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INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 3 / 2020

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AND WESTERN CULTURE INDUSTRY:  
INTERCULTURAL REMARKS  
ON THE AESTHETICS  
OF TRANSGRESSION**

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# HALF-NAKED BODIES IN ANIME AND WESTERN CULTURE INDUSTRY: INTERCULTURAL REMARKS ON THE AESTHETICS OF TRANSGRESSION

**Paolo Euron**

## **Abstract**

This article takes into consideration some popular entertainment products and the way they present the image of the feminine body, questioning the way the body is portrayed and how this portrayal affects the representation of beauty, desire, and sex. The intercultural perspective refers to the Eastern and Western culture, and considers the issues of prohibition and its inherent transgression. A movie offers models or life-styles consistent with the social system and it also presents these models and life-styles as pre-arranged transgressions of the given rules. In doing so, it prescribes a model of tolerated transgression rather than a prohibition. In this way, the culture industry prescribes the transgression of an empty prohibition as a strategy of individual emancipation.

As pointed out by Horkheimer and Adorno, “the culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises.”<sup>1</sup> What the culture industry promises is frequently prescribed by its products in the form of life styles, attitudes and expectations. This article takes into consideration some popular entertainment products and the way they present the image of the feminine body. More than on the bodies in themselves, the focus is on the clothes and the way the body is displayed. Using specific movie and anime scenes as texts and analyzing the characterization, this article questions the way the body is portrayed and how this portrayal affects the representation of beauty, desire, and sex in popular shows, with reference to the Eastern and Western culture. These cases, considered in an intercultural perspective, will be interpreted by relating them to the issues of pornography, prohibition and its inherent transgression.

The representation of a nude body is not enough to qualify a movie as pornographic. For example, in Kim Ki-duk’s *Birdcage Inn*<sup>2</sup> the main character, a young prostitute working in the inn, is often shown naked. Her attractive and sensuous body entices desire. At the same time, when it is presented it becomes remarkable and allows other meanings and experiences. The audience feels that her body unconcealed, cannot express all aspects and facets of the character and her existence. It becomes an object of desire but also an object of trade, power, love, wonder,

amazement, embarrassment, and fear. The body of Chin-a, the main character of *Birdcage Inn*, is beautiful, attractive, enticing, but also embarrassing, it is the image of human weakness, the impossibility to get in real touch with the other, the wish to be free; its function is undecidable, an object of “cultural negotiation” like the function of an actual body. In Kim’s movie, “the women’s bodies in these diegetically contained yet extradiegetically excessive images become a figurative battlefield” of a class warfare where female-centered narratives enact “some of the most powerfully *feminist* evocations of sisterly solidarity to be found in contemporary Korean cinema.”<sup>3</sup> Chin-a’s body expresses the undecidability of human condition. Usually mainstream movies propose an already-decided image of human nature, they “sell the product along with its conditions of use.”<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, *Birdcage Inn* rather questions human nature and its open essence.

The body can be an even more undecidable tool when we have to learn how to use it rather than a univocal instrument of desire. This is what happens in the Japanese movie *Air Doll*.<sup>5</sup> This movie is a fairy tale (with some parallelisms with Collodi’s novel for children *The Adventures of Pinocchio*) which narrates how a sex doll becomes a real woman and how, nevertheless, her body is still used for sexual purposes. The representation of her naked body does not have the effect of inspiring desire, but has the effect to allow the experience of the complex relationships and tricky elements concerning the practice of sex: power, money, feelings, without giving any definite answer. The feminine body is represented with its human ambiguities and possibilities, related to the elements of our actual life.

Writing about Kim Ki-duk’s movies, Hye Seung Chung uses the words of Elisabeth Grosz to focus the body’s meaning. “The body is neither brute nor passive but is interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation. On one hand, it is a signifying and signified body; on the other, it is an object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange. [...] The body is regarded as the political, social, and cultural object par excellence, not a product of a row, passive nature which is civilized; [...] not a precultural, presocial, or prelinguistic pure body but a body as social and discursive object, a body bound up in the order of desire, signification, and power.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time the female body, in its undefined and undecided essence, reveals its originality which precedes all objectifications and becomes “a matrix or a source of nourishment in which the elements are without identity or reason.” With these words Julia Kristeva connects the feminine body to the Platonic *chora*, “a mobile receptacle of merging, contradiction and movement, necessary to the functioning of nature before the teleological intervention of God, and that it corresponds to the mother.”<sup>7</sup> The *chora* is the pre-verbal and pre-symbolic, semiotic representation of the subject in process, structured around the maternal body. In this way Hye Seung Chung remarks how “in the final shot of *Birdcage Inn*, the water/ocean functions as a regenerative, pulsating space of semiotic

*chora* wherein the two female subjects are in the process of becoming one, unfettered by language and largely outside the symbolic order.”<sup>8</sup> The feminine body has a proteiform nature, it is a source of meaning and an opportunity to convey new significations rather than a defined object with a given function.

Western mainstream movies are generally meant to gather the largest audience composed by young people, adults and families without restrictions. The feminine character is often very young and sexually attractive. Her image usually highlights the secondary and tertiary sexual characters: red lips, a breast in evidence, and sexy clothes. In this conventional, foreseeable representation, the feminine character is usually not supposed to openly exhibit her naked body. The body is hyper-sexualized, but the skimpy clothes do not allow its nakedness, even when it would be justified by the events.<sup>9</sup> A staggering example is one of the initial sequences of *The Fifth Element*<sup>10</sup> in which Leeloo, the very beautiful Milla Jovovich, is cloned and, as soon as she is reconstructed in human form, she appears in her stylish, white swimming suit designed by Jean-Paul Gaultier.

We cannot justify this ideology of semi-nakedness permeating mainstream movie industry by saying that the movie displays a half-naked body because nudity is obscene and a movie should not show what is forbidden by common sense. In this case, what the movie presents is not the nakedness of a body but rather the idea of prohibition. In mainstream movies “the truly successful erotic transgression is one that maintains the emotional force of the prohibition.”<sup>11</sup> We can say nudity has a synecdochical consistency: it is triggered by the representation of a part of the whole. Without the prohibition, there is no nudity; without clothes, there is no visible body.

According to the mainstream standards, the musical *Chicago*<sup>12</sup> displays several enticing girls but no explicit nudity. The ballet of the prison is a very sensual show, but actresses are not naked and wear underwear to highlight their bodies. Their attires seem to transgress social conventions but, actually, at the same time, they enforce a prohibition: the naked body cannot be shown. In fact, the actresses do not break rules; conversely, they merely confirm the rules and, in doing so, they put on a display of dominant relations of power. We should always consider that even the most popular and conservative movies “put on display both the significant dreams and nightmares of a culture and the ways that the culture is attempting to channel them to maintain its present relations of power and domination.”<sup>13</sup> The highly stylized ballet refrains from a pornographic intention but is intended to elicit desire. In fact, the fundamental aim of this representation of the body is to create desire. Clothes are designed to hint to the feminine body, and this is indeed suggested in the form of desire.

Schopenhauer was the first Western philosopher who consistently insisted on the idea that desire is at the origin of the suffering of life. He wrote that life swings like a pendulum

forwards and backwards between pain and boredom. What we need to remember is that, according to Schopenhauer's philosophy, pain is caused by the desire of what we do not have yet, and that boredom is again a form of pain caused by the possession of what we cannot desire any longer. To express it in Schopenhauer's terms, the movie stops the swing of the pendulum on the side of pain as desire to prevent it from swinging to the side of boredom (the other, socially unproductive form of pain). A dress recalls the nakedness and, in doing so, triggers the desire for the body and, at the same time, it denies the possibility of going further. We accept that, in this kind of mainstream movie, the naked body is banned. It seems that the movie represents the promise of a satisfaction which is always delayed and postponed.

This endless delaying and postponing represents the principle of flirtation as the playful form of love.<sup>14</sup> In flirtation the woman inspires a desire and denies the possibility of satisfaction. A woman who totally denies herself loses the possibility to be desired; a woman who grants herself loses the possibility of flirting and of creating desire, that is to say: she dissipates her power. What actually interests the subject of flirtation is the desire and not the end of desire. Flirting can be above all described as an exercise of power. Satisfaction is ruled out or, better, "differed."<sup>15</sup> The lover has an object of love since he is waiting for it: "The lover's fatal identity is precisely: *I am one who waits.*"<sup>16</sup> But this identity of the loving subject is not an original condition, it is given by a relation of power. "*To make someone wait:* the constant prerogative of all power."<sup>17</sup> In a similar way, the movie *Chicago* puts a limit to the representation of the body and, at the same time, the body is presented as the pivotal object of desire for which people fight and kill: basically, as an instrument of power.

There is a deep connection between sex appeal, desire and individual power. Conceivably this is the reason which explains why many mainstream movies are machines to generate desire. As we have remarked above, it is a desire which is not supposed to be satisfied because, by definition, desire must remain desire for its object to survive as such and to be turned into a practice of power.

The case of the Bond-movies is instructive, a Bond-girl is an attractive, seductive, scanty-clothed young woman who appears in a Bond-movie. She is not just a decorative element, but the feminine body is used to trigger desire, however deprived of its real corresponding object we could find in our ordinary experiences. The actress brings the desire to the paroxysm and, proposing an impossibly high standard, virtually denies its satisfaction. Real life is ruled out, desire remains beyond the possibility of being satisfied or connected to the actual experience. The body is without any other purpose than one of excitement, and it does not offer any other meaning or experience. Even if a mainstream movie is produced for the whole family, this representation of the body is about sex, even if sex is never openly mentioned. As Adorno has put it: "just because it can never take place, everything revolves around the coitus."<sup>18</sup> This presentation of desire

creates a high expectation from sex, far beyond any realistic value and personal satisfaction. More precisely, it conveys the idea and creates the general ethos that sex appeal, desire without satisfaction, and individual power are deeply intertwined. The obvious and natural connection is denied: sex as the normal (although complex, complicated, and difficult, since the human nature is undecided) consequence of excitement is removed. In the Bond-girl representation of sex, as well as in many mainstream representations of beauty, the body is hyper-sexualized to make it sound outdated and almost not trendy any normal, effective, and satisfying sexual attitude related to the actual experience. In this way the cultural industry offers a simplified “instruction of use” for its products and a ready-made interpretation: “a woman must be ‘beautiful’ to be sexual.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, “we are asked to believe that our culture promotes the display of female sexuality. It actually shows almost none. It censors representations of women’s bodies, so that only the official versions are visible. Rather than seeing images of female desire or that cater to female desire, we see mock-ups of living mannequins [...]”<sup>20</sup> The hyper-sexualization of movie characters is not in the interest of men and women but is rather a part of the advertising campaign of a consumer society which provides a general dissatisfaction for the body and, consequently, a sexual dissatisfaction between man and women. “Ads do not sell sex—that would be counterproductive, if it meant that heterosexual women and men turned to one another and were gratified. What they sell is sexual discontent.”<sup>21</sup> In this way, high expectations and a generalized feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration are easily conveyed into a generalized desire of transgression.

In mainstream movies the hyper-sexualization of the character’s body is usually relatable to a kind of transgression. A transgressive behaviour is often associated to a character who exerts individual power through her sex-appeal. Slavoj Žižek writes how “Law itself relies on its inherent transgression”<sup>22</sup> and this remark explains the importance of transgression in strengthening the rules. Žižek reflection is decisive in revealing the mechanism hidden behind the “prescribed” transgression imposed by the system. Before we consider the transgression in itself, we have to discuss how it is suggested in movies and deal with the audience’s reaction. The way in which the character reveals her body is very meaningful and worth of consideration. We will bring two examples so that we can compare two ways of revealing a half-naked body, the former referred to the Eastern culture and the latter to the Western one.

On one hand, the Japanese anime *Agent Aika*<sup>23</sup> is a TV series aimed to a young adult audience. This science-fiction cartoon, set in an apocalyptic future, is about the war between a secret organization and a villain who wants to destroy humanity. In the first episode Aika, a young woman endowed with special powers, fights against a group of female opponents and, in doing so, they frequently offer sights beneath their skirts with a quick glimpse of their nudity. The same will happen more or less during the entire series. A critical reaction in the Western

debate has been generally absent or very negative.<sup>24</sup> According to this reaction, under the pretext of a science-fiction cartoon, the adventures of *Agent Aika* were an excuse to present shots from low down and reveal underwear and naked legs. “This OAV series has more panties than I've ever seen in any anime before.”<sup>25</sup> In short, this anime is presented as nothing but a pornographic show. “It is too perverse and fetish-oriented for the average person’s tastes, despite a relative lack of actual sexuality on display. [...] Just because we don’t see absolutely everything doesn’t mean that the show isn’t pornographic by definition.”<sup>26</sup> What makes “pornographic by definition” a cartoon which does not show any sexual explicit content? It seems that the *intention* to be pornographic is enough. We need to compare it to other popular movies to understand the meaning of this intention. Before that, in dealing with *Agent Aika* we also need to explain the relevance of this anime and the reason of our interest in it. This anime represents popular culture and similar pop artifacts are short-lived and depending on the demand of the market. This close connection to fan service and popular taste makes *Agent Aika* representative of a non-conventional production: a great part of its interest lies in its difference from the Western mainstream and in its being against the predictability of the Western, standardized popular culture. *Agent Aika* does not attempt to please everyone and to meet the taste of the largest audience. It cannot absolutely be considered as a masterpiece but it helps to reveal some peculiar features of a different representation of the body.

On the other hand, the movie *Valerian and the City of Thousand Planets*<sup>27</sup> is a mainstream production aimed to a young-adult audience as well as to a general, family target. Laureline, impersonated by the teenage model Cara Delevigne, is an over-sexualized and outrageously beautiful girl. In the beginning of the movie, she appears half-naked in her bathing suit. She quarrels with her boyfriend and then both leave on a mission. She enters the space ship and takes off. The reason she drives a spaceship wearing the same skimpy bikini remains unexplained. Nobody would say that *Valerian* is a pornographic movie or that it is perverse. Nevertheless, if we consider the percentage of naked skin, Laureline is more naked than Aika, and the takes presenting her body are longer than the quick up-skirts and glances on legs and underwear of *Agent Aika*’s characters in the discussed scene. In fact, the two characters are not showing their body in the same way. Laureline, like Leeloo in *The Fifth Element*, is actually wearing a bikini, a piece of clothing we can see on beaches and in swimming pools. It is strange to wear it in a spaceship; it is a behaviour against conventions and she proves to be an energetic and bold girl, ready to use her sex-appeal to her advantage, despite the social conventions. Her attire is not conventional, but it is not against morality. In this way she transgresses, and she confirms the law at the same time. The use of her body’s attractiveness is not a neutral display of beauty. Laureline exerts the power accorded by her body. The fact that she is naked grants her the power

on men and the superiority over women. Nudity is not any accidental or circumstantial situation: it is a choice; it is a strategy of power. It seems she is transgressing the rules, but actually she transgresses the rules in the way every teenager can do it. Laureline is not presenting herself as naked. She is presenting herself as transgressing a prohibition. She proposes a codified transgression of codified rules.

Actually, Laureline suggests that if you want to be an adult, if you want to exert power, you have to use the sex appeal of your body. A girl wearing skimpy clothes and showing her body transgresses the social order which is publicly proclaimed by a dress code; she is on her own, neither a controlled child, nor an adult framed by the system but an individual who can freely use her body. In doing so, she exerts her own power, granted by the sexual desire she arouses, amplified by transgressing conventions. Actually, her transgression is consistent with the rules she pretends to transgress. There is no real enjoyment of the body and there is not even the presence of the body. In fact, she arouses desire but, at the same time, annihilates the reasons of desire. She is not naked. Her bikini is presented as an individual choice against the rules but, as a matter of fact, it does not transgress anything, any prohibition, any limit. In the representation given by *Valerian*, the body has no possibility to be naked, and what Laureline transgresses was allowed since the beginning. All authentic possibilities to break the rules are denied. Nevertheless, it is presented as a transgression which is a source of power, which has an *emancipatory* power. Her body creates desire but it does not give any clue about a possibility beyond, let alone about the way to satisfy the desire it arouses. It is true what Adorno and Horkheimer stated: “the diner must be satisfied with reading the menu. [...] The culture industry does not sublimate: it suppresses.”<sup>28</sup> Along with the suppression of the body and beyond, the culture industry prescribes the transgression of an empty prohibition as a strategy of individual emancipation.

The case of *Agent Aika* is rather different. Anime, in general, do not attempt to gather the largest audience by pleasing everyone and avoiding to hurt somebody’s taste. A common feature of anime (as well as other works outside the mainstream production of culture industry) is “the lack of compromise in making these narratives palatable.”<sup>29</sup> The main character Aika is not any model for teenagers. She does not attempt to impose any aggressive or transgressive behavior. The shots from down low show what she is wearing and what she wears is without any doubt a piece of underwear: her panties reveal the form of her body under the thin fabric; details show the stitching of knickers. They are not pieces of a swimming suit and reveal her body. In other words, we are looking at the obscene, what should not be unconcealed, what is supposed to be “out-of-the-scene.” Panties cover a larger amount of skin than a bikini but, nevertheless, they cannot be presented in the show without a kind of moral condemnation and reprobation. In other terms, *Agent Aika* presents a prohibition which remains a prohibition and which does not entail any

emancipatory claim. The prohibition is felt as a prohibition and it is not the function of a prescribed, emancipatory transgression. It is the innocent, childish, candid view of boys on the world, when the world is a place of things and events to be discovered and wondered and not a set of rules and imposed life-styles to accomplish the social order. As Kurt Vonnegut wrote in his novel *Breakfast of Champions*: “girls concealed their underpants at all costs, and boys tried to see their underpants at all costs.”<sup>30</sup> Innocence is an attitude which can be easily thwarted and counteracted by a prescribed transgression. *Agent Aika* displays what has been called an “inherent innocence”<sup>31</sup> granted on one side by the medium of animation and on the other side by the cultural background of anime. Anime as such provides a more stylized and non-realistic representation of the character, so that a direct identification is not encouraged.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, “Japan is a country that is traditionally more pictocentric than the cultures of the West, [...] and anime and manga fit easily into a contemporary culture of the visual.”<sup>33</sup> Images may be accepted thanks their inherent, aesthetic justification. In this stylization, in line with a cinema industry which is “a dichotomy of artistic freedom and repression,”<sup>34</sup> anime frequently show scenes of sex for its own sake. Nevertheless, these sexual contents are mostly proposed in a recreational and playful perspective and their narrative style, imagery and humor are not predictable and do not aim to please everybody at all costs, like a Disney cartoon or a Hollywood movie.<sup>35</sup> A stylistic and humorous presentation can make some anime less a show *containing* sex than a show *about* sex.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, pornography has often be blamed on anime, despite the fact that, like in the case of *Agent Aika*, “the level of sexuality [...] is generally no higher than in most R-rated Western films.”<sup>37</sup>

On one hand, if *Valerian* deletes the prohibition as such and imposes a behaviour against the conventions which proves actually to be without any transgressive power, on the other hand *Agent Aika* shows that there is a prohibition and does not impose any individual, emancipatory transgression; it marks a limit and states that there is a beyond out there, where it is always possible to break the law but this action is not prescribed. In *Agent Aika* the body is really naked. Her underwear is not Leeloo or Laureline’s swimming suit. What she is wearing traces the limit, denotes the prohibition and the fact that we are looking at the obscene, something which is not allowed. Such representation of the body necessarily hints to the fact that there is a limit, and something beyond it. This importance granted to the body evokes an experience in which, to use Eagleton’s terms, “interests and desires [...] operate as quasi-transcendental anteriorities; there can be no asking from whence they derive, [...] for such values, whatever their origin in social interaction, are as radically given as the human body.”<sup>38</sup> The body seems to be at the origin of our social dimension, not an instrument whose use can be prescribed for social success. The transgression is now conjured up as an actual transgression, a real possibility with unforeseeable developments and not as an individual, emancipatory practice. Now desire is not just a game of

power but it can also be a real modality of human beings and can be displayed in something existing in the actual world. The show is not just about proposing a behaviour. The innocence presupposes something which is not yet taken for granted. Innocence allows amazement and wonder. The show is about something which is not in the show. In this perspective, as Eagleton put it, the body attests “our shared material conditions [which] open up the possibilities of friendship and love”<sup>39</sup> of our open and undecided existence.

When we speak about innocence, prohibition and transgression as an emancipatory practice, we should refrain from simply understanding these words and expressions as descriptive or normative terms. They have rather to be thought, as Judith Butler has put it, in their performative character: “the anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object. [...] [A]n expectation [...] ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates.”<sup>40</sup> In the same way the movie’s characterization acts in a performative way. Female characters offer an expectation which ends up in gender identity, behaviour and life-styles. The movie seems to mirror real life or to reveal the internal, troubled essence of the human being. Actually, it conjures what appears to be internal and is taken for granted as a legitimate desire. “What we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body.”<sup>41</sup> The character, in its performative function, displays the interiority as an already decided essence. What is presented as a state of being or as a natural condition is actually an action that human beings are compelled to perform by the social system. What we consider an internal feature of the human being is, in truth, what we anticipate and produce through certain acts and according to certain external models and given expectations. In the considered case of *Valerian* (as well as in many culture industry products, in which “just because it can never take place, everything revolves around the coitus”) a transgressive behaviour is proposed as a more normal attitude than wonder, amazement, enjoyment, curiosity, shyness, empathy, even than satisfaction. Transgression becomes a constitutive part of an ideology which prescribes what – at the same time – it forbids. As Žižek put it: “ideology is not simply an operation of closure, drawing the line between what is included and what is excluded/prohibited, but the ongoing regulation of non-closure. [...] [A]n ideology always admits the failure of closure, and then goes on to regulate the permeability of the exchange with its outside. Today, however, in our ‘postmodern’ world, this dialectic of the Law and its inherent transgression is given an additional twist: transgression is more and more directly enjoined by the Law itself.”<sup>42</sup>

In fact, what *Valerian* presents is not the nakedness of the body as a transgression. We should say the show rather confirms the prohibition related to the naked body and imposes a transgression. More precisely: the limit conjured up by breaking the law creates a prohibition,

and the show displays this prohibition as a constitutive part of itself. The audience is suggested to think: “I *know* that what I am watching is against the law.” The aesthetic experience always entails a cognitive aspect. Aristotle wrote that we need to know that the work of art is an imitation of reality. Arthur Danto reminds that “the knowledge that it is not real”<sup>43</sup> is presupposed by the aesthetic pleasure. In other terms, I must know I am experiencing a work of art. This cognitive aspect is a constitutive content of our aesthetic experience. In the same way, the fact that I know that the experience of the movie entails a transgression (and the related prohibition) is the condition of its enjoyment.

In this experience, your transgression is tolerated within the limits of your prescribed possibilities, anything beyond that is ruled out. Actually, we do not meet anything different from the trends of society. In the experience of the movie, we feel reassured in our basic attitudes and beliefs. As Horkheimer and Adorno argued: “[The] film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination.”<sup>44</sup> The movie does not simply offer models or lifestyles consistent with the social system but it also presents these models and life-styles as preformed and pre-arranged transgressions of the given rules. These behaviours are presented as forms of tolerated transgression. This tolerance makes a repressive society present itself as very human, tolerant, and free. “In truth, this tolerance is a repressive tolerance. Society prescribes a prohibition and, at the same time, a transgression, and by means of the culture industry it presents a cultural background in which prohibition and transgression seem to be natural and self-evident.”<sup>45</sup> In the mainstream movies the body of women, like the body of super-heroes, are simplified. They mostly show two codified meanings, the one of prohibition and the other concerning the breaking of the given prohibition, two faces of the same coin. Any other possible meaning of the body, any other use, seems to be impossible, outdated or, at least, not necessary. So simplified, movie characters represent stereotypes with which normal people can identify and find in them the meaning of their own existence, but a complete identification is not offered. “The female starlet is supposed to symbolize the secretary, though in a way which makes her seem predestined, unlike the real secretary, to wear the flowing evening gown. Thus, she apprises the female spectator not only of the possibility that she, too, might appear on the screen but still more insistently of the distance between them. Only one can draw the winning lot, only one is prominent, and even though all have mathematically the same chance, it is so minimal for each individual that it is best to write it off at once and rejoice in the good fortune of someone else, who might just as well be oneself but never is. Where the culture industry still invites naïve identification, it immediately denies it.”<sup>46</sup>

Identification with the main characters of *Birdcage Inn*, *Air Doll* or *Agent Aika* seems not to be required as a constitutive part of the aesthetic fruition of the show. It is difficult to identify

“with joyless or pained female characters who are shown engaging in sex acts that are presented in static, decidedly deglamorized scenes” and playing in films “which are devoid of pleasure-oriented sex scenes.”<sup>47</sup> Conversely, the vicarious satisfaction given by the identification with the character is fundamental in the case of the Western mainstream movies we are considering. The audience experiences contradictory feelings. Overcoming the distance between character and spectator is always given as possible by the opportunity (offered, but not to be necessarily practiced) of transgression. The audience can always enjoy the success of the character without any trouble. At the same time, the audience is reassured by a comfortable distance. Watching the movie, the audience is instructed on the fact that a transgression is happening. The law sounds so: “there is a limit you cannot trespass” and, at the same time, “trespassing this limit is your task, without forgetting that it is a limit and that your action is forbidden.” The character, with which a complete identification is always suggested but also always denied, does it for you and her success grants the vicarious satisfaction. Žižek pointed out the mechanism of inherent transgression of the law: “far from undermining the rule of the Law, its ‘transgression’ in fact serves as its ultimate support. So it is not only that transgression relies on, presupposes, the Law it transgresses; rather, the reverse case is much more pertinent: Law itself relies on its inherent transgression, so that when we suspend this transgression, the Law itself disintegrates.”<sup>48</sup>

In this way, in the fruition of the movie, the audience can experience the satisfaction through an interposed person. This vicarious satisfaction is granted by the character, and the social system proves to be more stable and complete: it grants not only limits and rules, but transgressions too, both combined in the same package. “[...] It is transgression which is the fundamental “moral” injunction of contemporary society. The true reversal should thus occur *within* this speculative identity of opposites, of morality and its transgression: all one has to do is to shift the encompassing unity of these two terms from morality to transgression. And, since this encompassing unity has to appear as its opposite, we thus have to accomplish a shift from a society in which the Law rules—in the guise of a permanent transgression—to a society in which transgression rules—in the guise of a new Law.”<sup>49</sup> Now we can see that there is no identification, no vicarious satisfaction possible in the naked body of a prostitute or of a sex doll, and above all we see there is no real, “permanent transgression” in them, whereas the half-naked body revealed by a girl driving a spaceship in a bikini prescribes an affordable transgression which is in the audience’s reach. In this way the actress occupies a role similar to the one of a pin-up girl during World War II: she can delight an entire army, and “it is accepted and approved, but prostitution behind the lines is not permitted.”<sup>50</sup>

Interestingly enough, in *Valerian* Laureline is a very resolute and energetic girl. The image of the woman conveyed by Laureline is that of an angry, unsatisfied, and resented girl. She

entices desire; she desires something she cannot have, but she does not give any clue to the possible object or way of satisfaction. In other terms: she wants something, but she does not know what she wants. This is the average condition of all teenagers and of most adults in the consumer society and the existential condition presented in *Valerian* can easily be applied to the Western contemporary culture. Once the desire is created, the object of this desire can be proposed a second time. Be unsatisfied, be unhappy, and desire something, what? It does not matter. But desire something. Society will give you enough reasons to be unhappy and suggest something which could quench your thirst. Nothing, of course, is supposed to be able to satisfy the desire. The logic, implicit in this principle, is clear. A desire with no clue on how to satisfy it can be easily redirected on commodities, behaviors and life-styles which – apparently – can quench the thirst but which – actually – create only disappointment and new desire. Schopenhauer's pendulum is stuck on desire when the magic of the movie works.

In *Valerian* Laureline's body, with its emancipatory power, hints to something and, at the same time, it denies what it suggests. The game of flirting, the "coquetterie," becomes a metaphysical principle which explains the logic (and the pain, in Schopenhauer's terms) of existence. In this way sexual attraction is used as a mechanism of power but sex in itself is disempowered. The audience supposes that Laureline's behavior is relatable to sex, but actually the audience suffers the effect of an instrumental use of human possibilities. Sex is just a device to manifest how you, as a viewer, are unhappy and without the possibility of satisfaction, except the vicarious satisfaction offered by the identification with the character or the partial, temporary satisfaction provided by other activities like social competition or buying commodities. Laureline presents a hyper-sexualized character acting in a de-sexualized world, since the representation has no real, sexual meaning. On the one side *Valerian* suggests that there are no further objects to be shown, that there is nothing beyond, and that the imposed transgression can (and must) go only just to that point and not further. A transgression of a given code which, actually, does not transgress anything but which, on the contrary, enforces the code and rebuts an even more severe and prude law. As we have already noted, the law relies on its transgression, and without it "the Law itself disintegrates." Transgressing is not by chance but is the norm. This transgression, in other words, is a part of the rules and enforces the rules. On the other side *Agent Aika* presents the obscene and, along with it, the idea of a beyond as a possible object of desire which is not completely displayed by the representation of the character.

In *Valerian*, as well as in other mainstream movies, transgressing the prohibition is offered as a form of individual freedom and self-affirmation, emancipation, autonomy and individual power. Also, consequently, implicitly, the viewer must believe that transgression exists and that it is within her or his reach in the prescribed form, even if this transgressive behaviour

entails the acceptance of dissatisfaction as the condition of the individual power. Otherwise, a transgression could no longer be needed to accord the satisfaction of a desire. If you have something, and you are satisfied with it, you do not desire anything else. Transgression is nothing but the changeable content given to desire, in order to make it palpable. Žižek has investigated this mechanism which connects prohibition and transgression referring to the obscene as the inherent supplement of power. As he has put it, “the power edifice itself is split from within: in order to reproduce itself and contain its Other, it has to rely on an inherent excess which grounds it. [...] To put it in the Hegelian terms of speculative identity, Power is always-already its own transgression.”<sup>51</sup> The way the obscene is presented is crucial. The obscene allows the (regulated) transgression and in this way the mechanism of social order. It is neither emancipation and opportunity of individual freedom, nor a simple delusory mechanism which denies freedom. “Power thus relies on an obscene supplement - that is to say, the obscene ‘nightly’ law (superego) necessarily accompanies, as its shadowy double, the ‘public’ Law. As for the status of this obscene supplement, one should avoid both traps and neither glorify it as subversive nor dismiss it as a false transgression which stabilizes the power edifice (like the ritualized carnivals which temporarily suspend power relations), but insist on its *undecidable* character.”<sup>52</sup>

In this article we have remarked the deep connection between sex-appeal, desire and individual power. In the Western culture industry the feminine body is a source of power (think of the decadent cliché of the *femme fatale* interpreted by Louise Brooks as Lulu in *Pandora’s Box*<sup>53</sup>), but this power has to be inevitably understood as individual power, granted by the individual sex-appeal. In other terms, power can only be conceived as an individual asset provided by the desired/prohibited body. Conversely, Asian movies prove that another perspective is possible and that power, even if granted by the body, relies on more complex and tricky bases.

In our investigation we can appreciate the usefulness of an intercultural, aesthetic approach. Japanese culture prescribes a severe ethos concerning work, duties and family but also endorses a more relaxed attitude towards beauty and sex.<sup>54</sup> Beauty and “the cult of cuteness” are socially recommended ways of pleasing and interacting, signs of politeness and means of achieving social harmony;<sup>55</sup> we can see these features mirrored by the stylized physical appearance of manga and anime’s characters. Even traditional and contemporary Japanese art adopt a more playful and recreational use of sex than its Western counterparts. In Japanese art, sex can mean dissent or conformity,<sup>56</sup> but no high expectations of social or individual emancipation are associated to the sexual power of the body. This situation allows a more stylized and, at the same time, more realistic representation of the body and of its social context. Naomi Tani, a famous Japanese sexy-movie actress, writes that “the woman’s naked body must not only be seen as a sensual object, but must also be able to express emotion” and convey cultural, traditional values

of “beauty, strong will or pride.”<sup>57</sup> An intercultural approach may risk misinterpretations but it always offers unexpected and fruitful perspectives on our culture. For example, anime reveal how “women’s bodies [...] are clearly powerful, more powerful than those of the male, in fact. These anime depict the female body as being in touch with intense, even magical, forces capable of overwhelming male-dominated reality.”<sup>58</sup> In this perspective the specific experience of desire triggered by the body seems to be more complex and encompassing, and the feminine body itself is far more than an object of sexual desire. “The body is seen as powerful, mysterious and frightening, controllable only by demons, and even then only temporarily.”<sup>59</sup> As we have stated at the beginning, the body (with its potentialities) is undecidable, a medium of forces which reach beyond the individual. This undecidable character of the body affects that, as we have written, it can be an object of desire but also object of trade, power, love, wonder, amazement, empathy, embarrassment, or fear. Maybe the tendency to qualify as pornography, aesthetic representations which do not conform to the logic of culture industry finds an explication. “Pornography brings the body to the fore, not only in terms of sexuality but also in relation to aesthetics, gender, and social identity.”<sup>60</sup> In other terms, the body outside the conventional system of representation appears as disturbing. Its experience outside the conventional and predictable form offered by the Western popular culture seems uncanny and threatening. The American domination of mass culture is often taken for granted and this article draws attention to the fact that even disturbing and uncanny possibilities of representing the body stand out as an enriching opportunity of cultural difference (in the most desirable perspective) or as resources of cultural resistance (in the less desirable one). In the aesthetic experience we question the social system and find in the body the example of an unexplained and unexploited beyond.

Our comparison of different attitudes in representing naked bodies has questioned the idea of prohibition and transgression. Examining the emancipatory value of transgression means to be aware that social competition is not mostly individual; it means to question the assumption that individualism is the most important and meaningful achievement in life; it means to consider that individual freedom is not about whimsical behavior; it also means that a generalized dissatisfaction is not necessarily to be considered trendy, as it seems to be in the Western, post-modern world, where “transgression is the law.”<sup>61</sup> Transgression in itself has neither any emancipatory character nor any delusory function corroborating the institutional power. The aesthetic enjoyment of the movie is necessarily based on an oversimplified representation of reality which, in many cases, offers a misleading cognitive content. Such a representation, for example, conceals the fact that the display of naked bodies can have an aesthetic claim and, at the same time, is a representation of a social order and of a system of power. The

cinematic representation of the body can hint what is beyond the system as well as what is stuck in the system and limited by it. The problem is the substantial nullification of transgression and, in this way, the offer of a more limited array of options in the representation of human beings and a limited aesthetic experience, which rules out the inherent duplicity of all transgressive images. This aesthetic experience can present a deprived reality, a society without any beyond, which can be offered in prepared packages in which transgression has been “negated by the co-option of the term as a marketing tool, and the financial sanction — indeed, incentive — to pursue the extreme and taboo [...]. If the transgressive act, image, or concept originates not from an organically developed testing of the edges, but from a calculated use of the *idea* of transgression to create allure or hype, the project has already failed to transgress before it has begun.”<sup>62</sup> It is exactly in the testing of the edges, in the experience of the limits, in the call of the beyond that the aesthetic enjoyment allows the experience of the undefined, undecidable human nature.

<sup>1</sup> Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, transl. Edmund Jephcott [Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002] p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> Ki Duk-Kim [South Korea, 1998]

<sup>3</sup> Hye Seung Chung, *Kim Ki-duk* [Urbana/Chicago/Springfield, University of Illinois Press 2012] pp. 71-72.

<sup>4</sup> Umberto Eco, *Apocalittici e integrati* (Apocalyptic and Integrated) [Milano, Bompiani 1964] p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> Kore-Eda Irokazu [Japan, 2009]

<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies. Toward a Corporeal Feminism* [Bloomington/Indianapolis, Indiana University Press 1994] p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Julia Kristeva, “The Subject in Process” in Patrick French, Roland-François Lack (editors), *The Tel Quel Reader* [London/New York Routledge 1998] p. 174.

<sup>8</sup> Hye Seung Chung, *Kim Ki-duk*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>9</sup> Today the streaming offers a larger choice which affects the aesthetic perception of the body: there is a more varied offer of possibilities and nudity is openly displayed in TV series like *Orange is the New Black* and in others. In these cases nudity is offered (even without any cogent justification) to meet the expectations of a specific audience, a kind of fan service like the one provided by the Japanese market of anime, whereas in the mainstream movies nudity is banned to avoid restrictions and gather the largest audience.

<sup>10</sup> Luc Besson [France 1997]

<sup>11</sup> Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* [Durham/London, Duke University Press 2008] p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Rob Marshall [USA/Canada 2002]

<sup>13</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* [London, Routledge 1995] p. 111.

<sup>14</sup> Georg Simmel, *On Women, Sexuality and Love* [New Haven, Yale University Press 1984].

<sup>15</sup> Paolo Euron, *Codice d'amore non per principianti. Le differenze di comportamento amoroso dell'uomo e della donna* (*Love Code Not For Beginners. Differences of Love Behaviour of Man and Woman*) [Turin, Lighea 2013], p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments*, transl. Richard Howard [Hill and Wand, New York 1978], p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth. How Images of Beauty are used against Women* [New York, Harper Collins 2002] p. 150.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>22</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* [London – New York, Verso 1997, 2008<sup>2</sup>] p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> Katsuhiko Nishijima [Japan 1997]

<sup>24</sup> See Chris Beveridge, “Agent Aika Vol. #1: Naked Missions” (review) in Mania, [http://www.mania.com/agent-aika-vol-1-naked-missions\\_article\\_73306.html](http://www.mania.com/agent-aika-vol-1-naked-missions_article_73306.html) (9 March 2020)

<sup>25</sup> Stig Høgset, “Agent Aika,” (review) in T.H.E.M. Anime Reviews, <http://www.themanime.org/viewreview.php?id=679> (9 March 2020)

<sup>26</sup> Jason Huff, “Agent Aika,” (review) in The Anime Review, <http://www.theanimereview.com/reviews/agentaika.html> (9 March 2020)

<sup>27</sup> Luc Besson [France/Germany 2017]

<sup>28</sup> Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, P. 111

- <sup>29</sup> Susan Pointon, "Transcultural Orgasm as Apocalypse: Urotsuki doji: The Legend of the Overfiend," in «Wide Angle» 19, no. 3 (1997), p. 45; quoted in Susan Napier, *Anime. From Akira to Howl's Moving Castle. Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2005] p. 9.
- <sup>30</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions* [London, Vintage 2000] p. 24.
- <sup>31</sup> Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* [London, Routledge 1998] p. 19.
- <sup>32</sup> Parodies, critiques, imitation, and cosplay are common forms of fictionalization among extreme manga and anime fans (*otaku*). These activities are a way to "possess" the fictional object and, in doing so, to separate it from life, avoiding identification and fetishism. The Japanese therapist Saitō Tamaki explains this obsessive practice of fictionalization in psychoanalytical terms: "Otaku have escaped sexual perversion through this practice of fictionalizing, since the desire to fictionalize a thing is ultimately the desire to own it, and stops there.[...] They realize that the object of their desire is nothing more than a fiction." Saitō Tamaki, "Otaku Sexuality" in Christopher Bolton, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., and Takayuki Tatsumi (editors), *Robot, Ghosts and Wired Dreams. Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime* [Minneapolis, University of Minnesota 2007] p. 236.
- <sup>33</sup> Susan Napier, *Anime*, p. 7.
- <sup>34</sup> Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara Weisser, "Fogging, Editing and Censorship" in Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara Weisser (editors), *Japanese Film Encyclopedia: The Sex Films* [Miami, Vital Books 1998] p. 21.
- <sup>35</sup> Susan Napier, *Anime*, p. 9.
- <sup>36</sup> Cfr. Brian Ruh, "The Robots from Takkun's Head: Cyborg Adolescence in *FLCL*" in Steven T. Brown (editor), *Cinema Anime. Critical Engagements with Japanese Animation* [New York, Palgrave Macmillan 2006] p. 154.
- <sup>37</sup> Susan Napier, *Anime*, p. 297.
- <sup>38</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* [Oxford, Blackwell 1990] p. 382.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.
- <sup>40</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [New York and London, Routledge 1999] p. xiv.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
- <sup>42</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* [London/New York, Verso 2008] p. 29.
- <sup>43</sup> Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. A Philosophy of Art* [Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press 1981], p. 14.
- <sup>44</sup> Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 100.
- <sup>45</sup> Paolo Euron, *Aesthetics, Theory and Interpretation of the Literary Work* [Leiden-Boston, Brill 2019], p. 181.
- <sup>46</sup> Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 116.
- <sup>47</sup> Hye Seung Chung, *Kim Ki-duk*, p. 75.
- <sup>48</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 99.
- <sup>49</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, p. 44.
- <sup>50</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 126.
- <sup>51</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 35.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>53</sup> Georg Wilhelm Pabst, *Die Büchse der Pandora* [Germany 1928]
- <sup>54</sup> Nicholas Bornoff, "Sex and Consumerism: the Japanese State of the Arts," in Fran Lloyd (editor) *Consuming Bodies Sex and Contemporary Japanese Art* [London, Reaktion Books 2002] p. 41.
- <sup>55</sup> Dani Cavallaro, *Japanese Aesthetics and Anime. The Influence of Tradition* [Jefferson/London, McFarland 2013] p. 141.
- <sup>56</sup> Nicholas Bornoff, "Sex and Consumerism" p. 44.
- <sup>57</sup> Naomi Tani, "Introduction" in Thomas Weisser and Yuko Mihara Weisser (editors), *Japanese Film Encyclopedia*, p. 11.
- <sup>58</sup> Susan Napier, *Anime*, p. 71.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- <sup>61</sup> Lawrence de Sutter, "Afterword to Transgression" in Idem (editor), *Žižek and the Law* [London, Routledge 2015] p. 195.
- <sup>62</sup> Matt Foley, Neil McRobert and Aspasia Stephanou, "Introduction: the Limits of Transgression and the Subject", in Idem (editor), *Transgression and Its Limits* [Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2012] p. xii.