Rethinking Gender in Popular Culture in the 21st Century

Rethinking Gender in Popular Culture in the 21st Century:

Marlboro Men and California Gurls

Edited by

Astrid M. Fellner,
Marta Fernández-Morales
and Martina Martausová

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The genesis of this book can be found in the 12th International ESSE (European Society for the Study of English) Conference, held at the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University (UPJŠ) in Košice, Slovakia, in August 2014. ESSE regularly arranges conferences to foster research networks in topics which bring together scholars and writers to facilitate intellectual cooperation. The conference in Košice, besides other interesting fields related to the study of English, opened up lines of debate about the new realities of popular culture(s) in the post-9/11 era in two seminars related to the fields of gender and cultural studies. More specifically, the initiative arose from the promoters of the two panels—"Gender and Popular Culture," co-convened by Astrid M. Fellner and Viera Novákova, and "Gender across the Media: 21st-Century Masculinities in Film and TV Fiction," co-convened by Marta Fernández-Morales and Martina Martausová. Both focused on the exploration of the cultural makings of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality in English-speaking countries' popular culture**.** In these events, challenging discussions took place about current constructions of gender identities and the cultural products that inspire and/or reflect them. All in all, the conference included over 100 works presented by researchers and academics from 43 countries who gathered at the UPJŠ for five days of intense activity, and the two seminars that we organized received a considerable amount of interest from scholars from different areas of the world.

The quality and the innovative approach of many of the papers presented during the ESSE events encouraged us to consider the possibility of taking a step forward and putting together a volume with a selection of texts in English, so that the materials, the knowledge, and the original academic proposals that circulated during the conference could reach a larger academic audience on an international level. Thus, we shifted our role from co-convenors to co-editors and committed to collaborating with Cambridge Scholars Publishing in order to make our idea a reality. The articles published in this volume are the result of a rigorous peer-review process that took into account not only quality but also thematic coherence. We contacted the authors of the selected papers and asked them to consider revising and expanding their work, which they did duly and generously. In addition, we invited some upcoming academics as well as some senior scholars from our gender and cultural

studies networks to send us proposals that could establish a dialogue with the ones presented in Košice. Together, as seen in the following pages, these articles cover a wide range of topics, making for an exciting reading for the general public and an invaluable source of secondary materials for specialists and researchers. Furthermore, since the volume includes contributions of non-English-speaking authors from four different countries in Europe—Austria, Germany, Slovakia, and Spain—it offers a transnational scope of cultural analyses. This is especially interesting in the current context of globalization, as the papers provide insight into how the media of English-speaking countries (most obviously the U.S., as a powerful globalizing influence) mould the perception of gender identities amongst international audiences.

This collection of essays owes much to the generosity of many people. First of all, we would like to thank the Scientific Committee that put the Košice conference together for accepting our original proposals and providing the space for the exchange of ideas that is at the root of this book. In particular, we want to thank Viera Nováková for her valuable support. We are especially grateful for the assistance we have received from Mohammad Al-Saqqa, Markus Hetheier, and Banu Ahibay, who paid attention to every detail and who provided indispensable assistance in formatting the articles. We are thankful for their many comments and suggestions that helped to develop this volume through its various transformations. This book could not have been finished without their arduous work behind the scenes. Thanks also to Bärbel Schlimbach for helping proofread the articles. We are also grateful to Eva Nossem, who carefully helped prepare the manuscript and offered guidance and support.

Our thanks go to the staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their interest in this book and their support, especially Theo Moxham and Victoria Carruthers. Finally, we want to thank all our authors for their collegiality and commitment to this project.

Introduction

Rethinking Gender in Popular Culture in the 21st Century

Astrid M. Fellner
Marta Fernández-Morales

In 2010, Katy Perry's song "California Gurls" became the summer anthem in many countries around the world. It was the first single from her third studio album *Teenage Dream*, which was produced by Capitol Records/EMI. Teaming up with Snoop Dogg, Perry offered a light-hearted and ironic subversion of the famous East Coast/West Coast hip hop feud. Perry's "California Gurls" reveals many issues relating to gender and pop culture. In fact, the song and the music video, which is set in fictional "Candyfornia," partake of a kind of popular feminism which appeals to many young women today. Wearing cupcake bras, bright colored wigs, extended eyelashes, and glittery costumes, Perry's artist persona challenges understandings of female identity and sexuality, combating the dictates of hegemonic masculinity, represented by Snoop Dogg. At the same time, Perry's candy gender politics that represents female empowerment as a matter of freedom and choice is complicit with neoliberal forms of self-governance, where the only principle is marketization and self-interest.

The notions of "California Gurls" and "Marlboro Men" in the title of this collection stand for a contradictory gender politics that is indicative of a postfeminist media culture.[1] The phenomenon of postfeminism called in a new era of gender-based discussions and heralded a revival of *chick culture*.[2] Conversely, the new century and its mediatized inauguration—

---

1. According to Rosalind Gill, postfeminism is "best thought of as a *sensibility* that characterises increasing numbers of films, television shows, adverts and other media products." Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility," (emphasis in the original).

2. "The stereotypical chick," as Heike Mißler explains, "is single, lives and works in an urban center, is surrounded by a network of friends, and is struggling to find

the events of 9/11—reopened the debate about masculinity when the transnational crisis and the culture of fear[3] contributed to the revival of the John Wayne myth, as Susan Faludi argues in *The Terror Dream*.[4] *Marlboro Men and California Gurls* explores the makings, un-makings and re-makings of femininity and masculinity in Western popular culture since 9/11. It aims at contributing to the ever-expanding field of gender and cultural studies, exploring 21st-century representation(s) and reception(s) of female and male figures in film and television fiction and other forms of popular culture. Continuing the intense dialogue forwarded by Susan Faludi and writers like Peggy Noonan, who in 2001 affirmed that "[f]rom the ashes of Sept. 11 arise the manly virtues,"[5] they pay attention to the intersections between postfeminism and new forms of femininity/ies and masculinity/ies, while also considering some queering processes that are taking place in contemporary audiovisual products.

The core of the volume is structured as follows: Part One approaches the construction, reconstruction, and deconstruction of female identities in the 21st century, specifically within the context of the ongoing debate about feminism(s) and postfeminism. As Angela McRobbie has explained in *The Aftermath of Feminism*, since the 1990s a new—or maybe we should say reactivated, since there is no novelty in it—set of representational practices have taken the media and popular culture by assault. From political positions that, at best, take the second wave of the feminist movement for granted and, at worst, undermine its contribution to the cause of equality, the proponents of the latest trend—and we use this word very consciously—of female rebellion shift the focus from collective struggle to individual success, reworking the meaning of concepts like

---

a fullfilling [sic] job and a meaningful relationship. The best-known elements of chick culture are certainly chick lit […] and chick flicks, i.e. films; Other media forms comprised by the term are TV programmes, advertisements, music, magazines, websites, and blogs." Heike Mißler, *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism, and Representation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 1.
3. See about the *culture of fear*. Frank Furedi, *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005); Frank Furedi, *Invitation to Terror: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007); Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Updated for Our Post-9/11 World* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).
4. Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America* (New York: Picador, 2007).
5. Peggy Noonan, "Welcome Back, Duke," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 2001, www.wsj.com/articles/SB122451174798650085 (accessed April 8, 2017).

empowerment or *choice* for their own purposes.[6] In the framework of a praxis that is deeply embedded in the neoliberal capitalist system, "feminism" becomes a brand that sells tickets for a Beyoncé concert or a *Fifty Shades of Grey* movie just as easily. In the midst of this perverse conversion of a revolutionary movement into a lifestyle, some activists and artists try to rekindle the fire of resistance through the creation of their own counter-discourses. The texts—a term that we understand here in the widest possible sense—that our contributors dissect in the seven chapters included in this section stand in a dialogic relation, offering an ample panorama of the public conversations that are happening around these issues. The authors illustrate the discussion about changing perceptions of what it means to be or to become a woman, and how dominant cultural representations project the influence of postfeminist discourse on the contemporary landscape of gender identities.

The collaborative paper signed by Meritxell Esquirol-Salom and Cristina Pujol-Ozonas uses precisely *Fifty Shades of Grey* as a case study to try and prove that the discourse that currently dominates the Western media and institutions is based on a logic of cultural (re)production that, despite the achievements of the women's movement, is still regulated by a heterosexual male gaze that establishes the rules for power relations and for the development of gender and sexuality. They argue that the neoliberal system of the 21st century instrumentalizes the language of feminism to encourage women's access to consumption and to entice them to exploit their own sexuality as a form of free choice. Individual experiences dominate over the social conditions of female citizens, and empowerment or liberation cease to be collective aims to become personal decisions. As tends to happen, by the way, in the second text that our authors bring to the spotlight in this section: HBO's *Girls*, created by Lena Dunham, is the object of study of two chapters by scholars from very different environments: Heike Mißler, writing in the German context, approaches it as both a continuation of and a challenge to the ideas and aesthetics of the 1990s chick culture, which in her view is relocated in the post-recession moment and rewritten to incorporate the conditions of life of the millennials. María Dolores Narbona-Carrión, in turn, looks at the comedic side of *Girls* from the Spanish standpoint, discussing the show's potential for transformation as part of a genre that is supposed to be subversive.

Still in the field of television fiction, Leopold Lippert's paper tackles AMC's successful *Mad Men*. Through a detailed close reading of a much-

---

6. Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009), 1.

discussed episode from the fifth season, and drawing on the work of theorists of postfeminism such as Rosalind Gill, Yvonne Tasker, and Diane Negra, he states that the notion of *femininity* is converted into a form of labor in favor of capitalist accumulation in the show at hand. The complicity between the postfeminist ideology and the dominant benefit- and growth-centered economic system, which is already pointed at in the first text of this section (Esquirol-Salom and Pujol-Ozonas), is thus made transparent through the example of a fictional audiovisual product that has become one of the most resonant in recent U.S. television, percolating, in Mendelsohn's words, every corner of American popular culture.[7] Other relevant instances, in this case from transmedia texts that have cut from literature onto the screen, serve to expand the examination of feminism and postfeminism in English-speaking cultural manifestations. A valuable contribution to this discussion, Lea Gerhards' chapter deals with postfeminist subjectivity in the vampire genre. She puts the characters of Caroline Forbes (*The Vampire Diaries*), Jessica Hamby (*True Blood*) and Bella Swan (*The Twilight Saga*) in dialogue with the classic female model of Lucy Westenra from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. She establishes a continuum of characterization, from very conservative to somewhat alternative femininities, but all of them contained within the limit(ation)s of postfeminist representation.

The last two texts in this group of papers are the ones that analyze the female figures that dare to tread the furthest into the slippery fields of transgression. Among the movie characters discussed by Irina Simon, some have been decoded as very radical in their gender politics, as is the case of Imperator Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015), which even raised a protest wave among self-defined "men-rights' activists": they encouraged viewers to boycott the movie due to its alleged feminist ideology.[8] Developing her analysis on the basis of Propp's model about the function of characters in classical tales, Simon explores the different positions taken by the protagonists of the aforementioned *Mad Max*, together with *Gravity* (Cuarón, 2013), *Ex Machina* (Garland, 2015) and *Upstream Color* (Carruth, 2014), combining commercial filmmaking and indie productions. Finally, bringing us back to reality after these journeys

7. Daniel Mendelsohn, "The *Mad Men* Account," *The New York Review of Books*, February 24, 2011, www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/02/24/mad-men-account/ (accessed April 8, 2017).
8. Lorena O'Neill, "Anti-feminists Call for Boycott of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Citing Feminist Agenda," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 14, 2011, www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/mens-rights-activists-boycott-mad-795658 (accessed April 8, 2017).

through film and TV fiction, M. Katharina Wiedlack also focuses on a woman-centered plot. In particular, she analyzes the cultural narrative woven around the two Pussy Riot members Maria Alyokhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova in the United States after their arrest and imprisonment. Like the characters that the rest of our contributors comment on, the punk female activists studied by Wiedlack were made to play different roles in and by the media, with more or less obvious political intentions. Similarly to the protagonists of some of the films and TV series in the rest of this section, Alyokhina and Tolokonnikova were (hyper)sexualized, orientalized, commodified, and even symbolically turned into supermodels in some of their audio/visual representations. Conservative gender politics once more aligned with capitalism in order to de-activate the radical collective embodied by these two women, oversimplifying their image and their cause, and changing potentially transformative praxis into monolithic, domesticated, consumer-based thought.

Part Two places its emphasis on masculinity. Individual authors present up-to-date analyses of the view of male gender identities on the screen, and their articles embrace a thematic scope that includes the renewed forms of the male chauvinism of the 21st century, the revision of American myths in the past two decades, the queering of (male) gender politics on TV, and the representation of same-sex relationships between men. The problematization of masculinity in a range of cultural products of our times seems to point in the same direction as Tim Edwards' *Cultures of Masculinity* (2006), where he affirmed that "masculinity is not *in* crisis, it *is* crisis."[9] Questioned on different fronts, traditional male practices of identity construction and reaffirmation struggle to find new shapes in order to maintain the patriarchy alive, but intersectional politics of difference burst into the scene to challenge the old ways, trying to kill John Wayne once and for all. Just as feminism and postfeminism are confronting their own internal and each other's dialectical and political issues, traditional masculinity and alternative masculinities are up against each other for a space on our screens and in our collective psyche.

Ruben Cenamor's article explores the mechanisms of nostalgia in Sam Mendes' screen adaptation of Richard Yates' 1961 novel *Revolutionary Road.* Discussing the evolution of the male protagonist in a comparative framework, he concludes that the film is more conservative than the literary text. As presented by Cenamor, the movie seems to constitute an example of what some feminist thinkers and media have started to call

---

9. Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 2006), 14.

retro-sexism,[10] a phenomenon very much in accord with the postfeminist wave explored in Part One. Consolidating this idea, Martina Martausová introduces us to the highly productive encounter between postfeminism and traditional masculinity in her paper about recent films dealing with fatherhood. Articulating her discussion around a corpus constituted by *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Muccino, 2006), *Martian Child* (Meyjes, 2007), and *The Descendants* (Payne, 2011), she argues that the classical myth of the American Adam is a malleable one. With the turn of the century, as she demonstrates, it has undergone a process of adaptation that allows for certain concessions to the egalitarian vindications of feminism while actually establishing, with great force, a cinematic model of postfeminist masculinity. With an appearance of progressive advancement, male authority is (re)confirmed at the expense of everything female—discredited or simply made invisible in the plots examined.

Rubén Jarazo, like Cenamor, writes within Spanish academia, on this occasion to introduce the question of sexual identities and the possibility of successfully queering male characters in popular TV series. With *Doctor Who* as his case study, Jarazo explores the gender-sex axis, with an attentive eye on the history of this long-running British production (it premiered in 1963). After analyzing a whole host of significant episodes, he detects an evolution in the main male character's options for queerness, a status that relates here to the representation of homosexuality, but also of asexuality on the part of the primary male role of the new *Doctor Who*. Finally, homoerotic relationships are at the basis of the chapter that closes the volume, Eva Michely's essay about NBC's series *Crossbones*. According to the author, this pseudo-historical production presents an archetypal heterotopia in transition; a *locus* where hegemonic masculinity plays an important symbolic and organizational role, but where this traditional convention is also challenged through bottom-up social practices of kinship. The narrative includes interesting struggles between mainstream gender roles and potential alternatives, but it falls back into a process of recuperation that reinforces traditional patterns. Both *Doctor Who* and *Crossbones*, then, open windows onto other possible ways of being or becoming a man, although both have to struggle with the power of a stubborn heteronormative system.

---

10. See, for example, Anita Sarkeesian, "Retro Sexism and Uber Ironic Advertising," *Feminist Frequency*, September 21, 2010. https://feministfrequency .com/video/retro-sexism-uber-ironic-advertising/ (accessed April 8, 2017); Meghan Murphy, "Men Embrace Women Who Embrace Retro Sexism," *Feminist Current*, January 16, 2015. www.feministcurrent.com/ 2015/01/16/men-embrace -women-who-embrace-retro-sexism/ (accessed April 8, 2017).

As editors of this book and as gender studies scholars, we are very aware of the tendency toward dismantling binary thought in today's theory and activism around gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, we have made the difficult but conscious decision of maintaining the male/female pair as the organizational principle behind this collection of essays. The reason for this is clear to us: however hard we may be fighting to move beyond dichotomies and to live in a world where categories are fluid and labels merely temporary—in Zygmunt Bauman's terms, a *liquid modernity* where certainties are substituted by questions and permanent selfhood by nomadic identities—[11]gender is still an active and productive principle in our society and, most particularly, in the internal dynamics of popular culture. In line with a form of academic feminism that refuses to be co-opted by the system and to turn into individualist, neoliberal postfeminism, we invited our colleagues to examine the concept of gender and its intersection(s) with other identity variables, and to produce texts which would make visible that gender is still a powerful construct and that much work remains to be done. The female and male characters/images/representations addressed in the upcoming chapters swim in a sea of contradictions, crises, mainstream currents, and bold counter-discourses. Some go with the tide, some resist it. And we must be able to pinpoint and understand them all, decoding the meanings that they produce and incorporating them (or not) to our models of possibility (what if...?). That is the beauty in the project that we now present to readers. Is the Marlboro type alive behind some of the alleged "new men" of our age? Are women back to being "gurls" and are they happy about their positions in the name of (post)feminism? This book gives us ways to deal with these questions.

Bibliography

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. London: Polity Books, 2000.
Edwards, Tim. *Cultures of Masculinity.* London: Routledge, 2006.
Faludi, Susan. *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America.* New York: Picador, 2007.
Furedi, Frank. *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right*. London and New York: Continuum, 2005.
—. *Invitation to Terror: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown*. London and New York: Continuum, 2007.

---

11. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (London: Polity Books, 2000).

Gill, Rosalind. "Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 147 (2007): 152. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/2449/1/Postfeminist_media_culture_(LSERO).pdf (accessed April 8, 2017).

Glassner, Barry. *The Culture of Fear: Updated for Our Post-9/11 World*. New York: Basic Books, 2009.

McRobbie, Angela. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2009.

Mendelsohn, Daniel. "The Mad Men Account." *The New York Review of Books*, February 24, 2011. www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/02/24/mad-men-account/ (accessed April 8, 2017).

Mißler, Heike. *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit: Popular Fiction, Postfeminism, and Representation*. New York and London: Routledge, 2017.

Murphy, Meghan. "Men Embrace Women Who Embrace Retro Sexism." *Feminist Current*, January 16, 2015. www.feministcurrent.com/2015/01/16/men-embrace-women-who-embrace-retro-sexism/ (accessed April 8, 2017).

Noonan, Peggy. "Welcome Back, Duke." *The Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 2001. www.wsj.com/articles/SB12245117479865 0085 (accessed April 8, 2017).

O'Neill, Lorena. "Antifeminists Call for Boycott of Mad Max: Fury Road, Citing Feminist Agenda." *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 14, 2015. www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/mens-rights-activists-boycott-mad-795658 (accessed April 8, 2017).

Sarkeesian, Anita. "Retro Sexism and Uber Ironic Advertising." *Feminist Frequency*, September 21, 2010. https://feministfrequency.com/video/retro-sexism-uber-ironic-advertising/ (accessed April 8, 2017).

PART I:

FROM CHICKS TO VAMPIRES: NEW (?) FEMININITIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

CHAPTER ONE

FIFTY SHADES OF GREY:
THE NEUTRALIZATION OF FEMALE SEXUAL
DESIRE IN A NEOLIBERAL TIME

MERITXELL ESQUIROL-SALOM[1]
CRISTINA PUJOL-OZONAS

Over the last decades, Western women have gained places of political, economic and cultural visibility. For example, they have normalized their inclusion in the academic sphere and in cultural labor. Thanks to these achievements, women increasingly form part of some spaces of leadership where their participation was, in historic terms, merely anecdotic. For these reasons, it seems that Western women have achieved more social relevance and have attained more autonomy in economic terms.

Taking into account that nowadays consumer culture is the main platform of social access, women are ready to invest in themselves and to try and fulfil their own wishes. This new form of cultural participation is regulated by the postfeminist stereotype that promotes the idea of an independent woman who overcomes her insecurities basically in two ways: by appealing to the idea of free choice, and being ready to display and (over)exploit her active sexuality.[2] At the basis of this stereotype is the fact that the neoliberal *ethos* promoted by contemporary capitalism and based on narcissistic consumerism as represented by the popular slogan "Because I'm worth it" has convinced women to invest in their own pleasure, beyond the traditional concerns of family care.

The aim of this paper is to analyze how the media mainstream and the consumer culture have taken into account this social and cultural turn, and

---

2. Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism* (London: Sage, 2009).

how in order to include women as a worthy target, they instrumentalize the anxieties that feminism has to confront and resolve. Our initial hypothesis is that the institutional and media discourses which promote the image of this "new woman," are built on the logic of cultural production regulated by a male gaze and a set of power relations that regulate female sexuality and desire. The contents offered to contemporary "emancipated and autonomous" women of the 21st century are not that different from those offered when the female role was limited to the domestic sphere and to a social contract based on dependence and submission.

We propose an analysis of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon, a trilogy written by a woman (E.L. James), starring a woman (Anastasia Steele), based on a fiction written by a woman (*Twilight*, by Stephanie Meyer), read by millions of women around the world, and adapted for the screen by yet two more women (screenwriter Kelly Marcel and director Sam Taylor-Wood) with extraordinary success. This case study will be the basis to discuss the ways in which contemporary female sexuality is imagined, thought, promoted and consumed. Beyond a mere analysis of content or a study of the characters in the saga, it is necessary to inscribe this imagery within the logic of production of cultural industries which, in their quest for new market niches, instrumentalize feminist struggles and the politics of difference in order to promote cultural identities with a commercial purpose.

In the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the interpellation to female sexuality is different in the movies and the novels. All the novels are structured around a traditional romantic narrative written from the female character's point of view, promoting the naturalization and internalization of a sexist narrative order. In the movie, in turn, the female character's viewpoint, through which female pleasure is structured, is absorbed by a spectacularly eminent male logic, strongly guided by consumer culture and the media entertainment industry. With this starting point, we will focus on three aspects:

a) The female sexual imagery inscribed within the discourses of meritocratic order integrated in the contemporary cultural and economic liberal model. A model that uses freedom of choice as a basis to empower individuals—in this case women—and through which we negotiate questions of power, ambition, complacency and an alleged self-awareness with which to validate representations.

b) The patriarchal imperative under which consumer culture is constructed, and the cultural imagery that makes it impossible to represent a female-centered sexuality. The Grey phenomenon in

film responds to a male-dominated imagery that revises and neutralizes female sexual desire under the scrutiny of the dominant male gaze.

c) The discourse of popular disavowal through which the Grey phenomenon is identified as a minor cultural object, thus resulting in a patronizing attitude towards women consumers.

Our aim is to describe the way in which cultural industries intervene in complex processes of social regulation: on the one hand, the regulation of the ways in which sexual practices and debates have to be performed in a society (discourse); on the other hand, the regulation of the modes of our sexual relations both at a symbolic level and in the cultural imagery (representation).

Female Sexuality in Popular Culture

From the perspective of sociology, the recent process of sexualization of popular culture is a result of positioning female sex and pleasure as the central themes in multiple narratives and popular products, with the advertising industry as the most obvious platform of female sexual promotion. Even though this is evidently not news in a media landscape that has historically used the female body as advertising ploy, a turning point takes place when the emphasis is placed, not on the usual representations of women as objects of desire and source of male pleasure, but on female agency.[3]

This change was initiated in the nineties by TV shows like *Ally McBeal* (FOX 1997–2002) or *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998–2004), and it continues nowadays with *Girls* (HBO 2012–present). They are all examples of narratives with active, empowered female protagonists who verbalize their wishes in uninhibited, hedonistic and complacent ways. This is far from the usual taboos and frigidities with which, historically, female sexuality had been dealt with in film and literature. These narratives also treat the new status of women and sexuality in a reflexive and self-aware manner, in constant dialogue and conflict with the representations and mediations that each society has imposed on the meaning of "womanhood" in a specific historical moment.

---

3. Rosalind Gill, "Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising," *Feminism and Psychology* 18 (2008): 35–60, http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0959353507084950 (accessed August 8, 2015).

   In this first decade of the 21ˢᵗ century the representation of women is
closely linked to the exhibition (in a more or less explicit way) of their
sexuality, entering in a "cultural logic of striptease."[4] The social promotion
of women, as we see in the paradigmatic case of celebrities, requires an
"indispensable" and "necessary" process of sexualization so that the pop
divas—Rihanna, Shakira, Jennifer Lopez, Britney Spears, Katy Perry,
Miley Cyrus—can be incorporated into the entertainment industry. Such
process, beyond the iconographic world of pop stars, also affects
politicians, athletes, journalists, writers, or any woman in the process of
professional promotion. Their presence in the social media tends to be
inscribed by a tension created between the representation of a self that is
sexy enough to satiate contemporary expectations of the sexually active
woman, and the necessary sobriety required for the promotion of a
professional activity.

   This cultural logic has placed female sexual agency at the center of
commercial circuits of popular culture, connected to the entertainment
industry, thus reducing women to the status of goods in a marketplace.
From this moment on, the exploitation of all kinds of products or media
content (TV shows, video clips, videogames, books, magazines, clothes
and accessories...) responds to this cultural logic that reduces female
sexuality to a lifestyle, and therefore into a commodity susceptible of
being designed, produced, promoted and consumed.[5] The result is an
imagery of empowered women who seek their own pleasure and exhibit
their desire in an uninhibited, active, almost aggressive way, within a
panorama that has inherited the language of pornography (sexual
positions, challenging looks at the camera, heavy breathing and orgasms)
filtered through the glamour of advertising; a *porno chic* aesthetics as an
added value to all kinds of products, which has transformed "the explicit
into something familiar and the sexual transgression into mainstream."[6]

   Within the logics of production and marketing, women are increasingly
identified as sexual consumers. Today they can access a whole cultural
market that allows them to purchase all the necessary complements to
organize a sexual rendezvous. A niche has been opened which incorporates

---

4. Brian McNair, *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of
Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).
5. Feona Atwood, "Fashion and Passion: Marketing Sex to Women," *Sexualities*,
8, no. 4 (2005), http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1363460705056617
(accessed August 8, 2015).
6. Feona Atwood, "Sexed Up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture,"
Sexualities 9, no. 1 (2006): 80, http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/
1363460706053336 (accessed August 8, 2015).

women into the sexual market sector which until recently had been devoted to satisfying male wishes. It becomes imperative to point out that that we are referring to the sexual desires of heterosexual women. While the sex market has known for decades how to access the heterosexual and gay male niches, lesbians, transsexuals and queer sexualities remain outsiders to a commercial logic that responds, as we try to explain below, to a masculinized and normative discourse.

Female Sexuality as the Last Conquest of the Market

The fact that women's bodies circulate as marketable goods and that female sexuality is consumed as a lifestyle can be understood as a process of democratization of sex and sexuality, in which women move from sexual objects of male pleasure to desiring subjects. However, it is important to highlight that, after this democratization, what remains is the market value that sexuality has acquired in contemporary financial capitalism. In a context dominated by self-aware and reflexive subjectivities around constructions of identity, the relations established between cultural imagery and female subjectivity are very complex.

Rosalind Gill (2008)[7] resorts to Michel Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self" to explain the way in which power, or the dominant imagery, acts on and through human bodies and behavior. This process of normativization and control does not happen through notions of "domination" in the strict sense of the word, but it functions through normative regulations and negotiations that end up assuming and performing such power. This allows women a certain agency, so that they are not presented as docile or passive subjects, but neither as the autonomous and capable people proposed by liberal humanism.

Gill considers "sexual subjectification" the process through which we stop talking about the utilization of women's bodies as objects—sexist imagery—to present the use of the body of women as a tool of empowerment—progressive imagery—understanding that media discourses have corrected the passive conduct representative of women, to admit their agency. Thus, the representation of the female body is constructed through a discourse of enjoyment, freedom and, above all, choice. Women are not presented as in need of male approval, but as satisfied with their own complacency, with the surprising spontaneous result that they achieve male admiration.

---

7. Gill, "Empowerment/Sexism," 40.

This process instrumentalizes women's agency and power as selling points and results in a new visual regime, a new imagery from where to incite and imply women to participate, by addressing them directly. This process becomes a project of discursive self-regulation in itself. Under the institutional representation of the new femininity, what actually happens is that women are invited to participate in a free and autonomous way of the traditional *male* model, thus making invisible the fact that our identity has been reduced to the self-fetishization or self-objectification of our bodies.

The idea of self-regulation and self-discipline responds intimately to the social model that neoliberal capitalism demands: that of the independent entrepreneurial individual, flexible, adapting to changes and to the structures of the markets. Harvey and Gill (2011) have coined the term "sexual entrepreneur"[8] to describe the way in which new female subjectivities are formed following this model of hypersexualization, a type of imperative according to which women must always be ready to live their sexuality in line with the dominant discourse.

Women are constantly encouraged to be sexy and to like themselves that way, always being ready to perform that sexiness. This "always be ready" idea stands as a reality that implies work, dedication, will-power, constant recycling, investment, discipline, and responsibility. What is eventually being promoted is the image of a postfeminist subject, always prepared to comply with the market's expectations. Beauty, being and looking desirable, and the consequent sexual performativity "constitute their ongoing project and [women] are exhorted to lead a 'spicy' sexual life, whose limits—not just heterosexuality and monogamy—are being closely watched as well as concealed or unauthorized through discourses of enjoyment and experimentation."[9]

The question remains as to which gaze or regulatory principle of the social order is responding to this self-demand through which women must always be ready. This is a question that proves crucial for two main reasons. First, because the cultural imagery has not overcome the sexist principles of its own representation, and, as much agency as is bestowed upon women from institutional representations, this not only fetishizes women's bodies, but also female sexuality itself. Secondly, because we must take into account that gender inequality is still a reality in our society. It is only in consumer culture where the mirage of having achieved full

---

8. Rosalind Gill and Laura Harvey, "Spicing it Up: Sexual Entrepreneurs and The Sex Inspectors," in *New Femininities. Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, ed. Rosalind Gill and Christina Sharff (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 52–67.
9. Ibid., 56.

equality is constructed, masking the need to re-establish a public debate about the inconveniences of this fetishization. Different authors from the fields of psychology and social education like Coy and Garner explain that this allegedly emancipating imagery of women means a limitation of the social expectations of girls and women.[10]

All in all, the constant process of individualization promoted by the cultural project of neoliberalism, which, for women, has become a celebration of the feeling of "freedom of choice," finds in the almost compulsive experience of its sexual agencies one of its most relevant representations in the cultural mainstream. The meritocratic system of regulation of neoliberal societies promotes a culture of constant self-discipline and performativity that allows for a "gender subjectivity"[11] in accordance with dominant discourses, which trigger the construction of a new narcissistic femininity in which the sense of self-demand and discipline are vital.

From this perspective, we bear witness to the construction of a female imagery which implies a purposeful re-sexualization of women, in which women are still marketable goods. On the other hand, we cannot forget that even though the call to women appeals to their narcissism, there still exists a dominant gaze or, if preferred, a politics of control, demand and scrutiny to which the bodies and the agencies of women are continually subjected. We concur that the hypersexualized imagery of women, while somehow promoting the image of a new femininity, is nevertheless imposed as the construction of a new media imagery in which self-demand, diligence and discipline work as new technologies of social regulation in consonance with the meritocratic project of neoliberalism.

Fifty Shades of Grey and the Neoliberal Feminine Sexual Imagery

We must incorporate the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon into this context of promotion and commodification of female sexuality. The novels

---

10. Maddy Coy and Maria Garner, "Definitions, Discourses and Dilemmas: Policy and Academic Engagement with the Sexualisation of Popular Culture," *Gender and Education* 24, no. 3 (May 2012): 285–301, http://www.tandfonline.com/ doi/abs/10.1080/09540253.2012.667793?journalCode=cgee20 (accessed August 8, 2015).
11. Rosalind Gill, "Supersexualize Me: Advertising and the 'Midriffs,'" in *Mainstreaming Sex. The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. Feona Atwood (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2009), 93–110.

began as fanfiction[12] of the *Twilight Saga*, another transmedia phenomenon that includes books, movies and much marketing built around fans. Fanfics, for example, have prolonged the life of the saga thanks to its rewriting and recreation possibilities.

Under the name of Snowqueen's Icedragon, the author, at the time a TV executive living in London, married and with two teenage children, started publishing periodically an erotic tale in *Fanfiction.net: Masters of the Universe*. This tale transposed the conflicts and tensions of the *Twilight* fantastic universe and its characters (a beautiful human teenager, still a virgin, in love with her classmate, a handsome young vampire; both confronting their communities in defense of their love) to the real world. The derived story is about the relationship between Anastasia, a young college student of literature, again a virgin, and Christian Grey, a young and handsome multimillionaire entrepreneur, and an aficionado of sadomasochistic sexual practices, or BDSM. Anastasia is torn between curiosity, rejection, and the acceptance of submission, and her adventure with Grey culminates in a love story that includes marriage and children. Just as *Twilight* incorporates elements from fantasy and science fiction into a classic romantic novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey* follows the logic of romance, in this case assuming the erotic charge of initiation into BDSM, described with detail from the female protagonist's perspective.

The repercussion of James' internet uploads of erotic tales was so impressive that they soon became an e-book published by *The Writer's Coffee Shop*, who specialize in digital edition of copies by demand. The commercial success brought Vintage Publishing, a brand of The Random House Group, to buy the rights to the printed edition, which resulted in the well-known trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011), *Fifty Shades Darker* (2012), and *Fifty Shades Free* (2012). Unlike other erotic publications, the distribution of the volumes in supermarkets, stationeries and bookshops well away from the specialized circuits made it a best-seller and a social phenomenon. By the end of 2015, over 125 million copies had been sold around the world, especially of the e-book edition, thus initiating another phenomenon: women's consumption of erotic literature in digital format.[13]

In this sense, we are analyzing a popular product that has known how to exploit a niche market addressed specifically to a female target by combining two of the main cultural discourses through which femininity is promoted nowadays. First, the traditional discourse of traditional romantic

---

12. An exercise of literary recreation made by fans of a specific work or topic.
13. The anonymity and discretion that the purchase and reading of an erotic book in a digital format allows has uncovered a new niche market for women, unexploited until the *Grey* phenomenon.

love in which a girl meets her protective blue prince; second, the experience of a free, full and allegedly self-aware sexuality, in line with contemporary postfeminism.

The Commercialization of Female Sexual Agency

A considerable part of the success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* is due to its perfect synchrony with its contemporary cultural market. It responds to a specific niche market of women whose experience of sexuality is torn between the romantic model at the heart of women's sentimental education—the institutional discourse—and the sexual revolution that defines womanhood nowadays—the feminist discourse. In the story, beyond the alleged transgression that the main character's initiation into sadomasochist sexual practices may imply, sexual relationships are understood within a heteronormative framework. The main characters are consistent with the traditional stereotype of romantic narratives: Anastasia is naive and inexperienced; Grey is charismatic, domineering and obscure. In the development of the plot romantic attachment prevails over the BDSM experiences of the main characters. When Grey invites Anastasia to participate in his sadomasochistic world, he explains that she must sign a contract which binds her to take on a set of demanding rules which confer onto Grey absolute power over her sexuality, looks, hygiene, and everyday life. From that moment on, the tension is not so much centered on Anastasia's capability to assume the risks as in the benefits that she can enjoy by doing it: gaining access to the *real* identity of powerful Christian Grey, from whom she gets the impression that he has a vulnerable and sweet side. In turn, if Anastasia signs the contract, Grey gives up his previous sexual life to devote himself to her, her body and her erotic education.

When Anastasia discovers sex, she creates an *alter ego* to describe it: her "inner Goddess," a double that is ready to put aside her traditional background in order to ask for and give satisfaction with no regrets. In this sense, the tension and the sexual relations that happen between the two protagonists are always focused on Anastasia's pleasure: it is *her* orgasms that become the real protagonists. Although she seldom takes the initiative in the sexual act, she makes the decision to fellate him[14] and she invents ways of giving him pleasure; the stimulation of the clitoris or the cunnilingus are frequent practices in the narrative, while masculine

---

14. We have to take into account that fellatio is the most common sexual practice in pornographic narratives.

ejaculation, the sole protagonist of most pornographic narratives, almost never appears or is mentioned. It is Anastasia who experiments different sexual pleasures thanks to the many gadgets and toys that Grey shows her. However, during most of the narrative, Grey only achieves pleasure after or with her, but his actions never seek his own sexual satisfaction.

This concept of "empowerment through submission" is at the core of the controversy that comes with the success of the novels. On the one hand, this is an erotic narrative written from the perspective of the female character, a college student with no sexual experience but a cultivated, intelligent, reflexive person who is aware of her acts and their consequences. In fact, as happens in all initiation stories, her challenge is to stop being so studious and self-conscious so that she can give in to the adventure of (sexual) pleasures that life may bring. On the other hand, this voluntary submission remains controversial in that she does not like these sexual practices. She is not familiar with them and she just consents to them to adapt to Grey's wishes. In this regard, Anastasia is again divided between her wish to experiment, her rejection of physical pain and her intuition that, deep within, Grey uses these sexual practices to conceal his real emotions.

In order to analyze the transition from an erotic fanfiction to a mainstream publishing phenomenon, we need to inscribe *Fifty Shades of Grey* within the commercial discourses that propose an experience of sexuality encoded within luxury and sophistication. Christian Grey is a wealthy businessman who showers Anastasia with presents such as refined clothing and lingerie, personal computers, a Blackberry device, and sport cars, among other things which allow her to take a peek at the lifestyle that she could lead.

The theatricality of the sexual scenes responds to the *porno chic* aesthetics dominant in advertising and in the audiovisual contemporary reality. Set in elegant and exceptional spaces (the elevator in Grey's opulent building, hotel rooms, the countryside, near the construction site of a house they want to buy, a garden shed in Grey's parents' house) and often paired with wine tasting or a soundtrack especially chosen to emphasize the moments of pleasure, all these elements work together to build up an imagery where sexual enjoyment and money go hand in hand. And access to this imagery is not open to everyone: Grey's secret, the "red room of pain,"[15] is a BDSM temple in his luxurious apartment in Seattle, decorated with first quality materials, full of sexual toys of sophisticated designs, described in detail (masks, bondage ties and leather, whips,

---

15. The room where Christian Grey performs its BDSM sexual encounters.

Chinese balls, anal plugs, expensive lingerie, torn pantyhose, etc.), and thoroughly organized. This space is also furnished with sound and lighting equipment to create specific atmospheres for his sexual encounters.

The representation of the romance in the saga is constructed on the basis of a process of differentiation, both in terms of gender and class. Grey's effort goes beyond satisfying Anastasia sexually. His wealth and his domineering character allow him to offer the inexperienced student a luxurious life in which she can enjoy expensive wine, exquisite food, helicopter rides, and stays in exclusive hotels and apartments. However, this process includes a "construction" of Anastasia according to the image of the hypersexualized and sophisticated woman analyzed here: like Pygmalion,[16] Grey models Anastasia according to what the dominant gaze expects from a woman: dresses, make up, lingerie, heels, cocktails, perfumes, etc., and a firm discipline to maintain her body according to his aesthetic parameters.

Sexuality is described in the book narrative as a marketable lifestyle based on a contract that can be (and actually is) broken at any time, all of which adds to the impression of a harmless BDSM erotic tale that women can safely share with friends while having drinks, *à la Sex and the City*. In this sense, the erotic story of *Fifty Shades of Grey* alludes directly to the contemporary feminine ideal based on style, image and self-fashioning.

Cultural Imagery and Film Narrative

In the film version of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the celebration of the woman's point of view vanishes. Following a commercial logic constructed at a time when the novel had already been spread in a large number of media platforms and social networks, and once Grey and Anastasia had already been represented via fanvids[17] incarnated by actors and actresses from the cast of popular young celebrities, the industry intends to reach as wide an audience as possible. Therefore, even though the novels are thought to reach an adult female reading public, the movie tries to reach a younger audience, so it downgrades the sexual tone in order to avoid a restrictive rating.[18] From this perspective, Anastasia is performed as a more childish

---

16. A myth that traditional feminist criticism uses as the paradigmatic explanation of how the representation of women is undertaken from and for the masculine gaze.
17. Audiovisual recreations made by fans of a specific work or topic.
18. The NC-17 rating would have forbidden admission to people under 17. The goal of the producers was to get an R, for minors accompanied by a parent or an adult guardian, which they got, according to censors due to its "strong sexual

and innocent character than in the novels. Even in those moments when she discovers sexual pleasure, and when it seems as if she were in control of her negotiations with Grey, the empowerment in the books by referring to herself as "goddess" disappears. Instead, she is constructed as always clumsy, always waiting, always doubting, always desiring.

Alternatively, despite the fact that the sadomasochistic relationship remains at the center of the complex love story and is still negotiated in the movie, the centrality of female pleasure which dominates the erotic passages in the books is also withdrawn: Grey's desire and gaze represent in the film what in the novels appears as female imagination and subjectivity. As opposed to the text, in which Grey's body and his lust for Anastasia are thoroughly described, in the film the male body is secondary. Following the classical codes of audiovisual representation, Anastasia's body is exposed on screen, showing it as an object to satisfy the pleasure of the audience's gaze. There is a whole series of technical and artistic devices (shots, lighting, editing), at the service of a (male) gaze that explores and exploits actress Dakota Johnson's body on the screen.

This shift of point of view is representative of the incapacity or impossibility of commercial cinema to subvert the hegemonic gaze, constructed on male-dominated imagery, a fact that demotes female pleasure in favor of a patriarchal fetish of erotic relations. As Laura Mulvey (1975) described, the dominance of male power requires the fetishization of gazes and representations, to the extent that even women screenwriters or producers participate more or less consciously of these codes.[19] As a result, the way in which the narrative is resolved in the film organizes the sexual desire with a male viewing logic: observing and scrutinizing the female body, the symbolic passivity from which the observed object is sublimated. From an eminently textual perspective, this double denial of the female subjective eroticism or female sexual desire reassigns women to the traditional symbolic spaces historically promoted through repetition of stereotyped representations and stories: in the romantic narrative, passivity and submission; as an erotic fetish, passivity and submission as well.

---

content including dialogue, some unusual behavior and graphic nudity, and for language" (Ben Child, "*50 Shades of Grey* R rating suggests bondage sex gagged," *Guardian*, August 8, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/jan/08/50-shades-of-grey-r-rating-suggests-bondage-sex-gagged (accessed 15 August 2015)). 19. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 833–44.