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Strategies of *The Suffering Actor*: A case study on
The Ardorous as a representative of girl power
media culture produced by girls

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Wien, am 27. August 2019

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INTRODUCTION

The Ardorous began in 2011 as “a platform that would allow young female artists to get their work seen and collaborate with one another” (Collins, 2014). It was founded by the Canadian photographer Petra Collins in her last year of high school, who was utterly fed up with the art world being a boys’ club (cf. *ibid.*). The online collective expanded and grew in popularity; group shows followed, along with an anthology, the photo book *Babe*—chosen by *Time* magazine’s photo department to be one of its 2015 favorites (Cole, 2015). *The Ardorous*’ creatives had apparently hit a nerve in popular culture and garnered solo job opportunities from magazines and fashion and “lifestyle” labels. Collins herself became the highly acclaimed “poster girl for an aesthetic that has taken hold in the fashion world and some quarters of Instagram—a dreamy, hyperfeminine approach that sometimes appears under the headline ‘the female gaze’” (Widdicombe, 2016).

From Collins’s intention to offer “a space to produce and share ideas of your own” (2014) in a male-dominated culture, a network of like-minded creatives beyond the collective emerged,¹ with some of its members continuing now to become increasingly popular. The characteristics those creatives share are often subsumed and referred to by the “contentious phrase” “Girl Power”, as the authors of the book of the same title claim (cf. Curry, Kelly, Pomeranz, 2009: 20). The characteristics associated with this label mostly resemble features that the collective’s artists are criticized for: hyperfeminine, hypergirlish, hypersexualized aesthetics and language (cf. *ibid.*: 9; Bae, 2011: 28 *passim*); not performing according to certain gendered expectations (like not removing body

¹ For example, Tavi Gevinson, founder—at age 15—and editor-in-chief of 2011-2018 online magazine for and by teenagers *Rookie*; Karley Sciortino, founder of *slutever.com*, executive producer / host of TV show and author of the Book *Slutever* on topics of sex and sexuality; Molly Soda, “an artist and everything [she does] is online or at least most of it is anyway” (Soto, *mollysoda.exposed*), also curating, doing digital/performance/video art, teaching at art schools and being visiting artist in *Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies*; Signe Pierce, multimedia/performance artist, known to a wider audience from the experimental documentary directed by Allie Coates *American Reflexxx* (2013), screened in MoMA February, 17th (moma.org, 2019), ...

hair or showing menstrual blood); being white, middle class, able-bodied, cis-heterosexual; or for establishing creative careers in mainstream media and undertaking corporate jobs.

More sympathetic “You Go Girl!” discussions of the girl-power phenomenon have drawn on the flawed, but at least empowering, aspect of a “watered-down feminist position available as a stylish accessory,” being “also a meaningful and widespread embodiment of some feminist positions that girls draw upon as they create their gender identities” (Zaslow, 2009: 9). An analysis of an actual work by the collective, the aforementioned photo book, has described it as useful since it “works [...] as a possibility to explore girls’ identity, body and sexuality from a female perspective” (Kamińska, 2017: 9). Much like discussions of girl power itself, that have and still do split the opinions of feminists, scholars and journalists alike (cf. Gonick, 2006: 9 *passim*), *The Ardorous*’ reception is mixed.

What is exceptional about the artists’ reception is the variety of people who are upset by various aspects of their performance, which are always implicitly (if not directly) concerned with their visual appearance. The girl-power codes they employ provoke critique from scholars who are documenting and analyzing “a dominant discourse of postfeminist media culture” (Keller, 2016b: 261 *passim*), and not only because they are adopting problematic gendered imagery. They have also been criticized for being exclusive, essentialist and “conventionally pretty”; for reproducing girlhood as white, middle class, able-bodied, heteronormative, and so on, all that accumulating into a hegemonic narration of feminism being available to be purchased only by specific gendered neoliberal subjects (cf. *ibid.* Keller, 2015: 274). Even though the collective’s members are self-proclaimed feminists, their actions are not straightforward anticapitalist or critical of consumer culture.

On the contrary, two of *The Ardorous*’ main figures, have teamed up with labels such as Adidas and Gucci. However, it was also their engagements with big labels that sparked debates about the prevailing narrow standards allowed in neoliberal societies in order to claim a “female” identity. When Swedish photographer and model Arvida Byström sported her leg hair in an *Adidas* campaign she was modeling for, she was harassed by people who felt offended

and entitled to let her know. She received messages threatening rape in return for modeling with unshaven legs (Byström/@arvidabystrom, 2017). After she addressed these messages in a post on her Instagram account, she (along with *Adidas*) was covered in Austrian newspapers from the tabloid (e.g., heute.at, 2017; krone.at, 2017) to the rather “sophisticated” (e.g., derstandard.at, 2017) and reached an audience that otherwise might not have seen the initial ad.

A discussion of feminist branding is vital. In this thesis, however, its discussion is limited mostly to *The Ardorous*’ narratives relating to this issue. In her case study analyzing “Gevinson’s self-produced media and media coverage”, Jessalynn Keller (2015: 274) has pointed out that “few researchers have grappled with the ways in which girls themselves are engaging in feminist politics through postfeminist media culture” (ibid.: 275). While Keller does not deny the structural factors that mark Gevinson’s success as a girl entrepreneur and her self-branding (cf. ibid.: 282, 283), she assesses

the need for feminist media scholars to move beyond merely identifying postfeminist discourses within media culture and instead examine the complex ways in which feminist politics ‘poke holes’ in an often seemingly daunting and oppressive media culture (ibid.: 282).

Byström’s case illustrates the process and the multiple media vehicles (e.g., used for connecting, communicating and (re-) sharing online, in commercial as well as traditional mass media) used in the shift from an online platform with the aim of empowering a small group of already very privileged individuals to having people discuss gender norms in Austrian newspaper articles. A careful examination is merited of the role of “oppressive media culture” as a tool of resistance. Keller has argued that places of girl-driven activism stay invisible since “dominant academic and public conceptions of activism” and “what counts as political is framed around a narrow set of practices” (2016b: 262) from an adult perspective. In concurrence with Harries and Dobson, she has proposed the rethinking of concepts of locations and practices of resistance, as well as the structure / agency binary (cf. Harries & Dobson, 2015: 147 passim; cf. Keller, 2016a).

The Austrian professor Eva Flicker who is researching in the field of gender and visual media, has pointed out that

feminist and queer gendered media representations resisting the established patriarchal model and heteronormative stagings increasingly feature on the Internet now [...] However, media mainstream is guided by everyday knowledge about gender, thus still permitting that stereotyped representations of gender remain dominant in the media. (2012: 420)

Flicker has not only taken the instability of those representations into account (cf. *ibid.*), but, also, has highlighted the dynamic of everyday knowledge and mainstream media together perpetuating stereotyped gender representations, and missing most of the queering that can be found online. Consequently, the entrance of Internet culture into mainstream media bears potential.

The Ardorous has formed and gained confidence as a community on the Internet and then taken over mainstream on- and offline spaces as an arena for confronting a more or less uninformed wider audience with their art. This is an aspect I suggest as a marker for this thesis to distinguish the collective's work from feminist branding in productions like the recent *Gillette* ad or *Dove* campaigns. To distinguish between sell-out from the potentially empowering in research, Dawn Curry, Deidre Kelly and Shauna Pomeranz have introduced "girl power culture produced for girls", as opposed to "girl power produced *by* girls"([cf.] 2009: 8 *passim*). Setting the cue on the aspect of production also allows alignment with the artists of the 90s punk music riot grrls' DIY tradition, and draws parallels to the movement girl power culture is said to originate from—a bond that is denied to protagonists of its current forms, as they supposedly sold-out the initial political force of its founders (see Curry, Kelly, & Pomeranz, 2009; Kaplan, 2017; Harris & Dobson, 2015; Keller, 2015).

"Empowertisement" is usually produced by savvy agencies picking up a current trend (which might not even be a bad thing *per se*, but the content is a reaction and bound to the trend they reproduce and therefore catalyze). Whereas, artists and friends from the collective have made their way into that business, amongst other reasons, for the kind of work they shared online. Further the momentum of

production is where this thesis' interest is to be circumvented from what Rosalind Gill has called "[c]elebrity and style feminism", as none of The Ardorous' members had celebrity status when they claimed feminist identities that informed their artistic style and their prioritizing of collaborative work.

For this thesis I examined the collective *The Ardorous* as representative of this "girl power culture produced by girls" outlined above, with the idea of drawing a more nuanced picture of young, predominately female-identifying artists and their work in the widest sense. The process, strategies and implications, from the initial teenage online collective, to triggering reactionary minds and initiating discussion about gender norms beyond a specific audience, constituted its general thread.

It was neither planned out nor turned out as a convincing argument that there is nothing problematic about becoming part of (and making a living in) the very media and communication industries that capitalize on promoting (female) insecurities² in order to market optimizing tools for the correction of these "flaws". A critical reading of postfeminist discourses championing choice, voice, and empowerment resulting in disguising structural inequalities (cf. Harris; Dobson, 2015: 145 passim) are at the heart of chapters one and two. Chapter one's focus is on mapping the genesis of the girl-power phenomenon, where girl power is said to originate from, the discourses that have shaped and transformed it and includes an introduction of the girl subject it addresses. Chapter two is an interrogation of girl-power culture as a specifically mediated phenomenon and of the neoliberal mediascape that it is embedded in.

Another perspective to approach girl power steers away from framing it as an inherently neoliberal nuisance. Heather Warren-Crow, for example, has proposed that this attitude was an effect of "girlphobia," a "long-standing anxiet[y] regarding the feminization and infantilization of the supposedly mature, implicitly male, subject," as a form of power dynamics towards "the girl's alleged emptiness and the adult subject's full intellectual maturity as there before and after, respectively of effective criticism" (2013: 110–111). The power

² Executed by employing "beauty as a tool of patriarchal domination, seen to entrap women in narrow and restrictive norms of femininity, contribute to their subjugation and make them ill with 'disorders' such as depression and anorexia." (Elias et al. 2017: 6)

/ knowledge perspective she has introduced here sheds light on the problematic fact that what can be smart, resistant, to-be-taken-serious, and so on, is as much produced discursively, as anything else.

Taking this aspect into account Harris and Dobson have reframed girls' cultural production as "juxtapositional practices" (2015: 153). They have recapitulated feminist poststructuralists' contributions to "thinking about resistant agency less as an inherent criticality joined up to a grand narrative, and rather as an intra-active social production forged with relations of force" (ibid.: 152). Scholars are investigating girls' disrupting normative power relations by negotiating their sexed bodies, looking for emerging ruptures and fissures in "spaces of discursive contradiction" and setting their focus on the contexts of how agency is employed in certain social spaces. In "recasting girls as 'suffering actors'" they "advocate for the scholarly examination of many forms of unheroic struggle and creativity, and/or non-resistant actions, relations and practices that can also be understood as 'agentic'" (ibid.: 152, 153).

Chapter three grapples with the effects that the dichotomous narratives, of either victimization or empowered neoliberal subject, have on the way agency and activism are conceptualized. The chapter also considers resistant practices and the status of girls within feminist and traditional "left intellectual" discourse. It closes with a presentation of creative tools and strategies anticipated to be of relevance for the empirical research.

research questions

This thesis was guided by one main question, supported by two sub-questions:

How can *girl power media culture produced by girls* within mainstream media's creative production, be thought of as a resistant cultural practice from the girls / young women who work in a postfeminist marketing industry?

- * What premises, circumstances and opportunities mark the *unheroic* process and were crucial for The Ardorous' artists as *suffering actors* to initiate discussion,

not so much within academia, but in the nexus of *everyday knowledge* and *mainstream media*?

- * What creative strategies did members of *The Ardorous* employ that challenged dominant discourses?

theoretical position and its methodological implications

The research questions considered what critique is, or can be, when our knowledge about it is produced within the logic of the dominant discourse. Hence, the approach selected for this research was a poststructuralist perspective. This also meant not having an established, middle-range theory of the media at hand. Meta-theoretically, Theo Röhle (2005: 405) has proposed the development of a more explicit corpus for new media theory that takes unresolved paradoxes into account, or, in this case, and in Harris and Dobson's words, the seemingly "juxtapositional practices." Röhle has suggested the use of Foucault and Deleuze's concept of the *dispositif* / social apparatus, since it provides "an effective tool to map the intricate relations of power and knowledge around the internet, as well as a possibility to analyze how processes of subjectivation³ are fostered or circumscribed in specific settings" (ibid.: 403). This approach focused on the renunciation of the power/resistance dichotomy and its central position in the case of interest. It also allowed an empirical analysis of whether the internet can hold possibilities of "genuinely new modes of emancipation" (ibid.: 419).

For a less abstract explanation of how media is understood, on the one hand, I endorse Keller's understanding of girls' online practices, such as blogging, as an "*accessible* activist strategy" (2016b: 262) and, therefore, online spaces can be viewed as sites for political and emancipatory media production. On the other hand, I suggest that the relevance of online activities are not limited to their

³ Including other translations such as: subjectivation, subjection, subjugation; following Foucault is the premises to being an intelligible person. Terms "describe[ing] a possibility for lived experience within a larger historical and political context" (Heyes, 2011:103).

place of origin. Klaus Bruhn Jensen has advocated letting go of the on-/offline divide in Internet studies, but hanging on to studies of intermediality and intertextuality that have not lost their potential in the context of digital media (cf. 2011: 43 *passim*). The phenomenon and its protagonists can be investigated across different sites since they are “focusing on media not as discrete entities, but as constituents of layered social and technological networks,” where the Internet can be “a resource for action” (ibid.: 46). A crucial part of the collective’s wider success was their move into other “old” forms of media, which draws on another of Jensen’s assessments of the contemporary global communication infrastructure, where the Internet simply constitutes a component. To reach local, regional, and global publics, traditional, institutionalized mass media continues to be an effective hub (cf. 2012: 445).

The “theoretically informed plan of empirical action” (Jensen, 2012: 442) in this thesis discerned useful creative strategies that girls employ to be agentic and to give impulses to mainstream discourses. The poststructuralist approach effectively showcased if and how these strategies productively exercise power. The findings of this research contribute to feminist scholarship by offering a perspective that is an alternative to a focus on the *faux pas* of young feminists. They highlight the possibilities of using one’s privileges not against, but for, others, and bring forward ways of achieving this in the contemporary American and European contexts. Methodologically, the informed plan of action was subject to a substantial amount of circumstances, available data, and the decisions and persona of the researcher. It was constituted by navigating somewhere between what can be done with the resources available and the standards that have to be met personally and according to the academic tradition within the institutional department. In order to adhere to these parameters, those factors were made explicit, the process was self-reflexive and transparent, offering context.

Advocating for adapting established methods to grapple with new media, Jensen has suggested digital ethnography as a prototypical, qualitative method. He has,

therefore, referred to Hine's approach⁴ to observing the "'contents' and 'discourses'" that present themselves in virtual worlds (2011: 48; 2012: 443). Hine's ethnographic "methodological stance for the contemporary Internet" (2017: 327) has offered an accessible, introductory guide. Some of her requirements, however, are incompatible with the phenomenon under consideration. The most problematic aspect of Hine's approach is the obligatory presence in the setting that, since the initial collective is no longer active, is simply not an option. Hine has offered the possibility of accepting this limitation and exposing facets only (cf. *ibid.*: 323), so her main concept was slightly adapted to fit this research.

Further exploration of ethnographical research opened up a substantial field of possibilities and, sometimes, contrasting paradigms. The initial plan to work around the impossibility of getting involved with the collective in its most active period was to borrow practices from "retrospective ethnography" (Ferreira & De Almeida, 2017). I identified that period as being approximately 2010 to 2014, mainly because that was when I was an active Tumblr-user myself, and this was the platform where I first came across *The Ardorous*. In revisiting my own Tumblr, collecting hints, retracing who I followed and so on, I was hoping to make up for the missing co-presence in the field by "reviving the past in the present" (Ferreira & De Almeida, 2017: 207). I hoped to reflect myself in that past time, while acknowledging my situatedness in the present.

However, I found that this "landscape that people simultaneously navigate and bring into being" (Hine, 2017: 325), or, more precisely, navigated, and brought into being, which I sought out as the base of my ethnographic field work, had so drastically changed that there was barely anything to revive. This effect of the ephemerality of digital spaces, forced me to "work out where to go and what to do when [I] get there" (*ibid.*: 324) earlier in the research process than I had planned. Chapter four opens with a presentation of the field I encountered and presents the methodological adaptations that were made in order to navigate it, along with the findings that were uncovered.

⁴ Hine, Christine (2000): *Virtual Ethnography*. Sage. London. As Hine published the new paper, "Ethnography and the Internet: Taking Account of Emerging Technological Landscapes" in 2017, this thesis draws upon her more recent work.

In the course of this change of plans it turned out especially useful that I had broadened the thesis design to include Norman Denzin's (2000; 2006; 2012) position on ethnographic research. He has offered more in-depth discussions on the kind of implications that I had anticipated being confronted with in this project. Denzin has argued that all variations of the *Chicago School* tradition are uncritical towards the past and has therefore rejected them, instead, calling for a performative, critical, pedagogical, political, and interpretative ethnography or analytic autoethnography.

[T]his ethnography attempts to better understand the conditions of oppression and commodification that operate in the culture, seeking to make these ways of the world more visible to others. The moral ethnographer searches for those moments when humans resist these structures of oppression and representation, and attempt, in the process, to take control over their lives and the stories about them. (Denzin, 2000: 402)

The felt esoteric vibe within Denzin's texts (e.g., the emphasis on morality and the task of ethnographies to "aspire[s] to higher, sacred goals" [ibid.: 407]), at first, left me slightly uneasy about their appropriateness for this project, considering its academic context. Looking beyond that and towards Denzin's priorities and his demands for the ethnographer, however, I felt that these goals were absolutely appropriate and they, therefore, informed the way in which this research was conducted as a "researcher-as-bricoleur-theorist" (Denzin, 2012: 85). This interpretive, political bricoleur is aware of the fact that the process is interactive and, therefore, "shaped by the personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity", "that science is power" and never "value-free" (2012: 85).

The final part of chapter four consists of a discussion on the findings of this process, with reference to the research questions it was guided by.

Finally, in the resumé, the thesis' chapters are summarized along with their key findings. In a last step, the results are evaluated according to their contributions to the scholarly field the thesis is located in.

In this light, before moving to the main part of this thesis, I present a few notes. These are mostly implications arising from my own socioeconomic position,

where and how I have grown up, which categories I am ascribed to. Being a white, middle-class, European woman of around the same age as the artists I was focusing my case study on, I believed that I had shared experiences with them. In some cases, I hoped that led to greater insight and understanding of how to navigate the field and how to interpret certain things. In other cases this obviously led to blind spots and one-sided interpretations of what I encountered. It is also necessary to address the fact that I wrote this thesis in English and am not a native speaker. This factor did not impact on the linguistic elaboration of the thesis, but, rather, meant that I encountered semantic difficulties. This was most evident in relation to the word “race”. Socialized within a German speech community, even in English, this word invokes associations that are inseparable from European, and especially Austrian and German, history. I felt great discomfort with the term, fueled also by the current social and political climate all over Europe, and, therefore, put the word into quotation marks, as I am not aware of an adequate alternative. This may seem irritating, clumsy, or unnecessary to other speech communities. However, in the context of a master’s thesis at the University of Vienna, this tactic seemed to be essential.

ONE:

ABOUT GIRL POWER

Girl power, as one of the thesis' most central concepts, is also the poster-child for the ambiguities marking the literature and pop-culture texts that were available to consult. It concerns the signified, as well as the signifier. Orthographically the *Oxford English Dictionary's* entry on girl power offers other common ways of spelling it like "girrl power", "grrl power", and variations with the letter r appearing four-plus times ([cf.] oed.com, 2019). Furthermore, the *OED* suggests two possible readings. The first is of no immediate significance in this context, as it describes girls' collective capacity to work (referring to manpower). The second definition describes girl power as a "self-reliant attitude among girls and young women manifested in ambition, assertiveness, and individualism" originating in the United States (ibid.). Clearly a one-sentence description cannot grasp the dimensions of "a complex of cultural phenomenon and social positionings" (Gonick, 2006: 6). Nevertheless, it already brings up some important aspects that this chapter addresses. The required qualities that are mentioned are at the same time considered virtues in neoliberal discourses. Girl power is embedded in consumer culture and this is clearly one of its major points of critique, however, there are a number of studies that have focused on its empowering effects for some girls and young women (cf. Harris, 2004: xvii). This chapter focuses on the roots and meanings of girl power and the discourses that shape it, and closes with an investigation of who is, can, or cannot be its subject.

the contentious phrase(s)

As the subtitle of their book, *Girl Power: Girls Reinventing Girlhood* suggests, the Canadian-based scholars Dawn Currie, Deidre Kelly and Shauna Pomerantz have

studied girl power culture with the premise of their 71 interviewees being agents actively “‘doing’ girlhood” (2009: xv, 181, 182). They have explored how girls navigate the cultural context they are growing up in. The analysis of the interviews emphasizes the limitations commonly ascribed to girl power and the authors’ findings suggest that discourses about girls and girlhood are pervaded with neoliberal values. Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz’ book is crucial to the conceptualization of this research project, largely due to its close attention to the in-betweens. They have affirmed the objective of contradictory practices, spaces, or discourses by naming the book *Girl Power*, where the meanings of this phrase are so ambivalent, and define girlhood “[a]s a culturally and historically changing social identity” that is shaped by girls within the structural limitations they find themselves in ([cf.] *ibid.*: 20). This approach has encouraged an abandonment of any attempt to exhaust every possible oppositional opinion within this discussion. In her analysis of two discourses that are “[c]onstituting the [n]eoliberal [g]irl [s]ubject”—one of them “girl power” (Gonick, 2006: 1) Marnina Gonick has summed up its contentious nature as follows:

Celebrated by some for creating more expansive forms of femininity and critiqued by others for the ways it transforms feminist ideals into crass consumerism, the meanings and implications of Girl Power continue to shift and change depending on the context and purpose of its articulation. What is clear about it is that Girl Power raises important questions about the relationships between feminism, femininity, consumerism, girls, individualism, and new subjectivities. (*ibid.*: 6)

Gonick, also a Canadian scholar with a focus on gender, education, feminist, media and girls’ studies, added two facets that support the choices made in this thesis. Allowing girl power as the signifier to have the signified adapt to the circumstances it is used in and for, allows it to be used as a label in this specific case. In general, finding labels and terms to address certain phenomena, styles, communities, or values have posed a challenge throughout this project. An example of this challenge is the *suffering actor*, which features in the title. By settling on a signifier that might not feel completely right, in the best case, moving beyond that issue opens up the possibility of finding a more accurate mode of referencing. In another example, the notion of postfeminism is inherent for any literature on the topic of girl power, but were used differently which

inhibited the research process. While some writers have used this term to describe antifeminism, others have used it to imply a discourse that feminism has been important but is no longer needed because men and women already have equal rights and, therefore, equal opportunities. Other commentators have used it to refer to third-wave feminism (cf. Curry, Kelly, & Pomeranz, 2009: 31; cf. Gill, 2007: 147 passim & 2016: 620 passim). Postfeminisms' omnipresence and its range of possible meanings suggest that what it signifies needs to be analyzed in depth, instead of accepting it as a constituent of girl power's contradictory character. Moreover, Gonick has attested to the interrelations between the core elements of this thesis' research questions to be of scientific relevance. The case under consideration in this thesis interrogates the specific constellation of these concepts that are and have been shaping society, and are concerned with its potential of being a mode that enables a shift in power relations.

story of the phenomenon

As contentious as it is, on a descriptive level the origin of girl power and its transformations are something scholars widely agree upon. In order to locate the practices, production, and performances of this thesis' research protagonists historically, culturally, and ideologically, a brief introduction follows on the origins of girl power, how it developed, what kind of discourses shaped its process and how it is and has been conceptualized.

The *OED* entry on "girl power" provides a useful one-sentence summary to begin with:

Although also used more widely (esp. as a slogan), the term has been particularly and repeatedly associated with popular music; most notably in the early 1990s with the briefly prominent 'riot girl' movement in the United States [...]; then, in the late 1990s, with the British all-female group The Spice Girls. (oed.com, 2019)

Further consultation of the pertinent literature has confirmed that girl power's roots are in the 1990s U.S. and U.K. music scenes and industries. The U.S.-based

*riot grrl*⁵ movement is considered to have authorship of an authentic girl power. *The Spice Girls*' popularizing of the term as a "household name" (Zaslow, 2009: 3) is considered as marking its commercialization and loss of potential to disrupt patriarchal hegemony (cf. Gonick, 2006: 6 passim; cf. Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009: 7 passim, 182 passim; cf. Zaslow, 2009: 29).

To use labels like original and fake implied by such an analysis is problematic within the theoretical frame based on the concept of performativity that denies the idea of originality or that anything is natural, respectively prediscursive. Clearly, this is not solely an issue of who first used the term and who copied it and introduced it to wider audiences through the popular media. When talking about girl power, not as a signifier, but "as a central organizing discourse in media culture" (Zaslow, 2009: 13) there are more factors involved than a pop music group picking up a (subcultural) slogan. According to Zaslow, alongside with the *riot grrl* movement, other pertinent factors were the popularity of girls' studies, the feminist backlash, and the emergence of a "third wave." The following discourses, which all manifested within the environment of the 1990s neoliberal turn, determined a cultural, social and political setting that was "ripe for girl power" (cf. *ibid.*: 14).

"reviving Ophelia"—girlhood as trauma / time of crisis

The rising popularity of girls' studies brought about great interest in the "condition" of "the" white, middle-class girl within academia and non-academia alike (cf. Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009: 6 passim; cf. Gonick, 2006: 11 passim; cf. Ward & Cooper Benjamin, 2004: 15 passim; cf. Zaslow, 2009: 15 passim). Feminist scholars have already problematized the invisibility of girls' experiences in theories of psychological development and how this created a social and cultural environment that fostered low self-esteem in young females in the 1970s and 1980s. Carol Gilligan, in her highly influential book published in 1982, has laid the foundations for the discourse of adolescence as a time of crisis in female psychological development. She is critical of the universalized white,

⁵ As with *girl power* numerous orthographic variations of *riot grrl* coexist.

middle-class male in her study, and has constructed girls' experiences as white, middle class. Despite this critique, girls, from thereon, were no longer invisible, but were vulnerable. This discourse lit the fuse for the commissioning of reports on gender equality in schools, as well as for a growing body of publications by the popular press (cf. Gonick, 2006: 13 passim). The topic really became of mass interest, however, with Mary Pipher's 1994 *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (cf. Zaslow, 2009:16; cf. Gonick, 2006: 11; cf. Ward & Cooper Benjamin, 2004: 21 passim), which was a *New York Times* bestseller for three consecutive years. Pipher has provided a name for the discourse by using Shakespeare's Ophelia⁶ to refer to troubled girls who cannot survive without gaining adult help. The success of her book raised awareness of challenges faced by girls who were growing up in patriarchal, U.S. (media) culture, but also manifested an almost obsessive cultural celebration of maidenly insane coming of age girls.

Pipher's book, and other pioneering feminist works on girlhood, were criticized for pathologizing girlhood and tracing their authors' adult female problems back to childhood, and not sufficiently taking into account that experiences of growing up had changed since the 1950s and 60s. Nonetheless, the public mind was made up about girls' mental health being at risk, and this was reflected and perpetuated by pop-culture texts, as part of what Pipher called the "girl-poisoning culture" (1994: 12; cf. Currie, Kelly & Pomerantz, 2009: 6, 181; cf. Gonick, 2006: 11; cf. Zaslow, 2009: 19).

The Ophelia discourse in this context is effectively illustrated by *The Virgin Suicides*. This 1993 novel by author Jeffrey Eugenides and its 1999 movie adaption by director Sofia Coppola, with lead roles by Kirsten Dunst and Josh Hartnett, accompanied by a melancholic score by the French duo *Air*, tell a romanticized story of the suicide of five sisters. Set in 1970s suburban Detroit during a hot summer, Cecilia, the youngest and first to attempt suicide, expresses

⁶ The character of Ophelia commits suicide, because she cannot meet the expectations of the men in her life: Hamlet and her father. In Western societies interpretations in art and literature of her character have tradition, portrayals can be found in nineteenth, and early twentieth, century that vary from depicting her as "hysterical" to innocent, even as a saint, or sexualized (cf. Gonick, 2006: 11 passim).

why she wants to kill herself: “Obviously Doctor, [...] you’ve never been a thirteen-year-old-girl” (Eugenides, 1993: 7). As the question of why all five Lisbon sisters chose to end their lives is left unresolved. The one explicit explanation offered is that the mere fact of being an adolescent girl is reason enough. The movie audio-visualizing Eugenides’ story works with displays and tropes associated with the aesthetic imagination of Ophelia. It uses a dreamy fairy-tale like style and a color scheme in favor of pastels, pink and glitter, depicting “idealized beauty and ethereality of ‘girlhood’” (Monden, 2013: 151). As a U.S. American production from the late 90s, the image of Ophelia in the film is made from more than simply Victorian or Pre-Raphaelite references.

Masafumi Monden, an Australian scholar publishing in the areas of fashion in media, cinema, youth and popular culture, has also investigated the construction and visualization of adolescent girlhood in contemporary culture via Coppola’s *The Virgin Suicides* (cf. *ibid.*: 139). Monden has introduced another culturally established icon of girlhood into his analysis: Vladimir Nabokov’s 1955 novel *Lolita*. Proposing that the movie resists the practice common in “Western” culture of placing the sisters on either side of the dichotomous paradigms of Ophelia and girl power, he has suggested that the movie, rather, encodes girlish femininity through an amalgam of Ophelia and the “conventional notion [of the] manipulative, flirtatious, coquettish and above all, self-assured yet innocent” (*ibid.*: 146) *Lolita*. Further, as his focus is on the visual aesthetics, he has noted that clothing as well as bedroom interior marks gender and specific modes of femininity (cf. *ibid.*: 143, 145). The visual cues of this exact girlishness is broadened to dresses and poses that imply awareness of their sexuality, school uniforms, and the stereotypical aesthetics of the very American prom queen at the homecoming dance such as tiaras, balloons, and twinkling stars (cf. *ibid.*: 139 *passim*).

The Ophelia / girl power binary developed alongside the emergence of state efforts to support the “troubled girl.” In 1997 the US Department of Health and Human Services launched a campaign called *Girl Power* to prevent risky behaviors and low self-esteem in girls and young women. This placed them on the opposing poles of crisis and solution in public perception (cf. Zaslow, 2009:

20). When deconstructing Ophelia and girl power discourses, both turn out to work as strategies to bring certain subjects into being, while the success or failure in the project of becoming subject is considered a person's individual choice and accomplishment. Both fail to overcome gendered dichotomies (active/passive, agent/victim, subject/object) and further

bespeak the two central and interrelated contradictions of the times [...] that is, that systemic contradictions require more than simply biographical solutions, even as these are increasingly the only solutions recognized as legitimate. And [...] they suggest that the individual produced by means of such solutions is both a leverage for change as well as a closure on what it is possible to become. (Gonick, 2006: 19; cf. *ibid.*: 18 *passim*)

waves and backlashes

The backlash against second-wave feminism and the formation of new, third-wave feminisms loosely frame a period of time in "Western" feminist history. Emilie Zaslow has comprehensively elaborated the circumstances that enable girl power culture by addressing that time with those labels. The wave metaphor appears as increasingly inaccurate and confusing, especially to young feminists (cf. Keller, 2016a: 137 *passim*). What Zaslow has termed the backlash against the second wave, Urszula Maria Pruchniewska, in her paper on feminist solidarity in digital times, terms "post-feminism, a cultural climate asserting that the need for collective feminism was over" (2016: 737 *passim*). The third wave, "focused on intersectionality and individual empowerment" (*ibid.*: 738), took place analogously, with the effect that (second-wave) feminism and its agendas largely disappeared from public perception. Web 2.0, Pruchniewska has asserted, has enabled the comeback of feminism as a digitized version, the so-called fourth wave (around 2008), and picking up on second-wave demands such as politicizing the personal. Waves that are tied to generations and highlight their oppositions not only split feminists but also misrepresent feminist practices through making invisible the persistence of the problems it fights to solve (cf. *ibid.*: 737 *passim*).

Jessalynn Keller has discussed the positioning of U.S. based teenage girl bloggers participating in her study within feminist history and belonging to a fourth wave. She has concluded that the third wave is not a stable thing for them that draws lines between waves, and separates “women’s organizing and discrediting the feminist work that continues to happen between the supposed waves” (Keller, 2016a: 140). Instead, she has argued that they position themselves as “a part of a larger feminist continuum” (ibid.). With a primary interest in the practices of a group of young females sharing major characteristics with Keller’s bloggers, the wave analogy does not provide the ideal terminology.

Zaslow has enabled a better understanding of the (weal and) woes of the period that brought about girl power and as the phenomenon that engages this thesis. Acknowledging the fluidity of feminism throughout history, Zaslow’s arguments are merged into a brief recapitulation of its more recent core concepts and landmark changes starting in the 1960s.

The second wave and the U.S. women’s rights movements in the 1960s and 70s are widely congruent when it comes to time, place, activists, demands, and the critique they face. In addition to the key themes such as reproductive rights, gender equality (job opportunities, education, equal pay, care work, etc.), domestic violence, objectification and sexualization, Zaslow has included intersectionality in the list of topics on the agenda of second wavers (cf. 2009: 26). As indicated earlier, a common criticism from third-wave feminists against their predecessors, however, is the lack of inclusion and the universalization of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Andi Zeisler, cofounder of *Bitch Media*,⁷ has positioned herself within that wave and has described it as follows:

The third wave of the 1990s [...] loudly defined itself against the second wave’s ostensible sex-negativity, racism, classism, and separatism, the generational equivalent of an emo teenager slamming a bedroom door in her mother’s face. (2016: 128)

Albeit, the irritation that such divergent interpretations might cause when trying to put together a coherent narrative about that time in “Western” feminism, Zaslow’s point about the dominant sentiment towards mothers works without

⁷ “A feminist response to pop culture” (<https://www.bitchmedia.org/about-us>, 2019), the media house publishes a quarterly print magazine, an online magazine and a podcast.

trying to resolve this issue. Second wavers supposedly achieved their goals; the white, middle-class mom could be more than just a housewife; she had a job and a daughter pursuing a career in sports or some other domain that had been exclusive to men before. The conservative backlash reframed that to be the reason for “troubled kids”, as they were supposedly neglected by their working mothers, while neoliberal policies cut back on support for education and youth programs. Anxiety about failing to meet standards of being a good mother but also liberated (with one’s own income) was answered with a new marketing strategy. Capitalizing on the guilt of working mothers, girl power media and toys, labeled as educational, were sold to save the girl allegedly in crisis due to the demise of traditional family values (cf. Zaslow, 2009: 22 *passim*; cf. Ward & Cooper Benjamin, 2004: 21). The message sold with such toys—girls can achieve anything, if they choose to perform properly—revealed the neoliberal mantra of choice and individual responsibility and was accompanied by the perpetuation of stereotypical femininity, focusing on consumption and style (cf. Zaslow, 2009: 24).

That femininity, girliness, and style can also be an empowering strategy constitutes the third-wave understanding of feminism. The bra-burning, body-hair-growing activism that is stereotypically associated with second wave, was a rebellion against oppressive patriarchal structures that organized along a capitalist logic and paved the way for certain women to take part in formerly men-only domains. It also conceptualized anything read as girlish to be undesirable from a feminist perspective, according to “Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, easily the most vocal third-wave spokeswomen” ([cf.] Zaslow, 2009: 27; cf. Baumgardner & Richards: 2004: 61 *passim*). Baumgardner and Richards have argued that while girlishness is not radical *per se*, reappropriating and recontextualizing it as powerful, is necessary for a contemporary feminism, as for “[y]ounger women, who have grown up with increased access to the ‘good’ parts of capitalism [, ...] asking women to opt out is essentially asking them to choose to be marginalized” (2004: 62).

riot grrls—authenticity and irony

The two “third-wave spokeswomen”, Baumgardner and Richards, founders of the *feminist speakers’ bureau*, *Soapbox Inc.* and *Feminist Camp*,⁸ co-authors of *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* [2000; 2nd edition 2010] and *Grassroots: A Field Guide for Feminist Activism* [2005]), advocated for a feminism that allows a wider range of personal expression to acknowledge the internalizing character of social practices and norms and to de-stigmatize and de-trivialize “girlie”. Their claims, however, have been swiftly dismissed by Zaslow for celebrating consumerism and individual choice (cf. 2009: 28). Riot grrls, on the other hand, have been granted access to the circle of approved political activists / legit feminists. The DIY character of riot grrls’ productions and how these writings, zines, songs, and visual artworks were circulated, were seen as verifying the authenticity of their messages due to their attitude towards and the handling of mainstream media and popular culture (cf. Driscoll, 1999: 183). Further arguments for this stance include their second-wave-inspired radical feminist approach of separatism and that they questioned beauty standards, heteronormativity, and addressing forms of violence that they experienced. However, mainstream media, anticipating the movement’s increasing popularity did not care about the riot grrls’ skepticism towards them and transformed their messages and style into consumable rebellion that would not challenge a neoliberal system (cf. Zaslow, 2009: 29 passim; cf. Zeisler, 2016: 174 passim). The tendency of hierarchizing within girl cultures and the vastness of interpretations of third-wave feminism is captured in Zeisler’s overtly partisan recapitulation of these events:

In the inevitable cycle by which mainstream culture sanitizes, dilutes, and repackages radicalism, by 1997 the phrase ‘Girl Power’ was harvested from Riot Grrrl zines and re-emerged, a marketplace-feminist Frankenstein’s monster, in the juggernaut of the Spice Girls. (2016: 176)

⁸ “Soapbox is a community for prominent and emerging writers, filmmakers, activists, and thought leaders.” (Soapbox Inc., 2019a) It organizes talks “to deepen or unearth [...] feminist practices.” (ibid.) *Feminist Camp* is Soapbox’s department to offer workshops and meetings on feminist activism (cf. Soapbox Inc., 2019b).

Even though Baumgardner and Richards and riot grrls are portrayed as representing very different forms of feminism (if at all), or levels of resistance, they share enough characteristics to include them under the umbrella of the term third wave. Their unifying characteristics that shaped girl power culture significantly was an ambition for emancipation from certain standards that a proper feminist had to meet figuratively and literally, according to their second-wave mothers. Most notably, this was the reclaiming of “girl” as a powerful identity by using it for self-reference, and its stereotypically associated style as a statement. The former call for a less dogmatic feminism that is not exclusive to “those who have sorted out all their issues and are no longer conflicted about men, sex, their bodies, their incomes, or fashion” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004: 67). The latter altered the spelling itself to add a growl, their girly/sexy style is read as ironic, resistant towards feminist desexualization, and as a mocking of gender stereotypes. Unsurprisingly, making politics with identity, both approaches faced the same critique as their predecessors that their feminism was tailored to cater only for white, privileged females. Aspects such as their style and rhetoric were incorporated into media and cultural production, and manifested in the consumable girl power marketed towards specific girls, their parents, and educators (cf. Zaslow, 2009: 30 passim).

who’s that girl

The preceding discussion of girl power as a phenomenon originating in very specific cultural and social contexts has already established a considerable amount of information about the homogenously constructed girl subject addressed at claiming power. As a primarily U.S./U.K. made girl culture, constituted mainly within the last 30 years, it was subject to technological, political, sociocultural, and economic changes. Those profiting from the phenomenon, however, has not changed significantly.

Scholars have quickly identified the classed and raced blind spots in early (90s) girl power discourses that had the resilient *and* victimized white, middle-class girl as their primary concern. Gonick has demonstrated how the alleged Ophelia

/ girl power binary is actually just two not so different positions within a neoliberal discourse and, therefore, veils structural inequalities by framing the project of subjectification as individual success or failure:

[T]hese discourses organize both different and similar formulations of the cultural ideals of personhood, individuality, and agency and do so with different consequences for girls depending on how they are positioned in relation to the dominant social group. [...] while Girl Power represents the idealized form of the new, neoliberal subjectivities, Reviving Ophelia personifies an anxiety about those who may not be successful in taking up those new forms of subjectification. (2006: 15 passim)

Both approaches revolve around the saving of specific neoliberal girl subjects, without taking into account that “race” and class, amongst other factors, shape the conditions under which one can become this subject (cf. Zaslow, 2009: 20 passim). They do not only sketch out how to be(come) girl in this narrative, but also who actually can take on the “challenge” as they

are [not] directed at dominant and marginalized girls respectively. On the contrary, both discourses have as their primary addressee middle-class girls. [...] The pervasiveness of the two discourses as a means for making sense of girls’ experience does, however, work to obscure some of the structural explanations for which girls are able to hurdle barriers to prevailing definitions of success and which are not. (Gonick, 2006: 16)

When it comes to demonstrating the effects of social positionings, Gonick has drawn on British studies that have found that a focus on self-determination and individual success can empower middle-class girls. In working-class girls, on the other hand, it can have quite the opposite effect, as such a narrative implies that those who fail in the competition, were just not ambitious enough, while their economic situation does not allow them to consume products and services to inhabit an idealized girl position (cf. *ibid.*). By revisiting changes in U.S. American discourse about teen pregnancy, Zaslow has added a case of how “race” mediates intelligible neoliberal subjects in this context. In the 1970s, prior to the mainstream interest in girls’ psychosocial health, the United States was in financial crisis, which was supposedly caused by teen moms dropping out of school and depending on social welfare. To counteract these tendencies law and

policy makers widely agreed that the solution was giving underprivileged girls access to contraception and abortion. The following decade brought a conservative backlash and teen pregnancy was reframed as a problem caused by promiscuity. Blaming those who got pregnant underage for their failure to maintain chastity was a way to legitimize not providing financial support if needed and, therefore, effectively veiled racist structures while demonizing Afro-American girls (Zaslow, 2009: 24 passim).

For an increasing section of (Angloamerican) academic studies on girls' experiences, class and "race" have become key criteria of analysis. Nevertheless, the complexity of intersecting factors is rarely sufficiently engaged with. The dominant myth of upward mobility in return for hard work, known as the "American Dream" is also reflected in academic work pathologizing poverty and introducing umbrella terms like "'urban' girls" to work around more nuanced descriptions that would address specific precarious positions ([cf.] Ward & Cooper Benjamin, 2004: 20 passim).

Janie Victoria Ward and Beth Cooper Benjamin's *Critical Review of American Girls' Studies* (15–27) is part of the 2004 interdisciplinary anthology on "Western" girls' studies at the intersection of feminism and neoliberalism, *All about the Girl*.

In this book's introduction, the editor, Anita Harris, has added ability to the norms that "pathologized and/or criminalized the majority outside the [white, middle-class and non-disabled] category of privilege" (xx). Further, she has pointed out that the girlification of culture led to a detachment of girl with age and popularizing adult women to be referred to as girls, as well as a style that uses stereotyped girl codes (cf. *ibid.*). Christine Griffin has contributed an insight into representations of British girlhood, proposing that, besides "the overwhelming Whiteness and slimness of the girls and young women depicted in the visual images", it "constitutes Girl Power as a heterosexual phenomenon" (2004: 49). This also becomes evident when researching with girls, as Kathryn Morris-Roberts reflection on the discomfort she experienced while conducting participant observations with pupils of secondary school for her doctoral project has suggested. The motive for her writing *Colluding in "Compulsory Heterosexuality"? Doing Research with Young Women at School* was the ethical

dilemmas she faced encountering “the policing of femininities and sexualities, and the exclusion of some girls based on style, dress, attitude, beliefs, or bodily behavior” (2004: 220). Morris-Roberts’ findings from the north of England, 1999–2000, are very much congruent with those of Curry, Kelly and Pomerantz’s interviews with girls across Vancouver and its suburbs from 2001 to 2003 (cf. 2009: 60). Operationalizing hegemonic girlhood by investigating their participants’ stance towards popular girls, with only minimal local nuances, descriptions turned out to be “surprisingly similar, [popular girls] were pretty, wore the right clothes and they were the subject of boys’ interest” (ibid.: 96). It goes without saying that such a set of identifiers is entirely contextual and can only be understood within its specific setting. In this regard, Griffin’s evaluation of Anglo- and ethnocentrism evident in the construction of girlhoods, has exemplified the dimension of factors that would have to be taken into account. These do not even explicitly include the blind spots of the researcher, nor those of a history of patriarchal knowledge production and organization. So in “Western” cultures, she has argued, the tendency is common to construct its own “modern”, civilized, progressive, and enlightened girl in opposition to a “traditional” girl who is oppressed, a victim of a patriarchal, anti-feminist and sexist culture located in the “Third World” or descent thereof. Referencing British studies on young South Asian and/or Muslim women that challenge these distinctions, Griffin has pointed out that while it is undeniable that, for example, in Islamic societies girls and women are often victims of extreme oppression, generalizing experiences of Muslim women, or other women associated with belonging to a specific group, is neither correct nor constructive (cf. 2004: 31 passim). Considering that girl power operates on a very visual level, the representation of dress codes linked with cultures and religions are relevant, however, an adequate investigation of this area is beyond the resources of this study.

TWO:

GIRL POWER // MEDIA // CULTURE

The previous chapter has demonstrated the significant role of the media in shaping contemporary girl power discourses. Riot grrls used the media as tools to connect and promote their concerts, workshops, and agendas, popular media picked up their rhetoric and style, as well as academic discussions of girlhood. The shift from sub- to pop culture, from academia to mainstream is not the only process that has substantially reshaped the meanings of girl power and society in general in the years since. With the advent of the Internet and its rapid growth of relevance in most privileged individuals' lives, media itself has changed, and along with it, girl power culture has opened up new opportunities for media production (cf. Keller, 2012: 430).

Zaslow has confirmed the relevance of girl power media culture as: "both a point of production and a mode of expression" (2009: 158), shaping societies' discourse about femininity, as an amalgam of its traditional elements and the dismissal or reinterpretation of some of those. This, amongst other factors, locates this discourse within postfeminism (cf. *ibid.*), a label that, as mentioned earlier, complicates a stringent terminology when engaging a diversity of works on the topic (cf. Gill, 2007: 147 *passim*). The recent emergence of feminist visibilities in mainstream media has altered the media landscape and discourses, but only superficially, leaving its core elements intact (cf. Gill, 2016: 620 *passim*).

the sensibility of postfeminism

Rosalind Gill, a British professor of social and cultural analysis, therefore, has suggested comprehending postfeminism as a sensibility rather than "as an epistemological perspective [, ...] historical shift, [or ...] a backlash in which its meanings are pre-specified" (2007: 148). Instead the sensibility can be analyzed

within media discourses where feminisms co-exist with antifeminism within discourses offering a set of characteristic themes worth investigating when undertaking research in the field of media culture. Gill has introduced these themes or elements of a postfeminist sensibility in a 2007 article in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*.

The most dominant aspect in postfeminist media culture is the construction of femininity as conformity to certain, very specific, and narrow features of the body. Other factors that shape identity (social, structural, etc.) are irrelevant, as the constitution of one's body and the visible work put into it defines whether it inhabits a feminine identity and if so, can equip the woman with power. The policing of women's bodies by means of prevalent standards of sexiness, beauty, and attractiveness, Gill has assumed, make up "the largest type of media content across all genres and media forms" (ibid.: 149). This obsession presents itself most remarkably in formats that focus on the meticulous analysis of celebrities' "flaws"—that are primarily concerning their physique, mostly weight gain, or—loss, but also their choice of underwear, revealed through visible panty lines.

Reducing femininity to a bodily property goes hand in hand with the sexualization of culture. It manifests in the popularity of coverage of topics concerning sex and sexuality, as well as pervasive depictions of eroticized female bodies in the public sphere. This applies throughout formats and genres, but the messages and modes vary. Common practices in news media is to sexualize stories about rape and commentaries concerning the sexiness of women's bodies in comparison to prevalent standards, entirely detached from what makes them of public interest, be it politicians or even "serious (sic) news anchors" (ibid.: 150). Men's magazines tend to have a playful and pleasure-oriented stance towards topics about sex. Magazines for girls and women, on the other hand, present these topics as linked to expectations on performance and responsibilities. The commercial sexualization of girls starts at kindergarten age and, along with the girlification already mentioned earlier, culturally creates the female child as the sexual ideal.

"The sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever 'up for it'" (ibid.: 151) is an element of postfeminist sensibility and a product of the commercial media industry. Representations of

women as passive sexual objects of and for a male gaze that have been criticized by feminists, have been reframed in a way that presents objectification as part of an active female sexuality, a deliberate act of submission that self-confident non-prude females enjoy. A very classic disciplinary “technology of the self” technique of power, as women (that can represent femininity as a bodily property) can claim this sexual subjecthood, but no one actually tells them they have to. This approach is problematic for several reasons. It is exclusionary; has dangerous effects on a society where sexual violence against women is not something out of the ordinary; and its neoliberal rhetoric argues that it is every woman’s entirely free and personal choice to comply, which denies internalized, gendered, sexual knowledge and the sanctioning of other choices.

In this logic, beauty practices like professional body hair removal, surgeries such as breast augmentation, and other “makeovers” achieved through consumption are not only located exclusively within the individual instead of society at large, but they are even presented as brave and empowered decisions one does out of self-love (e.g., for “feeling sexy,” hence being able to enjoy sex). Sex and sexiness, having substantially different meanings for women and men is, in part, due to and in return influenced by natural sexual difference being a key element of post-feminist media culture. Evolutionary psychology and research on genetics gained popularity in the 90s, backing up a discourse of men having been denied the opportunity to live their authentic manliness by hegemonic feminist ideology against any scientific proof. This assertion enabled men to “go back” to their natural, powerful, libidinous masculinity.

The psychological explanation for the supposedly fundamental difference introduced by John Gray in 2002 was, however, even more influential. Gray has coined the metaphor of men and women as coming from different planets. With the Mars and Venus comparison established, popular media primarily took up the mediating role between the different species that apparently could not communicate with each other by themselves. Such a discourse also legitimates patriarchal power structures, with the argument that men and women are just wired to be good at different things.

Finally, irony constitutes an elementary function in media for the postfeminist sensibility. It is introduced as a certain logic in which overt sexism and

homophobia, are supposedly not sexist and homophobic, when somehow presented ironically. Ways to do this include the use of retro imagery and vocabulary, indicating that sexism is a thing of the past, making up new words with an effort to sound playful and harmless or plain exaggeration, that justifies extreme depictions as non-offensive, as there is no sexism, racism, homophobia, and ableism anymore, so one can make fun about it. Anyone not laughing might be labeled a killjoy, ugly, stupid or a member “of the ‘feminist thought police’” (ibid.: 161), making this ironic reactionism a powerful tool for oppressive practices, that go hand in hand with the discrediting of those who speak up (cf. Gill, 2007: 147–166).

As previously mentioned, since the publication of Gill’s article *Postfeminist media culture—Elements of a sensibility*, some of these narratives in mainstream media culture have adapted to the emerging popularity of the feminism label. This “mainstream, celebrity, consumer embrace of feminism that positions it as cool, fun, accessible identity that anyone can adopt”, however, according to Zeisler, is “decontextualized” and “depoliticized” (2016: xii & xiii). Gill herself has pointed out that it continues to promote a postfeminist sensibility (cf. 2016: 625).

feminism’s new luminosity

Both Zeisler and Gill have published on the new visibility of feminism in popular culture that around two years ago, after Beyoncé’s 2014 MTV Music Video Awards performance, is said to have initiated the mainstream media hype. Their evaluations of it are equally sobering.

As Zeisler has recalled that “[b]y 2015, you couldn’t swing a tampon without hitting someone or something that boasted its feminist import, in places you definitely wouldn’t expect: nail polish, underwear, energy drinks, Swiffers”, Zeisler recalls, and “[t]hings started getting a little weird.” One lad magazine was called a feminist bible, while another considered whether the playboy bunny (logo) was sexist or a symbol of feminism all along ([cf.] 2016: xiii). Zeisler is not an academic, but her expertise and knowledge on U.S. American popular culture

and feminism is vast. Her journalistic career started in 1995 with the co-founding of *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*. This, a self-made zine intended, “to take pop culture seriously as a force that shapes the lives of everyone, and argue for its importance as an arena for feminist activism and analysis” (ibid.: ix). Her book, *We Were Feminists Once—From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement*, offered a detailed account of events and examples of the process, including political, sociocultural, and personal. Her arguments and her conclusion might be put into witty phrases referencing pop-culture texts, distinguishing her writing from scientific work, but the content delivered matched Gill’s arguments in her paper *Post-postfeminism? New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times*. They have both highlighted how the progress that feminism-gone-cool brought about left patriarchy and neoliberalism untouched and were still constituting key organizing concepts (cf. Gill, 2016: 619; cf. Zeisler, 2016: 251 passim).

Advocating for the relevance of postfeminism as a powerful tool to make sense of this new luminosity, Gill has drawn attention to the feminisms that are, in fact, increasingly visible, and to those issues that continue to be invisible. She has pointed out the celebrity factor, a facet of feminist visibility that is tied to “news value”, how and coverage on sexism and racism is mostly detached from the systemic dimension dealing with it as an individual issue and coverage on social movements that are not exclusively feminist, focus on male activism. The corporate and style feminism she has further characterized resemble the marketing techniques mentioned earlier and shed light on the problematic nature of the term empowerment itself. Just like girl power, empowerment, deprived of meaning, has become a label for anything sellable to women and a strategy for justifying consumer choices (cf. 2016: 615 passim).

From this postfeminist perspective commodity feminism with its focus on appearance and style resembles its take on girl power as “the aesthetically oriented consumerism that structures it” (Bae, 2011: 29).

empowerment—a consumers' choice

Originally a bottom-up concept with focus on marginalized communities' own ability to improve life quality, and the support thereof, empowerment in contemporary popular culture "is [...] a facet of choice feminism—anything can be a feminist choice if a feminist makes that choice" (Zeisler, 2016: 171). It "has become a way to signify a particularly female way of being that's both gender-essentialist [...] and commercially motivated" (ibid.: 169). Obviously, for some women, such a discourse does bring about more autonomy. For demonstrational purposes, Zeisler has listed empowerment sold with "High heels. Flats. Cosmetic surgery. Embracing your wrinkles. Having children. Not having children." (ibid.) Coming to the same conclusion as Gill, that "just about anything in the mainstream media universe can be (re)signified as 'feminist'" (2016: 619). Without a doubt, the act of making a shopping-choice between shoes that are most likely produced under similarly awful labor conditions is not feminist activism (although the act of wearing certain shoes can be) and does not challenge global power inequalities, corporate dominance, or patriarchal hegemony. Putting aside the limitations and luxury here, it is still worth mentioning that this freedom to choose what to wear, although now co-opted by capitalism, is not something "naturally" given. And neither are women's reproductive rights that are not only far from being taken for granted but even cut back by conservative policy makers in supposedly modern and progressive countries.⁹ Needless to say, the cause for critique is not that some women gain confidence and feel more comfortable with themselves as a result of a commercialized empowerment rhetoric, or that it reflects a less restrictive environment for women in some respects compared to another time / other places. It is the emergence of new restrictions and the increasing exclusiveness it brings and the hypocrisy of those employing it.

⁹ Worldwide "abortion remains illegal or restricted to certain conditions in a great number of countries, notably those of the South" (Guillaume & Rossier, 2018: 217). In Europe 29 out of 43 countries allowed abortion in 2017 (cf. ibid.: 234) and in the U.S. eight States as of May 18, 2019 "have passed laws that could challenge federal protections for abortion, with more on the way" (Dias, Tavernise & Blinder, 2019), Alabama being the hardliner, with one that would allow to punish abortion from the moment of conception by 99 years in prison, regardless of rape or incest cases (cf. Valenti, 2019).

Two of the numerous problematic effects Zeisler has presented prove the relevance of Gill's elements of the postfeminist sensibility in this context. They occur from blending out structural reasons for being a stay-at-home mom by celebrating it as an individual empowered choice and liberation from an outdated feminist regime (cf. 2016: 187). Or they occur in the telling of only glamourized versions of feminist agendas, as is the case with successful sex-work memoirs about the experiences of their young, white authors who are no longer in that business. Empowerment in these cases often serves "as a reflexive defense mechanism in discussions of this kind of sex-work experience" that is not available to "people whose time in the industry is less finite and less bookworthy—transgender women, exploited teenagers and trafficked foreigners, men and women forced into sex work by poverty, abuse, or addiction" (ibid.: 190).

In the introduction to *Aesthetic Labor: Rethinking Beauty Practices in Neoliberalism*, the editors, Ana Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, propose another reading of the popularity of celebrating women (mostly celebrities) in mainstream media for small gestures of bodily "non-conformity". Calling them "revolutionary", or a "'badass' spokeswoman for 'girl power'" for not wearing a bra or mascara in public, according to them, might not be a sign of the fall of patriarchy, but a manifestation of intensified beauty norms and the surveillance thereof ([cf.] 2017: 28). Considering such gestures as somehow radical support the accusation that empowerment on the level of speech is used as a way to soften power for female use, optionally to girl power (cf. Zeisler, 2016: 172 passim).

girl power for girls / by girls

The already extensively quoted work by Zaslow, investigating how New York City girls themselves experience growing up in girl power media culture, has concluded that the experience is one of cultural discordance. Her findings have aligned with those of other researchers who have highlighted the limitations of

girl power. The “urban” girls in her study adopted ideas of neoliberal girl power sensibility while at the same time showing awareness of how society’s hierarchical organization was limiting their opportunities and access to power due to socioeconomic, “racial”, classed, and gendered positions (cf. 2009: 160 passim). She has also confirmed the position, most prominently represented by Catherine Driscoll, that points out the necessity of questioning the strict divide of potential between mainstream and subcultural messages. “[G]irl power as a popularized feminism” is more accessible but also less potent and “girl power media culture, as a neoliberal commodity [, ...] is a personal tool, not a tool of social change” ([cf.] Zaslow, 2009: 159).

Two distinctions in the field of interest are crucial to the aim of this thesis of disclosing potentially subversive appropriations or versions of girl power media culture and forms of feminist activism that manifest therein.

Most scholars implicitly distinguish according to means of media production. They do so, for example, by positioning the riot grrls and their practices of zine making in opposition to marketing industries promoting the Spice Girls, gendered toys, literature, and popular media’s coverage of feminism, girl power and related topics. Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz have explicitly mentioned how a growing body of academic literature has developed on the cultural production of girl power *for* girls, as well as *by* girls (cf. 2009: 8 passim).

The latter is especially relevant to this thesis as they suggest that “[a]cross the various forms of popular media, one can sometimes detect a mild critique of consumer culture aimed at girls, but a deeper analysis of larger power structures is consistently absent” (ibid: 48 passim). Looking at studies such as Keller’s on girls’ feminist online practices as a form of activism, pursuing riot grrls’ tradition of DIY media production (2012, 2015, 2016a & 2016b), contemporary girl power culture production by girls, however, constitutes a site where resistant practices present themselves.

Jessica Taft, in her contribution to *All about the Girl*, has contrasted the corporate and mainstream media construction of girl power with the redefining of its meanings produced by girls’ organizations. The power to challenge the depoliticizing meanings produced by dominant popular culture institutions is limited though, as they are more visible and, therefore, also likely to be more

influential compared to girls' organizations with significantly less possibilities (cf. Taft, 2004: 70).

Taft and Keller have addressed domains in which *The Ardorous* operate, the semi-public virtual and physical (like blogs, or exhibitions), and the transgression that has followed into an arena of mediated public through the creative production of commercial media texts and their effects in the mainstream media realm. *The Ardorous*, therefore, present a case of girl power media culture produced by girls taking advantage of mainstream media institutions' structures.

THREE:

RETHINKING RESISTANCE

The understanding of resistance and critique is based on how the basic concept of power is perceived. As already pointed out earlier, this thesis theorizes power along with discourse and knowledge, a poststructuralist philosophical tradition ascribed to Michel Foucault, and, in part, picked up by Judith Butler to build her theory of gender performativity, creating the foundation for queer theory. Truth, according to Foucault, is not located outside of power, but

produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980[1977]: 131)

Its production and transmission is “under the control [...] of a few great political and economic apparatuses (university, army, writing, media)”, calling for the need to reframe the intellectual not as “the ‘bearer of universal values’”, but as someone that is just as much within certain discourses of truth and objected to the constraints of power. However, the intellectual “can operate and struggle at the general level of that régime of truth” inhabiting a productive position as Foucault sees “a battle [...] ‘around truth’ [...] about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays” ([cf.] *ibid*: 313 *passim*). This does not mean that the intellectual holds power exclusively, while others have none at all. According to Foucault, individuals always are “in a position to both submit to and exercise this power. They are never the inert or consenting targets of power; they are always its relays” (Foucault, 2003[1976]: 29). It is power itself that brings about the effect of allowing the recognition of the individual as such through the “bodies, gestures, discourses, and desires” it produces (*ibid*. 30).

These propositions from Foucault are of assistance in comprehending how Judith Butler has conceptualized the performative constitution of gender and identity and its inscriptions on the body. Butler has made her argument partly by employing the regulatory and disciplinary techniques that are at the core of Foucault's argument (cf. Butler, 2007: 183 passim). To keep this theoretical excursion compact, Butler's own résumé on (gender) performativity in the preface to her 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble* provides the basic outline. As she admits that there is no absolute answer, in part because her views on its meanings have changed since the first edition in 1990, she presents two statements. First that "performativity of gender revolves around [...] the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself" and then that it "is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" ([cf.] *ibid.*: xv). Consequently, agency and subversion are located within the discourses that produce bodies; more specifically within the iteration of bodily acts that follow norms of culturally intelligible gendered subjects (cf. *ibid.*: 194 passim).

Catherine Driscoll has used this framework to investigate commercial girl power culture's potentials and complicity as a form of agency. She has problematized the tendency towards a logic, to phrase it polemically, that formulates "riot grrl equals authentic feminist resistance and Spice Girls equals conforming dupe to patriarchal oppression." She has argued that this construction is articulated through and, therefore, propels the dominant narratives. Driscoll has suggested the employment of a lens of power dynamics, never beyond or outside patriarchy, as a possible way to think resistant girl culture (cf. 1999: 189 passim).

agency: juxtapositional practices and suffering actors

In most feminist theory/activism choice, empowerment and voice have long been the primary markers for agency, but, as they have become co-opted, their use as analytical concepts rather conceal mediating factors and new forms of resistance. Harris and Dobson have built their argument around the impact of “socio-cultural conditions of neoliberalism, post-feminism and post-girlpower” (2015: 145) and the way those factors complicate established conceptualizations of agency. In a logic where the ideal “can-do” girl is constructed as empowered and resistant, to claim pain or suffering is to claim individual failure as girls have all the choices, resulting in one of many possible reasons that lead to the silencing of girls’ voices (cf. *ibid*: 148 *passim*). In debates about what is deemed the sexualization of culture, the idea of girls’ voices being silenced becomes more complex. On the one hand, hypersexuality signifies normative femininity (discussed in chapter two, as an element of postfeminist sensibility). On the other hand, feminists and advocates for traditional family values celebrate girls who critically raise their voices on the sexualizing and objectifying of marketing towards them and female pop stars who present themselves in a sexual way are labeled as victims. This victim/agency or risk/resilience (Ward & Cooper, 2004: 25) discourse itself turns out to already be raced and classed (as pointed out in chapter one). The white, middle-class girl is to be protected as well as idealized as the critical, resistant subject that all girls should aspire to be. In retaining the dichotomy, where agents risk becoming victims when claiming to be affected by inequalities and, thus, subjectification is linked to “productions of agency via empowerment, choice and voice” (Harris & Dobson, 2015: 152), girls lack chances to feel and articulate the socio-structural and –economic factors responsible. To give space for both injury and action, Harris and Dobson have suggested the notion of the suffering actor, and have advocated for investigating girls’ juxtapositional practices beyond established concepts of resistance (cf. *ibid*: 151 *passim*).

Apart from these closely entangled binaries of either “can do” or “at risk” and “have” or “have not”, it is the ambiguous meanings of girlhood that have to be navigated that concern these studies. These “spaces of discursive contradiction” (Harris & Dobson, 2015: 152) or the “contested terrain” (Curry, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009: 184) have been addressed by Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose as “schizoid formation[s]” / “schizoid dynamic[s]” (2011: 393). They have presented their theoretical and methodological perspective to “explore how girls are regulated by, yet rework and resist expectations to perform as agentic sexual subjects across a range of spaces” (ibid: 389), drawing upon work from Deleuze and Guattari. The concept of *becoming* informs their understanding of subjectivity that (similar to Butler’s performativity) is constituted in a constant and non-linear process in relation to its environment, or *assemblages*. Resistance is conceptualized as “the capacity for bodies to affect and be affected” (ibid: 394) and found as ruptures at the intersection of the molar (macro—structural binds e.g., “race”, class, and gender) and the molecular level (micro—the everyday, little process with the potential to unveil sedimented molar formations)(cf. ibid.). Similarly, Davies, Gonick, Gottschall and Lampert have turned to Deleuze and Guattari to map possibilities for challenging normative girlhood as they propose that Butler’s theory operates “primarily [on a] linguistic or epistemological” (2013: 49) level. They have argued that Butler’s thesis is not easily available as a resistant practice, as it conceptualizes deviance as a threat to the intelligible subject. On the other hand, they have criticized Renold and Ringrose’s work for neglecting the various reproductions of normative femininity in their examples and their rather arbitrary interpretations (cf. ibid: 51).

activism: a gendered and aged construct

*“older feminist readers I’m a teen its for teens can’t be perfect don’t have a degree.
get some perspective plz & stop writing mean comments!”*

Tweet from Julie Zeilinger,¹⁰

feminist blogger participating in Keller’s study (2016a:85).

Early (1960s and 70s) academic conceptions as well as every day knowledge about activism were traditionally “based primarily around the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual, Western, adult men” (Keller, 2016a: 50). Activism as it was mainly understood as political participation (e.g., “voting, campaigning, and party membership”[ibid: 49]). Broader definitions like civic or protest activism include looser networks such as the women’s liberation movement, but stay located in the logic of a public sphere available only to the privileged, and excluding the forms of activism of marginalized women. In the 1970s, youth subcultures became the subject of research concerning their practices of resistance for scholars of Cultural Studies. This research included investigations “of the social meaning of style, the oppositional politics embedded in cultural practices [...] and the ways in which marginalized groups (primarily due to class and race) exercise creativity from their subordinated positions to enact cultural agency” (Keller, 2016: 51). Even though girls found and took up spaces for themselves to be feminist, activist, and agentic in subcultures such as punk or hip hop, as feminist scholars have pointed out (in part retrospectively), their activism was excluded from research, as gender was ignored (cf. ibid.: 51 passim). The line between alternative and dominant in contemporary society is blurred, dissolved even, giving way to youth cultures “marked by fluidity, mobility, shifting identities, emerging technologies, and new consumption patterns” (ibid: 53), hence their distinction is not a useful analytical concept to understand spaces of contemporary girls’ activism anymore. Instead, frameworks are employed that invest in “lifestyles”, “scenes”, “networks” and “communities” (ibid.). Having identified how these conceptions have been and

¹⁰ The FBomb, https://twitter.com/the_fbomb/status/2635343894 (14/07/2009).

are pervaded with power structures, Keller has further highlighted the importance to also take into question adult feminist perspectives on legitimate activism that emerged within this tradition. She has argued that public participation is not possible to girls in the same way, if at all, as it is to grown-up women and that forms of participation that do not conform to their norms are often self-referentially dismissed as rebellion (cf. *ibid.*: 55; cf. Keller, 2016b: 262 *passim*).

At this point, the argument can be reconnected to Driscoll's proposition, and, furthermore, to Warren-Crow's notion of girlphobia. Also in this thesis, consumerism and capitalism, are steadily addressed and linked to girls. This is important to acknowledge, as it is a pattern that has tradition in anti-capitalist argumentation, critical and media theory. The nexus discussed in the literature considered so far, however, has predominantly focused on issues about consumerism and capitalism as patriarchal and exploitative forces harmful to girls. Warren-Crow has unraveled a narrative that blames the girl/girls for cheating the legit bearers of culture into letting it go down the drain.

Critiques of mass and consumer culture, in particular, are frequently made at the expense of the girl, whose supposed impressionability, instability, and openness to commodification are understood as indexes of and contributors to capitalist hegemony. All too often, such adultist arguments can't think of disempowerment and resistance outside of the opposing forces of girlification and maturation. (Warren-Crow, 2014: 11)

By tracing this line of thinking back to the theorists Marshall McLuhan and Siegfried Kracauer (amongst others), blaming cultures' demise and emasculation on its girlification, Warren-Crow has demonstrated those girl and "commodity relations in media theory" (2014: 66 *passim*). The girl as the visual and rhetoric metaphor for (consumer) culture industry's degenerated morals and lack of substance, however, has outlived the authors of *The Mechanical Bride* and *The Mass Ornament*. In her book *Girlhood and the Plastic Image* the U.S. American media theorist and performance artist has presented the French, radical political collective *Tiqqun* as an example of that legacy translated into turn-of-the-twenty-first-century culture. The collective published their work anonymously and were only active from 1999 to 2001, but its writings have been, and still are, central to

the political theory of the far left. Their *Young-Girl* in *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* embodies the perversely powerful “traveling handmaiden of capitalist oppression [... that] feminizes and infantilizes the subject, which is implicitly figured as adult and masculine” (ibid: 73). The violence and misogyny in the language of Tiqqun’s theory, however, present themselves in a whole new quality compared to the early “girlphobes”. Its level varies slightly within different translations from the French original to English as Warren-Crow has shown in her comparison of passages. While *The Young-Girl* in the first official English translation is “stupid” and “reeks” (cf. ibid.: 72 passim), in another anonymous translation she is “just a stinking cunt” (Tiqqun, 2001: 36). Another example discussed by Warren-Crow is the novel *Reena Spaulings*, that she has addressed in her 2013 article *Gossip Girl Goes to the Gallery*. The 2004 book, directed by the New York / Paris based art collective *Bernadette Corporation*, written by a team of 150 people, “is a multidisciplinary performance that attempts to turn gossip against itself in order to expose the structures of techno-capitalist power” (Warren-Crow, 2013: 109 passim). While it fulfills its aim successfully, as it is itself a product of a participatory labor force, it employs a technique that reinforces power dynamics that are inherent to the system they critique. Apart from frequently quoting Tiqqun, they again use and degrade girls/girlishness as a symbol and vehicle for making their point, as they perpetuate the “notion of girls as blank commodities with incomplete contours and of girl talk as twittering but noxious speech/writing [...] made to stand for most everything that is wrong with labour under late-capitalism” (ibid: 117).

Such practice is not unique to the artist, political activist, or “intellectual”, as Keller has demonstrated with her analysis of media coverage on Tavi Gevinson’s (rise to) fame that brings forward how “journalists reinforce hegemonic and dominant notions of girls as culturally unproductive, emphasizing Gevinson as an exceptional case, rather than indicative of the creative skills many girls exercise” (Keller, 2016a: 161).

Even though Keller is not using the word “girlphobes” and what she describes is sometimes less obvious and not as directly hateful, she also brings up those cases that are incredibly unprofessional, lacking any self-reflection and—to sport Warren-Crow’s term—girlphobe. In 2011 a prominent fashion photographer and

blogger suggested in an interview that Gevinson was a project initiated by print media to demonstrate the insignificance of fashion blogs as they are produced and consumed by twelve-year-old girls. Presenting himself as a serious grown-up blogger, he goes on to make his argument by pointing out Gevinson's lack of a boyfriend (cf. *ibid.*: 163). Keller's examples have ranged from framing her as a prodigy, different from regular girls to protectionist discourses implying that she is not up for what she does to denying her expertise and instead positioning her as "fannish, obsessive, and thus, inauthentic, unreliable, and uncritical cultural commentator" (*ibid.*: 164). The comments of the young and successful blogger do not focus on her work, but on her physique, age, gender, and the right to take up space in the allegedly sophisticated, high-culture of fashion that is ultimately depicted as the realm of adult male professionals.

Girlphobia appears in academic, activist, and popular discourse, or as Curry, Kelly and Pomerantz have asserted, girl power in the mid-90s was resignified "as an emerging social menace" (2009:184), and, therefore, had to be considered and applied critically when investigating girls' contributions.

tools and strategies

The various findings, assumptions, preoccupations that have become evident from discussing scholarly as well as popular literature allow the suggestion of potentially resistant practices of *The Ardorous* as suffering actors, and relates to the tools they utilize. Tools employed include those used deliberately (connecting, art production, blogging) and those they probably, mostly perform unintentionally (belonging to certain privileged categories). As the specific style most of the collective's members share is concerned with a large part of the critique (as well as a dismissal of style as a form of politics), the following presentation focuses on theoretical positions that allow reframing an alleged flaw into something potentially powerful. Kamińska, in her analysis of the photo book *Babe*, has asserted that in *The Ardorous*' work, the tropes of (postfeminist) girl power aesthetics, the hyper-girlish, -feminine, -sexualized and celebratory consumerism, are arranged to "expose the absurdity of the pop-cultural image of

the girl.” (2017: 4). Techniques employed include, for example, juxtaposing hyperbolic stereotypical girlish visuals and talk, implying innocence, with texts about sexual harassment or the extreme depictions of the hyperaestheticized girl consumer in contrast to tabooed depictions of menstrual blood, body hair or queer sexuality (ibid.: 2 passim). The other aspects Kamińska has presented are how *Babe* can be read “as a proud reclamation of those attributes of girlhood that are often treated as immature or irrelevant” (ibid.: 5), and how their work resembles that of the riot grrls (ibid.: 2, 8). Aleksandra Kamińska, a Polish PhD student focusing on contemporary representations of girlhood, specifically in American visual culture and literature, has closed her analyses sympathetic to the collective. But she has also objected to their lack of diversity that does not challenge beauty standards apart from some body hair, as most of the featured models are “skinny, blonde, white and able-bodied” (ibid.: 5). She has and contested the tendency in several contributing artists’ work to indulge in individualistic self obsession (cf. ibid.: 9). This so-called selfie feminism is also at the heart of Jane Argodale’s critique of Collins’s female gaze,¹¹ that Argodale has perceived to be liberating for nobody, apart from the normatively beautiful girl / woman that Collins herself is, because her kind of feminism is “purely aesthetic” and in her “visual universe, no one ever gets to be ugly” (cf. 2018).

Offering another perspective, Michelle Bae, assistant professor of art education at Penn State with a research focus on art and media cultural production of minoritized girls, has argued that “resistance cannot be separated from aesthetic experience” (2011: 31). In a case study, Bae has investigated how an immigrant Korean girl visually negotiates hegemonic “Western” beauty standards on her blog and finds that the blogger critically engages in beautifying practices that eventually are closely tied to power relations. Bae has, therefore, suggested that a “complex assemblage of politics, aesthetics, and representation [in postfeminist girl power discourse] allows for possibilities of feminist critique” (ibid.: 38).

¹¹ The female gaze, in all brevity, is an answer to the male gaze—the objectifying, heteronormative standard in cultural products to deliver satisfactory female imagery by and to the male observing subject, a term/theory coined by the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (cf. Robertson, 1996: 13 passim). The dominant male spectator is sought to lose his power by producing by and for women.

Mary Celeste Kearney, an associate professor at the University of Notre Dame with a focus on gender, youth, and media culture, has argued in her article in defense of the love of sparkle, that we might rethink liberal feminists' rejection and femininity more generally within girls' culture. In pointing out "its significance to both queer culture and feminist culture" she has suggested that we might understand

sparkly female youth as junior versions not of pageant queens and porn stars—too often and problematically positioned in such discourse as dupes of patriarchy and postfeminism—but of femmes and feminist camp performers—those feminized agents of anti-normative gender politics who operate within and between queer and straight cultures. (2015: 270)

Hence, *The Ardorous* are also investigated in relation to the possibility of subverting by means of camp aesthetic and performing cis-female girl drag.

hyper queens and feminist camp

"Camp has an affinity with feminist discussions of gender construction, performance, and enactment; we can thereby examine forms of camp as feminist practice."
(Robertson, 1996: 6)

Butler has famously taken drag as an example of gender parody that "*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*" (1999: 187, italics from original), arguing that gender, as well as sex, are effects produced through stylized repetitions of bodily acts over time that cannot be traced back to any natural, prediscursive original. Consequently, the iterations seek to conform to configurations representing certain ideals and gender norms, which bear subversive potential, just like the "parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction" (ibid: 192). Parody per se is not subversive, but depends on the parodic

repetitions' context. It must be considered where, when and what kind of performance can successfully unmask naturalized categories (cf. *ibid.*: 189).

The drag queen is not, by definition, subversive (cf. *ibid.*: xxiii) and ultimately not directly applicable to this thesis' case either. Contemporary drag performance is, in part, drawing on the success of the argument of *Gender Trouble*. Jamie Lee Coull, in her PhD thesis on the implications of the rather new female-to-female impersonators in queer spaces, has suggested that drag performance is not exclusive to the male-to-female impersonators that have become visible outside the LGBT context (along with successful shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, etc.). First came the drag king, the female-to-male performer who was less visible outside as well as within the LGBT context, as this was more of a, mostly U.S. American, academic, and feminist practice (cf. 2015: 35 *passim*). The drag king and the drag queen were "widely understood and accepted as referring to performers who present over-exaggerated personas with a gender presentation usually opposite to their own" (*ibid.*: 35).

The cis-female drag queen as a new iteration of drag, a hyperbolized caricature of the hyperbolized caricature performed by a female-identified person, emerged in New York City and San Francisco in the mid-90s. So far, it has been labeled as bio queen, faux queen, glam drag, exploding femininity, queenly femininity, lesbian drag queen, female-to-female drag queen, female female impersonator and femme drag (cf. *ibid.*: 54). Many of the female drag performers in Coull's study preferred the term drag queen, rejecting those that they felt were unnecessarily gendered terms "in a way similar to the use of 'waitress' or 'actress'" (*ibid.*: 71). As it fits so well in this very context the label used is included with the prefix hyper, which is continuously used throughout this thesis. While the hyper queen is not included in Coull's extensive list, the label can be found in several non-scholarly articles on the topic¹² and hints towards all

¹² See for example:

Scrifer, Ama (2016): Why Faux-Queens Deserve A Place In Drag Culture. (18/5/2016). On: Medium <https://medium.com/the-establishment/why-faux-queens-deserve-a-place-in-drag-culture-ab0d6204734c> (accessed 25/8/2019)

Tongco, Tricia (2016): The Important Reason These Drag Queens Are NOT Gay Men. (29/5/2016). On: attn: <https://archive.attn.com/stories/8578/feminist-power-of-female-drag-queens> (accessed 25/8/2019)

those allegedly girl power hyper features, the hyper-aestheticized, -sexuality, -femininity, -girlish, -consumerism, -reality, and so on.

The origin of the term drag, Coull writes, is not clear but literature suggests that it was backstage slang for actors playing female characters in the middle to late 1800s, as they were dragging their gowns along behind them. When Coull talked to drag queens, however, they told her it was an acronym for *doing role as girl*, a theory or interpretation that she found no backup literature on (cf. 2015: 57). This came as a surprise to me in three regards, as I have never doubted that it actually stands for *dressed as a girl*, a misinformation apparently that also turns out to be impossible to substantiate. At least in literature, RuPaul, on the other hand, has used a similar version, *dressed as girl*, in a tweet that further claims the acronym goes back to Shakespeare (cf. @RuPaul, 2019). As Coull has pointed out, there is an interesting aspect to the rumored acronym she was told about, since it “does much to describe what drag is, especially if we consider drag as ‘doing girl’ as opposed to ‘being girl’” (2015: 58). Not only does this agree with the conception of identity in this thesis, it also explicitly addresses girls, while in theory it is basically always a performance that parodies what is considered adult femininity. In the light of the emergence of hyper queens as new forms of drag performance, Coull has further suggested better understanding “drag [...] as a deliberate performance of exaggerated behavior and appearance which purposefully draws on notions of gender construction and performativity, with less relevance to one’s biological sex” (ibid: 59), which also opens up the possibility of investigating the construction and performativity of girlish femininity.

Concurring with Butler, the potential of successfully queering in a hyper queen’s performance depends “on the performance venue, the performance modes engaged, the way performers might deliberately queer cultural products, and audience reception” (ibid.: 83). Coull has also contested that a crucial element to “resist reincorporation [into dominant ideology] and maintain the challenge of queer is their engagement with feminist camp” (ibid.: 78).

Jones, Megan (2019): RuPaul’s Offensive Comments Are Part of a Bigger Problem in Drag. (20/3/2018). On: FLARE <https://www.flare.com/tv-movies/ru-paul-on-offensive-comments/> (accessed 25/8/2019)

Camp, often referred to as an aestheticism and sensibility rooted in gay male culture, is, in most instances, present in drag performances and also “one of [...] queerest practices” (ibid.: 83). Susan Sontag, with her 1964 essay *Notes on “Camp”*, introduced it to mainstream heterosexual audiences, culture (and academic discussion). She was heavily criticized for this, as well as for the way she portrayed camp as apolitical and detached it from homosexuality (ibid.: 85). She offered an outsider’s personal analysis that is not so much interesting for the examples provided but for the way she attempts to make sense of a, to her, “fugitive sensibility” (Sontag, 1964: 2) as a “logic of taste” (ibid.: 1) and made it a legitimate topic of intellectual and academic discussion (cf. Robertson, 1996: 120).

There are elements widely agreed upon to be necessary for a performance to be camp such as irony, theatricality, and aestheticism. Furthermore, there is consent over the fact that no thing can be camp, a thing can only be read as camp (cf. Coull, 2015: 87). Coull has exemplified this by drawing on Margaret Thompson Drewal’s analysis of Liberace’s stage performance, “referencing items of everyday American consumption which [...] he] escalated to the spectacular through camp aestheticism” (ibid.: 86 passim). That his, for the most part, white, middle-class, heterosexual audience was blind to this style, and what it implied then—something that was obvious for other homosexual men—does not only demonstrate that camp depends on the camp eye, but also shows its inseparability from gay culture. Camp, to gay men, is also read as a reaction to a homophobic society, a form of coping by laughing about misery and being so over the top that the laughter is not directed towards themselves (cf. ibid.). A dialog that demonstrates this (lack of) sensibility in just a few words comes from the 1997 *The Simpsons* episode called *Homer’s Phobia*. The new character John (built on and dubbed by John Waters, iconic camp filmmaker and gay), owner of an antique store, is selling what Homer asserts to be junk, and tries to explain what it is about (cf. Padva, 2008: 61).

John: It’s camp! The tragically ludicrous? The ludicrously tragic?

Homer: Oh yeah, like when a clown dies.

John: Well, sort of. (Sweatpants, 2010)

Apart from several other scenes that comprehensively give an idea about (a 1997 American) camp sensibility, this Emmy Award-winning episode also supports this case study's claim about *The Ardorous*. The episode has been praised for its subversion of homophobia and promotion of gay-straight alliance in popular mainstream television, and its concomitant educational effect (cf. Padva, 2008: 58 passim). That the theatricality of camp relies on the ability to be read by the spectator, according to Coull, further allows the assumption that those who are able to read it are also "likely open to accepting gender as performative in the Butlerian sense" (2015: 86).

With few exceptions, the literature claims that camp is exclusive to gay men, supporting the idea that women are limited to being "camp objects but not camp subjects or readers" (ibid.: 91). Coull has drawn on Pamela Robertson and her call for a theory of feminist camp, to object to a purely misogynistic reading and to "reclaim camp as a political tool and rearticulate it within the framework of feminism" (Robertson, 1996: 6). In her analysis of 20th century camp icons, Robertson has concluded that camp is always a guilty pleasure as it "may appropriate and expose stereotypes, but it also, in some measure, keeps them alive", thus, they always have to be recoded to suit current circumstances, in order to be employed in feminist camp that manages to "regroup and revitalize seemingly outmoded feminist issues" (ibid.: 142).

With no intent to dig too far into the slippery terrain of attempts to define camp, in order to take on Robertson's prompt to think about the possibilities of using camp aesthetic as a resistant practice "from within dominant institutions" (1996: 153), a loose framework, respectively some leading questions, can avoid arbitrariness. Sontag, as well as Robertson, were contributors to Fabio Cleto's 1999 reader, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. In its elaborate introduction, Cleto not only summarizes and contextualizes what has been fought, and thought about (up to that point), but also introduces his own queer take to approaching camp, which is compatible with Robertson's propositions. Accepting that camp extricates itself from any definition "approached as *sensibility*, *taste*, or *style*, reconceptualised as *aesthetic* or *cultural economy*, and later asserted/reclaimed as (*queer*) *discourse*, camp hasn't lost its relentless power to frustrate all efforts to pinpoint it down to stability" (Cleto, 1999: 2,

italics from original). Like Robertson's analogy of recycling, he recommends framing camp as a queer discursive architecture. This allows not stable codes, but mobile knowledge within a flexible architecture and ephemeral apparatuses. Camp then is a nomadic category approachable from a provisional position that must be localized and scrutinized within the discursive space of its architecture (cf. *ibid.*: 34 *passim*). Referring to the constellation to be observed as a camp party, Cleto has suggested a number of pertinent questions:

- [W]here was the camp 'party', and who had access (and through which entrance) to it—who had been 'invited'?
- With what 'fancy dress'?
- Who participated as 'excluded', as embodying the very orthodoxy which camp para-doxicality (*sic*) presupposes?
- And how was that principle of norm-ality (*sic*) evoked, with what parodic mask was it present, although *in absentia*?
- What was the relationship between the nomadic party and the dominant, institutional, 'permanent' culture?
- With what degree of complicity and/or subversiveness?
- What elements of the nomadic party have been co-opted by the dominant culture, and how was the latter transformed in such process?
- What are the responsibilities, through compromise, of the party toward the reassessment of institutional culture? (*ibid.*: 35 *passim*, running text in the original, italics from original)

FOUR:

THE CASE // THE ARDOROUS

*"It's the headquarters of 21st century Girl Power,
and Collins is the group's fearless leader and link."*

Dolan, Maggie (2013)

It is almost a decade since Collins initiated her all-female art collective. It grew from an initial 15 to almost 40 members in 2014, as Collins has written in her *The Ardorous manifesto* on *Dazed*, their website, www.theardorous.com, still lists 32 artists. The last blog post showing photos from the Los Angeles group show *Strange Magic*, which Collins curated together with Tavi Gevinson on August 12, 2012, presenting the website as more of a business card for the artists.

Tumblr, on the other hand, offered a less formal platform that combined the feature of blogging and representing one's art or oneself, with those of a social network, to explore others work, contact people and reblog what you liked. So this was where the collective was actively updating their work, shows and publications, as individuals and as *The Ardorous*. Or where they used to do so. Due to community policy changes in 2017, amongst other factors, the platform now looks rather desolate. Once a space valued by queer communities, a platform from which new aesthetics emerged, in its pre-algorithmic and pre-"safe mode" times, Tumblr has now lost much of its "USP", letting go of its rhizomatic dynamic in favor of a more regulatory and quantifiable logic on which competing social media platforms rely (cf. Ables, 2019).



Figure 1: Screenshot from theardorous.tumblr.com

The collective has two Tumblr accounts: their first one, inardor.tumblr.com, and theardorous.tumblr.com. Both accounts now direct to the safe mode screen (see figure 1). What is retraceable of the first account it was only active for a little more than two weeks in February and March 2012. The most recent post from January 5, 2016 is on theardorous.tumblr.com. When going to your dashboard, as suggested, after confirming that you want to view the Tumblr, a preview is available on the right side of the screen that reminds of the platform's mobile version. The layout however is gone and plenty of posts are hidden behind a grey mask saying "Hey, this post may contain adult content, so we've hidden it from public view. [Learn more]." These posts do not even have timestamps. In order to collect data for recreating the collective's, and its members' careers, the "business cards" artists list <http://www.theardorous.com/artists/> became the initial point of reference.

In a first step, I transferred the names listed, numbered in the order they appeared, to a text document I labeled *bios* and added the information provided for each artist. In most cases this was one sentence about the artist's field of work, where she was geographically located then or from and a photo, that I did not copy but tried, from appearance, to interpret for "racial" background. Each artist provided at least one link. Many of these links were broken, and others led to professional websites, that in some cases even provided an up-to-date CV.

Overall, however, *The Ardorous'* website and the linked websites delivered far too little information for even a basic portrait of the collective. Therefore, artist by artist, I moved on to other platforms, social media, professional websites (that have not been linked). I also read interviews and articles to generously collect information, which was hard in some cases as there seemed to be endless information, and, in other cases, there was almost nothing to be found. I fed all of that information into my *bios* document.

To bring this data into a form that allowed me to compile and compare characteristics of *The Ardorous'* members for the presentation of the collective's general composition, I created a table in another document, which I called *the ardorous artists data*. The table was organized to vertically represent the artists with their assigned number and, therefore, had 32 rows. Horizontally, I labeled columns for the categories that in its final version were: "ig followers on 21/6/19, ig rank #, project(s) online: www.theardorous.com, tumblr,¹³ education + mentioned on website (y)/(n), nationality / place of residence / "race category", career & activities besides the ardorous (art show[s], commission/corporate, curatorial, editorial, publishing + vice feature [v], collabs/features), controversial, and other.

I chose to use the categories on controversy and Instagram followers as markers for potential subversion and quantifiable commercial success. (As a former PR consultant, I reference my knowledge and experience in the business of "lifestyle" and influencer marketing to use the individual artists' number of Instagram followers as an indicator for their self-brand's market value, but also refer to De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

For the three more in-depth portraits on the artists with the biggest Instagram following, I returned to research and gathered the information in the *bios* document. Finally, this document was just over 80 pages long. It included extracts of or complete interviews, Instagram Tumblr posts, a list of artists who have collaborated with one or more members of the collective, and documentation of the collective's Tumblr accounts' status at the very beginning.

¹³ That turned out to be not or scarcely in use, empty, deleted, in safe mode, hacked (and featuring porn) or a combination of those.

All the reported information that goes beyond numbers, such as social media reach is subject to my persona and my research skills, and its validity status has to be acknowledged as that.

the collective

The Ardorous members are predominantly white. From the photos, all appeared to be white. In the case of three members, however I found no other information to verify that impression, and one member is *hafu*, which is Japanese for half, in this case meaning having a Japanese/Asian and a white parent.

When it comes to the category of nationality, however, there is some variation. Even though 14 members are very likely from the United States, this does not account for half of the collective. From these 14, one has French-Lebanese heritage, one is half Swiss and, as already mentioned, one is half Japanese. Five members are Canadian (one having parents who immigrated from Hungary), three from the United Kingdom, three are Russian, two are Swedish and there is one member each from France, Germany, Australia, Israel, and the Ukraine. Two of the Russian artists live or have lived in the United Kingdom; two of the Canadian artists currently live in the United States and one in the United Kingdom; one Swedish and the Israeli member mostly live and work in the United States, or move between places.

The artistic paths pursued by the members are comparably diverse. Six from the website's 32 are dismissed at that point for two reasons. Two had dropped their artist names, so I assumed it was not in their interest to be included here. For the other four I was not able to find any further information. The remaining 24 all undertake solo and group art shows and/or undertake creative work for commercial purposes. From those 24, two do not seem to do any corporate jobs, and sell or have sold their artwork online on sites like etsy.com and saatchiart.com. At least seven creatives also were in curatorial positions; three were in the function of a magazine's editor-in-chief; and one of them had founded a magazine herself. At least six members published their own books, others went into film, music, contemporary dance and performance art, founded a clothing label, or opened a gallery. Education was not a prominent topic on the

website. Some mentioned their status as students, or that they were about to graduate. From 14 members, I could not find any further information, the others mostly had a BA or BFA degree and went to college, art, or fashion school. One was currently doing an MFA in Europe.

Apart from ongoing collaborations between the artists from *The Ardorous*, as mentioned in the introduction, many have worked with artists and creatives outside the collective. In addition to those already introduced earlier these, among others, include Sita Abellán (Spanish model and DJ), Lo Hallén (Swedish freelance writer and stylist), Dafy Hagai (Israeli photographer), Hannah van Arsdale (U.S. American director and editor), Madelyne Beckles (Canadian performance and mixed media artist), Ashley Kane (British arts and culture editor at *Dazed*), Sandy Kim (U.S. American photographer), Alexandra Marzella (U.S. American performance artist and model) and Sophia “#Girlboss” Amouroso (U.S. American founder of *Nasty Gal* and *Girlboss Media*). Connections have been made also with successful musicians such as Selena Gomez, Cardi B and Billie Eilish. The way to the “top”, however, is not only marked by networking and mutual support within the community of female artists. There were also controversial supporters providing a platform such as the retail/manufacturing company *American Apparel* and *Vice Magazine*, or, in one case, mentoring by the U.S. American photographer and filmmaker Richard Kern. Several of the 24 creatives had worked at *American Apparel* stores and worked as photographers for the company that in September 2013 funded their first group show *Gynolandscape* in New York. A total of 21 of them had published work in *Vice*. *American Apparel* was the client for whom three members of *The Ardorous* performed jobs that led to controversy.

In the course of this (co-)collection of data, I came across many similar and different creative and personal paths and stories that unfortunately cannot all be discussed within the frame of this thesis. This, and the fact that core elements of its questions include careers in corporate and mainstream media creative production, resistant practices, and a certain style, is why the following presentation’s focus is mainly on, but not limited to, the three artists with the highest reach on Instagram. As of June 21, 2019 these were Petra Collins

(@petrafcollins, 859k), Arvida Byström (@arvidabystrom, 232k) and Mayan Toledano (@thisismayan, 97.3k).

Note: I decided not to “(sic)” flag mistakes, when directly quoting the artists, believing that this would be rather pedantic and irritating, taking under consideration the nature of interviews and social media posts.

one

Petra Collins / @petrafcollins, number one on the Instagram ranking from *The Ardorous*’ members’ public profiles, crowned “poster girl” and “fearless leader”, has indeed successfully established a career working across art forms, for corporations, media and art institutions. Born in Ontario in 1992 to Hungarian parents, she was injured dancing and started taking photographs of family, friends, and herself (cf. Jansen, 2017: 160; cf. Garcia, 2017; cf. Collins, June 2015). In a video interview on the YouTube channel *StyleLikeU*, Collins says that she had trouble learning from a young age and left school early, aged 18, which manifested in low self-esteem and body image issues. This, along with mediated images in teen magazines and ads for beauty products, amongst other factors, played into her development of an eating disorder (cf. Collins, June 2015). After dropping out, Collins changed to an alternative school to graduate where she had an encouraging and supportive art teacher and a peer who suggested submitting her work to Tavi Gevinson’s *Rookie*. She became a regular contributor to *Rookie*. After graduation, she attended university to study Criticism and Curatorial Practice, but quit after two years, because she could not afford the fees. She moved to New York and worked for *American Apparel*, which funded *Gynolandscape*, Collins’s first group show to curate “IRL” ([cf.] *ibid.*; cf. Collins, March 2017a). With *American Apparel* and Alice Lancaster (@alicelancaster_, #14 on *The Ardorous* Instagram ranking with 16.9k followers) she created a t-shirt with a line drawing depicting a vulva with menstrual blood and pubic hair and a hand that suggests masturbation. This was her first project to be controversially discussed in mainstream spheres (cf. Collins, October 2013). In a *Vice* interview that went online on October 8, she talked about her intentions,

what she expected to happen, when she created the shirt, about female bodies and sexuality, sexualization, taboos, and violence in mainstream media. Asked about the reactions she gained on Instagram for the t-shirt, that were, according to Collins, positive and negative, she said that she was “always scared of people reporting [her] on Instagram because [she does not] want to lose [her] profile” (ibid.). She shared a story from when she was guest lecturing in a course on feminism at York University. Collins was 20 years old at the time, and the students were “grossed out” as she showed a photo of herself hips to thighs, wearing underwear with some of her pubic hair peeking out (cf. ibid.). The same month she uploaded the image to Instagram, resulting in her account being taken down. This incident again led to public discussion on female visibility, sexism and double standards—one that the artist herself commented on with an essay. *Censorship and The Female Body* was originally published on *Oyster* and *HuffPost*¹⁴ and is featured on the artist’s website, petracollins.com. As Collins told *Vice* earlier that month, the controversy about the t-shirt came as no surprise to her, as she is

used to seeing female bodies perfected and aspects concealed in the media [...] to seeing women being degraded, slut shamed, harassed for what they look like. Even the most powerful women in the world are measured by their appearance and constantly ridiculed for it. I’m used to one of the biggest media outlets calling a 9-year old girl a ‘cunt’ (with the intention of being ‘satirical’). I’m used to hearing the top played songs on the radio tell me ‘I know you want it – just let me liberate you’, [...] ‘Put molly all in her champagne/ She ain’t even know it / I took her home and I enjoyed that/ She ain’t even know it’ [...] I’m used to seeing cover after cover featuring stories about a popular celebrity being fat-shamed during pregnancy. I’m used to seeing reviews of an award show performance that critiques a female singer for being ‘slutty’ but then fails to even mention the older male behind her. I’m used to reading articles about whole towns harassing a rape victim until she’s forced to leave. (Collins, 2013)

Through platforms like *Rookie* and Instagram, however, Collins described that these issues could be addressed, discussed, and alternative imagery could be shared. Getting silenced on the Internet, without violating community standards,

¹⁴ Article on *Oyster* is offline <http://www.oystermag.com/petra-collins-on-censorship-and-the-female-body>, on *HuffPost* it was published on October 17th 2013 (edited December 6th 2017) with the title *Why Instagram Censored My Body* https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-instagram-censored-my-body_b_4118416 (both last accessed 25/8/2019)

was shocking to her, not only due to what imagery is considered okay or not okay for public audiences, but also as she believes that there is no on-/offline divide. Hence, censoring her, white, able-bodied, skinny, bikini-line for some hair online, to her is a danger to women in their everyday lives beyond the privileged problem of being excluded from an online social platform (cf. *ibid.*). The danger, she said in an interview the month after the incident, emanates from “the ability of peers to censor someone” when it has been individuals who reported images they felt were a violation of the community guidelines in order for Instagram to take it, or the account, down, if they depicted nothing that could have been detected automatically ([cf.] Collins, November 2015).

At that time she already worked (and had modeled) for Richard Kern as his casting director, whom she met at her boyfriend’s gallery. Being asked about his recent work that primarily features young women with little or no clothes on, Collins replies: “To put it bluntly, what he does is pornography. I really like him as a person, so I guess I’m biased” (Collins, November 2015). Crucial to her artistic development, she says, was her other mentor, Ryan McGinley, for whom she also modeled. Collins was fascinated with “how he was able to capture naked bodies in a non-sexualized way”, as she herself had struggled with how to live up to the standard she aspired to of being non-exploitative of the women she takes images of ([cf.] Garcia, 2017). Both male, New York based photographers “have captured the aesthetic and ambience that define their generation, by being part of it” (Jansen, 2017: 160). Kern became popular in the 1980s and McGinley around the turn of the millennium.

To date Collins has had and curated over 20 solo and group exhibitions, published three monographs and curated the art book *Babe*. She shot editorials for international fashion and youth culture magazines and high profile newspapers, and directed music videos for pop stars and image films / ads for fashion brands (cf. Collins, 2019).

The commercial sphere, to Collins, is both a vessel and a necessity. As she believes that nothing is going to change about the “Western” world being organized around consumption, it might just as well be less hetero-sexist and male dominated. Criticizing artists for earning a living, to her, is ignorant towards the privileges one must possess in order not to be dependent on making

a living outside the established art world (August 2015; October 2016). Institutionalized art is very much a big patriarchal business that, Collins says, is not for her

and it isn't for a lot of people. Rather, it's for one specific kind of person [...] because minority artists, female artists, we don't have the opportunity or the privilege to just create artwork and have it sold in a gallery and just solely do that. We are stronger in numbers and we have to do these things outside of the art world because we're not part of it and it's not for us. (August 2015)

The same is true for the consumption of art that is exclusive to those who have access to it, Collins assesses, and therefore work showcased on billboards is more powerful than work presented in a gallery (cf. October 2016).

In March 2017, Collins and her friend and close collaborator, Madelyne Beckles, entered the realm of the traditional, established, and institutionalized world of so-called high-art with their one-night show *In Search of Us* at the *Museum of Modern Art*, New York. It featured works,¹⁵ mostly performances, videos, and installations that were in dialog with the *MoMA* Collection to “confront traditional representations of the female body throughout the art-historical canon, which tended to exclude bodies of work by such historical “others” as women, gender nonconforming individuals, and persons of color” ([cf.] *MoMA*, 2019b; cf. Collins, March 2017b). Instagram featured the evening on its own platform's flagship account, as well as *MoMA's* account @themuseumofmodernart, and those physically attending were encouraged to share it online, in order to preserve the ephemeral show and reach those who do not have “the time and can [not] afford to buy tickets to a show”, ([cf.] Collins, March 2017c).

The artist used several occasions in interviews to offer insights of self-reflections on her own position and power,¹⁶ the perception of her persona,¹⁷ and mediated sexuality.¹⁸

¹⁵ By Beckles, Monica Hernandez, Kalena Yiaueki and Samira Alfarius as Junglepussey, Madeline Poole, Grace Miceli (@artbabygirl, #4 on *The Ardorous* Instagram ranking with 88.3k followers) and Aleia Murawski, with the help of set designer, Lauren Nikrooz, and stylist / fashion designer Zara Mirkin (cf. *MoMA*, 2019b; cf. Collins, March 2017c)

¹⁶ For example, “I'm always interested in telling stories that go untold. I'm at a point right now in my life where I'm hired to do magazine editorials and do my own casting, and I can create these images that have people in it that would never be in those spots otherwise. I try to do that as

Prominent topics included: body image, visual representation, femininity, obsession about youthfulness, beauty standards/industry, hairless norm, menstruation taboo, body shaming, mass/mainstream media, online communities/platforms, support, censorship, privilege, rape culture, double standards, established art world, *Rookie*, selfies, male gaze, curating and creating spaces.

two

“Arvida Byström [...]! She’s the queen, she’s so good,” was Collins’s answer to an interview question about the artistry of the selfie (Collins, August 2015). The queen of selfie, @arvidabystom, follows the collective’s founder as the number two with 232k following her account on Instagram. Born in Sweden in 1991 (cf. Fotografiska, 2019), Byström lived with her parents, before she moved to London in 2012 where she, along with Hanna Antonsson (#23 on *The Ardorous* Instagram ranking), ran the Gallery *Gal* in 2013 and 2014. Currently, Byström lives and works in Stockholm, London, and Los Angeles. The artist has kept a low profile concerning personal information such as family or formal education in interviews. Her accounts about her route into photography suggest that she is self taught, as she started taking photos, mainly of herself, as a teenager. While the selfie remained a dominant genre in Byström’s œuvre, especially in the

much as I can. I also want to make sure that people know that I’m not here to speak for everyone. I am a white girl, and I don’t want to say I speak for the black experience. I think that’s why my role in casting and curating is something that I love doing. My photographs are very special to me, but I also don’t ever want to use people as tokens... I want to be as truthful as I can be to my environment.” (Collins, October 2016)

¹⁷ “I’m so cautious of being boxed into that one area. Obviously it’s important to have different perspectives in photography but I don’t think that necessarily means [you have to] create a whole genre? [...] I just don’t like how the female gaze is so gendered and it’s just put on. Like, I see so many articles out there that are like *female gaze photographer*, and I’m like, no, I’m an artist and I take photos, and just because I’m a woman doesn’t mean I have to be labeled that way.” (Collins, November 2017, line from the interviewer taken out, italics from original)

¹⁸ On why people are offended by her depictions of the female body: “It goes back to how people are allowed to enjoy looking at a woman’s body, but she’s not personally allowed to enjoy it herself. As soon as she starts to feel good and proud in her natural state, society punishes her. It’s this weird push and pull and so confusing to girls as they grow up. It’s like you can be sexy, but you can’t be sexual, you have to be submissive, but also in control, and you have to be beautiful, but you can’t show what goes on behind the scenes.” (Collins, March 2018)

beginning, she was using it to negotiate her own perception of her body, fighting an eating disorder. The Internet, a photography blog at first and later Tumblr, she says, “became a window to the world” where she “dared to share [her] work and get in touch with other people” (Byström, May 2014). Tumblr, in particular, offered her a space she felt comfortable in, as an introvert and depressed teen and was a major influence on her artistic practice, aesthetically and politically (cf. Byström, August 2018; cf. February 2019; cf. Byström / @arvidabystrom 2019). The latter point is evident in some interviews, when she uses vocabulary that is only recently understood by a more general audience, apart from gender studies students and professors, that has been around on the platform for longer, like “queer” (Byström, November 2013), “femme” (May 2014), or “gender binaries” and “cis” (August 2015).

Byström’s premiere in print was in *Vice Magazine* (France) in 2008 (cf. Carlson, 2014). She then had commissioned work such as *There Will Be Blood. And it will flow from vaginas*¹⁹ in *Vice US*, 2012, as well as editorials for other youth culture magazines, and collaborations with brands such as *Monki & Lunette*, a menstrual cup, *Adidas* (cf. Fotografiska, 2019) or *Gucci* (cf. Byström / @arvidabystrom, 2018). Byström’s latest brand collaborations include *Polaroid Originals* (2019), luggage label *Horizn Studios* (cf. Shepherd, 2018) and headphones label *Urbanears* (n.d.). Asked about her criteria when deciding which brands to work with, the artist answers: “I don’t necessarily make a difference between brands. None of them are really transparent, so it makes it very difficult sometimes” (August 2018).

Together with the artist Molly Soda, Byström published the photo book *Pics or it didn’t happen* (Prestel) in 2017. The year before, they had an open call for submissions, asking for images to be sent that had been deleted from Instagram, so that they could curate those into a “collection [that] makes us question—just what exactly is ‘appropriate?’” (Byström / @arvidabystrom, 2016). The policing of bodies, however, is a topic that both artists have been invested with for longer, as shown in a panel discussion on *dazeddigital.com* that they participated in. Concerning the censorship of female bodies, for example, male nipples have not

¹⁹ Byström, Emma Arvida (17/5/2012) https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/kwn34w/there-will-be-blood

violated community guidelines, whereas, those of a female-passing body have. Byström asserts that Instagram's practice is just a symptom of how, in a heteropatriarchal society, nudity of non-male bodies, regardless of the context, is always sexualized. And in that narrative, "sexy" bodies are only those that conform to a very narrow and specific normative femininity, while those with the slightest deviation are deemed "inappropriate" or gross. The main reason for this, she explains, is

[b]ecause gender binaries sell. Aiming products to a clear group have been shown to be very effective. Also, rules that are very restricting work well for capitalism too. If the norms are impossible to follow, people will keep on buying products in the hopes of fitting into the norms. ([cf.] Byström, August 2015)

To Byström this means that body positivity within such a system is inherently contradictory, as it is tied to its ability to market products and "[t]here are no good capitalists" ([cf.] *ibid.*).

Later the same year that *Pics or it didn't happen* was published, Byström modeled for an *Adidas* campaign and, as outlined in the introduction of this thesis, she "got a lot of nasty comments." She wrote in an Instagram post:

Me being such an abled, white, cis body with its only nonconforming feature being a lil leg hair. Literally I've been getting rape threats in my DM inbox. I can't even begin to imagine what it's like to not possess all these privileges and try to exist in the world. Sending love and try to remember that not everybody has the same experiences being a person [...] Also thanks for all the love [...] got a lot of that too [...]. (Byström / @arvidabystrom, 2017, emojis removed by me)

For this member of *The Ardorous*, the commercial sphere seems to be a necessity only, not a site where "the 'revolution' should happen" (Byström, August 2015). Tumblr, however, has been a revolution to her, Byström recollected in 2019. But as companies kept on commercializing more and more spaces on the Internet, specifically, social media platforms and the technological progress in mobile devices substantially changed online practices, they kept losing their potential to be employed as emancipatory tools gradually. Social media platforms with their ability to censor content, and considering the fact that there is a feature to pay for visibility, puts them in the position of gatekeepers—gatekeepers that favor

the content of those who have business in mind. This commercialization, to Byström, is most evident on Instagram, but she believes that she cannot leave the platform as it works as a marker of her success as an artist to clients and collaborators. The positive sides of the online realm to her are the remaining spaces to communicate and the ability to reach people, as a tool for her as an artist, and privately for offering the possibility of being able to get to know potential partners before going on a date (cf. Byström, August 2015; March 2017a; August 2018; February 2019; March 2019, February 2019b).



Figure 2: Screenshot from Byström's Instagram

This is a little throwback to tumblr days [...] when the web still felt exciting and wasn't constantly buzzing in our pockets. Tumblr was my website of choice and I was deeply obsessed. The creatures on there I adored and got to know was a mix of feminists, artists, and queers often with a love of pastels. Pink still felt subversive and nobody thought of marketing it to millennials and fewer had heard of empowertisement. Then, in early 2013 I made this zine. It set out to portray straight men in a sexy manner and to let women play with the thought of objectifying straight cis men. Girls photographed their partners, straight boys' submitted cute self portraits, one poem submitted was on how to corrupt the behavior of men who share and concur boob pics by collecting and sharing their chatroulette dicks. It was before girlgaze mainly referred to women photographing other women. Tumblr and desktop time internet was a really fun time for me. Thanks to everyone who made it special ♥ [...]. (Byström / @arvidabystrom, 2019a, emojis removed by me)

Inflated Fiction (November 2018–February 2019), Byström's solo show at the Stockholm Photography Museum *Fotografiska* consisted of artwork creatively

discussing several of the topics above. The title, she explains, points at aspects or things that really are one amongst many, but as they are presented in a way that makes them appear huge, they take up all the available space. For example, female/femme bodies or aesthetics seem to be inherently about sex, when most of the time, they are not about sex or anything related to it (cf. Fotografiska, 2019; cf. Byström, December 2018; cf. Bakonsky, 2018). She contrasts the fact that femininity is tied to (sexualized) bodies with the technological disembodiment of the female support bot Siri, that can only exist alongside a material host. Part of the exhibition's opening, was a performance by Byström implanting 30 near field communication (NFC) chips under her skin, to demonstrate how technology is incorporated in our reality and identity, and, also, creatively, as in the performance's case. She had put messages and photo links on these chips, which visitors could access with their phones. The information provided was of no practical use (in comparison to chips used, e.g., for payment or identification), Byström explained, but enabled a form of self-expression that did not require interactive communication (cf. Byström, December 2018; cf. Bakonsky, 2018). The artist's style has not changed over the years, at *Inflated Fiction*, shades of pink dominated, as she still loves the color and still intends to challenge the perception of an aesthetic of no artistic and intellectual value due to its supposed natural tie with femininity (Fotografiska, 2019). In May 2014, Byström told Cajsa Carlson in an interview:

My art has a pretty specific femme style, and I think it's important that that is taken seriously—my pictures aren't ironic or sarcastic. I like to take what can be seen as extreme and try to make it less so. (Byström, May 2014; cf. Carlson, 2014)

Though, as Carlson asked about what position femininity and gender play have in her work, Byström went on to clarify:

I make feminist art, but that's simply because I'm a feminist, not because I'm trying to make a statement. And I can find it a bit annoying that you're always called a 'female artist.' I was on the cover of the latest issue of the British Journal of Photography—which is always nice, but I didn't know that it was for the 'Women Only' issue. I probably wouldn't have turned it down if I'd known, but it's a bit frustrating when you see it afterwards. There's a lot more to me than the fact that I'm a woman. (ibid.)

For this year's *Vice* photo issue, Byström, together with stylist Lo Hallén, contributed a project inspired by the *#bratzchallenge*.²⁰ Turning the dolls' brand name into "Ratz", they recreated the *Bratz* dolls' looks on human models, including a redo of the original packaging (cf. *Vice*, 2019). *Bratz, The Girls with a Passion for Fashion*, could already be read as a parody of hypersexualized postfeminist girlhood, nevertheless, the dolls and their brand's related products were extremely popular with its target consumers in the 2000s (cf. McAllister, 2007: 248). Their intention, Byström and Hallén tell *Vice*, was to parody this culture, while wondering how those dolls, that "are obviously completely ridiculous [...] can [...] even be allowed for kids" (Byström & Hallén, July 2019a). What can be seen on the photos is not a hyperbolic depiction of beauty standards and values of the ideal, neoliberal, girl subject of the early 2000s, as it mimics the dolls' style without exaggeration. The deviations from the kids' toy are to be found in the body type and gender identity of the models, and in the context as well as intention of its production. Considering the latter it can be assumed that "Ratz" also differs from a lot of the contributions to the "*Bratz challenge*" that give the impression of being about nostalgia and make-up skills. Byström's and Hallén's project was produced for a magazine's photo issue themed on "the absurd, the lighthearted, and the humorous" according to Ellis Jones, *Vice*'s editor-in-chief (cf. Jones, 2019).

Prominent topics included: gender norms/fluidity, queerness, beauty standards, tumblr, mental health, established art world, censorship of bodies online, commercialization of the internet, girlgaze, technology, capitalism, selfies, issues with 'female/feminist artist', double standards, body issues, queer feminist bubble.

²⁰ A trend to apply make-up to look like a *Bratz* doll, and sharing it online with said hashtag. See for example: <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/bratzchallenge/?hl=en>

Mayan Toledano / @thisismayan comes in third place with 97.3k followers. Born and raised in Israel in the 90s, she was a dancer all her life before she had to serve two mandatory years in the military from when she was 18 to 20 years old. She then moved to New York where she attended fashion school and met her best friend Julia Baylis (@othergirl_julia, 30.7k / #10 on *The Ardorous* Instagram ranking). Toledano quit dancing at 18 as she “started seeing the negative side of it, in terms of what it is to be a female dancer” and the lack of support she experienced, but had to discover later that the same was true for the fashion industry (Toledano, July 2015). Out of their frustrating experiences at fashion school, Toledano and Baylis founded the clothing label *Me and You* for their production of “feminist undies” that “quickly expanded to t-shirts, sweatshirts, sweatpants and more” (Me and You, 2019). As she regretted not having photographically documented the time when she was an Israeli soldier, she started her project *Girl Soldiers* in 2016 hoping “to capture them in a way that will somehow resist the violent idea of the military, looking at their disrupted youth and their teenage boredom as a refusal to become determined on goals they don’t share, within the system” (Toledano, May 2016). In an interview with *HuffPost* she replaced the notion of teenage boredom with a “glowing singularity [...] as a refusal to the system” (February 2016). Concerning this project, most of the interviews vary only slightly. She explicitly “oppose[s] the occupation of Palestine” (Toledano, May 2017) and points out that it is not glorification of the military that was her driving force, but rather she wanted to show the individuals beyond the (mediated) conflict, “not as symbols of Zionism or war, [as] they are basically kids in costumes, trying to still perform their identities beyond those uniforms” (ibid.). Describing her experience as a soldier the dominant aspect is on how the forced conformity, aesthetically and politically, affected her, how she generally felt held back personally, having no choice of her own. She, however, highlights positively that it was also an experience of female support in a male-dominated system, as well as an experience of diversity for Israeli women (cf. Toledano, February 2016, May 2016, May 2017). The 2017 interview with Alexandra Genova for *TIME LightBox*, however, also offers a more

detailed account of some aspects as well as some new ones. Toledano introduces representation and diversity to be core concerns for her in the context of her work. For her, regarding the *Girl Soldiers* project that means she would also love to document the lives of Palestinian teenagers, if it was possible, but the same applies to her creative work in fashion. Even though it is an exploitative industry that capitalizes on commodity feminism, in her opinion less radical but more accessible ways to problematic social issues are enabling change because “[p]eople aren’t likely to accept something unless they see it over and over again. We believe images more than we believe words and the repetition of those images is important” (May, 2017). This citation is the closing part of Toledano making her case after Genova brought up critics charging *Me and You* with selling out feminism. In the course of her argument, the label’s cofounder reflects on the shift of feminism’s public perception/image since the launch of their first “feminist undies”. She believes that in 2017, the label and some of the movement’s agendas were something many young girls had become comfortable with and aware of, and that this demonstrates how appearance and aesthetics can be effective tools. Hence *Me and You’s* early slogans had lost their importance, and also the focus of the label needed to adjust and shift its focus. What Toledano thought was important then was “to see our female culture within our bedrooms or see how we communicate with each other and look at intimacy in girl culture,” she assessed in a *Time* interview approximately three years later, when she said her “work focused more on the LGBTQ community or trans people or representing people of color in fashion” ([cf.] *ibid.*). Also in that interview, the artist talked about the importance of social media platforms and online communities to her own career as well as how she sees their impact on mainstream media. Especially interesting is Toledano’s answer to this interview’s last question about her perception of her work within contemporary feminist discourse. She points at a trend towards labeling anything from/about/by women as feminist and how that is limiting it, even if very likely meant well, portraying it always primarily as a contribution to this one cause. Also she puts into question the status of passivity as antifeminist, addresses mental health issues and gender identity as a performance:

I have to be honest, I'm a little tired of talking about it. I feel like I'm always going to be part of it because I'm a female and I shoot mostly female subjects. But what is interesting to me more today, is the ability to be more passive; by that I mean we are not always fighting and we are not always loud.

Portraying women as bored or passive in my photos also has a significant meaning to me. How can we do the most or achieve the most by just doing the bare minimum? If we're tired or if we're depressed or have mental illness, how can we speak about it by just being, without performing all the time? Being feminine is already a performance – it's already something that is forced upon us. It is something that we learn growing up in a society that is constantly judging us and constantly telling us how to be. But what if we're just quiet? (May 2017)

Without a doubt there is plenty of room for interpretation of Toledano's striation of those topics. While her critique of obligatory activeness can be read as a critique of exclusivity of feminism and neoliberal subjectification, it could just as well be described as reactionary, or pointed out that to Toledano passivity is a form of efficiency that still has to lead to maximum output. Jansen, in her introduction to *Girl on Girl*, has contextualized the artist's work concerning the label *Me and You* culturally as demonstrating the shortcomings of both a celebration of femininity and feminism as commodities and of a denial of any genuine interest in and the potential to evoke positive change by such means. The British-Sri Lankan journalist, has recalled being angry when she first saw photos of Toledano's and Baylis's "feminist knickers", but has observed that it did also have an impact. It was part of a momentum that opened up the discussion about female visibility to a mainstream audience, and to the label's intended audience (cf. Jansen, 2017: 8 passim; cf. *ibid.*: 164). Besides emphasizing the already mentioned importance that online communities and female support have to her in order to oppose mass mediated images, the Israeli-born artist "convey[ing] a belief in neoliberalism" (*ibid.*: 164) explains to Jansen that she "consider[s] any form of female exposure empowering and feminist as long as the creator considers it to be, as long as she feels safe and empowered by it" (Toledano, cited by Jansen, 2017: *ibid.*).

Toledano has not only been criticized for the "feminist undies", also her *Girl Soldiers* publication in *Vice* earned disapproval. It was published in combination

with a text by Mayaan Goldman on March 15, 2016,²¹ that was shortened into a two-sentence introduction for it to go online again on August 29, 2016.²² In an article on *Middle East Eye* (2016), Belen Fernandez accused Toledano of “airbrushing politics out of an intensely and irremediably politicised landscape [...what happens to be] one of the preferred pastimes of certain sectors of the Israeli establishment and other concerned pro-Israel entities.” Other critics focused on *Vice*’s problematic framing of the story, but considered Toledano’s concerns valid and to be taken seriously (cf. Weiss 2016; cf. Zax 2016). Despite the criticisms, she is continuing the project, as she posted a casting call for it on her Instagram this year January (cf. Toledano / @thisismayan, 2019).

Prominent topics included: support, visibility and visual representation, gender performativity, passivity, media (mainstream, social, online communities) , mental health, war and military service, beauty industry, feminist branding, accessibility of feminism, individualism.

reflection

On the one hand, not choosing to contact the artists led to difficulties in the data collecting process and to data being vague and sometimes even based on assumptions. This primarily obscured and limited biographical information that could have been helpful to contextualize the careers in regard to particular privileged positions they were able to take up. On the other hand, using interviews as a primary data source for the three close-up portraits opened up the possibility of finding narratives that reflected the interviewer’s and the interviewee’s agendas. Acknowledging that some things can and others cannot be said and that this applies to both positions, it can be assumed that those who are asked to answer questions can do so on their own terms. The artists still are,

²¹ Goldman, Mayaan (2016): Travel. Photos from the Everyday Lives of Young Female Israeli Soldiers. On: *Vice* (15/3/2016) https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/4wbk4n/beautiful-photographs-of-girls

²² *VICE* magazine (2016): Travel. The Defiant Femininity of Israel's Female Soldiers. Mayan Toledano's intimate series showing female Israeli soldiers was inspired by her own experience in the Israeli military. On: *Vice* (29/8/2016) https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yvevxy/the-everyday-lives-of-young-female-israeli-soldiers-mayan-toledano-v23n5

more or less, dependent on what they are being asked, not theoretically but practically, as interviews are mostly free PR and work that is often done amidst daily business. Furthermore, interviews usually get edited for readability, to fit the topic and the available space. In some cases, here, they were even conducted and published by the collaborating brand. The interview as an artifact, therefore, carries information about those involved, the time and place, discourses, and so on. This was illustrated, for example, by the growing discomfort all three artists voiced about being “othered” as female or feminist artists, being labeled with “female gaze”, and being asked about “their” feminism. What also became evident from the overall repetitiveness of the topics that they were being asked, was that the two artists with more Instagram followers (Bystöm and Collins) were interviewed and featured in articles more often and, as a consequence, were being asked about a more diverse set of topics than Toledano who had significantly fewer followers.

The limitations of the interview format become evident when reading other texts from the artists that do not follow the question answer style. For example, Collins, in her essay *Censorship and the Female Body*, addressed several of Gill’s elements of postfeminist media culture that bother her deeply. Byström, in her “little throwback to tumblr days” Instagram post, mourned the pre “empowertisement” times (see figure 2).

Though sometimes repetitive, concerning the questions as well as the answers, a lot of relevant and/or interesting aspects could be gathered from these interviews. These include, for example, their emphasis on the importance of giving and receiving support, the role of social, mass, and commercial media, exclusivity versus accessibility, visibility, diversity, privilege, and the hypocrisy of the established art world. They discussed mental illness, double standards and issues relating to growing up. Even though support was a recurring topic, its financial/material aspect was largely missing. Byström, Collins, and Toledano all mentioned their supportive family backgrounds and the online community. Only Collins, in one interview, says that she had to leave university as she had to pay for it herself.

I came across a variety of topics, not only in interviews but also on their Instagram accounts (and in Byström's case her Tumblr, because her archive was still available, barely anything was in "safe mode" and she publicly answered plenty of anonymous questions). Many of those topics and perspectives were of value, but a discussion of all of this material would have exceeded the scope and capacity of this thesis.

discussion

Calling to mind the leading questions of this thesis and the literature introduced, I believe the conducted fieldwork provides information that illuminates perspectives that allow suggesting readings of *The Ardorous* and their cultural practice in the area of conflict between commercialization, art, and resistance.

Considering the main question: how can anything be read as resistant, within the proposed frame of theory, the consistent answer is: if it is read as such.

Several statements made in interviews, through their writing, actions, and style make it seem fair to assume that many of the initial collective's artists are well aware of problematic implications that arise when engaging with certain structures. Yet many chose to engage with those structures for reasons such as those I have encountered in the field. Two major driving forces have become evident, but not exclusively, within the narratives of the three artists I have taken a closer look at. One arises from wanting to work as an artist while neither having (had, in the case of Byström and Collins) the opportunities, nor a desire to strive in the supposedly sophisticated, institutionalized, art world. At the core of the other pro-commercial-sphere argument, supported particularly by Collins and Toledano, was the platform that corporations have to offer. Unlike most art spaces that cater to an elite audience, they suggest that messages conveyed with, for example, public advertising spaces can reach those that do not visit museums for one or more of many reasons.

To contextualize these perspectives two sub-questions were set out asking for the circumstances and strategies shaping the creatives' careers so far.

The first question has mostly laid itself out in the course of chapter four. The collective's members were equipped with, not equal but similar, sets of privileges, that they were able to take advantage of. Not only did they have opportunities like access to education or the Internet, they also had the ability to make it useful for them. By that I do not mean that it is one's own job to find happiness and succeed in a neoliberal sense, but acknowledging that it is also nothing to be taken for granted to possess skills that allow you to use technologies, to network, and so on. A privilege that stood out from the biographies that I intended to map out conscientiously with the data I had collected, was the middle class, or as Byström put it "upper middle class" (in the *Urbanears* Interview, n.d.) network of support that "obviously made [her] life really easy" (ibid.). Collins and Toledano mentioned their parents as having been supportive of pursuing a career as an artist (cf. Collins, August 2017; cf. Toledano, February 2016). Byström told Alexandra Weiss in an interview revolving around *Pics or it didn't happen* that social positioning or "[c]ultural capital" also shapes people's perception of beauty and aesthetics ([cf.] Byström, March 2017b). She had pointed that out to relativize the idea that, for example, posting "no make-up" selfies is inherently a rebellion against normative beauty, as it might as well represent beauty norms from within a specific demographic. Her argument is not limited to this context. Taking, for example, *The Ardorous* members' conformity with standards of "conventional" beauty, that definitely demonstrate a factor of privilege, but simultaneously, to some critics this seems to cancel out the possibility of contributing anything valuable or having a genuine feminist agenda in mind. Those critics also have very specific ideas and norms concerning an aesthetic that signifies intellectualism or resistance, or the opposite. While this plays by the heteropatriarchal rules making women's actions about their bodies, it also judges individuals for a major deficit rooted in a society of white hetero male supremacy. Especially in combination with their personal and artistic style, it seems that some of the collective's creatives have been employing a visual language incomprehensible to many.

This informs the discussion of sub-question number two, which was concerned with *The Ardorous'* creative strategies. As suggested in chapter three the reading of their hyper-feminine / -girly style as feminist or queer camp, a tool with the

potential to unmask stereotypes and naturalized gender norms, relying on a camp reception, turned out to be key indeed.

For those unable to identify the hyperbolized qualities of camp as such, girly aesthetics easily are intrinsically about consumption and by definition apolitical. With no access to the “camp party” and unaware of certain power structures, corporate creative work is easily interpreted to be freely chosen by those that refuse to take part in an institutionalized art world.

Considering that, I suggest to read resistance not solely in challenging conceptions of normative femininity by causing irritation about “a lil body hair”²³ within an audience that actually is irritated by it. In this reading they challenge the status of those who do not see themselves as irritated by what *The Ardorous* does, when in fact it seems that very little openness prevails towards perspectives beyond their own.

The quality of resistance that does not resist neoliberalism remains open for discussion in the case of this thesis. Not primarily because quality is such a delicate category embedded in dominant discourses, as pointed out in chapter three, but due to the fact that it was not the aim of this thesis. Neither the research questions, nor the methodological design were set up for that. Obviously, the same is true for questioning if there was anything subversive *about* neoliberalism or postfeminism. What the consolidation of scholarly literature, pop-culture texts (and the in-betweens) along with the empirical observation set out to assess was the validity of conceptualizing subversion by means of neoliberal/postfeminist structures. In the case of *The Ardorous’ girl power media culture produced by girls**,²⁴ I propose that it is valid when moving the spotlight from what is agreed upon to be evil, onto the instances that own the authority of criticism. Then it is possible to unmask the arts and academics as sites of institutionalized power. Sadly, this also requires the acceptance of its

²³ In which case it has furthermore turned out that classist/elitist/bourgeois assumptions about what demographic that likely would be, can be refuted by e.g. the author and art journalist Karolina Modig’s review of Arvida Byström’s exhibition *Cherry Picking* that the artist criticized in an Instagram post for neglecting the exhibited work in favor of writing about Byström’s hairy legs (Byström / @arvidabystrom, 2019b).

²⁴ Talking about girl power media culture produced by girls now and referring to *The Ardorous’* members the asterisk (*) implies a space to include them as at least most of them are closer to being 30 than to being 20.

simultaneous support of another powerful and oppressive instance as collateral damage.

RESUMÉ

This thesis had been designed to pursue the call for an investigation of the mediated cultural field that mainly American/European girls and young women find themselves in, and that can no longer be grappled sufficiently with concepts and tools from the times of mass media, that have not been adapted to suit the new circumstances. The technological, political, and economic changes, that shape the world we live in, lead to an increase in regulatory forces and strengthen positions of power, but also open up new spaces for action. Therefore I presented the case of *The Ardorous* to investigate forms of resistance that are invisible due to a lack of empirical accessibility, ways to think about them, and places to look for them.

The introduction of this thesis provided a first presentation of the collective chosen to represent the specific mode of resistance by means of an oppressive neoliberal system, or more specifically, girl power media culture produced *by girls** in institutionalized mainstream media. It includes a first discussion of literature on the girl power phenomenon, its relation with neoliberalism, media, and feminism, followed by literature supporting this project, looking for possible forms of activism that have evolved from it. The research questions were introduced, the Foucauldian, poststructuralist frame of theory and the thesis' approach to media, as well as its methodology informed by components of digital and retrospective ethnography—conducted as an interpretative, political bricoleur—were brought forward. Some notes on the author preceded the main part for the possibility for the reader to contextualize the thesis in relation to the specific position it has been produced in.

Chapter one, *About Girl Power*, elaborated on factors that have shaped and shifted the meanings of a punk movement's slogan from the 1990s continuously until the early 2000s and beyond. An influential idea, popular from the mid-90s on, was claiming that U.S. American culture at that time was traumatizing girls

entering adolescence, resulting in “girl power” initiatives as means to strengthen these girls’ psyche. Another theme presented was the normalization of white, middle-class women being “working moms”. On the one hand a new market emerged for girl power toys and media products that mothers, pushed into feeling guilty for supposedly neglecting their child, could buy. On the other hand girl power became an identifier for girls and young women who disagreed with the idea of liberation by striving in “male” domains. Their style and codes defined what is still agreed upon to constitute girl power, amidst the fact that the cultures within that “generation” have been perceived to be very different. What all those trends had in common however was their inseparability from neoliberalism running rampant. Hence, girl power mirrored the overall socio-political landscape of hegemonic Whiteness, wealth, ability, heterosexuality, and other categories dividing the “powerful” from the “powerless”.

In chapter two, *Girl Power // Media // Culture*, the role of media in this process has been taken into account. Gill’s notion of a postfeminist sensibility has been introduced that dominated media discourses of femininity after the millennium that have been adapted to the circumstances of a “cooling of feminism”—the celebration of feminism derived of its politics and empowerment as a commodity—in 2016. By distinguishing girl power media culture produced for girls from that being produced by girls, this chapters’ final call has argued, that *The Ardorous*’ creative production, even though within structures using feminism as a marketing tool, cannot be reduced to being a marketing trend.

Chapter three, *Rethinking Resistance*, revisited Foucault’s theory on power and knowledge, to demonstrate that critique and resistance is always determined by the dominant discourses it is embedded in and, furthermore, to base Butler’s theory of performativity on. According to Butler, (gender) identity is produced by means of repetitions of norms, thus, the potential of subversion lies within the iterations. These perspectives then have been introduced to be crucial to the line of thought this thesis follows for two reasons. One, it delegitimizes the categorical dismissal of forms of critique, activism, and resistance by those inhabiting the interpretational sovereignty. Two, it opens up the possibility to view conformity and/or aesthetics not as modes naturally apolitical, but as modes from which power can be exercised. In the specific case at hand, this

allowed an interpretation of *The Ardorous* being able to shape discourses through taking up positions of power, and of their specific style unmasking gender as performative.

The end of this chapter suggested to read *The Ardorous*' work and performance as feminist/queer camp—one of drag performance's most central attributes. As a loose and temporary category, the subversive power of the parodic camp performance had to be assessed towards its accessibility, in- and exclusions, and its position in relation to dominant discourses—as well as how this position is executed, to what extent the dominant culture appropriated parts of it, and what obligations for the camp performers came along with that.

Chapter four, *The Case // The Ardorous*, disclosed the steps that were taken in the empirical process; why, with what intention, and the findings they acquired. After an anonymized presentation of the collective's composition of members, three of them were portrayed: Petra Collins, Arvida Byström, and Mayan Toledano. A brief reflection of the choices that were made in the research process followed, which lead to the discussion of the findings and their interpretations in regard to the research questions. The main research question was answered by proposing that girl power media culture produced by girls*, within mainstream media's creative production, can be thought of as a resistant cultural practice from the girls / young women who work in a postfeminist marketing industry. I proposed, that this possibility arises when employing an analytical framework with a concept of critique which is open to encounter practices that can't be categorized as either black or white. Calling into mind Collins's motive for founding the collective, which has been introduced at the very beginning of this thesis, it is fair to say that the turn-out has been successful from her point of view. The collective's practices were resistant towards dominant structures Collins aimed to subvert, as they fruitfully challenged their marginalization within certain spaces.

I therefore disagree with Zaslow's claim that commodity girl power is restricted to being a personal tool always, and argue, that it can also be a tool of social change. Since I implied that I considered suggesting an alternative reference for the "suffering actor" in chapter one, I must now review that I did not come across a more accurate label. Instead, I noticed that Harris and Dobson's term is very

accurate, as the *The Ardorous*' creative did claim injury, without losing their agency, while "retain[ing] an awareness of inequality" (2015: 152). Also, their notion of unheroic struggles has turned out to do well in describing the members' practices, considering some of the public and academic feedback they received.

As an examination of resistant practices without a predefined set of standards that have to be met in order to pass as such, this thesis has followed Harris and Dobson's call for rethinking the ways in which activism is approached in research and Keller's call to look for holes poked into misogynist, postfeminist media culture. By investigating the engagement with domains that are predominantly conceptualized as anti-emancipatory, such as mainstream media institutions or aesthetics, it brought forward moments that allow to suggest that a grand narrative of activism is in itself pervaded with power-structures and does not account for the complexity of contemporary culture. The findings of this case study contribute to this pursuit by suggesting a critical, but open-mind towards the possibility to unmask oppressive structures from within another, and to revisit drag performance and camp aesthetic as creative tools to challenge dominant discourses.

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figures

Figure 1: Screenshot from theardorous.tumblr.com. <https://www.tumblr.com/safe-mode?url=https%3A%2F%2Ftheardorous.tumblr.com%2F> (accessed: 25/8/2019).
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Figure 2: Screenshot from Byström's Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/B0B1iW_H3gR/ (accessed: 25/8/2019).
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ABSTRACT

English Version

This thesis is an exploration of possibilities and strategies to challenge power-structures from within postfeminist media institutions. The art collective *The Ardorous*, as representatives of girl power media culture produced by girls, are portrayed by means of digital, retrospective and interpretative ethnography to reveal resistant practices beyond traditional conceptions of activism. Supported by a poststructuralist, queer theoretical frame, the findings suggest that authorities of criticism have to be continuously re-evaluated, and drag performance and camp aesthetic are useful creative tools to challenge dominant narratives.

Keywords: Girl power culture / postfeminist media culture / activism / resistance / neoliberalism / *The Ardorous* / drag performance / camp aesthetics

Deutsche Version

Diese Arbeit sucht nach Möglichkeiten und Strategien um Machtstrukturen innerhalb postfeministischer Medieninstitutionen herauszufordern. Das Künstlerinnenkollektiv *The Ardorous* wird repräsentativ für „girl power media culture produced by girls“ mittels digitaler, retrospektiver und interpretativer Ethnographie vorgestellt, um widerständige Praktiken jenseits traditioneller Konzepte von Aktivismus aufzudecken. Gestützt durch einen poststrukturalistischen, queeren theoretischen Rahmen lassen die Ergebnisse darauf schließen, dass die Deutungshoheit über den Zustand von legitimer Kritik kontinuierlich hinterfragt werden muss und „drag performance“ und „camp“-Ästhetik wirkungsvolle kreative Werkzeuge sein können, um dominante Narrative zu denaturalisieren.

Stichwörter: „Girl Power“ Kultur / postfeministische Medienkultur / Aktivismus
/ Widerstand / Neoliberalismus / The Ardorous / „drag performance“ / „camp“
Ästhetik