

Like A Moon On The Water

Looking through gendered dynamics of power and their illusory effects

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I touch your mouth, with one finger I touch the edge of your mouth, I draw it as if it came out of my hand, as if your mouth was for the first time just barely open, and closing my eyes is enough to undo it and start over. Each time I create the mouth I desire, the mouth that my hand chooses and draws for you on your face, one mouth chosen from all, chosen by me with sovereign freedom to draw with my hand on your face, and for some random chance I seek not to understand, it perfectly matches your smiling mouth, beneath the one my hand draws for you. You look at me, you look at me closely, each time closer and then we play cyclops, we look at each other closer each time and our eyes grow, they grow closer, they overlap and the cyclops look at each other, breathing confusion, their mouths find each other and fight warmly, biting with their lips, resting their tongues lightly on their teeth, playing in their caverns where the heavy air comes and goes with the scent of an old perfume and silence. Then my hands want to hide in your hair, slowly stroke the depth of your hair while we kiss with mouths full of flowers or fish, of living movements, of dark fragrance. And if we bite each other, the pain is sweet, and if we drown in a short and terrible surge of breath, that instant death is beauty. And there is a single saliva and a single flavour of ripe fruit, and I can feel you shiver against me like a moon on the water.

— *Hopscotch*, Julio Cortázar

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It's a true image, born of a false spectacle.

— *Jean Genet, The Balcony*

Them

We are in the early 1990's. The place is Campos dos Goytacazes, a town in the countryside of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In the scene we see what appears to be fragments of a cityscape at night. Blurred artificial lights draw their abstractness within and throughout the frame, constructing a depth of field that is now contrasted with the moist of breath that I project onto the glass window of the car. I open my left eye while shutting the right one then shift backwards tirelessly. The in-and-out-of-focus effect outlines the mutable image, rectangularly framed by a standard car window. The softened edges are provoked by the limits of my peripheral vision and its inability to widely focus, transforming the visible image into invisible. I am behind this glass window, leaning my body against the padded car seat while not being able to reach the floor with my feet. I won't wear the seatbelt. Nobody has told me to do so. Besides, my curious restlessness would make it hard to seat still, secured by the piece of hard fabric. The levels of excitement provoke a tickling sensation that still persists to this date, emerging now in a stomach worn for over two subsequent decades. My aunt drives the car while her girlfriend is in the passenger seat. They make jokes directed to each other but I am aware of their intention to entertain us. My older brother and I gaze at one another and smile, secretly sharing the experience of a joyful adventure, while acknowledging the ambivalence of its permission.

We now enter the main street of the city centre. All the shops are closed but we can still hear the echos of cars honking, people talking, buses braking, laughter, and fast paced steps. We smell traces of all the cigarette smoke, the coffee and food trucks, hot cooking oil and their warm scent that pierces through the moisture of air. A vivid spectrum is projected from early memory into the emptiness and darkness of the streets.

We gradually start spotting people who stand throughout the sidewalks. They appear to be fully dressed as women, with frivolous bodily expressions that strike and intrigue my senses. They perform their femininity with such hypnotizing strength and self assurance that I uninterruptedly gaze at them, trying not to miss a moment - their controlled poses suggest to me an invitation to do so. They are offering themselves to my eyes so my gaze is free to drift around their bodies and expressed signs. My aunt and her girlfriend lower the car windows and wave at them, throwing cheerful compliments and greetings. I see their comfortable facial expressions give place to one of distress the second our

car approaches them. We are not adult men on the lookout for pleasure. We are two children in the back of a car led by two adult women.

A playful feeling of endangerment unfolds itself into the dichotomous confrontation with sensations of guilt and pleasure, revealing an uncanny sense of privilege; The privilege of being granted a chance to witness a unique situation, or a ticket to a secret society; The privilege of being a front row spectator of an ethereal show; The privilege to enter a forbidden world without an invitation; The privilege of passive bystanders that do not urge for participation; The privilege to watch reality happen in the safety of a car, protected by our control of speed, by our choice of direction, by our power of decision; The privilege to access a possible course of action and thought; And the privilege of holding a choice for a discourse.

The transgender women we see here are framed by the window of the car; By the streets; By our discourse (mine and yours, my reader, in the baggage carried by those who gaze); By the darkness of the night when illuminated by artificial lights placed in exact distances from each other due to the decision of city planners; By the speed of the car that dictates where and what to look at; By our comfort, by our position, and by our multiple privileges. After all, the factor which comes to define the subject one gazes at is not the 'what', not the subject itself, but one's private threshold of knowledge that consequently shapes the 'how', the manners through which we all come to comprehend things.

If I can't understand you, will I offer my empathy, my love

Memory and (re)Cognition

The story you just read is the interpretation of an experience lived by me as a child, re-assessed through what is left of its memory. Regardless of possible biased judgements, I endeavoured to dismiss any conclusions based on how my adult mind would comprehend this scene nowadays. Nevertheless, I realize that the striking sensations the situation had raised on me then (and that perpetuate to this date), were due to the encounter with an assertive ambiguity of gender. The manners through which the transgender women seemed to express themselves on a rather free platform, in the frame of the streets, appeared to emancipate their sexualities and embrace their identities fearlessly. The confidence revealed through the enhancement of characteristics of femininity provoked impact and I began to question things that I had until that point been frightened by. Signs of traits associated with femininity were surprisingly performed as an empowering phenomena, and not the other way around. I believe *this* to be the precise moment when the little girl I was figured she was meant to belong in a particular category of human being.

Traditional views of sexual difference undertake binary notions of principles of opposition such as ying-yang, water-fire, earth-sun, active-passive, protagonist-antagonist, and in which *women* become the other of *men*. Associated with cisgendered women, femininity is often approached and shaped through mythical ideas of purity, sensuality and mystery. Founded by patriarchal arguments and the aftermath of traditional ontology and cosmology, the role of women in society is inherent to its biological functions: the clean, sensual and supposedly fertile body which enables the perpetuation of life forms, and is meant to nurture. The perception of the female body and of the identity it performs are then embedded with idealised moulds of characteristics derived from biased notions of gender.

When characteristics of femininity or masculinity are performed by opposing sexes, a paradox of ambiguity is raised on one's judgement of the other. Challenging the obviousness of the notions of gender, this ambiguous sense of illusion questions what lays behind our repeated patterns of expression, the construct that comes to shape one's identity and gender. Fundamentally through creating unforeseen confusions in the processes of cognition, the performativity of queer identities help demystify ideas

installed by regimes of normativity that would consequently reinforce the foundation of the binary thought. If sex and sexuality are meant for reproduction, homosexuality and gender-fluidity may border an act of apostasy and are then tackled by heterosexist biases.

The toxicity of the norm

Throughout history, queer beings (i.e. performing identities other than the so called heteronormative or cisgendered) have been connected with ideas of perversion, transgressiveness and toxicity. Raised from a fear of the unknown, and the uncomfortable uncertainty of not comprehending another being, pejorative assumptions regarding one's identity and gender are so powerfully rooted among us that they impose denial, inhibit cohesiveness and keep reinforcing a long time shaped discourse. The repression of sexuality and of the plurality of identity and gender comes to strengthen a much broader effect of the heteronormative political and economic regimes that aim to keep the order of things intact. The catalyst of troublesome assumptions on gender is not the opinion itself, but the fact that we often avoid questioning *why* do we follow certain trains of thought as well as we refuse to trace their origin.

In '*The Will To Knowledge*', volume I of '*The History of Sexuality*'¹, Michel Foucault first coined his concepts of *biopower* and *biopolitics* through analysing the established discourse on sexuality within the capitalist regimes since the eighteenth century. Through *biopower*, Foucault elaborates on how sexuality is affected by a subjugation of bodies into categories in modern societies. This categorization happens through a model of control of broader populations with the intention of managing and providing manpower, wealth and a healthy labor capacity. With the regulation of risk and heredity, practices of public health and a general sense of morality, sexuality is transformed into a dictated subject. Sexual identities become then categorized by multiple discourses: the medical discourse (with an extensive number of nervous disorders and hysterias), psychiatry and criminal justice, for instance. This array helps build a common sense knowledge regarding what is considered to be perverse, transgressive and therefore toxic behaviour, conveying and founding stereotypes that consequently generates the position of marginalized beings within society. In this sense, how is it possible for us

¹ Foucault, Michel, 1979, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*. London: Allen Lane.

nowadays to recognise the (concealed) layers of thoughts and opinions that shape a discourse?

Now let's rewind it back to the streets for a moment. The transgender women that have inspired me as a child were in fact illegal sex workers condemned to live and belong to a criminal, violent and marginalized society. Because of an immense lack of opportunities all over the world and not only in economically developing countries like Brazil, transgender people turn to prostitution as a means of material resources and survival. In her '*Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*'², Melissa Hope Ditmore argues the following:

Trans people are engaged in sex work all over the globe for several reasons. Everywhere, there is a market of individuals who wish to purchase sexual services. In particular, there is a subcategory of (mostly) heterosexual-identified men who wish to sexually engage with MTF trans women. These men often find trans women powerfully sexy, alluring, and "exotic." Secondly, trans people across the globe continue to face massive discrimination and oppression. The situation in some Latin American countries, for instance, is particularly serious. Trans prostitutes are regularly murdered, assassinated by police, illegally held in police custody, tortured, and mutilated. Because of prejudice and discrimination, the only professions open to trans women in some countries are in sex work, hairdressing, and female impersonation.

Despite of the history of romanticized exotification of transgender and queer people in cinema and entertainment industries, most of them are in reality compelled to stray towards marginalized social roles. Obliterating the inclusion of a more sexually diverse workforce in nowadays society, this happens to not only reinforce the norm within the Western humanist sense, but it is also to this date the cause and support of a major public health concern, of social inequality and oppression.

In *Gender Trouble*³, queer theorist Judith Butler introduces her thought on gender performativity, arguing that gender is not something one is born with, not a thing in itself, but a construct built by a collection of signs adapted and performed by each person. This formation not always comes to exist according to a person's intent but instead, it is constructed by pre-set definitions built from assumptions established prior to their birth and defined by social and political circumstances and stances of power. Language becomes then the core generator of gender, conveying and dictating through nomenclatures and categorizations what gender is supposed to be(come) and not the

² Hope Ditmore, Melissa, 2006, *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work Volume 1*. Greenwood Publishing Book.

³ Butler, Judith, 1990, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.

other way around. Therefore gender is not the creator of discourse but discourse is what gives birth to the definitions of gender. It is a fabrication based on performativity and its assemblage is interchangeable, generated and defined by a repetition of expressed signs and behavioural patterns. Hence the identity of a being is then shaped by one's choice of fashion, aesthetics, their language, class, nationality, cultural background, sex, or race. It is meant to provide us with a sense of belonging, helping shape and guide a person's behaviour and to ensure a cohesive sense of Self. It is a construct based on the unities that define our ways of identification, coming across as signs which enable the understanding of a person's position and role in society. Butler's theory of performativity questions the dichotomy of nature and culture, disrupting the essentialist notions of gender and precisely reaffirming its fabricated nature, its fluidity and time-based truthfulness.

When interviewed by Vice Broadly on *'Why Do Men Kill Trans Women'*⁴, Butler explained the core reasons behind the growing number of murder cases of transgender women in 2015 all over the world and specially in countries like the United States, Brazil, Argentina and Turkey (with Brazil being on top of that list and becoming the country in which the most transgender people are murdered in the entire world). In the interview Butler notes that in the greatest majority of the murder cases, the victims were not only transgender women but also people of color. The gender and race of the aggressors (being in almost all cases white heterosexual-identified men) raises doubt on what could hypothetically be the reason of the hate crimes: the threat that arises from the confrontation with whatever comes to question the stances of male power and their masculinity. Why do the aggressors feel so emasculated by the confrontation with femininity, when it is performed by diverse genders and racial minorities, that it becomes necessary for them to kill? And why are these tragedies still not officially listed as hate crimes in most police reports?

Performing queer identities often represents danger and life threat to the ones who embody it, not only in social circles or public territories but also when dealing with the law and police. Therefore feminist, queer, lesbian and gay acts, alongside the simple performativity of queer identities, stand as a revolutionary voice and cri-de-coeur for a switch in the general discourse. Despite of it becoming a way of questioning the establishment of power stances and the norm, being queer is often the catalyst of oppression of the ones who carry the acts forward and/or identify themselves as whatever could become undefinable within heteronormative moulds of perspectives.

⁴ Tourjee, Diana, 2015, "Why Do Men Kill Trans Women? Gender Theorist Judith Butler Explains". Vice Broadly.

The Smoking Room

Jean Genet/Werner Hirsch: I had a dream last night. I dreamt that the technicians of this film would revolt. They never have the right to speak. Why is it like this? And I thought that they would be - culotté you say in French - that they would have the guts to take my place and chase me from my place. But still they are not moving. Why is that?

Pauline Boudry: Yes, why...

Jean Genet/Werner Hirsch: Yes, can you please ask them how they explain that. Why they are not coming and chasing me from my place, and chasing you also, and come, say, because it's so stupid what you are saying, that I really don't want to continue with this work. Ask them.

(The camera turns to the sound technicians.)

Renate Lorenz: Does it interest you to break the order of things? I mean since you were dreaming about it. Do you want to break the order in this room?

Jean Genet/Werner Hirsch: I am here alone. And in front of me, there is like 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 people, 7 people, so of course I want to break the order. And this is why I told you yesterday to come here, yes of course.

Pauline Boudry: Do you think this is like a police interrogation?

Jean Genet/Werner Hirsch: Oui! Yes! Of course! I was saying, the camera is running, alright! Good. I was saying yesterday that you are doing the work of a policeman, and you are continuing now today. I was saying this yesterday and you already forgot about it, because you are interrogating me exactly like the thief I was thirty years ago, interrogated by policemen, by a squad of policemen.

(The camera turns to the sound technicians, and backstage. You can see the filmmakers.)

Jean Genet/Werner Hirsch: So on the one side, there is a norm, the side where you are. And also outside of this room, the producers of this film, the editors, etc., and on the other side, there is the margin, where I am, where I am marginalized. And if I am afraid to enter the norm, of course I am afraid to enter the norm. And if I am getting annoyed right now, it is because I am in the midst of entering the norm, I am in the

midst of entering the museums, the gallery spaces, and the art spaces, etc. And that doesn't make me happy. But I am not angry at you, who are from the norm, I am angry at myself because I accepted to come here. So this doesn't make me very happy indeed.

Inspired by an interview with Jean Genet by Nigel Williams for BBC in 1985, this is the dialogue played by Werner Hirsch as a drag character in the video part of artist duo Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz's installation work Toxic.

The video starts with the setup of a theater stage, adorned with toxic plants and draped fabrics that frame a projection screen in the middle of the stage. A consistent amount of glitter is spread throughout the floor, mimicking the appearance of waste matter and evoking what could have been the leftovers of a great party. Photographs are projected onto the screen in a diptych form, performing rhythmically, and overlapping the front portrayal of the subjects with their profile. The pace and framing of the photographs resemble mug-shots appropriated by forensic photographers, referencing early anthropometric investigations.

While the images change, we hear a click noise similar to the one of a camera shutter, suggesting that there is somebody present off-frame who is in control of the speed and order of the images. The images are staged photographs of the performers and the artists themselves, showcasing visible tattoos, in costumes and poses that often resemble aboriginal people of sorts, gorilla suits, bio hazard gear, plastic and paper shopping bags, feathers, and medicine boxes. The shape and placement of the props onto the bodies of the performers blurs their human forms, revealing a certain monstrosity and fictionality that suggest them to be dehumanized, or uncategorized beings that fall out of an order.

Played by the German performer Werner Hirsch, a drag character sneezes off-frame before entering the stage. She crosses the projected image while the work is being announced in an audible voice by a punk character, embodied by the performer Ginger Brooks Takahashi. The drag character goes through the piles of glitter material on the floor, uncovers a dumped cigarette and smokes it, while coping with sudden coughs that blow and sparkle more glitter in the air. The narrator lists drug names, hormones, disease treatments and chemical substances used by transgender people in order to achieve a transition between sexes. During the narration a photographer enters the frame, disrupts the image in an imposing act, aiming the camera at Hirsch - who ironically commits in posing for it. The drag character takes the action of pointing spot lights back to the stage itself and its settings, while the camera drifts around the image,

intertwining plays of fast paced zoom with handheld movements that enhance the presence of a decisive eye which is in control of the image.

The scene cuts to the traditional settings of a documentary interview. A clapperboard titling the work 'Toxic' is in frame, subsequently giving space to the drag character, the subject to be interviewed, who sits on a chair lit by the spot lights. The whole setup resembles a classic interrogatory film scene. The interview transforms itself into the confrontational dialogue when Hirsch's drag begins to question the filmmakers on freedom of speech (behind and before the camera) and on the reasons *why* she is put in the spotlights.

Fluctuating amongst different ways of storytelling, the work establishes multiple contrasting paradoxes. The theatricality of the stage and props gives room to the ambiguously realistic dialogue scene that promptly shifts towards the presentation of historical documentary photographs in the installation. Displayed in glass-covered tables that are lit and kept horizontal, the photographs become documents, subjects to be analyzed. In the same manner as their content indicates, they are the result of police and medical investigations and of gender speculations. Dating from between the 1920's and 1938, the photographs portray people that were often regarded as criminals, freaks, outcasts, transvestites, hysterical, affected by physical and mental illnesses, or gender-fluid.

Boudry and Lorenz propose a constant shift of perspectives, alternating the main focus of attention from one subject to another, as if they are looking for clues and trying to provoke thought. Embodying different points of view that fraction the mechanisms of the gaze, the work confuses the formation of opinions that may seem accurate and that are often taken for granted. Through the shifts of perspectives that nervously disrupt positions, reality, subjectivity and truthfulness are put to question and reconsideration. Conclusively, the viewers who visit the work are placed in an immersive position that allows them to identify with all different perspectives proposed in the work, and inevitably start questioning their own modes of subjectivity.

Toxic picks up, extends and stretches the political questions raised particularly in the context of queer, feminist, trans, anti-racist communities, of their politics, artistic and social voice. The idea of toxicity is not only employed as a direct reference regarding all the chemical processes involved in film and the contemporary software productions, but also as a metaphorical critique towards the ways of seeing that derive from the powers behind the shaping of social discourses.

In 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'⁵, Laura Mulvey first introduces her thoughts on the theory of the male gaze. In her iconic essay, Mulvey approaches the Hollywood film industry as a male-dominant phenomena in which women are objectified in order to create a pleasurable experience for the male spectator. The woman is always presented as the object of the reifying gaze, not the bearer of it. Nevertheless, when revisiting⁶ the essay, Mulvey hints at what she calls the 'transvestism' of the gaze. The term is employed to metaphorically address the occasions in which the female viewer might oscillate between female-coded and male-coded analytic points of view. These ideas led to theories of how the gay, lesbian, and bisexual spectatorship might also be negotiated, as an alternative to having their viewing points obliterated. Creating situations where the gaze is put to question, through the proposed shifts of positions, the mechanisms employed by Boudry and Lorenz might eminently illustrate the essence of Mulvey's metaphorical term.

Detoxifying Confusion

When reflecting on Toxic, scholar Nana Adusei-Poku creates a parallel⁷ between the ideas of toxicity brought up by Boudry and Lorenz and the concepts of detox that appear in contemporary society. From the trendy popularity of the so called green juices, to the consumerism of products and a life style derived from the health industries miasmas - as well as the idealization of a model of purified species which seeks perfection. She calls for the end of detox and the embracement of the queer utopian potential, as the key figure of 'Toxic' proposes the possibility to challenge our way of thinking:

We are the interrogators that haven't revolted yet and appear to remain in the positions that society has left us with. Werner Hirsch calls on us to break the order of things and despite of the fact that we may never be able to leave ideologies realm, as Louis Althusser has framed it, we may be able to change ideology itself by accepting that we are part of a constant decay and that there is no such thing as purity on any level.

⁵ Mulvey, Laura, 1975, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. *Screen*, Oxford Journals.

⁶ Mulvey, Laura, 1981, *Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'*, *Inspired by King Vidor's Duel In The Sun (1946)*. Longman.

⁷ Adusei-Poku, Nana, 2012, *The End of Detox - Visual Myths and Estranged Dualisms*. *Le Journal des Laboratoires*.

Paradoxically central to postmodern literature, Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*⁸ elaborates on an ironic, albeit clarifying, hypothetical break from the conflictual discourses on gender. Haraway departs from the idea that we are all cyborgs, hybrids created from the duality of machine and organism. As our direct attachment to technology may change what we can define as experience, the cyborg becomes not only a fictional creature that appears in sci-fi films and books, but it is also a creature of reality. Nevertheless, the idea of the cyborg is offered as a metaphor to propose a way of overcoming binary notions of sexuality and gender.

Cyborgs do not remember the cosmos, they have no genesis, no beginning, no end. They have no families, they are not reverent, but instead, they are illegitimate offsprings and their father is inessential. The cyborg can enjoy desires but it replicates without the need for sexual reproduction and primarily, it has no gender. Through her theory, Haraway attempts to dismiss the idea of the opposition between unities that define identity, such as black and white, or male and female. She intends to tear down typical boundaries as an alternative to the promotion of categorizing labels. Encouraging the acknowledgement of boundaries that generate fractured identities, she argues that all beings are capable of having not only one, but multiple identities. Haraway cries for the end of dualisms and polarizations, forgetting boundaries in race, class and gender - as cyborgs are already part of our ontology, part of who we are, both building and destroying machines with multiple identities, categories and relationships.

Foremost, I believe the main generator of conflict lays within the spectrums of the ungraspable. It emerges from the difficulties encountered when trying to define and categorize someone other within our own understanding of reality and truth - and from the feelings of threat that ambivalently arise from this confronting confusion. Therefore I would like to stand by Boudry and Lorenz, Adusei-Poku and Haraway in proposing that we all embrace this confusion; Questioning the modes of subjectivity that might shape our own perspective on things; Disavowing moralist notions of toxicity and of social disorder; Acknowledging gender to be a fabricated illusion that only creates social boundaries which are urging to be torn down; Breaking from a heterosexist society and its truly noxious effects; And ultimately, in accepting the multiplicity of our own identities, which may bring us closer to one another.

⁸ Haraway, Donna, 1985, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. Routledge.



Self portrait of a 16 year old me, in mid-confusion.

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