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Who Possesses “Possessed Women”? Women and Female Bodies as Territories for Male Interference

¿Quién posee a las “mujeres poseídas”?

Mujeres y cuerpos femeninos como territorios para la intervención masculina

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Abstract

Patriarchy dominates systems of knowledge across religion, popular culture and medicine, constructing gender and sexuality. It subordinates women through categories related to health and illness, goodness and evil. “Possessed women” condense the idea of order subversion through the disorder of the soul and the body. Men assume the position as the keepers of social order, reversing chaos to restore normalization in society which are related with female bodies and sexualization. The female body is a territory of male intervention in realms as diverse as religion, popular culture, arts and medicine. Changes in women’s bodies during the course of their lives maintain the same objectification, molding their characteristics to the male gaze. Women remain constructed “in reference to” men in a patriarchal order. We propose here the concept of “women in motion”, subverting female subordination and refuting the simplification of female experiences through dualist explanations of body and mind.

Keywords: Body and mind; Subordination; Patriarchy; Women in motion; Complexity.

Resumen

El patriarcado domina los sistemas de conocimiento mediante la religión, la cultura popular y la medicina, construyendo el género y la sexualidad. Ello subordina a las mujeres a través de las categorías de salud y enfermedad, bondad y maldad. Las “mujeres poseídas” condensan las ideas de subversión al orden a partir del desorden del alma y el cuerpo. Los hombres asumen de guardianes del orden social, revirtiendo el caos para restaurar la normalización de la sociedad, la cual está relacionada con los cuerpos femeninos y sexualidad. Los cuerpos femeninos es un territorio para la intervención masculina en ámbitos tan diversos como la religión, la cultura popular, las artes y la medicina. Los cambios en los cuerpos de las mujeres durante el curso de sus vidas mantienen la misma objetivización, moldeando sus características a través del orden patriarcal. Nosotras proponemos aquí el concepto de “mujeres en movimiento”, para subvertir la subordinación femenina y refutar la simplificación de las experiencias de las mujeres a través de explicaciones dualistas del cuerpo y la mente.

Palabras claves: Cuerpo y mente; Subordinación; Patriarcado; Mujeres en movimiento; Complejidad.

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Introduction

Today, the category “woman” is considered an epistemological and ontological category that is somewhat problematic for establishing a feminist political strategy focused on the body as a “political threshold” (Grosz, 2005). Due to patriarchal premises, men are the universal referent under which gender issues are constructed (Connell, 1987), and women consequently tend either to be ignored in every sphere of life or “represented” under an androcentric point of view. This becomes particularly evident when we observe historical discourses in medicine and psychology and reflected in religion and artworks. Dualisms pervade gendered discourses on men and women as well as on goodness and evil, beauty and ugliness, health and illness, normality and deviation. Women’s chaotic and disruptive behaviors must be corrected by male order and male experts from different disciplines of knowledge that recreate societal norms (i.e. doctors, psychologists and priests).

The figuration of “possession” exemplifies this phenomenon in which patriarchal discourses are entangled and materialized. Possession is attributed to evil and related to the contamination of women’s souls, very commonly entailing mental disorders and transformation of the body linked to sexuality. Possession is a condition that affects both body and mind, in such an entangled way that it is considered perverse and polluting. Disrupting this phenomenon means breaking the dichotomous of the body and the soul in favor of the complexity and plasticity of women’s bodies, where gender is continuum categories. In this paper we explore who deals with possessed women, which arguments (also exorcisms and cures) are used and who holds authority over possession. We analyze the influence of heteronormative ideas for the identification and “reversion” of possessions understood as an example of deviation from upright behavior. Using cases from the past and present, fictional and non-fictional stories, we attempt to disrupt the hegemonic discourse around dualism.

Thinking about the differing relations between body and mind and how they are imprecated in our culture, we strive to detect mechanisms of oppression related to androcentrism in human construction knowledge across sciences, religion, popular culture and artistic representations.

We have organized the paper into four sections. First, we will address the construction of women by the patriarchal order in religion, and in popular culture as they feed our understandings of myths, aesthetics and scientific knowledge. Secondly, we will explore how possessed women and their healing through rites of exorcism have been represented in film. Thirdly, we will explore contemporary explanations of illness associated with the symptoms of possessions from psychology and neurology, and how these knowledge areas address restoring health to the female body. On this point, we call for breaking away from normative dichotomy categories in favor of a multiplicity of categories regarding women, particularly related to life course. In that sense, fourthly, we will explore the plasticity of body and gender categories, the acknowledged mutability of the female body and identity that may reverse the patriarchal order and normative ideal of women as a standard model related to the masculine gaze (Jeffreys, 2005). Finally, some remarks are presented as conclusions.

Reflections on women from a patriarchal lens: Is another viewpoint possible?

The patriarchal system has constructed gender categories through male values—considered universal—and positioned women as subordinate (Connell, 1987). This scheme permeates every dimension of human activity and the knowledge production of meanings widely linked to historicity. From religion to scientific knowledge, the patriarchy has constructed “normalization” by dividing men and women, assigning male and female values to each sex/gender, which situate men in the leadership position

and erase women's agency. Scientific knowledge assigns dualist attributes to construct discoveries and innovations, and gendered organizations divide the power relationships between men and women scientists, which affects their participation as researchers and the inclusion of gender issues involved in research (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004). Artistic representations are no exception. The majority of films reproduce dualistic values where women play secondary roles, as victims or *femmes fatales*, who are always constructed by and from an androcentric point of view (Creed, 1993; Colman, 2014). In this sense, critical feminist theory opens up new questions and forms for working out female subordination: "We must understand that patriarchal domination shares an ideological foundation with racism and other forms of group oppression, and that there is no hope that it can be eradicated while these systems remain intact. This knowledge should consistently inform the direction of feminist theory and practice" (Hooks, 1989: 22).

More women today try to introduce sex and gender approaches in research involving oppression and vulnerable groups (Schiebinger and Schraudner, 2011) and many women directors and actresses are breaking the rules in the cinema industry and fusing experimental film through an active concept of spectatorship (Beugnet and Mulvey, 2015). Despite these efforts, heteronormativity, closely connected to patriarchal domination, still permeates popular culture and reinforces the asymmetrical hierarchy of gender regimes. We are particularly interested in discovering how popular culture, scientific knowledge and the arts situate women as the object of desire from a male gaze, never for women's eyes or the sharing of a feminine language (Mulvey, 1975), but only by assuring a subjective—referring both to subjection and subjectivity—position for women as spectators (Knight, 1995).

Despite feminist readings that question dualism through the emergence of a variety of gendered identities, dualist thinking on genders—and their association with passivity and activity—are still present today. We feel that androcentric codes still govern religion, aesthetic manifestations and scientific knowledge (Foucault, 1975), and determine social constructs on goodness and evil, health and sickness, normality and deviation. Following Creed (1993) and Kristeva (1982), all societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine that represents the shock and fear of otherness, considered as those areas not controlled by the male power structure and patriarchal order.

The monster is constructed as the different other, separated from those considered "normal" people, where the monster is thought as the one escaping this order. Possessed women condense the idea of women as the "other", of women as "polluting" (Douglas, 1966), of women as "different" and, of course, of women as the "monster", as defined from a male androcentric and dominant view. Possessed and hysterical women, as categorized by religion and psychology, shape the acceptable norms of behavior. They are monsters "typified by their relationship with alterity, uncontrollability, liminality and unknowable differences and by their frightening presence" (Vacchani, 2014: 648). (Feminine) bodies as a matter of political technology (Foucault, 1975) are constructed by a male view that reproduces technologies of female bodies (Laurentis, 1987) deeply embedded in religion, scientific knowledge and the arts. The female body is the battlefield for an androcentric culture where goodness and evilness, order and chaos can be mediated and materialized in/through the political technology of power.

Patriarchal discourses remark on female bodies, emphasizing the impurity of female sexuality and its dangerous nature—the source of disorder and contamination—(Douglas, 1966). This understanding of female bodies is a consequence of female subordination in a patriarchal society that has constructed an ideal of women, always linked to goodness and beauty (replicating the idea of the Virgin Mary); when women do not fit into these social and religious paradigms, they are considered threatening to the moral and social orders. They become the (threatening) other related to sin, monstrosity and anomaly and, therefore, men have to protect themselves from the female nature because of the danger of pollution. Anomic women (so labelled in patriarchal ideologies) are distanced from standard codes of conduct (guided by patriarchy and androcentric values), are condemned and judged as evil, provoking pain in victims and rejection (monstrous). Women's bodies and minds are still constructed by and subjected to male maneuvering, as we will see in the next section.

Female representations: religious and popular constructs of the possessed women

According to Creed (1993), this patriarchal perspective generates a great diversity of meanings (from victim to monster) with regard to female characters. Sexuality lurks behind artistic creations, religious configurations and popular representations, which consider women as sexual and perverse characters who tempt men (depicted as the

representatives of order and normativity) or are innocent victims of male power. Women represent a destabilizing and polluting element, in which women become an intra-acting element (Barad, 2001). The restoration of their bodies and minds is a catalyst for re-establishing sexual morality in relation to the male protagonists. Thus, societal rules need to portray women as perverse and sexually active in order to demonstrate male moral superiority, producing a system in which one (male power) cannot exist without the other (female subordination). This social and sexual control of female behavior is necessary to set the order (the norm), as constantly reflected in literature and cinema by reproducing female monstrosity and/or the femme fatale role in a wide range of contemporary (and past) films. Androcentric points of view ground religious and historical notions of sexuality, (im)morality and body modifications (Creed, 1993: 69).

Possessed women, present in popular culture and widely reproduced by mass media, derive from the consideration of religion as a meaningful, classificatory and explanatory discourse to acknowledge “improper” behaviors of women (deviations) that are framed in the figuration of possession by an evil entity. Let us examine a first example of this representation of female abjection. In 1973, William Friedkin directed *The Exorcist*, where Regan (the protagonist, both in the novel and the film) is represented as polluted by a modern lifestyle characteristic of professional women (her mother). According to the background of the novel by William Peter Blatty, Regan’s mother was a working woman and a single parent back in the 1960s. Their home lacks a masculine figure, and because of this, Regan is threatened by the devil and social chaos (Creed, 1993). This film reflects the patriarchal interpretations of female victimization through the stigmatization of the normal order not followed by a single mother and her daughter. Both female characters represent the anomie, who alter the social norms, whereas the masculine characters (two priests) embody social order, normalization and the reversion of chaos (through exorcism) into order.

In the film, the possessed girl is presented as a playful puppet without agency: her transformation is objectified both through body and mind changes, thus mutating into a repulsive being. The head rotation and rude language of the daughter are presented as the affliction of her body and soul. The inverted face and abrupt movements are terrifying and make us feel concerned for the innocent little girl Regan. In contrast, the male characters, the priests, play the leading roles (really, they are the focal point of the film’s action) of preserving order, turning chaos

into control. They save the family from immorality and possession, illness and evilness. Eventually, the male protagonist saves the daughter who suffers the abjection provoked by anomie far from the standard roles of her mother.

Although the film might appear old-fashioned, its many sequels point to the relevance of the story in contemporary popular culture. There are many films focused on exorcism and possessions, and almost all show a possessed woman (an unknown and agent-less character) while men (very interesting and well-rounded characters) are the ones who heal them. The spectators know little about this woman, about her previous life and the reasons why possession affects her; they just know that this woman is at risk. In contrast, the male priests’ stories (such as in the film *The Exorcist*) are as well-known as their emotions, which are significantly relevant for the plot of the story, thus, the spectator knows everything about them. For instance, Lankester Merrin is a veteran priest who defeats a demon and Father Damien Karras is a priest and a psychiatrist who lost faith in God after his mother died.

An exception to the passive role of female characters is *Il Demonio* [The Demon], a film directed by Brunello Rondi in 1963. Puri (Purificazione, which means “pure” in contrast with the contamination of her body and mind) is an attractive woman who, after being rejected by her lover, turns to witchcraft to seduce him. The southern village in Italy where she lives is still embedded in magic and sorcery done by local people. However, Puri’s deviant behavior creates disorder and misfortunes for everybody in the village. Like in *The Exorcist*, the deviation of Puri becomes a social disorder that affects the whole community; therefore, her exorcism is mandatory for the villagers, who need to turn the anomaly into social order to live peacefully as a community. In contrast to other films on exorcisms, Puri is an agential element, not a totally passive woman, because she pursues her own goal (to seduce the man she loves) despite the transformation of the natural order.

In this story, men (a holy man and the village priests) are once again in charge of turning deviation into moral order; they try to convert her by moral codes, defeating the evil in her soul and reversing sexual contamination and body transformations. For example, during the first possession images in the movie, she performs an orgasm during the first demoniac manifestation and spider walks—which would become a symbol of possession in later films—as a representation of evil and ugliness, during her first exorcism in the church. Possession pushes her body beyond human limits: spider walks

and complex contortions appear as indicators of monstrosity, indicating tensions between good and evil. Female body and soul distortion point out social deviation and chaos that threaten the male order (the “normal” one). The storyline of *Il Demonio* presents a rare female character, Puri, embodying beauty and determination, but also considered a monster from the very beginning of the story. She appears as a sorcerer who is only trying to get her lover back. No context is given to help understand her complex personality and her determination in pursuing her goal.

Sensual scenes illustrate the evolution of her personality from beauty to ugliness. Her body materializes the battle over deviation, the threat to social control, the reversion of male order and her final destruction. It embodies a combination of sensuality and beauty that is quite usual in the depiction of female characters who threaten social norms (Creed, 1986). In this case, the highly sexualized content of the film reflects possession and otherness. Bodily signifiers of anomie are the spontaneous stigmas in her body, which appear while she sleeps, the spider movements during the church exorcism and, ultimately, the final injuries on her corpse. In the end, her sexuality causes her death because the lover possesses her body and then kills her. Similar to their responsibility to heal, the male character acts on the female body to achieve salvation (her death) and puts an end to the chaotic situation (in the village and in nature).

In the 19th century, scientific knowledge and, particularly, psychiatry came to replace religion as a classificatory system of meaning (Foucault, 1975). Religion and scientific knowledge—materialized in psychiatry and later neurology—had fought to become the explanatory authority for human deviation and for leading the cure of anomalies in body and mind, such as possessions (Hayward, 2004; Bonzol, 2009; Germiniani *et al*, 2012). Damien Karras, in *The Exorcist*, represents this battle between religion and science because he is a priest and psychiatrist.

In the next section, we will discuss the roles of science and religion through the consideration of real cases of “possession” and how they have been dealt with in psychology and neurology. Despite significant changes in how conditions similar to possession are considered and advancement of its healing, some gender division remains related to the passive and active roles of men and women, thus perpetuating patriarchal gender schemes. Dualism and patriarchal order perpetuate the subordination of women for body and mind standards.

Female representations of the possessed women in real cases and scientific explanations

In 1969, Anneliese Michel was a 17-year-old German girl who suffered epileptic attacks. A neurologist diagnosed her with “grand mal seizure”. Anneliese, deeply religious, started experiencing devilish hallucinations while praying, and she heard voices that told her that she was damned to hell. In 1975, her parents, convinced that their daughter was possessed, abandoned her psychiatric treatment. After a year of exorcism rites, she succumbed to the effects of severe dehydration and malnourishment. The case of Anneliese has inspired films, particularly *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, directed by Scott Derrickson in 2005. Her story illustrates the struggle between medicine and religion to interpret and heal “possessions”. Even now, according to some psychiatrists, the curing of this condition would be aided by combining chemical solutions and priest’s encouragement for people with profound religious beliefs (Tajima-Pozo *et al*, 2011).

Whereas religion interprets strange behaviors and bodily performances as possession, psychiatry is slowly evolving toward a different diagnosis based on biological and physiological conditions. Anneliese’s symptoms have been compared to several psychological disorders such as Tourette syndrome and schizophrenia. According to psychiatric discourse, Tourette syndrome is an inherited neuropsychiatric disorder starting in childhood, characterized by multiple physical-motor and vocal tics. Also schizophrenia, a chronic and severe mental disorder affecting thinking, feelings, including false beliefs, unclear or confused thinking, hearing voices, and reduced social engagement and emotional expression. Both illnesses and their symptoms show parallels with what is named “possession” by religion.

Hayward (2004) considers that the struggle between religion and medicine in possession cases represents an innovative strategy of medical professionalization, an evolution of epistemological knowledge, where eventually medicine gains control by defining human behavior, and specifying what is healthy and unhealthy. Thus, psychology (scientific knowledge) replaces religion as a source of knowledge (Foucault, 1975). Science (psychology) becomes a new framework for explaining social control and curing female abjection. Notwithstanding, religious as well as psychological constructs repeat similar features on the impurity of women and their relationships to sexuality and the body. The words “possession” and “monster” are avoided in neurological discourse, but they still are deeply-rooted ideas that affect the contemporary interpretation of illness.

In April 2009, a 24-year-old journalist, Susannah Cahalan, suffered autoimmune encephalitis. She had no clear memory of the previous few weeks, though her medical records showed her psychotic condition and violent attitude before lapsing into profound catatonia. When she recovered, she wrote the book *Brain on Fire: My Month of Madness* (2012) in which she explained her own condition:

Even my grunts and these guttural sounds that came from me sounded superhuman to someone who might be inclined to think that way... When you see videos of people—in fact, when I see videos of myself—demonic possession is not far from your mind. It wasn't far from Stephen's mind when he first saw that seizure. And I've talked to many people who've had this disease, and one woman I spoke to actually asked for a priest because she said, "The devil is inside of me. I need it out." (Utah Public Radio, 2012)

Susannah recalls having lost her identity. We can see how the "possession-possessed" discourse has not disappeared from intelligible explanations surrounding this condition, even when their medical status has been proved.

In 2010, Marta Moraga arrived home from school and told her parents: "I don't know what is happening to me; I cannot talk" (Estupinyà, 2012). For one and a half years, Marta was extremely ill and developed hypersexuality, paranoid hallucinations, aggressive conducts and Tourette's syndrome. After doctors had analyzed her condition, they induced her to coma in the hospital intensive care unit, and she followed medical treatment to eliminate her anomalous behavior. She declares that she has forgotten everything that happened during that time and continues taking all the drugs that were prescribed to her. She tries to go on with her life, although her parents think that she still acts in a strange manner.

Teratoma is initially benign but an immune response of the body causes schizophrenia. Patients forget what happened during their episodes of schizophrenia, but they show agitation, psychosis, hallucinations, memory deficit, speech reduction, abnormal movements, coma, respiratory failure, anger and aggressive behavior. The disorder is treatable with immunotherapy, and 80% of cases were cured. Body contortions are confused with spider walk, and phonetic tics in Tourette syndrome are compared to the ability to speak and write multiple and rare languages.

Recent developments in the field of neurology remain within the classic divisions between the body and psyche, creating a strong link between body and mind. Neuropsychologists propose a new connection between both entities mediated by physiological causes. But definitions of these experiences as an "incredible" transformation of their bodies and mental disorder create an implicit link to the immaterial part of the female body, as religion did in the past. Learnings from the field of health sciences have established that mental conditions generate risk of physical illnesses (Badr *et al*, 2000; Levenstein *et al*, 2001). Emotions (and alterations to the emotions) are core to explanations about these conditions, and women are usually associated with emotions to a greater extent than men. Thus, mutability is usually considered a sign of distortion and a marker of unhealthy symptoms in women. Symptoms of mental conditions have been detailed as a demonstration of female weaknesses, particularly when related to sexuality and body transformation or alteration of emotional expressions, such as hysteria (Freud and Breuer, 1995 [1895]).

Men remain in charge of constructing "the explanation" and "the salvation" because most neurologists are men. In 2007, Josep Dalmau offered a new angle of research on possession, now presented as a physiological problem. He and his colleagues identified the anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis, a rare reaction to a common ovarian tumor, a psychosis seen in young women (Dalmau *et al*, 2007; 2008). A glance at the publications and members of his research group at the IDIBAPS institute reveal male predominance, with young women only in predoctoral and postdoctoral categories (webpage of the Biomedicine Research Institute, Agustí Pi I Sunyer).¹ Despite the significant number of women doctors, or women who work in health research (the highest number according to the *She Figures* report, European Commission, 2015), the authors signing scientific papers on autoimmune encephalitis are mostly men. The distribution of roles is identical to that of religion and popular culture, and a good representation of gender roles in patriarchal societies. Likewise, conventional medicine and non-conventional practices of exorcisms follow the same patterns of restoration after the chaos promoted by female disorders.

Women in motion: a non-patriarchal and non-dualist female representation

In the real cases observed, a short period of madness (from one to four months) is followed by

¹ <http://www.idibaps.org/recerca/team/709/neuroimmunologia-clinica-i-experimental> [09/01/2018]

several months of physical and behavioral curation/rehabilitation (Dalmau et al., 2011), but, apparently, the recovery is a long process where women appear different than in the past. After their illnesses, the affected women must relearn basic abilities, such as writing and reading. Cahalan (2012) affirmed that she re-acquired nearly all her abilities, but she is not yet sure about being completely recovered. A married woman in the United States declared that she would never be completely the same person again. She feared harming herself and her children, and she felt that the disorder in her personality might transform her totally. Marta Moraga's parents also notice her strange behavioral mannerisms. All these women explain that they have suffered a total transformation of mind and body through sick and healthy periods that they believe may have shaped their identity. They think they are a kind of monster because of their body transformations, their sexual awakening during their unconscious periods when they are embodied representations of a lack of control. They feel that they were distanced from social order and moral codes through what they call "an identity transformation". These women feel they have gone beyond the social control that—in our androcentric culture—is strongly linked to repression.

In scientific knowledge, religion and artistic performances, women's agency is usually portrayed as a deviation of the social order, never as a probable mark of transformation or a result of the complexity of female identity and representations. The attribution of lack of agency is a consequence of how patriarchal order subordinate women in gendered schemes. According to Jeffreys (2005), women's bodies are designed to be a pleasure for men and to be controlled by them. In this scheme, there is no place for women's agency that disrupts male power in an androcentric society and questions the centrality of men. Androcentric culture places women in a situation of subordination embedded in an institutional distribution of power. Likewise, health conditions and bodily modifications of women during their life course—from adolescence to menopause—might lead to an objectification of the female body and reason for abjection (Fredrickson and Tommi-Ann, 1977; Kristeva, 1982; Brooks-Gunn and Petersen, 1983; Parlee, 1984). Mutability of female bodies, even those due to life-course transformations, is an excuse to mark a distortion of "normal" identity, a risky period such as female adolescence (linked to flourishing early motherhood signs) and menopause (symbolizing the end of motherhood). Some of them are pointed out as a marker of unhealthy symptoms and psychological deviation from the normalization of female representation.

Adolescence, menopause and other situations are considered "pathologies" that affect both the bodies and minds of women. The patriarchal order constructs feminine bodies as static and immutable matter, and their transformations are considered an anomaly, unless the purpose of this bodily modification (through cosmetics and surgery, for instance) aims to fulfil patriarchal ideas of female beauty. Women have to be beautiful, passive and good looking to the male gaze, translating into young attractive women who are "good girls". The female body represents ideal stereotypes that simplify the multiplicity of their bodies and their minds, which extends to their identities and/or identifications. In contrast, male bodies and minds-identities are not subjected to this simplification and subordination to the female gaze. Men are characterized by agency and commanded to save female bodies and psyches, which entails the recovery of female health and the social order.

As the cases of "possessed" women illustrate, multiplicity and complexity are strongly embodied, but the transformation, mutability and change in bodies are interpreted as a threat to social order; a lack of control that needs male intervention for the "salvation" of female bodies and minds and/or restoration of social order. This idea is part of the foundation of gender inequalities. Instead of pointing out the similarities, as Rubin proposed 30 years ago (Rubin, 1975), this comparison renders the female body as eternally "different from" and, because of this, "other than" the male body (Braidotti, 1993). Presented both by religion and science as confronted bodies, female bodies are always on the fringe of male control, always subjected to male supervision, interference and salvation.

Constructed "in relation to" men, the ideal image of women is that of fertile and young women, leaving older women outside the "normal" order, especially in popular and aesthetic representations. Some of these actresses declared that appearing ageless makes them fit into social expectations and the social order, otherwise they are subject to public critique. Despite biological changes, the majority of representations of women are still related to a homogeneous image of women, to a lack of control over their own stories and still tied to the male gaze. Jennifer Aniston explains how connected femininity is to cosmetic surgery now, in order to physically fit within the socio-cultural values established by Hollywood: "There is this pressure in Hollywood to be ageless. I think what I have been witness to is seeing women trying to stay ageless with what they are doing to themselves. I am grateful to learn from their mistakes, because I am not injecting shit into my face... I see them and my heart breaks" (Tang, 2016).

In this article, we propose the concept of “women in motion” to subvert these mechanisms of power that subordinate women’s agency and simplify their experiences through a simplification of their bodies, minds and identities/identifications. This idea is based upon the fluidity of the female body and women’s complex experiences, which are not incredible or inexplicable. This approach emphasizes the mutable condition of women as a positive impact that respects their identities and multiplicities, in opposition to the immutability of the female body and mind (psyche) defended by an androcentric social order. Patriarchy reduces the complexity of images of women into only one that fits into the consistent structures, defined by a traditional order that normalizes female body and mind corresponding with a fixed image of goodness and beauty.

Dualism appears as an oppressive power structure against female identity (over the control of standards for the female body and mind). Although interpretations of gendered identities are changing, subordination to male gaze is still visible, which erases the complexity of “the others”. The Gender Swap Experiment shows complexity in understanding body identity through gendered values (webpage Gender Swap, Be Another Lab, 2014).² This experiment was designed to reveal the transformation of female embedded experiences of their gendered bodies. Through a neuroscientific illusion in which users can feel as if they were in a different body, a sexualized body, the experiment aims to show participants how the experience of one’s body and sexual identity can be fluid. A man in front of a mirror sees a female body instead of his own body; on the opposite side of the mirror, a woman sees a male body instead. They see and feel each other’s bodies and perceive the other one’s feelings. Some other experiments based on body swapping show how two people exchange their bodies and mental perceptions. Based on a feminist approach, this technology creates self-images of our gendered subjectivity that enable the ontological alteration of our physical bodies and the possibility of displaying a different gender identity.

Traditional and oppressive schemes regarding gender must be transformed through critical and creative knowledge about men and women that involves an assumption of bodies as multiple gendered and sexualized. This approach addresses the traditional separation of gendered and sexed categories from subordination, victimization and otherness. All these elements are entangled indivisibly to reinforce oppressive gender orders, as well as male dominance. From religious to scientific knowledge, these oppressive patterns are shaping

women’s bodies, psyches and experiences. Arts, science and popular culture reproduce the same patterns of control and modulation of women’s bodies, reproducing a homogeneous representation of women (regarding beauty, fertile age, goodness and health) constructed from androcentric culture. In contrast, aged, diverse, ill and mutable bodies are still considered a deviation necessitating repair, a subject for intervention by male order.

Main remarks

This paper has outlined how the arts (especially through film), religion (through possessions and exorcism rites) and science (especially psychiatry and neurology) perpetuate gendered dualism, which hides the complexity and fluidity of women’s subjectivity and the agency of women. Androcentric values have historically ignored the mutability and variability of women’s bodies and experiences, constructing these differences as “other” and understanding diversity and change as a source of risk and social threat. Agency of women was considered an anomaly, such as Puri in the film *Il Demonio*. Oppression of women implies the denial of the possibility of powerful action by women and their agency. In those hegemonic discourses—produced by men and aimed at reproducing male power—women are subordinated and passive recipients of male agency.

Acknowledging that women are diverse and changing means having to manage unexpected and out-of-control situations where women may change and confront male social constructs. None of the hegemonic discourses that are available today clearly show a transformation, redefinition or renewal of gender roles, nor a complete rebellion against the oppression of female performances. From androcentric perspectives, women (their bodies and minds) are, and should be, simple characters that should obey social norms and be controlled by male codes. Other female characterizations are considered to endanger the social order and need to be repaired by savvy (holly) men. Males appear as the only ones with the power to explain the deviation for and from religion, science and popular culture.

In non-fiction cases analyzed in this paper, the body seems to play a central role for women, to a greater extent than for men, representing a source of contamination of and disorder from normalization. Throughout reality and fiction, “possessions” are more frequent among women than among the male population. Organic (ovarian teratoma) and psychological (hysteria) phenomena are linked to females’ bodies and social disorder (breaking androcentric rules). Possessed women represent subjects that have deviated from the male order and

² <https://vimeo.com/84150219> [25/04/2016].

then subject to male intervention (the demon and the exorcist are both men). Women also interiorize these oppressing patterns, so that men and women alike want to mold female bodies to emphasize the feminine features of young women (Jeffreys, 2005; Jeffreys and Gottschalk, 2013), which means alienating female bodies so that their embedded experiences are subject to androcentric normalization. Women are dispossessed of their own bodies, converted into passive objects to save the social order that arranges/preserves socio-cultural male values.

While the female body is changeable and complex, the arts, science and religion repeat patterns of one-dimensionality such as the Virgin Mary, simplicity and reduction of personalities, motivations and relationships to their own environment (social relations and related to themselves and others). We argue that breaking this dualism and going beyond it to the complexity of women body and mind. Thinking about how science, art and religion merge to reproduce these patterns is a plea to produce sensitive accounts of the complexity of women's experiences and the fluidity of our bodies.

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