

The Distribution of Chaos and Abjection

in Melanie Bonajo's *Economy of Love*.



(Economy of Love, 2015)

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The Distribution of Chaos and Abjection in Melanie Bonajo's *Economy of Love*.

On the 6th of March, I went to the exposition opening of “Oét d’r Sjtub”, at SCHUNCK*Glaspaleis in Heerlen, displaying a collection on the subject of the miners laboring and living in the south of Limburg. For my internship in Museum Arnhem¹ I was going to meet Melanie Bonajo, who was displaying her work in Heerlen and was also one of the artists that would be in the exposition² that was going to open at Museum Arnhem on the 3rd of October. Melanie Bonajo is a Dutch, New York based artist. In her artwork she looks at the way in which technology creates feelings of alienation within the individual; an alienation from our sense of belonging. She explores, through the “spiritual emptiness” of our generation, people’s changing relation to nature (Bonajo 2015, paragraph 2). According to Melanie Bonajo our increasing interest and believe in the powers of technology make for a distancing from that what she believes are important issues of society. By returning to nature and the spiritual, as opposed to the technological, she believes our attention and energy can be shifted back to the, according to her, more important issues. For her this is to say providing an alternative take on life through spirituality and eroticism.

Melanie was going to show us her project, *Economy of Love*, her newest work in progress that will be a part of a video project made up of three videos in the series *Night Soil*. We took the elevator to a conference room, light beaming through the broad windows, setting an all but pleasing ambience for the screening. Melanie took out her laptop and sat down, I sat next to her and she nervously pressed the play button. As intimate images of tangled limbs played out on the screen, the ambience changed, the bright light from outside now provided an opportunity to steal glances, and examine emotions reflected on our faces while watching the film. Melanie was interested in how I perceived certain scenes, I in turn was interested in which scenes she felt unsure about. Maybe it was this intimate watching experience that drew me to the video. Maybe what hailed me in was the unregulated yet regulated, staged yet

¹ Museum Arnhem is a museum for modern art located in the east of the Netherlands.

² During my internship the museum was preparing for the next exposition, Spiegeloog (translated the Mirrored Eye), displaying self portraits of Dutch artists between 1900 and now. See also the press release: <http://www.museumarnhem.nl/ENG/pers/persberichten/spiegeloog-het-zelfportret-in-de-nederlandse-kunst>

chaotic appearance of the video. Slightly confused, uncomfortable, and unsure how I felt about the film I stepped out of the elevator, mixing in the mass of people who, in a few minutes, were going to watch the same film I just had seen, now projected on a large screen in an exposition setting. The intimacy I had felt led to my decision to use this project, which I consider to be a feminist art documentary, as the case study for my thesis.

The work in progress *Economy of Love* is one part of a triptych called *Night Soil*. The second video project in the series is “*Night Soil: Fake Paradise*” (2014), examining the healing effect of the hallucinatory plant Ayahuasca on people’s minds. The third video is yet to be produced. All videos will provide a feminist take on how “non- rational spirituality” can lead to change and can transgress certain borders, created and set on the basis of rationality. This rationality, connected to the sense of vision³, has gained its importance in knowledge production and scientific truth based on patriarchal ideas of male-based rationality as opposed to female-based eroticism. Eroticism, connected to other senses is banned from the scientific sphere, whereas rationality connected to the sense of vision was named the most prominent empirical sense (Fox Keller and Grontkowski 1983). This rationality is embedded in a framework of male-based structures, which leads to the repression of certain groups of people. These ideas can be challenged by approaching knowledge in a non-rational way, for instance by making use of erotics or spirituality. The videos of Melanie Bonajo test these ideas in several ways, for example by providing an alternative take on life, lived partly outside of the borders of the rational sphere. Subjects in these videos are driven by for example eroticism or spirituality instead of rationality.

Economy of Love tells the story of chickens, ashes, healing and moaning soundlessly, of a group of women who define themselves as queer activists as well as queer sex workers. In this feminist art documentary Melanie follows a group of women living in a temple they call “Tantra”. These women self-identify as spiritual sex activists, with their main goal “women’s empowerment, as a gate way into the project of healing of the sacred feminine around the world” (*Economy of Love*, 2015). They are consciously using their sexuality as a form of spiritual therapy and empowerment for other women as well as for men. They want to free the shame that comes with sexuality, especially female sexuality⁴. They give a specific example of this shame in relation to the vocabulary used and the openness when talking about sex. When a woman would ask “can you go deeper?”, “can you go harder?” (*Economy of*

³ As will be explained more thoroughly in chapter 1.

⁴ Female sexuality is never homogenous or one. When I talk about female sexuality in this thesis it is important to note that this is the sexuality the women in this documentary define themselves as such.

Love, 2015) it is often perceived as dirty and unclean, as something that should not be said out loud. These desires are often barred, bound and suppressed. The sex workers in the video are using pleasure as a key for transformation, a method to fight these restrictions. According to Melanie Bonajo, the women “distribute love”; like the economic system of distribution, where goods are made available for consumers. They make love available to buy, the commodity being the seductive promise of orgasms that can heal, change and form us. The images in the video are all staged, the audio voiceovers are, however, “real”⁵, questioning what documentary art movies are: what is real and what is not?

Drawing on the case of Melanie Bonajo’s art documentary *Economy of Love*, this thesis explores ways in which feminist art documentary, as well as female sexuality, can be seen as a form of abjection as well as embodiment of the abject, functioning as a chaotic tool to provide an alternative to our rational centred society, thereby creating a space for change. The analysis will draw on the content of the documentary as well as the strategies and editing choices⁶, of the form. Both aspects of the analysis will provide a way to understand *Economy of Love*, seen through the lens of abjection. This thesis will make use of the theoretical construct of abjection provided by feminist, philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, in her work *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), as well as the theories on ‘liminality’ and ‘matter out of place’, developed by social anthropologist Mary Douglas in her work *Purity and Danger: An Analysis on the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966). These theories will be linked to female sexuality, seen as dangerous and monstrous, as well as feminist art documentary, seen as unclear, ambiguous, and in-between. The latter part of the argument will draw on several editing strategies and choices, which make possible to read *Economy of Love* in its form as abject. These techniques will all connect to the blurring of fiction and nonfiction, performance and reality, challenging the centrality of knowing and truth. In chapter 1, I will address the theoretical and methodological framework on abjection, patriarchal rationality and female sexuality as well as documentary in connection to truth. The second chapter will provide an analysis of *Economy of Love*, looking at it through a framework of abjection, provided in the previous chapter. These two chapters combined will answer my research question: “How can we understand Melanie Bonajo’s feminist art

⁵ This idea of a real truth is embedded in the patriarchal idea that vision will lead to rationality and knowledge that is true. In chapter 1.2, 2.1 and 2.2 these ideas will be outlined more in depth.

⁶ These strategies and editing choices all relate to various techniques that can “make” a documentary “strange”. The concept of making strange will be further elaborated later on in this chapter.

documentary *Economy of Love* as a form of abjection in terms of female sexuality and ambiguity, functioning as a tool to deconstruct the limits of rational patriarchy?”

Chapter 1. Abjection and Documentary: Theory and Techniques

In this chapter I will explore theories of abjection, referring to a range of scholars from gender, psychological, as well as anthropological backgrounds. I will explain the concepts of liminality and ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 1966), as well as abjection in relation to female sexuality. I will attempt to show how the use of these theories as political tools can become a channel of transformation with regard to limits patriarchy⁷ pressures certain subjects with. After having established this I will apply these theories to the content *and* the form⁸ of *Economy of Love*. In other words, I will show how *Economy of Love* as a documentary in its form becomes the abject, as well as how it addresses this abjection in the content, and how this results in the creation of a space for mechanisms of change. I will make use of the video material provided to me by Melanie Bonajo.

To create, carve out new space, one needs tools or techniques. In chapter 1.1 I will describe how abjection can be a tool to create space for change. In my thesis I will In chapter 1.2 I will show how certain filmic editing strategies and choices of Melanie Bonajo can be seen as the creator of ambiguity, placing the documentary in the position of deject.

Chapter 1. 1. Abjection and The Powers of Horror

Matter out of Place: Inextricably Confused with Defilement and Hygiene

Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise – Mary Douglas, 1966

To understand how abjection can be created by *Economy of Love*, as well as how theories of abjection can be applied to the form of this documentary it is important to gain an understanding of the complicated term that is abjection. In this chapter, I will attempt to provide an understanding of the term in connection to “liminality” and “matter out of place” (Douglas, 1966). Through this linkage it becomes clear how abjection can be seen as a method to disturb order and challenge certain norms in our society. In this chapter I will

⁷ As will be explained further on in this chapter

⁸ Throughout my thesis I will use the word “form” to describe what the strategic and editing choices in *Economy of Love* relate to.

explore how abjection can be defined as well as how it can be used as a political strategy, functioning as a tool to provide people with the power to work with their differences from an in-between, unclear and unclean position. I will describe how theories of abjection can be of use to women in particular, since the group of people in this documentary all self- as such. I will first explore the term “abjection” in an in-depth way, then I will argue how female sexuality can be seen as a form of abjection as well as a political tool.

Abjection is a term that is ambiguous, in between, outside borders, and outside place. Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian-French philosopher, literary critic, psychoanalyst, and feminist, starts her book *The Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (1982) with the following approach to abjection:

“There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned” (Kristeva 1982, 10).

What becomes clear from this quote is the intensity of abjection, which rejects and cannot be assimilated. Its power lies in its rejection of the enemy, that what threatens it. Because of the many ambiguities that go with abjection: fascination and horror, desire and rejection and outside and inside, abjection is hard to define. It cannot merely be captured in one sentence that explains all. Abjection leaves the one who is haunted by it in a state of uncertainty and repulsion. According to the Oxford Dictionary the word abject comes from the Latin word “abjectus”, meaning to reject (ab: away and jectere: to throw), abjection thus equaling the state of being cast off. This suggests that abjection is always cast out, rejected from something, somewhere, or even from someone. Kristeva defines abjection as the repulsion felt to these unclear, ambiguous things. Abjection are those or is that what is not accepted in social order. It can disturb order (Kristeva 1982, 10-12).

Kristeva connects this idea of repulsion to Mary Douglas’ anthropological theories on ‘matter out of place’ and ‘liminality’ (Douglas, 1966). In her book *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966) Douglas describes “matter out of

place”, that is to say, substances that are not where they “belong”. They are placed outside the body while they actually “belong” inside. Examples of these substances could be vomit, menstrual blood or other bodily substances. Kristeva describes these substances as abjection. They create deep feelings of repulsion, shivers down your spine, nausea, light-headedness, spasms in the stomach and tears of horror. According to Douglas, this transgressing of the borders of belonging creates the improper and the unclean. It crosses systems of order that classify inside and outside, thereby disrespecting rules, boundaries and positions. The matter out of place is positioned in a liminal⁹ sphere, between borders or, as I will use as a way to describe this in my thesis a state of being “in-between. The fear of this “dirt”, as Douglas calls it, is met by the human need to eliminate that what is unclean to re-establish order. Menstrual blood, vomit or other bodily fluids can, in their ambiguity, serve as a means to create uncertainty, disorder and chaos. Douglas elaborates:

“Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating, punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against in which a semblance of order is created” (Douglas 1966, 4).

Disorder and impurity as the opposites of order and purity can symbolize danger as well as power (Douglas 1966, 95). Dirt is dangerous and disorder is unwelcome. According to Douglas humankind longs for borders, categories, labels and limits. Societal norms lead us to believe that our hunger to categorize is inevitable. This clear division of life is, however, not what lived experience reflects. Objects, substances and also people exist between borders or outside of limits, transgressing and passing.

Patriarchal Rationality: A Vision of Knowledge

It would be ridiculous to believe that we can exist cut off from any part of ourselves. But there has been a false emphasis in Western European thought upon what is rational and a total rejection on what is emotional – Audre Lorde (2004)

These individuals that are positioned outside of these categories and borders are often seen as dangerous. I will argue how individuals that exist outside of borders and limits can form a

⁹ To learn more about liminality in an anthropological framework see for example Arnold van Gennep’s “Rites de Passage” (1909) and Mary Douglas’ “Purity and Danger: an Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo” (1966)

threat to, as what I will describe, patriarchal power. Then I will outline how a certain type of rational based knowledge, connected to the sense of vision, can be seen as a male-based way of understanding the world within patriarchal structures.

Nira Yuval-Davis who specializes in borders, identity and racism, describes in her article *Secure borders and safe haven and the gendered politics of belonging: Beyond social cohesion*, these individuals that live in-between¹⁰ these borders are “unsafe” (Yuval-Davis, 2009). Even though this form of unsafeness largely relates to actual land borders that separate one country with their citizens from the other, it can also be applied to borders that are set to divide social categories on the basis of patriarchal power. According to the French Philosopher Michel Foucault power is claimed through the reproduction of it. He describes in *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality* how we embody these forms of power. Power is part of us as acting, speaking subjects. It is embedded, we have internalized it and we live it (Foucault 1990, 6-7). These ideas are connected and intertwined by theories of repressive patriarchy. In these theories, the penis is the norm to which the other is measured. The unsafe “other” here becomes the woman, as the possible creator of disorder because of her difference from the norm (Grosz 1989, 105). This “unsafeness” leads to the repression of their bodies and knowledge¹¹. This unclear and impure position will be seen as dangerous by dominant patriarchal power because it can challenge their commanding power. Women are the impure opposite of men according to Grosz. Purity is however, as Douglas says, the enemy of change and ambiguity. I would like to argue how ambiguity in turn can become the enemy of purity and of clarity as well, thereby challenging patriarchal power. In *Economy of Love* the women consciously take on a “dirty” and unclear position, as mentioned before, by, for example, being explicit when talking about sex and pleasure. The force of being in-between lies in its ability to be a form of power that is unsettled and chaotic; dangerous and threatening as well as complicated to comprehend and to rationalize.

This need of rationalization is connected to patriarchal structures in society. These structures presume that there is one objective truth that can be found. These constructed ways of thinking about “the truth” are embedded in history. They are connected to empirical knowledge linked to vision. The power of vision is, according to Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Grontkowski, both feminist theorists, of higher status in our Western society and this is, according to them, unjust because the sense of vision is not value free. Fox Keller and Grontkowski argue how sexual bias has crept into this system of knowing (Fox Keller and

¹¹ I will give a more in depth description of this process in chapter 2.1.

Grontkowski 1983, 207). They explain how vision is de-eroticized and disconnects subject from object in science. This desire that science tries to ban out is the same desire that is so often connected to the female in social and psychological ways. The separation of object from subject should be criticized. This separation is often left unquestioned because it is strongly embedded in our structural ways of thinking about science. It is however not the only way, let alone a neutral way. The objects are looked upon from a distance as if this were an unbiased way to gather objective knowledge. Paradoxically, this objectivity can only be achieved by the dominant and “normal” individuals in a male-centered society, thus disqualifying women from this scientific sight (Braidotti 2011, 205- 206). In other words, this objectivity that can be achieved through vision is a male-centered way to uphold the image of science as objective truth. I will address these structures of thinking about objective knowledge production as “rational patriarchy” in my thesis.

Abjection: Avenue of Exiles

There is Fiction in the Space Between – Tracy Chapman

As mentioned before, abjection can relate to substances, it can however also relate to subjects. Abjection can be a strategy and a person. In this part of the theoretical framework I will argue how abjection can function as a political strategy that can be used by a person through placing their selves outside of certain norms, limits and borders set by society. I will then argue how “women” as a category can be seen as these people who can make use of strategies of abjection because they exist in an unclear and ambiguous position.

These persons that can use strategies of abjection are in a way ambiguous: they do not belong and cannot be defined within categories and boundaries (Kristeva 1982, 8). Mary Douglas describes the liminal and ambiguous phase in which people can exist in-between (like an unborn baby, not yet having set foot on earth, yet alive in the womb) as dangerous: “First consider beliefs about persons in a marginal state. These are people who are somehow left out of patterning society, who are placeless. They may be doing nothing morally wrong but they are indefinable” (Douglas 1966, 95). A baby’s future is not yet determined. It is fragile but it is also dangerous in its unclear status.

Kristeva names the person that is abject and unclear a “deject”. Kristeva explains: “The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), *situates* (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or

refusing” (Kristeva 1982, 8). This deject position in society is one that is unclear as these people are not settled within boundaries and categories. In her book *Love is a Treasure* (2013) professor in Media Studies Ana Koivunen describes how women who, for example, have experienced psychosis can be seen as dejects, for “these women struggle with boundaries between I and other, me and you, order and disorder, inside and outside, reality and fantasy, danger and safety” (Koivunen 2013, 89).

Where Koivunen uses the clear example of women who are struggling with mental illness and therefore are seen as unclear and dangerous, Kristeva argues how “women” as a category can be seen as deject. According to Kristeva the territory in which the deject wanders is never one and it is never homogenous. Borders are being crossed, the *where* am I becomes fluid, it is being build and torn down simultaneously. Outside of these borders and boundaries, the deject lives and strays as the Other, as opposite of the Self. The Self, according to psychoanalyst Barbara Creed is the man, the being that is in possession of a penis. The woman is defined as the lack of genitals, as the Other. (Creed 1993, 1-2). Women therefore are cast off to a different territory, in which the deject is positioned. There the clean becomes dirty, violent passion turns into jouissance¹² and pleasure becomes pain. We find ourselves in the other. Kristeva describes: “And, as in jouissance where the object of desire, known as object *a* [in Lacan's terminology], bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the abject” (Kristeva 1982, 9). Abject holds a place in all of us; at some point the alter ego bursts out and confronts us with discomfort and loathing. Abject changes us, the Other that is inside makes room for me to be, through possession and pain. A new space, a space between is created, being written. According to Kristeva, the deject, as subject, needs to be controlled. Not unlike matter out of place substances, they need to be eliminated. They form a threat to the orderly, rationally controlled society. The deject is often the opposite of this orderly structure and is the creator of chaos within this new in-between space.

¹² Kristeva uses concepts of psychoanalysis for her description of Jouissance, build upon Lacan's "The Ethics of Psychoanalysis" (1959–1960). I will however not use these psychoanalytical conceptualizations on my thesis.

“A bridge is a meeting place. A neutral place. A casual place. [...] for lovers a bridge is a possibility, a metaphor of their chances [...] this living bridge is tempting for all and you may find your soul or lose it here.” (Winterson 2001, 57)

Women who have experienced psychosis were named as an example of the embodiment of the deject. The example, the one that I will be using in my thesis is that of women, seen as sexual monsters, women’s sexual excessiveness in relation to abjection. I will argue how through the use of eroticism and female sexuality, as strategies of abjection, patriarchal forms of rational knowledge can be challenged.

Women and their sexuality have been a topic in the filmic horror genre for many decades (Creed 1993, 1). A woman as monstrous womb, beautiful and deadly killer or the deadly castrator, her vagina literally biting off the penis, (Creed 1993, 1) are used as characters in horror movies quite often. Although these horror images can be seen as slightly sexist and hugely exaggerated, they can also entail a form of power. The power of horror. I will explore how this power of horror works and how it can become a form of power when it is connected to sexuality, drawing on theories of feminist psychoanalyst Barbara Creed and feminist Audre Lorde.

Abjection and the horror genre can be connected in many ways. One of these connections lies within the obvious reaction of the spectator to a horror movie, for instance: “It scared the shit out of me” (matter out of place in a very literal way). According to Creed female sexuality can also be connected to horror and abjection (Creed, 1993). It is seen as dangerous and monstrous because of its difference from male sexuality and it is embedded within, what Creed describes as phallogentric ways of thinking (Creed 1993, 5). The differences from male sexuality in sex, sexuality, gender and genitals are unnerving and threatening. There is a certain ambivalence in women’s sexuality. Their difference in genitalia as well as in sexuality is perceived as unclear and unclean and therefore scary, calling on feelings of horror. The female as sexual monster stems from the ambivalence of her sexuality (Creed, 1993, 5-6). This fear for female sexuality is further described by social historicus Thomas Laqueur in his work *Discourses of Sexuality. From Aristotle to AIDS* (1992). According to him women within patriarchal structures are seen as mostly passive, whereas men are sexually active. When a man awakens women’s sexuality they can be sexual. The

ambiguity and uncertainty comes into play when a woman's desires are passions that are independent and not related to the male's "active" sexual desires (Laquer 1992). Women who are represented as "potentially active sexually beings" awaken horror as well as fascination. Frank Mort, professor of social history describes in his book *Dangerous Sexualities* how these ambiguities in female sexuality have a historical origin. He marks out gender, as well as class distinctions between men and women in the 19th century. He describes: "Working-class men had been brutalized through the state of the workplace environment and through their own inherent lack of morality as men; they are often described as semi-barbarous and close to nature. Official representation of the morals of working class women were more complex and contradictory, shifting across the health/disease, morality/immorality oppositions according to the focus of the male investigators" (Mort 2002, 47). This shifting, in-between and ambiguous position makes the woman as sexual "psychopath" enticing as well as ghastly. This aptly represents our culture's opinion and feelings on women's sexuality.

As I have explained, women within patriarchal structures are seen as scary and threatening because of their ambivalence, because of the inability to map and categorize them. Their power lies in their difference. Because of the in-between, unclear and threatening position of female sexuality, specifically to patriarchal structures, the power of horror can be used as the chaotic, ambiguous sexual opposite of the rational controlling powers of male-based knowledge production. This knowledge production, as mentioned before is embedded within historical constructions of male vision as the prime sense that will produce true and pure knowledge that can explain the world (Fox Keller and Grontkowski, 1983). The threatening sexual explicitness and eroticism can challenge rational knowledge that, as previously explained, attempts to leave these female-based forms of knowledge outside of rational knowledge production in science.

Audre Lorde explains how female sexuality can be used as a form of power that functions as the opposition of this rational knowledge hegemony, challenging its position as central form of knowledge. This power tool lies within us as a spiritual, energetic, forceful strength. Lorde states how the sexuality of certain bodies has been repressed by the "male world". In her book *Sister Outsider* Lorde uses the female erotic as a specific way to be freed from these restrictions laid upon women (Lorde, 1984). I do not want to imply that the strictly female bodies are the only ones being controlled by norms and structures in society, but in this analysis this will be the form of sexuality that I will address in order to analyze the

documentary while making use of the terms¹³ addressed by the women in *Economy of Love* themselves.

Lorde argues how unexpressed and unrecognized feelings of passion and eroticism are repressed by male-based structures in society. In order to step out of these structures we need to be feeling instead of doing. Lorde's use of the erotic does not restrict itself to the act of sex, it is much more than that. "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them and lessens the threat of their difference" (Lorde 1984, 57). Because the erotic is open fearless and courageous, it can increase joy and pleasure. Whether this pleasure is found in blissful orgasms or in the simple act of reading a poem is irrelevant. The erotic, as free and open, can form a bridge, a meeting point. It forms a space where passion forms possibilities. Lorde states: "The false idea that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong. That strength is illusionary for it is fashioned in the context of male models. As women we have come to distrust that power that rises from our deepest and non-rational knowledge" (Lorde 1984, 53). Placing our trust in this non-rational knowledge can be a powerful tool. This form of knowledge challenges our normative rational centered society, a place where knowledge and truth lie at the basis of our daily life choices because we are within the borders and limits as we are told to do. Stepping over these borders, crossing them by taking on different ways of making sense of the world can create possibilities. Feminist Philosopher Luce Irigaray states: "When women want to escape from exploitation, they do not simply destroy a few 'prejudices; they upset the whole set of dominant values- economic, social, moral, sexual. They challenge every theory, every thought, every existing language in that these are monopolized by men only. They question the very foundation of our social and cultural order, the organization of which has been prescribed by the patriarchal system" (Irigaray 1977, 68). The erotic can form a way to stray, follow the dejects, crossing the bridge and carving out a space that will challenge the repression of certain bodies and their sexualities in this calculating space of knowing where knowledge tells female bodies¹⁴ as well as voices to be humble, to not voice sexual desires. The chaotic, monstrous erotic, the festivity that is female sexuality, will rupture; crack the tracks, derailing the rational.

¹³ Female sexuality and its repression is used in *Economy of Love* by several of the women.

¹⁴ Female bodies as used in this thesis are not restricted to biology. They bear meaning of society and are not fixed or determined. This places bodies outside of gender binaries.

Chapter 1.2. Documentary: Picturing abjection

In chapter 1.1 I have discussed the concept of abjection, connected to female sexuality as a non-rational challenge to societal structures, based on rationality. In the following chapter, I will explain how hybrid art documentary in its form¹⁵ can also transgress borders and limits set, by mainstream documentary. I will then explain how alike documentary can inhabit the space of the deject, in terms of abjection. Where the deject challenges truth by writing fiction in the space between, documentary can also challenge this centrality of truth by reflecting on its own status as image of truth. In this chapter I will explain how mainstream documentary requires the representation of “the truth” in their projects. I will then show how feminist art documentary can be an alternative form of “hybrid” documentary to challenge these notions of truth. From there on I will describe three filmic strategies; the visibility of the filmmaker, the use of humor and the use of different senses as representation of truth that I will use as methods, lenses to analyze how *Economy of Love* can be considered as the abject, transgressing boundaries of mainstream documentary by making strange what is taken for granted as “the truth”.

Tyranny of Truth

Impossibility is a kiss away from reality – Sense8, 2015

The word documentary finds its roots in the Latin word *docere*, reflecting an urge to learn, to know, to teach. Documentary holds within its status the seductive promise of learning “the truth”, whatever that may be. The word documentary creates expectations within the viewers (Scheibler 1993, 137). These expectations relate to the content as well as the form of the documentary. Stories that are being told are meant to be authentic, the form of the documentary shows a transparent style of filming that creates what documentary theorist Susan Scheibler calls “The reality effect” (Scheibler 1993, 140). This should make the documentary into a reflection of reality as a cohesive and natural story that is being told, as if the camera were not there. To stray from this path of reality filming was seen as impossible when talking about documentary not that many years ago. Nowadays, certain feminist filmmakers have started to criticize this form of documentary that claims to represent the absolute truth.

¹⁵ When I say form of documentary I mean the way in which the filmic strategies or editing choices are used.

One of these filmmakers is Trinh T. Minh-Ha. She describes how truth often gets confused with “*a meaning*” (Trinh 1993, 92). This meaning is situated within the knowledge of one person. Feminist thinkers such as Donna Haraway would argue that knowledge is always partial. It is always connected to your own experience, cultural beliefs and position. It is created, gathered within a context, like a documentary is edited within a context (Haraway, 1988). Trinh T. Minh-ha notes that whether a film is perceived as true has to do with a lot of factors. A weirdly important one is the amount of money that is spent on the production of the film. “The higher the bet, the better the product” (Trinh 1993, 93). This is an issue of control and therefore it is important to bear in mind whose truth we are listening to. The filmmaker becomes the almighty meaning giver. Generous amounts of money are spent in a pursuit of naturalism in documentary films. Trinh names a couple of techniques, including the directional microphone, the Naga portable tape recorder and the lip-synchronous sound, that are widely and gladly used to fix and make “the real world” visible. Additionally, what is important when mapping this so called reality, is the presence of real people in real locations, doing real tasks (Trinh 1993, 94). This notion of documentary as absolute truth is often left unchallenged. No attention is paid to whose truth we are listening.

According to Foucault that what is conceived as truth is largely embedded in a society where knowledge and statements have been made into and authorized as reality (Cowie, 2011). He articulates: “It’s not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and culture, within which it operates at the present time” (Foucault as quoted in Cowie 2011, 53). The truth as imagined in our power systems are largely reliant on seeing evidence, as previously mentioned. The act of seeing is, according to Fox Keller a “masculine sense that has become a cultural way to “know” the mainstream.” (Braidotti 2011, 204) This seeing verifies masculine science (such as medical science) as being the absolute truth. We long so much for that which is the truth, even though it is maddening and manipulative. I want to argue that in documentary there is no truth, it is always a partial representation of reality that is embedded within structures and power relations of those who produce it. Mainstream documentary, as vehicle of facts, presenting rational evidence, verifies its status as authentic and real. Donna Haraway’s situated knowledge is largely and conveniently ignored. So how can documentary makers challenge this notion of truth within their films? How can they find ways to write fiction in the space between? The space that crosses these borders of truth, challenges these ideas that truth is objective and rationality is always needed.

In her book *Stuff it* (2003) video essayist Ursula Biemann provides one answer to these questions by discussing “video essays” that are hybrid and in-between. Their form is placed between documentary video and video art, as a liminal genre. I will argue in what sense *Economy of Love* can be considered as a hybrid and in-between documentary.

Economy of Love is, as mentioned before, an artwork that is now displayed in museum SCHUNCK*GLASPALEIS. The first film in the series *Night soil* (*Night Soil- Fake Paradise*) was however displayed at the IFFR (International Film Festival Rotterdam), being described as a “‘quest’ toward addressing questions of spirituality, empathy and feminism” (Website IFFR, 2015), giving the video a documentary-like appearance. The videos in the series *Night soil* walk and transgress the line between art and documentary. In this chapter I will explore the importance of art as a part of documentary, providing a transformative way to think about documentary as hybrid, liminal while re-contextualizing it in theories of abjection.

Biemann describes how the hybrid and ambivalent position of documentary can make a difference. Political, artistic and theoretical spheres coexist within these video practices. These diverse fields brought together in one video project experiment on how documentary can exist without certain notions of truth by claiming an ambivalent position. It sets itself outside of the normal designated categories of documentary, thereby becoming the abject, cast off. By explicitly making a documentary a staged and artistically written video story it is emphasized that what can be considered as “truth” is never one and is changeable. This hybrid form of documentary challenges rational truth based centrality, comparable to the way abjection challenges these notions. Isn’t it this exact type of documentary that is unclear, ambiguous? According to Biemann, these videos: “Often fall through given categories at art events, film festivals and activist conferences (Biemann 2003, 8)”. They are the deject that strays and creates a new space where the norm for documentaries can be challenged. They are the chaotic opposite of the structured evidence built mainstream documentaries.

Techniques of the Abject: Creating Ambiguity in Feminist Art Documentary

Economy of Love is one of the documentaries that is transgressing these borders of truth and fiction, clarity and a lack thereof. There are many techniques that can be used to reach this kind of in-between status. I will, in my thesis, focus on a couple of techniques that are all related to the challenge truth-based centrality within the documentary. These challenges of what is truth and what is not, what is clear and what is ambiguous, create a documentary that

is situated in-between genres and borders, continuously transgressing them. In the following chapter, I will explain the concept of “Making Strange” in relation to the visibility of the filmmaker, the use of humor and the use of different senses as representation of truth that can function as filmic strategies which can make the form of *Economy of Love* the cast off abject.

To “make strange” is a concept often used in cultural anthropology as well as feminist studies as a critical strategy. This strategy relates to the everyday life, to what we take for granted. It turns the familiar into the unfamiliar. The everyday and the mundane are not always the known. The mundane is often not questioned or looked into because it is simply present; it is something we do not think about. When making the everyday life strange, patterns in thinking can be exposed or broken and what we take for granted as norms are challenged. In the book *Everyday Feminist Research Praxis: Doing Gender in The Netherlands* (2014), editors and contributors Domitilla Olivieri and Koen Leurs describe:

“‘Making strange,’ estrangement, is here understood as the act of defamiliarising the perception and understanding of the everyday, the habitual [...] This defamiliarization of the quotidian, has a potential for questioning the known and the ‘taken for granted,’ for unsettling hegemonic discourse, and for triggering change in the way of thinking, in the imaginary, and finally in the social reality.” (Olivieri and Leurs 2014, xxxviii)

Our everyday life, mundane and habitual way of thinking about rational truth can be challenged by defamiliarising it. Within documentary practice this means making strange what is taken for granted in mainstream documentary by “unsettling the hegemony”. This hegemony of documentary encompasses, as previously stated in this chapter, that documentary should look natural and cohesive. It should appear to represent “the truth”. There are several strategies of “making strange” that can function as a way of being reflexive about the position from where a documentary is framed and formed in thereby testing “the truth” in documentary. In the following part I will describe three of these strategies¹⁶, as previously stated: visibility of the filmmaker, the use of humor and the use of different senses in representation of truth, that I will use as methods to analyse *Economy of Love* in terms of abjection.

Making the filmmaker visible in a documentary is an example of how truth and authenticity in documentaries can be challenged. In documentary the filmmaker often tries to become invisible. A ghostly subject operates the camera. The unseen filmmaker thereby turns

¹⁶ In this chapter I will touch upon the ideas of these strategies, in the chapter 2.2 I will go more in depth about what the strategies mean and can do in relation to *Economy of Love*.

her or himself into the voice from heaven; unnoticed yet commanding. By unmasking the voice from heaven the truth claims are ruptured. When the filmmaker becomes visible the viewer is confronted with the person behind the camera. A person who always comes from a certain background and position. This visibility of the filmmaker reflects upon the position of a documentary by making visible that it is made, edited or directed from a subjective perspective instead of an invisible and objective ghost (Scheibler 1993, 142)

The second strategy is the use of humour and absurdity, protesting reality, for instance in the fashion of absurdity is according to Biemann a way to make a documentary hybrid, because it breaks with the cohesion of a film project. She outlines: “Absurdity is frequently produced through the disjointed assemblage of visual associations that do not produce continuity in content” (Biemann 2003, 9). Humour in this sense is chaos. This chaos breaks with the cohesive storyline that is desired in mainstream documentary.

Another way in which ambiguity in documentary can be achieved, giving documentary the status of abject, is by actively producing fiction in documentary. According to Trinh T. Minh-ha “a documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction” (Trinh, 105). Trinh states: “The production of irreality on the other and the play of nonsense (Which is not mere meaninglessness) upon meaning may, therefore help to relieve the basic referent of its occupation, for the present situation of critical inquiry seems much less one of attacking the illusion of reality as one of displacing and emptying out of totality” (Trinh, 107). By laying emphasis on performativity and pretence in documentary, the filmmaker plays with truth or falsity, purposely creating an illusion to question reality (Scheibler 1993, 140). The artificial aspect in film then becomes reality. Melanie Bonajo does this in *Economy of Love* by staging the images while using actual voice over interviews in the documentary.

With the use of these strategies, documentary has the potential to become a traveler, a diasporic hybrid, its wish to move being granted by the filmmaker. It can travel across borders of assigned documentary genres, not inhabiting one space of genre, overlapping and moving. With the collapse of boundaries between documentary and fiction, a new space is created in which change can occur and the mundane, mainstream way of thinking about truth and documentary can be challenged. By inventing new ways of understanding and approaching the truth that challenges the concept of pure and objective knowledge, documentary can be reflexive of its own position. The liminal space of ambiguity ultimately provides an alternative to the empty center where the supposed connection between reality and documentary control. Chaos, uncertainty and doubt reposition, shift the boundaries while they

are being crossed. Like abjection it does not respect borders, positions and rules. “That which crosses or threatens to cross the border is abject” (Creed 11,1993).

Chapter 2. *Economy of Love*: an Analysis of Abjection

Economy of Love is a 25-minute long film that pictures a group of, according to the filmmaker Melanie Bonajo, self-described “queer feminist activists”. Centered in the concrete jungle of Brooklyn, New York, they devote their lives to work “with pleasure as a key to deep transformation” (*Economy of Love*, 2015). Melanie Bonajo directed this video, making use of staged images, portraying in the documentary the women in this group of activists. The audio interviews used, as voiceovers to other images, are the spoken expressions of the activists portrayed in the video. This complex whole of filmic images and sounds makes for a chaotic film, laying emphasis on the staged character of documentary. To be more precise: a feminist art documentary. Where the “art” and “documentary” component have already been established in chapter 1.2, the “feminist” character of the documentary is yet to be illustrated. What is the feminist¹⁷ multilayered dimension of *Economy of Love*?

Feminist theorist Donna Haraway describes in her work *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003) feminist inquiry as such: “Feminist inquiry is about understanding how things work, who is in the action, what might be possible, and how worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently” (Haraway 2003, 7). In an obvious and distinct manner, the content of this documentary revolves around this “love in a less violent way”. As mentioned before, by “distributing love”, bringing love to the economical market, thereby criticizing which capitalist products in this society can be commoditized and which products are conceived as a detestable taboo to buy, the activists in the documentary spread love. Another explicit layer of feminist intent is present in the themes touched upon by *Economy of Love*: portraying a group of women, claiming autonomy, fighting for the empowerment of those who claim to suffer from the restriction of their sexuality in one way or another. Melanie Bonajo has chosen one direction which functions as a blanket enveloping the three videos, together forming a triptych. This direction is a non-rational alternative approach to our ‘rationality based’ world. In *Economy of Love*, specifically the use of pleasure and the orgasm as intense life-changing experience, provides a feminist transitional and shifting way to rethink dominant structures in

¹⁷ This is a very complex term that is used in many different ways by many different feminist scholars. For this thesis I will however provide a definition that can be applied to the framework I am working in.

our society. This experience is based on other senses than vision and therefore it is not considered as rational. Connecting this to the economical structures of western society, the privilege of the women in this documentary as well as the power structures at work between the “clients” and the “prostitutes”¹⁸, she touches upon some relevant feminist issues¹⁹. The other, less pronounced layer that gives this documentary a feminist dimension is related to the form of the film. The filmic strategies used, that combine artistic video and documentary, make it a hybrid project. Consequently this also produces the possibility to conceive *Economy of Love* as a feminist documentary. This hybrid character of the documentary, set at the margins, embodying the in-between, cast out position of documentary in the mainstream, addresses “feminist inquiry as how things work”, within mainstream power structures embedded in the world of visual media. It makes clear how power relations are at work by being reflexive of the fiction/non-fiction supposed binary at work in documentary. The sometimes puzzling creative choices that Melanie Bonajo makes in connection to the structure of the documentary show alternatives of “what might be possible” (Haraway 2003, 7).

Having established this, in the following analytical part of the thesis I will first reflect on how the women in the documentary talk about sexuality as a means for change. Secondly I will draw a connection between this and the techniques of making strange to show how abjection can be found in the structure and construction of the documentary. Both aspects of the analysis will provide a way to understand *Economy of Love* in terms of abjection. This chapter will connect the previously gathered understanding of female sexuality in relation to abjection to understand how this connection works in *Economy of Love* in particular. It will also show how a hybrid feminist art documentary in general can function as a useful tool to rouse abjection in its viewers, creating a path of transgression and resistance. This transgression and resistance has the potential to challenge patriarchy and its rational approach to life by the creation of chaos, ambiguity and uncertainty, or in other words, abjection.

Chapter 2.1 Pleasure and Chaos: Abjection and Female Sexuality

This chapter will address the ways in which strategies of abjection can be found in the manner the women in *Economy of Love* present their own positioning and sexual experiences. In order to do this I will analyze several scenes in the documentary that are relevant to the question of how female sexuality is addressed in *Economy of Love* as a form of abjection. I will start out

¹⁸ “prostitutes” and “whores” as well as “clients” are terms used in the documentary.

¹⁹ These are very important issues, I will however not provide an in depth analysis of these issues in my thesis.

by explaining how the way in which the women in the documentary position themselves, as well as how Melanie Bonajo positions them, is a form of abjection, especially in relation to the deject position as explained in chapter 1.1. I will then move on to analyse several scenes in which female sexuality is used in an excessive, explicit manner, rousing feelings of horror. This sexual explicitness can be seen as a critique of the repression of this active form of female sexuality.

Deject Positioning: A Series of Hysterical Complexities

As for woman, one may wonder why she submits so readily to this make-believe, why she “mimics” so perfectly as to forget she is acting out man’s contraphobic projects, projections and productions of her desire... and why does she comply so readily? Because she is suggestible? Hysterical? But now we begin to see the viscous circle -
Luce Irigaray, 1985

The first scene of *Economy of Love* is set in a dark room; the image is fuzzy and faint. In the middle of the room a bed is located with numerous people in it. They are naked and they are moving. Their entwinement makes it difficult to count their exact total. The darkness and erotic chaos creates an explicit yet vague image that is playing out on the screen. Explicit is the nude, raw skin. The obvious is the sexual, unavoidably present. Undefined and left in the literal darkness remain questions such as: Who are these people? How do they relate to each other? How does that matter? A crackling noise plays out in the background. Then a feminine voice speaks: “It was a very, very erupting Renaissance, Brooklyn Renaissance, where a lot of women were coming out as whores, like responsible whores, generous whores, treating whoredom as an honour and a gift for yourself and to be shared and that was deeply exiting to me” (*Economy of Love*, 2015). This statement, that is all but unproblematic, calls on even more questions: Who are non-responsible whores or non-generous whores? And of course the ever-returning question, making its entrance to the stage: How does privilege²⁰ play a role in

²⁰ Privilege is understood in terms of critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw’s theories of intersectionality. Intersectionality divides certain categories as axis of identity. Examples of these axes are race, sex, class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. Someone who has disadvantageous positions in multidimensional intersections is less privileged than someone who has no disadvantages at all (Crenshaw 1989, 151). For a broader explanation of intersectionality and privilege see for example: Crenshaw, K. 1989. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” In: *The University of Chicago Legal Forum*. pp. 139-67.

this? In this part of the 2nd chapter I will first explain how the position of these women can be seen as the deject position, and I will address the problems of privilege. I will then move on to presenting a manner in which the deject position can be used as a form of activism. This form of activism should always reflect upon the activists position as deject. How did the deject come to be dejected and what kind of privilege is involved?

The women in this documentary are knowingly positioning themselves as “whores”, thereby taking on a position that by this society is perceived as unclean, unclear and dirty. This uncleanness and dirtiness of whoredom and prostitution is embedded within historical structures. French Social Hygienist in the 19th century Parent-Duchalet describes the fear for a lack of hygiene, created amongst the “poor population” due to their “lack of morals” (these morals being monogamy within marriage as pressured on people by religious structures). The poor population was associated with living in small places housing a lot of people at the same time. These “poor lower class population” would visit prostitutes thereby spreading disease, like cholera, quickly. These “dirty” prostitutes should therefore be regulated (Schaeppendriver 1986, 89). Besides a lack of hygiene and morals prostitutes in the 19th century also became associated with “lesbianism”. The prostitute was painted and depicted in many pictures as a lesbian. She became the fear of the Bourgeoise. Creating disorder in marriage, reproduction and heterosexual norms. She was seen as the revolutionary nightmare that threatened the hierarchies of that time because they could not be put in a box or category, which lead to chaos and crisis on sexual and political levels. “There was a slippage between class race and gender” (Choquette 1977, 218).

This slippage and inability to categorize that defined prostitution in the 19th century is nowadays still of importance. I want to argue how this inability to categorize sex workers in our time can be connected to the abject. As stated in chapter 1.2: “The one by whom the abject exists is thus a *deject* who places (himself), *separates* (himself), situates (himself), and therefore *strays* instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” (Kristeva 1982, 8). This unclear position of sex workers, outside of social patterning and outside of social acceptance, even outside of actual laws, makes the women in the documentary dejects. They stray over borders, creating new spaces by using abjection through sexual excessiveness and explicitness. They embody the monstrous feminine that is feared and dreaded, cast off from society and use this as a political strategy.

To use the position of the deject as a political strategy sounds great. It is however more complex and problematic. What becomes increasingly clear to me and painfully apparent in this documentary, is the grand difference between being able to position yourself

in a deject position as a conscious political choice, and being in the position of deject unwillingly, involuntarily. Does this mean that people, who make this political and conscious choice cannot “use” this strategy of female sexuality in order to be the deject because of their privilege? I would argue that one could use it, as long as the position from which you cast yourself out of society and into an in-between position is always considered and reflected upon. By reflecting upon your own position the mechanisms and power relations in which they are created gain importance and are made visible. According to Lorde when one fails to recognize their privilege the less privileged person becomes the “other” who is too alien to be comprehended (Lorde 1984, 117). By acknowledging difference and by reflecting upon it the structures underlying privilege can be questioned.

Reflecting upon one’s own privileged position can be a way to work as an activist from a privileged perspective. How does this position play out for the activists in the documentary? Luce Irigaray talks of “hysteria” as a political strategy in a similar way as I would propose to talk about the use of female sexuality, in this case voluntary “whoredom” as deject position. In order to understand this I will briefly elaborate on what Irigaray means with hysteria. Professor of Women’s studies Elizabeth Grosz discusses Irigaray’s theory: “Contrary to Freud, hysteria can be seen as the woman's rebellion against and rejection of the requirements of femininity (requirements which are humiliating for her insofar as they presume women's castration). It is a refusal rather than a repression of heterosexuality, and an attempt to return nostalgically to the pre-oedipal, homosexual desire for the mother” (Grosz 1989, 134). Those who would make use of Irigaray’s theory consciously and mindfully position themselves as hysteric. Hysteria gives a voice, speech to that what is often left unspoken by making women’s bodies speak. There is a need to develop a different strategy, one that does not fit within male-dominated rational theory as mentioned in chapter 1.1. She describes: “The hysteric thus attempts to cope with the demands and expectations of a male-dominated culture which relies on women's renunciation of their relations to other women, and of their unmediated relations to their own bodies and pleasures, by summoning up an apparently incapacitating 'illness', which prevents her from giving satisfaction to men while satisfying herself in a compromise or symptomatic form [...] The hysteric's defiance through excess, through *overcompliance*, is a parody of the expected” (Grosz 1989, 135). This parody of the expected, the mimicking of that what is a position that is described and stereotyped in a certain way by societal norms can serve as a means to work with the deject position while being reflexive of your own position as voluntarily chosen. In this case the societal expectations of “whores” being dirty and wrong.

To connect these ideas of overly excessive and self-conscious positioning in an in-between field, that is appointed, determined and confirmed by society as ‘dirty’ and ‘wrong’ and by mimicking this “dirty” position, one can work against these norms. I will analyze the following scene in which all these ideas can be interpreted. The scene plays out towards the end of the documentary. Two people sit in a bath, flowers in their hair and in the water, their faces covered in literal dirt. A feminine voice speaks:

“Any person working in the sexual field is constantly being told ‘no’ by the world around them. And the fact that this kind of work is illegal speaks to that largely. Most often sex workers are not feeling empowered. Because they live in a world where they are being told that they are wrong and they are told that they’re dirty and told that they don’t have other options” (*Economy of Love*, 2015).

In this bathing scene the literal dirt, covering the faces of the two people bathing and playfully touching each other, can be considered as a symbol of the position of these women. Even the sweet smell of flowers and the cleansing powers of water cannot wash the dirt off. I would argue that by juxtaposing the beauty of flowers and the unclean and unclear dirt, both positioned in a place (dirt of the face, flowers in the bath) where it does not belong, as “matter out of place” theories by Mary Douglas (1966) suggest, Melanie Bonajo shows how the position of the person working in the sexual field is not as clear and irreconcilable as what they are being told by the “world they are in” as mentioned in the documentary. Their position is presented as one of ambiguity and of dirtiness, not because this is the truth but because it was ascribed as such by mainstream structures of society. Through mimicking and “overcompliance”, as argued by Irigaray, that derives from the literal and theatrical addition of dirt on the faces of these people²¹, a parody of the expected is created. This hysteric – in the Irigarayan sense – outing of the abject substance of dirt in relation to the deject position of the sex worker brings together two different strategies, that of literal use of “matter out of place” as well as the cast off position in an in-between space. They are both pointing to female sexuality as a tool for change and criticism. It criticizes that what is dirty and what is clean is

²¹ The people in this documentary self-identify as women, that is the voiceovers in the background. Since the visual images are staged and I do not know which voice belongs to which person I will be calling the people in the visual images people because I do not want to put them in categories they do not identify with.

not always as clear as we are led to believe and it shows that the deject position can be used as a form of activism.

Female Sexuality: Release the Monster

Let the wild rumpus start! – Maurice Sendak, 1968

Female sexuality is made visible and audible in the documentary in a high degree. The excessiveness of female sexuality, the female as sexual monster, as explained in chapter 1.1, a monster who is independent from men's desire, is seen as dangerous and threatening to patriarchal structures (Creed 1993, 1). The "non-rational" side of the erotic, as a spiritual, energetic, forceful strength, as talked about by Lorde, can provide a means of change, a shift toward a space of the possible (Lorde 1984, 57). Even though in this documentary the uses of the orgasm as a spiritual erotic force are given high significance, I do not want to claim that the orgasm is the only useful means of expressing female sexuality. As Lorde states, there are many ways in which the erotic can be used that do not necessarily relate to sex (Lorde 1984, 57). Out of this I would conclude that the beauty of passion also lies in the power of the smaller intense experiences of life that can increase pleasure and joy. It is however useful to look at the orgasm as an example of *a* form of "non-rational" female sexuality.

With the analysis of the following scenes I will argue how the way in which the women in the documentary address and talk about their sexuality can be seen as a form of abjection through the use of excessiveness and explicitness of their sexuality. I will then connect this to the powers of horror (Creed, 1993). Horror in this sense is awakened by the monstrous feminine as sexually active, ambiguous and different from what is seen as "normal", in this sense male sexuality²². I will first show how these women once again position themselves in relation to their thoughts on sexuality. After that, I will analyse how the documentary plays on the dirtiness of openly talking about orgasm as the ultimate form of expression and key for change.

²² As explained earlier in chapter 1.1: Women are seen in patriarchal structures as mostly passive, whereas men are sexually active. When a man awakens women's sexuality they can be sexual. The ambiguity and uncertainty comes into play when a woman's desires are passions that are independent and not related to the male's "active" sexual desires, this is seen as different from the norm. (Laquer 1991).

In the middle part of the documentary, several people are standing in the water; they are naked, close to each other. The waves are moving them. They stare into the camera, blank. The feminine voiceover starts speaking:

“It started with a mantra which was very simple it was something like like ‘sexuality is good for me’ and that was it. I had to keep repeating it to myself over and over again. Sexuality is good for me, sexuality is good for the world. It seemed like idiotic to me that I would have to tell myself that that often. But I couldn’t believe how deep the level of shame and fear was and how deeply a part of me didn’t believe that. Part of me believed the story that it was evil or dirty or wrong. And that scared me more than anything. It scared me more than the risk of being punished for what I did. It scared me more than the risk of incarceration or danger. It felt like it was rooted all the way back to the beginning of time and the beginning of the oppression of women and the oppression of sexuality” (*Economy of Love*, 2015).

This quote introduces the feeling of this specific person in the documentary as being oppressed, struggling against the waves, caught up in the stream that has been flowing in the same direction for decades, as the text suggests: “It felt like it was rooted all the way back to the beginning of time and the beginning of the oppression of women and the oppression of sexuality” (*Economy of Love*, 2015). Because of the oppression of sexuality, the naked bodies are stuck in the stream. Their blank faces leave out any traces of emotion. The exposed bodies are countered by the non-revealing facial expressions. The feeling of this image is one of being trapped; trapped in the group of people, trapped in the waves, trapped in a hollow expression. This scene visually displays the feeling of incapability to escape the norms in society that are set to control female sexuality, as described by the voice in the background. The group of people, all together, is presented as forming a tight cluster that is keeping each other in place, as, one could argue, is what happens with social norms in the society that are repressing female bodies. Waves splashing against their backs moving them forward while subsequently pulling the group back again in a perpetual motion that results in them being marooned in the same place. Their blank facial expressions reflect the idea that emotion, passion and sexuality should be repressed. This repression of emotion and female desire as a social norm can be explained by Foucault’s theories on the reproduction of power. Foucault, in the book *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality* (1990) argues that there is a

dominant discourse²³ on sexuality but there are also several of them, and they are linked to different institutions and have different views on sexuality. Dominant power, as Foucault describes, usually institutions such as the church, the state and the medical system, have interests in keeping these discourses alive; for example, the state has an interest in the heteronormative discourse, leading to reproduction, which will, according to the state, lead to a large number of strong civilians which can be of use in times of war (Foucault 1990, 22). Female sexuality is an example of that what should be controlled because it is not of use to these ideas of “healthy” civilians. Female sexuality on its own cannot reproduce these strong civilians, it needs male sexuality and heteronormativity in order to do so (Foucault 1990, 6-7). Therefore these independent bodies that are sexual should be controlled. This form of control, power is reproductive, meaning that it disciplines but also produces at the same time. Power is part of us as acting, speaking subjects. It is embedded, we have internalized it and we live it, as explained in chapter 1.1. We are partly autonomous in the sense that we “chose” to reproduce these powers, yet it is hard, if not impossible to exist outside of these powers because power is omnipresent, it is everywhere (Foucault 1990, 6-7). Institutions rule over people through biopolitics, as a technological power to the right to “make live and let die” (Foucault 2003, 241). These powers are used to exert control over the population. Before biopower, the sovereign power had rights over life and death. This form of power exercised control over their population by repressing them in a physically violent way. Biopolitics however rules over bodies through caring for those who belong, while leaving those who do not belong, who are unsafe and form a threat to dominant power, to their fate (Foucault 2003). As described before, female sexuality independent from male sexuality can form a threat to “healthy” civilians that lead to increase the number of population. I would argue that it is repressed through the internalization of the idea that it cannot be voiced or expressed. This power works in a reproductive way, meaning that society as a whole live these ideas out, thereby making it very hard to change these lived out structures. The people in group in the waves can therefore be interpreted as holding up their own but also each other’s hollowness, mimicking the discourses that say female sexuality as a form of outing and expressions should be repressed, it cannot exist without male sexuality and it cannot thrive on emotions that are not embedded within a rational discourse.

This is my interpretation of how the women in the documentary introduce the

²³ According to Sara Mills discourses in Foucaultian terms are: “Practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Mills 1997, 17). A discourse creates something, it effects our view on things.

problems they are facing, combined with Melanie Bonajo's visual contributions. After this scene, these women also address how they are trying to change these repressive norms for themselves, and ultimately for others, that is: through making audible what is left unheard. I will then connect this to the powers of horror. The sunny sea image switches to a dark area, covered in snow. The same crackling sound as was heard in the beginning of the documentary plays in the background. It becomes clear now that it is snow melting, dripping from a plant. A feminine voiceover starts talking again:

“Actually in all of my experience I never had a woman tell me what she wants and that is crazy because you know, men tell me all the time what they want. Especially just being women anyway and being told never to vocalize what we want and what it is that feels good to us because that is irrelevant because we have to be okay with every situation that we are put in and not say a word so I think generationally that is ingrained in our DNA to be that (Laughs)... That also is why this work is so important to me because it allows for vocalization to come out for like I want this or I want you to do this to me, or can you press harder?”

The scene switches to the inside of a room. A woman lying on the floor naked, another naked woman hovering over her, touching her face. They are both blindfolded. The woman on the floor has a cloth over her eyes, the woman touching her wears a black bag with catlike ears. The voice continues:

“Can you push harder, can you go in circles, can you go deeper? I just think sometimes it might be perceived as like dirty and that has been projected on women as not being okay, you can't be dirty. You have to be a clean all white lady who gives and hardly ever receives.” (*Economy of Love*, 2015)

According to Foucault this taboo on voicing sexual experiences is also connected to the repression of female sexuality. He explains in his book *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*: “Repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, nothing to know” (Foucault 1990, 5). The taboo and denial of female sexuality is embedded within certain discourses on sexuality. As mentioned before one of them is that of biological reproduction. Talking about sex in a way

that does not deny female sexuality, is therefore placing yourself outside the reach of power in a knowingly subversive manner. Once again the women in the documentary argue for the position that is dirty. Be explicit. Voice what you want. Claim pleasure and claim intensity. This making explicit and loudness of subjugated voices can lead to an empowerment of women's sexuality by voicing that what is supposed to be left out of discourses. This passing of the borders on what is taboo can be considered as locating of the self in an in-between, abject field. A field that is dirty and taboo.

From another perspective this explicitness can also be seen as a form of abjection related to the power of horror. This very active and straightforward position that is seen as dirty, as "the opposite of clean, all white and virgin like" (*Economy of Love*, 2015), creates abjection. People fear it because it is ambiguous in the sense that it is independent as the Other, the woman, is not relating to the Self, the man, in a sexual sense, as explained in chapter 1.1. Her sexuality stands on its own. By voicing, articulating and expressing sexual desires the women pay full attention to their sexualities and passions, thereby entering a liminal and "dirty" position. Through this form of abjection they allow for vocalization and through that they create an in-between space where change can occur in relation to the repression of this sexuality. Thus, through excessiveness, explicitness and clarity in voicing their lusts and needs abjection is created through the ambiguity of the dirty position.

Another tool the women in the documentary use to restructure and transgress the ideas about repressed female sexuality in connection to abjection is what they call "pleasure, as a key for transformation" (*Economy of Love*, 2015). With the following scene I will describe how the orgasm, defined as a non-rational, chaotic and powerful experience that is independent and autonomous from "male sexuality" can enable an extended space. This space transgresses and transforms the limited spaces created by patriarchy in relation to rationality that is embedded in institutions as will become more clear later on. In this following scene one of the women describes an intense experience she had with an orgasm. A woman is hanging upside down, her mouth slightly open and her eyes big. It is dark, a red glow lights up her face.

"I remember a really good time when I really slipped into orgasm. I was laying down and because of the minute motion of the finger on my clit, it has like the most nerve endings of anywhere possible ever invented in humanity. You soften that little pinpoint in that area and then it just expands, like a liquid almost. So then it felt like her finger was stroking something like a mile long, this expansive lake surface like

space expended. And then I started to hear things. I heard a bird outside of the window and then I started crying. I was totally present for the first time” (*Economy of Love*, 2015).

This expansion of space, where she finally felt present, where she wandered, crossing boundaries of rationality, can be seen as a space between. The space where, as Kristeva states, the ‘*where* I am’ becomes fluid (Kristeva 1982, 9). Transgressing, expanding borders and spaces, the exiles, dejects find a new and creative way to review and reshape the world as we know it: entering this space of ecstasy that is disconnected from all rationality in a chaotic and disorderly attempt to reach something that is so intense that it is beyond rational understanding; so ambiguous that it becomes powerful. It is exactly this inability to grasp pleasure and desire that makes it the chaotic opposite of, for example, the medical discourse, which attempts to make sense of the world through rationality (Foucault 1990). Hard science, embedded in institutions such as the medical one, make use of vision²⁴ as their primal recourse of understanding, knowledge gathering (Fox Keller and Grontkowski 1983, 208). According to Irigaray this is not the only way to sense, to know (Fox Keller and Grontkowski 1983, 207). She argues: “How can we speak to escape their enclosures, patterns, distinctions and oppositions: virginal/deflowered, pure/impure, innocent/knowing, sick/well...How can we shake off the chains of these terms, free ourselves from their categories, divest ourselves of their names? Disengage ourselves, *alive*, from their concepts?” (Irigaray 1980, 75). One way to do so according to Irigaray is to step back from the idea that vision is the only sense we can use to gather knowledge. Vision according to Irigaray is connected to male-based language. She proposes to use touching as a sense that can be more “feminine” as opposition of the male-based sense of vision that is used as evidence for empirical and rational knowledge. Vision according to Fox Keller and Grontkowski is the sense that is connected to ratio (Fox Keller and Grontkowski 1983, 210). To use the sense of touch, as described in in *Economy of Love*; “I was laying down and because of the minute motion of the finger on my clit, it has like the most nerve endings of anywhere possible ever invented in humanity” (*Economy of Love*, 2015), a different kind of knowledge is made. Melanie Bonajo uses the sense of touch as well as hearing to make sense of the world she once knew in a different way. The woman describes: “And then I started to hear things. I heard a bird outside of the window and then I started crying. I was totally present for the first time.”

²⁴ A through description of this historical process will be given in chapter 2.2

The uses of different senses to understand the world in another way can be seen as a threat to rational knowledge. The woman in the documentary describes how she started crying, displaying fiery emotion. In that moment she is different, she is the abject, the deject, the monster; she is horror and chaos, her eroticism frightening. These differences can function as monstrous in the following sense: Difference is seen as monstrous, contrast in sex, sexuality and genitals are unnerving. This difference sums up why the female monster is “scarier” than the male monster. Her sexuality is something that defines her as a woman (Creed 1992). This active sexual experience of the orgasm conflicts with the humble, passive and silent way in which women still are pressured to act in Western discourse. These ideas derive largely from the medical discourse that, in the nineteenth century, dedicated much of its effort to categorizing and explaining sexual desires that could, according to them be seen as “deviant”. (Oosterhuis 2012, 37) “Sodomy” as well as public displays of indecency and prostitution were all punishable by forced law or imprisonment because they were seen as impure and threatening as well as “unnatural” (Oosterhuis 2012, 38). Even though nowadays, these ideas on impurity are present less prominently, they still exist. When “purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise” (Douglas 1966, 130) then the orgasm is the impurity that can produce change. It is impure in its disorderly fashion. The female orgasm becomes something fearful and autonomous. As Melanie Bonajo shows in her video, the world is literally turned upside down. Nothing in this space is what it used to be, the world is seen through different eyes after this moment of ecstasy.

As established before, through female sexuality as ambiguity and different from male sexuality, and thereby monstrous, creating abjection, a new space can be created. These differences can be detected in multiple forms. They can be the use and importance the documentary ascribes to the senses that are other than vision, as well as the impurity of the orgasm that creates an active sexual experience. Thus, through positioning, presenting and mimicking certain positions chaos is created. Through the explicitness of the voice of the repressed or through ambiguous, non-rational²⁵ sexual experiences, abjection is present throughout this documentary. These forms of abjection, all in relation to female sexuality present new opportunities to rethink our rationally based society that represses these forms of female sexuality that are unclear and unclean.

²⁵ Non-rational in this sense is meant as the opposite of rational knowledge that is created through the empirical discourse of vision on science.

Chapter 2.2 Making Strange, Making Hybrid

My focus in this second part of the chapter is on the question of how filming and editing strategies of making strange can contribute to making a hybrid documentary that is positioned in-between, as the abject. These editing strategies have been made explicit in chapter 1.2. This in-between and abject type of documentary does not fit within the established borders of how documentary should be, according to the laws of mainstream documentary (Biemann 2003, 8). The documentary is positioned between the borders of what is fact and what is fiction, what is truth and what is not. It tests these borders by providing an alternative way of looking at documentary and its relation to truth, legitimized by vision, as I will address more thoroughly later in this chapter. As is the case in *Economy of Love*, through the visibility of the artist, absurdity and the blurring of fact and fiction, ambiguity within documentary can be achieved. These techniques point the attention to how mainstream documentary is considered to be about absolute and unchallenged truth and they challenge these assumptions. Consequently, I argue that these artistic filmic strategies also challenge or at least question the importance we grant to the mundane way of thinking about rational truth²⁶. This mundane way of thinking relates to our everyday life structures and patterns of thinking. These patterns are often so embedded in our lives that we do not question them. In this chapter I articulate how the recording and editing techniques used in *Economy of Love* thus contribute to a defamiliarization of the common ideas that truth exists and that documentary films are, or should be, able to portray it. I will show how these dominant notions about the truth are criticized by the alternative abject forms of art-documentary in that such film is able to make these notions strange. This truth is, as explained before in chapter 1.1, based on patriarchal, male dominant structures of rational knowledge. By exposing a different way of thinking about documentary, through the lens of abjection instead of rational truth, these male dominant ways of understanding and making sense of the world can be challenged. In my reading of *Economy of Love*, documentary as a genre seen through the lenses of gender studies and critical documentary studies, is placed in a position that is unclear, that cannot be explained rationally, it is not truth and it is not fiction. In the following pages, through the analysis of several scenes in *Economy of Love* I will show how these techniques of blurring fact and fiction, of making visible of the artist and of humor and absurdity, can be at work, in

²⁶ With rational truth I mean the way in which we connect rationality to truth. Rationality will lead to truth.

this documentary specifically, but could also be used in other documentaries as a way to make hybrid abject documentaries that are located in an in-between genre.

Fact and Fiction: A Story of Staged Images

“Speak just the same. Because your language doesn’t follow just one thread, one course, or one pattern, we are in luck. You speak from everywhere at the same time. You touch me whole at the same time. In all senses. Why only one discourse, one song, one text at a time?”- Irigaray 1980, 73

The first technique that I will call a technique to make strange in documentary is one that juxtaposes reality and fiction, realistic and fictional images, sounds and editing strategies. In *Economy of Love* Melanie Bonajo has chosen to stage all the images; the interviews that are used as voiceovers are however not staged, they are fragments of actual conversation she has had with the people cooperating in the documentary. In this part of the chapter, I will argue how this friction between what is real and what is staged can create a sense of chaos, ambiguity and abjection in documentary.

According to artist and filmmaker Ursula Biemann, art embedded in documentary can give it an ambivalent position (Biemann 2003, 8). Political, artistic and theoretical spheres can coexist within video practices; this overlapping of diverse fields makes, according to Ursula Biemann, for a documentary that is in-between. She explains talking about hybrid artistic-documentary videos: “For a documentary they are seen as too experimental, self-reflexive and subjective, and for an art video they stand out for being socially involved or explicitly political” (Biemann, 2003, 8). Biemann intends to make clear that in some understandings of mainstream documentary it is required for a documentary to not be too experimental in order to achieve “truth” within a documentary. For some understandings of video art it is however important to create a project that is not influenced by political claims in order to make it less biased. Therefore hybrid artistic-documentary does not fit within either of these two genres, where diverse fields are brought together in one video project. These projects experiment on how documentary can exist as a specific genre with its techniques and implication, yet questioning certain notions of truth. The way this kind of videos do this is, according to Biemann, by claiming an ambivalent position: it sets itself outside of the normal designated categories of documentary; thereby, as I would argue, becoming the abject. By explicitly

making a documentary a staged and artistically written video story it is emphasized that what can be considered as “truth” is not connected to, as Trinh T. Minh-ha describes “a single meaning” (Trinh 1993, 93). In other words, Bonajo, in this film, presents some kind of truth, one of many possible truths; she offers and stimulates the production of many meanings but not one stable and normative ‘true’ one. This “one of many truths” that she creates is one that is created from her specific point of view. The subjectivity of this point of view is made visible to the viewers of this documentary, thereby showing there is not one meaning that will lead to the truth. The obviously staged images and scenes in *Economy of Love* call on questions such as: What is real and what not? Do the images, that what you see, make a documentary more real? Can a documentary still be a documentary without the use of “real” images? I will address these questions in this part of the chapter.

To understand the importance we in the Western world ascribe to the visual influence on our perception of the truth, it is important to not merely look at the history of documentary. Vision has conquered its status as the privileged and most reliable sense over a longer time lapse. Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Grontkowski, both feminist theorists, explain in *The Mind’s Eye* how vision has gained its strong connection in relation to truth. According to them this is heavily embedded in patriarchal and male dominant structures of society. They argue: “The logic of Western thought is too rooted in the visual; its failure it is implied, derives from an unwholesome division of the senses” (Fox Keller and Grontkowski 1983, 207). In their article they explain how this unequal division of the senses has come about as well as how the other senses can play an important part in our understanding of the world. These other senses can be an opposition to the “male sense” of vision. Irigaray explains: “Woman’s desire does not speak the same language as man’s desire... In this logic the prevalence of the gaze... is particularly foreign to female eroticism. Women find pleasure more in touch than in sight” (Irigaray as quoted in Fox Keller and Grontkowski 1983, 207). Vision is ascribed a higher status, by the Western society, than touching or hearing. This theory of vision and the gaze as male-centered and dominant derives from the cultural meanings attached to vision, rooted in Western history. Vision, objectivity and the truth are not value free. In a world that uses vision and the gaze as the most relevant and meaningful sense it is important to comprehend the context in which this sense has gained its grand status. In their article Fox Keller and Grontkowski state that “some underlying assumptions escape our attention by virtue of being too familiar. Unnoticed they can form both our concepts of knowledge and the language in which these concepts are formulated” (Fox Keller and Grontkowski 1983, 208). These assumptions that vision and knowledge are necessarily

intertwined are embedded in our culture and history, starting many years ago with the old Greeks and Plato's theories on knowledge in relation to vision. Plato was one of the first to address the importance of vision, without providing a solid argument of why this was to be the case. Sight for him was created in the same context as the soul and intelligence in human beings (Fox Keller and Grontkowski 1983, 210). By saying so, he disconnects sight from all other senses. According to Plato they are created in a different context. He connects the eye to light. Vision brings us light, thereby connecting it to intellect. He suggests the following: the soul, before entering the body once dwelt with the Gods. There we had the same pure understanding of the world as the Gods their selves. We do not remember this as such in our actual world. We merely know or see with our eyes the projections of that what we once knew as pure knowledge. This pureness of vision and sight was the ultimate knowledge that exists somewhere outside of this world (Fox Keller and Grontkowski 1983, 211). Still following Fox Keller and Grontkowski's study, this is the argument on which all Western philosophers after Plato based their theories of knowledge on, from Descartes to Newton, now entering the scientific field. Newton's theories clean the Godlike myths from Plato's former ideas of vision thereby making vision into something that is generally accepted in the scientific field as creator of truth. Newton's naked eye was his main research instrument.

These ideas, that vision is objective and that seeing leads to knowing and truth, is challenged in *Economy of Love*. Melanie Bonajo steps away from this culturally based idea that vision can explain all by staging the visual images: they are fictive and preformed whereas the audible fragments of interviews that play out as voiceovers are not. Melanie Bonajo uses a different sense, that of hearing, as a prime indicator of "truth". She uses interviews and conversations with the people represented in the documentary as storyline. Vision is ascribed a different status as well. The visual images in mainstream documentary would present reality, trying to show what happens in everyday life, regardless of the presence of a camera. Documentary maker and Lincoln University Chair of communications, Brian Winston describes in his article *The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription* (1993) how mainstream media has come to this idea. He notes: "Because they could now record actual events and sounds, they believed that anything else, including any sort of rehearsal or post-synchronization was immoral and unworthy [...] If the material was not spontaneous, they said, how could it be true?" (Winston 1993, 46). This way of filming and representation cannot be found with the eye in *Economy of Love*. All images that are shown are staged. Some of them look like they might be showing actual events, 'real' scenes, but in fact none of them are. One scene in which this is made explicit plays out in the 6th minute of the

documentary. A woman is lying down on a blanket in front of a large window that displays a forest in the background. The woman is wearing leaves, like a mask on her head as well as on her hands. She is naked and makes slow and sharp breathing movements with her chest, touching herself with the leaves and slowly rolling towards the camera, then tolling back to where she was first positioned. These moves in combination with the costume she is wearing make for an aesthetic staged appearance of the scene that does not correspond with “natural” filming techniques of mainstream documentaries that usually want to make the images appear as if they have played out like this in reality, without interference of the filmmaker.

As Irigaray suggests in a previous quote, by using more than just one of the senses it could be possible to gain a different understanding of the world that is not just embedded in patriarchal structures of knowing. What is true and what is not is challenged. Melanie Bonajo’s use of staged, aesthetically created and art-like images, steps away from how mainstream documentary would visually portray the truth about a situation or social reality. The use of art in combination with political and theoretical insights (as many of the audio interview voiceovers address feminist issues on sexuality) creates a documentary that is positioned outside of designated genres of documentary, crossing these borders, creating new spaces, becoming abject.

The Artist is Present: Making Visible of the Personal

“We’re inside of what we make, and it’s inside of us. We’re living in a world of connections — and it matters which ones get made and unmade.” – Haraway 1991, 149

The second editing technique that can be found in *Economy of Love* is one that makes the artist visible. Through the making visible of the artist the notion that the filmmaker as a Godlike figure who is non-existent, materially not present, as a voice coming from heaven that speaks what is truth, is contested²⁷. By putting emphasis on the filmmaker as someone with their own position, background and opinions, always subjective and always partial, a reflexive position towards the status of documentary as ultimate truth is taken.

In her book *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium* (1997) Donna Haraway describes why it is important to always keep in mind where knowledge comes from. Whose knowledge

²⁷ Donna Haraway calls this the God-trick in her book *Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium* (1997).

do we perceive as truth? There are always certain contexts and power relations in which knowledge is created. These contexts and structures always matter. Haraway explains that objectivity has always played a central part in science: “Science has been about a search for translation, convertibility, mobility, of meanings and universality- which I call reductionism only when one language (guess whose?), must be enforced as the standard for all the translations and conversions.” (Harway 1997, 580) This is the ruling Western, male dominant language that makes empirical science, seeing is knowing, the absolute truth. By looking at knowledge as partial, these hierarchies of rational truth can be reflected upon. According to Haraway, knowledge always comes from a context. The only truthful and objective knowledge is knowledge that acknowledges that it is partial. It is only what I see and what I have done. Objectivity is to be precise about how you come to this knowledge. It is local and partial. (Haraway 1997, 583) “Objectivity is not about disengagement but about mutual and usually unequal structuring, about taking risks in a world where “we” are permanently mortal, that is not final control. We have, finally, no clear and distinct ideas” (Haraway 1997, 596). In documentary film, the filmmaker can make use of these strategies of reflexivity by, for example, making their own position clear. Through making visible the artist’s position it is made clear that the person making the documentary comes from a certain background, context that is never neutral, never careless and never impersonal.

In *Economy of Love* Melanie Bonajo addresses her own background, thereby making herself present through a series of references to her past. By incorporating a part of herself in the documentary she calls attention to her own position, leading to visibility of the director and creating a challenge to the notion that documentary is and always has to be embedded within a paradigm of truth-telling that lays emphasis on truth as ‘objective,’ factual and rationally established. By showing her presence as the artist she is testing the importance we ascribe to finding truth and criticizing whose truth we believe at the same time, showing that in her documentary there is room for more than one truth.

A large part of Melanie Bonajo’s life and background is connected to the history of mine work. Melanie Bonajo’s grandfather was a mineworker in Heerlen. In *Economy of Love* she refers to the mine working family background by integrating the ashes from the mine into several scenes in *Economy of Love*. These ashes can be interpreted as a metaphor to her own position, her surrounding and her history. The following scene is an example of how she incorporates her own history in the documentary. Towards the end of the documentary a naked person is standing in the woods; snow covers the path that she is standing on. Her face is lit up by the sunlight, grazing her cheeks. Her chin is turned upwards, her eyes are closed,

her chest rising and falling sharply. The heavy breathing in the cold winter sky leaves soft traces of condensation, fog clouds forming as the air leaves her lips. In her hand she holds a green bag. Her hand reaches in, she takes a hand full of ash and she sends it flying, the wind helping her to spread it rapidly into the world. She repeats this several times, the ashes landing on her head. There is a close up of her face and upper torso. We now see that her entire body is covered in dirt, like the mine workers bodies were covered in smudges of ash, mud and soil. Melanie Bonajo's past now projected upon her naked body, becoming one, blurring the boundaries of film maker and film subjects.

Even though at first glance, mining history is not "relevant" to the story that is told in the documentary, it becomes very significant because Melanie Bonajo has chosen to include this in the documentary in order to make herself one of the women portrayed in the film. In other words, I argue that she puts herself in the film as a way of becoming one of the subjects of the film, becoming one of these women, in order to show the viewers that there are no clear boundaries between who represents and who is represented, between what is important truth and less important truth, what is worth to be told and what is left hidden. Merely because she has chosen to show us certain scenes, shots and people, merging them together in the story that she tells does not make for an absolute and rational truth. By 'making strange' the story she tells through the use of the ashes that allegedly have no connection to the story of the women in the documentary Melanie Bonajo creates confusion and ambiguity. By making visible her own background, mixing this with images of the other women in the documentary, telling a story within a story, showing how life and relations are always interconnected, intertwined and always changing, she displays that there is never one truth, never one definiteness that can be presented as completely rational and objective. Context matters, backgrounds matter. Relations to other people carry weight. They form and transform. Melanie Bonajo's relation to the women in the documentary is important and vice versa, as they always influence each other. As Donna Haraway says: "We're inside of what we make and it's inside of us" (Haraway 1991, 149). Connections matter, whether they are connections to our past, to other people, to our cultural beliefs or to the stories that we tell.

By mixing Melanie Bonajo's own life story, interconnecting it with the stories the women of the Tantra, making visible that there is more than one story to tell, challenging rational truth while at the same time creating scenes in the documentary that are out of place, that look as if they do not belong, Bonajo creates ambiguity in the documentary. This ambiguity and this unsettling of meanings through interweaving different stories and filmic techniques is what I call making strange. Taking what is normal and expected, (in

documentary this would be presenting one story that is exhibited as “the truth”) and making it strange by challenging these notions – through making the artist visible – I argue that she finds a way to critically reflect upon the implications of mainstream documentary. In doing so, she, consequently, places her own documentary outside the boundaries and borders of norms and genres, thus making her project the chaotic opposite of the structured evidence built by and in mainstream documentaries.

Humor, Absurdity and the Creation of Chaos

Another technique that I have detected in Bonajo’s film, used to unsettle borders and make things strange is the use of humor and absurdity²⁸ within the documentary. In this section I argue how humor and absurdity can deconstruct the expected, chronological story line of a documentary, thereby creating unexpected, deviating interventions that create a chaotic, unclear and sometimes confusing effect in the documentary, making it less cohesive (Biemann 2003, 9). This loss of cohesion places the documentary outside of its own limits, and, according to Biemann, the documentary then becomes hybrid. I propose that, through these techniques, the documentary *Economy of Love* becomes abject.

Melanie Bonajo describes how the uses of humor and absurdity in her projects are always important. She states: “Through humor and the absurd I touch upon the borders of our belief systems and search for an attitude that encourages new perspectives towards consciousness, value, the structural and ethical questions of ownership, the body, each other, nature and economic approaches” (Bonajo 2015, paragraph 9). Through the use of humor and absurdity Bonajo strives to confront us with that what we believe, presenting this as limited, caught between walls and borders of the oppressive systems we live in. My argument in this section, following from what I have discussed so far, is that by challenging these normative systems with these techniques that cross borders, placing her artworks outside mainstream space and into a space for change her projects become the abject. *Economy of Love* is present in the same space where the deject wanders and forms a threat to the orderly, rationally controlled society. It opposes itself to orderly structure, thereby creating a new space that is thrilling and dangerously disordered. This deject documentary is mostly a danger to those who are in the higher power positions, claiming these positions through rational based knowledge. The chaotic provides an alternative way of seeing “the truth”. An alternative and different position for those who do not feel like they belong within

²⁸ As described in chapter 1.2

the borders is created. Abjection is telling them that it is okay not to fit or to adjust and conform to that what is seen as normal, based on rationality. It provides an alternative, energetic and always dynamic field for those who are casted out: a field where change is initiated and a space where boundaries are being crossed. Humor and absurdity therefore are tools to create chaos; this chaos is the opposite of rationality and truth. It can therefore be used to challenge the idea that documentary presents the rational truth. These ideas connect back to the overarching structure in society that claims power and authority through the centrality of rational based knowledge, that, as I have elaborated before in chapter 1.1, is a partial and male dominant form of making sense of the world.

According to Ursula Biemann, humor and absurdity can be used to “test the possibility of theory- building through visual means” (Biemann 2013, 9). She states: “Absurdity is frequently produced through the disjointed assemblage of visual associations that do not produce continuity in the content” (Biemann 2013, 9). In *Economy of Love* there are multiple scenes that can be interpreted as humorous and absurd²⁹. The following scene is an example of the way in which Melanie Bonajo uses humor and absurdity. Towards the end of the documentary there is a visual image that portrays four neatly dressed men standing in a shed. Wooden bars and hay on the floor. They are all holding a chicken. They are softly smiling down on the chicken, their hands delicately caressing their feathers. The voice in the background speaks:

“It seems like a lot of men who come in are really seeking this deeply nurturing experience, even if it seems like they are seeking something more active and more sexy, what I always am reminded of is that they are seeking something nurturing. And that always brings me strength because it feels really good being that nurturing presence for someone like I’m channelling the divine mother like someone who is instantly loving and universally excepting.”

The images combined with the voice in the background make for an absurd moment. The feminine voice is explaining some sex-related and intimate moments she has with the men who come in for sex, earlier also explaining how that sometimes can be difficult for her. The images in the back show these caring and loving men, stroking the fur of the chicken, overly at peace with the weird and absurd situation that they are a part of, like it is something they do

²⁹ What a person may or may not think is humorous and absurd is of course subjective. This will therefore be my interpretation of humor that is used in this analysis.

everyday. Their familiarity with the situation that is, in most viewers' eyes, I imagine, not familiar at all, creates confusion. Questions therefore come up: why are these men dressed in suits petting chickens in a shed? How does it make any sense in connection with what the voice in the background is saying? This juxtaposition between the act of petting animals and prostitution can create abjection in the viewers. Sex and chickens is something that most people would not relate or connect to each other. This humorous intervention thus raises questions, abjection and makes the documentary move across borders in the sense that it disrupts the cohesion of meaning between the aural and the visual dimension of the film.

In the second part of this chapter I have argued how various techniques to make strange within documentary can produce a film that is positioned outside of the genres of mainstream documentary. This is a documentary that crosses the borders of the designated genres, thus creating a new space, a space of the abject where new possibilities are created. In these ways, the documentary challenges the patriarchal idea that vision leads to accurate or objective knowledge and that there is something as an objective truth that can be portrayed in documentary. I argued how these dominant notions about "the truth" are criticized by the alternative abject forms of art-documentary by the use of several strategies that make these notions strange. By exposing a different way of thinking about documentary, through the lens of abjection instead of rational truth, these male dominant ways of understanding and making sense of the world can be challenged. In my reading of *Economy of Love*, documentary as a genre seen through the lenses of gender studies and critical documentary studies, is placed in a position that is unclear, that cannot be explained rationally.

Conclusion

The aim of my thesis was to show how we can understand Melanie Bonajo's feminist art documentary *Economy of Love* as a form of abjection in terms of female sexuality and ambiguity, functioning as a tool to deconstruct the limits of rational patriarchy. By doing so a field of discussion may be opened on how feminism can provide alternate means to understand, make sense of the world. These alternate means challenge the male-based patriarchal assumption that there is an objective truth that can be found, whether this is in documentary film or in everyday life experience. I have explored which tools can be used as a means to create this ambiguous and abject position that is in-between genres as well as in-between social norms that can deconstruct these limits of patriarchy.

In chapter 1.1 I have outlined how abjection can be defined but more importantly how it can be used as a political strategy, functioning as a tool to provide people with the power to work with their differences from an ambiguous and in-between position, that of the deject. Because my aim was to provide an understanding of *Economy of Love* in these terms, the group especially focussed on in my thesis were women. The tools that could be provided by abjection as strategies to make certain patriarchal structures shift are those of female sexuality as a creator of horror and eroticism as opposite of rational male-based knowledge. Both of these tools and theories can be helpful to transform and cross the limits of rational patriarchy.

Next, in chapter 1.2, I have explained how hybrid art documentary in its form can similarly transgress borders and limits set by mainstream documentary. This mainstream documentary follows, much alike patriarchal rational knowledge, the assumption of knowing "the truth". This truth knowing is connected to underlying structures of patriarchy linked to the importance granted to the sense of vision. I have outlined three filmic and editing strategies that can be used to put documentary in an ambiguous, abject territory by "making strange" that what is taken for granted in mainstream documentary theory.

Then, in chapter 2 I have argued that *Economy of Love* proves to be a feminist art documentary that is positioned in an ambiguous, abject position in its content as well as its form. I have done this through analysis of the content of *Economy of Love* in chapter 2.1 and its form in chapter 2.2. For the analysis in chapter 2.1 I made use of the tools provided in chapter 1.1, that of female sexuality, eroticism and the deject position, using these as lenses for analysis. Connecting the deject position, as political strategy, to the sex workers in the documentary it soon became evident that the use of this strategy was not unproblematic. The

women portrayed in the documentary have certain privileges that needed to be addressed. I provided a possible solution on how to cope with this position of privilege through the use of Irigaray's theories of "hysteria" and "mimicking". Then, several scenes in *Economy of Love* were analyzed to capture how eroticism and female sexuality can be used in several ways as a form of abjection. Abjection is created through female sexuality as ambiguity and difference from male sexuality. Consequently, a new space can be created by the sex workers in this documentary because of their difference from the norms. These differences can be detected in multiple forms. They can be the use and importance that the content of the documentary ascribes to the senses that are other than vision, as well as the impurity of the orgasm that creates an active sexual experience. Thus, through positioning, presenting and mimicking certain positions chaos is created. Through the explicitness of the voice of the repressed or through ambiguous, non-rational sexual experiences, abjection is present throughout this documentary and provides a way to challenge patriarchal structures of knowledge and repression.

Chapter 2.2 provided an analysis of the form of the documentary as abject. Showing how the strategies of blurring fact and fiction, of making visible of the artist and of humor and absurdity, can be at work, in this documentary as a way to make hybrid abject documentaries that are located in an in-between genre. These strategies contest ideas of mainstream documentary that claim a documentary should be realistic and neutral, as if the filmmaker has no influence on the situation that is playing out, thereby picturing "the truth". This idea that "the truth" exists and can be found is set up by patriarchal assumptions on rationality and objective knowledge. Melanie Bonajo, presents some kind of truth, one of many possible truths thereby she offers and stimulates the production of many meanings but not one stable and normative 'true' one. I showed how *Economy of Love* crosses the borders of the designated genres, thus creating a new space, where new possibilities are created. In these ways, the documentary challenges the patriarchal idea that vision leads to accurate or objective knowledge and that there is something as an objective truth that can be portrayed in documentary.

Even though I have focussed on women in my thesis, further research could explore how other categories and groups could benefit from the uses of abjection as a political strategy. To work with an affirmative strategy that embraces differences, that tells you: yes I'm different and it's okay. It is okay because difference makes for possibilities, new space, transformative space. That space, non-confirmative and chaotic, is where I would want to travel. Abjection in all its imperfection.

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