



The Hairless Imperative: Gender, Power, Sexopolitics and Depilation

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1 Introduction

Let us cease to speak about men and women and simply say, hairy or smooth body [...]. These are not details but crucial sexopolitical signifiers [...]. (Preciado 2013: 227)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Western society retains high-tech techniques for the deciphering of gender. Besides assessing the size and shape of the genitalia, medical procedures enable differentiation through identifying X or Y chromosomes and the measurement of hormone levels within the body. (Preciado 2013: 227) However, public gender recognition depends predominantly on someone's bodily comportment, anatomical appearance, voice timbre and the degree and style of visible body hair, all of which can be altered. Every day we invest in our bodies through routines of care, dieting, sports, styling and dressing. Bodily practices are deeply embedded in Western societies. Although they play a significant role in constructing and maintaining the male and female gender as social categories, they often go unremarked.

The 2010 performance *The Brown Bear: Neither Particular Nor General* by the artists A.K. Burns and Catherine Hubbard explored questions of individual body styling, aesthetics and choice as attached to body hair in a societal context. In a hair salon, open to the public, the artists offered shaving and haircutting services to their audiences in order to collectively form their appearances. By means of *The Brown Bear*, I aim at examining what role body hair plays in maintaining the cultural concept of 'acceptable' femininity and at exploring practical resistances to this attribution within the arts. Although practices of body hair removal are often seen as trivial, they are in fact, borrowing from Bordo, "complex crystallisations of culture" and "the logical (if extreme) manifestations of anxieties and fantasies fostered by our culture". (2003: 15)

Within the framework of this text, I take as a starting point both the normative nature of female body hair removal and the motives which *The Brown Bear* reveals through its exploration of the formation of individual appearance to analyse how femininity is both collectively and individually constructed and maintained through



cultural practices. My research is informed by Michel Foucault's concepts of 'disciplinary power' and 'docility' as well as Susan Bordo's application of these concepts in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, in which she examines the link between excessive body modification practices (e.g. anorexia) and common ideas about femininity. Looking at normative body hair removal in the disciplinary society serves as a model to understand the relation of the body to power. Since "[f]emininity [...] depends on the seemingly willing acceptance of various norms and practices" (Bordo 2003: 167), Foucault's analysis gives insight into how the social order actualises itself and becomes incorporated within the human body.

In the context of normative body hair removal, gender as a general category of analysis seems vital to social criticism. Although the performance was conducted in a *queer* context with the aim to generate a room for reflection on queer aesthetics and formation of the self, it also reveals a great deal about hegemonic understandings of normative appearance and the work which is necessary to sustain this appearance. I will refer to Judith Butler and her conception of gender as a result of performative actions to understand 'femininity' and its role partly within the performance but particularly on a societal level. When it comes to specific regulative discourses and normalised representations surrounding the complex body hair, her concept of social intelligibility is helpful. Since one's epistemological perspective is always dependent on the locatedness and limitations of embodied existence, my focus will lie on how femininity is maintained in the context of Western society and how hegemonic power relations influence and benefit from this production.

My perception of the performance *The Brown Bear* is based on photographs, invitation cards, the press release and the webpages of both artists as well as their hosting organisation Recess. The photographs taken throughout the entire exhibition duration by Nick Johnson and published via the online image hosting service Flickr give a vivid insight into the procedures and intricacies of the performance. Text-based material from the different websites outlines the artistic intentions and organisational issues. Two reviews on *The Brown Bear* were published on the online platforms of the contemporary art magazines *Artforum* and *ArtSlant*. Both authors foreground that the artists challenge the act of looking. (Carlin 2010; Schultz 2010)

Concerning normative and gendered practices of depilation, several empirical studies have been conducted at different times since the early 1990s in the United States (Basow 1991; Fahs 2011), Australia (Tiggemann and Hodgson 2008; Tiggemann and Lewis 2004), Great Britain (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003; Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi 2005) and Germany. (Hahn 2016) Most of these studies were realised from a quantitative sociological perspective. The studies refer mainly to Caucasian women and hardly touch on differences of class and race. All authors agree that throughout the



course of the twentieth century the hairless female body has been established as a cultural norm in Western society and that the removal of hair from most body parts (apart from the head hair) is considered a basic part of good grooming. The studies provide data on the pervasiveness of the hairless norm and identify the reasons why individual women stick to it. The results of all studies are similar: A majority of women shave most body parts for reasons of attractiveness, hygiene and 'femininity'. Additionally, Tiggemann and Lewis have illuminated the connection between attitudes towards women's body hair and disgust sensitivity. (2004: 382) The focus of Fahs' study is on heteronormative policing of body hair norms and includes an experiment in which 34 college women from a women's studies course at a public university in the United States were assigned to not remove their leg and underarm hair for ten weeks. A subsequent report was made on the reactions and behaviours they triggered. (2011: 451) Other authors have focused on the various meanings which are associated with hair on different body parts. In 1987, Anthony Synnott accumulated a 'sociology of hair' elaborating on its social meanings depending on gender and body part. On the basis of Foucault's notion of the 'technologies of the self' and female pubic hair as a taboo, Smelik conceptualises the body as a project to be worked on, controlled and perfected in order to support an individual's self-identity. (2015)

On the basis of this, my research interest lies in how different elements of *The Brown Bear* render visible internalised and normalised cultural practices. Following this introduction, a detailed description of the working installation gives insight into the spatial and aesthetic setup as well as the performative procedures. Within this setup, hair functions as a mode of self-expression and communication. In line with this claim, the third section of this paper sheds light on the role of body hair in the construction of identity. The focus is put on the contribution of body hair removal to the construction of what is considered to be feminine aesthetic and behaviour. Judith Butler's ideas about gender as a result of performative and repetitive actions prepare the ground to look at the mundane practice of hair removal as an integral part in producing the contemporary female body and maintaining its femininity. Subsequently, a brief historical overview on the cultural construction of body hair removal as a normative and taken-for-granted practice in Western culture highlights the role of dominant imagery and representations. This is by no means intended to be an exhaustive historical account. The aim is to shed light on values and perspectives of female body hair and their correlation in power relations within society. To gain an understanding of the dynamics between social norms and stereotyped representations on the one hand, and cultural practices and processes of subjectification on the other, the analyses of Michel Foucault give an illuminating insight into the mechanisms of power at play. In the fourth section, I elaborate on Foucault's concepts of discipline and docility and how these can guide us towards understanding the cultural practice of female body hair removal within a complex network of practices, institutions, and technologies. Both, section three and



four, spotlight the theoretical concepts and ideas rather than discussing them extensively. On the basis of this, the fifth section looks at different discourses, practices, representations, artefacts and disciplinary strategies which seek to mark those who do not comply with shaving norms and thus exhibit deviant behaviour. In the same way, acts of depilation are an exclusively private practice in Western societies, the results of which, that is individual appearance, are however phenomena of enormous personal and public significance. Several dichotomies are directly or indirectly brought up by the performance *The Brown Bear* and will be further explained in the subsections: Visible body hair acts as a constitutive feature in the visual recognition of male and female, of illness and health, of child and adult, of normative heterosexual practice and deviance and finally of human, animal and machine. Cultural discourses surrounding these dichotomies contribute to the compliance of individuals within social imperatives. Taking the non-profit setting of *The Brown Bear* and its objectives as a point of departure, section six looks at some economic entanglements of feminine depilation. Through this network of social pressures – in this case through the compulsory feminine practice of shaving, epilating and waxing most body parts and buying the required products – the female body becomes part of the capitalist market. With regard to this, subsequently, I examine the degree to which the pervasiveness of beauty standards stands in relation to the social position of a subject. Finally, the performance itself is put back at the centre. What forms of resistance are proposed by the artwork and what potentialities does it open up? This last section aims at opening up further perspectives, questions and entanglements without claiming to deal with them exhaustively.

2 *The Brown Bear: Neither Particular, Nor General*

Between October 28 and December 11, 2010, the artists A. K. Burns and Katherine Hubbard realised their social sculpture *The Brown Bear: Neither Particular, Nor General* in the framework of the residency programme *Session* conducted by the New York City interdisciplinary art space Recess. The artists were given a storefront space which they used to conflate an artistic project with an experimental hair salon. *The Brown Bear* is the first collaborative work between Burns and Hubbard. Burns can be described as an interdisciplinary artist who works predominantly with sculpture, video and social actions to explore the implications of sexuality, power and language and how these can be interpreted. She is one of the founders of *W.A.G.E. (Working Artists and the Greater Economy)* – an artist activist group. In her artistic practice Katherine Hubbard combines sculpture, fibre, costume and performance with an interest in the establishment and (re-)definition of power structures. They share an interest in the body as site of political and cultural negotiation. Since 2010, Burns co-published the feminist queer arts



magazine *RANDY*, the first issue of which featured images of a performance by Katherine Hubbard.

In their hair salon, the artists aimed at creating a space which explored the question “What does *it* look like?”. The room was divided diagonally by a wall which cut the white-painted space in a triangular shape. The smallest corner located opposite from the window and front door was lined with mirrors creating an infinite reflection within which a copying machine was placed. Wooden shelves which contained archival material that the artists had collected from national LGBT archives “drawing from [their] own experiences, feminist hysterics and notions of queer aesthetics” were placed alongside the walls. (A.K. Burns’ website) The visual material included photographs taken from fetish porn and newspaper clippings addressing body hair, hair styles and aesthetics. Additionally, the archive contained texts such as Liza Cowan’s 1973 treatise “What the Well-Dressed Dyke Will Wear” and Gertrude Stein’s 1922 short story “Miss Furr and Miss Skeene.” (Carlin 2010)

A beauty couch lined with holographic foil as well as a styling chair covered by a huge black and white barber cape were placed in the middle of the room, thus the room exhibited a combination of typical interiors of hairdressing salons, barber’s shops, waxing studios or beauty parlours in general, while slightly changing the aesthetics of the objects. A mobile metal drawer held various tools for hair removal, trimming and styling, such as scissors, razors, blades, brushes, combs, hair dyes and tinctures. Since the glass of the shop window was opaque only silhouettes could be recognised from the outside.

Within this space, Burns and Hubbard offered various sorts of free body hair modifications to visitors ranging from “haircuts, fades, do’s-for-a-day, weaves, small dye jobs, body shaving” to “armpit augmentation.” (Recess website) Additionally, Burns and Hubbard provided a series of sculptural head dressings and wigs, produced before and during the installation hours which were exhibited on the walls and against the storefront window as wearable art works on loan. The artists specifically encouraging special requests and the modifications were conducted collaboratively in conversation with the audience. Renouncing all visual references and mirrors, they intended to make the process of styling a collective practice and experience. Without the possibility to verify the results in the mirror, those who were getting a shave or hair cut had to fully rely on the artists’ craft. The copying machine in the corner was used to duplicate and take home the pictures and other materials from the visual and theoretical archive “of ontological signifiers around the formation of self” that Burns and Hubbard had gathered. The hair remains were accumulated around the copying machine in the mirrored corner of the room throughout the duration of the installation. Each Saturday, Burns and Hubbard invited another artist to coinhabit their installation and contribute a



work or practice which prioritised media other than visual arts, such as poetry, food, scent and sound. In correspondence to the title, the artists created mixed media collages as invitation cards for each guest presence, which featured at least one cut-out image of a brown bear, of its body parts or fur.

3 Femininity and Body Hair Removal

3.1 The Role of Body Hair in Identity Construction

According to the artists, the purpose of *The Brown Bear* is to open up a space for the “exploration of ‘queer’ being, and how it is formed, affirmed and developed into cultural signifiers.” (Recess’ website) The working installation served as space for gathering and for exploring collectively paradigms of appearance that assign a central role in the constitution of the self to body hair. To make sense of the claim and positioning of the work, it is vital to look at body hair removal as a cultural practice. How does the presence or absence of body hair contribute to the formation of identity and what role do social power relations play within this process?

According to Kellner, in contemporary Western society identity is increasingly linked to style, to the production of an image, and thus to appearance:

While the locus of modern identity revolved around one's occupation, one's function in the public sphere (or family), postmodern identity revolves around leisure, centred on looks, images, and consumption. Modern identity was a serious affair that involved fundamental choices that defined who one was (profession, family, political identifications, and so on), while postmodern identity is a function of leisure and is grounded in play, in gamesmanship, in producing an image. (1995: 242)

As body hair is continually growing, the possibility of regularly changing its appearance through different techniques of grooming and styling is inherent. As the results of these modifications are visible to the public, body hair can be considered an important medium for communicating identity. Consequently, identities could theoretically – and at least to a certain extent – be chosen freely through acts of self-transformation and modifications of the body which comprise choices of fashion, cosmetics, diction and style.

However, appearance generated by the presence, absence, intensity and style of body hair cannot be conceived outside of normative and at times stereotyped ascriptions. Bordo stresses the embeddedness of such practices into a cultural and historical context and the corresponding power relations: “[T]he body that we experience and conceptualise is always *mediated* by constructs, associations, images of a



cultural nature.” (2003: 35) Even though hair modification does also play a role in the visual embodiment of subcultural, religious and political belonging, today the establishment of normative gender appearance seems the most pervasive one. (Synnott 1987) The gendered nature of normative body hair removal for understanding contemporary Western society has been brought to attention by several authors drawing, for instance, from the experience of a majority of women who claim to feel the obligation to shave their legs and arm pits. (Tiggemann and Lewis 2004: 381)

How is gender established as a structuring category and what role does body hair play in this process? In her analysis, Judith Butler conceptualises the category of gender as a product of ‘performative’ actions rather than as a biological essence or psychological truth. (1999: 33) She understands gender as a system of rules, conventions, social norms and institutional practices. Through their regularised and constrained repetition, norms get internalised in the form of bodily style, representation and public dramatisation. (Butler 1999: 84 ff.) As a result, the subject which historically and culturally specific norms claim to describe in the first place is performatively produced – gender is enacted through linguistic and bodily actions, through clothing, movement and posture. By means of such performative adaption a subject acquires social intelligibility and political recognition. (Butler 1999: 23 f.)

In Western society, gender and sexuality are closely linked. The term heteronormativity describes a societal order in which a binary understanding of gender and heterosexuality are constitutive of each other. A person who is assigned the female sex at birth is supposed to identify with the female gender, act ‘feminine’ and desire her ‘complementary’, that is a male-identified person. Butler describes the heteronormative order as a powerful imperative which places biological sex of either male *or* female, gender identity and sexual orientation (desire) in a naturalised and causal relationship. (1999: 64 ff.)

In regard to this, femininity (and masculinity) refer to behaviour and physical expressions that are used, learned and incorporated to announce female (or respectively male) identity. However, practices that are deemed feminine can be performed by persons regardless of their gender. On the basis of Butler’s understandings, Preciado describes normative practices of body hair removal as a means to construct and maintain femininity as biopolitical and somatic fiction, thus stressing the artificial nature of normative femininity. He understands the biopolitical ideal of femininity as “transcendental essence from which are suspended aesthetics of gender, normative codes of visual recognition, and immaterial psychological convictions.” (2013: 69) As will be shown, the removal of body hair can be understood as a standard of feminine comportment and accountably feminine behaviour. As body hair is used to announce female identity within the heteronormative order, I understand its normative removal



as a practice to give the concept of femininity a material reality. To be clear, this does not deny physical differences between people but rather stresses the assignment of a position within society based on the judgement of actions and physical appearance and how this is linked to power distribution.

Today, a feminine look is, among other things, characterised by an everlasting youthful appearance and by a smooth and hairless skin. This suggests that the female body is not acceptable in its natural state within Western societies. It is a body that needs altering to become understood as fully feminine although body hair genuinely is a sign of sexual maturity in humans and its removal is not universal across cultures. (Tiggemann and Lewis 2004: 381) Rather than having 'suprahistorical' essence or 'spirit', practices that are considered feminine and those values and meanings that are imputed to body hair vary across time and context. As identity markers are a product of constant changes in ways of representing and acting upon the body, Ramsey et al. stress the contingent nature of identity markers associated with different body-altering behaviours. They observed that the "practice of depilation for artistic, medical and cultural reasons has fluctuated throughout the ages and across civilisations." (Ramsey et al 2009, cited by Williamson 2015: 1) Historically, there are accounts of both general and gendered hair removal practices in various cultures including those of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome as well as of the Trobriand Islands, Uganda, South America and Turkey. (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003: 333)

The cultural definition of femininity prescribes certain behaviours onto people that are based on a set of aesthetic and behavioural codes which are supposed to maximise differences between genders. The enactment of gender in relation to hair style heavily relies on the construction of a female and male look, and accordingly the concepts of femininity and masculinity, functioning as opposites. Bordo points out that "[m]asculinity' and 'femininity,' at least since the nineteenth century and arguably before, have been constructed through a process of mutual exclusion." (2003: 174) Based on male and female gender being symbolically categorised as 'opposite' sexes, hair growth on different body parts is understood to indicate what side of the gender binary a body is placed on. Most humans have hair or hair follicles with the potential to grow hair all over their bodies, the distribution and thickness of growth depending on hormonal levels, ethnicity and other factors. (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003: 335) However, gender construction in relation to body hair illustrates how "these minor physiological differences of degree become major social distinctions of kind as the opposite sexes symbolically maximise their differences." (Synnott 1987: 391 f.) It requires work i.e. the aesthetic appropriation of the body to transform the social distinctions between 'men' and 'women' into a starkly visible physiological difference. Smelik claims that due to its 'marketability' the gendered nature of body hair modification and the female hairlessness imperative have been progressing in recent



years, towards a comprehensive, cultural tendency to groom, regardless of culturally recognised gender identity. She emphasises that since nowadays men also groom and depilate most of their body hair, they have also become subject to ‘technologies of the self.’ (2015: 240) However, in her study, Astrid Hahn proves that for men hair removal is still a matter of personal choice rather than obligation, and contravention is not socially sanctioned. (2016: 9)

Since the commercial introduction of products for feminine hair removal, the assumptions (a) of understanding gender identities as opposites negatively constituting each other and (b) that visible body hair is masculine and must thus be eradicated on female bodies, have been produced and reproduced through advertisement campaigns. (Hope 1982: 98) To name just two examples: In 2001, a Super-Max 3 women’s shaver ad proclaimed: “With summer weeks away, the last thing you want is legs like your dad’s.” (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003: 335) And more recently, the waxing strips brand Veet advised female audiences not to “risk dudeness”.

3.2 Normalisation in Historical Context

Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, within social interactions and media representations the recognition of gender difference is based mainly on visual criteria, one of which is body hair. (Degele, Bethmann and Heckemeyer 2011: 3; Preciado 2013: 227) In Western culture, the strongly normative character of hair removal for women is a quite recent development starting in the beginning of the twentieth century. Although already in Renaissance art and onwards, painters depicted the female body as hairless, exceptions being pornographic art of the seventeenth and eighteenth century where a pubic fleece would be used as a sign for lascivious sexuality, scholars suggest that hair removal was not yet a normative practice among women. (Smelik 2015: 242)

Analysing instructional and product-based advertisements (in the magazines *Harper’s Bazaar* and *McCall’s*) and articles in catalogues, health texts and beauty books in the United States between 1914 and 1945, Christine Hope concludes that before World War I most Western women did not remove their body hair. (1982: 93) However, by 1945, the removal of underarm and leg hair in women was established as a conventional practice. Between the First and Second World War depilatory advertisers recurrently used images of hairless women as the beauty ideal while instructing viewers on how to use razors and depilatories by elaborating the resulting social and medical benefits. Hope distinguishes four periods that manifest the gradual transition in cultural standards of beauty: Named after the predominant beauty ideal in women prior to 1915, during the phase of “The Ivory Complexion” visible dark body hair other than on the head was already seen as undesirable on women, but due to the clothing fashions at that



time it remained largely invisible anyhow. Between 1915 and 1919, depilatory advertisers successively targeted female underarm hair and hair on the limbs as ‘ugly’ and ‘unwanted’ while stressing the fashion- and hygiene-based appeals of removal and thus expanding the potential market with what Hope calls “The Great Underarm Campaign”. Oddly, according to this analysis, advertisement campaigns were first to publish instructions for removing body hair and these suggestions were only being incorporated into health articles and beauty books with a temporal delay. In the phase of “Coming to Terms with Leg Hair” (1920-1940) mainly product-based advertisements continued to be published. Despite uncertainties concerning the removal of leg hair based on the injuries that razors and depilatories inflicted to users, removing hair from arms and legs became increasingly conventional. Finally, between 1941 and 1945 advertisers carried a “A Minor Assault on Leg Hair” (1941-1945) and prevalently published instructional campaigns with a focus on the leg as an object of beauty in magazines. By 1964, 98% of American women surveyed between the ages of 15 and 44, regularly shaved or depilated their arm and leg hair, suggesting that the instructions and images circulated by advertisers and beauty books in the first half of the twentieth century had largely been normalised by that time. (1982: 97)

During the 1960s and 1970s the objectification of the female body became a central point in feminist critique. As Bordo points out, “[a]ll the cultural paraphernalia of femininity, of learning to please visually and sexually, through practices of the body – media imagery, beauty pageants, high heels, girdles, makeup, simulated orgasm – were seen as crucial in maintaining gender domination.” (2003: 182) Although, within this context, hairiness was shortly associated with bohemian or countercultural lifestyle, later findings indicate that these resistances against shaving and grooming no longer persisted. (Fahs 2011: 435) Historically, those body parts which are targeted by the hairless norm have been mostly correlative with clothing fashions (except for during the 1930s and 40s) and public visibility – as soon as women’s fashion trends reveal more skin the respective body parts need to be smooth.

Since then, several authors in the United States (Basow 1991), Great Britain (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003) and Australia (Tiggemann and Kenyon 1998; Tiggemann and Lewis 2004) have supplied empirical evidence for a gendered hairlessness norm which shows both in individual body-altering behaviours and general attitudes towards female body hair. All studies support the supposition that a majority of women in Western cultures remove their underarm and leg hair. In their 2004 investigation carried out with a sample of 198 undergraduate students at Flinders University in South Australia, Tiggemann and Lewis found that among women, 98% removed their leg hair and 96% their underarm hair, most commonly by shaving or, less often, by waxing at least weekly. (2004: 384) More recently, pubic hair is increasingly targeted by the hairless norm. (Tiggemann and Hodgson 2008)



Today, the extensive visualisation of the body, including very intimate body parts, has become part of contemporary visual culture. First considered in the study by Tiggemann and Hodgson in 2008, the removal of pubic hair seems to be a relatively novel phenomenon that is increasingly incorporated in shaving and depilation routines. Two thirds of the sample removed their pubic hair beyond the bikini line for reasons of sexual attractiveness, femininity, self-enhancement and normative factors. (Tiggemann and Hodgson 2008: 895) It is important to mention that age is a considerable factor for the survey results: The younger the respondents the more sensitive are they to the hairless norm. (Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi 2003: 405)

Smelik suggests that visual pornography played a major role in this process. (2015) During the Cold War governmental and economic regulations concerning pornography and prostitution changed. Consequently, the first North American 'porn' magazine to be sold regularly at newspaper kiosks, Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* was released in 1953. The period from the beginning of the 1970s until the mid-1980s (also referred to as the 'Golden Age of Porn') constitutes a production boom and gradual normalisation of filmic, pornographic representations: early porn movies such as *Deep Throat*, made in 1972 by Gerard Damiano and starring Linda Lovelace, were widely commercialised, received international attention from film critics and the general public and grossed millions of dollars. (Preciado 2013: 28) However, until the 1990s female pubic hair was present and a distinctive characteristic of pornographic representation. The depiction of a hairless and *visible* vulva (instead of just a blank area, covered by a leave or body part, as had been a practice in the visual arts) is relatively new. (Smelik 2015: 242 f.) Genital depilation ultra-exposes the complexity of female genitals with a clitoris, minor and major labia, and a vagina. As a result of the vulva becoming fully visible, thus comparable to porn representations and rateable along criteria of hegemonic beauty conceptions, genital cosmetic surgeries to make the labia and clitoris look smaller and more youthful have increased. (Smelik 2015: 245)

At the beginning of the twenty-first century with continuing normalisation of the porn industry, pop-cultural representations are mainly in accord with the hairless norm: "[A]dverts and social commentaries present hairless pubic areas as glamorous, sexy and liberating, and indisputably hairless genitals for both sexes are presented as a porn industry standard for genital beauty." (Cokal 2007, cited by Williamson 2015: 4) In line with this, Tiggemann and Hodgson observed in their 2008 study among graduate students in Australia that the degree of compliance with normative beauty standards in women correlates with exposure to particular formats of popular media. These namely are fashion magazines and TV shows like *Sex and the City* and *Big Brother*. Nevertheless, it could not be determined whether hair removal was caused by media exposure or women who shaved were more drawn the consumption of examined media. (2008)



4 Power and the Body: Body Hair as a Means of Social Control

A central aspect of the performance *The Brown Bear* is the role the artists ascribe to a collective body in the formation of identity. The individual look is not generated in a societal void but draws from a subject's context, within which it elicits associations and reactions. Historically, in the West, media images and advertisement campaigns have played an integral role in establishing hairlessness as a normative ideal of femininity. They provide a relatively narrow framing of appropriate bodies which feeds into the perception of specific norms and normality. Exploring the hairless female body against the background of institutionalised discourses and cultural practices, Foucault's ideas about the relation between knowledge and power and its disciplining effect give an illuminating insight into the mechanisms and pathways of power at play.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault uses the analogy of the panopticon to visualise how power manifests itself within the human body by means of daily and habitual practices through which individuals engage in auto-surveillance, self-discipline, and thus self-subjugation. (1990: 140 ff.) The idea of a panopticon comes from the English philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham. In the eighteenth century he developed the plan for a new prison architecture enabling the highest possible degree of surveillance with minimal effort: The concentric arrangement of prison cells around an observation tower with panoramic windows should enable the guards to control the prisoners at all times. Within this structure, detainees can easily be individualised and constantly supervised. (Foucault 1995: 200) From the perspective of the inmate in the cell, however, it is not possible to see whether one is being monitored by the guards in the tower or not. On the basis of this disciplinary architecture, Foucault concludes that by creating the feeling of constant exposure, no matter if there are guards in the tower or not, the inmates will constantly exercise self-surveillance. (1995: 201 f.) To put it in Foucault's words, "[v]isibility is a trap." (1995: 200) Detached from its specific penal use, on a societal level this figure of political technology helps to demonstrate how disciplinary power is no longer mainly exercised through physical restraint and coercion issued by an authority, but power is employed rather indirectly, in non-authoritarian, non-conspiratorial, and non-orchestrated ways. The feeling of being constantly and critically observed causes individuals to regulate their actions in accordance with what is deemed lawful, normal and acceptable. According to Foucault, the human body and mind are no fixed entities but are malleable. They can be altered and 'perfected', involving repetitive practices of aesthetically modifying or maintaining the body, for example through dieting, physical exercise, beauty care and hair-styling, removal of body hair and cosmetic surgery. Using the profession of a soldier as an example, according to Foucault, the particular social role of a person is something that



can be made; out of formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit. (1995: 135)

This understanding marks an important conceptual change to the 'sovereign order' that was prevalent in the eighteenth century: Instead of a centralised and linear power which is exercised through coercive law and negative mandate, disciplinary power works as a dynamic network of non-centralised forces through light, subtle coercion 'from below'. It thus constitutes a functional mechanism which regulates the physical body and is supervised by society as a whole:

There is no risk, therefore, that the increase of power created by the panoptic machine may degenerate into tyranny; the disciplinary mechanism will be democratically controlled, since it will be constantly accessible 'to the great tribunal committee of the world. (Foucault 1995: 207)

Foucault asserts that different categories such as gender, sexuality, race, ability, age and appearance are produced *through* specific discourses and forms of knowledge (e.g. religion, medicine, law, science, therapy and the media). This process is not neutral but provides the ground for the establishment of norms against which difference can be recognised and measured. As something that designates the socially worthy, statistically average, scientifically healthy and personally desirable, norms become an important factor in the formation of the self. (Foucault 1995: 144) It takes work to achieve the state which is conceived as normality.

However, power does not only operate through the production of knowledge, but also through the creation of the desire to conform to the norms which are established by this knowledge. Having internalised disciplinary power as desire, individuals engage in perpetuating prevailing relations of dominance and subordination. (Pylypa 1998: 27) Thus, power does not infiltrate from the outside, but it rather dwells within every person. Self-surveillance contributes to the creation of 'docile' individuals striving for conformity. "A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" according to what is socially and economically profitable. (Foucault 1995: 136) By regulating and correcting themselves according to prevailing norms and forms of selfhood and subjectivity (including gender and sexuality), individuals contribute to maintaining the societal order. (Bordo 2003: 27) Hence, the positioning of the body within this network of forces is ambivalent: Bodies figure as product and producer of society at the same time. On the one hand, people are the embodiment of social norms and on the other hand, they are active bodies that produce and reproduce themselves through social structures and conditions. Depending on eating and working habits, sports, body modification, clothing among others, the body is created and creates itself within social contexts. Individual bodies become subjects.



Bordo uses this understanding of power for her analysis of the politics of appearance which “aris[e] out of and reproduce[e] normative feminine practices of our culture, practices which train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being *experienced* in terms of power and control.” (2003: 27) Focusing on the body as site of subjugation, Foucault’s ideas shed light on how individuals contribute to their own oppression through self-regulation. The above described power-knowledge relations are neither arbitrary nor neutral. Closely intertwined with contemporary consumer capitalism, particular body images are produced and normalised “to serve prevailing relations of dominance and subordination.” (2003: 26) On the one hand, individual bodies are depicted as deficient and in need of ‘correction’. On the other, individualistic, neoliberal politics construct the problem-solving as an individual responsibility instead of something that needs to be tackled within bigger social structures and through collective actions. Additionally, the devaluation of reproductive labour – the care for bodies (one’s own body as much as those of others) – as a feminine field of activity serves to uphold gendered power relations. These processes and conceptions “regulat[e] the most intimate and minute elements of the construction of space, time, desire, embodiment” (2003: 27) through the most mundane practices and bodily habits of everyday life. The feeling of being under a constant and critical gaze causes individuals to regulate their actions, appearance and conduct in accordance with what is deemed lawful, normal and acceptable. Through social risks, some of which will be explored in the following sections, the care of the self is relegated to the realm of an individual’s responsibility. In this context, to accord with the norm can get incorporated into the individual’s desire for well-being and become a matter of ‘self-care’. Thus, the rules governing the construction of contemporary femininity become inscribed in and visible on the hairless body.

5 Complex Body Hair: Discourses, Practices, Representations, Artefacts

All the mechanisms of power [...], even today, are disposed around the abnormal individual, to brand him and to alter him... (Foucault 1995: 199 f.)

As soon as a body abandons the practices that society deems masculine or feminine, it drifts gradually toward pathology. (Preciado 2013: 256)

Body hair polices a myriad of boundaries which play a decisive role in the construction of fundamental categories and specific moral discourses. Its status can be described as liminal: hair grows in a precarious in-between-zone that is ‘outside the individual’ but not yet ‘the external world’. Visible body hair is used to differentiate between male and female, between illness and health, between child and adult, between normative heterosexual practice and deviance and between machine, human and animal. As power in Western culture often actualises itself through dualistic and hierarchical grids (Bordo



2003: 234), these dichotomies are vital to understanding the normative power of female body hair removal and its role in transforming and subjecting the self.

What social ramifications do individuals face when they transgress from shaving norms? Reactions from the social environment of women who did not shave for ten weeks in the framework of the experiment by Breanne Fahs reveal the intricate relation between the physical and social body. (2011) As visible body hair on women is conceptualised as deviant, women who do not conform to the gendered normative practices of depilation face different forms of public sanctioning. Documented reactions range from “ridicule and abuse by comments that question their femininity, sexuality, hygiene and morality” to “assum[ing] aggressiveness, animalistic traits, poor education, or mental health issues.” (Williamson 2015: 3) These stereotypes are being reproduced in popular media, such as gossip magazines and commercials, within public institutions like the clinic or beauty salon, in interpersonal encounters between family members, friends and strangers. Being marked as deviant, those who choose to or involuntarily diverge from expected gender performances are subject to demonstrations of power in their daily lives and are targeted with disciplinary strategies designed to neutralise their deviance. Such loathing comments and associations generate shame and pathologise healthy female bodies by positioning them outside the normative, public society. The classification of what is conceived as ‘normal’ relies on community-wide compliance. Only if the definition of ‘normality’ is shared, it becomes possible to identify and punish the ‘deviant’. This knowledge is perpetuated through different discourses, some of which are directly referenced or indirectly brought up within the performance. In the following sections, I would like to spotlight these specific discourses, practices, representations and artefacts which surround the complex of body hair.

5.1 Anticipating Gazes

What Foucault describes as panoptic arrangement programmes contributing to the creation of docile bodies, manifests itself in the fact that female bodies are culturally required to exist first and foremost for others. Having internalised the socially constructed link between shaving or smooth skin and the feeling of attractiveness and ‘proper’ femininity, women discipline their bodies to manage not only their own but more specifically others’ expectations and anxieties. The feeling of one’s own body being constantly on public display contributes to the desire to conform. In *Ways of Seeing* John Berger put this phenomenon of anticipating the imagined preferences and desires of others as follows:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. [...] From earliest childhood she has been thought and



persuaded to survey herself continually. And so, she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. (2008: 46)

This is not true for men and women alike. The auto-objectification of female bodies is structured along gendered lines and oriented towards the heterosexual dating market. Berger goes on:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (2008: 47)

In her 1975 essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey describes this exhibitionist role of the female form in terms of the ‘male gaze’. Within these dynamics, female bodies fulfil a double function: They are passive and are being observed whilst actively trying to conform to projected fantasies. The marketing strategies for depilatory products confirm that the male surveyor is crucial to the representation of the female body. For example, the razor manufacturer Gillette uses different renderings of the song “Venus” as soundtrack to advertise Venus safety razors, the product line for women. Sung by a female sounding voice, the chorus states: “Well, I’m your Venus, I’m your fire, at your desire.”

The women who participated in Fahs’ experiment were ‘individualised’ as deviant and subject to criticism from family members, friends and co-workers. Participants growing their body hair reported being confronted with concerns such as “What if guys saw it?” and questions whether their husbands or boyfriends approved of their actions. (2011: 461) Bordo also points to the contradictory requirements towards their appearance with which women are confronted: While there is a general requirement to look attractive and well-groomed, women have asserted that if they “do not efface their femaleness, they may be seen as inviting, ‘flaunting’” to men. (2003: 6) Even if women are silent or verbalising the contrary, the mere presence of a female body in the public sphere seems to invite comment. This “work[s] to disclaim male ownership of the body and its desires.” (Bordo 2003: 6)

Nevertheless, I do not intend to ‘essentialise’ men as sexual brutes and cultural dominators, a conclusion which would rely heavily on the dualism of the active oppressor and passive oppressed. Cultural images and ideology are pervasive in the sense that all members of a society are vulnerable to them. Men as much as women contribute to upholding power structures within networks of practices, institutions and technologies. Despite the anticipation of and orientation towards the male gaze,



Williamson stresses that women's female friends fulfil a much stronger role in policing the hairless norm than (male) sexual partners do through their comments. (2015: 3) Take, for example, the case of Lynn, participant of Fahs' experiment who reported being humiliated among her friends:

My friends took a picture of us all lifting one arm in the air, with me (and my hairy armpit) in the middle. They all used me as some kind of tourist attraction. I laughed it off, but I'm still a little uneasy about how uncomfortable women are with body hair. Body hair is so rare, no one has it! And when someone does, they become a circus act! (Fahs 2011: 462)

The danger of arousing disgust and negative feelings in close persons linked to one's own body is a sure way to keep women continuously shaving or waxing and buying the necessary products. (Tiggemann and Lewis 2004: 386) The all-encompassing gaze of power emanates from the mirror, television, magazines, social media, family and friends. Power is found whenever limbs are not covered by clothing, in product designs and palettes which mirror ideas of physical beauty. Others' and specifically direct and imagined male opinions on the 'feminine' look and comportment figure as a central source of self-esteem. In Fahs' experiment, even for those women who felt empowered by growing body hair, the empowerment was based on men's support, namely their male partners' validation. (2011: 464-468) Here, power masks itself as empowerment, but the seeming liberation still remains within given power structures: Women's bodies are nevertheless controlled and possessed by men.

5.2 Hygiene

According to Foucault, the role of hegemonic knowledge is essential in identifying those who do not fit in. Being hairy has come to be perceived as a sign of poor hygiene (Tiggemann and Lewis 2004: 382), but only in women. Two of the studies mentioned above find that a majority of surveyed women remove their body hair to feel cleaner, which suggests that there is a link between perceived hygiene and hairlessness in Western culture. (Tiggemann and Lewis, 2004; Tiggemann and Hodgson 2008: 895) However, unlike other cultures that have recognised body hair as something dirty, this attribution is highly gendered. Whereas leg and underarm hair is conceived acceptable in men and its removal optional, it has come to figure as a taboo in women. (Smelik 2015: 246) Like most substances that cross the boundary of the body (tears being the only exception), body hair is read as a sign of disorder and has the potential to become a pollutant (This terminology is borrowed from Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), later taken up in Julia Kristeva's 1980 *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*). As female body hair is seen as dirty, its removal has become obligatory and incorporated into standards of what is considered 'good



grooming' and a means to avoid causing public offence. (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003: 338) In accordance with the cultural link between hairlessness and common conceptions of hygiene, Tiggemann and Lewis found in their quantitative research among both male and female identified undergraduate students that female body hair elicits disgust in a majority of respondents. (2004: 381) This opens up a morality/immorality dichotomy. Not to arouse public disgust becomes an individual obligation and desire. In the face of increasing rates in pubic hair removal, several scholars have recently pointed out that femininity becomes ever more aligned with youth and pre-pubescence rather than female sexual maturity. (Hope 1882; Tiggemann and Lewis 2004: 385; Smelik 2015: 245) This practice both puts the female body on a maximised sexual display whilst concealing the visual signs of adult sexuality. On a societal level this could indicate an ambivalent, rather disturbing relation to sexuality. Principally, the trend towards full pubic hair removal can also be considered part of the hygienisation and virginisation of the modern body. Even when still rooted in its follicle, the hair can be seen as corporeal waste, as something which has to be removed for its carrier to become a woman, a subject, a human.

As the association between hairlessness and hygiene shows, discourses surrounding female body hair removal are not neutral or value-free but are moralised to a degree that they create a social pressure to continuously shave or wax most body parts including arms, legs and the pubic area even beyond the bikini line (Tiggemann and Hodgson 2008: 895) regardless of potential side effects. Since the health risks of particularly pubic hair removal can be severe, Hope describes normative body hair removal as "one of the [masochistic] rituals of being female in America." (1982: 93) Here, she refers to the component of pain and self-inflicted injury that are inherent to different depilatory methods. Side effects associated with the use of razors, waxing or electrolysis and laser hair removal range from

wrinkling, scarring, discoloration, and growths from X-ray treatments; neuritis (an inflammatory or degenerative lesion of nerves marked especially by pain, sensory disturbances, and impairment or loss of reflexes) from depilatories containing thallium acetate; skin irritations (reddening, rash, swelling) due to depilatory product characteristics or because the product had been left on the skin too long; capillary punctures, infections, severe pitting or scarring and inflammation from inexperienced electrologists who insert needles too deep or use too strong a current; and scarring and pitting from mail-order home electrolysis devices. (Ferrante 1988: 222, cited in Toerien and Wilkinson 2003: 334)

Additionally, acting as physical protective barriers, the absence of body hair, particularly pubic hair, increases the risk of contracting or transmitting sexually transmitted bacterial and viral infections, such as herpes simplex and the human papilloma virus. (Williamson 2015: 2) Despite severe risks and consequences for physical health, most women rather keep shaving than risking being seen with a stubble. (Fahs 2011: 463)



Given that the desire for smooth skin is so strong that it partially leads to self-harming behaviour, the question arises as to what the underlying relationship to the body may be in our culture. All surveys identified a link to self-esteem as a reason for removing hair (Basow 1991; Tiggemann and Hodgson 2008; Tiggemann and Lewis 2004; Toerien and Wilkinson 2003; Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi 2005). As Bordo puts it: "We may be obsessed with our bodies, but we are certainly not accepting of them." (2003: 14 f.) Obsessive body practices can be seen as manifestations of anxieties and fantasies fostered collectively by our culture. With the strong link between femininity and artificial hairlessness, the body must first be altered in order to become a source of self-esteem and social acceptance. Hence, for women, social recognition strongly rests on an appearance which can only be achieved through (more or less) excessive practices of body modification. As such, the body is constructed "as something apart from the true self and as undermining the best efforts of that self" (Bordo 2003: 5) which indicates that the body/mind experience is an agonistic one. Hair removal practices can be understood as one distinctive way in which this dualism is embodied. At a very early age, women learn to manage themselves as ornamental objects, disciplined and shaped specifically for the (sexual) gaze of others. This form of self-objectification is, as Tiggemann insists, closely linked with "body shame, self-loathing, depression and low self-esteem." (Tiggemann 2011, cited by Williamson 2015: 4)

5.3 Under the Scientific Gaze

The clinical condition of hirsutism illustrates a discursive shift from the interactional to the institutional arena. Hypertrichosis, which is the medical term for hirsutism, describes excessive body hair growth in areas where hair is usually absent or minimal, caused by an increased level of androgen. Both in the past and today, those who choose not to or those who are physically unable to follow the norm are individualised as deviants within institutions like clinics or beauty salons.

However, the methods to neutralise deviance have changed over time. In the nineteenth century for example, intensely haired female bodies, e.g. a 'bearded lady', were considered 'freaks' and were consequently presented and spectacularised in front of the public in circuses and freak shows. In 1961 David Ferriman and J.D. Gallwey developed the Ferriman-Gallwey score which assesses normal hair growth along gendered and racial lines, thus establishing hirsutism as clinical condition. Within this framework, the degree of hair on different body parts and ethnic belonging are understood as correlative. Together these factors generate a score indicative of androgen excess which can consequently be treated with electrolysis and hormonal therapy to neutralise testosterone production and insulin regulators. (Preciado 2013: 115) This example shows how institutional arrangements are reflective of the



stereotypical conceptions of gendered body differences and how deviance is neutralised institutionally. The understanding of femininity and masculinity as oppositional states runs down to the level of hormones. Hair growth is designated to testosterone which is conceptualised as a 'male' hormone. Although the degree of hair growth has no effect on the functioning of the body and is not essential to its survival – in contrast to the side effects of depilation – hair being a marker of gender difference, hirsutism has been historically constructed as pathology. The knowledge and assignment of what exceeds 'normal' feminine hair growth is delegated to medical authorities which consequently exercise individualising control by means of binary division, branding and coercive assignment. These techniques work towards the normalisation of bodies. Although Preciado reminds us that there is no empirical truth about female sex but rather “a multiplicity of genetic, hormonal, chromosomal, genital, sexual, and sensual configurations” (2013: 263), bodies which are culturally supposed to look feminine find themselves under the epistemological gaze. They become knowable objects of scientific observation.

5.4 Assumptions about Sexual Orientations

The Brown Bear not only references styles and aesthetics associated with 'queer' and LGBT communities through the images featured in the archive but also through texts directly and indirectly alluding queer desire. While Liza Cowan's treatise “What the Well-Dressed Dyke Will Wear” elaborates on the clothing fashions of the Amazons, a probably exclusively mythological tribe of women-identified women that chose to live in an all-female community and is known for fighting against spreading patriarchy (1973), the short story “Miss Furr and Miss Skeene” written by Gertrude Stein in 1922 excessively and ambiguously features the term gay. In general, particularly Burns artistic oeuvre draws from their rooting in New York's queer community.

The entanglement of the categories of gender and sexuality within Western culture manifests in the policing of body hair norms. Fahs proves in her experiment that body hair practices are not only linked to gender identity (creating 'proper' femininity) and hygiene but also to assumptions about sexual orientations. (2011) A hairless body is read as heterosexual whereas bodies that do not conform to the hairless norm elicit deviant sexual desire, orientation and practice. According to Basow, lesbian and feminist respondents are less likely to shave, although the majority still does to avoid heterosexist and homophobic comments. (1991) Regardless of sexual orientation, the socialisation process teaches all people deemed as women that to comply with heteropatriarchal norms concerning their body appearance grants privilege and power. (Dworkin 1989: 33, cited in Toerien and Wilkinson 2003: 340)



In particular, family members showed harsh heterosexist comments towards women growing their body hair, conceiving this behaviour as a sign of homosexuality or deviant sexual identity or interpreting it as the wish for a transition/sex change. Mona, one of the participants of Fahs' experiment who openly identifies as bi-sexual, reported the following:

Upon talking in class about this assignment, many women that were participating made the remark that someone asked them if they were turning into lesbians. I guess since my mom cannot be worried about me being a lesbian, she just jumped to the next step and asked me if this assignment was really just an excuse because I wanted to get a sex change. In actuality, I am very comfortable being a female and I even had to show her the paper for the assignment to reassure her that I was not just making something up so I could prep for a sex change operation that I do not want. (Fahs 2011: 459 f.)

These assumptions, leading to questioning their relative's identity, can only be perceived as normal and consistent in the context of heteronormative views which prevail in Western society. Female body hair acts as an important signifier of sexual orientation and, if present, poses a threat to the heteronormative and hygienic societal order. Heterosexual orientation is seen as inherent to ideal femininity, and both, femininity and heterosexuality, work as social currencies in the pursuit of acceptance (Fahs 2011: 455) and in the acquisition of social intelligibility. Homophobic and transphobic sanctioning challenges the routinisation of behaviour that diverges from normative expectations of gender and sexuality. In this context of normative passing, principle deviations from the hairless norm are significant and may be described as ideological.

5.5 Hairless Human – Furry Animal

To be recognised as an intelligible human being and political subject, a body is not only required to conform to hegemonic understandings of reproductively and sexually functional female body, but also to reject traces of animality. The title of the performance as well as the invitation cards for guest performances feature the brown bear, an animal which is known for its thick fur. Hairiness is widely associated with animality, bestiality, wild instincts and with untamed, at times aggressive, sexuality, a link that can also be traced throughout Western art history. (Smelik 2015: 243; Greer 1971: 38, cited by Synnott 1987: 395) In this context, the practice of body hair removal can also be read as a desire to reassert a strict boundary between the hairless human and the furry mammal. The trend towards body hair removal from almost all body parts is a technology to achieve an aesthetics that places the human body further away from nature and more on the side of the artificial, of culture. Smelik points out that “[b]y



disciplining and controlling the materiality – hairiness – of the flesh, humans turn away from nature with a touch of disgust.” (2015: 240)

However, Tiggemann and Lewis underline that this link between hairiness and animality is, again, gendered: men’s body hair does not – at least not to the same extent – elicit such associations and if so the connotations are less negative. (2004: 386) Women are encouraged to suppress aspects of their vigour and libido. Redirecting the female body away from the realm of animals, female desire is symbolically tamed through body modification which reasserts patriarchal control over the female body:

Hairless femininity is, we would argue, ‘tamed’ femininity. Not only is the body itself tamed — the messy eruptions of tufts and strands of hair routinely kept under control — but the cultural associations of hair with strength and virility are denied to the feminine woman; she is to be kept in a perpetually pre-adolescent state of relative powerlessness. (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003: 341)

Another allusion which could be implied in the title is the gay slang term *bear*. It refers to the subcultural identity of a very hairy, sturdy and overtly ‘masculine’ bisexual or gay man and can be opposed to those men who are labelled as *twinks*. *Twink* describes slimly built men with a youthful appearance and very little body hair. Since this paper focuses on normative femininity, I will not discuss this point further.

5.6 (In)visible Labour

Actual public and institutional reactions as well as anticipated opinions can be held accountable for most women subjugating themselves to the hairless norm. The norms of discipline, regulation, and the subordination of embodied knowledge to scientific knowledge operate in the private sphere through self-disciplinary behaviour by means of which women not only try to avoid social disapproval, but also try to attain a state of bodily perfection. The level of social normativity in Western culture is so high that the practice of female body hair removal goes unremarked. (Tiggemann and Lewis 2004: 381) Although the cultural making of ‘ideal’ femininity can be considered collective, the maintenance of that image is delegated to the individual, often within private settings, namely the domestic bathroom (or in beauty salons where the maintenance is performed by another woman, often of a lower socio-economic status). The dogma of individual responsibility for hygiene and sexiness creates a belief in a personal obligation to modify and transform the body to resonate with the dominant conception of femininity. Fahs points out that “[w]omen typically construct body hair removal as something they do almost unconsciously – a rite of passage adopted in their teens and perpetuated throughout their lives.” (2011: 454) As such, the work it takes to discipline the body into what is considered ‘proper’ by society as well as the “tools of



transformation” get trivialised and disguised from the public. “The process of conforming,” Toerien and Wilkinson emphasize, “is made more complex by the assumption that femininity should appear ‘natural’.” (Chapkis 1986: 5, cited in Toerien and Wilkinson 2003: 339) The result is a cycle of pain and effort to maintain the illusion that femininity takes no effort. It is only by disguising the serious effort which is required to appear hairless and thus properly ‘feminine’, that no or very little body hair as a signifier for femininity has been cast as a scientific and natural truth. Hairlessness is related to what a woman *is*, not what she *does*. In other words, body hair removal is not seen as what women do, but what they *are*.

This assumption has been further maintained by commercial representations of female bodies. In advertisements the hair that grows on female bodies is erased. Most video clips show razor blades gliding along already hairless legs or hide the process of shaving by showing a happy person with smooth skin *after* the use of the offered product. Another strategy is embraced by the Veet advertisement which I already mentioned above: Here, body hair becomes depictable only on a clearly male attributed body. Every time the female protagonist is being caught hairy, she turns into a hairy man with a female sounding voice.

The consequences of social constructions are powerful and have a concrete effect on our lives. The body and its hair function as a carrier of sexual and other social value. Whereas most women who participated in Tiggemann and Lewis’ study were able to point at social normative reasons for hair removal in other women (2004: 384), they were unwilling to accept this rationale for their own behaviour:

Here the reverse seems to be the case. Perhaps the normative values of individualistic cultures render it difficult for women to acknowledge their own vulnerability to social pressures, although they can recognize such vulnerability in others. (Tiggemann and Lewis 2004: 385)

Due to negative social consequences which await those women who deviate from social norms – including perceived or real violation and harassment – and also out of economic dependence many women internalise conformity to heteronormative and patriarchal ideals of femininity. Of course, not *all* women submit to oppressive regimes of beauty to a degree of blind compliance. The point is that “[o]ften, given the racism, sexism, and narcissism of the culture, their personal happiness and economic security may depend on it.” (Bordo 2003: 30)



6 Economy, Power Distribution and Resistance

For whatever the objective social conditions are that create a pathology [...], the individual [subject] must invest the body with meanings of various sorts. Only by examining this productive process on the part of the subject can we [...] see how the desires and dreams of the subject become implicated in the matrix of power relations. (Bordo 2003: 177 f.)

While other fashion trends change with the seasons, female hairlessness has persisted over decades. Ongoing and repetitive alteration of the body is vital to the economy: one must consume the required commodities or services to achieve the desired bodily appearance. Within a capitalist society dissatisfaction with the self as well as gender difference and the provision of the possibility – or rather compulsion – to modify the body through the consumption of required goods are economically highly productive. (Degele, Bethmann and Heckemeyer 2011: 8) In this context, “‘gender’, ‘sex’, ‘sexuality’, ‘sexual identity’, and ‘pleasure’ [are transformed] into objects of the political management of living.” (Preciado 2013: 25)

Bordo stresses that “to live in our culture is not (despite powerful social mythology to the contrary) to participate in some free play of individual diversity” but one is always located in structures of dominance and subordination. (2003: 234) Looking at the female body as a locus of practical cultural control helps to demystify the rhetoric of ‘self-expression’ and ‘personal choice’. Within neoliberal discourses the responsibility is not located at a societal level, but to the individual body. (Tiggemann and Lewis 2004: 386) In this context, shaving behaviour, and thus conforming to the predominant beauty standard, are masked as a result of free choice. Because it *feels* liberating to free oneself from unwanted hair and from social sanctioning, the larger context in which the cultural practice of depilation is embedded and the close proximity between docility and liberation are concealed. Not only are cultural practices of body modification regulating our everyday life in terms of time and resource management, their results also highly influence the way we experience our embodied existence within social and (bio)political contexts.

The creation of the female body itself – in this case through the feminine practice of shaving, epilating and waxing most body parts – is part of the capitalist market and cannot be looked at detached from its economic entanglements. As hair is constantly growing, it requires regular practices of aesthetic modification and maintenance. This makes the marketing of hair removal products continually profitable and economically exploitable. The beauty industry is dependent on the conceived as much as actual gaze of others, power hierarchy and mechanisms of social control. The ideal of a constantly hairless body is unattainable for most women. However, the perpetuation of this ideal through imagery, cultural norms and sanctioning keeps providing the motivation and



creating the desire “to engage in multiple time-consuming, costly and potentially harmful beauty regimens to modify their appearance.” (Williamson 2015: 2) Not surprisingly, “the hair removal business has grown into a multi-million dollars industry.” (Black 2004, cited by Tiggemann and Hodgson 2008: 895) Manufacturers charge higher prices for most hygiene and grooming products for women than for the exact same products for men. While the product features are identical, only the colouring and product language differ. According to a study commissioned by the New York City Department of Consumer Affairs, razors and razor cartridges marketed for women cost eleven percent more than those marketed for men. (Bessendorf 2015: 33) Differing package sizes and designs contribute to concealing this inequality and thus upholding the desire for gendered products. In regard to this, known as ‘pink tax’, women are confronted with a double exploitation: They are charged higher costs for buying an ‘appropriately feminine’ grooming product which then will be used for a practice that the patriarchal-capitalist complex takes advantage of.

Hair is arranged to conform to “larger cultural conceptions of masculinity and femininity, of sex roles, and of changes in social-sexual status.” (Toerens and Wilkinson 2003: 336) Invested with polarised gender meanings, social distinctions are symbolised through visible body hair. Through different discourses, some of which are mentioned above, female bodies are represented as inherently defective and in need of alteration as well as external regulation to become fully feminine and sexopolitical subjects. Binary conceptualisations as well as networks of social pressures guarantee conformity to ideals of heterosexual femininity (Fahs 2011: 467) and create individual desire. Instead of by coercion or force from ‘above’, compliance with cultural norms is guaranteed by the fact that it actually feels better and contributes to the subject’s well-being. The pursuit of femininity is presented as a “chief route to acceptance and success for women in our culture” and, in turn, community-wide compliance legitimates the institutional arrangements. (Bordo 2003: 180)

However, the possibility of altering bodily identity markers opens up practices for resistance. Bordo reminds us that “Modern power-relations are [...] unstable; resistance is perpetual and hegemony precarious.” (Bordo 2003: 28) Understanding the body as site of political struggle where power manifests itself through habitual practices, the potential for creating forms of dissident subjectification can also be located within the body itself and the technologies through which it is formed. Hair figures an intermediate zone where both compliance and resistance can be enacted. Bordo encourages us that “we must *work* to keep our daily practice in the service of resistance to gender domination, not in the service of docility and gender normalization.” (2003: 184) Taking this as a point of departure: Can art counter normalised social and cultural practices? Which exit strategies do Burns and Hubbard propose with *The Brown Bear*? As initially stated, I argue that the performance imitates ways in which appearance is medially,



socially and scientifically constructed. However, by slightly changing and re-appropriating the routines of a hair/beauty salon, the artists lay bare several institutions that maintain gender roles and feminine conduct.

Firstly, choosing the space of a storefront as location for the salon mimics the shop front of commercial beauty salons in the public space. Although the opaque storefront window does not allow passers-by to look at the process of styling from the outside, the salon is a public place inviting everyone to come in during the opening hours. Those who enter can become part of and actively engage in exchanging ideas and generating personal aesthetics. While the maintenance of the body is usually individualised and delegated to the private space, the chosen location makes the struggle public. Thus, the artists break the silence which upholds femininity as a perceived natural state including its subordination. Eliding the discretion, the labour which is required to attain a disciplined body becomes visible.

As has been shown earlier, resisting shaving norms may signify dissident beliefs and political or cultural marginality. Informed by their feminist views and LGBT perspectives, Burns and Hubbard create a sexually non-segregated space as a public and welcoming place of transformation. With *The Brown Bear*, they target the heteronormative order as it becomes visible and tangible in body hair removal practices from the margins. Exactly this marginality can be the site of radical possibility: To imagine alternatives, to foster counter-hegemonic discourse, in words as much as in aesthetics, smells, tastes, music and touch. Building an alternative archive of representations, Burns and Hubbard transform minority and embodied knowledge into collective experimentation, into physical practice, into ways of life and forms of co-habitation. Thanks to the copying machine, visitors are able to take copied representations and texts home. Stubble, tufts and locks may be used to express or to conceal classification into set identity categories. Within a noncritical space and through the practice of collective being, the artists propose the manipulation of body hair as a political signifier. The aim is to construct one's own sense of self freed of the constraints that mainstream society puts on gender appearance and sexual expression. The artists offered their services free of charge, thus withdrawing hair removal from the capitalist service market. Although, with the tools, furnishing and equipment used and probably purchased in exchange for money the performance does not entirely manage to unshackle itself from its capitalist context, it renders visible the embeddedness of seemingly trivial practices into capitalist structures.

The performance can thus be understood as an artistic and political intervention in the sense of an epistemological inversion. Through the appropriation of social mechanisms of control, they performatively re-signify aesthetic and social codes and become subjects of representation, instead of mere objects/products. *The Brown Bear*



opens up the potential to mix up normalised visual signifiers that attribute hair style to gender and sexual practice and that thus produce the impression of the natural stability of sexual relations and gender relationships.

7 Summary

What on a macro-level looks like a matter of individual choice – because there are no legal rules on how to groom – can be identified as a docile behaviour following cultural expectations. Hence, one can start from the hypothesis that choices regarding body hair removal are neither trivial nor inconsequential but rather culturally, and thus structurally imposed. A closer look at habits, attitudes and representations concerning body hair removal confirms Foucault's concepts mentioned above: normalising power works through self-discipline, self-surveillance and the production of desire.

Hair is an important signifier of religious, political, economic, social and sexual identity which can be manipulated to express and conceal. Due to its modifiable quality, body hair also becomes subject to various social control mechanisms. Material and physiological order is upheld through visually distinguishable femininity or masculinity. As social markers, they ascertain between mutually exclusive categories of civilised and uncivilised, self and other. Disorder is perceived as a threat to the foundation of society: Corporeal divergence is considered a monstrosity, a violation of the laws of nature or a violation of moral laws. Disciplinary techniques aim at neutralising those who do not comply with the expected norm. By attributing specific meanings to body appearances assumptions about femininity are cast as scientific truths. As a consequence, binary oppositions between fundamental categories can be upheld. The performance *The Brown Bear* helps to unmask that femininity is always a performance – a public practice of regulated repetition – the normative grooming of body hair being one part of this. Also, it becomes visible that both society as a whole and individual people perpetuate the 'properly' feminine.

Within a capitalist market, body dissatisfaction, the individual responsibility of attending the body as well as the separation of reproductive labour along gendered and racial lines are highly productive. In the light of unequal power distribution, body hair and the cultural conventions that surround its adjustment have sexopolitical significance as they facilitate the visual recognition of a subject's position within Western society. Far from being a natural quality, femininity is a quality which positions a subject within networks of power. Body hair is a political signifier and one of many "cultural orthopaedics that construct everyday femininity." (Preciado 2013: 366)



With their performance, the artists Burns and Hubbard try to, firstly, broaden the framing of what are 'appropriate' appearances for specific bodies. Secondly, they make the maintenance of individual appearance a generative and collective process that is freed from restrictions. Still, one must be wary: Can what is generated within the art context also be upheld in everyday life? In addition, accounts of capitalism tapping into marginalised communities in order to find and capitalise novelty are numerous, resistance as much as power itself is precarious.

The indefinite feeling of femininity figures central in both actual reasons for shaving and in advertisements for products which promise to enhance supposedly natural femininity. Depilatory products are represented as an instrument for beauty and femininisation. This reveals a fundamental paradox: If several products, such as razors, blades, cremes and gels, and physical labour are needed to constitute 'essential' femininity, this contradicts the very claim for it being a natural quality. At a closer look, advertisements deconstruct themselves revealing the artificiality of femininity. Further research could focus on this paradox, applying, for example, Judith Butler's concept of intelligibility.

Moreover, it would be interesting to look at the desire for self-subjugation in a wider context of gender and femininity as forms of political technologies. What laws does an economy of desire obey that implies individual failure? According to Preciado, the contemporary regime of production of sexual bodies and subjectivities can no longer be fully described as premodern or modern, sovereign or disciplinary, although some social mechanisms persist. On the basis of scientific, political and medial changes that have happened since World War II, their effects on social organisation, and Deleuze's and Guattari's notion of a 'control society', Preciado proposes the concept of the 'pharmacopornographic' order to point out how the pharmaceutical and pornography industries invest in creating desire and how this fundamentally changes the way subjectivity, gender and sexual identity are formulated today. (2013: 77) What role the body and body hair can play should be a topic of future studies, political action, the imagination as well as fiction:

From now on, in fact, it's a matter of inventing other common, shared, collective, and copyleft forms of sexuality that extend beyond the narrow framework of the dominant pornographic representations and standardized sexual consumption. (Preciado 2013: 272)

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