

The non-conformist woman in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century – in conversation with modern feminism.



(Kate Peters, 2015, *Cam Girls - Libertine*)

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## Abstract

The text investigates the demonisation of the non-conformist woman. Drawing from representations of the female/female body in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, particularly the figure of the witch, as means to discuss the modern imaging world. As well as analysing societal repercussions tied to the belief that “ugliness equals evil” (Petherbridge, 2013:10), noted in construction of the feminine ideal and destruction of all that opposes it.

The problematic semiotics of Goya’s etchings highlight the aging body as a source of disgust, while manipulated internet-memes of Hillary Clinton as a beheaded medusa attempt to condemn female authority. Citing the histories of demonic representation, but more importantly, the relevance they in hold contemporary culture.

In conversation with the writings of Deanna Petherbridge and Donna Haraway, I revisit the potential of the Cyborg (1985) in disrupting patriarchal discourse. Similarly connecting feminism’s reclamation of the term Witch, as a site of historic reference and with the ability to deflect systematic definition. Illustrating the lens as a form of resistance, practitioners such as Cindy Sherman, Juno Calypso, and Linda Stupart consider the abstracted body as means to confront and challenge misogynistic viewings.

Themes that persist throughout the text include, the doing/undoing of archaic perspectives on the female/female body – referencing the contemporary lens as a method of destabilisation. As well as Sarah Franklins “*wench in the works*” (2014:22), consumerism under the guise of ‘girl power’, and manifestations of fear within modern mediascapes. Discussing, also, the detrimental state of Trump’s America in relation to feminist agenda[s] and the dehumanisation of women in positions of power, be it of a sexual or political nature.

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## Introduction.

This text sets out to critique, from a feminist perspective, the demonisation and persecution of the non-conformist female/female body as a continuous site of reference. I intend to draw parallels between representations of women, in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, and our modern visual landscape. While citing the social/psychological repercussions resultant of visual and historic oppression – noted through the dehumanisation of women in power, the feminine ideal, and Trump’s America.

“She holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire” (Mulvey, 1999:837) but when she doesn’t, she is the wicked body of the witch, the haggard crone, the demon.

The text will consider the contemporary lens, and it’s potential to defy gendered criticism/derail patriarchal norms. Connecting histories of demonisation, particularly the figure of the witch, with deep-rooted and archaic perspectives on “what Woman is, and the social value she is assigned” (Bonner et al, 1992:157). Opening stage to feminist interest and conversation, I will examine, similarly to Donna Haraway’s cyborg (1984), the reclamation of the term witch as a non-systematic category – unfixed, and with means to resist classification.

Chapter one, *Contextualisation of Gender Hierarchy and Misogyny*, concentrates on the demonisation and dehumanisation of the non-conformist woman. While arguing, through Goya’s witch and biblical associations between woman and the devil, the contribution of oppressive representation to gender-hierarchy. The physical torture/murder of the hysterical woman, both under the accusation of witchcraft and through medical mistreatment, noted in Silas Weir Mitchel’s *Rest Cure*, provide a relevant lens from which to apply feminist theory. The chapter also highlights an illustration of Donald Trump, reinstating an anti-abortion legislation amongst his male-only cabinet. Noting that despite a transitioned pictorial/cultural landscape, women’s bodily functions remain governed by the state.

Looking towards modern manifestations, and further locating the political state of Trump’s America, chapter two, *Contemporary Manifestations in Media and Politics*,

draws upon advertising's adoption of feminism, woman in power, and ownership of the gaze within sex entertainment. Questioning whether slogan t-shirts promoting 'girl power' prove effective in raising awareness, or simply exploit 'women's empowerment'. The commodification of the Punk era providing example of societies tendency to dismiss rebel discourse. Manipulated images of Hilary Clinton, as a beheaded medusa, also argue the relevance of art histories contribution to modern perspectives – regarding the difficult female/female body as 'a wench in the works' (Sarah Franklin, 2014:22). In contrast, Kate Peters works challenges archaic viewings of women, made apparent in mainstream pornography. Drawing on the aesthetics of the classical nude to photograph willing sex workers, Peter's work acts as resistance and thus, an introduction into chapter three.

In response to the research outlined in chapter one and two, chapter three, "I am here. This is my mouth. This is my voice. You cannot silence me." (Chemaly, 2018:218), considers the modern lens as feminist resistance. Questioning whether artists, such as Cindy Sherman, must be defined as feminist, for the work to act effectively as an agent for change. Discussing, also, the abstraction/mystification of the female form as means to avoid sexual objectification – and whether this is progressive in reforming misogynistic viewings. In conversation with Linda Stupart's ritualistic performance pieces, the chapter argues a likeness between the notion of Haraway's cyborg (1984) and the witch, both as methods of rebellion - inciting a greater fluidity with regards to gender, sexuality, etc.

## Chapter 1. Contextualisation of Gender Hierarchy and Misogyny.

Representation of the female form within visual culture proves central to modern feminist analysis of the oppression of women because “it is upon the biological difference between male and female bodies” that gender hierarchy has been “built and legitimized” (McNay, 1992:17). In patriarchal society a female child is born into, and instantaneously interpellated, by a world where many of the “conventions of romance” convey strong authority. Shaping, at a level of the unconscious, her own perception of gender/the body through “popular songs and fairy tales”, and later, in novels and movies.” (Modleski, 1991:43). In the late eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, representations of the demonic woman transitioned into playful illustrations and comics, “separating”, and disguising “ugly history [as] delightful fairy tales” (Petherbridge 2013:111). Normalising, as consequence, histories and realities of gendered violence/discrimination into the malleable psyche of a child.



Fig.1 (Francisco Goya, 1799,  
*Linda Maestra!*)

The iconography of the witch, for example, draws out feelings of repulsion, and from an early age, is recognised in childhood literature. The body is generally distorted – the breasts pictured sagging, wrinkles and facial hair emphasised, and features such as the nose, hooked or disfigured. Connotations of infertility/envy of all that is classically feminine. Goya’s 18<sup>th</sup> century etching *Linda Maestra* (Pretty Teacher) Fig.1, reinforces the attitude that “ugliness equals evil” (Petherbridge, 2013:10). The



contrast between the young witch and her haggard teacher indicates corruption, while de-humanising/scorning the aging female body.

In visual opposition to the witch, the figure of the enchantress seduces and lures the viewer in – her deceitful intentions disguised behind a mirage of beauty. Phillip Stubbes (1583) also argued that face paints (make-up) were ‘the devil’s invention’ in which to ‘intangle poore soules in the nets of perdition’ (Oldridge, *The Devil*, 2000:94). So, even when fulfilling the written ideals of femininity, the women must be painted evil – for she cannot exist without a hidden agenda that seeks to threaten the order. Fear thus manifests itself in dominant culture as a means to control the body and maintain male hierarchy.

The association between ‘women’ and ‘the evil one’ can be dated back to the mid-17th century. During which time, it was not unheard of for Satan to be represented as a woman, “particularly in the guise of the whore of Babylon” Fig.2 – who illustrated “traditionally feminine traits” as well as “sexual lust” (Oldridge, 2000:91).



Fig.2 (William Blake, 1809, *The Whore of Babylon*)

William Blake draws this symbolic/biblical figure with “voluptuous” (Langridge, 1904:187) features – noted in the lips and breasts. The ‘Whore’s’ charm, however, is only painted in to confirm an illusion of beauty, as she directs human existence into the grasp of the hybrid beast below – symbolic for greed, lust, and desire. Also

referenced as The Mother of Prostitutes, it is argued that Blake presents 'The Whore' both as "an agent of evil [and a] victim" (Mangina in Benson, 2017). Signifiers of seduction/deceit jeopardise male authority, and thus, fears surrounding female sexuality transition into normative attitudes.

The reality of such demonisation can also be studied through the persecution of the wicked body during the European witch-craze of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Trevor-Roper's account of this (1969) details how discrimination, in hand with unfounded hysteria, can drive a community to drown, burn, and torture its own residents – most of which were women. It is however, from a feminist perspective, essential to note that the methodologies used to recognise the European witch-hunts/academics' analysis of their significance, have "undergone substantial shifts." So, when regarding the witch and other historical representations, we must consider the "[ever]changing pace of gender" (C.Hults, 2005:1)

Ensuring that the suffering imposed by inequality is adequately reflected upon and considered in the public/political sphere, visual artists must be able to encapsulate raw emotion/experience in ways that deflect and confuse patriarchal society. Paula Rego's practice, for example, details the notion of femininity and rigidity of gender. According to Germaine Greer, the works "have no narrative sequence; they defy and undo history, explanation and theory" (2004). Deanna Petherbridge highlights, also, Rego's willingness to appropriate the figure of the witch for political satire "in the spirit of Goya, in campaigns towards legalising abortion or banning female mutilation" (2013:19).

In her etching, *Straw Burning* Fig.3, Rego illustrates an amalgamation of symbolic references, including mice, insects and reptiles. In conversation with the poetry of Blake Morrison, she responds to the scene of “male adolescent sexual fears” in relation to the older women. Lines from Morrison’s *Old Witches* (2012:20) read “The more blind, deaf, lame, arthritic / hairy-chinned, bow-backed and incontinent / the greater power they have.” Suggesting that the non-conforming body incites a ‘greater power’, for it does not comply/follow the implicated rules. *Old Witches* concludes, “Once they were hanged or drowned. Today it’s subtler: a pillow when no one’s looking.” (2012:20) – noting the transition of historic suffering into contemporary realities and on-going violence(s) against women.



Fig.3 (Paula Rego, 1996, *Straw Burning*)

Another insight into the treatment of the disobedient female/female body can be noted in the behaviour of doctors/medics during the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century. Silas Weir Mitchel’s *Rest Cure*, for example, instructed the use of electro-therapy massage, over/force-feeding, and 24-hours of solid bed rest a day – underlining the attitude that women should remain submissive under male instruction, for the benefit of her own wellbeing/health. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), echoes the isolation/oppression felt as a woman undergoing such treatment.

Confined to the domestic space Gilman's selective sentencing and metaphorical narrative is just one illustration of the volatile relationship between control, and sanity. "So, I take phosphates or phosphites—whichever it is, and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and am absolutely forbidden to "work" until I am well again." (:380). Manipulation of the female psyche is a dominant theme throughout the text. Gilman uses the voice of a female narrator as means to express the "patriarchal structure" (Carey, 2011) and medical mistreatment of women under the care of nineteenth-century psychiatry. The diagnosis of hysteria and misunderstanding of what is now recognised as mental health disorder (postnatal depression, PTSD, etc.), prevented women of the period access to appropriate care, and thus their psychological state became further impaired. Submissive, and physically unable to retaliate against their male oppressors.

Dictatorship over women's bodily autonomy can also be studied through global, and European abortion laws. Up until May of this year, it was illegal for Irish women to terminate a pregnancy unless their own life was at risk. The imagery associated with the referendum, particularly on the side of the pro-life campaigners, relied heavily on shock-tactics. Attempting to demonise and silence their opposition by pushing depictions of butchered fetuses, humanised by the use of imaginary dialogue. Ultimately, suggesting that the "life" of an unborn foetus (that otherwise has little to no chance of survival outside the womb) is more important than the living, fully-conscious woman. Branding those who wish to terminate a pregnancy, regardless of circumstance, as demonic "murder[ers]" (Catholic Review, 2012).

Looking towards the present day in America, Donald Trump's political/personal agendas exemplify manifestations of modern suppression. As feminist activist Soraya Chemaly notes (2017), prior to the election, "millions of women [experienced] real profound physiological traumas as the result of conversations had about [Trump's] own behaviour". Noted particularly in the wake of the audio tape, in which the president is heard making grotesque remarks that encourage/condone sexual assault against women – "I just start kissing them ... I don't even wait. When you're a star they let you do it. You can do anything." (Trump, 2006). Chemaly continues on to discuss the inescapable visibility of Trump within the media, "looking at pictures of this man, hearing his voice, and knowing that he has the power to put his ideas into

policy” (2017) – such policies including a reduction in funding towards women’s issues and healthcare.

On his first full day in office Trump reinstated (without a single female present Fig.3) the “global gag rule” – banning federal funding to nongovernmental organisations that provide abortion care. Administering that women are not trusted, nor capable of, being in charge of their own bodies/reproductive system. Historian John Riddle argues that “in the suppression of witchcraft” there stands three pillars “witchcraft, midwifery, and birth control” which together, form “an unfortunate, unholy marriage” (1997:110). The knowledge obtained by women during the witch-hunts, regarding herbal contraceptives/abortifacients (which were effectively ‘potions’), was as Linda Stupart describes it, “women trying to control their bodies” and control them outside of a “patriarchal context” (2017).

Evan Vucci’s documentation of such events Fig.4 are maddening to view. A collective of men are pictured standing, stern-faced, over president Donald Trump “a man who has openly bragged of sexual assault” (Cosslett, 2017) – who signs a declaration, in which the consequences (restricted access to safe abortion care) cannot and will not ever concern those present. The smirks apparent on the faces of these men indicates a self-awareness, of the position of power in which they stand and their contribution to female oppression.



Fig.4 (Evan Vucci, 2017, *Trump Signs Executive Orders*)

## Chapter 2. Contemporary Manifestations in Media and Politics.

Chapter 2. considers how the aforementioned histories/on-going issues have informed modern manifestations and perspectives. Navigating representations of women who hold power – within the political landscape and sex industries. As well as citing advertising's adoption of 4<sup>th</sup> wave feminism and attempts to withdraw/subvert power through the feminine ideal.

Twenty-first century feminism has been hijacked by modern mediascapes/the advertising industry. Fashion-houses and ad agencies, commonly operated by a male-dominant cohort, pander to the millennial generation despite lacking any inherent interest in the destabilisation of gendered hierarchy. Presenting an aestheticized ideal of what it means to disorder the order, faux-feminist advertising “[benefits], [promotes], and [sells]” (Jamil, 2018) off a patriarchal narrative, disguised as ‘women’s empowerment’ Fig.5.



Fig.5 (Topshop, 2017, *Feminist T-Shirt*)

Similarly, the commodification of the punk era saw the transition of the rebel self into passing trend – understood today as a movement that centred itself around fashion. Thus, punk’s intentions for social reform were reduced to slogan t-shirts - worn, momentarily celebrated, and then disposed of. As Gabriel Koureas (2007:4) explains, it is not enough to simply “combat radical ideas” but rather to “wipe them from living memory” – modern consumerist society supports this notion in desperation to maintain a progressive/inclusive reputation. One may argue that in adorning a pencil-case or tote bag, embellished with the words ‘girl power’/ ‘girls



support girls', feminism is kept at the forefront of 'living memory', encouraging conversation/positive exposure. It is hard to ignore, however, that by commodifying the contemporary horrors that feminism(s) works so hard to erase (i.e the pay gap, FGM, rape), the following generations/the less informed will consider, in the same way we do with punk, feminism as a passing trend.

Looking towards how a history of misogynist visual representation connects with "current manifestations of gender and age discrimination" (Petherbridge, 2014) - it is not surprising to note the ubiquitous nature of modern mediascapes through the promotion of anti-aging, weight-loss, and beautification products. Consequently, the public sphere's 'commodification of youth and beauty" (Petherbridge 2013:111) fuels an unconscious/conscious fear of becoming what past and present narratives have repelled. The portrayal of woman is to be both "desired and desirable" a persistent cue of "what Woman is, and the social value she is assigned" (Bonner et al, 1992:157).



Fig.6 (Flat Tummy Co., 2018, *Billboard Ad*)

A billboard erected in Time Square just this year Fig.6, plays on a number of problematic signifiers to promote appetite-suppressant lollipops. Firstly, the use of millennial pink - which is now so commonly associated with 4<sup>th</sup>-wave feminism, draws consumers in and, at first glance, passes as another generational ad.

The semiotics, however, are in no way of the progressive nature we should expect. Addressing its audience with the phrase ‘Girl, Tell Them To #SUCKIT’, together with the physicality of sucking on confectionary – silences the model while referencing a childlike state of innocence/naivety. “Withdrawn into their silence ... they can no longer be spoken for, articulated, [or] represented” (Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, 1983:22). The advertisement directs a “level of insult and humiliation” against “bodily failings” (McRobbie, 2008:130) – while appealing to a younger, impressionable ‘Girl’, and encouraging the ideal that the female body must be controlled/remain inside the parameters of conformity. Flat Tummy Co. are not suggesting that their audience pursue a healthier lifestyle, but instead, reduce their diets to the nutritional value of a lollipop.

Yet, in refusal to be silenced/governed by such influences, a woman in power is (to those threatened by her ambition/assertion) another wench in the works. She is “difficult, a bitch, a diva” (J. Douglas, 2010:267), because she refuses to conform and comply to the ideals suggested in Fig.6. Political/personal objectives aside, the backlash directed at Hilary Clinton is just one example of how gender discrimination continues to dominate our modern landscape. During efforts to obtain U.S. presidency, images of Clinton “an older woman, an accomplished woman, and a feminist” (:269), were manipulated in attempt to mock and subvert her authority Fig.7. Similarly, sexist taunts, pornographic cartoons, and cries “to ditch the witch” (Marks, 2014) closely followed Julia Gillard, Australia’s first female president.



Fig.7 (Unknown, 2017, *Hilary Clinton as Medusa, Trump as Perseus*)



This helps us to understand, as much as that is possible, the demonisation of Clinton's physical appearance. Confirming the extent to which women, as marginalised subjects, remain "culturally embedded" within society - while classical manifestations of "formulating and justifying" (Beard, 2017:79) such bigotry persist in the form of internet memes and locker-room 'banter'. As Mary Beard explains, "the normalisation of gendered violence" (2017:79), goes unnoticed - often excused for its supposed comedic value. In 2015, over 1,600 women were murdered by men in the U.S alone (Violence Policy Centre, 2017), with researchers noting that black women were twice as likely to be killed by a male attacker than their white peers. Yet when challenging the violent semiotics and representation of women in power Fig.7 we're reminded to lighten up - after all, it is just a joke. In the words of current US president, Donald Trump, why not "grab [her] by the pussy" (2006).

Another lens, through which gendered power imbalances can be viewed, resides in the construction and distribution of pornography – a universe in which violence and discrimination prevail, and female desires remain substandard to male desire/pleasure. "Radical pro-censorship feminists" argue that it is not the viewing of visual erotica itself that is problematic, but rather the "heterosexual relations that form the basis of women's subordination" (McLeod, 2011:35). To sustain sexuality in a patriarchal context calls for liberation. In disagreement, Angela McRobbie considers the effects of a "lack of serious scholarly debate" in relation to "[outdated] feminist perspectives on pornography and the sex industry" (2008:3). The increasing involvement and interest of women in sex entertainment - an interest that has always persisted but hasn't always been accepted - suggests a shift in who controls the lens. Women are positioning themselves in front of the camera to confront and reassign the gaze.

Kate Peters' series *Cam Girls* references art history, as explored in Chapter 1, to build a contemporary representation of female sexuality and the online sex industry. Peters notes the transition of social interaction/behaviour in relation to the internet, citing cam girls as a "product of [technological] development" - demanding "[capital] on our voyeuristic cyber culture." (2015). The series, produced via skype and then reshot using large format, creates a dialogue between the classical nude and modern technologies. Peters' directs her subjects (working cam-girls) into well-

considered compositions, urging a powerful, and collaborative performance. In this instance the relationship between subject/photographer further connects histories of oppression and erasure. The female sex worker, despite societal efforts to dismiss/silence her practice, stares down the lens of the female photographer Fig.8 - who herself has been written out of history/burdened with the weight of a gender-biased sphere.



Fig.8 (Kate Peters, 2015, Cam Girls - *Libertine*)

Pornography can easily be labelled as a vehicle for oppression or, alternatively, as a dispute between “objectivity and subjectivity, gender, power, representation and interpretation” (Bonner et al, 1992:274). The marriage between feminist critique and a feminist “way of seeing[s]” (Berger, 1971) tends to create and encourage a formulaic viewing – often opposing women who choose to view/be viewed in an erotic context. Sex Blogger Erica Jagger, whose writings challenge the (in)visibility of older women and their sexuality, articulates how “[She] Can Be A Feminist and Still Like Porn” (2014). Jagger notes conscious efforts to bypass content that degrades other women, focusing, instead, on film and imagery where women are not depicted as “penis receptacles”, but rather as “sexual equals” (2014) with mutual experiences of pleasure.

“Men, in Trump’s worldview, might do disgusting things” but “non-compliant women”, the sex worker, the female Politian, are themselves, a source of “[disgust]” (Chemaly, 2018:237). Chapter 3 will begin to discuss how contemporary practitioners have responded, and attempted to defy, the misogynistic histories outlined in Chapter 1, as well as the ongoing struggles noted in this section.

Chapter 3. “I am here. This is my mouth. This is my voice. You cannot silence me.”  
(Chemaly, 2018:218)

Twentieth-century feminism began to question the archaic literary/visual stereotypes attached to women as “entrenched forms of discrimination”. Leading practitioners to “[re-present] ‘abject’ images of women’s bodies as a deliberate, if not deeply disturbing, form of “visual criticism” (Petherbridge 2013:111). Josefine Wikström also identifies a return to artistic practices that “might be described as feminist”, but which also, more importantly “identify themselves as feminist” (2016). Despite a varied background of social and political perspectives, Wikström notes that such practices interpret the female body “as a site of oppression and violence” as well as “a location of resistance and transformation” (2016).

In her *Fairy Tales* series, Cindy Sherman uses bizarre and unsettling prosthetics/make-up to re-construct the female form Fig.9. Using photography as a transformative medium to reference art history, Sherman opens stage to a satirical dialogue – illustrating a grotesque yet potent duality between the young and aging female body. As Cathy McGlynn explains, the “sexualised ageing women” stands as a source of repulsion – warranting the disconnection between “the ageing body” and “the ageing subject” (McGlynn et al, 2017:4) – a theme that prevails throughout the series.



Fig.9 (Cindy Sherman, 1985,  
*Untitled No. 151*)

It is important to note that Sherman has never claimed her work to fall under the scope of feminist art. Yet the conversations/consequences apparent as a result of her practice have been hugely progressive in terms of women's position in the industry – which begs the question, must the lens be christened 'feminist' for it to successfully act as an agent for change.

Contemporary photographer, Juno Calypso, raises concern as to the number of male critics that question “can you really call yourself a feminist when you pose like that?” to which she answers, yes “of course” (2016). Calypso details the pressure to practice “‘good’ [feminism]” (2016), in which we are expected (as feminists) to behave/comply with outdated conditions – to confirm, for the sake of others, our commitment to the movement. For instance, remaining modest as means to defeat sexual objectification is a fairly archaic argument. It might temporarily deflect the gaze, but it ceases to challenge or alter it. Rather than mystifying/covering the naked female body for the sake of bypassing unwanted viewings, why not seek to reform the perspective of the viewer.



Fig.10 (Juno Calypso, 2015, *A Dream In Green*)

To appreciate/pursue pleasure in naked attraction is not an act of defiance, but a natural occurrence. It is, however, problematic to separate “feminists” from women who “pose like that” (2016). Inciting that women who choose to show their naked body or pose ‘provocatively’ cannot be taken seriously in the fight for equality.

Arguably, and in a similar sense to Sherman's *Fairy Tale* series, Calypso still abstracts/obscures the body Fig.10. She plays a character, in which we are both disconnected, and connected to. Unlike Sherman, the work is far less grotesque and "[revels] in the construction of femininity" (Cresswell, 2016), rather than deconstructing it entirely. Yet, presenting an "air of defiance", Calypso is often pictured staring nonchalantly at her reflection – as if to demand ownership over such constructions. Featured in Charlotte Jansen's *Girl on Girl* (2017), a publication that explores how a "new generation of women" (Genova, 2017) are approaching art and photography in the age of the female gaze - Juno Calypso's practice humours, through the exaggeration of familiar beauty regime, how the feminine ideal has seduced us into a hypnotic state/trance. Addressing, however, that the real issue does not lie with the absurdity of such ritual, but rather, the ways in which women are considered "moronic" for "wanting to indulge" (Calypso, 2017) in their appearance – while being simultaneously criticized for lack of participation.

Elaborating on the process, defined by Foucault as the "disciplining of the body" (1979), Silvia Federici, in her essay *Caliban and The Witch* (1998), argues the commodification of the female body in relation to capitalism. Linda Stupart's practice and performative works explores a similar narrative - creating a protective space in which they place themselves and the audience. Transcending biology, Stupart intends to subvert patriarchal paradigms/shift the position of 'otherness' through the casting of spells, and cyberfeminist ritual Fig.11. Gasworks London, cite Stupart's



Fig.11 (Linda Stupart, 2016, *A Spell to Bind All Male Conference Panels*)



(re)consideration for “objectification and abjection as sites of resistance for queer and femme bodies” (2016). *A Spell to Bind All Male Conference Panels* Fig.11, presents a tactile creativity in opposition to the 2D image, the performance is an experience in itself – cast only for the moment. Rebelling against and attempting to decode dominant power structures.

Donna Haraway’s ‘*A Cyborg Manifesto*’ argues that liberation leans upon “the construction of the consciousness” (2016:6-7). The cyborg, as Haraway describes, is a ‘matter of fiction’, a creature of ‘social reality’, inhabiting a post-gender world and defying patriarchal constructs. The manifesto details a pleasure in “the confusion of boundaries” and for the “responsibility in their construction” (2016:6-7). The fluidity of cyborg, in that it seeks to destabilise the categories installed in Western society and capitalist patriarchy - “animal-human, organic-machine, and physical-nonphysical” (Munkittrick, 2009), transcends societal limitation, presenting itself as a threat. This discourse/concept applied to feminist objective, suggests that, by refusing to be defined (by gender, sexuality, etc.) we become, like the cyborg, unfixed - harbouring a greater potential for reformation.

In honour of Haraway’s writings, female collective VNS Matrix erected an 18-foot billboard Fig.12, depicting hybrid figures/strands of DNA, and accompanied by a spherical text panel reading “we are the virus of the new world disorder.” In refusal to present as an identifiable subject/object, the work, similarly to Linda Stupart’s



Fig.12 (VNS Matrix, 1992, *A Billboard Based on The Manifesto*)

practice, rejects the rigid boundaries that classify/differentiate between human, mammal and machine. The representation of the cyborg, as means to destroy identity, “can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves.” (Haraway, 2016:67-8). VNS’ confrontational approach is effective, our desire to make sense of the work in relation to normative ideals is overthrown – thus proving difficult to read from a position of misogyny/expectation.

Last year the Yerbamala Collective (YMC), a group of anti-fascist witches, put together a Google Doc detailing a poetically aggressive manifesto titled ‘Our Vendetta: Witches vs. Fascists’. The collective claim and justify the term “witches” because they stand as a “non-consumer category” – they, similarly to Haraway’s cyborg, “do not exist” and therefore cannot be removed, putting them in “unique position to fight”. (Beusman et YMC, 2017). Phrases in bold capitalised font “resistance is witchcraft” Fig.13 and “if the broom fits witch it” Fig.13, incite an empowering and rebellious reading while referencing witchcraft/the witch as a vehicle for social change. The manifesto rightfully attacks Donald Trump with crafted language, “refuse trump // refuse tyranny // more than refuse // fight back”, offering an example of how histories of dehumanisation are being reclaimed - as part of “the

rising feminist passion for witches”  
(Hunt, 2018).

**CONFLICT IS  
PROGRESS**

**RESISTANCE IS  
WITCHCRAFT  
SHOW UP FOR  
THE END OF  
CAPITALISM  
YOUR ANGER  
IS RIGHT**

**IF THE BROOM  
FITS WITCH IT  
IS TIME TO  
RIDE IT  
ACT UP  
RESIST**

Fig.13 (YMC Collective, 2017, *Our Vendetta: Witches vs. Fascists*)



Contrary to De Beauvoir's belief that women without the position of 'otherness' could too, "become subjects" (Jagger, 2008:52) with the same freedom as men, Hito Steyerl argues that as objects we have the "potential to break things" (Scott et Stupart, 2017) in a way a subject could never do. Sociologist Sarah Franklin refers to "the wench in the works" (2014:22) – a difficult female body who "gets in the way of capitalism" (Stupart, 2017). The figure of the witch, the sex worker, the aging body, are all ultimately, "[wenches] in the works" – painted throughout our pictorial landscape as the enemy. Warped, torn, manipulated, and then laid out under the red light of social critique. For women to envisage/embody themselves outside conventional normality, we must "challenge the kinds of [pervasive] subjectivity" depicted in our imaging world (Bonner et al, 1995:157). Refusing to perceive our own and others' value through the same restricted lens.

In Margaret Whitford's *Ingaray's Body Symbolic* (1991:97) she quotes Roszika Parker, who argues that feminist art, particularly representations of "our genitals", have often been viewed "not as the intended celebration of women's autonomous sexuality" but rather "as titillation, or even as obscenity" (1985). In contrast to the male body, that is considered in relation to a far greater spectrum of "emotion and experience" (1985). I'd argue that 21<sup>st</sup> century feminist art, particularly within the last couple of years, has progressed away from this statement – not entirely, but a transition is apparent.

Modern feminist representations of the naked female body/female sexuality, within Western culture and social-media spheres, can succeed in celebrating "autonomous sexuality" (1985). As well as rewriting/challenging the histories and on-going prejudices outlined throughout this text. Women now have access to "instant visual platform[s]" that allow them to explore their sexuality by "post[ing] naked pics, etc" (Sayle, 2015) - decoding fem bodies as sites of vulgarity and offence. Consequently, this new-found/persistent visual voice notes that rising generations are far less likely to view the naked female body as "[obscene]" (1985). Yet, we must also consider how sites, such as Instagram, have also fed into a culture of insecurity - fuelling an obsession with validation that just "wasn't there before" (Sayle, 2015).

## Conclusion.

Throughout the text I have addressed an array of issues surrounding the female/female body. Arguing how representations of the non-conformist women, despite transitioned representations, continue to inform modern societal attitudes. The eclectic range of research used to support this study has looked to define the relevance of historic demonisation in today's culture. Noted in the inescapable promotion of beautification products, that maintain our attachment to the feminine ideal and our fear of rejection – of becoming the witch, whose sagging breasts and facial hair remain a site of repulsion. As well as feminist response, and the on-going battle to decode, deconstruct, and destroy patriarchal structures that limit and confine us. The research looks, also, at contemporary practitioners and how they have proceeded to challenge and re-write histories of misogynistic viewing[s] – outlined in Chapter 1.

Reflecting upon the text as a finished article, I've noticed that my understanding of the discussed topics has shifted quite considerably. Despite considering myself well-versed on the subject, it would be fair to highlight a sense of naivety. For instance, I could not have comprehended the complexities/multi-faceted nature of feminism[s] if it were not for the extent of my research. Even so, I feel as though I have only scraped the surface of the topics discussed. Given the time I think it would benefit my writings to further explore the psychological repercussions attached to pictorial demonisation, and the consequent manipulation of the female psyche. In addition, I consider it of high importance for my investigation to become more inclusive. The text concentrates mostly on representations in American/Western culture, and I think it is necessary to diversify this and regard feminism[s] on a more global scale. Another topical avenue I would have liked to dissect would be violence against women, and how this is normalised in visual outlets, such as the gaming industry. As well as physical acts of mutilation (i.e FGM).

Through contrasting/comparative image analysis and literature review I have drawn on connections that, at points, seemed obscure - but have, for the most part, effectively supported my argument. Aspects of chapter 2., however, proved challenging, as I attempted to briefly investigate a number of complex avenues. I

think it would have been beneficial to focus on one of these topics - to urge a greater sense of clarity, and relevance in relation to the rest of the text. Despite this critique, I am confident that my choice of research material has assisted in building a unique and original reading.

Since writing the text I have a greater awareness of the potential of feminism, but more interestingly, its faults. Prior to research, I had regarded the movement as bulletproof – unwilling to critique or take into account its failings. Yet, although still in agreement with feminist agenda[s], I have started to consider how the 4<sup>th</sup> wave, defined predominately by technology and social media, promotes a quick-fix culture. Allowing us to feel as though we've done our bit by sharing/retweeting/liking a post that's #feminist.

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