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EDITORIAL

Max Ryynänen

Dear reader, This issue does not have a theme, so the articles that we publish here are very different from each other. I think we can still say that all the fresh ones (one of the texts is a republication) touch upon really contemporary issues.

Paolo Euron's "Half-Naked Bodies in Anime and Western Culture Industry: Intercultural Remarks on the Aesthetics of Transgression" discusses naked bodies in film from a global intercultural perspective. Yvonne Förster's "Emergent Technologies between Phenomenology and Poststructuralism: A Methodological Question" aims at presenting phenomenology's special nature as a key for understanding today's technology (and so contemporary culture). Michaela Pašteková's "Dance Movement as the Saviour of the Routine in the Pandemic Era" reflects on our current pandemic era, and the way everyday routines (and the way we record and distribute them) now have an impact on dance and choreographic thinking.

This issue's republication of a 'classic' is about Singapore and its modernism/kitsch. C.J.W.-L. Wee's "Bland Modernity, Kitsch and Reflections on the Aesthetic Production in Singapore" was originally published with the title "Kitsch & the Singapore Modern" in the Singapore-based art journal *Focas* (2002, No 3, Jan; we are thankful to Lucy Davis for connecting us to this text).Doryan Batycka's review of Mike Watson's book *Can the Left Meme?* finishes the issue. "The Work of Art in the Age of Memetic Reproduction" is as much about our era as our main articles.
And what's next? Guest editor Paco Barragan is working on a special issue with the title *Storytelling and Its Narrative Modes: Conspiracy Theories, Fake News, Post-Truths, New World Orders, Negationist Theories and Infodemics*. This will be Vol 8 and it will be published summer 2021.

EMERGENT TECHNOLOGIES BETWEEN PHENOMENOLOGY AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM: A METHODOLOGICAL QUESTION

Yvonne Förster

Abstract
This essay aims at understanding the importance of phenomenological method in questions of new technology and changing life-worlds. Emergent intelligent technology fundamentally change the way we live, perceive and act in the world. This fundamental shift includes a blurring of categories such as natural/artificial, biology/technology, real/virtual to name just a few. This calls forth philosophical reflection. Posthumanist theories as well as media theories, which have their roots in poststructuralism, propose a new materialism of the embodied and embedded subject, that evolves through and with its environment. The differences between phenomenology and poststructuralism become obvious when one works on the impact of technology on human self-understanding: There is an appeal to poststructuralist thinking because it encompasses complex and dynamic systems and relations. I will argue that in these accounts the role of experience lacks systematic reflection. The question of how we experience the profound changes in our perception, construction of knowledge and self-understanding is rarely addressed. Phenomenology as method has the clear advantage of having developed a methodological and systematic approach to qualitative experiences, which is central to a philosophical account of human-machine relations. In this essay I will address the methodological question along the lines of Maurice Merleau-Pontys's thinking and contemporary approaches.

Keywords
Technology, Phenomenology, Method, Experience, Technogenesis

1. Introduction

This essay aims at understanding the importance of phenomenological method in questions of new technology and changing life-worlds. Emergent intelligent technology fundamentally changes the way we live, perceive and act in the world. Major parts of global economy and systems of transport will soon be governed by automated systems. Humans interact increasingly with intelligent robots and connect their bodies through technological devices with the Internet of Things. This fundamental shift includes a blurring of categories such as natural/artificial, biology/technology, real/virtual to name just a few. Such a blurring of lines calls forth philosophical reflection. Current theories in media philosophy and philosophy of technology make use of poststructuralist theories. When Katherine Hayles (2012) speaks of the technogenesis of consciousness or Bernard Stiegler's epiphylogenesis (1998), the evolution of humans through technology, they describe processes beyond human experience and are related with accounts of

relational or process ontology (e. g. Karen Barad 2007). Those theories describe being as a temporal and relational becoming/process.

The philosophical movements of postmodern and posthuman thought are essentially post-metaphysical in the sense that they question anthropocentrism and the categories established in the course of humanist thinking. In this line of thought, a new materialism of the embodied and embedded subject, that evolves through and with its environment has become central. This subject is not the strong Cartesian ego cogito, but a weak and temporal node of relations and affects. Brian Massumi (2002) goes as far as to establish a theory of movement independent from what is moving. The blind spot of such accounts is experience. If the subject is conceptualized as relational, cognitive and intentional agency is also decentralized. The notion of experience is thus marginalized.

Here I challenge the absence of a conceptual framing of experience in the above-mentioned theories. The working hypothesis is that the strong presence of poststructuralist thinking in posthuman philosophy and philosophy of technology needs to be complemented by a phenomenological account of novel experiences in technological life-worlds. Such an account is important to establish new constructive and creative relations with technological possibilities as well as for the constitution of moral standards and ethical guidelines for intelligent technologies.

The differences between phenomenology and poststructuralism becomes obvious when one works on the impact of technology on human self-understanding: There is an appeal to poststructuralist thinking because it encompasses complex and dynamic systems and relations. In contrast to that phenomenology seems too preoccupied with the subject. Nevertheless, this tradition has the clear advantage of having developed a methodological and systematic approach to qualitative experiences, which is central to a philosophical account of human-machine relations.

In a first step, I will give an overview of how I think technology impacts on human self-understanding: This becomes visible in cultural narratives and how the embodied human subject is imagined, narrated or pictured. In the second part of this essay, I will develop an understanding of the way contemporary philosophy of media and technology deals with human-machine relations. Most of these accounts are strongly influenced by poststructuralism, such as the theories of Brian Massumi, Katherine Hayles, Bernard Stiegler or Mark B.N. Hansen. My aim is to understand why this method has become so predominant even though most of the authors are also trained in phenomenology and often reference to Edmund Husserl, Merleau-Ponty while the concept of qualitative and bodily experience is omitted.

I will argue that in these accounts the role of experience lacks systematic reflection. The question of how we experience the profound changes in our perception, construction of knowledge and self-understanding is rarely addressed. Most of the theories no matter from what field agree

on one thing: There is no such thing as a strong subject. This has not only been shown by neuroscience but also in philosophy the notion of a strong unified subject has become dubitable probably long before Foucault's dictum of "man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea".[1] It might have started already in early human history with the evolution of cognitive capacities through tools, symbols and oral narratives.[2] With the advent of new technologies, the hybridization of humans and technology is taken to a whole new level. The central question is: How can phenomenology account for the qualitative changes in our experience of technological life-worlds? I will conclude my considerations with some thoughts on Merleau-Ponty's late writings, especially his notion of the *flesh*, as a possible framework that integrates the poststructuralist insights and phenomenological analysis of experiences in and with technology.

2. Human self-understanding challenged by technology

My aim is to understand how emergent technologies challenge human self-understanding: More precisely the impact of current reductionist views of human cognition growing out of neuroscience and their application in predictive smart technologies. Neuroscience strongly promotes the view that the human subject essentially is a cerebral subject.[3] Despite a growing interest in more holistic accounts and the importance of embodiment as it is promoted through contemplative neuroscience and phenomenology (Evan Thompson 2014, Thomas Fuchs 2009, Antonio Damasio 2006), the view of the brain as necessary and sufficient condition for any mental act prevails. Examining the view critically, Vidal and Ortega (2017) show in *Making of the Cerebral Subject* that people rarely think of themselves as their "brains", even though this reduction of psychological processes to the neural processes is heavily propagated by neuroscience as well as neurophilosophy. Patricia Churchland (2013) even named her recent book *The Self as Brain*. She argues that:

> Without the living neurons that embody information, memories perish, personalities change, skills vanish, motives dissipate. Is there anything left of me to exist in an afterlife? What would such a thing be? Something without memories or personality, without motives and feelings? That is no kind of me. And maybe that is really okay after all.[4]

A functional brain is a necessary condition for being a person, but that does not mean that it is also a sufficient condition. While there is a strong brain-centered rhetoric present in science and its popularizations through media and cinema, people still think of themselves as beings with an individual body, history, psychology plus a brain. This keeps on being the status quo despite of various predominant approaches in neuroscience and psychiatry of the past and the present to treat patients as brains. One of the common credos of psychiatry and in major mental health agencies today according to Vidal and Ortega is: "there are no mental diseases, only brain diseases."[5]

The authors cite a study by Emily Martin from 2009 stating that patients nevertheless have problems to adapt a view of themselves as "brains" because this view cannot accommodate personal experiences and narratives of how it is like to be a person with this or that condition. In short: Neural a-typicalities are never simply experienced as that. For once, nobody actually experiences ones' own neural processes. And second: Any given condition is experienced mentally and thus integrated in a holistic framework of embodied psychological, intersubjective, social and autobiographical experiences. None of those can be accounted for in terms of neural processes.

The tension between the neuroscientific reduction of the individual to neural processes and the self-understanding of people as being embodied social beings with mental states is paradigmatic. One might say it is the contemporary *conditio humana*. As such it should be questioned from a philosophical perspective.[6] Within the individual this tension is not as problematic as on a social level: Neuroscience with its aura of novelty and cutting-edge imaging techniques remains a story of success, even though imaging techniques create much less new and relevant knowledge as their successes in funding suggest (comp. Vidal, Ortega 2017). Nevertheless, the idea of a central organ that can be manipulated to create better humans, enhanced cognitive performances or novel perceptions is very tempting, which explains that everything using the label *neuro-* is a potential academic and economic success.

Neuroscientific imaging techniques and the fascination they trigger are the entrance point to the topic of technology. Imaging techniques do not present images of brain processes, but create pictorial representations of theories about neural processes.[7] They act as visualizations of more or less adequate theories and models of neural activity. It is the fascination with the possibility to hack our brains that is enforced through neuroscience's liaison with imaging techniques. This successful relation feeds back into the creation of artificial intelligence and smart devices. The two main questions for me are: First: What image of human cognition, emotion and purpose gets integrated in technology? And second: How do we imagine human-machine relations and societies of the future? This second question is directed toward digital art and cinematic narratives.[8] These two fields are linked by one encompassing narrative: That is the idea that intelligent technology will eventually transcend the human race and either in a merger with human intelligence or all on its own evolve to new level of existence. This is what computer scientist and futurist at Google Ray Kurzweil calls the singularity (Kurzweil 2006), a historical point zero in which humans and technology merge. Whether this is a real possibility or not lies beyond the scope of my research. I aim at an understanding of how technology is experienced. Cinema is one strong cultural force which displays human concerns, hopes and self-projections into future societies. I take these images and narratives as a source to evaluate how the relation with technology is imagined and what concepts of human and artificial intelligence are at stake here (comp. Förster 2016). An interpretation of

contemporary utopian and dystopian narratives will give a clue about what to for in current developments in technology. What images and normative components concerning human behavior are incorporated in the technologies now? This question is very different from what is commonly asked: It is not about the anxiety of being outrun by technology and neither is it about technology becoming self-conscious. It is necessary to reveal the human factor in artificial intelligence: Beyond the dystopian narratives lies a fascination for an enhanced and more efficient human intelligence that is related to the reductive notion of the malleable cerebral subject in neuroscience. To uncover these reductive features in existing and emergent technologies a phenomenological approach is needed to look beyond the surface of profit-maximization and smooth user experiences.

3. Poststructuralism vs. Phenomenology

Coming back to the initial methodological question of poststructuralist inspired theories vs. phenomenological ones: It does not make much sense to put poststructuralist accounts into opposition to phenomenological ones, also given that poststructuralism in large parts is rooted in phenomenology. Still, these two approaches open up two different lines of critique, that from outside seem in part mutually exclusive. Theories coming from the poststructuralist tradition emphasize the problematic features of the concept of the subject and especially the subject in Humanism, while phenomenology is all about the subject as the locus of qualitative experience. Humanism, anthropocentric thinking as well as the *anthropocene* as a historical result have become the target of critique in poststructuralism and postmodern thought. The anthropocene is a geochronological concept describing an epoch in which human activity predominantly influences developments in nature and society. What might have appeared as a positive outlook in enlightenment and within the narrative of progress in modernity now figures as destructive force: Humans are responsible for exploitation and destruction in the name of profit. Furthermore, the processes triggered by human activity are far too complex and exceed human capacities to regulate them. Poststructuralist critique targets the idea that human beings are more special than any other life-forms because of their rationality and moral sentiments. Also, the interpretation of everything from a human perspective has become problematic in the light of climate change and the destruction of whole ecosystems. Without going into detail here, one can say that current theories share the conviction that anthropocentrism needs to be replaced by an ecological account of humans being embedded within a complex system of relations and agencies.

This description of environments as complex nets of relations and agencies has both an ontological and a phenomenological claim. In terms of ontology, most theories refer to Merleau-Ponty, Alfred North Whitehead, Gilles Deleuze and Gilbert Simondon. In short, the aim is to develop an understanding of reality as a complex and open system of relations in constant

development. For the problem of human-machine relations that means first and foremost that there is no essential difference between human and technological agency. Jennifer Gabrys for example creates the notion of the ambividual, that can be both a human or artificial agent:

> Rather, the citizen works through processes that might generate ambividuals: ambient and malleable urban operators that are expressions of computer environments. While the ambividual is not an expression of a cognitive subject, it does articulate the distribution of nodes of action within the smart city. [...] I would suggest that who or what counts as an ambividual is not restricted to a human actor in the smart city, since the articulation of actions and responses occurs across human-to-machine and machine-to-machine fields of action.[9]

In an ontological perspective those theories replace essence with relations to be the fundamental feature of reality. Most current positions in philosophy of technology represent a critique of the modern subject, the strong subject that acts according to reason and is able to shape the world by its own agency. Human agency has proven to be a dangerous construct that erects dualistic abysses, borders between humans and all other species and destroys habitats on a planetary scale. Donna Haraway pronounced the slogan of this post-anthropocene era: "Make kin, not babies!"[10] Theories that propose relational ontologies (comp. Haraway (2016), Hansen (2012), Hörl (2008), Massumi (2012)) do so with a critical agenda: They aim at an understanding of being that encompasses different agencies and perception. This means that both the classic notion of an object (as tool or technological object) as well as the transcendental subject, as the condition of possibility of perception and hence of the object become devalued and in an ontological sense secondary, Mark B.N. Hansen writes:

> We must reconceptualise the coupling of human and technics beyond the figure of the 'technical object.' In the wake of computational technologies that distribute sensibility beyond consciousness, the correlation between human-implicating individuation and technics has moved beyond what we might think of as its objective stage [...] and has entered a properly processual stage in which technics directly intensifies sub-perceptual dimensions of human experience. [...] The technical object had to make way for technical processes that operate through far more complex imbrications with human activity.[11]

The development of computational technologies according to Gabrys and Hansen has produced a situation in which human agency and perception stands in no relation of ontological primacy to technological objects. Thus, the focus lies on relations and processes. This ontological framing is in line with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. His whole thinking is characterized by the idea, that the categories of subject and object only arise from a primordial embeddedness within an environment:

> We have the experience of an I, not in the sense of an absolute subjectivity, but rather one that is indivisibly unmade and remade by the course of time. The unity of the subject or of the object is not a real unity, but a presumptive unity within the horizon of experience; we must discover, beneath the idea of the subject and the idea of the object, the fact of my subjectivity and the object in the nascent state, the primordial layer where ideas and things are born.[12]

In a genetic perspective, this emphasis on becoming gives rise to theories that focus on the intertwining of cognitive abilities and contact with the world, such as theories of extended and enactive cognition, embodiment.[13] Concerning the influence of technology one might think of Katherine Hayles (2012) concept of the *technogenesis* of human mind or Bernard Stiegler's *epiphylogenesis* (1998) of human cognition. Those theories build on the fact that human perception is increasingly engineered through non-human, computational processes. Stiegler would extend this idea and say that human cognitive history was already from early on shaped by non-human, that is technological means. For the impact of computer technology, that does not only mean that computational processes process large amounts of information quicker than the human mind. First and foremost, it means that the contents of perception become selected by predictive and preemptive machine agency. Self-learning algorithms are used to gather data and predict human behavior up to a level that no human intelligence could ever do. Searching through google for example: These days everyone knows that slightly creepy feeling of having searched for a certain item online and having instantaneously popping up adds for that very same item on every social network used soon thereafter. This is a very transparent form of predictive computing. The depth of this phenomenon is much larger than we expect, because basically everything in the virtual realm is based on prediction.

With the internet of things (IoT), the virtual penetrates the real world in much deeper sense than we expect. Literally every object will be connected and equipped with sensing devices, life-worlds become intelligent infrastructures, which is already at play with the artificial intelligences Alexa, Siri or Bixby, who can register every move we make and every word we speak. All that data can be used to generate outputs tailored specifically to each user. The experience to live in a Facebook bubble with a completely personalized feed can in principle become the predominant form of human life. The Netflix production *Black Mirror* repeats this topic in its dystopian versions over and over again. In season 4, Jodie Foster directed the episode 2, *ArkAngel*, in which a little girl gets injected with an implant that connects her mind to a surveillance device that can locate the child at any time, observe her vital data, project what she is seeing and erase possibly traumatic content from her vision. This means her perceptual world is engineered nearly entirely by computational technology and the parental fear for her life. This episode shows in a very drastic

way how far people are willing to go for the sake of safety, be it for themselves or for their children. It is utterly painful to watch and symptomatic of how little understanding of the dynamics of real life we are willing to integrate in machines that should serve efficiency and safety purposes. This claustrophobic scenario of complete observation ends in a violent fight between the teenage daughter and her overly anxious mother. Even if that scenario is fictive, the consequences of 9/11 already made it pretty clear how much preemptive oppression we are ready to put up with for the sake of very abstract safety. The predominance of dystopia in popculture these days is only one symptom of problematic developments in technology. There is also an increasing awareness in politics that emergent intelligent technology will need to be subjected to an AI ethics as well as the consequences for human labor need to be reflected, since a major wave of displacement of human work is already taking up speed.[14] In the last section of this paper, I will argue for the need of a phenomenological perspective on technology for the sake of a productive critical stance.

4. Making the case for a phenomenology of emergent technologies

As outlined before the poststructuralist view with regard to technology implies a critique of the essentialization of the subject-object dichotomy. Also, there is a more or less implicit critique of humanism, which points in the same anti-dualistic, anti-essentialist direction. The main idea is that we need to think beyond humanism toward a more inclusive concept of perception, sentience and agency. Even though I share this position wholeheartedly there is a shortcoming with regard to actual human-machine-relations. To understand the impact of new technologies on perception, cognition, everyday life, and societies we need to employ a phenomenological perspective. As mentioned earlier, phenomenology implies a different critical agenda than poststructuralism: Positions with focus on phenomenological method will engage in an understanding of the experiences arising from human-machine-relation. Such theoretical frameworks pay attention to the lived body, the variations in the perceptual setup and the intentionalities involved in human-machine-entanglements. In the view of poststructuralists this means falling back into essentialist or humanist thinking. They would diagnose this as melancholy for the subject - this phrase comes up in many discussions in my experience.

The following questions need to be tackled: 1. What do we gain by adopting a phenomenological approach? 2. What notions of experience and being human are at stake? 3. Is there a phenomenological alternative to ecological concepts drawn from poststructuralism? I will give a rough sketch of what I think could be viable alternative or rather complementary approach to predominant theories on technology currently in use.

4.1 What do we gain from a phenomenological approach?

The gain to be expected from a phenomenological approach is pretty straight forward: A phenomenology of human-machine-relations will give a much more fine-grained description of how we experience technology. This also opens up a field of possible comparisons and differentiation between a range of human-machine encounters or even mergers (in the case of body-invasive technology). To accomplish such an analysis of the relations in question it is not necessary to define the type of intelligence at stake for example in robots or AI in general. Neither is a transcendental theory of the subject necessary. To give an example I give a longer quote from Mark Coeckelbergh about a phenomenology of human-robot relations:

> A phenomenological analysis of human-robot relations, then, must distinguish between various kinds of human-robot relations and must do so on the basis of appearance, that is, the appearance of the robot as experienced by the human. Thus, for the purpose of understanding human-robot relations we must distinguish between male and female robots, humanoid robots and pet robots (dogs, cats, etc.), 'friendly' robots versus 'neutral' or 'unfriendly' ones, etc. Regardless of what the robot 'really' is (if it makes sense to say this at all), in each case, the nature of the human- robot relation will differ, depending on appearance. [...] These hypotheses are not trivial in the light of a philosophical tradition that attaches much importance to ontological difference. They urge philosophers to turn away from questions such as 'When does a robot have consciousness?' (which concerns the 'mind' of the robot) and to take an approach that is in line with research on how humans perceive and treat new media and robots. [...] As argued above, what counts for understanding human-robot relations is not the relation the robots may have to the world, but their appearance to us, humans —that is, our relation to others and the world. [...] If this is true, the question whether or not humans are really or fundamentally different from non-humans such as animals or robots is much less relevant to how we should shape our relations with these non- humans than usually supposed.[15]

Such more fine-grained descriptions are by no means limited to the interaction with social robots. They can in general be done with any interactive device or environment. Such a research has at least two great benefits: It adds a more detailed perspective to the large-scale ecologies and relational ontologies and it has an inter- or transdisciplinary reach because research in technology design, urban planning or the health sector can use these results and integrate them in their own doing.

4.2 What notions of experience and being human are at stake?

The most common critique phenomenological positions are facing is a return to the subject and to an essentialism about human nature. Both can be rejected. First: a phenomenological analysis does not necessarily imply a transcendental subject. On the contrary, many phenomenological positions, especially theories of embodiment hold that subject and object only arise from mutual contact and are shaped by being embedded in an environment characterized by dynamic relations. Merleau-Ponty notes for example: "[...]the chiasm, the intentional 'encroachment' are irreducible, which leads to the rejecting of the notion of the subject, or to the defining of the subject as field, as a hierachized system of structures opened by an inaugural there is."[16] Such a notion of the subject lends itself perfectly to the current situation in which dualistic categories of real/virtual, organic/artificial or human/non-human are getting more and more fluid. A subject framed in these Merleau-Pontian terms is conceptualized as a having a plasticity similar to what neuroscientists define as neuroplasticity, meaning that the brain can adapt to altered situations or transfer function from damaged regions to other areas. That is to say that the process of becoming is what remains constant. As for the notion of the human similar things can be said. A phenomenological description is not about uncovering a human nature or essence. It is about understanding *how* being human is experienced. Coeckelbergh makes that very clear:

> Modern technology may be problematic. But changing and shaping matter and bodies—even if that always takes place within particular constraints and can never be fully controlled—is part of what human existence is about. The notion of human being is broad enough to include this technological aspect of human existence; whereas the notion of human nature suggests too much separation between nature and technology, between nature and culture, and between natural humans and the technological world.[17]

4.3 Is there a phenomenological alternative to ecological concepts drawn from poststructuralism?

As I have shown, poststructuralism-inspired conceptions of ecology do explicitly not distinguish between human and artificial agency or sensing and thus do not allow for a phenomenological analysis of what it means to live in technological environments. The concept of the *flesh* as presented in Merleau-Ponty can be an alternative here because it allows for deep intertwining of all kinds of sensing and agency while it contains a focus on experience. It expands the logic of perception beyond the perceiver. In Merleau-Ponty's view perception is only possible because the perceiver and the perceived share the fact of being perceivable, touchable and embodied. Just as things relate to their surroundings via their material form and perspective so does the perceiver. In the case of human subjects *being embodied* means two things: Being a lived body with

sentience and qualitative states as well as having a body that can be an object of perception just as stones, tables or cars.

Thanks to this double-sidedness of the body human perception is deeply intertwined with its environment. This environment is changing profoundly now. With digital technology being embedded within the *flesh* of the perceptual world, there is a new form of sensing present: the digital sense culture. This is why I use the term *digital flesh* instead of the Merleau-Pontian notion of *flesh* or *flesh of the world*. The concept of the *digital flesh* focuses on the continuity between human and artificial sensing and is meant to serve as a starting point of a more fine-grained perspective of the experiences involved. Merleau-Ponty holds that being in touch, being related and being embedded within an environment gives rise to higher order cognitive capacities like self-awareness. The concept of the *digital flesh* is meant to describe the depth of the experiential dimension in technological life-worlds. It is directed toward a distributed sense-culture which is transcends the dualism of biology and technology and merges digital and biological forms of perception, folds them into each other and creates spaces of new sensations. The concept of the *digital flesh* in my view contains the best of both theories: The poststructuralist insight of deep relatedness and constant becoming paired with a phenomenological description of the qualitative impact of changing life-worlds.

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[7] Förster, 2017.
[8] Also, in literature, there is a huge number of narratives dealing with technology and its impact on human self-understanding. For further reading see Hayles 2005 and Vidal, Ortega 2017, Chapter 4. There has been a notable shift from a preference for utopian plots in the Obama era to dystopian topics such as Margaret Atwoods The Handmaid's Tale (1985) after Trump's election. The sales of this book went up by 30% in 2016 according to an New York Times article. There it is stated that: "The sudden boom in popularity for classic dystopian novels, which began to pick up just after the election, seems to reflect an organic response from readers who are wary of the authoritarian overtones of some of Mr. Trump's rhetoric".
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DANCE MOVEMENT AS THE SAVIOUR OF THE ROUTINE IN THE PANDEMIC ERA

Michaela Pašteková

Abstract
Routines are originally considered to be the pillars of stability and security. They make us feel homey and in control, even if they can be boring and monotonous. Brushing teeth, dressing or cleaning are tasks that we perform almost automatically every day and in their repetitiveness we find a balance against the unpredictability of reality outside our homes. Usually, the routine is acceptable because it can be disrupted. Breaks are necessary to appreciate the ordinariness. But what if the ruptures are eliminated? What if everyday routine becomes a permanent condition? During social quarantine restrictions, the number of domestic videos in which people are doing various domestic chores in a performative way began to increase rapidly on social networks. Of course, the intertwining of dance and everydayness is not a new phenomenon. But what if it is no longer a dance that appropriates elements and gestures of everyday life, but it is everydayness that parasitizes on dance? In my study, I will try to demonstrate how the obligatory curfew deprives everyday habits of their original function and why this dance or performative movement can be one of the effective tools to bring the safety and familiarity back in the routine. I claim that so-called performative presence can make everydayness and ordinary bearable again.[1]

Keywords
Routine, Performative Presence, Dance, Pandemic, Everydayness, Rupture.

1. Introduction

Dance critic Gia Kourlas recently wrote in one of her texts for the New York Times that today we are all dancers.[2] The pandemic prescribes choreography of our movement and we must follow it - to be at least two meters apart, to avoid any touch, to walk along the edges of the sidewalks so that others can pass around us safely. „The pandemic has created something fascinating: a new way of moving, a new way of dancing in the streets.“[3] Shops, pharmacies and even banks use tape on the floors to specify the exact trajectories of our steps. They define boundaries, conduct the dynamics of our dance. The collective “choreography” is dispersed into hundreds of solo performances.

The COVID-19 pandemic is in many ways reminiscent of the plague pandemic described by Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. It also sectionalised the space, froze the movement. The plague, like coronavirus, required “multiple separations individualizing distributions, an organization in depth of surveillance and control, an intensification and a ramification of power.“[4] We can say that some state governments today live a bit of a “dream of a disciplined society”, a “utopia of the perfectly governed city”[5].

In recent months, cities have become Foucault's disciplinary spaces, in which gatherings are suppressed, where each individual has its own specific place, where we can supervise everyone's behaviour, punish but also appreciate it (in Slovakia, for example, through text messages from the Public Health Office). Our bodies have become "docile bodies" governed by restrictions, prohibitions, obligations. We are moving under the weight of much greater responsibility, physical contact can cause fatal consequences. Street "dancing" has become moral.

The pandemic restrictions not only changed the way we move in public space but also significantly affected the experience of our everyday life in the privacy of our homes and flats. Millions of people have been required to work from their home offices, students have commenced distance education, parents have become teachers. We celebrate the birthday with our relatives through Skype, we participate in conferences, concerts, or yoga classes through Zoom. Hundreds of thousands of us found themselves in lockdown, in obligatory quarantine, or have been placed under curfew. We have been in a new model of reality since the spring. And I think I'm right when I say that we also live in a new model of everyday life.

In my study, I will be particularly interested in how the pandemic affected daily habituality and routines that traditionally gives us a feeling of homey and control. Brushing teeth, dressing or cleaning are tasks that we perform almost automatically every day and, in their repetitiveness, we find a balance against the unpredictability of reality outside our homes. But what if everyday routine becomes a *permanent* condition?

My initial impulse to this topic was the identification of the rapid increase in the number of domestic videos on social networks in which people are doing daily chores in a performative way during the lockdown. They started to show the removal of dishes from the dishwasher or the dusting as choreographic sets. Of course, the aestheticization of the banal is not a new phenomenon in the age of Instagram or TikTok; however, forced domestic isolation has fundamentally contributed to its even more significant expansion. Why? Why do people need *to perform* everyday routine?

In the following parts, I will try to demonstrate how the lockdown deprives everyday habits of their original function and why the dance or performative movement can be one of the effective tools to bring the safety and familiarity back to the routine.

2. Routine and its Rupture

We cannot escape everyday life, writes the Austrian philosopher Konrad Paul Liessemann in his book *The Universe of Things*. According to him, life would not be possible to live if it were otherwise. We all are doomed to perform minor or bigger stereotypical tasks. Some of them are existentially necessary and almost unchanged (sleeping, eating), others, more variable, are

defined by our social or work being or by our hobbies (morning running, dinner with friends, work meetings, Twitter scrolling).[6] Each of us does something regularly every day.

Routines are originally considered to be the pillars of stability and security. They ”bring order and control to lives that may otherwise seem entirely determined by the contingencies of context.“[7] According to Liessmann, a sign of everyday life is that we almost do not perceive it and its function is not to make our life more interesting, but to allow us (in it) to exist. Philosopher and aesthetician Arto Haapala claims that routine, as an activity that is performed on a regular basis, gives us a sense of control, something we can count on. “Everydayness is identified with such qualities as comfort, ease, safety, and coziness,“[8] writes philosopher Kalle Puolakka with reference to Haapala and aesthetician Ossi Naukkarinen. They argue that “the ordinariness, routines, and familiarity which constitute the “everydayness” of our everyday lives are integral and fundamental aspects of human existence”[9]. Jessica J. Lee goes even further when she says that it is about these repetitive activities and habits that make a house into a *home*: “We do not necessarily clean the house for the sake of cleanliness itself, we clean for our own satisfaction and to make our homes more comforting for ourselves and others.“[10]

On the other side, a routine can be also boring, monotonous, and dull. Naukkarinen emphasizes that ordinariness “has both positive and negative, plus rather neutral, aspects to it, depending on how we see it“[11]. Also, Ben Highmore, a cultural studies scholar specializing in everyday studies and philosopher Yuriko Saito remind us that everydayness cannot be associated only with concepts such as homey or warmth. Its character is ambiguous. Highmore states that routine can be “simultaneously comforting and frustrating“[12]. Even according to Saito “most people experience everyday life sometimes as a dreary and monotonous routine and some other times as a familiar safe haven“[13]. At the time of the pandemic curfew, it is precisely this annoying dimension of routine that is intensifying, and the feeling of frequent repetitiousness accelerates. The routine becomes only dreary drudgery for us. We can no longer rely on its aura of reassurance and settlement. Why is it happening? Why does domestic isolation make the routine *a burden*?

Usually, the routine is acceptable because it can be disrupted. Breaks are necessary to appreciate the ordinariness. But what if these breaks are eliminated? I would like to list two possible ruptures of the daily routine:

The first is the interruption of the ordinary by some *extraordinary experience*. One that is the exact opposite of the routine and is, therefore, something unique, unrepeatable, unexpected, exciting - such as a vacation, a surprising visit or phone call, an accidental meeting, a celebration in a restaurant... We need a temporary departure from the everyday to love it, to appreciate it even more. At the end of the holiday, we are looking forward to lying back in our bed, watching Netflix during breakfast, and ironing our shirts while listening to podcasts in the evening.

The second disruption lies in the presence of a certain *conscious aesthetic dimension* in the routine which can make monotony colourful. We are not talking here about some external elements that infuse aesthetics into the routine but rather we see routine filled with inner aesthetic potential. I will explain this through the example of Yuriko Saito: "Many claim that there is an "art" to laundry hanging, such as creating an order by hanging similar kind of things or items of the same color together or by hanging objects in order of size. Furthermore, the reward of skillful laundry hanging is also aesthetic: the properly hung clothes retain their shape and carefully stretching clothes before hanging minimizes wrinkles. Finally, the fresh smell of sun-soaked clothes and linens cannot be duplicated by scented laundry detergent or softener."[14] This second distraction indicates that we normally see the aesthetics in everyday situations which make them bearable.

However, the problem is that pandemic eliminates both of these ruptures - the curfew significantly limits the possibilities of unusual experiences and also gradually weakens our ability to perceive the aesthetic potential of routine activities. The almost never-ending household isolation turns every possible extraordinary into the ordinary and aesthetic into the anaesthetic. It also creates routine from activities that we did not consider as a routine before. Originally sedative repetitiveness suddenly became a reminder of isolation and an uncertain future. Consequently, if we didn't want to completely reduce life to a set of anesthetized acts, we would have to start looking for ways to return the routine to its original function. Dance has become our new rupture.

3. Dance and Everydayness

During the lockdown, choreographer Ryan Heffington began holding live dance classes on Instagram called *SweatFest* in which, among other things, he also performs choreographic sequences that reflect domestic isolation – for example, so-called refrigerator run. Kristen Warner describes her experience with his lesson: "He invites us to run, in slow motion to the fridge, exaggeratedly opening the door using your whole body not just arms (…) we've gone (even if we didn't quite mean to) from exercising to dancing and a mundane, regular pandemic activity."[15] Sarah Wildma also reports on her impression of the class: "We're told to sweep the house ("get the corners, honey!") and wash the windows. We "write an email" and send it away."[16] Heffington, whose work has long disturbed the usual views on dance[17], this time disrupts the daily home exercises, which also converted to the routine in many households during a pandemic. It prevents us from practicing them on autopilot. At the same time Heffington shows how we can smash various domestic necessary rituals through dance and find something special and strange in this heightened banality of our everyday lives.

Of course, the intertwining of dance and everyday life is nothing new, it has already started in the 1960s. It was especially Steve Paxton, considered the founder of contact improvisation, who rebelled against the conventions of modern dance at that time by appropriating trivial activities such as eating, dressing, smiling into his choreography. He was mostly fascinated by human walking which he observed at the markets in New York early in the morning. Dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham also declared that any move can be a material for dancing, any part of the body can create movement and it is possible to dance in any space. In one of Paxton's most famous works, *Satisfyin' Lover* (1967), dozens of people walk the stage seemingly ordinary and aimlessly, sometimes stopping or sitting down. Everyone, of course, moves in a unique and precisely defined way. When Paxton was given the task of creating a one-minute dance at school, there is a story that he sat down on a bench and ate a sandwich for sixty seconds. For him a non-artistic act became a source of a deeper knowledge of his body and himself.

Paxton generally claimed that dance brought us back to our nature and did not perceive it as the contradiction of everyday life. What was a revolution sixty years ago is a well-established, anticipated, and even required component of contemporary dance today. But what happens when the parasitism proceeds oppositely? What if it is no longer a dance that appropriates elements and gestures of everyday life, but it is everydayness that parasitizes on dance? What are the consequences of contamination of everyday life by dance movements?

4. Performative Presence

Dance performance places the body in a state called performative presence. The performer's attention is at this moment completely focused on the action performed, he is fully aware of it. He also consciously experiences it considering a given space, time, and the audience. He is present in action *here* and *now*. "To experience the other and oneself as present means to experience them as embodied minds; thus, ordinary existence is experienced as extraordinary — as transformed and even transfigured,"[18] explains theoretician of theatre and performance Erika Fischer-Lichte. This means that when I commence my daily activities performatively, firstly, the autopilot will turn off. Suddenly, I find myself to be fully occupied with the routine. As a result, I begin to feel my body differently and also my perception of space and time in which the routine is performed, will change. "Dance refocuses our focusing mind on very basic existence, and time, space, gravity open up to creativity,"[19] writes Kourlas. Let's look at these changes in our relationship to the home environment in a little more detail:

1. Relation to the body: By placing the body in a performative presence, it will turn it in the subject and an ephemeral object at once. Through the dance movement, the body will determine that it is the performer of the routine. At the same time, converting the body into an object will

allow me to take an aesthetic distance from it and I will be able to isolate the routine from its practical context. As Saito states: "It is clear that the familiar and the ordinary can generate an aesthetic experience when we render them unfamiliar and extraordinary by isolating them from their everyday context and shedding a different light on them."[20] Due to this act, I know that I can achieve dominance over the routine as both, a performer and a choreographer, at once. I control the movement and I can recover (at least at that moment) the feeling of steadiness in the routine.

2. Relation to space: Dance movement allows me to experience space differently, to perceive its size or purpose otherwise. Maybe thanks to dancing, I'll start vacuuming the bedroom in an unusual direction. Space seems more flexible to the performative body, the contact with objects in it can suddenly be completely surprising and unexpected. In some places I may suddenly feel cold or warm, the touch with the surfaces of shelves or upholstered sofas can be rougher than it used to be. In a performative presence, familiar things begin to change their identities and functions. Considering the pandemic isolation, where the apartments sometimes resemble a prison, transforming them into performative scenes, we can free the space from the crampedness of the four walls. Kristen Warner and Clare Croft confirm this kind of feeling: "Spontaneity is possible because he [Heffington] assumes your home is ready to be a dance floor, and if you move with your household objects, the claustrophobic can be transformed into something expansive, strange."[21]

3. Relation to time: The standard routine clearly structures my day. I brush my teeth for three minutes, I have 20 minutes set aside for breakfast, the washing machine will wash for two hours, I have to respond to emails between 3 and 5 pm. Performativity can change the perception of time. It has the power to speed it up or slow it down, psychological time is about to dominate over objective time. Being *here* and *now* interrupts any relationship to the past or the future. As a performative body, I forget the depressing vision of endless pandemic custody. I focus on the presence and allow myself to break free from the linear experience of time.

4. Relation to the audience: A dance performance is a traditional live interaction of a performer and a spectator in the paradigm of *here* and *now*.[22] This relationship has, of course, a specific position in the case of domestic amateur performances. As the goal of these acts is not to create a work of art or an artistic performance, the recipient is essentially irrelevant in most cases. If the spectator enters this event at all, it happens mostly after the event is finished, via videos on social networks. So, there is no direct immediate response of the performer to the viewer. The interaction occurs in following likes or comments and does not retroactively affect the performative activity. I incline to the opinion of philosopher Kevin Melchionne who claims that this kind of performance "is not simply for the pleasure of the onlooker, but also for the homemaker, who takes pleasure in the process."[23] According to me, it is especially for the homemaker.

5. Conclusion

In my study, I tried to suggest that by appropriating some dance movement into our everydayness, we give our infinite pandemic habituality its necessary disruption and our routines can regain their function of the pillars of stability. Thanks to performative presence we will be aware of our bodies, we will replace anaesthetization with attentiveness. And paying attention is a prerequisite for any kind of aesthetic experience. Yuriko Saito confirms that "we can capture the aesthetic texture of ordinariness experienced as such, as long as we pay attention to what we are experiencing rather than acting on autopilot."[24]

If we look at the pandemic as a tool for the destruction of the familiarity and security of everyday life, dance can be considered as an instrument for the aesthetic deconstruction of the everyday. It will split its rational basis into a system of dance compositions, by which we suddenly look at the everyday differently, we enrich it with the necessary small rifts that make everyday bearable again. We weaken the practical function of routines at the expense of the aesthetic function. We make the invisible visible again. We experience the reenchantment of everydayness.

Turning pandemic housework bodies into dance housework bodies does not mean elevating a trivial activity to art but restoring everydayness and returning its tolerability and natural role to everyday life. Simultaneously, we will deprive our bodies of the required obedience for a while and give them a little aesthetic rebellion through dancing.

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[1] The study was created within the project KEGA no. 016PU-4/2018 entitled „Compendium Aestheticae: Edition of Teaching Texts for the Study Program of Aesthetics".
[2] Gia Kourlas, "How We Use Our Bodies to Navigate a Pandemic," *New York Times,* March 31, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/arts/dance/choreographing-the-street-coronavirus.html.
[3] Kourlas, "How We Use Our Bodies"
[4] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, Inc., 1977), 198.
[5] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 198.
[6] Kalle Puolakka, „Does Valery Gergiev have an everyday?" in *Paths From The Philosophy of Art to Everyday Aesthetics, eds*. Oiva Kuisma, Sanna Lehtinen and Harri Mäcklin (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Aesthetics, 2019), 136.
[7] Ben Highmore, „Homework. Routine, social aesthetics and the ambiguity of everyday life," *Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2004): 307, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950238042000201536.
[8] Puolakka, „Does Valery Gergiev," 136.
[9] Oiva Kuisma and Sanna Lehtinen and Harri Mäcklin, eds., *Paths From The Philosophy of Art to Everyday Aesthetics* (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Aesthetics, 2019), 16.
[10] Jessica J. Lee, "Home Life: Cultivating a Domestic Aesthetic," *Contemporary Aesthetics* VOLUME 8 (2010), https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=587&searchstr=Jessica+J.+Lee.
[11] Ossi Naukkarinen, "Everyday Aesthetics and Everyday Behavior," *Contemporary Aesthetics* VOLUME 15 (2017), https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=802&searchstr=Naukkarinen.
[12] Highmore, "Homework," 311.
[13] Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), Introduction, Kindle.
[14] Lee, "Home Life."
[15] Kristen Warner, and Clare Croft, "Dance Routines, Pandemic Routines: Ryan Heffington's "SWEATFEST"," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 1, 2020.
[16] Sarah Wildma, "I'm Dancing My Way Through the Pandemic With Ryan Heffington," *Vogue*, April 22, 2020, https://www.vogue.com/article/dancing-through-pandemic-ryan-heffington-sweat-fast.
[17] Ryan Heffington is best known for choreographing the music videos for Sia's Chandelier or creating the choreography for the science fiction series The OA.

[18] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics,* trans. Saskya Iris Jain (New York: Routledge, 2008), 99-100.
[19] Kourlas, "How We Use Our Bodies"
[20] Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar,* chap. 1.3.2.
[21] Warner, and Croft, "Dance Routines."
[22] Juraj Korec, "Telo v kontexte tanečnej performance," (PhD diss., Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, 2018), 23.
[23] Lee, "Home Life."
[24] Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar,* Introduction.

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HALF-NAKED BODIES IN ANIME AND WESTERN CULTURE INDUSTRY: INTERCULTURAL REMARKS ON THE AESTHETICS OF TRANSGRESION

Paolo Euron

Abstract
This article takes into consideration some popular entertainment products and the way they present the image of the feminine body, questioning the way the body is portrayed and how this portrayal affects the representation of beauty, desire, and sex. The intercultural perspective refers to the Eastern and Western culture, and considers the issues of prohibition and its inherent transgression. A movie offers models or life-styles consistent with the social system and it also presents these models and life-styles as pre-arranged transgressions of the given rules. In doing so, it prescribes a model of tolerated transgression rather than a prohibition. In this way, the culture industry prescribes the transgression of an empty prohibition as a strategy of individual emancipation.

As pointed out by Horkheimer and Adorno, "the culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises."[1] What the culture industry promises is frequently prescribed by its products in the form of life styles, attitudes and expectations. This article takes into consideration some popular entertainment products and the way they present the image of the feminine body. More than on the bodies in themselves, the focus is on the clothes and the way the body is displayed. Using specific movie and anime scenes as texts and analyzing the characterization, this article questions the way the body is portrayed and how this portrayal affects the representation of beauty, desire, and sex in popular shows, with reference to the Eastern and Western culture. These cases, considered in an intercultural perspective, will be interpreted by relating them to the issues of pornography, prohibition and its inherent transgression.

The representation of a nude body is not enough to qualify a movie as pornographic. For example, in Kim Ki-duk's *Birdcage Inn*[2] the main character, a young prostitute working in the inn, is often shown naked. Her attractive and sensuous body entices desire. At the same time, when it is presented it becomes remarkable and allows other meanings and experiences. The audience feels that her body unconcealed, cannot express all aspects and facets of the character and her existence. It becomes an object of desire but also an object of trade, power, love, wonder,

amazement, embarrassment, and fear. The body of Chin-a, the main character of *Birdcage Inn*, is beautiful, attractive, enticing, but also embarrassing, it is the image of human weakness, the impossibility to get in real touch with the other, the wish to be free; its function is undecidable, an object of "cultural negotiation" like the function of an actual body. In Kim's movie, "the women's bodies in these diegetically contained yet extradiegetically excessive images become a figurative battlefield" of a class warfare where female-centered narratives enact "some of the most powerfully *feminist* evocations of sisterly solidarity to be found in contemporary Korean cinema."[3] Chin-a's body expresses the undecidability of human condition. Usually mainstream movies propose an already-decided image of human nature, they "sell the product along with its conditions of use."[4] On the contrary, *Birdcage Inn* rather questions human nature and its open essence.

The body can be an even more undecidable tool when we have to learn how to use it rather than a univocal instrument of desire. This is what happens in the Japanese movie *Air Doll*.[5] This movie is a fairy tale (with some parallelisms with Collodi's novel for children *The Adventures of Pinocchio*) which narrates how a sex doll becomes a real woman and how, nevertheless, her body is still used for sexual purposes. The representation of her naked body does not have the effect of inspiring desire, but has the effect to allow the experience of the complex relationships and tricky elements concerning the practice of sex: power, money, feelings, without giving any definite answer. The feminine body is represented with its human ambiguities and possibilities, related to the elements of our actual life.

Writing about Kim Ki-duk's movies, Hye Seung Chung uses the words of Elisabeth Grosz to focus the body's meaning. "The body is neither brute nor passive but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation. On one hand, it is a signifying and signified body; on the other, it is an object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange. [...] The body is regarded as the political, social, and cultural object par excellence, not a product of a row, passive nature which is civilized; [...] not a precultural, presocial, or prelinguistic pure body but a body as social and discursive object, a body bound up in the order of desire, signification, and power."[6] At the same time the female body, in its undefined and undecided essence, reveals its originality which precedes all objectifications and becomes "a matrix or a source of nourishment in which the elements are without identity or reason." With these words Julia Kristeva connects the feminine body to the Platonic *chora*, "a mobile receptacle of merging, contradiction and movement, necessary to the functioning of nature before the teleological intervention of God, and that it corresponds to the mother."[7] The chora is the pre-verbal and pre-symbolic, semiotic representation of the subject in process, structured around the maternal body. In this way Hye Seung Chung remarks how "in the final shot of *Birdcage Inn,* the water/ocean functions as a regenerative, pulsating space of semiotic

chora wherein the two female subjects are in the process of becoming one, unfettered by language and largely outside the symbolic order."[8] The feminine body has a proteiform nature, it is a source of meaning and an opportunity to convey new significations rather than a defined object with a given function.

Western mainstream movies are generally meant to gather the largest audience composed by young people, adults and families without restrictions. The feminine character is often very young and sexually attractive. Her image usually highlights the secondary and tertiary sexual characters: red lips, a breast in evidence, and sexy clothes. In this conventional, foreseeable representation, the feminine character is usually not supposed to openly exhibit her naked body. The body is hyper-sexualized, but the skimpy clothes do not allow its nakedness, even when it would be justified by the events.[9] A staggering example is one of the initial sequences of *The Fifth Element*[10] in which Leeloo, the very beautiful Milla Jovovich, is cloned and, as soon as she is reconstructed in human form, she appears in her stylish, white swimming suit designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier.

We cannot justify this ideology of semi-nakedness permeating mainstream movie industry by saying that the movie displays a half-naked body because nudity is obscene and a movie should not show what is forbidden by common sense. In this case, what the movie presents is not the nakedness of a body but rather the idea of prohibition. In mainstream movies "the truly successful erotic transgression is one that maintains the emotional force of the prohibition."[11] We can say nudity has a synecdochical consistency: it is triggered by the representation of a part of the whole. Without the prohibition, there is no nudity; without clothes, there is no visible body.

According to the mainstream standards, the musical *Chicago*[12] displays several enticing girls but no explicit nudity. The ballet of the prison is a very sensual show, but actresses are not naked and wear underwear to highlight their bodies. Their attires seem to transgress social conventions but, actually, at the same time, they enforce a prohibition: the naked body cannot be shown. In fact, the actresses do not break rules; conversely, they merely confirm the rules and, in doing so, they put on a display of dominant relations of power. We should always consider that even the most popular and conservative movies "put on display both the significant dreams and nightmares of a culture and the ways that the culture is attempting to channel them to maintain its present relations of power and domination."[13] The highly stylized ballet refrains from a pornographic intention but is intended to elicit desire. In fact, the fundamental aim of this representation of the body is to create desire. Clothes are designed to hint to the feminine body, and this is indeed suggested in the form of desire.

Schopenhauer was the first Western philosopher who consistently insisted on the idea that desire is at the origin of the suffering of life. He wrote that life swings like a pendulum

forwards and backwards between pain and boredom. What we need to remember is that, according to Schopenhauer's philosophy, pain is caused by the desire of what we do not have yet, and that boredom is again a form of pain caused by the possession of what we cannot desire any longer. To express it in Schopenhauer's terms, the movie stops the swing of the pendulum on the side of pain as desire to prevent it from swinging to the side of boredom (the other, socially unproductive form of pain). A dress recalls the nakedness and, in doing so, triggers the desire for the body and, at the same time, it denies the possibility of going further. We accept that, in this kind of mainstream movie, the naked body is banned. It seems that the movie represents the promise of a satisfaction which is always delayed and postponed.

This endless delaying and postponing represents the principle of flirtation as the playful form of love.[14] In flirtation the woman inspires a desire and denies the possibility of satisfaction. A woman who totally denies herself loses the possibility to be desired; a woman who grants herself loses the possibility of flirting and of creating desire, that is to say: she dissipates her power. What actually interests the subject of flirtation is the desire and not the end of desire. Flirting can be above all described as an exercise of power. Satisfaction is ruled out or, better, "differed."[15] The lover has an object of love since he is waiting for it: "The lover's fatal identity is precisely: *I am one who waits*."[16] But this identity of the loving subject is not an original condition, it is given by a relation of power. "*To make someone wait*: the constant prerogative of all power."[17] In a similar way, the movie *Chicago* puts a limit to the representation of the body and, at the same time, the body is presented as the pivotal object of desire for which people fight and kill: basically, as an instrument of power.

There is a deep connection between sex appeal, desire and individual power. Conceivably this is the reason which explains why many mainstream movies are machines to generate desire. As we have remarked above, it is a desire which is not supposed to be satisfied because, by definition, desire must remain desire for its object to survive as such and to be turned into a practice of power.

The case of the Bond-movies is instructive, a Bond-girl is an attractive, seductive, scanty-clothed young woman who appears in a Bond-movie. She is not just a decorative element, but the feminine body is used to trigger desire, however deprived of its real corresponding object we could find in our ordinary experiences. The actress brings the desire to the paroxysm and, proposing an impossibly high standard, virtually denies its satisfaction. Real life is ruled out, desire remains beyond the possibility of being satisfied or connected to the actual experience. The body is without any other purpose than one of excitement, and it does not offer any other meaning or experience. Even if a mainstream movie is produced for the whole family, this representation of the body is about sex, even if sex is never openly mentioned. As Adorno has put it: "just because it can never take place, everything revolves around the coitus."[18] This presentation of desire

creates a high expectation from sex, far beyond any realistic value and personal satisfaction. More precisely, it conveys the idea and creates the general ethos that sex appeal, desire without satisfaction, and individual power are deeply intertwined. The obvious and natural connection is denied: sex as the normal (although complex, complicated, and difficult, since the human nature is undecided) consequence of excitement is removed. In the Bond-girl representation of sex, as well as in many mainstream representations of beauty, the body is hyper-sexualized to make it sound outdated and almost not trendy any normal, effective, and satisfying sexual attitude related to the actual experience. In this way the cultural industry offers a simplified "instruction of use" for its products and a ready-made interpretation: "a woman must be 'beautiful' to be sexual."[19] In fact, "we are asked to believe that our culture promotes the display of female sexuality. It actually shows almost none. It censors representations of women's bodies, so that only the official versions are visible. Rather than seeing images *of* female desire or that cater *to* female desire, we see mock-ups of living mannequins [...]."[20] The hyper-sexualization of movie characters is not in the interest of men and women but is rather a part of the advertising campaign of a consumer society which provides a general dissatisfaction for the body and, consequently, a sexual dissatisfaction between man and women. "Ads do not sell sex—that would be counterproductive, if it meant that heterosexual women and men turned to one another and were gratified. What they sell is sexual discontent."[21] In this way, high expectations and a generalized feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration are easily conveyed into a generalized desire of transgression.

In mainstream movies the hyper-sexualization of the character's body is usually relatable to a kind of transgression. A transgressive behaviour is often associated to a character who exerts individual power through her sex-appeal. Slavoj Žižek writes how "Law itself relies on its inherent transgression"[22] and this remark explains the importance of transgression in strengthening the rules. Žižek reflection is decisive in revealing the mechanism hidden behind the "prescribed" transgression imposed by the system. Before we consider the transgression in itself, we have to discuss how it is suggested in movies and deal with the audience's reaction. The way in which the character reveals her body is very meaningful and worth of consideration. We will bring two examples so that we can compare two ways of revealing a half-naked body, the former referred to the Eastern culture and the latter to the Western one.

On one hand, the Japanese anime *Agent Aika*[23] is a TV series aimed to a young adult audience. This science-fiction cartoon, set in an apocalyptic future, is about the war between a secret organization and a villain who wants to destroy humanity. In the first episode Aika, a young woman endowed with special powers, fights against a group of female opponents and, in doing so, they frequently offer sights beneath their skirts with a quick glimpse of their nudity. The same will happen more or less during the entire series. A critical reaction in the Western

debate has been generally absent or very negative.[24] According to this reaction, under the pretext of a science-fiction cartoon, the adventures of *Agent Aika* were an excuse to present shots from low down and reveal underwear and naked legs. "This OAV series has more panties than I've ever seen in any anime before."[25] In short, this anime is presented as nothing but a pornographic show. "It is too perverse and fetish-oriented for the average person's tastes, despite a relative lack of actual sexuality on display. [...] Just because we don't see absolutely everything doesn't mean that the show isn't pornographic by definition."[26] What makes "pornographic by definition" a cartoon which does not show any sexual explicit content? It seems that the *intention* to be pornographic is enough. We need to compare it to other popular movies to understand the meaning of this intention. Before that, in dealing with *Agent Aika* we also need to explain the relevance of this anime and the reason of our interest in it. This anime represents popular culture and similar pop artifacts are short-lived and depending on the demand of the market. This close connection to fan service and popular taste makes *Agent Aika* representative of a non-conventional production: a great part of its interest lies in its difference from the Western mainstream and in its being against the predictability of the Western, standardized popular culture. *Agent Aika* does not attempt to please everyone and to meet the taste of the largest audience. It cannot absolutely be considered as a masterpiece but it helps to reveal some peculiar features of a different representation of the body.

On the other hand, the movie *Valerian and the City of Thousand Planets*[27] is a mainstream production aimed to a young-adult audience as well as to a general, family target. Laureline, impersonated by the teenage model Cara Delevigne, is an over-sexualized and outrageously beautiful girl. In the beginning of the movie, she appears half-naked in her bathing suit. She quarrels with her boyfriend and then both leave on a mission. She enters the space ship and takes off. The reason she drives a spaceship wearing the same skimpy bikini remains unexplained. Nobody would say that *Valerian* is a pornographic movie or that it is perverse. Nevertheless, if we consider the percentage of naked skin, Laureline is more naked than Aika, and the takes presenting her body are longer than the quick up-skirts and glances on legs and underwear of *Agent Aika*'s characters in the discussed scene. In fact, the two characters are not showing their body in the same way. Laureline, like Leeloo in *The Fifth Element*, is actually wearing a bikini, a piece of clothing we can see on beaches and in swimming pools. It is strange to wear it in a spaceship; it is a behaviour against conventions and she proves to be an energetic and bold girl, ready to use her sex-appeal to her advantage, despite the social conventions. Her attire is not conventional, but it is not against morality. In this way she transgresses, and she confirms the law at the same time. The use of her body's attractiveness is not a neutral display of beauty. Laureline exerts the power accorded by her body. The fact that she is naked grants her the power

on men and the superiority over women. Nudity is not any accidental or circumstantial situation: it is a choice; it is a strategy of power. It seems she is transgressing the rules, but actually she transgresses the rules in the way every teenager can do it. Laureline is not presenting herself as naked. She is presenting herself as transgressing a prohibition. She proposes a codified transgression of codified rules.

Actually, Laureline suggests that if you want to be an adult, if you want to exert power, you have to use the sex appeal of your body. A girl wearing skimpy clothes and showing her body transgresses the social order which is publicly proclaimed by a dress code; she is on her own, neither a controlled child, nor an adult framed by the system but an individual who can freely use her body. In doing so, she exerts her own power, granted by the sexual desire she arouses, amplified by transgressing conventions. Actually, her transgression is consistent with the rules she pretends to transgress. There is no real enjoyment of the body and there is not even the presence of the body. In fact, she arouses desire but, at the same time, annihilates the reasons of desire. She is not naked. Her bikini is presented as an individual choice against the rules but, as a matter of fact, it does not transgress anything, any prohibition, any limit. In the representation given by *Valerian*, the body has no possibility to be naked, and what Laureline transgresses was allowed since the beginning. All authentic possibilities to break the rules are denied. Nevertheless, it is presented as a transgression which is a source of power, which has an *emancipatory* power. Her body creates desire but it does not give any clue about a possibility beyond, let alone about the way to satisfy the desire it arouses. It is true what Adorno and Horckheimer stated: "the diner must be satisfied with reading the menu. […] The culture industry does not sublimate: it suppresses."[28] Along with the suppression of the body and beyond, the culture industry prescribes the transgression of an empty prohibition as a strategy of individual emancipation.

The case of *Agent Aika* is rather different. Anime, in general, do not attempt to gather the largest audience by pleasing everyone and avoiding to hurt somebody's taste. A common feature of anime (as well as other works outside the mainstream production of culture industry) is "the lack of compromise in making these narratives palatable."[29] The main character Aika is not any model for teenagers. She does not attempt to impose any aggressive or transgressive behavior. The shots from down low show what she is wearing and what she wears is without any doubt a piece of underwear: her panties reveal the form of her body under the thin fabric; details show the stitching of knickers. They are not pieces of a swimming suit and reveal her body. In other words, we are looking at the obscene, what should not be unconcealed, what is supposed to be "out-of-the-scene." Panties cover a larger amount of skin than a bikini but, nevertheless, they cannot be presented in the show without a kind of moral condemnation and reprobation. In other terms, *Agent Aika* presents a prohibition which remains a prohibition and which does not entail any

emancipatory claim. The prohibition is felt as a prohibition and it is not the function of a prescribed, emancipatory transgression. It is the innocent, childish, candid view of boys on the world, when the world is a place of things and events to be discovered and wondered and not a set of rules and imposed life-styles to accomplish the social order. As Kurt Vonnegut wrote in his novel *Breakfast of Champions*: "girls concealed their underpants at all costs, and boys tried to see their underpants at all costs."[30] Innocence is an attitude which can be easily thwarted and counteracted by a prescribed transgression. *Agent Aika* displays what has been called an "inherent innocence"[31] granted on one side by the medium of animation and on the other side by the cultural background of anime. Anime as such provides a more stylized and non-realistic representation of the character, so that a direct identification is not encouraged. [32] Moreover, "Japan is a country that is traditionally more pictocentric than the cultures of the West, [...] and anime and manga fit easily into a contemporary culture of the visual."[33] Images may be accepted thanks their inherent, aesthetic justification. In this stylization, in line with a cinema industry which is "a dichotomy of artistic freedom and repression,"[34] anime frequently show scenes of sex for its own sake. Nevertheless, these sexual contents are mostly proposed in a recreational and playful perspective and their narrative style, imagery and humor are not predictable and do not aim to please everybody at all costs, like a Disney cartoon or a Hollywood movie.[35] A stylistic and humorous presentation can make some anime less a show *containing* sex than a show *about* sex.[36] Nevertheless, pornography has often be blamed on anime, despite the fact that, like in the case of *Agent Aika*, "the level of sexuality [...] is generally no higher than in most R-rated Western films."[37]

On one hand, if *Valerian* deletes the prohibition as such and imposes a behaviour against the conventions which proves actually to be without any transgressive power, on the other hand *Agent Aika* shows that there is a prohibition and does not impose any individual, emancipatory transgression; it marks a limit and states that there is a beyond out there, where it is always possible to break the law but this action is not prescribed. In *Agent Aika* the body is really naked. Her underwear is not Leeloo or Laureline's swimming suit. What she is wearing traces the limit, denotes the prohibition and the fact that we are looking at the obscene, something which is not allowed. Such representation of the body necessarily hints to the fact that there is a limit, and something beyond it. This importance granted to the body evokes an experience in which, to use Eagleton's terms, "interests and desires [...] operate as quasi-transcendental anteriorities; there can be no asking from whence they derive, [...] for such values, whatever their origin in social interaction, are as radically given as the human body."[38] The body seems to be at the origin of our social dimension, not an instrument whose use can be prescribed for social success. The transgression is now conjured up as an actual transgression, a real possibility with unforeseeable developments and not as an individual, emancipatory practice. Now desire is not just a game of

power but it can also be a real modality of human beings and can be displayed in something existing in the actual world. The show is not just about proposing a behaviour. The innocence presupposes something which is not yet taken for granted. Innocence allows amazement and wonder. The show is about something which is not in the show. In this perspective, as Eagleton put it, the body attests "our shared material conditions [which] open up the possibilities of friendship and love"[39] of our open and undecided existence.

When we speak about innocence, prohibition and transgression as an emancipatory practice, we should refrain from simply understanding this words and expressions as descriptive or normative terms. They have rather to be thought, as Judith Butler has put it, in their performative character: "the anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object. [...] [A]n expectation [...] ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates."[40] In the same way the movie's characterization acts in a performative way. Female characters offer an expectation which ends up in gender identity, behaviour and life-styles. The movie seems to mirror real life or to reveal the internal, troubled essence of the human being. Actually, it conjures what appears to be internal and is taken for granted as a legitimate desire. "What we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body."[41] The character, in its performative function, displays the interiority as an already decided essence. What is presented as a state of being or as a natural condition is actually an action that human beings are compelled to perform by the social system. What we consider an internal feature of the human being is, in truth, what we anticipate and produce through certain acts and according to certain external models and given expectations. In the considered case of *Valerian* (as well as in many culture industry products, in which "just because it can never take place, everything revolves around the coitus") a transgressive behaviour is proposed as a more normal attitude than wonder, amazement, enjoyment, curiosity, shyness, empathy, even than satisfaction. Transgression becomes a constitutive part of an ideology which prescribes what – at the same time – it forbids. As Žižek put it: "ideology is not simply an operation of closure, drawing the line between what is included and what is excluded/prohibited, but the ongoing regulation of non-closure. [...] [A]n ideology always admits the failure of closure, and then goes on to regulate the permeability of the exchange with its outside. Today, however, in our 'postmodern' world, this dialectic of the Law and its inherent transgression is given an additional twist: transgression is more and more directly enjoined by the Law itself."[42]

In fact, what *Valerian* presents is not the nakedness of the body as a transgression. We should say the show rather confirms the prohibition related to the naked body and imposes a transgression. More precisely: the limit conjured up by breaking the law creates a prohibition,

and the show displays this prohibition as a constitutive part of itself. The audience is suggested to think: "I *know* that what I am watching is against the law." The aesthetic experience always entails a cognitive aspect. Aristotle wrote that we need to know that the work of art is an imitation of reality. Arthur Danto reminds that "the knowledge that it is not real"[43] is presupposed by the aesthetic pleasure. In other terms, I must know I am experiencing a work of art. This cognitive aspect is a constitutive content of our aesthetic experience. In the same way, the fact that I know that the experience of the movie entails a transgression (and the related prohibition) is the condition of its enjoyment.

In this experience, your transgression is tolerated within the limits of your prescribed possibilities, anything beyond that is ruled out. Actually, we do not meet anything different from the trends of society. In the experience of the movie, we feel reassured in our basic attitudes and beliefs. As Horkheimer and Adorno argued: "[The] film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination."[44] The movie does not simply offer models or life-styles consistent with the social system but it also presents these models and life-styles as pre-formed and pre-arranged transgressions of the given rules. These behaviours are presented as forms of tolerated transgression. This tolerance makes a repressive society present itself as very human, tolerant, and free. "In truth, this tolerance is a repressive tolerance. Society prescribes a prohibition and, at the same time, a transgression, and by means of the culture industry it presents a cultural background in which prohibition and transgression seem to be natural and self-evident."[45] In the mainstream movies the body of women, like the body of super-heroes, are simplified. They mostly show two codified meanings, the one of prohibition and the other concerning the breaking of the given prohibition, two faces of the same coin. Any other possible meaning of the body, any other use, seems to be impossible, outdated or, at least, not necessary. So simplified, movie characters represent stereotypes with which normal people can identify and find in them the meaning of their own existence, but a complete identification is not offered. "The female starlet is supposed to symbolize the secretary, though in a way which makes her seem predestined, unlike the real secretary, to wear the flowing evening gown. Thus, she apprises the female spectator not only of the possibility that she, too, might appear on the screen but still more insistently of the distance between them. Only one can draw the winning lot, only one is prominent, and even though all have mathematically the same chance, it is so minimal for each individual that it is best to write it off at once and rejoice in the good fortune of someone else, who might just as well be oneself but never is. Where the culture industry still invites naïve identification, it immediately denies it."[46]

Identification with the main characters of *Birdcage Inn*, *Air Doll* or *Agent Aika* seems not to be required as a constitutive part of the aesthetic fruition of the show. It is difficult to identify

"with joyless or pained female characters who are shown engaging in sex acts that are presented in static, decidedly deglamorized scenes" and playing in films "which are devoid of pleasure-oriented sex scenes."[47] Conversely, the vicarious satisfaction given by the identification with the character is fundamental in the case of the Western mainstream movies we are considering. The audience experiences contradictory feelings. Overcoming the distance between character and spectator is always given as possible by the opportunity (offered, but not to be necessarily practiced) of transgression. The audience can always enjoy the success of the character without any trouble. At the same time, the audience is reassured by a comfortable distance. Watching the movie, the audience is instructed on the fact that a transgression is happening. The law sounds so: "there is a limit you cannot trespass" and, at the same time, "trespassing this limit is your task, without forgetting that it is a limit and that your action is forbidden." The character, with which a complete identification is always suggested but also always denied, does it for you and her success grants the vicarious satisfaction. Žižek pointed out the mechanism of inherent transgression of the law: "far from undermining the rule of the Law, its 'transgression' in fact serves as its ultimate support. So it is not only that transgression relies on, presupposes, the Law it transgresses; rather, the reverse case is much more pertinent: Law itself relies on its inherent transgression, so that when we suspend this transgression, the Law itself disintegrates."[48]

In this way, in the fruition of the movie, the audience can experience the satisfaction through an interposed person. This vicarious satisfaction is granted by the character, and the social system proves to be more stable and complete: it grants not only limits and rules, but transgressions too, both combined in the same package. "[...] It is transgression which is the fundamental "moral" injunction of contemporary society. The true reversal should thus occur *within* this speculative identity of opposites, of morality and its transgression: all one has to do is to shift the encompassing unity of these two terms from morality to transgression. And, since this encompassing unity has to appear as its opposite, we thus have to accomplish a shift from a society in which the Law rules —in the guise of a permanent transgression—to a society in which transgression rules —in the guise of a new Law."[49] Now we can see that there is no identification, no vicarious satisfaction possible in the naked body of a prostitute or of a sex doll, and above all we see there is no real, "permanent transgression" in them, whereas the half-naked body revealed by a girl driving a spaceship in a bikini prescribes an affordable transgression which is in the audience's reach. In this way the actress occupies a role similar to the one of a pin-up girl during World War II: she can delight an entire army, and "it is accepted and approved, but prostitution behind the lines is not permitted."[50]

Interestingly enough, in *Valerian* Laureline is a very resolute and energetic girl. The image of the woman conveyed by Laureline is that of an angry, unsatisfied, and resented girl. She

entices desire; she desires something she cannot have, but she does not give any clue to the possible object or way of satisfaction. In other terms: she wants something, but she does not know what she wants. This is the average condition of all teenagers and of most adults in the consumer society and the existential condition presented in *Valerian* can easily be applied to the Western contemporary culture. Once the desire is created, the object of this desire can be proposed a second time. Be unsatisfied, be unhappy, and desire something, what? It does not matter. But desire something. Society will give you enough reasons to be unhappy and suggest something which could quench your thirst. Nothing, of course, is supposed to be able to satisfy the desire. The logic, implicit in this principle, is clear. A desire with no clue on how to satisfy it can be easily redirected on commodities, behaviors and life-styles which – apparently – can quench the thirst but which – actually – create only disappointment and new desire. Schopenhauer's pendulum is stuck on desire when the magic of the movie works.

In *Valerian* Laureline's body, with its emancipatory power, hints to something and, at the same time, it denies what it suggests. The game of flirting, the "coquetterie," becomes a metaphysical principle which explains the logic (and the pain, in Schopenhauer's terms) of existence. In this way sexual attraction is used as a mechanism of power but sex in itself is disempowered. The audience supposes that Laureline's behavior is relatable to sex, but actually the audience suffers the effect of an instrumental use of human possibilities. Sex is just a device to manifest how you, as a viewer, are unhappy and without the possibility of satisfaction, except the vicarious satisfaction offered by the identification with the character or the partial, temporary satisfaction provided by other activities like social competition or buying commodities. Laureline presents a hyper-sexualized character acting in a de-sexualized world, since the representation has no real, sexual meaning. On the one side *Valerian* suggests that there are no further objects to be shown, that there is nothing beyond, and that the imposed transgression can (and must) go only just to that point and not further. A transgression of a given code which, actually, does not transgress anything but which, on the contrary, enforces the code and rebuts an even more severe and prude law. As we have already noted, the law relies on its transgression, and without it "the Law itself disintegrates." Transgressing is not by chance but is the norm. This transgression, in other words, is a part of the rules and enforces the rules. On the other side *Agent Aika* presents the obscene and, along with it, the idea of a beyond as a possible object of desire which is not completely displayed by the representation of the character.

In *Valerian*, as well as in other mainstream movies, transgressing the prohibition is offered as a form of individual freedom and self-affirmation, emancipation, autonomy and individual power. Also, consequently, implicitly, the viewer must believe that transgression exists and that it is within her or his reach in the prescribed form, even if this transgressive behaviour

entails the acceptance of dissatisfaction as the condition of the individual power. Otherwise, a transgression could no longer be needed to accord the satisfaction of a desire. If you have something, and you are satisfied with it, you do not desire anything else. Transgression is nothing but the changeable content given to desire, in order to make it palpable. Žižek has investigated this mechanism which connects prohibition and transgression referring to the obscene as the inherent supplement of power. As he has put it, "the power edifice itself is split from within: in order to reproduce itself and contain its Other, it has to rely on an inherent excess which grounds it. [...] To put it in the Hegelian terms of speculative identity, Power is always-already its own transgression."[51] The way the obscene is presented is crucial. The obscene allows the (regulated) transgression and in this way the mechanism of social order. It is neither emancipation and opportunity of individual freedom, nor a simple delusory mechanism which denies freedom. "Power thus relies on an obscene supplement - that is to say, the obscene 'nightly' law (superego) necessarily accompanies, as its shadowy double, the 'public' Law. As for the status of this obscene supplement, one should avoid both traps and neither glorify it as subversive nor dismiss it as a false transgression which stabilizes the power edifice (like the ritualized carnivals which temporarily suspend power relations), but insist on its *undecidable* character."[52]

In this article we have remarked the deep connection between sex-appeal, desire and individual power. In the Western culture industry the feminine body is a source of power (think of the decadent cliché of the *femme fatale* interpreted by Louise Brooks as Lulu in *Pandora's Box*[53]), but this power has to be inevitably understood as individual power, granted by the individual sex-appeal. In other terms, power can only be conceived as an individual asset provided by the desired/prohibited body. Conversely, Asian movies prove that another perspective is possible and that power, even if granted by the body, relies on more complex and tricky bases.

In our investigation we can appreciate the usefulness of an intercultural, aesthetic approach. Japanese culture prescribes a severe ethos concerning work, duties and family but also endorses a more relaxed attitude towards beauty and sex.[54] Beauty and "the cult of cuteness" are socially recommended ways of pleasing and interacting, signs of politeness and means of achieving social harmony;[55] we can see these features mirrored by the stylized physical appearance of manga and anime's characters. Even traditional and contemporary Japanese art adopt a more playful and recreational use of sex than its Western counterparts. In Japanese art, sex can mean dissent or conformity,[56] but no high expectations of social or individual emancipation are associated to the sexual power of the body. This situation allows a more stylized and, at the same time, more realistic representation of the body and of its social context. Naomi Tani, a famous Japanese sexy-movie actress, writes that "the woman's naked body must not only be seen as a sensual object, but must also be able to express emotion" and convey cultural, traditional values

of "beauty, strong will or pride."[57] An intercultural approach may risk misinterpretations but it always offers unexpected and fruitful perspectives on our culture. For example, anime reveal how "women's bodies [...] are clearly powerful, more powerful than those of the male, in fact. These anime depict the female body as being in touch with intense, even magical, forces capable of overwhelming male-dominated reality."[58] In this perspective the specific experience of desire triggered by the body seems to be more complex and encompassing, and the feminine body itself is far more than an object of sexual desire. "The body is seen as powerful, mysterious and frightening, controllable only by demons, and even then only temporarily."[59] As we have stated at the beginning, the body (with its potentialities) is undecidable, a medium of forces which reach beyond the individual. This undecidable character of the body affects that, as we have written, it can be an object of desire but also object of trade, power, love, wonder, amazement, empathy, embarrassment, or fear. Maybe the tendency to qualify as pornography, aesthetic representations which do not conform to the logic of culture industry finds an explication. "Pornography brings the body to the fore, not only in terms of sexuality but also in relation to aesthetics, gender, and social identity."[60] In other terms, the body outside the conventional system of representation appears as disturbing. Its experience outside the conventional and predictable form offered by the Western popular culture seems uncanny and threatening. The American domination of mass culture is often taken for granted and this article draws attention to the fact that even disturbing and uncanny possibilities of representing the body stand out as an enriching opportunity of cultural difference (in the most desirable perspective) or as resources of cultural resistance (in the less desirable one). In the aesthetic experience we question the social system and find in the body the example of an unexplained and unexploited beyond.

Our comparison of different attitudes in representing naked bodies has questioned the idea of prohibition and transgression. Examining the emancipatory value of transgression means to be aware that social competition is not mostly individual; it means to question the assumption that individualism is the most important and meaningful achievement in life; it means to consider that individual freedom is not about whimsical behavior; it also means that a generalized dissatisfaction is not necessarily to be considered trendy, as it seems to be in the Western, post-modern world, where "transgression *is* the law."[61] Transgression in itself has neither any emancipatory character nor any delusory function corroborating the institutional power. The aesthetic enjoyment of the movie is necessarily based on an oversimplified representation of reality which, in many cases, offers a misleading cognitive content. Such a representation, for example, conceals the fact that the display of naked bodies can have an aesthetic claim and, at the same time, is a representation of a social order and of a system of power. The

cinematic representation of the body can hint what is beyond the system as well as what is stuck in the system and limited by it. The problem is the substantial nullification of transgression and, in this way, the offer of a more limited array of options in the representation of human beings and a limited aesthetic experience, which rules out the inherent duplicity of all transgressive images. This aesthetic experience can present a deprived reality, a society without any beyond, which can be offered in prepared packages in which transgression has been "negated by the co-option of the term as a marketing tool, and the financial sanction — indeed, incentive — to pursue the extreme and taboo [...]. If the transgressive act, image, or concept originates not from an organically developed testing of the edges, but from a calculated use of the *idea* of transgression to create allure or hype, the project has already failed to transgress before it has begun."[62] It is exactly in the testing of the edges, in the experience of the limits, in the call of the beyond that the aesthetic enjoyment allows the experience of the undefined, undecidable human nature.

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[1] Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, transl. Edmund Jephcott [Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002] p. 111.
[2] Ki Duk-Kim [South Korea, 1998]
[3] Hye Seung Chung, *Kim Ki-duk* [Urbana/Chicago/Springfield, University of Illinois Press 2012] pp. 71-72.
[4] Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati* (Apocalyptic and Integrated) [Milano, Bompiani 1964] p. 72.
[5]Kore-Eda Irokazu [Japan, 2009]
[6] Elisabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism* [Bloomington/Indianapolis, Indiana University Press 1994] p. 18.
[7] Julia Kristeva, "The Subject in Process" in Patrick ffrench, Roland-François Lack (editors), *The Tel Quel Reader* [London/New York Routledge 1998] p. 174.
[8] Hye Seung Chung, *Kim Ki-duk*, pp. 93-94.
[9] Today the streaming offers a larger choice which affects the aesthetic perception of the body: there is a more varied offer of possibilities and nudity is openly displayed in TV series like *Orange is the New Black* and in others. In these cases nudity is offered (even without any cogent justification) to meet the expectations of a specific audience, a kind of fan service like the one provided by the Japanese market of anime, whereas in the mainstream movies nudity is banned to avoid restrictions and gather the largest audience.
[10] Luc Besson [France 1997]
[11] Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* [Durham/London, Duke University Press 2008] p. 15.
[12] Rob Marshall [USA/Canada 2002]
[13] Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* [London, Routledge 1995] p. 111.
[14] Georg Simmel, *On Women, Sexuality and Love* [New Haven, Yale University Press 1984].
[15] Paolo Euron, *Codice d'amore non per principianti. Le differenze di comportamento amoroso dell'uomo e della donna* (*Love Code Not For Beginners. Differences of Love Behaviour of Man and Woman*) [Turin, Lighea 2013], p. 154.
[16] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments*, transl. Richard Howards [Hill and Wand, New York 1978], p. 40.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 113.
[19] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth. How Images of Beauty are used against Women* [New York, Harper Collins 2002] p. 150.
[20] Ibid., p. 136.
[21] Ibid., p. 143.
[22] Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* [London – New York, Verso 1997, 2008[2]] p. 99.
[23] Katsuhiko Nishijima [Japan 1997]
[24] See Chris Beveridge, "Agent Aika Vol. #1: Naked Missions" (review) in Mania, http://www.mania.com/agent-aika-vol-1-naked-missions_article_73306.html (9 March 2020)
[25] Stig Høgset, "Agent Aika," (review) in T.H.E.M. Anime Reviews, http://www.themanime.org/viewreview.php?id=679 (9 March 2020)
[26] Jason Huff, "Agent Aika," (review) in The Anime Review, http://www.theanimereview.com/reviews/agentaika.html (9 March 2020)
[27] Luc Besson [France/Germany 2017]
[28] Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, P. 111

[29] Susan Pointon, "Transcultural Orgasm as Apocalypse: Urotsuki doji: The Legend of the Overfiend," in «Wide Angle» 19, no. 3 (1997), p. 45; quoted in Susan Napier, *Anime. From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle. Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2005] p. 9.
[30] Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions* [London, Vintage 2000] p. 24.
[31] Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* [London, Routledge 1998] p. 19.
[32] Parodies, critiques, imitation, and cosplay are common forms of fictionalization among extreme manga and anime fans (*otaku*). These activities are a way to "possess" the fictional object and, in doing so, to separate it from life, avoiding identification and fetishism. The Japanese therapist Saitō Tamaki explains this obsessive practice of fictionalization in psychoanalytical terms: "*Otaku* have escaped sexual perversion through this practice of fictionalizing, since the desire to fictionalize a thing is ultimately the desire to own it, and stops there.[...] They realize that the object of their desire is nothing more than a fiction." Saitō Tamaki, "Otaku Sexuality" in Christopher Bolton, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., and Takayuki Tatsumi (editors), *Robot, Ghosts and Wired Dreams.Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime* [Minneapolis, University of Minnesota 2007] p. 236.
[33] Susan Napier, *Anime,* p. 7.
[34] Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara Weisser, "Fogging, Editing and Censorship" in Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara Weisser (editors), *Japanese Film Encyclopedia: The Sex Films* [Miami, Vital Books 1998] p. 21.
[35] Susan Napier, *Anime,* p. 9.
[36] Cfr. Brian Ruh, "The Robots from Takkun's Head: Cyborg Adolescence in *FLCL*" in Steven T. Brown (editor)*, Cinema Anime. Critical Engagements with Japanese Animation* [New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2006] p. 154.
[37] Susan Napier, *Anime,* p. 297.
[38] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* [Oxford, Blackwell 1990] p. 382.
[39] Ibid., p. 410.
[40] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [New York and London, Routledge 1999] p. xiv.
[41] Ibid., p. xiv.
[42] Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* [London/New York, Verso 2008] p. 29.
[43] Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. A Philosophy of Art* [Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press 1981], p. 14.
[44] Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 100.
[45] Paolo Euron, *Aesthetics, Theory and Interpretation of the Literary Work* [Leiden-Boston, Brill 2019], p. 181.
[46] Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 116.
[47] Hye Seung Chung, *Kim Ki-duk*, p. 75.
[48] Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 99.
[49] Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, p. 44.
[50] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 126.
[51] Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 35.
[52] Ibid., p. 98.
[53] Georg Wilhelm Pabst, *Die Büchse der Pandora* [Germany 1928]
[54] Nicholas Bornoff, "Sex and Consumerism: the Japanese State of the Arts," in Fran Lloyd (editor) *Consuming Bodies Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art* [London, Reaktion Books 2002] p. 41.
[55] Dani Cavallaro, *Japanese Aesthetics and Anime. The Influence of Tradition* [Jefferson/London, McFarland 2013] p. 141.
[56] Nicholas Bornoff, "Sex and Consumerism" p. 44.
[57] Naomi Tani, "Introduction" in Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara Weisser (editors), *Japanese Film Encyclopedia*, p. 11.
[58] Susan Napier, *Anime*, p. 71.
[59] Ibid., p. 76.
[60] Ibid., p. 64.
[61] Lawrence de Sutter, "Afterword to Transgression" in Idem (editor), *Žižek and the Law* [London, Routledge 2015] p. 195.
[62] Matt Foley, Neil McRobert and Aspasia Stephanou, "Introduction: the Limits of Transgression and the Subject", in Idem (editor), *Transgression and Its Limits* [Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2012] p. xii.

BLAND MODERNITY, KITSCH AND REFLECTIONS ON THE AESTHETIC PRODUCTION IN SINGAPORE

C.J.W.-L. Wee

'Origin is the goal.'
Karl Kraus, *Worte in Versen*, vol. 1

As we look at our cityscape, created since the years of independence, first from the British, and then from Malaysia, we are struck by two seemingly contrasting cityscapes. One is the 'international' modern style (what I think of as the bland, decontextualised and dehistoricised modernity) of our socialist-style public housing, and the buildings constructed in the 1970s, such as the High Street Centre and the Hilton Hotel, and the other is the presence of what can be described as kitsch-conservation projects as manifested by Peranakan Place, the colonialist nostalgia of Raffles Hotel and, most recently, the Chinatown conservation area.[1]

How are we to account for the contrasting aspects of our cityscape? The first-generation political leadership of post-colonial Singapore did not have time for kitsch conservation projects; that was the result of a more wealthy Singapore, from about 1980 onwards, that had started to think of 'Asian values', grounding national identity in something more than the obvious marks of consumerism that started to quite marked by the late 1970s, and finally, what a 'Global City' needed to do to become a first-rank hub of capitalist flows – the answer to that last question was to become a 'Global City of the Arts'.

Thinking through the two aspects of our cityscape mentioned above are important, I think, for they may help us understand the art and aesthetic production that has developed in the 1980s-1990s. I thus will try to think through the nature of the kitsch in our cityscape, and then speculate on the sort of genealogies of artistic creations it contributed towards.

Progress, modernity and the modern Asian-Singaporean city

To begin with, I shall need a definition of 'kitsch'. For this discussion, I shall use a definition offered to us by Matei Calinescu in his now-classic *Five Faces of Modernity*: 'No matter how we classify its contexts of usage, kitsch always implies the notion of *aesthetic inadequacy*'; Calinescu also speaks of 'the *parody of aesthetic consciousness*'.[2] To this critic, 'kitsch is meant to offer instant satisfaction of the most superficial aesthetic needs or whims of a wide public'.[3] Further, kitsch itself, as a cultural-artistic phenomenon, is the product of industrial society (it is *modern*), and is our time linked to commercialism and mass standardisation. As we can see, Calinescu draws from Theodor W. Adorno's perspectives on high art and the culture industry.

At the same time, kitsch can be fun—when it is self-conscious, when it becomes a style, it becomes 'camp'. This is Micheal Chiang and Dick Lee at their best, such as in the musical *Beautyworld*. The willingness to 'conserve' old buildings – and later the willingness to do 'adaptive reuse' of buildings—seemed to suggest that both 'fun' and the complexity of life in the old city, whatever its faults, seemed desirable. Some continuity with the past was valid.

One may wonder how the situation came about that the austere and relentlessly modernizing and pragmatic (or rational-instrumentalist) People's Action Government (PAP) would have time for the frivolities in our built environment of the enclosed Bugis Junction, for example, with its enclosed old streets such as Malay Street and its shophouses, when it has put some 80 per cent of the population into flats that look like they would fit into pre-1989 East Berlin. Of course, the boxes of modernist architecture now have add-ons (little neo-classical triangles and metal scaffolding that don't really give you shade), courtesy of interim- and full-upgrading, that approximate the style of many condominium projects.

The PAP's utopian ideals in the 1960s and the 1970s were rather literal in following the etymology of the word 'utopia': *topos*, for 'place'; *u*, for 'no'; and thus 'nowhere'. To be modern, to go beyond what they saw as our Malayan primordial racialised/ethnicised past of conflict and Chinese-inflected communism, to break the traditional family orientation of Chinese businesses, one had to be committed to 'modernisation' and ditch the not-so-good present and past; one had to become 'nowhere' and 'no place'. Singapore had to be dehistoricised and decontextualised; cultural roots had to be axed; and we had to become a society that wanted 'progress and prosperity for our nation', as the National Pledge goes. While many people have described the PAP as 'conservative', the reality is that those of us sitting in this room have experienced a *radical* experiment in socio-cultural engineering.

In the 1960s – unlike what we would see from the 1980s to the 1990s – there was no approving talk of 'Asian modernity' or 'Asian values'; the latter were the retrograde values the PAP then thought arrested the ideals of universal progress that all seemed desirous of in the 1960s.

Indeed, the 1960s were earmarked by the United Nations to be a 'decade of development', a goal that Singapore was 'in sync' with.

At the same time, while we wanted to be part of progress, to be part of the process of Enlightenment, we didn't want the more liberal-humanistic aspects of modern life, as it had developed in the West – and indeed, in places like China, with its May 4th background of modernising reform, inspired by Western ideals.

The PAP rejected all the soft, aesthetic aspects of 'modernity'—which is not surprising, as culturally sensitive modernists were inclined to be self-reflexively critical—and instead chose instead what can be described as the 'bourgeois idea of modernity', that which was 'a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism'.[4] The most obvious manifestation of this pragmatic modernity was in its cityscape.

The 1950's colonial Master Plan for the city, which demarcated city and rural areas, was ditched, and the entire island became a city, increasingly dominated by the faceless and humourless public housing blocks that looked as they had been moved from UK Council housing estates. As we know, all the kampungs had to go – the then-Prime Minister thought that their way of life held the young back.

The architect and critic Rem Koolhaas has famously described our modernity thus:

> In Singapore – modernization in its pure form – the forces of modernity are enlisted against the demands of modernism. Singapore's modernism … has adopted only the mechanistic, rationalistic program and developed it to an unprecedented perfection in a climate of streamlined 'smoothness' generated by shedding modernism's artistic, irrational, uncontrollable, subversive ambitions – revolution without agony.[5]

While we can – and should – take issue with Koolhaas's implication that Singapore did not have any artistic modernism, we can accept his general description of the logic that underlay the PAP's statist modernity up to the late 1970s.

Then conservation, as already indicated, became possible from the 1980s. You can think of numerous examples – apart from what I've already mentioned, there's Clarke Quay, Robertson Quay, and the Civic District, with the Singapore Art Musuem (the restored, old St Joseph's Institution), the Asian Civilisations Museum (the restored Tao Nan School), the Asian Civilisations Museum extension (the restored Empress Place building, the former Colonial Secretariat) and the hotel that has 'grown-up' around and on top of the old Rendezvous restaurant opposite the Cathay building. We also know that there are plans afoot for the 'upgrading' of MacDonald House.

We can ask if these recent urban developments reflect an architectural postmodernist sensibility, in the sense that architect Charles Jencks would define it:

> A Post-Modernist building is doubly coded – part Modern and part something else: vernacular, revivalist, local, commercial, metaphorical, or contextual. … It is also doubly coded in the sense that it seeks to speak on two levels at once: to a concerned minority of architects, an elite who recognize the subtle distinctions of a fast-changing language, and to the inhabitants, users, or passersby, who want only to understand to enjoy it.[6]

In the end, one doubts it. It's not clear to those who look at the new urban developments whether there are really deep gestures towards history, fun, the local and thus local identity. The developments are too serious and commanding—they represent a more obviously aestheticised version of the 1970's notion of 'progress'. They are pastiche cultural fragments that have only a very fragmented sense of the local. It is, if this can be said, 'bad' kitsch. It is a sort of a bad parody of a parody of aesthetic consciousness. The kitsch we have is an extension of the serious and bland consumerist logic of a focused modernity that will seriously use whatever is available for economic development. It is the old modernising impulse now commodifying what's left of the markers of old Singapore. It certainly never becomes a real style – it is never camp. Of course, kitsch, in any case, almost entirely lacks historical depth or context (hotels in Las Vegas come to mind here); the thing here, however, is that our kitsch claims *real* history, *real* identity and location, and *real* fun. It is not self-aware of itself as kitsch.

We can examine Singapore Tourism Board's document, *Enhancing the Chinatown Experience*, to flesh out some of the claims just made. The opening section of the document claims that the revamp of Chinatown will preserve 'a legacy [that] has become part of national heritage speaking not only of Chinese Singaporeans but also of the unique multi-cultural interaction with other races' (p. 2). It then proceeds to caution that this historic area is declining: 'If nothing is done, Chinatown will lose its soul and its unique irreplaceable ability to serve as a fount of history, culture and heritage that enables Singaporeans to hark back into the past…. There are cultural and emotional reasons lessons they need to learn in order to have the strength to tackle the challenges of the future with the fortitude of the pioneers' (p. 5). Chinatown has become somewhat of a ghost town, after the inhabitants there were slowly moved out to HDB estates – while there are now areas with fancy restaurants and expensive office space, it is quite dead at night.

What are the solutions to this desire for 'real' history, and not kitsch nostalgia? I will look at the main project that is being proposed as the centre of this conservation—the 'Village Theatre':

The Village Theatre will be an integrated complex housing a traditional theatre, a Chinese temple, a teahouse, retail outlets and restaurants. It will be a place to shop, drink, eat, learn, be entertained and be revitalised. There will be an open courtyard with an outdoor stage for street opera. Sharing this common courtyard is the Chinese temple. The courtyard can be used for Chinese New Year plant sales or by residents for their *taiji*, *qigong* and *wushu* classes. Religious festivals and events can also be held here (p. 6).

It's been pointed out that such a Chinese 'village' complex has never existed in Singapore – but the planners did go to China to find out what it 'really' should be. That aside, the passage entirely lacks irony. It is *seriously* kitsch in its parody of kitsch-ness—it proposes that this complex can serve both tourist and nation-building needs: learning, shopping and praying: they all can go hand in hand. A 'real' fake temple will exist for 'real' religious festivals, presumably for the really real tourists to take their authentic photos of the shopping-eating-praying-learning natives. Forget about Walter Benjamin's notion of the mechanical reproduction of auratic art – original 'aura' is not taken as a useful concept here to begin with.[7] The fact that the Tourism Board and not the Urban Redevelopment Authority or National Heritage Board are in charge of this project speaks volumes.

The possible causes of bland aesthetic production

Why have we arrived where we are now—with the above-described Chinatown scenario, for instance? There are two possible reasons for our predicament.

The first may be that our high-cultural resources and folk art—the bases for cultural and cultural-identity development—were perhaps limited to begin with. Many of us are, after all, the descendents of largely immigrant and displaced peoples who were fleeing floods in southern China, or who were brought in from south India to work in the colonial plantations. While such elements have now been taken on board to support the narrative of the 'Singapore Story',[8] there clearly is historical veracity behind it. The consequence of this is that there is less to commodify into spectacular kitsch than in other societies, a situation made more difficult by the state domination of cultural resources. One need only reflect upon the somewhat emotionally ineffective Merlion in relation to the ultra-successful kitsch of the USA's Disneyland, or Japanese 'cuteness' in cultural products like the *Pokemon* or 'Hello Kitty' phenomena, and the sort of loyalty they foster.

The other reason is related to the first: our economic success was wrought at the expense of things cultural—broadly defined as the arts, intellectual life, folk or popular culture.

One could therefore argue, in relation to the above, that the odd urban kitsch that has resulted in the city-state is really an extension of the earlier, more-austere wish to instrumentally use culture for nation-building in a pragmatic-scientific manner. The very state itself, in the economic success that has been wrought, does not have the resources *itself* to create 'good' kitsch.

There must be an initial desire in the first place to have art—and art for the masses—for its own sake for 'good' kitsch to come about. Thus, in the 1980s, when a desire for aesthetics, locality and culture in the built environment and society arises, we find that the resources for sensitive urban conservation are thin.

At the same time, we should not underestimate the affactivity of state-sponsored kitsch that has developed—it could be argued that the most successful form of this particular aesthetic is the National Day spectacles that have emerged since the late 1980s. (This is in contrast to the stricter, more militarised parades of the 1960s and 1970s, and the multi-cultural display of Asian dances and so forth done by schoolchildren.) Kuo Pao Kun calls this 'The theatre that governs', and observes that 'We cannot be cynical about this. … I think this kind of national propaganda is not only inevitable but sometimes quite necessary.'[9] While some may scoff at some of the extreme kitsch that has appeared here in the late 1990s—'Merli', the Merlion comes to mind, as part of a pageant of four mythical creatures on a mythical isle—the spectacles put up in recent years are extremely popular. It is possible that these spectacles are now an accompaniment of what might be called an 'emerging-middle-class' national identity that revolves around the issue of consumption.

The difficulty here, for a city that desires to be a Global City for the Arts, is that the middle-class aesthetic that is oriented towards kitsch—as opposed, say, to a more ascetic notion of aesthetics—is that it may be a 'middle-of-the road hedonism, perfectly illustrated by the "principle of mediocrity" that always obtains in kitsch'.[10] What aesthetic production and cultural products then come to mainly represent then is consumption. This in itself isn't a problem because an aesthetic product or work of art can be many things; the problems arises when making a cultural product for consumption becomes the *dominant* or perhaps even *sole* reason for aesthetic production, one in which consumption is transformed into a regulating social ideal. What makes such a practice of aesthetic production worse, in the case of Singapore, is that the state's and in fact society's cultural resources, after some thirty-five years of homgenising modernisation, may be exhausted; the question is now how we foster the arts given the particular context that marks our economic success as a society.

Statist and non-statist aesthetic production

The particular urbanscape and also experience of this urban environment that has been expanded since the late 1960s or early 1970s must surely affect our aesthetic production (broadly defined) to a greater or lesser extent, though I am not claiming that I think that they are modern the only causes that are pertinent to us. Nevertheless, with the above analysis in mind, I will in this concluding section, briefly try to construct two genealogies of aesthetic production, one the government's own aesthetic production, and the other various artists' reactions to it.

The State's Aesthetic Production

The 1960s-1980 are marked by the rise of a severe modernist urban aesthetic, as seen in the HDB high-rises that succeeded the low-rise Singapore Inprovement Trust flats that still can be seen in Tiong Bahru, for instance. Then there are the tall financial buildings that start to rise at Shenton Way. Taken in toto, this urban environment is the manifestation of a local economy that is lowly starting to be part of global economy—in 1972, S. Rajaratnam speaks of Singapore as a Global City: by 'linking up with international and multinational corporations, Singapore not only becomes a component of [the] world economy, but … catch[es] up or at least keep[s] apace with the most advanced … societies.[11]

The abstract modernism of artists such as Thomas Yeo was the suitable accompaniment to the early industrialisation of the post-colonial city-state. We have to note, though, that despite the severe industrial-modern aesthetic that was dominant, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, by the mid-1970s, had come out with the Merlion symbol, which starts to take an increasing importance as an official symbol of the city-state itself. But it could be observed that the early kitsch that the Merlion represented was only an exception that proved the rule of a severe statist aesthetic.

The 1980s mark a shift in both the way culture is managed and notions of Singapore as an urban centre. The 'Asian values' discourse begins, originally as consideration of the modern relevance of Confucian values; this coincidentally or otherwise accompanies the state's greater openness to conserving parts of the old city. Peranakan Place comes about, though it is criticised as the creation of a Hollywood set; later conservations projects such as that along Tanjong Pagar Road occurred. 'History' and 'rooted identity' become possible as artistic themes because in some ways, the government itself starts to validate their importance.

The National Day Parades start to change shape as well, leading to the Orchard Road street parties of the late 1980s; they presage the attempts to have an even more 'hip' National Day celebrations that can motivate a 'creative' society as represented by by the 2000 'Carnival@TheBay'. The government, then, partially adandons a more severe, decontextualised aesthetic; but by this time, the culture of the young nation is already reshaped.

Non-State Aesthetic Production

It can be argued that production in the arts and related cultural fields in Singapore since the 1980s, when the economy effectively 'takes off', question the complete validity of the cultural and urban decontextualisation along with the historical erasure that has been part-and-parcel of the modernisation programme. Basically, art and aesthetic production from the 1980s start to contend that there is more to the city-state's cultural landscape than is seen on its pristine surface.

Theatre developed, often in an unprecedented multilingual and multicultural format, asserting the need for place and diverse-if-linked identities in a seemingly monolithic Singapore that had its cultural roots axed. Max Le Blond's *General Hospital, or Nurse Angamuthu's Romance* (1981)—an adaptation of Peter Nichol's *National Health*—put local English on the stage for the first, and in that way helped authorise the representation of the 'local', one at odds with the desired universal purity for the still-new nation. Kuo Pao Kun's Chinese-language plays in the 1980's also explicitly dealt with the destruction of the old, colonial-Asian city (*Kopitiam [The Coffeeshop]* [1986]) and the problem of cultural identity under erasure (*The Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree* [1987]).

Contemporary art practices in the form of installation sculpture and socially responsive public art that disrupted an established and somewhat bland abstract modernism (that itself was an earlier adaptation from Euro-America) exploded among the younger artists associated with a group called the Artists Village, started in 1988 in what was then a still a rural part of the island called Sembawang.[12] The fact that the artists linked with performance and visual artist Tang Da Wu (then newly returned from a long sojourn in England, and later the winner of the Fukuoka Cultural Prize of 1999), the dominant personality in the Village, installed themselves in the disappearing rural landscape indicates that the newer art practices were part of a reaction to the new urbanscape that had sought to eradicate previous identities. We can see that social and collective memory and local cultural identities became central thematics in the arts.

Nineteen eighty-eight was an interesting year, for it was a year in which the contemporary art show *Trimurti* was mounted by S. Chandrasekeran, Goh Ee Choo and Salleh Japar (part of their goal was to assert that while art was 'universal', it 'is also an expression of race, a culture, [and] a nation. … There is a need to show that different things can exist together harmoniously and in perfect equilibrium'[13]), the Practice Theatre Ensemble did Kuo Paok Kun's groundbreaking multilingual *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, and the Artists' Village started.

By the late 1990s, out of the still-existing cultural diversity in the midst of a homogenising modernity, TheatreWork's Ong Keng Sen attempted to envision 'The New Asia' in the form of his Asian *Lear* (1996 and 1999), with funding from the Japan Foundation Asia Center, while The Necessary Stage maintained their ongoing experiments in what Artistic Director Alvin Tan choses to call 'intra-cultural theatre'.

More recently, film has developed as an embryonic art form. Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* (1995) was the first recent major attempt at making local art film, followed by his *Twelve Storeys* (1997). Both of these films, it is generally acknowledged, have tried to probe 'deeper under the surface of the country's conspicuous wealth and success, focusing on the forgotten, the hidden, the problematic and bizarre aspects of Singapore life.'[14]

Singapore's built environment appears, in both of Khoo's films, as a disjunctive and claustrophobic space to which individuals have to adjust to emotionally—generally unsuccessfully. They attempt to get away from the cliched blandness of efficient Singapore, within which intimacy and individual autonomy seem restricted.

Other attempts to show stories at odds with the pristine surface of the Lion City followed, the most successful being the low-budget comedy *Money No Enough* (1998), which despite its relatively low production values was the second-highest grossing film in 1998, behind *Titanic*. The film questioned the *arriviste* materialism in Singapore life, and like *Twelve Stories* got past the state censors with the use of the proscribed Hokkien-Chinese. The protagonists emerge as authentic figures from the so-called 'HDB Heartland', showing how the Chinese-speaking could suffer in the city the 'English-educated,' as they were called until the 1990s, created. There was also Kelvin Tong's and Jasmine Ng's *Eating Air* (1999), which was about alienated Heartlander youth. The HDB estate and the less-salubrious bits of the city are themselves part of the subject of the film.

Conclusion

What I have attempted thus far only represents tentative attempts to think of the socio-cultural context of the modern society created since the 1960s within which aesthetic production takes place within in Singapore. I think what can be seen is that there is a realisation by artists that while the 'global' dimension of modern life is important, the 'local' must be come to terms with as well. One may say that there is a double consciousness here of being 'local-global' inside a state-oriented local-globalism with a more specifically economic outlook.

Why such aesthetic concerns and developments may be important for us as a society is that they may help Singapore work out new cultural identity directions that will not be nullified by the global packaging of lifetsyles that continues to gain strength, given a Southeast Asia weakened by the 1997 Asian economic crisis and the downturn in the US economy since 2001. The PAP government itself now asserts that the passive citizens of a Singapore Inc. that produced within the homogenised urban envirnoment of the 1970s are no longer desirable. In the place of an earlier imposed and bland modernity and urbanism is now an articulated desire for 'messy' creativity, that which will be less conformist and that which can fuel Singapore's ambition to be an IT hub. We must wait and see what sort of contemporary urban culture that embraces diversity and Asianness while comfortable with its Asian Western-ness will emerge.

[1] The proposal for Chinatown's conservation can be found in Singapore Tourism Board, *Enhancing the Chinatown Experience* (Singapore: Singapore Tourism Board, n.d.).
[2] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (1977; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 236, 241.

[3] Ibid., p. 262.
[4] Ibid., p. 41.
[5] Rem Koolhaas, 'Singapore Songlines: Portrait of a Potemkin Metropolis … or Thirty Years of Tabula Rasa', in Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large*, ed. Jennifer Sigler (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1995), 1041. All subsequent page references will be given within brackets in the main text.
[6] Charles Jencks, with a contribution by William Chaitkin, *Current Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1982), p. 158.
[7] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (1968; London: Fontana, 1970).
[8] See, for example, C.F. Yong, *Tan Kah-kee: The Making of an Overseas Chinese Legend* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1987), and also Yong's *Chinese Leadership and Power in Colonial Singapore* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992).
[9] Kuo Pao Kun, 'Uprooted and Searching', in *Drama, Culture and Empowerment: The IDEA Dialogues*, eds. John O'Toole and Kate Donelan (Brisbane: IDEA Publications, 1999), p. 169.
[10] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 244.
[11] S. Rajaratnam, *The Prophetic and the Political: Selected Speeches of S. Rajaratnam*, eds. Chan Heng Chee and Obaid ul Haq (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1987), p. 229.
[12] This area is now a public housing estate.
[13] S. Chandrasekeran, Goh Ee Choo and Salleh Japar, 'Trimurti, 1988 Statements and Documentation', in *Trimurti and Ten Years After*, ed. T. K. Sabapathy (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum and the National Heritage Board, 1998), p. 11.
[14] Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde, *Latent Images: Film in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 109.

THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MEMETIC REPRODUCTION

REVIEW

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Mike Watson (2019): *Can the Left Learn to Meme?*
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From wojak to bloomer, chad to trad, 4chan to Reddit, the internet today is ground-zero in a full blown culture war that insists on the autonomy of a freewheeling system of creativity with memes at the top of the semantic pecking order. But at what cost? What can memes tell us about the state of visual culture today? And are memes, as some have suggested, the new institutional critique of the 21st century?

As a starting point, it is useful to consider the title of a recently published book: *Can the Left Learn to Meme?* by art critic and philosopher Mike Watson. The question seems simple and symmetrical enough. Yet, upon closer inspection, the book reveals a sophisticated theory of meme culture markedly further afield than traditional political binaries between left and right, asking to what extent memes are able function as an expression of the avant-garde's seemingly endless preoccupation with horizontally-inclined cultural content.

Meme
Noun

1. An element of a culture or system of behaviour passed from one individual to another by imitation of other non-genetic means.
2. An image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations.

Memes, at their best, are accessible to millions of people and allow creators to bypass traditional gatekeepers of culture by offering new path towards creative distribution. At the same time, they upend longstanding beliefs around authenticity, art originality and authorship, political orientation and the economics of a bloated art system, basically, Richard Prince's wet dream.

To start, Watson dispels a common misunderstanding that memes are solely the domain of edgelords spreading alt-right content on 4/chan imageboards. Nevertheless, Watson claims that more recent incarnations of the left -- such as the Sanders or Corbyn movements -- find it difficult to participate in meme wars where it is absurdity that predicts virality. Oftentimes, the memes that achieve viral-status lack credence, accountability and truth, mostly by way of provoking obnoxious comparisons strictly for the lulz - internet parlance for content that generates laughter through unruly juxtapositions of text and image. ance for content that generates laughter through unseeming juxtapositions of text and image.

Incumbent to this conundrum, Watson turns to Adorno, who recognized much earlier that critiquing the rationality of a dominant system is useless without a strong materialist analysis. As early as the 1950s, Adorno observed how the empirical limitations of our own lived experience stem from culture, or what he dubbed the "culture industry." Not to be confused or conflated with the vast gaslighting of cultural Marxism today, which is paradoxically mostly thanks to alt-right trolls without even a modicum of understanding of materialist analysis, Watson segues into a soft critique of capitalism through its own rationality and ideology.

While the essence of any culture is arguably subjective, a matter of individual consciousness, not based on any single or universal truth, the book leans heavily into Adorno to insist that while there is an instrumental rationality that dominates late-capitalist logic today, it is also this rationality that in turn assimilates the working classes from Toronto to Timbuktu, denigrating art and aesthetics with it. According to Watson, the art industry that survives today, even in the post-pandemic era, is still mostly concerned with a capitalist logic that is used to prop up the status quo of existing capitalist relations. Watson takes stock of the culture industry as really nothing more than a field that has become rife with financial speculation and market manipulation, thereby limiting the symbolic potential of art to that of commodity fetish.

Moreover, Watson correctly conveys Adorno's paradox, which is twofold: that culture holds within it the contrapposto of truth and anti-truth, a shadowplay of extremities that make for an altogether disorientating abstraction at best, pure political propaganda and disinformation at worst. In terms borrowed from Adnoro, who was writing in the shadow of European fascism and all the horrors that came along with it, there is a dialectic at play within the culture industry that allows art to critique existing power relations, while remaining firmly implanted within it at the very same time.

These issues are certainly not unfamiliar to anyone adjacent to the current state of art discourse and criticism today, to which Watson is certainly purview. As a writer for *Artforum, Frieze, Hyperallergic* and others, Watson has long since examined elsewhere how the institutions, capital, markets and concepts that underlie art idioms create unequal power dynamics within the culture industry, despite often grand proclamations otherwise. Whether within the global circuity of contemporary art, or cinema, media or whatever, Watson argues without trepidation that financial interests ultimately determine what is and isn't art. This relationship, according to Watson, gives credence to transcultural processes that elevate conceptual and socially engaged art to the new holy grail of culture par excellence, while at the same time supporting a revolving door between art historians, museums, galleries, wealthy donors, art collectors, tax havens and off-shore storage facilities. According to Watson, the prevailing system of culture today is one that uses social engagement to assimilate critique. The culture industry, as such, refracts into self-referential microcosms that offer little by way of actual radical change or upheaval. The sub-status-quo of the art market is thus rendered mute by armies of PR pay-to-play driven content. Biennales and non-profit cultural spaces and events are hardly exempt; leading to what Watson describes throughout his art criticism career as a milieu that ensures the elongation of evermore subtle entanglements of cultural elitism and financialization that continue with unabated impunity.

Crucially, one should remember that this makes meaningful political action or resistance from within the culture industry either futile or naive, more often than not a little bit of both. The culture industry is, after all, an *industry* like any other. So long as artists are willing to propose ever more ambitious social projects for an ever smaller chunk of the proverbial cultural pie; the once transcendental hope of art to hedge against social injustice has become mostly a farce, a subject to which Watson devotes a considerable portion of his earlier book *Towards a Conceptual Militancy* (2016).

Against the spectrum of widespread and more systemic social injustices, even the most poignant critiques from the likes of Claire Bishop, Hannah Black or the Guerilla Girls remains infinitesimal to the mighty task of many avowed leftists. Today, with the march of right-wing populism the world over, it appears less and less likely that the realm of art world incubated critics will produce any meaningful resistance.

Today, Watson argues, the leftist-indoctrinated art world has become a cause célèbre for micro-feuds that do little to advance class consciousness, much less any meaningful social reform or change. While the art world still maintains an avowed surface tension and interest in commodifying identity politics and turning the art industry into some sort of Olympics of Otherhood, the real ability it has to institute meaningful social or political reform is becoming more

diluted by the day. It seems that we have become indoctrinated into a system where cultural exchange value is measured not by form, but instead by proximity to identity politics, be it anti-colonial, feminist or queer theory, often at the expense of underlying class critique. Though proponents of intersectional theory may wish to argue otherwise, the communal experience of socially engaged art offers but a short relapse, a minor detour from the otherwise unabating shock doctrine of disaster capitalism.

Enter a genuinely subliminal counter-hegemonic art form -- such as memes, Watson argues -- which by their very form necessitate that they exist outside the realm of high art because memes do not play within the existing power structures or the dynamics of the culture industry. Memes do not follow the novel and elitist infrastructure of contemporary art, nor any other culture industry for that matter. Memes are self-referential, infinitely reproducible, often authorless, sometimes semi-anonymous, viral, symbolic and dank. Memes have become the modern-day icons of intersectional class criticism, forgoing the charlatans who act as gatekeepers of blue-chip galleries, editors of art magazines, academia and the biennale-circuit all in one fell swoop, to which the younger generations from the millennials all the way on down are naturally more inclined.

Resistance in meme-form offers outsiders and art world adjacents with only a computer and internet access a slew of potential avenues to march forth with new icons of proto-institutional critique, Watson argues in his book. However, at the same time, memes also contain the same negative tropes that shore up class, racial and gender divides. One quick perusal through 4chan's infamous /pol/ image board reveals no shortage of anti-semitic, sexually explicit, or unabashedly racist and/or offensive images.

Regardless, the premise of Watson's book and the question it then attempts to answer is what makes the cultural capital of the left so blighted and unable to respond to the rise of right-wing, conservative, anti-identitarian streams of contemporary political discourse. The easy answer is that populism engendered by the internet creates a cause and effect that upends *some* existing power relations, while paradoxically reinforcing other power relations at the same time. It is precisely why, on top of the imperial infrastructure of the internet, what Shoshana Zuboff elsewhere describes as 'surveillance capitalism', that a site like Wikileaks could proliferate. But memes also serve the interests of the dominant class, particularly in a world where propaganda and disinformation are now part and parcel of states' ever growing cyber arenal; warfare and memes have become ever more entangled synonymous.

As with most viral content, a meme can and often does play into the hands of keyboard warriors eager to push a political agenda. Case in point being a recent Joe Biden meme, which portrayed the presumptive Democractic nominee for the Whitehouse alongside a photo of him

smiling along with the phrase “His Brain? No. His Heart.” However, after the meme went viral, artist Brad Troemel claimed credit for it, suggesting that “the ad is real, not in the sense that it was officially released by the Biden campaign,” Troemel said in a later video explaining his logic, “but in the sense that this is truly their message to you—that Joe Biden is a mentally and morally defunct candidate whose folksy and centrist charm will lead him to victory.” By the time the Biden presidential campaign caught wind of the ad, it had accrued over 10,000 retweets and 62,000 likes, thought it was later flagged and removed from Twitter for violating its terms of service, the damage had clearly already been done.

So while many consider memes simply off-handed jokes and side-swipes at well-known tropes or stereotypes, memes have also come to encompass an all out organ of fake news and disinformation. As such, Watson rightly nuances how today there are numerous examples of internet censorship and surveillance, but ultimately the sheer veracity of culture being produced on the internet obviates the need for elitist cultural gatekeepers, which allows for dissident voices and content to also take root, alongside a cacophony of just about everything else, leading to Watson’s central thesis:

> Adorno’s complaint that an ostensibly democractic system uses mass-produced cultural products to numb the minds of an unsuspecting public loses traction given the vast range of choice interactivity offered by the internet [...] Or put otherwise, Adorno’s worst fears regarding the homogenising effects of the culture industry have been realised, yet at the expense of the autonomy of high art, which has contradictorily migrated to mass culture in the form of internet memes. (p.51)

Yet, where exactly this leads us is to a bit of an impasse. By leaning into a systemic analysis of memes, the book also drifts into an array of spuriously related cultural references, including the obscure internet music genre vaporwave, gaming culture (mostly *League of Legends),* Netflix’s television series *Stranger Things,* through to the reality TV show *Keeping up With the Kardashians*. This slightly obfuscates the title of the book (or perhaps it is the other way around, with the book’s title obfuscating the content). Regardless, *Can the Left Learn to Meme* gives little justice to Watson’s otherwise interesting and important thesis: that the left, either wittingly or not, is losing the culture war and the battle of ideas to an army of mostly uneducated, dumb, right-wing trolls.

In the final chapter, Watson offers several nuanced thoughts as to why video games and millennials - and by extension memes and new media forms of institutional critique vis-a-vis the web - are often “unwitting acolytes of the new far right.” (pp.) Watson claims that new media, despite a surface connection to so-called ‘woke’ millennials, is not void from the same crude

political binaries and hyperpolarizations that define our contemporary political arena. Is it possible to simultaneously see the 21st century new media landscape as both positive and negative? To some extent, Watson argues that yes, the meme wars are naturally privy to the same polarizations taking place across the political sphere. Returning to Adorno, Watson reiterates that "the flood of precise information and brand new amusements make people smarter and more stupid at once."[1]

Accordingly, other aspects of the book may be instructive to some in the online left, in particular the sections in which he analyses the impact of Steve Bannon, Breitbart News and gamergate, which for more seasoned readers with knowledge of these topics the book will not offer much by way of new information, but potentially add new insight into an already well-trodden history. All told, *Can the Left Learn to Meme* examines with fevered pace the outstripping of all manner of online activity, all the while offering a cautionary tale to those on the precipice of an antiquated culture industry. With punkish attitude and gingerly panache, the book makes a sincere attempt to chart the rise memes and with it the defining tragi-comedy of 21st century culture, riddled with twists and turns and calls for art's emancipation beyond the stoic gallery and museum walls.

[1] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, 2002), xxvii.

POPULAR
INQUIRY