

A Particular Rush of Blood to The Brain

*The first female Pope, the taboo of eating in public
and a search for the meaning of sex.*

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1 Introduction

The work starts with the word “sex” in its title. The three letters provoke a certain rush of blood to the head. From there on, at the table of the imaginary readers we can observe a range of reactions - some positive, others annoyed, unfavourable. For some, mentioning the three letter word wakes up inner anxiety. The audience allows itself to consider the author as a sexual being. It is fine. The author considers the audience as a group of sexual beings.

The variety of reactions depends on the number of factors (e.g. age, origin, gender, religion, personality, sexual satisfaction levels, traumas, education, way of upbringing etc.). A similar phenomenon occurs when the three letter combination appears in a set, surrounded by other letters, unintentionally (e.g. Middlesex, sexennial, sextette etc.). For some reason ‘sex’ has a

larger responsive impact than other words that have also appeared in the foregoing text, like 'table', or 'blood'. The intention of this thesis isn't to say that it's a bad thing.

2 What is the intention of this thesis?

Well, let me tell you about the Trobriant islanders from North-Western Melanesia. The islands belong to Papua New Guinea. In the Trobriant indigenous society it is a taboo to eat in public. People consume their meals alone, avoiding being seen by others. Nevertheless, the activity they are more comfortable about is sex. Both male and female islanders are free to have as much sexual intercourse and partners as they want before and while being married.

Malinowski, Bronislaw. The sexual life of savages in North-Western Melanesia. Harcourt House, 1941.

There is no festive wedding ceremony. A couple of lovers spends a night together. If the girl doesn't come home before the sunrise, her mother brings them cooked yams in the morning. In this exceptional moment, the lovers eat next to each other and the marriage is established. From there on, they eat together for one year, after which they can eat separately again.

The research was made and published by anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski in 1929. It brings up a feeling that in perception of Trobriants, eating has a similar emotional connotations as sex does for us and vice versa. For the islanders, eating is an intimate element of life, to be shared only with a spouse. Sex on the other hand is a casual activity, free from shame, social disgrace, not limited to monogamy. I find it truly fascinating how sex for them is just a 'thing'.

Sociology and sexology give the answer that is not truly our nature to be so problematic and oppressive on the topic of sex, it is rather the history and culture that through centuries have shaped our discomforts and fears, morals, gender norms, denials of different orientations and guilt which we started assigning to particular parts of our bodies.

The intention of this thesis is to wonder. Why and how did we get to the point where we understand and represent sex the way we do? Could it have gone another way? What does the culture think about sex? Does the culture like it?

3 Fiction

From Alexandre Orlando to the first female Pope

In order to answer these questions we shall go back to 1757, to the household of merchant Antoine Orlando in Paris. His long awaited child is being born. The great joy doesn't last long, since it quickly turns out that the child's gender is hard to determine. The baby has both types

of genitals. The terrified parents decide to establish the newborn's identity as male, and give him the name Alexandre. They never spread the problematic information further.


Four decades later, Alexandre Orlando is one of the most influential people in France. After quadrupling family's fortune, ze gets acknowledged at the royal house of Bourbon as a friend and advisor. It has been speculated that Orlando's intersex gender was known among the elite and that ze has been involved in a romantic relationship with the latest king before the French Revolution, Louis XVI.

The monarch is beheaded in 1793. Orlando manages to avoid consequences of belonging to the royal circles and joins the revolutionists, attempting a sabotage in which ze would avenge the king. However, after some time ze starts to become convinced of their ideas and the plot is dismissed. Alexandre Orlando becomes a leader of the French Revolution and hir gender is revealed. Hir skills in economy and strategy seem to be more important than the problematic identity, so the revolutionists seem to accept hir dissimilarity.

Orlando's devotion for the revolt turns towards hir own revolution of gender. Ze strongly condemns the abolishing of all of the Revolution's women's clubs by the Jacobin, which was the most influential political club of the period. The crushing of the women's movement took place in October 1793. Orlando applies for re-establishment of those and partly succeeds. Ze himself maintains a status of not belonging to any of the clubs. In this way, ze is allowed to the meetings of many of them, confronting ideas and encouraging to focus on common goals. Orlando's incredible diplomatic skills and financial genius provided ze with a respect of the most prominent clubs, which seems even more exceptional if we consider the fact that ze was commonly known for having mingled with Bourbons. In 1796 ze comes out officially and requires to be referred to as Hermaphrodite Orlando. The revolution in the area of gender is progressing, as Hermaphrodite proposes the new French Church to consider making space in its structures for people like hir. At first, the response is negative. The approach shifted only because of how Revolution took its toll on the Catholic Church by confiscating its property and leading to massive executions on priests during the Reign of Terror. In order to improve its poor situation after being separated from the state, the French Church decides to make a pact with Orlando.

In 1801 the Humano Sexualis decree is signed by both parties, where the Church promises to break down gender-based limitations on all levels, meaning non-males entering ecclesiastic structures. This is a groundbreaking event in the history. The new open face of the French Catholic Church bridges the divisions, confusion, pain and the bitterness of the previous decade.

90 years later in Rome, Elisabeth Williams becomes the first female Pope and she takes the name of Catherine the I. She is the one to legalise the homosexual marriage in 1896.

 Alex Twobby. *The Influence of Pope Catherine I on the Culture of Sexuality*. 1st ed., vol. 1 1, Academia Globaltica, 2005.

How did the lifting of patriarchal gender limitations for ordaining priesthood influence the deeply male-dominant XIX century France? Or in other words - what did society say about a non-male priest? The fact that not only men were allowed to officiate in church anymore, mainly meant opening its doors to women, since non-binary people like Orlando were in a great minority, almost always living in a closet.

The first few decades were turbulent. The French Church suffered significant decline after the Revolution and even though the new open-minded and modern policy attracted some parts of

the society, it sickened the others. Churches that consisted of not exclusively male priests were being set on fire. There was a lot of public debate on whether women are capable of any higher state of serving God than nunhood and whether their spiritual priestly vocation is possible. It was often argued that the Humano Sexualis is a profanation of the Christ's teaching, as he ordained only men for his apostles. The response of the French Church was that like in early Christianity, women should be allowed to serve as deacons, priests and bishops, and that there isn't any biblical reason to prohibit women's ordination.

Paul Scott. "French Studies: The Seventeenth Century." The Year's Work in Modern Language Studies, vol. 72, 2012, pp. 67. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/yearworkmodlang.72.2010.0066.)

"So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them." - Genesis 1:27


"There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." - Galatians 3:28

Holy Bible: Common English Bible. Common English Bible, 2011, [www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis 1&version=CEB](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201&version=CEB).

Despite Humano Sexualis, women kept being seen as the second category humans, representing inferior positions in parishes. Until the XX century the majority of French churches did not give positions for women, which is a textbook example of how strong the male supremacy was at the time. Not only the superiors did not put trust in women though. Apart from extreme cases like church buildings being set on fire and female priests being killed, the parishioners were demonstrating generally less regard to them compared to the inviolable male priest's persona. Bishop Eloise Deschamps elaborates on this in her book "Deliberations on a Female Servant".

"Priestesses of the French Catholic Church after Humano Sexualis were exposed to significant mistreatment. For the exceptional ones that managed to hold a position it was common to be located in the rectorial basements, often together with nuns. They rarely were given an opportunity to hear confessions or to participate in Eucharistic procedures. Their role was vague, somewhere between a nun and Deaconess, depending on the parish's individual policy. The regulations concerning non-male priests did not exist. Hence formally they all came under the same laws. Nevertheless it took a century for the female priests to pave the way to the higher ministry corresponding to their spiritual vocation. The wisdom of the Lord resides in the challenges he puts on us. The last decades are the proof of the great achievements built on the devotion and strength of the individuals. We have always been, are and will be vulnerable to the culturally based habits, prejudices supported by years and years of practice. The question is how to apply the learning of Jesus Christ to our contemporaneity? How to find the truest value of tradition and separate it from the relics of our painful history? How to sort the wheat from the chaff? Our duty is to seek for the divine form of our reverence for God. This process has been taking place since the beginning of Christianity and shall continue as we, believers, should always take effort to improve our ministry with a great commitment. My predecessors from the dawn of the XIX century were never acknowledged with a bow by a folk. They could

neither baptise, nor bury. They devoted themselves to the hardship of the service, knowing that they were likely to be killed by those blinded by false values. Yet they persisted, as we should all persist with our faith."

 Deschamps, Eloise. *Deliberations on a Female Servant*. 2nd ed., vol. 1 1, Loyola Press, 1994.

The abolition of gender limits has spread to other countries, once Pope Leo XV reconnected with the French Catholic Church, admitting the righteousness of Humano Sexualis. It has been commonly argued that this change in the Catholic Doctrine worldwide wouldn't have ever happened without Orlando and non-males might be denied consecration for centuries to come. Today, no longer does gender define a believers' role or potential. Yet how did it correspond to the transformations in the secular understanding?

Sexual Revolution of the XIX century

Despite the fact that French Revolution almost killed the Church, religion was still the main root of sociologic standards in various areas. This phenomenon hasn't changed even after French de-Christianisation, therefore when Humano Sexualis was introduced, there appeared a chance for discussion on patriarchy and the role of women in other areas of life.

The claims of first wave feminist movements received more attention, not only in France. Humano Sexualis encouraged women to be tenacious with their statements and was often used as an argument for letting them into other institutional structures. More voices have been rising to argue whether women are really inferior to men and what is it that decides about limiting their potential and opportunities. In countries like United Kingdom, Netherlands, Sweden and United States feminist issues and gender roles were written about in media and literature, and slowly laws started to be passed on topics like economic separation from husbands, right to education, owning and managing properties. In 1833, Ohio opened the first co-educational university.

After the economic and educational issues, the time has come to address the sociologic topic like reproduction, sex and the cultural position of women in the society.

Here we come to the point where the heavily oppressed and tabooed subject of sex starts appearing in popular news media. It is not needed to explain how strict were the social codes concerning sex in those times. Heterosexual, monogamous marriage followed by appearance of offspring was a condition of decency and fulfilling the expectations of the social status quo. Nevertheless people were staying in having affairs, lovers, spreading illnesses and satisfying their need for not-heterosexual love - as long as it wasn't revealed to the eye of the public, as long as the family, neighbours and children did not see.

Hermaphrodite Orlando died in 1809 aged 52. After Orlando's death, intersexuality has been officially introduced to France as an alternative gender, and has been studied in Medical Studies programmes. Enlightenment made it possible for the human reason to investigate the laws of nature, while not having to appeal to the doctrines of the Church or the eye of God.

At the same time, the Industrial Revolution contributed to the economic independence of women. Instead bearing the role of informal business partners in their husbands' shops, they started

being acknowledged as workers who are as fit to work in factories as their husbands, sometimes even more than them. For both parties (women and the industry) that was a beneficial turn.

In 1852, Irish printers working for the historical Freeman's Journal started unofficially and secretly printing a humorous addition to their newspaper. It was one paragraph consisting of erotic writings and later small sized illustrations, making fun of famous people and providing imagery of inappropriate, pornographic content. The Freeman's Special was brought by a group of anonymous artists, cooperating with the printing press workers. The addition was produced in small quantities and distributed within the ones in the know. The costs of production were included in the expenses of the real Freeman's Journal - the radically Protestant and nationalistic newspaper was unconsciously sponsoring the the press. However it was the matter of time before the world has discovered the indecent work of the Irish boheme. On 20th March 1854, the printers have accidentally sent to the shops the 'wrong' version of the Journal. Unwary customers read among the advertisements of furnished lodgings and open vacancies a following note:

"Honourable Lord Edward Mc Donnel was thrown into a state of consternation on Friday afternoon, by a discovery that dear to his heart Sir Edward O'Brien invested in new French curtains to his mansion. No longer can Lord's eye be pleased by the sweet exploration of his platonic friend's nightgown's patterns through binoculars. "My eyeballs fancy the vision of disappearance of thy silks, yet not the appearance of these unsightly curtains!"

 *The Freeman's Journal, 20 Mar. 1854, pp. 1-1. British Newspaper Archive, www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.*

Underneath the paragraph was an icon depicting naked Sir O'Brien with an erect penis. The release brought an incredible controversy and a significant increase in the Journal's demands. Printshop workers lost their jobs. In order to avenge the wrong, they committed to print the last edition of Journal consisting entirely of 'Special' content. The prints, thrown into the streets of Dublin went like hot cakes, before the police managed to seize them. Gossips on the sexual lives of Irish elites and unconventional sexual practice descriptions spread among the society, making an impression as if in the higher classes homosexuality, bisexuality, orgy and other hedonistic sexual activities were common and accepted.

Even though the content was mostly fictional, it had an impact on the approach to sex in Ireland. The simple little illustrations of nudes and people making love in many different ways were the most popular ones. The lucky owners of the paper were cutting it in bits and confidentially selling them for prices that could equal to a monthly living costs.

The interest in rare, yet known forms of lovemaking and the focus on pleasure were growing. In 1858, in the Cavendish Laboratory, Cambridge University establishes a course in human sex and so does Sorbonne three years later. Sexual Studies start to explore the mysterious area of orgasms.

For centuries before the sexual boom, in Christianity-dominated Western Europe, that kind of pleasure used to be associated with evil. The strict rules recommended procreative, heterosexual and post-marital monogamy. Research was hardly possible to conduct due to the heaviness of the taboo. Nevertheless there were certain studies over the topic of sex and pleasure. They differed significantly from today's knowledge and science though. One common aspect though that connects all of the writings from Hippocrates to Enlightenment is that they were always

assuming 'male' as the default unity, 'female' as the secondary supplement. The other types of genders and sexualities were immensely ignored. The studies were always conducted by male scholars and despite the comprehensive efforts, the narrative of explanation of sex and attempt to define the sensations was highly limited by their perception. The new Sexual Studies and the discoveries made between XIX and XX centuries tackled the subject of orgasm and freed the science of sex from the patriarchal chains.

The decriminalisation of homosexuality resulted in huge interest of homosexuals in studies of sexuality, hence there was a significant shift in the societies of educational institutions from being hetero-male-dominated into becoming epicentres of diversity and intellectual discoveries motivated by sociological liberation.

It must be mentioned that the new gender-liberal boom has also met a disapproval among certain intellectual groups, even late at the end of XIX century. Sigmund Freud, Austrian philosopher born in 1856 was a defender of gender-based hierarchical structures. The statement that clitoral orgasms are purely an adolescent phenomenon and that upon reaching puberty, the proper response of mature women is a change-over to vaginal orgasms is a good example of his ideology. Nevertheless the scientific discourse quickly proved that and other ideas wrong.

Irvine, Janice M., Disorders of Desire: Sexuality and Gender in Modern American Sexology. Temple University Press. pp. 37–38. ISBN 1-59213-151-4. 2005.

The fact that leading European universities started having wider variety of students had also an impact on the 'male' not being the default anymore. The second half of XIX century brought research of the psychological differences conditioned by gender. It was believed that the potential of all humans contributes to the sustainable and democratic societies and we should stop standardising power structures due to male preferences. Around that time the popular saying "Democracy is female" has emerged. In 1869, American Psychiatrist and Sociologist, Carol Linklater, argued that something we should learn from the women's psychology is seeing it as a priority not to disrupt the order of interrelations. What made women's voice differ from the male approach in her studies was their concern about the relations in the world that is rather focused on separation and building barriers between people.

Gilligan, Carol, et al. Innym głosem: teoria psychologiczna a rozwój kobiet. Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2015.

Introducing non-heterosexuals and non-male individuals to the positions of governing structures brought relief to the dominant phenomenon of general aversion to any form of leadership that might denote a deliberate renunciation of the signs and privileges of the masculine role. Men did not have to bear the pressure of meeting the 'manly' expectations anymore. Within years it started being obvious that less oppressive representation of power is possible, and moreover, can be as successful.

4 My personal notes:

Yesterday, after writing the part about women in politics of XIX century, I went to have some drinks with my newly made friends from Antonin Publishing House. We had an interesting talk with Theodore and Ole about how sex transformed within those centuries. What were the origins of the stigmas attached to the sexual act and what was it that made them unshakeable for so many centuries? For us the idea of people being institutionally assigned to one of the binary genders and having to comply with all those norms against their nature is abstract. Theodore wondered who would we be now if the sexual revolution didn't take place. We looked at each other. Theodore would definitely be male. I imagined ze without hir sleek eyelashes and long dress, in a XX century styled suit, all dark in colours, flat 'manly' leather shoes. The beard would have stayed. I imagined ze playing sport with similarly looking, young men.

I imagined ze marrying some feminine individual and having to fulfil the role of a strong, stable husband. We all laughed, although it was all a little bit sad. Ze couldn't stand the idea of being limited to trousers and not wearing make up. It was less easy in case of Ole. I didn't dare to ask about hir genitals, we all knew each other just since Sunday. With hir serious and sharp approach to work, attractive and discrete intelligence, elegant style, ze was lacking any features that would put hir closer to 'male' or 'female'. Hir voice was low, shoulders angular and thin. Ze was just a genuinely attractive person, without the use of specifically male or female tricks of charm. Instead of giving us some opinion, ze suggested that we probably wouldn't have such infertility problems if our ancestors weren't so obsessed with genital surgeries. Indeed, the world today is going through a serious problem, as one in three people are born infertile, while the rest often refuses to have children. We live in times when women from third world countries spend their entire fertile years on serial surrogate motherhood, often being severely abused, providing us, people from privileged societies, with kids without bearing the physical inconvenience of pregnancy. Our grandparents thought that we will be living in times when our genders won't limit us in our pursuit of happiness and fulfilment. They didn't expect that in 2017 there would be hardly any company with a binary CEO, while in the ghettos of the same cities androgynous people would be massively kidnapped or raped by homophobes. Meanwhile in Saudi Arabia, homosexuality keeps being illegal with the cases of death sentences.

Sexual revolution brought us new possibilities and an alleged sense of freedom, but those reached only people like us - Western, preferably white and of decent income. For the rest of the world it just changed the name of the pain they have been always bearing. The disparities between our societies have never been as big as they are today.

From the trio of me, Ole and Theodore, I was the most binary person. Female. Homosexual. Coming from a traditional monogamous, Christian, lesbian family. My biological mother was struggling for five years to get pregnant. My other mother was infertile, probably due to gender surgeries of both of her parents. She comes from Hungary, where gender surgeries were very new in 1960s and many dangerous substances were being used in hormonal medications. Apart from the hardship, our life was peaceful and steady. I couldn't imagine that my mothers and their mutual love could have been ever seen as a perversion. Yet without Catherine I, they couldn't have been married. Knowing how important their faith is for them, I wonder how they would lead their lives. Would they be single? Would they marry men? Where was the place for people like my mother in the world of the heteronormative human? How come did the ability of procreation happen to determine whether people's love could be recognised and respected on equal terms?

I imagined having society seeing my breast as something indecent, having an obligation to cover them constantly, even in summer, even on the beach. I imagined not being admitted to the ballot box because of what I had in my underwear. I imagined being prohibited from higher education and it made me angry. How would I deal with my sexuality in the times of puberty if I was to never talk and learn about it? It is such a broad and sophisticated topic. Hard to imagine how strong the taboos must have been if they were able to overcome the great curiosity and prevent people from touching the topic.

But the core of my wild amazement concerning people living before the sexual revolution oscillates around my inability to understand. What did those people feel when falling in love? How could guilt and evil land in that mixture of feelings? How did they position themselves at the moments of purest attraction to another person? Apart from knowing the culturally based norms, did they deep inside really feel that this vibrant force is a bad thing? Did they feel to have sinned after reaching orgasms?

5 Consumerism in pink latex (a come back to reality)

- What is the visual identity of sex?

I see sex in Western culture of the XXI century as a product, phenomenon that at some point was assigned a visual identity. Just like visual identities of brands, companies, political structures, it has been designed based on some aspects of its idea, message, history with certain design decisions being made. My point here is that the designer was not a good designer.

Since my early years the picture of what meaning sex holds in one's life was a very particular topic. It was always a problematic one, although very exciting.

Imagine coming to the planet Earth, without having ever heard about or experienced sexual intercourse. Pink leather, black latex, winking strawberry showing a thumb up, flash light, red lips, black lines outlining eyes, fake fur, violet silicone, shouting typography, or decorative and kitsch one, laces, neons, shiny heels, metal elements, pikes, theatrical poses, necessity of pleasure, dull expressions, openness, vulnerability, leopard print. It all certainly raises questions.

I would like to find out WHY it is all so poorly designed, pictured, recorded. I have a hard time figuring out how it happened that sex in the mainstream visual culture got inseparable from the grotesque and kitsch representation. My sincere attempts to find any academic sources investigating the XXI century's visual culture of sex were completely unsatisfactory. Browser is the most influential medium for pornographic contents these days. They seem to adopt the grotesque visual qualities and narratives of their predecessors - video tapes and magazines. The websites are rarely developed professionally and they operate on a one-hacker type of mentality. Moreover, there is rarely a need to raise the aesthetic standards, since their success is independent of it - then why investing money in that?

A young individual discovers their sexual self at a certain point of growing up. The excitement and needs of positioning themselves towards the new area requires seeking knowledge, sources of information. What I find significant in the formulation of the cultural identity of sex is that the very inner thing that sexual consciousness of the individual is, seeks for explanations from the outer sources - culture, media, native models, customs. Yet, the behavioural trends are changing faster these days. No longer do models practised by our parents seem relevant.

Just like a bold neon-red billboard with huge letters SALES and a given brand's logo attracts human attention, the red, blinking, shouting pornography affects the way we understand sex. To certain extent the power of shaping that form is in the hands of the user. In the digital era, where the sexual consumption is available, anonymous and (potentially) secure, he can chose from an extensive range of possibilities without guilt.

The variety of options interests the consumer, and the consumer's interest encourages the market. There are norms and there are deviations, but the borders between those are hard to define. Most of the pornographic websites promote storylines of incest, aggression, pedophilia, rape and humiliation. I see it as a self-generating organism that feeds itself with our lust and feeds us with its productions, trying to make them more and more extreme. By seeing what is culturally constructed we transfer our arousal to the given content. We are having fantasies, but they are not our own. Our drives are vulnerable to how sex is being designed and sold. I would call it a consumerist degeneracy of hedonism of Western culture. I planned to say that the standardised image of sex is a cultural failure of representation. On the other hand maybe it is rather a degeneracy of the sexual consumer? Or alternatively, is it a degeneracy? Or is it a pure reflection of what we, humans in the end deeply want?

Peter Michelson writes in "The Aesthetics of Pornography":

"Whether we like it or not, [pornography] is an imagination driven record of human's sexual needs."

Michelson, Peter. The aesthetics of pornography. Herder and Herder, 1971.

Again, in order to capture how those needs are being satisfied, we get back to the feminist topic - who do they primarily aim to satisfy? The art of pornography in Europe origins from the traditional paintings - nudes. As John Berger implies, in "Ways of Seeing", the main character of the painting is beyond the frame - the receiver (male) who stands in front of the painting is never captured in it, while it is for him that the nude emerges.

Berger, John. Ways of seeing. Penguin Books, 2008.

Jones, Amelia. Sexuality. Whitechapel Gallery, 2014, pp. 73-75.

If we go back to the years of the beginnings of cinematography, we might tract how the standards for representation were set. The moment in which a photographic image came to existence was a crucial event in the development of representation. Although the goal was to build a device that will capture the image the same way the human eye could in real life, the phenomenon of cinematographic fetish lays in the camera's ability to register the image better than the human eye. The new appliance created opportunities to direct the visual narrative, manipulate, bewitch.

An example of that superiority could be the famous question by Leland Stanford, whether a galloping horse ever lifts all four feet completely off the ground. Human eye is unable to break down the action of that speed. Stanford commissioned an English photographer Eadweard Muybridge, who studied the horse's motion via photography, proving that indeed, a galloping horse happens to be detached from the ground. The artist did not end his project on Occident, the horse though. Nine years later, Muybridge publishes an eleven-volume opus, "Animal Locomotion", which is a giant pictorial study of men, women, children, and animals performing short tasks designed to elicit a wide range of movements. There is something significant in the knowledge on female motion that has been depicted in the work and it gives the beginning for cinematic representation of women that is familiar to us till this day.

"Naked and semi-naked men, for example, walk, run, jump, throw, catch, box, wrestle, and perform simple trades such as carpentry. While naked and semi-naked women perform many of the same tasks, in their activities and gestures we see how the greater sexuality already encoded in the woman's body feeds into a new cinematic power exerted over her whole physical being. [...] While the men go about their business rather like Occident, Stanford's trotter, simply performing the functions they do best, the physical business of the women is less clearly defined, and their self-consciousness in its performance is much greater, they blow kisses, narcissistically twirl about, endlessly flirt fans, and wear transparent drapery that emphasises the nudity underneath."

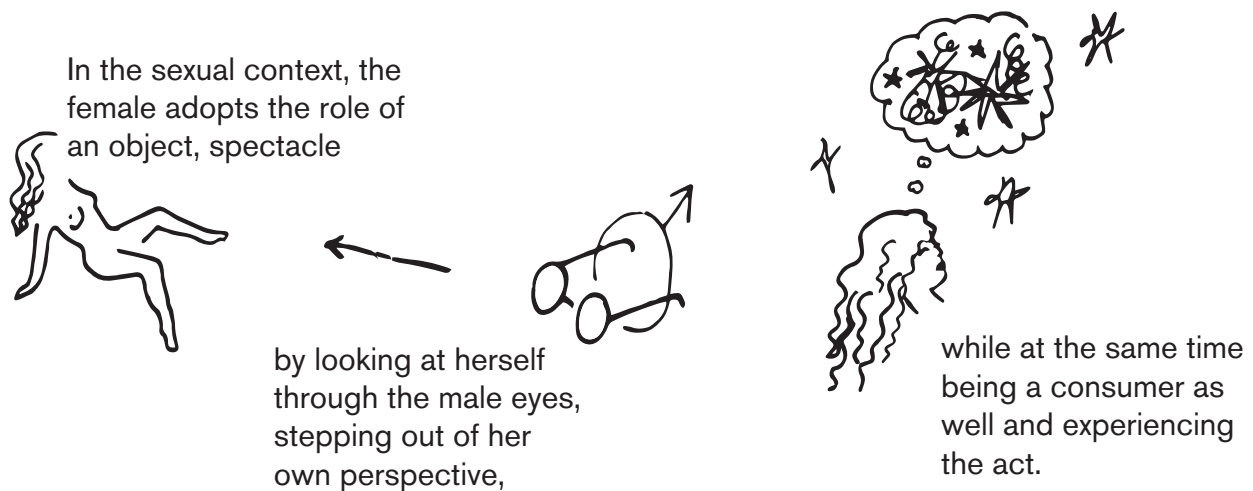
Williams, Linda. Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible", Expanded edition. 1st ed., University of California Press, 1999.

The same or even more so happens in the contemporary representation of sex, not only in the form of pornography. The identity of sex is built mainly on an assumption of the passive/active classification - passive, objectified female and active, consuming male. It could be said that it comes from the centuries-old tradition of diminishing women as secondary humans, the purpose of whom is to satisfy the primary ones. This being the core of the problematics that feminism has been fighting against since the very beginning - is no surprise. But what is interesting is how women position themselves towards it. Even though they live in the environment which defines them as the medium for representing sexuality, it is not that they are not being consumers.

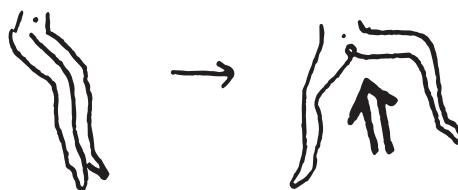
The common problem in the development of female psychology is that because of the constant and conscious being in-relation with other people, the female exists in two versions of herself: the one she believes is expected from her to be by the people she's in relation with; the real her, experiencing and perceiving.

Gilligan, Carol, et al. Innym głosem: teoria psychologiczna a rozwój kobiet. Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2015.

The same happens in sex. The female is perfectly aware of being objectified, while at the same time being an aware consumer too. This duality of the female perception of the participation in a sexual act is a topic that should have been given much more attention, as the layering of it is indeed fascinating.



As a matter of fact she could be seen as an even bigger consumer, receiver of sex, since in the most default kind of intercourse, she is the one that sex is being done to. She does not have to provide much (of energy, movement, ejaculate), just give a permission.



The same happens with sexual narratives. Even though cinematography, media, pornography etc. give women the role of objects in the sexual context, they are able to take over this perception and adapt it to their own experience. Nevertheless the way in which the above-mentioned perception is designed doesn't make it easy for women to relate to. It is made for men. As an effect women are less of the consumers of the sexual contents, show less interest in pornography - even though it works, it doesn't work in a satisfying way. This problem is being addressed more and more, since many female creatives working in porn field are taking up the challenge of creating new narratives for pornography that would focus on the satisfaction of female needs and would respond to the completely different way a female experiences sex.

Conclusion: We are facing a vicious circle in the portrayal of sex in our culture, where our needs of sex are being shaped by what the media have to offer, while what they offer us, is based on our need for sex.

At the same time, because of the strong tradition of seeing man as the default form of human, those representations offered by the media have been always neglecting to address the needs of female receivers, which (another vicious circle) has a certain influence on how women perceive the sexual self, and makes the structure of that experience much more layered.

The above reflections are obviously limited to just the heterosexual representations. I believe that homosexual, bisexual etc. phenomena might bring a whole new kind of sophisticated relations, the investigation of which is enough for a whole collection of books.

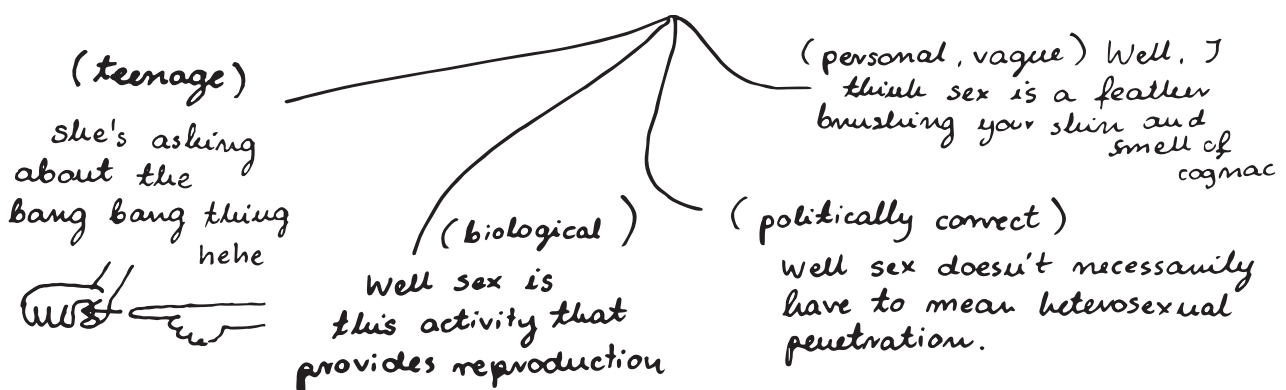
From the foregoing writing, it emerges how the identity of sex is deeply culturally and historically rooted or in other words manipulated. That is when it comes to produced content, staged representations, subliminal messages coming from media. In order to broaden the investigation of the designed identity of sex in Western world, I felt that more internal input was necessary, by which I mean not the representation, but comprehension of sex. What we are being fed with in literature, cinematography and internet might be in the end significantly different from what an individual, someone operating in the bare reality, experiences and perceives.

6 I put myself into the role of an alien in order to explore what sex is to humans.

Willing to contextualise the identity of sexuality I needed to step out from my own knowledge and perspective. I thought the best way would be by dismissing all my existing ideas and prejudices and start with a tabula rasa. For that purpose, I arranged several short interviews, questionnaires, asking people:

- What is sex?
- What color does sex have?

The success of the interviewing people from that point of view is hidden within the simplicity of the question 'what is sex?' itself. When predicting what kind of responses I might receive, I thought there will probably be several types of approaches:



Interviews

SUBJECT A:

1. What is sex? - Sex is a moment of the connection of two people. I see sex in two ways. First is the part of pure pleasure - what does the body feel? The second part is what your heart and brain experiences. I think that sex is a combination between those two parts, but what it will be in the end depends on you. Oh and the significant thing is the chemistry. - What is the chemistry? - Hmm... Actually it is pretty complex, because it connects with your whole life in general, so everything influences it in a way. When you are having sex a lot of good things is happening in your head, some of them stay there for 48h after the intercourse as far as I remember.
2. What colour is sex? - It is few colours. And I think they are my favourite ones at the same time: light rose, pale blue, I think also ruby.

SUBJECT B:

1. What is sex? - Oh well... Hmm... There is a saying that goes like that brain is the most important sex organ you have. And it is either by intellectual stimulation or physical stimulation and then you can just do whatever. But then whatever sensations that you get attach to the idea of sex and the idea of pleasure, to the brain. So it depends how your brain is configured by default, by birth or by culture or social influences, that is actually how you get to experience. Because of the fact that we are intelligent people, we are focused mainly on what society thinks sex is rather than what we deeply think sex is. That's why we have gay, lesbian and all the array of possibilities. I could get excited you know from a very nice conversation, I could get less excited by the intercourse.
2. What colour is sex? - It's purple. For me it's purple.

SUBJECT C:

1. What is sex? - I would say, first of all there is a biological reason for sex because we have to reproduce the species, this is the main thing, but if we look a little bit deeper, then we'll say it is also for joyment, it can be also used for power and many other social reasons and uses. For someone that doesn't know anything about sex, I would say that it is something really broad, it involves many things.
2. What colour is sex? - Colour? I'm not that kind of person that assigns colors to things. For me there is no colour for it.

SUBJECT D:

1. What is sex? - Nice. - Is that the answer? - Yes. Well, I assume that the alien would have enormous difficulties in understanding the language and... - But assuming that the alien knows English - Oh. Hmm... still 'nice'. - [after 5 minutes of conversation about the subject of my work] - Oh and three-dimensional! I forgot the 'three-dimensional'.
2. What colour is sex? - Pink.

SUBJECT E:

1. What is sex? - I will tell you. When I was in primary school, we always had a joke. Give me your finger, like this. - [the person pulls out their index finger towards me. Our fingers touch and rub slightly for few seconds.] - And I will say to you: Did you like it? - Ah neutral - Normally they would say yes or they would smile, and then I say: You just had sex with me! We didn't know anything about sex, we were little kids. Haha, oh yes, but that is a very sophisticated question! I can say that we have those parts on us that are meant to reproduce to make more of us and we have organs for that, but we are humans so we also have it for pleasure.
2. What colour is sex? - Red. It is not my favourite colour though! Yellow is my favourite colour. But I never think of sex as a colour really.

SUBJECT F:

1. What is sex? - Generally speaking it is an activity, aiming for procreation among humans. It could be elaborated on many different grounds. On one hand it is reproduction, on the other hand as an effect of an emotion it is some sort of utmost intimacy that two people can achieve - physical, but on the other hand psychological. That is how I perceive it. I think there are as many answers to this question as there are people in the world. Everyone has a different approach to it.
2. What colour is sex? - Red

SUBJECT G:

1. What is sex? - It is a method of reproduction, extension of the species. That is my first thought. Also, I think only humans and dolphins get enjoyment from it.
2. What colour is sex? - Pink

SUBJECT H:

1. What is sex? - It is the deepest and most intense kind of intimacy two people can get. It is a very specific and exceptional kind of sensual experience and pleasure. It can be a way of communication... It is a way of communication. Also a cooperation of two bodily mechanisms, a very intuitional one, that our bodies naturally know and long for.
2. What colour is sex? - Grey. Like when you squint your eyes, everything you see gets grey. Also washed colours of duvet covers in the morning light.

Analysis

Surprisingly little amount of people approached the topic in a simple way, describing some sort of mechanical, sexual activity, despite my insisting that I want to hear instant answers that do not have to be well-thought or sophisticated. What was common in all cases was a general puzzlement after being faced with the problem. It did not happen due to the natural awkwardness

of talking about sex - I warned my interviewees that I'm dealing with the topic of sex. The perplexed emotion seemed to come from an actual difficulty to explain what sex is. When reading the answers it confirms that the essence of sex is actually very hard to grasp and define. Many of the people I spoke with immediately turned to the direction of a metaphor or a description of the goals and functions of sex, instead of describing the sex itself. Were my assumptions wrong? I assumed that among the answers there would be some visible references to the pornographic narratives, while it seems like porn did not have that much of an influence on the understanding of sex within my study group.

We are being bombarded with sexual imagery, suggestive contents, we feel the presence of our inner sexual perception every day, finally we just do have sex, nevertheless to answer what it stands for causes us trouble. It is possible that there is just no ultimate answer to that question and I am pretty fine with that.

Certainly, the answers that have been used so far - models for understanding and setting standards to sex and sexuality - did not work out. Last decades, the times when people started being freer to speak have proved that. The rise of gay rights movements, feminism in all the waves and LGBTQ+ indicate that the current state of affairs does not meet our needs.

7 Conclusions

Genius Cucufa is obliged to fulfill the wish of Sultan Mangogul, to make all the women at his court to open up about their sexual experiences. The Genius takes a silver ring out from his pocket and instructs the Sultan to put it on his finger.

“every woman, at whom you shall level the stone, will relate her intrigues in a plain, audible voice. Do not imagine however, that 'tis by the mouth that they are to speak!”
By what then will they speak, says Mangogul? “By the frankest part about them, and the best instructed in those things which you desire to know, says Cucufa; by their Toys.”

Diderot, Denis. Les bijoux indiscrets: or, the indiscreet toys. Nabu Press, 2010. European Libraries, archive.org/stream/lesbijouxindisc01didegoog#page/n34/mode/2up.

Diderot's fairytale from 1748 is mentioned in Foucault's History of Sexuality. Foucault suggests that for years we have been living in the kingdom of Sultan Mangogul; we keep asking sex questions and are never satisfied, searching for magical rings that would break its secrecy. In my work, I have attempted to explain the contemporary representation (both visual and conceptual) of sex in Western culture. It is possible to define with historical analysis WHY sex is conditioned the way it is conditioned. Centuries of religion-based restrictions, criminalising homosexuality, moral incrimination of pleasure, power relations and the glass ceiling of patriarchy - these phenomena give us some ideas. Nevertheless in our culture it is not that easy to define what sex IS.

Foucault, Michel, and Robert Hurley. The use of pleasure. Penguin Books, 1992.

Concerning the short interviews I decided to keep the complete anonymity of my subjects, not revealing their age, gender or identity. But one of them put me in a wider context of sexual comprehension and I will let go my restrictions in his case. I'm talking about the subject E, a 60 year old man running a sex-shop in the Hague. I was amazed by the fact that HE was the person to give me such a vague and metaphorical answer, acknowledging a touch of a finger as a form of sex. We had an interesting conversation in his shop, being surrounded by pop music and variety of dildos looming up in the background. While we talked, he was attending on a few clients who would buy tickets and disappear behind a curtain. It was some sort of porn cinema. I asked if I could have a look. Behind the plastic portal there was a dark space, with a couch, a cellar on a side that was closed with a gate, and a narrow corridor opposite, no screens. I heard the owner saying something to me, so I turned back to the shop. He proposed to give me a tour around the place.

It might be good if you walk with me, because there is this strange thing, that once you are behind this curtain, everyone assumes that you will be ok with having sex with them.

We walked through the extremely dodgy maze of little rooms and cellars, some with screens, some without, some with small seats, others with entire king-sized couch sets. Different men were passing by as the proud owner was telling me about how the place functions, what possibilities it offers and what renovations he is planning. He told me that women never come here alone. If a woman happens to visit the cinema, it is only when she is accompanied by a man (most of the cases their partners - he assumes). After seeing all the glory holes, showers and torn couches, he guided me out of the labyrinth. We finished the interesting conversation, said goodbye, and a second later I was back on the ordinary street with Christmas light decorations and people coming back from work.

Afterwards, I had a thought: The unceremonious and foul straightforwardness of that space is the same abstract portrayal of sex as the confused metaphorical explanations from my interviewees and the finger-to-finger experience I had with the sex-shop owner. My hypothesis when starting this extensive work was my personal assumption, that the whole idea of sex and sexuality, the way we know it here, all the problems assigned to it and the emotional load it carries is to a certain extent a very random result. It just happened to come out like this, it did not have to. Random in a way that certain people from our history (e.g. Jesus) had an influence on other people (people interpreting Jesus), who living in certain historical conditions had a certain influence on other people. An influence they wouldn't have had if they were born in another country, or in another body, or if one day instead of going one place, they went to another one.

My point, which I was trying to prove by creating an alternative historical reality as well as bringing the anecdote of sex-positive islanders from North-Western Melanesia, was that sex could be for us something entirely different. It could be something less difficult in approach, causing less harm and less pathology. Or on the contrary - it could do even more of those. It could be more of just an ordinary activity like consuming food, or it could have gone more to the extreme direction of people not finding it acceptable to show their ankles in public.

I think that the variety of possible outcomes when it comes to the visual and conceptual identity of sex is caused by how abstract phenomenon sex is. What follows, the very specific consumerist, pink and trashy representation is almost a random by-product of the attempt to grasp this abstraction and it is surprising that this particular portrayal prevails. Working on this thesis brought me to a reflection that while the conceptual side of sex that I have investigated is closer to erotics, the visual one in its nature is like pornography, much less sophisticated.

I understand that there is neither need nor sense in attempting to develop a new definition of sex in our times. Nevertheless the subject is incredibly beautiful in its ambiguity, letting us play with it and give it interpretations. I believe that we are slowly getting more open to different non-heteronormative, non-misogynist, non-monogamous forms. I am excited to observe how both in a positive and negative ways this organism will develop with its visuals and concepts, hopefully bringing less convention-rooted forms of representation.

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