

III. Performing Non-normative Discourses

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The Impossible and the Desire

Abstract. The paper has the aim of offering a critical perspective on gender and identity, following the line suggested by Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak, whose theories and visions are reflected in the movies *In a Year of 13 Moons* by Rainer Fassbinder and *Morer como un homem* by Jaou Pedro Rodrigues. As sexual issues are strongly related to the way existing norms shape our perception, Michel Foucault's ideas will be mentioned with the aim of also highlighting the changes that have occurred in the existing paradigms throughout history. The movies approach the theme of identity and of exclusion from the perspective of marginal characters, often looked down upon in society: Elvira, from Fassbinder's movie is a transsexual and Tonia a drag queen.

Keywords: queer studies, alienation, gender, identity, film theory.

Identity is the constituent basis of our existence and represents something to which we relate naturally, without further questioning. In case acceptance is not given to the individuals, their whole existence is bound to clash, as it is often the case of those whose invisibility has been decided beforehand, a fact often noted during history when deviations from the norm were meant to be eradicated (the situations of the Jews, political exiles, natives or of those excluded on sexual grounds). The paper will focus mainly on the latter category and has the aim of proving that those marginalized are often looked down upon by an alterity who imposes its own vision and way of seeing the world and who relates to everything according to the adherence or the distancing from this perception (often represented by the ideals held by the Western society). This causes the arousal of conflicting feelings,

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as the individuals who find themselves caught between living according to their own nature and following the paradigms offered by society, which seem to represent the only way towards acceptance and recognition.

Desire and the need for (an)other

The movie *In a Year of 13 moons* by Fassbinder reveals the harsh truth transsexuals have to go through every day and brings in view the lack of understanding and of tolerance to which they are daily subjected. Seen from Judith Butler's perspective, who in *Undoing Gender* speaks about the way sexuality strongly relates to our identity, the movie presents the impossible life Elvira lives. The term impossible designates the whole spectrum of situations Elvira has to confront and which are, in most cases, beyond her control. Impossibility is rendered in various ways in the movie, one of which depicted as the unattainable desire of a man to love another man. The film suggests that the reason why Elvira chose to undergo a sex reassignment surgery was because she wished to be together with Anton, a Jewish criminal, who jokingly claimed that he would love Elvira if he were a woman. The fact that the character takes this affirmation seriously and acts accordingly, shows how alienated she is from society, as well how strong is her desire to bond and create a connection. Towards the end of the movie, Anton finds out about the reason she pursued with the surgery and further refuses to accept her identity: he begins to make fun of her and laughs at her, something that prompts her final suicidal act.

Another impossibility the film yet tackles is the idea that an Arian could fall for a Jew, as this certainly defies the laws of common sense that envision the way society is supposed to be organized. The impossibility of connecting with another on grounds of exclusion is a theme Fassbinder often addresses in his movies. In *Ali Fear eats soul*, exclusion is based on racism and is pictured as a feeling powerful enough to erase all other constituent aspects of a human being. The story focuses on Emmi Kurowski, a respectable cleaning lady who falls in love with a much younger Arab immigrant, Ali, but their passion is characterized by dismay, as they constantly have to face society's prejudices and lack of understanding. The Other in this case becomes *object petit a*, something which is in him more than himself, according to Žižek (*which is in Coke more than Coke*). Elvira seeks to create stable relationships with the ones surrounding her in a similar way to Tonia from Rodrigues' movie. The director suggests that the movie is mainly focused on desire and not on homosexuality as it might appear at a first glance and claims that homosexuality is absent from his movie. The opposition between herself and Anton represents the locus of attraction for Elvira, who, in contrast with Anton's libertine and instinctual spirit, is characterized by a certain depth, which reveals more profound and considerate emotions.

Desire implies desire for acknowledgement, which make the individuals reliant on society's approval in order that their gender becomes legitimized. Following a Hegelian line, Judith Butler suggests that *to persist in one's own being is only possible*

on the condition that we are engaged in receiving and offering recognition. If we are not recognizable [...] we have been foreclosed from possibility. (41). Referring to Jacques Lacan, Butler suggests that in case desire is linked to social norms, they constitute the conditions upon which society decides who is recognizable as a human and who is not (12). This legitimization represents an act of power as Gayatri Spivak notices in *Death of a Discipline* and which is suggestive for the seriousness of the issue, as those excluded from the possibility of being will not accept their reality and way of being in case the means of recognition are not offered to them. This aspect becomes clear in Elvira's case, who, by the end, decides to commit suicide as it finally dawns on her that society cannot appreciate and value her individuality in its complexity.

Does the body belong to us?

An idea recurrent in both movie is related to how the individuals perceive their own body and how society reacts to their perception. Michel Foucault in *Histoire de la sexualité* mentions the fact that during the Hellenistic period, the body was not something of which the individual could freely dispose, but was rather perceived as belonging to the society. As an example, Foucault refers to the times when women were given as homage to tribe leaders or as a peace sign in case of war. The most appropriate argument is, however, the way the relations between men and women were constituted, when woman were seen as part of man's property. The man could make use of the woman as he saw fit, according to his own desires, once the woman became his wife. The sole reason why I woman was respected was because she belonged to another men, suggests Foucault: *Moderation and virtue are, in men's case virtues attributable to the leader, while women's moderation and courage are virtues of subordination* (85). That is also the reason why the Greeks could not conceive the idea of women having extra-marital relationships. The man, on the other hand, was not supposed to be faithful, and those who were, only presented the kindest way of treating their wives(146). In Fassbinder's movie, we can notice the concept of the body serving for the benefit of the partner in the case of Elvira and her boyfriend. Upon arriving home after being aggressed in the park by some individuals, Elvira meets Christopher who has just returned after being away for some time. Used to abuse and exploitation, she is not able to impose herself in any moment. In one disturbing scene, Cristopher makes Elvira look at herself in the mirror above their bed and compels her to recognize her inferiority, her submission. The violence of the image is powerful and emphasizes the status of the one dependent in a relationship. These movies stress the fact that even the men who willingly chose to become women are in an enfeebled state, something which speaks of the status of women in the society.

Another thought provoking aspect of these movies is the fact that those marginalized are most often depicted as victims. The difference between Tonia and Elvira stems from the fact that as Elvira is a drag queen, she receives appreciation by the public, something which enhances her self-esteem, but which also represent

the starting point of her drama as she realizes she could very well be replaced by a younger figure. The relationship between her and Rosario is also problematic as he repeatedly steals her belongings in order to procure himself heroin, breaks up with her and disrespects her, without facing any consequences. Tonia unceasingly forgives him, believing that she deserves to be treated in this way. She thinks that all the ill that comes to her stems from the fact that she has taken some wrong decisions for which she should be punished, contributing in this way to her self-victimization. Her situation is similar to Elvira's who also tacitly accepts the abuse to which she is subjected.

Suicide is also represented in relation to the idea of a selfless body, that belongs to another. Foucault claims that this act was once regarded as a crime as it meant a violation of the right to live which only the suzerain, on earth and above could exercise(44). Elvira from Fassbinder's movie witnesses the enactment of a suicidal attempt and seems to understand the victim's reason for refusing to struggle with life anymore. An apparently cynical scene is the one in which she offers a last supper to the victim, (bread and wine, also symbolical), only to remind him afterwards of the deed he must fulfill. The fact that she decides to put an end to her life in a similar way, discloses the importance of the discourse about sex and gender, and how strongly this is related to recognition and to the way the individual shapes his identity.

Gender, a moving paradigm

The terms masculine and feminine are not constants, but rather variables, as they are continuously bound to undergo changes. This implies that as the notions of feminine and masculine have different meanings in different cultures, this should serve as a sufficient argument for accepting the idea being a man or a woman does not mean only ticking some features society regards as defining, but comprises a whole process, complex and hard to define: *Terms of gender designation are thus never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade.* (Butler 20). The movie *Die like a man* thoroughly envisions this aspect throughout most of the scenes. Tonia lives her whole life as a woman, more precisely a drag queen, only to decide to die like a man in the end. Finding the inner self is what matters above all, and which surpasses any barriers imposed by sex or by gender. Furthermore, another aspect of importance which marks her decision of shifting from one identity to another is her mental state; for instance she usually wears manly clothes when she feels sorrowful, claiming that they better represent her inner state. She is situated on the same line with Gayatri Spivak who claims that the terms men/women are only cultural constructs, and not naturally given. It is however important to notice that the men who presented feminine traits or behaviour were often looked down upon and scrutinized. People seem perplexed upon hearing about the desire of men to become women as they regard this act as downgrading; the reason for that is the general opinion people have on men, which should supposedly be strong and self-sufficient. From Aristotle onwards, as Foucault observes in *La Volonté du savoir*, men were perceived as the

active element in the relationship, while women the passive one: *the woman in her position of female is a passive element, while the man as a male an active element* (5).

We can also notice a similar point of view regarding the gender construction in Fassbinder's movie where Elvira is constantly disregarded because of her female characteristics, pejoratively attributed. A relevant scene is that in which Christopher breaks up with Elvira and taunts her about gaining way, arguing in this way that she shows too little interest about her outlook. The episode is suggestive of the reality about women's role in society: they must possess an aesthetic function, so as to please men's eyes. This aspect is visible in the way society shapes gender construction: in the case of both men and women, what matters is not the feminine look, as both dress up for the eyes of other men.

Elvira is in a continuous self-exploring journey and we can often sense the idea that she does not fully identify herself with any gender. Judith Butler draws our attention towards a similar case, that of asexual children, whose parents, influenced by the doctors, strictly impose one of the two genders, claiming that the children would not feel normal otherwise. She suggests that this kind of restrictive mentality stems from the wrong presupposition that everything must be placed into strict categories, which proves to be dangerous once it refers to the gender issue, as this strongly relates to the concept of identity.

We need to understand that gender is a performative act that does not belong to us only. This act always implies an Other as a referent, even if an imaginary one, according to which we project our gender (similarly to the case of Desire), which means that the *terms depending on which we project our gender are from the start strongly related to the exterior world* (Butler 11). Tonia from Rodrigues movie is a drag queen that always has in view performing her gender in front of a public. She orders herself dresses, does her make-up and tries to create a good impression on the public and to appeal to them. When she finds herself in intimate moments, together with her boyfriend Rosario, she discards these artificialities, as she does not feel the need to resort to external means in order to be self-fulfilled, something that proves again that the paradigms relating to gender and sexuality are not irrevocably constituted. While assuming Simone de Beauvoir's perspective, Butler claims that *since the individual is not born a woman, but becomes one, becoming is the becoming is the vehicle for gender itself* (75). If we are to consider Gilles Deleuze's perspective on becoming, this designates a ceaseless process, not bound to be framed into any fixed forms. This view is similar to what Judith Butler suggests: *Terms of gender designation are thus never settled once and for all but are constantly in the process of being remade.* (20).

Gayatri Spivak also argues about the cultural aspect of the gender, which is however taken as natural and led during history to the creation of hierarchies and different forms of segregation. One of the problems Spivak identifies in *Can the Subaltern speak?* is the fact the alterity has lost its voice, or to put it bluntly, that we have stopped listening to it. This aspect is distinguishable in Rodrigues' movie in

which Tonia loses her voice during her final act, when she gives up life, upon confronting the society that does not accept her individuality. When talking about the position the intellectual should assume, Gayatri Spivak suggests that he should not support any of the existing hierarchies, as these create inequalities on every plan and take away from the individual the possibility of them being recognised in the world, once they cannot fit into any of the existing paradigms. On the same line of thought, Judith Butler asserts that we should offer the individuals the chance to freely express their sexual choices. One of the arguments she brings forth is the fact that as there are people who simply cannot situate themselves inside the binary system we have been accustomed ourselves to, this should serve as a sufficient reason to become more tolerant and implement a way of thinking based on plurality on multiplicity.

Another notable aspect is the fact that gender does not define our sexual choices, meaning that even if we choose to shift from one gender to another, this does not necessarily imply changes with regard to what we consider most attractive. Michel Foucault suggests that Greeks did not regard as exclusive options the attraction towards a man or a woman. Furthermore, one could be attracted to man or female regardless of his own gender, as in those times, beauty was the value which mostly influenced the perception on attraction. Elvira seems to live according to the same principles, as for her attraction is clearly unrelated to the gender she performs. The fact that she falls in love with Anton does not indicate a homosexual desire, and, as a proof of that, she later marries a woman and has a child with her. This denotes the complexity of an individual's identity, as well as how hard to grasp and to define this concept is, since it is dependent on so many various factors. We become aware of the multiplicity which characterizes our beings once we encounter views and perceptions radically different from our own and which makes us conscious of our limits. As Foucault suggests in *Let mots et les choses*, our perception tends to spare things in order to prevent chaos from instilling. Our perception is undoubtedly influenced by the time and space in which we find ourselves, a fact often neglected and which produces the illusion that the explanations and the definitions we receive are permanent and natural, and not cultural constructs. The limits of our perception are brought forth once contrasted with other existing paradigms, as the order of things is not given by nature, but by the look who distinguishes them.

Rodrigues was inspired by Fassbinder's movie in creating the character Tonia and associates sexuality with desire, with irrational occurrences, impulses that become tragic. Foucault mentions that in today's society, sex has acquired such an important value that not even death can surpass its importance and which confirms the fact that sex is traversed by the instinct of death (147). All of Rodrigues' characters are atypical and present obsessive fantasies, dislocated forms of imagination. Tonia, more than the others, exhibits profound feelings of guilt aroused by her desires and the life she leads, which society regards as wicked. Foucault encourages us to ponder about the reason why we connect sin with sex and reflect on when in our history it has been

decided that sexuality should be deemed sinful and censored accordingly, inducing people into inhibiting their sexual instincts and transforming sex into taboo subject (44). One reason, Foucault adds, is Christianity, as in comparison with the Hellenistic society, people obviously had a less thwarted relationship with pleasures of any kind.

Norms and normality

Judith Butler mentions the importance of the norms that govern our lives and suggests that they *produce a differential sense of who is human and who is not, which lives are liveable, and which are not* (13). Fassbinder claims about Elvira that she is characterized by a heightened level of existential anxiety and who seems to be alienated in every stance depicted, as the film envisions her in different social roles: female, man, lover of Christopher, father, son of Gudrun (a character who wanted to adopt her when she was young). In all of the roles mentioned, she helps the others in their quest of self-finding, while, paradoxically, it seems impossible for her to create a stable form of identity. She is alienated from herself and from the ones around her, but Fassbinder suggests that this is none of the characters' faults individually. Not even Anton Seitz for whom Elvira did the surgery and who ignored her for several years is not necessarily depicted negative per se. What appears to be the reason behind Elvira's alienation, is the society in which she lives and where she cannot be taken seriously and leads to her dissatisfaction with other fellow humans. The film suggests that her final sacrifice is meant to dismantle the vicious circle of abjection and ignorance, so that people finally understand that in order for those like Elvira to survive, the social constraints that prevent them from being tolerant have to be foregone.

Michel Foucault demonstrates the way in which the different ideologies treated as natural are nothing else than cultural constructs with which the population got accustomed in time and which are not filtered through their consciousness anymore. On a hermeneutical line, Judith Butler suggests the fact that we cannot situate ourselves outside the norms that govern our lives: *Even a master of the historical method is not able to keep himself entirely free from the prejudices of his time, his social environment and his national situation* (Gadamer, 534). Butler observes the fact that we are controlled in this society by laws undetermined by us. In *Die like a man*, we can notice the consequences Christianity left in society, as this ideology was strongly situated against the relationships between the individuals of the same sex (until the 18th century sodomy was punished with death) and also opposed the idea of undergoing a sex reassignment surgery. Tonia's wish to become a woman cannot be accomplished as she also desires to remain true to her Catholic beliefs, something which urges her boyfriend to constantly her criticise and to assert that she is nothing else than a man in women's clothing, denying in this way her identity. The fact that Elvira decides to end her life in a suit, as a man, can, to some extent, be interpreted as her decision to fully adopt the Christian beliefs, upon becoming conscious of the approaching and

inescapable death, but the purpose of the story seems rather to be that of highlighting the fact that gender is self-made and not given by nature.

The norms enable the violation of human rights when it comes to the individuals that not considered *normal* enough to be respected. Once the process of dehumanization takes place, acts of violence against these people are not only possible, but often encouraged. These films focus on the figure of transsexuals or drag queens, marginalized not only from society, but from the family medium as well, and who are most often depicted as victims, as mentioned. Elvira, in the beginning of the movie is aggressed because although being dressed like man and exhibiting manly features, she lacks male reproductive organs. She tries to flirt with the individuals whom she encounters and they play along, until the moment of truth is revealed. Upon feeling defamiliarized with this situation, and as confusion arouses, they resort to violence, physical and verbal, unable to cope with their conflicting emotions in any other way. We can notice in this case the power of majority at work, in other words, the tyranny of the majority, as, according to them, those upon whom they act deserve their faith, as they are *unnatural* beings. These individuals take upon them the role and responsibility of correcting the society, of putting things in order, by fear of letting chaos to settle in, something which makes Rancière's ideas from *Moments Politiques* relevant in this case: *More than ever, fear is the cement that binds individuals to the state* (89).

According to Judith Butler, once changes occur, it is perfectly normal that disorder appears, which is something the society needs to accept as well: every social change comes with a certain kind of confusion, a disturbance of the current social order. For the benefit of those excluded and with the aim of contributing to the well-being of society, it is required to abandon *sense* for a while: *To assume responsibility for a future, however, is not to know its direction fully in advance, since the future, especially the future with and for others, requires a certain openness and unknowingness; it implies becoming part of a process the outcome of which no one subject can surely predict* (49).

Apart from society's conventions, something which Rodrigues claims influences to some extent our existence are the cosmological elements. In order to emphasize this, we can refer to the way Rodrigues movie begins: *Every seventh year is a lunar year. Those people whose lives are essentially dominated by their emotions suffer particularly strongly from depressions in these lunar years. The same is also true of years with 13 new moons, albeit not quite so strongly. And if a lunar year also happens to be a year with 13 new moons, the result is often a personal catastrophe*. The passage holds a great significance for the director, as part of the reason why he decided to create this movie was because the play writer with whom he was involved in a relationship killed himself in a lunar year, possibly because of the unfulfilled relationship between them, as it seems that the director often ignored and disregarded him. The movie was thus partially created with the aim of escaping the guilt stemming from these death-surrounding circumstances. Although not a religious person, Fassbinder tackles spiritual issues

in his movie, which are tightly connected with the idea of social acceptance. Elvira is in a continuous identity quest and crisis, greatly influenced by all elements surrounding her. Together with Tonia, who is also a symbolical character, they make us realize the wrong assumption that guides people's mentality and perception regarding transsexual and drag queens. Rodrigues tries to make us aware of the fact that by inhibiting the other's potential and by refusing to offer him a place in society, death becomes their only attainable escape line. Henry Thoreau also suggests the importance of remaining faithful to oneself and one's nature: *If a plant does not live according to its nature, it dies. And so does a man* (15) which highlights again the importance of embracing one's individuality.

Changes in the human paradigm

The problem of exclusion can be discussed not only in relation with sexual exclusion, but by referring to the various faces of marginalization present in society, faces that the Other is not willing to accept, as for instance, those of the immigrants. In this context, the affirmation Judith Butler makes about preserving the Western values is worth considering: *Most importantly, we see the violence done in the name of preserving western values, and we have to ask whether this violence is one of the values that we seek to defend, that is, another mark of "western-ness" that we fear might be lost if we agree to live in a more culturally complex and hybrid world?* (241). Foucault also draws our attention to the fact that Europe was constituted as a supposedly inclusive territory by what of, in fact, building unbreakable barriers for those coming from outside.

Judith Butler's vision on acceptance is relevant for what these movies strive to transmit. She refers to Vatican's decision from 2000 which claimed that human rights are not applicable to homosexuals or transsexuals in order to suggest that if this is the case, what we need is a change regarding how we perceive the human. If the definition of this term cannot designate all the changes society has gone through, a conceptual revision is required in order to represent these innumerable changes. This radical paradigm shift is required so that people wilfully accept all those perceived as *different*, and in order that the forms of violence to which they are subjected become considered crimes against humanity and not tolerated, as it sometimes is the case. It is necessary to fight for these changes to take place, and so that these people become considered *human* enough to be not only tolerated, but to be actually given a voice. As Žižek in *Tolerance as an ideological Category* suggests, it is wrong to assume *tolerance* as the only way by which we integrate the alterity in the society, as this actually means a defeat because it only further disseminates inequality, and thus make the philosopher claim: *one should answer in Benjaminian terms: from culturalization of politics to politicization of culture.*

In Spivak's terms, a constant shift of the current world order is needed, of those values perceived as natural. A solution for the intellectual would be to always adopt an ethical position which envisions the marginalized ones. His aim should be to find

the ways by which he can bring to life the sub material. In the name of non-violence, the paradigms to which we have accustomed ourselves need to be changed, following Rancière's axiom of equality, which implies perceiving equality not as an aim, but as a starting point: the political perceived as *producing a certain effect; as an assertion of capacity; and as a reconfiguration of the landscape of the visible, thinkable, and possible* (*Le Partage du sensible* 113). Only on this premise can we perceive ourselves as equal subjects and not let violent hierarchies materialize in the real.

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