article with another quotation from Marcuse – who, by the way, was famously the teacher of Angela Davis (see Zampaglione 2022) and who wrote in *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*:

> *Aesthetic qualities* are essentially *non-violent, non-domineering* [...] – qualities which, in the domain of the arts, and in the *repressive* use of the term *"aesthetic"* as pertaining to the *sublimated "higher culture" only*, are divorced from the social reality and from "practice" as such. [...] The faculty of being "receptive," "passive," is *a precondition of freedom*: it is the ability to see things in their own right, to experience the joy enclosed in them [...]. This receptivity is itself the soil of creation: it is opposed, not to productivity, but to *destructive* productivity. The latter has been the ever more conspicuous feature of male domination; inasmuch as the "male principle" has been the ruling mental and physical force, *a free society* would be the "definite negation" of this principle – it would be *a female society*. In this sense, it has nothing to do with matriarchy of any sort; the image of the woman as mother is itself repressive; it transforms a biological fact into an ethical and cultural value and thus it supports and justifies her social repression. At stake is rather the *ascent of Eros over aggression*, in men and women; and this means, in a *male-dominated civilization*, the *"femalization" of the male*. It would express the decisive change in the instinctual structure: the weakening of primary aggressiveness which, by a combination of biological and social factors, has governed the patriarchal culture. [...] [T]he woman holds *the promise of liberation* (Marcuse 1972, pp. 74-78; my emphasis).

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[1] This work represents one of the outcomes of my participation – as a member of the Research Unity based at the University of Bologna – to the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN) entitled "Italian Feminist Photography: Identity Politics and Gender Strategies," funded by the Italian Minister for University and Research (MUR), and guided by Prof. Federica Muzzarelli as Principal Investigator.

[2] See www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xd7Fhaji8ow.

[3] Beside this, the example of Beyoncé may also appear controversial and problematic for other reasons, especially in the context of a potential analysis developed from the point of view of anti-capitalist feminism. In saying this, I refer, for instance, to some critiques that have been raised against Ivy Park – the athleisure clothing line owned and managed by Beyoncé through Parkwood Entertainment, her management company – because of the poor working conditions of the women who produce the company's sportswear line in Sri Lanka (Cherrington 2016), despite the universal feminist slogan that Beyoncé had used to emphatically describe the spirit of her company: "It's really the essence: to celebrate every woman and the body she's in while always striving to be better" (cited in Gottesman 2016). Ivy Park has subsequently replied to these critiques and has defended itself against these allegations (see Conti 2016). I am grateful to Ines Zampaglione for having informed me about these facts and, more generally, for having read with great attention a first version of my article and having offered me some valuable suggestions and some constructive criticism that helped me to improve my argumentation.

[4] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvsFoCWUjGw.

[5] As a complementary counterexample to Pearl Jam's songs written from the standpoint of women (and also to the Seattle band's tendency to sometimes reinterpret songs originally written and sung by women, as in the case of their wonderful version of Victoria William's song *Crazy Mary*), it is perhaps possible to cite again Tori Amos. Amos has been emphatically defined as a "feminist pop icon" (https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/tori-amos-talks-about-feminism-and-her-new-album) and as "an awesome feminist activist," whose "music [is] totally empowering and bad-ass," and who has also "use[d] her success in the music industry to raise funds for the Rape Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN)" (Benjestorf). In her LP *Strange Little Girls*, Amos "brought a female perspective to rock anthems originally written and sung by men" (Power 2021): in fact, *Strange Little Girls* is "a cover album comprised entirely of songs by men, about women" (PopMattersStaff 2012), reinterpreted in a fascinating and original way by a woman, namely Amos.

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TOO QUEER TO BE QUEER? REVISITING THE METAPHYSICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY OF ASEXUALITY

Abigail Klassen

Abstract
The current trend of sex positivity in spaces of the Western and non-Western world alike – namely, within academia, popular culture, and the lived world, as well as its accompanying proliferation of ways to understand or identify one's own or others' sexuality (i.e., as "pansexual," "demisexual," "polyamorous," etc.) – affects the lived experiences and self-understandings of asexual people themselves. While interest, both expert and otherwise, has increased with respect to non-*hetero*sexuality, despite some exceptions, asexuality remains largely overlooked. Asexuality remains a relatively unknown, and perhaps worse, a largely misunderstood phenomenon or way of being a person. Scholarship pertaining to asexuality is therefore not only of importance to the natural or social sciences and the humanities; general conversation about asexuality, too, is imperative. This is because understanding asexuality is of moral importance: Conflict can arise when misunderstanding or ignorance is faced by individuals who are, or who are taken to be, asexual. When asexual persons are misunderstood, constraints placed upon them by others or even by themselves can be not only epistemically unwarranted, but unethical or oppressive. Further, when asexual persons themselves lack hermeneutic understanding of asexuality or when others lack hermeneutical understanding of others who identity as asexual, for some, self-understanding and someone attempting to understand the asexual other, too, can be difficult or even painful. This paper aims to explore the possibility of feminist (read: ameliorative) reimaginations of the very concept of asexuality and for asexual people qua individuals or groups afforded by academia, especially philosophical analyses, by popular culture, as well as for asexual people/groups and their allies.

Keywords
Social metaphysics. Popular culture. Ameliorative conceptual analysis. Asexuality. Queer studies. Social epistemology.

1. On the Importance of Beginning to Embark on Philosophical Analyses of Asexuality

Is asexuality too queer, too strange, and too imprecise a phenomenon to even be put under the LGBTQ* banner? This question is apt given that asexuality, conceptually, may not amount to one concept at all. Of course, the existence of multiple meanings and imprecision may be space- and time-dependent. To use one example, arguably, the masses have a better understanding of the meaning(s) of transgenderism (what used to largely be referred to as "transsexualism") today than they did even a decade ago and much of this better understanding may be attributed to the increase in representation and discussion on popular media mediums of trans issues and trans people (trans TV characters, reality TV stars, YouTube "transitioning" vloggers, and so on). Perhaps the same fate will befall asexuality and asexual people. In any case, the referent of the concept of 'asexuals' or the term 'asexuals' may also not admit of one concept or point to one

homogenous group with membership conditions that admit of necessary and sufficient conditions. Why might it matter whether asexuals are accepted into most LGBTQ* communities? An obvious answer is the political traction that is afforded by group-membership. There is power in numbers. The LGBTQ* community and its subcommunities have sought to and have succeeded in securing some enablements and rights. Though this paper will not produce, and nor does it take as a goal in what follows to settle the issue of what asexuality *is* or what asexuals ultimately *are*, it proceeds with some tentative definitions of possible understandings of the meaning of asexuality, lest there be no footing whatsoever and no means by which to continue further. Herein, asexuality is defined as the experience or phenomenon of not experiencing or desiring sexual activity/pleasure or as experiencing or desiring sexual activity/pleasure, but *actively* choosing not to engage in sexual activity. Asexual people, it follows, refer to people to whom this tentative definition of asexuality applies.

While attention, both expert and otherwise,[1] has increased with respect to non-*hetero*-sexuality, despite some exceptions, asexuality remains largely overlooked in academia, and in philosophy in particular. In the lived world, though asexuality admits of a slightly rising presence in popular culture, for most people, asexuality remains a relatively unknown, and perhaps worse, a largely misunderstood phenomenon or way of being a person. Drawing from portrayals of asexual characters in popular culture, some typical misconceptions, or at least hegemonic representations, include the notion that an asexual is a "closeted homosexual," a person who "has yet to find the right person," or a person who is intellectually impressive in the sense of possessing logical and highly theoretical reasoning capacities, but lacking in emotional maturity. This list is, of course, non-exhaustive.[2] Examining asexuality is not only of consequence to the natural or social sciences and the humanities; general conversation in the lived world about asexuality, too, is vital because understanding asexuality is of *moral* importance. Constraints and enablements, to borrow Ásta's[3] language from "The Social Construction of Human Kinds" (2013), are placed on individuals who are, or who are taken to be, asexual. When asexual persons are misconstrued, constraints placed upon them by others or even by themselves can be not only epistemically unjustified, but unethical and oppressive. If feminism, broadly understood, aims to undermine oppression against Othered groups and persons qua individuals and/or groups, then asexuality is of feminist concern. Indeed, when asexual persons themselves lack hermeneutic understanding of asexuality or when others lack hermeneutical understanding of those who identity as asexual, for both asexuals seeking self-understanding or for someone attempting to understand the asexual Other, the situation of being asexual or being with (in whatever capacity) someone asexual can be difficult or even painful. Further scholarly examination and a more inclusive portrayal of asexuality and asexuals in popular mediums of cultural dispersion could aid

in emancipatory aims or in any project, descriptive or otherwise, affecting asexual people. In what follows, an attempt is made to explain why, as well as how.

Though some attention will be afforded to cases of past and present examples of popular culture portrayals of asexuality and asexuals, guiding goals of this paper are to set up motivation and a novel framework for philosophically or theoretically robust analyses of asexuality. The intent is not to undermine the value of the empirical – to undercut the worth of sociological analyses or case studies of depictions of asexuality or asexuals in or on popular cultural mediums. Where there is only theory, things can run amok. But, of course, empirical analyses are bolstered by good theoretical underpinnings. At the time same, this paper must aim to produce a tractable and *honest* analysis. On the latter point, this paper proceeds while cautiously remembering that its writer is prejudiced by the very language, and so thinking, including the assumptions that all thinking contains, in which the writer has been trained. As the writer who is at once "an analytic philosopher," the paper, like the writer, dwells mostly in the theoretical – in the "meta." This is to say that this paper, in the spirit of metaphysical analyses, takes as an essential task, and one at which this paper will mostly aim herein, to examine the very conditions of possibility of the following:

> (i) popular culture's influence on asexuality understood conceptually and as a lived experience,
>
> (ii) popular culture's potential for ameliorating asexuality understood conceptually and as a lived experience, and
>
> (iii) rebelling asexuals' and non-asexual allies' capacity to affect popular culture's portrayal of asexuality and asexuals.

Analyzing, perhaps combining, and utilizing the conclusions and conceptual tools afforded by (i), (ii), and (iii) might, eventually and hopefully, in some even modest way, ameliorate the lived experience of asexuals considered more broadly. Realizing in practice what (i), (ii), and (iii), whether independently or jointly tentatively conclude, might work to produce a positive change, via, to borrow Ian Hacking's vernacular from *The Social Construction of What?* (1999), a looping effect.

Hacking (1999) sees child viewers of television, child abusers, schizophrenics, and women refugees, to name only a few examples, as constructed kinds of people or "interactive kinds." Here, "kinds" refers to both the individual instances of some kind (e.g., particular women) and to the kinds themselves (e.g., *women*). Such kinds are subject to "the looping effect": The kinds, qua the people classified as some X "become aware of how they are classified and modify their behavior accordingly" (Hacking 1999, p. 32). According to Hacking, the interaction between a person and a category happens through a person's awareness of being classified and is mediated "by the larger

matrix of institutions and practices surrounding the classification" (Hacking 1999, pp. 31-32). Object-construction of this sort happens when social situations provide concepts and socially available classifications that people take up to frame their self-understandings and which inform their intentions. For example, if a woman is classified as a woman refugee,

> she may be deported, or go into hiding, or marry to gain citizenship… She needs to become a woman refugee in order to stay in Canada; she learns what characteristics to establish, knows how to live her life. By living that life, she evolves, becomes a certain kind of person [a woman refugee]. And so it may make sense to say that the very individuals and their experiences are constructed within the matrix surrounding the classification "woman refugees." (Hacking 1999, p. 11)

Given that popular culture and lived experience, as well the alteration of each, are, at least in most milieus of today's world, inextricably linked and mutually-affective, and, though milieus are not individuals qua individual people (as is Hacking's focus [1999]), but rather spaces of the world in which individuals dwell, these milieus and spaces are, or so this paper argues, also subject to Hacking's looping effect. Other philosophers, namely Ásta and Sally Haslanger, are philosophers upon whose work I later draw heavily, and, like Hacking, their works are best described as attempting to offer a metaphysics for how social identities come to be, are carried out, lived out, explain how it is possible for social identities to dole out both limitations and enablements, and, further, how social identities' referents/meanings and their corollary constraints and enablements can come to change.

To aid in the task of furthering feminist or other emancipatory programs, drawing largely from the work of such thinkers as Michel Foucault, and more recent thinkers such as Judith Butler, Ela Przybylo, Karli June Ceranowksi and Megan Milks, aa well as Ásta, this paper proffers an analysis of (i) the background conditions under which questions such as "Who counts as asexual?" and "What might constitute an ameliorated situation for asexual people?" can even be well-formulated. In drawing mainly from the work of Haslanger from *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (herein, *Resisting Reality*) (2012), the following also propounds (ii) *one* possible mode of conceptual analysis that, like ideology critique or critical social theory, aims to debunk, queer, query, and ultimately alter or amend "our"[4] (mainstream and mostly problematic) conceptions of asexuality and asexual people. These constitute the main theoretical aims of the paper, which, again, may hopefully contribute to practical, ethical, and political goals of asexuals and their allies.

It is fair to claim that (i) philosophers in particular have paid little attention to the subject of asexuality, but that, nonetheless, (ii) philosophy can serve as a useful tool in most analyses and

projects. The analysis of asexuality, as well as its relation to popular culture and to feminism (read: emancipatory movements/projects) in the sense of *Kritik* from the German, and especially borrowing from Kant's use in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), which means "to delimit the conditions of possibility and limits of," is an essential methodological precursor, or is at least a helpful tool, in undertaking robust empirically-attuned studies of asexuality. Demarcating the boundaries of categories, including categories of sexualities, "conceptual analysis" being the lovechild of analytic philosophy, contributes to the clarification of terms and categories used in academic and non-academic milieus. In theory or ideally, and thus, perhaps overly-optimistically, this philosophical task might lend itself to more careful or fine-grained theoretical research across ranges of disciplines, and, again, perhaps overly-optimistically and naïvely, to more careful colloquial vernacular and more informed and respectful lived relations. The hope is that the above processes initiated by demarcation might lend themselves to real-world ameliorative amendments to practices and understandings of both asexuals and non-asexuals alike.

Despite this paper's overriding adherence to the methods and goals of analytic philosophy, the writer does not pretend to be non-situated and nor does the writer pretend that analytic philosophy operates independent of time and space. Analytic philosophies are produced by individual people or groups. People do not occupy a God's eye view. Intuitions, including the intuition about how to even reason about the reasoning of any given domain, must come from somewhere. Intuitions, following the dictates of empiricism at least, must come from the world. Hence, just as a looping effect is actual and possibly ameliorative in the case of the relation between portrayals of asexuality/asexuals and asexuals themselves (or perhaps non-asexual allies), so too is there a looping effect between meta-analyses of analytic philosophical undertakings of explorations of domains of inquiry and "the real world." The real world "contains" popular culture, too. There is only one world. But this one world is a world wherein there exist constant dialectical relations between milieus. There exist perpetual dialectics between popular culture and individuals and groups of the everyday world, resulting in perpetual syntheses and then further dialectics and syntheses, in turn. All being and becoming, it seems, is being- and becoming-with others (through whatever medium).

While conceptual distinctions exist between the milieus of academia or theory, popular culture, and the lived world, and can perhaps be delimited as such (i.e., qua conceptually), it is naïve to assume or pretend that there exists a tripartite division between these milieus. The distinctions between the milieus, save theoretically, are not sharp, and the contours of each are porous. Some, indeed, may suggest that there is no difference between popular culture and "the real world." Many of us exist as pixels on screens – our faces, our ideas, our identities. Is it not more common, especially amongst the generation of now 20-something-year-olds who grew up

with smartphones, to FaceTime or WhatsApp friends than to call them using the now-old fashioned "call" function on even that same smartphone? Again, this paper, taken as a whole, aims to illustrate for the reader, in a novel way, not only that there exists a looping effect, for better or worse, between all three delicately divisible milieus (this claim is fairly uncontroversial), but to explicate in, once more, an original way, how to proactively and in a liberatory manner, employ the looping effect for feminist or otherwise ameliorative aims.

2. Beginning Caveats

The referent of the term/concept of asexuality/asexual is at best vague, However, to proceed, one must begin with some at least tentative definitions. In what follows, the term 'asexual' is used to refer to persons who do not experience sexual arousal or sexual desire, or who, despite experiencing sexual arousal or desire, choose not to engage in sexual activity. Much controversy exists in academic and colloquial contexts and milieus surrounding who counts as asexual, as well as which acts and behaviours (or which non-acts and non-behaviours) fall under the extension of "asexual." The following will examine these issues, amongst others, in turn. But some other initial disclaimers before continuing: It is acknowledged that, for many, there exists a close association, which is often misguided, between physically *otherly*-abled and asexual bodies/persons, though this important issue will not be explored in what follows.[5] The reasons for this omission relate to the necessity to choose a manageable scope for a topic.

Another necessary caveat: So-called "psy" disorders will not be addressed herein. "Psy" conditions refer to those "conditions" familiar to readers of the *DSM*. The following will not address other "medical" (albeit non- "psy") conditions associated with asexuality either (e.g., menopause, low testosterone, atypical genitalia, and so on). Though aware and uncomfortable with the division just drawn between "physically caused" and "psychologically caused" conditions, the paper will not delve into these issues further in order to maintain a manageable topic.

3. The Need to Develop a Theory of Asexuality Across and Between Disciplines

Arguably, the most important concept developed in critical sex studies (and it is certainly an essential element of feminist studies, queer studies, and so on) is the idea of *hetero*sexuality as an institution. The conceptualization of heterosexuality as an institution allowed for analytical shifts – "Others" could now be understood, *however understood*, relative to a social condition of (descriptive and evaluative) normative heterosexuality. Politically, the concept of heterosexuality created, for some, a change in agenda. In what might this change have consisted? One change might be better understood as a goal, namely, to contest the social inequalities produced by the institutional enforcement by various mechanisms of power of heterosexuality (the power of popular culture included)

(Seidman 2009, p. 18). Perhaps best described in the works of Foucault, Western society pervasively and dramatically emphasizes "compulsory sexuality." Despite the overt sexualization of society that most of us *do* notice, compulsory sexuality functions more insidiously – in the ways that are so embedded and hegemonic that they are almost invisible. Compulsory sexuality is the idea that human beings are "naturally sexual." This idea, coupled with the current trend of "sex positivity" in many spaces of the world and its accompanying proliferation of ways to understand or identify one's own or others' *sexuality*, while considered emancipatory by some, can serve to reinforce the notion that there is something *wrong* with asexual people.

It has been decades since Foucault famously stated that "[s]exuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given […]. [I]t is the name that can be given to a historical construct" (1990 [1978], p. 105). In 1990, Butler claimed that "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance" (1999 [1990], p. 173). As Przybylo (2011) rightly notes, Foucault's and Butler's insights have become postmodern axioms: Sexual identity *construction*, for a long time, has and continues to be permeated by and produces essentialist impulses. Przybylo (2011) aptly puts the point as such: Essentialism is enacted not only by normative against marginalized sexualities, but "is rearticulated and recirculated throughout *all* sectors of [society], so that fringe identities fighting for their survival also replay its logic" (p. 445; my italics added for emphasis). On this theme, Wendy Brown (1991) echoes a similar concern: "[I]dentity politics – with its fierce assertion and production of subjects – appears less a radical political response to postmodernity than a symptom of its rupture and disorienting effects" (p. 67). It is not uncontroversial to claim that "identity politics" almost fully saturates and is at once a topic of conversation/much disagreement (both productive and otherwise) in academia, popular culture, and the lived world.

So far, it has been argued that compulsory sexuality creates, at minimum, a problematic for the asexual person. Now, an examination of how past "versions" of feminism have not served to emancipate or otherwise offer much assistance to the asexual person either is presented. To summarize a crucial point raised by Steven Seidman (2009) and others concerning the anti-porn/pro-sex "sex wars" of the 1980's, both radical and pro-sex feminisms characterized their opposing views of female sexuality as "liberatory." Radical feminists, broadly construed, sought out a sexuality uncorrupted by patriarchy. Pro-sex feminists, broadly construed, sought a "politically incorrect" feminine sexuality as they saw the general repression and subordination of women as a product of the sexual oppression of women and heterosexism. However, asexuality challenges us to consider how female and other marginalized subjects' sexuality remains framed by the discourses of liberation of the 1980's feminist movements. One difficulty with those anti-porn/pro-sex debates is that they position female or any person's sexuality as either empowered or dominated. This binary then works to characterize asexuality or asexuals as repressed, dysfunctional, dominated, and so forth. "The

asexual movement challenges that assumption, working to distance asexuality from pathology" and, consequently, "[challenges] many of the basic tenets of pro-sex feminism – most obviously its privileging of transgressive female sexualities that are always already defined against repressive or 'anti-sex' sexualities" (Cerankowski & Milks 2010, p. 656). In short, one difficulty with a landscape or social imaginary that connects a language of emancipation (read: liberatory sexuality) with sex, is that sex (this kind of sex or that kind of sex, but sex nonetheless) remains intertwined with, and seemingly inextricably so, with emancipation or liberation. One worry therefore arises: "Does the asexual person threaten to remove sex from politics all over again, or does she or he challenge the ways we think about sex and desire even within queer communities" (Cerankowski & Milks 2010, p. 661)? Though the following will not attempt to answer this question, it is noted that the question itself, and providing an answer(s) to such a question may be part of an ameliorative political agenda of asexuals and their allies.

4. Who Counts as Asexual?

According to AVEN (The Asexual Visibility and Education Network: asexuality.org), a relatively popular Western website for asexuals, an asexual is a "person who does not experience sexual attraction." In the non-Western world, asexuals are similarly categorized (consider the Indian Instagram site indianasexuals: https://www.instagram.com/indianasexuals). Some theorists and asexual individuals themselves do operationalize asexuals as those who have never felt sexual attraction to anyone at all. Notice that the presented definition is absolute. It is predicated on "lack, absence, and 'neverness'" (Przybylo 2011, p. 445). Studies and many people underscore the complexity and variability of the lived experience of asexuals. For example, "some are not interested in any romantic physical contact, while others are simply not interested in coital sex" (Przybylo 2011, p. 445). Hence, while asexuality is lived "plurally," to use Przybylo's language, asexuality (institutionalized and reified in popular culture and the lived world) functions, even in its early stages, "to foreclose and boundary-set" (Przybylo 2011, p. 445). These boundaries enact Butler's conviction that "to qualify as a substantive identity is an *arduous* task, for such appearances are rule-generated identities, ones which rely on [...] rules that condition and restrict (1999 [1990], p. 184).

It is clear that AVEN's "official" formulation of asexuality as *not a chosen*, but a biologically (?) determined orientation (a definition that opens up the large ongoing nature/nurture debate in studies of human sexuality) does not easily map on to a theory of asexuality as a chosen, feminist mode of resistance (one construal, in turn, that may be of emancipatory value). To opt out of enacting sexual acts, whether one experiences sexual desire or not, may indeed be a positive mode of political engagement qua an *active* refusal to partake in an action or behaviour precisely on

account of the hegemony and the constraints and enablements a society demands and enforces. In fact, problematically, AVEN repeatedly opposes asexuality to celibacy. Celibacy, like positive, feminist resistance, is chosen and not biologically or otherwise "naturally" determined. For example, in an informational brochure, AVEN claims, "[c]elibacy is a choice to abstain from sexual activity. Asexuality is not a choice, but rather a sexual orientation describing people who do not experience sexual attraction. While most asexual people do not form sexual relationships, some asexuals participate in sexual behavior for the pleasure of others" (AVEN, "Asexuality: Not Everyone Is Interested in Sex": unpublished Seidman 2009 document circulated in San Francisco, 2008 as quoted in Cerankowski & Milks 2010, p. 658). "This [...] [claim] forces us to question to what extent the practice or abstention from sex acts matters to the definition of asexuality" (Cerankowski & Milks 2010, p. 658; my italics added for emphasis).

A possibility? Perhaps "we" (us "progressive" thinkers?) should define asexuality by means of a self-identification? Perhaps it is better, at least for feminist purposes, to define someone who has *no sex drive*, but who does *not* see herself as asexual as "not asexual" and to define someone who *does* experience a sex drive, but who *does* see herself as asexual, as "asexual" (Cerankowski & Milks 2010, pp. 658-659). This definition contradicts AVEN's definition, but more closely aligns with an emancipatory feminism (not to be conflated with the more particular "radical feminisms" of the 1980's). This inverted definition of asexuality that this paper quasi-endorses or entertains applies to those who do not "lack" sexual attraction or desire, but who are sexually inactive "not through religious or spiritual vows of celibacy, but [on account] feminist agency" (Cerankowski & Milks 2010, p. 659). This understanding echoes Simone de Beauvoir's reading of "frigidity" from *The Second Sex* (1949). Therein, Beauvoir argues that "frigid" symptoms are not always intrinsically natural (i.e., are not non-socially or non-interpersonally caused). She suggests, rather, though not in the following language, that these "symptoms" are at least sometimes the result of rejected, albeit internalized norms of a socially (male-) constructed world of compulsory sexuality. I gesture here at only one possible alternative definition to AVEN's and many other groups' and organizations' stated definitions of who counts as asexual.

5. A Metaphysics for the Question of "Who Counts as Asexual?": Learning and Drawing from Ásta

Is someone asexual on account of intrinsic properties (whatever those may be) or on account of extrinsic properties, including the perceptions of others or on account of the relations in which they figure with respect to other individuals or groups? In what follows, it is assumed that the meaning of "asexuality" and thus, who counts as asexual, is socially constructed. If this is so, then it follows that, at least to a large extent, being asexual is determined by social factors.

Indeed, the very concept of asexuality, then, must be socially constructed since there is, following Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hilary Putnam, at least, no such thing as a private language. The philosophers in whom this paper is most interested do not attempt to sketch a metaphysics for the question of "Who counts as asexual?". The philosophers with whom this paper engages are best described as independently attempting to understand the metaphysics and epistemology of social categories, as well as what it means to say that any category at all, "asexuality" and "asexual" included, and thus, the individuals falling under its extension, are socially constructed.

Ameliorative or emancipatory constructionism is propounded by some social scientists, various branches of the humanities, grassroots interest groups, and philosophers. These constructionists attempt to show that categories and kinds usually thought to be natural or inevitable are really socially founded or non-inevitable and, as such, can be amended or even discarded altogether. Haslanger clearly and succinctly distinguishes between descriptive and ameliorative social constructionism in *Resisting Reality* (2012), though she does not suggest, of course, that the distinction between "the descriptive" and "the ameliorative" is specific to social constructionism. Indeed, quite the contrary. She assumes that both are traditional ways of pursuing philosophical analysis. Descriptive programs ask "What is X?" where X is some category or kind and ameliorative or emancipatory versions ask "What do we want X to be?" or "What *should* X be?" Ameliorative projects thus have both descriptive and normative components since the possibility of the latter is, at least to some extent, parasitic on the former.

In "The Social Construction of Human Kinds" (2013), Ásta creates a new name for social categories that entail constraints and enablements, but which are maintained and enforced by unofficial (read: popular/social) power. Call these types of kind, as does Ásta, "communal" or "constraining and enabling kinds." In the case of constraining and enabling kinds, one can be subject to a script attached to a social role or property that constrains or enables without being officially or collectively acknowledged as having (or being given) some status of falling under some category of persons (e.g., female-gendered, bisexual, asexual, indigenous, etc.) and without being officially (i.e., legally, medically, etc.) obligated to follow the constraints and enablements of the script attached to the category. Similarly, when it comes to interacting with a person qua person understood as falling under some way of being a person (i.e., a scene kid, a "typical millennial," an ethical vegan), in some cases, individuals/groups are not obligated by an official authority to behave in any particular way towards another person who falls under the category of some constraining or enabling kind. Individuals and groups, however, may feel social pressure to act in a particular way towards them or may act in a particular way towards them out of habit or on account of having no script to draw from to know how they "should" (descriptively or normatively) act.

For Ásta, the conferral of a property by a conferral involves a five-part conferralist schema:

> *Conferred property*: being of gender G, for example, a woman, man, trans
> *Who*: the subject S in the particular context C
> *What*: the perception of the subject S that the person have the grounding property P
> *When*: in some particular context C
> *Grounding property*: the grounding property P (Ásta 2013, p. 9).

Where any one item of the five-part schema differs, so too perhaps can the script that follows from the conferral of a property and so too can one fail or succeed in meeting the conditions for counting as an X (or, to use Ásta's language, being taken to possess some property X). Though not explicitly noted by Ásta, it seems that a conferred property can be thicker or thinner depending on others' beliefs about the expectations that follow from having (or, to use Ásta's language once more, being perceived to have) property X. The language of "thicker" or "thinner" here refers to the number of expectations connected to some category and rigour with which individuals taken to belong to some categories of personhood are expected to behave.

Some constraining and enabling kinds are robust (e.g., *being a Southern belle in the late 18th century*) in the sense that they place more expectations on the behaviours of both the individual qua some constraining and enabling kind and for others in their dealings with an individual conferred as Y. Other constraining and enabling kinds are less robust (e.g., *being female in San Francisco in 2022*). Correlatively, failure to behave according to the scripts attached to constraining and enabling kinds can result in heavier or weaker social sanctions. Before homing in further on the question of "Who counts as asexual?" we first require a description of the background in which such a question arises. What is presented in the next section is, obviously, but *one* possible description and not *the* description if there is indeed one "correct" description at all. That being so, what I present in the next section, however, I take to be in the service of ideological critique and political agendas aimed at ameliorating the lived situations and popular representations (lived situations being in a dialectical relation with popular representations) of asexual people.

6. Przybylo's "Sexusociety" (Compulsory Sexuality Re-Named?): General Metaphysics and Epistemology of Przybylo's "Sexusociety"

As Seidman (1989) writes of sexuality, it is a "natural" force akin to eating and sleeping; "sexuality, in other words, is built into our biological make-up" (p. 299). According to Przybylo (2011), sexusociety is for asexuals "very much akin to what patriarchy is for feminists and heteronormativity for LGBTQ [sic] populations" (2011, p. 446). Sexusociety constitutes "the oppressive force against which some sort of marginalizing and rebellion must take place" (Przybylo 2011, p.

246). Przybylo's use of the concept of sexusociety is worth clarifying in full. "Substituting *sexusociety* for 'sexual world' which is 'out there'" allows one, textually and verbally, to emphasize that "sexusociety is everywhere, it is within us, it is us" (Przybylo 2011, p. 246). Sexusociety is a rhetoric that lives in and through our bodies, as Butler might claim. However, while sexusociety may be everywhere, it is not solid or monolithic (Przybylo 2011, p. 246). But neither is it the case that "the 'sexual world' connives and organizes; [similarly] sexusociety [is not a] front that crushes everything in its wake" (Przybylo 2011, p. 246). Sexusociety does not have a monolithic representation, but it is nonetheless organized around "conceptualizations of the sexual imperative" (Przybylo 2011, p. 246). Sexusociety functions as such: Subjects mimic each other, not *en masse*, but akin to a game of telephone, and hence, "there are always slight variations of repetition, amounting to the *impression* of a coherent body politic" (Przybylo 2011, pp. 246-247). This performance, to use Butler's language, is, however, enlarged – the "doer" is compounded from the repetition, some repetitions being very privileged, of the individual deeds and the doer is "society" (Przybylo 2011, p. 247).

7. Pathological Repetitions Amongst the Doer

As Cerankowski and Milks (2010) note, there is a significant distinction between people who experience a low sex drive or lack sexual desire and are not distressed by this "lack" and those who experience a low sex drive or lack of sexual desire and *are* distressed by this "lack." Cerankowski and Milks (2010) "are interested in the latter group [...] and in locating asexuality as a viable sexual and social identity" (p. 653). What Cerankowski and Milks oversimplify or overlook – in the case of the lack of distress or in the case of the distress of the supposed lack – is whether the distress of lack is primarily a result of one's situation (others' support or lack thereof) or whether it is primarily indicative of a subject's internal/personal distress or lack thereof as considered independently of a subject's social relations.[6] Of course, the distress or lack thereof could be a result of both etiologies and might be time- and situation-dependent.

8. Why Asexuals are Between a Rock and a Hard Place in Light of Old Repetitions. Asexual Identity and Absence: Who am I? What am I "For"?

The hegemony of postmodernism's and liberal politics' (read: the so-called emancipatory and "Other-friendly" agendas of institutions, popular cultural mediums included, and within the many milieus of the Western and non-Western lived world alike) emphasis on the need to self-identify (consider, as just *one* example, the now popular and sometimes enforced practice of including one's preferred pronouns in email signatures in formal correspondences) entails that one must confess even the absence of anything to confess – the absence itself must be confessed

(Przybylo 2011, p. 449). One must "confess" that one is not Other. Such performances are often uttered half-jokingly, perhaps to mask discomfort or to place emphasis on a perceived ridiculousness of the situation – e.g., "I guess I'm 'the straight white guy' in the room!" One must announce oneself as a this or a that. If one announces oneself as neither a this nor a that, but rather as non-binary or otherwise ambiguous, in the very act of naming or labeling, one makes oneself into a this or a that, and so, does not remain, to use Jacques Derrida's language, "monstrous," or to use Beauvoir's language, "ambiguous." The confession of sexual taboo as outlined by Foucault in *The History of Madness* (1978) is by now far less verboten than the confession of having nothing to confess. Announcing oneself as asexual is at once taboo in the Foucauldian sense (because misunderstood, because largely unheard of) and in the sense of having no sex acts (or even perhaps desires) to confess, which require, in turn, confessing.

Echoing Jean Baudrillard's (1998 [1981]) reading of postmodernity, and in particular, his diagnosis that for those living under postmodern conditions, "it is the map that precedes the territory" (p. 350) and such a condition is the catalyst for an overabundance of identity formulations because "as habitants of postmodernity [we] resort to the fierce assertions of 'identities' in order to know/invent who, where, and what [we] are" (Brown 1991, p. 67). This postmodern condition seems not to be on its way out. Indeed, this postmodern requirement is so entrenched and enforced by power that some who even privately reject its proliferation choose, at minimum, to feign belief in its emancipatory agenda just, say, to avoid being labeled as "politically incorrect," at best, or as racist/sexist/transphobic/conservative (in its pejorative sense), and so on. Given these conditions, for better or worse, providing a conceptual analysis of asexuality, for both asexuals and for others in their dealings with asexual persons, is all the more pressing. Perhaps one can be human and asexual (however defined). But how can one live out their personhood or subjectivity under postmodern conditions? Colonized by sexusociety, which is reinforced in both popular mediums and then largely re-acted in the lived world, What is an asexual person *for*? How will/should others engage with the asexual person? What do/should asexuals do with themselves, with their time? These questions are pressing in light of postmodernism's (i) compulsory sexuality and (ii) postmodernism's emphasis on the need to present and understand oneself by means of ever complicated and constantly multiplying "self-identifications." Consider the above questions. If one presents as, is taken to be, or is asexual, there are few rules or language games familiar to most of us for how to engage with asexuals. Wittgensteinian-style games provide social maps through which we unconsciously order even everyday conversations, but these games or maps offer up little by way of "rules of the game" for understanding asexuality.

9. Popular Culture Portrayals of Asexuality and Asexuals.

There exist a few "maps" or portrayals to which one might look, or through osmosis, adopt, to engage, problematically or not, with asexual people and to try to understand (or take oneself to understand) asexuality. Across a range of asexual-friendly websites (and if one engages in just a quick Google search), it is often written that pop culture characters assumed (one might ask: Assumed by whom?) to be asexual include Sherlock Holmes, Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*, Doctor Who from the BBC's *Doctor Who* series, Elsa from *Frozen*, Todd Chaves from *Bojack Horseman*, Sheldon, a character portrayed as possessing "theoretical hyper-intelligence," but lacking "normal" human emotion and emotional maturity from *Big Bang Theory*, DC Comics' *Prime Earth*'s character Tremor, and SpongeBob ("considered '*somewhat asexual*' by the creator and '*gay*' by the fandom") ("Asexuality In Popular Culture: The Need For Diverse Representation Of The Asexual Experience [sic]"). A quick search of Wikipedia using "media portrayals of asexuality" produces a short list of asexual popular culture portrayals in the West as well.

Perhaps best, though not perfectly, stated by Aarthi Ramnath, writer of "Asexuality In Popular Culture: The Need For Diverse Representation Of The Asexual Experience [sic]":

> The problem with this [common portrayals of asexuals and asexuality] is [amongst other issues] the erasure of homo/bi/poly romantic and aromantic attractions within the Ace [a shorthand for 'asexual'] representation in popular media [...] Another problem with the portrayal of asexual characters in pop culture is that some characters may resonate fully with the Ace community [sic] and they may clearly state they do not feel attraction or desire for sexual intimacy but the omission of the label '*asexual*' leads to an unconfirmed Ace character which does more harm than it does good in terms of representation [...] Of course, there need not be a golden, do-no-wrong character for every Ace representation in pop culture narratives but when representation is already scarce, it is important to give the characters the right language and labels so that the audience who are coming to terms with their own queerness, have the vocabulary to express and know for themselves that they are not alone [...] To conclude, I would like to leave this quote by Angela Chen, author of *Ace: What Asexuality reveals about Desires, Society and the Meaning of Sex*: "Representation not only reflects, but actually changes reality." I am hopeful that one day we shall see more diverse asexual and romantically queer characters on-screen and in stories but till then we can appreciate and celebrate the handful of Ace representation we have today.

It is here noted that Ramnath problematically assumes that asexuals must not have sexual desires or in any sense desire sex.

10. Returning to Ásta to Precise the Question:

"Who (and Actually, According to Who Does Who) Counts as Asexual?"

In "The Social Construction of Human Kinds" (2013), Ásta intends to provide a metaphysics for constraining and enabling non-institutional categories such as "asexuality" or "being asexual." Unlike Ásta, however, herein, this paper considers "constraining and enabling kinds" to refer to identity-categories that place constraints or enablements *upon the conferee or upon others* in their dealings with the person upon whom kind-membership is conferred. Ásta's "communal" kinds, in her original sense, are constraining and enabling with one important qualification. She commits herself only to the position that communal kinds place constraints and enablements upon the conferee. But, departing from Ásta's original analysis, it is possible that at least sometimes, misunderstandings on the part of the conferee can constrain and enable the conferee, as well. Misunderstanding another or mislabeling another constrains the other insofar as the individual possessing the misunderstanding or who mislabels lacks hermeneutical depth, for example – an epistemic harm – and may enable the conferee, assuming they hold some social power, in deciding how the individual or group upon which a conferral is placed, is treated. On Ásta's account, the conferral of a property or properties (*being a woman*, *being an intellectual*, and so on) by another subject's or subjects' attitudes is what limits and permits the individual upon whom the property or properties is conferred to *do* or *not do* certain things. One occupies a social role or has a social property just in case he or she is subject to the mainstream or popular socially-enforced constraints and enablements that come from being taken to belong to a social category or being taken to have some socially salient property or properties.

Ásta emphasizes that when it comes to certain social properties, the physical facts (nonconferred properties) do not determine, or are not sufficient to explain the existence of the social property. Consider the view that asexuality or being an asexual means, according to popular social meanings, not desiring sex and/or desiring sexual interaction, but not engaging in such actions. On the conferralist program, an asexual can be understood as follows. A body and mind that does not desire sex is the nonconferred or grounding property and "asexual" (understood as a social category under which such an individual falls, along with the categories' privileges and burdens) is conferred by society on the person taken to have a body and mind that does not desire sex and/or desires sex, but does not engage in sexual acts. Ásta acknowledges that conferralism about many grounding properties and their social categorization can be cashed out multiply. Much feminist, queer theory, and activism has been aimed at challenging the assumption that grounding and social categories are co-extensive; that is, "tracking one of these properties need not help us track the others" (Ásta 2013, p. 8). Accordingly, Ásta would, it seems, suggest that the conferral of sexuality is highly time- and space-dependent. Faithful to her account, sexuality assignment is dependent on one's place in history, one's geographical location,

and so on. Moreover, "when it comes to historical periods and geographical locations, [the same locations] can allow for radically different contexts, so that a person may count as a certain gender [for example] in some contexts and not others" (Ásta 2013, p. 9). This is possible since different properties may be tracked in different situations in order to attribute property P (see below) or because judgments about the same grounding property differ across milieus.

Ásta (2014) considers the conferred property of gender to explicate, once more, her five-part conferralist schema:

> *Conferred property*: being of gender G, for example, a woman, man, trans
> *Who*: the subject S in the particular context C
> *What*: the perception of the subject S that the person have the grounding property P
> *When*: in some particular context C
> *Grounding property*: the grounding property P (p. 9).

Ásta (2014) further notes that the conferral of a social category like one's perceived sexuality is not done as a one-time act; rather, sexuality conferral involves what she calls a "standing attitude," namely

> the perception by the subjects in the context that the person has the relevant grounding property. This perception can be in error and the person may not in fact have the property. What matters is simply the perception (p. 9).

If sexuality assignment functions as Ásta suggests, then upon entering any new situation, it follows that a sexuality is conferred upon individuals by some subject(s) who is authorized, which is to say, has the unofficial social power or influence, to do the conferral within the particular milieu (say, in the context of a house party or on the site of an influential blogger or YouTuber). Ásta, it follows, would agree that others have power to confer a sexuality upon others.[7] However, they do not have institutional authority (as when a doctor declares the sex of a baby to be female, male, or intersex). In the case of a social media influencer on, say, Instagram, "the conferral [...] involves a complicated negotiation over what rules apply in the context and who should play what role" (Ásta 2013, p. 9). The complicated negotiation may sometimes involve a matrix wherein individuals in some situation (say, the Instagram subscribers to the influencer's account) disagree on some property conferral. However complicated or simple the negotiation, very often, as Ásta would hold, the users confer a social classification upon others by citing the unofficial authority. Since Paul is the relevant social influencer in our hypothetical example, what Paul posts is what is accepted).[8] In other cases, others confer identities upon others by appeal to structures of power that may or may not lack normative support – some of these structures may be maintained and constituted by habit or by threat (Ásta 2013, p. 9). She suggests

that in any milieu, the conferral of a social identity upon another is undertaken by citing maps of social relations or games with rules for social relations within that milieu. These rules might prescribe how, for instance, a single or married woman is to act at a party or how an asexual man should act towards a non-asexual person who seems to be flirting with him.

For Ásta, these maps originate from outside the particular milieu. They are derived from a structure(s) that has been operative in other situations and are then taken on by those in a comparable situation to be utilized consciously or unconsciously. The structure, I submit, is Przybylo's sexusociety. What I would add to Przybylo's account of sexusociety, however, is that sexusociety just *is* the dialectical interplay of academic, popular culture, and, as Ásta emphasizes, lived world interactions. Recognizing this interplay, however, does not address certain concerns. Which milieu has the most power to influence? Dialectical relations aside, it is commonplace and well-founded to worry that media Goliaths, for instance, have too much power over what can be seen and not seen on their platforms. This is especially problematic if individuals and groups rely heavily on popular media or on popular media influencers to make sense of and normatively evaluate social and political goings on. Another worry is that platforms with tailored information are a cause of political polarization and civic antagonism. Though the latter issue, specifically, strikes me as critical topic, I will here simply point out that relativism and disagreement need not necessarily be construed as destructive, immobilizing, vitiating, or aporetic. I have argued for this position elsewhere.[9]

11. Where to Do We Go from Here? Haslanger's Ameliorative and Feminist (Read: Liberatory Program)

Empirical and psychological investigations are but one dimension of capturing the meaning and the constraints and enablements that follow from "being asexual." In Hacking's terms, asexual people are also subject to the looping effect. Being characterized as asexual by oneself or by others, an individual has some capacity to negotiate the meaning of that characterization. They may accept, reject, or (aim to) alter it. Our contemporary abundance of social media mediums and the uncontroversial influence of popular culture on everyday lived, and ever changing, norms, entails that not only can popular culture negatively and or positively (read: amelioratively) affect asexuals, but that asexuals too have the power through these very mediums, mediums that are by now largely interactive or dialectical to affect the conferrals, narratives, and portrayals afforded by popular culture. Resistance from those of the everyday world can sometimes lead to changes in representations in popular culture mediums.

With the goal of negotiating and imagining more emancipatory meanings of belonging to some social category, as previously highlighted, Beauvoir's analysis of "frigidity" is useful in

providing a lens through which to reconceptualize asexuality by means of ideology critique. She *re*constructs frigidity as an active resistance to one's situation rather than a passive pathology. This is, of course, just one way that frigidity or asexuality may be reconceptualized in order to create a less pathological and more feminist-friendly (read: liberatory and inclusive) understanding of various ways of living out and portraying various ways of being a person. Haslanger's work in *Resisting Reality* (2012) is mostly focused on ameliorative conceptual projects. One useful and liberatory-aiming undertaking would be to, in Haslanger's spirit, and in the letter of her characterization of ameliorative social constructionist programs (programs that ask what do "we"[10] want some concept to do), explore and ask, what do "we" want the concept "asexual" to represent or do?

Haslanger (2012) introduces novel analytic tools and demarcates the concerns of various social constructionist programs. She delineates three approaches that may be taken when asking questions of the form "What is X?" A conceptual or internalist approach looks to a priori methods and to introspection, asks "What is our concept of X?," and aims to achieve reflective equilibrium by taking "into account intuitions about cases and principles" (Haslanger 2012, p. 386). A descriptive approach tries to identify whether our concepts track objective types, and its goal is to develop "more accurate concepts through [...] consideration of the phenomena, usually relying on empirical or quasi-empirical methods" (Haslanger 2012, p. 386). Descriptive projects attempt to elucidate and capture paradigmatic natural kinds (i.e., chemical, biological, neurological, and other purported natural kinds) and social kinds as well (institutions, practices, and other social kinds). Descriptive genealogies analyze the social matrices (history, practices, power relations) within which we discriminate and have discriminated in the past between Xs and non-Xs (Haslanger 2012, p. 376). Descriptive approaches may also attempt to track individuals' and groups' operative conceptions – that is, the way they apply a concept or delineate Xs from non-Xs (this may be accomplished through experimental philosophy, social psychology, or other empirical or quasi-empirical means). Finally, according to Haslanger, an ameliorative project asks, "What is the point of having concept X?" and then asks "What conception of X would do the work we want it to do, best" (2012, p. 386)? In her view, the latter question requires normative input, and its goal is to provide the (or a?) concept we seek considering our critically examined purposes (epistemic, ethical, or both) (Haslanger 2012, p. 386). We may, of course, decide not to reform our concept of X, but rather to throw it out entirely. Further, although Haslanger does not say so herself, it is also possible that upon reflection, we may decide to keep our concept of X as it is.

If different approaches to the question of "What is X?" produce different accounts of X, it is perhaps not immediately obvious why this is a problem. Once one considers why Haslanger elaborates on these approaches in the first place, it becomes clearer why a divergence between the results of the three approaches does constitute a problem for the social constructionist. She

elucidates various approaches to (i) emphasize the importance of debunking and ameliorative projects and (ii) draw attention to a common situation wherein people take themselves and others to be asking the same question and talking about the same thing, but are, in fact, talking past one another. To bring out more clearly why a mismatch among the three approaches can sometimes constitute a problem, she puts forth a three-fold distinction between manifest, operative, and target concepts, which corresponds, respectively, to the distinction between conceptual, descriptive, and ameliorative approaches. She notes that, in practice, the approaches are not usually neatly disentangled and the results of one approach may alter one's conception of the result arrived at by means of another approach (Haslanger 2012, p. 343).

Haslanger's distinction between intrinsic or natural properties and social properties is compatible with Ásta's (2013) distinction between grounding and conferred properties. According to Haslanger, some social categories like gender, race, and sexuality are not dependent on the intrinsic features of bodies even though the markers of belonging to some categories are (Haslanger 2012, p. 7). Many, though not all, social roles, categories, or kinds (understood as ways of being a person) are defined by "a set of attitudes and patterns of treatment towards bodies as they are perceived (or imagined) through frameworks of salience implicit in the attitudes" (Haslanger 2012, p. 7). Like Ásta's account, according to Haslanger, to be an X is to be subject to such and such expectations and to have certain self-understandings that one is such and such or ought to perform in such and such a way.

Haslanger's (2012) program draws attention to the fact that the meaning of any social identity and the practices in which one is "supposed to" engage given that social-identity classification given by others, as well as others' behavior and attitudes towards a socially-classified individual or sub-group, vary across space and time. Thus, social constructionists concerned with the effects of categorization for individuals are usually interested not only in the meaning of nominal classifications, or to state it differently, in the meaning of concepts independent of context (i.e., "woman refugee," "asexual," and so on), but also in the larger social matrix that determines whether social categorizations will admit of, to use Ásta's language, weaker or stronger constraints and enablements (Haslanger 2012, p. 126). Social constructionists and social scientists are also interested in the ways in which

> [m]embers of… subordinate groups typically internalize and eventually come to resemble and even reinforce the dominant image because of the coercive power behind it. Thus [sic] the dominants' view appears to be confirmed, when in fact they have the power to enforce it (Haslanger 2012, p. 6).

Social constructionists see the goal of debunking projects to be that of undermining the sense of necessity in what are really conventional categories or practices, and moreover, exposing to

individuals their complicity in these conventions, including the ways in which their beliefs and other practices contribute to the perpetuation of other beliefs and practices.

With respect to the critique of a concept or practice, Haslanger (2012) approvingly quotes Elizabeth S. Anderson's "Unstrapping the Straitjacket of 'Preference': A Comment on Amartya Sen's Contributions to Philosophy and Economics" (2001) directly:

> A critique of a concept is not a rejection of that concept, but an exploration of its various meanings and limitations. One way to expose the limitations of a concept is by introducing new concepts that have different meanings but can plausibly contend for some of the same uses to which the criticized concept is typically put. The introduction of such new concepts gives us choices about how to think that we did not clearly envision before. Before envisioning these alternatives, our use of the concept under question is *dogmatic*. We employ it automatically, un-questioningly, because it seems as if it is the inevitable conceptual framework within which inquiry must proceed. But envisioning alternatives, we convert dogmas into *tools*; ideas we can *choose* or not, depending on how well the use of these ideas suits our investigations and purposes (Anderson as quoted in Haslanger, p. 17).

The preceding has provided a general overview of what descriptive and ameliorative social constructionist programs amount to and has shown that Ásta's and Haslanger's works independently and jointly reveal the complexity and difficulties involved in attending to disagreements about the meanings and demarcations of the extensions of social kind-concepts. Though this paper has not provided an answer to the question of how asexuals and allies might specifically proceed in altering and ameliorating popular conceptions of asexuality and asexuals qua individuals or as a group(s), and while this paper has not provided a specific account of how popular mediums might work to do the same, it has, by incorporating the works of Ásta and Haslanger's social-epistemological and social-metaphysical programs in particular, expounded a general description of how sexusociety might come into being and an ameliorative program that might do some work in the service of altering, in a liberatory manner for asexuals, Przybylo's sexusociety.

12. Conclusion

While much attention is and has been focused on LGBTQ* rights and pro-sex issues, asexuality has and continues to be marginalized in society writ large and within the marginalized LGBTQ* community as well. This subject has important philosophical and real-world ethical implications. This paper has attempted to make clearer a particular, perhaps ironic, phenomenon, which is that as non-heteronormative, non-monogamous, and generally pro-sex movements gain momentum and public support, asexuals are left by the wayside or even seen as standing in

the way of emancipatory goals (or in need of emancipation themselves). All of this serves to underscore asexuality as a pathos, creating a climate, whether in academic milieus, in most of popular culture, or in the everyday world, where allies are hard to come by on account of an epistemic harm. The notion of asexuality is not well-enough understood to be defended, questioned, or even re-evaluated. This paper has provided *one* general description of a hegemonic sexually compulsory society by combining Ásta's and Przybylo's programs. This paper has also suggested *one* precursor to an ameliorative escape route for asexuals and allies, be they individuals, groups, popular culture influencers (whether individuals or technologies/technological productions). This has been undertaken by combining Ásta's and Haslanger's programs in the service of providing a backdrop or metaphysical picture that may prove useful in at least some proactive feminist or otherwise ameliorative programs. Przybylo's, Ásta's, and Haslanger's accounts emphasize how, to various degrees, by means of dialectic, "we" might attempt to alter and ameliorate the portrayed and lived experiences of asexuals, as well as the portrayed and colloquially understood meaning(s) of asexuality.

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1 The following pressing question arises: Who is the expert on the topic? This is to say, who are the real experts, if anyone: Academics or asexuals themselves?
2 More radically, perhaps, as portrayed in popular news media, asexual persons can be wrongly associated with the recent uprising of "involuntary celibates" or "incels" – persons desiring, but unable to secure sexual or romantic partners. "Inceldom" is often characterized by misogyny, resentment, a sense of entitlement to sex, and the endorsement of violence against people who are sexually active. Recent media coverage of violent incel cases includes the 2014 U.S. shooting massacre undertaken by Elliot Rodger, for example. Though examining involuntary celibacy is of vital importance and in need of further analysis given its overtly violent nature, and given inceldom's incorrect association with asexuality, I will not address the topic herein, but wish nonetheless to draw attention here, in only a cursory manner, that this misguided connection exists.
3 In 2013, Ásta self-referred and published under the name Ásta Kristjana Sveinsdóttir. I refer to Ásta herein as she does herself currently. I do so despite her article from which I reference having been published under her now not-in-use name.
4 The "we" to whom this "our" corresponds remains an open question.
5 What will not be explored is the issue of asexuality's relation to those individuals and groups classified as physically otherly-abled where "physically otherly-abled" is understood according to non-homogenous, but still fairly comparable lay understandings.
6 Given that we are social creatures, perhaps through and through, one might wonder if it is indeed possible to consider such a question independent of social relations or social influence.
7 Plausibly, a question to ask Ásta (2013) is where this coercive power originates, as well as what sustains its force.
8 Obviously, in the case of a party, deferral to an authority on sex is very much an unlikely scenario. How often, for example, could an individual have access to a medical specialist's interpretation of some individual's chromosomal makeup?
9 See Klassen 2017.
10 Admittedly, it is unclear to whom this "we" does or should refer.

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KINDNESS IS THE ANTIDOTE TO A MALE CHAUVINIST WORLD

Maria Grazia Turri

Abstract
The aim of the present contribution is to highlight the limits of some forms of feminism of the last thirty years, including the feminism of difference, to which we can even trace back some thoughts on women recently expressed by a well-known Italian historian, Alessandro Barbero, who asked in an interview with a national newspaper: "Is it possible that, on average, women lack that aggressiveness, swagger and self-confidence that help to establish themselves?". Barbero is right. From the 1980s onwards (although the signs were already visible in the second half of the 1970s), when the feminist slogan "The body is mine and I manage it" became a big success, feminism has stood out for a strong sense of freedom of expression and decision, which, however, has also been marked by the emerging culture of individualism. Feminism develops in a society that has fully shared now Margaret Thatcher's statement that society does not exist, but only individuals exist. It was the prerogative of feminism to somehow accept and validate in communicative terms the fact that it must not be posed a limit to individual freedom. Sure, the slogan had its meaning because it was, and it is, necessary and legitimate to affirm that the last word on sexuality and motherhood must be the woman's. In my contribution I show how some aspects of current feminist debates are very likely to be addressed in a better way by resorting to some skills that have characterized a certain type of stereotypes about women: kindness, patience, the ability to wait and live in uncertainty, trying to progressively adapt moods and behaviors to the perceived changes, even infinitesimal ones. Such an uncertainty can be faced, if you really want warmer and more consistent relationships with others. In my view, what needs to be changed is society as a whole, and also the educational modality implemented towards the male gender and beyond. Kindness is the women's strength and outlines a clear strategy for navigating everyday life with charm, attention and prudence. Kindness is the antidote to a brutal world.

Keywords
Kindness. Uncertainty. Limit. Freedom. Competition.

> *A king's son ate at the table. Cutting the ricotta, he injured his finger and a drop of blood went to the ricotta. He said to his mother, "Mom, I would like a woman as white as milk and red as blood." "Eh, my son, whoever is white is not red, and whoever is red is not white. But look for it, if you find it."*
>
> Italo Calvino, "The Love of the Three Pomegranates," in *Italian Folktales*

1. Red as Blood, White as Milk

Alessandro Barbero, a well-known Italian historian specialized in Medieval history, said in an interview with a national newspaper: "Is it possible that, on average, women lack that aggressiveness, swagger and self-confidence that help to establish themselves?" The answer to this rhetorical question that I would like to give here is: "Yes, it is possible. Fortunately!"

For the most part, women do not adhere to those soft skills. Thank goodness, since 95% of the murders in the world are committed by men. Today many women have introjected or projected certain values – and, therefore, they implement certain consolidated behaviors – in a male-driven society: aggressive, bold and appreciative of self-confidence. In fact, we all suffer

from aggressions every day, on average we don't appreciate swagger, and we live in a social and cultural context characterized by uncertainty.

Emma Sulkowicz became a performance artist and an anti-rape activist after that, in August 2014, she walked around the Columbus University Campus with the mattress in the place where a brutality by a classmate had happened, during the first night she was staying there. Since that day Emma has tried in every way to convince the University management, the police and even friends that what had happened to her was rape, and that her tormentor deserved to be punished. Despite the fact that she filed a complaint, the alleged culprit did not suffer any consequences, and so she has stubbornly staged a protest-performance ever since.

We cannot fail to consider rape as a torture and an expression of sadism, of sexual pleasure derived from the enjoyment of the humiliation of the other. Rape is an act in which pleasure becomes the pleasure of pleasure, a form in which sadism and narcissism come together in a revealing union of the evil potentialities inherent in the human being.

Rampant narcissism is the result of a culture that, since the 1950s, has theorized the supremacy of the individual over the community, generating diversified forms of estrangement, ranging from egotism to selfishness up to pathological narcissism. This was due to the fact that the educational, cultural, social and psychological conditions favored – and continue to favor – the primacy of the ego over everyone and everything else. Narcissism is such a pervasive pathology that it has been suggested to declassify it in DSM (Diagnostic Statistical Manual) from a disease to a "trait" of a wider mental problem; an explanation for this possible "downgrading" could be precisely the effect of its excessive diffusion.

Kindness, the ability to listen, the respect for others are the attitudes that, as Sigmund Freud argues (Freud 1921), represent the "psychic dam" that pushes to oppose cruelty and aggression. It is a dam that it is required by society to simply survive, while instead we are facing today the individualization of the individual, the *hýbris* (the excess), that in ancient Greece implied that the hero would succumb and be punished by fate.

Narcissism can degenerate into attitudes that damage fundamental ways of social relations, including cooperation, solidarity, kindness, availability, when the benevolent form of valorization is distorted, culturally and socially, by the exaltation of the concept of individual freedom, making it become the Golem to whom we should sacrifice the quality of our relationships (Lasch 1979; Ballatt and Campling 2011).

It gets worse. There is no doubt that feminicide is red, red like the blood that comes out of the bodies of Hannah, Elisabeth, Mary, Eleanor, Sylvia and at least 53,000 women who, in the world, every year die a violent death at the hands of partners, husbands, lovers, fathers,

brothers, cousins, grandparents, and rarely even at the hand, or with the complicity, of other women (Magaraggia and Cherubini 2013).

In *Syngué Sabour* (2012), a drama movie directed by Atiq Rahimi, blood instead comes out of a man's body, killed by an unnamed woman, a woman for all women. "Those who do not know how to make love go to war" are the words pronounced by the protagonist to represent the feelings of women living in a country, Afghanistan, that is impregnated with permanent warfare. The woman whispers the truth of a relationship devoid of love and affection, she welcomes the truth of one's life and the conditions to survive, and she affirms and fights for the truth of her existence: in doing so, she invades the room with her own body, a room in which almost the entire film takes place. It is a body that accounts for her interiority and that is her life. Painful images accompany a long anguished and ferocious monologue which tells of the suffering and the need to perform unacceptable gestures for the tribal human beings that are, at the same time, indispensable for her to be accepted and not repudiated as a wife. The narrative is made possible by the fact that the husband is a passive hearer, rendered helpless by a bullet lodged in his neck, a bullet fired from the weapon used by a guerrilla of the same faction. This passivity gives rise to an inversion of the roles and causes the increasing vitality of the protagonist's body that thus becomes symbolically the sign of rebellion against male power. The fact of escaping rape implies to declare herself a prostitute, as this practice is, in turn, the emblem of a constantly violated body who is deprived of its own intimacy and that therefore, according to the logic that the film puts on, no longer adheres to the law of "purity" – so that the potential rapist, if he intends to remain pure, cannot come into contact with it. Where there was an "illegitimate" penis he cannot "immerse himself" his own, because at that point he himself would become impure. This is well stigmatized again by the words uttered by the woman: "Because putting his filthy male organ in a used hole doesn't give him any manly pride." This is a sentence reminiscent of the novel *Les Hommes qui marchent* by Malika Mokkedem, set in Algeria in 1962, where the male crowd is described in this way:

> Herd of sexual misery, they segregated women and because of their absence they were so hungry, that the sight of a girl without a veil upset a whole multitude. They were bursting with abstinence. The old sperm that fermented in them did not ejaculate [shortly after defined "rancid sperm"], foamed at the corners of their lips. Cries of "manhood," of hatred and misogyny, faces deformed, knotted, mutilated by perpetual frustrations, until they become nothing but feral bestiality! (Mokkedem 1990, p. 284; cited from the Italian edition).

It is in the Torah that the female body becomes a paradigm of the pure/impure. It is a paradigm that then gives life and origin to this categorical dichotomy that has characterized European

thought and culture. The impurity is attributed to the body of the menstruating woman and the woman in childbirth in the Torah, in the Koran and in many texts of Hinduism. It was women who first went to check the body of Christ to the sepulchre and recognized the Resurrection, whose absence is the metaphor *par excellence* of a male body that rises to purity.

After all, in New Guinea it is the concept of impurity, related to the female body, that explains the presence in the villages of the structure of "man's house," necessary for the separation of boys from women in view of the complicated initiatory ceremonies which will lead them to the status of men and future warriors. Beyond the concept of impurity linked to menstruation and childbirth, in this area of the planet the idea of impurities is also linked to the denial of the importance of the female role in procreation (Langness 1974). This may suggest an analogy with the Mediterranean world, in this case with the Greek world of the 5th century B.C., where the denial of a woman's generative capacity was explicitly stated on the theatrical scene through the myth of Orestes who kills his mother to avenge the murder of his father and is acquitted by the court, on the grounds that the only parent who "creates" the child is the father, while the mother simply offers the place. This Greek mythical theme has been used by Johann Jakob Bachofen, in his famous *Mutterrecht*, to explain the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy.

In the contemporary world we are undeniably witnessing an ambivalence and we can observe the paradox of feminine charm passing from the body in its entirety, or from certain parts of it, such as hair, eyes, voice, movements, skin, clothing, emotions and sentiments transmitted, forcing to reconcile, on the one hand, seductiveness and self-affirmation, and, on the other hand, the discomforts of menstruation or the alteration caused by the belly in motherhood with the relative deformation of their image: a belly that, in some cases, is proudly displayed and that, in other cases, is vice-versa a mere burden, regardless of whether motherhood is an event that occurs very early or at a more mature age. Hence today, like yesterday, women are vagabonds, restless, curious, submissive, rebellious, loyal, modest, sober, industrious, merciful, graceful, taciturn, graceful, faithful, irreproachable and more, and in being so they use clothes, jewels, make-up and everything else available, or they choose not to use it.

2. Power, Domination, Freedom

There are many examples of literary, cinematographic, theatrical stagings, where the fear of lack of power over one's life can lead to sadistic violence that illusorily promises to fill the void of power and precisely because of its illusory character, carries with it the need for the sadistic act to repeat itself. Those who rape do not rape once, but carry out a behavior that can only be serial, because it is generated by an insatiable appetite to inflict torment, havoc and pain, and to subjugate a body and its ravines to martyrdom in order to remove death from oneself by inflicting

it psychologically and physically to another person (a woman), not looking – as happens with death – in anyone's face, not listening to any plea to be spared, in order to let people know with the blows of one's penis that one is stronger and more inexorable and that there is no wealth that can overcome the need to affirm his thirst for power. Conversely, the raped woman experiences rape as a single, singular, personal, specific, exclusive act, addressed only to itself: hence, an experience that is opposite to the "impersonal" experience of the rapist. For the woman, after that act, nothing will be ever the same again and nothing will be the terrible fault of being a woman, to be both the symbol and the flesh of a coveted and missed power which can only be exercised by subtracting dignity from the identity of others (Waldenfels 2006). This becomes possible thanks to the paradigmatic staging of gestures which become obscenities and which feed on imagination. The guilt of being a woman is confirmed by the sin of the sexual act, an act imposed by a supposed unmanifested desire: "You enjoy being raped, it's your secret desire, I know this, even if you don't admit it."

Power is really such, if it takes away the freedom of others, and it is all the more powerful the more it is exercised on the body of the other person (a woman). The Israeli film *Viviane* (2014), by Ronit Elkabetz and Shlomi Elkabetz, plastically stages the difficulty of abandoning dominion over the life of the other person (a woman), and freedom – divorce – is formally granted only if the unwillingness to use one's body is obtained as a guarantee in sexual acts with other men.

A completely different image of the idea of freedom can even cause emotional reactions, like the one we feel every time we watch the ending of the film *Dead Poets Society* (1989). We watch the film and we are troubled when professor John Keating, fired by the dean of the school, leaves the classroom for the last time and his pupils do not surrender to the decision and, in order to pay homage to him, one after the other, stand up on the counter and shout: "O Captain! My Captain!" The pupils repeat that gesture and that phrase over and over again, and accordingly they turn an individual event into a collective rite. The movie and its persistent relevance testify the human need for someone to show us the way to go, a way to salvation from a world in which you feel that you have been thrown in the sea of existence (with its constitutive burden of uncertainty) without knowing how to swim, or how to navigate. The protagonist of *Dead Poets Society* is a man, and his pupils are men, just like the vast majority of CEOs in banks and private or public companies are men. Buddha, Christ and Gandhi were men, and God has always been "imagined" as a male figure. The persisting stereotype is that men are the masters who indicate the "right" path in life, that men are the models to imitate.

A woman, a teacher of life, is imagined as sexless, savvy, perhaps not too sweet or, vice-versa, very sweet, a little authoritarian or completely submissive, or even a holy woman who juggles alchemical tools and saving potions. The teacher of life is not a mother, but the teacher

of life is a father (Recalcati 2012, 2013a, 2013b), so much so that the male teacher becomes a father and in Christianity man became the Father *par excellence*, the Father of all fathers. Not by chance, also the opposite of God, namely the Devil, is male and has followers and disciples, and is in turn a teacher.

The male thus embodies both the best of all goods and the worst of the evils.

Stalin and Hitler have become the symbol of extreme crimes which are accomplished when one attacks humanity as such, that is, when everyone's right to exist is denied because all persons are different from each other. It is difficult in History to find traces of female figures that have been the protagonists of such crimes that are so structurally and rationally designed; in rare cases, women can be identified instead as supporting actors.

For several years we have been witnessing the denunciation of the loss of the paternal dimension and this absence would be the cause as well as the product of a new form of cynicism, the "narcinism": a neologism coined by Colette Soler (2009) on the basis of her work on Jacques Lacan. From this perspective, we would be faced with the exasperation of our appetites to the detriment of all responsibility and respect for each other. At the same time, narcissism triumphs with its "lack of humanity," "denial of feelings," "hunger for affection," absence of remorse, pursuit of power and drowning in envy, up to the denial of the individual identity of others.

Some dynamics grafted by social networks unequivocally endorse the advancement of the dimension of "narcinism." Let us just think of the fact that C. P., after stabbing his wife to death, posted on his Facebook page the sentence "You are dead bitch," and 308 people expressed their consent through a "Like."

These elements justify the demands for equality of the historical feminists of the 1970s and 1980s: those demands meant that equality could exist without being considered an appendix, a draft or an imperfect declination from the original, the masculine. Those feminists weren't facing a narcissistic and narcissistic collectivity, but they were facing a community that was still firmly founded on solidarity and collective responsibility, in which the single person was responsible for everything.

It is a dysfunction, that of narcissism and "narcinism," that Amelie Nothomb has expressed with these metaphorical terms: "I am hungry [...] By hunger I mean that scary hole in the whole being, that emptiness that grips, that aspiration not so much to utopian fullness as to simple reality: where there is nothing, I implore that there is something" (Nothomb 2004, p. 57).

What is described is an emotional hunger induced by the desire to swallow the other or oneself, generated by a hole in the stomach up to the irrepressible desire for a particular food which can express the need for something to bite, to face, to approach, to swallow, to make ours, to digest, to elaborate. Nathomb puts "devouring the other" at the center of her research, which

happens in a way that ensures gratification and peace from one's anxiety, in the illusion of withstanding the blows of life in a better way, to distract from the fatigue of living, to be satisfied quickly, to delude oneself of governing the constitutive uncertainty of life. Thus, each one individually and all together, we become people hungry for sensations, stimuli, attention and recognition. "Eating" the other becomes a kind of comforting and gratifying pacifier. Despair, anxiety, sadness, but also excitement and craving, become ways to express one's autonomy, by entrenching oneself in one's own inner space and not allow any possibility of exchange with the other, because if the other is not eaten, he will eat us. If so, then it is not worthwhile to display kindness, but it is better to attack first.

On the pediment of the Delphic temple of Apollo is engraved the motto "Know yourself." In Plato's dialogue *Protagoras* the warning "But not too much" follows to the motto "Know yourself." The problem highlighted by Plato is that of the *limit*. A limit that is insurmountable, due to the very nature of the human being: aiming to overcome the limit would mean to commit the sin of *hýbris*; aspiring to know oneself truly and fully, in perfect self-sufficiency, would be tantamount to turn the sea into a land. It is an entity, the earth, that the human being, thanks to technique, presumes to be able to dominate and subdue, while the sea presents itself as an entity that does not allow to be mastered or conquered, not only because of its size, but also because of its very fluid nature.

In order not to err on the side of *hýbris*, the investigation into oneself must be limited and cautious, it must not run the risk of trying to peer Eckhart's "bottom of the soul."

The only way to know yourself without wanting "too much" is relating to the experience of the other and to the experience that the other has of me. To have the possibility not only of a correct *gnosis*, but simply of an adequate *theoría*, the presence of the other is required. But the other is hopelessly a foreigner, the other is the transcendental condition of the individual's self-knowledge. In other words, it can be said that one always knows oneself as a stranger to himself or herself. Bernhard Waldenfels in *Grundmotive* writes that "the ego is another because strangeness begins at home" (Waldenfels 2006, p. 32).

Identity is therefore instantiated in the relationship, but while women (as the other) have been questioning this relationship for a long time, men (as the other) have struggled to investigate this relationship because on the social level they have been considered the top and the privileged subjects.

The ego is configured in terms of a split from the beginning, as Plato had already well described in the *Symposium*:

> In the first place, let me treat of the nature of man and what has happened to it; for the original human nature was not like the present, but different. The sexes were not two as

> they are now, but originally three in number; there was man, woman, and the union of the two, having a name corresponding to this double nature, which had once a real existence, but is now lost, and the word "Androgynous" is only preserved as a term of reproach. In the second place, the primeval man was round, his back and sides forming a circle; and he had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, looking opposite ways, set on a round neck and precisely alike; also four ears, two privy members, and the remainder to correspond. He could walk upright as men now do, backwards or forwards as he pleased, and he could also roll over and over at a great pace, turning on his four hands and four feet, eight in all, like tumblers going over and over with their legs in the air; this was when he wanted to run fast. [...] After the division the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, and throwing their arms about one another, entwined in mutual embraces, longing to grow into one, they were on the point of dying from hunger and self-neglect, because they did not like to do anything apart; and when one of the halves died and the other survived, the survivor sought another mate, man or woman as we call them, – being the sections of entire men or women, – and clung to that. [...] When Zeus in pity of them invented a new plan: he turned the parts of generation round to the front, for this had not been always their position, and they sowed the seed no longer as hitherto like grasshoppers in the ground, but in one another; and after the transposition the male generated in the female in order that by the mutual embraces of man and woman they might breed, and the race might continue; or if man came to man they might be satisfied, and rest, and go their ways to the business of life: so ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing the state of man. Each of us when separated, having one side only, like a flat fish, is but the indenture of a man, and he is always looking for his other half (Plato, 189c – 193e).

Being split off, being separated, being alienated from oneself is the first step in the separation from others, in the alienation of relationships and, in our case, of the relationship with the other (the woman). Etymologically, *alienus* unequivocally refers to *alius* and means "belonging to others," because "to alienate" means "to transfer possession of a thing to others."

The discrimination of the other from oneself, and in oneself, implies a denial of freedom in a double sense: firstly, the denial of the freedom to express and exchange different views, and secondly, the denial of the freedom to act and to be able to establish a mutual comparison. In other words, the essential character of this form of domination consists in destroying what constitutes the founding element of identity, that is, the constitutive plural and communal character of humanity.

What takes shape is, on the one hand, the perspective of plurality, the unfolding of the power to act in concert, the experience of equality of power; on the other hand, the prospect of isolation, the will to dominate the other (the woman), which embodies man's fear not to be able of dominating himself.

So, while power calls into question responsibility – because power can be asked to account for how it is exercised –, conversely the dominating person is configured as a-responsible: in fact, he who dominates does not ask himself the question of responsibility towards the dimension of his domination. Power includes demand, domination excludes it.

Tyranny is based on total domination and brings about the destruction of relationships, generating a power not *over* individuals but *among* human beings. In this way, "ruins" are generated, because the horizon of meaning is destroyed, namely the horizon that cements the bond between individuals and that each individual contributes to enrich and nourish with his/her own being in the world, being the subject who projects himself/herself into and through death, where the latter is the dimension that is configured as the limit that each one tries to overcome. The totalitarian form of domination, as Hannah Arendt argued, shows that evil is never radical but is just extreme and has neither depth, nor a demonic face. So much so those partners, husbands, lovers, fathers, brothers, cousins, grandparents who abuse women are "normal" people, namely individuals that are anything but inhumane, so that the worst atrocities can arise from people who apparently seems harmless and banal.

If the history of feminism is the history of the rejection of hierarchies in the relation between female and male, then there is no doubt that these long years of battles failed to scratch the mentality linked to domination and power.

3. Freedom, Biocapitalism, Individualism

In recent years, there have been many debates in which it has been raised the question as to whether the modalities and contents of feminist struggles had not ended up becoming an ally of biocapitalism (Fraser 2013), a useful accomplice in the construction of the discourse on the theme of casualization, that is, organizational devices in the work-life imposed by the new paradigms of accumulation. Over the past forty years, many women wanted to escape from home life and the sole care of children, in order to emancipate themselves in the public space. However, it is possible that precisely these struggles have helped to segment and further to fragment the labor market. If so, then the critique of sexism may have provided a justification for new forms of inequality and exploitation.

This could explain why a certain number of feminist ideas, that were once part of a radical worldview, are used today for individualistic purposes. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminists

criticized a society where careerism was promoted, while now women are advised to "trust." Women's movement had established social solidarity as a priority, while today it celebrates female entrepreneurs. Feminist perspectives at the time valued in a positive way "taking care" and human interdependence, while now they encourage individual progress and meritocracy.

The common thread with history is the fact that women have always aimed to be freer, happier, more fulfilled. These are ambitions that the most fruitful and most reflective strands of feminism – emerged in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, such as *essentialist and deconstructionist* (Irigaray 1974, 1984, 1989), *sexual difference* (Braidotti 1994)*, gender issues* (Buffer 1990, 1993, 1997, 2004), *cyborg theory* (Haraway 1991)*, nomadic subjectivity* (de Lauretis 1996) – have always indicated as objectives to be pursued. These goals have been the harbingers of new clichés and stereotypes, also received from feminism itself, which have generated the exclusion of all non-women and non-female subjectivities, as well as all non-man and non-male subjectivities. The latter are the "other" genres that have the same kaleidoscope of desires that women have and that, as happens with women, may also change over time.

What is certain is that, from the 1980s onwards (although the signs were already visible in the second half of the 1970s, when in Italy the feminist slogan was depopulated: "*The body is mine and I manage it*"), feminism has stood out for a strong sense of freedom of expression and freedom of decision: something which, however, was clearly marked by the emerging culture of individualism. Different forms of feminism developed in a society that fully shared Margaret Thatcher's famous statement according to which "There is no such thing as society," but only individuals exist. The idea that underlies this perspective is the idea that life is a jungle, in which only the strongest wins and in which the feminine should endow itself with the aggressiveness of those who are "more men than men," thus giving life to the so-called (in Italian language) "uoma": that is, in English, "woman-man." This bizarre expression means an aggressive, competitive woman, who mainly (if not solely) takes care only of herself, and is therefore a narcissist.

It was the prerogative of feminism to somehow accept and validate in communicative terms the fact that one must not pose any limit to individual freedom. Of course, the slogan had that meaning because it was, and still is, necessary to affirm the women's right to have the last word on both sexuality and motherhood. However, it remains true that the criticism only of patriarchy and the vindication only of individual freedom have turned that slogan into a forerunner of a kind of feminist thinking marked by individualism. This has led, as evolutionary biology can teach, to enhance competition more than cooperation. In this sense, our current society is a society that is culturally marked by individualism. The goal of the present contribution is to highlight the limits of these thirty years-old forms of feminism, including the so-called feminism of *sexual difference* to which also the abovementioned statement by Alessandro Barbero seems to refer.

The second wave of feminism emerged as a critique of capitalism instantiated after the Second World War, but many feminist positions have soon become ideologically compliant to the structural foundations of contemporary capitalism: "disorganized," globalized, neoliberal.

In 1961 the novel *Revolutionary road* (Yates 1961) appeared, a novel in which the protagonist prefers to die as a result of an abortion rather than continuing to live with a profound sense of existential failure, having been forced to give up her ambition to be an actress, finding herself in the condition of leading a purely closed life at home, and not feeling any consolation in the "happy" condition of marriage and maternal care. The novel took shape in a social and cultural humus in which the contradictions of the lives of American women were evident, since a survey made in 1957 by the psychologist Betty Friedan, released in 1963 with the title *Mysticism of Femininity* (Friedan 1963), had revealed that a large part of American society was made up of disheartened housewives. This social climate was staged in the 2000s by the television series *Mad Man*: Betty, the first wife of the protagonist Donald "Don," is the archetype of a "desperate housewife." Behind the appearance of a fulfilled woman, Betty actually feels dissatisfied and unhappy, so much so that Don, after some initial resistance, agrees to have her undergo psychoanalysis sessions, a practice legitimized by the general American public in those years. Friedan's essay describes the society that took shape following the demographic boom and shortly before the consumer boom: a period in which American women, after the emancipation occurred between the two world wars, were forced to "go home," thus suffering from the new generalized situation. This represents one of the many examples that do not allow to conceive of a linear development in the path of liberation and freedom. Friedan focuses on the strength of the symbolic, since society is able from time to time to present ideals of "happiness" aimed at the female world; for this reason, she focuses her criticism on the sneaky character played by persuasions, both when they have a manipulative intent in the background and when the latter is not present since the possibility of escaping – on a material or a reflective level – is never very simple. Let us think, for example, of American films from the 1960s and their typical model personified by the beautiful little house with a garden, in which the cool appliances are the blender, the vacuum cleaner and the lawnmower, and the man is a helpful domestic worker. Those were the same years in which Katherine Hepburn wore pants in private life and played as an actress in *The Desk Set* (1957), a film that stages the figure of an emancipated, proud, dazzling woman, who, in her work, is replaced anyway by a first mammoth electronic computer, which should allow her to engage in positions of greater responsibility.

It is precisely since the 1960s that the mysticism of femininity has taken on the most diverse forms but has not lost the characteristic of normativity of roles, thus giving rise to new stereotypes, that is, to rigid and often distorted perceptions or concepts that support

interpretations of reality often based on unsubstantiated facts. Charisma, determination, authority are the qualities that the non-female world does not tend to recognize in us; these three properties have been considered indispensable for directing and do not conform to the thesis of Egidio Romano, according to which the soul follows the constitution of the body: since, in his opinion, women have a soft and unstable body, consequently they are unstable and mobile in the will and desire. After that, other stereotypes such as vulnerability, courage and authenticity were understood indeed as the defining characteristics of the feminine (where vulnerability does not necessarily coincide with weakness), although nothing hinders the possibility of being charismatic, determined and authoritative.

With hindsight, we can argue that the women's liberation movement has simultaneously pointed to two different possible futures. In a first scenario, it designed a world in which gender emancipation went hand in hand with participatory democracy and social solidarity; in a second scenario, it promised new forms of liberalism, capable of guaranteeing women, as well as men, the "goods" of individual autonomy, expansion of choices, merit-based advancement. In short, "second generation feminism" was ambiguous in this sense: being compatible with both representations of society, it was therefore susceptible to lead to two different conceptions of history.

The male breadwinner and the female housewife models were central to post-World War II capitalism and its organization. Feminist critiques of that model now help to legitimize "flexible capitalism." This new organizational form of contemporary capital relies heavily on waged female labor, especially at low cost, in services and manufacturing: a labor that is guaranteed not only by young single women, but also by married women and women with children.

Feminism has also provided a second cultural contribution to liberalism: criticisms of domestic and sexual violence, and of reproductive oppression. By rejecting economicism and politicizing the personal dimension, feminists have broadened the general political agenda, adding to it the theme of the hierarchical construction of gender difference. The expected result was to expand the struggle for social justice, encompassing both cultural and economic elements, but the actual result was instead an extreme focus of feminism on the theme of "gender identity," to the detriment of the issues that have to do with labor and capitalist exploitation.

In all these cases, the ambivalence of feminism has been resolved in favor of a liberal neo-individualism. But certainly, the other side of us, that is, the perspectives represented by solidarity feminism, could still be alive. The economic and social crisis that began in 2007, accentuated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the current war in the heart of Europe, offer the possibility of further expanding this approach, reconnecting the dream of women's liberation with the vision of a society based on solidarity. To this end, feminists need to break the dangerous relationship with liberalism.

There are different realities on the planet than the one that has been described so far. For example, in the province of Yunnan, in China, women have the monopoly of authority and administer the economy, marriage does not exist, love is practiced freely and without coexistence constraints. Shortly after puberty, women receive a room, where they can decide to let the man that they want in, just once or for months and years. This is a sort of "walking marriage," or rather a love bond (called *axia*), that is radically different from what we mean and that does not include to have any property in common. Everyone stays at home, so that when the bond is broken the consequences are less severe for women and men and for the children. The latter live in the mother's family, cared for – just like the elderly – by the grandmothers, by the sisters of the mother and also by the uncles, because here the father figure does not exist, so much so that it is even irrelevant to know who they really are from that point of view. Women work, always and a lot, and at the same time they hold the power and the purse strings. Men do heavy or humble jobs, and intervene in big decisions, but only sporadic ones, for example when it comes to mediating between neighbors. For the rest, they rest and play cards. Much more central is falling in love and the relative sexuality, playful and free, which the Mosuo never thought of placing – unstable and complicated as it is – as the basis of the family.

4. The Triangle of Complexity and the Thousand Colors of Genders and Sexes

Today women must face a thematic triangle that is composed in a complex way by neurobiological and genetic discoveries, new technologies, and economic crises. This is the underlying layer with which it is necessary to confront: a triangle around which spaces of democracy, and the characteristics of rights and duties (and their limits and boundaries), are formed, as well as categories and facts, on which individual, relational and social responsibilities are defined.

In this triangle, freedom must be the focus of the new feminism: this must include the desire for freedom and the recognition that "claims in the name of freedom" are something different and do not always go hand in hand with those aimed at eliminating status hierarchies or injustices of treatment. The concept of freedom is a difficult one to formulate, and, furthermore, it is also a contested and certainly dangerous one. The process of investigation of freedom is a process that women (and, with them, the social, cultural and educational context) have only partially completed; it is a very contradictory and contrasted path, which I nevertheless believe to be important, inasmuch as it has been started, and presumably unstoppable. This process is a path inside and outside of oneself, which generates new behaviors, new forms of aggregation, and also the search for new passwords, together with the repercussions that can hinder or place strong limits to freedom and the general process of emancipation.

Undoubtedly, a critical articulation of stereotypes has fortunately happened, in particular of the cruder ones such as those of the "obedient daughter," the "efficient housewife," the "good mom" and the "understanding wife." This has led to the possibility that the conducts or attitudes of a woman take on a character that is no longer unique, without losing their prescriptive essence.

The strands of feminism that I have referred to, on the one hand, have allowed to stop interpreting the outward traits of corporeality as a natural datum; on the other hand, these strands have been feeding themselves in the duality of categories, they have in many ways excluded all that is eccentric, multiple, undisciplined and in constant movement with respect to the boundaries assigned to the female or male gender, and have not allowed to focus one's attention on the variations of sensitivity and personal identity over time and on the variations that take place on an organic and cultural level. We have lives and identities on the way, and Africa, that has always been "Mama," is constitutively associated with the idea of femininity and life bearer, thus representing for everyone the paradigm of the contradictions of the feminine.

The different forms of feminism have made it clear that gender is not a biologically "pure" given, but is also something that is culturally defined. The concept of culture can be traced back to the same non-hierarchical principle: in fact, today more than ever it is not easy to define what *popular culture* really consists of, because it does not seem possible to really distinguish between culture and popular culture, inasmuch as all the aspects of a culture are inexorably intertwined, especially in an age, like the present one, in which communications in social media are depopulated and do not require specific skills or knowledge to have the right to use them.

The researches that refer to the man/woman dichotomy, trying to understand if the two genders have identical brain bodies, start from a genetic heritage that is based on the different chromosomal coupling, heteromorphic (XY) for males and homologous (XX) for females. These researches show that the range of the possible conditions that may exist between the masculine and the feminine is capable to cause many "headaches," thus questioning, at the root, the dichotomy that underlies the distinction between the genders, that is, how can we really define if someone is a boy or a girl. The matter becomes even more complex if we examine the relationship between genetic heritage, hormones, central nervous system and the generation of specific neurons. These complex interactions can explain how, in the same individual, there may be many intermediate nuances that cannot be "read" only as dichotomously attributable to a woman or a man, or account for the presence of masculine attitudes in "women" and feminine ones in "men," or for transgenders, transvestites or crossdressers, drag queens, drag kings, gays with feminine attitudes, lesbians with masculine attitudes, and so on: namely, for all those persons who experience a gender identity that is not congruent with their form of appearance. If the form persists throughout life, then the described interactions act in such a way as to modify the definition of the

individual parameters constantly and continuously in us. So, we are always sexually different from who we were a moment before, and we cannot know who we will be sexually tomorrow (Del Giudice 2009a and 2009b; Del Giudice, Ellis and Shirtcliff 2011; McCarthy and Ball 2011).

Whether sexual and gender differences are of a biological nature or of educational, cultural and social nature, is only in part an open question, since the constraints that are given by the "sketch" that we are at the time of conception (so to speak, the form we take) play a role, but also brain plasticity and epigenetics are decisive. In fact, the latter describe how permeable the structure of the individual is, first of all from internal hormonal influences and from those caused by the environment, starting from intrauterine life and continuing with neonatal, pubertal, adolescent and finally adult life.

The biology/culture dualism, which has markedly invested gender issues, can only lead to generate a new perspective, since feminist thought in its various facets has often been nourished by the man-woman, male/female dichotomy. The first has been usually attributed to the organic domain, while the latter to the cultural field, and from their nature normative and prescriptive categories, aimed at controlling who one is and how one is, have been derived. From which it follows that one thing is sex and another is sexism.

In my view, it is not enough to embrace the position of Judith Butler, the famous theorist of "gender performativity," who emphatically theorized that the body one is born with has little or no importance, and that what really matters is rather the gender that you choose to belong to. For me, it is not even enough to admit, as Butler later did (and, in doing so, partially denying her previous assumptions), the existence of "an incontrovertible material residue," that is, the sexed body (Butler 1993, 2004).

Today we are faced with countless scientific researches and behaviors that strongly question dichotomous visions both between the sexes and between genres, and above all between nature and culture, and also between different aspects of culture, so much so that sex and gender are intertwined and confused with each other, and give life to a reality in which the articulation of behavior is expressed in shades of color, where the rainbow is the archetype of main reference for this experience. All this requires taking on the dimension of uncertainty, firstly one's own and then that of the other, given that the genetic characteristics, with their phenotype and genotype, can be altered and modified by educational, cultural and social conditions, just as the latter are undoubtedly influenced by genetic-biological bonds. We are immersed in a context that makes us live in a perennial, constant and endless interaction which results in constant co-adaptation of each of us with the environment and vice-versa.

A work that will never end is the one linked to highlighting the traps generated by the social constructions of identities and differences in their various facets; it is a question of

eradicating at the root the logics that carry normativity, which rely on a close relationship between *nómos* and *lógos*. It is the multiplicity that must be brought to light, in a "natural" light, which requires to overcome the dichotomies and an alleged sense of superiority, each time differently defined, that makes it possible to nullify the face of alarm, dismay and insecurity coming from the "other," from the different.

In everyday reality, the meanings of sex, gender, domination and power continue to determine each other. Even on the cognitive level, this mutual determination is still re-proposed: men are supposedly good at mathematics, while women are supposedly inclined to take care of others; boys are hyperactive, while girls are chatty.

These are gender stereotypes that have been apparently supported by a vast scientific literature – and also well rooted in what we may call the collective imagination – and that are extremely hard to die (Stoet, O'Connor, Conner and Laws 2013).

What has been seriously questioned from a scientific point of view is, instead, what we may call the dual membership scheme: women and men. Thus, sex and gender as such, with their metaphysical significance, are now, on the scientific level, archived.

However, we are all borderline figures.

The very widespread simplification, in particular in the field of communication, but above all its desire, are potentially perceived as a card to be played in difficult, tough, hostile, competitive, competitive and even cruel social conditions. And so, simplification and its own desire become attractive to shelter one's heart (so to speak) or relegate one's expressiveness to the cliché of the *femme fatal* (as long as the registry allows it) or that of the woman who "by nature" is suitable to take care of children, of elderly parents, of life companions, even of the whole planet.

We are all, apparently and deceptively, on the same level. In reality, this is not the case, we live in an unequal world that is based on inequality. We all know, for example, that the so-called viral character of certain messages is often managed by those who have more power, financial and technological resources.

There are three aspects that are very likely to be addressed in a better way by resorting to other skills that characterize a certain type of stereotype about women's meekness, kindness, patience, ability to wait and live in uncertainty, trying to progressively adapt their moods and behaviors to the perceived changes (even infinitesimal ones).

In this regard, questions concerning the ethics of care, such as those proposed by Joan Tronto, should be carefully evaluated. Tronto proposes to set free the ethics of care from its traditional link with female morality, because this connection would be doubly deleterious, because it could lead to treat birth, mortality, and care as "women's matters" (and, consequently, as secondary issues), and also because it could be used to bind women only to maternal and filial

functions. Therefore, Tronto strongly criticizes the feminist thesis that was summarized by the suffragette slogan according to which, if women had the right to vote, then there would be no more wars: in fact, for Tronto this slogan accredits the idea that women would be more moral because they are mothers, at least potentially, and therefore strengthens the roles that have been culturally attributed to women and the latter's alleged extraneousness to the economic processes and dynamics that characterize the market. Tronto raises objections against the idea according to which an ethics of care would be the expression of an essentially feminine morality, whereas an ethics of rights and justice would be the expression of a specifically masculine morality (Tronto 1994, 1998 and 2006; Adams and Donovan 2007).

For example, we can observe the story of the mothers, and especially of German women during Second World War (but not only), who were very proud to send their children to war; or still, the increasing presence of women in armies and the request to be the first; or still, the behavior of female soldiers in the Iraq war and specifically in the Abu Ghraib prison; or still, the presence of women in acts of terrorism and their role in organized crime: all these events certainly do not offer support to the idea according to which there would not be any "acts of war" in a world ruled by women.

It is certain that, with the changes that are currently taking place, women must confront and deal with new slogans, in particular with the concept of *limit*. When the male gender was able to do this, he set no limits in expanding his power and it is necessary to develop a complex relation on this (a reflection that, for now, is still missing).

The idea of a supposedly essentialist superiority in taking care of someone, or an imaginary feminine meekness, has ensured that women have been almost entirely excluded from political, institutional and cultural power until today. The strategy of crediting a supposed female moral supremacy made women fall into traps which were strategic to prevent them from taking on significant roles and functions. Therefore, an integration process would be needed: not a meek behavior but rather a kind behavior between individuals belonging to different "sexes / genders."

Kindness is an important component of care: there is no doubt that care brings with it the practical concept of kindness, and the latter has a fundamental value in the context of human relationships. Kindness is a first step in the relationship with the other, usually a stranger. We know from experience that kindness calms aggression and that, in case of heated arguments, the anger subsides. Kindness therefore has a relational dimension, based on the respect of the dignity of the other.

As an adjective, *kind* means having a sympathetic, helpful or forbearing nature, and – quite importantly for our subject – being inclined to bring pleasure or relief. The Old English noun *cynd* metamorphosed through Middle English to become *kinde* and, in our modern

language, *kind*. The word meant "nature," "family," "lineage" – "*kin*." It indicated what we are, who we are and that we are linked together, in the present and across time.

The word "kindness" indicates the quality or state of being kind. It describes a condition in which people understand and feel their interdependence, feel responsibility for their successors, and express all this in attitudes and actions towards each other.

Also, in the case of kindness it is important to return to its basic conditions, namely the neuroscientific ones.

The brain is a complex, self-organizing system that simulates and represents experiences through a competitive as well as a cooperative activity of populations of neurons, at both local and global level. Its optimal functioning depends on the flexible, dynamic balance between specialized, locally segregated activity, and more generalized global integration. Both excessive segregation and excessive integration can lead to suboptimal functioning. Interestingly, to fully prosper, the human community needs to similarly continuously adjust toward optimal balance between individual freedom and social responsibility, between national sovereignty and globalization (Turri 2012).

Recent researches have shown that training kindness can increase positive emotions, social connectedness and pro-social behaviors. It can decrease negative feelings and social biases, and even slow biological ageing (Cutler and Campbell-Meiklejohn 2018).

Several key emotional competencies contribute to the capacity for kindness, especially empathy and sympathy (feeling with another), compassion (feeling for another's distress), and the theory of mind (the ability to understand another's beliefs and intentions). These are all skills that depend on mirror neurons and simulation neurons. The brain networks involved in these competencies show hierarchical structuring, from relatively simple perceptual-motor circuits to highly complex ones such as those involved in the theory of mind. In particular, empathy and compassion have been found to involve three levels of processing: firstly, an initial assessment performed by the amygdala and the components of mirror neuron system in the inferior frontal/pre-motor and inferior parietal cortex; secondly, affective simulation involving bilateral insula and the anterior and middle cingulate gyrus; thirdly, the cognitive component engaging the executive system for emotion control via attention and re-appraisal in the fronto-parietal and temporal areas, and the areas associated with theory of mind in the dorsal medial prefrontal cortex and temporo-parietal junction.

Additionally, compassion has been found to activate systems for reward and positive affect, involving ventral tegmental area, nucleus accumbens and the orbito-frontal cortex (Turri 2012; Turri 2019).

Recent researches in the field of contemplative neuroscience have shown that kindness and related competencies can be trained, resulting in both functional and structural neural plasticity. In altruistic individuals, increased activity in the posterior superior temporal cortex has been reported (when compared with less altruistic individuals). Individual acts of kindness release both endorphins and oxytocin and create new neural connections. The implications for such plasticity of the brain are that altruism and kindness become self-authenticating (Fredrickson and Kok 2016; Turri 2019).

Jo Cutler and Daniel Campbell-Meiklejohn collected data from 36 previous studies in which 1.150 participants had undergone functional MRI scans while they were produced in acts of generosity or selfishness. Through a detailed analysis of all the brain scans, these two scholars were able to identify biological differences between two forms of kindness: the genuine and fully altruistic one, and the one defined as "strategic" (so called because it involves a return in terms of reputation or an asset), which provides a benefit for those who do their utmost in the act of generosity. These two forms of kindness manifest themselves in a biologically different way in our brain, activating specific areas of the brain. When one performs an act of strategic kindness, the reward area is activated, highlighting greater activity (i.e., more oxygen consumption) in the striatum. Selfless kindness also activates the reward area; however, the greatest activity is evidenced in the anterior cingulate cortex. It is a brain region in which problems and dangers to which we are exposed are processed unconsciously, preparing the brain to face any unexpected events. In practice, that warm feeling of well-being resulting from being purely altruistic (what the Anglo-Saxons call "warm glow") really exists, because it corresponds to a biological response that is different from that of being kind for interest (Cutler and Campbell-Meiklejohn 2018).

A thorough examination of kindness reveals the great strength of this course of action in deploying the ability to shape liberal and pluralist practices of citizenship. Kindness can only be asserted if its value is recognized, thanks to a strong reorientation and eradication of the culture of narcissism that has reigned over the last years. Especially after forty years of a culture that has exalted individualism with all available means, we cannot avoid thinking of our behaviors, our experiences and our reflections that have remained immune from it. The different forms of feminism have not been exempted and they have nurtured, given life and green light to articulated, widespread and permanent forms of individualism, and also to its psychopathological aspect, namely narcissism.

Barbero reminded us that all of humanity can be different, if human beings can and if they want to. In order to do so, people must take on the uncertainty of life in a more articulated and conscious way, which is individual at a psychological level, but is also a dimension that is generated by the social reality.

Uncertainty can be faced if one really wants warmer and more consistent relationships with others. In fact, what must be changed is society as a whole, and also the educational modality implemented towards the male gender and beyond. Kindness is the strength of women and outlines a clear strategy for navigating everyday life with charm, attention and prudence. Kindness is the antidote to a brutal world.

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CRITICAL THEORY, FEMINISM AND POPULAR CULTURE: INTERVIEW WITH MARINA CALLONI

Valentina Antoniol and Stefano Marino

Valentina Antoniol and Stefano Marino (VA and SM)

Dear Professor Calloni, we would like to sincerely thank you for having generously accepted our invitation to participate in this issue of *Popular Inquiry* with an interview on the link between critical theory, popular culture and feminism. We believe that, first of all, it is very important to express your specific understanding of feminism and feminisms (from a theoretical standpoint) in relation to your way of being a feminist. In this manner, two fundamental teachings of feminism itself are called into play: the importance of positioning, hence the need for recognition of the speaker's position (primarily political and social) and, at the same time the fact that what is personal is political. In the wake of these reflections, and paraphrasing the famous question "What is the purpose of philosophy?," we wish to ask you a question that is both politically and ethically important: What is feminism for?

Marina Calloni (MC)

I am very grateful for your attention and interest in my work. I will try to answer your questions, letting my studies interact with my experience in research networks and international projects in several countries. These multicultural and multidisciplinary experiences have allowed me to rethink Western culture and reorient my profession in order to identify common strategies to be changed – to the extent that this is possible – such as aggressive mentalities, patriarchal awareness as well as forms of both symbolic and structural violence that are epistemological injustice's factors of reproduction. We therefore should refer to feminism as feminisms, as a complex and open plurality of different practices (both past and present) that women's movements have globally experienced, combining different cultures, but always based on common ground for protests and demands for transformation, as we also nowadays see in mass mobilizations. Thus, feminism cannot be reduced

to a *unicum*. As we know, during the world conference organized by the United Nations in 1995 in Beijing, the "protective maternalism" performed by Western women was firmly criticized by women from post-colonial countries. They are active subjects, able to speak in their own voices and on their own terms against any form of domination and one-sided thought.

Feminism has always been capable of self-reflection and self-criticism through processes involving continuous inclusiveness. Feminism also continues to persist through defeats and the failure of rights that once seemed to have been acquired forever and for everyone. Feminism – understood in the broadest sense – is an intercultural and interclass bottom-up practice. It is the result of multiple struggles that were initiated by women (intellectuals, workers and activists) at the end of the 18th century, and continued over time, battling for the recognition of citizenship and human rights, as well as equality/equity in all public and private spheres (from the work-place to education, politics and scientific environments to the domestic space). Feminism has thus implied a "cultural revolution" that has not ended yet. In fact, forms of discrimination and inequality continue to survive and that is the reason for which it persists.

You asked me what it means "to be a feminist." It is a very difficult question to answer because the reply should focus on a multiplicity of (personal, professional, political and social) aspects that affect my daily practice, my work, my institutional collaborations and my relationships with civil society's associations. This can be summed up in an overlapping approach, which means respect for human dignity thanks to action taken against all forms of abuse and violence, starting with the persistence of gender inequality.

This conviction leads me to answer the second part of your question concerning the meaning of "positioning," which feminist epistemology has defined as "situated knowledge." Standpoint theory argues that knowledge always relates to the observer's point of view and, consequently, gender dimension. Feminist scientists stress the centrality of a gendered subject (i.e., sex difference and gender relations), rooted in concrete contexts of daily life. She/he/them are situated selves. Cognitive processes are thus criticized if based on a supposed impartial subject and on a concept of rationality that conceives it as objective and neutral. A concrete knowledge is also based on fair relationships that become expressions of care and emotions in rethinking social ties and institutional politics.

Starting from the reality of a tangible and contextually rooted self, which thinks and acts autonomously (contrary to Descartes' perspective), in my opinion feminism has two fundamental implications: an epistemological and a normative one. On the one hand, feminism implies the need to include in the sphere of knowledge disciplines and studies that – due to a narrow patriarchal idea of rationality, as women's history shows – have hitherto been repressed and neglected, by introducing new points of view and research questions. On the other hand, once

again in my opinion, feminism has a normative and at the same time critical and socio-political dimension in analysing social pathologies and human rights violations, which must necessarily be opposed. In both cases, education, training and cooperation with both institutions and civil society associations become pivotal in the prevention of gender-based violence and the planning of social policies. This implies a rethinking of our roles as teachers, researchers, global citizens as well as activists, intersectionally united by cross-border networks.

In particular, women philosophers have had to fight against age-old prejudices. In philosophy the battle is still ongoing because philosophy – from a male perspective - was considered the "queen of sciences" and the expression of a capacity to think and act. Artistic, statuary and pictorial images have usually depicted philosophers as men capable of "thinking the world," thanks to their distinctive reasoning faculties. Philosophers were thus depicted as assertive subjects able to provide a theoretical structure to a shapeless world. The *School of Athens* – painted by Raphael – presents us with an assemblage of men, with an elderly Plato at the centre of the painting, pointing to the world of forms and ideas, and a young Aristotle turning his hand towards factual reality. Indeed, the history of (male) philosophy marks a long, self-contradictory and self-reflective process, perpetuating itself through schools of thought and, at the same time, renewing itself through epistemological change. Philosophy's self-criticism thus marks self-critical paths through the admission of denial processes: rational thinking has usually been depicted using male bodies and minds, distinguishing between the public sphere of politics and the intellect, on the one hand, and the private space of needs, devoted to biological and everyday reproduction, on the other. The age-old prejudice consisted in the belief that women, reduced to a mere expression of feelings, lacked rationality.

In my opinion, Hannah Arendt has been considered the most important 20th-century female philosopher also because she always applied to her own philosophical reflections the ethical principle of individual responsibility, hence the praxis of *Selbstdenken*, the need to think for oneself autonomously, despite criticism and prejudice. However, the path to the "recognition of female philosophers," both in academic and public debates has been and still is very bumpy. There is still much resistance – if not derision – to using the name "philosopher" when addressing a woman ("filosofa," in Italian) who is involved in philosophy as a profession or as a public commitment. It should also be stressed that the number of female professors in the different philosophical fields – especially in fields such as logic and philosophy of science – does not differ too much from the presence of female academics engaged in STEM disciplines, stressing the persistence of both a still resistant dominance and a millenary prejudice connecting philosophy and (male) rationality, so that it has become a form of self-inhibition and self-deception for women.

The kind of "reason" that feminism has put into play – thanks to social experiences and biographical practices – against a model of self-referential rationality, has consisted in the ability not only to think theoretically, but also to point out the forced dichotomy between the public and the private. The core of philosophical reflection has on the contrary become the conceptualization of the meaning of relationships in their twofold and dialectic significance: a manifestation of discriminatory violence, as well as a founding element for radical social and cultural transformations. A substantial democracy can function only when repressive attitudes, traditional mentalities, and images of violence are replaced by concrete forms of gender equality in all spheres of life. This is a daily task for both men and women.

Reframing your question: "What are philosophy and feminism needed for?", I would say that feminism – as a plurality of actions, thoughts, traditions, cultures, knowledge aimed at achieving dignity, freedom and equality – still needs to refer to counterfactual normative principles and maintain utopian contents that cannot be fully realized in the political and social sphere. I believe that – by maintaining a complex balance between social criticism, realism and idealism – feminism is still able to keep a potential of concrete utopian contents as pragmatic tools that refer to the possibility of changing existing power relations. Despite all the failures and conflicts, the desires and aspirations for a different world remain intact in feminism. Human dignity and justice cannot be separated from moral feelings and passions. The goal of utopian aspirations is to improve human conditions, to increase respect between human beings, to open new horizons in our lives, learning from each other, reinforcing networks and common projects. However, utopia cannot be fully realized. Feminism remains a sort of resistant and resilient utopianism.

VA and SM

Having focused our attention in the first question in this interview on a few very general problems – namely, those concerning the general meaning of philosophy and feminism, and the relevance of one's "positioning" at a personal and political level –, we would like to focus now, more in particular, on your specific position in contemporary philosophical debates. By saying this, we refer to your belongingness, as a philosopher, to the "paradigm" or "tradition" of critical theory of society, founded by such thinkers as Horkheimer, Marcuse and Adorno. In your essay dated 2005 "Adorno e il femminismo: un incontro mancato?" you defined the relationship between a critical theorist such as Adorno and feminism in critical terms, as "a failed encounter." What is your opinion concerning the relationship between critical theory of society and feminist struggles, also beyond the first, second (Habermas) and third generation of Frankfurt thinkers (such as Honneth, Benhabib, Fraser and Jaeggi)?

MC

The question of my "belonging" to critical theory is quite complex because it is not simply a theoretical-philosophical issue, but also an existential matter, which includes my teaching experience and research activities in many different countries. My sense of being a social-political philosopher interested in gender studies concerns first and foremost an attitude towards choices, i.e., what one decides to study, which research aspects one enhances, which collaborations one develops and, last but not least, in which direction does one want to go. My sense of being part of the tradition of critical theory is therefore linked to my studies and frequentations. I would say that I have diachronically and synchronically navigated several generations of critical theorists, starting with my stay in Frankfurt in the late 1980s.

I obtained an MA in Philosophy at the University of Milan with a thesis on the concept of the public sphere in the German debate, and at that time was more favourable to a radical notion of *Öffentlichkeit,* as developed by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, than to Habermas' perspective. My supervisor, Emilio Agazzi, was one of the first Italian translators of Habermas' works, and he aimed at introducing new approaches to the reinforcement of Marxism in crisis. Thanks to my research, I was awarded a scholarship under the supervision of Habermas, who had recently returned to Frankfurt after the Starnberg experience. During my stay in Frankfurt, I continued to work on the founding fathers of the Frankfurt School - in particular on Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse -, but also on Kracauer and his criticism of modernity in the Weimar Republic. I edited a number of documents and correspondences dating from the difficult post-war years and the return from exile. In particular, I edited the sharp exchange of so far unpublished letters between Marcuse and Heidegger. I remember that at that time there were still discussions and critiques – thanks to the testimonies of feminists who had taken part in students' protests – against male colleagues, but also memories about the astonishing reaction from Adorno, who had always thought of himself as a critical thinker but was now criticized as a patriarchal thinker. Negative dialectics were turning against his author. His thought showed deficiencies: a gender-based perspective. Adorno's unexpected death made it impossible to establish a real encounter with feminism and the political-theoretical claims of his female students. Yet critical theory was strengthened by including something that had been denied: an anti-patriarchal gender-based viewpoint.

During those years, every Monday evening, I used to attend the famous *Colloquium*, where Habermas discussed his new writings, and where researchers and eminent guests - such as Gadamer, Rawls, Rorty and Searle (among others) - presented their works. The collective dynamic was very interesting and stimulating. Many strong objections were usually raised against the various speakers. In particular, I remember quite well the radical criticism that some American feminist

theorists directed at Habermas. It is no coincidence that later on Habermas recognized his shortcomings, acknowledging in the "Preface" to the new edition (1990) of his 1962 book on *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* the important role played by feminist thinkers in stressing the patriarchal features of the public sphere (although he was not so convinced at the beginning). The role of women's movements in creating a new form of a deliberative public sphere was recognized. Later on, in *Between facts and Norms* Habermas devoted a chapter to feminist policies on equal opportunities, in order to show the dialectics between juridical equality and factual equality, and the necessity to rethink the traditional framework of social and distributive justice in the perspective of a procedural idea of deliberative democracy.

During my years in Frankfurt, I also remember very well – among others – the active participation in debates by Sheila Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, Iris M. Young and Jean Cohen. At that time Honneth was Habermas' assistant. As a young scholar – coming from the tradition of Italian history of philosophy, where we had to repeat what authors said and not what we thought about them – I was very much impressed by the possibility to freely express my viewpoint, also contradicting Habermas. It was – and remains – a fundamental experience and lesson for me to practice and express my convictions without restrains, to learn reciprocally from criticism, to include otherness. In 1990, together with some Italian friends, we founded the *Seminario di Teoria Critica* and some years later the *Società Italiana di Teoria Critica,* which gather scholars interested in the different generations of the Frankfurt School. Nowadays I am still in touch with many friends and colleagues who attended the *Colloquium*, meeting them at conferences or at the annual Colloquium "Philosophy and Social Science" held before in Dubrovnik and now in Prague. At the end of the 1980s, faced with the affirmation of Habermas' intersubjective paradigm and post-metaphysical thinking, multiple debates were raised by a conflicting group of academics and intellectuals, who instead believed they were the true successors of the Frankfurt tradition, according to a renewed Marxist tradition based on the theory of the value-form and the centrality of work over interaction.

My interest in gender studies also grew during my years in Frankfurt and concerned the reconsideration of the German tradition of Romantic women (such as Günderrode, Brentano, and others) in light of East German literature by women writers. Illnesses and depression seemed to refer to a deeper social and political malaise. A paradigmatic example was Christa Wolf's novel *Kassandra*: the so-called "bringer of misfortune" had simply predicted what reality was; namely the fall of an unjust system. Troy's walls represented the fall of Berlin's barriers. Thanks to my classical studies, I thus began to identify in literature, artistic depictions and myths those signs of gender violence, perpetrated throughout the centuries that sought redemption in generations to come. My researches in critical theory, socio-political philosophy and gender studies have been

enriched by a deconstructive/reconstructive approach to "imaginal philosophy," aimed at investigating – by interpreting signs and hidden meanings – the dialectics between violence, struggles against domination, and emancipation. Violent cultural representations and images, understood as complex verbal and non-verbal languages that have persisted over the centuries, must be carefully decoded, in order to understand their significance in the present and in order to be opposed to prevent the perpetuation of violence. With regards to my belonging to the tradition of critical theory of society, I can say that I have passed – albeit in different ways – through three different generations. Now I am very happy to see the global development of a fourth and even fifth generation, following different orientations and theoretical influences. This is also a sign of the fruitfulness of critical theory, which has always been open to new challenges, in order to understand the present in relation to new conceptual and pragmatic tools due to poli-emergencies and overlapping crises, as empirical factuality tragically shows us.

VA and SM

In the context of a special issue of the journal *Popular Inquiry,* specifically dedicated to the topic "Popular Culture and Feminism," it is difficult not to be spontaneously reminded of a concept such as that of "the culture industry." As it is well-known, this concept was originally coined by Horkheimer and Adorno, in a famous chapter of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), not only to critically refer to mass culture but also to immediately emphasize, already at a terminological level, the strictly industrial characteristics of *all* mass culture. According to Horkheimer and Adorno this was tantamount to denying that *any* form of mass culture (popular music, films, comics, fashion, etc.) could have a potential for human emancipation, given their idea of the culture industry as an organ of "the administered world" and thus as an agency of "mass deception." Do you think that such a critical perspective on popular culture is still useful and valid, or can popular culture also now offer some opportunities for human liberation (including women's emancipation)?

MC

Horkheimer and Adorno were among the first theorists to develop a radical critique of the culture industry, conceived as a decisive instrument allowing the manipulation of human beings, resorting to propaganda, inducing consumerism and restricting free will. Their criticism of the cultural industry appears as a further destructive effect of instrumental reason, the genealogy of which was identified by Horkheimer and Adorno in Odysseus' purpose-driven action, whereby nature and human beings are exploited and reified, if not annihilated. The radicalization of the Frankfurt thinkers' anti-modern position was also the result of the fact that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written in exile – due to a dual persecution of these intellectuals as anti-Nazis and Jews – between

1941 and 1944, in the bloodiest years of the global conflict, when the end of the atrocities was not yet foreseeable because of Nazi deportations and exterminations. The idea of domination became totalizing. Albeit with necessary differentiations, on the one hand Nazi barbarism became a totalitarian lethal regime in Europe, while on the other hand – *mutatis mutandis* – capitalist society in the U.S. was reinforcing forms of control that subjugated the human soul. This meant that, despite the existence of democratic systems, instrumental reason would continue to survive in the economic sphere through capitalism and in society through mass media culture. And yet Horkheimer and Adorno's criticism can be considered as a form of "performative contradiction," as Habermas pointed out from a normative view point. From which perspective can the Frankfurt thinkers exercise their critique, if they live in a context of totalizing power and instrumental reason? How can their claims for validity be legitimized? An immanent and normative counter-factual position is needed, defining the idea of "another kind" of non-authoritarian reason that supports our argumentation. Yet Horkheimer and Adorno's reflections can be also applied nowadays to the debates on "surveillance capitalism" in an age of neo-libertarianism, due to the advent of new social media. It can also be useful for a critical understanding of the ideology of "exporting freedom," where motivations to wage war on non-democratic countries are identified with the financial imperatives of globalization.

To answer your question, in my opinion the meaning of popular culture and mass culture do not necessarily coincide. For example, popular culture has a dialectical meaning for feminism. "Popular" can imply an interest in minorities or forgotten cultures, those who the intellectual elites did not consider as fundamental or worth knowing. They represented forms of minor, non-heroic, non-hegemonic knowledge. Popular culture also implies studies on "material" everyday life, as the French *Annales* school did in rethinking historiography. Women's movements and feminist scholars have supported the historical and scientific significance of such knowledge, coming from bottom up. This approach highlighted aspects that heroic and patriarchal knowledge had left out. However, it is possible to see in these "official" narratives the very roots of patriarchy and the reasons for its reproduction through imaginaries, scientific disciplines, and schools of thought. In this sense, we can better understand the connections and differences between popular culture, mass culture, and cultural industries.

Through the medium of mass media, prejudices and gender-based stereotypes contribute to perpetuating images of violence, discriminatory languages, and misogynistic communication. This fact opens a new front for the development of innovative research, educational intervention and public policies against hate speech now propagated through the abuse of social media (sexting, revenge porn, stalking, etc.), which can change the very nature of the public sphere. Thanks to social media, each individual becomes without moderators the author of

contents that are mostly produced in the private space of his/her own home and then launched as messages and videos to a potentially unlimited online public space. Echo chambers contribute to confirm and reproduce beliefs and news (as well as offensive messages) without any barriers. Women are the ones most subjected to personal attacks. Forms of public regulation and awareness-raising action are thus needed. Anti-violence campaigns must start in the early school years, adequate training for teachers must be envisaged, in-depth research as well as cooperation with civil society associations must be reinforced. Social media can only have an emancipatory function if deprived of violent imageries and hate speech that continue to be reproduced in "popular" songs, films, videos and representations.

Feminism must fight against all those representations that reduce women to passive objects, rather than represent them as active subjects, capable of transformation. If we conceive social media in a dialectical way, we can also identify its empowering potential. It is no coincidence that totalitarian regimes always try to restrict the free flow of ideas. As we have recently seen, telematic networks are repressed when regimes aim to limit protests and allow mass repression: action – as we are seeing – that is impossible to manage. We live in a society of multiple networks that cannot be stopped entirely: we are all interconnected.

VA and SM

After analyzing the contemporary relationship between the cultural industry and feminism, we would like to ask you how, as a philosopher and feminist, you conceptualize being/feeling a woman in relation to the cultural industry. This is clearly an issue that calls into question several fundamental nodes such as that of female representation/under-representation in relation to the cultural industry; the relationship between gender and power; feminist critique of neoliberalism, considered particularly in relation to its ability to include/subsume gender and sexual differences in production and valorization processes. Is there, in your view, an adequate – hence theoretically, politically, ethically useful – way of thinking about (and/or rethinking) gender, as well as gender roles and differences in our present day? Again, this is a question that opens up a range of particularly interesting issues, which you have focused on several times in your writings, and which can be explored, in order to answer the question. Among these, in particular, the problem of gender violence and, more precisely, the private roots of political and gender violence; the relationship between feminism and everyday life; the issue of equal opportunities.

MC

Feminism has been recently challenged by different forms of cultural-theoretical and socio-political claims, which indicate the need for additional rethinking. I refer here to studies and statements

promoted by researchers and activists working on LGBTQI+ issues. Although they find their origins in gender studies, these new political and cultural schools of studies claim their own autonomy as being separate from feminism. This position radicalizes the tradition of sex/ gender differences in the form of a critique of heterosexual "binarism." The debate on gender fluidity thus shifts the question concerning biological differences to the idea of a "mobility" or "fluidity" of gender identity.

With regard to my current educational, scientific, political and social commitments, I can say that I have been involved for many years in fighting this, but, above all, in preventing gender-based violence, and especially domestic violence. In fact, it is in the family that respect and the grammar of moral feelings should be learned; however, vice-versa, the home can often become a space of ongoing abuses and terror, if not death, with repercussions on future generations and society as a whole. The example of the prevention of gender-based violence can summarize different tasks for feminism from an interactive viewpoint: normatively, it implies respect of principles; scientifically, it implies research on situations involving violence; didactically, it implies educating students and training professionals; socially, it implies cooperation with civil society's associations; politically, it means cooperation with institutions. It is a continuous interdisciplinary, intersectional and inter-institutional job. This is why I am involved in various cross-border projects, in networking and training, thanks to collaboration with extraordinary colleagues and activists. For example, I coordinate a Departmental Research Centre at the University of Milano-Bicocca, called ADV -Against Domestic Violence, an inter and intra-professional programme called SFERA (almost 1900 participants were formed), the Academic Network UN.I.RE. (Networked Universities Against Gender Violence for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention) in collaboration with the Council of Europe. I have been a consultant to the "Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on Femicide, as well as on all Forms of Gender-based Violence" at the Senate of the Italian Republic, and also a delegate of the Italian Ministry for University and Research on issues related to contrast gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination. Mindsets and institutions must be changed thanks to cooperative and integrated projects and policies, in which different professional and scientific competences can proficiently interact in order to avoid the escalation and perpetuation of violence. The battle against gender- based violence is primarily a cultural battle.

Feminism succeeded in breaking the great dichotomy that separated the public from the private. Private issues – as shown by domestic violence – are political. As is generally understood, political philosophy has removed the private roots of public violence, although the latter has been clearly visible in depictions and myths since antiquity. Violence was only understood as an intra-male issue, as a matter of war or power struggles. The suffering of women and children was not recognized as a form of coercive subjection. We had to wait until 1993 to see gender-based violence recognized by the United Nations as a human rights violation; until the end of the last century, it

had not received any public recognition, and only since then have nations had to provide legislations and policies, in order to address it. Feminism and critical theory are crucial also in terms of personal orientation, when our actions are constantly subjected to self-reflection: we can all inflict violence and power, imposing control and oppression on other human beings in different spheres of life. Empowerment praxis can contribute to the development of human capacities and promote equal opportunity policies, monitoring democratic institutions, because fair representation is not only a matter of quantitative parity but also a qualitative statement of those needs that arise from the sphere of everyday life and that traditional politics has failed to take into account. Feminism and critical theory are therefore closely linked to each other from a theoretical, cultural, political and personal viewpoint. They also interact as persistent judgment in relation to how we have to act in order to oppose discrimination, violence and forms of intolerance, which are increasing even more in the present emergencies associated with pandemics, wars, socio-economic and environmental issues. Due to the endurance of traditional forms of discrimination and violence that we thought we had now overcome, what remains is the prospect of a continuous unfulfilled legacy of women's movements and battles over the centuries, as well as the perspective of common goals yet to be achieved. One cannot be free, if everyone is not free from domination. Feminism certainly does not only concern women.

FEMINISM AND FASHION: INTERVIEW WITH EUGENIA PAULICELLI

Chiara Tessariol

Chiara Tessariol (CT)

Good morning, Prof. Paulicelli. Thank you for your interest and for agreeing to this interview for the issue of *Popular Inquiry* on popular culture and feminism. I would like to start our conversation with an introductory question. How would you define feminism? Do you think that today's post-feminism differs from previous waves?

Eugenia Paulicelli (EP)

Thank you for this question. To answer it, I will focus on a few points. First of all, several movements and developments that have taken place in the history of women allow us to talk in the plural and use the term "feminisms." As you know, there have been several debates concerning white feminism bearing on race, class and postcolonial studies which identify and intersect within a domain of studies, such as critical race theory, postcolonialism and gender studies, and involve the LGTBQ+ movement (which is very important to articulate and problematize questions such as labor and gender within the history of women). Other intersections, in this kind of domain, concern justice, respect and environmental change. All these intersections and fields of study have taken place in a close relationship with women's movements in various locations in the West and the East. We find points of communication and integration in the ongoing debate even when we do not agree on particular topics, because, when we talk about women, it is not just about sex, but also about race, gender, class and other kinds of issues. This debate is important and very crucial for fashion studies and the study of fashion. It bears recalling that the two terms "fashion" and "feminism" were once thought to be antithetical, especially if we think of the radical feminism of the 1970s, in which using make up was considered to be "cattiva coscienza" (a "dirty conscience," so to speak). But things changed quite a bit in the 1980s, when

we had a reaction to this kind of radical feminism that had been important, of course, insofar as it raised issues such as sexuality, women's bodies, abortion rights and so forth, issues which we thought had been solved, although it turns out it was not the case. Anyway, in the 1980s a different reflection on feminism took place, integrating other kinds of stories, with the result that fashion was not understood as just something imposed from above on to us all. Of course there is a system, and we are part of a capitalist society, but the idea of caring for the body for women has been historically conflictual and is still so today. So, what I am saying is that caring for your body and beautifying yourself is not a sign of a "cattiva coscienza" aimed to fulfill the male gaze. It's something much more profound than that. In history, critical feminism went back to rethink, in different fields such as literature, art, philosophy, etc., periods of the past in which women were kind of invisible, and then how they became visible because of this need that they had to attract attention as subjectivities and not just as passive objects of the gaze. Redefining women's agency in history has been an interdisciplinary collaboration and enterprise, and in this way fashion became part of the conversation on popular culture.

Fashion is not just *couture*, even though now the notion of *couture* (high fashion) has changed so much thanks to social media. *Couture* is a reconsideration of the everyday, not just in the glossy magazines, which are part of the conversation, but more in daily activities: the way you dress up, go to work, speak with people. It's a lot more than that and, in this way, we find a popular dimension, starting especially from the 1950s that I think is very important to take into consideration. Popular music affected immensely the perception of the body, sexuality, make-up, gender, dressing up, dressing down and how people interact with each other, and so forth. We have to talk in the plural form, and as a consequence we have to take into consideration all these domains, how they really enrich our understanding of women's lives, their gender definition, their role in society and family, their intimacy with other people, and the role that women had and still have as mothers and caregivers. Today, we are in a very different moment because of the complexity and positive developments of the feminist movements. But, you know, we are also in a time that is very challenging: for example, we know what happened in the United States, where the Supreme Court for the first time abolished the right to abortion at the federal level. So, our time is very scary. The decision of the Supreme Court is a huge defeat for women in general, especially for women from the minorities, who do not have adequate recognition within society and suffer from racial issues that still persist among many groups, particularly African Americans. There is still a big struggle in the United States for these groups to be recognized and to have the same quality education and prospects at work, especially in those States that are not as culturally and politically advanced as New York, for example. There exist many gaps between different areas. It is very worrisome that this is happening today, in the 21st century, and we need

to fight back as women, again and again. Speaking about the USA, where I live and work, I find it particularly concerning that we have, on the one hand, this terrible situation where children are shot and where there is little or no gun regulation, and then, on the other hand, you talk about children who are not even born: it is a sort of schizophrenic dynamic. That is why we need to fight back and be alert to these kinds of situations.

CT

Thank you, Prof. Paulicelli, for this long and detailed reply to my first question on feminism today. My next questions will be more specifically focused on some of the essays that have been included in the important volume *The Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*, published in 2021, and edited by Veronica Manlow, Elizabeth Wissinger and you. Let us start from the contribution entitled "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as fashion icon: Addressing nationalism and feminism with style," written by Floriana Bernardi and Enrica Picarelli. Considering the case of Adichie, reported in this essay, do you think that social media have changed the feminist message?

EP

As far as fashion is concerned, there is a lot that can be done and that is being done in different kinds of politics. Chimamanda Ngozi-Adichie says in her essay "We all should be feminists" how important dressing was for her. It's interesting to see how the sorts of rituals she describes are significant for people and even more for people who are underrepresented in society. The idea of underrepresentation, as I wrote in the concluding essay of the *Companion* dedicated to Dapper Dan and Gucci, has also worked for women in history: to care for the image, to care for themselves and to make a statement became a political act, as long as the political valence of that was made clear. Especially for underrepresented subjectivities, like black people, there has been a long history of cultural style, which was crucial in popular culture, music and so forth, that has influenced mainstream fashion, as we can see in brands like Gucci and Balenciaga, to name but two. I have an example that links Chimamanda Ngozi to feminism and fashion: in fact, the Creative Director of Dior, Maria Grazia Chiuri, presented in her first collection the phrase "We all should be feminist" on a t-shirt. This is an interesting case study, because Chiuri continued to be very much involved in promoting women's work and talked openly about the relationship between fashion and feminism. As I mentioned earlier, once this was a relationship that was considered antithetical. But now the two terms are accepted and used in a variety of ways by different kinds of brands that have generated projects to fund women's initiatives, work and the battles against violence. How come? The fashion and the luxury industry, now more than ever, becomes part of the popular discussion around these kinds of items. Think, for instance,

of the open statement about defending freedom of expression and democracy in the latest political election in Italy (September 22, 2022)[1] and I would say in the world in general. I also think it is important to bring in the role of consumers, among whom we can find women of different ages and classes and races, black and Asian communities, who are much more involved and vocal in their choices. The role of social media is and has been crucial for the expansion of the discussion about fashion, its politics and its accessibility. Everybody now watches collections, films etc., online and I think that this fact, on a certain level, has facilitated the involvement of consumers in their fashion choices, commenting on, reacting to and even criticizing particular models or collections. For example, I am familiar with "Diet Prada," which is a page on Instagram that allows its followers to criticize and to be heard but also offers provocative views of contemporary fashion. This has changed the picture quite a lot.

CT

My next question deals with the essay "Crafting Care through childhood: Education, play and sustainable ethical fashion," written by Melinda Byam. Her article aims to explore the relationship between childhood educational practices and the fashion industry's commitment to sustainability practices. What the author also argues is how, in our adulthood, "calls for actions" do not have enduring consequences in our purchase behavioral patterns, despite our knowledge about the unethical and unsustainable issues of the fashion industry. From your point of view, how should fashion improve consumers' patterns of behavior so we are more informed, from childhood on, to be more sustainable and ethical?

EP

This is crucial, not only for fashion studies, but in general. It is a reflection about the bases we give to children and how we teach them, in the family and in school, to understand certain values. These values also have to do with gender, such as respect, equality and how we treat boys and girls. It's about the awareness that now gender is also plural, that we have identities that don't necessarily fit into one category or another. These are all issues that we didn't have to face so much before, when there was a sort of silence about this. Education is crucial. How do you teach children certain principles such as sustainable and ethical fashion? There are many ways this can be done and Melinda, who is particularly concerned with sustainability, gives some examples, such as games, dialogues or different activities. Melinda started developing this idea during a seminar that I was teaching entitled "The Fabric of Cultures," which is an ongoing project I direct (www.thefabricofcultures.com). I was very pleased to see how she started to develop this idea, thinking of children.

We usually don't talk too much about children in relation to fashion, but this is another important issue to face: how to make them better citizens in the future. It is interesting that Melinda refers to Maria Montessori too, an important Italian revolutionary for her times, whose pedagogical method is well known and respected in the USA. In fact, there are many schools here that instill those principles and values. Another author that I admire, Richard Sennett, talks about the importance of connecting the mind and the hands, and about values and ideas of activism that belong to our Italian tradition and history (such as, for example, in the Renaissance) and how these kinds of reflections and values can become transnational, not necessarily related only to Italian life, but also potentially connected to fashion, as in the case of the Montessori educational method. So, consumption is of course part of the system, but there are different levels of awareness that we can develop and I think that this goes in line with ethical values, social justice and respect for people of any gender, color, race and class. That has to be part of the political agenda today and fashion has to take an active role in it.

CT

In the essay "College students' fashion activism in the age of Trump," included in the *Companion*, Charles J. Thompson reflects on the role of students' clothing. Scholastic formal attire became so popular that today it is a well-established style in fashion, the so-called "preppy" style. As we can understand from the article, students started very quickly to change the rules, introducing new clothes, meeting their desires to express their personality through their image and dress choices. Today, school is still an active battleground of the dress code. On the one hand, teachers reproach students for wearing skimpy outfits, defending the idea of decency in certain spaces whose primary function is not to show off to peers. On the other hand, we can also observe a strong supportive collective response by students who, in order to defy the established authorities, dress in even more eye-catching clothes as a political act, thus protesting against those rules in the name of the freedom to express one's personality and identity. In your opinion, are people – and, more specifically, the young generations – still willing to accept a restrictive way of dress to respect an appropriate dress code for certain situations? Or should we consider the idea of disrupting dressing, using fashion for activism, as a legitimate political act?

EP

This is a case study about a particular time period, and so we still don't know. It is still an uncertain political situation because of Trumpism and different forms of white nationalism and fascism, and not only in America, given that it's a global issue that we have to come to terms with.

In college, as well as in high school, there are different contexts in which, through dress, you are judged to be part of this group or that, or not in any group. Thompson reports on how clothes could affect this particular situation of acceptance and interaction among students. There are certain codes and rules that are unwritten. I would say that a lot of things have changed because of the online situation that we are still dealing with, and due to which we cannot see people face to face. And also, what is decency? Decency seems to be something that is redefined each time. Fashion has a lot to do with it. For example, while I was in Bologna (during my research sabbatical leave in 2021-2022), I noticed while walking in the street that many students exposed their skin, especially the midriff in wintertime when it was cold. It certainly replicated the current fashion and they seem comfortable with it. For me it's fine, it does not disturb me. It would be interesting to know other people's reactions to this, as in schools, for instance. The idea of exposing certain parts of the body has always existed in fashion, so there is an interconnection here. The notion of decency seems to me always in constant redefinition and that fashion has a lot to do with that concept. But we always need to consider the specific context: in some cases the environment can be very strict, in other cases it can be more liberal, and becomes a site of struggle and clothes truly and always become part of this struggle. This is especially so in countries and cultures in which orthodox religious and moral codes are in place.

CT

In her essay "Violence and fragmentation in interwar fashion and femininity," Lucy Moyse Ferreira writes about the horrific realities of war and how, for instance, mutilation of limbs became a new "normal." Fashion was not immune to this new "normal" as during this period fashion magazines published images of distorted feminine bodies. For example, as we can see in one of the images included in the article, faces with missing parts – usually eyeballs – appeared; illustrations where the head was detached from the rest of the body were common, too. From these sketches we can appreciate how fashion worked as a tool to represent a widespread sense of fragmentation and persistent social anxiety. Today, we are not directly involved in war, but we are going through several different human crises: let us just think about the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change or the struggle to fight a male-dominated society. So, how would you say that fashion is accompanying, influencing and having a real impact on all these challenges of today's society? What is the social role and responsibility of fashion today?

EP

It's fascinating to see Moyse Ferreira analyze images in magazines of war time and how they connect to a parallel discourse of bodily violence with what was going on at that time. I would say that, yes, fashion can express or accompany the challenges of society today and, of course, there are implications between fashion and the actual historical moment. But sometimes things are much more complicated. Regarding the pandemic, as I was thinking the other day, we have so many things to process, because we have been living through these years going forward and forward, but all the changes that really affected us will manifest themselves sooner or later, even if not immediately. Sometimes, when you have to live in the present, you have to face the situation quickly and respond almost immediately to it, and the response is always a survival response of fighting back. We are humans, we are not passive, so we have resistance and so draw on that drive to fight back to transform things. I think there was, on the one hand, a great deal of discussion, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, about how people started to become more aware of social issues and climate change. There was a whole discussion about that: people wanted to dress in a simpler way because they were not going out, they were meeting on Zoom, etc. In addition, some market research showed how people invested in vintage. The vintage market is huge. Through the pandemic, it developed even more, and now people want to invest in

certain pieces. On the other hand, there were a lot of alarming discussions about the production processes and the supply chain, and I am still not sure what the impact is. There is also the war, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, so I think it's kind of an open question: there is always an implication. Fashion is culture, it shapes culture, it is a multibillion manufacturing industry, but it is also a very powerful, symbolic force. That's why fashion is much more complicated. It is an industry, like many other industries we have, but it affects the body very much, and that makes it more difficult to classify. It could be very slippery but, at the same time, I think it's very, very important to study various phenomena and see how they can be related to understand culture and the popular culture of our time. The other day I was browsing shows and saw, for example, that the way luxury brands present *couture* has changed so that it doesn't look so exclusive anymore. I am talking about marketing strategies that also changed with the pandemic. There is, after a moment of darkness, a will to go back to life, and this sense of desire is present in fashion, but also in cinema [and in other artistic realms], for example. So, there is a sense that it is part of our being human, to enjoy and to have a sense of going back to life. I also refer to popular culture and to communities: people want to share certain experiences and enjoy the fact that other people like that particular item. I think that high level brands have been changing. A sign of this is how they are bringing their collections to places and involving the community, creating an experience for all of us. Even watching fashion shows is available to anyone, is not as elitist as it once was.

CT

Otto von Busch writes in his essay "Bullying and barren fashion: An affective perspective on the psychopolitics of dress," that we not only *know* fashion, but we also *feel* it. Fashion plays on emotions and, quoting him, it "forces us to appear and thus be judged by others." He also suggests that we have two possibilities. On the one hand, we can choose what he called a "barren fashion": in this case we comply with a low risk dress code of boring sameness, choosing conformity over freedom and eventually not exposing ourselves to peers' judgments and discriminations. On the other hand, we have "vital fashion," which is described as a courageous choice to take the risk of dressing differently and with passion, following our personal style more than obeying unwritten social rules, leaving our comfort zone to step into something new. Considering also the historically unstable relationship between feminism and fashion, I would like to ask: how, in your opinion, can the feminist movement include dress within its cause and adopt it as a means for inclusion rather than exclusion?

EP

Yes, dress became part of the struggle: in fact, bullying through dress in high school is something that happens all too often, depending on the kind of school, if it is more restricted or not. I also think bullying happens everywhere, in Italy too. It's not a phenomenon restricted to the US. So, dress is truly an important ornament, and for this reason it is a big part of the struggle concerning identity. I'm sure there are certain things that need to be respected, because, if not, it would lead to suffering, mostly for young people, as there also exists an anxiety that concerns a struggle for teenage identity. Certain things that are not important for one age group, are important for teenagers, who are searching for their identities. Sometimes they have to experiment, probably more than other people, because things are not always so clear; and other times they just want to belong to a group. Belonging to a group means to conform to or to fit in with the image of that particular group and in contrast to groups that dress differently. It is a very difficult process on a cultural and aesthetic level. From the point of view of gender, if you don't fit in the categories that are offered in that particular environment, it is especially hard. This struggle is also well explained by Georg Simmel, who describes the fact that, on the one hand, one wishes to belong to a group, a community, that also gives one a sense of identity; on the other hand, each one of us is different, any person cannot just repeat what other group members do (as we are unique individuals), and this fits the desire to distinguish yourself from the group, erasing your uniqueness. These psychological processes are very strong, important and difficult during the teenage years; and fashion, clothes, ornamentations (and everything that has to do with the body, including tattooing and piercing) are part of these processes. There also must be an awareness from educators and families to understand without judging those desires, even if, of course, what their children and students do is not the way they would do it.

CT

Your essay "Fashion and race: Translating cultures in Dapper Dan and Gucci" is the last contribution in the *Companion*. Here you analyze what happens when an Italian brand like Gucci meets an African American designer. In the very first paragraph of your essay you write about the word "translation" and its roots. As you explain, the term suggests a movement, a sort of process that is especially important for those identities that have been excluded from the main narrative of history. Among the many minorities that have always been marginalized from cultural representation, we find the LGBTQ+ community. In particular, the dialogue around homosexuality seems to be fairly accepted, but we still face many resistances in addressing transgender identity. Besides, as you named the word "translation," I would like to note that we can derive from the very same root also the word "transgender" – and, exactly as in translation,

we are faced with a process of change. How can transgender people be better represented by dress to express their identity? And how would you say that Gucci (but also other fashion brands) created greater freedom to cross-dress?

EP

The Gucci/Dapper Dan encounter and collaboration is particularly important especially from the perspective of race and the notion of race in the context of fashion studies. First, Dapper Dan was able to turn the tables on the fashion industry. Once accused and punished for "copying" luxury brands for which his flourishing Harlem atelier was closed and his expensive machines taken away, he was in the position to accuse the Gucci brand of having copied his 1990s coat design for Dianne Dixon without acknowledging him. In fact, I chose to use "translation of cultures" in order to understand the complexity of these mechanisms in fashion that sometime are simplistically called "cultural appropriation." In addition, it is important to consider who are the players and what is their position in society and in the industry. Since this episode, for which Gucci apologized publicly and has initiated several initiatives on inclusiveness and diversity, Dapper Dan and his business have found a new Renaissance. A common concern for luxury brands and not only Gucci, of course, is the inclusion of race and the creation of programs, in the US, for instance, of scholarships for African American designers, or initiatives on sustainability, and others dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community. The question of inclusion in terms of gender, class and race are part of our culture and strongly involve younger generations. This is something that the fashion industry as a whole knows well and these are issues along with climate change that are going to shape our future. Hopefully structures are also going to change. We are witnessing a real demand for change in terms of inclusion, in terms of work and conditions of work. There is an opportunity to develop ideas that would really create an impact in production and in the supply chain. About women, also, there are many things ahead of us that would be, in one way or another, part of this conversation (such as the right to a legal abortion) and they actually are part of it even in the fashion industry, at different levels. We cannot avoid this kind of talk and now we will see the results, we are witnessing a constant drive to address these issues. Plus, different models, which were created by the people, are responding to industry. This is a constant dialogue that we have in education, in studying, criticizing and writing. But what I think it is important is that all these issues are very much part of the global fashion conversation. Again, I would like to go back to the idea of the popular, of community involvement and participation and democracy if you wish, which is also perhaps connected to *Popular Inquiry*. This notion of the "popular" and how fashion could respond to cultures, different subjectivities, involves all these domains.

CT

Amazing, thank you so much Prof. Paulicelli. That was very useful. I find what you have been saying to be very inspirational and insightful. I also think that a lot of other themes can be linked to many of the concepts that came out today and are worth analyzing in greater detail. Maybe the next time it would be very profitable to think about them with you. Thank you again.

[1] Instagram Post of Pier Paolo Piccioli, Creative Director of Valentino, September 22, 2022. "Un uomo di sinistra."

WOMEN, ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY: INTERVIEW WITH FEDERICA MUZZARELLI

Anna Preti and Francesca Todeschini

Anna Preti and Francesca Todeschini (AP and FT)

Today feminism holds a social relevance that was unknown to earlier epochs, and manifests it through the proliferation of a multitude of discourses that animate the contemporary theoretical debates. Taking this into account, is it possible to offer a different reading of the self-representation practices realized by women artists at the turn of the 20th century, so often unrecognized or relegated to a peripheral realm into the art world? What are, for you, the specificities of those years' artistic research? In what way this new way of making art by women was able to find a redemption from the traditional paradigm?

Federica Muzzarelli (FM)

Starting from the second half of the 19th century, the practices of self-representation realized by women, such as the photographic self-portrait and the diary writing, have been lessened in their meaning because they have been considered by the institutional cultural system as amateur activities. The idea that women were able to confront themselves only with the dimensions of the private and individual has provided an alibi for their exclusion from the domain of public confrontation. In reality, the marginality to which women, especially female artists, have been relegated, has paradoxically enabled them to find ample spaces of original and exceptional expression. Spaces where they could confront themselves with the experimentation of ideas and imaginaries that, until then, had been considered unrelated to the common widespread themes: the direct testimony of the self, the inquiry into one's own identity, the introspective storytelling, the research of one's own definition of gender, the celebration of one's obsessions and desires. As bell hooks has taught us, that forced marginality has progressively become a precious centrality when 20th-century's art and aesthetics have simultaneously rediscovered the centrality of

body, experience, identity and behavior. This rediscovery – which, as different philosophical traditions show, is something like a sea that bursts into 20th-century culture – arrived to have a mass impact in art only with the Neo avant-gardes of the second post-war period, in particular, with the experiences connected to Body Art in the 1960s and 1970s. It is absolutely important to notice that this was also the season when women started to become protagonists – and maybe they actually even determined themselves as the best commentators of these new instances in which art and life, aesthetic and existential experiences, constituted a sort of unsolvable twist. Of course, there are historical, political and social reasons that enabled this revolution, but, in fact, the centrality of the body was one of its characterizing elements. Therefore, today we are allowed to re-read the "private" exercises that women with artistic ambitions put in place already starting from the end of the 19th century – naturally turning for their urgencies to writing and photography – not only as interesting recoveries, but rather as forward-thinking and transgressive intuitions, and we are also allowed to connect them with the updates that explicitly feminist practices have further intensified and developed. In all of this, writing and photography are been redeemed from their purest conceptuality, namely that of being identification and performative tools way before the Duchampian revolution made such hypothesis even just conceivable.

AP and FT

In the Introduction to your book *Il corpo e l'azione. Donne e fotografia tra Otto e Novecento* you mention the marked affinity between writing and photography as tools for women's self-representation and self-inquiry into identity. Similarly, in a recent text published on the *Financial Times* entitled "I Have a Lot of Questions for You," Elena Ferrante and Marina Abramović have questioned each other on the existing similarities between writing and performance art. There is a passage within this literary exchange that seems particularly significant to us in respect to the themes you deal with in your research. As Ferrante writes: "In *The Artist Is Present*, even more forcefully than elsewhere, you make of Marina Abramović – the artist – the work itself. And you offer that work to the public to contemplate no differently, in my view, from the way a carefully wrought text is offered to readers. I mean that the body, too, with its many experiences, is raw material, just as much as stone, wood, paper, ink. What's important is how that material is worked poetically, how we invent it, how we become its author. The rest is the industry of greatness, marketing, success, celebrity, biographical and autobiographical detail: things that are not at all irrelevant, and which we can enjoy or – with a self-control that I can assure you isn't easy – relinquish." It is certainly interesting to think about Elena Ferrante and Marina Abramović as prosecutors of a "feminine" art and literature, understanding these terms as referred to those practices capable of putting into action radical political mechanisms and subversion of the traditional codes of artistic production. In continuity with writers and artists of the

past, in Ferrante's literary work we find the centrality of the female gaze on the world, as well as in Abramović is the connection between art and life and the centrality of the body in action. What emerges from the words of Ferrante reported here are the themes – common to both feminist writing and performing arts – of the authorship of oneself, of personal experience as a starting point for any type of artistic practice, and of the body (which is shown in images or words) as a meaning-bearing universe. In the same way, writing and photography have crossed, sharing most of these themes, and already between the 19th and the 20th centuries artists and writers have experienced their possibilities and affinities. What do you think those affinities meant for women artists in the past?

FM

For some time – and hopefully soon *as well,* in a new monograph – I have been working on "mixed" forms of creativity between photography and writing, on how these forms have become characteristic of a certain presence of women in art within a feminist perspective, and even more so of resistance. I would like to recall here the contribution given by Carla Lonzi's reflection, when she defined the feminist practice of self-awareness as the recovery of a way of thinking, talking and acting unbound from habits based on rationalization, logics and coherence, in favor of existential and aesthetic necessities that passed through the manifestation of the body. In a recent and very interesting work, which starts from Lonzi's diary, Carla Subrizi recalls the words of this famous Italian feminist scholar, when speaking of the free and irrational writing that is typical of the diary form: "[…] writing becomes a necessary tool in its original function to secure and stop thoughts […]. It is no longer a writing connected to exceptional needs and talent." For Carla Lonzi, the art of women had to re-establish its paradigms and restart from writing and self-consciousness. It is perhaps superfluous here to mention the reasons why, for female artists, photography appeared – alongside writing – as perhaps the most immediate and spontaneous tool to respond to the expressive need of women, confronting with identity, with the body, and with the presence in the world (digital developments have made this perspective wide and globally understood). This is why I find the activities of women, who use photography and writing, extremely interesting, as real activities of self-aware identity re-appropriation and as revolutionary practices of resistance and diversity. I am thinking of historical cases such as the scrapbooks of the Victorian-era aristocrats, or the Dadaist ones by Hannah Höch, the autobiographical-psychoanalytical work of Claude Cahun, the poetic and photographic experiments of Anne Brigman, up to the contributions between family album, diary and pamphlets offered by Carla Accardi, Francesca Woodman and Sophie Calle, or, even more recently, the multimedia projects of Alba Zari.