The Feminine Art of Failure: queering feminist spectatorship
El arte femenino del fallo: queering *a la audiencia feminista*

Debra Ferreday
Lancaster University

Abstract

This paper asks: in post-postfeminist times constitutes a feminist reading of the popular, and in particular potential futures are implied by the current 'return' to canonical feminist practices of reading, and how might these apparently utopian futures work to silence certain critical voices emanating from within the sphere of the popular – particularly queer and feminine voices? In answer to this question, it proposes a re-examining of contemporary 'abject' images of femininity in order propose a re-framing of feminist analysis of visual culture. By reading fashion imagery alongside selfie culture and popular feminist narratives of the visual, it argues that the melancholy nature of the popular representation of femininity precisely dramatizes the impossibly divided position of female femininity in a masculinist world.

Keywords: **Feminism; Gender; Digital Cultures; Fashion; Femininity**

Resumen

Este artículo pregunta: en épocas post-postfeministas, ¿se constituye una lectura feminista de lo popular? ¿y particularmente, de los futuros posibles que están implicados en el actual "retorno" a las prácticas feministas canónicas de leer? Y, de ser así ¿cómo podrían estos futuros, aparentemente utópicos, silenciar ciertas voces críticas que salen de la esfera de lo popular, en especial aquellas queer y femeninas? En respuesta a esta pregunta, se propone una reexámen de las imágenes contemporáneas "abyectas" de la feminidad, con el fin de proponer un replanteamiento del análisis feminista de la cultura visual. En la lectura de las imágenes del mundo de la moda junto la cultura selfie y las narrativas populares feministas de lo visual, se argumenta que la naturaleza melancólica de la representación popular de la feminidad dramatiza precisamente la posición, imposiblemente dividida, de la feminidad de mujer en un mundo masculino.

*Palabras clave: **Género; Culturas Digitales; Moda; Feminidad***

In March 2014, a new social media trend attracted widespread attention in the British and North American mainstream and online media. On Facebook and Twitter, women began to post 'no makeup selfies', self-taken photographs showing them with faces bare of cosmetics. These images, some posted by celebrities with large social media followings, spread virally through the chain-letter like practice of tagging or 'nominating', apparently had something to do with cancer research: either with raising donations – some women posted screen grabs from mobile phones or computers proving that they had made a small donation, usually three pounds - or, more vaguely, 'raising awareness'. Within

days, a prominent cancer charity, Cancer Research UK, had associated itself with this grassroots fundraising movement: a week later, the British press was reporting that the selfies had raised a record eight million pounds in six days. Despite this fundraising success, media reports and online responses were characterised by a range of reactions from bewilderment to overt critique: from questioning how the very idea of a 'no makeup selfie' as something unusual and daring might suggest that it is otherwise unusual for a woman to appear barefaced in public, to anti-capitalist and pro animal rights critics suggesting, variously, that these women were: cultural dupes making themselves complicit with big pharma; narcissists desperate for validation; pathetic victims of capitalism and or/its willingly complicit advocates; as complicit with the 'cancer industry's' funding of animal testing and as supporting the medical establishment's deception of the public; and constituting a 'slap in the face to women with cancer' (Park, 2014). Although there were some positive responses, they usually took the form of a defence or riposte to the first wave of articles and posts, the vast majority of which were critical or downright hostile. Most of this analysis raised similar questions: what did these images mean? What, to use the language of media semiotics, were there connotations: what did they represent? How should 'we', as a society, read this apparently spontaneous mediated performance of feminine identity? Most typically, the images were attacked for being unfeminist and for 'characterising the narcissism of our internet age', as Emily Buchanan in the Huffington Post put it:

> It was all very well meaning and inoffensive but, as far as I could tell, absolutely nothing to do with breast cancer awareness. If anything, it was trivialising a very serious issue and using it to justify a vanity project. 'Here's a picture of me. Beautiful. Bare-faced. Make-up free. Like it. Share it. Validate me. Do the same and I'll validate you. Go on, take a selfie. It's for a good cause LOL!" 'Tell me, what is the good cause? Who exactly is this benefitting other than the person in the picture, who will undoubtedly be swathed with social endorsements of her natural beauty? (Buchanan, 2014, paragraph 2).

This response, in a liberal online newspaper, resonates with a familiar discourse about the narcissism of the 'selfie generation' in the left-wing and feminist press (the assumption that selfies are exclusively practiced by young, post-feminist women is a universal feature of this anti-selfie discourse, despite the fact that women of all ages apparently participated). For example, Charlotte Raven, editor of the *Feminist Times* (a crowd funded online magazine whose strapline is 'Life Not Lifestyle), has previously used her editorial column to compare today's young generation with her own adolescence, which 'was spent reading Marxist tracts in a Soviet themed bedroom. Instead of uploading selfies onto YouTube, I was highlighting passages of Lenin's What is to be Done and deliberating about whether the USSR was a degenerate workers state, as my Militant colleagues claimed' (Raven, 2013, paragraph 7), a version of 'real' feminist activism that she contrasts with online campaigns which may 'change a few small things' but 'can't change consciousness' (Raven, 2013, paragraph 17). In the mainstream media, this generation logic was reproduced in an interview on BBC's *Today* programme with Warwick University student and feminist blogger Yomi Adegoke. Adegoke, apparently there to speak for the 'internet generation', suggested that the campaign showed that going makeup-free is now as unusual as shaving one's head or sitting in a bath of baked beans, two activities associated with fundraising in the UK. After suggesting that fewer women wearing makeup might in itself be a good thing – another common trope in the media discourse surrounding this campaign – she concluded, 'if it's considered that ground-breaking that women aren't wearing makeup, I don't really understand why' (Today, 2014): thus assuming that in taking a photograph of themselves without makeup, these women were implicitly suggesting that *all* women 'should', in reality, wear makeup every time they are seen in public: an assumption never stated by the participants themselves, but widely attributed to them nonetheless. These images of individuals, produced through a network of connections and attachments, are read not as performative of a particular kind of self-identification that might be contingent and shifting, but as though they were an ideological text produced to promote capitalist and patriarchal standards of beauty. In a parody of ideological media analysis, the cultural response to barefaced selfies suggests that women's self-created images, and the practices through which they are produced, are in

themselves unworthy of engagement or analysis: instead, they are read only as evidence of women's subordination.

The phenomenon of the barefaced selfies, and the responses it evoked, provide a troubling portrait of the way public performances of feminine identity by, specifically, female-identified feminine subjects are read in the current historical moment. I am not concerned, here, with analysing the phenomenon of the selfie, though this is an important emerging field in cultural studies. What interests me, rather, is the overwhelmingly negative response to this practice and the way that it mobilises a feminist vocabulary alongside discourses of narcissism to critique women's – especially, but not exclusively cis women's - embodied performances of femininity. These images, seen as threatening because of their unintelligibility, precisely generated an excess of readings designed to assign meaning. In this reading, the absent referent of the images – makeup, and hence feminine identity performance and practice – becomes a way of marking the subject as feminine: thus marked, she becomes burdened with the imagined failure of feminine futures. As I argue in this article, this aligning of cis women's attachment to femininity with feminist failure is a characteristic contemporary trope which, paradoxically, works to render invisible and inaudible the complex affective attachments and shared practices which are at stake in feminine identity performances. Through the generational discourse reproduced by Raven and others, and through a turn back to a certain retro-essentialism which holds that women should be 'natural', feminine subjects are held to have failed, and to be responsible for the failure of anti-capitalism and of feminism. However, it is not my purpose to argue the opposite: instead, following queer narratives of failure, I want to argue that by suspending ideological reading it is possible both to refuse the imperative to subject feminine identity performances to constant critique (and which is in itself more violent and more sexist than any supposed hidden message encoded in a selfie), and to interpret contemporary visual images of femininity precisely as a celebration of queer failure that represents a far more sophisticated and self-aware rejection of masculinist values than femininity's detractors would allow. This paper asks, then: what, in post-postfeminist times, constitutes a feminist reading of the popular? What potential futures are implied by the current 'return' to canonical feminist practices of reading, and how might these apparently utopian futures work to silence certain critical voices emanating from within the sphere of the popular – particularly queer and feminine voices? I examine contemporary images of femininity – queer and straight, cis and trans – to examine how the feminine body is precisely being re-imagined as a body inscribed with failure, as an anti-feminist body. I argue that the melancholy nature of the popular representation of cis femininity precisely dramatizes the impossibly divided position of femininity in a masculinist world.

Postfeminism and Femininity

The re-imagining of the feminine body as anti-feminist or un-feminist often draws on the idea of postfeminism and, latterly, of neoliberalism. Women's performances are imagined as 'postfeminist' and aimed at 'empowerment' at a moment when feminist scholars such as Charlotte Brunsdon perceive that this term's 'moment/utility is now waning' (2013, p. 379): hence a public avowal of feminine identity is menacing since it threatens to fix 'us' in the eternal present of neoliberal capitalism, making a turn 'back' to feminist politics impossible. Postfeminism is a contested term, which has been used to signify contradictory meanings according to context, but broadly it has been used to signify particular issues seen as problematic for feminism. These include the use of concepts of 'empowerment' and 'pleasure' to justify attachments, for example to practices like fashion and makeup, previously imagined to be anti-feminist. It is not my intention here to defend feminine performances using the rhetoric of postfeminism: as a result of the current upsurge of new popular feminisms, especially within digital culture, and accompanying anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal critique, this account of femininity as empowering has been widely, and correctly, discredited (and if the internet shows us anything, it is that almost anything can be a source of pleasure to someone somewhere: neither pleasure nor 'agency' can in themselves be the grounds of a transformative feminist politics). However, I think we need to be sceptical of the way that popular feminisms have tended to turn to more canonical, second-wave readings of

popular culture which emphasise readings for ideological content, and focus on the negative effects of media images of feminine subjects, and particularly the way that the so-called 'media effects model', long rejected by media scholars, appears to be undergoing a resurgence.

The current cultural moment is particularly productive in terms of feminist cultural analysis, since the current resurgence of feminism, especially online, suggests a more hopeful future than might have been predicted in the late twentieth-century, or what was widely imagined as a 'postfeminist' era. As Angela McRobbie has noted, the 1990's in particular can be seen as an important turning point for feminism (McRobbie, 2004). This period constituted what she terms a 'moment of feminist reflexivity' characterised by the turn to the body in feminist theory, the advent of queer theory, particularly the work of Judith Butler (1990; 1993), and a proliferation of interventions by postcolonial scholars into the raced and classed assumptions inherent in the category 'Woman'. These interventions, representing both a crisis in feminist thought and an extraordinary revitalisation of debates in feminist media studies, were accompanied by Girl Power and the notion of postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004; 2008). These shifts marked a growing perception that young women were rejecting feminism, and that this rejection is inextricably linked to their attachment to femininity (Adkins, 2004). In the same period, feminism became both 'canonised' in educational terms, and increasingly visible in the mass media. In the 1990's, many feminist scholars saw this dissemination of feminist ideas as hopeful (McRobbie, 2004; Stuart, 1990; Walkerdine, 2004). Nevertheless, the popular 'feminism' that resulted has not always done justice to the depth and nuance of feminist theory. Instead, a rather pessimistic critique of femininity has come to 'stand in for' feminism in the popular media; whilst the imaginary figure of the 'killjoy feminist' (Ahmed, 2012) is imagined, first and foremost, as objecting to femininity, and hence becomes a focus for the projection of anxiety and guilt produced by the notion that one's attachment to femininity means that one has 'failed' as a feminist. In particular it is often supposed that mainstream images of femininity, especially those produced by the fashion industry, have either aimed to profit from feminism

(for example through the marketisation of the figure of the 'career woman' in the 1970's) or, more often, simply ignored it. Yet fashion imagery often functions as a sort of shadow of or reaction to feminist concerns: this is especially true of fashion's more extreme, 'artistic' manifestations. As contemporary feminist activists turn back to issues of consent and sexual violence, fashion flirts more and more with ambiguous imagery that suggests sexual violence. As feminist debates on pornography become at once more urgent and more polarised, the otherwise technically unremarkable photographer Terry Richardson, whose work charmlessly blurs the boundaries of editorial fashion photography and hard-core pornography, becomes a hugely influential figure in shaping the popular aesthetics of the day (including, most infamously, Miley Cyrus' controversial *Wrecking Ball* video and her hotly debated performance at the 2013 Grammy awards). As the fashion theorist Caroline Evans has argued, the imagery of femininity in advanced capitalism has increasingly been dominated by tropes of trauma, death, decay, alienation and violence (Evans, 2003). It is no coincidence that this period coincides both with the postfeminist period, and with postmodernity and the advent of queer theory. Since the later part of the twentieth century, debates about feminine identity have been intense and polarised. Second-wave certainties about the relationship between images and lived bodies, and about the oppressive nature of femininity, have been radically destabilised, feminine subjects are still routinely represented as cultural dupes whose gender performances can do nothing to destabilise patriarchal norms, and whose continuing attachment to femininity bars them from accessing the freedoms won by feminism.

In this context, I want to ask: if high femininity is a pleasure for which feminine subjects are willing to renounce both the Left's doctrine of the 'good' anti-capitalist subject and neoliberal capitalism's vision of respectable, balanced and 'appropriate', marketable gender identities, why are our dominant images of femininity so overwhelmingly melancholic? Perhaps the widespread belief that a feminist utopia would be a world in which femininity no longer existed has some influence on the ways in which femininity is at once privileged, and widely portrayed as intolerable. Disdain for fashion, presented as a defence of femi-

nism, often barely conceals an implicit hatred of feminine subjects, as one journalist eloquently describes:

> Some people still believe that an interest in clothes means a woman's brain – and it is overwhelmingly women on the receiving end of this disdain – has crumbled into face powder, that the very existence of lipstick scrubs out 50 years of feminism (Nicholson, 2013, paragraph 1).

In this sense, the feminine woman is seen as the ultimate complicit dupe of consumer capitalism. This is especially significant in the context of the current anti-capitalist turn in feminist theory and activism, since as Ishay Landa among other has argued, anti-consumerism has become 'nearly hegemonic' in left wing discourse (Landa, 2013). Landa's summary of the Left's anti consumerism resonates powerfully with popular feminist critiques of mediated femininities: as he argues,

> "The consumer society" is widely held in contempt. It is seen as deplorable epiphenomenon of capitalism, where shallow hedonism takes the place of genuine human bonds. The left-wing project of political transformation is thus largely conceived as emancipation from consumerism. The perceived need is to wean the masses off their consumerist infatuation, cure them of their addiction to "false" and "artificial" needs (2013, paragraph 1).

Thus the belief in feminine false consciousness is symptomatic of a more general project of freeing the oppressed masses from bourgeois and patriarchal media influences. Thus a critique of the commodification of the pleasures and desires, as well as the creative potentials produced through feminine cultures need not necessarily entail a critique of femininity itself: yet it is the attachment to femininity, not simply attempts to enclose and profit from that attachment, that is too often the subject of popular feminist vitriol. If the performance of feminine identity is liable to be read as an inscription of feminism's failure, it seems productive to address the 'problem' of femininity through the notion of a 'negative turn' in feminism, and especially Jack Halberstam's queer politics of failure. In order to understand what contemporary feminine performances tell us about the relation between bodies, images, and identity, perhaps it would be more productive to return to a close reading of the extraordinarily rich and complex range of feminine representations that exist across DIY and mainstream media cultures.

Femininity, queer theory and negativity

Although cis femininity in particular has traditionally been excluded from the spectrum of bodily identities imagined as queer, queer theory and femininity share certain affinities: not least their tendency to be dismissed as 'first world problems', as luxuries only to be afforded in times of socio economic and intellectual plenty. In these times, when the response to austerity is to turn 'back' to activism and to reject theoretical constructions of hope as individualist and naïve, it can feel as though the moment for queer theory is past. As Michael O'Rourke argues, 'there is a certain discourse which propagates the idea that queer theory (and not just its politics) is always already dead, buried, over, finished' (O'Rourke, 2011, p. 103). There is a sense, as a queer theorist in the academy, that queer is a luxury 'we', in these times of austerity, can no longer afford. O'Rourke further quotes Halberstam's impression that '"some say that queer theory is no longer in vogue; others characterize it as fatigued or exhausted of energy and lacking in keen debates; still others wax nostalgic for an earlier moment"' (2011, p. 103). In a polemical review of Halberstam's work, feminist blogger Jackie Wang, better known as Loneberry sums up this philosophy. Posing the question, 'what is negative feminism and anti-social queer theory?', she proposes her 'fragmentary answer' (Wang, 2010, paragraph 1): 'It is a queer critique that aims to decenter positivity, productivity, redemptive politics of affirmation, narratives of success, and politics that are founded on hope for an imagined future. It's rude politics and has no interest in being polite. It embraces masochism, anti-production, self-destructiveness, abjection, forgetfulness, radical passivity, aggressive negation, unintelligibility, negativity, punk pugilism, and anti-social attitudes as a form of resistance to liberal feminist and gay politics of cohesion. It's about *not-becoming* because the notion of *becoming* is perceived as following the capitalist logic of production and models of success that are often tied up with colonialism' (Wang, 2010, paragraph 1).

Importantly, she concludes that 'Jack's theories don't advocate *doing nothing*, rather, *doing something through a refusal to do anything*, a radical form of passivity' (Wang,

2010, paragraph 7). Affect is a central part of the politics of negation: it is a philosophy which rejects the emotional flatness of that consumer capitalism entails, that privileges 'feeling good over feeling like shit' (Wang, 2010, paragraph 3). Crucially, it refuses the demand to become properly adjusted to society, instead paying attention to the ways in which marginal subjects are *made* to feel 'angry or depressed as fuck and [who] seek self-annihilation' because 'the world demands our unity' and for whom the promise that emotions can be controlled and mastered represents not liberation, but a final capitulation to patriarchal power (Wang, 2010, paragraph 3).

In *The Queer Art of Failure,* Halberstam argues for a political refusal that declines Western feminist theories of 'agency and power, freedom and resistance' which, s/he argues have historically obscured 'alternative ways of thinking about self and action that emerge from contexts often rejected outright by feminism' (2001, p. 126). Citing, for example, Spivak's work on nineteenth-century widow suicide, s/he argues that it is necessary to pay attention to modes of being woman that are 'incomprehensible within a normative feminist framework' (2001). It is with this provocative notion of feminine as normative that I am concerned here: with the ways in which a dominant form of white and middle-class feminist discourse is mobilised both within the academy (through the rejection of queer theory as naïve) and in popular culture through, for example, the widespread normalisation of the belief that femininity is oppressive and that feminine subjects – mostly women but also camp gay men, for example – need to be rescued from it. The politics of agency, of who gets to determine what is recognised as agency, is an important one for Halberstam since it has a bearing on the kinds of futures that are imaginable. What, s/he asks 'is the alternative to … cynical resignation on the one hand, and naïve optimism on the other'? (2011, p. 1); this seems a particularly important question for queer theory, which, like femininity, is always vulnerable to being misrecognised, in contrast to more readily recognisable forms of activism and intervention, as inactive through being *both* cynical *and* naive simultaneously.

Michael O'Rourke counters concerns that queer theory might be 'over' with work by Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner and Jose Munoz which, he says, reminds us that the appeal of queer theory lies in its openness and the promise it offers of radically different futures (O'Rourke, 2011, p.103). He argues that Munoz' *Cruising Utopia* raises the 'now-central question of how to bring about utopian futures from within a negating and seemingly hopeless present. How to introduce or bring exuberant futures … into being' (O'Rourke, 2011, p. 103). In order to address this question, O'Rourke draws on Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), to argue that happiness, for example, is 'an affect which has been downplayed in queer studies which has up until recently preferred to wallow in bad feelings such as shame (by far the most dominant affect in queer cultural studies), hate, fear, anger, disgust and so on. Negative affect, melancholy and trauma' (O'Rourke, 2011, p. 111). Ahmed reflects on 'unhappy queer archives' which reveal how queer subjects become unhappy precisely through the social and familial construction of the queer subject as 'unhappiness-cause' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 95): she insists on the need to 'see the importance of embracing the unhappy queer, rather than simply placing our hopes in an alternative figure of the happy queer' and thus risking that 'the unhappiness of this world could disappear from view … *We must stay unhappy with this world*' (2010, p. 105): a formulation which resonates with the construction of the feminine subject as a bad object for feminism, one whose supposed unhappiness (a state assumed to be caused by false consciousness) and responsibility for the unhappiness of others (through the creation of anxiety, envy or the imperative to witness and validate her narcissism) legitimates her subjection to violent regimes of critique, silencing and shaming.

It should be noted, here, that in suggesting that femininity is queer, I am not attempting to appropriate queer politics as a way of redeeming normative practices, since to take such an approach would only be to reconstruct femme performance as incoherent and in need of critical intervention in order to be intelligible. It would also be to reproduce the all-too-familiar feminist move by which mass pleasures are given an academic seal of approval by being pronounced 'subversive' or

indicative of agency. I do not feel qualified to make such a judgment: instead I would argue that feminine performances 'speak for themselves'; that if they are sometimes incoherent, self-contradictory, unintelligible, this in itself tells us more about the contemporary status of femininity than any attempt to resolve or reduce them to a single ideological statement. Further, I am aware that many of the advocates of negative feminism are speaking specifically of queer lives and experiences: I am not claiming that all feminine performances are necessarily radical, only that recognising the many connections between the queer and the feminine might enable a radically new way of seeing. Firstly I would point out that the feminine, no less than the queer, is frequently positioned as threatening, excessive, marginal, and in need of continual policing. Secondly, the notion that some femininities are radical and destabilising, others merely normative, obscures the practices, technologies and embodiments that all feminine subjects share, and the possibilities this shared practice allows for connection as well as disconnection. My project here is to suggest questions anti-social queer theory might raise for feminism. Especially, I am interested in the possibilities offered by repudiating social structures which, since they are assumed to be *a priori* patriarchal and heterosexist, can *only* result in failure for queer subjects: that is, the promise of equality or success is constantly deferred through a narrative of progress towards some idealised, utopian future that – in what experience should tell us is the nature of utopias – is *at best* never realized and whose price is always the violence of assimilation.

Here, I want to turn to Jose Munoz' vision of queer futures, particularly to his reading of the spaces of hope opened up by queer performance, specifically that of Kevin Aviance, the African-American drag performer. For Munoz, Aviance draws on drag traditions and club culture, especially Vogueing, to perform 'fabulous' queer identity (2009, p. 76-78). By performing in partial drag – extremely feminine in dress and makeup, but with shaved head and unconcealed bulge in his crotch – Aviance 'performs the powerful interface between femininity and masculinity that is active in any gender, especially queer ones' (2009, p. 79). He is 'in-between', both masculine and feminine at once, and also neither

(Munoz, 2009, p. 79). To reduce this performance to 'unthinking appropriation of high fashion or other aspects of commodity culture', as Elizavet Pakis elegantly summarises, would be to gravely underestimate the power of performance to destabilise. To read reductively, as though feminine performance were always merely the sign of ideology, is to read inattentively. We are the worse for it, Pakis argues, since we need to be attentive to nuance in order to grasp how 'Aviance in performance becomes a beacon for queer and racialised possibility and survival'. As she concludes:

> [Munoz] suggests that though live performance seems to exist ephemerally and then vanish, it does not disappear completely after its expiry. Rather, it changes form, like energy, and lives on, as very important trace and residue in the hearts and minds of those who witnessed it (Pakis, 2011, p. 6).

My question, then, is: if we read apparently normative feminine performances – that is, those performed by the biologically female and in the spaces of capitalist consumer culture – if we can lay aside both the uncanny combination of triumph and depression that comes from reading only for evidence of ideology, and the narcissistic comparison and self-hatred that consumer culture demands of us as feminine readers of feminine images – what else might we find? What traces, what residues, might linger after such a reading, and what possibilities – for reconciliation, for acceptance of femininity and refusal to internalise masculinist values, for instance – might remain?

In recent years, fashion culture has embraced freakishness as a way of making this attachment to artifice visible. The rise of brands like MAC and Illamasqua, which are notable for the visibility of queer models and models of colour, and for marketing to all feminine subjects regardless of gender, sex or sexuality, could of course be read very critically, as simply evidence of capitalism appropriating the images of trans people and people of colour in order to market their products as hip. But such an analysis would be in danger of missing much about how these images travel, about what they can do, and about what they tell us about the queerness of contemporary fashion and beauty. Of course it would be possible, in exactly the kind of critical move I am rejecting here, to read these brands as

'just' concerned with the commercial possibilities for profit afforded by middle-class, and hence affluent, subcultures Therefore, I would suggest reading these new feminine visual cultures rather more generously, by paying attention to the ways in which shifts in representation work to structure the kinds of feminine performances that are possible; how new images of femininity feed into new feminine futures.

One such image is a 2011 viral ad campaign for Illamasqua, a cosmetics brand that positions itself as both high-end and marginal, for example through its association with the Sophie Lancaster trust, the charity set up to challenge subcultural hate crime after the murder of the young Goth woman from whom it takes its name. The campaign, collected as an online archive on the company's website, is entitled Theatre of the Nameless, after the subculture of female and male sex workers who paraded on the streets of interwar Berlin, and who became a tourist attraction for their extreme, theatrical performance of femininity as well as for the proliferation of queer identities represented: it features both apparently both female and male models, and references performance art, sex work, dance, and the popular exoticism of the 1920's and 30's European avant garde (Illamasqua, 2011). The colours and textures of these cosmetics mimic the costumes of 'The Nameless' – the sex workers - especially their tall leather boots, whose particular shades represented their professional specialisms through a complex 'street semiotics' similar to that employed in queer handkerchief codes (Gordon, 2008). So, for example, a green nail polish with an innovative rubber-like finish represents the 'poison green' boots of the dominatrixes who, according to a Beidecker guide of the time, specialised in 'psychological enslavement'; the matte purple lipstick worn by one model is named 'Kontrol', presumably based on 'Kontroll Girl' the Weimar term for a licensed sex worker (Gordon, 2008). The brand presents these nameless subjects as icons of self-expression and glamour, but there are of course overtones of Weimar, of the subversive power of glamour as well as of its ultimate uselessness in the face of massive violence. This is a vintage-style femininity along the lines of burlesque (Ferreday, 2009), but whereas burlesque often focusses on 40's and 50's Americana, these images suggest the

pre-World War II period: they are darker in tone, more European in setting, more overtly queer. Looking at them I am reminded of Angela Carter's writing on beauty from the 1970's, a period which similarly combined austerity with Gothic trends in makeup and dress. In her 1975 essay "The Wound in the Face", reprinted in 2012, Carter lays forth, in characteristically elegant prose, the second-wave indictment of red lipstick as a psychoanalytically charged sign of women's oppression. Carter begins by describing the 'hallucinatory weekend' she has spent examining images of women's faces cut from magazines, in order to understand '(a) what women's faces are supposed to be looking like now, and (b) why' (2012, p. 141). The emphasis on 'what women are *supposed* to look like' is significant:, she notes that we need to make a distinction between the 'official' face of the season, that is, what the beauty industry is telling us, and 'the face in the street' which might make up its own 'do-it-yourself assemblages'. With this caveat in place, what she finds, she records, 'scares me' (Carter, 2012, p. 142).

The article, unsurprisingly for its time, is a dizzying display of semiotic analysis: as Carter notes, one might argue that it is useless to examine the specific imagery of cosmetic ads, since they are simply designed to push whatever manufacturers are currently selling; and this must be different from what was being sold previously, in order to encourage consumers to buy more products. But this, she suggests, would be to miss the point; specific images, she suggests, do encode specific and nuanced ideological messages: '[the manufacturers] do not understand their own imagery, any more than the consumer'. I quote the following long passage to demonstrate how her reading makes connections between the faces on the wall, with their blank stares, and other texts, other images of the feminine:

> The face of the seventies matches the fashions in clothes that have dictated some of its features, and is directly related to the social environment which produces it. Like fashions in clothes, fashions in faces have been stuck in pastiche for the past four or five years. This bankruptcy is disguised by ever more ingenious pastiche – of the thirties, the forties, the fifties, the Middle East, Xanadu, Wessex (those smocks). Compared with the short skirts and flat shoes of ten years ago, style in women's clothes has regressed. (…) The *Vogue* face (…) is strongly under the 1930s influence, the iconographic, androgynous face of Die-

trich and Garbo, with heavily emphasised bone structure, hollow cheeks and hooded eyelids. Warhol's transvestite superstars too, and his magazine, *Interview* – with its passion for the tacky, the kitschy, for fake glamour, for rhinestones, sequins, Joan Crawford, Ann-Margret – have exercised a profound influence. As a result, fashionable women now look like women imitating men imitating women, an interesting reversal (1982, p. 142).

Citing Adorno's claim that both the feminine character and the idea of femininity itself are products of male-dominated society, Carter makes the unlikely claim that this 'transvestite influence' is due to the sweeping away of outmoded feminine styles by feminism: since only drag queens have carried the torch for femininity in the interim, it is to them that the fashion industry turns 'to find out what it had looked like' (2012, p. 143). This turn back from the 'Rousseau-esque naturalism' of the 60's (2012, p. 143), with its DIY aesthetic of pale lips and kohl-rimmed eyes, flat shoes and short skirts, is exemplified most of all, she claims, by the return of dark lipstick which has brought the mouth back in focus as 'a bloody gash, a visible wound' (2012, 145). This face suggests both sexual excess and austerity: it resembles 'the hard, bland with which women brazened their way through the tough 1930s the tough 1940s and the decreasingly tough 1950's… back to sustain us through the tough 1970s' (2012, p. 143). In this, it 'recapitulates the glazed self-contained look typical of times of austerity' (2012, p. 143). But while it may render the face hard and impenetrable, red lipstick 'bleeds over everything'; it is a woman's 'bloody spoor' (2012, p. 145), the trademark of the 'Baudelarian female dandy' exemplified by Dietrich (2012, p. p. 145), who 'wore the wound like a badge of triumph' as she 'stalked to her doom' (2012, p. 145). The inevitability of doom is foreshadowed by the wound in the face: Carter concludes, magnificently, with the image of Liz Taylor scrawling 'Not For Sale' on her bedroom mirror in red lipstick in *Butterfield 8*: 'the generosity of which the mouth has given so freely will be spurned with brutal ingratitude. The open wound will never heal. Perhaps, some day, she will mourn the loss of the tight rosebud: but it has gone forever' (2012, p. 146). With presumably deliberate bathos, she closes with the line, 'The revival of red lipstick indicates above all, I suppose, that women's sense of security was transient' (1982, p. 146).

While Carter's article displays the unreflecting transphobia characteristic of its time, there are interesting resonances between her queer reading of austere femininities, and the images I am analysing here. In the Illamasqua campaign, there are resonances with the work of Isherwood and Otto Dix and Dietrich and Bob Fosse: the image featured here strongly resembles Dix' muse Anita Berber, the scandalously bisexual and androgynous dancer and porn actress known as 'Queen of Debauchery' (Gordon, 2006). An elaborate masculine-themed face resembles Berber's lover and collaborator, Sebastian Droste. If feminine burlesque speaks eloquently to the lacks and longings at stake in feminine subjectivity, as I have argued elsewhere, these queer, melancholic yet powerful images surely suggest a sense of femininity as marginal, as an object of prurient fascination for a polite society by which it is publicly rejected, but with which it is involved in a symbiotic relationship. These images suggest a melancholic fantasy of a lost world in which everyone is a drag queen except the heterosexual masculine figures who lurk outside the footlights, pathetic at first, and then sinister: a fantasy of queer companionship which has at least the potential to overturn the sneering popular notion of misogynist gay designer/model victim with which discussions about fashion are continually trolled. In inviting us to dress up as flamboyant prostitutes, the campaign is not simply seeking to glamorise sex work; instead, it feels like a satire on the discourses of gendered affective labour at stake in images of business-appropriate femininity that saturate makeover culture: a negative, provocative reminder of the extent to which feminine identity is always destined to be read not as a radical act of self-creation but as an advertisement for something – herself, her unrecognised emotional labour, or patriarchal, neoliberal and capitalist ideology – that the performer is imagined in to be 'selling'.

Conclusion; Flaming Creatures

By reading contemporary feminine images across mainstream and digital media sites, it is possible to see how the feminine subject is abjected by being imagined *both* as a figure of privilege *and* as deviant. The un-made-up face is a screen onto which an excess of ideological readings is projected: just as feminine

subjects are routinely infantilised through the fantasy that they are particularly vulnerable to interpellation by media ideologies, they are also made responsible for the perpetuating of those ideologies. Thus the bareface selfie image, for example, is imagined through discourses of media critique which assume that all images of women are produced with the aim of interpellating (or excluding) female spectators. Although the campaign itself explicitly relies on nomination (i.e., participants nominate friends *because* they routinely wear makeup), this is read as an imperative ('all women wear makeup'/'all women should wear makeup'). What is more, these images are problematic since they connote female narcissism and vulnerability – in a neoliberal culture which values individualism and self-sufficiency over all else, there is something queer, something abject, about the idea of a relational subject in need of validation. What is problematic about no makeup selfies, then, is that they perform an uncanny worldview in which the natural becomes unnatural, unintelligible: where the very idea of a simple, unadorned, unmediated body, through being transformed into the object of narcissistic performance, is made strange, indeed becomes associated with the body-with-cancer as a figure of diseased and abject femininity. This move, as I have argued, is located in the context of a wider shift in consumer cultures of fashion and makeup, in which queer connections are being made: makeup hence becomes associated not just with privileged cis femininities, but with a network of queer subjects whose shared practices have the potential to bring them together. Finally, I have argued that the complex visual cultures and queer networks of femininity have important things to say beyond a mere capitulation to patriarchy. It is not that these texts can be re-read by cleverly applying queer theory, or 'negative feminism', to slyly recuperate them as 'subversive' or suggestive of feminine agency. Instead, I am arguing that femininity *is always already* queer: that femininity might be re-imagined a queer commons whose practices, texts and communities demand critical attention precisely since they dramatize the very questions that are central to feminism and queer politics.

If we are to re-read feminine visual cultures in this way, queer theory is not a movement whose time is past: instead, If we are to avoid slipping into retro-essentialism and a nostalgic return to the media effects model, it is crucial that feminism be queered. In a passionate piece about the erasure of queer histories in the era of gay marriage, Michael Warner writes of 'flaming creatures' whose stories are in danger of being forgotten in the name of the project of becoming respectable (1999, p. 66). I want to make a similar move, arguing that in positioning femininity as evidence of self-hatred and hence as disgusting, the popular discourse of the visual seeks to eradicate a complex network of cultural belongings and attachments. This is not to say that we should never be critical of any aspect of feminine images and practices. But we should consider whether the increasingly freakish and violent imagery generated by the fashion industry might be read not simply as an attempt to shock or to appropriate marginal experience, but as a performance that attempts to make sense of the affective politics of artifice. For this, we need a 'street semiotics' which reverses the all too familiar generational and essentialist logics that are re-appearing in popular feminist discourse. Such a reading might be willing to suspend leaping to ideological judgment, but also to engage with the details of feminine performances: to read femininity as a multiplicity of practices and performances than cannot, must not, be reduced to a single ideological sign.

References

Adkins, Lisa (2004). Passing on feminism: from consciousness to reflexivity? *European Journal of Women's Studies, 11*(4), 427-444. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1350506804046813

Ahmed, Sara (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, Sara (2012). Feminist Killjoys and Other Wilfull Subjects. *Scholar & Feminist Online* 8(3). Retrieved from: http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed_01.htm

Brunsdon, Charlotte (2013). Television crime series, women police and fuddy-duddy feminism. *Feminist Media Studies, 13*(4), pp. 375-394. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2011.652143

Buchanan, Emily (2014, March 19). Why I Won't Be Posting a Make-Up Free Selfie. *Huffington Post*. Available at

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/emily-buchanan/breast-cancer-awareness-make-up-free-selfie_b_4992438.html

Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London and New York: Routledge.

Butler, Judith (1993). *Bodies that Matter*. London and New York: Routledge.

Carter, Angela (1982). The Wound in the Face. In Robert DiYanni, ed., *One Hundred Great Essays*. London: Penguin Academic Series, pp. 141 - 146.

Evans, Caroline (2003). *Fashion at the edge: spectacle, modernity and deathliness*. London: Yale University Press.

Ferreday, Debra (2009). Showing the Girl: The New Burlesque. *Feminist Theory, 9*(1), 47-65. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1464700108086363

Gordon, Mel (2006). *The Seven Addictions and Five Professions of Anita Berber: Weimar Berlin's Priestess of Debauchery*. Los Angeles: Feral House.

Gordon, Mel (2008). Inventory / Everyone Once in Berlin! *Cabinet Magazine, 32*. Available at: http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/32/gordon.php

Halberstam, Judith (2011). *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Illamasqua (2011). *Theatre of the Nameless*. Available at: http://www.illamasqua.com/explore/collections/theatre-of-the-nameless/

Landa, Ishay (2013). The Left and the Masses: The Question of Consumerism. *Marxist Humanist Initiative online*. Available at: http://www.marxisthumanistinitiative.org/the-left-and-the-masses-the-question-of-consumerism

McRobbie, Angela (2004). Post-Feminism and Popular Culture. *Feminist Media Studies, 4*(3), 255-264. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000030993 7

McRobbie, Angela (2008). *The Aftermath of Feminism*. London: Sage.

Muñoz, Jose (2009). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: NYU Press.

Nicholson, Rebecca (2013, September 18). Fabulous Fashionistas. *The Guardian*. Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2013/sep/18/fabulous-fashionistas-tv-review

O'Rourke, Michael (2011). The Afterlives of Queer Theory. *Continent, 1*(2), 102-116. Available at: http://continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/view/32

Pakis, Elizavet (2011). Locating hope and futurity in the anticipatory illumination of queer performance. *Borderlands e-Journal, 10*(2). Available at: http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol10no2_2011/pakis_utopia.htm

Park, Grace (2014). No Makeup Selfies a slap in the face to women with cancer (Blog entry). *Neon Tommy blog*. Available at: http://www.neontommy.com/news/2014/03/nomakeupselfie-trend-slap-face-women-cancer

Raven, Charlotte (2013, November 6). Meets Not Tweets. *Feminist Times*. Available at: http://www.feministtimes.com/meets-rather-than-tweets/

Stuart, Andrea (1990). Feminism: Dead or Alive? In Jonathan Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (pp. 28 – 42). London, Lawrence and Wishart.

Today (2014, March 21). [Radio programme]. *BBC*.

Walkerdine, Valerie (2004, November). *Neoliberalism, Femininity and Choice*. paper presented at seminar series on New Femininities: Post-Feminism and Sexual Citizenship. London School of Economics, London, United Kingdom.

Wang, Jackie (2010, June 22). *Negative feminism, anti-social queer theory and the politics of hope* (Loneberry blog). Available at: http://loneberry.tumblr.com/post/724635724/negative-feminism-anti-social-queer-theory-and-the

Warner, Michael (1999). *The Trouble With Normal: sex, politics and the ethics of queer life*. New York: The Free Press.

DEBRA FERREDAY

Debra Ferreday is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies in the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University. She has published widely on feminist cultural theory, drawing on a heterogeneous archive which includes digital media, social networking, fashion cultures and women's media, film, performance, new media and literature.

DIRECCIÓN DE CONTACTO

d.ferreday@lancaster.ac.uk