



## **The opposition against binary (op)positions**

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The culture today is visualised, and reflects to us in images everyday and everywhere we go. From the papers we read in the morning and the commercials on the train to the very last minute before we turn of the TV in the evening they follow us. Images of products and people, stories of the reality constructed and communicated through images are cornerstones for how we organize the information and knowledge we have to deal with, to understand and be able to handle life.

Some images we seek to find, we want to take part of them, but most of the images we see are brought to us without us asking for them, we simply cannot avoid them. And most of these involuntarily seen images are produced by commercial powers, advertisement companies out on one mission, to make us choose to spend our money on their product.

Their basic goal is to make the possible consumer feel that the product is something they need in their life, and this is done by presenting it with connection to something that the consumer can identify with, or that the consumer would want to be(come).

In these images gender, as the performed construction of man and woman, is made and represented. One of the basic rules of the construction of gender is separation, and the creation of differences between the male and the female, masculine and feminine. For the gender system to function it is crucial that representation of the female is the opposite of the male, and in the best cases, that they complement each other. There is a need to force this difference and

binary opposition to exist, to be able to attract and gain acceptance from the other sex and society. We see how women are represented as passive and attractive, with an inviting glaze in to the camera- “come and get me, I’m waiting for you.” Men on the other hand are usually represented as active doers, busy with something at hand, maybe not even giving the camera a look- “call my attention if you want me”. One example of this kind of representation is in the Swedish tv- commercials of a traditional female product, a lip salve, now directed to attract male consumers. The product is called “Active lip salve” and in the advert we see a man in a boat in the strong wind in his face and with a rope or rudder in one hand. With the other hand he is applying the “Active lip salve” to his lips using the special “male” function that it has; that you can open it and pull up the salve with only one hand! To make the product more masculine we have to see that it is especially made for the masculine man, far away from the connotations of beauty care that a lip salve might have. Within this system of binary oppositions connected to masculinity and femininity there is an endless list of examples of supposed qualities that are connected to each sex: rational – irrational, intelligence – emotion, mind – body, strength – weakness, public - private and so on. The qualities that are more appreciated and have a positive connotation are the ones connected to masculinity, whereas the ones connected to femininity are perceived as perhaps beautiful or nice but not what you would put down in a job- application.

In the system of “opposites attract” there is no space for images of possible feelings or desire for someone from the same sex as this does not fit into the system of binary opposition. Thus the images we see will only communicate a heterosexual logic, nothing else would sell as much. If the main interest would not be to create differences between the sexes, if fulfilment could be gained without the embodiment of ones own sex - physical and mental representation of it- it would be difficult to sell something directed to the “consumer groups” of men or women. We need to think that this is something we should have in order to conceive the most basic thing, the acceptance from the society.

The gender roles that are communicated to us through commercial images, whether we want it or not, are hopelessly stereotypical and hetero-normative.

The discussion of the image of the woman goes way back in the feminist movement. Ever since the seventies we can identify two main critiques against the way the woman is represented in mainstream images. These two camps of opinion are and have been in conflict with each other.

The conflict between these camps of opinions, when it comes to the image of the woman, has its base in a broader feminist dilemma: the question of whether the woman today in western societies is represented as and expected to be too sexual or if she still has not gained the right to be sexual. This may seem confusing at first, as these standpoints seem to be completely opposed to each other, but we can avoid this conflict if we choose to focus not on the image per se but rather a bigger system of who produces the images and who receives them.

One of the clearest examples of the above mentioned strive for separation and creation of differences between the sexes, is the production and merchandise of weekly magazines for women and men. In the magazines for women the main focus is looks, in the ones for men it is technique, cars and women. On the covers of both the magazines for men and women we usually find one of the "come and get me"-women described earlier. Not long ago in Sweden there was a huge trend for famous women to participate in these magazines for men, often in a series of images where they were presented as sexually attractive, a kind of light porn pictures. From feminists these women received heavy criticism, they were accused for selling themselves and being bad role models for young women who looked up to them. Their response was to claim a kind of "bimbo-feminism", we have the right to take our clothes off, to be sexual and we feel strong and powerful by doing it. These women will in this text represent one of the camps of opinions of the image of the woman. The basic point of this camp is the right to be sexual for women, and the right to express it publicly.

This point of view is opposed by the camp that strives for the right of women not to always be seen and represented as possible sexual prey. In this text the huge feminist movement against pornography and prostitution will represent this

group. One of the main focuses of this movement is to work against what is usually called the objectification of women, that women in images many times are reduced from person to object, without any agency or voice of their own. They are simply represented as a blond or brown-headed pretty thing, always will to be at your (sexual) service.

One example of how the feminist question of women as too sexual or not sexual enough is much broader and is interesting in a much broader sense than when it comes to the image of women is the French movement “Ni Putes Ni Soumies” (Neither whores nor suppressed). As the name suggests, they deal with the same question, but their base is not in feminist media criticism. Fadela Amara started the movement, after the assassination of an 18-year-old girl who was burned to death in a rubbish room in a suburb of Paris. Around ten young women from the suburbs organized themselves in the association with the name “Ni Putes Ni Soumies”, which in short time became a movement of more than 30 000 people that marched the streets of Paris a few months after the assassination. They work to change the social situation in the suburbs and against men’s violence against women. Their focus is the borderline existence that many women live with, when they have only two choices, either to stay within the rules of their culture and marry within the family and with the requirement of being sexually immaculate, or break these rules and then be convicted to be seen as whores and live with this shame and in many cases be exposed to, or threatened with, violence.

The situation with only two possible images of the woman, either as whore or saint, is real in many aspects within the patriarchal society.

We see how even the two camps of different views of the image of women, the bimbo-feminists and the movement against prostitution and pornography, are stuck in a system of only two alternatives. It’s either or. But the bimbo-feminists and their strive to express their sexuality is trapped in the media which is completely governed by commercial forces governed by men. And so is the business that the movement against prostitution and pornography are working

against. Feminist discussions are ever so intertwined with discussions of capitalism and visions of another world. If feminists don't lift the discussion to a more societal level we might end up isolated and blaming each other for having different standpoints.

The queer movement that is today growing within feminist theory is in many ways working to break the tendencies within the feminist movement to stay within the same "ether or discussion" that they are somehow trying to break. The queer movement is saying porn is good, if it is made for me. And I am a feminist but I will dress in small skirts and fulfil all the feminine attributes but I will not see myself, or act, as a victim. There is a huge business mostly distributed through the Internet of queer products, magazines, calendars and books. To disturb the system of binary opposition by using the images that we are used too se, but twisting it is to change the system itself. A queer porn calendar may at first seem confusingly similar to a commercial one, but at a closer look we will see that the images are not of passive "come and get me" women and active men, but of women with male attributes and men with female, or women attracting or attracted to women, without the male gaze present.

The movement that is to a large extent based in the Internet of separatist groups and forums creating other images of men, women and sexuality is growing. And their work is spreading to the whole feminist movement and theory. The possibilities of connecting yourself to the people that you want to meet and spread the information that you want to spread is in many ways strengthening the queer movement, if it's only to meet people that are like you or if it's to find another gay couple that are also looking to have a child.

But the possibilities of closed forums in the Internet also bring many threats to women. The business in trafficking of women and children for sexual purposes is growing dramatically. Every year around 800 000 people are trafficked across borders and around 80% of them are women and girls. The buying of women and girls is mostly based in the Internet. The paradox of the openness and closed ness of the Internet brings with it great risks. Young girls are loading up

images of themselves in what they might think is a closed forum but if they ever want to take the image down they find it impossible as it has spread without control as the Internet is disturbing one of the most basic binary oppositions of society, the one of public and private.