

**Feminist representations in contemporary media: an analysis of audio-visual contents.**

**Abstract**

With the thesis “Feminist representations in contemporary media: an analysis of audio-visual contents” I intend to inquire the development of a feminist narrative and of a feminist aesthetic in contemporary audio-visual productions. Specifically, the study consists in a neo-formalist film analysis of three selected case studies, an advertising, a documentary series and an independent film, with the addition of a critical level. The analysis is linked to theoretical concepts about the female body in relation with sexuality, gender identity, and the *male gaze*, to understand to what extents these audio-visuals are providing subversive representations of female characters. As a result, two videos presented similar characteristics in regards to feminist sensibility, focussing on representing diversity, while the independent movie is the only content to bring on the screen a discussion around gender identity. The findings suggest that while diversity has entered a mainstream discourse around feminism, the nature of gender is still a concept underdiscussed and dedicated to a niche audience.

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## 1. Introduction

With the thesis “Feminist representations in contemporary media: an analysis of audio-visual contents” I intend to inquire the development of a feminist narrative and of a feminist aesthetic in contemporary audio-visual productions. Specifically, I will analyze three selected case studies, an advertising, a documentary series and an independent film, that have been described by the public opinion as representational of a reborn feminist sensibility.

The analysis will be framed in the context of a perceived reborn feminist interest,<sup>1</sup> a response to the strong gender inequality that still a reality in Western countries. While Postfeminism considers achieved the objectives of the feminist movements, the present generation sees in gender equality just an illusion, being sexual abuse, the marginalization of minorities, violence against women, homo and transphobia, and unequal pay between men and women common experiences in everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, my thesis will be focused on the response, from a media perspective, to this kind of social injustice, considering audio-visual productions that position themselves both inside and outside of the mainstream.

As a matter of fact, as sexism and gender inequality are still committed in contemporary society, misrepresentations and the underrepresentation of women in cinema and in advertising are still pressing issues. Cinema perfectly reflects the condition of western contemporary society, where gender inequality has been claimed to be addressed and overpassed, while the “celluloid ceiling”<sup>3</sup> is still a reality that have little changed during the years. Data shows that, in 2016, among the 100 top movies, rated looking at their income, only the 29% of the protagonists were female.<sup>4</sup> To continue, the numbers dramatically drop when looking at women behind the camera, directors or, even

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Rampton. “Four Waves of Feminism” in *Pacific University Oregon*. October 25, 2015. <<https://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism>>

<sup>2</sup> Martha Rampton. *ivi*.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia White. *Women’s Cinema, World Cinema. Projecting Contemporary Feminism*. Duke University Press, 2015. p.2.

<sup>4</sup> Rosie Fletcher. “ Leading roles for women in Hollywood reach an all-time high... which is still pathetically low” in *Digital Spy*. February 22, 2017. <<http://www.digitalspy.com/movies/news/a821818/females-leading-roles-in-hollywood-reach-all-time-high-still-only-29-percent/>>

more decisively, producers. In this case, always in 2016, only four out of 100 top movies can boast a female director.<sup>5</sup> The statistics are more reassuring when looking at the production of documentaries, a field where women find their place more easily.<sup>6</sup> However, even though gender inequality is still persistent and the relationships of power of the cinematographic industry appear healthy and long lasting, the 2016 has also been the year in which the number of female lead characters touched the highest rate since the beginning of cinema.<sup>7</sup> Something is moving, and the attention towards the theme of gender equality, and the representation of empowered female characters, is equally a concern of mainstream films as well as more independent, alternative productions, a decision that is often rewarded by the success obtained, not only by critics but also at the box office.<sup>8</sup>

A reborn sensibility towards gender equality issues is present also in the field of advertising, where socially engaged campaigns are increasing, amplifying their sailing success and their ability to link the product to a specific, ethical ideology.<sup>9</sup> Publicity can easily be the medium to play around fantasies and to settle in and enforced stereotypes of gender, class and race,<sup>10</sup> often representing the cream of the crop of a sexist and misogynistic culture.<sup>11</sup> As a response, a new stream of socially engaged publicity has been developed, the so called “femvertising”.<sup>12</sup> The term *femvertising* describes those kinds of ads that aim at representing strong, empowered women, often challenging

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<sup>5</sup> Marquita Harris. “The Same Number of Women Have Worked Behind the Camera in Hollywood since 1998” in *Refinery29*. <<http://www.refinery29.com/2017/01/136033/women-film-industry-hollywood-same-two-decades>>

<sup>6</sup> *ivi*.

<sup>7</sup> Rosie Fletcher. *ivi*.

<sup>8</sup> Connor Behrens. “After 19 male-led superhero movies, how much progress does Wonder Woman represent?” in *The Washington Post*. May 31, 2017.

<[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/woink/wp/2017/05/31/after-19-straight-superhero-movies-starring-men-wonder-woman-is-about-to-break-the-mold/?utm\\_term=.056236787316](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/woink/wp/2017/05/31/after-19-straight-superhero-movies-starring-men-wonder-woman-is-about-to-break-the-mold/?utm_term=.056236787316)>

<sup>9</sup> Marcie MacLellan. “Brands up their game in ethical advertisement” in *The Guardian*. December 10, 2015. <<https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2015/dec/10/unethical-advertising-outdated-trend-feelgood-marketing>>

<sup>10</sup> Susan Bordo. *Unbearable Weight. Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. University of California Press, 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Yaiza Janssens. “Sex-role stereotyping and sex discrimination regulation in advertising: the belgian case” in *Gender in Focus: (new) trends in media*. CECS Eds, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Simonsen. “Feminism and PostFeminism in Advertising” in *CharlotteSimonsen.com*, 2015. <<http://www.charlottesimonsen.com/blog/2015/6/2/feminism-and-postfeminism-in-advertising-is-femvertising-a-result-of-fourth-wave-feminism>>

institutionalized ideas of beauty and femininity, with the ultimate goal of selling a product to an emerging, growing section of the market (working women).<sup>13</sup>

Tracing a connection between theoretical foundations and the three case studies selected, an advertising for H&M,<sup>14</sup> the documentary series *Vagina Dispatches*,<sup>15</sup> and the independent movie *The Love Witch*,<sup>16</sup> I will try to inquire the strategies used in contemporary representations to convey a message related to gender equality, both in mainstream and alternative media contents. Case by case, I will try to answer the following research questions. To what extents are those contents subversive? What do they say about gender identity? How do they relate themselves with female sexuality and compulsory heterosexuality? And, do they propose alternative representations of female characters?

Regarding the theoretical background, it will be necessary to combine two kinds of studies: feminist film theory and feminist theory especially framed in the area of “body studies”. As a matter of fact, the female body is the essential of a cinematic analysis that wants to be critically engaged in the study of women’s representation. It is not only the most visual part of the character represented on the screen, but it is also the locus of different and sometimes opposite interpretations. Specifically, I will focus my research on three main theoretical concepts: the female body in relation with sexuality, gender identity, and the *male gaze*.

A starting point will be provided by Elizabeth Grosz’s work on the female body, to understand the origins of the binary thinking responsible for the creation of stereotypes. Against it, the author proposes a “corporeal feminism”,<sup>17</sup> a feminism that starts from the corporeal dimension, usually invested with a negative connotation, to develop a discourse around gender equality. Female sexuality represents an important part of this dimension, and its conception in society is strictly related to *compulsory heterosexuality*,<sup>18</sup> an

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<sup>13</sup> Julia Repisky. “Femvertising: The New Era of Advertising” in *Worcuga.com*. February 18, 2015. <<http://worcuga.com/2015/02/femvertising-the-new-era-of-advertising/>>

<sup>14</sup> *New Autumn Collection H&M*. Dir. Gustav Johansson, 2016. Advertising. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-RY6fWVrQ0>>

<sup>15</sup> Mona Chalabi and Mae Ryan. “Vagina Dispatches” in *The Guardian*. <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/series/vagina-dispatches>>

<sup>16</sup> *The Love Witch*. Dir. Anna Biller. Oscilloscope Laboratories. 2016. Film.

<sup>17</sup> Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. *Figures of Resistance. Essays in Feminist Theory*. University of Illinois Press. 2007.

ideology that plays an important role in reinforcing a patriarchal system of values.<sup>19</sup> In fact, it not only presents itself as homophobic, negating sexual preferences and normalizing them into a natural, reproductive system, but it also excludes women from a discourse around sexuality and desires.<sup>20</sup> A reasoning around *compulsory heterosexuality* will be fundamental during the analysis, to identify those elements that, in the contents, work against this institution, trying to reveal it in its constructed nature.

In regards to gender, and trying to understand how to undermine a fixed idea of gender identity, I will take into consideration Judith Butler's<sup>21</sup> study on the "gender trouble", a conversation around the performativity<sup>22</sup> of gender roles and of gender itself. Butler recognizes the power of subversion in what does not have a fixed identity, in what is not a pole neither the other, but something in between, a liminal subject, that I will be specifically looking for during the analysis.

I will conclude my literature research with Feminist Film Theory, a field of studies concerned with the representation of women in audio-visual contents, that counts among its pioneers Laura Mulvey, with her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*,<sup>23</sup> and Mary Ann Doane, with *Femmes Fatales*.<sup>24</sup> Mulvey, using psychoanalysis, brought to the attention the concept of the *male gaze*, the dominant perspective in cinema, one that sees women as fundamental in films, but only as passive subjects, as source of visual pleasure.<sup>25</sup> Mary Ann Doane, using the *male gaze* as a starting point, focused her studies on the many misrepresentations of women in cinema, one above all the *femme fatales*. With the analysis of the contents, I will try to identify whether the proposed representations conform to the requirements of the *male gaze*, or whether they refuse the standard, proposing alternatives.

In regards to methodology, I will combine a more formal component, employing a Neoformalist Film Analysis method, and a critical perspective, referring to feminist critique

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<sup>19</sup> Ivi.

<sup>20</sup> Ivi.

<sup>21</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge. New York, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> Ivi.

<sup>23</sup> Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Screen*. Vol.XVI, Issue 3, 1975.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Ann Doane. *Femmes Fatales. Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge. New York and London, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Mulvey. Ivi.

and feminist film studies. Regarding Film Analysis, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction*<sup>26</sup> will provide me the basis for a first level of study, one that will inquire the film as a whole, conceiving each of its parts as strictly connected one another, and therefore equally important in the creation of meanings. On the other side, I will add a critical aspect by taking into consideration feminist methods of research as synthesized by Sharon Bird,<sup>27</sup> aimed at uncovering the relationships of power between genders brought on the screen. So, I will first analyze the case studies starting from stylistic elements and elements of the plot, to enrich the discourse with an inquire on to what extent those representations are trying to undermine a patriarchal ideology, proposing alternatives and new meanings.

The thesis will be structured in six different parts. Firstly, I will propose an historical background able to provide a context about the last developments of the feminist movement in relation to media. I will then discuss theory, presenting the three main concepts the thesis turns around, compulsory heterosexuality, gender identity, and the male gaze, indeed, able to provide a theoretical understanding of the topic. Another section will be dedicated to the methodology used for the analysis of the case studies, to finally enter the analysis, where each selected content will be studied by itself. A short conclusion will answer the research questions and will briefly sum up the whole thesis.

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<sup>26</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction* (1979). University of Wisconsin, eight ed. 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Sharon Bird. *Feminist Methods of Research*. Iowa State University, 2012. Presentation. <<https://www.slideshare.net/miryammastrella/presentation-on-feminist-methods-of-research>>

## 2. The Feminist movement and the media: a historical overview.

The first appearance of the term “feminism” in the English language has been dated back to the 1890s, used to indicate the social and activist movement that, during the late Nineteenth and the early Twentieth century, was struggling to obtain equal political and civil rights, both for men and for women.<sup>28</sup> The word, from the French *feminisme*,<sup>29</sup> has been defined as “the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes”,<sup>30</sup> and it includes a series of theoretical, social, cultural and political movements dealing with gender inequalities, gender studies and equal rights.<sup>31</sup> Historians generally agree on a division of the feminist movement, in an ethnocentric perspective only looking at the Western developments,<sup>32</sup> into three main different waves: first, second and third wave feminism.<sup>33</sup>

While the activism of the first-wave feminism, started in the second half of the 1800s to continue in the early years of the 1900s, was focusing on gaining women civil rights, on the equal possibility for women and men to enter the public sphere,<sup>34</sup> the second-wave feminism marked the start of a consistent interest towards women’s representation (or better misrepresentation and underrepresentation) in media and, especially, in cinema. The 70s has been a golden age for the arise of consciousness around this issue <sup>35</sup> and for the development of counter movements, together with the publication of theoretical texts that have changed the perspective on media and film studies. As a matter of fact, right when the feminist debate needed to be refreshed and to look for other ways to express itself, feminists started to see in cinema a great potential to empower women of a language that has been historically used to reinforce the

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<sup>28</sup> “Feminism” in *New World Encyclopedia*: <<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Feminism>>.

<sup>29</sup> Ivi.

<sup>30</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary. <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>>

<sup>31</sup> In *New World Encyclopedia*. Ivi.

<sup>32</sup> Dana Bisignani. “The History of Feminism in the U.S.: The First Wave” in *The Gender Press*. January 23, 2015. <<https://genderpressing.wordpress.com/2015/01/23/feminism-the-first-wave-2/>>

<sup>33</sup> Martha Rampton and *New World Encyclopedia*. Ivi.

<sup>34</sup> *New World Encyclopedia*, Ivi.

<sup>35</sup> B. Ruby Rich. *Chick Flicks. Theories and memories of the feminist film movement*. Duke University Press. 1998.



patriarchal system,<sup>36</sup> to oppress women and whoever positioned itself outside of the rules of a compulsory heterosexual<sup>37</sup> society.

In part due to political circumstances, the Reagan-Thatcher axis, begun in 1982, that created a period reluctant to a discourse around civil rights and social inequalities, the feminist debate accused a heavy backlash, being perceived by the public opinion and portrayed by mainstream media as simple “political correctness”.<sup>38</sup> In addition, issues started to appear also inside of the same movement, worries especially raised by Third World scholars, noticing how the second feminist generation was not taking into consideration the variables of race and class.<sup>39</sup> As a response to the internal and external doubts and, especially, to what has been considered the failure of the feminist movement, in the mid-90s a new, Third-Wave took consistency. This time, the activism was informed by postcolonial and cultural studies, it destabilized the ethnocentric and universal ideology, and defined diversity no more as a menace to gender equality but as a fundamental topic to be addressed.<sup>40</sup> Gender and female sexuality (together with the challenge to heterosexual normativity) became central topics for the development of feminist studies, and their analysis started to be perceived as the only way through women’s emancipation.<sup>41</sup> These were also the years of the incorporation of feminist ideology into mainstream culture and, especially relevant, into mass media, starting to be addressed by pop figures such as Cher and Madonna, artists become iconic of the feminist movement.<sup>42</sup>

Looking at the new media, the internet played a fundamental role in the battle for gender equality, creating a (semi) democratic platform for women and other minorities, able in this way to participate in the public discourse, presenting different perspectives from the dominant one. In the digital space the language became the most important tool of this third generation, and the strong and empowered “grrls”, term used to identify the

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<sup>36</sup> B. Ruby Rich. “The Confidence Game” in *Camera Obscura*. 2013 Volume 28, Number 1 82: 157-165.

<sup>37</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. *Figures of Resistance. Essays in Feminist Theory*. University of Illinois Press. 2007.

<sup>38</sup> “A brief history of feminism” in *Oxford Dictionaries*. ivi.

<sup>39</sup> Ivi.

<sup>40</sup> Martha Rampton. ivi.

<sup>41</sup> Amanda D. Lotz. “Communicating Third-Wave Feminism and New Social Movements: Challenges for the Next Century of Feminist Endeavor” in *Women and Language*. Vol. XXVI, No 1, 2003.

<sup>42</sup> Amanda D. Lotz. ivi.

new feminists, re-appropriated themselves of those epithets commonly used to denigrate women.<sup>43</sup>

So, where do we stand now?

Martha Rampton, professor and director of the Centre for Gender Equity at the Pacific University (Portland, USA), in 2015, talking about the history and the future of the feminist movement, stated that “the times are changing, and a fourth wave is in the air.”<sup>44</sup> During an interview released to Elle Magazine, Rampton tries to outline the features of this new generation, tracing a comparison both between the second and between the third wave. She understands this new movement as a response to the Third Wave Feminism and to the exaggerated positive attitude of Post feminism, streams that have identified gender equality as almost completely achieved. On the contrary, reality draws a different frame: sexual abuse, the marginalization of minorities, violence against women, homo and transphobia, unequal pay, these are all extremely relevant issues present in contemporary society,<sup>45</sup> social injustices that have found a way to express themselves freely and to formally be accepted with the 2016 election of Donald Trump and with the ethnocentric European attitude in response to the refugee crisis. The Fourth-Wave Feminism Rampton identifies learns from the previous generation and takes back with full hands from the second one, wanting to re propose gender equality as a pressing concern, both for a political and a cultural agenda. It is a movement that Rampton sees emerging spontaneously, thanks to the ability of the internet of levelling hierarchies, a space where its members just discovered themselves as being “feminists”, even though feeling this definition as a potential limitation to their ideals.<sup>46</sup> This new activism takes back from the second feminist generation the aspiration for a real and practical struggle against gender inequality, and from the Third-Wave the awareness and the understanding of the relations of power and of the importance of inclusivity, together with a deep acceptance of the sexed body and a focus on female sexuality.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Martha Rampton. *ivi*.

<sup>44</sup> *ivi*.

<sup>45</sup> Martha Rampton. *ivi*.

<sup>46</sup> *ivi*.

<sup>47</sup> *ivi*.

This renewed interest around gender equality, as a theme not only concerning women but also LGBTQ people and other minorities, has gained the attention of mainstream press and politicians,<sup>48</sup> leading to a desire (and sometimes an obligation) for a change also in mainstream media, as well as in cinema and advertising (as the data proposed in the introduction show). My thesis positions itself in this context, having the intention to inquire how this new feminist sensibility is shaping the debate around gender equality, in media representations, especially focusing on audio-visual contents.

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<sup>48</sup> *ivi.*

### 3. Theoretical Framework

The thesis focusses on feminist representations in the contemporary media panorama, particularly dealing with audiovisual material, both coming from the mainstream and from a more alternative field. For this reason, I found necessary to combine two kinds of studies: feminist film theory and feminist theory especially framed in the area of “body studies”. As a matter of fact, the female body is the essential of a cinematic analysis that wants to be critically engaged in the study of women’s representation. It is not only the most visual part of the character represented on the screen, but it is also the locus of different and sometimes opposite interpretations, the way through a theory that is no more constructed around the universal, male individual,<sup>49</sup> but that is re-thought under different gender perspectives. In addition, when necessary to deep into the topic, I will briefly reference to some concepts from cultural studies.

Since I intend, during my analysis, to be specifically looking for those terms that contribute to a subversive representation of the female, I will elaborate the theoretical chapter in three main sections. A first part will be dedicated to the female body in relation with sexuality, a second part will be build around gender identity, while the last section will introduce concepts from Feminist Film theory that will be fundamental for a critical analysis of the case studies. While a stereotyped idea of female sexuality, especially with the concept of compulsory heterosexuality, and of gender identity has heavily contributed to the affirmation of a patriarchal ideology, Feminist Film theory wants to uncover the relationships of power between genders, existing on the screen as well as in society.

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<sup>49</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. *Ivi*.

## The female body and sexuality

Elizabeth Grosz, professor at the Duke University, who has dedicated her studies to human sexuality and French philosophy framed in a queer and feminist perspective, in *Volatile Bodies*, proposes the idea of a “corporeal feminism”,<sup>50</sup> a field of study that wants to qualify the body for a philosophical discourse. Grosz starts from the awareness that the mind/body relation can be considered as the foundation of the oppositional thinking that has characterized human philosophy since the ancient Greece,<sup>51</sup> a scheme where “(...) the distinctions between reason and passion, sense and sensibility, outside and inside, self and other (...)”<sup>52</sup> are all juxtapositions that characterize the mind/body nexus, and they each indicate on a pole what is considered “positive” and on the other pole what is considered to be the “negative” side of human life. In this set, the female/male relation has been thought and shaped around the contraposition body/mind, where the female has been paired with the body, also for her capacity of being a mother and of generating new bodies, and the mind has been attached to the male individual.<sup>53</sup> This is the reason why, while early feminist debates have shaped themselves around the will to negate the corporeal dimension of women,<sup>54</sup> Grosz proposes a feminism that starts from corporeality, the only way she sees to overcome the binary thinking and to identify in corporeality not a natural, pre-existing and impure attribute but “the *cultural* product”.<sup>55</sup>

The implications of a system of values that considers the activities related to the body as filthy, and not worthy of a serious analysis, has led to a significant lack of information around issues concerning the female body and, especially, female sexuality. Starting from the 70’s, surgeons and gynecologists became especially concerned with women’s genitalia. This body part was still under studied, and moral puritanism from a side did not allow science to inquire more on the subject, while on the other it was casting a shadow of disgust and anxiety for the vulva, representing the unknown.<sup>56</sup> Due to this

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<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Grosz. *ivi*.

<sup>51</sup> Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1994.

<sup>52</sup> *ivi*. p.3.

<sup>53</sup> Elizabeth Grosz. *ivi*

<sup>54</sup> Martha Rampton. *ivi*.

<sup>55</sup> *ivi*. p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> Alice E. Adams. “Molding Women’s Bodies” in *Bodily Discursions. Genders, Representations, Technologies*. State University of New York, 1997. p.72.

situation, together with an analysis of female genitalia from a pure phallogocentric perspective, the idea of a “woman’s natural pathology”<sup>57</sup> spread out between surgeons, so that several doctors decided to practice an operation on women to cure them from this original disease. This is a case of science used exclusively from a male perspective, where “male sexual functioning is posited as the norm and female sexual functioning as the deviant”,<sup>58</sup> directly intervening on the part that is threatening the “heterosexual values”.<sup>59</sup> The set of unwritten norms that constitute those heterosexual values has been addressed by feminists with the expression *compulsory heterosexuality*, an ideology, or better institution, that plays an important role in reinforcing a patriarchal society.<sup>60</sup> A fixed, single representation and idea of sexuality derives from this frame, the heterosexual normativity, indeed, and desires express themselves only under the same circumstances. This institution excludes women from a discourse around sexuality, imposing over women and men social rules aimed at erasing everything that does not attain to an established definition. Given this status of exclusion, some feminist theorists, such as Teresa de Lauretis and Monique Wittig, have focused their research on female sexuality on what de Lauretis calls the “eccentric subject”,<sup>61</sup> a subject able to provoke a struggle on meanings and representations, one that wants to rewrite her identity and the identity of her community, “the conscious of something else”.<sup>62</sup>

In more practical words, it looks like two characters would be able to destabilize compulsory heterosexuality, from one side the expression of homosexual and lesbian preferences (or, I would say, even more of a fluid sexuality that transcends genders), and from the other side the incorporation of female needs and desires into the discourse around pleasure and sex. So, during my analysis, I will identify those terms that are referring to female sexuality, to pose them in relation with an institutionalized heterosexuality, noticing whether they confirm it, or they lead against it. I will be looking for the representation of eccentric subjects, both under a perspective of sexual preference and under the explicit expression of female desires and needs.

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<sup>57</sup> Ivi. p.64.

<sup>58</sup> Ivi. p.64.

<sup>59</sup> Ivi. ibidem.

<sup>60</sup> Teresa de Lauretis and Elizabeth Grosz. Ivi.

<sup>61</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. Ivi. p.62.

<sup>62</sup> Ivi. p.182.

## The subversion of gender identity

Having identified the mechanism of the binary thinking as problematic, responsible of being the first producer of (gender) inequalities,<sup>63</sup> feminist theory has largely focused on finding a way to overcome this mindset, to use a reasoning that is not one pole neither the other, but something in between, considered by many <sup>64</sup> the only way to disrupt mainstream culture and to provoke a subversive outcome. And the main aim of this thesis will be to analyze the audio-visual contents to understand to what extents they produce subversive representations. So, before I proceed to illustrate a theoretical set that will be fundamental to understand gender and gender representations during my analysis, I find necessary to elaborate on what being *subversive* means, framed in a media perspective. With the term *subversive* is indicated, according to the definition given by the Cambridge Dictionary, a behavior or a product that aims to “destroy or damage something, especially an established political system”.<sup>65</sup> Larry Gross, professor and expert in visual communication, identifies two main possibilities to present a media content that can be considered subversive.<sup>66</sup> The first possibility is, being inside of the mainstream and being completely aware of its dominant practices, to take a self-consciously position outside of it.<sup>67</sup> A second possibility is made when the individual or the group producing the content is effectively outside of the mainstream,<sup>68</sup> when the minority is creating culture, having the chance to directly express its voice.<sup>69</sup> These two paths, posing the producers of contents inside or outside of the mainstream, do not necessarily use opposite strategies, and what is relevant for the first case can be as much relevant for the other.

To sample it, this may lead to a representation that focuses on creating an oppositional match of the polarized terms, where a subordinate pole is coupled with a dominant one.<sup>70</sup> Even though this strategy works in complete respect of differences and

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<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Grosz. *ivi*.

<sup>64</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, Elizabeth Grosz, B. Ruby Rich in *Chick Flicks*.

<sup>65</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*. <<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/subversive>>

<sup>66</sup> Larry Gross. “Out of the Mainstream” in *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Critical Reader*. SAGE, 2003.

<sup>67</sup> Larry Gross. *ivi*.p.68.

<sup>68</sup> Larry Gross. *ivi*.

<sup>69</sup>*ivi*. p.68.

<sup>70</sup> Stuart Hall. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. SAGE, 1997.

of variants, and it challenges stereotypes, as a reverse, it does not undermine them.<sup>71</sup> So, a step ahead in this direction can be a process of re-appropriation of those stigmatizing features that have been traditionally associated with a minority, re-proposing them with a positive connotation.<sup>72</sup> It is a process of exaggeration of conventional traits to provoke hilarity and to uncover stereotypes in their constructed cultural identity.<sup>73</sup> In films, Camp style, with its ostentation and over-played characterisation, perfectly fits this category. This mode permits to enter the mainstream while playing inside of it, without repudiating diversity, in respect of gender, race and class,<sup>74</sup> and, in its course, it overcomes the binary thinking.

To go back to gender, Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, states that:” One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one”,<sup>75</sup> a sentence that exemplifies how gender is not a natural, given fact, rather a cultural one. Fundamental, in this sense, is the work on gender studies elaborated by Judith Butler, an inquire on gender and on its “troubling” status,<sup>76</sup> a meticulous study of what gender is, how it reveals itself and what are the processes that reproduce it. Butler’s work will be the core of my analysis, it will lead me through an understanding on how gender is represented in the case studies, highlighting whether the content provide a subversive representation of gender identities or if it confirms the standard.

In Butler’s work, gender is not presented as a noun, neither as a floating system of attributes as it follows an internal specific coherence, it is constructed around four different attributes that need to “follow”<sup>77</sup> (thought as a political relation) one another. Rather, it is an identity constituted by the terms that are supposed to be its outcomes.<sup>78</sup> There are no other genders outside the institutional ones, and their nature is always performative,<sup>79</sup> as they actively do, perform, the identity they are supposed to be. In the last chapter of her work, Butler’s focus goes on “the possibility of subverting and

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<sup>71</sup> Ivi. p.273.

<sup>72</sup> Stuart Hall. ivi. p.272.

<sup>73</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. Ivi.

<sup>74</sup> Larry Gross. ivi.

<sup>75</sup> Simone de Beauvoir. *The Second Sex. (Le Deuxième sexe, 1949)*. Vintage, 1989.

<sup>76</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge. New York, 1990.

<sup>77</sup> Ivi. ibidem.

<sup>78</sup> Ivi. p.25.

<sup>79</sup> Ivi. ibidem..



displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power (...)",<sup>80</sup> a part that is particularly relevant in the context of this thesis, as it will provide a theoretical context to analyze to what extents the representations of genders in the case studies lay outside of the standard.

The author decides not to elaborate on something that overcomes the very structure of language, a utopian aim in her words, but rather on those liminal possibilities that are able to challenge the gender institution and to show it in its nature. To redistribute the attributes of gender means to subvert the institutionalized character of sexual difference,<sup>81</sup> so that to be a being not able to be fully described as a man or as a woman is possible with "(...) an internal subversion in which the binary is both presupposed and proliferated to the point where it no longer makes sense".<sup>82</sup> Here comes the power of parody, an imitation of what is considered to be the natural, particularly powerful when performed by homosexuals or lesbians, reproducing in a homosexual frame those relations that constitute the norm of compulsory heterosexuality, an act able to destabilize the categories of sex and gender, and to denaturalize them.<sup>83</sup> To continue, Butler recognizes a full subversion of the relations of gender in the art of drag, a practice that confuses "inner and outer space"<sup>84</sup> revealing the performative character of gender: "*In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself-as well as its contingency*".<sup>85</sup> In this way, parody, impersonation, embodies a political component that provokes a laughter aware of the ritualistic nature of gender identity, of its existence as something that is supposed to be natural and that is supposed to not exist in any other form. While, in fact, it clearly proposes an alternative, undermining established systems of representing and thinking male and female identities.

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<sup>80</sup> Ivi. p.34.

<sup>81</sup> Ivi.

<sup>82</sup> Ivi. p.127.

<sup>83</sup> Ivi. p.122.

<sup>84</sup> Ivi. p.137.

<sup>85</sup> Ivi. ibidem.

## Feminist Film Theory

Once laid the foundations to initiate a critical discourse around female identity and sexuality, understanding the performativity of gender and the compulsory character of the institution of heterosexuality, together with the ways through subversive alternatives, it is now necessary to explore a field of studies strictly related with the topic of my analysis, the representation of women in audio-visual contents: Feminist Film Theory.

Feminist Film Theory has born from the necessity to rewrite the history of cinema, to provide the tools to develop a critique around it, not only from a gender perspective but also keeping into consideration representations of class and race.<sup>86</sup> So, at the end of the 60's and at the beginning of the 70's, the issue of including women's perspective in films became central for the feminist debate, leading to the production of the first modern feminist films, and to the elaboration of a new way of analyzing cinema, that brings together psychoanalysis, film theory and feminism.<sup>87</sup> According to de Lauretis, one of the most important achievement of feminist theory is that "it has conceived a new social subject",<sup>88</sup> women thought as viewers, producers, speakers, agents. Revolutionary, in this sense, was the publication, in 1975, of Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, in an issue of the prestigious film theory journal *Screen*.<sup>89</sup> The author, using Freudian psychoanalysis, brought to the attention the concept of the *male gaze*,<sup>90</sup> which develops as follow. Taking back from Freud's work on sexuality, Mulvey notices two different and opposite kind of pleasures deriving from cinema. The first one is the pleasure of *scopophilia*,<sup>91</sup> defined by Freud as an action of voyeurism associated with "(...) taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze".<sup>92</sup> The second pleasure connected with cinema is a *narcissistic scopophilia*,<sup>93</sup> a process that moves the spectator to first recognize himself on the screen, and then to identify himself with the images shown. Important to notice, these two mechanisms need two opposite

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<sup>86</sup> B. Ruby Rich. Ivi.

<sup>87</sup> B. Ruby Rich. Ivi.

<sup>88</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. Ivi. p.35.

<sup>89</sup> B. Ruby Rich. Ivi.

<sup>90</sup> Ivi.

<sup>91</sup> Ivi.

<sup>92</sup> Ivi. p.835.

<sup>93</sup> Ivi. p.837.

terms to function, an active character to identify with, and a passive character to take as the object of desire. In a society that have associated active with the male and passive with the female, this process on the screen reinforces a sexist system, relegating women to the role of erotic objects, and men to the role of the “bearer of the look”.<sup>94</sup> If the point of view of the action on the screen is male (and heterosexual), then the sexual difference, so the female, or a homosexual subject, represents the alternative, the other. Mulvey reminds that women, as site of sexual difference, are characterized by the lack of the phallus, therefore representing castration.<sup>95</sup> For this reason, women are threatening, and they can evoke anxiety. So, it is necessary for the male gaze to embody them in the representation created on the screen, to normalize them into the conventions of a patriarchal society. This anxiety towards the female subject leads to a series of misrepresentations of women, and the *femme fatale* is one of the many. The *femme fatale* is a dangerous subject, able to castrate men, depriving them of their virility and leading them to destruction. From a male perspective, she is both extremely fascinating and frightening at the same time, a status that Mary Ann Doane especially recognizes in the veiled *femme fatale*.<sup>96</sup> This is a figure that is distanced from the camera, the male perspective, because of her instability and unknown power, but that, at the same time, is a point of attraction, that the male subject wants to inquire as much as possible, via extreme close ups on her face.<sup>97</sup> *Femmes fatales*, because of their status and of what they really represent, male fantasies together with their deepest fears, are figures that are usually tamed on the screens, with punishment or with a final catharsis.<sup>98</sup> A similar fate awaits for women in movies in general, and, usually, in traditional, mainstream films women are fundamental, but only as passive subjects, as source of visual pleasure.<sup>99</sup> They usually do not add anything to the story, on the contrary they are used to create

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<sup>94</sup> Ivi. p.837.

<sup>95</sup> Ivi.

<sup>96</sup> Mary Ann Doane. *Femmes Fatales. Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge. New York and London, 1991.

<sup>97</sup> Ivi. p.72.

<sup>98</sup> Ivi.

<sup>99</sup> Laura Mulvey. Ivi.

moments of still erotic contemplation, and they contribute to the plot only in function of the male hero, for what they inspire him.<sup>100</sup>

To overcome the problematic status of women in cinema, feminist film culture proposed the creation of a new language of representation,<sup>101</sup> a language that would not only provide a new perspective about what we see on the screen, but also about how we see it, a new language that breaks the established cinematic conventions. This necessity resulted in the quest for a *feminine* aesthetic<sup>102</sup> and for a “new language of desire”.<sup>103</sup> This means a reversal of the system in which women are excluded by the construction of desires, and by a possible identification into an active agent, and it would lead women to express their necessities in their own words. In the process of construction of a feminine aesthetic, a fundamental factor is the audience addressed. So, according to theorists such as Ruby Rich and Teresa de Lauretis, the focus of feminist cinema should not be on the woman behind the camera, or on the screen, but the true revolutionary act would be in thinking the audience as female.<sup>104</sup>

Using the tools provided me by Feminist Film Theory, I will be able to inquire the representations of women proposed by the case studies, if they present an alternative or if they stick to the standard, whether they re-propose the *male gaze*, or if, on the contrary, they try to build a feminine one, addressing the audience of the *others*.

To sum up, my analysis will be developed mainly taking into consideration the three main concepts earlier discussed: compulsory heterosexuality strictly connected to the expression of female sexuality, the identity of gender and the concept of a subversive narrative that wants to represent the liminal possibilities, and, to conclude, the *male gaze* in cinema and a quest for a new, feminine language to fight the established system in audio-visual contents.

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<sup>100</sup> Ivi.

<sup>101</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. Ivi.

<sup>102</sup> Laura Mulvey, Teresa de Lauretis, B.Ruby Rich.

<sup>103</sup> Laura Mulvey. Ivi.

<sup>104</sup> Teresa de Lauretis and B. Ruby Rich in *Women and Film*.

## 4. Methodology

The intent of the thesis is to analyze selected audio-visual contents that have been described by the public opinion as *feminist*, to understand to what extents those case studies provide a subversive representation of women, in relation to gender identity, compulsory heterosexuality, and diverse and alternative representations of female characters. The case studies I will take into consideration are: an advertisement for H&M, created for the autumn collection of H&M 2016,<sup>105</sup> a documentary series called *Vagina Dispatches*,<sup>106</sup> and the independent movie *The Love Witch*.<sup>107</sup> The different positions of these examples, together with their different nature, will permit me to consider the development of a feminist narration and language not only inside of the mainstream but also outside of it, in a time where the internet makes it hard to understand where the limits of the one give way to the other. The different genres will provide me a different approach on the topic, leading to a more comprehensive research, inquiring an example from the newborn *femvertising*, one from documentary and one of independent cinema, where independent cinema and documentaries have historically saved more space for women as producers of contents and meanings.<sup>108</sup> In addition, it is important to notice that the selected examples have reached a considerable state of notoriety, whether on the internet or in the critical field, and they all have been marked as feminist audio-visuals, as it will be largely discussed in each video analysis. Therefore, they will provide me with an insight on those characteristics and representations that are recognized in contemporary society as feminist, and they will inform me about the development of a narration around gender identity, women's empowerment and alternative representations.

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<sup>105</sup> *New Autumn Collection H&M*. Dir. Gustav Johansson, 2016. Advertising.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-RY6fWVrQ0>>

<sup>106</sup> *Vagina Dispatches*. Dir. Mae Ryan. The Guardian, 2016. Documentary series.  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAFvGrOwVug>>

<sup>107</sup> *The Love Witch*. Dir. Anna Biller. Oscilloscope Laboratories, 2016. Film.

<sup>108</sup> B. Ruby Rich. Ivi.

The methodology used during the analysis will be developed following two paths: I will employ a Neo-Formalist Film Analysis method <sup>109</sup> which is necessary to study the content under a technical perspective, especially providing terms and tools useful for a formal, first level of analysis, and I will add a critical perspective, referring to feminist critique and feminist film studies. These two components will allow me to understand the contents in their entirety, where formal and critical aspects will be one in communication with the other, so that the visual elements will be studied under different perspectives. The stylistic parts of the film will add meaning to the plot, and the critical approach will contribute to a final interpretation of the content, so that this ensemble will be able to answer to the research questions.

### **Film Analysis**

The elements of Film Analysis employed in this research will be based on the work of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, a book that has been, since 1979, a best-selling, widely recognized as a relevant introduction for cinema analysis,<sup>110</sup> and, in this case, able to provide useful tools and terms to indicate, in a correct lingo, the features observed on the screen. Key concept, during my research, will be the *Film Form*, “the overall system of relations that we can perceive among the elements in the whole film”.<sup>111</sup> These systems are composed by *narrative* elements, that constitute the film’s story, and a series of *stylistic* elements, that depend on the different film techniques.<sup>112</sup> The authors of the book underline how, according to neo-formalist analysis, the film should be thought as a product in which “every component functions as part of the overall pattern that engages the viewer”.<sup>113</sup> So, during my analysis, it will be key to think the contents as film forms, where each element, always in communication one with the other, will contribute to the final interpretation of the video. Therefore, I will both focus on narrative elements and on stylistic choices, linking them one to the other to understand the whole of the Film Form.

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<sup>109</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction* (1979). University of Wisconsin, eighth ed. 2008.

<sup>110</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. *ivi*.

<sup>111</sup> *ivi*. p.55.

<sup>112</sup> *ivi*. p.54.

<sup>113</sup> *ivi*. p. 56.

As for the narrative part, I will take into consideration the story and the plot, the temporal order of the story, and the space of the film narrative, elements that will provide me a general overview. Another fundamental component, able to shape a critical response to the visual content, will be the analysis of the *narrator* of the story, the perspective by which the narration is developed and brought on the screen.

As for the stylistic parts, my analysis will take into consideration the composition of the *mise-en-scene*, all those elements that, because of the director's power and decision, are shown in the film frame.<sup>114</sup> The *mise-en-scene* is composed by setting, costume and makeup, lighting, and the movement of the figures (such as actors) on the screen. After tracing their characters, I will analyze their functionalities, the reasons why they are presented as such, if they create *motifs*, and how those elements are staged in space and time directing the spectator's attention (and emotions). Other stylistic choices compelled the shot of the film, and the editing. As for the shot, it will be important to determine how the image is stylized, how it is framed, photographed and its duration in time.<sup>115</sup> Overall, the analytic process connected to the study of the stylistic elements will finally lead to an evaluation of them in relation with the whole Film Form, underlining how those parts affect meanings, interpretations, emotions and the narrative itself, how they relate with each other and, in general, how they contribute to the spectator's experience of the movie.

### **Feminist Critique**

However extensive and detailed such analysis may be, it still lacks in adding a critical aspect, a side that can deeply affect the relations of the elements on the screen and, therefore, meanings. Since the subject of my thesis is a critical response to supposed contemporary feminist representations in audio-visual media, a second methodological level will be added to the regular film analysis, one that is concerned with feminist critique.

The aim of feminist methodology is to uncover those relationships of power (thought in a Foucauldian sense of the term) that are constructing a patriarchal society

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<sup>114</sup> Ivi. p.112.

<sup>115</sup> Ivi. p.218-219.

and that, as a consequence, reflect themselves into cultural contents.<sup>116</sup> This method wants to give space to minorities and to unsettle the power created over the years by majoritarian groups,<sup>117</sup> acknowledging women's experiences and perspectives while demonstrating the existence of a phallogocentric system of values, that often excludes the others (thought as whoever lays outside of the institution of heterosexuality, non-men and non-white) from contributing to culture. The case studies have been selected because of their eccentricity respect to the standard, because they possibly allow the others to be represented and to contribute to visual culture. Following a feminist methodology, their analysis will aim to understand to what extents those representations resist gender inequalities and provide alternative visions and expressions of desires, if and how they give space to minorities and whether they refer to or refuse a patriarchal society.

Fundamental to apply this new level of analysis will be a continuous reference to the theoretical background, a link between representation on the screen and the main concepts discussed in the literature chapter.

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<sup>116</sup> Sharon Bird. *Feminist Methods of Research*. Iowa State University, 2012. Presentation. <<https://www.slideshare.net/miryammastrella/presentation-on-feminist-methods-of-research>>

<sup>117</sup> Ivi.



## 5. Analysis:

### 5.1 Introduction

With the following chapter I intend to analyze three selected case studies: the H&M spot *New Autumn Collection 2016*, the documentary series *Vagina Dispatches*, and the independent movie *The Love Witch*, all 2016 productions. While two of these examples found their main distribution online (the H&M advertising and the documentary), the film has initially reached visibility being showcased in the film festival circuit. Moreover, while the advert, because of its nature and because of the accessibility of its brand, presents itself as completely inserted into mainstream culture, *Vagina Dispatches* was born as an independent production, but thanks to its success and to the visibility given by its platform of distribution, *The Guardian US Edition*, it reached over a million views both on the website of the journal and on the social networks.<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, *The Love Witch* still an alternative content, from film festivals brought to the *Oscilloscope Laboratories* distribution, an independent film company and distributor. The popularity reached by these contents, and their different approach to a feminist narration, represent here relevant characteristics for a study of the strategies used in media to answer to a gender equality sensibility, being indicators of what is recognized as feminist in the contemporary media panorama.

Case by case, I will try to answer the research questions of the thesis. To what extents are those contents subversive? What do they say about gender identity? How do they relate themselves with female sexuality and compulsory heterosexuality? And, do they propose alternative representations of female characters?

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<sup>118</sup> Mae Ryan. "Vagina Dispatches" in *Maeryan.com*. <<http://maeryan.com/work/vagina-dispatches>>

## 5.2 The ultimate feminist commercial? The case of H&M.

### Background

The first case study I will analyze is the video created for the Autumn Collection 2016 of the low cost, multinational brand H&M.<sup>119</sup> It has been directed by the Swedish director Gustav Johansson, who is committed to social and environmental causes, and produced by the Forsman & Bodenfors, a Swedish advertising agency. The video has been released online on the 14th September 2016.<sup>120</sup> Once uploaded on Youtube, it has reached a great visibility, counting more than four million views, and creating a vibrant debate around it, being considered as the ultimate feminist spot of modern times. It wants to describe what is like to be a woman, referenced with the word “lady”, in contemporary society, displaying on the screen models that are extremely diverse in style, physicality, ethnicity, sexual preferences, but that are all feeling highly confident in their shoes (and in their new H&M clothes). The images are accompanied by a new version of the classic Tom Jones’ single “She’s a Lady”.<sup>121</sup> If the original song, of 1971, sounded like a manual of instructions for women to be well mannered and to please men, the new version, covered by the duo Lion Babe, acquires a whole different meaning. In this last case, framing the words of the song into a visual context, given by the video, and constructing a different disposition for the song, being a lady is easily linked with an emancipatory and more empowering message.

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<sup>119</sup> *New Autumn Collection H&M*. Dir. Gustav Johansson, 2016. Advertising. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-RY6fWVrQ0>>

<sup>120</sup> Alexandra Ilyashov. “Conservative Group goes After H&M’s Boundary-Pushing New Ad” in *Refinery29*. October 6, 2016. <<http://www.refinery29.com/2016/09/123329/hm-fall-2016-commercial-shes-a-lady>>

<sup>121</sup> Alexandra Ilyashov. *ivi*.

## Impact

To understand the impact this content had on the public opinion, it is enough to make a simple google research. *The Huffington Post* US Edition, become an international media company counting more than 35 million followers all over the globe,<sup>122</sup> described the video as a “feminist ad” that “destroys (...) what it means to be a woman today”.<sup>123</sup> Same recognition comes from *Cosmopolitan*, one of the most popular female targeted magazines,<sup>124</sup> that welcomes the video as a needed type of publicity, one that the women reading and writing the magazine can finally relate to.<sup>125</sup> However, together with the excitement for such a diverse, pop and fun campaign, the bitterness and the discussion around grew fast. A strong reaction against the video arrived from conservative groups, that retained inappropriate to display on TV images of women kissing each-others and of presumed transgender models.<sup>126</sup> To continue, some articles have accused the campaign of using a hot topic such as diversity to sell the image of H&M,<sup>127</sup> without in real life making any effort to accomplish the journey towards inclusivity. The journalist Arwa Mahdawi, concerned with the importance of giving minorities visibility, while recognizing the importance and the intelligence of the advert, wants to push forward her analysis, uncovering the well thought marketing move hidden behind it.<sup>128</sup> In her opinion, more than a step towards disruption, this campaign is the proof that the clients of the fashion industry are changing, and that they do not identify themselves anymore in idealized images of hyper fit, white women.<sup>129</sup> From this perspective, the spot appeals to a certain idea of

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<sup>122</sup> Nicholas Sabloff. “ How We Built HuffPost Into a Global Media Company By Thinking Local” in *The Huffington Post*. May 27, 2017.

<[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nick-sabloff/how-we-built-huffpost-int\\_b\\_10127438.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/nick-sabloff/how-we-built-huffpost-int_b_10127438.html)>

<sup>123</sup> Alanna Vagianos. “ H&M’s Feminist Ad Completely Destroys What It Means To Be A ‘Lady’ ” in *The Huffington Post*. September 20, 2016.

<[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hms-feminist-ad-completely-destroys-what-it-means-to-be-a-lady\\_us\\_57dfe7ace4b08cb14096a763](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hms-feminist-ad-completely-destroys-what-it-means-to-be-a-lady_us_57dfe7ace4b08cb14096a763)>

<sup>124</sup> “Top 10 women’s magazines” in *All you can read*. <<http://www.allyoucanread.com/top-10-womens-magazines/>>

<sup>125</sup> Jess Edwards. “H&M’s new campaign is the feminist advert we all need in our lives” in *Cosmopolitan*. September 21, 2016. <<http://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/fashion/style/news/a46070/hm-new-feminist-ad-campaign/>>

<sup>126</sup> Alexandra Ilyashov. *ivi*.

<sup>127</sup> Arwa Mahdawi. “ H&M’s diverse advert mirrors the real world. Shame the ad industry doesn’t” in *The Guardian*. September 28, 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/28/hm-advert-diversity-ad-women>>

<sup>128</sup> Arwa Mahdawi. *ivi*.

<sup>129</sup> *ivi*.

“cool” feminism, one that may have succeeded in completely inserting the issue of gender equality into the mainstream, belonging to the recent phenomenon of *femvertising*.<sup>130</sup> With this compound word is described the tendency of “ advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages and imagery to empower women and girls”.<sup>131</sup> The most common critic to this phenomenon is that the ideology and the struggle of feminism is in this way turned into a commodity, weakening its effect and, often, reducing and simplifying its message.<sup>132</sup>

### **Analysis**

With my analysis I will try to clarify to what extents this advert provides a subversive representation of gender, sexuality, and alternative models of femininity, in this case in relation with beauty and the female body, key topics for the fashion industry.

Following the neo-formalist film analysis, I will now focus my attention on the *mise-en-scene*,<sup>133</sup> introducing the video by an analysis of the figures presented on the screen, how they are framed, photographed and stylized. To each protagonist only few seconds are dedicated, but in a discontinuous and fragmented editing, using jump cuts to move from a situation to the other, the back and forth within the different models lasts for the whole duration of the video, each time presenting to the audience different aspects of the ladies introduced. Even though the speed of the narration is quite high, the publicity is able to tell the stories of these women, to characterize them first of all with their extremely different styles and physical features, then followed by spontaneous and cheeky behaviours.

The beginning of the video already sets the tone. As a matter of fact, the shot one, of two seconds in total, is dedicated to the first protagonist, a plus-size woman that proudly shows her physicality while only wearing lingerie (fig.1). The model is presented from her back while walking towards the bathroom, with the camera using a low angle to glorify her figure and to place her in a position of advantage. The lights are soft and the

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<sup>130</sup> Julia Repinsky. “Femvertising: The New Era of Advertising” in *Worcuga.com*. February 18, 2015. <<http://worcuga.com/2015/02/femvertising-the-new-era-of-advertising/>>

<sup>131</sup> SheKnows Media, 2014. In Charlotte Simonsen. *ivi*.

<sup>132</sup> Charlotte Simonsen. *ivi*.

<sup>133</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. *ivi*.

atmosphere glamorous, even though represented in the simplicity of what probably is a private house. Together with her figure, the first second displays also the H&M logo, completing the frame and immediately preparing us to watch an advertisement that still unconventional for the fashion industry. In place of a slender, probably white woman, our first meeting with H&M is hosted by a “curvy”, probably Latin lady, that with confidence watches herself in the mirror during the second shot of the scene.



Fig. 1

Other than shape, the more striking physical characteristic of the models is represented by their different ethnicity, a choice that allows minorities to be represented, unsettling the relations of power of a white, male, dominant society.<sup>134</sup> So, the protagonist of the second consistent sequence of the video is a woman of colour, Jillian Hervey, African-American, who is also a member of the group Lion Babe.<sup>135</sup> In a long shot, she is presented at the table of what appears to be a quite elegant restaurant, while having a

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<sup>134</sup> Sharon Bird. Ivi.

<sup>135</sup> Zoe Weiner. “Who Are The Women In The H&M ‘Ladylike’ Ad? Meet The Badass Stars” in *Bustle*. September 28, 2016. <<https://www.bustle.com/articles/186469-who-are-the-women-in-the-hm-ladylike-ad-meet-the-badass-stars-photos>>

dinner with some girlfriends (fig.2). What first strikes about her is her hair, naturally comb in an afro hairstyle, followed by her spontaneous behaviour, almost “masculine”. To continue, the third sequence of the video introduces an Asian woman, with a minimal style, feminine only in her long, perfectly combed dark hair, who is characterized by her working status (fig.3). With a long shot (min. 00:19-00:20) we are able to follow her while she is heading a meeting in a room full of colleagues, suggesting to the spectator her powerful position in the working field. The strength of the image is cleverly reinforced by the words of the song going like “cause she always knows her place”, that, subverting its original meaning, gives to the whole frame a new significance, indicating that women can achieve any position, as every place is their place. Another working woman is introduced at the minute 00:43-00:46, and her diversity is this time characterized by her age. She is Lauren Hutton, a former supermodel who is 72 years old,<sup>136</sup> and, this time again, her professionalism is represented by her dark, elegant, minimal clothes that, together with her thin body, cover her with an androgynous charm (fig.4). And while the music goes “always something nice to say”, Lauren performs the opposite and, being extremely bored by the conversation of the two men at the business party, that we individualize for their gender but whose faces are not shown, she prefers to leave them and to find relief with the sole company of herself. (fig.5)

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<sup>136</sup> Ivi.



Fig.2



Fig.3





*Fig.4*



*Fig.5*

The last shot of the video is as emblematic as the opening one and, potentially, even more shocking for a conservative audience, as it clearly works in unsettling the institution of heterosexuality.<sup>137</sup> From minute 01:08 until the end, the image is set on a

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<sup>137</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. Ivi.



couple of young women in a swimming pool, kissing under water (fig.6). The slow motion gives to the scene a sense of pathos and engages with the viewer, but it also helps to represent a statement. The diversity portrayed is here linked to sexuality, and while not even one heterosexual couple is shown during the video, the end is dedicated to two lesbian characters, a choice by H&M not to represent the standard, but to look for the *others*.<sup>138</sup> The image is highly glamorized, as the whole spot, while avoiding erotization, a process that often affects the representation of lesbian couples.<sup>139</sup> In fact, the real protagonist of the shot is the kiss between the two women, who are only identified by their profiles and their long hair moving in the water, in this way failing to address the *male gaze*<sup>140</sup> placing a distance between the couple and the observer.



Fig.6

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<sup>138</sup> Ivi.

<sup>139</sup> Ivi.

<sup>140</sup> Laura Mulvey. Ivi.

If the message conveyed by the spot seems to be so far quite empowering, representing minorities and alternatives to the standard,<sup>141</sup> the choices of makeup and costumes seem not to strive for the same achievement. Probably due to the trend of the season, almost every woman on the screen is wearing dark colored clothes, so that black, grey, and white are the most representational colors of the video. To continue, no one is wearing really eccentric clothes, but the majority of them are quite minimal, expressing a will to conform to non-written regulations. Same situation when talking about the makeup, always present but almost always extremely natural (exception made for the dark lipstick of the lady in the car). If from a side linked to an ideological point of view that wants to embrace the message that natural body is beautiful in all its imperfections, on the other hand this aesthetic is limiting and conformist. So, while the sounds of the actions made by the protagonists on the screen keep on overcoming the soundtrack, (min.00:11; 00:36; 00:40; 00:56) suggesting that women's actions are never silence, the looks of the same ladies are quite tamed, limiting their ability to mark their difference and to impose an alternative aesthetic.

To continue with film analysis, I will now reason on the functionalities of some figures and on the *motif* they suggest.<sup>142</sup> The theme of being alone with oneself, of being confident and satisfied with one's image and personality, and, maybe above all, not to need a man to feel beautiful and worthy, is a constant of the campaign. As a matter of fact, all the protagonists we see on the screen are tracing relationships in three ways: within other women, within the camera and within a mirror. The models are often portrayed on their own, or talking with other girlfriends, and the presence of men is never something worthy of attention. To continue, an object of the *mise-en-scene* is often present in the shots: a mirror. We can trace the presence of this prop, having a fundamental function and contributing to the creation of a motif, three different times. The first one is in the opening scene already cited, where the plus size woman watches herself in lingerie in the mirror of a bathroom. Later on, at min. 00:21-00:23, we see the same lady dancing to her own rhythm and watching herself with satisfaction, she seems to enjoy what she is looking at (fig.7). Then, at min. 00:20-00:21, the video presents us a blond,

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<sup>141</sup> Susan Bird. Ivi.

<sup>142</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Ivi.

Caucasian lady in her car, introduced with a side view angle, busy in watching herself in the rear-view mirror while she is putting a dark lipstick on (fig.8). And again, at min. 00:36-00:41, the mirror is present and a fundamental element of the scene. This time, the setting is an elevator and the only member inside is an elegant woman in a black dress, characterized by her muscled body and an extremely glamorous charm. (fig.9) She is looking at herself in the mirror, checking the dress, checking her figure before she confidently steps outside the elevator, ready to face the world. The last shot of the scene is even more empowering as the camera portrays her exit with an extremely low angle.<sup>143</sup> These images seem to suggest not only that beauty can be extremely diverse, but also that the most important act of being a modern, empowered lady is to embrace your image, embrace your difference and be proud of who you are. The protagonists dress those clothes because they first like their own reflections in the mirror, they are doing it especially for themselves, being attractive could be just a consequence, but never a reason.



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<sup>143</sup> Ivi.

Fig.7



Fig.8



Fig.9

As clear from the analysis of the actors present on the screen, another key theme for the campaign is diversity, especially visualized with models having different shapes and different ethnicities, and then developed further by showing a lesbian couple. To continue, the campaign presents the quality of not only representing biological women,

but also to count in her cast a transgender woman, Hari Nef, model and activist. Her inclusion represents a subversive trait under a perspective of gender identity, as the supposed naturally given factors reproducing gender, at a certain point, stopped to *follow* one another,<sup>144</sup> and Hari, born with male sexual organs, actively decided to be a woman. The news of the participation of a transgender woman in the campaign was well known, however many journalists and members of conservative groups failed in individualizing her, fact that underlines the illusory and performative status of gender.<sup>145</sup> *The Huffington Post* US Edition confused Hari Nef (min.00:04 and 00:59-01:00) with Pum Lefebure (min. 00:18-00:20), talking about a transgender model walking to her office,<sup>146</sup> while a conservative group, part of the *American Family Association*, mistook Fatima Pinto (min. 0:33-0:36) for a transgender, failing to criticize its real target at all.<sup>147</sup>

## Conclusion

To wrap up, the subversive character of the H&M spot is mainly given by the diversity it brings on the screen, and by the fact it addresses a female audience<sup>148</sup> (the targeted audience to sell the brand). Diversity is presented by alternative ideas of beauty, that do not conform a standard, but it is also connected to sexuality and gender. The video challenges compulsory heterosexuality by proposing a lesbian couple on the screen, eccentric subjects per excellence,<sup>149</sup> an expression of desires alternative to the standard, and not normalized in an erotic representation subjected to a male contemplation.<sup>150</sup> In addition, from a perspective of gender identity, the presence of a transgender model reveals the constructed character of gender.<sup>151</sup>

However, the advert also presents some limitations. While the idea of femininity is extremely amplified in the campaign, costumes and makeup tend here to normalize<sup>152</sup> the female characters, plus, every model on the screen, even though with an

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<sup>144</sup> Judith Butler. Ivi.

<sup>145</sup> Ivi.

<sup>146</sup> Alanna Vagianos. ivi.

<sup>147</sup> Alexandra Ilyashov. ivi.

<sup>148</sup> Teresa de Lauretis and Ruby Rich. Ivi.

<sup>149</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. Ivi.

<sup>150</sup> Laura Mulvey. Ivi.

<sup>151</sup> Judith Butler. Ivi.

<sup>152</sup> Laura de Lauretis.

androgynous look, is easily recognizable as a woman. In other words, without knowing of the participation of Hari Nef, the spectator is led to think that all the ladies on the screen are cisgender women, and a fixed gender identity seems to be extremely necessary to conceive the empowering message. What is missing is the idea of a gender fluid identity, of a clear, explicit parody of the norms and behaviors of compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Judith Butler. Ivi.

### 5.3 Knowledge as the only way to “be in charge of our bodies”: the documentary series *Vagina Dispatches*.

#### Background

On November the 8th 2016, the entrepreneur Donald Trump won the American presidential election. His victory came unexpected, especially because the new US president, during his campaign, let himself go to a series of xenophobic and sexist assertions, the reflection of his set of mind and ideology.<sup>154</sup> Among the many examples, a strong backlash from the public opinion, including some of his supporters, came after the emerging of an audio tape, recorded in 2005, in which Trump asserted his right, as famous person, to “seduce” beautiful women by “grab them by the pussy”.<sup>155</sup> This outrageous expression summarizes Trump’s position in relation to women, re-evoking ideals belonging to the culture of rape.

The second case study I want to introduce poses itself, explicitly, against Trump’s politics, claiming that, in an era in which the president of “grab them by the pussy” just won the election, this kind of content is necessary if not vital.<sup>156</sup> I am talking about the documentary series *Vagina Dispatches*,<sup>157</sup> published in four episodes on *The Guardian US Edition*, between the 23rd September 2016 and the 17th November of the same year. The videos present in each episode a different topic, each of them informing the audience about quite basic notions on the female body. The starting point of this journey is a gap between the information around men’s bodies, including their genital functions, that have an history in being studied from a scientific point of view and in being largely represented in media, and a lack of information and correct representations in relation to female bodies and genital parts.

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<sup>154</sup> Sam Levin, Zach Stafford, Scott Bixby. “Donald Trump shock victory sparks protests across America” in *The Guardian*. November 10, 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/09/anti-donald-trump-protests-new-york-chicago-san-francisco>>

<sup>155</sup> Scott Bixby, Ben Jacobs and Sabrina Siddiqui. “‘You can do anything’: Trump brags on tape about using fame to get women” in *The Guardian*. October 8, 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/07/donald-trump-leaked-recording-women>>

<sup>156</sup> Mona Chalabi and Mae Ryan. “Vagina Dispatches: what to know in the age of Donald Trump – video” in *The Guardian*. November 30, 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/video/2016/nov/30/vagina-dispatches-donald-trump-video>>

<sup>157</sup> Mona Chalabi and Mae Ryan. “Vagina Dispatches” in *The Guardian*. <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/series/vagina-dispatches>>



So, explicitly based on the idea that “knowledge is power”,<sup>158</sup> being the only way to be “in charge of [our] bodies”,<sup>159</sup> the documentary starts to treat the argument from a basic knowledge that, as it will be proofed, is completely missing even in Western culture. Therefore, the first episode, simply entitled “The Vulva”, wants to discover what a vulva is, how it looks like and its functions. Then, the second episode, “Stopping Periods”, is dedicated to menstruation and to the common practice, between young women, to decide to stop periods, inquiring the effects of this decision and the reasons behind it. The third and fourth episodes, respectively “The orgasm gap” and “What you didn’t learn in sex education”, are dealing with sexuality, not only thought as a search for pleasure but also as part of a healthy life, being sex education a fundamental tool for women to be in control of their bodies. All the episodes are set in the USA and they make large use of interviews with common people as well as doctors, scientists, sexologists, activists and other public figures able to give an informed contribution to the conversation. The majority of the interviewees are women, as well as the cast of *Vagina Dispatches*. This is composed by Mona Chalabi, data editor at *The Guardian US*, in the place of the host, one of the writers and of the producers, flanked by Mae Ryan, Emmy Award winning film maker, who is co-host, writer, editor, camera and director. Besides Chalabi and Ryan, two other women are producers of the project, Samara Breger and Valerie Lapinski.

### **Impact**

The documentary is an independent production, specifically created for *The Guardian US*, that, thanks to its popularity online, easily reached over a million views both on the website of the journal and on the social networks.<sup>160</sup> The visibility of *The Guardian* immediately helped the videos to achieve this result. As a matter of fact, the journal accomplish a considerable level of esteem in 2014, when it won, together with *The Washington Post*, the Pulitzer Prize for public service.<sup>161</sup> In addition, its reputation as a

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<sup>158</sup> Mona Chalabi and Mae Ryan. “Vagina Dispatches: what to know in the age of Donald Trump – video”. ivi.

<sup>159</sup> Mona Chalabi and Mae Ryan. *Vagina Dispatches - the vulva*. September 23, 2016. <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/video/2016/sep/23/vagina-dispatches-part-one-what-vulvas-look-like>>

<sup>160</sup> Mae Ryan. “Vagina Dispatches” in *Maeryan.com*. <<http://maeryan.com/work/vagina-dispatches>>

<sup>161</sup> Paul Farhi. “Washington Post wins Pulitzer Prize for NSA spying revelations; Guardian also honored” in *The Washington Post*. April 14, 2014.



relevant source of information, not colluded with any political faction or economical interest, is widely recognized, as the journal is part of *The Guardian Media Group*, owned by the media company Scott Trust, a charitable organization devoted to ensure editorial independence.<sup>162</sup> I will now focus the attention on the analysis of this documentary, in order to discover the characteristics that make it a sample case for feminist representation in contemporary media.

## Analysis

I will now proceed with an analysis of the docuseries starting from a neo-formalist film analysis method,<sup>163</sup> and taking into consideration those elements of the plot, and of the *mise en scene*, that structure each episode. In fact, even though each video presents a different topic, the series has a set structure, using fixed and well thought strategies in order to convey its message.

In each episode, the first shots are fundamental to set the tone and the atmosphere of the documentary. These are composed by a possible disclaimer of the incorporation of graphic images, followed by an introduction to the topic that will be discussed. The introduction is narrated by the voice-over of Mae Ryan and Mona Chalabi that, while different images pass on the screen, gives to the spectator an overall frame about the level of information around the topic. To enrich the introduction, illustrations are inserted in episode three and four (fig.1 and fig.2), together with brief interventions from a group of usual interviewees (episode one, two, and three). This is also the occasion in which firstly the logo of *The Guardian* is presented, by its superimposition on the image. To follow, Chalabi and Ryan introduce themselves to the audience, with a close up on both their faces and some long shots revealing the urban setting (fig.3), in which the figures are walking and talking to the camera, until the illustrated logo of the series takes over the scene. At this point, the title of the episode is presented, always with a superimposition on the image, and we are introduced into what seems to be a completely informal chat

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<[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/washington-post-wins-pulitzer-prize-for-public-service-shared-with-guardian/2014/04/14/bc7c4cc6-c3fb-11e3-bcec-b71ee10e9bc3\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3d3654a1a13f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/washington-post-wins-pulitzer-prize-for-public-service-shared-with-guardian/2014/04/14/bc7c4cc6-c3fb-11e3-bcec-b71ee10e9bc3_story.html?utm_term=.3d3654a1a13f)>

<sup>162</sup> "History of the Guardian" in *The Guardian*. June 6, 2002. <<https://www.theguardian.com/gnm-archive/2002/jun/06/1>>

<sup>163</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Ivi.

between the two hosts. The two women, always in a peaceful and serene setting, that usually looks like part of a private house, share with the spectator their urgency to inquire and collect information about a topic that not only is underrepresented in media, but that is also covered by a veil of ignorance and shamefulness. While the familiar tone is carried on for the whole narration, the conclusory structure of the videos recreates the atmosphere of friendly chat already built for the beginning. So, the camera brings us back to Chalaby and Ryan, always walking in a urban setting, while discussing between each other their findings, and the personal conclusions they drawn from the inquire (fig.4). Then, the logo of the documentary takes over the scene once again, followed by an anticipation, narrated in voice-over, about the theme of the next episode.

This set structure and the attitude of the two hosts are elements that participate in creating a familiar and safe atmosphere, where no behavior will be shamed and no topic will be censored, and it gives to the audience the feeling of participating in the genesis and in the development of the video. Chalabi and Ryan present themselves as part of us, they also have restricted information about sex education and the female body, so they start a conversation, within themselves and within the viewers, to permit to both the parts to enrich their knowledge and be empowered by it.

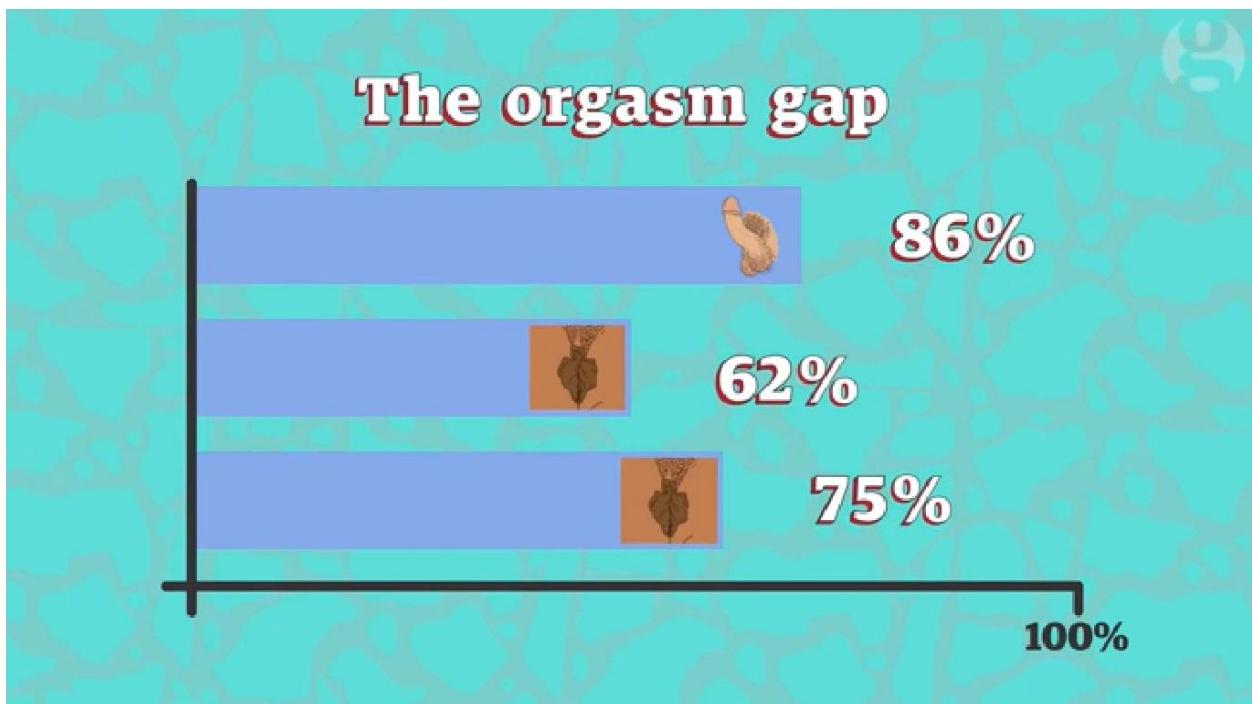


Fig.1 From *Vagina Dispatches* Episode 3 "The orgasm gap".



Fig.2 From *Vagina Dispatches* Episode 4 "What you didn't learn in sex ed".



Fig.3 From *Vagina Dispatches* Episode 1 "The vulva".



*Fig.4. From Vagina Dispatches Episode 2 “Stopping Periods”.*

This sense of familiarity is carried on also by two other elements that are recurrent within the episodes, one concerning the plot and another one concerning the style and the photography of the shots.

Regarding the plot, this is largely composed by a series of interviews that aim to inquire both the understanding of the topic that common people may have and a more scientific point of view, creating a wider and more comprehensive frame. So, together with unstructured interviews made to the citizens living in cosmopolitan cities such as New York (Episode one, min.01:34-02:34), each episode counts a large number of interventions coming from experts of the theme inquired, such as neurologists, scientists, doctors, and so on. In addition, a group of recurrent interviewees is present in each episode. This is composed by Jodie Patterson, mother and activist engaged with gender equality and queer studies, Betty Dodson, well known sex educator and feminist, Harvey Katz, transgender artist and educator, Jessica Gonzalez, activist for free press and media diversity, and Ali Stroker, the first actress in a wheeling chair to appear in Broadway, a group able to provide a human and humanistic approach to the issue. The heterogeneity



of the interviews wants to recreate a debate that, following a feminist methodology,<sup>164</sup> counts each perspective, and that gives space to the minorities, without taking any assumption for certain. Also, the presence of some stable interviewees contributes in creating a familiar, safe atmosphere. As a matter of fact, in each episode we not only get to know Mona Chalabi and Mae Ryan, but we also recognize in each video the faces of other guests, willing to share their opinions and experiences with the spectator.

Regarding the style and the photography of the shots, another stable element is the introduction both of original illustrations and of graphic images and pictures. The illustrator of the cast is a woman, Laura Callaghan, known for her colourful style, “lady-oriented” work<sup>165</sup> and her inclination in depicting intellectual women.<sup>166</sup> Callaghan confirms her style once again, and what most of all strikes the spectator about her designs is the colourfulness and the brightness of the images. Usually, both the illustrations and the graphic pictures are introduced in the scene for educational purposes, together with the will of providing truthful representations, they want to give explicit examples and illustrate functions, facts and situations. The logo of the series is emblematic of the style of the whole project (fig.5). This is composed by a series of triangular shapes in the background, clearly referring to the vulva, and the two main producers of the documentary, Ryan and Chalabi, in the front, represented with their unique and somehow eccentric style and a confident attitude, with a selection of extremely bright colours.

The style of the illustrations, eccentric and playful, but at the same time able to inform also from a scientific perspective, engages the audience, recreating, once again, a serene atmosphere that attempts to normalize the topics discussed, and to present and acknowledge on the screen female experiences<sup>167</sup> and an alternative aesthetic.

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<sup>164</sup> Sharon Bird. Ivi.

<sup>165</sup> Maisie Skidmore. “Illustration: Laura Callaghan draws girls you’ll want to befriend and run away from” in *It’s Nice That*. August 29, 2013. <<https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/illustration-laura-callaghan-updates-1>>

<sup>166</sup> Ivi.

<sup>167</sup> Sharon Bird. Ivi.



Fig.5. Logo.

Continuing the analysis applying feminist critique,<sup>168</sup> I would say the docuseries present two main aspects which work in a direction of female empowerment: it represents diversity and it directly addresses compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>169</sup>

As for diversity, the insertion of graphic images and illustrations is fundamental. As a matter of fact, the images, mainly inserted for educational purposes, strive to provide different representations of the female body, as inclusive as possible. For example, in the first episode, the vulva, which is also the title and the topic of the video, is presented in its variations and different forms both under the shape of illustrations (min.01:04-01:23), also aimed at providing information on the scientific composition of the female sex organ, and of actual pictures of it and of its transformations due to plastic surgery (min.06:30-06:54). To continue, diversity is presented also under a gender perspective, and the female identity is not limited to a biological status. So, always in the first episode, a transgender woman, Callie, shares her experiences about the process of changing sex,

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<sup>168</sup> Sharon Bird. Ivi.

<sup>169</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. Ivi.

in this way adding the perspective of another *other*<sup>170</sup> about the topic of the female body and female sexual organs.

Again, another aspect of the documentary, that complies with a feminist critique, is the attempt to uncover and denounce those mechanisms typical of the institution of heterosexuality, one that experiences the world only and exclusively from a phallogentric perspective.<sup>171</sup> For example, the whole episode *The orgasm gap* is constructed around the awareness that sex has been inquired mainly from a male perspective. So, while it is completely possible to define a male orgasm, the female orgasm is still something unknown, hard to define, and the reason why of this unequal level of information is not only due to their visual outcomes. In this active effort to denounce the lack of information around female bodies and sex education, directly addressing a female audience, Chalabi and Ryan succeeded in uncovering those mechanisms typical of a patriarchal society, the *male gaze perspective*<sup>172</sup> that have not only taken over media but often also science.

## Conclusion

Going back to the research questions and trying to give them an answer, the analysis of *Vagina Dispatches* provided me with useful information. First of all, the same series presents itself as subversive, wanting to appeal to a female audience,<sup>173</sup> and to address a topic that, as it will be proofed during the videos, is still a taboo in contemporary society. The subversive character of the content appears quite strong and explicit as the videos directly address and denounce issues around gender inequality, above all the lack of a diverse representation of the female body and compulsory heterosexuality.<sup>174</sup> This institution is not only blamed of creating an idea of sex that do not conform with reality, but it is also claimed to be responsible for a persistent lack of information around the female body.

Under a perspective of gender identity, the documentary tries to amplify the spectrum<sup>175</sup> by including in the discourse also a transgender woman, however, due to the

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<sup>170</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. Ivi.

<sup>171</sup> Sharon Bird. Ivi.

<sup>172</sup> Laura Mulvey. Ivi.

<sup>173</sup> Teresa de Lauretis and Ruby Rich. Ivi.

<sup>174</sup> Teresa de Lauretis.

<sup>175</sup> Judith Butler. Ivi.

nature of the topic, which is very much connected with a biological discourse, a fixed gender identity is still necessary to make sense and to provide a feminist representation.



## 5.4 Campy excess to uncover gender. The feminism of *The Love Witch*.

### Background

The last case study I will bring to the reader's attention is the independent horror movie *The Love Witch*, released in the US on the 11th of November 2016. Director, producer and writer of the film is Anna Biller, independent filmmaker and feminist, based in Los Angeles, who has personally curated every detail of this production, including the editing and the costumes, a long-lasting process that took seven and a half years to be fully realized.<sup>176</sup> The film is a retro horror that takes back the campy style of the 60's genre, and a tribute to Technicolor films. This mix of elements, that leads to a wide series of references hinted on the screen,<sup>177</sup> together with the retro atmosphere, has been one of the most successful features of the movie, amplified by Anna Biller's decision not to use digital and to shoot on a 35mm film.<sup>178</sup> *The Love Witch* tells the story of Elaine, an attractive, modern witch that, after the death of her husband, decides to move to Eureka (California) to start a new life. Part of a cult, she will use her wicca arts to prepare potions and spells in order to find the new love of her life, a process that will have catastrophic results for her lovers. The film premiered in January 2016 at the International Film Festival in Rotterdam, to be acquired in May for distribution by Oscilloscope Laboratories, an independent film company and distributor.

### Impact

Since its release, *The Love Witch* obtained extremely positive critics, both for its style, as already mentioned, and even more for the reasoning it brings on the screen about gender roles in contemporary society. Because of the warm critical reception, it won the Trailblazer Award and Best Costume Design at the Chicago Independent Film Critics Circle Awards, engaged with diversity in cinema criticism, plus the Michael Cimino Best Film Award at the American Independent Film Awards. Moreover, the film has been

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<sup>176</sup> John Patterson. "The Love Witch director Anna Biller: 'I'm in conversation with the pornography all around us'" in *The Guardian*. March 2, 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/02/love-witch-director-anna-biller-conversation-pornography>>

<sup>177</sup> Ivi.

<sup>178</sup> Wendy Ide. "The Love Witch review – delicious retro horror" in *The Guardian*. March 12, 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/mar/12/the-love-witch-review-deliciously-lurid-anna-biller>>

included in a list of the 2016 best movies both made by *The New Yorker*,<sup>179</sup> magazine that offers reviews, comments and reportage on popular culture, politics and the arts, with an average household income in 2009 of \$109,877, and *IndieWire*,<sup>180</sup> information and networking site for independent filmmaking.<sup>181</sup>

## Analysis

Once again, I will start the analysis of the movie using a neo-formalist methodology,<sup>182</sup> focusing on how the scenes are stylized and on what they reveal about the plot and about the narrator of the story. The first scene is fundamental to introduce the protagonist's personality and to give us some basic information about her, but it is also emblematic of the whole development of the story and of its aesthetic. The film opens up with a long shot of a calm landscape into the green of nature, interrupted by the passage of a red car moving towards the camera. While the setting suggests a serene atmosphere, the soundtrack is tense and it reveals that something is about to happen. The second shot already introduces the protagonist, Elaine, who is presented, with a medium close up on her face, while driving and smoking a cigarette at the same time (fig.1). She is an attractive, young woman, with long reddish hair, and a perfect makeup, that will be later underlined by a close up on one of her eyes (min.00:24, fig.2), adorned with a glittery, light-blue eye shadow, thick lashes and precise eyeliner. While the spectator follows her in this journey towards the bucolic landscape, Elaine herself starts the narration, using a voice-over. Right when the story begins, we start to understand we will experience it through Elaine's mind and Elaine's eyes, so we can see what she sees, and we will have an exclusive access to her recount, as well as to her memories. Both these aspects (memory and recount) will be fundamental to understand the different meanings of what is displayed on the screen. For example, always in the first scene, Jerry, her ex-lover, will be introduced using a back and forth realized with referent cuts,

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<sup>179</sup> Richard Brody. "The best movies of 2016" in *The New Yorker*. December 9, 2016. <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-best-movies-of-2016>>

<sup>180</sup> David Ehrlich. "The 25 Best Movie Moments of 2016, According to IndieWire Critic David Ehrlich" in *IndieWire*. December 6, 2016. <<http://www.indiewire.com/2016/12/best-movies-2016-david-ehrllich-memorable-moments-1201753085/>>

<sup>181</sup> *Indiewire.com*. <<http://www.indiewire.com/about-us/>>

<sup>182</sup> David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. *Ivi*.

from Elaine's expression in the car to a flashback in her memory. While the protagonist continues her voice-over, explaining how devastated she was after Jerry's decision to break up with her, depicting herself as a victim of abuse, the flashback, at min. 01:54, shows for the second time Jerry's body, dead, poisoned by his drink, using a high angle to explicitly suggest Elaine committed the murder (fig.3). The whole narration will be often structured in the same way, and it will follow a double path, on a side presenting Elaine's words and on the other side showing Elaine's actions and memories, images that will deny and counterbalance what has just been said.



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3

The first theme<sup>183</sup> of the film I would like to elaborate on is, indeed, duality. In fact, the duality of the narration is also reflected in Elaine's behavior, that, at least in the first half of the movie, will be extremely different when in relation to men from when in relation to women. While with women, such as Trish, the lady in the magical shop *Moonrise Herbs*, or the lady that is playing the harp in the Victorian Tea Room, she is extremely courteous, almost flirty, suggesting, especially in the tea room, some kind of lesbian plot, with men her reaction is completely different. In fact, when Elaine needs to approach the possible love of her life, she acts nearly rude and quite aggressive.

And again, the difference between her actions, her thoughts and her words, is underlined by a specific scene set in the country house of Elaine's first victim in Eureka, Wayne. Indeed, during the scene of the strip tease, the young witch reveals to have lined her total black coat and dress with a rainbow fabric (fig.4), disclosing an inside that is the exact opposite of what is in the cover, while the symbolic meaning of the scene is explicated even more by Wayne's words "You have two selves" (min. 25:05). And the examples may go on, but I would like now to discuss, also applying a second level of analysis by addressing feminist critique,<sup>184</sup> what this motif is representing.



Fig.4

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<sup>183</sup> Ivi.

<sup>184</sup> Sharon Bird. Ivi.

The first interpretation is the easiest and also the official one. Anna Biller herself explains how she wanted to bring on the screen a modern *femme fatale*.<sup>185</sup> The love witch uses her seduction and her wicca arts to get what she wants, and she is completely aware of her power. Because of her skills and of the influence derived from her sexuality, as well as from her witchcraft, Elaine, as the *femme fatale*, is a dangerous subject, able to castrate men, but at the same time to provoke in them a strong desire.<sup>186</sup> In this status, as well as in her ambiguous behavior, lies the duality of the character. Once again, the film exemplifies her position with a scene, the night of sex between Wayne and Elaine. Opposite to the tendency of the movie, we experience part of this action from Wayne's perspective, who is in a state of confusion and paranoia due to the hallucinogenic herbs Elaine putted in his cocktail. If on a side Wayne is extremely closed to her, finally getting what he wanted from the beginning, on the other side the atmosphere is disturbing, partly thanks to the tense soundtrack, and when the camera closes up on his face, Wayne reveals a terrorized expression.

However, while *femmes fatales* are usually tamed on the screens, with punishment or catharsis,<sup>187</sup> the protagonist of *The Love Witch* poses herself in a different position. In fact, as already stated, the story is narrated from her perspective, escaping and avoiding the *male gaze*,<sup>188</sup> so that the spectator is catapulted in her mind. Even more importantly, the mechanisms operating in the creation of a *femme fatale* are displayed and directly addressed in the movie, as much that Elaine herself, while she is having a sexual encounter with Richard, Trish's husband, tells the audience she is incarnating the "ultimate men's fantasy". To continue, the finale of the film does not follow stereotypical rules. In fact, the protagonist escapes her brutal punishment, a crowd rape inflamed by the screams "burn the witch!", a scene that clearly subverts the relationship between good and bad, evoking the violence and ignorance of the Middle Ages. Moreover, in the end, also a catharsis is avoided, and Elaine does succeed in winning the heart of one of her lovers, quite literally, by stubbing detective Griff in his chest. So, the last shot of the movie is a close up on her serene, satisfied face, while she is finally living that impossible dream

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<sup>185</sup> John Patterson. ivi.

<sup>186</sup> Mary Ann Doane. ivi.

<sup>187</sup> Ivi.

<sup>188</sup> Laura Mulvey. Ivi.



of perfect love society has been sold her for her entire life, a dream that only provoked violence and destruction (fig.5).

I will now discuss a second level of interpretation of the duality that traverses the film, one that has to deal with the revelation of the performativity of gender.<sup>189</sup> As a matter of fact, the contrast between Elaine's actions and Elaine's words can be easily attributable to one main reason: she is acting, she is playing a role. And the role that she is playing has to deal with a hyper-femininity that, far from being a natural attribute, needs to be constructed day by day. This fact is revealed by a series of features in the movie.

First of all, the setting in which the protagonist likes to find herself is always extremely artificial. Starting from the Victorian villa in Eureka, (fig.6) to continue with the ostentatiously feminine Victorian Tea Room (fig.7), where Trish and Elaine will meet twice, inverting their positions in regards to the quest for love. Again, the meetings with Elaine's cult are always happening in surreal settings (fig.8), out of space and time, and with a strong fantasy taste, to end on the dreamy medieval fest Griff and Elaine bumped into during their first date. There is nothing natural about these locations, all of them are conceived and composed to be too fake to belong to the natural world.

Similar discourse for the acting of the protagonist. She is overplaying her femininity, taking to the extreme her vampy character, and producing a campy interpretation so forced to provoke laughter, so performed to reveal its artificiality. Elaine's performance is a ritual and, as such, it sometimes takes advantage of some formulas to repeat itself. So, Elaine often uses the same expressions, for example crying out, with a pitiless expression on her face, "Poor Jerry", "Poor Richard", "Poor Wayne" or "Poor baby" (referring to Griff), the moment before she takes these men's lives.

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<sup>189</sup> Judith Butler. *Ivi*.



Fig.5



Fig.6





Fig.7



Fig.8

But the disclosure of this performativity goes even beyond, identifying also the scene costumes of Elaine’s performance. The morning after Wayne’s fatal night, Elaine

discovers her period started, so she heads to the bathroom to wear a tampon. Right after, the camera cuts on her looking into the mirror while putting on a wig, a gesture that contributes to get her into character for the start of a new day. Also, it is equally interesting to notice how Elaine's makeup is always the same, with a few variations on the colour of the eyeshadow, marking the construction of an appearance connected to the construction of an identity. This connection between costumes and identity will be revealed also in Trish's final scene. In fact, when the woman discovers her husband committed suicide, she starts to ponder Elaine's words on how to treat men, arriving to the conclusion she may have been right. She probably started to wish to be like Elaine, to behave like her, so she moves the first steps in this direction, wearing the "scene" costumes, Elaine's makeup, wig and lingerie. (fig.9) What Trish is wearing is not only clothes and accessories, but an ideal of femininity sewn by men for their desires.



*Fig.9*

## Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Love Witch* is a content that requires a deeper level of analysis to be understood. It presents itself as a reasoning around gender, around the performativity of femininity and, as a consequence, of masculinity as well. It is a film extremely subversive because it is able to uncover gender, to start a conversation around it, and to completely take the distance from a relation between gender and biological attributes. If Elaine had male sexual organs, would her power be different? Anna Biller answers in part this question with Trish's last scene, showing how in order to be the love witch it is only necessary to get into the character. Also, with the decision of giving voice to a *femme fatales* to reveal the genesis of this kind of misrepresentation, the director brings on the screen issues related to the *male gaze* and, therefore, to compulsory heterosexuality, an institution able to shape fantasies and to trap women into constructed ideas of what they are supposed to be.

## 5.5 Analysis Conclusion

The analysis of these three different audio-visual contents provided me with useful insights about the strategies used to transmit a message of gender equality and emancipation, that has been perceived by the public opinion as a feminist message. As a matter of fact, each content provides alternative representations of female characters, and their subversive nature is to be looked into different aspects. The subversive power of the H&M spot and of *Vagina Dispatches* lies for the most in their will to represent diversity, to portray on the screen alternative representations of the female body, both under a perspective of beauty and under a more organic and natural point of view. These videos challenge compulsory heterosexuality<sup>190</sup> and the *male gaze*<sup>191</sup> with the insertion of eccentric subjects,<sup>192</sup> and by portraying on the screen female needs and desires. However, what is missing, both in the documentary and in the spot, is a serious and more explicit reasoning around gender identity, not only thought as linked to biology but as linked to culture and performativity.<sup>193</sup> On the other side, *The Love Witch* focuses her feminist intentions on the revelation on the screen of the performativity of gender roles,<sup>194</sup> presenting a protagonist that is over playing femininity in a completely unnatural way, and that is informing the audience by revealing the *male gaze* and its deepest fantasies.

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<sup>190</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. Ivi.

<sup>191</sup> Laura Mulvey. Ivi.

<sup>192</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. Ivi.

<sup>193</sup> Judith Butler. Ivi.

<sup>194</sup> Ivi.

## 6. Conclusion

The thesis *Feminist representations in contemporary media: an analysis of audio-visual contents* wanted to be an inquire on those strategies used in media to convey a feminist message in contemporary society. I structured the work in different, separated sections, each one fundamental for a general understanding of the topic and to lead the reader towards the analysis of the selected case studies. So, after a brief introduction, I started providing information about the historical context where the thesis needs to be positioned, focusing on the last developments of the feminist movement in relation with media. Then, I continued with the literature review, a section able to develop the theoretical frame fundamental for a deeper understanding of the case studies and of the representations they propose. Specifically, I elaborated on three main theoretical concepts: female sexuality in relation to compulsory heterosexuality, gender identity, and the *male gaze*. Each one was necessary to understand to what extents the case studies were proposing a subversive content. As a matter of fact, while a stereotyped idea of female sexuality, especially with the concept of compulsory heterosexuality, and of gender identity has heavily contributed to the affirmation of a patriarchal ideology, the concept of the *male gaze* is able to address the relationships of power between genders, existing on the screen as well as in society. Equally useful for the development of a further analysis, a section has been dedicated to the methodology used for each case studies. So, I combined two different methods, one more connected to a formal analysis, Neoformalist Film Analysis, indeed, and one able to add a critical level to the study, a feminist critique.

After tracing the basis of my research, I started with the analysis of the case studies, trying to answer to the following question. To what extents are those contents subversive? What do they say about gender identity? How do they relate themselves with female sexuality and compulsory heterosexuality? And, do they propose alternative representations of female characters?

As a result of my research, two videos present similar characteristics in regards to feminist sensibility, the documentary and the H&M spot, while the independent movie *The Love Witch* really stands out for the way it treats the same subject. So, *Vagina Dispatches*

and the advertising approach to feminism pushing on diversity, proposing different and alternative representations of the female body, and directly addressing a female audience, the audience of the *others*.<sup>195</sup> In addition, they both addressed compulsory heterosexuality<sup>196</sup> by bringing on the screen eccentric subjects,<sup>197</sup> in terms of sexual preferences, as in the case of the H&M spot that portrays, at the end of the video, a lesbian couple kissing under water, or in terms of the expression of female desires, as in the case of the documentary that explicitly wants to inform about female sexuality. While the documentary, because of its educational purposes, presents the great advantage to directly address, during the conversations, issues such as the institution of heterosexuality and the lack of alternative representations of the female body in media, the H&M spot tries to achieve the same objective by only using images and suggestions.

*The Love Witch* is very different from the previous examples. In this case, we assist to a whole discourse about gender roles, gender identity and its performativity.<sup>198</sup> It is the same protagonist of the movie to inform the audience about the origins of her character, denouncing her being a product of the *male gaze*,<sup>199</sup> the men's "ultimate fantasy", and she is also the one revealing the constructed nature of gender, by overplaying her femininity. Because of the ability to think gender identity as something completely untied to natural attributions, Anna Biller's film, among the three case studies, seems to be the most successful under a feminist perspective, the only one explicitly working in a sense of liminality.

To conclude, what do these case studies say about feminist representations in contemporary media?

First of all, it seems that the most successful way to address a feminist sensibility is to present diversity on the screen. Alternative representations of the female body are a hot topic, so we experience different types of beauty and femininity both from an aesthetical point of view, and from a more natural and biological one. Inclusion seems to be a key ideology for contemporary feminism, it aims at recognizing the differences, so

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<sup>195</sup> Teresa de Lauretis. Ivi.

<sup>196</sup> Ivi.

<sup>197</sup> Ivi.

<sup>198</sup> Judith Butler. Ivi.

<sup>199</sup> Laura Mulvey. Ivi.

that transgender women are represented together with cisgender ones, and gay and lesbian couples find their space on the screen. However, the grip on a fixed idea of what is male and what is female is still unavoidable, and the idea of a gender fluid identity is still largely ignored. While diversity in all its aspects, from different sexual preferences to different types of beauty and bodies, has entered the mainstream, as the H&M spot and the documentary show, the nature of gender is still a concept underdiscussed. In fact, the only content able to provide a reasoning around gender identity is the independent movie, that is also the harder content for a large, mainstream audience.

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