To illusions that exalt

WHAT A DRAG?
POPULAR CULTURE & THE COMMODIFICATION OF "FEMININE"-OTHER
BODIES

Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
of
İhsan Doğramacı Bilkent University

by

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In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE DEPARTMENT OF
COMMUNICATION AND DESIGN
İHSAN DOĞRAMACI BİLKENT UNIVERSITY
ANKARA

January 2016

I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Media and Visual Studies.

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ABSTRACT

WHAT A DRAG? POPULAR CULTURE & THE COMMODIFICATION OF
"FEMININE"-OTHER BODIES

Baştürk, Tonguçnaz Seleme

M.A., in Media and Visual Studies

Supervisor: Assist. Prof. Dr. Özlem Savaş

January 2016

This thesis explores the issue of the appropriation of emancipatory potential in an advanced capitalist society, particularly through neoliberal discourse that maintains patriarchal ideology, through an analysis of "feminine" other bodies. It focuses on the boom in representations of drag queens and transgender women in U.S. media over the last half decade in the context of the longtime repression of non-heteronormativity. This study aims to address the societal restrictions on "feminine" bodies and whether the seeming liberalization of them in popular culture is not merely a reason for celebrating "progress" in recognizing the disempowered, but may also signal the promotion of other changes and values within a capitalist system based on consumerism, as with post-feminism. It inquires about various questions pertaining to sexuality and its performances, the role of artistic pursuits in communal and individual life, the influence of the media and attempts of meaning-making in a culture oversaturated with carefully constructed media texts and commodification. The thesis concludes by highlighting how mainstreamed depictions of such subjects are susceptible to absorption into the system, particularly one that thrives by channeling the desire for subversion and liberation. It underlines the threat of such representations becoming superficial tokens that gain legitimacy by appearing like emancipatory values despite their presentation being a depoliticized one, which assume the semblance of an anti-ideological challenge that hides their very own incorporation into the system and the subsequent strengthening of dominant discourses.

Keywords: Capitalism, Commodification, Popular culture, Non-heteronormativity, Post-Feminism

ÖZET

POPÜLER KÜLTÜR VE ÖTEKİ-"FEMİNEN" VÜCUTLARIN
METALAŞTIRILMASI

Baştürk, Tonguçnaz Seleme

Yüksek Lisans, Medya ve Görsel Çalışmalar

Tez Yöneticisi: Yrd. Doç. Dr. Özlem Savaş

Ocak 2016

Bu tez, ataerkil ideolojiyi sürdüren neoliberal söylem vasıtasıyla ileri kapitalist toplumlarda özgürleştirici potansiyelin nasıl sahiplenilmesini ele alır. Çalışma, bu bağlamda "kadınsı" (feminen) öteki vücutların analizine başvurur. Tez, heteronormatiflik dışı duruşların uzun süredir bastırılmaya çalışıldığı bir bağlamda, drag queenlerin ve transgender kadınların Amerikan medyasındaki görünürlüğünün son beş yıl içinde yaptığı patlamaya odaklanır. Çalışma, "kadınsı" vücutlar üzerindeki toplumsal kısıtlamaları araştırırken, onların popüler kültürde zahiren daha özgür bir konuma gelmesinin, güçsüzleştirilmiş bir kesimin tanınmasıyla "katedilen mesafeyi" kutlamak için geçerli bir sebep olmaktan ziyade, post-feminizmde örneğinde olduğu gibi, tüketimciliğe dayalı bir kapitalist sistem içerisinde aslında başka değişim ve değerleri ön plana çıkarma teşebbüsünün bir göstergesi olup olmadığı konusunu irdeler. Araştırma; cinsellik ve temsillerine, toplumsal ve kişisel yaşamda sanatsal arayışların rolüne, medyanın tesirine ve titizlikle inşa edilmiş medya metinleri ve metalaştırma örnekleriyle aşırı doygunlaşmış bir kültürde anlam üretme çabalarına dair sorular sorar. Tezin sonuç bölümünde, yukarıda bahsedilen konuların anaakımlaştırılmış tasvirlerinin sistem tarafından özümsenmeye ne kadar müsait olduğuna vurgu yapılır. Bu noktada söz konusu sistemin, yıkıma uğratma ve özgürleştirme arzularını kanalize ederek güçlendiği ve büyüdüğünün altı çizilir. Çalışma aynı zamanda bu tasvirlerin, siyasetten uzak biçimde sunulmasına karşın özgürleştirici değerler şeklinde ortaya çıkarak meşruiyet zemini bulurken, gerçekte yüzeysel sembollere dönüşmesi tehlikesini vurgular. Bu sözde değerler, anti-ideolojik bir meydan okuma kisvesine bürünür; halbuki bu meydan okuma, bizzat kendisinin sisteme dahil oluşunu ve böylece baskın söylemlerin berkitilişini perdelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kapitalizm, Metalaştırma, Popüler kültür, Non-heteromormative, Post-feminism

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Over the last five years, drag queens and transgender celebrities – particularly trans women – have appeared across popular media in the U.S. at an unprecedented rate that has only increased since 2014. While the donning of articles of clothing deemed to oppose the sex that one was assigned at birth would have been a punishable violation of laws across the country just decades ago, and a phenomenon usually hidden from conventional public life but practiced among small communities associated with the disenfranchised and/or avant-garde, figures engaging in such acts have had increasing visibility within just the last few years. While drag queens and transgender people have become a common topic on television programs and films, some have even become well-known celebrities across publics that do not consider themselves queer or transgender.

The transition by which a practice or identification considered a shocking violation of social codes – or even criminality – manages to enter mass media suggests a

process whereby that which was previously repressed by a society insistent on eradicating any traces of such non-normative possibilities may be gaining recognition, if not also acceptance. Such a process of mainstreaming may appear to imply progress occurring in a society as it begins acknowledging – by offering visibility, and perhaps even long-withheld support, to – individuals who have long been disenfranchised and persecuted.

This thesis focuses on representations of drag queens and transgender subjects – especially women – over the period of approximately the last five years, while also touching on a few more widely known figures from past decades. By doing so, it seeks to address what values such figures connote, due to both how they are situated within society through its underlying codes – such as the dominant one of patriarchy and heteronormativity – and how they present themselves as members of a disempowered community. In concentrating on representations of both drag queens and transgender people, this thesis in no way equates such subjects with one another, but addresses both as a way of exploring how non-heteronormative subjects associated with identifications, behaviors and practices regarded as "feminine" according to the gender binary long enforced by Western society, among others.

In exploring the recent interest in such subjects in mainstream media and popular culture, this study will discuss a number of issues related to the enforcement of restrictive patriarchal values and the resistance/transgression against them, as well as the role of culture in governing social life and the identities individuals are able to craft within such contexts. This thesis aims to explore the societal restrictions on "feminine" bodies and whether the seeming liberalization of them is not merely a reason for the celebration of progress in the recognition of the disadvantaged, but

may also signal the promotion of other changes and values within a capitalist system whose regulations are based around development and consumption. It will do so by inquiring about various questions pertaining to sexuality and its performances, the role of artistic pursuits in communal and individual life, the influence of the media and attempts of meaning-making in a culture oversaturated with carefully constructed media texts.

This thesis will ask a number of questions in an attempt at examining how mass media represents that which is deemed contrary to conventional values, and whether these representations can serve as a means of undermining such repressive ideologies. These include: In what manner does popular media portray empowered "feminine" subjects? Could mainstream portrayals of drag and transgender people remove the potential subversive qualities of such practices and identifications? Could they fall in line with furthering oppressive views of femininity? Could a temporary break from heteronormativity be channeled into enforcing sexual and social complacency over an extended period of time? Are representations of drag and transgender issues losing the ability to unsettle general audiences and thereby the possibility of disrupting established views about sexuality and the implied power dynamics? Have such representations been reduced to "shocking" entertainment, or one lauded for "promoting" equality and freedom? Do oversexualized representations of drag and transgender figures enable the maintenance – and in some ways expansion – of a misogynist "male" gaze?

Primarily, this study is motivated by a concern for whether all form of the body, central to individuals' identity and position within a culture, and sexuality, an area so closely tied to social ideas of what is considered taboo, are susceptible being

rendered as avenues for the maintenance of the most dominant power balances. Questions like those above are particularly relevant in a late capitalist neoliberal context in which values that are generally deemed as beneficial for individuals – especially the disempowered – such as equality, freedom and empowerment end up not necessarily weakening the systems that uphold injustice, but rather strengthening the most potent forms of hegemony. This thesis aims to question whether the depictions of drag queens and transgender women that are becoming more common in mainstream media may ultimately resemble the pattern already witnessed with the prevalence of post-feminist ways of thinking and living in the U.S. nowadays – which through their superficial association with progressive values have legitimized the equation – both cognitively and materially throughout society – of women's right with consumerism and a reinforced emphasis on beauty as personal responsibility.

With these concerns in mind, this thesis asks whether the new visibility granted to drag and transgender subjects will contribute to such non-heteronormative bodies remaining as a challenge to misogyny and the imbalances sustained by the gender binary, or whether they can finally offer an opportunity to resist – if not subvert – the influence of the commercial sector as the new regulator and enforcer of cultural control. Will they fall victim to the same fate as other previously transgressive practices and symbols and be rendered into an illusory form of pacification, or can they overcome attempts at recuperating them into the system and thereby gradually change it from within?

In terms of the methodology for this study, I decided upon focusing on a few high-profile figures among both drag queens and transgender women who regularly

appear on television programming in the U.S. – as well as other media – and well as new trans publication that has features many Hollywood actors and celebrities famous among – and beyond – the LGBT community. This choice was made in order to enable an in-depth analysis of how depictions of such figures, and the values associated with them, represented non-heteronormative feminine subjects to audiences across the country. It also allowed the study to find patterns within different representations so as to bring to light overarching schemes into which such subjects and their bodies were placed through media portrayals. The case also draws from two documentaries released since 2010 on transgender Andy Warhol star Candy Darling and Divine, a persona played by Glenn Milstead who gained popularity in film and music through her typically appalling anti-social behavior. The inclusion of the documentaries enables a discussion on not only the renewed interest in Candy and Divine, both deceased, but also an opportunity to address the not-too-long-ago origins of depictions of non-heteronormative figures in American artistic scenes, as well as what such an aspiring transgender film star and female impersonator known for blatantly offensive behavior could stand for decades ago.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on theories about the role of definitions and regulations of gender and sexuality in society, and what acts of transgression and the pursuit of liberation from imposed confines would imply within such contexts. Due to the study's focus on "other" forms of "feminine" bodies, it addresses the taboos affiliated with not only sexuality in general, but also the restrictions placed particularly on "womanhood" in society's mechanisms to control subjects and enforce their conformity to gender-based codes. The potential to challenge patriarchal systems through empowering acts by feminine subjects and their assertion of control over their bodies is considered as possibilities through which to

pursue freedom from the grasp of repressive ideologies. This then leads to a debate on the threats of such "self-empowerment" being neutralized through the commodification of sex, particularly in a post-feminist and neoliberal context that maintains – and even strengthens – the hold of power imbalances by promoting an ideal of personhood based on crafting one's body and identity. The chapter also addresses theories about gender as a form of socially constructed and enforced performativity and whether it can be unsettled by non-heteronormative identification and practices.

Meanwhile, the second chapter is centered on a discussion of culture in the late capitalist period, particularly in terms of popular entertainment and consumerism. It addresses how the contemporary phenomenon of the aestheticization of everyday life permeates into nearly all aspects of society and the position of the individual within it in it amidst the increasing blurring between "higher" and popular culture, that some regard as of inferior quality and others as democratizing. Camp tastes reflect these tensions within culture through its somewhat paradoxical coupling of the marginal with elitism. The exploration of the possibility of escaping – or even challenging – dominant ideologies through resistance through popular culture as well as subcultures is accompanied by a consideration of whether the omnipresent media texts impose and reinforce hegemony or offer potentially subversive options. This ultimately leads to a discussion of whether more radical messages or even moderate ones, which do not directly challenge the status quo but nonetheless offer some aspiration toward liberation, can resist becoming appropriated into a late capitalist system that strengthens itself through co-opting transgression, and then offering the illusion of freedom, often in a commodified form.

The third chapter then focuses on a case study of several popular drag and transgender figures who have become high-profile celebrities with regular appearances across various media. But first, as mentioned above, it starts off by addressing the legacy of Candy Darling and Divine, and what they have come to symbolize in terms of their association with different scenes – whether underground or Pop Art milieus, or as the model for well-known photographers or a disco diva. Attention is also paid to recent discussions on the issue of representations or drag and transgender identities, raising issues such as if the new visibility will provide sustained progress for non-heteronormative communities, and whether mainstream media portrayals are offensive to women or imply if they imply that drag/trans are in danger of losing their subversive edge. These topics are also handled through an analysis of drag queen RuPaul's successful career and programming under his name, as well as of reality shows centered around Caitlyn Jenner and Jazz Jennings – who both have assumed roles as transgender spokespeople.

CHAPTER 2

"FEMININE" BODIES & TRANSGRESSION

While the disparities in the status allocated to males and females is widely acknowledged, as well as the taboos associated with sexuality in general and the roles assigned to both the "he" and the "she", it is femininity that carries the more sexed meanings. Images of a feminine subject – even when barely provocative in adornment, pose, etc. – more easily bring to the viewer's mind sexual thoughts. Nearly any article of clothing – even uniforms associated with the tedium of bureaucracy – can become sexualized when worn by a woman figure deemed attractive, as can even unworn inanimate objects associated with femininity – a high heel shoe, a lipstick tube, a necklace.

2.1 "Feminine" Bodies

The prevalent loading of meanings on feminine subjects has been addressed by Jean Baudrillard (1998) in his study on consumer society, in which he writes that "it is woman who orchestrates or rather around whom is orchestrated this great Aesthetic/Erotic Myth" (Baudrillard, 1998: 137). He argues that the reason behind

the positioning of woman based on the social constructs involving sexuality is ultimately "*historical* in origin." Throughout the processes through which communities developed, such subjects were strictly bound by the collectively fashioned and controlled beliefs regarding bodies and how their sexed features determined their management. Amid the inequalities found within such contexts, the "repression of the body and the exploitation of woman were carried out in the same spirit" (Baudrillard, 1998: 137). With woman being relegated to a position of being the object upon whom more active agents – typically men granted more powerful roles – acted, the passive role left woman exposed to the determining and assessing standards of the male-dominated social realm. Woman was constructed as the sex object of the male gaze, with the spectator "always assumed to be male" (Lury, 1996: 140). This relationship that has been a determining factor of power in societies for centuries has conditioned spectatorship to maintain associations with a masculinity, the values of domination of which have become so entrenched that they continue to impact how all genders judge the objects upon which they gaze.

The term "male gaze" was coined by film critic Laura Mulvey (1999) in an essay in which she discusses the crafting of cinema around feminine bodies that serve as docile sites for the projection of masculine desire. She points out the socially enforced distinction between makes as the active creators of meaning and women as the passive bearers of those meanings by explicating how woman "stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions" (Mulvey, 1999: 833). Within such cultures that strip women of agency, they are rendered into beings that fulfill a visual presence and a "traditional exhibitionist role" where they "are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic

impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1999: 837). As a visual medium, film then comes to reflect these social dispositions in a culture in which "mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (Mulvey, 1999: 835) and "cinema builds the way she [woman] is to be looked at into the spectacle itself" (Mulvey, 1999: 843). With subjugated woman to the role of being observed according to the interests of the man to whom power is relegated, this results in a "fetishistic scopophilia" that "builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself" (Mulvey, 1999: 840) and ultimately "producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire" (Mulvey, 1999: 843). Within such a patriarchal context, woman is positioned and cast based on the purposes of masculine agency, and the images of such a culture come to be derived from – and therefore reflect and spread – the vantage of the powerful.

While the cultural products through which the values that bind a society may be maintained and controlled by the dominant sections, the potential for resistance may offer some chance of agency for those on whom such meanings are imposed. Many scholars addressing the possibility of multiple readings – particularly in the postmodern era – have written about how different audiences may arrive at varied understandings of a text, sometimes in ways that could generate meanings that counter those originally intended by the producers. In exploring the role of resistance in contemporary leisure practices, Susan M. Shaw (2006) explores the avenues of resistance to the dominant discourse that may be available in leisure. She writes that while the possibility of such acts not limited in terms of place and time, but rather cropping up in "all settings and circumstances" – has been studied, such potential is seen to stem from "the greater opportunities for self-expression and self-

determination" (Shaw, 2006: 535) available through leisure. She argues that its potential may be more likely to bear fruit with the space of leisure due to the perception of "the innocence or marginality of leisure with respect to important and consequential social processes" (Shaw, 2006: 535). Due to such conceptions, its "potential role in challenging dominant power relations may go unrecognized, allowing for greater opportunities to effect change in circumstances relatively free of social control" (Shaw, 2006: 535), rather than those regulated by codes about the public, professional, etc.

Shaw argues that the concept of resistance "emphasizes the significance of leisure as a site where the personal is closely tied to the political" (Shaw, 2006: 541). Due to the connection between the political and personal realms, leisure contributes to the "recognition of the political nature of leisure, of the importance of relative freedom and self-determination in leisure settings, and of the potential, although contradictory and ambiguous, for challenging relations of power" (Shaw, 2006: 541). But while an individual may have opportunities for resistance in their leisure, such potential will exist within the larger context against which it stands. This "co-existence of resistance and reproduction," Shaw explains, stems from "the instability and ongoing construction, reconstruction and contestation of hegemony, and, in postmodern society, to changing social conditions and social consciousness as well" (Shaw, 2006: 543). So the process of resistance will involve what the concept itself entails – an ongoing battle against existent forces.

An emphasis on the pursuit of personal power by an individual through moves of resistance, however, is not sufficient. Shaw stresses that the "political significance of resistance lies in the process of communication and the impact such acts may

have on other people and on the potential for influencing political beliefs and ideologies" (Shaw, 2006: 535). She underlines the need for social interactivity within leisure practices to curtail the confinement of resistance to an ineffective minor condition. What is required instead is acts whose influence can impact others – whether they be participants, spectators, or casual observers – so as to serve as "part of the process in which meanings and beliefs are contested, negotiated, constructed and reconstructed" (Shaw, 2006: 535). So although resistance may have more opportunities to be put into action in the realm of leisure, its actual impact will depend on it moving beyond the personal domain of single individuals and into their cooperation.

A major threat to hopes of the effectiveness of resistance to work toward change, however, lies in the energies being channeled into forms in which they lose the aspects enabling them to take on dominant discourses. Shaw provides Pronger's study of the development of the culture of gay sports as an example of how a seeming resistance to the homophobia in sports settings may not be a source of unqualified optimism. She cites Pronger's concerns that "these changes do not represent a fundamental challenge to sociocultural structures, but have given lesbians and gay men 'the opportunity to conform to those structures'" (Shaw, 2006: 540). Given the threat of appropriation, she ultimately stresses the need for more in depth theorization due to how "like hegemony, resistance is never going to be fully complete, but continuously subject to change, interpretation, revision and ambiguity" (Shaw, 2006: 539). Characterized as a force of struggle, resistance is a process without conclusion, mirroring the attempts of dominant sectors to maintain their grasp on power over culture.

2.2 Sexuality and Transgression

While expressions of sexuality that go against heteronormativity may offer chances of resistance, their potential may even move beyond simply denying the dominant ideology to actively passing its boundaries. Acts of transgression involve not only refusing to fully conform to societally established norms, but also undertaking actions that break the codes. In his theories on transgression and its relationship to aspects of culture such as sexuality, art and luxury, Georges Bataille (1962) discusses how transgression and taboo are complements associated with the contradictory urges impacting people's thoughts, desires and behaviors. He explains these drives – and their connection to the realms widely sanctioned as sacred and profane – by writing:

> Men are swayed by two simultaneous emotions: they are driven away by terror and drawn by an awed fascination… The taboo would forbid the transgression but the fascination compels it. Taboos and the divine are opposed to each other in one sense only, for the sacred aspect of the taboo is what draws men towards it and transfigures the original interdiction (Bataille, 1962: 68).

Rather than taboos serving to completely deter people from transgression, they have a relationship whereby the former's prohibition of the latter actually plays a crucial role in the allure of having the latter unsettle the former. The contradictions inherent in the relationship are furthered by the way in which transgression does not trespasses against a rule considered sacred – thereby resulting in a form of desecration – but the process of doing so stems from a seeking of the sacred that has been marked off. And such violations are plentiful to encompass all forms of codes as there is "no prohibition that cannot be transgressed" (Bataille, 1962: 63), so that each regulation and value comes with a means by which it is infringed upon.

Bataille further explicates the process through which transgression happens by saying that a taboo is abided by when "a negative emotion has the upper hand" (Bataille, 1962: 63) while it is violated when the opposite is the case. Even though a negative emotion would push away a violation, Bataille explains how counter-intuitively the latter "will not deny or suppress" the former, but instead "justify it and arouse it" (Bataille, 1962: 64). This suggests that although a positive urge prompts such an action, the transgression does not then alleviate the negative emotion that would have deterred it, rather results in the continued sensing of it and the warranting of its presence. It both "transcends" and "completes" the taboo, meaning that in Bataille's theory, a taboo is not whole until the law to which applies has been violated and the sacred it marks off breached upon. Given their complementary relationship, transgressions – even if they continue to increase to the extent of becoming regularities – do "not affect the intangible stability of the prohibition" (Bataille, 1962: 65). Violations of rules therefore do not nullify them, but rather reveal the boundaries they draw.

The concept of taboo also gained a prominent place in the fields of psychoanalysis and sociology through the work of Sigmund Freud (2001) and his analysis of how it involved contrary implications. He highlighted how it entailed both the sacred and consecrated as well as the "'uncanny', 'dangerous', 'forbidden', 'unclean'" (Freud, 2001: 21) – representing both the untouchable ideals and the most dreaded fears of a society. It is therefore affiliated not only with that which most repels social subjects, but also "the quality of exciting men's ambivalence and *tempting* them to transgress the prohibition" (Freud, 2001: 38) – reflecting the contradictory coexistence of the maintenance and violation of a code also addressed by Bataille. Yet despite its operation as both the sacred and the forbidden, taboo is nonetheless able to be

transferred onto individuals as well so that anyone "who violates a taboo, becomes taboo himself" as a result of becoming endowed with "the dangerous quality of tempting others to follow his example" (Freud, 2001: 38), revealing the allure of that which is denied. But the impact moves further to encompass even those who have committed no violation as people who are "in a state which possesses the quality of arousing forbidden desires in others and of awakening a conflict of ambivalence" (Freud, 2001: 38) also function momentarily or indefinitely as the taboo.

Theories on transgression are further explored by Pasi Falk (1994) when he delves into the role of the body in formulating selfhood in contemporary consumer society. While the study addresses several fundamental areas of value today, including sexuality and the arts, it defines transgression as a "crossing of borders" and a "transition to the other (non-normal) state" that indicates that "the dynamics in which the order of the secular and everyday world is shattered" and "the breaking down and crossing of the borders confining and defining the body imposed by culture as an Order" (Falk, 1994: 59). With its emphasis on moving beyond boundaries, transgression involves the challenging of the delineated regulations established and maintained by societal order to access the prohibited. The discussion on luxury brings out the subtleties of the argument, in which Bataille explains how the "'other' perspective on luxury" involves the "desire of man and human culture to go beyond the Order to break the prevailing boundaries both in regressive and progressive forms" (Falk, 1994: 97). The direction of the crossing therefore need not be set beforehand to a single outcome but can result in regression just as well as progress – despite typically being associated with the latter. Such a development, however, should not be entirely shocking such the relationship between transgression and the Order is founded up the contradiction that transgressions are

not only defined negatively as violations but also enabled by the restrictions constituting the Order. And as such, the ideas are not limited to just aesthetic and moral systems but "more profoundly to the basic structures of expression" (Falk, 1994: 197), determining what is visible to individuals and how they communicate with one another.

The implications of transgression and the opportunities it offers for people to understand the moral orders in which they conduct their lives can be analyzed through society's views and attitudes toward criminality. In his essay on the matter, Keith Hayward (2002) addresses the seduction of criminal activity among the young population. Drawing extensively on Daniel Katz's theories, Hayward explains that "[e]voking the notion of the Nietzschean superman, Katz asserts that deviance offers the perpetrator a means of 'self transcendence,' a way of overcoming the conventionality and mundanity" (Hayward, 2002: 82). Thus activities viewed as transgressing certain norms result in the sensation of surpassing certain constraints to experience a new sense of the self freed from the tedium of predictable everyday life. Given the "transformative magic" accompanying deviance, whether crime-related or otherwise, "individuals are seduced by the existential possibilities offered by criminal acts - by the pleasure of transgression" (Hayward, 2002: 83) given that it provides "a different temporal framework from 'ordinary life'" (Hayward, 2002: 87). The desire for deviance, as is generally the case with motivations and urges, is experienced within the context of social conditions that lend such acts meaning and push people toward them. In stressing contemporary times' relation to person experience, Hayward argues that nowadays "transgressive behaviour is becoming seductive not only because of the excitement it brings at the level of the individual experience (à la Katz) but also, importantly, because it offers a way of seizing

control of one's destiny" (Hayward, 2002: 87) through the possibility of escape from run-of-the mill-life. The distinguishing character of deviance today is also strongly tied the feeling of being "trapped by applied science and the rational" and "oppressed within the so-called scientific measurement of our lives" (Hayward, 2002: 8). While routine life is characterized by its predictable quality that strictly adheres to and regulates clearly demarcated boundaries, transgressive experiences provide an opportunity to transcend such constraints that are regularly imposed.

The theories of Katz are also addressed in Chris Jenks' (2006) exploration of criminality in the leisure activities of subculture groups. In considering the appeal such behaviors that could lead to legal consequences for those involved, Jenks underlines that Katz's message is that "such acts, be that defined as deviant, transgressive, criminal, wicked, non- normative, naughty or bad, are not just the province of particular groups" (Jenks, 2006: 292). While they may violate the restrictions imposed by the order dictating daily life, the desire for transgression, "their sensual attraction, belongs to us all" (Jenks, 2006: 292). The same appeal can be found in the various forms of so-called "edgework," characterized by their threat to personal safety, a domain typically safeguarded for the individual's well-being – whether that be in terms of physical security, mental soundness or social acceptance. Jenks explains the intricacies involved in edgework by writing that while it centers around "the general ability to maintain control of a situation that verges on total chaos," it is able to do so "through the luxury of desired choice and through the exercise of highly specific skills, both hyperbolic instances of leisure defining practices" (Jenks, 2006: 293). So even though prohibited behaviors are defined as those breaking through imposed controls, they entail a process where practitioners of such acts assume a type of control – one that is forbidden by social codes.

As one of the objects on which a culture's values and restrictions is most marked and through which individuals may strive to create an identity, the body serves as a site over which battles are fought. Every place and time imposes its standards on the subjects living within them, and as the means by which they interact with the outside world, the body becomes the focal point of the struggle. Yet it also serves a primary role in a person's self-definition and the means through which they can resist – or even transgress – social norms. In his theories of transgression, Bataille (1962) argues that the bonds to transgression are a defining feature of the dimensions of corporeality. In exploring these theories, Falk writes:

> The expression of corporeality does indeed take place as (externalizing) functions of man's bodily being, such as convulsive laughter or signs of sexual stimulation (erection, etc.), but this 'alien force' becomes sensuality and pleasure precisely because it transgresses boundaries; in the case of the modern individual it dissolves (momentarily) the boundaries of the self (Falk, 1994: 64)

Such a view assesses quite literally how acts of the body involve the physical breaching of bounds in the social realm. Yet in doing so, it also sometimes engages in acts that defy the strict standards set by the social codes. This case can be seen in the liberalizing of restrictions on expressions through which gender inequality was enforced and sexual freedoms restrained – a process that particularly sped up in the West with the sexual revolution. Regarding these shifts in the second half of the twentieth century, Jean Baudrillard (1998) addresses the "rediscovery" of the body after a "millennial age of puritanism" (Baudrillard, 1998: 129). He argues that the shift from discourses on hiding and restricting the body – particularly the female – have been replaced by those heralding its omnipresence. On an individual and social level, its appears that the body – after being kept under wraps for so long – is no permitted, and even encouraged, to announce its presence in a way that declares its crossing out of the boundaries previously imposed upon it.

While the body is the site on which the whole spectrum of social codes are imposed – whether that be regarding labor, class, or reproduction – its potential for transgression is no doubt strongly tied to its role in sexuality. In theorizing about transgression, Bataille delves into its association with sexuality, an element of human life that is highly regulated throughout the centuries during which it is tied to ideas of breaking certain boundaries. "Underlying eroticism is the feeling of something bursting, of the violence accompanying an explosion" (Bataille, 1962: 93) he writes in a general description of what the erotic entails. As he examines its relationship with social norms, he explains that "taken as a whole [it] is an infraction of the laws of taboos" in which humans engage in an act whose "foundation is animal none the less" (Bataille, 1962: 94). This suggests that one complexity underlying sexual activity is that despite being deeply tied to cultural ideas according to which it is understood and judged, it nonetheless is removed from an entirely human realm and crosses the differentiation between human and animal. The passing of the limits imposed on the conduct deemed appropriate by society leads to a shattering of the demanded composure. "The first obvious thing about eroticism is the way that an ordered, parsimonious and shuttered reality is shaken by a plethoric disorder" (Bataille, 1962: 104), meaning that the sexuality poses the threat of undermining the illusory stability uphold by society. Given its potential for disruption, an "indefinite general taboo is set up against that violence" (Bataille, 1962: 105) that shakes up the regulated restfulness of the system.

Although sexuality is a natural part of being human, it plays the role of a taboo due to societal efforts to keep it contained so as to curtail its disruptive potential – a process that has merely led to its meanings being extended and multiplied. Bataille

explains that despite its foundation and role in the natural, the sexual urge "cannot be given free rein without barriers being torn down, so much so that the natural urge and the demolished obstacles are confused in the mind" (Bataille, 1962: 106). This once again brings up the central theory of the complementing of alleged transgressions and the restrictions that had seemingly been opposed to one another. Despite the formulated contradiction between the two forces, "the natural urge means a barrier destroyed. The barrier destroyed means the natural urge" (Bataille, 1962: 106). This paradoxical relationship serves a crucial role in the sensation of freedom. Bataille writes:

> But transgression is not only objectively necessary to this freedom, for it can happen that unless we see that transgression is taking place we no longer have the feeling of freedom that the full accomplishment of the sexual act demands, so much so that a scabrous situation is sometimes necessary to a blase individual for him to reach the peak of enjoyment (Bataille, 1962: 107)

Due to the strong links that have been established between taboos and transgression, the experience of moments of freedom have become dependent on recognizing the acts as breaking codes. Likewise, the knowledge of a pleasure "mingled with mystery" is a result of the taboo's contradictory stance toward it – one that "fashions the pleasure at the same time as it condemns it" (Bataille, 1961: 107). Since the relationship is one in which "the essence of eroticism is to be found in the inextricable confusion of sexual pleasure and taboo," ultimately "the taboo never makes an appearance without suggesting sexual pleasure, nor does the pleasure without evoking the taboo" (Bataille, 1962: 108). They are thus evoked together or not at all.

In the context of a society replete with regulations accompanying sexuality and the power dynamics they maintain, an opportunity to challenge the system arises when those placed into subordinate ranks have a chance to present alternative

representations. In terms of the inequalities associated with norms involving gender and sexuality, the past centuries have witnessed a number of forms of resistance in struggles for equality and empowerment – whether it be women's suffrage, sexual liberties, birth control, gay marriage or non-binary gender identification. Since the sexual revolution, ideas of representations of femininity and its empowerment have particularly received intense attention in discussions that have been highly publicized and greatly impacted social norms and everyday life. While some progress has consequently been achieved in terms of the rights of women, the debate over non-heteronormatively masculine subjects has not died down, but rather expanded to address other less normative forms of what is deemed feminine. Thus even though the issue of focus may not involve people born biologically female, but also males who engage in drag or cross-dress, or people who consider themselves transgender, the struggle stems from the individuals being involved in the struggles being "others" who do not fit the strict definition of what is masculine. Given such a background, theories involving the battles fought over womanhood can also shed light on the Others who are subjugated due to associations with the restrictions on the feminine.

While the last decades have witnessed much debate on portrayals of women's empowerment through the omnipresence of popular culture, perhaps no figure has been so widely theorized on as iconic performer Madonna. From the name by which she is recognized to her lyrics, imagery, style and subject matters, the role played by Madonna and its reflection of – and impact on – society at large has been contended since the 1980s. While the pop icon is not the focus of this paper, explorations of her figure and its appeal to – or outrage of – an audience can have much to offer in addressing the issue of the role of the feminine in the public arena. In theorizing on

the relationship between politics and mass entertainment, Fiske (2000) argues that "[t]he assertion of women's right to control their own representation is a challenge to the way that women are constructed as subjects in patriarchy" (Fiske, 2000: 132). When feminine subjects present themselves to the viewer's gaze, they display a form of agency typically assigned to men in most culturally sanctioned power dynamics. While Madonna is among the forerunner figures to assume such a role, she has done so by consciously engaging in reflexive performances, parody and blatant excessiveness to problematize gender roles by calling them into questioning. He explains her potentially subversive qualities by detailing how her performance "enables the viewer to answer a different interpellation from that proposed by the dominant ideology, and thus occupy a resisting subject position" (Fiske, 2000: 105). Her parodies of conventional portrayals of women work by "interrogating the dominant ideology" and exaggerating its defining features to "[mock] those who 'fall' for its ideological effect" (Fiske, 2000: 105). Rather than seeing her use of large quantities of makeup and jewelry as adherence to codes on feminine adornment, he argues that the excess – which "overspills ideological control and offers scope for resistance" – likewise "invites the reader to question ideology" (Fiske, 2000: 105). Other scholars have also regarded Madonna's display of sexuality in terms of overcoming the subjugation of the feminine subject. McRobbie (1994) underlines the disruptive function that Madonna's image serves by "by placing her body on precisely those lines of classification, for example, as the site of sex, as the truth of femininity, and also as the property of the female self" (McRobbie, 1994: 67). Such a possibility is enabled due to the recognition that such positioning "can and does give pleasure quite autonomously from the regulative discourses within which it is more traditionally placed" (McRobbie, 1994: 67).

If feminine subjects are able to challenge oppressive ideologies by taking control of representation, the potential of such practices lies in the semiotic power. While advocating the possibility of change that Madonna's performances offer, Fiske (2000) nonetheless acknowledges that the social experiences of many of the audience members who Madonna appeals to – mostly young females – entail powerlessness and subordination. He warns that in order to prevent the naturalizing of the disadvantaged position, "Madonna as a site of meaning… must offer opportunities for resisting it" (Fiske, 2000: 97). He proceeds to further explain that in such a case, her image not only serves as an example against patriarchy but even more – "a site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal control and feminine resistance, of capitalism and the subordinate, of the adult and the young" (Fiske, 2000: 97). Fiske places great emphasis on semiotic power as a possible available form of agency for the generally disadvantaged, even going so far as to assert that it and social power "are different sides of the same coin" (Fiske, 2000: 5). Semiotic power is not simply limited to being "a mere symbol of, or licensed substitute for, 'real' power" or as a means to "the construction of resistant subjectivities" (Fiske, 2000: 6). Rather, its functions can lead to "the construction of relevances, of ways of negotiating this interface between the products of the culture industries and the experiences of everyday life" (Fiske, 2000: 6), so that users can generate personal meanings through available resources that originated elsewhere.

2.3 The Body Appropriated

Though the body serves as a primary means for a person in developing their individualism and empowerment, in contemporary society it has become inseparable

23

from the widespread preoccupation with signs. This is particularly a menace in consumer society, where the body – as Baudrillard warns – can be rendered into "simply the finest of these psychically possessed, manipulated and consumed objects" (Baudrillard, 1998: 131). Such is the case given the prevalence of signs and the reduction of all aspects of life to sign-values. Falk too discusses the phenomenon by explaining that the signs are "no longer part of a static system in which the body with its signs and social status are one" (Falk, 1994: 54), meaning that unlike in more traditional cultures with stricter codes of conduct, a person's body is no longer inextricably bound to a socially derived and determined status. Rather the presence of so-called liberated people with social mobility entails that since "bodies are in principle equal, the body and its signs become something to acquire and to achieve" and "the sign now takes precedence over status" (Falk, 1994: 54). Since the signs socially attached to the body are not given, people find themselves needing to cultivate them – a priority that becomes the focus of self-development. Referring to Baudrillard's theories and quoting his phrases, Falk writes that a body "subsumed to the 'total culture of appearances'" serves as merely a façade that "both conceals and expresses the inner being" and that it "becomes a mannequin" (Falk, 1994: 53). Kellner (2003), meanwhile, cites the concept of the hyper real when indicating that it also applies to representations of the ideal body in media.

In a culture whose values – even those such as liberation itself – are not free of the market, the potential of an individual's mastery of their body can be exposed to threat. A primary way in which this can occur is by its appropriation within the ethos of consumption and superficial meanings. In explaining how the contemporary processes of commodification lead to the production of signs and likewise their

users, Falk (1994) underlines that the domain of the signs of material culture are no longer limited to the body's outer shell – which together hide the person's internal identity. Rather the internal realm believed to be able to maintain a genuinity less impacted by the external world is ultimately "the product of these signs and their sign production which can now be conceived of as part of the productive power technology, as conceptualized by Foucault" (Falk, 1994: 55). With sign production being a fundamental part of power dynamics, its extensive influence even incorporates an individual's internal reality that is likewise constructed and defined by the signs found in the outside world. Baudrillard likewise underlines the threat of the body being reified by noting how the system results in "the representation of the body as capital and as fetish (or consumer object)" (Baudrillard, 1998: 130). Therefore rather than the body being a resourceful means of emancipation, the structures of capitalism and the progress it promises can even reduce it as well to an object assessed according to its exchange value within the system. Hence it is not "reappropriated for the autonomous ends of the subject," but instead falls prey like other aspects of everyday life to "a *normative* principle of enjoyment and hedonistic profitability, in terms of an enforced instrumentality that is indexed to the code and the norms of a society of production and managed consumption" (Baudrillard, 1998: 132). Though pleasure is generally considered to be a form of satisfaction for the individual in question, once it and the body are subjugated to the prevalent dominating codes, it too is stripped of the hopes formerly imagined for it and rendered into little else but another calculation directed according to the objectives of the capitalist system. According to Baudrillard, ultimately the narcissistic reinvestment "orchestrated as a mystique of liberation and accomplishment, is in fact always simultaneously an investment of an efficient, competitive, economic

type" and part of the "goals of integration and social control set in place by the whole mythological and psychological apparatus centred around the body" (Baudrillard, 1998: 136).

Yet the contemporary consumer society involves a form of control over the body that is paradoxically predicated upon – and simultaneously promotes – freedom as a paramount value. In theorizing on the relationship between the body's placement on a pedestal and the capitalist context, Baudrillard draws attention to how the body "*has to be* `liberated, emancipated' to be able to be exploited rationally for productivist ends" (Baudrillard, 1998: 135). Such a view reveals that the body's alleged freedom is the a precondition for exposing it to the objectives of the system – running counter to the general perception that such a process will lead to progress. Delving deeper into the matter of the subjugation of the body – particularly that of woman – he writes:

> all the things in whose name they are `emancipated' (sexual freedom, eroticism, play, etc.) form themselves into systems of `*tutelary*' values, `irresponsible' values, simultaneously orientating consumer behaviour and behaviours of social *relegation*, with the very exaltation and excess of honour that surrounds them standing in the way of real economic and social responsibility (Baudrillard, 1998: 137)

Baudrillard points to two crucial points in this excerpt, the first being that the values that were thought to have the power to liberate people from long-established societal constraints may be bereft of such potential. In fact, they may be made to function in an opposite manner through their use in system that incorporates them in a way that maintains a form of patriarchal control over individuals – despite giving a promising impression to the oblivious subjects it exploits in a highly potent form of management. And by doing so, it achieves a further objective by rendering the need for – and even desire of – real progress invisible, thus maintaining an unchallenged foothold.

Given the exposure of particularly the feminine body to different and excessive forms of social standards and restrictions, the implications of a manipulation of emancipatory principles weighs especially on subjects with such qualities. In the context of an ethos based off deriving the maximum results from material resources, Baudrillard writes that women find themselves in a position where "beauty has become an absolute, religious imperative… such an absolute imperative only because it is a form of capital" (Baudrillard, 1998: 132). As consumer society reduces standards to superficial signs, the concept of beauty is rendered into yet another factor to be managed in the way it can be cashed in on the most. And the values of individual and sexual freedoms – particularly when coupled with neoliberal standards – are unfortunately open to being manipulated in a way serving the apparatuses of capitalism. One of the factors for this being the case is that the supposed emancipation "occurs without the basic ideological confusion between woman and sexuality being removed" (Baudrillard, 1998: 138). As long as the role of that regarded feminine remains marked in this manner, subjects associated will continue to marked – even to a fundamental extent – in terms of the sexual. Baudrillard even goes so far as to argue that the "legacy of puritanism" weighs down harder in contemporary times since "only now does it assume its full scope since women, once *subjugated* as a sex, are today `*liberated*' as a sex" (Baudrillard, 1998: 138), so that they remain confined with such definitions – but more dangerously today due to the illusive associations with freedom. This ultimately results in the "almost irreversible confusion now deepening in all its forms, since *it is in so far as she `liberates' herself that woman becomes more and more merged with her body*" (Baudrillard, 1998: 138). What one ends up with is a deceptive trap in which the pursuit of freedom by means of the body yields to further confinement with it and its

27

socially assigned definitions. This leads Baudrillard to the ominous conclusion that "by confusing women and sexual liberation, each is neutralized by the other" (Baudrillard, 1998: 137), draining the emancipatory potential of both. This produces a double loss in which "[w]omen `consume themselves' through sexual liberation, and sexual liberation `is consumed' through women" (Baudrillard, 1998: 137).

2.4 Commodification of Sex

Yet the paradox of individuals being liberated from long-established restrictions under a process leading to their control through values and practices formerly deemed subversive are not merely limited to women but affect all segments of society. This is particularly the case with sexuality, a major common drive across cultures and their members that has widely been repressed for centuries – but whose freeing need not coincide with true emancipation. Herbert Marcuse (1964, 1971) had become renowned in the context of the sexual revolution for his Neo-Freudian theories, some of which expressed hope about how sexual freedoms could counter the excessive forms of repression found in society. His works published in the 1960s, however, marked a shift by expressing increased doubt about the possible challenges to dominant forms of repression. In his *An Essay on Liberation*, for instance, where he advocates the need for new forms of freedom following the advent of advanced industrial society, he addresses doubts about the inversion of liberating potential. This concern encompasses "the contradiction that the liberalization of sexuality provides an instinctual basis for the repressive and aggressive power of the affluent society" (Marcuse, 1971: 9). He elucidates that the seeming contradiction can be explained by how "the liberalization of the Establishment's own morality takes place within the framework of effective

controls" where it "strengthens the cohesion of the whole" (Marcuse, 1971: 9) rather than posing a challenge to it. By freeing people from the repressive norms of older communities, the liberalization does not leave an individuals without commitments to the wider community and the values dominating it, but instead "sense of guilt and binds (though with considerable ambivalence) the "free" individuals libidinally to the institutionalized fathers" (Marcuse, 1971: 9). Marcus theorizes on this phenomenon through the concept of "repressive desublimation," which describes the process by which the relaxing of restrictions on potentially subversive practices by those in power results in the strengthening of the system against threats. It involves a process carried out from the "position of strength" of a society that need not fear practices that may have formerly been a challenge, since "its interests have become the innermost drives of its citizens, and because the joys which it grants promote social cohesion and contentment" (Marcuse, 1971: 9). By presenting the semblance of offering the previously denied, the system if able to pacify the masses.

What defines desublimation is ultimately its conduciveness to maintaining the position of those in power within the status quo despite the appearance of liberty associated it presents. Within such a context, "sexuality is liberated (or rather liberalized) in socially constructive forms" (Marcuse, 1971: 9) so that the sexual practices are rendered into no longer working as transgressions of the codes. Repressed desublimation is able to neutralize emancipatory potential since it "operates as the by-product of the social controls of technological reality, which extend liberty while intensifying domination" (Marcuse, 1964: 76), revealing that access to liberties does not necessarily mean the capacity to resist subjugation. Marcuse also addresses the systematization of the process through the concept of "institutionalized desublimation" that can be found when "the greater liberty

involves a contraction rather than extension and development of instinctual needs" and "works for rather than against the status quo of general repression" (Marcuse, 1964: 77). Sexual freedoms are one domain that can become susceptible to enforcing the system that they – by going against social constraints – were previously thought to threaten once they are rendered into "a market value and a factor of social mores" (Marcuse, 1964: 77). Like other aspects of life in a capitalist society, sex too becomes commodified – its meanings, practices and standards determined by the priorities of the market. Likewise, its prevalence is expanded to increase control over the overall population as a way that also reinforces the objectives of a system based off work. In addition to the market, it also assumes a prominent presence within the workspace and public, no longer confined to the private and illicit.

The way in which repressed desublimation works to neutralize the contestation of dominant mores can be understood based on its contrast to ways in which they were questioned and rejected through the avenue of sublimation. Forms of sublimation are characterized by how they preserve "the consciousness of the renunciations which the repressive society inflicts upon the individual" and thus also "the need for liberation" (Marcuse, 1964: 79), so that it is aware of the barriers imposed by those in power. Due to its recognition of such restraints, it works through conscious acts of transgression against them. In comparison to the awareness and intentional transgression of sublimation, the forms of desublimation found more commonly in more contemporary society are much more conformist. It operates by offering opportunities for satisfaction that rid the urge to resist against the barriers, so that it "generates submission and weakens the rationality of protest" (Marcuse, 1964: 78). Among the most effective opportunities it can offer to gain the submission of the

masses is that of sexual pleasure – the promise and possible fulfillment of which will keep people content enough to not rise up against the system. Marcuse thus warns that the "mobilization and administration of libido may account for much of the voluntary compliance, the absence of terror, the pre-established harmony between individual needs and socially- required desires, goals, and aspirations" (Marcuse, 1964: 78). By lifting some of the long-imposed taboos on sexuality, some contemporary cultures have been able to channel the relaxation of such codes into the pacification of its people, to whom they supply a sense of contentment – no matter how superficial. The result is ultimately a culture where:

> Freed form the sublimated form which was the very token of its irreconcilable dreams – a form which is the style, the language in which the story is told – sexuality turns into a vehicle for the bestsellers of oppression (Marcuse, 1964: 81)

The dominant ideologies have thus evolved from placing restrictions on sexuality to allowing its expression, using its appeal to draw people in and control them based on their own desires and aspirations – rather than having to constantly deny and battle against them.

Given the emphasis on the female body in society's stance toward sexual practices, the commodification of sexuality may have ramifications on reception toward feminist discourse and its pursuit of emancipation for "feminine" bodies. The discussion of representations of women's liberation amid a neoliberal context has raised concerns about their impact on the change advocated by feminism. One scholar who has explored the topic throughout their career has been McRobbie (1994, 2009), whose earlier texts in the 1990s express some degree of optimism about the ability of the role of female figures in popular culture – and the female audience's reading of the texts involving them – to empower themselves by challenging patriarchy. In her later writings, however, she said she may have been

too hopeful, overestimating the possibility of achieving true agency amid the existing power relations and the evolution of their techniques. The shift in her outlook is evident in the 2000s when she warned of the threat posed to feminist politics by post-feminism. Her later texts address how following the influence of feminism across all areas of culture, its values came to be regarded as somewhat of a given that prioritized the individual, in a process that saw them stripped of the political history and continuing potential for political development and collectivity – an idea explored through the term "feminism taken into account" (McRobbie, 2009: 5). She explains that the phenomenon occurred when aspects of feminism were taken into account and "incorporated into political and institutional life" before ultimately being "converted into a much more individualistic discourse" (McRobbie, 2009: 1) rather than focusing on the progress of a long oppressed group. This development is criticized for having the somewhat malicious role of enabling "a kind of substitute for feminism" (McRobbie, 2009: 1) and "the more thorough dismantling of feminist politics" (McRobbie, 2009: 12), particularly through the spread of the engineered values via the media and popular culture.

In dulling the widespread political potential of feminist ideas, their being taken into account not only presents an obstacle to progress, but by doing so even reinforces the hold of patriarchy. By setting aside the role of feminism, the widely circulated stance on values such as independence and personal and sexual freedoms allows for "the subtle renewal of gender injustices, while vengeful patriarchal norms are also re-instated" (McRobbie, 2009: 55). This is possible due to the prevalence of the constructed association between contemporary womanhood – particularly in terms of young – and assumptions about freedom. McRobbie writes that post-feminism can therefore "be equated with a 'double movement'" whereby "gender retrenchment

is secured, paradoxically, through the wide dissemination of discourses of female freedom and… the 'pretences of equality'" (McRobbie, 2009: 55-6). Rather than progress, it appears that the values and rights women have long fought for have been incorporated in such a way that the system presents people with the illusion of freedom and equality, satisfying them with the appearance of social advancement and thereby curbing resisting and transgressive acts. As a result of illusory progress being offered within a neoliberal context, the product is ultimately "young woman as a highly efficient assemblage for productivity" (McRobbie, 2009: 59) and an "intensively managed subject of post-feminist, gender-aware biopolitical practices of new governmentality" (McRobbie, 2009: 60). The widespread success of popular culture and commercial interests in using emancipatory concepts to maintain the oppression of women through what appears to be their own will brings the questions of whether such methods can now be applied to "feminine" Other bodies, whose non-heteronormativity could contribute to such developments' even greater association with such "progressive" values.

The establishment of the contemporary feminine subject and the double movement entailed in her freedom is a product of a shift in power relations from one based primarily on patriarchal principles. In exploring the positions of power that establish and enforce codes relating to sexuality, McRobbie makes use of Lacan's theory of the symbolic to analyze how it functions as "the source of patriarchal authority" (McRobbie, 2009: 61). She focuses on how it does not keep authority concentrated at one focal point that dictates all codes, but instead extends its reach – while also rendering it more discreet – through various sectors. The Symbolic is especially forced to adopt new measures following the impact of feminism and the increased liberties available to women, as it finds itself in a position where it needs to "*re-*

secure the terms of heterosexual desire" (McRobbie, 2009: 62). In order to do so, it "allows itself to be dispersed, or governmentalized" and "discharges (or maybe franchises) its duties to the commercial… which becomes the source of authority and judgment for young women" (McRobbie, 2009: 61). Thus rather than women having imposed upon them edicts decreed from an authority clearly positioned above them hierarchically, the governing power is transmitted to the commercial realm that offers women seeming opportunities for engagement along with what is presented in the guise of advise about how to refine their tastes and themselves as individuals. Ultimately the products of "the commercial domain undertak[ing] to carry out the work of the Symbolic by means of the attention it pays to the female body" (McRobbie, 2009: 61) turns out to be the creation of a model woman subject constructed upon the principles of autonomy and self-development, as well as individual confidence and sexual freedom.

Due to the way in which post-feminism operates and the values it disseminates, it fits within the larger neoliberal context that positions individuals as responsible for the project of developing their own selves. Characterizing late capitalism by its prioritization of reflexivity, Giddens writes that "the body can no longer be taken as a fixed… but has become deeply involved with modernity's reflexivity" (Giddens, 1991: 218), meaning it is a primary area of a person's life that one must be conscious of and aim to cultivate. Describing the prominent role of "life politics," he defines it as "a politics of self-actualization in a reflexively ordered environment, where that reflexivity links self and body to systems of global scope" (Giddens, 1991: 214), explaining how the development of one's self has become connected to ideas of morality in the larger environment. Yet despite society's supposed movement beyond traditional values of ways of understanding the world, he

explains that due to life politics revolving around the "core perspectives of modernity," "the project of the self remains one of control, guided only by a morality of 'authenticity'" (Giddens, 1991: 224) that dictates what views and behaviors are deemed worthy. Rose makes similar observations about contemporary society and how it promotes the cultivation of an "entrepreneur" of the self that centers on "instrumentalizing its autonomous choices in the service of its lifestyle" in an environment whether "the conduct of everyday existence is recast as a series of manageable problems" (Rose, 1998: 159). In such a project, consumption plays a central role in that the choices people make and the tastes they affiliate themselves with are seem to serve as markers of their desired identity. "In performative cultures, individuals do not merely buy a product, they buy an index of lifestyle images through which personality and social standing are articulated," according to Rojek (Rojek, 2006: 483). The subject in contemporary society is thereby defined through the refinement of a self that derive sits meanings from the context of an advanced consumer society placing the individual and their body on a pedestal.

While values based off cultivating a lifestyle apply to all within late capitalism, it nonetheless has additional implications given the history of how woman were granted a greater role as citizens within the context of consumerism after World War II. In her study of the development of women's magazines in the following decades, Winship addresses how "the articulation of patriarchal and capitalist relations, through women's involvement in the process of consumption (and in paid work) has ideologically constructed them as 'individuals'" (Winship, 1981: 10), meaning their status as individuals was recognized alongside the increasingly central role of consumerism in everyday domestic life. Referring to the growth of women's roles outside the home in the 1960s, she also describes how the public flaunting of their

bodies and sexuality began to become commonplace, also touching on Marcuse's theories of repressive desublimation and how people must be "liberated" before they could be controlled by ideology based on freedom and individuality. The pursuit of the desire identity can only be upheld through the continued maintenance of the "creative work involved in producing it, a work executed in everyday life not only be the 'experts' but by women themselves" (Winship, 1987: 12).

2.5 Non-heteronormative Bodies

The socially constructed origins of accepted presentations and behaviors identified with the binary genders have been extensively discussed in the works of Judith Butler (1993a, 1993b, 2006), who explains that such norms and regulations are part of an enforced "performativity." Refuting assumptions that regard conventional distinctions between the "masculine" and "feminine" as some sort of primordial essence, she describes gender as "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler, 2006: 191). Such a definition underlines that gender is a created and maintained within society and is accepted as a part – oftentimes unquestioned – of communal life through people's recurring actions that abide by the code. "The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body" through bodily movements, composure and adornment – all of which "constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, 2006: 191). She stresses that despite cultural norms based off gender, a "proper" gender does not actually exist (Butler, 1993a: 312) but that such a notion is "always and only *improperly* installed as the effect of a compulsory system" (Butler, 1993a: 313). Thus instead of the system being shaped according to innate realities derived from

the alleged binary of sex, views about gender are constructed according to the ends of the system itself and come to be established and entrenched into society.

Despite being constructed within certain social settings, ideas about gender regulate even the most intricate aspects of communal and personal life due to have they appear as indisputable facts of nature – a positioning that conceals the arbitrariness. Butler clarifies that the exploration of gender as a construct does not seek to "assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes the 'real' and the 'authentic' as oppositional" (Butler, 2006: 45). She explains that it instead aims to "understand the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation and to suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of 'the real' and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalization" (Butler, 2006: 45). Thus the discourses and structures underlying a society enable norms about gender and performances adhering to them to appear to be the effects of the "natural" qualities of people depending on the sex with which they were born. Challenging such established views, Butler defines gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 2006: 45). This mean that these behaviors, displays and values are enforced over time in a way that leads to them being institutionalized to such an extent that they are not even questioned as, being "the normal", they pass unnoticed – a possibility only due to how gender "regularly conceals its genesis" (Butler, 2006: 190). The maintenance of the conventional approach to gender is possible only because of how "the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as

cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them" (Butler, 2006: 190).

Given the extent to which prevalent views on gender have been naturalized, in order for them to be challenged, they must first to identified rather than overlooked as an seemingly commonsense reality that goes unrecognized. Such a process can only commence appearances and actions related to the body that are taken for granted come under attention and examination. In a domain where heteronormativity is enforced and other alternatives hidden and suppressed, an opportunity to question can arise if "the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (Butler, 2006: 185). Once a gender identification or sexuality that transgresses the restrictive bounds of sanctioned definition comes to attention, the "regulatory ideal is then exposed as a norm and a fiction that disguises itself as a developmental law regulating the sexual field that it purports to describe" (Butler, 2006: 185). In such an instance, conventional views on gender and sexuality are revealed to be the product of the social rather than an acknowledgement of an essential reality without an origin in space and time. Butler asserts that the movements and appearances associated with gendered bodies are "*performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (Butler, 2006: 185). Their presence is thereby a result of the ideologies dominant within certain contexts, rather than a natural aspect of bodies themselves.

In discussing how conventions related to gender are uphold, *Gender Trouble* also addresses what would be required to unsettle their seemingly given status and reveal

how they too are constructed. Butler insists that the attempt to "think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power" will focus on "the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity" (Butler, 2006: 46). One such area that is offered as an avenue that can serve to disturb the naturalized approach to gender is that of drag performances. Butler argues that drag "fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (Butler, 2006: 186), expressing hope in its ability to unseat the dominance of such views. She cites the work of Esther Newton, one of the early anthropologists to write on contemporary female impersonation, as describing drag as a "double inversion" that simultaneously says "'my 'outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine...'" and "'my appearance 'outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine'" (Butler, 2006: 186). The practice can therefore involve two sets of unsettling incongruities[1] – one in which the performer assumes a garb that proves the illusory nature of acting according to social norms, and the even more complex one that shows the incompatibility of how the subject feels about their identity and what society imposes on their body. "Both claims to truth contradict one another and so displace the entire enactment of gender significations from the discourse of truth and falsity" (Butler, 2006: 186-7), Butler writes in

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[1] Instances of such disruptions of commonly accepted gender codes are often referred to as "gender fuck," defined as a "reversal of normal gender roles; (specifically) transvestism" (Sheidlower, 2009: 189)

response, stressing the shortcomings of attempts at restrictive fixations. She argues that drag ultimately functions through how it *"implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency"* (Butler, 2006: 187) given that people can perform – to varying degrees of conformity – the gender society has not assigned them.

While Butler's presentation of drag as a potential site of challenging heteronormative values is widely referenced, her discussion of the matter in *Gender Trouble* is limited to a few paragraphs and in her later works she would further qualify her stance on whether it can serve as a means of subversion. An acknowledgment of the attention the excerpts about drag received is evident by the frequency with which she brings up the matter in the Preface written in 1999 for versions of *Gender Trouble* published later. It includes the disclaimer that the book was not aimed at "celebrat[ing] drag as the expression of a true and model gender (even as it is important to resist the belittling of drag that sometimes takes place)" (Butler, 2006: xxiv). She spells out that the purpose of the discussion was to "explain the constructed and performative dimension of gender is not precisely *an example* of subversion" as such an approach would mistakenly "take it as the paradigm of subversive action or, indeed, as a model for political agency" (Butler, 2006: xxii). Thus while the texts do serve to shed light on how the arbitrary distinctions surrounding discourse on gender serve to control behaviors and oppress some groups, they are not meant as a call to mobilize drag to undermine the system. While qualifying her argument on drag's threat to heteronormativity, however, Butler interestingly enough does offer an example of such performance's potential through the character Divine. She writes that the impersonations by Divine – whose female characters generally coupled exaggerated "feminine" qualities such as large

breasts, tight clothes and excessive makeup with "crude" behaviors contrary to "feminine" elegance and a beauty-based seduction – "implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real" (Butler, 2006: xxi). "Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates" (Butler, 2006: xxi), Butler says in presenting the character's role as an anti-hegemonic force.

In another book published around three years after *Gender Trouble* (1993b), Butler engaged in a more detailed discussion about whether drag could operate as a challenge against the gender norms it imitated. In *Bodies that Matter*, she addresses how many readers had read the earlier excerpts as a promotion of drag performances, before writing, "I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and re-idealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms" (Butler, 1993b: 125). Not only does she spell out the impersonation may not necessarily undermine norms, but acknowledges that it can also function in the opposite direction by reinforcing them. The challenge drag may present lies in how it may reveal "the exposure or the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals" (Butler, 1993b: 237), exposing how they do not in fact constitute all-encompassing realities. "Hence, it is not that drag *opposes* heterosexuality, or that the proliferation of drag will bring down heterosexuality" (Butler, 1993b: 237), she adds, clarifying that such acts need not be challenges – let alone ones capable of defeating the dominant discourse. Given that drag involves people using their bodies – through adornment, physical movement and language – in ways that run counter to those prescribed and enforced by society, the degree of

its subversiveness ultimately lies in "the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (Butler, 1993b: 125).

Alongside the acknowledgement that drag may serve to undermine established gender norms comes that of how it may actually – even if not knowingly – do the opposite. In explaining the danger that drag, a form of representation associated with a disadvantaged oppressed group, may be channeled by dominant discourses to further their control, Butler refers to the theories of Antonio Gramsci. Citing Gramsci's concept of hegemonic employment of "rearticulation," she writes of how "the accumulated force of a historical, entrenched and entrenching rearticulation overwhelms the more fragile effort to build an alternative cultural configuration from or against that more powerful regime" (Butler, 1993b: 132). From its position of power – which it has built up by long maintaining, and will endeavor to continue doing so – hegemony has the ability to crush forms of resistance or opposition so that its control can persist unchallenged. Furthermore, it presents an even greater danger in that "prior hegemony also works through and as its 'resistance' so that the relation between the marginalized community and the dominative is not, strictly speaking, oppositional" (Butler, 1993b: 133). So rather than posing the threat of undermining the established order, avenues of resistance can be incorporated for the purposes of the powerful, further reinforcing their position of advantage. Butler warns that in such cases, not only does the citing of the "dominant norm" not unsettle it, but also "it becomes the means by which that dominant norm is most painfully reiterated as the very desire and the performance of those it subjects" (Butler, 1993b: 133). Through such a process, the disempowered can become implicated in their own subjugation while simply seeking an outlet from their

oppression. Given the odds that such groups are up against, Butler ultimately defines drag as a "site of a certain ambivalence" that "reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes" (Butler, 1993b: 125).

The ambivalence of drag and their reception by audiences by Keith E. McNeal (1999) in an article in which he analyzes performances at a popular Atlanta nightclub and the relationship between queens' and both their gay and heterosexual viewers. While *Behind the Make-Up: Gender Ambivalence and the Double-Bind of Gay Selfhood in Drag Performance* primarily focuses on what drag can mean for members of the gay community, it also touches on what appears to be the queens' competitive attempts to use their acts to prove their supremacy over heterosexual female audience members. In trying to avoid making sweeping generalizations, or reductionist arguments, about the meaning of drag for gay men, McNeal refers to past literature on the matter and relevant theories from social psychology. Ultimately he argues, much like Butler in later works, that drag reveals the ambivalence among the community and its members.

While McNeal acknowledges that multiple factors may determine the appeal of drag performances and their reception, he examines how it serves as a chance for members of a stigmatized group to question gender norms – yet is not completely free of the oppressive social values it seeming opposes. He defines drag as "a domain of culturally mediated expressive action characterized by emotionally charged communicative exchange and catharsis" (McNeal, 1999: 346). Its importance lies in how it offers members of a stigmatized group a chance to "watch,

explore, and participate in symbolic transformations of gender ambivalence in the psychocultural arena of the show" (McNeal, 1999: 346). Yet despite acknowledging how drag can function as an outlet and haven from the repression of dominant ideologies about gender, he also recognizes that alongside its form of rebellion, it too can be tainted by misogynist views and spread such representations. McNeal thus argues that it is a site that reveals the "double bind of gay selfhood." While impersonation performances are "assertive, retaliating against a hegemonic straight world" (McNeal, 1999: 347), they are not necessarily "purely liberating" given instances in which "the self-hate that often characterizes gay male subjectivity emerges as misogyny expressed by the drag queen" (McNeal, 1999: 347). He therefore suggests that some gay men – he is careful not to make absolute statements – who take part in drag shows, whether as the performers or audiences members, may have difficult in casting aside the oppressive views on gender under which they too are stigmatized when it comes to representations that reflect such values and the possible challenge of them. He argues that "this misogyny is full of self-loathing, born of the deep ambivalence of a culturally modeled double-bind" (McNeal, 1999: 360), reflecting how the troubles faced by homosexuals bleeds into, and can contaminate, the avenues through which they seek liberation. "It is sobering and disheartening to observe attempts at assertiveness, empowerment, and transcendence through the marginal play of drag that resort to re-stigmatization and sexism" (McNeal, 1999: 360), he writes, mourning how such a practice can become a further extension of the dominant discourses. Ultimately, his stance on the issue is similar to that of Butler's, urging against the simplistic view that will "pose drag performance as either subversive or reaffirming of dominant cultural models of gender and sexuality" (McNeal, 1999: 360).

While the purpose of McNeal's article is not to explain why drag may particularly be under threat of appropriation, one of his observations does shed light on a quality that may contribute to a process of it being mainstreamed – the emphasis on beauty, especially that of a somewhat effeminate quality. He describes the domain of drag as being "pervaded by conspicuous displays of glamour, and [] related to the gay male subcultural emphasis on beauty" (McNeal, 1999: 355). He too cites the frontrunner work on drag by Esther Newton, quoting a passage on the value of displays of beauty that says:

> the performer who is acknowledged as a 'beautiful glamour queen' but only a so-so singer will win (sometimes grudgingly) admiration even from the stage impersonators, and will be idolized by the street impersonators. The homosexual subculture values visual beauty, and beating women at the glamour game is a feat valued by all female impersonators and by many homosexuals in general (Newton, 1979: 46)

Both writers underline the great degree of importance placed on beauty – one that can not only appear as a cisgender woman, but also furthermore excel at it – within the wider subcultural community. McNeal draws a connection between the so-called "'pretty boy' syndrome in the gay male community" and how "a hierarchy of value is exhibited within the realm of drag which places beauty and glamour at a premium" (McNeal, 1999: 355) – values that resemble those related to femininity under heteronormative norms. Other scholars have even drawn attention to the class- and race-related implications latent in the kinds of drag performances that gain visibility. bell hooks, for instance, has criticized the 1990 *Paris is Burning* documentary on drag queens on the grounds that its portrayals revolve around how "the idea of womanness and femininity is totally personified by whiteness," with African American men acting out "their obsession with an idealized fetishized vision of femininity that is white" (hooks, 1992: 147). She argues that such a

representation "privileges the 'femininity' of the ruling-class white woman" (hooks, 1992: 148), bonding notions of beauty to features associated with power and capital.

CHAPTER 3

POPULAR CULTURE & MARGINAL VOICES

While scholars over the last decades have been theorizing about whether the period can be called postmodern, and what such a classification may mean, many describe it in terms of the aestheticization of everyday life and the decrease in the distinction between high art and popular culture. Much has been written on the positive and negative potential of such a blurring. While some theories have warned of it in the context of a loss of depth and meaning in contemporary society, others have noted how it has challenged conventional hierarchies. In *Market Society*, Slater and Tonkiss (2001) refer to theories that highlight the liberating and populist possibilities that come with culture being brought closer to everyday life and practices. Of course such a process is part of the commercialization of ideas of aesthetics, access and interaction with which is no longer limited to a minority elite circle, but opened to the general public. Amid the shift toward an environment that move toward a "property of a larger public" (Slater and Tonkiss, 2001: 154) and less courtly art, opportunities for cultural competition are opened up. A space for

the introduction of new tastes is thus introduced, as the elitism associated with determining cultural values is to some degree eroded and room is made for further voices to be heard.

3.1 Aestheticization and Blurring of Taste Hierarchies

The expansion of aesthetics into commonplace domains of lived experience is in many ways associated with the link between the artistic and rebellion – whether from the perspective of production or consumption. In exploring the history of the art world gaining an interest in the common objects that would typically not be thought of carrying any particularly transcendent meanings with which high culture is thought to be concerned, Featherstone analyses various movements such as Dada, surrealism and Pop Art. He writes that while Dada and surrealisms "sought to show that any everyday object could be aestheticized" (Featherstone, 2007: 25), the postmodern trends that would follow in around four decades – as exemplified by Pop Art, the style of Andy Warhol and his Factory circle – "entail a focus upon everyday commodities as art [], an ironic playing back of consumer culture on itself, and an anti-museum and - academy stance in performance and body art" (Featherstone, 2007: 25). So while the arts were conventionally associated with elite settings such as academia, aristocratic courts and cultural institutions, some creative circles began to challenge that by placing value in objects that would not be considered as signs of higher class values. Alongside this ironic placement of profane, even mass produced, objects on pedestals, there was nonetheless the "attractions of the romantic-bohemian lifestyle with the artist presented as an expressive rebel and stylistic hero" (Featherstone, 2007: 54) in the emerging popular culture. All this occurred amid a "particular injection of art into popular culture

which also helped to deconstruct the distinction between high and popular culture"
(Featherstone, 2007: 54). So as the avenues to explore what could be considered
artistic increased, so did the appeal of undertaking a role associated with exploring
transgressive displays and practices.

Some of the most defining features of late capitalist society, such as the declining
distinction between high and popular art and the anesthetization of everyday
practices, correspond to those of camp culture. In her essay on the phenomenon
during its early years, Sontag (2001) illustrates how it is characterized by its
fascination with artifice, exaggeration, extravagance, glamor, style and theatricality
– all concepts socially associated as being of more appeal to "feminine" subjects.
She defines it as a "way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon… not in
terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization" (Sontag, 2001:
277) thereby prioritizing the process of meaning-making rather than viewing values
as an essential given. The role of camp as an authority on style with a detached
sense of comedy endows it with an elite status as the "dandyism in the age of mass
culture," but one which nonetheless flouts conventional tastes by making "no
distinction between the unique object and the mass-produced object" (Sontag, 2001:
289). While Camp taste "is part of the history of snob taste," it is nonetheless
associated with a sense of marginality and rests on "the great discovery that the
sensibility of high culture has no monopoly upon refinement" (Sontag, 2001: 291),
fitting into a milieu in which popular images have immense influence in determining
aspirations and norms. Sontag explains that even though "it's not true that Camp
taste is homosexual taste," there is undeniably a "peculiar affinity and overlap" in
which homosexuals "constitute the vanguard – and the most articulate audience,"
fulfilling the role of "creators of sensibilities" (Sontag, 2001: 290). Thus camp tastes

reflect some of the primary values and inclinations defining the last decades due to the ability to find meaning in everyday symbols and objects, in a way that makes use of some more established principles while flouting others in pursuit of newer ones.

The role of camp in popular culture is also explored by Andrew Ross (1989), who addresses the conflicts within the phenomenon and its alleged challenging of conventional tastes while presenting more novel options. He discusses, for instance, the contradiction underlying Pop camp given how "camp is the 'in' taste of a minority elite, while Pop, on the other hand, was supposed to declare that everyday cultural currency had value, and that this value could be communicated in simple language" (Ross, 1989: 150). Thus while both camp and pop were defined by their supposed association with the deterioration of hierarchy, they both operated through a pursuit of distinction, particularly among rising sectors. While shedding light on even thee early connections between the intellectual figures behind the generation of pop tastes and commercial industries, he argues that – amid the spread of marketing to new communities formed around formerly hidden sexual identities – similar tensions could be found in camp given that:

> If camp can be seen as a *cultural economy* which challenged, and, in some cases, helped to overturn legitimate definitions of taste and sexuality, it must also be remembered to what extent this cultural economy was tied to the capitalist logic of development that governed the culture industries (Ross, 1989: 169)

Given the above, it would be over simplistic to associated camp tastes with merely resistance and rebellion when the pursuit of an elite position in terms of creating and adopting values and lifestyles will in all likelihood not be abandoned.

The blurring of the distinction between what constitutes higher and lower forms of culture mirrors another accompanying process, that of the extension of the role of the "intellectual". This phenomenon is one extensively analyzed by Pierre Bourdieu

(1984) in his theories on cultural tastes and their role in peoples' individual and social lives. He argues that the new "intellectuals" try to gain power in the cultural realm – which had been connected with a minority with the privileged educational background – by "inventing an art of living which provides them with the gratifications and prestige of the intellectual at the least cost" (Bourdieu, 1984: 370). Their aim thus lies in extending the aesthetic throughout a variety of domains while maximizing it in return for the least possible. He describes members of this group as being "guided by their anti-institutional temperament and the concern to escape everything redolent of competitions, hierarchies and classifications and, above all, of scholastic classifications, hierarchies of knowledge, theoretical abstractions or technical competences" (Bourdieu, 1984: 370). Given that they are not among the traditional elite who have inherited the cultural resources, it is not surprising that they would seek to refute – or even challenge – the value systems that place them at a disadvantage, as their claims will depend on the undermining of such standards.

By undermining traditional distinctions and the emphasis on abstraction that marked elitist tastes, the role of intellectualism is rendered more readily available rather than delegated to a select minority. Bourdieu explains that "in the name of the fight against 'taboos' and the liquidation of 'complexes' they adopt the most external and most easily borrowed aspects of the intellectual lifestyle, liberated manners, cosmetic or sartorial outrages, emancipated poses and postures, and systematically apply the cultivated disposition to not-yet-legitimate culture" (Bourdieu, 1984: 370). Those who were previously disenfranchised make use of the resources to which they have access – which tend to be physical objects marking cultural values rather than the more abstract qualities associated with a pedigree – and try to apply them to new areas that the established intellectuals would have not deemed worthy. Within such a

context, the "new intellectual popularization… is also a popularization of the intellectual lifestyle" (Bourdieu, 1984: 370), meaning that as that which is considered "intellectual" becomes more available, there will also be an accompanying appeal of a lifestyle based on those values. Bourdieu writes:

> like legitimate culture, the counter-culture leaves its principles implicit… and so is still able to fulfill functions of distinction by making available to almost everyone the distinctive poses, the distinctive games and other external signs of inner riches previously reserved for intellectuals (Bourdieu, 1984: 371)

The trends associated with intellectualism that enter more general society typically include objects, symbols and values suggesting the user's higher knowledge of areas that lie outside the everyday society to which everyone has access. It can thus involve an appreciation for "other" cultures and lifestyles not readily accepted by the masses due to uneasiness with that deemed foreign or strange – such as non-heteronormative forms of bodies and behaviors.

3.2 Popular Culture and Non-dominant Voices

While many thinkers have expressed skepticism – even criticism – of the prominent place of popular culture in postmodern times, others have explored how some forms of media and entertainment can provide opportunities for groups who have typically been left powerless to make their voices heard. Among those who have expressed the most hope about the potential democratizing forces of pop culture has been John Fiske (2000), who has argued that it functions by offering, to some degree, channels through which people can escape conventional constraints. Disputing mass cultural theorists' notion of popular culture being handed down from above by privileged groups detached from society, Fiske writes that it "is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic

interests of the dominant" (Fiske, 2000: 2). He thus argues that although the economic gains may work in favor of powerful, the content of popular culture is produced according to the needs and tastes of the disadvantaged. In line with the theories of Michel de Certeau about how the weak use tactics at opportune moments so that they can practice agency, of which they are typically deprived, Fiske casts the "art of popular culture" as "the art of making do" (Fiske, 2000: 4). Describing popular culture as "a culture of conflict," he underlined that there is "always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces" (Fiske, 2000: 2). This suggests that such media inherently have a quality that does not fully accord with dominant ideologies. He underlines that the significance of "popular differences," which he describes as bottom-up, lies in how "they oppose and disrupt the organized disciplined individualities" generated by the repressive system and "exceed the differences required by elaborated white patriarchal capitalism" (Fiske, 1991: 161). Thus, popular differences are presented as a potential producer that can generate oppositional messages within media.

In a context in which certain forms of culture may serve as sites where subordinate views can be expressed, such sites became points under contestation as dominant forces strive to maintain their strong hold. Describing popular cultures as one such site Fiske writes that "attempts to control the meanings, pleasures, and behaviors of the subordinate are always there, and popular culture has to accommodate them in a constant interplay of power and resistance, discipline and indiscipline, order and disorder" (Fiske, 2000: 5). Thus popular culture functions as an arena of struggle between those with power and those without, as the former attempt to maintain their advantage and the latter strive to have some agency. Analyzing the conflict as a "struggle for meanings," he argues that since "any commodity that serves only the

economic and ideological interests of the dominant" would not appeal to most people, "popular texts are structured in the tension between forces of closure (or domination) and openness (or popularity)" (Fiske, 2000: 5). In order for a product or concept to be adopted in contemporary consumer society, it must attract more than just those in power since that which offers a benefit to only them will not have an impact beyond their minority circle. And in order for productions to appeal to a large number of people – even if not the majority – they cannot merely flaunt the values and institutions placing the elite minority in an advantaged position. Defining popular culture as "tasteless and vulgar," Fiske proceeds with this point to argue that it even counters established values "for taste is social control and class interest masquerading as a naturally finer sensibility" (Fiske, 2000: 5). He explains that the popular arena "often centers on the body and its sensations…for the bodily pleasures offer carnivalesque, evasive, liberating practices" (Fiske, 2000: 5). The portrayal of popular culture's lack of regard for the mind brings to mind Bourdieu's arguments about the new intellectuals' wishes to set aside abstraction in their competition with the established elites. Fiske, however, emphasizes that the body and its senses become the concentration since "they constitute the popular terrain where hegemony is weakest, a terrain that may possibly lie beyond its reach" (Fiske, 2000: 5).

In casting popular culture as a domain in which the concerns and aspirations of groups other than the dominant can be expressed, Fiske argues that opportunities for some degree of freedom and resistance are particularly possible through fantasy. Refuting notions that reduce fantasy to "mere escapism," he stresses that it can "under certain conditions, constitute the imagined possibilities of small-scale social change, it may provide the motive and energy for localized tactical resistances" (Fiske, 2000: 113). Qualifying that all contexts may not be conducive for the

fulfillment of fantasy, which itself may not spur a radical and instantaneous change, he nonetheless views it in terms of the potential to ignite a form of challenge based on the resources available to those deprived of power. "The interior resistance of fantasy is more than ideologically evasive, it is a necessary base for social action" (Fiske, 2000: 113), meaning it serves as not only an avenue for the subordinate to escape oppressive forces – or fall subject of the illusion of doing so – but to also develop a form of agency in the face of obstacles. Stressing fantasy's role in the politics of popular culture, he writes that "making a resisting sense of one's social relations is prerequisite to developing the will and the self-confidence to act upon them" (Fiske, 2000: 125). Thus fantasy offers momentum and a vision to strive toward, which subordinate groups will need if they are to mobilize in hopes of progress. So before subcultures can challenge the dominant discourse in a way that can make commodities become free of their ideological signifieds, there must be a fantasy according to which people contest norms and pursue access to control over cultural meanings.

In his defense of fantasy, Fiske uses examples about the liberating of women's bodies to illustrate how subordinate voices may put forward representations that challenge their oppression. Referring to McRobbie's earlier writings on the how women may experience freedom from social constraints by being able to feel pleasure in their bodies irrespective of male judgments, Fiske says that "[d]ance and fantasy resist this [patriarchal] closure and assert meanings and control that are women's, not men's" (Fiske, 2000: 131). Whereas hierarchies and restrictive social norms are based on attempts at "closure" to secure values and the power relations they promote, resistance must initially start with challenges that will try to open up these areas so they can be contested. An example which he cites throughout his book

of one such case from popular culture is Madonna, whose lyrics, music videos, dressing style and representation of herself he sees as rebelling against patriarchal culture's denial of agency to women. He elaborates that the potential in popular culture figures such as Madonna lies in how she "adopts an oppositional political stance that challenges two of the critical areas of patriarchal power — its control of language/representation and its control of gender meanings and gender differences" (Fiske, 2000: 131). He takes the argument further by saying that a "fantasy that asserts feminine control over representation, particularly the representation of gender, is no escape from social reality" (Fiske, 2000: 131) since it confronts repressive ideologies and their reflections in the social world. While hailing how fantasies involving "an empowered heroine controlling the meanings of herself and her gender relations" as oppositional to the extent that it possesses "political effectivity," he however concedes that it does not have "direct political effect" (Fiske, 2000: 131). So even though fantasy can offer opportunities for empowering individuals, more will be required to translate this into tangible results in the political fabric of society.

In his depiction of popular culture as a site where dominant ideology can come under contestation, Fiske anticipates criticism that struggles unfolding in somewhat mainstream avenues may inadvertently lead to the neutralization of emancipatory potential. While defending the tactic of evasion as "the foundation of resistance… [and] first duty of the guerrilla" (Fiske, 2000: 9), Fiske addresses ideas that "evasive or carnivalesque pleasures are merely safety valves" which the system permits so as to prevent more radical challenges, so that "such tactics finally serve to strengthen the system and to delay any radical change in it" (Fiske, 2000: 11). While these concerns about whether less aggressive forms of resistance that permeate everyday

life may just be appropriated in a way that contributes to the evolution of the dominant ideology are substantial, Fiske warns that "[i]f this argument is followed to its extreme, it would propose that the more the subordinate suffer the better, because their suffering is more likely to provoke the conditions for radical reform" (Fiske, 2000: 11). He therefore stresses the benefits of oppositional practices that do not "fail to take into account [] the politics of everyday life that occur on the micro rather than macro level" (Fiske, 2000: 9), that will have an impact on how people understand and relate to all aspects of their lives in society. He even offers the opposite argument, cautioning that radical tactics may have significantly less chances of success given that "Western patriarchal capitalism has proved remarkably able to prevent the social conditions that provoke effective radical action" (Fiske, 2000: 12). In contrast to radical endeavors that are easily detected, and which the dominant discourse has arguments at hand to legitimize crushing, Fiske promotes progressive tactics that operate by "enlarge[ing] the space of action for the subordinate" (Fiske, 2000: 11). He stresses that the strengths of such methods lie in how they "effect shifts, however minute, in social power relations" and "are the tactics of the subordinate in making do within and against the system, rather than of opposing it directly" (Fiske, 2000: 11). Since such tactics would not blatantly defy the establishment and its codes, they would be less likely to face abrupt defeat. Despite their subtlety – and actually thanks to it – "at this micro level they may well act as a constant erosive force upon the macro, weakening the system from within so that it is more amenable to change at the structural level" (Fiske, 2000: 11).

While Fiske's writings on popular culture have allocated a form of agency to the audience and resistive forces, they have also been criticized for doing so on the ground that such possibilities are overestimated. While agreeing that media

functions as a domain that must offer some emancipatory opportunities to attract viewers, Douglas Kellner nonetheless stresses that media texts "are not so polysemic that they can mean anything" (Kellner, 1995: 114). He also cautions that "there is little evidence for the belief that audiences always read texts against the dominant culture, as Fiske comes close to claiming" (Kellner, 1995: 114). A similar criticism is made by Don Slater when he discusses the difference in the power of the reader and that of the producer, underlining that "being active doesn't mean being free or oppositional" (Slater, 1999: 171). He therefore finds fault with how Fiske "abandons the fine line between active and oppositional" (Slater, 1999: 172), highlighting that engagement as a viewer does not entail that one comes up with meanings that run counter to the hegemonic ones.

While culture is defined by the prevalent codes and ways of thinking that form connections between people and enable them to understand one another and their positions in social life, its tenets do sometime come under questioning by smaller groups. One such phenomenon that provides such as opportunity are subcultures that work through a different set of values and their associated vocabulary and imagery that create spaces distinct from the consciousness and environments commonly found in a culture. They are able to provoke questioning and have the potential to unsettle taken for granted aspects of social life since they involve "violations of the authorized codes through which the social world is organized and experienced" (Hebdige, 1979: 91). Hebdige discusses the operations and significance of subcultures in his leading studies into the topic, as in his 1979 book in which he analyzes various movements among the youth in the United Kingdom during the period, including punk, mod and the Teddy boys. He explains that their appeal and raison d'etre involves how "spectacular subcultures express forbidden contents

(consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms" (Hebdige, 1979: 91). While a mainstream culture derives its defining characteristics based on widely recognized values and practices that determine everyday existence while serving as a form of cohesion among its members, subcultures offer a chance to transgress against the imposed boundaries and thereby stand apart from the masses. It operates by "go[ing] against the grain of a mainstream culture whose principal defining characteristic, according to Barthes, is a tendency to masquerade as nature, to substitute 'normalized' for historical forms" (Hebdige, 1979: 102). Subculture poses a challenge to the wider culture by putting its rules – presented as natural codes – into question and exposing them as the constructions of those in power. Little surprise then that subcultural elements are "accompanied by a wave of hysteria in the press" (Hebdige, 1979: 92) that is also not predetermined and settled, but can oscillate between "dread and fascination, outrage and amusement" (Hebdige, 1979: 93). Such an uncertain response is appropriate given the unsettling effect of the elements.

By resorting to styles and practices that defy the mainstream, subcultures cause an interference – or even disruption – in the taken for granted assumptions on which daily communal life is based. Hebdige describes it as a "noise" rather than the commonplace sound that serves as "interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media" (Hebdige, 1979: 90). Its unsettling quality is characterized by a glitch in the social processes to which people have become accustomed. Yet the disruption is not merely limited to the ordinary sequence, but also to the overall semantics around which knowledge is organized. Hebdige argues that it is therefore imperative to:

> not underestimate the signifying power of the spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy 'out there' but as an actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation (Hebdige, 1979: 90)

Part of the reason for subcultures' potency in unsettling the masses lies in how it cannot be easily contained and distanced as something outside and distant from the mainstream culture. By reappropriating elements of the dominant discourse for its own – sometimes even subversive – purposes, such as the suit and tie that are transformed from the signs of neoliberal efficiency to "empty' fetishes," it twists meanings to generate new ones that challenge the original. Through its exposure to citizens, it also generates opportunities for them to think beyond the bounds which society inscribed around them, so that signs can begin to convey more meanings than were previously assigned to them by those in power. However, just as they put common aspects of social life into question, subcultures themselves are fundamentally defined by their unsettled qualities and purposes, which are multiple and open to negotiation – similar to the conditions that brought them into existence. "The 'subcultural response" is neither simply affirmation nor refusal, neither 'commercial exploitation' nor 'genuine revolt'," just as it in the end serves as "neither simply resistance against some external order nor straightforward conformity with the parent culture" (Hebdige, 1988: 35). So rather than looking at the issue as black-and-white, the complex interplay of different factors in meaning-making must be considered. Hebdige concludes that they are ultimately "an insubordination" that "is also a confirmation of the fact of powerlessness, a celebration of impotence" (Hebdige, 1988: 35).

Even though subcultures are characterized by a relationship in which they bring aspects of the dominant culture under question, they nonetheless face the threat of being appropriated by the latter and losing their substance. Referring to Hall's

theory that media operates by both recording and situating resistance "within the dominant framework of meanings," Hebdige writes that it is "through this continual process of recuperation that the fractured order is repaired and the subculture incorporated as a diverting spectacle within the dominant mythology" (Hebdige, 1979: 94). In describing the ways in which subcultures become absorbed, he lists two possibilities for the process – one of which involves "the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form)" (Hebdige, 1979: 94). Subcultures are rendered particularly vulnerable to recuperation once they are removed from the communal contexts in which their meanings represent potential resistance and exposed to the mainstream and "become codified, made comprehensible" (Hebdige, 1979: 96). In some instances, both the semantic – or ideological – and the "real" – or commercial – incorporation "can be said to converge on the commodity form. Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions" (Hebdige, 1979: 96). Having started out as a renunciation of dominant mores, rebellious styles lose their resistive qualities when they are repackaged based on the logic of the market, where they have wide appeal due to their association with self-definition and the cutting-edge.

Hebdige's account of how subcultures lose their originality and ability to challenge the mainstream when they become codified finds an echo is McCracken's (1990) discussion on the setbacks of using goods as symbols for protest. In his writings on consumer culture, he warns that although some groups may "use consumer goods to declare their difference, the code they use renders them comprehensible to the rest of society and assimilable within a larger set of cultural categories" (McCracken, 1990: 133), thereby resulting in the unintended result of their losing the possibility to defy

the system and its control over symbols. Rather than endowing the goods with a new set of meanings that undermine the previous capitalism-oriented ones, once "[e]mbraced by culture and its media of communication, the 'act' of protest becomes an act of rhetorical conformity" (McCracken, 1990: 133). The groups are incorporated within the larger cultural context they were opposing since through their use of the goods, "they invite the object-code to create an expanded version of itself" (McCracken, 1990: 134), strengthening it by contributing to its meaning – but in a modified way that does not actually challenge it. In addressing the possibilities of rendering challenges into a profitable objects whose allure lied in their supposed transgressive qualities, Holt writes that "[s]ince these oppositional meanings can be appropriated by marketers, consumer resistance requires nimble work" (Holt, 2002: 72) whereby consumers immediately modify alternative meanings once they are stripped of their potential. Such relentless efforts are especially difficult in a context in which even social activism "is managed, organized and exchanged, not simply as a commodity but as a brand" (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 48), thereby requiring brand cultures to be "understood as a coexistence and intersection between creative activity and exploitation" (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 219-220).

3.3 Culture, a Site of Struggle

Amid the debate about whether texts and objects carry the meanings imposed by the dominant ideology or those that are potentially oppositional, many of the theories that have been influential over past decades have been those that analyze the social realm as a site of struggle in which different sectors strive to enforce or resist hegemonic forces depending on their interests. The works of Bourdieu (1984) have held a prominent position within this context due to his exploration of the pursuit of

cultural capital and distinction based on a person's relationship with knowledge of – and involvement with – social codes. In describing the significance of Bourdieu's account of the negotiation process involved in the dissemination and reception of meanings in culture, Don Slater cast his work as "different than semiotic accounts" due to it being "concerned less with internal structure" and "more with complex battles" (Slater, 1999: 161). His writings also informed the much-quoted book by Featherstone, who admitted the purpose of it was to develop a perspective that argued that:

> new conception of lifestyle can best be understood in relation to the habitus of the new petite bourgeoisie, who, as an expanding class fraction centrally concerned with the production and dissemination of consumer culture imagery and information, is concerned to expand and legitimate its own particular dispositions and lifestyle (Featherstone, 2007: 82)

And in seeking to increase its role in the cultural arena, the new petite bourgeoisie must, according to Featherstone, wage its struggle "within a social field in which its views are resisted and contested and within… especially, an economic climate and political culture in which the virtues of the traditional petite bourgeoisie have undergone a revival" (Featherstone, 2007: 82). So while those battling for power try to secure their hegemony by fixing the ideologies that will allow them to maintain their hold, culture itself is the ground on which such attempts are waged.

If the meanings found within cultural settings are sites of struggle, this would suggest that rather being given and constant, they can be multiple and open to different interpretations and objectives. An influential theory on the matter has been Stuart Hall's (1991) distinction between encoding and decoding. While encoding involves the process by which certain meanings – typically dominant ones – are endowed to different ideas and objects, decoding involves the variety of meanings

that can be derived from them depending on the reception process. Describing the "(ideological) effect of concealing the practices of coding," Hall explains that "naturalized codes demonstrate is the degree of habituation produced when there is a fundamental alignment and reciprocity – an achieved equivalence – between the encoding and decoding sides" (Hall, 1991: 132). While the engaging with decoding, and whether one concludes on abiding by the dominant code or one that questions or even defies it, may at times be more conscious, cases in which people process the common code without even realizing it suggest the degree to which it has become naturalized. This is quite different than when such a process occurs through a "negotiated version," in which case it involves more of an active engagement. In such instances, the decoding "acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules – it operates with exceptions to the rule" (Hall, 1991: 137). In negotiated versions, while the dominant definitions maintain their overall influence, meanings that have been adapted can be applied to more specific areas to some degree. A greater potential for challenging hegemony lies in oppositional codes that, according to Hall's theories, "coincide with crisis points" (Hall, 1991: 138) and occur when areas that were previously under negotiation transform further. In such cases, "the 'politics of signification' – the struggle in discourse – is joined" (Hall, 1991: 138), and the cultural landscape because a battleground over which different factions work to gain power.

Other theories have also addressed the issue of multiple meanings and the opportunities they provide those who lack hegemonic power, including in the writings of Hebdige and Daniel Miller. In his study of subcultures, the former explores the options that may be brought to the table when "the simple notion of

reading as the revelation of a fixed number of concealed meanings is discarded in favour of the idea of *polysemy* whereby each text is seen to generate a potentially infinite range of meanings" (Hebdige, 1979: 117). By placing emphasis on seeking how readings in addition to the dominant one may function, he writes that the "approach lays less stress on the primacy of structure and system in language ('langue'), and more upon the *position* of the speaking subject in discourse ('parole')" (Hebdige, 1979: 118), thereby focusing on the kinds of agency available to subjects outside of what appears to be imposed meanings. In likewise addressing the potential for negotiating in material culture, Miller addresses the concept of "recontextualization" and whether it can serve as a "form of resistance that can lead to positive consequences" (Miller, 1987: 176). Stressing that objects need not carry only the meanings according to which the systems mass produced them, he writes that their relationship with particular groups or individuals may result in a transformation. Refuting the tendency to reduce such efforts to the pursuit of social distinction, he says that recontextualization involves "highly specific and often extremely important material presence generating possibilities of sociability and cognitive order… engendering ideas of morality, ideal worlds, and other abstractions and principles" (Miller, 1987: 191). Olsen also stresses the multi-dimensional quality of a text, writing that each "must be conceived of as the site of intersection of other texts" (Olsen, 2013: 88). He argues that such a recognition and the accompanying attempt to understand a text's multiplicity will open the way for it to "[lose] its status as a passive medium and [become] a site of contestation and negotiation, something to be worked upon, considered, struggled with" (Olsen, 2013: 91).

The potential of texts representational oppositional meanings as well as the circulated dominant ones in also addressed by Douglass Kellner (1995) in his influential writings on media and culture. Underlining the need to consider "the context of social struggle and political debate" (Kellner, 1995: 108) and "how ideological texts are sites of tensions and dissonance" (Kellner, 1995: 114), he argues – in a manner reminiscent of Fiske's defense of popular culture – that such texts must possess "a relatively resonant and attractive core and thus often contain emancipatory promises or moments" (Kellner, 1995: 109) if they are to win over the audience. In describing media as a site through which the masses can both be subordinated and seek their empowerment, he refers to theories expounded by Ernst Bloch and Frederick Jameson that address "a utopian residue or surplus" within ideology. "Ideologies thus provide clues to possibilities for future development and contain a 'surplus' or 'excess' that is not exhausted in mystification or legitimation" (Kellner, 1995: 109), he says while stressing the need for cultural criticism to utilize a "double hermeneutic" that can properly examine the contrasting directions toward which ideology may move people. He quotes passages from Jameson's works that say that media texts "cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public," thereby suggesting "that anxiety and hope are two faces of the same collective consciousness" (Jameson, 1992: 29). Thus it is not constructive to adopt a reductionist position that addresses the issue of cultural products as being either pro- or anti- establishment since adhering to both tendencies to some degree would be more likely to ensure their presentation in the first place, and their appeal to mass audiences later.

Given how texts may be able to operate by communicating content that can contribute to both maintaining the dominant discourse and suggesting emancipation

from the oftentimes accompanying oppression, a comprehensive account of culture must take into consideration these conflicting tendencies. Kellner portrays American society as being the site of a hegemony that is "complex, contested, and constantly being put into question" (Kellner, 1995: 116), with its media reflecting the "conflictual nature of contemporary capitalism" (Kellner, 1990: 95). Since cultural productions cannot be reduced to representing merely a single set of values at all times to all viewers, he argues that "a critical cultural studies should not only critique dominant ideologies, but should also specify any utopian, oppositional, subversive, and, emancipatory moments within ideological constructs" (Kellner, 1995: 11). The conflict within a text is partially a result of how the values promoted by dominant ideologies have not only diverse qualities, but can also be used for different objectives depending on the interests of those exposed to them. Kellner explains that this seeming contradiction stems from the following:

> while bourgeois ideologies of freedom, individualism, and rights are to some extent ideologies which mask class rule and domination, they also contain critical and emancipatory moments which can be used to criticize the suppression or curtailment of rights and freedom under capitalist society (Kellner, 1995: 11)

Thus the values used by the system to maintain the grip of the powerful also contain within them the opposite promise. Alluding to other theories mentioned earlier in this thesis, Kellner underlines the need to analyze both "postmodern surface and the deeper ideological problematics within the context of specific exercises which explicate the polysemic nature of images and texts, and which endorse the possibility of multiple encodings and decodings" (Kellner, 1995: 238). Rather than simplifying texts to straightforward one-dimensional meanings, their power may be better understood when considered in terms of the richness resulting from their being the point in which multi-dimensional social forces intersect.

3.3.1 Media's Stifling of Opposition

Despite casting media texts as a site of contestation between multiple meanings, Kellner (1990) nonetheless expresses doubt about the chances of oppositional messages being broadcast in television programming in the U.S. While characterizing commercial broadcasting as being based on contradictions due to its production "by a synthesis of capitalist and democratic structures and imperatives" (Kellner, 1990: 15), he still argues that the medium "tries to absorb, co-opt, and defuse any challenges to the existing organization of society" (Kellner, 1990: 122). "When television portrays social change or oppositional movements, it often blunts the radical edge of new social forces, values or changes" (Kellner, 1990: 122), he warns, highlighting the objective in mass media to maintain the status quo, even in the midst of continually offering new sensations. Describing the programming options as "especially nonreflective," Kellner elaborates that it operates by "eschewing complex or disturbing material that might require thought or action and encouraging instead a consumerist hedonism and conformity" (Kellner, 1990: 125) that will enable hegemony to continue unquestioned. But rather than dismissing the possibility of change and liberation through media texts, he nonetheless calls for "new roles and functions for intellectuals" who will assume the task of exploring the ever-increasing "new terrains of political struggle and intervention" and pursuing a "democratic media politics" (Kellner, 1990: 337).

Skepticism about the seeming progress promoted by television content has also been expressed by Bourdieu (1999), with him questioning the reasons for media to assume an interest in moral values. In addressed the fascination with human interest stories, he writes that such a focus operates by "fixing and keeping attention fixed

on events without political consequences, but which are nonetheless dramatized" (Bourdieu, 1999: 51) so they appear as an opportunity for learning about social woes. He draws a connection between this tendency and the one contributing to "the selection of stories that give free rein to the unbridled constructions of demagoguery (whether spontaneous or intentional) or can stir up great excitement by catering to the most primitive drives and emotions" (Bourdieu, 1999: 52). Such a criticism reveals certain areas of concern when it comes to recent popular culture depictions of drag and transgender women that seeming promote understanding of the "other," but by focusing on glamourized "feminine" bodies that abide by views of beauty enforced by mainstream consumer culture. Bourdieu ultimately concludes that the association between the pursuit of market success and stories by which audiences can be educated "only works if it is supported by structures and mechanisms that give people an interest in morality" and that "morality has to find support, reinforcement, and rewards in this structure" (Bourdieu, 1999: 56). The justice of a principle does not guarantee that it will be recognized – but it may find such an opportunity if it is compatible with the interests of the system at that time.

3.3.2 Makeover TV

One area in which progress and development are seemingly promoted but in a depoliticized manner is recent makeover-based television programs. Included among the scholars who have addressed the educating function of these programs is McRobbie (2004), who has analyzed makeover programs in the UK and how they reflect the enforcement of "taste" in contemporary society. Exploring the commentary and behavior of the figures filling the roles of judge and mentor on the series, she asks whether "through the prism of individualization, class differences

are re-invented, largely within the cultural and media field, so as to produce and re-produce social divisions now more autonomously feminized?" (McRobbie, 2004: 101). Tying the patterns she notes in the programming to the theories on Bourdieu on the cultivation of taste and class distinction, she ultimately compares the "experts" roles to that of privileged individuals within a boarding school system who mock those deemed to not attain as high a class level. "This is popular entertainment which uses irony to suggest that it is not meant to be taken literally" (McRobbie, 2004: 106), she writes, pointing out the sleight of hand present in programming that usually leaves participants humiliated. She draws attention to how "there is 'panic mingled with revolt' as they are put through their paces, unlearning what is considered unacceptable and unattractive about themselves" (McRobbie, 2004: 107), in what turns out to be the ingraining and enforcement of classed norms. In the following chapter, programming involving drag queens – as competitors in a TV show and as coaches for participants – will be discussed in examining how they fit into these patterns.

Similar criticisms have also been leveled against the *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* series that centered on makeovers instructed by five gay style "experts". In her article on the series, Tania Lewis (2007) acknowledges the "democratization" associated with mainstreaming of lifestyle TV and cites McRobbie's concept of "double entanglement" in the context of the relation between neo-conservative values and liberalization. She also addresses how the series, which ran for five seasons, has been analyzed based off its "pairing of queerness with consumer culture and style expertise" (Lewis, 2007: 296), adding that the makeover process depicted revolves around "a particular type of lifestyle connected to certain normative notions of identity" (Lewis, 2007: 302). Describing the role of the experts, she writes that

"[q]ueer or camp style becomes a form of expertise or subcultural capital then that can be adopted by straight men without challenging their straightness" (Lewis, 2007: 299), meaning that the value of their taste lies in the non-heteronormative sexuality and its connection with an "other" community. Yet despite this, the show's use of queer expertise not only avoids representations that can put heteronormativity in question, but also shows the experts' views as being in compliance with that of society at large. Lewis indicates that the experts' use of camp and punning serves not only for humor at supposed masculinity and irony over their seeming authority, but consists of a "seemingly unthreatening manner" (Lewis, 2007: 298). She argues that since the personal transformation process depicted focuses on taste and style and does not challenge heterosexuality, to the extent that a main priority seems to be "transforming style-deficient and socially clueless single guys into dateable or marriageable propositions" (Lewis, 2007: 300). Also analyzing the show, Sender (2012) refers to an episode featuring a trans man, Miles, as both routine and exceptional of the programming in the genre. She argues that while the episode reflects that "gendered strategies of self-improvement have been democratized beyond women," it still indicates that such shows prioritize "dramatic physical transformation, the stress on appropriate gender presentation, the expressly didactic approach, the commercial frame, the use of surveillance, and the expression of feeling" (Sender, 2012: 28). The role of such factors will be discussed further through the cases in the following chapter.

While elements of popular culture and youth subcultures over the past decades have been interpreted as examples of media being utilized as a means of resistance and rebellion, recent trends suggest that such impressions may be giving way to a loss of their potential to transform into substantial challenges to dominant ideologies. An

examination of how "controversial" topics appear in mainstream media in a way that enables them to gain acceptance, but lose their potential to unsettle the oppression within the system, raises the question of what happens to seemingly neutralize the progressive meanings that were thought to have been part of messages of change.

Concerns over the seeming disappearance of substance bring to mind theories that define postmodernity as an overload of signs devoid of meaning, such as those of Baudrillard, who had described the period as an "era of simulation [] inaugurated by a liquidation of all referentials – worse, with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning" (Baudrillard, 1995: 2). He had written ominously of how "the whole system becomes weightless, it is no longer itself anything but a gigantic simulacrum" in which meaningful exchanges based on use value are replaced by forms of exchange based on sign value "in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference" (Baudrillard, 1995: 5-6). To describe societies in which a pursuit of "reality" ceases to be regarded, Baudrillard coined the term "hyperreality" to explain the omniscience of superficial images and their accompanying hypersimulation. In a world in which illusion – like reality itself – is "no longer possible," a form of parody surfaces that "makes submission and transgression equivalent" (Baudrillard, 1995: 21). A world in which the possibility of opposition is no longer an option is one in which "everything is 'recuperable'," a phenomenon which can occur when "everything, even artistic, intellectual, and scientific production, even innovation and transgression, is immediately produced as sign and exchange value" (Baudrillard, 1981: 87). Aspects of life that people consider central to their identities, and ways of thinking and living are thus hollowed out – deprived of their substantial meaning by a system that nonetheless uses them to regulate citizens.

The prominence of images amid the lack of comprehension characterizing the postmodern period has also been explored by Frederic Jameson (1991, 1992), who has warned of its "schizophrenic" effects on the masses. Referring to Guy Debord's writings on the role of the spectacle in consumer society, Jameson says that "the priorities of the real become reversed, and everything is mediated by culture to the point where even the political and ideological 'levels' have initially to be disentangled from their primary mode of representation which is cultural" (Jameson, 1992: 22). Thus the meanings regulated by culture come to permeate all aspects of life so that everywhere people encounter constructs that enforce normative views. Describing this phenomenon as an explosion in his works, Jameson draws attention to the expansion of culture "to the point at which everything in our social life – from economic value and state power to practices and to the very structure of the psyche itself – can be said to have become 'cultural' in some original and yet untheorized sense" (Jameson, 1991: 48). Despite their penetration into the population as a whole and its members on an individual level, the circulated ideas do not result in a consistent form of unity. Rather, people are left vulnerable to what resembles schizophrenia due to "isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence" (Jameson, 2002: 137). Yet while people are overwhelmed into adopting the surrounding superficial images without being able to process them, the system that seemingly spreads the incoherent media does not fail to disable sources of potential resistance. Part of the strength of late capitalism therefore lies in how "even overtly political interventions… are all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it"

(Jameson, 1991: 49). Caught up in a world that provides a plethora of images but merely superficial meanings, peoples' lives and beliefs are carried out in an illusory manner reflecting their fundamentally vacuous surroundings and the lack of substance.

Such theories centering on the illusory codes on which culture is based are captured by the concept of the spectacle, as detailed by the writings of Debord, who described it as "the ruling order's nonstop discourse about itself" (Debord, 2002: 9). In his critique of such societies, Debord addressed the dangers of the process of commodification, warning of its power to spread to all fields and generate a world "dominating all living experience" (Debord, 2002: 12). The possibility of a context in which escape from the process is rendered inescapable is a result of commodities not only making their presence felt – both physically and cognitively – but also their mass proliferation to the extent that "the world we see is the world of the commodity" (Debord, 2002: 13), which comes to encompass all aspects of life and consciousness. Debord ultimately concludes that as a culture undergoes such a process, it itself "tends to become the star commodity of spectacular society" (Debord, 2002: 52) so that culture is rendered into the most prominent production of a capitalist system, so that all aspects of life are just microcosms reflecting the overall illusions upheld by the dominant ideological program.

While these theories provide an account of how mass culture manages to instill images and ideas that do not contribute much substance into peoples' lives, they have bee criticized for underestimating the meanings available in society. Kellner (1995) has been among the scholars expressing reservations about both the writings of Baudrillard and Jameson for casting media as one-dimensional. Calling the

former's idea that television "undermines meaning and collapses signifiers without signifieds into a flat, one-dimensional hyperspace" an exaggeration, he argues instead that "television and other forms of media culture play key roles in the structuring of contemporary identity and shaping thought and behavior" (Kellner, 1995: 237). He criticizes Jameson on similar grounds for his analysis of the image culture of postmodernity. Yet in his discussion of the numerous – and accordingly unstable – identities available in postmodern times, Kellner nonetheless concedes the validity of Jameson's concerns. Noting the difficulty of determining "whether on the whole this is a 'good' or 'bad' thing," he concludes that "it is probably safer to conclude with Jameson that the phenomena associated with postmodernity are highly ambivalent and exhibit both progressive and regressive features" (Kellner, 1995: 257). Featherstone has also criticized Jameson, highlighting his "overintellectualist approach to culture" (Featherstone, 2007: 61) and his emphasis on how it falls on intellectuals to "to resist the democratizing, populist spirit of postmodernism and retain the authority to speak for humankind" (Featherstone, 2007: 60). According to him, Jameson's works do not give enough credit to the social realm of everyday life and therefore "play down the role played by classes, social movements and groups in creating the pre-conditions for such a logic in their various power balances, interdependencies and struggles for hegemony" (Featherstone, 2007: 52, 62).

Yet despite these criticisms and similar ones leveled against likewise pessimistic accounts by the thinkers of the Frankfurt School for their seeming elitist criticism of last capitalist society, Marcuse's (1971, 2007) theories on the neutralization of resistant energies seems to be highly applicable to recent popular culture content, particularly that related to sexuality. He had written of how consumer culture has

"created a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form" (Marcuse, 1971: 11) and which retaliates against any force that could pose a threat to its attachment to the market. "The needs generated by this system are thus eminently stabilizing, conservative needs: the counterrevolution anchored in the instinctual structure" (Marcuse, 1971: 11), meaning that the system's objective of maintaining its power becomes instilled within the people it subjugates. Marcuse describes the process as follows:

> This desublimation leaves the traditional culture, the illusionist art behind unmastered: their truth and their claims remain valid next to and together with the rebellion, within the same given society. The rebellious music, literature, art are thus easily absorbed and shaped by the market – rendered harmless (Marcuse, 1971: 47)

By taking on the guise of rebellion and change while latently upholding the traditional, long established norms, such a culture is able to appear as a move toward progress – while thereby undermining that possibility. Given such a tendency, it is not surprising that Marcuse concludes that such a society "turns everything it touched into a potential sources of progress and exploitation, of drudgery and satisfaction, of freedom and of oppression. Sexuality is no exception" (Marcuse, 2007: 81). Rather, one could argue, that sexuality – especially when coupled with the highly-prized, revered valued of liberty and development – is among the most potent and guaranteed means through which to secure control.

The following chapter seeks to examine the operations of contemporary popular culture in addressing non-heteronormative sexual identities and practices – particularly in its handling of "feminine" Other bodies. In focusing on the last few years in the context of the history of female impersonators and transgender women in American culture, it seeks to explore whether such representations can serves as a means of overcoming oppressive – and still highly misogynist – views of "feminine"

subjects, or whether they face the threat of maintaining them further through an illusory guise that appears to advocate for acceptance of the disadvantaged – so long as they fit dominant stereotypes about womanhood rather than undermining them.

CHAPTER 4

DRAG & TRANSGENDER WOMEN REPRESENTED

The last approximately five years have seen an explosion of representations in mass media of "feminine" bodies that lie beyond the association of such bodies with people born biologically female. While people who do not identify with – or do not fashion their lifestyles based off – the simple binary of "man" and "woman" can deal with their gender and sexual identification in diverse ways, these approaches can typically be grouped under the categories of drag and transgender, which need not always be mutually exclusive. While there have been cases of drag and transgender people appearing in popular media forms for decades, particularly after the 1960s, its representations in various media such as television series, reality programs, music and fashion magazine has snowballed over the last half a decade. The program that may have brought drag culture most visibly into the mainstream of American everyday life may be considered the reality TV competition *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which premiered in 2009 and is hosted by drag icon RuPaul who has held a leadership role as a drag queen among the gay community over past decades. The show has since been renewed each year and even had a spinoff – which did not

fare as well – and numerous new programs have also been launched focusing on the topic of drag and transgender people – particularly in 2015 for the latter.

4.1 Remembering the Trailblazers

Amid the rise in mainstream interest in these topics, there has also been an accompanying return to past figures who are considered to have led the way in for drag performers and transgender people, particularly at a time when acts involving cross-dressing were illegal. Although several documentaries have been made on such frontrunners who had a role in cultural productions since the 1960s, only transgender actress Candy Darling and drag queen Divine – memorialized in *Beautiful Darling* and *I am Divine* (2013), respectively – will be addressed in what follows. Candy Darling (1944-1974) was famous during her short life during art crowds in major U.S. cities – especially New York – as a member of the crowd associated with Andy Warhol's Factory studio. She appeared in several of Warhol's films alongside fellow transgender actresses Jackie Curtis and Holly Woodlawn, as well as playing a seductive young female role in Tennessee Williams' play *Small Craft Warnings and* being featured in photographs by many of the renowned photographers of the period. On the other hand, Divine – the stage name of Glenn Milstead – gained popularity among gay and counter culture communities in the 1960s and 1970s by starring in several films by John Waters that came to become cult classics. After developing a career based off shocking stage performances and dance records based off his stage personality, which also appealed to the disco and punk rock scene of the late 1970s and 1980s, he gained mainstream renown for his role as the mother in *Hairspray*, a 1988 romantic musical comedy about the civil

rights movement. Their roles in the popular culture decades ago will be analyzed in assessing their legacy and its implications for "feminine" Other bodies in following decades.

4.1.1 Candy, Underground Starlet

Amid the transgender actresses in the Factory circle, Candy Darling stood out as the one who seemed to be most inspired by – and comply with – the glamour of classic Hollywood female figures. An admirer of Kim Novak who spoke with a hushed sultry voice, she played starred as a character based on Marilyn Monroe in an Off-Broadway revival of playwright Tom Eyen's *The White Whore and the Bit Player* in 1973 and was the only the only of the transgender stars of Warhol's *Women In Revolt* to be taken to the Hollywood premiere of the film. She served as a muse for the avant-garde protopunk band The Velvet Underground, whose fame and influence only spread through pop culture in the following decades, and had the song "Candy Says" written for her. She was also a subject for portraits by numerous renowned artists of the period, including Robert Mapplethorpe and Gerard Malanga, with the photographs being exhibited at a gallery in New York City in 1982. The documentary *Beautiful Darling* chronicles her life, her hopes of stardom after appearing in several Warhol films, her idealized female roles in plays, her financial troubles, her concerns about love and being the woman she desired to be, and her ensuing disappointment before her death at age 29 from lymphoma.

Many of the comments in the documentaries from her contemporaries place emphasis on her role as an attention-catching and dynamic member of the avant-garde and artistic scene of the period, as well as admiration for her captivating

beauty, which was simultaneously unsettling due to the uncertain it exposed about gender. One of the most interesting comments about her is made by filmmaker John Waters, whose projects helped make Divine famous. He remembers that Candy "was witty funny smart beautiful and had a certain cache in being revolutionary just by the way she lived her life especially at that time," calling her "one of the frontrunners" of public transgender figures. He then adds that Candy, however, stood apart since "the other ones were freakish and she was beautiful," before adding that those qualities "really put people off but drew them to her because it confused them." While complimenting Candy for her beauty these comments also suggest that she particularly stood out since her qualities were missing from most of the other transgender woman of the time. Thus her beauty was even more striking due to being automatically compared to the less-appealing results of the transformations undergone by others like herself. Waters' comments also underline the connotations she stood for as a transgender woman, as she served as a model of a revolutionary identification and lifestyle in a society where cross-dressing was illegal and such crossovers were unchallenged taboos.

Another comment that stands out from the others, especially as it does not come from a personality in the avant-garde art world, is that by a concert promoter. "I was always looking for something different, that was theatrical," Ron Delsener says, "and I thought she would be great theatrical in a nightclub act." Looking at Candy from the point of view of a promoter, Delsener sees a unique subject for a show that would be both be alluring enough to draw in audiences and difficult to compete with. "I'd never seen her sing but I didn't care because I knew she would have been good, and even if she wasn't good she'd be interesting enough," he adds, revealing that skill would not be necessary as the focus of the shows would be Candy as an all

inclusive subject, a spectacle in and of herself. Delsener explains that it would have been sufficient for Candy "just to sit and talk bout her life," and details the kinds of lighting he could have used for the staging – "black with a white hot light" – verbalizing how to package Candy and her narrative in a striking, dramatic way for an audience. He even proceeds to discuss the targeting of an audience and the possible distribution details by saying that it would have been "big" in Europe and could extend to a few cities in the U.S., conforming to the stereotypes of Europe being more progressive in terms of sexuality during the period. So even at a time when transgender identifications were less visible, those in the entertainment industry could consider how the appeal of performances involving the "strange" and "forbidden" could draw audiences.

As the documentary wraps up, it covers the death of Candy Darling while also addressing the shifts within the Warhol circle and the Factory in accordance with the increasing materialism of the times. Author Fran Lebowitz, who had worked as a columnist for Warhol's Interview magazine, remember her horror at hearing that Candy had asked Peter Hujar to photograph her at the hospital – images which have since become famous for capturing her on her deathbed, while appearing beautiful in a haunting manner. Once the narrative moves past her death, it focuses on the shift that marked the 1960s having come to a close. Bob Calacello, the editor of Interview magazine from 1971 to 1983, refers to the "beginning of Yuppies" by explaining that "the baby boomers turned their focus to hedonism consumerism and materialism." He underlines that many of the members of the Factory and Interview – which had previously been a magazine circulated among the avant-garde crowd – "were all part of that wave" and "weren't resisting that at all." "We were out there trying to sell ads for Interview and selling portraits to rich people, so Interview

could exist really," he says. Thus the film concludes by noting the increasing role of the factor of consumerism on the artistic scene of the period – especially significant given the role of Warhol and pop art is blurring the boundary between high art and media dealing with the lives of, and used in entertaining, the masses.

4.1.2 Divine, Underground Queen of Filth

While Candy Darling won admiration for embodying the elegance and lady-like qualities associated with femininity, the popularity of the character Divine spread through its performer's use of "feminine" adornments and behaviors through inverting them in ways that likewise elicited responses of shock in viewers – but in an outraged and oftentimes disgusted manner. Rather than meaning a slender gentle beauty, Divine – in all her numerous and diverse stylings – was an overweight, loud and aggressive character whose inappropriate behavior and dirty comments worked to terrify and disgust those around her. The documentary *I am Divine* tells of how a young Milstead, the Baltimore native who would eventually perform Divine, started participated in underground drag balls in Washington DC that were held around midnight in disreputable neighborhoods, with the attendance of queens the commentaries describe as being beautiful, thin and elegant. Waters, who started making films with his group of young friends, recalls how Milstead twisted the conventions of the balls, "breaking the rules of drag by wearing stuff that a fat person would never wear." He says that by not adhering to the graceful characters assumed by other queens, Milstead "took it to a different level of anarchy." Milstead meanwhile had explained his motivation by saying that the queens at the balls "were serious so I wanted to have fun." Waters explains that he encouraged

Milstead to take on shocking guises that did not conform to the norms of female beauty because "I realized he was making fun of drag" and its usual codes.

After first appearing in the low budget films Waters made with his friends, which would later become cult classics, Divine began having a following in counter culture scenes in major cities across the U.S. The name of "Divine" was first given to a character Milstead performed in drag by Waters for *Roman Candles* (1966) and would also appear in a few more of his films. One of them included *Mundo Trasho* (1969), which would be screened at the Palace Theater in San Francisco in 1970. The theatre was managed by Sebastian and also showcased performances by the Cockettes, a psychedelic gay liberation theater group composed of hippies. One of the members, Fayette Hauser, recounts in *I am Divine* how Sebastian came to screen *Mundo Trasho* at the theatre by saying that he "scoured the planet for the freakiest movies he could find." Ida Cockette remembers a script in which Divine started with "I give blowjobs to serial killers" while Pamela Tent Carpenter recalls skits in which Divine would grope near-naked male performers to determine which to cook in a stew, as well as a play called *Divine Saves the World* in which she seduces Fidel Castro and achieves peace in the Middle East. Divine's character and performances were thus constructed in such a way as to break through what was socially acceptable to touch on taboo topics, winning him acclaim among groups interested in counter culture.

The shocking performances of Divine would only win the character more widespread fame following the shooting of Waters' *Pink Flamingos* in which the character would sport even more exaggerated guises while undertaking more extreme behavior. In the role, Divine has a larger puffy hairdo that is closer to

yellow than blonde that is shaved back until mid-scalp with heavy eye makeup that extends to where her hairline should start. In her quest to be "the filthiest person alive," she wears form-fitting outfits and has lines such as: "Kill everyone now. Condone first degree murder," "Advocate cannibalism, eat shit" and "you stand convicted of ass-holism." The alarming quality of the larger-than-life personality is obvious in the scene – filmed from a car – where she walks down a Baltimore street, attracting the confused attention of all other pedestrians. *I am Divine* quotes Milstead as reminiscing of the shot, saying that "the whole city was filled with laughter and screaming, people were going absolutely out of their minds. They didn't know what I was." This demonstrates that the drag of Divine was ultimately a highly unsettling one, whose somewhat monstrous qualities obliterated attempts of trying to categorize it as feminine. The scene that jarred the attention of audiences nationwide occurs toward the end of the film where to secure her title, Divine ultimately eats dog droppings – a task actually performed by Milstead for the role. In defending the motivation behind a climactic ending, Waters says they had to ask themselves "what can we do that isn't against the law… yet." By not adhering to the attractive and soft qualities associated with femininity, Divine would instead disrupting such conceptions by performing in a way that tied the exhibition of an imposing female sexuality with that considered grotesque, upending the boundaries of even drag in the process.

As the notoriety of Divine spread, the character would perform in off-Broadway shows and release disco albums, winning the appreciation of A-list celebrities. The plays *Women Behind Bars* and *The Neon Women* – performed at a popular Manhattan upper west side club – which drew members of the in-crowd. They included celebrities who were considered emblematic of the period's rebellious

popular culture such as musicians David Bowie, Mick Jagger and Elton John as well as actors Warren Beatty, Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson. Amid the prevalence of underground queer arts at the time, Divine began to represent "explicitly shocking underground films" and became "the queen of the underground," according to Waters. In addition to films and stage performances, Divine also started a music career designed specifically around the personality. The lyrics of her songs – which were recorded in the 1980s and included singles such as "Born to Be Cheap," "Native Love," "You Think You're a Man" and "I'm So Beautiful" – were confrontational and edgy, with the performances being ramped with energy. Drag performer Joshua Grannell describes them in the documentary as "gay bathhouse disco" that "evoked a sense of power and punk aggression" – appropriate in the context of the punk subculture and its motifs from gay clubs. Divine performed in clubs in the U.S. as well as the United Kingdom, where his performance on the Top of the Pops music program in July 1984 led to many complaints against him appearing on British television. The objections resulted in extensive press coverage, and the oftentimes accompanying boost in record sales. Artist Robert W. Richards is quoted as describing Divine's dynamic by saying that "if there weren't trouble, you had to invent some."

While earning renown among counter culture movements and artistic circles, Divine would not become a household name until starring as a mother in the family friendly film *Hairspray*. In the 1988 John Waters film that addresses the issue of segregation against African Americans through the aspirations of an overweight Caucasian girl aspiring to be part of a televised dance program, Divine plays Edna Turnblad, a devoted mother and wife who has shuttered herself at home for around a decade and stopped looking after herself. It contrasts greatly from Divine's earlier roles in

which she was the high-maintenance star with makeup, hair and outfits that provoked outrage alongside the character's scandalous behaviors and expressions. The film, which Waters has said they did not undertake with the intention of producing a mainstream film, broke Waters and Divine into mainstream cinema. Milstead, however, would pass away just three weeks after the film's nationwide release. It has since become a classic that has been adapted into a Broadway musical and was remade as a musical film in 2007 with John Travolta playing the role of Edna Turnblad. Milstead's assumption of the character of Edna has set a tradition in which the mother role is constantly played by male actors.

4.2 RuPaul, 'Supermodel' Drag Queen

While some drag queens and transgender figures played major roles in the underground arts scene in the second half of the twentieth century, the presence of "feminine" bodies that challenge the male-female dichotomy in American media has ballooned over the last half a decade. While numerous celebrities and appearances in various media came by cited as marking a turning point, it is possible to argue that no one has become such a big household name as drag queen RuPaul. But even before hosting *RuPaul's Drag Race*, a reality TV competition among drag queens that premiered in 2009 and has been renewed since, RuPaul had been one of America's most well-known drag queens. After his 1993 single "Supermodel (You Better Work)" became an international dance hit, he appeared on the music video of singer Diana Ross' 1995 cover of Gloria Gaynor's disco anthem "I Will Survive." In 1996, he won recognition as the world's first drag queen supermodel by becoming a spokesperson for leading cosmetics brand MAC. Back in 1993, an article about

RuPaul in Florida's Sun-Sentinel newspaper had asked "But is America ready for a mainstream drag queen?" (Cochran, 1993). In the interview conducted by Jason Cochran, RuPaul had asserted, "I'm the mainstream, too. I'm in the American public. And I was ready for something wild and frothy and electric and friendly and positive" (Cochran, 1993). Expressing his determination and ambitions he had stressed with his characteristic playful attitude, "I worked my whole career to get to this point. Ain't no stopping the lady at this point, honey" (Cochran, 1993). While Cochran had underlined how the celebrity was "posturing herself to become an icon of self-empowerment," RuPaul had stressed his progressive role in bringing in a new era in pop culture by exclaiming "Hey, I'm 65 million years in the making!" (Cochran, 1993). His phrase "We're born naked, and the rest is drag" has become emblematic of views of the practice as disruptive to the arbitrary code enforced by societies in terms of gender. In the 1990s, the significance of his role had even been noted among scholars, with Tamsin Wilton singling him out as an example of "politically aware gender-fuck… [that] gets much closer to radicalism" (Wilton, 1995: 109) in contrast to other performers known for their androgyny, such as Annie Lennox and David Bowie.

The RuPaul-hosted *Drag Race* show has since exposed the world of drag queens to the wider American audience, but not without sparking controversy along the way. Since it began airing on LOGO – a channel aimed primarily at lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people – it has provided an opportunity for mainstream viewers to become familiar with what used to be a community mainly confined to certain venues and events, and thereby resulted in concern over the mainstreaming of what used to be an activity among the queer community. One of the controversies, revolving around the word she-male and pun she-mail that were

deemed offensive to transgender people, even resulting in sections being removed or edited from the show. While some of the contestants have revealed their transgender identity either during or after the show, the majority are gay males who perform in drag. Alongside the popularity of the show has come questions about whether its exposure of a lifestyle form has led to the reduction of a marginalized identity and practice to a mere form of entertainment. Despite such concerns, the shows' reach has expanded, with episodes being re-aired in the U.S. by channel VH1, while the program is now available in not only Anglophone countries but also Germany, Hungary and Brazil – as well as across other parts of Latin America through VH1's regional version.

Amid the widespread success of the show and its representative of a subculture, a fundamental question that must be asked is whether the forms of drag shown on the program have the potential to challenge stereotypes of femininity and the patriarchal man-woman binary. With the already having completed seven seasons, the majority of the participants have been queens who mostly conform to more "glamorous" embodiments of femininity that abide by the standards of what counts as elegant, classy, sexy or chic appearance. Having an expertise of contemporary fashion know-how and makeup skills is a must for ranking well in the competition, in which participants' success depends on how "naturally" they are able to embody personas that align with mainstream definitions of femininity and the physical attraction associated with it. The feedback from the judges – which include RuPaul himself, dressed in drag – often applaud those who exhibit graceful or seductive qualities. Criticisms, on the other hand, usually advise that the queens be more elegant, softer and ladylike rather than boyish – as evident from the judgments in the very first episode alone.

Due to the show's emphasis on conventional femininity – whether it be a more elegant seductive form or a more bold sultriness – it has been dragged into discussions about whether drag is offensive to women. After all, if drag is supposed to be a potentially subversive form of performance, it should challenge heteronormative views of femininity rather than adhere to – or furthermore reinforce – them. After Mary Cheney, former Vice President Dick Cheney's lesbian daughter, voiced her objections to drag in January 2015, even going so far as to compare it to racist blackface performances, discussions on the issue were rekindled. In a program on Southern California Public Radio addressing the comments, drag queen and writer Miz Cracker told the AirTalk program that he had had both a visceral response to refute the claims as well as an intellectual one recognizing how certain acts could be interpreted as degrading to women. While stressing that drag was fundamentally a "celebration of women and their beauty and intelligence," he acknowledged that it could "also be used for other purposes like pointing out stereotypes of women" (AirTalk, 2015). Meredith Heller, a faculty member at Northern Arizona University specializing in drag and performance, joined the discussion by underlining that drag's purpose lies in bending gender identity, and how historically the practice served as "an act of visibility and celebration in queer communities." She the proceeded to explain that when removed from the context of the associated community and its values and placed in a commercial context – she cites *RuPaul's Drag Show* as an example – "you lose part of the meaning of drag and so it becomes more traditionalist, more static, more of a parody." This implies the danger of drag loosing what transgressive meaning it may have during the process of becoming mainstream, concerns also voiced by an article in *The Media* bi-weekly newspaper titled *Deconstructing Drag Race: A Radical Reconsideration*

of RuPaul's Reality Show. In it, Francis highlights that while drag is "in and of itself is subversive," unfortunately "the drag culture depicted on Drag Race is just a wigged, mascara'd, and tucked status quo" (Francis, 2013).

While concerns have been expressed over how the show does not seem to place enough attention on forms of drag that can be disruptive to repressive gender norms, the unease can even extend to objections about how such representations reinforce an imbalance in the case of its spinoff series. Unlike *Drag Race*, *RuPaul's Drag U* doesn't center on a competition between drag queens but rather one between participants presented as "average" women in need of a change – or more precisely, a physical and mental improvement – in their lives under the guidance of drag queens. It can be compared to other lifestyle improvement reality series, and has three women partake in a 48-hour competition for each episode . Playing off the theme of higher education and learning of sophistication, the show features RuPaul serving as the "president" of the "university" where the professors are all drag queens, with the exception of the dance instructor and rarely the celebrity guest judge. A marked different between the spinoff, which debuted in 2010 but was cancelled after three seasons, and the original is that RuPaul does not appear in drag but always dons a fashionable male suit. The consistency of the menswear seems to suggest an affirmation of their association with authority and the enforcement of social codes. While he still speaks – and to some degree moves – in the effeminate style for which he is known, the iconic drag queen's constant donning of a male suit in a series focusing on teaching biological women how to fulfill their "femininity" is striking.

The purpose behind the episodes lies in counseling women who are less than satisfied with themselves in how they can refashion themselves according to the standards espoused by the drag queens assigned to guide them. The introduction to each episode starts with RuPaul describing the imaginary institution as serving to "help biological women unleash their inner divas," suggesting that the contestants need to add more feminine dynamism to their lives, and can learn how from overly glamorized queens. "We here at Drag U are in the business of putting drag queen heads on women's shoulders," he says, playing off the idiom of "a good head of his/her shoulders" and underlining how the purpose of the education offered involves acting out exaggerated roles of femininity. Alluding to his well-known quote that any adornment picked up after birth is a form of "drag," a key area of focus during the process is to "sass up their everyday drag," thereby bringing about a change in how the participants present themselves in their lives. Upon greeting the three contestants n each episode, RuPaul reminds them of that the program "like the real world" is a competition – echoing the principles of capitalism – but in this case, the prize will be claimed by the "baddest bitch in school," or the woman who shows the most dynamism.

Based on the societally determined categories the contestants are categorized under and the lessons they are taught, the show suggests an ideal of contemporary womanhood and the need to work toward it. For instance, each episode is titled according to the types of women participating and in most cases, they are grouped according to qualities that may socially be deemed as deficient. They includes so-called tomboys, plump women, mothers who devote their time to their families, women whose employment deals with animals or "masculine" tasks, and women seeking relationships. This thus leaves the impression that the type of womanhood

that must be aspired toward is one in which a woman spends prioritizes her appearance, focuses on more luxurious aspects of living and attracts admiration. Toward this end the contestants are provided "Lady Lessons" – a title that brings to mind the traditionalist norms imposed on women. The guidance under this section involves a range of how to leave a sexy voicemail message or take a sexy picture for an online dating profile, as well as how to create fuller lips and a curvy figure with padding. The "Drag Tips" likewise emphasize constructing the appearance and demeanor of a physically provocative woman by giving advise on cosmetics, items of clothing and even how to use different shades of makeup to create the look of fuller breasts.

The show involves the identification of the alleged shortcomings in the contestants' lives and provides them with guidance on how to cultivate their femininity – in the process revealing how closely the ideas advanced by the program adhere to the priorities of a womanhood compatible with the empowered individualism promoted by consumer society in neoliberal times. The theme of the very first episode and its title – which like that of others, involves a witty cultural allusion and/or pun – depicts the standards underpinning the process – "Tomboy Meets Girl". Not only does it play off the coming-of-age popular television series "Boy Meets Girl," but foregrounds the emphasis on gender role. However, what is even more striking about the episode title is how it entails two tensions about gender performativity that will be fundamental to the program. Firstly, it suggests that the participants involved are sufficient in their femininity so that they are more identifiable with the label of tomboy – a term which itself recognizes a discrepancy between the sex one was born with and their gender identification and/or performance – than that of girl. While it may seem like a harmless play on words, it nonetheless carries some degree of

normative judgment, particularly given the purpose of the show. Second, the title positions the participants are the stark opposite of the "professors" training them. While the latter were born males and have adopted performances of – and to some degree identification with – feminine characters, the former were born female and identify with the woman gender, but their way of dressing and way of holding themselves, whether through walk or body language, skew toward what is socially categorized as masculine. While cross-dressing may at times serve as a potentially subversive practice that man-woman binary, here the drag queens serve somewhat as guardians of normativity, teaching these women what they have to change about themselves in order to conform to the practices generally deemed elegant and attractive – notions not free of classed and racialized meanings.

The conversations and advise given during the show typically fits into a profile of enforcing a form of female subject who is confident and can pursue her desires, while also deriving her "power" based off her ability to draw the gaze of others through compatibility with societally-sanctioned definitions of beauty. The drag queens' first and foremost task lies in encouraging the contestants by boosting their self-esteem and teaching them self-worth, drawing a powerful connection between confidence and self-respect and assuming an attractive feminine role. In the "Tomboy Meets Girl" episode, one of Jujubee's primary objectives is how to teach the participant she is paired with how "to feel safe and sexy in a dress." When Reyna wears a dress, Jujubee inquires in a pedagogical way "do you feel powerful?" as she tries to affiliate the ability to wear a feminine article of clothing with empowerment. She then proceeds to assert that "just because you're feminine doesn't mean you're weak," challenging views that associate certain ways of dress with fragility and passivity. Perhaps the most noteworthy remark is when she that

"there is no one better than a drag queen" to teach the contestants how they can don feminine garb with confidence and strength. While suggesting the challenge men playing the role of hyper-femininity presents to heteronormative norms, this comment can have other implications as well. Such is the case since it also sets drag queens in an authoritative position as having cultivated the code of femininity, and therefore one in which they can enforce it.

In addition to the focus on appearance, the conversations aimed at learning about and bringing out any dynamism in the contestants' personalities bring to the forefront of another aspect of valued in femininity – attraction to males and sexuality. When questioning the women upon meeting them to understand their priorities and concerns, the queens often ask about what kinds of men they are attracted to – such as who their favorite celebrity is and what qualities they would prefer in a significant other. They also try to extract any details that may hint into their sexual fantasies or better – their willing to experiment with anything that may be considered intriguing or daring, such as hula hoop dancing, boudoir modeling or bisexuality. The drag queens also appear to not pass up on opportunities to make dirty jokes, seizing on chances joke with Freudian slips and play with puns. While the openness about sexuality and unwillingness to censor the humor may be aimed at showcasing self-empowerment and agency, often they are spoken from the point of view of a passive role and/or one more associated with the female in the sex binary. They include jokes about "being poked" during a conversation about mascara as well, high libido but in a more submissive role, and fellatio. Such jokes as these mostly adhere to common associations of female subjects with certain sexual practices and the widely perceived power dynamic between genders, rather than challenging them. While they promote a woman subject who can pursue her

desires, these desires are ones typically associated with womanhood in cultures that position them as objects of pleasure. While Morgan McMichaels may proudly proclaim the "drag queens are the epitome of sex," this need not purely mean that they embody freedom and self-determination. Rather, their being equated with sex may reduce them to a position which has long been the exploited one, especially in a consumer society which adds a monetary value not only to conventional forms of beauty, but values such as empowerment.

4.3 "The Year(s)" of Other "Feminine" Bodies

The RuPaul reality programs began airing and gained popularity – especially in the case of *Dag Race* – at a time when feminine bodies not belonging to cisgender female commenced a process of rapidly gaining visibility. In December 2010, an article published in the New York Times had pointed to the prevalence transgender figures and attention to the issue. In *Bold Crossings of the Gender Line*, which carried the subheading *Transsexuals Are Edging Into the Mainstream*, William Van Meter had referred to "visible bits of evidence that 2010 will be remembered as the year of the transsexual" (Van Meter, 2010). Using examples from across popular culture – such as the premiere of the first "transversal" magazine Candy, designer Marc Jacobs cross-dressing for *Industrie* magazine and the success of Brazilian model Lea T – he had argued that it had not been "since the glam era of the 1970s [that] gender-bending so saturated the news media" (Van Meter, 2010), referring to past exposures amid an interest in experimentation. He then proceeded to indicate that a shift however has occurred in that "mystery has been replaced with empowerment, even pride" (Van Meter, 2010). The argument is then that whereas the presence of a transgender subject previously caused responses that shocked the

audience and piqued its fascination, more recent representations involved subjects who were not reduced to merely objects of curiosity, but existed in a context of greater agency for people who affiliated with the matter. Van Meter also quoted Paisley Currah, political science professor at Brooklyn College, as saying that transgender people "are slowly becoming a common part of popular culture" (Van Meter, 2010). He too remarked on the development of attitudes on the issue, underlining that such individuals "elicit interest, but it's not some incredulous response," elaborating that: "The public is much more aware of the possibilities of transgender people existing and taking part as leaders in the social and cultural life" (Van Meter, 2010).

While the article had hailed how an entry into the mainstream would serve as a sign of acceptance and recognition, it also addressed concerns of whether further progress would follow or the issue lose its momentum and fade away. Van Meter takes into account past instances of transgender people gaining visibility in media, and the existence of "a transsexual moment in fashion in virtually every decade" (Van Meter, 2010). He refers to the case of model April Ashley as early as the 1960s, whose career ended once her gender status was published in British tabloids. Katie Grand, editor of alternative British fashion magazine Love is quoted referring to the use of transgender people in the 1960s and 1970s fashion industry, but underlining a new development in that currently "high fashion has embraced these characters for advertising, as well as Vogue and Oprah Winfrey" (Van Meter, 2010). Connie Fleming, a transsexual who gained fame in the 1990s and modeled for Thierry Mugler and appeared in a George Michael music video, also describes the interest as that has "always come in and out." She somewhat ominously described the trend as "a flavor of the month, and let's get into it, and then there's always a

backlash" (Van Meter, 2010) – expressing the anxieties that come alongside an issue as it catches popularity amid a process of mainstreaming, a trend that may soon fade out rather than having lasting impact.

Concerns about the interest in unconventional feminine bodies fading out, however, seem to have been unwarranted as the past years have seen an even further mainstreaming of drag queens and transgender women. Drag queens have become increasingly visible as celebrities and spokespeople [2] and on advertisements, television programs particularly reality shows, and at entertainment venues and parties – where they serve growingly diverse crowds rather than those in solely gay and/or artistic circles as previously. Some of those who have made a name for themselves through gender-bending practices have even been able to advance their careers and build brands. Such opportunities have been especially common in the fashion and cosmetics industry, with figures including Jeffree Star – a pop singer and social media sensation – and Elaine Lancaster – an entertainer initially popular among Miami's "in" crowds who went on to appear on several reality TV shows – starting makeup brands that they actively promote over social media. MAC cosmetics meanwhile has continued in its adoption of subcultural icons nearly twenty years after using RuPaul as a model by using possibly the most famous fictional transgender character as its poster girl – alien mad scientist Frank N. Furter from *The Rocky Horror Show*. The association of "feminine" Other bodies, especially in the fashion and cosmetics industries, seems to suggest an association between a leading force in determining tastes — particularly consumerist ones – and an interest in the uncommon of boundary-breaking.

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[2] Earlier this year, a drag queen who goes by the name Miss Richfield 1981 was even appointed the tourism ambassador of Atlantic City, New Jersey, following the election of the city's first openly gay mayor, Don Guardian.

4.3.1 'Candy' Magazine, Fashion de-politicized?

One such cultural production that demonstrates the appeal of gender-bending is Candy magazine, which has marked its fifth anniversary since being mentioned in the New York Times article (Van Meter, 2010). The biannual publication that was named after Warhol star Candy Darling touts itself "The First Transversal Style Magazine," foreground cross-dressing as well as trans-identity. While each issue ran as an exclusive limited edition with only 1,000 copies when it was first launched, the number has since been increased to 1,500 prints – with many issues being sold out despite the high price range of 50 to 70 Euros depending on the buyers' location. Each issue features either a transgender celebrity or one known for their artistically "creative" roles dressed in a drag-like manner. For its special 5th anniversary for Winter 2014-2015, it featured 14 renowned transgender women including Laverne Cox, who became the first transgender person to grace the cover of *Time* magazine and to be nominated for a Primetime Emmy award in 2014.[3] Writing about the magazine and its latest issue, an article in *Vogue* had hailed it as a "celebration of gender and sexual diversity that manages to be simultaneously glamorous and radical" (Blanks, 2014) – casting it as demonstrating the main objectives of the fashionable.

In the interview, the magazine's editor Luis Venegas describes the purpose behind the publication by emphasizing his ambition to run a fashion magazine that would

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[3]Another was Carmen Carrera, a "RuPaul's Drag Race" contestant who came out as transgender and began transitioning following her appearance on the show's third season. A petition on Change.org had called on Victoria's Secret to include her among the brand's famous runway show in 2013, but was not heeded despite collecting more then 48,000. While it would indeed be a history-making event for a transgender woman to walk for a lingerie brand known to exemplify the epitome of female beauty under mainstream consumer, it must be asked what the further implications would be if spokespeople for an identification deemed as disruptive to heteronormative norms start representing them.

push the boundaries of what had so far been undertaken. He tells writer Tim Blanks of how he had asked himself:

> how could one more be different and important? As new, exciting, and relevant as it was to see black models on the covers of fashion magazines back in the late '60s and '70s? What group of people deserved to be celebrated? (Blanks, 2014)

Thus the mission is presented as one of breaking into a new frontier, one comparable to the progress made during the years of the civil rights and counter-culture movements. It aims to grant visibility to a previously disenfranchised group and addressed issues formerly considered taboo. Much of the rest of the interview dwells on Venegas' pursuit of the groundbreaking, with him agreeing with Blanks that he deliberately "seek[s] out the trailblazers, the originals, and give[s] them their due" (Blanks, 2014). When Blanks draws a comparison between him and renowned Spaniard filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar by asking "You're subversive like him though, aren't you?" the editor responds by saying, "I guess I am... I always try to push some limits of what's 'conventional'" (Blanks, 2014). This prioritization of transgressing former societal restrictions and moving toward change is underlined when Venegas describes the special issue as "starring 14 women who are leading the contemporary trans revolution" (Blanks, 2014). He then consciously concentrates on how the issue fits into the current era and which direction it may be headed toward by asking a rhetorical question he himself answers: "Is it too daring to say that we've made history? Time will tell" (Blanks, 2014).

Yet despite the Venegas' voicing of a desire to transgress socially-imposed barriers and explore new ground, he has also presented Candy magazine as a publication that serves as part of mainstream fashionable culture. While not necessarily contradicted by his 2014 interview with *Vogue*, an earlier one with van Meter for the New York Times had cast the magazine as one focused on style whose ambitions did not

include flouting the mainstream. Referring to how the magazine collaborates with popular fashion photographers, he had insisted that Candy is "not underground or niche" but rather "something that everybody, especially in the fashion and art world, could be interested to look at" (Van Meter, 2010). Instead of presenting the publication as one whose content and aims can challenge established values, he describes it as appealing to stylish circles who uphold certain aesthetic tastes. Venegas even went so far as to deny any political potential that the magazine may have entailed, contrasting it to other publications seeking to improve the welfare of queer communities by addressing their rights and "the achievements of the gay movement." He is quoted as saying "I didn't want Candy to be like that. I wanted it to be like Vogue" (Van Meter, 2010), a purpose demonstrated in the 2010-2011 edition that stars actor James Franco in drag and includes images of Venegas himself impersonating *Vogue*'s editor, Anna Wintour. Yet while disassociating Candy from the fight for gay rights, he nonetheless adds how besides the gay community, "[t]here are few groups of people for whom fashion, makeup and hair is more relevant" (Van Meter, 2010). Such comments seem to suggest that while being reluctant of the magazine having the image of a political one, he is more comfortable to present the gay and transgender community – at least the members who Candy caters to – as prioritizing a lifestyle prioritizing aesthetics.

The appeal of Candy as a not so political publication focused on an appreciation of fashion that stands out by shocking audiences through gender-bending may also be reflected by the celebrities it features and which issues are more successful. Of the eight editions published to date, two covers star transgender women, three males dressed in feminine attire, one female donning a mustache and masculine garments, one actress Tilda Swinton – known for her androgynous appearance – dressed in a

fantastical metallic evening dress with a glamorous hairdo and makeup, and a dual cover of musicians Marilyn Manson and Lady Gaga attired in gender-blending clothes, seeming facial hair and nudity. While the majority of the issues have sold out, it is important to note which ones have not. All the issues of men in drag – including Jared Leto and James Franco dressed appearing as conventionally decorated women on the cover and dressed as males wearing seductive makeup in the inside pages – are out of stock. Whereas of the five covers with female subjects, the fifth anniversary issue with the 14 transgender celebrities donning sexy dresses is among the only two to be sold out. The other features – in black and white – Lady Gaga with her head resembling a mustached Charlie Chaplin impersonator, clown-like dark lipstick and mismatched eyebrows, a dark furry coat leaving the left side of her body exposed, including her genital area and a breast whose nipple is only covered by a drawn-on scorpion. Meanwhile the issues that remain in stock are those of actress Chloe Sevigny dressed as a dorky-looking man, a glamourized Tilda Swinton and the 1990s' famous transgender woman Connie Fleming as a Michele Obama look-a-like being sworn into office and waving an American flag. Despite originally casting the magazine as a non-political one, Venegas has explained the motivation behind the issue by referring to how the two presidential nominees from the Democratic Party in 2007 were the African-American Barack Obama and the female Hilary Clinton. "At that time, I thought, 'when will the time come when these archaic walls break down and the White House will be occupied by, for example, a black, transsexual woman?'" (Davies, 2012), he told Dazed Digital in December 2012. The cover thus serves to represent the possibility of a candidate fitting into all three categories of disenfranchisement. Yet despite the provocativeness of the cover, the question is why did it not sell out like the majority of other issues.

While the NYT article cited above pondered on whether 2010 would be remembered as the "year of the transsexual," the momentum of coverage of the issues faced by people with such gender identifications has only increased – particularly from 2014 into 2015. The television schedule this past summer saw several stations air reality programs touching on the matter: ABC Family's *Becoming Us*, Discovery Life's *New Girls on the Block*, Bravo's *I am Cait*, TLC's *I am Jazz* and a Public Broadcasting Service Frontline episode called *Growing Up Trans*. The year before, Amazon had premiered a show called *Transparent* that focuses on a family discovering that their retired professor father is identifies as a woman. While all the programs aim to address the issues faced by transsexual people and society's response, it must be noted that most of the programs focus on subjects who identify as female. The protagonists in all of those listed above are transgender females – with the exception of the PBS show that focuses on a spectrum of youths – even if they do sometimes present transgender males. This paper will discuss the reality shows on Bravo and TLC. While the former revolves around Caitlyn Jenner, who was previously famous as Olympian Bruce Jenner and the patriarch of the celebrity Kardashian-Jenner family, the latter follows Jazz Jennings and her supportive family of six as she prepares for high school.

4.3.2 Cait, Olympian-turned-Woman of the Year

Jenner's coming out as transgender in April was followed by the premiere of her reality show in July. The revelation of identifying as a female had been a high contrast to the heteronormative masculinity with which Bruce Jenner had been associated given his status as a renowned American athlete who won the decathlon during the Cold War and as a man surrounded by females who exemplified the

fashionista and consumerist lifestyle. Due to his decades of fame and recent appearances on popular – and widely mocked – reality series focusing on the now ex-wife's children from Jenner and previous relationships, Cait has become the most spoke about transgender figure, a status of which her new show reveals consciousness.

As could be expected due to the attention on Cait, her show claims to aim to spread awareness of the difficulties faced by transgender individuals for whom she feels like she must be a spokesperson. The first episode starts with her seemingly filming herself as in a confessional style as she is unable to sleep amid concerns about the struggles of transgender youths and whether she will be an appropriate representative for the community. She expresses grief over the high death and murder rate among transgender people, while simultaneously asking "will I say the right things, do I project the right image?" Throughout the first episode, she underlines the need for support, giving statistics on how many people have been killed due to their gender identity. In this light, the series covers her visiting the family of a young transgender boy who recently committed suicide and speaking with groups of transgender women while trying to come to terms with finally living her life openly as a woman. The show also addresses the common objection to whether Jenner can be an appropriate spokesperson for the transgender community given her high social standing and financial assets. In expressing appreciation for the support system available to her in the first episode, she acknowledges that many others struggle with families who lack the financial resources. "I have a voice but there are so many transgender people who don't have a voice," she says. "I realize that in this transition I have a privileged status."

However, despite Cait's constant reiteration of the needs of the transgender community, there is also a significant emphasis on her upscale lifestyle and reminders of her celebrity status. This pattern is especially concerning given how her association with the shallowest form of entertainment may impact any potential for her message to unsettle oppressive heteronormative approaches. Throughout the first episode alone, there is a relentless focus on physical attractiveness. In the early morning confessional the series launches with, before expressing her worries for transgender people, she has to make the insecure disclaimer that women are all-too-acquainted with having to acknowledge – "I look like crap." When the first episode does dive into the narrative, it starts with Cait receiving a makeover with stylists surrounding her, before she contemplates which outfit would be most appropriate to present herself for the first time as a woman to her mother and sisters. While this early focus on her appearance may at first be explained as aimed at depicting the tension of preparing herself for her family, the emphasis on appearance persists throughout. When her mom is trying to come to terms with the change in the child she raised as a boy, she comforts herself by saying that "I think he's a very good-looking woman." While she is a senior woman whose understanding of her child has been disrupted, other cast members who are younger and more familiar with contestations over gender seem to focus just as much on physical beauty, with her daughter repeatedly telling her "you look so pretty." When ex-stepdaughter Kim visits with rapper husband Kanye West, her first comments are to call Cait beautiful and skinny, before jumping to inquire about her new wardrobe. This leads to a scene of exploring the closet and listing off the designer names whose products are available.

Perhaps the most disappointing scene, however, is one that seems to confirm doubts about whether Cait can serve as a spokesperson if she maintains her reputation for reality TV and a celebrity lifestyle that encourages consumerism. When her daughter Kylie does show up to see her dad for the first time since Cait's transition, she rushes to put teal-colored extensions into her hair putting having her turn around to post a picture to upload onto social media. Cait mentions how people will not be able to recognize whose back is in the photo and they discuss how to caption it, laughing about Kylie revealing that the woman captured is her father. The conversation touches on the issue of gender performance and challenge to heteronormative views on it, but fails to address the matter with any depth. Rather it comes across as upsettingly shallow due to its framing in the context of altering a woman's natural features with accessories and the contemporary obsession with adorning and positioning oneself to present flattering images on social media. While I have not, prior to learning of Jenner's transition, willingly attempted to learn about the Kardashian-Jenner family, due to my knowledge of their high involvement ‚n exposing their personal lives to such an extent that it has produced overwhelming coverage on them, the scene raised suspicion on another level. Upon searching whether Kylie Jenner had any connection to the hair extension market, I discovered that sure enough there is a line under her name by the Bellami extension company. Yet despite all the concerns about Jenner as a transgender spokesperson, she is the one receiving the most attention and was even awarded Glamour magazine's "Woman of the Year" award – at a time when so many transgender women, many with less financial and social resources, have managed to make a name for themselves.

4.3.3 Jazz, the Youngest Postergirl

While Cait's show follows a high-profile celebrity taking a role as a representative of the transgender community, *I am Jazz* tells the story of what is presented as an "average" American girl – who happens to be transgender – coming to terms with growing up with the support of her loving family. While the Jennings are cast as a typical middle class family, Jazz had received media attention as early as 2007 when she became the youngest person to come out on national television as transgender. She has already written a children's book titled *I am Jazz* like the show, and runs a YouTube channel that has more than 178,000 subscribers. She was among TIME magazine's "25 Most Influential Teens of 2014."

While Jenner's show has received mixed reviews, with many criticizing her privileged status and the show's incoherent narrative, TLC has mostly been applauded for its handling of *I am Jazz*. Critics have praised the focus on the presentation of Jazz and her family as a relatable "average" family supporting their youngest in her difficult teenage years, as well as the sympathetic and sensitive way it addresses her transgender status – all of which may be instrumental is gaining acceptance for the disadvantaged group. A number of reviews including one by Variety magazine (Lowry, 2015) drew attention to how the series does not disclose Jazz's accomplishments and spokesperson role until the fifth episode when she attends a signing for her book. Her parents and two older brothers and sister are also sympathetic with easygoing attitudes and a genuineness to them despite – and perhaps partly because of – not having become fully adapted to ignoring the presence of the camera and crew. Explaining the parents' decision to do the show, mother Jeanette said that the family had previously not been ready for such a large

amount of attention, and they did not think that America was either. "Transgender was not on everybody's tongue," she said in a Buzzfeed report (Shapiro, 2015). Both she and her husband Greg refer to the high number of cases of violence against transgender people as a motivation for agreeing to make their private lives public. "We felt like we were in a certain position where, maybe if we shared our story on a more regular basis, a societal shift could occur," Greg told the website.

Despite the sympathetic qualities of the Jennings family and their expressed desire to contribute to change, there is once again a recurring emphasis on feminine appearance. Of course, this is an understandable concern for a transgender girl who is on hormone blockers so that she will not develop the secondary male characteristics that develop with puberty. They are also worries that make Jazz identifiable with all other girls at that age. But what are the implications for an audience for transgender issues to be so foregrounded in the need to conform to the societally enforced definition of feminine beauty? In the Buzzfeed article, Amanda Shapiro refers to the "voyeurism factor" of the show. As examples of the cover of "Jazz's budding sexuality," she cites how Jazz "jokes with her mom about her breasts, giggles with her friends about how she doesn't menstruate, or calls her genitalia a 'thinga-minga' at the doctor's office" (Shapiro, 2015). Yet given the teenage insecurity about looks and the need to measure oneself according to one's peers, the discussion touching on sexual characteristics and issues spread to Jazz's cisgender female friends as well. Shapiro writes about an instance during her interview of the family when Jazz expressed sadness about how the show had covered a discussion with her friends in which one mentioned having the smallest breasts among them, and her brother Sander tried to comfort her by saying that friend was "the prettiest" – a comment the other Jennings acknowledged. Such an

exchange again places primary value on physical features, suggesting that a deemed deficiency in certain features can only be compensated by others considered more flattering. The article also refers to a screening of the show in which the father of one of the teens attending compliments the show to Jazz, before telling her that she is "gonna get a lot of dates out of it" (Shapiro, 2015). The remark of praise equates female success and young women's concerns with the ability to attract admirers, as if that were a fundamental sign of fulfilling one's womanhood. So although Jazz's narrative is one that challenges restrictive conventions on what constitutes gender and sexuality, the presentation and reception of it seems at times to be far free of cultural meanings that tie womanhood to attractiveness.

In addition to Jazz's narrative being fit into molds that conform with long-established standards of gender, it seems to also be under threat of another form of the recuperation – that by the commercial sector. Jazz serves as a spokesperson for the transgender community, but also for dermatological brand Clean & Clear. The company's interest in working with her suggests a further mainstreaming of the transgender issue and how more benefits than backlash were perceived in such an acceptance and affiliation. Uploaded onto the brand's YouTube channel are a commercial starring Jazz as well as short videos in which she speaks about herself and various products. Overall, the videos share some similarities with the reality show, primarily in how they revolve around interest in a transgender girl, while also focusing on how her process of transitioning resembles that of her cisgender peers. The commercial begins with the lines:

> I've always known exactly who I am. I was a girl trapped in a boy's body. Growing up has been quite a struggle being transgender – especially in middle school.

It starts with a line that can resonate with anyone, before introducing the speaker as transgender, a revelation that compounds the meaning of the previous statement. Elaborating more on the difficulties that come with the "extra-ordinary" identification, it then transitions into a general dilemma faced by most people in the U.S. Furthermore, the challenges faced in middle school are often related to growing into one's body and being accepted by other members of society – concerns which the brands skincare products are targeted at. Jazz lists some problems she has faced in terms of being embraced – literally and figuratively – by her peers, before shifting to the epiphany of deciding to "put myself out there." So although the subject matter revolves around growing up transsexual, it relates to nearly all adolescents – the target consumer group of Clean & Clear – and carries the universal message of being proud of, and developing, one's self.

Amid the increasing focus on the "feminine" bodies of transgender woman and mostly homosexual female impersonators in American media, such portrayals have often come across an appreciate and praise for the visibility granted to non-heteronormative individuals who have long been repressed by society. However, as the cases discussed above suggest, this process of mainstreaming seems to be unfolding through representations of such individuals adhering to long-established – and even patriarchal – understandings of femininity, rather than those challenging them. The people who have gained renown as spokespeople are usually those conforming to the prioritization of physical beauty and consumerism associated with the "modern" women's role in a late capitalist society. And even if these figures do not shoot to fame through the association of their sexuality – in some cases, even exaggerated sexuality – with transgression, it appears that brands are ready to seemingly ally for their cause, thereby promoting themselves through an affiliation

with the ethical principles such as freedom and equality. In considering the threat of appropriation faced by potentially emancipatory values and practices, there is a need for constant analysis and criticism – as exemplified for Laverne Cox (mentioned above) when admitting to the shortcomings of her reality TV program *TRANSform Me*, which revolved around transgender women assisting cisgender women reconstruct themselves. Voicing her criticism of makeover shows, she admits her later dissatisfaction with her own "the premise of the show presupposes that all trans women are hyper-feminine and that trans people exist for the entertainment of cis people" (Jones, 2014) – posing the fundamental questions that must be asked.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

After centuries of being repressed under patriarchal societies, feminine subjects and the sexuality associated with their bodies, when they gain visibility in popular culture texts that allow them a voice and agency, appear to stand for the possibility of overcoming long-established and – enforced inequalities. Such subjects' assertion of their respect for, and control over, their bodies suggests a challenge against the dominant ideologies that have long restricted how their bodies could be used and what they could symbolize – often relegating to them only the option of serving as a docile site on which society's patriarchal and heteronormative values were inscribed.

The breaking of such limits provides an opportunity for these subjects' emancipation – yet transgression is not without its pitfalls. Due to both feminine bodies being laden with sexualized meanings and the allure of supposed transgression, representations of such feminine subjects rebelliously asserting self-control are prone to being absorbed into the system, particularly one that has come to thrive by channeling the desire for subversion and liberation, and even incorporating them

into the life politics individuals use to aestheticize their everyday lives. Within such an evolved capitalist context, representations of drag queens and transgender women in popular culture face the threat of having their oppositional potential neutralized through the process of mainstreaming, particularly given the influence of camp tastes that reflect the conflicted drives, offering a voice to the marginal but through an elitist claim based on aesthetics. As revealed by the contradictions inherent in the development of post-feminism, such representations are susceptible to becoming superficial tokens that gain legitimacy by appearing like emancipatory values despite their presentation ultimately being a depoliticized one, and therefore perhaps little more than a semblance of an anti-ideological challenge that hides its very own incorporation into the system and the subsequent strengthening of dominant discourses.

In exploring representations of feminine subjects who could be considered "subversive" in popular culture over the last few years, this thesis has aimed to contribute to literature on these topics by examining what theories about the handling of – and possible meanings derived from – portrayals of female bodies can reveal about "other" types of the "feminine" and whatever patterns there may be in media. A discussion of the primary conceptions and conflicts involved – transgression of taboos, challenges to patriarchy and heteronormative – may be applicable to other studies of the representations of sexuality and the possible threats they may pose – or be perceived as posing. Likewise, the discussion of popular culture as a terrain of contestation alongside the analysis of patterns of the appropriation of transgression has aimed to shed light on the particularly severe danger of neutralization present when what could be subversive is depoliticized, or when multiple issues deemed "transgressive" are presented simultaneously in a way

creating a spectacle within the system rather than posing the questions that may undermine it. This has led to an examination of how the fostering of an "interest" in the marginal is especially concerning when it gains its legitimacy through associations with – and the interaction between – emancipatory visions, elite tastes and the channeling of desire.

Due to its being inspired by the cultural meanings attached and imposed onto femininity, however, this thesis has prioritized the analysis of the representations of women and female bodies in texts rather than an in-depth discussion of theories on transgender identities and issues. Such topics have primarily been addressed in terms of their challenge to heteronormativity and patriarchy rather than in terms of their own defining characteristics. In a similar way, the focus on mainstreaming and on the power and appeal of appeal of popular culture – especially due to its prominence in a consumer society – has not devoted a lot of attention to drag queens and transgender figures who can be considered highly rebellious in intentionally flouting common symbols and notions about femininity (with some exceptions including the acknowledgment of the legacy of Divine and Cox's admission of the need to be cautious about the mainstreaming process).

Future studies can take these discussions into multiple directions depending on the issue placed as the focus – non-heteronormative femininity, its media portrayal, its repercussion on dominant views about sexuality. Of course the most direct continuation would be an ongoing examination of whether the current trends mentioned in this thesis will persist. The questions for which answers are sought could include whether such trends are "the flavor of the moment," whether they will go the route of post-feminism and become mainstream morality upheld by

consumerism, or whether they can break through attempts at commodification. Will representations and values of sexuality – no matter how taboo previously – repeatedly be made to comply with patriarchy, will capitalism continue to evolve through channeling repressed forms of sexuality, or will oppressed "feminine" subjects pave paths for each other's emancipation?

In exploring these questions and others, future studies may wish to not concentrate on mainstream media portrayals and the familiarization of non-queer audiences with drag and transgender lifestyles and culture, but examine forms of genderfuck based on destabilizing ideas related to gender binaries at their core through a disassociation from the clothes, makeup and behaviors equated with sexiness and femininity. They could also address the issues from an angle other than that of "feminine" bodies and revolving around queer and trans theory and practices. An analysis of media representations and the way in which they are negotiated by both producers and audiences can continued to be engaged with in a more in-depth manner, or could be set aside for field studies of the impact of these images and messages on communities and individuals. Another stimulating inquiry that could shed light on the relationship between texts and bodies deemed transgressive and/or subversive would be an in-depth examination of specific figures and the transformation they undergone over time and through media exposure in accordance with the interests of general audiences, the LGBT community and commercial and sociopolitical agendas.

For the time being, this thesis has striven to examine the recent increase in media representations of drag queens and transgender women in a social context in which "feminine" bodies have been overloaded with various and at times contradictory

culturally constructed meanings. The discussions constituting the study have been motivated by questions about whether such non-heteronormative bodies can finally pose a challenge to patriarchal views that have long been upheld, despite adapting some modifications that have permitted some liberties associated with femininity and sexuality in a manner that has opened the way for the further development of capitalist society and neoliberal values. The chances of such emancipatory potential to be realized, let alone maintained, however, appear to be slimmer than not in an environment in which people are presented with texts that give the impression of being open to active engagement and contestation – but while stripping texts of actual substance and subjects of their oppositional drives. The urge for transgressing social constraints is pacified through the offering of opportunities to "develop" one's self – physically, politically and morally – through affiliations with superficial symbols standing for a recognition and embracing of the long-oppressed marginal.

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