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# GENDER FORUM

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## Imagendering II: Gender and Visualization

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## About

*Gender forum* is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

## Submissions

Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure to number your paragraphs and include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to [gender-forum@uni-koeln.de](mailto:gender-forum@uni-koeln.de).

We always welcome reviews on recent releases in Gender Studies! Submitted reviews should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition), have numbered paragraphs, and should be between 750 and 1,000 words in length. Please note that the reviewed releases ought to be no older than 24 months. In most cases, we are able to secure a review copy for contributors.

## Article Publishing

The journal aims to provide rapid publication of research through a continuous publication model. All submissions are subject to peer review. Articles should not be under review by any other journal when submitted to *Gender forum*.

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There are no submission or page charges, and no colour charges.

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## Editorial

1        **Imagendering II** is a continuation of **Imagendering I**, analyzing visualisations of gender and the gendering of visualisation. This second issue presents target essays which focus on the negotiation of gender and sexuality in contemporary poetry, in the nineteenth-century image culture, and in films of diverse genres, from US and German comedies of the 1950s to *The Matrix* trilogy.

2        Elizabeth Parsons's "The Body of Work - Dorothy Porter's *Akhenaten*" investigates the depiction of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten as a hermaphroditic subject in Porter's recent collection of poems. In "Looking at Women Looking: Female Portraits in the Gender Crisis," Renate Brosch explores the increasing observer participation in nineteenth century image culture and discusses the impact of this shift on the constitution of identity, especially in terms of gender, sexuality and power.

3        In addition to these explorations of the interface of gender and visualisation in the fields of poetry and portrait painting, **Imagendering II** also investigates filmic conceptions of the issue. Katrin Greim's "Discursive Violence in *Aimée and Jaguar*" focuses on the presentation of lesbianism as an act of anti-nationalist resistance in both Erica Fischer's book and the movie *Aimée and Jaguar*, arguing that the novel and the film have competing investments in the issue. In her essay "The Performance of Male Subjectivity in *The Matrix* Trilogy," Christiane König focuses on the figure of Neo to discuss the performative constitution, development and stabilization of the male subject in the trilogy. Massimo Perinelli and Olaf Stieglitz's article "Liquid Laughter. A Gendered History of Milk & Alcohol Drinking in West-German and US Film Comedies of the 1950s" argues that post-war film comedies played an important part in the social re-establishment of heteronormative and patriarchal gender systems after the war, both in Germany and in the USA. Finally, in "Heroines of Gaze. Gender and Self-Reflexivity in Current Espionage Films," Isabelle Stauffer investigates female spy figures in 1990s movies *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and *Shining Through* and proposes that their portrayal necessitates the reformulation of Mulvey's analysis of gender-specific ways of looking in Hollywood cinema. In "No one claps at the end of a novel," the British playwright Laura Wade, who has just received the Critics' Circle Award for Most Promising Playwright, talks to Christina Wald about her recent plays *Colder than Here* and *Breathing Corpses* as well as her new play *Other Hands*, which has just opened at London's Soho Theatre. The fiction section of *Imagendering II* presents the first scene of *Other Hands*.

4      The featured reviews in this issue are on *Regarding Sedgwick. Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory* (edited by David Clark and Stephen Barber), *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*( edited by Sherrie A. Inness), *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan) and *Janespotting and Beyond* (edited by Eckart Voigts-Virchow).

# **Looking at Women Looking: Female Portraits in the Gender Crisis**

By Renate Brosch, University of Potsdam, Germany

## **Abstract:**

In this paper I want to look at nineteenth century image culture to show a historical trajectory which gradually favoured increased observer participation. Going back into the historical development of specific images can delineate the evolution of the conditions of perceiving and codes of depicting to ultimately throw light on how these conditions correspond to subject positions and expose power relations. Ways of seeing and their concomitant constructions of spectatorship, the gaze and the glance, practices of viewing, observation and visual pleasure are constantly being reorganized. And because questions of perception and seeing reach into the constitution of identity, investigating vision and visual representation necessitates a central focus on how issues of gender, sexuality and power are inextricably connected (Pajaczkowska 1).

1 Today's visual media have redefined the value and status of images. Cultural commentators like Nicholas Mirzoeff and W.J.T. Mitchell assign agency functions to images which they define as active players in global culture (Mitchell 10). Images have always appealed directly to emotions or to affective response, as is evident in their earlier cult or ritual status. This direct impact is part of the power images hold over us and part of the power we invest them with. At the same time, the images a culture produces are caught up in existing power relations. Visual Culture Studies have from the beginning made efforts to analyse the role of the visual in the discourses and praxes sustaining power, and more particularly the gendered distribution of power.

2 The inundation with images we are subjected to and participate in today resulted from stunning new visual technologies invented in the nineteenth century which produced radical changes in understanding and producing representations. Recent research has been much occupied with this explosion of visibility in the nineteenth century, when many new optical devices, theatrical and illusionist effects on stage, optical instruments, techniques of reproduction and experiments in representation were complemented by the visual challenges of everyday urban life, such as high speed transport. The iconographical revolution of the nineteenth century, especially the beginnings of photography and film, initiated the cultural shift that led to today's pictorial turn.

3 In this paper I want to look at nineteenth century image culture to show a historical trajectory which gradually favoured increased observer participation. Going back into the historical development of specific images can delineate the evolution of the conditions of perceiving and codes of depicting to ultimately throw light on how these conditions correspond to subject positions and expose power relations. Ways of seeing and their

concomitant constructions of spectatorship, the gaze and the glance, practices of viewing, observation and visual pleasure are constantly being reorganized. And because questions of perception and seeing reach into the constitution of identity, investigating vision and visual representation necessitates a central focus on how issues of gender, sexuality and power are inextricably connected (Pajackowska 1). While the central gender focus is an advantageous starting point, it has in the past created set pieces of formulaic assumptions.

4 Visual observation and a ubiquity of surveillance have been identified as dominant forms of sustaining the gendered hegemony of power in post-industrialist Western society. This common assumption results in the suspicion of the visual which derives from Foucault's thesis of a society of surveillance which replaced an earlier model in the European enlightenment. According to Foucault modernity shifted the means of exerting power towards invisible strategies of observation and containment which inscribed themselves into the individual's methods of self-control. Many feminist analyses of nineteenth century culture echo this idea of a resolutely ocularcentric power regime in modern society (Jay 3-28), deploring a panoptical observational power that would confine women within the limited space of a heavily regulated private life. Another enduring notion concerning the nineteenth century is the separation of spheres with the dominant concept of Victorian femininity geared towards the angel-in-the-house role model repressed not only in terms of sexuality but in terms of total exclusion from civic and public life.

5 In painting, the female portrait with its conventional composition, framing and objet d'art character exemplifies a restrained construction of female subjectivity within an imaginatively rationalized space oriented towards a male gaze. Following Alison Conway who called for a differentiation of the totalizing assessments mentioned above (5), I am going to examine portraits of women as well as contemporary art criticism to show how the second half of the nineteenth century increasingly placed ideas of theatricality and the aesthetics of beholding at the centre of its representations. Painting as well as theories of spectatorship increasingly foregrounded an implied spectator's gaze. Portraits of women, those representations which specifically address gender issues, most particularly emphasized the beholder's participatory agency as did theories of aesthetic experience. I argue that the period, in which narrative fiction also shifted from an omniscient eye, capable of occupying multiple visual sites, to a subjective point of view, must be seen as transitional and ambivalent. The transition from a narrative omniscience to an individual view-point has a structural analogy in portraiture's overdetermined construction of an implied observing situation and theory's excessive use of an embodied observer. This shift involves a rejection of the realist consensus

dominant in earlier Victorian times which yet remains ambivalent: It allows women to become subjects, rather than objects of the gaze but it presents itself in the guise of a profound disturbance. Thus while my discussion has profited greatly from earlier feminist diagnosis of patriarchal spectatorship, I want to point out a tendency towards counter-discourse and resistance which is often lost in generalizing evaluations.

6 In the course of the nineteenth century, the buying power of the newly rich industrials and manufacturers tipped the scales of the art market in favour of contemporary scenes while art criticism still debated the issue of their appropriateness to "high art". The contemporary and everyday was still a contested subject for painting. However, the middle class ascendancy to wealth and power caused the art market to turn away from historical painting. For patrons who wanted pictures for the walls of their homes, still-lives and genre-scenes proved more attractive because of the smaller format and easy semantic accessibility. Historical and mythological painting adapted itself to the changing tastes by translating these topics into more contemporary iconologies, like John Everett Millais's scandalous "Christ in the House of His Parents" (1850) naturalistic carpenter's shop complete with a mother Mary who has chilblains on her feet. Later modifications in the Pre-Raphaelite efforts towards a decorative and ornamental style cleansed of emotional expression by Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti also adapted to the taste for less high-blown and heroic subject matters. A perfect combination of elaborate historical settings with Victorian genre sentiment can be observed in the paintings of the Academicians Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Frederic Leighton.

7 In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the most prominent systems ordering society, namely class and gender, were threatened by "the Woman Question." Caricatures in *Punch* and other magazines showed the New Woman as a threat to the institutions of marriage and the family because of her "masculine" behaviour. The women's movement, the shifting labour market and reform legislation challenged traditional institutions like marriage and the role of women in the family. Discourses of provocation and radical reform intersected with those which rearticulated ideas of gender difference in order to police deviant behaviour. In the context of the economic difficulties and political and moral panic which dominated the second half of the century, the codification of domestic femininity as a part of the dominant position of the bourgeoisie became an obsessive topic of representation. Narrative and genre painting contributed to these containment strategies against threats perceived in interventionist reforms, women's paid employment, feminists speaking out against masculine sexuality and marriage, nationalist struggles and the rise of socialism (Cherry 122). The



pictorial depiction of the domestic terrain in genre painting mapped feminine social spaces.

8 Contemporary scenes of life were particularly apt for the pictorial mapping of the domestic terrain, such as the drawing room, morning room, conservatory, and garden, as the appropriate spaces of respectable femininity, could construct femininity as a part of the dominant oppositional gender model. The *Art Journal* which promoted itself as the authoritative cultural magazine acclaimed the increasing number of domestic subjects:

England, happy in her homes, and joyous in her hearty cheer, and peaceful in her snug firesides, is equally fortunate in a school of Art sacred to the hallowed relations of domestic life. From prince to peasant, from palace to cottage [...] the same sentiments [...] have found earnest and literal expression through domestic pictures [...] The public at large naturally bring such compositions to the test of their own experience [...] for the works of this class are successful just as they awaken a dormant sympathy. (Doane 178)

The patriotic rhetoric invoking national humanity as transcending social differences of "prince to pauper" appeals to a sentimental unity based on bourgeois nationalism (Cherry 122). However, the critic's democratic invitation to readers to test "pictorial transcripts" against their own personal experience and to judge success in art according to their feelings of sympathy is a new tone taken. In the wake of growing popular interest in pictorial art, it is this respect paid to subjective response which gains more weight in the course of the century, in visual art as well as in theoretical discussions.

9 A debate carried on in *The Times* in 1885 concerned the propriety of the naked body in paintings. The critic John Horsley denounced contemporary nudes as improper even in mythological subjects.<sup>1</sup> Evoking conventional Victorian convictions, he called an appeal to the animal passions contrary to the moral and aesthetic duty of art, which should be "a manifest appeal to the love of beauty, and not to appetite, an ideal presentation not a literal transcript of individual fact, observance of special artistic conventions" (Weikert 266). The fact that the female body, especially the naked body, was no longer a natural attraction for the public gaze may be seen as not just another instance of Victorian prudery but as a growing awareness of the problematical relationship of spectators to objects. The habit of presenting women as objects to be looked at was coming to be questioned.

10 The female nude had a long tradition depicting the naked female body turned towards an implied male spectator outside the frame, displaying the Venus pudica position which suggests chastity and draws the gaze towards the genitals and posited so that the eyes are accorded no power of returning the look. According to Nanette Salomon, this type of picture

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<sup>1</sup> He had in mind a picture by Wiedemann Browning of Jeanne d'Arc bathing ("Joan of Arc and the Kingfisher"). Robert Browning defended his son's picture claiming that it showed a historical incident. It was exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in 1886, cf. Weickert 269-270.

legitimized male desire among a community of hierarchically differentiated men opposite an essentialized "universal" womanhood (99). In France Edouard Manet secularized the nude by showing unidentified prostitutes instead of Venuses and Ledas (e.g. "Olympia"). This intrusion of eroticism in the shape of authentic, lower class bodies into the realm of high art was a scandal to contemporary audiences. On the whole, however, photography, rather than painting, quickly became the medium for pornographic images. Its impersonal technique of automatic documentary registration favoured a voyeuristic gaze, suggesting a complete, merely apparatus-dependent intimacy between viewer and image. The *Times*-controversy is evidence for a confrontation between Victorian ideals of femininity and newer concepts of female corporeality due to these innovations (Betterton 3). On the one hand, the educated rhetoric of titles pointing out mythological or biblical references seem to have lost some of their legitimizing effect as Victorian art audience were no longer able to decode all the traditional iconographies for which they needed Ruskin's explanatory Academy Notes. On the other, artists' experiments like Manet's refusal to idealize the nude disturbed expectations of gratification by the female body as a passive possession for the male gaze. In spite of its overt conservatism the *Times*-debate exemplifies this double break with tradition.

11 Many female authors also achieved a disruption of received notions by rewriting descriptions of art works from a different point of view. Charlotte Bronte used a painting of an Orientalized nude of Cleopatra in *Villette* (1853) as an occasion for a deliberate misapprehension.<sup>2</sup> The confrontation of her heroine Lucy is staged as an encounter which gives its viewer qualms about her female identity. It results in her comment: "If I am not she, Cleopatra, who is this 'I' which I believe to be?" This is not just part of a psychological maturing process, the scene in the museum where Lucy looks at the painting is carefully dramatized to produce a conflicting encounter with aesthetic, ethical and gendered aspects of the gaze in the protagonist and by extension in a female reader. Lucy is facing the nude in the painting but also herself as the object of a male gaze (by Monsieur Paul) and aware of the spectacle of the painted female nude for all the others looking at it (Ender 89). Significantly, there are no women in Bronte's imaginary museum except for those framed on the walls but there is a crowd of male spectators with eyeglasses "exceedingly taken with this dusk and portly Venus of the Nile" (Bronte 209). Lucy who has chosen to look at this picture is told by Monsieur Paul that it is not proper for her. He tries to take her away and make her understand that she should be looking at other paintings "more like her" and he positions her in front of genre sequence showing the stages of ideal womanhood entitled "La vie d'une femme." Lucy

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<sup>2</sup> The painting has been identified as Eduard de Biefve, "Une Almée," which Bronte had seen at the triennial Salon de Bruxelles 1843. Cf. Onslow 450-473.

dislikes the "vapid," "bloodless," "brainless" representations of decorous femininity and resists his interdiction of the nude, but she also resists the traditional reading of the nude in favour of a personal ironical misreading:

She was indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat - to say nothing of bread, vegetables and liquids - must she have consumed to attain that [...] wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed round her; she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments [...] out of the abundance of material - seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery - she managed to make insufficient raiment. (Bronte 203)

12 The female protagonist here lays claim to the "innocent eye" later called for by the art critic John Ruskin, pretending to be unable to explain the disarray of the exotic boudoir, the reclining pose and the near-nakedness of the figure. She directs naive exhortations at the subject of the painting to get up and tidy up the mess. Interpreting the exotic nude determinedly within categories of European domestic genre painting as a household mismanaged by an indolent woman, she ridicules the current taste for Orientalist nudes, which showed slave-markets or harems and gratified male voyeurism while at the same time exploiting sentiments of imperial superiority. The satirical passage pointedly lays bare the sexist commodifications in academy painting and in the politics of official exhibitions. The passage makes clear that the unstable borderline between the naked and the nude is a distinction in ways of seeing, where nakedness is the experience of a real and vulnerably exposed body and nudity is a prerequisite of art and therefore an aesthetic experience (Clark 4). The scene of Lucy's misreading is contemporary with Manet's analogous experiment in translation the nude into nakedness in his "Olympia." Both unsettle the established male-centred conventions of viewing the female form (Ender 96). Both contribute to the contemporary negotiations of female representation and female spectatorship, while Bronte specifically empowers a female act of spectatorship to draw attention to ways of seeing and their ideologies.

13 At the end of the century, when anxieties about gender became omnipresent, a host of different images was produced. As female submission was called into question by emancipist discourses and practices, domestic scenes in painting (Johnson 256, 83, 86) and in literature tended to depict more problematic relationships. At the end of the century, gender concepts were in flux in intellectual and artistic discourses. Abandoning moralising didacticism, fiction concentrated increasingly on observable phenomena. Images of containment of women were not the only reaction to the changing state of affairs, unconventional female behaviour came

to be seen in a more sympathetic light. Behaviour patterns constructed as feminine could take on exaggerated forms which endangered normative assumptions about woman's roles in society. Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, George Meredith's *Lord Ormond and his Aminta*, to say nothing of Oscar Wilde's and G. B. Shaw's plays showed non-conforming women as victims of the hypocrisy of respectable society. In texts by Robert Browning, Meredith, Thomas Hardy, George Gissing, and others who took part in the creation of the New Woman-ideal males were guilty of egoism and insensitivity and indirectly responsible for the ruin of female fates. Patriarchal authority was increasingly represented as a stifling and often blighting influence on the lives of its dependent wives and children. Thus the development of fiction and drama from moral tale to psychological realism contained an increasing scepticism towards the value of the imposed system of gender difference.

14 Not surprisingly, the period of gender crisis was also one of redefinition of urban spaces. On the upper end of the social scale public spaces previously reserved for men, whose aggressive, competitive abilities fitted them for public life, were opened up for women as consumers. Women "in the street" had been an anomaly, not in terms of numbers but in terms of categories of respectable womanhood. Ladies were not supposed to be seen walking the streets, so as not to be confused with those professionals who were considered criminal offenders and a danger to the moral fabric of society. However, as the topography of cities altered, women increasingly conquered public territory (Wolff 71). The establishment of large department stores for instance turned shopping into a leisure-time activity for women and redefined the gender constructions of public activity (Friedberg 61). By the 1870s an active consuming public, increasingly and deliberately addressed as female by the advertising world, thronged through boulevards, department stores and exhibitions. The resulting uncertainties in social structure are depicted in cartoon of ladies being mistaken for "non-ladies" while waiting for the bus. This increased presence of women in the city boulevards created new options for female gazes within the developing consumer society and gradually led to a shift in the distribution of spectatorial roles.

15 Even within the home the private individual was not free from consistent exposure to a cross-class gaze, a gaze that often produced irritation if not downright antagonism. Robert Kerr contended in his 1864 book *The Gentleman's House, or how to plan English Residences from the Parsonage to the Palace* that the most essential division in the design of a residence was to preclude observation by the servants (Beard 240). The provision of back-stairs ensured that the wealthy house consisted of one structure for the family, horizontal and open in its

plan, and one for the servants, vertical and confined from attic to basement (Tristram 38). Kerr's remarks point to the considerable anxiety felt by the well to do about cross-class surveillance. In a mass society, freedom from observation had become a class as well as a gender privilege.

6        The nineteenth century had to teach people to come to terms with mass society and the resulting visual encroachment on private space. People were forced into greater reserve and the idea that one can be nowhere as lonely as in a crowd quickly took hold of the collective imagination. On the other hand, crowds could also provide effective hiding places where one could seek refuge in anonymity. Urbanism liberates identities, this experience is simultaneously one of disturbing loss and one of exhilarating opportunity. Edgar Allan Poe had expressed this feeling in his short story "The Man of the Crowd," in which a man walking the streets attracts a shadow existence, somebody who follows him and imitates his irregular perambulation. Poe's short story is often called the first description of the flaneur in literature. The flaneur was the epitome of the new spectatorial attitude to city life (Benjamin 567). The provocatively aesthetic attitude to the urban scene was a favourite pastime of gentlemen and indeed a male prerogative.

17       Art historians have presented considerable evidence to suggest that Impressionism "was a defence against the threat of rapid urbanization and rapid industrialization" (Chadwick 232). The changing face of cities and their instable social relations were presented in impressionist painting as a modern culture of increased leisure and consumption (Herbert 305). The impressionist style with its blurred representation of reality significantly changed the pictorial appearance of familiar social relations. Whether the artists were aware of it or not, the impressionist style produced an ephemeral impression that imbued the social relations depicted with a precarious volatility and transience. Thus many paintings by impressionists like Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassat must be seen in the context of the restructuring of public and private spheres. Although women's role as spectacle continued to dominate the period's visual culture, the increasing participation of women in public life challenged notions of female passivity and restraint.

18       As cultural changes, such as urban crowds, crime detection, and photography, brought the power of observation into general consciousness, art and aesthetic theory started to invite reflections on the process of viewing. Paintings by these impressionists made viewers adapt to a dramatically changed concept of realism opposed to the conventional idea that the message or subject of a painting is paramount. Broken brushstrokes called attention to the surface, distracting from the things represented. Sometimes the latter could only be identified at a

certain distance from the canvas, a distance quite unusual for the contemporary visitor to the crowded Salon or the Royal Academy. This technique demanded participatory activity of the spectator or at least foregrounded the act of viewing. The most prominent feature of impressionist painterly experiments could be called a reorganization of the visual relationship between picture and beholder, a reorganization which disrupted the gaze of conventional pictorialism which had been completely devoted to the content. The unprecedented inaccessibility of surface, now covered in pastuse patches of paint, shocked viewers who were accustomed to fine "finish" as a manifestation of artistic technique. The particularity of impressionist technique provoked a creative response of the viewer who is invited to consciously reflect his or her own process of viewing to an unprecedented degree.

19 The second half of the nineteenth century was a time when the arts responded assertively to the challenge of the revolution in visuality that had taken place. Photography especially, which had rapidly disseminated into all major cultural areas, significantly altered ways of seeing and representing. Because it was thought of as an automatic self-revelation which could record reality more faithfully, photography may have played a liberating role for the arts, freeing painters from the duty of mimetic representation. In painting, the fleeting, transitory moment already captured by photography became more important in impressionist records of the play of outdoor daylight. Subjects in all the media became more contemporary and every-day. In literature, narrative techniques tended to reject the homogenizing panoramic vision of classic Victorian novels in favour of a single subjective perception. The subjective personal focus emerging in literary fictions of the late nineteenth century must clearly be seen in the larger context of a cultural re-conceptualisation of visuality. Foregrounding *point-of-view* in fictional narratives, such as Henry James's significantly titled *The Portrait of Lady*, shifted the centre of interest from action and plot towards the individual perception and consciousness of heroine. It is no coincidence that at the centre of the reorganization of the gaze in painting and fiction were female figures. The discussions of the "woman question" and the feminist movement had created a destabilization of strategies of the gaze and its attendant anxieties and desires.

20 Some painters responded to this situation by not only adopting the new broken style, but also by challenging traditional viewing expectations in terms of subjects. Prevented from asking men from outside the family or "dubious" models to pose, and limited in their access to the public life of bars and cafes, women artists often concentrated on the home. The social meanings produced by Mary Cassat's and Berthe Morisot's canvases, e.g. "Mother and Sister of the Artists" (1870) and "A Cup of Tea" (1880), transform informal interiors into a public

statement. Through their compressions and juxtapositions of the pictorial spatial system they created an atmosphere of uncomfortably encroaching boundaries of feminine space, a mood somewhat at odds with prevalent notions of haven and retreat. Even more interesting is their depiction of a female venture into new territories, which Griselda Pollock has analysed. She demonstrated how impressionist women artists devised new options for the female gaze within the developing consumer society. Although women's role as spectacle continued to dominate the period's visual culture, the increasing participation of women in consumer culture challenged notions of the relegation of women to completely private sphere. Female spectatorship, becoming a social reality as female shoppers usurped the leisurely stroll of the previously exclusively masculine flaneur, also became a subject of female painting (Chadwick 242). Female artists like Mary Cassat and Berthe Morrisot explicitly pointed to hierarchies of the gaze in metropolitan public life which were by extension the same hierarchies produced in front of their canvases. Mary Cassat's "Woman in Black at the Opera" (1880) is an ironic response to male scopic power over the female body as an object of observation and evaluation. Many other painters were critical of notions of one-way rights of looking in anonymous metropolitan surroundings (Nochlin 23).

21 Male artists, by contrast, very often portrayed women in such a manner as to question the naturalized power structures of the gaze. Women look out of the paintings at the observer in a vulnerable, or provocative or otherwise disturbing manner, promoting feelings of discomfort and denying an easy comfortable voyeuristic pleasure. Manet, who was a target for numerous jibes and ridicule by the press because of break with good taste in "Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe" was an artist whose figurative painting is full of problematic and irritating gazes. His pubescent prostitute "Olympia" returns the gaze in a calculated exchange reflecting the nexus of desire and commodity, and other solitary women avert their eyes in way which emphasizes the intrusion of a male onlooker. The complicated viewing situation depicted between a bar maid and a male customer in the mirror in "La bar aux Folies Bergères" has puzzled generations of art critics. A disrupted visual communication is most obvious in Manet's portraits of couples, all of which present a moment of alienation between male and female. Manet set the example for later painters' deliberate reflection on the representation of women in revised power structures of viewing (Armstrong 225).

22 A gaze returned from the *objet d'art* became a disturbing feature used by advanced artists to signify an asymmetry in the relation between observer and perceived subject and to draw attention to a new order of participation of the recipient in the construction of meaning of a piece of visual representation. In 1856 already Samuel Carter-Hall's *Art Journal*, the very

voice of the conservative Victorian art establishment, had called Millais's "Autumn Leaves" "a significant vulgarism" because "the principle figure looks out of the picture at the spectator" (18:1856, 17, Landow). The gaze from the painted girl was perhaps interpreted as unnecessarily assured and unsuitably reminiscent of either an aristocratic tradition or of a courtesan impertinence. However much these women are safely confined within the picture frame as well as within a traditional portrait iconology, the representation of their gaze beyond the frame and at the beholder directed undue attention outside their assigned domestic and private sphere and hinted at a transgression of a prescribed modesty of behaviour.

23 The most well-known and important artistic mediators of impressionist techniques in England were the Americans James MacNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and John Singer Sargent (1856-1925). Whistler was by far the more controversial personality. As a reaction to John Ruskin's statement that one of his pictures was "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face" he took the famous art sage to court for libel. Whistler used the courtroom as a platform to make provocative and witty pronouncements in favour of his *l'art pour l'art* ideas, and achieved considerable notoriety through his aphorisms and witticisms. The painting which had incited Ruskin's scorn, "The Falling Rocket," showed a cascade of fireworks against a velvet night sky in motley daubs and patches. Its dissolution of conventional pictorial space into a confusion of scattered fragments seemed lacking in referentiality. Whistler gave his portraits of people, e.g. his mother, confusing titles like "symphony" and "harmony" to emphasize the formal compositional features, their rhythmical affinity to music, instead of content. His naming of portraits, even if these depicted close relatives, thus denied the mimesis and foregrounded formal aspects.

24 Like Whistler, John Sargent was a successful artist at the *fin de siècle*, a period called "the second consumer revolution," in which an increased emphasis on feminine refinement and upper class purchasing power and penchant for luxury overlapped (Lubar 11). Middle-class self-representation was an obsessive goal of conspicuous consumption; especially wives and daughters in domestic and society settings were a favourite of art commissions. Sargent willingly supplied these images of femininity gaining a reputation for beautifully executed and psychologically perceptive portraiture with a certain surplus of daring *frisson*. He is now generally held to have remained committed to upper class, conservative values, flattering the nouveaux riches with glossy pictures of their attractive wives. At the same time, he achieved something like a theatrical redefinition of female self-fashioning. Sargent shared a popular fascination with the theatre at this period, which had inspired his famous painting of Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth. But the influence of the theatre extended beyond his portraits of



actors. The bright lights which make ordinary figures stand out from a dark background hint at the footlights of a stage. The persons portrayed are offered as a spectacle of ostentatious display to the viewer, not only because of their affected poses and dramatic illumination but primarily because they are surrounded by slightly distorted and impenetrable spaces.

25 This lack of equilibrium in his portraits was noted by many contemporary critics and was the subject of disparaging caricature. In the beginning of his career his odd angles and abrupt foreshortenings were held to be his particular failing (Hills 170). But around the turn of the century the often precarious poses came to be seen as excitingly apt, "these creatures vibrate with the nervous tension of the age" (Hills 171). Unsettled pictorial spaces were increasingly interpreted as a successful expression of fleeting moments of heightened psychological significance (Kilmurray/ Ormond 36). The idea that life can be improved by seeking as many hedonistic moments of elevated experience as possible, "getting as many pulsations as possible" (237) would have been familiar from Walter Pater's famous conclusion to *The Renaissance*.

26 Sargent's assimilation into high society as an American prodigy who gave people the glossy effigies they demanded should not detract from his more modern achievements. He managed to capture visually the undercurrents of anxiety that affected London society at the end of the century. One of the main anxieties was the break-up of the social fabric through destabilization of gender roles. To express these prevalent insecurities in his fashionable portraits, he employed three main strategies: Obscure and unstable spatial organization, theatricality of pose, and a response-provoking structure of gazes.

27 Let us consider briefly his group portrait "The three Misses Vickers" (1884), a painting which was faulted by critics for its failure to do justice to the social rank of the Misses Vickers, *The Athenaeum* called the painting an "insult to their evident high culture" (Hills 98). What made most viewers uncomfortable was again the unconventional approach to composition, the oddly angled perspective and spatial ambiguity in the mysterious darkness which fill the background. The three sisters are highlighted against the dark interior, which seems to throw the figures forward. The impression of looking at them from an unrealistically high angle is increased by the sharply cropped foreground. The resulting compression of the figures creates a tension which can be read into the mood of the sitters. There is an emphasized lack of communication among the young women in the different directions of their gazes which seems to suggest that the siblings are not at ease with each other. They seem to exemplify three types of looking: the demure submissive downcast eyes of the middle sister, on the left an abstracted inward look of dreamy abstractedness and on the right, turned

away from the others, a startling uncompromising directness of gaze at the viewer. Sargent renders three different versions of femininity as potentialities within the spectrum of respectability, but the bold outward gaze is clearly privileged in the pictorial structure. The outward gaze of the sister conveys an exciting sense of nervous expectancy. She seems intent on the conversation of an unseen companion, who must be supplied by the spectator himself (Kilmurray/ Ormond 107). A visual response is forced, the viewer is drawn into the picture via a triangle of gazes, to supply a missing mediator and make up for a lack of interior coherence. Sargent thus dissolved the boundary between viewer and viewed or at least called it into question. A suggestion of problematized relationships is here projected outside the picture frame.

28     Theatricality is the key to Sargent's representations of women. He encourages heightened attention by transforming an everyday domestic space into a performative area of display. The poignant crisis in the concept and representation of womanhood mentioned above is captured in Sargent's redefinition of the relation of spectators to images of women. The uncanny interior spaces encroaching upon the portrayed produce a specific bond between spectator and bodies represented. The theatrical poses in decidedly obscure and indefinite territory prevent a psychological or narrative reading. Instead, the spectator is condemned to regard a surface, marked as a superficial appearance on display and perhaps provoked to reflect on the female role in these conspicuous exchanges. Perhaps one may even read these pictures as demanding a compassionate response; they transform aesthetic experience into empathetic attention.<sup>3</sup>

29     According to Showalter, the cultural crisis perceived as attack on patriarchy was generated not only from an external feminism but also from within, by men responding to stresses and tensions in the rigid constructions of masculine roles (11). Parallel to the battle between the sexes, there was also "a battle within the sexes," an instability and change of concepts of femininity and masculinity, that produced what Showalter calls "sexual anarchy." This anarchy posed a threat to the cherished belief in the polarised spheres of the two sexes (Showalter 9). Gender blurring in aestheticist design and art by Aubrey Beardsley and the *Yellow Book* circle and in symbolist poetry and fiction represented and provoked anxieties concerning the vanishing of sexual difference. Sargent did not, like Oscar Wilde, launch an explicit attack on mainstream gender relations, but, like the French impressionists, he was concerned to redefine the relationship between viewer, space and body. He invested in the problematizing of gendered spaces that impressionist women painters had initiated. Working

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<sup>3</sup> The ideas summarized here are presented at length in Brosch 2003.

in a society where observation had become a vital activity for pleasure and for self-protection, Sargent succeeded in making the spectator contemplate his (or her) scrutiny of the figures and in renegotiating the power structures of the gaze.

30 The painterly reorganization of the power relations between picture and beholder works through an implied observer who structures the process of viewing. The implied observer of these portraits ties in with a subjective personal focus emerging in literary fictions of the late nineteenth century, which must clearly be seen in the larger context of the cultural re-conceptualisation of visibility. Nineteenth century novels were still able to combine or compromise between individual perspective and collective/consensus vision. An idealistic faith in ulterior purposes still informed most narratives, producing a common spiritual horizon of universal truths. But the more narratives moved inward, the less this collective function could be fulfilled. The *fin de siècle* represents a unique transition in the history of narrative perspective. With the full development of internal focalization the transindividual validity of narrative is lost. At the turn of the century a fundamental uncertainty concerning observable reality produced proliferating relativist viewpoints in fiction.

31 The discovery of literary point of view was not the sole achievement of canonical authors such as Henry James and Joseph Conrad. As Talia Schaffer has recently shown, many forgotten female aestheticists anticipated highly subjective or even unreliable modes of narration. These authors' anxiety about their own femininity led them to develop self-defensive literary techniques designed to baffle the intrusively curious reader (Schaffer 4). Narrating from an interior focalization tied in with the general cultural emphasis on the role of the observer, and provided textual possibilities for the staging, exploration and reconciliation of competing models of femininity.

32 These innovations in literary narratives which generated an increasingly subjective fiction culminating in literary modernism can be related to the inventions and developments in optics and visual technologies which preceded it; both created an awareness of the unreliability of human perception (Crary). Non-fiction discourses in art criticism also relied on a more significant role of subjective observation. While the visual arts negotiated the boundary between art and spectatorship, new directions in the philosophy of art tended to consider aesthetics in terms of spectator response. The realist consensus in visual art derived from central perspective had rested on the assumption that objects represented are seen as these objects and not in an iconic duality of image-object. Now the reaction of the spectator became an indispensable element in creating the meaning of a work of art.

33 Walter Pater's notion of art as an experience enlarged the function of a mediating

observer or spectator figure. He rejected a purely content-oriented neglect of the sensuous element in art, which causes almost everything that is essentially artistic to become "a matter of indifference" (Stamm 98). He illustrated this argument with some memorable reinterpretations of famous art works. Pater's ekphrastic description of "La Gioconda" in *The Renaissance* (1873) is written from the point of view of an impassioned observer giving free reign to his imagination and interpreting the Mona Lisa as an embodiment of the enigmatic nature of women. Pater read the portrait as a symbolist image of a predatory femme fatale: "She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants..." (80). His interpretation was largely responsible for the aura of mystery which surrounds Leonardo's famous portrait to this day. Its Orientalist and misogynist overtones recall Brontë's rereading of Cleopatra, which was supplemented at the turn of the century by aestheticist ekphrastic writings which read famous Renaissance nudes against the grain, completely subverting the gaze of male heterosexual desire. One example is the 1892 poetry collection *Sight and Song* by "Michael Field", the pseudonym of the collaborating authors Katherine Bradley (1846-1914) and Edith Cooper (1862-1913). The female poets' ekphrastic verses recast the extreme objectification of the female nude in paintings like Giorgione's "The Sleeping Venus" and Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" as an extraordinary and daring independence of male desire (Field 13-14). Similarly, Vernon Lee's fantastic stories made an imaginative but more subversive use of ekphrasis than Pater's description. All stories in her collection *Hauntings* revolve around the fatal consequences of male spectators looking at female beauty. In Lee's stories, women's portraits enact a fatal revenge on their Pygmalion-like admirers. Thus at the end of the nineteenth century the tables are turned on the sinister nexus of femininity, death and eroticism which a Romantic fascination had written into the art-life dichotomy in literary texts such as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (Bronfen 90).

34     Though Vernon Lee has been rediscovered by feminist literary criticism as a writer of fiction, her theory of art is still unfairly neglected. She developed this theory (originally in an article in 1897, later elaborated and published as *The Beautiful*) expanding the work of the German authors Friedrich Theodor Vischer and Theodor Lipps, who based aesthetic value judgement not just on the intrinsic qualities of the art work itself but paid increased attention to the act of observing. Lee's theory went beyond those of her precursors, because it assigned the mental and physiological experience of art a new significance. To Lee viewing art was a transfer process in which the object under scrutiny is invested with the physical and mental

dynamics of the act of viewing, "we transfer from ourselves to the object not only the physical eye muscle movement but the thought and emotion which have been accumulated in our minds to that movement" (65). The movement and rhythm of the act of perception is then attributed to the inert representation. For Lee, art can thus become a tonic experience: "[...] movement and energy, all that we feel as being life is furnished by [the perception of shapes in art] and allowed to fill our consciousness" (74).

35 For Lee the beholder of art is involved in intense, complex, and reiterative, but not necessarily conscious mental and embodied activities she called "empathy" (155), a term she introduced into the English language. Like impressionist paintings, empathy aesthetics liberated the arts from the stranglehold of what Michael Fried termed the "supreme fiction of the beholder's non-existence" (71). Lee saw empathy as chiefly responsible for value judgements and "preference in aesthetic contemplation," obviously setting up a category of compassionate appreciation against the blasé connoisseurship she thought permeated her contemporary culture. Empathy is not sufficiently explained as an emotional identificatory response, and it also encompasses more than a hermeneutic act of constituting meaning. Empathy meant that "art can do nothing without the collaboration of the beholder and this collaboration far from consisting in the passive 'being impressed with beauty' [...] is [...] a combination of higher activities, second in complexity and intensity only to that of the artist himself" (Lee 128). In Lee's theory the collaborative energies of the beholder are needed to complete the project of art itself.

36 In the course of the nineteenth century, as ways of seeing challenged active participation, increasing agency was attributed to the seeing subject. This participatory agency meant a resistance to absorption by the referential content of an art work. Instead of looking exclusively at the meanings and codes contained within visual images themselves, or exclusively at the receptive side of visual experience, an approach to the "gaze" should concentrate on issues arising from the interaction of viewer and viewed. Here Lee's definition of aesthetic experience as a process of interaction can contribute to a revision of current concepts of spectatorship. Twentieth century feminist theories of spectatorship were based on the dualism that "men act and women appear" (Berger 47). The concept of the gaze later differentiated in Griselda Pollock's and Linda Nead's analysis of Victorian images of women might be more profitably thought of not as a fixed feature, but as a range of viewing possibilities adopted temporarily by viewers in specific encounters with images. With Marcia Pointon, I think that "there is no absolute and inalienable correlation between the gender of a reader and the experience of reading [paintings]" (9). Instead, temporary viewing

communities and shifting gazes allow strategies of selective attention or resistant viewing which can be helpful in the face of today's ever increasing predominance of visual events and globalization of images.

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## More to the Story: Discursive Violence in *Aimée and Jaguar*

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### Abstract:

The story of *Aimée and Jaguar* can be read on multiple levels. Indeed, it comes to us already in two incarnations. Erica Fischer published her novel *Aimée and Jaguar: A Love Story*, Berlin 1943 in 1994. In 2001, Max Färberböck's movie, *Aimée and Jaguar: A Love Greater than Death* was released. Though these two different representations reveal oppositional and competing sociological, political, and cultural agendas, what emerges is that there is no ultimate, objective 'truth.' This story, as is it is told by Fischer and Färberböck, represents lesbianism as a site of resistance to the National Socialist eugenicist agenda. But finally, this story reinscribes the racist and classist dynamics it sets out to critique. What emerges from close readings of both the novel and the film is that non-heteronormative relationships are not inherently revolutionary, but instead often reproduce (whether consciously or not) hegemonic power relations and discursive violence.

1 The story of *Aimée and Jaguar*<sup>1</sup> can be read on multiple levels. Indeed, it comes to us already in two incarnations. Erica Fischer published her novel *Aimée and Jaguar: A Love Story, Berlin 1943* in 1994. In 2001, Max Färberböck's movie, *Aimée and Jaguar: A Love Greater than Death* was released. Though these two different representations reveal oppositional and competing sociological, political, and cultural agendas, what emerges is that there is no ultimate, objective "truth." Instead, it is more productive to analyze the cultural commentary enabled by these texts, situating them within historical context, contemporary politics, and personal investment. This story, as is it is told by Fischer and Färberböck, can be read as a universal "love in the face of adversity" story. It is also a project of recuperating lesbian history. It represents lesbianism as a site of resistance to the National Socialist eugenicist agenda. But finally, this story of resistance is also tainted with the imbalance and inequality of the social context in which it exists. It reinscribes the racist and classist dynamics it sets out to critique. What emerges from close readings of both the novel and the film is that non-heteronormative relationships are not inherently revolutionary, but instead often reproduce (whether consciously or not) hegemonic power relations and discursive violence.

2 The plot of the novel and the film are roughly the same. Elisabeth (Lilly) Wust is a mother of four, married to a Nazi soldier fighting on the front. While her husband is away, she has affairs with various other high-power members of the National Socialist party. Through her domestic assistant, Inge Wolf, she meets Felice, and they fall in love. Felice comes to live with Lilly, and from then on her home is filled with various lesbian and bisexual women and

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<sup>1</sup> "Aimée" is Felice's nickname for Lilly, and Lilly calls Felice her "Jaguar."

occasional male friends. Eventually Felice discloses to Lilly that she is Jewish. Lilly is amazed that Felice can love her despite Lilly's history of anti-Semitic remarks. Shortly after they declare their mutual love and exchange rings, Felice is discovered by the Gestapo and sent to a Jewish collection center in the city. Lilly visits her there daily until Felice is sent to a labor camp. When Lilly tries to visit her at the labor camp as well, Felice is sent to a concentration camp. What happens to Felice after that is unclear, but she is not heard from again. In 1948, the municipal court of Berlin-Charlottenburg declares her legally dead as of December 31, 1944.

3 Erica Fischer's novel is based on interviews with Elisabeth Wust (Lilly), excerpts from her diary, letters from Felice Schragenheim and Lilly, as well as interviews with surviving relatives and friends, and historical documents tracing the growing restrictions on Jews during the reign of the National Socialist (Nazi) party in Germany. Because Fischer's story is based to a significant extent on archival documents, it could be read as a closer approximation to the lived realities of its characters than the movie, which minimizes the Holocaust to an interesting backdrop to a lesbian love story. Färberböck's movie leaves out several important historical occurrences, including Lilly's second marriage and her conversion to Judaism after the war.

4 Anna Parkinson describes how the movie was received differently by lesbian feminists and German Jews (147-150). While lesbian feminists predictably interpreted the movie as evidence of a "lesbian history," German Jewish feminists point to the purely narcissistic type of lesbianism embodied by Lilly. Fischer also "deploys a reductive psycho-analytical understanding of lesbianism where she clearly equates Felice's lesbian sexuality with an attachment to the mother's body" and "dismisses the philo-Semitism of Lilly as Lilly's conflation of lesbian love, represented here as a dissolving of boundaries between the self and the other, with Jewish identification" (Parkinson 148-149).

5 Another significant criticism of both the movie and the novel is that they ignore the persecution of homosexuals during the Nazi regime. For example, in her review of the film, Catherine Zimmer states: "The film takes the simpleminded, outdated position that only Jews suffered at the hands of the Nazis. The historical moment becomes a backdrop for a love affair, not a moment in queer history" (456). In fact, lesbians were not mentioned in Paragraph 175.<sup>2</sup> Myrna Goldenberg explains this omission:

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<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of homosexual victims were males; lesbians were not subjected to systematic persecution. While lesbian bars were closed, few women are believed to have been arrested. Paragraph 175 did not mention female homosexuality. Lesbianism was seen by many Nazi officials as alien to the nature of the Aryan woman. In some cases, the police arrested lesbians as "asocials" or "prostitutes" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, pamphlet)

While their love for women may have made some of them vulnerable, lesbianism was not illegal and therefore not defined as a category in the concentration camp system of crimes. Lesbians did not wear the pink triangle, as gay men did; instead they wore triangles that designated them as "asocial" or as "political" prisoners. Because "Nazi ideology saw the 'Aryan' woman as predestined to motherhood and marriage as a matter of principle," Nazis regarded lesbians as women who were not fulfilling their biological destiny and as women in need of intercourse (p. 11). Generally, women were commodified and lesbians were victimized as a result of pernicious Nazi misogyny. (678)

6 The extent to which German women were seen as vessels for reproduction of the nation can be seen in the state's response to Lilly's request for divorce from her husband, Günther. Lilly filed for divorce on the grounds that Günther had broken his marriage vows (through extramarital affairs). Günther denied culpability on the basis that Lilly had refused conjugal relations since December 1942 because she did not want to have any more children. The court decided that Lilly's reason (that she already had four children) was not justifiable (Fischer 138). In this instance, the state decided that already having four children was no justification for not wanting more, and that Lilly and Günther were equally culpable for the divorce. The ideology of reproducing the Aryan race becomes codified in the legal system when marital infidelity and the desire to stop having children (after four) are equivalent violations of a marriage contract.

7 The character of Elisabeth Wust provides a rich text for examining the gendered production of the nation. As a dutiful German wife, she reproduces the Aryan race while her husband fights for expanded territory. For her efforts, which produce four blond, blue-eyed sons, she receives the 'Cross of Motherhood' in bronze. She is so efficient in her motherhood that she manages to raise four boys while her husband is away, and still has time to entertain various other high-powered Nazi officials. This extramarital heterosexuality does not really interfere with the Aryan agenda, which focuses more on reproducing racially pure citizens than on the moral structures that inform those relationships.<sup>3</sup> Her extraordinary feats of motherhood also make her eligible for state-provided domestic assistance of an obligatory domestic service worker, in the form of Inge Wolf. Ironically, it is through her connection to Inge Wolf that Lilly meets Felice Schragenheim.

8 Lilly's love for Felice, and her newfound lesbian identity, eventually lead her to seek a divorce from her husband. Felice therefore disrupts the National Socialist agenda for propagation of a pure Aryan race in a way that Lilly's infidelities with other Nazi officials do not. Felice's interruption of the mechanism of race-propagation is complicated by the fact that

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<sup>3</sup> This can be seen in the assignment of culpability in Lilly and Günther's divorce, to which I will return in a moment.

she is both female and Jewish. She embodies at once the threat of racial and moral contamination through her ethnicity and her sexuality. Reading *Aimée and Jaguar* as a commentary on nationalism illustrates the nation's investment, indeed, dependence on, the enforcement of heterosexuality and the exclusion of ethnic others. Lesbianism can be seen therefore, as a site of resistance to nationalism and the nation.

9 Lilly's trajectory from anti- to philo-Semitism follows her conversion to lesbianism. In a true Western "coming-out" narrative, once Lilly falls in love with Felice she finds evidence of her "true" lesbian self in her past, recounting stories of school girl crushes and an obsession with a gym teacher. "Actually, my parents weren't surprised at all. At that moment [when Lilly told them about her love for Felice] they probably thought back to my youth, when they had done everything in their power to suppress that" (Fischer 115). Interestingly, once she finds out that Felice is Jewish, she retraces a similar past affiliation with Jews, by acknowledging the family secret (her brother's Jewish father), Jewish friends in school, and the fact that her parents really weren't convinced by Nazi rhetoric. She also recounts that one of her school-girl crushes was on a Jewish girl, and adds as an aside, "Just as Jews showed a liking for me, I showed a liking for them, that's the way it was" (Fischer 116).

10 Felice and her friends also looked at Lilly as the object of a dual conversion. Elenai Pollack recalls that they "had their own missionary tic, of course. A woman like that can indeed become "different," we thought, maybe we'll do it" (Fischer 110). And Gerd Ehrlich states, "Frau Wust was known in her neighborhood as a true Nazi. It was our (positive) influence that converted her. Of course, in order to be of even greater help to us she remained a loyal follower of the Führer on the outside" (111). Lilly's conversion from heterosexual Nazi to lesbian philo-Semite was thus widely acknowledged and embraced by her new circle of friends, who attributed this enlightenment to their own efforts.

11 Lilly's evolving attitude towards Jews is of key importance in contextualizing the "ordinary German" during the Nazi era. Erica Fischer alludes to this in an interview when she discusses that the film is more than just a love story: "While I was researching, I realised there was another story behind this first one, namely the transformation of a Nazi sympathising anti-Semite into a pro-Semite saviour of four Jewish women, and then the story became even more interesting. It became a very German story, capable of symbolizing the eternal German dilemma" (Interview with Erica Fischer). The resolution of this German dilemma is symbolized by Lilly and Felice's relationship. Specifically, Felice defends Lilly's anti-Semitism in several instances. First, when Inge reports to Felice that Lilly says she can "smell a Jew," Felice takes this as a challenge and it becomes the impetus for Felice and Lilly to

meet. The fact that Felice falls in love with Lilly despite her blatant anti-Semitism enables identification with Lilly (and her anti-Semitism) because she is loved by the object of her supposed hatred. Later, Felice defends Lilly to Inge when Lilly blames the war on the Jews. In the movie, this defense of Lilly is articulated as well. In a conversation with Ilse,<sup>4</sup> Felice defends Lilly by saying "She isn't better or worse than any of us" and in reference to Lilly's lack of political conviction, Felice berates Ilse for judging Lilly, stating that it is not a crime to have no opinion. (Taberner 233). Lilly provides an alibi for the silence of "ordinary" Germans especially because she is defended and forgiven by the very people persecuted in the name of Aryan purity. Stuart Taberner further points out that the conflict of the ordinary German is embodied in the figure of Lilly when her suffering becomes the focus of the film after Felice is taken by the Gestapo (233). The camera focuses on Lilly on the floor of her apartment, curled in the fetal position and screaming, "No!"

12 Further identification with Lilly is enabled through the fact that in both the book and the film, she is constructed as naïve and un-knowing. Lilly's "innocence" is contrasted with the active knowing and constant uncovering of knowledge by Felice and Elenai, as they work as underground spies at a Nazi newspaper. Lilly is unaware that Felice is Jewish until well into their relationship. Her obliviousness operates in defense of her anti-Semitism. The viewer can assume (from Lilly's eventual love for Felice) that had Lilly known Felice and her friends were Jewish, she would not have made anti-Semitic remarks, and furthermore, that she would have questioned and revised her attitude towards Jews. Lilly's anti-Semitism becomes part of her general naïveté and simple-mindedness, an inherited and unquestioned political compliance rather than malicious intent.

13 Furthermore, Felice defends Lilly's anti-Semitism. For example, after one particularly violent air raid, Lilly says to Inge and Felice: "It's all the fault of the Jews." Felice defends this remark to the furious Inge, yelling: "Leave her alone, Inge! She doesn't know what she's saying!" (Fischer 37-38) Here Lilly's anti-Semitism is excused through either political naïveté or the fact that Lilly is not aware that Felice is Jewish. Lilly stands in here for an entire post-Holocaust Germany. The rhetoric of "not knowing" was repeated endlessly by German citizens when the atrocities of the Nazi regime came to light after the war. Even after Felice "comes out" to her as Jewish, Lilly claims ignorance or incomprehension of Felice's underground activities: "I knew that she worked for the underground, but didn't know the what or how of it...what it all means is a mystery to me. I never found out" (Fischer 155).

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<sup>4</sup> The character of Ilse in the movie seems to be a composite of several individuals from the novel, most notably Inge, the domestic service worker, and Elenai, another friend of Felice's that Lilly stayed close with throughout the war.

This ignorance was also perpetuated by Felice, who refused to disclose her underground activities in order to protect Lilly (according to Lilly). Friends of Felice tried to impress upon Lilly the degree of danger that Felice faced as a Jew, and to explain to her what exactly a concentration camp was. "Lilly often gave Elenai and Gregor the impression that she didn't really comprehend that Felice's situation fundamentally differed from hers..." (153). Again, Lilly's naïveté prevents her from understanding the danger to Felice and other Jews. Lilly's love for Felice blinds her to their differences, which will ultimately cost Felice her life. The willing German viewers are able to deduce that it was innocence, naïveté, or color-blind love that obscured the reality of ethnic cleansing in their midst.

14 Erica Fischer also documents instances where "not knowing" is impossible. After Felice has been taken to a collection camp, Lilly writes in her diary:

I had a terrible experience...Waiting at the stop for the number 41 streetcar, I saw a procession coming toward me. A procession of women prisoners was coming along Osloer Strasse. They were from a branch of the Oranienburg prison and were dressed in striped clothing, with shaved heads, and barefoot. Felice, I wanted to scream, I wanted to rush into their midst. But I didn't move, I couldn't utter a sound. It was as if I had turned to stone...Tears streamed from my eyes...It was so horrible...How am I to bear this? (Fischer 185)

Here Lilly can no longer deny the reality of Jewish persecution in Berlin, but it is too late. Felice has already been taken from her when she finally understands the gravity of the situation. Her inability to act is also rendered understandable through her grief. Further, in a manner quite consistent with her character, she personalizes the experience and projects the suffering onto herself: "*I had a terrible experience.*" "*How am I to bear this?*"

15 While Lilly and Felice's relationship can be read as an instance of lesbianism as a site of resistance to heteronormative ideals of nationhood, it also becomes an example of how hegemonic power relations are reproduced in non-heteronormative relationships. At the same time that Lilly foils the Nazi agenda by refusing to have any more children and removing her body from the Aryan propagation machine, she also contributes to a history of discursive violence against Jews. This happens through Lilly's over-identification with Felice, first as a woman, then as a lesbian, and finally, after Felice's death, as a Jew. Finally, it is through the vehicle of the lesbian relationship and at the hands of Lilly's love for her that Felice's fate is sealed.

16 After Felice had been sent from the collection camp in Berlin to Theresienstadt, Lilly was determined to visit her. Theresienstadt was a labor camp that at that point did not have a reputation for extermination of Jews. It was however, unheard of for an Aryan to visit a Jew at a labor camp. Elenai remembers trying to talk Lilly out of her plan. In addition to

endangering herself, it could be harmful to Felice, and have unforeseen consequences (Fischer 192). In effect, when Lilly made it to Theresienstadt, she was thrown out with threats from the camp leader, and Felice was sent to Gross-Rosen concentration camp shortly thereafter. In this way, Lilly facilitated Felice's transfer from a labor camp to a concentration camp, which is where Felice presumably was killed.

17 Lilly also faced consequences from her visit to Theresienstadt, in the form of a official summons from the Gestapo. She was interrogated as to her relationship with Felice. The possibility of a romantic relationship between the two women was seen as unlikely and dismissed in order to focus on the real crime: having "aided and abetted" a Jew (Fischer 222). At the end of the interrogation, Lilly was forced to sign a document stating that because she had aided and abetted a Jew, she belonged in a concentration camp, but was spared because her four children depended on her. Once again, Lilly's status as mother of the Aryan race protected her.

18 Both in the novel and in the movie, it is clear that Lilly goes to see Felice because she cannot help herself. She goes at risk to herself and Felice, overcome by the desire to see her loved one. Lilly ignores the risk differential to herself and Felice, despite cautions from her friends. As an Aryan German citizen and mother of four sons, Lilly enjoyed social and political protections that were never available to Felice. Lilly's visit to Felice at Theresienstadt is what likely sealed Felice's fate. This act of selfish love reveals how Lilly's unexamined privilege is directly harmful to Felice. This first act of ostensible murder is followed by further discursive erasure of Felice's reality by Lilly.

19 Because of Lilly's conflation of herself with Felice, what is described by Anna Parkinson as the narcissistic model of lesbian identification, Lilly cannibalistically takes on Felice's identity: "[Felice] was my counterpart, my complement, literally. I felt I was both myself and Felice. We were a mirror image" (Fischer 34). After Felice's death, Lilly enters melancholic identification. This is minimized in the movie in a final scene where Lilly and Ilse meet in a home for the aged, and they compare notes on their lives after they lost touch. Lilly declares that she never loved anyone else. "I only thought of her...Fifty years - one thought - one face - one name." Here Lilly represents the tragic figure of the survivor of a lost love. When Lilly states that fate has betrayed her, Ilse prevents the seamless reading of Lilly as the abstinent heroine by saying, "First it was the Führer, now fate. It's always something, preferably something big. You betrayed yourself, Lilly, no one else." Ilse clearly returns responsibility for Lilly's own life (and maybe Felice's) to Lilly, alluding to the choices that she made during and after the war.



20 The book allows a much more explicit reading of Lilly's melancholic incorporation of Felice through her attempted conversion to Judaism, what Parkinson refers to as an interiorization of an idealized Jewishness (160). Lilly disassociates herself from her German past before the war is even over. When the Russians arrive at Berlin, Lilly sews Felice's Star of David to her coat and told Russian soldiers "We nix Nazis, we Jews. War over, you our liberators" (Fischer 241). While this could have been a survival strategy, it also presents the beginning of Lilly's assumption of a Jewish identity. Her sons report how she imposed herself on a Jewish community in Berlin, enrolled them in Jewish schools, and unsuccessfully attempted to convert to Judaism herself. Thus Lilly never properly mourned Felice, or the Holocaust.<sup>5</sup> She distances herself from her German/Aryan identity through a cannibalistic/melancholic identification with Felice, the lost object of her love. But through this identification with Jewishness, Lilly denies her own responsibility in both the relationship between her and Felice and the larger context of the Nazi regime. Under the cover of the tragic heroine, she assumes victim status and erases her role in history. And finally, she relates her love story to the world, while Felice is forever silenced and accessible only through poems, letters, and the memory of others.

21 Authorship becomes a confounded subject in this instance, where the story of Lilly and Felice is narrated by Lilly, through Erica Fischer, who is Jewish and not German.<sup>6</sup> While a reductive reading of the story would have Felice be the unheard and oppressed voice that comes to us through Lilly's memories of her, Fischer reclaims Felice from Lilly's narration. In her epilogue, Fischer declares of Lilly: "I do not grant her the status of victim. I guard the line that runs between her and Felice, my Jewish mother, and myself obdurately, protective of my small piece of identity. She tried again and again to cross that line [...] as if she had nothing to do with her own land of Germany" (271). She continues, "I don't believe Jaguar would have stayed with Aimée. I don't think Lilly did either - and she found cold comfort in the suspicion that she would be spared this lot" (Fischer 272).

22 Finally, completing the circle of oppressor and oppressed, victim and perpetrator, Fischer discloses that she wrote the story of Aimée and Jaguar during the Bosnian war, while

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Parkinson addresses the cultural phenomenon of melancholia described by Margarete and Alexander Mitscherlich, who posit that "the relentless work of the German Wiederaufbau was a deflection from the necessary forms of national and individual mourning that should have occurred after the devastating events of the Second World War...Instead of the necessary mourning that usually takes place after significant and traumatic loss, post-war German society was riddled with melancholic identifications that were collectively disavowed through the obsession with manically and frenetically rebuilding Germany. Thus the necessary act of confronting and working through their interiorized ideals of the 'Vaterland' and the 'Führer myth', and the mass crimes of the National Socialist regime never really took place on a collective, or often even individual level" (159).

<sup>6</sup> Erica Fischer is claimed as "one of Vienna's foremost feminist writers and journals" who currently resides in Berlin, Germany. (Back cover of *Aimée and Jaguar*). In her epilogue, she identifies herself as Jewish.

her Austrian husband, in an effort to undo some of the "looking the other way" of his own parents, devoted himself to finding homes for Muslim refugees in Germany. Fischer describes having to choose between advancing the story of Felice Schragenheim and intervening in the ethnic cleansing that Bosnian Serbs had learned from the Third Reich. Her women friends encouraged her to continue with her writing. In the end, she passes the judgment that she has not withheld from others: "During the time it took me to complete this book, living without the benefit of his love, Martin [her husband], the moralist, saved the lives of fifteen hundred people" (274). This last sentence of her epilogue to *Aimée and Jaguar* attests to the multiple identifications inhabited by all of us. As oppressed, we are also oppressors, and in liberating or giving voice to some, we sacrifice others. Every action, in any name, has benefactors and those that pay the price.

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## The Performance of Male Subjectivity in *The Matrix Trilogy*

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### Abstract:

The trilogy of *The Matrix* essentially speaks of, indeed demands, the constitution, development and stabilization of a male subject. [...] In the figure of Neo as the Chosen One the trilogy permanently reproduces a consistent concept of active masculinity in the form of male heroism by means of the formal principle of recursive (presup)position as an ongoing process. That this male subjectivity is a performance is one of the trilogy's most essential, constitutive messages, which the films never acknowledge openly but keep producing on a formal level. [...] At first glance, the films thus seem to represent a stabilizing trend of the Hollywood cinema dispositif. At the same time, however, the trilogy is perilously situated on the brink of an abyss when the production process of this masculinity exposes its own constitutive dependence on a femininity whose visible and representative manifestation could hardly be more energetic, nimble and clever. Thus, the trilogy of *The Matrix* figures as the prototype of contemporary manifestations of a dispositif that seeks to (re)consolidate the severely shaken status of male heroism by employing strategically its whole array of technological possibilities.

1 When *The Matrix*<sup>1</sup> by the brothers Wachowski was released in 1999 the film was celebrated frenetically as a masterpiece worldwide. Even the academic world chimed in with the praises of the extent of self-reflection to which contemporary mainstream cinema was able nowadays. By means of an enormous amount of psychophysical-technical simulation<sup>2</sup> the film raised the topic of alienated human existence to the latest level of the post-modern condition. Critics declared that its powerful imagery constituted a seductive vortex which amounted to an elaborate critique of the mass media.<sup>3</sup> Since then two sequels have been produced: *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix: Revolutions*.<sup>4</sup> Because of its narrative density and the ironic finesse with which it treats the highly topical virtualization of the world as well as of the self, *The Matrix* was appraised as matchless and unique. In spite of the serial character established by its sequels, it was retroactively allocated the status of a closed entity. Accordingly, the academic verdict on *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix: Revolutions* could only be scathing. Regarded as mere continuations of something unique, the sequels

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<sup>1</sup> *The Matrix*. Dir. Andy and Larry Wachowski. Warner Brother, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> That is, a simulation generated by directly bombarding the optical nerves with electro-technical stimuli in an interrelated series.

<sup>3</sup> By now the Wachowski brothers have created a complex, commercialized *The Matrix*-universe, including online computer games and a computer animated compilation of short films, *The Animatrix* (2003). This rouses the suspicion that the success story of the *Matrix* films is indeed a stroke of genius planned from first to last by Hollywood mega-capitalism and that the films might in fact be mere add-ons of the computer games.

<sup>4</sup> The sequels were released world-wide in 2003 with only a couple of months separating them.

were belittled as purely commercial action-movies and mass-produced articles. And yet it is this recalcitrant reception, I would argue, which paradoxically attests to the basic principle of the films, a principle they expose and at the same time work with: the principle of consistency as regards content and narration, which is intimately connected with that of *production* and therefore always accompanied by a potential surplus that precludes closure as such.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the three films do in fact form a unit, but one which is potentially infinite and open, since they point out that stability can always only be achieved through recursion, that something appears as consistent only if something else is retroactively posited as foreclosed. This, of course, is precisely what the concept of performativity maintains in regard to the production of subjectivity, as Slavoj Žižek and, in regard to gender identity, Judith Butler have pointed out.<sup>6</sup>

2 My thesis therefore is that the trilogy essentially speaks of, indeed demands, the constitution, development and stabilization of a male subject. Reviewers have commented extensively on the figure of the Chosen One, the eschatological willingness to sacrifice oneself, and the almost epic-scale heroism around which the films revolve. Each of these paradigms can be folded back onto that of the development of (modern) subjectivity. I would like to argue that in the figure of Neo as the Chosen One the trilogy permanently reproduces a consistent concept of active masculinity by means of the formal principle of recursive (presup)position (Žižek, *Die Nacht der Welt* 154). Subjectivity, especially when it takes the form of male heroism, is an ongoing process and therefore a performance; this is one of the trilogy's most essential, constitutive messages, which the films never acknowledge openly but keep producing on a formal level. Neither a pre-existing entity nor located in the natural biological body, masculinity is always contingent and relational. Inserted into the context of an undiminishedly powerful heteronormativity, it is at the same time conceivable and above all representable only in relation to femininity as its delimiting difference. At first glance, the films thus seem to represent a rather conservative, stabilizing trend of the Hollywood cinema *dispositif*. At the same time, however, the trilogy is perilously situated on the brink of an abyss when the production process of this masculinity exposes its own constitutive dependence on a femininity whose visible and representative manifestation could hardly be more energetic, nimble and clever. Moreover, the object's circulation in the symbolic circuit, which here takes the form of the search for a riddle's solution, lays bare the constitutive flip-

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<sup>5</sup> For this reason, the commercial exploitation of the Matrix-hype by the Hollywood industry becomes visible as a clever reaction rather than a fully intended instrumentalization of this phenomenon.

<sup>6</sup> Especially Butler's concept foregrounds the compulsive nature of this process, which is brought about by social interpellation. Gender identity exists only in the permanent (re)production of the normative contents of this interpellation. Film as a mass media genre can be said to function analogously in that gender is not simply a natural given but necessarily conceptualized as something constituted and negotiated in this medium.

side of active subjectivity as such, that is, its fantasmatic supports. Its final solution, though, which identifies the hero himself as this very object around which the whole story has revolved all along, can neither be interpreted as an act of self-recognition by the Cartesian cogito, nor as a system-constitutive error. Thus, *The Matrix* trilogy figures as the prototype of contemporary manifestations of a *dispositif* that seeks to (re)consolidate the severely shaken status of male heroism by employing strategically its whole array of technological possibilities. The time of an essential, unchallenged masculinity figuring as emblem of universal humanity is definitely over; and yet its status is reclaimed again and again with the help of the latest in film production technology. In this essay, then, I would like to explore the two (retroactively posited!) preconditions which formally constitute the indispensable functional supports of male subjectivity; and I will further explain their effects in the course of the whole trilogy. But first we should recall what the matrix itself might stand for.

3 From the narrative universe of *The Matrix*, broadly speaking, there emerge the features of a messianic hero who is to liberate humanity from the ubiquitous yoke of the machines. This process is embedded in the thematic context of individual human freedom and collective fate, that is to say, of contingency and determination. As Elisabeth Bronfen in "Erlöserfiguren ungewöhnlicher Art. GATTACA und Matrix im Vergleich" has made clear in her analysis of *The Matrix*, the films offer no reliable statements about their eschatological content or the utopian dimension of the notion of salvation. Very perceptively, she also remarks that the hero is interpellated by a performative gesture and by this means summoned to the status of savior in the first place. This "production process" of the One can be characterized, Bronfen claims, as a digital series of 0 and 1, in which Neo becomes the One because all the differences previously raised in the film dissolve in his person. At the very moment when Neo emerges as an essentially immanent unpredictability of a technical system, he is uniquely enabled to change it as a whole. With his insider's knowledge of the code he can change the rules in his (own) favor as he goes along, as well as bring it to the attention of others. I want to argue, however, that any narrative fixation of this status is already superseded by the production process itself. *The Matrix* produces a surplus which cannot be contained in one narrative only and thus demands a radically different theoretical perspective.

4 In the second part of *The Matrix*, the architect enlightens us concerning Neo's relation to the system: he is indeed the One, not, however, because he can change the system, but because he figures as that deviation which the system needs to establish itself in the first place. To paraphrase Žižek, an ideological system exists only as the effect of a collective fantasmatic presupposition on part of its subjects (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*

118).<sup>7</sup> The idea of a controlling power constitutes a scenario in which the subject is never able to attain some kind of unity. The film allocates this constellation of fundamental lack, collectively externalized as alienation, a perfectly fitting image: the matrix. This is how Žižek describes it:

What, then, is *The Matrix*? Simply the Lacanian "big Other", the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures reality for us. This dimension of the "big Other" is that of the constitutive alienation of the subject in the symbolic order: the big Other pulls the strings, the subject doesn't speak, he "is spoken" by the symbolic structure (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 216).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the Matrix provides the meaningful hold onto reality without which subjects cannot exist at all. Its simulations do not obfuscate the "real" reality (be it material or ideal), but they obfuscate that there is nothing whatsoever "out there" which the subjects could symbolize (the Real, whatever its contents might be). The oppressive ideological system, which has to be changed (if only from the inside), has this single function: to draw attention away from the fact that a non-alienated existence is unattainable *per se*. There is no way, however, that a systemic change could be induced by any act of agency on the side of the subject, since active subjectivity is nothing but an imaginary, fantasmatically supported concept itself. Only the act of assuming responsibility for one's own status as a passive object, which corresponds with the notion of a manipulating, invisible mastermind as the second "real" support of human existence, could induce any kind of "systemic change." According to Žižek, the second scenario of unattainability is represented in that sequence which shows the human beings, attached to tubes, lying in tubs.<sup>9</sup> For him the matrix is a thematically consistent image for the symbolic order and as such represents the *sine qua non* of human existence. His readings seek to discover the fantasmatic supports necessary for the production of subjectivity in the whole symbolic realm of the films. Following Žižek and, indeed, going beyond his analysis, the whole *The Matrix* trilogy can thus be interpreted as an apparatus which is able to produce successfully a consistent concept of the male hero only by (re)producing its two necessary, preceding supports. The imaginary, closed concept of masculinity entails above all Neo's acceptance of his symbolic mandate as savior. The acceptance of his "destiny", however,

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<sup>7</sup> The thesis of a manipulating mastermind behind the matrix must already be seen as a phantasm of this film.

<sup>8</sup> The virtual reality represented by the matrix differs from the symbolic order only in its status as a secondary induction. Phenomenologically, it is defined through images. However, it too needs to adhere to the structural laws of the symbolic order insofar as activity is still only enacted through an other who represents the subject. The subject therefore can never be completely in control of its own agency. See Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* 127-167

<sup>9</sup> According to Žižek, this sequence offers a rather naive scenario. For it is this content of the Real alone - i.e., the phantasma of passivity - which constitutes the condition humaine as such. Žižek has elucidated this conception, especially in regard to the domination of the visual in cyberspace, by applying the model of interpassivity; his specific example is the Tamagotchi-phenomenon. See Žižek, *Liebe Deinen Nächsten?* 201-226.

renders such issues as free will, extent and quality of impersonation and the question of how a mask can create authentic subjectivity problematic. That his status as the Chosen One rests on the witness of a community of simple-minded believers such as the group around Morpheus, is an important factor here. Žižek's interpretations of the notion of destiny and especially of symbolic impersonation highlight the formal nature of this issue. The figure of the savior is not defined by his inherent qualities but rather by his function which is strictly bound up with a position in the intersubjective network the three films spread out. The shifting meanings of his task only serve to underline this kind of determination. It is therefore Neo's (self)sacrifice which finally makes him the savior in the eyes of those who already believe him to be the savior. Yet the content of the two supports, I would argue, is not identical with that claimed, because desired, by Žižek.<sup>10</sup> In what follows, I will demonstrate and explain this other content.

5 In the first frame of the second sequence of *The Matrix* we see a monitor in close-up, on which a newspaper article, uploaded from the internet, is displayed. The article features a bold looking, colored man; its headlines declare him to be the worldwide most dangerous terrorist. This is one of the central characters of the film, the leader of the *résistance*, Morpheus. A male figure has fallen asleep in front of the monitor, his head resting on the desk. In a slow tracking shot, the camera moves toward this figure from behind. At this moment we do not know yet that it shows us the protagonist of the film, Thomas A. Anderson alias Neo. The camera cuts to Morpheus' face in half-profile on the monitor. Then, in a reverse-shot, it moves closer to and beyond the head of the dozing figure, who is wearing headphones. It is suggested that the muffled music we hear in the voice-over issues from those headphones. In this way, the camera creates an increasingly intimate connection between the two figures even while neither of them is able to perceive the other consciously. Even before the protagonist wakes up and starts to act, the film establishes a special relation between him and Morpheus. In the guise of a digital or virtual self, Neo's future mentor is already watching over the pupil he has elected and will train to be the "Chosen One." The mode of representation already suggests that what we see is located completely in the symbolic. This suspicion hardens during the next frames. After a series of cuts has established the room the dozing male figure is situated in, the camera returns to a close-up shot of the

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<sup>10</sup> At the same time this figure is revealed on the formal level of production as an empty signifier the competing forces equally can refer to, so that the operations of both, the *résistance* as well as the machines, follow the same logic. The savior is therefore not an iconoclastic figure, as the films seem to claim at first, but basically consolidates the symbolic universe as a whole. The only serious threat to the films' veritable flood of images is posed by Agent Smith, who is himself contaminated with the essentially human stain of desire and longs for a material based reality beyond images and technologies of representation.



back of his head, then re-focuses on the monitor in reverse-shot. The newspaper articles disappear, the screen turns black, and a bright green cursor starts to gleam and writes the following line: "Wake up, Neo!" All this time we still hear electronic dance music in the voice-over. The camera cuts back to the figure who raises his head, squints into the camera and asks in surprise: "What?" Then, irritated about this unwanted intrusion into his digital privacy, Neo tries to interrupt it by pressing the EXIT-button. To no avail, the interface persistently keeps transmitting two messages: "The Matrix has you" and "Follow the white rabbit" - two baits which will initiate his quest. Apart from the fact that the sender of this message remains anonymous, one might well wonder how the figure could have reacted to these messages at all. How is it possible that he is woken from his sleep without any audible stimulation? This is indeed a remarkable scene, since the film suggests that we witness a moment of semiotic identification with the name on the screen while this is utterly impossible according to the "hard," physical facts. Even if the computer were able to generate a human voice, Neo would de facto not be able to hear anything but music since he is wearing headphones. Yet he opens his eyes and, almost at the same time, utters in response: "What?" Again, he has in fact not been able to see the line on the monitor. That the protagonist is at first in a state of narcissistic, pre-symbolic self-sufficiency from which he awakes in order to enter the process of becoming a subject, falls short as an adequate interpretation. On the contrary, the film offers several clues that the very conditions necessary for the constitution of subjectivity are already completely established in the form of the symbolic network.

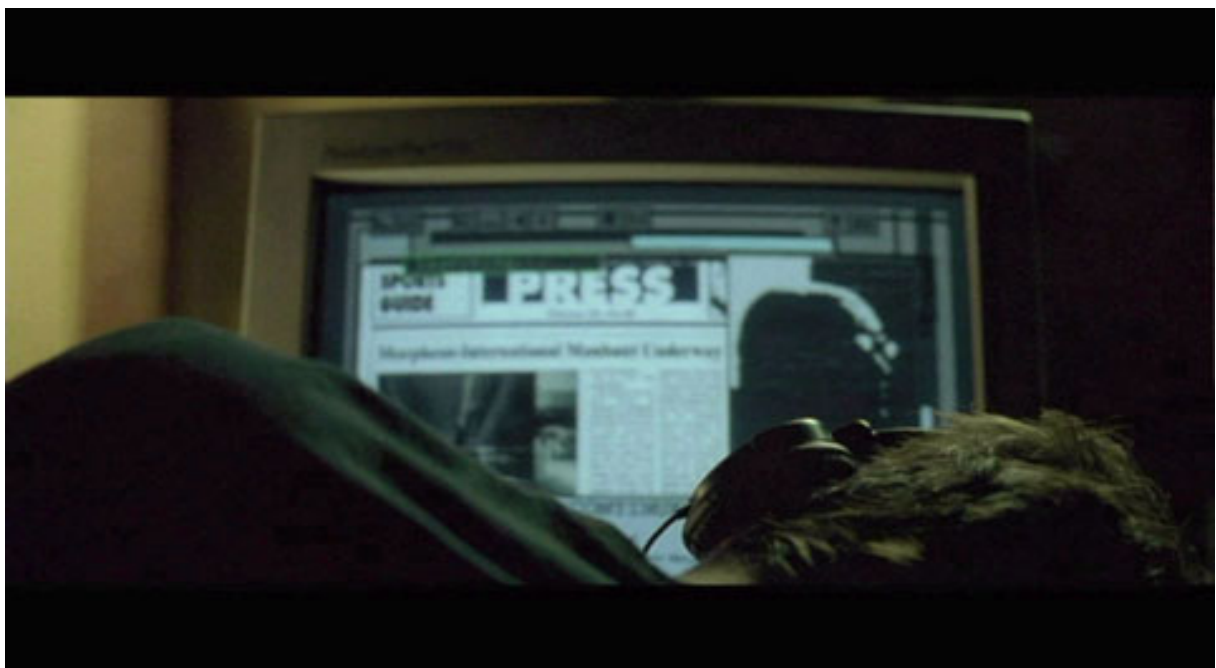


Fig 1.



Fig 2.



Fig 3.

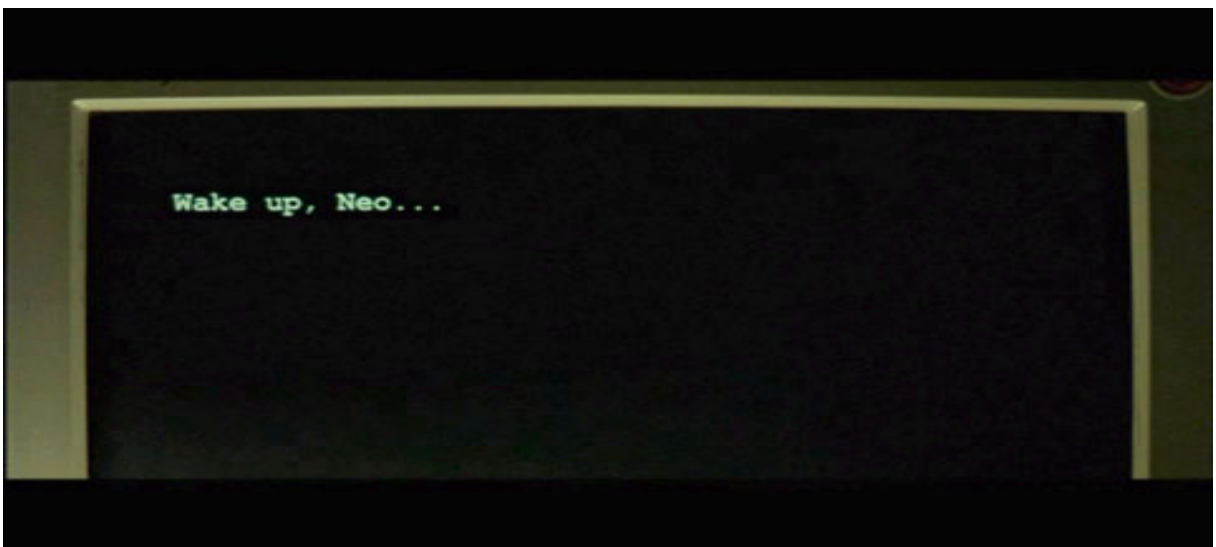


Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.

6 This is clearly demonstrated in the first sequence of the film which follows the intro. The intro starts with the by now famous cascading lines of numbers and signs, pulsating and shimmering in an iridescent green on the black screen. During this simulation of a digital code, several signs are arrested, turn a gleaming white and form, one after the other, the film-title *The Matrix*. While the moving letters and numbers appear the wrong way round, the title corresponds to the standardized western spelling. The design of this interface foregrounds and challenges the conventional positioning of the human being, firmly rooted in physical reality, toward the machine. This mirroring positions us not as viewers looking on a computer screen, or rather, into the computer, but reveals that we are already positioned inside. The world which we gaze at from this perspective and into which the camera takes us when it moves forward through the columns of numbers and signs, when it penetrates the membrane of the monitor, is nothing but our "reality." This is to say that reality is indeed always already virtual insofar as it is only accessible from within the symbolic order which provides it with structure and meaning. At the same time, the film shows that what we are going to see has not only the status of a fictional narrative but also that it is a simulation, equally subjected to the laws of the symbolic order, yet with a qualitative difference.

7 After the title has dissolved, a green pulsating cursor appears on the black screen and writes the command protocol for a trace program (first the command: Call trans. Opt.: received. 2-19-98, 13:24:18 Log>, then: Trace program: running). On the voice-over we hear a dialogue between a man and a woman, apparently belonging to an organization whose aims

are, however, not made explicit. In the manner of a telephone conversation, the voices talk about a third male "person." It soon becomes clear that this telephone call is risky, that it puts the figure belonging to the female voice in a precarious situation, and that the members of this group are divided amongst themselves concerning this said male "person." Both voices are disembodied; any connection to a visual figure is avoided. Their controversy about the "person" regards his status, here already claimed to be unique since he is "chosen," and his safety, which however cannot be guaranteed at the moment. Even before we can form an image of this person who will somehow play a special role in this narrative, the way in which the voices talk about him establish him as an object. In turn, they constitute him in language, they "bespeak" him. This makes clear that the "person" has *not* existed as the Chosen One before this moment, but is *per se* constituted exclusively through a symbolic structure which obviously always already precedes it. The actions of the agents at the end of this first sequence, after Trinity - the figure belonging to the female voice - has managed mysteriously to leave the telephone cell she has been trapped in -, can be interpreted analogously. The actual target, according to the agents, is not Trinity but that figure the group is searching for and whose name is here uttered for the first time in the narrative: Neo. In other words, like the two voices, the representatives of the system of order, too, precede Neo.

8        Within the symbolic texture, however, this "person" is known at first as Thomas A. Anderson. He is Joe Regular, whose everyday world is dull but quite intact and who yet has a suspicion that there must be somehow "more" to his conventional, bourgeois existence, because "something goes wrong all the time" (as Morpheus tells Neo in the fifth sequence). Known as a hacker under the alias Neo, he pursues this suspicion each night in the Internet, where it crystallizes into the search for an answer to the one, urgent question: "What is the Matrix?" He is driven by the desire for this particular knowledge even before Trinity promises him the answer in the second sequence. Neo's waking up from his sleep, therefore, is supposed to mark the moment when his suspicion becomes focused and is directed toward the realization that his life is alienated and manipulated by an invisible ideological power which he has to find and fight. So far the (rather affirmative) reading the film offers on the surface. The special circumstance, however, that Neo can identify with his intrepid *alter ego* on the monitor, Morpheus, without having heard or seen him, points into yet another direction if we take into account that he has emerged as the "One" from a symbolic act in the previous sequence. Based on this, the second sequence should not be misread as an initiation in the sense of a passage from a pre-symbolic state into the symbolic order. When in the following scenes Neo faces the choice whether he wants to follow the white rabbit he has been predicted

to encounter, or not, we do not witness the moment of the "original choice" but rather are introduced to the leading motif of the film: how to accept a symbolic mandate, how to impersonate efficiently a mask imposed on one. The sequence shows without doubt an important moment, yet it constitutes not a beginning but is merely the precursor of a specific kind of incision whose meaning can be more closely specified with the help of the third sequence.

9        Here we are introduced to a typical day at the office for Thomas A. Anderson. He works in a software company and, because he spends his nights in front of the computer and therefore has a problem with getting up early, he gets in trouble with his boss every day for showing up late for work. After having been rebuked for this by his boss, he withdraws to his office box where he receives a phone call on a cellular phone that has been delivered to him by a parcel service just a moment ago. It is Morpheus who warns Neo that he is being followed and should flee. He offers his help by suggesting an escape route. The way Neo reacts to this call allows us to draw conclusions as to the actual abyss looming behind his suspicion that something is wrong with his life. Instead of trusting himself implicitly to Morpheus' guidance, who demands of him to perform acts which, judged in terms of common sense, necessitate superhuman daring and outrageous risk, he spontaneously puts up resistance. In the end he refuses, as common sense tells him to, to balance along the window ledge of a skyscraper in order to climb onto a scaffolding at a dizzy height. Although this leads to his being arrested, Neo chooses the security of his "normality," his every-day life. Why does he not accept Morpheus' authority? When Neo takes the phone call, Morpheus merely asks: "You know who I am?", whereupon Neo calls him - for the first time in the film narrative - by his name (Neo spontaneously, but insecure: "Morpheus?"). This sudden, seemingly unfounded certainty that his suspicion will now be confirmed can be placed in analogy to his waking up in front of the computer screen in the second sequence, especially when we take into account that the connection between the two figures is established there in the first place. What does not occur, however, is a change in the quality of that relation, since Neo again does not encounter Morpheus in persona. At the very moment when Neo is convinced of Morpheus' identity, this identity turns out to be not to a substantial being at all but rather a disembodied voice: "I can guide you, but you must do exactly as I say," Morpheus tells him on the phone. This voice resounds with authority, and it sticks out from the narration in that it is exclusively self-legitimized. Yet this authoritative status of the voice is not isomorphic with the moment of the subject's interpellation by an ideological authority, but stands primarily for something else which the subject cannot see, for "an object, which

stares back" (Žižek, *Zurück zur Naht* 15). The shock Neo experiences accordingly stems from his having to acknowledge the symbolic debt he has accrued in becoming a subject by seeking to hide part of himself and his desire from the gaze of the "big Other." What makes this moment so unbearable is not that Neo arrives at the certain knowledge that his hitherto peaceful life is merely a fiction generated by an ideological authority. Rather, this is a moment of horror because the voice occupies the very place that marks the rupture in the symbolic fabric of his world, indicating thereby that there *is nothing* behind it (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 58-59). This correlates with the overwhelming realization that the other is not an entity but "pure semblance" (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 40). These scenes are therefore surprising, if not because there is a mysterious power which makes itself known to Neo and guides him on the way into another existence. Shot increasingly from Neo's perspective, they rather deal with his realization that the symbolic world and its web of meaning is bound up with the very conditions of his own subjectivity, and is therefore as delicate and fragile as a cobweb. What is more, the encounter with this voice turns out to be so abysmal in effect because the rupture it indicates highlights that what Neo has until that moment perceived as a stable, reliable reality is in fact only himself in the form of an object, that is, the Lacanian *objet a*. For him to accept these presuppositions unconditionally is utterly impossible, because this would be more terrifying than the simple unveiling of an ideological authority.

10 This is also a decisive moment because of what emerges simultaneously with the act of interpellation: Neo is obviously certain that he is being addressed personally by this interpellation, even if this certainty is at first articulated *ex negativo*. Just before being arrested by the agents, he expresses this conviction as follows: "'I'm nobody! I didn't do anything! I'm gonna die.'" This is the very constellation described by Žižek: the subject is being confronted with fatal events at a moment it perceives as utterly contingent - "Why me? Why was *I* chosen?" (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 12) The sudden conviction of being someone special derives from the subject's profound misrecognition that it has been chosen as addressee of this interpellation because of its inherent, positive qualities. This, however, ignores the performative nature of an ideological interpellation which defines the addressee solely according to its position in a symbolic structure in which it happens to be at that very moment. The addressee as such exists only from that very moment of interpellation onwards.

[W]hen I recognize myself as the addressee of the call of the ideological big Other (Nation, Democracy, Party, God, and so forth), when this all "arrives at its destination" in me, I automatically misrecognize that it is this very act of recognition which *makes me* what I have recognized myself as - I don't recognize myself in it because I'm its addressee, I become its addressee the moment I recognize myself in it. (Žižek, *Enjoy*

In those "fatal" scenes when Neo obviously experiences the workings of a mysterious power, two things are happening simultaneously. They represent a traumatic rupture in the symbolic texture through which Neo encounters the true content of his own message, that he is not a subject but an object. This is not a primal traumatic event but its repetition in the symbolic order. Yet at the same moment the production of the illusion that he is indeed the addressed subject of the interpellation sets in. When he identifies with the message of the interpellation - i.e. that he is someone special - he accordingly succumbs to the misrecognition that he might have existed as a subject before this moment of interpellation. The illusion consists, of course, in being a coherent subject and has to be seen here as a *reaction to the evocation of a repressed content*. This content, however, possesses no positive quality of its own either and is therefore produced as pre-existing only in the very moment of closure. Where can this constitutive content, this fantasmatic support be found which supports the process of active subjectivity, a process which in this case is ushered in by the misrecognition of being chosen?

11 Let us return to the first sequence. During the telephone conversation between the man and the woman in the voice-over, the columns of ciphers and letters start cascading down the black screen again. The camera moves slowly towards the screen and, in between two ciphers which in this close-up perspective form a zero, dives into its darkness. At this moment the female voice asks her partner anxiously: "Are you sure this line is clean?" (Whereupon he answers: "Sure, yes, I'm sure.") "I'll better go now." Just then a small white point appears on the completely black screen, which increases to a round halo. After the camera has gained some distance from it, this turns out to be the pane of a switched-on flashlight directed at the viewer. The camera's focus widens to include the immediate surroundings of a rather derelict entrance hall. We see police officers on duty, probably looking for or pursuing somebody. After a cut, the camera shows a figure from behind, seated at a table in front of a laptop. Another cut shows the figure in a close-up from a high-angle position: It is the female

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<sup>11</sup> Any experience of one's life being determined by a higher power, for example when a prediction comes true, contains such a radical moment of contingency, since from the subject's perspective this experience entails acting out the will of an other quite independently from what it perceives as its own essential qualities. Fatal moments, therefore, are almost unbearable because they confront the subject with this contingency. The teleological notion of 'destiny' serves to assuage this contingency by ascribing meaning to it, for example as a conviction of "being chosen." The Lacanian notion of the letter which always arrives at its destination reveals the teleological circle as a structure working retroactively. That the letter always arrives is due neither to the subject's essential identity nor the content of the letter itself but rather to the meaning ascribed retroactively to it: "[...] 'a letter always arrives at its destination': it waits for its moment with patience - if not this, then another contingent little bit of reality will sooner or later find itself at this place that awaits it and fires off the trauma." For Lacan, then, fate is both contingent (as regards its factual trigger) and at the same time ineluctable because the repressed will always return at the apposite moment. "Fatal" in this sense is the reception of a message the subject has sent out (externalized) previously and which is now returned by the symbolic order with its true content revealed: that surplus generated by the subject of enunciation which escapes control and symbolization.

character Trinity, who is committing illegal computer transactions in a room of the deteriorated *Heart O' The City* hotel. The policemen's entry into the room is followed by that famous, computer-animated scene which quotes the overdrawn martial arts style typical of Eastern kung-fu films: Trinity fights suspended in the air and thus easily defeats her adversaries.<sup>12</sup> Under Morpheus' telephonic guidance, she then tries to escape over the neighboring rooftops at incredible speed and to save herself by a super-human jump over a street. Only the agents who arrive belatedly on the scene are able to keep up with her. In their capacity as special forces for unusual tasks they are also able to predict that the police will not be capable of dealing with this "*one* little girl," as one lieutenant boasts. His gross (and literally fatal!) misrecognition of the semantic surplus of the word "one" becomes immediately apparent. For this female figure is indeed unique, distinguished by her super-human abilities which enable her to assert herself actively against the seemingly superior force of her male adversaries. In this, she does not meet the belittling description of the police officer at all, but rather, as Agent Smith's dire prediction about the outcome of that fight implies ("No, Lieutenant, your men are already dead"), she emerges as the fulfillment of their destiny in the sense of a return of the repressed with a vengeance.

12 The final frames of this sequence show Trinity's attempt to reach a telephone booth before the agents do. Those are already in position with a lorry in order to destroy the booth. Although Trinity manages to reach it, the way this scene is cut suggests that this is a hopeless situation. The figure is inside the phone booth, receiving a call - the question is, how and where to she can possibly escape from there. Just before the lorry crushes the phone booth to bits, the camera shows Trinity's face in a close-up, illuminated by the headlights, her face rigid with fear, fading into whiteness. At this very moment, she raises her arm in a protective gesture. (With the same gesture Neo will succeed in fending off the agent's bullets at the end of the film.) The next frame shows from a high-angle position the agents assembling in front of the ruins of the phone booth. Soberly and calmly they observe Trinity's disappearance. Obviously, she has vanished mysteriously, has "got out," as the agents put it. This does not only imply that apparently she is not dead, but that she is in another place on the "other" side, the outside to an inside. Far from interpreting this as some kind of obscure metaphor, I would suggest to read this scene with its open, ambiguous ending as the symbolic death of this

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<sup>12</sup> These scenes are shot by means of the so-called bullet-time technique, which creates the illusion of the camera moving continually around the figures while in fact they are shot one by one after another in front of a green screen. The digitized images can be manipulated so that the movements of camera and figures respectively can be combined as needed. The position of the viewer itself is inscribed as a digital code as well. The camera is moving rapidly around Trinity who by this means seems to be suspended motionless in the air. Thus, time is foregrounded as a significant factor in a way impossible to achieve by analogue recording techniques, which are limited by physical, real time.



figure. It is followed immediately by the second sequence in which Neo "wakes up," stirred more by a premonition than by an interpellation. Trinity's symbolic death therefore constitutes the first fantasmatic support necessary for Neo's entrance into the process of assuming a subjectivity as the Chosen One. In other words, her death in the symbolic order constitutes the content of the repressed that correlates with and is produced by the imaginary closure of the concept of the Chosen One. Functioning as its constitutive element, this support is the very precondition for the hero's becoming a subject, for his being able to act as a subject. Already at the beginning of the trilogy, Trinity thus also represents the impossibility of the fulfillment of his desire.

13     However, *The Matrix* also establishes a further interpretive pattern for the concept of the Chosen One. It develops in the third sequence from that series of scenes in which Thomas/Neo is being arrested by the agents and taken to a police station for a questioning. Thomas/Neo is sitting at a table in a cell. This scene is taken from an extreme high-angle position. We see several monitors on which this scene is reproduced from the perspective of a surveillance camera. This multiplication of the visual anticipates by analogy Neo's fragmentation we will encounter again in the architect's room at the end of *The Matrix Reloaded*. Then the camera moves closer to one of the monitors, its disembodied gaze selects one version of its mediated object and enters it through the screen. Thus, it assumes the position of a superior, invisible and omnipotent power. In analogy to the second-to-last sequence in *The Matrix Reloaded*, this scene already exposes the status of the One as a fiction and, on the level of content, predicts its function as a system-constitutive deviation. The sequence, I would argue, negotiates the notion of human alienation through the manipulations of an institutional authority, represented here by the agents. In the face of this authority, the subject is utterly helpless, its only weapon is subversion; in Neo's case, his hacker activities in the Internet are subversive. It is this illegal activity Agent Smith refers to when he starts the questioning with the words: "As you can see, we've had our eye on you for some time now, Mr. Anderson." According to the logic of oppression and subversion, Thomas/Neo cannot accept the cooperation offered by Agent Smith - immunity from persecution for information -, and his attempt to insist on his legitimate civil rights (a phone call to his lawyer) is in effect a gross misinterpretation of the situation, since the very consistency of a despotic power is guaranteed by an arbitrariness that defies all other claims to legitimacy. This arbitrariness is put into practice when, in a telling and powerful gesture, Thomas/Neo is robbed of language and thus excluded from participation in the symbolic: manipulating the matrix, the agents have his lips grow together and thus his mouth is sealed effectively. In this situation of

symbolic impotence, his body is contaminated with an electronic bug which is inserted through his belly button. In entering his body, it transforms into a moving, living "animal." As the hidden representative of a virtual power that operates through the media it will from now on control the subject from within. The spectacle of total, passive subjection to this thing enacts an effeminization of the figure. What is truly horrific about this being penetrated by a machine is less that it demonstrates the possibility of absolute access, but rather the subject's confrontation with the *jouissance* it derives from being an object. Just as he has woken up in front of the computer screen after Trinity's symbolic death, Thomas/Neo is roused from these scenes as from a nightmare. In this, both sequences enact formally what is strictly impossible on the level of content. This impossibility - that what happens outside his "reality" nevertheless has a direct impact on it - constitutes the second fantasmatic support for the fulfillment of the Chosen One scenario, of which Morpheus' interpellation forms a part.

14 This scenario entails, moreover, the process of becoming a male subject, which Neo embodies first in the role as the One, then as savior and finally as (self-)sacrifice. The process is initiated in the third sequence and arrives at its ideological closure when Neo escapes from the matrix. The message externalized thereby necessitates its own circulation within the symbolic; it does so in the form of a fateful narrative. Bound up in this narrative is the question of Neo's status as the One within a community of believers, his acceptance of this symbolic mandate and its realization as he impersonates the mask of the savior. In the course of the trilogy, however, this disburdened subjectivity<sup>13</sup> and the free agency it is capable of, is presented as constantly threatened by the very conditions it is based on, because it is forced to go back to them again and again, thereby triggering a process of recursion. It is this process I wish to demonstrate from the relevant scenes from *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix: Revolutions*.

15 At the end of the first film, Neo is defeated in a fight with three agents and finally shot by Agent Smith in the matrix, whereupon Trinity whispers to him from without the matrix: "I'm not afraid anymore. The Oracle told me that I will fall in love and that that man, that the man I love, would be the One. So, you see, you can't be dead. You can't be, because I love you." At this point, Neo regains consciousness in the matrix and continues the fight. From this moment on, he has the power to not only perceive the code of the matrix but also grow beyond the restrictions its laws impose and thus to master it. The fight ends when Neo penetrates Agent Smith and lets him explode from within. Seeing this, the other two agents take to their heels. Trinity awakens Neo by giving voice to the impossible: Neo *is* not dead; he

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<sup>13</sup> "Disburdened subjectivity" refers to that condition of the subject in which an other is being active in its place while it can remain passive itself.

cannot be dead since he is beloved by her. He becomes the One who is able to fend off the agents' bullets, who can read and change the code of the matrix, on ground of the fact that he is the man beloved by Trinity. This performative speech act is not only the second condition (the first one being Morpheus' interpellation) for Neo's successful impersonation of his symbolic mandate. This gender-inverted version of Sleeping Beauty possesses a deeper meaning since it differs significantly from Morpheus' tautologically structured, self-fulfilling prophecy of the savior (Neo is the One because he is the savior, and vice versa). Through his death in the symbolic realm (the matrix), Neo is reduced to passivity. In order to rise again and continue the fight in it, he needs Trinity's declaration of love. And yet he cannot go on being her lover, because he has to become the One. In the symbolic realm of the matrix, male subjectivity and agency are coupled with the impossibility of living this love.

16 Thus, the constellation of the first sequence is repeated, yet under inverted circumstances. When the hero, in single combat with Agent Smith in an underground station, identifies himself as Neo and hence with his identity as the One outside the matrix ("My name is Neo"), The Matrix asserts that he has accepted his symbolic mandate and thus produces closure. The surplus of active agency which Trinity has initiated in waking up Neo, however, cannot be completely contained in the narrative of *The Matrix*. Hence, *The Matrix Reloaded* also begins with a repetition of Trinity's symbolic death, again in the form of a nightmarish vision of Neo's, in order to sustain this agency. That freedom, then, which Neo gains at the end of the first film and which is claimed as securely his in the second part, namely his successful impersonation of the symbolic mandate of the One, again grounds in the two phantasms described above: male passivity and the enactment of the non-fulfillment of his love for Trinity. Only on these conditions can Neo accomplish his task of liberating the key-maker who is held captive by the Merowinger in *The Matrix Reloaded*. And this also can only be achieved under a specific, remarkable condition.

17 After the Merowinger has refused to release the key-maker, his wife, Persephone, offers them a deal. In return for the key-maker's freedom, she insists on a kiss from Neo. And he must kiss her just as if he were kissing Trinity. Her aim is to evoke a memory of something she herself has experienced a long time ago, that is, she wants to produce a "sample" of this experience, a file she can call up any time. This scene, then, is about the paradox of authentic love simulated as a memory in a recursive loop. Love, or rather, desire again serves as the pledge or the motor for Neo's ascent to the next "level" in this game of fulfilling his purpose as a savior. He passes this test only at the second try. Only when he impersonates convincingly what he seems to be, Trinity's lover, does he become a "true lover." However, it

is not Trinity he is kissing at this moment, but Persephone. Thus, Neo again constitutes himself as Chosen One through this scenario of his impossible love for Trinity.<sup>14</sup> This is affirmed by the following scenes just before the three - Neo, Trinity and Morpheus - succeed in liberating the key-maker from his cell. In a TV-room with a large television set Persephone introduces them to two of the Merowinger's bodyguards, programs "from a much older version of the Matrix" that "caused more problems than they solved." On the screen, we see scenes from Terence Fisher's *Brides of Dracula*.<sup>15</sup> They show a young beautiful girl, obviously a female vampire, who emerges from a coffin and approaches another female figure. Simultaneously, Persephone mutters laconically to herself before she kills one of the bodyguards with a heavy handgun: "How many people keep silver bullets in their guns?" In regard to the image of the female vampire, the revenant, Persephone's sentence (which because of the Oracle's previous comments on the werewolf nature of older programs can also be referred to the bodyguards) becomes ambiguous and thus disrupts the narrative consistency. The images on the monitor stick out from the narration as "pure objects"<sup>16</sup> and as such represent the reverse side of femininity, namely, of being per se the impossible object of desire. Žižek uses the term *femme fatale* to describe its function: it is a femininity to which the subject finds itself in a relation of absolute, destructive dependence.<sup>17</sup>

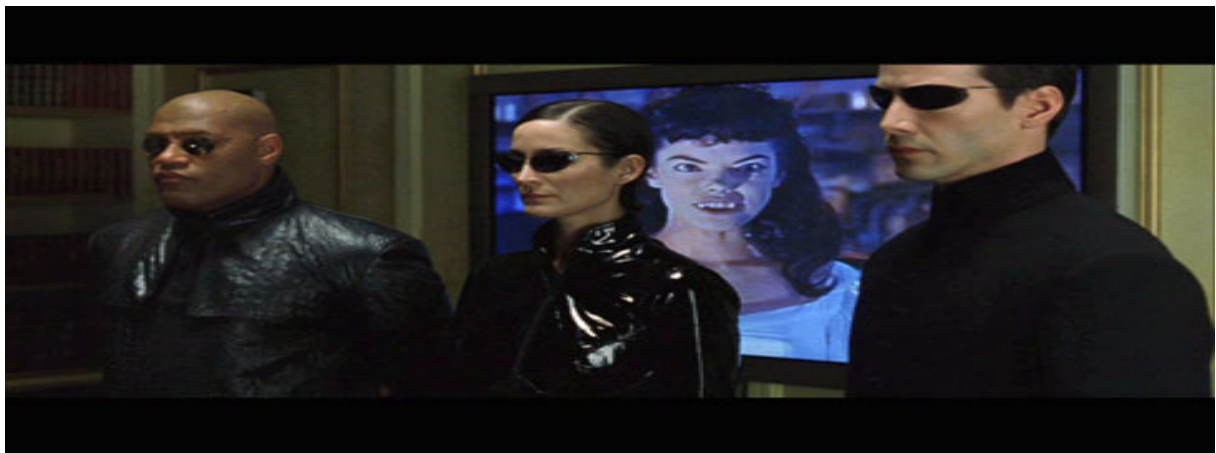


Fig. 6.

<sup>14</sup> It does not invalidate my argument that there actually is a love scene in *The Matrix Reloaded*. For the fulfillment of this love in the act of sexual intercourse is aborted by, tellingly, a return of Neo's vision of Trinity's death. On the contrary, this demonstrates the fantasmatic nature of his desire or rather, its fulfillment, because at this very moment, this fantasmatic "filler" breaks down. The phantasm of fulfillment apparently does not prevent love but rather constitutes its necessary support.

<sup>15</sup> Dir. Terence Fisher, 1960, featuring Peter Cushing as vampire slayer Dr. Van Helsing.

<sup>16</sup> This "pure object" represents the innermost kernel of the subject and constitutes its surplus; since it is split off, it remains forever unattainable.

<sup>17</sup> On Žižek's explications of the function of the *femme fatale*, see esp. Žižek, *Die Furcht vor echten Tränen* 243-81. English Edition: *The Fright of Real Tears, Kieslowski and The Future*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.

18 The visual setup of the scene suggests that the vampire "bites" Neo's neck and thereby recalls as a grotesque repetition of the scenario at the end of *The Matrix*, when Neo becomes the passive receiver of a female breath of life. Again, love is represented as per se unattainable because it is permanently deferred, in this instance projected onto a screen. It becomes clear what the *real* object of exchange in *The Matrix Reloaded* is: Neo himself. At the very moment when his active male subjectivity is at stake (the kiss), the fantasmatic scenario of non-fulfillment is staged in order to maintain stable the imaginary illusion of his function as the Chosen One. Its projection onto the screen has the effect of both containment and subversion. When Neo resuscitates Trinity in the symbolic towards the end of *The Matrix: Reloaded*, her remark "Guess that makes us even now" fails to grasp precisely this

constitutive structure of their relationship. For he does not save her because he loves her, but because he needs to affirm his position as hero, which he has to fulfill as part of his role as system constitutive deviation. This is why the possibility of free agency outside the matrix, claimed and partially validated by the end of the film and affirmed by the architect, is the rigorous, seamless continuation of the imaginary illusion of active subjectivity which cannot be contained in a single plot but in turn initiates a further surplus.

19 That Neo fends off and defeats the robot guards, the "squiddies," outside the matrix with his super-human abilities is less due to his positive status as savior than to the narration's need of an expanded scope that leads directly to the next narrative. However, since this concept needs its symbolic supports, Neo's defense of his combatants and his lover leads up to a unique state of coma. Although he is not logged into the matrix, his neuronal activity suggests that he is not merely dreaming but is in touch with the world represented by the matrix. In this liminal state he is literally somewhere beyond both the matrix and the real world, in the underground station *Mobil Avenue*. Although these scenes insist on the impossibility of a clear distinction between virtual and real worlds, at the same time they assert the possibility of the agency of the free subject. In turn they reproduce a *scenario of passivity* similar to that at the end of *The Matrix* from which Neo, whose attempts at escape from the tunnels of this antechamber to hell literally make no progress whatsoever, is released through Trinity's love and becomes an active subject again. She trades his life for that of the Merowinger in a risky transaction.

20 In keeping with the continuation of a consistent male subjectivity as an imaginary illusion, Neo's actions in *The Matrix: Revolutions* focus completely on the quest for the task that will lead him to fulfill his destiny as the savior. In his subjective view, this task consists in saving the human population of Zion, while in fact he is responsible for the protection of the real as well as the virtual worlds in the universe of *The Matrix* as a whole. Neo knows exactly who is his antagonist on this mission - Agent Smith. That his own "visions" of the way to the machines' city remain fragmentary is just as befitting as the fact that the means by which he is to reach his destination remain in the dark, for he himself is the riddle that will be solved at the end of his fateful journey. When he lies there, connected to the machine god's tentacles, suspended completely motionless and passive in its clutches, we encounter the last scenario of passivity. Here the true content of his message is returned to Neo, here the circulation of the object, as which he himself figures, ends. Neo has arrived in himself, as Žižek puts it with regard to the myth of Oedipus:

The same horror emerges with the fulfillment of symbolic "destiny", as is attested by Oedipus: when, at Colonnus, he closed the circuit and paid all his debts, he found

himself reduced to a kind of soap bubble burst asunder - a scrap of the real, the leftover of a formless slime without any support of the symbolic order. [...] The unpaid symbolic debt is therefore in a way constitutive of our existence: our very symbolic existence is a "compromise formation", the delaying of an encounter. (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 21-22)

In these last scenes Neo is reduced to pure substance of life, to an amorphous mass (Žižek's "leftover"), he might even be dead already. Previously, the fundamental support, introduced as an impossibility of fulfillment, that is, his love for Trinity, has been ended abruptly and rigorously since by then it has lost its functional meaning. Before she and Neo, who is already blind, reach the machines' city, Trinity is wounded mortally when their severely damaged ship crashes. This time there are no attempts at reanimating her since Neo is completely focused on fulfilling his destiny, that is, his act of self-sacrifice. As a distinguished individual, Neo functions as a purely imaginary filler in the matrix program as well as in the film's symbolic universe as such. This is why its consistency is ensured by his illusion of a coherent subjectivity.

21 When at the end of *The Matrix: Revolutions* he offers himself to the machine god as an instrument, as a weapon in the final fight against Agent Smith within the matrix, he is being active through the other for the last time. The film does not deny this status of passivity at all. Its visualization enacts a passive self-abandon that forms the content of that phantasm which Žižek has already described in regard to *The Matrix*; this time, however, the passivity is not deferred onto another object. With this, the illusion of a coherent subjectivity in the guise of the Chosen One basically collapses. The last frames of *The Matrix: Revolutions*, then, expose on the levels of content and visualization the very conditions of subjectivity. On the formal level of discourse, however, the trilogy keeps denying the corresponding inconsistency of the Other and the interrelated recognition that the subject can indeed lose what it has never possessed in the first place. Moreover, Neo's self-sacrifice is not a radical act of abandoning the supports of the symbolic order altogether. With the disclosure of the machine god as "hidden agency," it is established as the still very effectual representative of the fantasmatic functions of the matrix. The threatening extinction of its symbolic universe through Agent Smith is averted. Since Trinity is dead and Neo is at least incapable of acting, the conventional happy ending of the lovers surviving the end of the fight is displaced onto Niobe and Morpheus. The very last frames, which feature a beautiful sunset above a metropolitan skyline in the matrix, attest to the consolidating force of the symbolic order. And to the extent that the films productively orchestrate a stabilizing interplay of production, containment and surplus, they are representative of a generation of blockbuster movies that draw financial

profit from a postmodern aesthetic with its playful reflection on its own conditions and modes of being. The male, active hero consequently has to assert again and again a status of consistency in the face of a continually threatening loss, if he does not want to be extinguished by the disclosure of his own passivity.

22 In this respect, *The Matrix* trilogy goes far, though not beyond this one almost absolutely certain realization: The confrontation with destiny produces per se a surplus, and with it enjoyment born from the "unpleasure" of incomplete satisfaction. The encounter with death therefore can always only be an asymptotic approximation, an endless deferral. And this is what is inscribed in the end of *The Matrix: Revolutions*, too. If we then take into account the trilogy's desire for stability and containment, we will in all probability meet Neo again in a fourth part of *The Matrix*.



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## **The Body of Work - Dorothy Porter's *Akhenaten***

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### **Abstract:**

This article stages an 'imagendering' of Akhenaten, a contemporary collection of poems by Australian poet Dorothy Porter. Surviving sculptures of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten depict a hermaphroditic subject who is, for Porter, a muse of transgression. Her fascination is with his challenge to long-held creative conventions of Egyptian art, depicting himself with a combination of breasts, swollen belly, rounded thighs and a penis. This collection of poems is thus a site of gendered reinscription made possible by the death of Akhenaten's physical body. His bodily absence allows for Porter's textual presence. Operating in this speculative historical space, a space in which the body of work physiologically cross-dresses and engages in sexual play across the boundaries of masculine/feminine, history/poetry, symbolic/semiotic, this poetry demonstrates that language itself can never evade embodiment.

1 There are two names on the cover of Dorothy Porter's collection of poems, the poet's own name, and the name of her subject, the Egyptian pharaoh, Akhenaten. In this introductory space both identities and genders operate simultaneously but separately, while between the covers identities merge, gender distinctions dissolve, and history interplays with poetry in an unbound space made available by silence. Interpolated into this silence, Porter's poems speak of/for a long dead pharaoh in deliberately liminal and shifting ways, toying with palimpsests and challenging authenticity. In Porter's rendition of history, Akhenaten is an artist. She calls him "a visionary and a poet" (*Akhenaten* xiii) and reworks one of his hymns in her text, treating it as poetry and challenging authorial authenticity by casting his 'poem' in her collection. This shared vocation as poets is only one of the levels at which the distinction on the front cover between the two identities, one masculine, one feminine, begin to dissolve.

2 The starting point of this dissolution is the collection of sculptures that inspired Porter's poems. Akhenaten's strange physique, depicted in surviving limestone reliefs, has been understood by Egyptologists, and Porter, as artistic innovation. There are, however, alternative readings of the curvaceous, breasted man. Nicholas Reeve, in *Akhenaten: Egypt's false prophet*, maps the contentious research claiming that Akhenaten had a rare genetic disorder called Marfan's Syndrome. Some of the indicators of the disease include a raft of deformities applicable to the peculiar features visible in images of the pharaoh: tall stature and slender bones, long face, elongated limbs and skull, pigeon chest, wide pelvic girdle, localized distribution of subcutaneous fat, and misshapen outer ears. But Porter disregards this medicalized reading, seeing Akhenaten as deliberately rejecting established conventions both of artistic representation and of gender conformity. This version of events, this fascination with transgressive gender logics in the Akhenaten subject matter is, I am arguing, both

canvassed and mirrored in Porter's own poetry. The poems decommission a range of binary categories in ways so interwoven that this article looks beyond the visual representation of Akhenaten's multi-gendered body in order to understand his hermaphroditic effect on a number of oppositional logics operating in the world of this text. The Akhenaten image of multiple gender creates a faceted mirror in which the poet unravels a multiplicity of agendas.

3 Porter begins her writing with a prose introduction for Akhenaten in which he is credited with initiating a "bold adventure in the arts" (Porter, *Akhenaten* xiii). Porter's poetry can be read as an equally bold adventure, especially in terms of revisioning the gendered poetic subject. Art historians point out how "severely Akhenaten led his artists to break with tradition and to experiment with what is the only genuinely new style during the many millennia of Egyptian art" (Terrace and Fisher 121). His endeavours are as transgressive as Porter's own disregard for binary logics. But this collection offers more than the mirror-space for a poet imagining the life of another poet. Many of the slippages between Porter and her subject are specifically the outcome of silence, a silence in which poetic gestures can exist without being curtailed by historical facts. This pervasive silence operates because after Akhenaten's death the Egyptians tried to erase him from their records. Porter is explicit about this facet of her project, incorporating into her prose introduction the spaces in which she intends to write. She describes the pharaoh's silence as enforced:

On his death he was execrated as a heretic, his name removed from the monuments, his city abandoned and used as a quarry...The Egyptians wanted to forget the heady Akhenaten years as quickly as possible. (xiii)

Akhenaten finds a new existence in Porter's poems, a textual existence which serves as a kind of survival. Porter takes his erasure as her starting point, reinscribing his name in direct challenge to the Egyptians' attempted annihilation. Her poems are, then, not exactly revisions of history (although they resemble them). Unlike her literary feminist forebears like Virginia Woolf, Gilbert and Gubar, and Adrienne Rich, Porter validates not only that which history has forgotten, but chronicles silences which are indelibly etched in the remains themselves. She traces a wilful act of erasure, a *damnatio memoriae*. This poetic practice is thus not precisely an attempt at retrieval because central to Porter's adoption of Akhenaten is the silence of the essentially irretrievable.

4 There is a freedom inherent in the open relationship between poetry and history. Dismantling these categories allows Porter to undergo a kind of transference with her protagonist in ways that undermine structures central to the dominant discourse, namely, individuality and authenticity. It is this loss of individuation that shapes Porter's conception of her relationship with Akhenaten. She says of the pharaoh:

I found out as much about him as I could and then I trusted my own intuition. And obviously I used myself. Any book like this is clearly masked autobiographical writing. (Digby 3)

From behind this mask Porter can imagine herself as the decadent Egyptian who redefined the art of his time and indulged in unbridled sexual exploits that crossed between hetero- and homosexuality, and traversed the incest taboo. The reversal of this mask gives the pharaoh the language and experience of the Australian suburbanite, saying to his baby "give Mummy/ a big hug" (106). The finished product is like a poem in translation. More than re-vision, this poetry requires an act of creation or invention, a convergence of the self with the lost voice to create an altogether new Akhenaten-self. Like the 'tombeau' which Rachel Blau DuPlessis describes in *The Pink Guitar*, this poetry is "the collaboration between two poets, the dead and the living, [whose] interests...do not necessarily coincide....The classical tombeau ends in a draw" (Blau DuPlessis 41). The dead and the living meet in like circumstances in Porter's collection. And it is arguably in crossing the boundary between life and death that Porter also transgresses both an/other personality, gender, and the other discourse (other to poetry) of history.

5        What Porter finds in Akhenaten's silence, then, is what she refers to in an interview as "hypothetical space"(Digby 2), a silence in which to hear better. Perhaps this interpolation of the personal into the historical partly serves to make this poetic and fictionalised revision a mockery of the long-sanctified discourse of history. Porter mimics the role of historians in producing a vision of the past, yet antagonizes historical discourse by writing herself into the gaps creatively, a gesture while not antithetical to the suppositions made in historical writing, is at least outside the traditional notion of history as non-fiction. Francis Hartog deliberates on the *Histories* by Herodotus, the first historian, in a way that brings much to bear on this discussion:

The Histories are a mirror into which the historian never ceased to peer as he pondered his own identity: he was the looker looked at, the questioner questioned, who always ended up by declaring his own status and credentials. Was he an historian or a liar? (Hartog xxiii)

Writers of history, whether they are poets or historians, must ponder their own identity in this mirror. The vacillating dividing line between truth and fiction which began the supposition that Herodotus was in fact two people (one an historian, the other a liar) also signals a collision beneath one name, especially given that naming and accurate identity are typically crucial to the function of history.

6        For Porter this is as political in relation to gender as revisionist histories have been for

feminists. Porter has sought a kind of communion with both Akhenaten and silent space. If the two-way, two-faced relationships (inevitable to the forging of such bonds) are to become fertile poetic spaces, it is necessary to further unravel this collision between the 'other' and the self. Alphonse Lingis also recognises a kind of mirror in such processes. He says:

I find myself afflicted with the imperative that commands the other. I feel its weight as a force that weighs on my understanding. I find myself compelled to see his or her surfaces as ordered surfaces, exposed to me and ordering me, that is facing me. (27)

When Porter orchestrates her relationship to the lost and silenced voice of Akhenaten she peers into these mirrored spaces, both historical and personal, seeing the other, and seeing herself, and specifically seeing herself as a male figure who cross-dresses in terms of the representations of his physical body.

7 The boundaries of authenticity become contested sites in this collection, but it is gender, Porter argues, that shapes poetic endeavour. She claims that "women have not been given time, have not been given space, have not been given permission to be creative, but only in the cracks of male creativity" (Digby 2). This is perhaps the reason she chooses a history riddled with such cracks. She refers to the "enormous gaps" (Digby 2) in the Akhenaten story and describes her intellectual meeting with the pharaoh as one which defied her expectations of her own interest in the masculine/feminine dichotomy:

I had come to see the famous bust of his wife, Nefertiti, but it was the smirking, distorted, oddly beautiful face of Akhenaten that put out tentacles to my imagination. A strange confession from a feminist poet. (*Akhenaten* xiii)

But it is not such a strange confession given Porter's fascination with the liminal gender Akhenaten attributes to himself, and which she, in turn, exploits in her version of history. The story she tells of the pharaoh's life is one that questions any demarcation between the symbolic and the pre-language pulsions of the polymorphously perverse infant. But the lines she draws in the Egyptian sands are not entirely congruent with the ways in which feminists have read these differences across psychoanalytic phases.

8 Just as the visual representations of Akhenaten's body demonstrate a coexistence of male and female in one physical space, Porter's poetics employ coexistent gendered psychoanalytic categories: the (feminine) semiotic and the (masculine) symbolic. To claim that these categories are gendered follows some well-trodden philosophical paths (most famously those forged by Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva<sup>1</sup>). The plural

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<sup>1</sup> Like Toril Moi in her influential feminist reader *Sexual/Textual Politics*, I have taken these three women as representative proponents of Lacanian inspired feminist approaches, partly because they are arguably the most significant theorists of this school, and "partly because they are more closely concerned with the specific problems raised by women's relation to writing and language" (Moi 97).

semiotic, Kristeva claims, belongs to the maternal chora (what Lacan calls the Imaginary), while the symbolic entails the singular and phallogentric law of the father. Porter draws on these theoretical positions by playing with a logic of reversals that begins simply with her attraction to speaking through a male protagonist. She continues this preoccupation via her poetics, as both Porter and her Akhenaten are mutually engaged in breaching the boundaries of physically/linguistically wrought oppositional categories. This, of course, mobilizes the contradiction inherent in writing the semiotic, that is, using symbolic codes to access a pre-language state.

9 Akhenaten, both the collection and the pharaoh, is arguably dominated by the semiotic world of the pleasure principal. He refuses to concede to the law of his father by rejecting outright his father's favoured god Amun and devising his own new god inspired by his mother. But this law of the father, as Porter depicts it in her poetry, is strangely (hermaphroditically) dominated by the pulsions of the body. The father/King's god "Amun" is on numerous occasions likened to an anal fixation, replete with farts (14) and a "dirty nappy" (18). Akhenaten feels suffocated by these compulsions that are opposed to his own, as though Amun "spread his black bum / over my eyes and mouth" (3). Seemingly, then, the semiotic space of polymorphous desires, ruled by unbound and feminine logic, is here linked to the paternal law which the child is flouting. Thus the semiotic becomes associated with the father, while the symbolic order is dominated by a mother-politician who gives Akhenaten the new singular god Aten, the sun, as a deity.

10 As Porter explains in her introduction, Akhenaten is "credited with establishing the world's first monotheistic religion" (xiii). This singularity is decidedly patriarchal when read in opposition to the feminine plurality which would more logically be embodied by the pantheon of gods worshipped during the reign of Akhenaten's father. Monotheism is easily compared to phallogentrism, but Porter's text will not be pinned down by this gendered delineation. As described above, in the artistic representations Akhenaten commissioned during his reign, his likeness was variously adorned with androgynous combinations of breasts, swollen belly, rounded thighs, and penis. In Porter's poem "My Ka" an inner self is the subject of the sculptured depiction of the pharaoh:

My ka has big breasts  
that can squirt milk as far  
as Kush

My ka has fat thighs  
as heavy as gold.

She hides her cock

but can flash for  
ceremonial occasions. (38)

This inner self is a woman with a phallus. She shares both her gender and her fascination with power with Akhenaten's mother who "is a politician / and a good one / she loves power" (10).

11 The father/King is, by comparison, completely ineffectual. He:

    [...]plays  
    in his inoffensive way  
with his health  
    or his harem

Mummy plays  
    with gods  
Mummy frightens  
    iron. (10)

Arguably, Porter is here envisioning an Irigarayan bodily encounter with the mother (Irigaray 25). There is also a pun suggested by the Egyptian 'mummy' implying the relationship between the mother and death. As the ultimate satisfaction of desire, death is, of course, the unity finally achieved by the self which splits upon entry into the symbolic order.

12 However, these oppositions are colliding because the monotheistic worship of Aten seems here to belong to a semiotic relationship with the powerful mother. She "let Aten / loose / in my baby head" (12). For Porter's Akhenaten the maternally dominated semiotic persists beyond infancy and is textually manifest in the pharaoh's fascination with the functions of the body and physical, sensual pleasures which indicate these undirected and multifarious desires. For example, the satisfaction of sexual desires, in many forms, is made religious in this collection. Akhenaten tells the story of the birth of the god Horus, the Egyptian sky god, in the poem "Death and the Randy Vulture" (76). The tension between multiple bodily desires is palpable in this work. The vulture sees Osiris' penis and the poem asks "What is a poor vulture to do / eat it or fuck it? / Stomach and cunt / have a civil discussion" (76). The outcome of this discussion is that "cunt wins and Horus is conceived" (76). But closure is not so readily achieved in Porter's larger gender shifting vision of ancient Egypt as semiotic space.

13 Interestingly, in terms of the play of contradictions being mapped in this poetry, these bodily functions are often linked to the most symbolic practice — writing. It is when Akhenaten sits down to write a hymn that he is diverted by one of his servants and bodily pulsions. The telling verse reads:

    then Parenfer poured me

a jar of beer  
that got bottomless  
during his fart concert  
oh, I pissed myself  
laughing at his anal rendition  
of Amun's Sed Hymn.

The toilet humour of this poetry offers a critique of the patriarchal religion in line with feminist notions that the feminine semiotic is exchanged for the masculine symbolic order when the child subject is subsumed into the law of the father. At this point Akhenaten employs the bodily logic of the semiotic space in order to resist, or at least temporarily divert, this shift into the symbolic order. This suspension occurs, paradoxically, while he is trying to call up this new order so as to write a hymn for his singular (and thus arguably patriarchal) god. At the end of the poem the commentary incorporates a description of "a donkey/ his black penis extended/ a happy erection in the sun/ / I watch him for luck/ and let my Hymn come" (50). Obviously, the collapse of meaning shared across the word "come" simultaneously refers to both ejaculation and to the outpouring of the words of the hymn. This sexual play in language is indicative of the slipperiness of these representations and the way that desire itself is a product of the symbolic order which substitutes its logic in place of the semiotic connection with the mother.

14 The anal phase of the polymorphously perverse infant is also linked to Akhenaten's homosexual and incestuous relationship with his brother. Their desire for each other during a sexual encounter is punctuated with the smell of "donkey shit" and the sound of "an old woman noisy in the palace toilet" (113). But the distinctions between the semiotic and symbolic are consistently blurred in the text, especially when the god Thoth, the ibis, "shits /with a quick squirt /on a library of papyrus" (37). A gesture which Akhenaten acknowledges is "strange behaviour/ for the god of scribes" (37). Arguably this is "strange" in that Thoth is male, and his engagement in writing positions him firmly in the symbolic order, but this positioning is undermined by his writing implement, his anus, which is the province of desires typically linked to the semiotic and maternally dominated bodily processes.

15 Porter's representation of Akhenaten's myriad sensual pleasures also encompasses his oral fixation made manifest in his request that the sculptor give him "a beautiful mouth" (31), but neither is the oral pleasure separate from the symbolic order. Akhenaten, as a poet of sensual and sexual sensations, tastes the words he chooses. The poem "Luminous" plays out these relationships between orders of knowledge:

Luminous



My mouth  
spiced with sunlight

luminous

what a tasty word!

the juice  
of a fresh melon

the spiked drink  
of an erect nipple

luminous

my mouth sends Aten  
incense (48)

In this poem, the oral fixation is neither separate to, nor precursor of, the symbolic order. The two are melded in a synaesthetic approach to language as a physical, sensual entity.

16 These collapsing boundaries between pre and post language states are as undivided as Akhenaten's visions of his hermaphroditic self. However, such self portraits are interestingly made abject in the text. The sculptor Bek reveals his revulsion in bodily ways when he asks: "Is that you, Pharaoh?/ He said and his voice/ shivered" (31). This question refers to the illustration of the feminized Akhenaten drawn in, as Akhenaten describes it, the "nauseating sand" (32). The shudder and the nausea are linked to what appear to be epileptic seizures which take hold of Pharaoh at crucial moments in the text. At these points the body takes control over the ruler of Egypt in ways that do not undermine the pharaoh as much as privilege the power of the physical body over this imagined historical world. After one such seizure Akhenaten prays to Aten, asking him to teach him how to live with the loss of control. This implies, in line with the theories, that the essentially phallocentric monotheism is inextricably linked to the abandonment of the semiotic as the phase in which the pulsions of the body dominate.

17 Such blurrings are equally crucial to the new monotheistic worship of Aten orchestrated by Akhenaten. The poetry tracks the inception, rein, and death of Aten and Akhenaten in tandem. The relationship between creator and created is completely entangled in that Akhenaten devises the God Aten, and then claims that Aten is the source and invention of all things on earth, including of course Akhenaten. This chicken or egg problem is both sexualized and sexually politicized in terms of power and desire when Akhenaten confronts it in the poem called "Inundation":

both the Black  
and the Red Lands  
of my kingdom  
tremble for Aten  
do His bidding  
like a twelve year old bride  
in His harem rooms

but then Aten trembles for me  
or do I tremble for Him?

Sometimes He is imperious,  
shoves me away  
and I lie prostrate  
among the cool mosaic water lilies  
hysterically immobile  
as any woman  
blubbering ignored  
on the harem floor.

But other times  
He calls for me  
silly with desire  
whimpering (45)

The power distinctions between god and subject are seamlessly merged in this poem. These sexualized fascinations pepper the text in ways that speak Akhenaten's ambiguous world view. His sense of himself without boundaries or stable gender, his multifarious sexual drives, and his failure to ever concede to the law of the father (embodied by the patriarchal religion of Amun) all suggest his position in the feminine or pre-symbolic phase. Yet this sits in awkward contradiction with the masculine and phallic monotheism of his worship of Aten — the sun who is arguably also a son.

18 To complicate this further, his sun god, Aten is undeniably a manifestation of the symbolic order. The pharaoh says Aten "will have a new sign" (26) but this sign cannot be communicated, it is unto itself. This is evident in Akhenaten's orders to his advisor Ay: "explain-no-/ show/ Bek and the others/ what I want" (27). The symbol for Aten is its own language and therefore cannot be explained to the royal sculptor Bek. But despite this highly symbolic gesture, which is at the core of his religion and equally at the core of his reign, up until the end of his life Akhenaten is in search of a corporeal voice. This search culminates in a violent struggle between flesh and language. Akhenaten arranges a trepanning operation to open his skull - the place of the brain and, therefore, language. This body is now no longer seeking sexual pleasure, it is seeking freedom from language, a desire that necessarily equates with death. The poem reads:

tomorrow Pentu  
my Skull-Opener  
will come

he will clean  
his instruments  
in the sacred fire

he will give me  
poppy juice

his knife will free  
this muck (164)

Just as it was in the Thoth story, muck, or shit, is words. The operation may find a reversion to the silence in which the poetics originated - the silence of erasure "sweet / in my empty skull"(164). This could be read as the final satisfaction of desire, the return to unhindered semiotic space. But the outcome remains unknown because the operation is set for a tomorrow that never textually arrives in the collection. What is significant is the implication of the body in the process, and opening the body as a means for finding something trapped in the mind.

19 These poetics of physical space seem to belong to Cixous's logic of the female body: A woman, by her opening up, is opened up to being "possessed," which is to say dispossessed of herself.

[...]

Through the same opening that is her danger, she comes out of herself to go to the other, a traveler in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be. (42-3)

Writing a male figure within the logic of this feminine space, Porter re-genders power across these sexual differences. This allows her to dream up a hero whose sexuality is boundless, traversing both genders, both sexual orientations, and engaged in incestuous liaisons with his brother and impregnating his daughters.

20 The poetry consistently pivots on these pluralities:

in sex and art  
I'm like a Hittite army  
I don't recognise borders

I heap male and female  
into one silky dune  
and dig in my toes (129)

The sliding grains of sand are sensuous in their silkiness, slipping between toes and suggesting both the Egyptian desert sands and the passage of time measured in the hourglass. The slipperiness is undifferentiating in relation to sex and art, the two colliding in one collection of poetry, one visualization of history. Here is the liminal space that is shared by the body (sex) and the body of work (art).

21 This unbound freedom is arguably an outcome of the aforementioned gaps in Akhenaten's historical remains. These silences signal a space in which Porter's poetic inventions and interventions cannot be held up to the mirror of historical accuracy, she uses, instead, a mirror in which she can speculate freely. Cixous suggests that this anti-mimetic space belongs to her definition of feminine writing: "If there is somewhere else that can escape the infernal repetition, it lies in that direction, where it writes itself, where it dreams, where it invents new worlds" (xxix). These inventions are the opposite of mimesis - a logic born out by these poems in which it is precisely 'nothing' (historical silence) that is supplemented by invention. As Gaston Bachelard maintains, "If we cannot imagine, we cannot foresee" (xxx).

22 Porter imagines memory in a mode of poeticizing that sends imagination, not along its usual course toward the unknown future in which to invent, but that opts instead for speculation in the palimpsestically available past. She trespasses in this chronology by taking up a silence which poses uncertain challenges to historical discourse. It is in such openings that feminine spaces can reconfigure masculine logics to speak a dual language of bisexuality and the multi-gendered self. Thus gender transgressions operate in Porter's poetics in multifarious ways, but they always signal the possibilities of infiltration. Silence as an unbound space is able to infiltrate both historical records and language itself. Silences thus insinuate themselves into language in ways that endlessly negotiate and renegotiate with the symbolic. Akhenaten's bisexuality both in his depiction of himself, and in his sexual choices as they are mapped by Porter's collection, posits the doubled category of the hermaphrodite. He engages in intercourse with his wife, brother, daughters and concubines in a sexually transgressive poetic of body politics. Cixous renegotiates bisexuality in ways pertinent to this discussion:

Bisexuality — that is to say the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes [can be seen as] [...] a fantasy of a complete being, which replaces the fear of castration and veils sexual difference insofar as it is perceived as the mark of mythical separation - the trace, therefore, of a dangerous and painful ability to be cut. Ovid's Hermaphrodite, less bisexual than asexual, not made up of two genders but of two halves. Hence a fantasy of unity. Two within one, and not even two wholes. (41)

23 Perhaps this goes some way to explain the fascination with physiological cross-

dressing in Porter's collection. She employs the transgressive politics of bisexual behaviour to undermine the binary oppositions which pin down gender beneath codes of authenticity, including psychosexual theories of language. Strangely, for Porter as a poet embroiled in her own transgression (in the form of autobiographical transference with her protagonist) Akhenaten pays a hefty price for his challenge to the dominant discourse. The outcome of Akhenaten's transgression is silence, the silence that falls when a populous abhors such outlandish acts. In Akhenaten's case this retribution is for nonconformity to his role as King. Historian Cyril Aldred says:

[A]ncient Egyptians had deliberately effaced most of Akhenaten's memorials, expunged all mention of him from their official records, and done their best to blot out of their consciousness the recollection of a pharaoh who had apparently not conformed to the centuries-old tradition of repeating the primal pattern of kingship which had come down from the gods. (113)

To defy a divinely given patriarchy is a large-scale transgression. But, perhaps the most significant manifestation (for art) of this nonconformity is envisioned in the pharaoh's artistically represented anatomical cross-dressing. This self-depiction constitutes his artistic innovation, but all that he achieved was debased by the Egyptians at the end of his reign. That the protagonist transgresses by virtue of his art is also central to Porter as the poet who is herself undertaking similar poetic innovations and transgressions in her poetry. Writing from behind the mask of her character, Porter is able to experiment with miscreant behaviour on two levels; crossing into the psyches of these historical others, and crossing again via the gender and sexual trespasses made by Akhenaten.

24 The necessary consequence of such infringements returns this discussion to the problem of authenticity. Acts of transgression are, by definition, necessarily not authentic, or not subordinate to the logic of authenticity. This is because they involve a violation, a disobedience antithetical to the genuine, valid or original that defines what is authentic. Perhaps Porter seeks a new mode of authenticity by her transgression, one that parallels her personal, rather than empirical, truths as provisional to breaking silences. However, these violations and the outcomes they manifest, are textually punished by the poet writing the collection. As the poetic-narrative draws to a close Porter depicts Akhenaten blaming himself for the fall of his Kingdom, mentally laying out his sins: "My dead daughter / my debauched little brother" (122). Some poems later he is more lucid: "My eyes hurt as I write / It's my own fault" (132). One of his responses to this personal anguish is directed at his wife, and is alarmingly like the silence which circumscribes his own fate: "I chipped out Nefertiti's face / from her stela" (133). In accordance with this, the final obliteration awaits Akhenaten's death.

He understands his posthumous fate:  
the workmen of the new king  
have arrived with chisels  
and hammers  
they have orders  
to cut down my city  
and cut out my name (167)

25 But such retribution is reserved for the historical character, Akhenaten, while Porter manages to evade the silent punishment of destruction she is examining in these transgressive poems. This is the final poem of Porter's book, her next will be a fiction, the highly successful narrative poem, *The Monkey's Mask*. This verse novel also chronicles the remains of a silenced poet, the murdered young woman Mickey whose mysterious death drives the plot. Mickey and Akhenaten are both sexual transgressors who are textually punished for their multifarious desires. Mickey is killed during sex play with a female academic and a male lawyer, but her murderers are hard to track because of her sexual rapacity with (fictionalised) members of Sydney's poetry scene. Her poetry holds the clues to the mystery and much of it is destroyed to throw the private investigator off the trail. For both Akhenaten and Mickey, silencing and destroying both the transgressively sexualized body and the body of work (poetry) is the narrative punishment Porter chooses. This constitutes a strange stance for Porter, as a poet who is interested in exposing sexual alternatives in her own poetry. This is also important in relation to the role of the image. Once the physical bodies of these poet-protagonists have been disposed of, the visual can be replaced by the textual.

26 But, as this article has argued the textual can operate as a mirror. Here there are implications for autobiography. Dorothy Porter is open about her own bisexuality, something which makes these narrative punishments even more striking. It is not the province of poetry analysis to speculate on this issue intrusively, but perhaps within such a mimetic discussion it is apt to end by turning the mirror outward so that it reflects the poet writing. It seems pertinent to leave it to Foucault to address Porter's role in the sexual politics of contemporary Australian society:

If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places [herself]himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; [she]he upsets established law; [she]he somehow anticipates the coming freedom (Foucault 6).

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# **Liquid Laughter: A Gendered History of Milk & Alcohol Drinking in West-German and US Film Comedies of the 1950s**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper aims to present a Gender History of the social dimension of laughter. It intends to demonstrate, by scrutinizing several West-German and US film comedies of the 1950s, that romantic comedies of that era firstly served as a tool in a process of (re-)establishing heteronormative and patriarchal gender systems; secondly, we will outline that this development was highly contested and depended on constantly referring to forms of gender subversion and deviance.

## **Prologue**

1 Using feature films as primary sources has become a more and more common research option in international historiography during the last years. In the New Cultural History especially, images in general and feature films in particular form prominent parts of its program which aims at a fundamentally different perspective of history (Daniel). Nevertheless, writing history by analyzing film comedies is still a rare practice, for established academic rules seem to enforce a certain "seriousness" and "relevance" of employed source materials. Such mass media forms of "only entertainment" are usually dropped from the scholarly agenda. This paper questions this convention and aims to present a Gender History of the social dimension of laughter. It intends to demonstrate, by scrutinizing several West-German and US film comedies of the 1950s, that romantic comedies of that era firstly served as a tool in a process of (re-)establishing heteronormative and patriarchal gender systems; secondly, we will outline that this development was highly contested and depended on constantly referring to forms of gender subversion and deviance. We interpret this emphasis on male and/or female deviance and its recurring presentation as abject in the films not only as the often described "backlash" of the 1950s, but as evidence for existing subversive elements in both national gender systems. Subordinating and marginalizing these subversive elements was not self-evident or even "natural" but the result of repeated and arduous efforts to reterritorialize them into the heteronormative structure. Yet, our objective does not include a comparative approach in the strict sense. Instead of looking for differences and similarities, we postulate and take as given corresponding aspects in both post-war societies which derive from the immediate wartime situation and its influences on the gender system.

2 For such an approach, it is necessary to accept movies as part of historic gender



discourses, as media that simultaneously produce these discourses in their multi-relational reference to other social factors and contribute to their social distribution in the processes of audience reception. With the help of literary theory, New Historicism as articulated by Stephen Greenblatt, Moritz Baßler and others, and a definition of discourse as formulated by Michel Foucault, we understand movies as texts which form a fabric of individual discursive layers. Moreover, feature films themselves formulate new, different, enhanced meanings in addition to the existing discourses (Baßler, 14). In our view as cultural historians, a theory that combines the historicity of texts with the textuality of history constitutes a productive answer to current questions concerning how fiction informs reality and vice versa. We consider this question to be wrongly posed because neither fiction nor feature films can escape their historic and discursive setting; as movies are composed of discourses, and are themselves only understandable in historic discursive structures (Perinelli, 46). This also means that texts/movies always tell us more than they intend to. Given their multi-dimensional complexity, movies might serve as valuable tools for historians to gain new perspectives and pose different questions in the framework of cultural history.

### **The Joke**

3        What we state for films and their discursive production of social reality is especially true for comedies and their function of modifying hegemonic discourses. In our opinion, it is primarily the joke, as described by Sigmund Freud in *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten*, which enables people to regress from logic while remaining understandable (Grotjahn); it allows the transgression of social borders without the fear of sanction. The joke is thus able to transmit a new (or yet denied) meaning and provides an opportunity for safe passage from the utterable into a sphere of social taboo.

4        According to Freud, the joke expresses an otherwise repressed unconscious aggression which has worked its way to the surface, something Freud calls joke-work. To pass the censorship of the pre-consciousness, this aggression needs to disguise itself through symbolization. In other words, the joke helps to articulate a tabooed desire. It thus serves to set free the energy needed to suppress aggression and leads to increased pleasure through laughter.

5        Additionally, the joke is a fundamentally social technique because it needs a certain social setting to be effective: firstly, the person whose aggression is to be expressed, secondly, the victim against whom the aggression is directed, and thirdly, a person who checks whether the aggression is adequately symbolized and disguised in order to hurt enough to be effective

without transgressing social conventions too much. The third person's laughter is the touchstone of the social arrangement: if she or he laughs, the first person is allowed to join in. The joke-work of the first person ultimately depends on the third person who judges whether the second person might be victimized through that joke.<sup>1</sup>

6 Cinema serves as an apparatus for such forms of social transmittance, in which the audience and its role in constituting legitimate laughter additionally enhances the described setting. The audience takes the position of the third person and judges whether a joke is funny or not. A laughing spectator legitimizes the aggression and the fictitious victim of the film becomes a real victim in his or her head. This image thus finds its way out of the cinema into the field of everyday social discrimination. Should the aggression not succeed in disguising itself as a joke and is judged as not funny, the joke only provokes feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, and disgust.

7 This paper suggests using the Freudian argument for a historical analysis of feature films. It raises particular questions, e.g. who laughs about whom and who collaborates in the process of making a joke successful. Moreover, it may be brought to light which aspects were not considered funny or which remained in a zone of taboo. From a present-day perspective, it might also be interesting to see the differences of what was considered funny during the 1950s and today or vice versa. In the following, we would like to raise these questions with regard to West-German and US film comedies in order to scrutinize the contemporary social relevance and the social effectiveness of this genre.

### **Romantic Comedies**

8 Comedies were and remain popular both with film producers (as they are easy and inexpensive to realize) and the audience. One reason for this genre's success might be its first-glance harmlessness. Critics attest subversive capacity to explicit satires or "black" comedies, but generally "comedy is often taken to be the epitome of light relief or 'just entertainment'" (King 2). This corresponds with the underestimation of film comedies in historiography which we want to challenge by closely examining the represented gender relations.

9 From a perspective of Gender History, we are first of all interested in the romantic comedy, which focuses on the establishment of heterosexual relations despite several obstacles and difficulties. Many of these films stress an individualistic worldview in which "the love" between two social actors is endangered by social and cultural conventions but nevertheless proves to be invincible. Implications of social dichotomies add dynamic to the

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<sup>1</sup> Freud describes several different forms of joke-work. Here, we focus only on the mentioned one.

plot, but a happy end is certain. This setting provoked the ever-recurring assessment of romantic comedies as "escapist entertainment," but it also stimulated not only our analytic curiosity but also the interest of Geoff King:

Their implicit "don't take it too seriously" helps, potentially, to inoculate them against close interrogation: those who subject comedies to ideological analysis are more likely than most to be criticised for making too much of works of "mere" entertainment [...] If romantic comedy can have ideological implications, in its imaginary reconciliation of both characters and thematic oppositions, these need to be located in the specific socio-historical contexts in which it has been produced, particularly in terms of prevailing notions of gender relationships. (56)

10 Like melodrama, the romantic comedy usually and typically revolves around gender conflicts, and female protagonists very often occupy a central role in the plot. But while melodramas were rather frequently analyzed by historians, romantic comedies were not (Byars; DiBattista). On a primary level, this paper draws from ideas formulated by film historian Kathleen Rowe:

Making fun of and out of inflated and self-deluded notions of heroic masculinity, romantic comedy is often structured by gender inversion, a disruption of the social hierarchy of male over female through what might be called the topos of the unruly woman [...] When romantic comedy fully realizes the potential of this topos, it dramatizes a resistance to the law of Oedipus, a carnivalization of sexual identities and gender hierarchies that posits a new and more inclusive basis for community than the social order it takes as a point of reference. (1994, 41-42)

11 Following and expanding her thesis, we want to show that subversive and affirmative elements of comedies are strongly interconnected in a necessary and multi-layered relation of exchange with one another and social discourse. For historians, an analysis of this exchange in periods which were like the post-war 1950s characterized by a dynamically charged gender system is especially rewarding.

### **Post-War Gender Systems**

12 Historiographies dealing with the United States and West Germany take it for granted that in the 1940s certain "traditional," hetero-normative notions of femininity and masculinity lost their hegemonic status and influence due to the effects of the Great Depression and the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> One reason for these developments lay in the fact that the social division of labor on both home fronts were to a far lesser degree divided along gender lines than before the war. The spheres of production and social participation and those of reproduction and domesticity became more and more blurred. They no longer reflected a clear binary order

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<sup>2</sup> We adopt the term heteronormativity from Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge 1993.

of gender.<sup>3</sup> One consequence of this deterritorializing development was a new class structure in the USA and in West Germany, for in both countries the middle-class segment of society expanded largely and established or stabilized its cultural hegemony.

13 With regard to Germany, this decisive development occurred faster, more directly, and more clearly because National Socialism was overthrown by the allied forces and thus all relevant social constellations were open to immense change. But in the USA as well, concepts of class, status, and social mobility changed or were perceived differently during depression and war.

14 We interpret the accelerated reconstruction of the heteronormative gender order in both countries during the 1950s as the resolute attempt to stabilize the social setting in general. Whereas the new class arrangement was a desired development, the gender notions advocated by the war were not, and the restabilization of heteronormativity was a crucial part of keeping a precarious order working. But this strategy of arresting one social development to accelerate another was contested and difficult to achieve. As we want to show in our sources, achieving a return to heteronormativity as a hegemonic norm not only rested on permanent discourses of exclusion and normalization, but also on permanently citing and displaying deviant notions of femininity and masculinity. "Roll back" was a social fact of 1950s gender systems but in the long run, this decade was much more fractured, contested, and dynamic than is commonly attested. The alternative gender concepts important during war years were remarginalized but remained present as the "other" in popular discourses. They thus formed a basis from which the social revolts and the so called sexual revolution of the 1960s could arise.

15 Film historian Christopher Beach presented an interesting approach to scrutinize class and gender questions in movies relationally. He deals with 1950s Hollywood comedies and puts forward the thesis that economic success and failure as well as upward and downward mobility were to a large degree reflected on women's bodies in an unprecedented amount. Class, according to Beach, was staged as a fetishized female body. Simultaneously, the male body lost its clear signification of class belonging and represented in its physical uniformity the blurring of social stratification in one large middle class; the "Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" epitomizes this image. Through fetishization the woman's body served as the main signifier for both her own class and that of men. Furthermore, economy was itself inscribed onto women's bodies. In naturalizing these effects, this phallic fetishization now constitutes

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<sup>3</sup> We do not want to suggest that accelerations of gender systems are always caused from its "outside." Here, we want to underscore the enormous importance of depression and world war, which of course were highly gendered phenomena themselves.

the specific truth we nowadays routinely recognize as a woman. The man as social no-body or invisible-body corresponded to this setting. He seemed to have no characteristic features, he formed the "normal matrix" which for so long remained outside of scholarly attention. It is our aim to make these interrelated processes of both capitalistic and gender production visible in the film comedies we examine (Beach; Cohan).

## **Two Plateaus**

16 For developing and transmitting these discourses and strategies during the 1950s, the cinema apparatus in general and romantic comedies in particular were highly influential. It was a suitable platform to disarticulate the partial gender inversion of the early 1940s.

17 The jokes present in 1950s romantic comedies focused on the reproductive man and the productive woman. This setting is represented via several distinctive social characters, like the single mothering father, the childless non-reproductive woman, the passionless man, the desiring woman, the anti-authoritarian weak man, the authoritarian strong woman, the jobless single man, the working single woman, the regressive boy, the old spinster, etc.

18 To analyse this aggressive operation in romantic comedies, we will elaborate on the metaphoric appearance of particular liquids, milk and alcohol, in order to open interesting windows for interpretation. These metaphors were never the actual theme of the movies but nevertheless platforms or agents for signifying specific developments. As we will see, alcohol on the one hand symbolizes unproductive masculinity and thus signifies liquidation,<sup>4</sup> flight, transgression, helplessness, illness, disability, and denial. On the other hand, it also stands for an independent, strong and non-reproductive femininity, which is associated with success, power and sexual passion instead of family and children.

19 In the comedies, alcohol becomes a borderline at which processes of transformation take place. As much as excessive alcohol consumption challenges the rules of heteronormativity, for it leads to sexually inactive men and women, complete abstinence is no better an alternative, for it signifies sexual immaturity. Milk carries out the exact counter-running movement. It gains its importance because it occupies the place of alcohol and takes over alcohol's functions. As for consuming alcohol, drinking milk in the movies also allows for flight — a flight, however, that in the 1950s did not end in liquidation but in complete regression, in a restabilization of personality and thus of the gender order. This regression was determined in solely Oedipal terms, resulting in patriarchal subject positions.

20 With the help of milk's healing capacities, controlling the liminal processes of alcohol

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<sup>4</sup> "Liquidation" means to become fluid in a non-fluid fixed order and thus can tend to life as well as to death. Economically, it stands either for access to cash-flows or for becoming illiquid.

drinking became possible. Certain characters were more or less forced to drink alcohol, to satisfy their desire for liquidation, but only to prove that they have naturalized their gender formation. In this sense, both milk and alcohol symbolized an exit from a certain order, its denial through non-productivity. But in the end, the metaphor of healing through milk consumption served to overcome the deviant gender arrangements which are usually described as "crises" in historiography; it focused on re-installing man's position in the phallic order. Using the point of male denial as its departing range, milk offered simultaneously total non-productivity for men and success for women. But although this at first glance affirmed the deviant gender arrangements of the war years, in the end these metaphors re-introduce men back into the patriarchal position. This is the aim of these movies; it is their humorous way of disarticulating subversive gender arrangements.

21 While the joke renders the "wrong" gender setting as disdainful and sets free necessary energy, the metaphors of milk and alcohol open the field of counter-inversion. Although both fluids liquidize the protagonists of the films at first glance, milk ultimately serves as a solidifying device. Alcohol liquidates order, while milk re-installs the man as hegemonic in the capitalistic and patriarchal order. That is what it is all about - to be fluid in the discourse of patriarchy or to liquidize it - milk versus alcohol.

### **Milk and alcohol within selected movies**

22 For exemplification, we will analyze several movie sequences. It would be easy, though, to bring up many more examples in which gender is symbolically negotiated through these two drinks and their related foods. Moreover, it would be far more difficult to find comedies (as well as films of other genres) of the 1950s not marked by this subject matter.

23 In *The Girl Can't Help It* things come into flow.<sup>5</sup> On her way to her new agent Tom (Tom Ewell), Jerri Jordan (Jayne Mansfield) passes a number of men, who become literally fluid in her presence. While the paperboy exhales air and whistles after her, the massive block of ice in the hands of a worker vaporizes in only a few seconds as she walks by in her short dress. In Jerri's presence the elements change their physical condition from firm to fluid. The image of orgasm becomes evident: everything expands, volatilizes, flows. When the milkman in front of Tom's house faces Jerri, it becomes unambiguous that milk not only connotes femininity but stands for male body secretions as well. In the immediate presence of Jerri, the

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<sup>5</sup> Directed 1956 by Frank Tashlin. The plot shows a down-and-out gangster (Edmond O'Brien) who hires an alcoholic press agent (Tom Ewell) to make his blonde bombshell girlfriend (Jayne Mansfield) a recording star in six weeks. But what is he going to do when he finds out that she has no talent? And what is going to happen when the two fall in love?

milk bottle in the milkman's hand bursts its cap like a bottle of champagne its cork and spews the milk; the bottle ejaculates.

24 Jayne Mansfield's body stands for the success and the wealth she aspires.<sup>6</sup> Her body turns into a signifier of a higher class and so becomes an economic sign. In her tight skirt she resembles the phallic form of the milk bottle in the hand of the milk man. In this scene Jayne Mansfield is so over-fetishized that the male gaze cannot control her anymore. On the contrary, she anticipates the male gaze and exaggerates it in such a way that the fragmenting gaze returns. The men become magnetized and fixed as if Medusa had glanced at them. In this phallic congealment, evoked by the fetishization of Jayne Mansfield, masculine engendering can succeed (as a joke).



Fig. 1.: Milkman

25 Hence the metaphor of milk is not only phallic. When the eyeglasses of a neighbor in the stairway break into pieces at her sight and leave him blind, we can sense a second meaning of the figure Jerri: blind as Oedipus Rex after the sexual act with his mother, the motherly figure is heralded. In fact, Jerri holds two milk bottles upon her already demonstrative chest and with that refers to its nurturing and maternal function. Moreover, the picture emphasizes the relational proximity of the categories gender and race: the milk bottles

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<sup>6</sup> Moreover, she does not only go for a career, but represents it. In her first conversation with Tom she states "I am a career" whereupon Tom replies "You are a career? I thought most girls want a career." The equalization of Jayne Mansfield and economic prosperity in *The Girl Can't Help It* also takes place in the movie *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* In the opening credits a voice-over introduces the appearing image of Tony Randall "this is Rock Hunter" followed by the image of Jayne Mansfield "and this is success."

in front of her breasts indicate the platinum blonde Mansfield as a desirable white woman and a mother, being at the same time fetishized, lactified, and maternized. The racially motivated lactification heightens her value as signifier, which she embodies, which she *is*. The categories race, class, and gender directly interfere in this scene and display themselves on each other.

26     Marked in such a triple way she enters Tom's apartment and starts nursing him. In the early morning, the heavily alcoholic agent suffers from a strong hangover. With the bottles still pressed against her front, she introduces her motherly role by telling Tom that as a youngster she used to care for her father and her seven brothers. The way she recalls her childhood memories is funny and seems absurd against the background of her initial foolishness. She then begins her cure with hot tomato juice against the remaining alcohol in his blood to re-establish his physical health. The burning red juice acts as an antidote to alcohol.



Fig. 2.: Jerry

27     Afterwards, Jerri refers to her "real," that is "natural" motherhood underneath her make up: "Pretty is just how good you apply your base," she explains to the slowly recovering Tom while fixing his breakfast. She de-fetishizes herself in order to switch over from the sphere of a phallic celebrity to the sphere of a domestic housewife and mother. In order to do so, she debunks her sexualized femininity as a mask. This means that she removes the



fetishized mask to express a hidden but true womanhood. But — and here is the joke — this quasi natural femininity of Jayne Mansfield is portrayed to be as phallic as the modelled one. As she bends over the table towards the eating Tom, she allows him a deep look in her plunging neckline and continues: "I am equipped for motherhood." She makes clear what exactly equips her for motherhood, namely her breasts that are or could be full of milk. Thus the film negotiates a concept of natural femininity that is at the same time domestic/maternal and fetishized.

28 The "underlying" and "real" womanhood in the movie is perceived humorously and provokes our assumption that it does so because it comes into conflict with a non-phallic and non-maternal reality of women in the fifties' society that did not correspond with this concept of gender. The phallic form of female nature is the joke of that scene. It even may only have been representable as a joke because it did not match the common discourse of gender identity of that time. Hence we can understand the strategic impact of this comedy in the (re)construction of a patriarchal gender system that lost its discursive self-evidence.

29 The West-German movie *Wenn der Vater mit dem Sohne....* was aligned with this very project as well.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Jayne Mansfield, who appears motherly by nature, the social father Teddy is not provided by nature to nurture, in other words, he is not "equipped for motherhood." When after five years Ulli's mother surprisingly contacts Teddy in order to take the boy with her to the USA, Teddy desperately kidnaps the unaware boy and flees with him to Italy. After having cared for Ulli almost all the child's life, he understandably does not want to separate from him. On their way south they have to stop in the Swiss mountains and Ulli becomes hungry. Hence Teddy tries to milk a cow in a pasture. In this footage, milk emerges in the realms of intact nature, in the context of purity and rural environment. But the father is unable to give milk to his son: after a number of ridiculous and funny attempts of milking, the cow shatters the bottle with its tail. The loving, nursing, and caring man appears absurd and unnatural and consequently it is mother nature herself who hinders his efforts. The plot heads for the necessity of an exchange between the provident but awkward single-father and the so far absent but nevertheless biological mother. After the exchange took place, Teddy himself gets cured from his incapacity to work that had stricken him after the death of his own son during the war. When finally Ulli is placed in the proper position with his mother, Teddy can also find his place in society and carry on his profession as a famous clown.

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<sup>7</sup> Directed 1955 by Hans Quest. The widowed Teddy (Heinz Rühmann) raises little Ulli (Oliver Grimm) who as a baby was abandoned by his mother, who emigrated to the USA directly after the war. Not knowing the facts, the boy sees his father in Teddy. Years later his mother wants to take him back and bring him to the States. Thus Teddy flees with the boy to Italy. Finally the mother catches up with them and Teddy now understands that a child is better off with his mother: he lets Ulli go.



Fig. 3.: Rühmann

30 Parallel to Teddy's story, the course of Peepe (Carl-Heinz Schroth) proceeds. The always boozed best friend and former colleague cannot stand milk and seeing a glass of it makes him literally sick. Like Teddy, Peepe is unable to work and a social outsider. However, at the happy end of the film Peepe marries Teddy's landlady Frl. Biermann (Fita Benkhoff). Unlike Jayne Mansfield who was placed outside of the "natural" order as a "single star celebrity," the deviant figure, Frl. Biermann is ridiculed as an old maid. The movie portrays Frl. Biermann's initial sexual desire for Teddy as completely ridiculous and her attempt to make him drunk and to seduce him as sheerly hopeless and embarrassing — as a joke. Consequentially, the development of the relationship between Peepe and Frl. Biermann relationship runs the other way around. In the last scene we see Peepe sitting in front of a glass of milk, even drinking it. Doing so, he reports to Teddy, who returns childless, which tragedy happened to him when he was totally drunk: "Frl. Biermann did marry me. Since then all I drink is milk, to prevent worse." Symbolized by milk, Frl. Biermann takes over the maternal role for Peepe and in doing so reconstructs him as a responsible man. Moreover, she too gets "cured" from her initial desire and thus becomes reterritorialized within her "natural" identity. Hence her welcome-kiss for Teddy is not ambiguous or ludicrous anymore. Neither Fräulein (miss) nor Bier (beer) nor Mann (man) anymore, she becomes Peepe's wife.

31 In *Father of the Bride*,<sup>8</sup> Stanley (Spencer Tracy) cannot sleep at night as he thinks

<sup>8</sup> Directed 1950 by Vincente Minnelli. The harassed Stanley Banks (Spencer Tracy) father of his beautiful daughter Kay (Elizabeth Taylor) experiencing his only daughter's expensive wedding. He tells the story of the

about his daughter Kay's (Elizabeth Taylor) projected wedding. As he looks at a childhood picture of Kay showing her next to a horse, he starts to worry about losing his beloved daughter. The girl on the photo holds the rein of the horse, and we understand that he needs her as a foothold much more than she needs him. Stanley's wife Ellie (Joan Bennett) tries to calm him down by offering him a glass of warm milk. But it is not her milk he wants to drink; he cannot regress with her. He can merely dump his fears on her to find some sleep again. But in his subsequent dream the angst returns as a nightmare of Kay's wedding, which depicts how he loses control over the whole situation in church. He sinks into the carpet of the long aisle, becomes unable to walk anymore, pedals and crawls on all fours, until his clothes fall off and everything around him becomes vast. The father again becomes a little naked baby — he regresses.



Fig. 4.: Pepe

32 Stanley wakes up startled from this picture and totters down in the kitchen, to his surprise finding his daughter sitting there and drinking milk. She pours him a glass of milk and as they start talking, his fear leaves him and flows through the milk over to his daughter. Here the *mise-en-scene* places the milk bottle exactly between them, vertically parting the frame. As a border, the bottle divides as well as connects father and daughter. It stands for the liminal process of passing fluids and therewith for the psychic content going back and forth between both. While Stanley's condition gets increasingly solid, Kay's becomes more and

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announcement of her engagement and all the ceremonial requirements and events leading up to the wedding over a period of three months.

more flowing. Taking on the theme of his dream, now it is her who fears not to be able to walk down the aisle of the church. Meanwhile her father can assure her his encouragement to lead her safely to the altar. At the end of this scene he is reterritorialized in the position of the father, while she is in the position of the helpless girl: his regression floated through the milk towards her.



Fig. 5.: Fob

33 In *Father of the Bride* — just like in the other comedies — the dysfunctional man gets "cured" by the female protagonist. Accordingly, she finds the way from her significant position in society back into the dominated order of the recently reconstructed man. Kay's walk down the aisle is no longer propelled by her very own desire, but organized as a classical patriarchal handing-over of the bride by her father. Milk is the symbolic medium for that exchange.

34 Alcohol plays a contrasting role. When Stanley and his wife Ellie drive to the parents of their future son-in-law Buckley Dunstan (Don Taylor) for a first visit, Stanley's urge for a drink gets stronger with every minute and a quick stopover at a bar is prevented only by Ellie. After they have arrived, however, Buckley's father offers drinks, and Stanley gets more and more drunk. He talks endlessly about Kay's life from its very beginning. His attempt to keep hold of his daughter by telling her entire life story appears funny. The more he drinks, the more the object of his talk slips out of his narration and thus Stanley himself slips out of it. At the end, he dozes off on the couch of his hosts and totally deceives himself of the fact that he is going to lose his daughter to their son.

35 The fear of losing his daughter holds yet another meaning. On their way to the Dunstans' house Stanley blusters about their assumed lower class. He alleges that the Dunstans are trying to climb up the social ranks by uniting their son with his daughter. As they arrive, he has to admit that things run rather the other way around. Despite the fact that Buckley is a whole generation younger than Stanley, the vibrant fiancé already belongs to a higher class. It becomes clear that it is not the achievement of Stanley's work but rather the alliance of his daughter with Buckley's family that could enable Stanley's family to scale up economically. Kay's desirable femininity — not his labor — becomes the signifier of his class. For the moment Stanley flees this insight with the help of alcohol. Until his daughter re-establishes him in the already mentioned kitchen/milk scene — the turning point of the plot — he remains helpless. Only then does he find the strength to detach from his daughter and to act according to the symbolic order.

36 But as long as the path to a "natural" gender system is still barred, milk is inedible in all these movies. That is also the case with Violet (Joan Blondell), the lady's companion of the film diva Rita Marlow (Jayne Mansfield) in *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?*<sup>9</sup> She likewise is a heavy drinker who can stand neither the taste nor the look of milk. Her bemoaned love was a milkman, whom she recalls by his big and little bottles of milk. Here it is not only the milk, but explicitly the form of the bottles itself that reminds her of him. Especially the linking of her love with the little phallic bottles emphasizes once again the symbolic content of this picture. Milk is configured as maternal/female as well as phallic/male; is at the same time breast milk and semen. When she finally does find a new love — Henry Rufus (Henry Jones) — the former, heavily drinking colleague of Rock Hunter, their happy end is pictured by the drinking of a shared glass of milk. The footage is organized similarly to the kitchen scene in *Father of the Bride*. Recently promoted senior boss Rufus sits in his brand new office together with Violet. Between them on the desk stands a glass of milk and the two drink from it with straws, while the voice over tells us that "we see Rufus, put on a milk diet by his new fiancée Violet." Again, they symbolically exchange bodily fluids and thereby perform a gender inversion that re-installs them in a classical way. Here, too, milk stands for the overcoming of alcoholism and moreover for a completed Oedipal phase, i.e. for the man the participation in economic success and for the woman the fulfilment of love and participation in male

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<sup>9</sup> Directed 1957 by Frank Tashlin. In this spoof of the TV advertising industry, Rockwell Hunter (Tony Randall) is the low man on the totem pole at the advertising company where he works. That is, until he finds the perfect spokes model for Stay-Put lipstick, the famous actress with the oh-so-kissable lips, Rita Marlow (Jayne Mansfield). Unfortunately, in exchange, Rock has to act publicly as Rita's "Loverboy," about which Rock's fiancée Jenny (Betsy Drake) is not very happy.

subjectivity. To achieve this, Violet abandons her own societal productive position, which was her employment with Rita Marlow.

37 We can see the very same process with the film diva herself. When Rock Hunter visits her in her hotel suite, Rita plays with him. She practices kissing and wriggles in her tight dress next to him on the sofa. As he spills a drink on his clothes, she hands him a far too big shirt and trouser of her ex-lover, the simple-minded bodybuilder Bobo Branigansky. Rock literally disappears in the giant garments while Rita is trying to catch him like a child. As Rock starts panicking, she enjoys the game. Symptomatically she calls him her baby and says that "mommy" is going to get him and bring him into bed. This extreme regression appears as the necessary interlude for his development towards "real" manhood that marks the happy end constellation of the movie. Thanks to Rita Marlow, at the end of the film Rock Hunter is a self-contained man, economically promoted and therefore enabled to marry his fiancée Jenny. And again, like Kay, Violet, or Frl. Biermann, Rita Marlow gets her "real" love, who is neither a "loverboy" like Rock nor a male celebrity like Bobo, but an older or respectable man.

38 Milk as well as alcohol indicate in all these movies an escape and an exit from a specific regulation that is not endurable anymore. Milk stands for regression, for determining the Oedipal scheme and resetting the patriarchal order. In the films, the female protagonists organize the initiation into the symbolic through the Oedipal handing over of the symbolic phallus to the deviant men. Moreover, with Oedipalization comes an upward social mobility, something the male protagonists were incapable of before. The female body in the comedies of the 1950s signifies all this. It carries out a double function by installing men as well as women (back) in a binary gender system. Hence the function of women in romantic comedies of that period is exceptional: they own the phallus at the same time as they represent it as a fetishized body; they embody the social status of the men as well as their very own.

39 In contrast to milk, drinking alcohol beyond normal bounds acts against a heteronormative gender order and indicates its dissolving. However, it is not that easy: not only the excessive consumption of alcohol but also the lack of alcohol tolerance is ridiculed in the movies. In *Kindermädchen für Papa gesucht*,<sup>10</sup> for example, the female employees joke about their timid boss Kurt Jäger: "This Jäger isn't a real man, he doesn't smoke and he

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<sup>10</sup> Directed 1957 by Hans Quest. The cousins Peter (Claus Biederstaedt) and Kurt (Gunther Philipp) own a chocolate factory. While Peter is a true playboy, Kurt is a shy character who can neither confess his feelings for the adored Sabine (Susanne Cramer) nor at least start a little conversation with her. To help his cousin, Peter engages Sabine as a nanny in Kurt's house. The only problem is, that neither of the two men has a child. With a lot of chocolate they bribe the eight year old naughty Heinerle (Peter Fischer) to play Kurt's son. After moving in, Sabine of course falls in love with Peter. But Kurt now becomes increasingly interested in his secretary, Inge (Carla Hagen), and finally marries her.



doesn't drink, he just doesn't know what to do with a woman." Instead of alcohol, he constantly drinks valerian and eats chocolate in order to calm down. When he falls in love with a customer, he hires her as a nanny for his non-existent son. The hint is clear and even without the comment of the old house maid we know that it is him who is in need of a nanny, because he never really grew up. On the other side there is Jäger's young secretary, Inge, who is helplessly in love with her boss. But Jäger cannot understand her many and evident signals. In his childish way he cannot sense her sexuality. At the end, Inge makes him very drunk and Jäger finally discovers not only the enjoyable euphoria of his first drink but also discovers women. After asking Inge, if she, too, were not "something like a woman"<sup>11</sup> she answers "it really took you a long time to find out." But — thanks to alcohol — Kurt knows that "today is the day of discoveries." Spirited, he kisses Inge and immediately asks her to become his wife. Through the mastering of alcohol he now is a real man. Like in *Wenn der Vater mit dem Sohne...*, here it is again the woman who is trying to release the man's desire by means of alcohol. It seems to be the female part in the movies to express an active sexuality whereas the men are short of desire and have a fear of it.



Fig. 6.: Kurt Jäger

40 This is as well the case in the German film *Mein Mann das Wirtschaftswunder*.<sup>12</sup> The director of a heavy industry company, Alexander Engelmann (Fritz Tillmann), wants to remarry for the sake of his daughter. In his opinion Julia (Cornelia Froboess) needs a mother

<sup>11</sup> "Sie sind doch auch so eine Art Frau?!"

<sup>12</sup> Directed 1960 by Ulrich Erfurth. Fritz Tillmann and Heinz Erhardt play two fellow soldiers, Alexander Engelmann and Paul Korn, who built up a highly successful company with the money of their former military unit, stolen in the last days of the war. But in the family, things are doing less well: Alexander's teenaged daughter Julia (Conny Froboess) is only interested in film stars and gets dismissed from one school after the other. To bring back some steadiness in his family, the widower decides to marry the famous actress Ilona Farkas (Marika Röck), whom his daughter adores. Unexpectedly, the business relation becomes a real love.

that can handle the tomboy and unruly teenager. Therefore he proposes to the famous actress Ilona Farkas (Marika Rökk), of which his daughter is a big fan. He suggests to the Hungarian film diva to hire her. Despite the warning words of his best friend, accomplice and chauffer Paul (Heinz Erhardt), that no-one can "buy a woman like one buys a milkshop," he signs a marriage contract, whose first paragraph prohibits "corporal contact." When they propose a toast on the agreement, his daughter Julia remarks amused: "When men come with champagne, they always demand something." This ambiguous statement becomes funny in the next picture, where the cork shoots out of the bottle and Paul — totally startled — apologizes with the spraying champagne in his hand: "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean it." Funnily, this *Missgeschick* becomes a metaphor of his orgasm.



Fig 7.: Sekt

41 Indeed, both men are far from any kind of sexual suggestion. When Ilona Farkas gets unerringly drunk at her wedding and dances to the fierce gipsy music, Alexander is overstrained by the situation. After her dancing, screaming, smashing of glasses, singing and artistic jumping is over, Ilona arranges to get locked in the bedroom with Alexander. While she undresses in front of him, he starts panicking and hysterically searches for an exit. When he climbs out of the window and hangs on the ledge like "grapes on the vine," she remarks cheerfully that she will "harvest him when he is ripe." His fear and reluctance of sexuality is staged in the most explicit way at the end of the movie. In the basement of his house, Ilona teases Alexander that he would not know how to kiss anyway, even if he wanted to. From



there on he embraces her confidently in order to prove that he can kiss. But in the crucial moment he chickens out and confesses that she is right. Thereupon, he rushes out of the house into the next bar, getting extremely drunk.

### **Everything flows**

42 Two functions of alcohol regarding the men in the movies emerge in the analyzed sequences: we find a fear of sexuality and a naiveté towards women, symbolized on the one hand by a dilettante dealing with alcohol, and, on the other hand, by its excessive indulgence. Alcohol appears in all the plots as an examination that puts the boundaries of gender into question. If men control their physical and psychic boundaries, i.e., if they are not afraid of partial defragmentation and if they always find their way back from a drunken state to their predetermined gendered form, their manhood is considered to be intact. According to this, especially masculinity emerges as an instable battlefield.

43 However, the opposite is true with the women. The drinking woman<sup>13</sup> on the screen can stand much more alcohol than her male counterpart and seems to be self-confident and determined. According to psychoanalysis, the regular female gender identity in hetero-normative systems has to be imperfect and unstable because it lacks the symbolic phallus that is the symbolic signifier. It first becomes fixed by the allocation of men's subjectivity or by phallic self-stratification through fetishization. But this "normality" no longer exists in the comedies of the 1950s. In fact, the female protagonists rule their gendered boundaries, they are subjects of themselves, not of somebody else. They can drink dauntlessly, and doing so, actively express their sexual desire,<sup>14</sup> but are also presented as ridiculously deviant in the films.

44 The autonomous drinking women are a good laugh just as the men are who are too shy to drink or who drink too much. The happy end constellation aimed at by the romantic comedies of the 1950s is an inversion that exchanges the sexual, societal, and economic positions of men and women. While alcohol is the frontier of that liminal process, milk stands for the river that crosses this border and carries the binary codes of gender. In all the movies the role of these two liquids is used in the same manner without even explaining it with a single word. Only the lust for, or respectively, the incapability to consume alcohol or milk is

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<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the drinking woman often is presented as dark and exotic. Take Alma (Thelma Ritter), the janitress of Jan Morrow (Doris Day) in *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959) as an example. She drinks with Brad (Rock Hudson), who loves Jan, until he literally faints. Just as the "hot blooded Hungarian" Ilona Farkas in *Mein Mann das Wirtschaftswunder*, who gets drunk and dances furiously to the gipsy band.

<sup>14</sup> As subjects they desire someone else as an object of their desire, instead of - as Freud puts it - desiring to be desired, i.e., to be the object of another subject.

expressed, but their meaning seems to be self-evident. It is this self-evidence that refers us to the productive effect of these drinks because their subtext is able to disguise its meaning and hence cannot be easily interpreted. On the contrary, it seems odd to examine the function of this little liquid story and to give it discursive importance.

45 By analyzing romantic film-comedies as organized aggression against a certain historical occurrence of different gender identities and practices of the 1950s, we could detect a hard struggle to reconstruct a hetero-normative gender system. Within the cinematic apparatus, only the joke could cross the discursive border easily and call for the acknowledgement of the existing deviant identities. One of the techniques was to create a little and almost invisible side story to the main plot, in which this inversion could take place: the story of the consumption of milk and alcohol. In this marginalized, disguised, and comedic sphere any severe proposition could be stated. For a better understanding of historical processes, an analysis of sources of popular culture seems to be necessary if not indispensable. In addition, we should turn even more to such cultural products which are too easily marked as solely entertaining and foolish. As we hope to have shown, especially these media are holding an enormous potential for historical interpretation.

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# Heroines of the Gaze: Gender and Self-Reflexivity in Current Espionage Films

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## Abstract:

The two female spies central to the movies *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (Renny Harlin, USA 1996) and *Shining Through* (David Seltzer, USA 1992), indicate that it is time to re-scrutinize Laura Mulvey's now famous analysis of gender-specific ways of looking in Hollywood cinema. Spys - male or female - need to be good observers and usually they are also in possession of optical devices extending their visual capabilities and hence their visual power. Psychoanalytical approaches, however, fail to explain such a character: the female spy provided with optical devices and weapons cannot be explained away as a phallic and therefore 'false' woman, but transgresses the binary logic by means of her ability to form assemblages with weapons, special devices and things found.

1 In the history of the spy movie genre, women have served mostly as little more than "window dressing." At least this is the conclusion that Tom Lisanti and Louis Paul come to in their work, *Film Fatales: Women in Espionage Films and Television*, which appeared in 2001. Despite this initially one-sided statement, the authors go on to outline four different types of heroines. The first type, the helpful spy, supports the hero with her fighting skills and may, as an exception, even be central to the action. The second type, the innocent, becomes the quasi-reluctant spy who burdens the hero with her ignorance; she helps to maintain the tension of the film by her need to be repeatedly rescued. The two remaining types are to be found on the side of the adversary: either the spy who because of her love for the hero sides with him, or the incorrigible fiend (Lisanti/Paul 14-16).

2 Then again, despite this differentiated categorization, Lisanti and Paul's talk of "window dressing" implies that the presence of these women generally serves a voyeuristic purpose and that they are unable to return the gaze. This view corresponds to Laura Mulvey's now famous analysis of the gender-specific ways of looking in Hollywood cinema that she had put forward in 1975 in her essay, "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema": "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (19). What Mulvey was saying was that spectators identifying with characters in films, male protagonists act as "bearers of the look," whereas female protagonists serve merely as spectacle - on both levels: within the narrative and for the audience. The female character's visual presence tends "to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation" (19). While the male characters, as bearers of the look, neutralize these extradiegetic tendencies of the female spectacle by pushing the story along (Mulvey, "Visual

Pleasures" 19-20). Consequently, according to Mulvey, the cinema establishes and serves only the scopophilia of the male members of the audience, while the visual pleasure of the female members of the audience remains unconsidered. These structures, however, conflict with the career profile of the female spy. Spies need to be good observers, therefore they usually possess optical devices, such as night-vision equipment, telescopic sights, cameras, etc., that extend their visual capabilities and consequently their visual power. As a result, such characters, when female, might present a potent key to reverse traditional ways of looking in cinema.

3 Optical devices as mentioned above not only present visually attractive props for the camera, they also form a kind of connection with the camera by introducing a self-reflective quality, as can be seen in early crime films (Schlupmann 115). The same holds true for the espionage film in general as crime film and espionage film can be regarded as closely related genres (Brockhaus-Enzyklopädie 12: 510). There is, nevertheless, a slight difference in character typology: in contrast to police officers or detectives, a female spy can deviate further from postulated norms and is allowed to demonstrate a more violent behaviour (Dole 94).

4 Let us now turn to the factor of self-referentiality in more detail. I agree with Robert Stam's understanding of the term "reflexive art", that is, an art form that calls attention to its status as a construct by inviting the audience to examine its design and materiality (1). Of course, reflexivity cannot only affect the visual level of espionage films, but also that of the narrative, as the character of the female spy alludes to the literary stereotype of crime fiction narrator, whereupon the manifested gender reversal provides a possibility for self-reflexivity of the narrator's position (Schlupman 136).

5 In my analysis of interrelated aspects of gender and self-referentiality in espionage films, I will focus on the first kind of the female spy - the helpful spy. I have chosen as examples the following two films: *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (Renny Harlin, USA 1996) and *Shining Through* (David Seltzer, USA 1992). My aim is to examine in the light of Laura Mulvey's theories the degree to which the potential of inversion has been realised and the resulting self-reflective elements. Although *The Long Kiss Goodnight* as a secret agent film and *Shining Through* as an anti-Nazi film belong to different sub-genres, they are related by their moments of self-reflective questioning of gender roles.

### **Scrutinizing the self and others: *The Long Kiss Goodnight***

6 Samantha Caine (Geena Davis), a primary school teacher and mother of an eight-year-

old daughter, suffers from partial amnesia and only remembers the last eight years of her life. After a series of traumatic events she starts searching for her past with the help of a private detective, Mitch Hennessy (Samuel Lee Jackson). Gradually she (and along with her the audience) discovers that she used to be an assassin for the CIA called Charlene Elizabeth Baltimore. Meanwhile, however, circumstances and power structures have changed; former enemies of her employers have become the CIA's allies. This new situation leads to a series of brutal confrontations involving Samantha/Charlene, Mitch and their opponents, including the CIA.

7 In espionage films the character of the secret agent is often portrayed as a split personality; here, this provides additional depth as the split results from a modern woman's view of herself and from conflicting notions of contemporary femininity. Accordingly, both sides of her personality confront each other in two mirror scenes hallucinated by Samantha. In the first scene, Charlene introduces herself to Samantha thereby announcing her return. In the second scene, Charlene goes so far as to cut the throat of the primary school teacher and mother.

8 According to Carol M. Dole, such character splitting is a mechanism typical of contemporary films portraying women whose power is based on armed violence and physical strength: "Splitting, which distributes among multiple personalities or characters the modes of power that would otherwise be concentrated in a single female hero, reduces the threat of each individual protagonist" (89). This mechanism aims at the empowering of women *without* bringing about the sense of disempowerment in men (Dole 81).<sup>1</sup> By splitting the role, the male and female attributes of the heroine can be apportioned to two personalities and thus the binary ordering of the sexes can be re-established at least within the character. In consequence, "[e]ach of these splitting techniques avoids commitment to a single representation of heroic womanhood [...]" (Dole 94).<sup>2</sup> Hilary Neroni thinks, that the splitting results in a stereotypical representation of two traditional opposite images of women, the whore and the faithful wife. "The battle between these two stereotypes in *The Long Kiss Goodnight* offers us an example of the role of violence in male fantasies of women" (157). Thus the splitting reinforces the duality of women rather than collapsing it (160).

9 However, I challenge Dole's and Neroni's thesis that the female spy in *The Long Kiss*

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<sup>1</sup> Empowering and disempowering are terms used by Dole that I will discuss further at the end of my article. The possibility that violent women trigger in men a feeling of disempowerment exists not least because violence normally results in establishing hierarchies. In this specific case this carries the added consequence that it represents a reversal of traditional configurations (Vares 223).

<sup>2</sup> Dole's observations are based on a traditional, i.e. original, rational-autonomous and uniform understanding of the subject, in the Cartesian sense, whereas the current post-structural interpretation sees the subject as being decentralised and generated through discourse (Nünning 613).

*Goodnight* is being weakened by such a splitting strategy. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, there exists a certain tradition within espionage films to employ main characters with a split personality. In the opening credits already we see contrasting images characterising each side of the heroine: Scenes portraying Samantha are shot normally, that is, in positive (compare fig. 1), whereas scenes from Charlene's life are shot in negative (compare fig. 2).<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the film emphasizes the subversion of the binary opposition, on the one hand between the heroine's two contradicting personalities, and on the other hand between femininity and espionage activity. As a result, the film constructs a complex image of a woman that includes both female-defined and male-defined characteristics. Binary oppositions are undermined as follows: firstly, we can identify iconographic similarities between, say, lipstick and bullets.

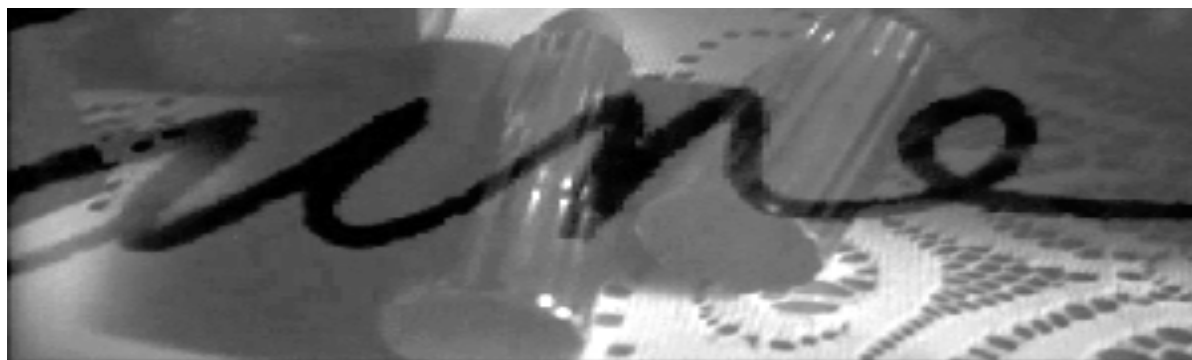


Fig. 1.: *The Long Kiss Goodnight*



Fig. 2.: *TLCG*

10 Secondly, at the beginning of the opening credits we see Gina Davies' hand signing Samantha's name, followed by the same hand signing as Charlene, but this time the sequence is represented in negative. Furthermore, a scene (located near the middle of the film) depicting the transition from one personality aspect into the other is alluded to: In search of

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, by showing family photographs in a reverse shot through the telescopic sight of a weapon we see that traditional role images will be attacked.



her identity, Samantha writes Charlene's name on a sheet of paper in a gesture reminiscent of automatic writing. In addition, the entire opening credit sequence features repeatedly images of both names in handwriting. Thirdly, these negatively and positively represented film passages are inseparable from one another, hinting at the likewise established connection between the two sides of the character. Finally, this reference to the materiality of film as a stripe of celluloid also embodies a self-reflective element.

11 The transformation from Samantha to Charlene takes place gradually and gets communicated by various mechanisms, one of which uses the mirror scenes as mentioned above. Further mechanisms are as follows: Samantha increasingly picks up on male-connotated behaviour, such as drinking, smoking and swearing - activities her boyfriend jokingly indulges in at the beginning of the film.<sup>4</sup> The principle of a phased intensification is also applied to Samantha's assumptions concerning her past. As her weapon skills return, she thinks - first due to her dexterity with a knife - that she must have been a cook. In the course of the story this assumption is commented on ambivalently. Samantha knocks out her first opponent with a cake. In the further confrontations with her opponents, the visual and acoustic codification of her as the female victim is gradually being replaced by that of her as the female culprit. Initially, Samantha is depicted as attractive for both the characters on screen and for the people in the audience. Her adversaries strip her down to a white *négligé* and she gets tortured by being tied to a water wheel. Yet, the more her fighting spirit returns, the less her underwear highlights her femininity. Instead, the camera emphasizes her upper arm muscles and what used to be Samantha's hysterical cry of fear alters into Charlene's battle cry.<sup>5</sup> Thereafter, her *négligé* gets replaced by an armless (and again white) T-shirt and a pair of jeans.<sup>6</sup>

12 In addition to these transformation processes there are also fundamental elements of ambivalence that help to resolve the oppositions. Motherhood, as a popular vehicle for traditional representations of women, relates to both personality aspects, in conflict-oriented as well as harmonious form (Dole 105). The character names are also chosen correspondingly: both names, Samantha and Charlene, get shortened to Sam and Charly, that is, to names normally attributed to men. Furthermore, Samantha's surname Caine is reminiscent of the pugnacious biblical figure Cain.

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<sup>4</sup> For male codification of these activities see for example Vares 223.

<sup>5</sup> This change is achieved by cinematic means, that is, both the camera range and the framing is altered (switching from a medium long shot or from American shot to a close shot), resulting in her arms filling the middle of the screen. Regarding muscular women and the way in which they present a problem for a binary conception of gender identity see Tasker 4 and Brown 62.

<sup>6</sup> With regards to her clothing, Samantha has already dressed as a man at the beginning of the film when she appears as Santa in the Santa Claus procession.

13 In accordance with its undermining of binary oppositions, the film's end remains open. We see the heroine spending her days peacefully on a farm with boyfriend and child at her side. Her appearance combines that of Sam and Charly. When her boyfriend remarks that he could live like this forever she confidently throws a knife at the nearest tree, where it sticks quivering. Dole's regarding of this ending remains ambivalent. On the one hand, she claims that the end is monopolized by the traditional female side. On the other hand, it is precisely this open-end quality that offers new possibilities of strength and of self-acceptance to the heroine (Dole 98). Neroni is convinced, that Sam has become a schoolteacher again, even if we do not see that. For her the combination of Sam and Charly ultimately fails, so she speaks of an "uncomfortable amalgamation" and a "uneasy combination" (154, 158). At the same time she notices: "But the combination also shows that we cannot separate the violent woman from the schoolteacher - or the whore from the mother" (158). She gives another hint, that there is more complexity in his depiction of femininity than she would like to admit: "When faced with the question - who is the fantasy, Samantha or Charly? - the film nicely formulates the idea that both these identities are based in fantasy" (158). I will return to this deconstruction of an original gender identity in my discussion of Judith Butlers notion of gender as a cultural construct below.

14 I prefer Karen Schneider's approach of assessing the ambiguity to Dole's and Neroni's interpretations; Schneider concludes that: "Sam has not repressed Charlie but incorporated her; she can fully reemerge any time Sam/Charlie needs - or wants - her to. It is left for the audience to decide if this is a promise or a threat" (11).

15 The role-transgressing potential of a figure like Sam/Charly causes problems for binary sex/gender conceptions:

For example, feminists working within the dominant theoretical model of psychoanalysis have had extremely limited spaces within which to discuss the transformative and transgressive potential of the action heroine. This is because psychoanalytic accounts which theorize sexual difference within the framework of linked binary oppositions (active male/passive female) necessarily position normative female subjectivity as passive or in terms of lack. From this perspective, active and aggressive women in the cinema can only be seen as phallic, unnatural or 'figuratively male'. (Hills 39)

Psychoanalytical approaches not only see an active performance but also special devices and weapons as phallic: "It is perhaps the centrality of images of women with guns [...] that has caused the most concern among feminist critics. The phallic woman, that characters like Sarah Connor and Ripley represent, is seen as a male ruse [...] (Tasker 139).<sup>7</sup> The logic

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<sup>7</sup> See also Schmid-Bortenschlager 80, 90 and Brown 53, 56.

behind these approaches emerges as a circular "'philosophy of capture' in which the innovation of a new concept is contained and interpreted in an endless being-made-what-one-is-*a priori*" (Hills 44). If role-transcending heroines are basically seen as being phallic or male they cannot be perceived as questioning gender categories, and women as a result can only be defined as being passive (Vares 239, Brown 53, 56, 65 and Hills 39, 44). What this does result in, however, is that gender roles become absolute. In addition, these approaches are blind to their own self-constructing element: "In the circular logic of gender/role identification, the character wields the guns and muscles because of the role and is identifiable in the heroic role because of the guns and muscles" (Brown 60). Adding to this is the ultimate and too narrow notion of viewer identification (Brown 69). Barbara Creed notes that post-Mulvian feminist film theory increasingly questions an identification model where the spectator is monolithic and rigidly oriented on his or her gender counterpart on the screen. It is assumed rather that the audience takes alternating positions, depending on how films attempt to channel and manage to regulate the identification process (84 and Neale 4-5).

16 Elizabeth Hills' term *assemblage* offers an escape from the circular argumentation of such an approach (44). For her, it is no longer a question of which organ a body has at its disposal, but rather what it is that the corresponding body produces, what connections it makes and what it does. In connection with special devices and weapons, the body can form associations or assemblages. The focus of such a new mode of subjectivity lies in the dynamism. Whereas in a psychoanalytical model the heroine's losing her weapon even once would indicate "instability of ownership" and thus lack of phallus, with Hill's approach this must not have more pejorative implications than the male hero's losing his weapon (Dole 97).<sup>8</sup> In line with Hills' stress on temporary alliances it is unimportant where Charly takes her telescopic sight and/or weapons from. However, if a woman with a weapon, or any active and aggressive woman, from a psychoanalytical point of view is been regarded as a false woman or a disguised man, then the element of falsification or of disguising should be looked at more closely - even when refusing such a view. And this is where Marie Ann Doane's term *masquerade*, from her essay "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator" which appeared in 1982, does come in. Doane suggests that the representation of femaleness is to be understood as a masquerade, just as identification by a female audience with a male position was described as transvestism. Whether intentionally or simply in effect, masquerade carries the accoutrements of femaleness to extremes, thus duplicating the representation. This contains a disturbing effect for the image of the woman: "By destabilizing the image, the

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<sup>8</sup> By making this claim Dole is ultimately limiting herself to the psychoanalytical model.

masquerade confounds this masculine structure of the look. It effects a defamiliarization of female iconography" (Doane 26). Moreover, in the business of espionage, the element of masquerade is part of the job, as a result of which female spies with their femaleness as masquerade always possess a duplicated representation (Schlupmann 138 and Horvilleur 148).

17 Jeffrey A. Brown points out that Judith Butler also uses masquerade as a starting point in her discussion on gender as a cultural construct (53, 56).<sup>9</sup> The element of construction and consequently the instability of the gender category is apparent in the parodistic staging of gender in drag performances. In his reading of Butler, Brown draws attention to the fact that drag performances can support essentialist perceptions of gender. This is based on an audience's knowledge of the original gender of the performer, and on the fact that transgressing gender borders is depicted as something comic or tragic (55). This critique does not quite apply to Butler in that, with its examples of gender parody, it does not confine itself only to drag: "The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities" (174). Moreover, in drag performances there is also something like a doubling of representation when, for example, a woman plays a man who is playing a woman.<sup>10</sup>

18 Accordingly, the action heroine allegedly disguised as a man is not to be read as a false woman but rather as a means to challenge traditional gender roles. In *The Long Kiss Goodnight* this challenging is not just due to the presence of a muscular and armed heroine, but also because the heroine has power of gaze at her disposal. This gets especially clear towards the end of the film. In collaboration with the criminals, the CIA plans a bogus terrorist attack, hoping to thereby being granted more money from the Congress following this incident. Also, in order to be able to blackmail Charly, they arrange for Charly's daughter Caitlin to be kidnapped. For their part, Charly and Mitch want to rescue Caitlin and want to prevent the attack. They succeed to free Caitlin, but in the shooting that follows she runs away and hides in a truck. Under the cover of darkness, Mitch tries to seize the truck that also contains the bomb intended for the attack. Charly, who is monitoring the situation through her telescopic sight, is in radio contact with Mitch and advises him where he should shoot, as well as supporting him with a few well-aimed shots. The camera assumes Charly's point of view, and accordingly, the image adopts a greenish colour and is intersected by the cross hairs of

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<sup>9</sup> In Butlers approach masquerade is not restricted to femininity as Neroni claims (193-194, Endnote 4). See also Brood and Benthien/Stephan.

<sup>10</sup> See *Venus Boyz* (Gabrielle Baur, CH/USA/D 2002) or older films that include variations of this theme such as *Viktor und Viktoria* (Reinhold Schänzel, D 1933) and the remake *Victor; Victoria* (Blake Edwards, USA 1982).

the telescopic sight. As we have already seen in the opening credits, the gun and the camera combine behind Charly's gaze, which is at the same time deadly and life preserving.

This configuration is the exact inversion of two comparable excerpts from the following films: *Entrapment* (Jon Amiel, USA 1999) with Catherine Zeta-Jones and Sean Connery, and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Simon West, USA 2001) with Angelina Jolie. In each of these films the male protagonist possesses the optical device used to direct the female protagonist's movements.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig. 6.

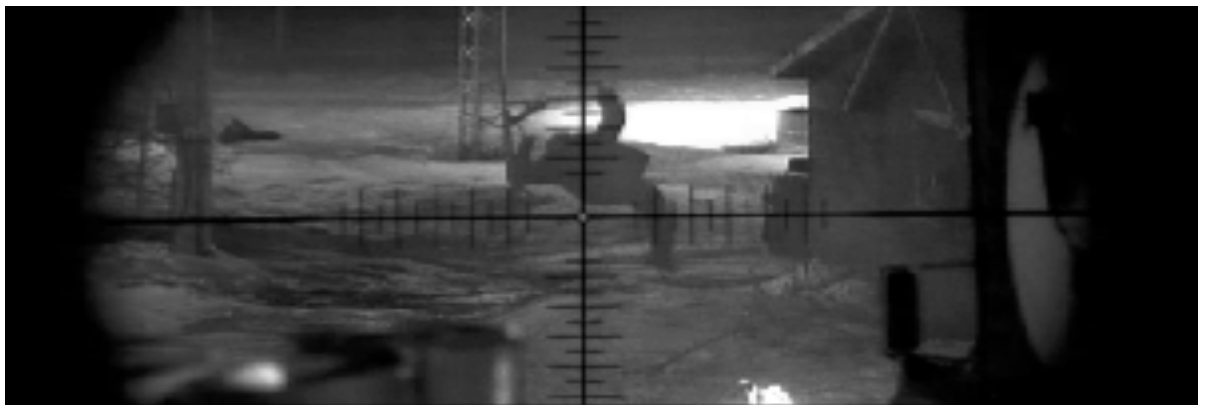


Fig. 7.

19 In *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, notions of female scopophilia and control of the gaze are addressed directly and self-reflectively when Charly retorts to her main adversary, the father of her daughter who is trying to kill Charly and their daughter: "You're gonna die screaming and I'm gonna watch!" At the end of the film she puts her "promise" into practice, thus reversing one of the conventions of horror films by casting the gazing murdering character as a woman, and the screaming dying victim as a man (Brown 57-58). The scene, with a touch of biting commentary, portrays Charly hanging onto a cable in front of a hoarding with a prominently displayed advert depicting a happy family (see fig. 8).



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.

### **The Female Spectator's Pleasure and Knowledge: *Shining Through***

20 The scopophilia of the female spectator, which until now could not be adequately explained by any theoretical model, is being staged in *Shining Through* both on the visual and narrative level. As a result, the film achieves something that neither Laura Mulvey nor Mary Ann Doane can comprehend with their theoretical approaches. In her "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946)", Mulvey proposes a transvestite identification for female spectators. She herself admits, though, that this is not a completely satisfactory suggestion: "So [...] is the female spectator's fantasy of masculinisation at crosspurposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes" ("Afterthoughts" 37). Mary Ann Doane talks about three possibilities for the female spectator: she either adopts Mulvey's "transvestite" identification; or she accepts a masochistic over-identification with the passive position; or she chooses narcissism, thus making herself the object of desire (31-32). Doane poses the question of what her concept of masquerade could mean for a female spectator position, yet leaves it unanswered (26). In this respect, she transcends Mulvey's ideas as she does not rule out a female audience's position at all, nor does she reduce it to transvestism. Rather, she sees the female perspective, like the male one, as a produced position within a network of power relations (32).

21 Yet, how is *Shining Through* going about in treating the scopophilia of the female spectator? The film is constructed around a BBC interview about women and their life during the Second World War. Linda Voss (Melanie Griffith) talks about her experience as an American spy in National Socialist Germany. How it came about that she ended up as a spy and what happened during her time in Berlin is being narrated with the help of flashbacks, either explained by her voiceover or made sense of by the dialogues in the flashback sequences. Her only training in the field of espionage had been her early fascination with spy

and war films. She used to identify with the heroic characters on screen, no matter whether they were female spies, resistance fighters or allied soldiers. She also dreamed of being dropped by parachute over Germany and of fighting her way through to her Jewish relatives to rescue them. The film depicts her sitting in a cinema watching films. Some extracts of these films the audience watches along with her, other extracts she mentions, but we do not see her watching them. The clips are taken from *Espionage Agent* (Lloyd Bacon, USA 1939) with Brenda Marshall and *The Mortal Storm* (Frank Borzage, USA 1940) with Margaret Sullivan and James Stewart and *The Fighting 69th*, (William Keighly, USA 1940).<sup>11</sup> Thanks to these films, Linda recognizes her superior Ed Leland (Michael Douglas) as a spy. After she bluntly accosts him, he tells her she has been watching too many films. But she only replies: "Enough to know a spy when I see one." When he asks her how she managed to access so much information about him, she replies: "I might be a better spy than you are." In the course of the film this prediction proves to have been correct. By refusing to comply with Ed's orders, she is able to locate and microfilm plans for a rocket factory in Peenemünde. She then kills her friend Margarete von Eberstein, who had turned out to have been a double agent working for the Reich; with the help of Ed, Linda eludes the Gestapo and manages to smuggle the film into Switzerland. When other characters and later on the BBC interviewer ask her how she knew how to behave, she repeatedly refers back to the films she used to watch.

22 In addition to this narrative element of self-referentiality there are several striking visual elements. For example, in the opening credits sequence to *Shining Through*, a tracking shot inside a TV studio occurs (see fig. 10). The camera follows Linda Voss and her interviewer to the designated transmission area. The camera movements are jerky, the camera has to be re-focussed, they do a sound check, and the clapper-board claps for the interview scene. Also, during the flashback scenes, there are regularly cuts back to the interview situation.



Fig. 10.: *Shining Through*

<sup>11</sup> Thus we see a woman not only entering the "Männerkino" (men's cinema), but also indulging in a genre usually spurned by women (Koch 19). In using a term like "Männerkino", Koch understands what Mulvey before her had understood about cinema's gender-specific ways of looking, but Koch argues not only psychoanalytically, but also cultural-historically and socio-politically (Koch 17).



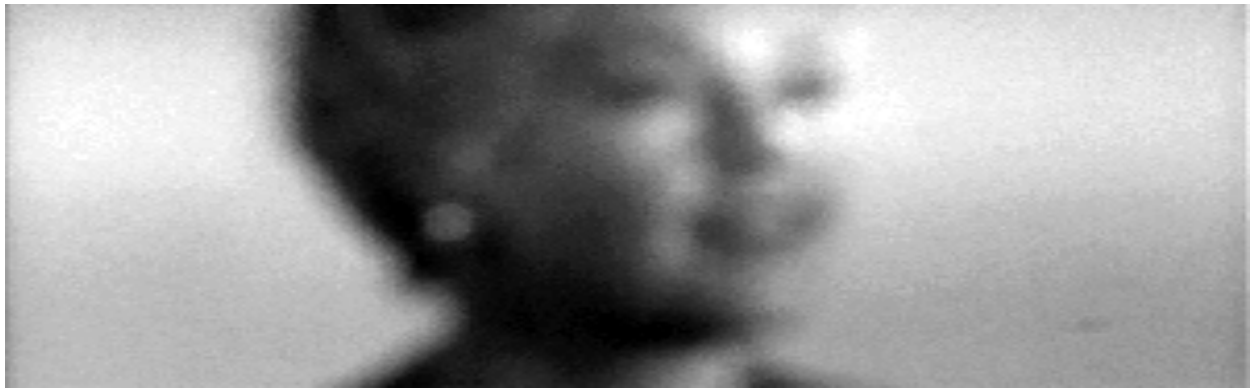


Fig. 11.: *ST*



Fig. 12.



Fig. 13.

Moreover, the genuine and faked clips from films and newsreels of the 1940s are shown in standard black-and-white 1.33:1 format, whereas the interview and flashback scenes are shot in colour and in a wide-screen format. That some of these excerpts are also fake becomes only clear when we suddenly see Linda Voss in one of them. This dual framing is skilfully realised by means of screen enlargement and colouring.

23 Such designating of the apparatus, interruptions of narrative flow, juxtaposition of heterogeneous slices of discourse, as well as mixing of documentary and fiction are all efficient means of signalling reflexivity (Stam 16). Of course, such means can serve in a purely playful way without claiming to be emancipatory (Stam 16, Lewinsky 75), but here they are significant, as in *Shining Through* the female gaze is taken as an intradiegetic theme and explicitly being portrayed as gender specific. Linda Voss not only often refers to the cinema in her lines, but we also see her as a cinemagoer - and that not in the context of a social activity, but on her own. Gertrud Koch has suggested that going to the cinema by oneself, for women, is not considered to be a very high-minded leisure activity. This "latente Kinoverbot" (latent prohibition of the cinema) should keep women from experiencing scopophilia (15). Because the film depicts Linda in the cinema, the incorporated clips she watches are defined as *point of view shots*. Moreover, because of the framing as an interview situation, the flashbacks can even be understood as imaginary POV shots from her perspective.



Fig. 14.



Fig. 15.



Fig. 16.



Fig. 17.



Fig.

## Power of Gaze and Empowerment

24 The modern action heroine refutes Laura Mulvey's theory of the female figure as passive image. Her struggling, shooting, killing, riddle solving, and her ability to rescue herself and others from dangerous situations demonstrates anything but passivity. The modern action heroine carries the plot in a way that only male characters can - according to Mulvey. Yet, in the two example films, if the female protagonist's physicalness is revealed, it is not merely as sexual objectification; her trained and muscular body is predominantly functional, serving as a weapon: "The cinematic gaze of the action film codes the heroine's body in the same way that it does the muscular male hero's, as both object and subject" (Brown 56).<sup>12</sup>

25 The figure of the modern female spy has an even greater potential for inversion when taking into account the self-reflective aspects. According to the representation system as described by Mulvey, a gazing woman constitutes a threat (Doane 27). Earlier films often outweighed this threat by increasing the spectacle of the female spy as the desirable and endangered sexual object. Examples for such films are *Mata Hari* (George Fitzmaurice, USA 1931) with Greta Garbo and *Dishonored* (Joseph von Sternberg, USA 1931) with Marlene Dietrich.<sup>13</sup> In *Mata Hari*, Garbo is introduced as an exotic dance attraction for Parisian society. The subsequent scenes depicting Garbo in the company of friends and admirers in nightclubs and private rooms offer space for a magnificent staging of the star.

26 In *Dishonored*, Marlene Dietrich plays the role of a prostitute who has signed on as a spy. Her appearance, and in particularly her famous legs, is staged correspondingly. At a masked ball her disguise serves above all as a device to emphasise her lips. At some point she puts aside her mask in front of the other characters, and therefore is recognised later on. In the end, she falls in love with one of her opponents and lets him escape, which leads to her downfall - she is being charged with treason and shot. Thus, the game of masks gets destroyed by love, allowing the characters "true" personality to appear, and, with the death following inevitably, is finalized once and for all.<sup>14</sup> Right at the beginning of the film, *Dishonored* comments on the endangerment of the female spy due to her femininity, when an insert title appears on the screen with the words<sup>15</sup>: "Strange figures emerge from the dust of the falling Austrian Empire. One of these, listed in the secret files of the War office as X-27, might have

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<sup>12</sup> On the visual display of the male muscular body see Tasker 35-53, 73-152 and Dyer.

<sup>13</sup> "Greta Garbo et Marlene Dietrich pratiquent l'espionnage comme une forme supérieure, quasi sacrée, de prostitution, où s'épanouit leur séduction naturelle." (Horvilleur 148)

<sup>14</sup> In *Dishonored*, the element of masquerade is carried to extremes, and with it the questioning of naturalised concepts of femininity within the narrative framework: Dietrich, dressed once again as a prostitute, faces the firing squad. The young commandant loses heart and refuses to give the order to shoot, and while a replacement officer is being sought, Dietrich takes the opportunity to put on her make-up and to adjust her suspender.

<sup>15</sup> On the vulnerability of the female spy through the dilemma of the incompatibility between someone's mission and heart - usually leading to a fatal ending - see Horvilleur 148.

become the greatest spy in history . . . if X-27 had not been a woman." The implication that the female protagonist is endangered through a sexual/love affair - usually linked to a theme of vision and recognition - can, according to Dole, also be encountered in current police films: "Although male movie cops sleep with their enemies on occasion, female law enforcers are routinely placed in danger through a sexual relationship, usually with an opponent" (82).

27 Although *The Long Kiss Goodnight* and *Shining Through* realise an impressive amount of the above-mentioned potential for inversion, they exhibit some remaining traces of the female spy as spectacle. Linda Voss in *Shining Through*, for example, accompanies her National Socialist employer, who has fallen in love with her, to the opera. There she is seen and recognised and, in a scene borrowing heavily from *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, USA 1945/6), her cover gets blown (Pawelczak 123). In *The Long Kiss Goodnight*, the possible endangering of the mission by a sexual/love affair is only dismissed when the man concerned gets killed. Consequently, a certain ambivalence regarding the gender-transgressive female character can still be observed in the analysed two rather recent films. According to Butler, though, this corresponds to the manner in which gender is culturally produced, that is, from a multitude of incoherent directives. Such incoherence offers, however, the possibility for subversive reconfiguration:

The injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated. Further, the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once. The coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment [...]. (185)

Both films thus achieve something that in recent cultural studies discussion has been described by the term *empowerment*, that is, a self-reflective authorization of the female characters *and* the female spectator.<sup>16</sup> In *The Long Kiss Goodnight* this empowerment is based on the power of gaze of a muscular and armed heroine performing violent action. In *Shining Through* it is based on the pleasure and knowledge that an ordinary woman derives from viewing films of a predominately male-oriented genre.

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<sup>16</sup> Dole 78, Hills 46 and Tasker 139 apply the term to the characters, and Brown 68 to the female spectators. Tina Vares, however, calls attention to the heterogeneity of female spectator reaction (Vares 235).

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## "No one claps at the end of a novel" - A Conversation with Laura Wade

By Christina Wald, University of Cologne, Germany

Laura Wade's play [\*Colder Than Here\*](#) premiered at Soho Theatre directed by Abigail Morris in February 2005 followed shortly afterwards by her Royal Court Theatre debut *Breathing Corpses*, directed by Anna Mackmin. Laura was subsequently joint winner of the prestigious George Devine Award 2005, and also won the Pearson Best Play 2005 award for [\*Breathing Corpses\*](#). The interview took place in London in July 2005, when Laura was working on a revised version of *Colder Than Here* for its New York opening as a MCC Theater Production in September 2005. Currently, Laura is working on new play commissions for Soho Theatre, the Royal Court Theatre, and Hampstead Theatre as well as adapting an unfinished Jane Austen novel for the stage, under commission to West End producer David Pugh. Laura's newest play *Other Hands*, from which we feature an extract in our [fiction section](#), has recently premiered at Soho Theatre. Laura was awarded the 2006 Critics Circle Award for Most Promising Playwright.

### Interview taken in London in July 2005

#### The writing process

**Christina Wald:** When you burst onto London's theatre scene in February 2005 with your debut play, *Colder Than Here*, and your second play, *Breathing Corpses*, running almost simultaneously at two of Britain's leading new-writing venues, Lyn Gardner remarked, "At just 27, Wade has gone from the playwriting equivalent of 0 to 90 in what seems like seconds."<sup>1</sup> I am interested in your preparation for this ostensibly sudden start - how did your interest in the theatre begin, which experiences did you make with the productions of your previous plays, and what role did young writer programmes play in your development as a writer?

**Laura Wade:** I was interested in theatre since I was really tiny. I remember going to see plays from the age of five or six and just thinking it was incredible. I totally believed it, I thought it was magical, and I still have that "childhood wonder" at theatre. I know that some writers work from wanting to make political points, whereas my writing just comes from an absolute total love of theatre - it's my favourite thing in the world. So I suppose I've always wanted to be involved. When I was younger, I wanted to be an actress for a few years and then decided I'd be terrible at that. And then, when I was about sixteen, I thought perhaps I

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<sup>1</sup> Lyn Gardner. "Death becomes her." The Guardian, February 2, 2005.

wanted to be a director. So I wrote lots of letters to theatre companies around near where I lived, which was in Sheffield, and one director at the Crucible Theatre was very kind and let me come and watch some rehearsals. There were rehearsals for a new play, so they had the writer with them in the rehearsal room and I got to be friends with him and I thought he was really cool and he encouraged me to have a go at writing. At that point I wrote my first play, *Limbo*, around the edges of school work, and really loved doing it. *Limbo* ended up being produced; I showed it to some of the staff at the Crucible Theatre and they were looking for a play about young people. When I first started I was very much writing about myself - so this is a play about a young girl who is about seventeen and happens to live in Sheffield and have a life very similar to mine... It was all quite autobiographical at that point. But seeing my play being produced, I was hooked. I went off to university to study drama and I produced a couple of plays at the university theatre. After that, I spent a few years still fiddling around and not quite being able to find what I wanted to write about - I was going through the process of finding my "writing voice," I think. When I moved to London, three years after finishing university, it really kicked in and it was the "Young Writers Programme" at the Royal Court that really that helped everything fall into place. They run groups for writers between the ages of thirteen up to about twenty-six. You have a course of ten weeks, one evening per week, with a group of fifteen of you which is run by Simon Stephens. It's just a wonderful, wonderful opportunity because it really taught me a lot more about things like structure, approaching the writing with more rigour and having tools in your toolbox to tackle a problem. Another thing they really encouraged us to do was to read a lot. I hadn't read enough before and I think the best writers I know are the ones that read everything and see everything. It encouraged me to work a lot harder and it was while I was on that course that I wrote *Colder Than Here*.

**CW:** How does the Royal Court select the people who are allowed to take part in these courses?

**LW:** For what they call the "Introductory Course," you just have to apply. You don't have to have ever written before, you don't have to submit anything, so anyone can do it. And then they do a second course which they only run about once a year. This "Advanced Course" or "Invitation Course" is only for about ten people they pick because they feel they have some promise.

**CW:** To which degree, do you think, can playwriting be taught? Which specific skills can be taught?

**LW:** It's a very difficult question, isn't it?! There is something about being a playwright that is

a way of looking at the world which cannot necessarily be taught. It's about this raging curiosity about people and that is an essential character trait. But there's something about spending time with other writers that's really useful, especially learning about other people's processes and trying out other people's writing exercises. The Royal Court course is very good in that it allows you to do that. It doesn't say "this is the only way to write a play and this is how you structure a play and if it doesn't conform to this five-act-structure then it's not a play." They really teach you to find your own way. I think if courses are structured in the wrong way, they have a potential to be damaging. But in my experience, it was enormously helpful.

**CW:** You have just mentioned your love for the theatre. Could you imagine writing something other than plays, novels for example?

**LW:** No, no one claps at the end of a novel. It is the liveness of theatre that excites me. You can't have two hundred people sitting in a room all reading a novel at the same time and experiencing it together. I think that's the aspect of it that excites me the most - and the collaborative nature. Writing plays is lonely enough, really. Because it takes months and months to write something before you have that gorgeous month when you are in a rehearsal room and you've got actors around and a director and you get to see everybody making it into a "real" thing. Novelists seem to be on their own all the time and I don't think I'd like that, not really. And novels take years to write - I'm not that patient.

**CW:** Are there other playwrights whom you find particularly interesting and who have influenced your writing, or are there maybe different playwrights for each play?

**LW:** It's always difficult to tell when you've been influenced by something, because you try to resist that. You are always trying to speak in your own voice... But there are always playwrights that I go back to. I think Caryl Churchill is wonderful. She's my playwriting heroine, in terms of the way that she finds a new form for every play she writes. And the story fits the form; it's never about structure as a form of fireworks. So I love her work. I'd love to have a career as long as hers. Continually doing something new throughout such a length of time, that's wonderful. I read her work a lot. I love Martin Crimp. My writing is not anything like his at all, but he inspires such a love of language, and his plays, even when he's describing something horrific, make me smile because of the way that he's chosen the perfect words to the perfect phrases to describe something. Reading his work is very invigorating. And I like David Eldridge. I read his play *Under the Blue Sky* quite a lot while I was writing *Breathing Corpses* because it was another example of a narrative that is stranded but all the

plot lines are nonetheless linked in some way. And I like Joe Penhall's work very much as well - and Sarah Kane, she was a genius.

**CW:** You have mentioned Caryl Churchill as your dramatic heroine. Do you share her feminist commitment? Would you consider yourself a feminist writer or as a writer interested in feminism? Do you think that gender plays a role for your plays?

**LW:** I don't think I write from any necessarily feminist impulse. I think being a woman I have an interest in writing good female characters and we are still working against a long, long theatre history that has been very male-dominated. There are not enough really good female roles in classical work. So in terms of providing quality roles for female actors, yes, I suppose I have that at the back of my mind. When I first started out, I determined that I would never write a play that had more men in it than women. But then I wrote *Breathing Corpses* and that has got four men and three women, so I messed up. But other than telling stories about women, to some extent, I am not sure I necessarily call myself a feminist writer.

**CW:** You have also referred to Sarah Kane as a writer whose work you admire. Although critics responded much more positively to your debut than to hers, I was reminded of the reviews of *her* debut when I read the reviews of your plays, because reviewers again wondered how a young woman can write about such sinister or shocking topics. Several articles played with the idea that you are obsessed with death and expressed concern for your mental health. Did you have the feeling that your gender played a role in the way that your public persona was created?

**LW:** I don't know really. I hadn't thought of my gender playing a role. But yes, I think that girls are not supposed to write about nasty things. People tended to be quite surprised when they met me. They expected me to be some kind of little goth chick and some of the reviews even seemed to be a little worried about my mental health. To me it is absurd to assume that I am obsessed with writing about death, or that writing about death is a necessarily unhealthy thing to do because I think death is something that we should be allowed to consider. And think about it and discuss it at any time. Not only when we are directly confronted with it.

**CW:** When you begin writing a new play, do you know what you actually start with? Is it a specific topic, or are you attracted by a particular character or a constellation of characters? Or is it maybe a formal interest, as the time structure in *Breathing Corpses*?

**LW:** I suppose it depends on the play. *Colder Than Here* started because I had an interest in natural burials after I've read a newspaper article about it. And also, as a writer you are always looking for stories that haven't been told before. *Colder Than Here* particularly came out of the idea of natural burial and of someone planning their own funeral - I had never seen that

dealt with in a piece of drama. Usually ideas bubble away to the back of my head for a year or two until they are grown enough to become a play. With *Breathing Corpses* it was quite different, because I started with the character of the chambermaid finding corpses in the hotel. First it was going to be just a play about her, but then, through exploring her character, I got interested in what it is like to find a body and the different situations that can happen in. That snowballed into the idea of three corpses which will somehow be connected. I came to the idea of this circle and the idea of writing an impossible story, and so found a structure that was exciting because the audience would have some work to do in terms of putting the stories together. I think if it had been sequential, I would have gotten less out of the individual relationships. I wanted to have a linear structure of themes rather than of narrative. The *themes* were in a linear progression. I imagined the structure in the shape of a bowtie: It starts out wider in the beginning and closes in - and in the middle of that is the fight scene, which is the core - and then it spreads out again.

**CW:** I think you generally mix comic and serious elements in a very successful way, which makes it difficult to categorise your plays in terms of comedy or tragedy. Is that something that you aim to do, with having a special function of comic elements in mind?

**LW:** I suppose it comes out of an attitude really. My own sense of humour is slightly dark. And I think there is room for humour, even when the subject is really serious. Humour makes the tragedy feel bigger somehow. And particularly with *Colder Than Here*, I wanted it to be humorous, because I didn't want it to become melodramatic. I don't know if it's a specifically British thing, but I wanted to write about people's ability to make jokes in that kind of situation and to show how people get on with their lives, and that there can be humorous elements to that. I used to think of it as a graph, whose top line was the lightness and the humour, with the seriousness as another line underneath. And that the top line could fall down underneath occasionally, but you need it to get back up because the audience are capable of seeing both lines and connecting them by themselves.

### **From Page to Stage**

**CW:** What are your experiences with joining rehearsals? Do you feel that there are repercussions in your work - do the rehearsals lead to immediate changes in the script, and does watching rehearsals maybe also have a long-term impact on your writing?

**LW:** I love being in rehearsals. Not just that you get to see some people but just to see how people react to the text and what they find difficult. Sometimes it comes out in a completely different way than how you imagined it. Actors are fascinating. I feel admiration for them, the

way that they start off on the first day, you do a read-through, and then they spend weeks going deeper and deeper and deeper into it, their performances are developing and developing. So I find I learn a lot. There are some writers that don't really want to be in a rehearsal at all. I stay until I get kicked out. I just love watching it come together. It's mind-blowing at times.

**CW:** Do you make minor changes in your work during the rehearsals?

**LW:** Yes. We made more changes to *Colder Than Here* than to *Breathing Corpses*. Partly because in *Breathing Corpses* the structure is so tight that we tried to get it right before we went into rehearsal, because it is the kind of play where you take out a line in one scene and it has a repercussion somewhere else and it all gets very complicated; it's built like a house of cards really. I worked with the director before we went into rehearsal, and we had a draft that we were really happy with before we started rehearsing. But with *Colder Than Here* it was a bit more open. There were a few things that I hadn't made clear enough. The interesting question in terms of changing things in rehearsal is whether something is wrong because you've written it wrong or because it doesn't fit with the way the actor is playing the role or with the actor's particular set of skills.

**CW:** Did you ever feel that you had to defend your text? Were there changes that the director or the actors suggested which you didn't like?

**LW:** Yeah, there were a few, and I find that if I can defend it, if there is a really good reason and I can explain that reason, then that's a reason for leaving it how it is. When I'm floundering, when I can't think of why I've done it, or I've just done it for some instinct or arbitrary reason, then that's when I will consider changing it. But sometimes, the actors ask for it to be changed when actually they just haven't found the right way to do it yet. And actually to change it would have repercussions in the rest of the play which would perhaps bend it out of shape or change it, steer it off in a direction you're not happy with.

**CW:** You mentioned that *Colder Than Here* was translated into German and might soon be produced in Germany. As in Germany productions tend to depart from the text much more than over here in England, how would you feel with a production that treats your text as material rather than as a script which is to be followed?

**LW:** I haven't experienced that yet, so I don't know. I'm very interested because I understand you have a very different approach in Germany, so I imagine I'd just be fascinated if that happens and I'm going to see it. Partly I wouldn't know, because my German is minimal. So I might not even know if they changed it unless they put an elephant on the stage. But I'm interested to see it. Even in any straight translation there are changes you would have to make

anyway in terms of culture. At the moment, I'm having to make some changes to *Colder Than Here*. It will be produced in New York by the [Manhattan Class Company](#) (MCC) and I'm translating a few words in it into American because there are things that they don't understand. I'm having to work through it and find places where it needs to be changed so the audience is not alienated - for example by not understanding what a jaffa cake is.

**CW:** Having seen both plays, I had the impression that *Colder Than Here* was much more realistic than *Breathing Corpses*. Would you say that this also applies to the writing or is that impression due to the different registers of the productions?

**LW:** No, I think that's right. *Breathing Corpses* is quite realistic inside the scenes, but the structure makes it less so. In production it was given a slightly gothic atmosphere, because of all the screaming noises during the scenes and bangs and crashes. Some things were striking and expressionist in the design and I loved that. But I can imagine a different production of it that would make it appear much more realistic.

**CW:** Did you write any of your plays with a specific theatre space in mind?

**LW:** I've written a new play for the Soho. For that one - because it was a commission - I did have a theatre space in mind. But when I'm writing, I tend to see the characters in a 'real' space rather than on a stage a lot of the time. Some writers can see the stage all of the time. Writing *Colder Than Here*, I was imagining a mother and a daughter picnicking in a field and not really thinking about stage design.

**CW:** So the combined space of living room and outside setting in *Colder Than Here* was the idea of the designer?

**LW:** I think the director and I had discussed it and we both agreed that we hated plays where people are moving furniture on and off - especially as in this play the sofa has to come on and go off again and come on and go off again - it would have been awful. And we both did not like blackouts, either, when the stage management team all come on and start moving things around and everybody has to wait for three minutes. So we were giving that as a brief to the stage designer and then we needed to find a way of coming up with a solution. We found a way of bringing the trees into the living room and the living room into the fields - it was beautifully matched.

**CW:** To what degree do you write for particular audiences? Would you say that the audiences of the Soho Theatre and the Royal Court Upstairs differ from each other?

**LW:** I think *Colder Than Here* possibly played to a slightly different audience than the typical Soho audience. Demographically, Soho's audience is rather young but as there were older characters in *Colder Than Here*, we had some middle-aged people coming in. But the

new play for the Soho is quite young. I think the characters are all between their late twenties and early thirties, so it will probably appeal to younger people.

**CW:** So the audience you had in mind for the new play is comparable to the Royal Court upstairs?

**LW:** I think so, yes. Although the new play is not as harsh as *Breathing Corpses* and the Royal Court has this reputation for doing things that are quite shocking. Quite daring. I think *Other Hands* is more quietly unsettling than that one was. A bit more subtle.

### ***Colder Than Here and Breathing Corpses***

**CW:** I'm sure that Myra's attitude towards her death was one of your main interests when writing *Colder Than Here*. Do you feel that the problems that Myra's family has with her straightforward way of dealing with her impending death represents the way that European societies see death as a taboo?

**LW:** I am fascinated by death and cultural attitudes towards it. I'm reading at the moment about American funerals and they are very different to the way we do it in Europe. Horrifying in some respect to a European person. I am also fascinated by death rituals in other parts of the world. I could talk hours about that. I think Myra has to be provocative. She has to provoke a reaction from her family in order for the play to have anywhere to go. She is trying to provoke them into action and knows that she has to be shocking and detailed enough so that they will be able to cope with her death. I always felt that she has that in her mind but I don't think that she necessarily gets it right in terms of her approach; sometimes she goes too far. I wanted to write a person that was fallible, because I hate literature where people become terminally ill and then suddenly become a saint. I'm sure if I was diagnosed with something awful like that I'd be horrible to everybody because I'd be angry and sad and resentful and scared.

**CW:** Is there any particular reason why you left the actual death of Myra out of the play and why there wasn't a burial?

**LW:** I really didn't want it to be a play about someone who died. I have seen that scene of everybody standing around the grave with umbrellas looking sad so many times. I wanted to do a play about someone who is going to die. I wanted to look specifically at the grief that happens *before* death.

**CW:** Does the family in *Colder Than Here* represent a typical contemporary British family for you?

**LW:** I think a typical family of that class. It is very difficult really to say what a typical



family is. Sometimes people ask me if it's my family. There are elements of my family, there are also elements of other families that I know. A lot of people my age came up to me and said: "He's just like my dad." My best friend's father, after seeing the play, went to her asking: "Have you been telling Laura about me?" I know him, but I hadn't consciously had him in my head as a model. So if it's possible for people to draw this connection, than maybe it is typical. But I suppose the aim of writing is that you are as specific as possible. And every family is the only one family in the world that operates exactly that way. You make it as specific as possible, and somehow, by making it specific, it can become universal.

**CW:** I was wondering how the audiences' reactions were during the run of *Colder Than Here* and also during *Breathing Corpses* because you said yourself that they tackle taboo themes.

**LW:** It's always hard to gauge an audience's reaction - apart from when people walk out in disgust! Nobody left the theatre during a performance of *Colder Than Here*, but we had a few people leaving in *Breathing Corpses* because of the violence. A couple of people walked out during the scene between Kate and Ben - we had a fight director who choreographed quite a nasty fight. I'd seen it several times by the time the audience came in and I knew exactly that he wasn't really holding her hair and dragging her around the stage. But it did look quite horrific. I didn't mind that people found it distressing because that was what it was supposed to be like. The reviewer of the *Daily Mail* said that it was pretty much the most horrible thing he had ever seen and that when he came out in the end, he had to ring his loving wife to remind him that there was some good somewhere in the world. I was delighted. That day we sold out due to that review. We sold every ticket. But some people don't like it and that's the risk you take, I suppose. You rip your heart out and put it on a plate and say, "Here you are. Please criticise." That's what you do. You have to accept it.

But for *Colder Than Here*, the responses I had from audience members were very positive - which surprised me, because I had expected more resistance. Partly because people knew from interviews that I hadn't written it from personal experience, I was worried that people would come back and say, "Well, you know nothing about it. This play has no resemblance to what that experience would really be like." But I had a few people come up to me afterwards and say that it was very like what they had been through with their family. Those that didn't relate could appreciate that it is a work of fiction, which offers one specific story about one specific family but is not trying to represent everybody's experience with grief.

**CW:** The characters in your plays that struggle the most are men. Would you agree that Alec and Jim are the most vulnerable characters in *Colder Than Here* and *Breathing Corpses*?

**LW:** I have been fascinated with the way men deal with emotion. The men that I know have been less able to deal emotion than women. In my opinion it is always very interesting to write about someone who cannot express what he is feeling, because you have to find some alternative outlet for that feeling. Men like Alec and Jim tend to submerge themselves in activity. Instead of sitting down and dealing with the feeling, Alec is busy with the heater, and Jim takes all the doors off. I was interested in that but I am not making a pronouncement about men in general.

**CW:** What is your new play about?

**LW:** The one I am currently writing for Soho Theatre, [\*Other Hands\*](#), is about the way that technology affects our lives in modern society in the way that we rely on all these computers for example but we don't actually really know how they work. I combine this with the idea of emotional paralysis. So, I am not writing about death right now. Partly so that everybody can stop worrying about my mental health, but I still have an interest in death and I keep thinking of brilliant ideas for death plays that will have to wait...

**Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (eds.): *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*. New York: Routledge, 2002**

By Christian Lassen, University of Tübingen, Germany

1        Reviewing *Regarding Sedgwick*, it is somewhat ironic to see that this eminent scholar and her exceptionally influential rediscovery of shame with regards to identity (trans-)formation should be so shamelessly ignored by large parts of academia. In certain quarters one still seems to assume that one can do without the groundbreaking insights that this remarkable and controversial thinker has produced over the last two decades. As a matter of fact, none of her works have been translated into German.<sup>1</sup> And that is a shame! As it is, we can only hope that this dubious condition will soon come to an end; meanwhile, we can turn to publications that do recognize the outstanding impact Sedgwick has had on Gender Studies in general, and on Queer Studies in particular. One such study is *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*.

2        Celebrating Sedgwick as a prime source of inspiration, this compilation of essays comprises ten articles on Sedgwickian topics such as shame, queer ethics, or the protogay child and a comprehensive introduction as well as an interview with the critic herself. Considering the diversity of material discussed in this ambitious project, the editors have chosen to provide their readers with a critical positioning of the term queer as a lead-in to the subsequent debate before sketching the contents of the various contributions, of which a selection shall be discussed in the following. The arrangement of the essays follows thematic aspects, dividing the main part of the study into two sections, namely "Sedgwick's Subjects and Others" and "Writing Ethics: Reading Cleaving".

3        One of Sedgwick's most notorious subjects, then, is shame. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the two opening articles deal with this powerful affect. Lauren Berlant's essay "Two Girls, Fat and Thin" pursues a politics of de-shaming that is however strangely at odds with a Sedgwickian notion of shame, for it hints at a strategic shamelessness, a de-shaming, that prevents Berlant from realising the full potential of a queer performativity that eventually triggers a similarly queer identity formation through, and via, shame. In contrast to Berlant, Douglas Crimp understands shame in much the same ways as Sedgwick herself, namely as "a free radical that [...] attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of - of

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the only available translation so far is an excerpt from Sedgwick's "Epistemology of the Closet" published in: Andreas Kraß, ed. *Queer Denken: Gegen die Ordnung der Sexualität*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003. 113-143.

almost anything" (Sedgwick 62). His exceptionally significant essay "Mario Montez, For Shame" easily marks the most vigorously political contribution to the entire compilation. Crimp offers his creed in praise of shame, "queer before gay" (58), which aims at the rejection of what he calls "the current homogenizing, normalizing, and de-sexualizing of gay life" (58). According to Crimp, gay mainstream movements have compromised themselves by denying that "shame is what makes us queer, both in the sense of having a queer identity and in the sense that queerness is in a volatile relation to identity, destabilizing it even as it makes it" (64). This ever so compliant denial, this eagerness to be gay at the expense of being queer, indeed this uncanny desire for exclusively positive interpellations, however, already discloses its hideous effects in countless ways such as, for example, the increasing exclusion of AIDS from mainstream gay policies. As it appears, we cannot do without shame; and indeed, we would not want to, for to prematurely discredit shame as a poisonously paralysing affect is simultaneously "to miss a vital point about the positivity of shame, namely its demonstrative character, the myriad ways in which - under certain conditions that await further analysis - it can and is put to creatively performative work" (26). In his essay on the cinematic art experiments of Andy Warhol, Crimp explores some of these ways by advocating a queer performativity that acknowledges, negotiates, and at times even playfully subverts shame without ever being shameless - in the severely normative sense of current gay pride movements.

4 In the realm of queer ethics, Regarding Sedgwick includes a number of essays that have taken on exactly this point, i.e. the distinctiveness of Sedgwick's ethics. Ross Chambers depicts these as an "ethics of inversion" (178), thus highlighting the matchless move by which Sedgwick has "inverted" gayness: "from 'exceptional' deviancy to paradigmatic status" (172). However, his text "Strategic Constructivism?" is somewhat referential, gay rather than queer, and illustrates that the entire compilation is not at its best when its contributors try to explain Sedgwick, but when they show how their readings, and writings, have been influenced by her. Turning to Judith Butler's "Capacity", we at once realise how the linear logic of philosophy has benefited from the inspiration of someone who "takes us beyond that logic and opens up what I [Butler] want to affirm as a certain ethics of thinking, one that postpones the question of logical incongruence in the name of historical possibilities" (117). Butler, then, offers short discussions of Kimberly Peirce's movie *Boys Don't Cry* and Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* that strikingly demonstrate how Sedgwick stretches the range of the possible in the realm of thought by asserting that ambivalence, incongruence, and non-closure need to be perceived as "specifically ethical practice[s]" (110)

5        Regarding Henry James, we have to mention Kathryn Bond Stockton's hilarious essay "Eve's Queer Child." Stockton lets us in on an open secret by revealing the true author of what has up till now been believed to be a characteristically Jamesian novella, *The Pupil*. Anyone who is interested in the shamefully masochistic pleasures of the protogay child will have a fantastic read - and the delights of witnessing the rare act of a truly queer procreation.

6        Hopefully, this review has illustrated that *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory* is itself a heterogeneous manifesto whose wide range displays an impressive and inspiring diversity of texts, including some that have not even been discussed here such as Paul Kelleher's appeal for a new sentimentalism, "If Love Were All: Reading Sedgwick Sentimentally," or James Kincaid's camp love letter to Eve, "When Whippoorwills Call." What makes it exceptional is the fact that this diversity is present not only in what, but moreover in how it is discussed. Eve's "queer children" have thus accomplished a worthy tribute to their teacher; a tribute that lastingly portrays Sedgwick herself as "a free radical that [...] attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of - of almost anything" (Sedgwick 62).

**Sherrie A. Inness (ed.): *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004**

By Aldona Bialowas Pobutsky, Oakland University, Michigan, USA

1        This collection of essays is a testimony of a relevantly recent efflorescence of tough women in mass media. As Sherrie A. Inness, its editor, states in the introductory chapter, the book is a natural continuation of numerous studies about the impact of tough women on popular culture, such as her own publication *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1999), her edited anthology *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century American Girls' Cultures* (1998), or Martha McCaughey and Neal King's compilation, *Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies* (2001). Whereas these collections focus on the earlier hard-boiled protagonists from the 1980s and 1990s—including Sarah Connor of "Terminator", Ripley of "Alien" or Thelma and Louise—Inness's most recent book analyzes images of tough heroines from the last decade, exploring the cultural role these strong women really play in contemporary society. As the essays delineated in continuation corroborate, tough women are still designed to appeal to a primarily male audience, since they are expected to be womanly, physically attractive and heterosexually appealing. On the other hand, their sex appeal is not reminiscent of traditional passivity, as these heroines challenge the patriarchal social structure by defending other women and fighting the men who threaten them. These female protagonists exhibit aggressive behavior, quick wit, and intellectual skills, an array of attributes allotted traditionally to men. They become popular heroines and as such, they shake up women's role in American pop culture.

2        Following Inness's introduction, the anthology is divided into two sections. One, entitled "Changing Images of the Female Action Hero" demonstrates how women have come to the forefront as new role models who often substitute traditional male heroes. Its first essay, written by Claudia Herbst focuses on Lara Croft, the lead character of a 1996 computer game "Tomb Raider," who combines erotic allure with unprecedented violence. The author warns that although Lara Croft grew to represent a virtual sex symbol of the digital age, she is far from providing a positive gender model for girls. A desperate gladiator whose sole function in the game is to kill and avoid being exterminated herself, the heroine embodies fascist ideas of obedience and hardness, triggered by computer science and military practices. As such, Herbst argues convincingly, she cannot and does not provide a powerful gender role where women could see their own interests reflected in her adventures.

3        The second essay by Jeffrey A. Brown deftly builds a conciliatory interpretation of

sexy female fighters who combine what has been traditionally viewed as masculine and feminine characteristics and, by doing so, destabilize the concept of gender traits. For Brown, recent heroines such as Pamela Anderson's curvy Barb Wire straddle both sides of the gender divide, being simultaneously a sex symbol and an aggressor, an object to be looked at and a gazing subject. Their playful manipulation of virile brutality and feminine sultriness corroborates that both genders are conventional and that these very conventions do not have to symbolize sexual difference. The third essay written by Inness is based on a survey of American toy stores in search of female action figures who serve as gender role models for little girls. Based on her findings, Inness confirms that female action figures remain only helpmates to more important toy action heroes. Thus, regardless of changing attitudes towards both genders, the lingua franca of mass media and mass production perpetuates traditional stereotypes of child-bearing females and combative males. Even in those rare positive cases where gender and race are equally distributed (such as, for instance, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers), female dolls are stereotyped into pastel-colored uniforms, which allude to girls' softer nature. The most problematic finding is perhaps the fact that female action figures hardly ever make it to the actual stores because, fearing small demand and subsequent loss of profit, stores order almost exclusively male action figures.

4 The section's fourth essay by Charlene Tung takes a closer look at the television series "La Femme Nikita", arguing that its heroine endorses neocolonial empowerment. The show demonstrates that an acceptable fighting female must fit into pre-existing tropes, reinscribing notions of Western and white heteronormative superiority, and relegating African American and Asian women to stereotypically oversexualized, criminal and/or exotic roles. Tung seems to be torn between condoning and condemning the series as she concludes that despite its reinforcement of Western imperialist discourses, its focus on female courage is largely redeeming. David Greven, the author of the following article on another popular television series "Witchblade" is reminiscent in his message of Herbst's attitude towards Lara Croft in that he cautions about the show's impasse between radical and reactionary forces. Witchblade's lead character, Sarah Pezzini, a 'metahuman' witch with extraordinary powers, seeks to defy patriarchy yet, in the end, destroys its enemies: queer men and power-seeking women. Analyzing closely two seasons of the series, Greven discovers that the second part distances itself from the first season's homoerotic tableaux, removing previous queer themes and eventually locking the heroine into a conventional gendered and sexual place.

5        The section's final essay by Sara Crosby is perhaps the most pessimistic one, as it points to a startling phenomenon in the present-day television series where in the mere summer of 2001, three highly popular female lead characters perished, in "Dark Angel," "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" and "Xena: Warrior Princess." Reading these deaths as patriarchy's solution to eliminate any threat to gendered hierarchy, Crosby examines recurring dilemmas which the female fighters must confront before their deaths. Unlike their male counterparts, these women regard their toughness a sin, ultimately rejecting their heroism as transgressive and detrimental to their (patriarchal) community. Plagued by guilt, denial, and final community choice, they become sacrificial heroines, transforming the feminist shows into patriarchal affirmations. Of course, such fictional characters can be resurrected on demand, and Crosby sees this possibility as the choice between perpetuation of female monstrosity (encoded in woman's physical aggression) and a productive critique of an idolized national identity, provided the tough female's death is recognized as unnecessary and morally bankrupt.

6        The collection's shorter second part consisting of four essays examines the media's traditional constructions of female heroism, simultaneously offering different forms that such toughness could adopt. These standard characteristics include muscularity and aggression (which, nevertheless, cannot be as prominent as they are in male fighters), childlessness and the absolute autonomy of a loner. Dawn Heineken's essay about World Wrestling Federation superstar Chyna examines the hidden high costs of the fighter's move from the fringes to mainstream culture. The author convincingly argues that the wrestler's popularity is owed more to her steady process of physical normalization than to her transgressive qualities of an outrageous and unruly rebel she exemplified initially. Extensive plastic surgery, including breast implants and facial reconstruction, as well as glamorous makeup and sexy animal-patterned clothes, converted the shocking 'other' who did not fit into any culturally recognized mold to an objectified tough female. Arguably though, despite all these normative practices, Chyna still retains unaccustomed female musculature and the visceral power to disturb hegemonic gender norms.

7        Marilyn Yaquinto's exquisitely written article goes into the murky waters of the gangster world -both in the movies and in the recent television hit *Sopranos*-, in order to track the rise and fall of mobsters' molls and their surprising legacy for the present-day gangsters' wives and sisters. While the early days of the cinema portrayed molls as tough chicks who moved with confidence in a flagrantly misogynistic universe of crime, the conservative mood of the 1980s and 1990s has devaluated their cockiness, converting them to hysterical and



often disloyal sexual partners. In the process, however, their toughness and aggression have moved on to the gangsters' households, giving previously silenced female family members an opportunity to demonstrate their feminist assertiveness, their intelligence and guts. Presently, mob women still nurture their family members but they also protect their turf and contribute to the game, rewriting the rules behind power plays in the gangster underworld. Unlike old-fashioned molls, they come in a wholesome suburban package, yet their strong character and ruthlessness make them equal partners in crime with their husbands.

8 Sharon Ross's article returns to Xena and Buffy, in order to demonstrate that new visions of heroism inflect the concept of toughness with the notion of flexibility, also leaving behind the less practical individualism in favor of women's reliance on their female friends. Rejecting isolationism and emotional withdrawal characteristic of heroic loners, Xena and Buffy are able to resist patriarchal intentions to divide and conquer them. Instead, these hard-boiled fighters build their real strength by consciously seeking harmony through communication and interdependency. Renny Christopher's essay, which closes the second section of the book, takes the issue of female toughness to outer space, where women's empowerment and the shift in gender roles can be reimaged with a greater ease. Aeryn Sun, the female protagonist of the science fiction show "Farscape" comes from a planet where men and women are equally aggressive interplanetary space police. She establishes a romantic relationship with a human astronaut who exhibits many traditionally female qualities yet does not lose any allure this way. Since the show treats the reversion of the couple's gender roles with utter naturalness, it allows for the evaluation of generations-old stereotypes. It paves the way for the imagery of autonomous and fearless female heroes and more intuitive men who do not need to flaunt aggressiveness to assert their position.

9 Overall, the collection most certainly does what it sets out to accomplish. It focuses on a broad array of recent action heroines from computer games, science fiction series and films to real life female fighters of the World Wrestling Federation. It probes how contemporary popular culture presents powerful females and how this imagery has changed in the last decade, if at all. The essays-albeit of somewhat uneven quality where some are far more engaging than others-highlight the contradictions and impasses of a female-identified notion of heroism where women have indeed advanced in their autonomy, but only as far as men (or mass media) have let them go. They evince that the new female heroes are tougher and more muscular, yet they are still attuned to their "feminine" side. They fight and risk life and limb, yet also protect the weaker and maintain their friendships with other women. Athletic and physically attractive, they become nearly equal partners to their male counterparts. Sadly

though, they still have to ascribe to conventional feminine tropes of being sexy and somewhat weaker than men if they want to enjoy the limelight a while longer. This pessimistic underlying message aside, the anthology is insightful, provocative and certainly fun to read. It is an important contribution to the field of cultural studies and would make an excellent teaching tool in courses on Popular Culture or Women and Gender Studies.

**Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan: *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*.**

**London: Sage, 2004**

By Alyson Tyler, University of Wales at Aberystwyth, Wales, UK

1      Aimed primarily at students (both under- and post-graduates), *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* offers those new to this field an in-depth yet accessible introduction to the discipline's important concepts. The authors acknowledge that the choice of concepts is "not random, and value-free" and does, to some extent, reflect their own personal and academic backgrounds. The selection process also "evolved" over time, and they have sought to include not only issues of contemporary debates but also to discuss concepts that were central to the development, or fragmentation, of women's studies and gender studies over the past 30 or so years.

2      Whilst the book is structured in a straight-forward A-Z manner, each entry is fully cross-referenced, facilitating fuller reading of related concepts. The nature of the cross-references also means that as one is reading and moving from cross-reference to cross-reference, the interconnections within the subject area become evident. Each entry is also more than just a dictionary or encyclopaedia-like definition. A concise definition of each concept is provided, which then develops into a more in-depth discussion of the issues, theories and application of the concept. Examples illustrating each concept help inform and illuminate the discussion. Further reading is also suggested to encourage the student to turn perhaps to the original works cited and subsequent debates surrounding the concept.

3      Preceding the 50 concepts is an Introduction which provides a brief overview of the development of Gender Studies (primarily in the UK) as an academic discipline. Given the title of the book it is pertinent to note that the authors record the shift from Women's Studies and close ties to feminist movements to the broader term of gender studies, thus incorporating men and masculinities. They do however, also see feminist perspectives as "central" despite the shift in thinking.

4      Given that most people do not read an encyclopaedia from page one to the end, I approached this book in terms of dipping in and seeing where I ended up. Having recently read Susan Faludi's *Backlash*, I choose this term as my starting point. With just over two and half pages of discussion/definition (which seems to be about the average length for each entry), the entry manages to do justice to Faludi's concerns and theories whilst also bringing in more recent developments in the theory of a backlash against feminism. The cross-reference from here is to Post-feminism - a complex topic, and not one that I feel very

comfortable with. The authors begin by outlining the problems of defining post-feminism as there are numerous definitions and critiques of the term. In their discussions of the varying approaches, we can see elements of the backlash against feminism, thus resonating with the preceding term, whilst also appreciating the current debates surrounding the use of the term 'post' and its connections to postmodernism and theories of difference. Indeed, the cross-references here include these two terms along with Feminisms and Third wave feminism.

5 Like post-feminism, "third wave feminism has numerous definitions" (p.169) and there is considerable debate about its origins and place within feminist discourse. The authors here opt for a definition which locates third wave feminism within writings by women of colour and women from a younger generation who have grown up with the advances (derived) from their foremothers, yet do not feel empathy with the terminology, identities and concerns of second wave feminists. What the authors perhaps omit is the issue that one element of third wave feminism is that it tends to present itself in opposition to a single, unified second wave, often colluding with backlash commentators who present feminists from the 1970s and 1980s as a single stereotype of dungaree-wearing, bra-burning lesbians who all wanted to ban pornography and hated men. In fact, even writings from the 1970s and 1980s highlight the divisions within the women's liberation movement, and issues such as pornography actually became instrumental in fragmenting feminist movements (see Bailey 23). Despite this, the authors do highlight the strengths of third wave feminism, its focus on the individual, and some of its dynamic manifestations e.g. in the Riot Grrrl movement. From here, the cross-reference is to Second wave feminism, but strangely, not to First wave feminism which is also an entry in the book.

6 Thus we can see how several of the terms are inter-related and form mini circles or loops within the text. Another strand one could follow is Pornography, Sexuality, Queer theory, Lesbian continuum, Separatism and Consciousness raising, with each term forming a cross-reference from the preceding one. As well as quite concrete concepts such as Body, Class and Cyborg, there are also several entries dealing with theories and discourses such as Difference, Essentialism, Post-colonial theory, Post-feminism, Postmodernism, Post-structuralism, Psychoanalytical feminism, and Standpoint. There are also terms that many would see as central to discussions in women's studies such as the Family, Patriarchy, Pornography, Power, Sexuality and Violence. In addition, as the book is concerned with Gender Studies, there are the necessary entries on Gender, Gender Segregation, Masculinity/Masculinities and Men's Studies. As someone who is slightly less familiar with some of the theories of these latter terms, these entries provide useful starting points for

beginning to seek a deeper understanding of the concepts.

7 The authors note that the book, given its title, has to appeal to, and be appropriate for, students from a wide variety of disciplines. For this reason it is possible for a reader from one discipline to feel that certain concepts have been excluded, or not received sufficient attention. For example, I would have liked an entry on 'grass-roots activism' as this was central to many feminist and women's liberation movements and campaigns. Also, although there is an extensive bibliography, it might have been useful to have also included an index of key writers, theorists, etc with reference to where they occur in the text. However, as the book is part of a series of 'Key Concepts in...', perhaps this feature is not part of the series' structure.

8 In conclusion, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies* provides a comprehensive introduction to the multi-disciplinary field of gender studies. The definitions are even-handed critiques where a range of viewpoints are presented, leaving the reader sufficiently informed to either look further into a concept, or move on depending upon their requirements. Students from different academic backgrounds can explore the discussions and debates central to gender studies, whilst those already possessing knowledge within this field will find new approaches and clear critiques of some of the central concepts in this multi-disciplinary area. The book is rigorously academic yet also highly readable and sufficiently accessible to appeal not only to students but also to those outside of academia.

**Eckart Voigts-Virchow (ed.): *Janespotting and Beyond: British Heritage Retrovisions Since the Mid-1990s*. Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2004**

By Jennifer M. Jeffers, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

1 With this collection of essays Eckart Voigts-Virchow has brought together an impressive range of perspectives on the British heritage phenomena since its heyday period of the 1980s and early 1990s. *Janespotting and Beyond* should appeal to various segments of scholarship, as well as be of use to the general reader. Divided into four main sections, each section concentrates on an evolving heritage facet or issue of the ongoing heritage debate in British Culture Studies. Two of the four sections focus on the principal British writers, Jane Austen and William Shakespeare (only E. M. Forster has received as much "heritage" attention as Austen and Shakespeare). Section three "From Auntie's Heritage to Anti-heritage" discusses the turn away from heritage aesthetics, which opens up timely issues for the twenty-first century. Section four "Transnational Productions/Transnational Classrooms" evidences Voigts-Virchow's German context as the three essays in this section explore the British heritage film's international appeal, especially from a German perspective.

2 In the lively Introduction, "'Corset Wars': An Introduction to Syncretic Heritage Film Culture since the Mid-1990s," Voigts-Virchow maps out the heritage terrain for beginning readers as well as provides direction for future scholarly discussion. In terms of gender the heritage film debate was reinvigorated in the 1990s by feminist and gender critics who moved the debate out of issues of nationality and nostalgia to those of gender and sexuality. Perhaps not surprising the gender debates that enlivened the discussion in the 1990s are not the collection's principal concern. Instead, nationalism and nostalgia are still key concepts as Voigts-Virchow maintains that British cultural production in the form of the "post 1980s or 1990s heritage films" fills the German vacuum or lack of heritage films because of, ironically, the manifestation of nationalism in Germany in the twentieth-century: "Even if there have been attempts at rejuvenating the Austro-German Heimatfilm one can hardly overestimate the influence of the British heritage formula on the German market. In this sense, Germany and Britain seem to share a 'culture area', British traditions imaginatively replacing the lacunae of German heritage culture destroyed by militarism and fascism" (23).

3 The first section "The Mise-en-scene of Austen Powers" contains articles by two of the most well-known scholars in heritage films studies, Andrew Higson and Pamela Church Gibson. In his article "English Heritage, English Literature, English Cinema: Selling Jane Austen to Movie Audiences in the 1990s," Higson believes that the mid-1990s Austen films

fit into the category of "the tasteful, middlebrow period drama with an English setting and characters, strong literary connections, and an intense appeal to female viewers" (39). Although Higson does not reference the trendy (American) nomenclature of "chic-flick" (British aka "frock flick"), this is in fact what he accuses these productions of pandering to, as Hollywood became "fascinated by the potential of the co-production and the cross-over film" (39). Higson goes on to name "nine features of the Anglo-Hollywood costume drama production trend that I think are salient here" (40). Well-regarded scholar Pamela Church Gibson addresses Patricia Rozema's adaptation of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* by hailing it as a presentation of "'otherness' of sexuality" (53). According to Church Gibson, "Yes, Claire Monk and others have found-correctly-'queer' moments in the main body of heritage texts; however, this is the first to be infused throughout by a queer sensibility and by the deliberate introduction of different modes of transgressive sexuality" (53). Examples of "transgressive sexuality" include Rozema's presentation of Fanny's attraction to the female body (supposedly representative of Austen's own same-sex attraction), intimation of incestuous relations, suggested multi-person sexual liaison, and the "disturbing" inclusion of "Sir Thomas' firm belief that his female slaves are there to provide him with sexual pleasure" (55). Rozema's film is not your grandmother's Austen and Church Gibson notes that she is not surprised that "Middle England Jane Austen devotees were so hostile" to the film, but is "disappointed" that scholars have not given the film proper and due attention.

4 In Section Two, "Bardbiz: Heritage Shakespeare," another well-known heritage critic, Deborah Cartmell, addresses what Voigts-Virchow has called the 1990s "reconceptualising Shakespeare" for postmodern audiences. The now familiar "Trainspotter" and "Janespotter" label to identify the film-goer Cartmell claims can be seen in 1990s Shakespeare films. Featuring Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*, Cartmell discusses this teenpic film as relying heavily on the techniques popularized in that other postmodern teenpic film, Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. In "Heritage, Humanism, Populism: The Representation of Shakespeare in Contemporary British Television" Roberta E. Pearson claims that no matter which of the three strategies (heritage, humanism, populism) employed to appropriate the image and cultural capital of Shakespeare in contemporary Britain, each "erases history." The heritage approach "constructs a waxwork icon Shakespeare divorced from the vibrancy and brutality of the popular culture of his own time" (96); humanism makes him transcendent and universal, yet insists on "faithful" period adaptation; populism, meanwhile, "blurs distinctions between historical and contemporary audiences and cultural forms" (96). These classifications could be rewritten as pomophobic (heritage), modernist (humanist), and aesthetically postmodern

(populist). More instructive for the reader might have been an assertion as to how to get beyond these types of appropriation-what kind presentation of Shakespeare might be more historically faithful? And could a historically accurate Shakespeare 1) in fact exist, and 2) be as desirable, weighty and seductive as the three analyzed presentations of Shakespeare?

5        These questions bring us to Section Three "From Auntie's Heritage to Anti-heritage." Another well-known British media scholar Sarah Street interprets British television's use of postmodern cinematic techniques in recent television historical dramas. Because television historical dramas such as *The Lost Prince* and *The Other Boleyn Girl* focus on "lost" historical figures, the attempt at a self-reflexive camera lets the viewer in on this "insider" view of history-and those outside of "official" history. Similarly, Carolin Held discusses the way in which two recent television serials, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Vanity Fair*, depart from "established conventions against the presumed canon of monolithic generic formula and are proof for the increasingly complex representation of heritage in contemporary British television" (114). The major question in my mind that arises from this section and which perhaps haunts all supposedly anti-heritage films is how do these films-and critics discussing these films-get beyond those traces of longing that even-or especially-the anti-heritage film presents?

6        The first essay of Section Four "Transnational Productions/Transnational Classrooms" by Angela Krewani discusses the British heritage drama's impact on America and American film. While the heritage phenomenon was at its height in the US in the late 1980s and early 1990s with a certain segment of the box office and Hollywood invested in the cross-over film when it seemed profitable, it would have been useful if Krewani's article would have contextualized the importance or impact of *British* heritage film on US audiences (thus, further gauging Hollywood's involvement in heritage). The final two essays of the collection, Carola Surkamp's "A Plea for Varied Readings: Teaching British Heritage Films to German Students" and Monika Seidl's "Kommissar Rex Meets Mr. Darcy: Pedagogical Approaches to Visualising the Past and Literary Classics," are insightful not only for their pedagogical merit, but also valuable in thinking about representations of people, history and the very process and problem of representation across national and cultural boundaries.

7        As should be evident in this brief review, *Janespottting and Beyond* is valuable for its richness in multiple perspectives and for its help to those scholars engaged in specific areas of the heritage debate. Certainly many of the essays reinvigorate heritage and post-heritage discourses. In this way, Voigts-Virchow's collection is valuable and timely. Ten years after the famous "Janespottter" versus "Trainspottter" tag, the debate begins to show signs of wear:



the Janespotter and the Trainspotter begin to merge into the same entity. Essays in this collection deal with the inevitable amalgamation of heritage and "yob" (e.g., *Plunkett and Macleane*) in an effort to get beyond *Janespotting*.

## ***Other Hands (Excerpt)***

By Laura Wade

### **Scene 1**

*Lydia's studio flat. Late morning.*

*Lydia is standing in front of the computer, looking at Steve. He stands by the door, a motorbike helmet in his hand. The air fizzles.*

**Lydia**            You've got an hour.

**Steve**            Um

**Lydia**            What?

**Steve**            It's. I can't predict how long it's

**Lydia**            How long

**Steve**            I mean, it can take longer

**Lydia**            Longer than an hour?

**Steve**            Well, it. I don't always know till I. Start. How long I'm going to be doing it for is all

**Lydia**            Right. Well / I

**Steve**            Sometimes it's just thirty seconds or so sometimes and sometimes it's I do try and keep it as quick as possible but

**Lydia**            OK

**Steve**            But it can take longer and I can't really tell until I, you know, get down to it

**Lydia**            Get down to it

**Steve**            Have a go

You don't think with your, your experience you should be able to predict

**Lydia**

Because I did tell you quite clearly what I wanted on the phone

**Steve**            There's lots of

**Lydia**            And you are a *professional* so

**Steve**            I mean it just isn't possible to

*Beat*

**Lydia**            I can only afford an hour.

**Steve**            Right.

**Lydia**            Sorry.

**Steve** No

**Lydia** I should have said on the phone

**Steve** OK

**Lydia** So

**Steve** Well let's give it an hour and see how we go.

**Lydia** OK.

*Steve puts his helmet down and moves towards the PC.*

**Steve** It's the modem, you said

God, I don't know, I mean

**Lydia**

God knows what's going on in there just won't connect to the internet

**Steve** Since

**Lydia** Monday

**Steve** OK well let's

**Lydia** I might not be using the right words, the terminology

*Lydia is still standing in front of the PC, barring Steve's way.*

**Steve** Can I

**Lydia** Um

**Steve** Have a look?

**Lydia** Um, yeah

*Lydia starts to move away, then darts back to stand between Steve and the computer.*

Sorry

**Steve** What?

Sorry I just

Thing is I can't let you *start*, you see, because

**Lydia** If you start and then we get to the end of the hour and it isn't fixed, and you. I'm not questioning you know, but. If it isn't fixed and you go away, or it's worse because I don't know, you've run some kind of programme on it and now it's worse it's made all sorts of crawlies come out of the. I mean I'm not saying you would, you know, but

I mean then I'm

Then I'm *really* stuck

**Steve** Yeah

**Lydia** I really need it, I

**Steve** Yeah Yeah

And you, you did say that. You know, sometimes, doesn't it, it takes more than an hour you said and I can't afford it because

And you can't tell, can you, with people, sometimes it's an hour and five minutes and you get charged for the second hour, for breaking into it but I really

**Lydia** I mean, when I say I can't afford it it's not that I think it *shouldn't* take longer than an hour, like I'm opposed to the idea of paying for this this service that you do, which I actually think is a great idea and you know it's a godsend for people like me so it's not that I don't agree with the idea of paying more than forty pounds it's just that

I mean I just don't have it, I really can't.

I'm sorry

**Steve** No, I

**Lydia** I should have said before

**Steve** No

**Lydia** Stead of making you come all the way over here from

**Steve** Fulham

**Lydia** Fulham. Oh, not too far

**Steve** Not too far, no

**Lydia** Quite direct on a bike I should think

**Steve** I, um

**Lydia** I'm sorry. I really am.

*Beat*

**Steve** I could

**Lydia** Yes?

**Steve** You could just pay me for the hour and I'll. I'll stay till it's done.

*Lydia exhales. Smiles.*

**Lydia** Yes. Yeh. Thank you

*She moves away from the PC.*

You see that's. That's kind. *That's kind*

Thank you.

**Steve** Sure

*Steve sits down at the PC. He flexes his fingers.*

**Lydia** So what if it's less than an hour?

**Steve** What?

**Lydia** Joke. Sorry, joke. Just, joke.

*Steve smiles. Lydia sits down on the bed.*

**Steve** You don't have to stay with me if you

**Lydia** It's a studio

**Steve** Right, sorry

**Lydia** Unless you'd like a cup of tea, or

**Steve** No thanks

Or water or

**Lydia** I think I've got some squash, some kind of weird combination like strawberry and apricot or

**Steve** I'm OK

**Lydia** Don't know why I bought it really, sounds disgusting. Not very grown-up, is it, squash?

*Steve moves the mouse, then frowns.*

**Steve** Does it always crash like this?

**Lydia** Oh. Yeah, always. All the time. Hit 'Save' every five seconds now.

**Steve** You work from home, do you?

**Lydia** No, I. No.

*Pause. Steve reboots the PC. Lydia watches him.*

God, you must. You must really see some stuff

Things people have on their machines

**Steve** Don't really look

**Lydia** No?

**Steve** Not really interested

**Lydia** No

*Beat.*

No? You must be a little bit?

**Steve** Maybe a / bit

**Lydia** A little bit. Curious.

**Steve** Most people there's not

**Lydia** Well you won't find any porn on there

*Lydia laughs and looks away.*

**Steve** What you do with your personal

**Lydia** My *personal*

**Steve** It's none of my business

**Lydia** I don't have anything *personal* on

**Steve** I'm just here to fix it

*Beat.*

There's someone I email, OK?

**Lydia** And if. If I can't email, then

And I haven't been able to email for days so I feel a bit

**Steve** OK

But I wouldn't

**Lydia**

I wouldn't want you to read any of the emails, so

**Steve** I won't

I haven't met him

**Lydia** I

It's ridiculous really, but

**Steve** I won't

**Lydia** Read them, no

*Steve peers at the screen.*

**Steve**                Shit

**Lydia**              What? What?

**Steve**              I'm going to be here a while.

*Fade.*

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We are grateful to Oberon Books for the permission to reprint this extract from *Other Hands*. Please visit [www.oberonbooks.com](http://www.oberonbooks.com) for further information on Laura Wade's published work.

## List of Contributors

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**Katrin Greim** is finishing her MA in Women Studies at San Francisco State University. She is currently conducting first-person interviews with self-identified femmes living in the San Francisco Bay Area for her thesis, "The Politics of (In)Visibility: Articulations of Femme Gender and Sexual Identity."

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