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# EDITORIAL

Tereza Kuldova

*Extreme Masculinities 1* is a special issue that emerged out of the international conference *Extreme Masculinities*, which I have organized on behalf of the *Extreme Anthropology Research Network* ([www.extreme-anthropology.com](http://www.extreme-anthropology.com)) at the University of Vienna between 28th September and 1st October 2017. This is the first of two special issues of JEA devoted to the topic.

In this issue, you will find a range of articles on exciting and thought-provoking topics. Henrik H. Mikkelsen explores the dynamics of headhunting among the Bugkalot in the Philippines, showing how empathy can paradoxically allow violence to achieve its transformative power. Graham Roberts draws us into the Russian fashion world and the politics of style. Lisa Nike Bühring thinks through aging of men under neoliberalism and *The Expendables*. Marco Pedroni explores the lives of gamblers in Italy through the notion of excess. Jukka Jouhki offers us an analysis of online poker ads and the hyperreal. Adina R. Sverdlin draws us into the impoverished neighborhoods in Western Mexico City, and traces the life trajectories of the members of *bandas*, under the city's neoliberal transformations over the last decades. Fabian Hartwell explores the convergence of masculinity, terrorism, and the Indian state, through the case of the Kashmiri separatist Burhan Wani. Udith Dematagoda offers us an insightful review essay of the recent book on the alt-right, *Kill All Normies* by Angela Nagel. I contribute a book review of *The Rise of the Right* by Steve Hall, Simon Winlow, and James Treadwell, a brilliant book analyzing the English Defence League within the political and socio-economic context of the transformation of the last decades. Finally, Henry Moncrieff closes this issue with a photo essay on cockfighting in Venezuela. We hope you enjoy reading this issue!

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## Article

# Facehunting

## Empathy, Masculinity and Violence Among the Bugkalot

Henrik Hvenegaard Mikkelsen

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**Abstract** This article discusses how anthropological explorations of empathy can be enriched through a focus on transgression. Empathy is commonly understood as a human capacity that allows a person to share the feelings of others through some form of mental engagement. Thereby, it is believed, empathy establishes compassionate relationships between people and prevents violence from breaking out. In this article, I suggest the opposite may be the case: in fact, empathy may be the very foundation for acts of radical violence and killings. The ethnographic basis of my inquiry is research conducted among the Bugkalot (Ilongot) of northern Philippines on the practice of headhunting. I propose that empathy is what allows violence to achieve its transformative capacity. Furthermore, I seek to show how understanding headhunting as ‘murder’ may disclose how this particular act is tied to masculine ideals of autonomy. Headhunting, I argue, targets not the head but the ‘face,’ that is, it strikes at the very fulcrum of the ethical relation and the foundation of empathy.

**Keywords** Bugkalot, Ilongot, headhunting, empathy, transgression, violence

*This infinity, stronger than murder,  
already resists me in her face, is her face,  
is the primordial expression, is the first word:  
‘you shall not commit murder.’  
Levinas, *Totality and Infinity**

‘It is not easy! It is a hard task!’ ... In 2010, I was having a discussion with Tó’paw, a 60-year-old Bugkalot man, about the practice ritual headhunting, *ngayó*, which involved cutting off the head of the victim. He was irritated that this form of killing, which was largely abandoned as a common practice in the Sierra Madre Mountains of northern Philippines in the 1970s, was today talked about among the youth as if it was merely some type a ‘game.’ It seemed vital to him that I understood that *ngayó* had deep and at times devastating effects on the *dima mamotog*— ‘the ones who cut.’ ‘I once had the experience that I could not hold on to my bolo,’ he continued. ‘I had to hold it with both of my hands. This was not just because of fear. To kill a human this way is hard. It’s a big thing for the young man who succeeds in this endeavour. It is supposed to be demanding.’

In this article, I examine a form of masculinity that manifests itself through transgression. In this sense, not only is it ‘demanding’ to kill another person—it is, within the context of headhunting, *supposed* to be demanding. *Ngayó* refers to the type of



headhunting that made the Bugkalot<sup>1</sup> rise to scholarly fame through the works of Michelle Rosaldo (1980, 1983, 1984) and Renato Rosaldo (1980, 2004). It is a collective event that circles around the intentional beheading of a human person. And the treatment of the victim's body during *ngayó* seems surprisingly brutal: after the victim had been ambushed and shot, his or her head was cut off at the neck, preferably in one determined strike with the headhunting knife, the *tek-yaden*, and was subsequently tossed to the ground with all the force that the killer could muster in a final deed known as *balabag*. This treatment of the head (or rather, the face) was part of a transformative act that ultimately aimed to render the man autonomous as he was no longer dominated by chaotic emotions of shame, and anger.

This situation requires us to reconsider key questions concerning the role of empathy in relation to violence, especially in the way empathy tends to be considered as being antithetical to violence. Empathy, in this conventional view, is based on the pre-reflexive experience of the affective and experiential world of others as analogous to our own. This phenomenological engagement in the world is implicit in our recognition of others as members of our moral community. Empathy, then, involves a moral commitment to others, a certain proximity, which *commands us not to kill*. This idea is present in Zygmund Bauman's book, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, in which he reveals a Levinasian inspiration in his thinking. He argues that our sense of responsibility for other people is dependent upon proximity. Thus, morality 'looms large and thick close to the eye. With the growth of distance, responsibility for the other shrivels, moral dimensions of the object blur, till both reach the vanishing point and disappear from view' (Bauman 1989, 192). Writing about the famous experiment conducted by the psychologist Stanley Milgram at Yale University, Bauman argues that 'it is difficult to harm a person we touch. It is somewhat easier to afflict pain upon a person we only see at a distance' (Bauman 1989, 155). Rather than holding that Bauman is incorrect, I will argue that a form of violence exists that is nourished by exertion. This type of violence is transgressive through and through and would and in fact does only exist due to being difficult to carry out.

This article contributes to current attempts to expand the category of empathy and to explore the ways in which empathy may be culturally patterned (Throop 2010, 771). The task would be, as Nils Bubandt and Rane Willerslev recently phrased it, to move beyond 'the implicit idea that empathy is always a moral virtue and instead embrace a broader approach that also encompass its darker, but no less social side' (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015, 6). They argue that empathetic engagement with others may, in certain situations, not have intersubjective compassion and mutual understanding as its goal, and likewise the end-result may not always be a stronger social cohesion. In fact, the opposite may be the case. Empathy can be used for deceptive and ultimately violent purposes: the capacity for imagining the vantage point and emotional life of another person may also provide a way to manipulate, abuse, and dehumanize that person.

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons that go beyond the scope of this article, the Bugkalot gradually changed their name during the 1970s. They began to be known as the E'gongot, meaning 'from the forest/mountain,' by the lowlanders and subsequently became widely known as the Ilongot within the anthropological literature through the ethnographic works of Renato Rosaldo (e.g., 1980, 2004) and Michelle Rosaldo (e.g., 1980, 1983). In accordance with the wishes of my informants, I will refer to them by the term Bugkalot.

Following this attempt to uncover the ‘dark side of empathy’ this article seeks to show that rather than being antithetical to violence, empathy may, in some situations, be intrinsically linked to violence—not merely as that which makes violent acts possible, as Bubandt and Willerslev suggest, but as that which spurs and gives meaning to violence. This is the argument I pursue. However, I will argue that there may be a link between empathy and violence even when an empathetic relationship based on compassion persists between assailant and victim. Thereby empathy becomes the violent agent itself rather than a means to a violent outcome.

### **The Dark Side of Empathy**

Across a wide range of scholarly fields, empathy is seen as centrally important in relation to our capacity to respond to others ethically (Copland and Goldie 2014). While such ideas have a long history, they have found their contemporary champions in influential scholars such as the professor of developmental psychopathology, Simon Baron-Cohen. Believing that empathy is an ability as old as homo sapiens itself, he considers it ‘the “glue” of the social world, drawing us to help others and stopping us from hurting others’ (Baron-Cohen and Wheelwright 2004, 163). According to Baron-Cohen (2004) we respond to cruelty in three ways: (1) we may ‘experience’ the suffering, (2) we may respond in ways that are considered culturally appropriate without experiencing the suffering, or (3) we may take pleasure in the suffering. Baron-Cohen argues that the first two should be considered empathetic responses while he explicitly categorizes the third response as unrelated to the empathetic faculties of humans (see also Young 2012, 415). As reflected by the title of his most recent book, *The Science of Evil* (2011), Baron-Cohen’s work demonstrates the shifting of the study of ‘evil’ from the fields of philosophy and theology into the field of neuroscience. Evil becomes a naturalistic quality or a disposition, which involves a lack of empathy, while empathy is regarded as the foundation for human moral behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

Empathy, understood as a particular process in which one person imagines the particular perspective of another person, is said to presuppose a conception of the other as a distinct individual. In other words, by generating a ‘fundamentally individualizing view of another’ (Halpern and Weinstein 2004, 567) empathy is understood to counteract objectifying and generalizing practices, which might in turn legitimate violence. This fundamental empathic conception of the other as a human like myself, it is often argued, has as its critical consequence that ethnic cleansing and other mass scale violence require processes of dehumanization in order to render such violence feasible; the victims must first be classified as less-than-human (Hinton 2002).

Yet, within the last decade, anthropologists in particular have challenged such longstanding assumptions concerning empathy. They have commented on what they perceive to be a fundamental misapprehension in the way philosophers, social scientists, and, more recently, neuroscientists, have linked empathy to fundamental altruistic, social drives among humans. Nils Bubandt (2009) argues that empathy may just as well involve imagining the other as fundamentally inhuman thus legitimizing violence against

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<sup>2</sup> The conclusion on this issue within the neurosciences, however, is not unanimous. For instance, a recent study shows that empathy for others can motivate violence on their behalf. For instance, the father who beats the man who has assaulted his child (Buffone and Poulin 2014).

political opponents. The aspiration of this form of ‘hostile empathy’ (ibid., 566) is not to obtain an ‘understanding nor compassionate knowledge of the mind of the other. Instead it has the aim of laying ... the imagined hostile intentions of another in a political world where the mind of the other is not open to scrutiny’ (ibid.). As Bubandt explains, hostile empathy permits ‘an imaginary leap into the mind and emotions of the other that serves to reveal his inhumanity’ (ibid., 567). Likewise, in a recent article with Rane Willerslev, Nils Bubandt (2015) provides the argument that the link between empathy and deception has been given scant attention in the burgeoning literature on empathy. What they call for is a move beyond the idea of empathy as an altogether altruistic capacity or as synonymous with ‘sympathy.’ They visit ethnographic cases where people identify with the bodily states and experiences of significant others and yet, ultimately, apply their empathetic understanding to hurt, cheat, and even kill the other. Thus, while compassion, mutual understanding, care, and social cohesion are the goals that have conventionally been regarded as the *sine qua non* of empathy, Willerslev and Bubandt deliver the simple, yet overlooked, argument that the empathetic faculty may also be used for deceptive, dehumanizing, and violent purposes.

While this argument goes a long way towards widening our understanding of empathy it recapitulates the idea that empathy is in fact antithetical to violence—only in this approach empathy is applied to dehumanize the victim before the violence can be legitimized and carried out. They thereby reinforce the assumption found in much writing, both popular and academic, that a process of dehumanization precedes violence. For instance, it has been observed that within military training, enemies are persistently referred to as ‘rats,’ ‘dogs,’ and other terms by which they are portrayed as ‘inferior forms of life’ (Grossman 1995, 161) and set apart from the moral community (Blok 2000, 29). This, one could argue, creates a suspension of ethical responsibility.

This approach, which seeks to grasp and understand violence through the moral framework of dehumanization, still leaves a critical set of questions unresolved—in particular, in relation to the way that violence may gain a particular impact on the violator through the act of *willfully rupturing the empathetic relation*. Such forms of violence do not involve a suspension of empathy, but maintain the empathetic bond *in order to* rupture it. This is the case with *ngayó*.

### **The Bugkalot: Violence and Male Personhood**

The Bugkalot communities are nestled in the Caraballo and Sierra Mountain Range of northern Luzon. Although the approximately 46 villages are set apart by the expanse of these two mountain ranges, linguistic similarities are found throughout the area. Until recently, various areas of the mountains were associated with different clans, and warfare could persist for decades. However, with the escalation of agriculture and establishing of roads, as the two major, interlinked agents of change in the area, the contact between the clans has increased to the extent that the clan-label has today become almost insignificant in daily life. The institutions around which everyday life revolves are the household and conjugal family, and the networks of kinship and affinity that link these units together in exchanges of food, wealth, and labour.

The small village where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork had achieved *barangay* status in 1982. This meant that it had become recognized by the state as an administrative division or a district within the Philippines. With the institution of the *barangay*, the position of *punong barangay*—the official head of the district—was also introduced. This position is up for election every three years. Whereas anthropologists have often noted that the state and its administrative techniques are widely regarded as alien impositions among rural communities around the world, this was not the case within a Bugkalot context in any straightforward way. They openly invited the political forms of the state into village life. But when viewed through local ideas of authority, such forms were little more than performances. The men I came to know who held or had previously held the position of *punong barangay* admitted that this position had entailed only a minimum of real influence. Even after the introduction of the *barangay* structure, the *de facto* largest political unit was the individual household, referred to as *ten tengeng*, one trunk. The *punong barangay* explained that while no hostility was directed against them, any attempt to make any changes in the village was simply ignored.

However, the egalitarianism among the Bugkalot manifests itself not only as disregarding of political authority. Daily interaction was, in fact, saturated by egalitarian decorum. For instance, bragging (*manga'ngada'ngadang*) was considered an extreme breach of politeness that caused 'bad atmosphere' (*ngégetáget*) and 'bad feelings' (*en-oget ma nem-nem*). Such effects are considered adverse since they brought about feelings of jealousy among peers (*apet*).

While the Bugkalot identify themselves patrilineally by descent through the male line, they have traditionally practiced a matrilineal form of post-marital residence: the man was expected to move in with his in-laws until he had paid the bridewealth (*lango*). This often entailed that the man moved to a community where he had a limited social network. My younger informants wanted to avoid the traditional conjugal procedures that they saw as outmoded and frustrating. For instance, prior to the wedding it was expected that the future husband would work for the girl's family, a practice known as *tognod*, which could sometimes last for several years. This period was described to me as a time of profound loneliness and insecurity. Often, the young man was requested to carry out arduous tasks in the fields, to bring back hunting rifles, generators, and various expensive tools from the lowlands that he had no chance of procuring. When failing to do so he became the target of agonizing insults from his peers.

Due to the emotional torment of the young men, they were often spoken of as vulnerable, unpredictable, and prone to emotional outbursts. This condition was referred to as *ligét*—a term that refers to a form of rage that may erupt in unforeseeable ways. But it was not only young men who could be marked by *ligét*. When faced with bereavement, such as the loss of a close relative, more mature men could also be overcome by *ligét*. As the *ligét* of men could erupt in ways that could attract legal action, it involved an inherent threat to the tranquility in the villages. I was often told that some men would try to overcome *ligét* through assertive action. Such action was referred to as *pámotok*, 'cutting.'

## **Ngayó**

Originating within the context of headhunting, *pámotok* refers to the cut—the severing of the head from the body—while the overall framework of the customary practice—the departure, the long journey through the forest and the kill—is known as the *ngayó*. Yet, in most accounts the former headhunters do not refer to the head as such. Rather than targeting the head, *ngayó* targets the ‘face’ (*ga-nop*). Among the Bugkalot, as elsewhere, the face is related to the social aspects of one’s personhood as the locus of empathy, ethical relations, and the signalling of emotional states. Thus, the cut that was carried out during *ngayó* entailed setting oneself apart from the ordinary forms of social interaction, which were marked by humble restraint (Author 2013). In other words, the purpose of *ngayó* was not first and foremost a matter of prestige or creating a difference in status between *momotok* (‘cutters’) and non-*momotok*. In fact, it was not possible to detect who had been engaged in *ngayó* from the way they were treated in general or from the amount of respect they received. This observation is supported by the Philippinist and historian William Henry Scott (1979). He wrote that headhunting among the Bugkalot did not have any significant influence on the social status of the killer, who was neither awarded with special privileges, nor subsequently classified as belonging to a warrior elite. To understand the Bugkalot impetus towards engaging in headhunting we must look beyond matters of social prestige.

More than half of my elderly, male informants claimed to have participated actively in these killings and almost all people who had been born into a Bugkalot community before the 1970s had first-person accounts of *ngayó*—as killer, as eyewitness, or as survivor. Though headhunting was in decline alongside the emerging evangelization in the 1960s, it continued, though on a much lesser scale, even after the socio-economic incorporation of the Bugkalot people into the economy of the Philippine state (Yang 2011). A friend and primary informant of mine, Tó’paw, whose accounts inform much of the following, carried out *ngayó* as late as 1993. And during my last visit in the field in January 2011, in the last stage of my fieldwork, two beheaded men were found in the mountain interior (see Mikkelsen forthcoming).

Attempting to explain what prompted their male informants to engage in ritual killing, the Rosaldos focused on the desire of Bugkalot men to be like those among their peers who had previously taken a head. Envy (*avet*) was thereby conceptualized as a social engine that continually created ‘sameness’ among peers (M. Rosaldo 1980, 140). Thus, a striking feature of headhunting was that it was carried out without at any point invoking any spirits, gods, or ancestors. Rather, the Rosaldos claimed, the Bugkalot referred to their individual *desire*, that is, a craving for accomplishing the same as their peers had, whereby they could cast off the feelings of despair and shame that caused anger and unrest. Michelle Rosaldo noticed that certain inherent aspects of male personhood were tied up with the beheading and she noticed that local conceptualizations of *ngayó* often revolved around ideas of emotional states: the heaviness of the heart (*g’nawa*) and anger (*ligét*) (see M. Rosaldo 1980, 1983). She argued that *ligét* increased when the egalitarian ideals of “sameness” are breached. *Ngayó*, she argues, is the instrument that transforms ‘the “shameful” weight of childhood into the ease and the respectful “shame” appropriate to adults’ (1983, 146). Several of the intriguing ideas presented by the Rosaldos need, however, to be critically addressed. For instance, as Peter Metcalf

pointed out, the act itself seems almost completely arbitrary since the Rosaldos do not explain which attributes inherent to the specific act of the ritual beheading have made it the violence of choice among the Bugkalot (Metcalf 1996, 274).

I suggest that the *ngayó* is in fact far from arbitrary. However, to grasp the significance of the specific act of the ‘cut’ requires us to move beyond the depiction of *ngayó* as a uniformly accepted, pristine, traditional practice, as it is depicted in the writings of the Rosaldos. In fact, in the following, we will see what might be gained from seeing *ngayó* as an act of transgression—or even an act of murder—rather than an unambiguously endorsed act. By employing such terms, I seek to decisively depict *ngayó* as a morally problematic act.

### **Pity and Terror**

Anthropologists rarely deal analytically with the moral implications of headhunting. By examining the anthropological literature on ritual killing and traditional headhunting (e.g., Ellen 2002; George 1996; Hoskins 1996) one is left with the impression that such practices have little impact on the killers—besides gaining various social privileges. Headhunting among the Bugkalot, *ngayó*, seems to turn this around: the kill did have a profound effect on the Bugkalot man, but the successful headhunting raid did not lift him above other men in social status. Rather, the common feature that connected the various cases of *ngayó* was that *ngayó*, in all cases, became the man’s response to outside forces.

What often surprised me during interviews was that while the stories of headhunting raids depicted a form of hyper-masculinity, the men who told me about their experiences frequently included details that directly went against the image of masculinity as the ability to maintain one’s composure and remain unaffected. The men would tell me about intimate details that would in other contexts be considered shameful. Vomiting from fear, crying in sheer pity. The accounts drew an image of expeditions that had involved dread, unease, and indecision. The men appeared to oscillate between states of profound terror—to the point of throwing up and fainting—and feelings of potency and ecstasy. The latter was especially related to the act of tossing the head to the ground with all the force that the cutters, *dima memomotog* (lit. ‘the ones who cut’) could muster. Following this act, the cutter would humiliate the victim verbally, hurling insults at the dead body. However, before this act, leading up to the actual kill, they described in detail, without having been requested to do so, how some men would sometimes ‘freeze’ or, at other times, throw up or even faint. However, the most common story had to do with men who went berserk—that is, rather than killing one person, they would, for instance, attack a home and kill a whole family in an act of uncontrollable violence. Michelle Rosaldo argues, however, that it is not unproblematic to approach the emotional life of Bugkalot headhunters through Western metaphors. The headhunter who suddenly finds himself unable to move in front of his victim would, by the ‘naïve psychologist,’ be described as ‘frozen with fear.’ Having been trained as an anthropologist within a particularistic American tradition, she forcefully advocates for the virtue of not applying Western concepts to a local, native context. Thus, Rosaldo comments that such a translation of emotional states between cultures is ethnographically invalid—and for this reason, ‘headhunting paralysis stands



unexplained' (M. Rosaldo 1983, 138). I believe, on the other hand, that understanding the violent effects of *ngayó* requires us to draw lines between widely different ethnographic contexts and traditions of thought.

For instance, *ngayó* finds a perhaps odd analogy in the writings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century British writer, Thomas De Quincey, who identified a transcendental, cathartic capacity in murder. In his 1827 essay 'On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts,' (2009) De Quincey saw the act of murder as a way of breaking with the conventional world, which made murder similar to a work of art. However, for murder to be considered art, it had to be as useless as art. This point is made in relation to John Williams's mass-murders of two families in Ratcliffe Highway, London, in December 1811. Above all, Williams's violent rampage, according to De Quincey, was purposeless and, apparently, inexplicable. For instance, the killer did not know his victims and did not steal anything from the households. As the murder could not be tied to motives of any sort, it brought about a perfect transgressive experience on behalf of the killer. Murder, De Quincey asserted, created an aesthetic suspension from the world through a break with the ethical. These aesthetic qualities of murder lie in its ability to 'cleanse the heart by the means of pity and terror' (ibid., 32). The murder that was resolutely carried out represented a cathartic experience in the killer, relieving him from repressed sentiments and establishing emotional equilibrium.

### **Empathizing with the Victim**

De Quincey's depiction of the act of murder seems to have more in common with *ngayó* than the varieties of headhunting described elsewhere in Southeast Asia. While the Rosaldos asserted in all their accounts that the dehumanization of the victim within the context of *ngayó* was a fundamental prerequisite for the act to take place in all their accounts—as well as in the accounts I have recorded—the dehumanization in fact took place *after* the act. For instance, Renato Rosaldo relates how the headhunters would mockingly refer to the dead victim with the same word that denotes the spot where one urinates (Rosaldo in Burket, Girard and Smith 1987, 245). However, across the accounts that were given by former headhunters it was clear that empathy with the victim shaped the experience. As my friend and informant, Tó'paw, explained to me:

‘I was around twenty years old at the time that I went with my father and the Elders. It was my younger brother who would now cut. We walked for many days and we needed only little rice, our feet were light. When we were very far away we found a trail. Then we came to a place by the river where people came to cross. We then waited until the next evening when a man and a woman stopped to rest. They had come to the mountains to fetch rattan and they were now on their way down [from the mountains] [...] We killed the man.’

Tó’paw made a motion with his hands as if he held a spear, indicating that the man had been speared to death. He carried on:

‘My younger brother was the one who cut him. [My brother] then tossed the head. That is our custom, as you know. And then the other, the woman, was for my uncle. We tied her with the rattan. But before killing the woman, my uncle cut off one of her legs. I remember how I felt pity, oh, how I pitied her. She screamed and so we killed her. My uncle cut and tossed the head.’

The subsequent part of Tó’paw’s story supported the observations made by the Rosaldos: as the unruly forces of *ligét* had been cast off, Tó’paw explained how he gained control over his emotions and his body. Now, being untouched by the people around him, he no longer knew anger and shame. But what the Rosaldos do not focus on is the pity which headhunters felt towards their victims—their empathetic involvement with the victims.

What De Quincey claimed (and, arguably, the reason his writings appear so controversial) was that murder, in his view, offered a ‘sublime effect’ when applied decisively. But this required that the human victim must not be denied its status as exactly that: a human. In this sense, the form of killing that he explores deviates from headhunting as it is known within the ethnographic literature. It has been a common assumption among anthropologists that headhunting and other forms of trophy taking of human body parts was related to either a problematic ‘humanness’ of neighbouring tribes (Mckinley 1976) or directly linked to dehumanizing practices (Harrison 2006, 2012). In her treatise on beheadings, the historian Frances Larson points out that the ‘physical detachment of a person’s head is often preceded by an assumed *social* detachment that separates the perpetrator from the victim’ (Larson 2014, 270). Larson writes that such social detachment may, for instance, be expressed through ideologies of racism through which the victims are represented as subhuman. For example, the Marind-anim of Southern New Guinea classified all non-Marind peoples as ‘semi-human objects of headhunt’ (Mckinley 1976, 111). The act of beheading the enemy involved removing their humanness. Humanness, Robert Mckinley suggested, posed a phenomenological threat within a cosmological system where outsiders were considered as non-human. Yet, the inescapable, empirical fact of the humanness of the outsider kept ‘putting humanness where it should not be.’ Thus, by making sure that a critical human component of the enemy—his head—belonged to one’s own society, the Marind maintained ontological order and made sure that things were no longer ‘out of place’ (cf. Douglas 1966). It had to do with bringing the inconvenient humanness of the theoretically nonhuman ‘back’ into society where it belongs. By doing so they rescued an

entire ideological system from being destroyed by its own inherent contradictions (Mckinley 1976, 116-117). Likewise, the Iban of Borneo used headhunting to incorporate their enemies into the village and, thus, into the world of kinship, fertility, and social reproduction. Following a war raid the severed head of slain enemies were treated in a friendly way after they were brought to the village; this involved the offering of food, wine, betel, and tobacco—and keeping the heads warm during cold nights (ibid.).

Simon Harrison (2006) has recently shown that not only have human skulls been used as trophies among some indigenous Amazonian, Southeast Asian, and Melanesian societies; he argues, that the trophy-taking practices among allied servicemen in the Pacific War closely resembled those one might find within traditional headhunting societies. The use of body parts, he argues, may occur in a wide variety of settings in which this type of imagery of predation is employed (Harrison 2006, 818). The use of trophies is thereby closely tied to the perception of the enemy as something ‘less-than-human.’ This was the case in the nineteenth century in southern and eastern Africa, where the sport of trophy hunting was a popular leisure pursuit among colonial officials. The British and German soldiers in these areas also beheaded Africans and kept their skulls as trophies (Harrison 2006, 819). Evidently such acts of violence should be understood from the perspective of the racist regime under which they were carried out. Similarly, the war in the Pacific was mapped strongly onto social divisions of race. Harrison argues that one of the conditions that is required to make human trophy-taking occur within any given society is that the human status of the enemy is denied to begin with; thus, the rendering of victims into ‘sub-humans’ is a necessary step before such violence can be executed.

The Bugkalot case does not support this notion. *Ngayó* was not directed at a specific category of people or non-people; besides living up to the criteria of not being part of the assailant’s immediate family, the victims did not belong to a certain category of humans. The victims were neither dehumanized nor classified as enemies. The Elders who escorted the raids attempted to find victims—men, women, and children alike—to whom there was no animosity. Furthermore, I was told that the victims could not belong to the ethnic group known as *negritos* who lived in the northeastern part of mountains and whom many Bugkalots regarded with disdain due to their black skin and nomadic living. Rather, what was important was that victims were chosen towards whom the headhunter could establish an empathetic relation.

### **Rethinking Empathy**

Day after day, listening to men talking about the headhunting raids of the past made these acts stand out as something unreal, as if listening to fictions. Because of the uncanny ordinariness evoked through such stories, listening to them was—to use one of Michael Taussig’s metaphors—‘like watching a sunken world underwater’ (Taussig 1987, 39). I was gazing at a hazy, anaesthetized past that made me, at first, blind towards questions of morality, transgression, and empathy. For this reason, I opened this paper with the words of Tó’paw, who explained that as time had passed the significance of *ngayó* had changed. For most people today it was just a story; when seen through the mists of history, what was left was only the impression that headhunting was a neatly

organized event, which followed the same format since time immemorial and which never deviated from a certain ritual structure. In fact, Tó'paw explained to me, this missed the entire idea of *ngayó*. It never went according to the plan and it was supposed to be difficult. The difficult aspect, I have argued, is related to the fundamentally transgressive character of *ngayó*.

In an important sense, Tó'paw's depiction of how headhunting is conceived among the younger generations mirrors how headhunting is portrayed within anthropology. Rather than approaching it as a morally ambiguous practice—thus allowing the violence to contain the same degree of complexity as violence in a Western context—it is imagined as a uniformly accepted, pristine, traditional practice. First of all, this reproduces the idea that 'ritual violence' within indigenous communities around the world ended with the introduction of Christian morals (Willerslev 2009). Thereby Christianity becomes related to a civilizing order and new moral awareness that renders violence problematic and transgressive (see also Yang 2011; Harris 1994). I propose, however, that the problematic aspects of ritual killing should not be understood exclusively as a post-conversion phenomenon. Rather, as Simon Harrison has recently argued, the use of parts of the human body as trophies of war has been widely practiced also by soldiers in modern times. He thereby shows that rather than being an irrational and savage feature of premodern and primitive warfare, there is something about trophy taking—and especially the taking of heads—that transcends the assumed boundaries between modern and premodern societies.

Secondly, this idea of the pre-Christian moral void renders us unable to properly grasp what provided *ngayó* with its transgressive impetus. Headhunting was, I argue, an act that should be grasped in all its moral ambiguity: it gained its impact on the 'cutter' due to the empathically conditioned relationship that he violated. Thus, headhunting, I suggest, does not involve a *suspension* of the ethical. It is thereby empathy itself that contributes meaning to violence.

Empathy is commonly assumed to be a universally shared feature of the human personality that helps to maintain a baseline of peaceful interaction among humans. By putting yourself in another's place, even a stranger's place, you achieve a bodily sensation of the person's experience in given situation. We *empathize* with this person. And this, we believe, establishes a connection to this person, which involves a pre-linguistic demand to help and protect. However, this assumption may be challenged through *ngayó* as a violent act that gains its significance from its inherent transgressive nature. This article has attempted to approach empathy as both an antithetic detergent to violence and, yet, paradoxically motivating violent acts by imbuing such acts with transgressive meaning. Thereby, empathy as a form of compassion may be linked to radical forms of violence.

The common feature that connected the various cases of *ngayó* was that *ngayó*, in all cases, became the man's attempt to achieve a heightened sense of autonomy. Thus, to reach a more comprehensive understanding of *ngayó*, we should place the faculty of empathy at the *centre* of this practice. And rather than simply seeing empathy as the detached ability to put oneself in the other's stead, empathy should also involve an

emotional engagement. Therefore, rather than referring to headhunting as ‘ritual killing,’ I have deliberately presented *ngayó* as a specific form of *murder*.

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## Article

# Angels with Dirty Faces

Gosha Rubchinskiy and the Politics of Style

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**Abstract** In many ways, twenty-first century Russia is the land par excellence of extreme masculinity. President Putin himself regularly indulges in spectacular performances of extreme masculinity, whether it be pledging to ‘bump off’ Chechen terrorists in their ‘shithouses’, swimming in ice-cold Siberian lakes, or posing in the pilot’s seat of a supersonic strategic bomber. Men’s fashion and fashion imagery is one of the rare areas of Russian culture where the kind of masculinity embodied (in a literal sense) by Putin is still challenged, and indeed subverted. Perhaps the most interesting Russian men’s fashion designer working today, certainly the designer who has engaged most persistently with political change, is Gosha Rubchinskiy. In his work he foregrounds various ‘extreme’ forms of Russian masculinity, from the angelic youth at one end of the spectrum through the brown-shirted neo-fascist adolescent, to the shaven-headed football fan at the other end. He does so, he maintains, in order to change the way Russia is perceived in the world. Indeed, if Dostoevsky once claimed that ‘beauty will save the world,’ Rubchinskiy self-consciously enlists what he refers to as the ‘beauty’ of his models in an attempt to challenge the negative image of Russia generated by western media as part of what he has called an ‘informational [sic] war’ against his native country. Borrowing concepts from Bakhtin (the chronotope, carnival) and Foucault (heterotopia), I examine Rubchinskiy’s extreme masculinities, and the questions they raise about masculinity, about the cultural relationship between Russia and the West, fashion as a discrete cultural practice, and the place and role of the fashion designer in society.

**Keywords** fashion, Gosha Rubchinskiy, masculinity, Russia, visual representation

‘Angels with dirty faces,  
Angels from nowhere places,  
Kids like me and you’  
Sham 69, *Angels with Dirty Faces*

In many respects, post-soviet Russia is the ultimate land of extreme masculinity. The secret initiation rites, violent ‘protection’ methods and brutal moral codes of the mafia that spread through the country in the 1990s, for example, and indeed of the loose network of criminal fraternities that preceded it, known as the ‘thieves-in-the-law’ (*vory-v-zakone*), have been well documented (Varese 2001). The countless examples of Russian male public figures engaging in extreme forms of behaviour include the outlandish far-right nationalist politician and one-time presidential candidate Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, whose 1998 book *The ABC of Sex* (*Azbuka seksa*) called for Russia to model itself on Thailand and place sex at the centre of its economy (Sperling 2015, 65), and Alexander Zaldostanov alias ‘The Surgeon’, free-wheeling leader of the infamous Night Wolves motorcycle club and personal friend of President Putin, who publicly decorated him in 2013 with the Russian Order of Honour for encouraging patriotic feelings in the



country's youth. Putin himself regularly indulges in spectacular performances of extreme masculinity, whether it be pledging to 'bump off' Chechen terrorists in their 'shithouses' (Gorham 2013), swimming in ice-cold Siberian lakes, or posing in the pilot's seat of a supersonic strategic bomber (on Putin as 'strongman,' see also Roxburgh 2012). Indeed, by uniting in one and the same body the three cultural paradigms that have historically codified heroic masculinity – the warrior, the philosopher and the ruler (Goscilo 2013) – Putin has made a quite extreme form of hegemonic, heteronormative (and indeed homophobic) masculinity a central pillar of Russian national identity (see also Sperling 2015).

As Putin's performances underline, and as Goscilo (2013), Healey (2010) and others have shown, masculinity is increasingly central to contemporary debates about Russian identity. This should not surprise us. For much of Russian history, as Evans Clements (2002) has argued, the question of Russian identity has been primarily clothed in debates about Russian men and their bodies, how they should behave, what they should look like, and how they should be dressed (on the symbolic significance of the body, and especially the male body, in the Soviet era, see also Kon 2003, and Amico 2014). As she puts it

What is certain ... is the centrality of conceptions of the masculine in Russia's past. Tsarist bureaucrats, Stalinist economic planners, intellectuals and social reformers from the eighteenth to the twentieth century understood that they could not change Russia unless and until they changed Russian men. Fundamental to this task was defining what Russian men were and what they should become (Evans Clemens 2002, 12).

As I have noted elsewhere, men's fashion and fashion imagery is one of those areas of Russian culture where notions of 'what Russian men [are] and what they should become' (Roberts 2017a) are still in a state of flux. Moreover, it is one of the relatively rare domains where the kind of hegemonic masculinity embodied (both in a metaphorical, and in a literal sense) by Putin, while sometimes found, is also frequently challenged, not to say subverted. Men's fashion designer Serguei Teplov, for example, has used androgynous-looking male models in his publicity material, while some of Cyrille Gassiline's shoots have a distinctly homoerotic feel about them. Designers such as these bear out Karaminas' point that 'fashion imagery, as a mode of representation, is in constant flux with the social forces that shape culture and political change' (Karaminas 2012, 180).

The question of political change in general, and of the relationship between representation, masculinity and power in particular, is especially relevant to Russia, a country where traditional gender stereotypes – and in particular the equation of masculinity with such characteristics as physical strength, high economic status, and emotional restraint – are especially popular among the country's young male population (Levant et al. 2003). Perhaps the most interesting men's fashion designer working in Russia today, certainly the designer who has engaged most persistently in his 'fashionscapes' (Karaminas 2012) with the forces of social and political change, is *Comme des Garçons*' Gosha Rubchinskiy (Roberts 2017b). In what follows, I propose to examine Rubchinskiy's work, and the different forms of extreme masculinity that appear

therein. In doing so, I shall explore the questions Rubchinskiy raises not just about masculinity, but also about Russia itself, the cultural relationship between Russia and the West, fashion as a discrete cultural practice, and the place and role of the fashion designer in society.

### **Gosha Rubchinskiy, the Image Maker**

Politics, style and extreme masculinity run through all of Rubchinskiy's work like an inextricable tripartite red thread. That work itself is remarkably diverse for such a relatively short (if nevertheless meteoric) career, although Rubchinskiy has been keen to emphasize the ways in which his different creative activities complement each other (ICA 2014). A graduate of the Moscow State University of Design and Technology, he first made his name as a fashion photographer and designer of street wear in Moscow in 2008. *Empire of Evil*, the title of his first men's fashion collection, presented at the end of that year, can be seen both as an allusion to Ronald Reagan's description of the USSR, and as a nod towards the anti-Russian sentiment felt in much of the West following the country's brief war that summer with neighbouring Georgia (for a short extract of this show, see YouTube 2008). His second collection was shown in a disused Orthodox church-turned-gym, while his third, entitled *The Sunrise Is Not Far Behind the Mountains* consisted of a video shot in St. Petersburg, a book of photographs, and the collection itself (ICA 2014). In 2012, Rubchinskiy was signed up by Adrian Joffe at Comme des Garçons (Kansara and Fedorova 2016). Since then, while keen to stress his independence (YouTube 2015), he has effectively operated as a (highly bankable) sub-brand for Joffe, producing what one fashion journalist has succinctly described as 'the new black' (Massoca 2016; on Rubchinskiy as 'the hottest designer in menswear' see also Ferrier 2016). Perhaps the high point of his career so far came in June 2016, when he was invited to present his Spring/Summer 2017 collection as guest designer at Florence's biannual Pitti Uomo, currently the world's largest menswear trade fair (Leitch 2017), and also one of the most prestigious.

Rubchinskiy's guest designer status at the Pitti Uomo, and more generally his success with critics and consumers alike (see for example Stoppard 2015), is all the more remarkable, given that the man himself appears not to wish to be seen as a fashion designer. As he put it in an interview with SHOWstudio's Lou Stoppard in 2015: 'I still don't think I'm a fashion designer. I feel more comfortable when someone says, "You're an artist, or photographer, or producer"' (YouTube 2015). In another interview, this time given to *i-D*'s Anders Christian Madsen on the fringe of his Autumn/Winter 2017-18 runway show presented in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad in January 2017, Rubchinskiy claimed to be first and foremost an 'image maker' (Madsen 2017a). His images are designed, he maintained in that same interview, in order to change the way Russia is perceived in the world. Indeed, if Dostoevsky once claimed that 'beauty will save the world,' Rubchinskiy self-consciously enlists what he refers to as the 'beauty' of his models in an attempt to challenge the negative image of Russia generated by western media as part of what he has called an 'informational [sic] war' against his native country (YouTube 2015).

Showing us his 'world' (Suliman 2015), and the youths who make up that world, would appear then to be just as, if not more, important to Rubchinskiy as designing t-shirts.

Discussing his 2008 *Empire of Evil* show, he has suggested: ‘I wanted it to be like a performance. It was not about the collection, but about these boys, this generation, this energy’ (quoted in Kansara and Fedorova 2016). Indeed, fashion may be little more than the means to an end for Rubchinskiy, a way for him to stage performances – and specifically performances of masculinity - around the images he creates. Even Adrian Joffe, who has been distributing Rubchinskiy’s designs since 2009, sees him less ‘as a fashion designer,’ than as ‘a recorder of things’ (Kansara and Fedorova 2016). Rubchinskiy’s interest in visually recording not just any ‘things,’ but the quite specific, and at times extreme, masculinity of teenage boys in particular may be why in 2016 he helped design the *Mad About The Boy* exhibition, curated by Lou Stoppard at SHOWstudio, a fashion film website. This exhibition, as Stoppard herself has put it, ‘explored fashion obsession with youth, focusing on the way ideas of the teen boy are constructed through specific collections and images’ (SHOWstudio [n. d.]).

Rubchinskiy himself has directed two films documenting the activities of teenage boys in his native Russia, both of which can be found on his official website (Rubchinskiy [n. d. a]). These are *Transfiguration* and *The Casting of Alexey* (both released in 2012). This is also the subject of three of his collections of photographs: *Transfiguration* (2012), published to coincide with the release of the eponymous video, *Crimea / Kids* (2014) and *Youth Hotel* (2015), all strictly limited editions produced and sold exclusively by Dover Street Market’s IDEA books. In 2016, Rubchinskiy published a fourth collection of photographs in which young men – at times fully clothed, at others semi-naked or completely undressed – feature prominently, namely *The Day of My Death*. This book was issued to coincide with the eponymous 17-minute video directed by Russian filmmaker Renata Litvinova and designed by Lotta Volkova, screened at the end of Rubchinskiy’s Pitti Uomo show.

This last example, and in particular the involvement of Volkova, hailed recently as ‘the coolest woman in the world,’ and ‘fashion’s most in-demand creative’ (Fox 2016), reminds us that whatever the man himself may say about his work, Rubchinskiy’s international reputation undeniably rests primarily on his fashion designs. These designs have gained a good deal of (very positive) critical attention in recent years. An article on ‘Goshattitude’ in the Spring/Summer 2017 edition of *Vogue Hommes* went so far as to claim that ‘if you’re into fashion and you haven’t heard of Gosha Rubchinskiy, then there’s something wrong [with you]’ (Anon. 2017; our translation). Commenting on the disruptive mise-en-scène of Rubchinskiy’s Spring/Summer 2016 show in Paris, SHOWstudio’s Stoppard commented: ‘Rubchinskiy’s clothes merit consideration, they demand that you reflect and ponder. Unlike a lot in fashion at the moment, they’re worth waiting for’ (Stoppard 2015). Stoppard’s observation nevertheless has relevance not just for Rubchinskiy’s collections, and the runway shows at which those collections are displayed, but also for his camera work, his photography collections and his video output. Taken collectively, Rubchinskiy’s work presents us with a whole range of extreme masculinities, as we shall now see.

### **Rubchinskiy’s Videos – Angels and Demons**

When asked about the relationship between his different activities in an interview at London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts in 2014, Rubchinskiy himself commented that

it was very difficult for him to separate film, fashion, and photography, and suggested (a little enigmatically) that designing clothes was in a sense complementary to, and a continuation of the exchanges he had with the young people he associated with and who appeared in his films (ICA 2014). One of the best places to look to see just the kind of young people Rubchinskiy likes to associate with, and the kind of exchange he has with them, is his 2012 video *Transfiguration*. This was produced while he was taking a year out from designing clothes, due to the fact that, as Rubchinskiy put it in the interview at London's ICA (an interview which coincided with a public screening of the film), it is so difficult to work as a fashion designer in contemporary Russia (ICA 2014). The film's central trope – skateboarding – is nevertheless closely connected to Rubchinskiy's activity as a designer; Rubchinskiy's early shows presented his adaptations of the clothes worn by his skateboarding friends (Fury 2016).

The focus of this 45-minute documentary film is the vibrant youth skateboarding culture in the New Holland area of Russia's second city, St. Petersburg. While politically, this might appear to be a perfectly innocent subject, this is certainly not how Rubchinskiy himself sees it. As he put it in an interview with *AnOther* magazine: 'I filmed *Transfiguration* before the crisis with Ukraine [following Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014], but revising [sic] the work it becomes relevant now. It is my best possible comment on politics as an artist. Russians skate on tanks but they also skate on skateboards – they're not all bad!' (Baker 2014). From the outset, this project was designed to change the way both St. Petersburg, and Russia itself, are perceived in the West. Russia is meant to be seen not as an Empire of Evil, but simply as a place where young lads hang out, listening to rock music, playing in the street or lazing on the beach just like anywhere else in the world. Indeed, the young men Rubchinskiy filmed (female skateboarders are conspicuous by their absence here), and the kind of masculinity they embodied, were central to this project. To quote from the same interview: 'I wanted the film to be part of an effort to rebuild Saint Petersburg creatively, and to make it a more prominent part of the cultural state of Russia. I spent two months in New Holland, where the boys were coming and going to skate. They were authentic, beautiful boys' (Baker 2014).

For the most part the film contains various scenes of skateboarders in and around St. Petersburg, together with interviews of some of the skaters, and scenes from rock concerts, including two that actually take place in a skate park. The film's only (vaguely) narrative thread relates to an unnamed young boy aged about 14 or 15. Identified by Rubchinskiy in a subsequent interview as Maxim (Baker 2014), this boy appears in a number of scenes, repairing his skateboard, talking about his love for the sport, practising his art (with varying degrees of proficiency) in the city's skate parks, and discussing his dreams for the future (at one point he says he wants to open his own skateboard shop, or possibly become a fashion designer, since this seems to be an easy way to make money).

What Rubchinskiy himself describes (Baker 2014) as the authenticity, and indeed the beauty of the boys we see in *Transfiguration* is in sharp contrast to the sombre, self-conscious performativity of many of the male models in some of his earlier runway shows. Indeed, there is something distinctly, almost radiantly angelic about Maxim, with his youthful innocence and disarming spontaneity, and his tight blond locks and clear

green eyes atop a smoothly pre-pubescent and frequently exposed torso. One could argue, however, that the most angelic character in this video is not Maxim, but rather a slightly older, unnamed boy who appears with him in one particular scene. In many respects this boy is very different from Maxim, who derides him for spending his time with his head in books. Asked what he is currently reading by the interviewer (Rubchinskiy himself), he holds up a copy of *The Devils*, Dostoevsky's novel about a group of revolutionary students in imperial St. Petersburg. While Rubchinskiy has claimed that *Transfiguration* was completely unscripted, the allusion to *The Devils* can be seen as a thinly veiled reference to one particular kind of 'transfiguration,' namely the radical social, political, economic and cultural change Russia has been undergoing since the 1990s, the decade in which Rubchinskiy himself grew up – an important theme for Rubchinskiy both in his fashion designs and in his photography (Cadogan 2017). Indeed, this boy himself alludes to this theme, in a subsequent scene in which he appears alone, discussing how people are generally afraid of change, and find it so difficult to adapt to new situations. But he is no revolutionary 'devil' – quite the opposite. Like Maxim, he has something distinctly angelic about him. This quality comes across not just in his blond hair, his piercing grey-green eyes, and his white t-shirt, but also in the way this particular scene is filmed: he is shot in mid-distance and in ethereal monochrome, and bathed in bright sunshine as he stands against a plain white background; the ethereal, luminously other-worldly aspect of the image is reinforced by bleaching, slight blurring and even over-exposure; and his words become increasingly indistinct and indeed incomprehensible, as the intradiegetic soundtrack is gradually replaced by Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. The angel of Transfiguration (source: Rubchinskiy [n. d. a])



Fig. 2. A model from Rubchinskiy's *Empire of Evil* show (source: YouTube 2008)

The type of angelic masculinity embodied here is very different from the broodingly sombre, almost cabbalistic masculinity of Rubchinskiy's 2008 *Empire of Evil* show, which included two models dressed in the kind of metal-studded face mask that might be found in a BDSM club, or on the set of a *Mad Max* movie (Figure 2). I argue, however, that as a form of masculinity, it is just as 'extreme.' But Maxim and his bookish companion are by no means the only angelic boys in *Transfiguration*. This becomes clear if we turn to the 127-page book accompanying the video (Rubchinskiy 2012). The epigraph to this book, which contains a number of stills from the video alongside other photographs of skateboarders, contains the following lines:

This whole world baby! / It is all for you! / You are beyond all praise, / You're just super!!! / This will happen baby! / You just take care of yourself! / And I, I, ie [sic] we will find each other! / So it goes! / Here now, listen, in the light / Of the sun's rays, creating a golden / Aura around you, you seem / To be an angel..." (Rubchinskiy 2012: [n. p.]).

The implication here is that we are meant to see *all* the boys and young men featured in Rubchinskiy's *Transfiguration* project, be it the video or the book, as the embodiment of angelic 'beauty' – not just the boy in Figure 1. As if to reinforce this idea, one of the first photographs in the book is of the exposed back of a skateboarder, across which a life-size set of angel's wings have been tattooed.

This suggestion that all the subjects featured in Rubchinskiy's *Transfiguration* project possess angelic qualities is in itself worthy of note, because the boys he shows us are generally remarkable in their very ordinariness. With their shoulder-length, unwashed hair, their acne-ridden faces, bored expressions, street wear branded t-shirts and at times quite filthy personal habits, they are anything but angelic in any recognizable sense of the word. How, then, are these boys transfigured into figures of extreme, otherworldly beauty? The main technique Rubchinskiy resorts to is juxtaposition, both in his video

and in the accompanying book. For example, the photograph of the youth with angel's wings tattooed across his back is placed directly opposite a photograph of the top of a Russian Orthodox church, featuring an angel carrying a cross. Most often, however, Rubchinskiy uses not angels, but other models of classical beauty. On one occasion, his film switches suddenly from a skateboarder to the still image of a portrait of a youth by Italian Renaissance artist Botticelli. Their matching hairstyles, and the close similarities in terms of framing and composition serve to reinforce the association between these two male subjects (Figures 3a and 3b, below). The film includes stills of other Botticelli portraits, as well as images of paintings by Leonardo da Vinci (such as his *Madonna Litta*, c. 1490). A close-up of the latter, featuring the baby Jesus suckling on his mother's breast, can be found in the *Transfiguration* book, directly opposite a photograph of three young, anonymous skaters, shot from behind sitting on their boards, gazing out across the tarmac. At another moment, Rubchinskiy's camera lingers over a series of classical sculptures, including Michelangelo's *The Dying Captive* (c. 1513) from the Louvre in Paris. A still photograph of this particular statue is also featured in the *Transfiguration* book, juxtaposed with a monochrome image of a young skateboarder in a similar pose, pulling on a t-shirt on which one can read the name of the US rock band the Ramones. In what can be seen as an example of Rubchinskiy's homoerotic aesthetic (Roberts 2017a), at two distinct moments in the book Rubchinskiy juxtaposes the photograph of a painting of the gay icon Saint Sebastian with images of young St. Petersburgers.



Fig. 3a. A young Russian skateboarder from Rubchinskiy's *Transfiguration* video (source: Rubchinskiy [n. d. a]).



Fig 3b. The portrait of a youth by Botticelli which immediately follows the image in Fig. 3a (source: Rubchinskiy [n. d. a]).

Inserting classical works of art taken exclusively from the St. Petersburg Hermitage and the Paris Louvre also serves to question how we in the West view Russia, and to underline the fact that the country is far less ‘alien’ than the ‘informational war’ waged by the western media might lead us to believe. At the same time, repeatedly juxtaposing his images with those of western classical artists – many of which display extreme examples of masculinity themselves – Rubchinskiy seeks to question (one might even say to transfigure) our very notion of masculine beauty (and thereby our understanding of the artist and the artist’s social role). His aim here is nothing less than to generate a new mythology (Barthes 1973) of masculinity in general, and a new genealogy of Russian masculinity in particular, one which, oscillating between past and present, myth and reality, natural and artificial, ordinary and extraordinary, participation and representation (Jefferson 1989), has its own quite specific chronotope (literally ‘time-space’). Developed by Bakhtin in his writing on the novel, the chronotope is both the spatio-temporal matrix shaping any narrative, and the cognitive structure shaping my worldview as author of that narrative. If in his essay *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel* (1981, 84-258), Bakhtin suggests that specific chronotopes correspond to particular genres, the lesson of Rubchinskiy’s *Transfiguration* project is that they relate to particular *genders* too. In other words, Rubchinskiy reminds us here that gender norms, and standards of beauty, are always and inevitably tied to specific places and times. More specifically, both the video and the book imply that we need to rethink the chronotope of classical masculinity. The implication of Rubchinskiy’s *Transfiguration* project is in fact two-fold: first, these young skateboarding Russians in twenty-first century St. Petersburg are extremely beautiful, and we need to redefine our notion of masculine beauty to include them; and second (and following on from the first point), there is nothing extraordinary about their extreme beauty – it is in fact extremely banal, because it is remarkably like any other. Contemporary Russian masculinity, then, is both extreme and banal, just as Russia herself is both different and the same. As Rubchinskiy

himself has put it in a different context (his Autumn/Winter 2017 show held in the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad in January 2017, which featured a collaboration with German sportswear brand Adidas): ‘Now things are changing, you see skate kids wearing football clothes and you can see football fans wearing skate stuff. *Cultures mix, subcultures mix*’ (quoted in Fearon 2017, emphasis mine).

Conflating what French art historian Régis Debray (1992) identifies as the three historical stages of the image (what he calls ‘the three ages of the gaze’), namely the locally rooted idol, Western figurative art and global visual culture, Rubchinskiy also of course invites us to view him himself as a new Botticelli or da Vinci. This is particularly audacious, when one considers that the male subjects he depicts are purportedly chosen ‘spontaneously.’ This is especially the case with his photo shoots and runway shows, where Rubchinskiy is notorious for finding his models on social media (as for example the models for his Pitti Uomo show: Muret 2016). The *Transfiguration* book features photographs of one of these models, taken during a photo shoot which, rather curiously, had nothing at all to do with the eponymous video. The model in question is the subject of the second of the two videos on Rubchinskiy’s official website, namely the ten-minute long *Casting of Alexey*. This film shows us a series of interviews with Alexey, as well as a photo shoot, and extracts from one of his social media accounts. However, Alexey presents a very different kind of extreme masculinity from that embodied by Maxim and his skateboarding pals. In the first half of the film he is a nervous, self-conscious and rather pallid youth. In the second half, on the other hand, he appears extremely cynical, consciously exploiting other people for his own advantage. In the on-line social media sequence he is remarkably sexually aggressive, using extremely crude language and at one point even sending a girl a photograph of a dildo, the image of which fills the screen.

As I have argued elsewhere (Roberts 2017b), Rubchinskiy may be said to “carnivalize” (Bakhtin 1968) the catwalk here. This is because he takes us behind the scenes, both of his own work as a fashion photographer, and of Alexey’s private life, breaking down boundaries in a way which not only introduces a crudely bawdy element, but also turns upside down our expectations as viewer and our understanding of what a “casting” is. However, the essential point about carnival is that it offers merely a simulacrum of liberatory licentiousness; its ultimate purpose is to reassert authority and control. ‘Taking back control and showing [the audience] what I want them to see’ is the reason designer Gareth Pugh makes fashion films (quoted in Khan 2012, 253). While one could argue that the point of Rubchinskiy’s carnival here is to allow him, like Pugh, to take back control over his brand, there is arguably something else behind Alexey’s display of extreme masculinity, too. To see what exactly that might be, we need to turn from his films to his runway shows. For Rubchinskiy himself has said that his films and photographs convey the same ‘message’ which is there in his clothes, but which is not necessarily quite so clear (ICA 2014). So what about those clothes? And what about the Russian youths who model them, and whose images (unlike Alexey’s) can be found in countless fashion publications, both off- and online, around the world?

### Rubchinskiy's Runway Shows

*The Casting of Alexey* is noteworthy for two things in particular. First, by the way Alexey offers his body for consumption (by Rubchinskiy, by his social media fans, and ultimately by us, the viewer), it reminds us that the body is the cornerstone of social identity construction (Belk 1988). Second, it underlines the fact that this construction is primarily negotiated in space (Roux 2014), even when the space in question is the hyperspace of social media (Bauman 2007). As for social media, that particular space emerges in *The Casting of Alexey* as a quintessentially carnivalesque milieu. In many ways, it is a topsy-turvy world where the normal order of things is reversed, albeit temporarily, and there are, it would seem, no limits on what the imagination can come up with (Bakhtin 1968, 9; see also Maclaran and Brown 2005, 312). This makes it a utopian space, a place which, for French philosopher Louis Marin (1984) for example, is 'the space that is neither yes nor no, true nor false [...] a space of neutrality in which contradictions are allowed to play against one another rather than being resolved or indeed repressed' (Marin quoted in Maclaran and Brown 2005, 312). This is of course a particularly postmodern utopia, one which, in the words of Siebers 'critiques the concept of the self, questions community, unhinges cause and effect, and abhors explanation' (Siebers 1994, 31). Nevertheless, this utopian element links *The Casting of Alexey* to *Transfiguration*, which constitutes a visual representation / exploration of St. Petersburg, a place historically held in Russians' collective imagination to be 'an unreal city that was alien to Russia, a supernatural realm of fantasies and ghosts, a kingdom of oppression and apocalypse' (Figs 2002, 158).

If the spaces in which the heroes of Rubchinskiy's films evolve can be conceptualized as utopias, then the places he chooses to shoot his runway shows might be called *heterotopias*. A term first coined by Foucault (1967/2001; 2009), heterotopias are, in the words of Dominique Roux (in her study of that hyper-masculine space, the tattoo parlour), locations defined precisely in opposition to utopias. Unlike the latter, heterotopias are:

real places ... governed by rules that support various human imaginary projects. These include for example libraries as the purpose of accumulating all knowledge; asylums, prisons or nursing homes as ways to manage and correct physical or moral deviance; cinemas and theaters as spaces of creation of and projection into imagination; cemeteries as sites for commemoration and cult of the dead (Roux 2014, 64).

When it comes to organizing the 'imaginary projects' that are his runway shows, Rubchinskiy has a particular fondness for alternative, heterotopic spaces. This tendency can be seen in his early shows, such as *The Empire of Evil*. This show, his very first, featured archetypical Russian symbols, such as bears and Kalashnikovs, in what Rubchinskiy himself has more recently suggested was a response to the fear of Russia in the western press following the country's military conflict with neighbouring Georgia that summer (Kansara 2017). The heterotopic element is even more evident in his most recent shows. The Pitti Uomo show of June 2016 for example took place in the Manifattura Tabacchi, an abandoned cigarette factory built in Florence in the 1930s, at the height of Mussolini's fascism (Muret 2016). Rubchinskiy's next show was staged in

Russia, or to be precise in the country's western enclave of Kaliningrad (a city described by Madsen, perhaps a little unfairly, as a 'ghost town' and a 'desolate backdrop': Madsen 2017a, 178-79). It took place in the 1875 hall of the former Königsberg Stock Exchange, an imposing building designed in the Italian Renaissance style, which now serves as the city's Centre for Youth Culture. His most recent show to date at the time of writing (October 2017) was held in St. Petersburg, in a building that had previously housed a concert hall, library and theatre, and had also been home to the city's first rave, back in the 1990s (for a video of the show, see YouTube 2017). According to Cadogan and Hope Allwood (2017), during the show itself 'guests sat around a balcony, looking down on a set made up of smashed up theatre chairs, shrouded in smoke and lit up with the green lasers you will know if you've ever been to a techno rave.' This show coincided with the launch by INRUSSIA of a new collection of photographs, dedicated to the rave scene in St. Petersburg in the 1990s and explicitly conceived to complement it (Yurchak 2017). But the question is: what relevance might Foucault's concept, or indeed the use of heterotopic spaces have for Rubchinskiy's representation of extreme modes of masculinity?

A way to answer that question is suggested by Roux (2014). As she notes, quoting Foucault, heterotopias are 'various sites for exchanges, [in which] traditional rules currently applying to the marketplace are 'represented, contested and inverted' (Foucault, 1967/2001, p. 1574). Indeed, these places harbor transactions, which [...] are not based on common economic standards but on the restoration of alternative modes of exchange such as bartering, haggling, gift giving and/or reviving traditional ways of life.' In short, heterotopias constitute 'special places where deviant (re)presentations of aesthetics and relationships to the society are expressed' (Roux 2014, 63). Rubchinskiy has a long tradition of staging heterotopic runway shows, with his amateur models selected on social media, often wearing nothing more than customized t-shirts, and parading in specially converted public spaces. These are not the 'common economic standards' by which the runway show is conventionally organized, even by the most avant-garde, critical fashion designers operating today (Geczy and Karaminas 2017). Moreover, and more importantly, these in many respects 'deviant' representations of fashion also contain within them the kind of alternative mode of exchange which Roux sees as central to heterotopia; for in and around these runway shows, Rubchinskiy gives us time and time again the 'gift' of his (quite utopian) worldview, via the utopian bodies that circulate within them.

To understand the precise nature of this worldview, we need first to return to the heterotopia of Rubchinskiy's 2016 Pitti Uomo show. Rubchinskiy presented onlookers in Florence with a particular kind of extreme masculinity, one very different both from that on show in *Transfiguration*, and from that to be found in his recent lookbooks (Roberts 2017a). The Italian setting, the modernist architecture, the youthfulness and inexperience of his models, recruited via social media, as well as the clothes they wore - such details as these all suggested unbridled, (not to say criminalized) male sexuality of the kind personified in and explored by the dedicatee of the show, Pier Paolo Pasolini. Indeed, as Muret puts it, referring specifically to Pasolini's work: 'Wearing sneakers, retro tracksuits and loose sweatshirts and chains on their necks, they were reminiscent of Pier Pasolini's [novel] "Ragazzi di vita" [1955], the rent boys plying their trade in Rome's suburbs described by the Italian poet, writer and director, who inspired the

Russian designer for his Spring/Summer 2017 collection.’ (Muret 2016). More than anything else, perhaps, it was the models’ bodies, how those bodies moved and performed in space, that created this sense of a ‘gang’ of marginalized young men. The forty boys who made up the show, according to Muret ‘looked all identical, with their close-cropped hair, athletic appearance and grumpy demeanour’ (Muret 2016). This look, this body image, is described by Katerina Zolototrubova, fashion editor of *Russian Vogue*, as *gopnik*, a Russian term meaning ‘the bad boys from the [Russian] suburbs’ (Ferrier 2016). It is something that Rubchinskiy has long-since been developing, and something that sets him and his models apart in today’s fashion world. As Petrarca has commented, in his Pitti Uomo show Rubchinskiy ‘cast a crew of Soviet-looking teenage boys with bleached buzz cuts and without facial hair as the models. They were a sharp contrast to the usual Pitti peacocks’ (Petrarca 2016: see Figure 4, below).



Fig. 4. Rubchinskiy’s gang of ‘bad boys from the suburbs’ at the Pitti Uomo, June 2016 (source: Madsen 2017b).

Rubchinskiy’s boys certainly exuded a raw, edgy masculinity during his Spring/Summer 2017 show in Florence, at odds with the kind of extrovert dandies – Petrarca’s ‘Pitti peacocks’ – usually associated with this event (Leitch 2017). Rubchinskiy’s staging of the bad-boy *gopnik* look, a look that is very different from that of his New Holland skaters in *Transfiguration* for example, but can in some ways be traced back to his 2008 *Empire of Evil* show, was given a new twist with his Kaliningrad show of January 2017. This show signalled a return to Russia for Rubchinskiy, and as such it held particular personal significance for the designer, who in an interview compared it explicitly to his *Empire of Evil* show held in Moscow in 2008 (Kansara 2017). Approximately one-third of the items of his Autumn/Winter 2017 show were football-themed garments made as part of a commercial collaboration with German brand Adidas, with a view to the 2018 FIFA

World Cup, due to take place in Russia. Not insignificantly, the Kaliningrad show came just a few months after Russian football hooligans, dominated by right-wing nationalist militants, had made a name for themselves by running amok and fighting particularly viciously with rival fans during the UEFA European Championships in France. Whereas Rubchinskiy's show in 2008 featured elements – the bears and Kalashnikovs – specifically designed to parody western views of Russia and Russian masculinity through caricature, his January 2017 show was on the contrary intended to be far less provocative. As he put it himself, more than a little euphemistically: 'It's interesting for me to show an image of a more modern Russian football fan' (quoted in Kansara 2017). The image of masculinity that Rubchinskiy displayed in Kaliningrad is very much a hybrid; during the show itself, the shaved heads, purposeful gazes and angular chins



characteristic of Rubchinskiy's Pitti Uomo 'gang' members combined with the acne-ridden cheeks and self-conscious postures of a number of his models – at least one of whom was as young as 16 - to produce what one critic has called a 'poetic new masculinity' (Madsen 2017a, 172). Dressing up (literally) his 'poetic' vision in uniforms of extreme masculinity likely to intimidate many onlookers – the scarf-brandishing football hooligan, or brown-shirted Fascist Youth League member, for example - only served to bring the 'poetic' element into sharper relief. The *gopnik* here has an angelic innocence almost unique to Rubchinskiy's models, who emerge very much as 'angels with dirty faces' (see for example Figure 5).

Fig. 5. Rubchinskiy's brown-shirted model from his January 2017 Kaliningrad show (source: Madsen 2017b).

A short video about the models featured in the show, produced by Rubchinskiy in collaboration with webzine and publisher INRUSSIA, was also issued (to view the video,

entitled *Apart*, see Hsleh 2017). The video contains interviews with three of the young boys who answered Rubchinskiy's invitation posted on social media, and who converged on Kaliningrad from places as far away as Divnogorsk and Krasnodar ('just a regular town – nothing special about it', as one lad puts it), as well as from Kaliningrad itself (Hsleh 2017). In the video we follow them back home, walking their dogs, wandering around their city, or covering old abandoned buildings with graffiti. We also see them during rehearsals in the Centre of Youth Culture, where they appear (as one might expect, given their complete lack of professional experience) as self-conscious, naïve, and guileless. Seeing them being put through their paces by a particularly demanding choreographer, and observing one of them having his hair shaved off prior to the show, only accentuates the impression of watching raw recruits on their first day in the army. Nick Knight has argued that the new, digital medium of the fashion film breaks down the former barrier between the artist and the audience, exposing the creative process and thereby demystifying the fashioned object itself (Knight 2013; quoted in Geczy and Karaminas 2016, 117). While Knight is no doubt right, one might say that what is demystified here in this particular video is not so much the fashioned object, as the (masculine) subject as fashioned by Rubchinskiy. That subject emerges here as collectively exposed, fragile, and indeed vulnerable.

Demystification was also a key trope of Rubchinskiy's last runway show to date, staged in June 2017. To coincide with this show, Rubchinskiy also collaborated with INRUSSIA, this time on a collection of photographs of the (predominantly male) members of the St. Petersburg rave scene, taken in the 1990s (see Yurchak 2017). As Yurchak's introduction to the INRUSSIA collection makes abundantly clear, St. Petersburg's ravers in the anarchic 1990s in clubs such as Tunnel and 145 Fontanka were in many ways engaged in 'extreme' behaviour in 'extreme' times (for a fuller discussion of the rave scene in 1990s Russia, see Yurchak 1999). Paradoxically, however, what is most 'extreme' about the models in Rubchinskiy's 2017 shows, whether in St. Petersburg or in Kaliningrad, is their very ordinariness. This ordinariness is in sharp contrast with some of the clothes he designs, which one journalist has described as 'tricky, esoteric even: gently oversized utility jackets, high-waist jeans tied with shoelaces; T-shirts emblazoned with the hammer and sickle' (Ferrier 2016). This ordinariness, and the care Rubchinskiy takes, both in his photography and in his choreography, to present them as a 'gang,' a hodgepodge of street kids assembled from the four corners of the country (Lau 2016, Muret 2016, Dewintre 2017), symbolizes a rejection of the Russian glamour culture of the 2000s. Glamour is a new social structure many see as deliberately promulgated by Putin's regime, that has led to Russian men's collective 'disorientation and desperation' in the face of such 'radical transformation' (Goscilo and Strukov 2011, 12). In this way, Rubchinskiy and his models hark back not just to the pre-glamour, rave-crazy Russia of the 1990s, but way beyond that decade too.

Evans makes the point that so much of today's fashion involves a 'return of the repressed,' typical of many of today's fashion designers. As she cogently puts it, 'modern fashion gives us a collection of dislocated images in which many narratives, histories and images are condensed' (Evans 2013, 89), adding: 'the haunting of contemporary fashion design by images from the past is a kind of return of the repressed, in which shards of history work their way to the surface in new formations and are put to work as contemporary emblems' (Evans 2013, 95). The repressed returns quite spectacularly in

Rubchinskiy's work in all sorts of guises and in all kinds of forms. Most obviously, perhaps, there are the Soviet emblems and slogans (which disappeared in the 1990s before being resurrected by Putin in the 2000s), with which Rubchinskiy likes to adorn his designs. More importantly, however, Rubchinskiy displays 'repressed' forms of masculinity. There is the un – indeed *anti*-glamorous – masculinity of the early post-Soviet era, evident in his focus on the 1990s rave scene. Then there is the element of homoeroticism and gender slippage, proscribed under the Soviets, that one finds in his some of his recent lookbooks (Roberts 2017a: see Figure 6). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there are the *gopniki* of his latest runway shows.



Fig. 6. An example of homoerotic masculinity in Rubchinskiy's Spring/Summer 2016 lookbook (source: Rubchinskiy [n. d. b]).

However, the different members of Rubchinskiy's 'gang of style' (Lau 2016) do not just embody the return of the repressed; they also stand for the utopian Russian body politic (Siebers 1994) as nostalgically imagined / envisioned by Rubchinskiy. The *Apart* video that coincided with the show held in January 2017 in Kaliningrad for example, is as much about the far-flung places the models come from, the geography and history of those places, as it is of the models themselves. Discussing that show (a Russian military enclave, taken from Nazi Germany at the end of WWII, and therefore hardly a politically neutral setting: Kansara 2017), Rubchinskiy opined: 'If you think about Russia you think about politics. It's more interesting for me to invite you here and *show you* what Russia is, rather than *showing you* in Paris' (Madsen 2017a, 178, emphasis mine). And for Rubchinskiy, 'showing [us] Russia' means first and foremost showing us its

young men. This is what Kaliningrad purportedly allowed him to do, and what made it the perfect location for him. As he put it in an interview with *Dazed* magazine, ‘to me, [Kaliningrad]’s like a portrait of Russia, an image of the youth generation of today’ (quoted in Cadogan 2017). Rubchinskiy shows us Russia’s (male) ‘youth generation of today’ in almost everything he does, whether it is filming skateboarders in St. Petersburg, photographing young kids in the Crimea in 2014, or dressing his catwalk models in t-shirts with *Russkii Renessans* – ‘Russian Renaissance’ – emblazoned on them, as he did at the Pitti Uomo in 2016. If his models all appear to be part of a gang – perhaps even the ultimate fashion designer gang (Dewintre 2017) – the masculinity that gang now exudes is not one of ‘bad boys’ (Muret 2016). Rather it is one in which angels and demons cohabit in dialogic tension. The clothes may be oversized (Ferrier 2016), but if they are, this only serves to bring into greater relief how small these boys are. This was particularly evident in Rubchinskiy’s Spring/Summer 2018 show, where the green lasers cut relentlessly, mercilessly through the models’ semi-exposed bodies. As for the bodies themselves, they were clothed in garments of varying degrees of sportswear-ness (on account of the designer’s continued collaboration with Adidas) that were either ill-fitting, or ill-suited to the spectacular context (a simulated rave). This tension between diametrically opposed modes of being – angelic innocence and something far darker – that cohabit his models is ultimately what is most ‘extreme’ about the kind of masculinity Rubchinskiy presents us with, both here and elsewhere in his work. In short, the heterotopic spaces used by the designer for his recent runway shows all function as backcloths against which his utopian vision – both of Russian masculinity and of Russia itself - stands out in stark relief.

## Conclusion

In an article on the legacy of British fashion designer Alexander McQueen – and in particular on his final show, entitled *Angels and Demons* – Nathalie Khan discusses fashion as ‘mythology’ (Khan 2013). Gosha Rubchinskiy’s work, both his fashion and his image making more generally, is full of mythology, in particular surrounding masculinity, Russian masculinity and Russian identity. In an unconscious echo of McQueen, that identity is one which oscillates between the two extremes of angel and demon. In conclusion, then, these spaces - both the New Holland skateboard park and the spaces staging his runway shows, whether in Russia or abroad - serve as the (quite remarkable) backdrop against which Rubchinskiy constructs his artistic and ideological project. This project involves giving us the ‘gift’ of his very personal, deeply nostalgic and ultimately ‘glocal’ vision of Russia, a vision in which his country exists in a quite specific chronotope, one which is both here and there, now and then, heterotopia and utopia. His male models play a central role in expressing this vision, since in a long-established Russian tradition (Haynes 2003), they stand both metaphorically and metonymically for the (Russian) body politic.

Gosha Rubchinskiy is not just a highly successful international menswear brand. He is also an artist steeped in a very specifically Russian tradition. That tradition is one in which the artist has a *mission salvatrice*, a duty to use beauty to explore Russia’s identity and place in the world. As Rubchinskiy put it in an interview with *i-D*’s Anders Christian Madsen (Madsen 2017a: 179), comparing himself to Pasolini in the process: ‘[In my runway shows] I ask, what is Europe now? What is Italy now? What is Russia now?’ (In

this respect, it is surely no coincidence that Rubchinskiy returns time and again to the youths of St. Petersburg, that ‘artificial’ city built to be Peter the Great’s ‘window on the West,’ and for so long the focal point of so much debate in Russian intellectual and cultural circles on the country’s identity and direction: Volkov 1995). Revisiting, and at times Russifying, major western fashion brands such as Fila, Tommy Hilfiger (reproduced on a t-shirt mixed with the Russian and Chinese flags) and Adidas, Rubchinskiy has a very ‘glocal’ view, not just of his own brand, but of Russia itself. It is primarily through the male subjects and their performances of a range of extreme forms of masculinity that we see in his films, his photography and his fashion work, that this view is expressed.

Rubchinskiy demonstrates via the range of extreme masculinities alluded to in his work both a concern with (Russian) national identity, and an insistence on Russia’s cultural ambivalence straddling East and West. As he put it, in a comment about Kaliningrad but which could be taken to apply to Russia as a whole: ‘It’s Russia and it’s a small city, but at the same time it’s in the middle of Europe’ (quoted in Kansara 2017). This search for Russia’s national identity, and the concomitant insistence on the country’s geographical and cultural ambivalence, is the Russian Idea that has preoccupied Russian artists for centuries (Beumers 1999, Franklin and Widdis 2004). If Rubchinskiy denies his work has a political agenda (see for example Madsen 2017a), this is because in Russian culture, asking questions such as these is not seen as political, but rather as something far more normal – the very opposite of ‘extreme.’ These questions are moreover particularly pertinent in today’s post-Soviet era. Answering them is at the heart of the ‘informational war’ Rubchinskiy is engaged in and to which he so tellingly referred during his interview with SHOWstudio’s Lou Stoppard in 2015. This is the significance of the binary oppositions running through all his work, between east and west (in his fashion designs), and between angel and *gopnik* (in his photography and video work). Rubchinskiy is one of the very first artists to explore Russian identity by looking nostalgically back to the post-Soviet era (the 1990s of his childhood and early adolescence: Madsen 2017a). This fact alone makes him worthy of note. That he should choose to do so via the prism of masculinity is in itself nothing new, given what Evans Clements (2002) notes about the historical connection between the question ‘what is Russia?’ and ‘how should Russian men behave?’ On the other hand, that he should so radically challenge the norms of masculine beauty and indeed masculinity that have emerged in Putin’s Russia – and ‘trailblazing a new poetic masculinity’ (Madsen 2017a, 172) in the process – is surely the most interesting and innovative thing about him – although it is unlikely the world’s fashion cognoscenti will choose to focus on this aspect of his work.

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## Article

# Men Refusing to Be Marginalised

Aged Tough Guys in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*

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**Abstract** Old age is in western cultures under current neoliberal ideology increasingly linked to notions of decline, frailty and dependence as it is often equated with being unproductive and a burden to society. This case study is grounded in the belief that to change socio-cultural patterns one must first understand them. Consequently, this article aims to analyse the socio-cultural (re)production of narratives of ageing in general and of narratives of male ageing in particular – a topic often neglected in academic debates of ageing. Mass media today hold an enormous influence on the development and maintenance of socio-cultural standards. As such, their products need to be taken seriously even if their content might seem superficial and frivolous. A critical analysis of commercially highly successful Hollywood action films *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* will shed light on the cultural narratives of male ageing revealed in the two films and subsequently support a better understanding of the strategies used to transform narratives of decline commonly linked to ageing into stories of success and progress.

**Keywords** neoliberalism, cultural narratives, ageism, hegemonic masculinity, action films, marginalisation

## Masculinity and Ageing in a Neoliberal Society

*Ageing Tough Guys in Action Films*

The hyper-muscular bodies, exaggerated armament and almost super-human powers of the predominantly older, male cast in *The Expendables* (Stallone 2010) and *The Expendables 2* (West 2012) are impressive but, given the fact that they are in between mid-forties and late sixties, also slightly obscene. The films seem to prove that only the roughness and toughness of the allegedly outdated and aged action heroes can save the world and as such they do not only tell the conventional story of the good fighting the evil but also one of older men battling their decline and disproving their perceived ‘expendability’ for neoliberal society. However, the contextualisation of the ageing action heroes in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* is not without ambiguity. This, for instance, becomes clear when Barney Ross (Sylvester Stallone) after the violent death of the youngest member of the team says: ‘Why is it that the one of us who wants to live the most, deserves to live the most, dies. And the ones that deserve to die, ... keep on living? What is the message in that?’ (West 2012, 40:19). Some 45 minutes later, he remarks upon the sight of his ‘new’ water plane: ‘That thing belongs in a museum’ which provokes Trench (Arnold Schwarzenegger) to respond: ‘We all do’ (West 2012, 87:01). Although a reaction to specific situations in the films, on a subtler level these remarks hint at a theme intertwined with the main narrative of the films, namely the value of aged men in a neoliberal society.



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Figure 1: Aged Tough Guys, Source: (IMDb 2014).

Neoliberalism has become the dominant political and economic system of western countries (Žižek 2009). It is based on the understanding that free markets liberated from political and social interferences are essential for a healthy and stable economy and the prerequisite for the freedom and well-being of people (Chomsky 1999, Harvey 2007). However, if countries are ruled by a system which is based on the belief that all activity can and needs to be assessed by its market value then ‘it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market’ (Harvey 2007, 3). It is therefore no surprise that in a neoliberal society youth is worshipped beyond comparison as it is seen as the principal time of independence, production and consumption. On the other hand, the physical and mental transformations caused by ageing are viewed negatively (Cruikshank 2013, Harvey 2007, Žižek 2009). Older age is viewed as limiting one’s ability to produce and consume and, hence, often linked to notions of decline, frailty and dependence (Cruikshank 2013, Gullette 2004). Remaining a valuable member of neoliberal society in older age is possible but only when accepting and executing the individual responsibility (Laceulle and Baars 2014) of staying active and youthful as long as possible and by all purchasable means (Cruikshank 2013). These views of successful and unsuccessful ageing are reflected in the hegemonic cultural narratives of the West and, among others, communicated through mass media in general and particularly through U.S. American films (Woodward 2006).

The media depiction of older men and related cultural narratives have been, when compared to analyses of the media portrayal of older women, much less in the focus of academic discussion (Spector-Mersel 2006, Feasey 2011). However, I believe that linking the process of ageing either to cultural narratives of decline, frailty and dependence or presenting it as successful when one has grown old but does neither look nor behave old, offer neither men nor women sufficiently differentiated cultural frames in which the construction of an older self in personal ‘progress’ narratives is possible (Gullette 2004, Spector-Mersel 2006).

In my view and along with other scholars (Connell 2005, Cruikshank 2013, Hills 1999) gender roles are a socio-cultural construction influenced by historical conditions and

acquired and continuously renegotiated throughout the life-course. Media are a crucial agent in defining and maintaining dominant cultural standards of masculinity and femininity (Chivers 2011, Gullette 2004). The genre of action films has received much attention within the context of filmic representation of masculinities and its influence on our cultural understanding of masculinity (Tasker 2015). However, discussions of older male characters in action films are underrepresented when compared to the analyses of the filmic representation of young and middle aged males (Spector-Mersel 2006, Feasey 2011). Additionally, little attention has been paid to the fact that age might, similarly to sexual orientation, class and mental and physical handicaps, contribute to the marginalisation of men (Coston and Kimmel 2012, Arber, Davidson, and Ginn 2003, Connell 2014, Connell 2005).

The aim of this article is, thus, to examine current cultural narratives determining the representations of older males in Hollywood mainstream action films, in general and the cultural narratives revealed in the portrayal of older men in the films *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*, in particular. The analysis focuses on the strategies used in these films to transform narratives of the decline commonly linked to ageing into stories of success and progress with a strong market value.

### *The Expendables & The Expendables 2*

The revival of tough guy action films in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be seen as a reaction to changes in the social construction of masculinity provoked by socio-historical events such as fear and insecurity after the 9/11 attacks on the WTC and the crisis of white collar male employees after the financial collapse in 2008 (Boyle and Brayton 2012, Lennard 2014, Donnar 2016b). On the surface, none of these films are a surprise at all. Hyper-muscular men with no, mysterious or problematic family ties, fight injustice in a disadvantaged position. They face a massively superior opponent and are armed with male camaraderie, true loyalty, authentic values and most importantly, inhumane physical strength and agility and, of course, they are, in the end, victorious.

The main cast in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* is between forty-four and seventy-two years old. The main character Barney Ross (Sylvester Stallone) is sixty-four in the first film and sixty-six years old in the second. The remaining crew is considerably younger. Mr. Christmas (Jason Stratham), Hale Caesar (Terry Crews), Toll Road (Randy Couture) and Yin Yang (Jet Li) are all between mid- and end-forties and Gunner Jensen (Dolph Lundgren) is in his mid-fifties. Supporting roles, including the opponents, are predominantly filled by older men of the likes of Mickey Rourke (58), Eric Roberts (54) or Bruce Willis (55) in *The Expendables* or Chuck Norris (72), Jean-Claude Van Damme (52) and Arnold Schwarzenegger (stars in both films) (65) in *The Expendables 2*.

The chronological age of the majority of the cast is in stark contrast to the current ideal of masculinity, one of heterosexual, white-collar, young to middle aged, affluent, middle- and upper-class managers (Coston and Kimmel 2012, Connell 2005). To cast actors who do not conform to this ideal of masculinity in lead roles in an action film is not only atypical for the genre (Tasker 2004) but also unusual for an industry which is still characterised by an obsession with youthfulness and a reluctance to portray the ills of ageing (Chivers 2011, Addison 2006). The high commercial success of the films in the

U.S. and abroad (Mojo Box Office 2010, 2012) suggests that the films present male characters which are, despite being marginalized by their age (and social status), accepted and indeed embraced by audiences. Hence, the examination of representations of masculinity in older age in the selected films will allow for particularly interesting insights into a neoliberal society characterised by patriarchal dominance and will enable a better understanding of ‘the context within which contemporary older men struggle to build acceptable identities’ (Spector-Mersel 2006, 68).

### **Narratives of Successful Ageing**

#### *Physical & Mental Fitness*

In *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* the faces of many of the main characters particularly Barney (Sylvester Stallone), Tool (Mickey Rourke), Gunnar (Dolph Lundgren) and Trench (Arnold Schwarzenegger) show clear signs of ageing and are proof of a life in its last third. It is also striking that compared to the earlier performances of the actors their bodies are often covered by clothes. Rarely do we see more than the overly muscular arms of the actors while the armoury they use and the destruction they cause seems to have increased with the age of the actors (Donnar 2016a).



Figure 2. Ageing faces. Source: (Stallone 2010, West 2012).

The films’ narratives hasten to assure audiences that age has not in any way altered the capabilities of their heroes. Literally from the first scenes the protagonists are staged as men who, despite their aged faces and their age, have neither lost their physical strength, agility and fitness nor do they suffer from any age-related mental limitations. Commonly associated characteristics of older age such as slowness, bad hearing, forgetfulness or

worsening eyesight are sparingly and jokingly mentioned and set in stark contrast to the hyper-muscular bodies of the protagonists (even if often veiled in clothes) and counteracted by spectacular shoot outs, martial art fights and car chases, to name but a few. The slightest reference to age-related weakness is immediately disproven by scenes in which the team are portrayed as fully capable of defeating any overwhelmingly superior power, clearly fully in command of a perfectly working body and mind.



Figure 3: Muscles & Action, Source: (Stallone 2010, West 2012).

As a result of the strong dominance of bodies and minds working to perfection when facing very bad opponents, overwhelming armoury and grave danger, older age is presented as something which can be managed by keeping physically fit. Sylvester Stallone and the rest of his cast prove that it is possible to remain in control of your body and mind later in life. By doing so, men can, as the narrative of the two films show, retain a position which allows them to enjoy patriarchal privileges throughout the life-course even if aided by an arsenal of high-tech weapons (Chivers 2011). The portrayal of older men in *The Expendables* and *The Expendable 2* is therefore, by and large, based on the socio-cultural understanding that to age successfully one has to stay fit, in control and above all, young. Both films are thus a manifestation of the dominant cultural narrative of successful ageing (Cruikshank 2013) and ‘transform the older male figure from a man whose masculinity is perceived to be fading to a man whose masculinity is exaggerated and compensatory’ (Chivers 2011, 99).

### *Productivity*

The narrative of successful ageing is further supported by staging the members of the team as gaining identification and meaning largely in and through their work. In a neoliberal society, being a productive member of society is essential in determining the individual's value for society (Cruikshank 2013, van Dyk 2014). Negative views of ageing are frequently based on the perception that physical and mental decline hinder older people's active participation in society. In other words, retirement reduces pensioners to being consumers, provided they are affluent enough (Featherstone and Wernick 1995). If physically, mentally or financially limited, older people are marginalized and viewed as a burden to society since they do not produce or consume an adequate amount of goods (Heron 2008). It is therefore no surprise that living a meaningful and productive life in later life is largely linked to keeping busy (Cruikshank 2013, Stannard 1976).

Particularly for men, employment, related status and efficiency are main means of identification and of rightfully demanding male privileges in society (Chivers 2011, Baur and Luedtke 2008). Hence, portraying the 'Expendables' as earning a living by saving the world from evil – undoubtedly a meaningful and important job - enforces not only their masculinity but also their use- and youthfulness - the western ideal against which everyone is judged (Gergen and Gergen 2000). The faces of the actors might have aged but there can be no doubt that they have not lost any of their abilities. In fact, it seems as if being older has made them stronger, more efficient, more agile and generally more productive.

All in all, the dominant line of narration in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* clearly follows the cult of youth celebrated in western cultures (Woodward 2006, Addison 2010) and often disseminated in commercial feature films produced in Hollywood (Addison 2010, Cruikshank 2013). The older age of main and supporting actors in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*, is not entirely ignored but rather overwritten by communicating that the older age of the protagonists does neither reduce their effectiveness nor their usefulness. Indeed, the storyline of both films communicates that as long as you are active and keep fit, you can reach anything you have set your mind to. Therefore, age has become something which is not a matter of biological decline, something we all have to face sooner or later, but something which can be defeated provided one tries hard enough (Laceulle and Baars 2014). Keeping young is the frame of mind which allows one to age successfully and productively while simultaneously being the prerequisite for successful or productive ageing (van Dyk 2014). The cultural narrative communicated in the two films therefore draws on the dominant Western and particularly US American narratives of the 'American Dream' or 'You are as old as you feel' (or look), or 'You can reach anything if you try hard enough' (Gullette 2004). By utilizing these cultural narratives to inform the storyline of *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* narratives of ageing usually linked to decline are transformed into stories of success and progress. And, what better place to do so than in an action film, a genre inherently defined through physical activity, speed and muscle work (Tasker 2014).

Understanding ageing not as something to be feared but as something to be fought could be seen as supporting a positive attitude towards older age, but is it really? Can the physical and mental changes coming with age really be defeated in the long run? And what about the surely predominant group of elderly people who are not physically and mentally as fit as they used to be? The cultural narrative of successful or productive ageing contributes to the marginalisation and discrimination of anybody who does not adhere to these standards and puts enormous pressure on those trying to fulfil them (Chivers 2011, Gullette 2004, van Dyk 2014). However, a closer look at *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* reveals that despite following the cultural narrative of successful ageing in its main storyline, other narratives are developed alongside this narrative.

## Narratives of Decline

### Seniority

In *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*, the myth of successful ageing is intertwined with other dominant western narratives which link ageing to attributes such as wisdom and providing service to society but also to physical and mental decline (Cruikshank 2013). Particularly Tool, Barney Ross and Toll Road are presented as men who can be self-critical, have depth and can do more than just fight. Wearing glasses in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* is staged less as a sign of ageing and more as a signifier for intellectual capacity. The image of Barney, Tool and Toll Road as wise and mellow men particularly when compared to the other, often younger and more ill-tempered members of the team is supported by showing them smoking a cigar or pipe which in western cultures is often presented as an indication of wisdom and seniority (Gilman 2004).



Figure 4: Wise, Old Men, Source: (Stallone 2010, West 2012).

The theme of wisdom is further developed, particularly with regards to Barney Ross, when showing him interacting with younger men (and on one occasion a woman). His calm and controlled manner is often staged in contrast to the impulsive and sometimes over-aggressive behaviour of his companions and opponents. Frequently, he gives advice to Christmas on his relationship and tries to de-escalate confrontations although rarely successful, for example when he intends to keep Gunnar from hanging a pirate who, however, can only be stopped by physical force in *The Expendables* or when he attempts to save Billy the Kid's life in *The Expendables 2* by following all demands made by Villain who then kills him anyway. In the relationship with the two young members of his crew, Billy the Kid and Maggie in *The Expendables 2*, Barney takes the role of a mentor, something which is typically associated with older age and seniority (Cruikshank 2013). However, there is also some sexual undercurrent in the interaction with Maggie who is at the time of filming more than thirty years younger than Sylvester Stallone in his role of Barney Ross, which matches the ambiguities found in the characterisation of Barney Ross (see below).



Figure 5: Young and Old, Source: (Stallone 2010, West 2012).

Staging Barney and the rest of his crew alongside two significantly younger actors, *The Expendables 2* pronounces and draws on the age differences explicitly. Older age as linked to experience, wisdom and serenity is portrayed in contrast to younger age depicted as being highly efficient and knowledgeable while continuously having to defeat being perceived as inexperienced by the older generation (Gullette 2004). Notwithstanding this, in general, the film shows that cooperation between young and old is possible and indeed a fruitful experience for both even if in the two films it is short-lived since Billy the Kid is killed and Maggie is sent away by Barney to protect her from the consequences of his destructive life-style.

### *Decline*

Although the portrayal of old versus young in the two films is predominantly positively charged, it follows common western cultural narratives of ageing linking it to decline while relating youth to progress (Gullette 2004). In accordance with these dominant

cultural narratives (Arber, Davidson, and Ginn 2003, Featherstone and Wernick 1995), the films communicate that the downside of wisdom and serenity is disillusionment, cynicism, resignation and loneliness.

Except for Christmas and Hale Caesar, the team do not seem to have partners, families or, in fact, any friendships apart from the homosocial relationship to the other team members (Boyle and Brayton 2012). Hale Caesar's family ties are not elaborated while Christmas' rocky relationship is all the more a topic of discussion between Barney and Christmas. Barney's comments show clearly, and in line with genre customs (Tasker 1993a) that he believes women and particularly Christmas' girlfriend are not to be trusted. In his view, 'the man who gets along best with women is the man who gets along without them' (Stallone 2010, 34:24). Christmas is staged as a more naïve and less cynical and resigned younger counter pole to Barney and their relationship somehow seems to resemble a father-son bond. And just like a pubertal son, Christmas disagrees with Barney's view on his heterosexual relationship. He continues believing in the possibility of romantic love at his age and in his profession and clearly does not want to end up like his fatherly friend who, besides owning 'a seaplane and a truck' (Stallone 2010, 37:26-39:21), is alone.

However, Hale Caesar and Christmas are the exception to the rule and indeed Booker's (Chuck Norris) nickname 'Lone Wolfe' in *The Expendables 2* could easily be used to describe most of the team, many of the supporting characters, their opponents and perhaps even their employer in the two films, even if in times of crisis 'it is sometimes fun to run with the pack' (West 2012, 86:16). Although the social seclusion and loneliness of many of the characters in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* could be seen as simply complying with genre conventions (Tasker 1993a, 2015), it is also something which is commonly viewed and discussed as characterising older age and particularly older male age (Arber, Davidson, and Ginn 2003, Kudo, Mutisya, and Nagao 2015).

Especially in *The Expendables*, a relatively high amount of time is dedicated to establishing Barney and to a certain degree Tool, as men who have due to their traumatising past experiences lost all belief in humankind and in good winning over evil. What is left are disillusionment, resignation and cynicism and a kind of pity felt for younger men who have not yet discovered how bad the world really is.

Christmas: 'This new job sounds bad.'

Barney: 'Yeah, but it'll pay good.'

Christmas: 'Yeah well, money aside, what happened to your code?'

Barney: 'What code is that?'

Christmas: 'The target has to deserve it.'

Barney: 'Oh, that was cancelled due to lack of interest.'

Christmas: 'You're dark, dark and cold.'

Barney: 'You noticed!?'

Christmas: 'And I ain't buying into it, by the way.'

Barney: 'You will.' (Christmas leaves)

'Stick around young man, you will.' (Stallone 2010, 24:54-25:15)

The unfolding story in both films clearly contradicts Barney's characterisation as coldblooded and heartless killer only interested in money. In fact, in *The Expendables* he seems to have regained some of his compassion and kindness by the irrational and highly dangerous decision to go back and save Sandra who they left behind. Nevertheless, the theme of 'having a black heart' recurs several times in *The Expendables 2* and is supported by numerous references to Barney's belief that it is dangerous to be around him. This is also emphasized by linking the motive of 'black' explicitly to death:

Tool: '... Kinda feelin' like... dead too, ya know? My heads all very, very black place. Didn't believe in shit. Just goddamn Dracula black...'  
(Stallone 2010, 57:55)

Maggie: 'Do you think about the young man who died?'

Barney: 'All the time.'

Maggie: 'You don't talk about him much.'

Barney: 'No, that's how we deal with death. Can't change what it is, so we keep it light until it's time to get dark. And then we get pitch black, understand?'

(West 2012, 51:26-51:42)

Barney as the main character and one of the oldest characters is consistently shown as a character drawn between resignation, disillusionment and cynicism and care and compassion for the younger people around him. This portrayal draws heavily on the cultural myths of being increasingly pessimistic and embittered in later life (one reason also for progressive loneliness in older age) (Chivers 2011, Rodwell et al. 1992) while feeling the need to protect and serve the younger generation (Cruikshank 2013). After Billy the Kid is killed by the very bad Villain in *The Expendables 2* Barney's plan is: 'Track them, find them, kill them.' This is neither a sign of wisdom nor serenity but motivated by the desire for revenge typical for the genre of action films and their male heroes (Tasker 2015). However, it also complies with the cultural understanding that killing the young is particularly condemnable. Taking the life of people who still have their life ahead of them is generally considered one of the worst crimes imaginable. Notwithstanding this, it also reveals a cultural view which assigns different values to life at different stages. In a culture that values youth significantly more than older age, it is no surprise that it also ascribes a higher value of life to the young than to the old 'who have already lived their life'. In fact, it is a common cultural view that the older generation should make room for the younger, something which is impressively illustrated by the 'generation war' created in the media (Gullette 2004).

The older men, and especially the main character Barney, in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* are linked to the predominant cultural narrative of decline and portrayed in a fashion that in many ways hints at their 'expendability' (as the title suggests). Nevertheless, in the films their existence is justified since they are depicted as fulfilling a useful service to society by doing the dirty work others are unwilling or unable to do. According to Margaret Cruikshank 'to serve others' (Cruikshank 2013, 43) is a typical and socially acceptable role assigned to the older generation who otherwise suffers from a role-less role in our society (Cruikshank 2013).

*The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* play on and partly with the full range of dominant cultural narratives of ageing. In accordance with the genre customs, Barney is portrayed as an ambiguous and flawed character (Bordwell 1985, Tasker 1993a). However, his depiction of being wise and mellow while at the same time being cynical, disillusioned and resigned are typical attributes assigned to old age (Cruikshank 2013). So is the characterisation of many of the characters as ‘lone wolves’ who, however, have taken it onto them to do no less than save the world despite or perhaps because of their age since they are more expendable than younger men and women. Simultaneously, the main narrative relies on disseminating that older age is acceptable and indeed successful as long as one is productive, active and no burden to society (Gullette 2004, Woodward 2006). *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* therefore fits well into the long list of films that seem to signal a greater social concern about old people but ‘in fact the films reflect an ongoing pathologization of changes associated with age’ (Chivers 2011, 148). Both films thus contribute to the social segregation and marginalisation of older people. Nevertheless, in my view, there is another subtler and more subversive side to the two films.

### **Narratives of Marginalisation** *Social Class and Ageing*

The protagonists as well as the antagonists of the two films are paid killers. They are killing machines and are hired by men such as Church, who resembles the currently dominant masculine ideal of being white, affluent, heterosexual and powerful, to do jobs that are unpleasant and highly dangerous. Undoubtedly and despite the fact that the different nationalities and races and the high educational level of some of the characters deviate from the typical definition of working class men, they are representatives of a masculinity codex strongly linked to working class men. Over and over again the main characters are staged as an embodiment of “‘real” men whose loyalty to one another endures beyond their physical bodies’ (Boyle and Brayton 2012, 475). However, this masculinity ideal is long outdated and anachronistic. This contextualisation is further underlined by surrounding the cast of the two films with black-and-white photos, classic motorbikes and cars, a battered water plane and in one scene even placing them in an old army base resembling the US in the 50’s.

Although these props are in stark contrast to the high-tech armoury and technology used and the bikes and cars must also be seen as genre specific means linked to the tough-guy image of men (Balkmar 2012, Quinn and Forsyth 2007), the outdatedness of many of the requisites is striking. In my view they are used intentionally to highlight that the ‘Expendables’ have become dinosaurs in a modern world ruled by younger men (Hearn 1995) who represent the current ideal of masculinity.

However, the members of the ‘Expendables’ are not only working class men but also in a life stage well beyond the masculinity ideal of youthfulness. Consequently, they do not match the current socio-cultural standards of masculinity and belong, if they want to or not, to a marginalised group of men (Coston and Kimmel 2012, Connell 2005). Within this context, the ‘Expendables’ and their macho-masculinity must be seen as representatives of a dying out species in the imaginary world of the films as well as in



the real world of the Hollywood film industry (Donnar 2016a, Treme and Craig 2013). As actors who rely on their hard-boiled bodies for employment, ageing and changes in the cultural understanding of masculinity threaten their professional careers in an industry which is obsessed with youth and highly dependent on sensing and following

Figure 6: Props, Source: (Stallone 2010, West 2012).

current cultural standards (Boyle and Brayton 2012, Chivers 2011). Having somehow exceeded their expiry date, these musclemen now perform and employ their masculinity, ‘interpassively’, in the service of and in place of (Pfaller 2003) the hegemonic group of men such as Church in the two films or film producers in the real world (Connell 2009, Pyke 1996). Although out of fashion, their roughness and toughness, physical power and aggression aid the hegemonic group of men in maintaining their patriarchal dominance. Their extraordinary strength and muscularity in combination with their actions and behaviour seem to prove and legitimate the dominance of heterosexual men – a belief which is still one of the cornerstones of a neoliberal ideology presented as a seemingly natural order which benefits all (Chomsky 1999). Simultaneously, their aggression, violent behaviour and blunt machismo justify the right to rule. They look down on such archaic behaviour and attitudes and pride themselves with a more sophisticated and civilized understanding of masculinity which includes a supposed belief in the equality of men and women (Connell 2005, Pyke 1996, Kimmel 2012).

### *Strategies of Resistance*

According to Coston and Kimmel (2012) one way of handling marginalisation is militant chauvinism – a strategy in which differences to the ruling ideal are stressed and used to establish the superiority of the marginalised group. *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* can therefore also be read as a manifest and outcry of older, working class men not willing to accept their dismissal. The films are a proclamation of their superiority over the competing masculinity ideal of heterosexual, effete, white, powerful and young managers. They clearly communicate that to save the world from everything

going wrong it needs men like the ‘Expendables’ – not unlike Jesse Ventura in real life. The films, hence, criticise nothing less than the socio-economic system of neoliberal financial capitalism which has produced the current dominant masculinity ideal (Kotz 2002, Griffin 2005, Pyke 1996). Barney voices his criticism of the currently trending idea of masculinity openly in *The Expendables 2*:

‘You know Church, you’re the kind of guy that pulls the strings, and everyone else does your dirty work. Because you never had the guts to do it yourself’ (West 2012, 41:54).

The name ‘Church’ and the selection of a church for the first meeting of Barney and Church supports the interpretation that ‘Church’ acts in the name of and as secular assistant to the new godlike idol of neoliberalism, namely money and power. ‘The Expendables’ are his crusaders whose job is to protect and preserve neoliberalism, the economic and political system which supposedly has proven to be without alternative (Chomsky 1999). Within this context, Church’s behaviour could be read in terms of ‘interpassivity’ (Pfaller 2003). Or else, Church delegates the necessary but less valued and extremely dangerous aspects of manliness to Barney and his crew who in his place execute what needs to be done (Kuldova 2016). By doing so, he satisfies still widely accepted standards and rituals of masculinity (Pyke 1996) but without risking his own privileged life (Kuldova 2016). Presenting Church as a bureaucratic weakling, who does not do much more than paper pushing but also stands representative for dominant masculinity, is used to further underline the true manliness of Barney and his team (Pyke 1996). More importantly, however, when Church, provoked and purged by Barney’s remark, later in the narrative reclaims his maleness by joining into the battle, his behaviours marks a victory of marginalised masculinity over the new effete ideal and a defeat of neoliberal ideology.

This criticism of the neoliberal understanding of masculinity is also transparent in *The Expendables*, when Viena is portrayed as an island which has been infected by the evils of neoliberalism and is close to complete destruction by exploitation. It therefore does not surprise when General Garza says: ‘We will kill this American disease!’ (Stallone 2010, 87:39) but it is also a clear and explicit declaration of war against neoliberalism in a U.S. American action film. In *The Expendables 2*, ideology criticism is less pronounced and largely replaced by elements of humour and satire discussed above. However, the antagonist Villain is once again like Monroe motivated solely by greed for money and power and characterised as bare of any morals or human traits. He is therefore an embodiment of a socio-economic system that values profit and productivity above everything else (Featherstone and Wernick 1995, Chomsky 1999, Harvey 2007).

The ideology criticism in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* could be viewed as a variation on the genre typical staging of the protagonist against the state or the bureaucracy linked to the state which underlines his image of being a true man (Tasker 1993a). However, in my view, the ideology criticism of *The Expendables* is too blunt and explicit to be simply attributed to genre conventions. In fact, the story would have worked as well without lashing out on neoliberal financial capitalism. I believe that the all than positive depiction of the perversions of a neoliberal system in *The Expendables* is carried over to *The Expendables 2*, even though the socio-political criticism is here characterised by a lighter, easier tolerable and perhaps more commercially usable style.

If both films are seen as a critical comment on neoliberal financial capitalism, then the films criticise the very system the apparent obvious portrayal of macho masculinity and successful ageing in both films is based on. Consequently, both films are characterised by the ambiguity of, on the one hand, enforcing and communicating powerful cultural narratives of ageing and masculinity while on the other hand, questioning and critically reflecting on the socio-economic structure these hegemonic cultural narratives are informed by.

### *Exaggeration and Humour*

Both films, *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*, present audiences with an extreme exaggeration of action, speed, violence and brutality. Some scholars explain this phenomenon by suggesting that in screen culture masculinity and its dominance and privilege can only be maintained into old age by showing older men to brutally subordinate everyone and everything around them and by placing them amidst very bad people (Chivers 2011, Peterson 2011, Thompson 2006). I believe that it is precisely this exaggeration that simultaneously mocks and questions the very genre and socio-cultural customs it reflects.

The sheer amount and size of muscles, motorbikes, corpses and general destruction in both films but particularly in *The Expendables 2* is so much over the top that one cannot help but be amused. While *The Expendables* is still characterised by a more serious

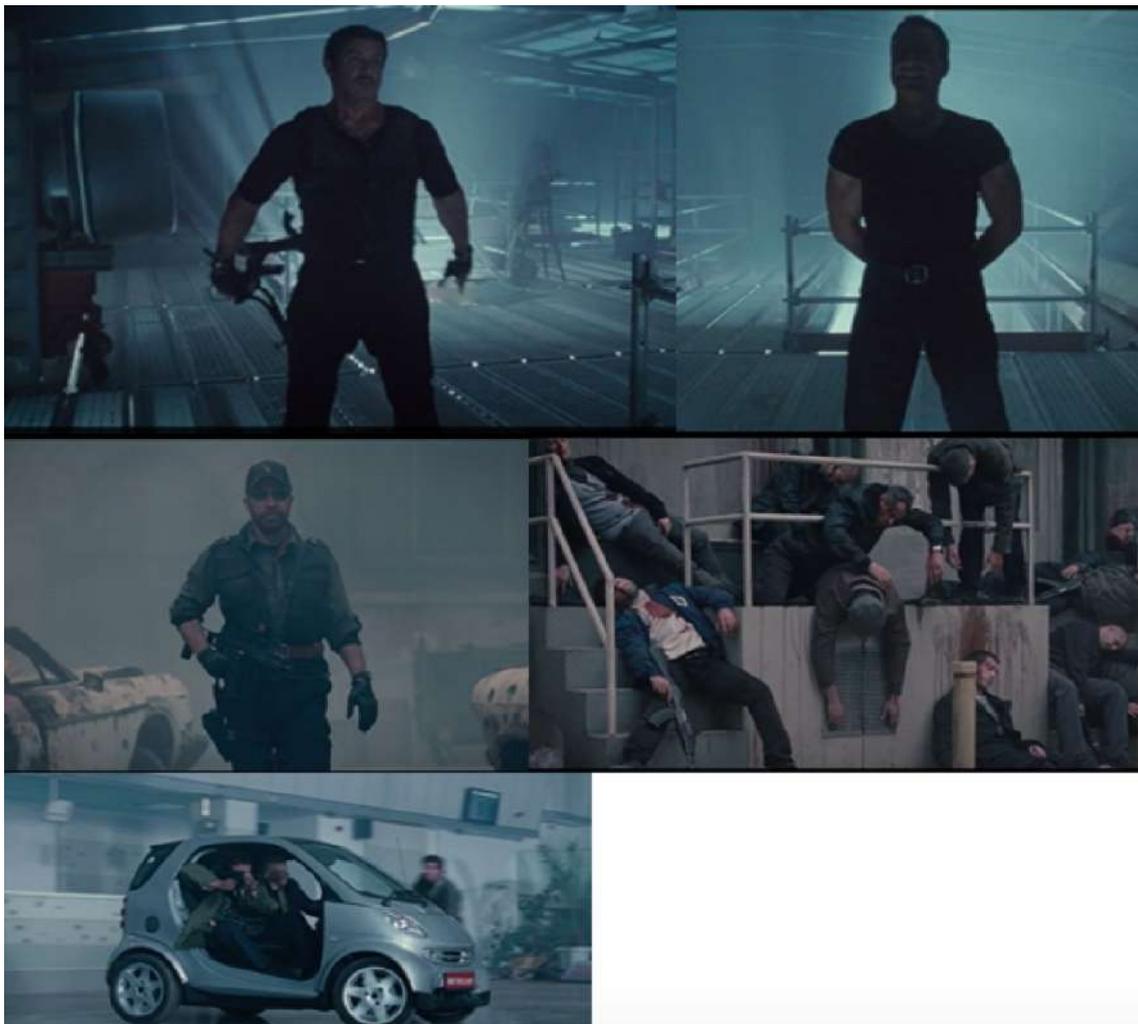


Figure 7: A man has got to do what a man has got to do ... Source: (West 2012).

undertone which includes elements of film noir, *The Expendables 2* is clearly in parts veering towards an action comedy. Humorous scenes are not just established by reference to the earlier performances of Trench (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in the *Terminator* series but particularly by playing on the hyper-masculine and hyper-muscular image of the actors. Two of the most brutal scenes in *The Expendables 2*, the slaughter of Villains assassins in the old army base and the killing of Villain, are both staged to mimic the classical western scenes of the 50s which is funny but also highlights the outdatedness of these men. Similarly amusing is watching Trench and Mr Church use a SMART, a modern but very small car, which is clearly not made for their body frame, to chase the bad guys.

These humorous elements as well as the excess of brutality, destruction and violence in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* can be interpreted as highlighting the need for reinstating the very type of archaic masculinity showcased in a world where not many things are going right (Jeffords 1994). However, they also allow for alternative readings of the hegemonic masculinity model communicated in both films.

#### *Old Men & Young Women*

Alternative readings of the films are also supported by the portrayal of women in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2*. Hollywood action films typically portray men as active while women are staged as passive subjects who need male protection and rescue (Tasker 2002, 1993b). Although both films are typical examples for the revival of the tough-guy action films of the 80s (Boyle and Brayton 2012) and female characters are therefore a rare phenomenon, archetypically much younger than most male protagonists and very attractive (Lauzen 2015, Tasker 2012), when they appear they are predominantly neither passive nor weak. They follow in the footsteps of Ripley in *Alien*, Lara Croft or Sarah Connor in *Terminator* and are staged as resourceful, active and physically as well as mentally strong heroines whose muscularity and behaviour match and sometimes outperform their male counterparts' (Tasker 2002, 1993b). The muscular, physically and mentally strong and aggressive action heroines could be viewed as gender transvestites or, in other words, as men in a female body (Clover 1993, Johnson 1994, Creed 1996). Given the fact that most scriptwriters, directors, producers etc. in Hollywood were and still are men, there is surely some truth in this perception of the female action hero (Follows 2014).

However, if gender is understood as a social construction, assigning attributes such as muscularity, aggression, mental and physical strength to men is simply a convention, yet another cultural narrative (Butler 2011). Action heroines can therefore be seen as transgressing the conventional binary of weak, passive and objectified women and strong, dominant and active men (Hills 1999). In my view, the contextualisation of these modern heroines reflects a changing cultural narrative of femininity. It is my argument that the portrayal of women in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* is largely informed by neoliberal ideology – an ideology in which the value of the individual is determined by his or her productivity and consumption power (Gergen and Gergen 2000, Chomsky 1999). As such, the conventional binary of active men versus passive women is overwritten by a storyline transmitting that gender, age, social class or race are insignificant if one is productive and useful to neoliberal society (Cruikshank 2013, Gergen and Gergen 2000). Although the partly genre untypical depiction of women

might also owe to targeting women audiences, I believe that it hints at cracks in the portrayal of the seemingly straightforward tough guy masculinity which needs submissive women to continuously reinstate male dominance (Chivers 2011).

## Conclusion

Neoliberalism, the socio-economic system dominating the western world today, is based on three main pillars: a free markets, productivity and consumerism (Kotz 2002). As a result, neoliberalism worships productivity, speed and efficiency. Within this setting it follows that our cultural understanding of older age and related potential physical and mental decline leading to unproductiveness and less efficient performance is negatively connoted and that youth is paid the highest tribute since it enables production and consumption at the same time. Although men are, without a doubt, judged less on the basis of their appearance and it might therefore be easier for them to avoid social exclusion, in my view and contrary to some scholars (Cruikshank 2013, Addison 2010), ageing is not a gender specific phenomenon (Arber, Davidson, and Ginn 2003, Featherstone and Wernick 1995, Hearn 1995). Neoliberal society is mainly controlled by young and effective men who represent, maintain and reproduce the current hegemonic masculinity ideal of patriarchal dominance (Griffin 2005). Male ageing and resultant physical and psychological changes often lead to a severe reduction of the privileged male status (Chivers 2011). This is particularly true for men whose employment is largely dependent on physical strengths which naturally diminishes which age. Consequently they often 'become dependent on the state and on the younger men who control it' (Spector-Mersel 2006, 77). Thus, the hegemonic cultural narratives of ageing not only lead to social marginalisation and segregation of women but also of men.

Within this context, *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* are by far no rebellious piece of filmic work which calls old and young to arms to fight against neoliberal views of ageing and masculinity. There can be no doubt that both films are by and large commercial products aimed at making the highest possible profit. They are a result of being produced in Hollywood for the mass market and thus follow conventional, easily understandable and sellable cultural narratives. Both films consequently support a view of ageing and masculinity which is deeply rooted in the western socio-cultural and political system of neoliberalism and which can be summarised as follows: as long as one is productive one is valuable to society. Successful ageing in *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* is resultantly defined as an individual and controllable fight against ageing aimed at staying fit, self-reliant, productive and, above all, youthful as long as possible.

Successful ageing is in both films skilfully interwoven and contrasted with hegemonic narratives linking ageing to decline since the older age of the main cast cannot be ignored entirely but more importantly since their victorious fight against ageing then becomes even more pronounced and admirable. Notwithstanding this, *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* also allow for alternative readings by explicitly portraying neoliberal financial capitalism as inhumane and unjust in *The Expendables* and by mocking the cultural narratives of ageing and masculinity the depiction of the characters is based on in *The Expendables 2*. This socio-cultural criticism might be a result of the films being directed and written by men in the last third of their lives who surely are not only aware of the challenges involved in ageing but also have realised that being

old has an effect on one's social status and treatment often leading to marginalisation. However, it could also very well be based on trying to 'pimp up' the quite conventional pattern of action films so as to appeal to younger audiences. It is therefore hard to tell if and to what extent *The Expendables* and *The Expendables 2* really aim at challenging dominant narratives of ageing and masculinity and thereby facilitate a more differentiated and realistic understanding of the process of male ageing.

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## Article

# Extreme Losers

## On Excess and Profitless Expenditure of Male Gamblers

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**Abstract** The essay looks at male gambling by investigating it as a form of resistance to the utilitarian values which lie at the base of the market logic. Excess is viewed as a central notion in opposition to that of utility. Far from minimising the negative impact of excessive gambling on society and individuals, this contribution attempts to go beyond an analysis based on the categories of pathology and expenditure. Through excess, the pathological gambler unveils the symbolic and arbitrary ideology of capitalism which sees economic success as a sign of election or a choice whereby money is used not as an investment or to access to goods and services, but 'wasted'. The article attempts to answer the following research question: How does excess manifest in male gambling practices? Risk factors for extreme gambling are analysed, with a particular focus on the relationship between gambling and masculinity. Gambling locations are studied and understood as facilitators of excess, while the life stories of pathological gamblers discussed. The paradoxical ambivalence of gambling practices is highlighted: on the one hand a form of domination of the subordinate classes, on the other an opportunity to resist through an anti-utilitarian act.

**Keywords** gambling, excess, ideology, masculinity, utilitarianism, pathological gambling

And every gambler knows that to lose  
Is what you're really there for  
(U2, *Every Breaking Wave - In: «Songs of Innocence», 2014*)

It is a cold winter afternoon in Rivolta D'Adda, a small town 30 kilometres west of Milan. Gianni is what the medical and psychological literature defines as a 'pathological gambler,' someone who is unable to resist the impulse to feed the slot machines. He is now in a clinic ward, the only one of this kind in Italy, where compulsive gamblers receive residential care for a 5-week period and are treated both pharmacologically and psychologically. He has agreed to tell me his story to aid my gambling research. 'After buying a bar,' he says, 'I started playing the [slot] machines. You keep playing, you keep playing. What happens to you then? When you lose, you want to recover [the money]. The more you gamble, the more you will gamble. It's a chain that has begun and doesn't end anymore.'

Gianni, aged 62, lives in a familiar context of substance abuse. His 34-year-old son is addicted to cocaine and alcohol; his wife is an alcoholic. Excess is a keyword defining his current state, an excess of financial losses due to gambling. He has been forced to close down his business, an excess of his addiction to a behaviour that is responsible for deteriorated relationships with family members. He is also a male, and as most literature on the



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topic shows, men are the most exposed to compulsive and pathological gambling – even if female addiction is rapidly growing.

This essay looks at male gambling not only by investigating it as a form of risk-taking behaviour, but also as a form of resistance to the utilitarian values which lie at the base of the market logic. Excess is viewed as a central notion in opposition to the notion of utility. Far from minimising the negative impact of excessive gambling on society and individuals, this contribution attempts to go beyond such an analysis based solely on the categories of pathology and expenditure. Through excess, the pathological gambler unveils the symbolic and arbitrary ideology of capitalism (Bjerg 2009) which sees economic success as a sign of election or a choice whereby money is used not as an investment or access to goods and services, but ‘wasted.’ What if this excessive behaviour were also a way to resist capitalistic and market values, such as capital accumulation and commodification of time? An answer might be found by investigating how excess manifests in male gambling practices.

To address these issues, I used two complementary ethnographic methods. Firstly, I conducted a three-month ethnographic observation in 23 gambling locations in Milan’s metropolitan area, including Bingo halls, bars, tobacco shops, slot rooms and betting rooms, in an effort to understand how space enhances a spiral of excess. I then interviewed 10 male extreme gamblers (part of a larger sample including women) using a ‘life-story approach’ (Bertaux 1981), conducting non-directive dialogues with an unstructured outline and lasting between 1 and 2 hours each. The interviewees were selected from gamblers taking part in care pathways offering medical and/or psychological assistance in private or public structures. This allowed the categorisation as pathological gamblers in a scientific sense – the extreme degree of ‘intensity’ in a scale that comprises the recreational gambler (prone to perform the games as a social activity) and the problem gambler (the condition before the disease, where the player starts losing control over his behaviour) (American Psychiatric Association 2013; for further gambler typologies see Blaszczynski 2000, Lewy 1994, Reith 2007). The interviews focused on three main areas: (a) the ‘education’ of gamblers, in the broad sense of the persons, events and circumstances that led them to excessive gambling; (b) their concrete practices, ranging from gambling-related routine activities to the evolution of their ‘career’ through social, problem and pathological gambling; (c) the relationship between gambling and the personal and familial context; (d) finally, the reflexive sphere. The interviewees were asked to remember the period of their life affected by addictive behaviour in retrospect and to assess it in terms of future perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

The article attempts to answer the following research question: How does excess manifest in male gambling practices? Section 1 will analyse risk factors for extreme gambling with a particular focus on the relationship between gambling and masculinity. Section 2, in the effort to go beyond an analysis of gambling based solely on the categories of pathology and expenditure, will connect the phenomenon to the notion of excess. Gambling locations as facilitators of excess are the subject of Section 3, while

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<sup>3</sup> The research was partly funded by a not-for-profit organisation, Fondazione per la Sussidiarietà, which financed the ethnographic observation of gambling sites. The in-depth interviews were financed independently and the research was conducted between 2014 and 2017.

Section 4 takes into consideration the life stories of pathological gamblers to show the concrete manifestations of excess in gambling behaviour. The last and conclusive Section will underline the paradoxical ambivalence of gambling practices, on the one side a form of domination of the ‘really inferiors’ (Nibert 2000), on the other an opportunity to resist through an anti-utilitarian act - wasting money.

Listening to male gamblers’ views and experiences allowed me to come closer to the object of study and, more precisely, to the depths of excess in the lives of compulsive gamblers. In my opinion, even the impressive statistics on the phenomenon usually fail to achieve this goal, as they may be misleadingly used by the ‘bank’ (the state and the concessionaires) to support arguments that pathological gambling is under control and is statistically insignificant. On the contrary, this qualitative research meant that the researcher had to listen to the subjective meanings that gamblers ascribe to their behaviour and the huge consequences it has on their own lives, as well as those of their family members. These subjective histories are therefore better suited for the presentation of a portrait of gambling as an excess than the large amount of statistics generally used to describe the phenomenon.



Figure 1. A video lottery store in Magenta, Milan metropolitan area. The store occupies the major part of the ground floor in a residential building close to the city hospital, a bus stop and a high school. The glasses are obscured with figures of the games (on the left) and stereotypical images of casino nightlife (on the right), such as a man smoking a cigar and playing a machine under the complacent gaze of a young woman.

### **Gambling and Masculinity**

Problem and pathological gambling are the subjects of a wide medical, psychological and criminological literature, reinforcing the negative view of extreme gambling. The approaches rely on the notion of a pathological ‘addiction,’ a problem associated not only with massive and distorted use of a substance (drug or alcohol), but also with a

behaviour repeated uncontrollably because it is dictated by an urgent and coercive need for satisfaction (Pani and Biolcati 2006). This form of addiction is characterised, from a clinical point of view, by compulsiveness due to the irresistible impulse to gamble, a loss of control and inability to limit the game, and a continuation of the gaming, despite the problems that it generates to the gambler.

Psychological studies of pathological gambling have mainly focused on predisposing factors, such as the presence of gamblers in one's family or tragic events, and by drawing an identikit of the hardest cases. The majority of these are men over 30 years old, unmarried, with little education and an early experience as gamblers (see Volberg 1996, Chalmers and Willoughby 2006; Dickson et al. 2008). However, definitive conclusions are difficult to formulate because the individual attitude to gambling is deeply influenced by socio-cultural variables. The player's profile can be very different from state to state. The correlation between pathological gambling and substance abuse has been equally investigated, and it is suggested that persons prone to substance addictions are more likely to gamble.

The very broad set of risk factors leading to addiction (Welte et al. 2004, Raylu and Oei 2002, Johansson et al. 2009) may be categorised into three main areas (Inserm 2008). The first includes the factors related to the *subject of addiction*, i.e. the type of game (the quicker the bet-to-pay interval, the higher the frequency and the risk), the initial gain (a high win leads to problem gambling), and the tools and context (for example, the anonymity and lack of social contact in online gaming are considered risk factors), as well as the offer and availability of games. Comorbid disorders such as alcohol and drug abuse (Spunt et al. 1998) also play a role in increasing extreme gambling behaviour. The second group includes *environmental and context* factors, ranging from cultural and religious (influence of obligations, religious restrictions) to economic and socio-educational ones (parents and family context, socio-economic status). Low levels of education may be linked to cognitive distortions, for example, an illusion of control, erroneous perceptions. *Individual factors* form the last area. These involve gender (Feigelman et al. 1995, Ladouceur et al. 1999, Volberg et al. 2001, Bondolfi et al. 2000), age (Shaffer and Hall 1996), as well as genetic and behavioural factors (Goudriaan et al. 2004, Walthers 2002) and the personal family and biography.

For our purposes, it is relevant to note that being a man is commonly recognised as a prominent risk factor. The number of male gamblers (whether social, problem or pathological) is higher than that of women in any inquiry into gambling diffusion, even if the female tendency to gamble is reportedly on the rise (Wardle et al. 2007, Abbott, Volberg and Ronnberg 2004, Davis and Avery 2004). The difference is also qualitative, as gender also seems to affect the choice of gambling type. Women prefer games of chance such as lotteries, slot machines and bingo (Grant and Kim 2002, Potenza et al. 2001), while men are over-represented in strategic games requiring skills (together with luck), such as poker or sports betting (Ibáñez et al. 2003, Wenzel and Dahl 2008, Ladd and Petry 2002).

The feminisation of gambling should not lead us to forget that men generally remain more likely than women to take part in gambling activities (Volberg 2003). Central to this is the role of space in the 'social construction' of gender (Umiker-Sebeok 1996).

Many gambling sites are still gendered spaces populated mainly by men, a factor reinforcing and reproducing the gender distinctions that both gamblers and scholars take for granted. Sport-based games such as betting are often associated with male fandom, as in the case of football supporters (Raymen and Smith 2017). The development of online gambling has created new gendered environments with visual and social constructions empowered by ads and thematic magazines (see Jouhki, in this issue, on the hyperreal masculinity in online poker advertisement).

In acknowledging the state of the art of the literature on gambling and gender, I am fully aware of the feminist critique of problem gambling research (Mark and Lesieur 1992), which denounces the fact that the vast majority of studies has been conducted on male subjects and in male-dominated sites, as well as the fact that categorising male games as skill games may lead to an ideological interpretation of gender differences. When such skills are referred to, we implicitly mean 'male skills' or skills developed by male gamblers. For this reason, we make clear that the male universe is the subject of the research, and that its conclusions cannot be generalised to the female or total population.

### **Gambling and Excess**

Gender is an important topic in contemporary gambling studies, not only given the underestimation of female gambling. Excess and utility, on the contrary, are not, or to be more precise, have been subsumed and then concealed by psychiatric and economic language, the former (excess) being referred to as problem, compulsive, or pathological gambling, and the latter (utility) reduced to the behaviour of the economic gambler, a person who plays with the rational intent of making profit. Excess is, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, 'an amount that is more than acceptable, expected, or reasonable.' An extent or amount which is immoderate and extreme, which goes beyond what is socially prescribed and results in what is proscribed or explicitly forbidden by shared values of a certain society, if not by formal norms. When used as a noun, it is synonymous with *extra*. Excess cannot be referred to without implying a connection to the *extreme*.

A better understanding of the notion of excess requires a brief consideration of what is usually understood to be its opposite, namely *utility*. After being recast in Darwinian evolutionism as the idea of survival utilities and in Marx's emphasis on useful labour as the mainspring of the human condition, the principle of utility remains of crucial importance in contemporary thought. Utilitarianism is a theory which considers the best action to be the one that is best able to maximise utility. It is based on Bentham's notion of utility as 'that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness' (Bentham 1789, 2). According to Pawlett, the classical sociology of Marx, Durkheim and Weber, even while criticising utilitarian theory, did not break with the idea of slavery to utility and rationality as forces driving human action (Pawlett 1997, 94). The principle of utility has not been radically challenged in contemporary mainstream sociology either, creating a juxtaposition between utility and excess where the latter notion is seen as a negative phenomenon to be contained. No example is more appropriate than the German sociologist Beck's analysis of excess in terms of

calculation of risk and security (Beck1992). In coining the term ‘risk society’ he referred to dangers created by globalisation such as radioactivity, pollution and unemployment, issues capable of generating concern in people from all classes and, consequently, strategies to insulate oneself from these risks.

The contemporary age offers a variety of examples of the rise of excess. These are not confined to cases of extremism inspired by religion or ideology but instead are embodied in the everyday behaviour of people. They include the political populism which leads to the election of excessive leaders such as Donald Trump or an excessive and ultra-conservative reaction to socio-political problems (voting for Brexit or supporting xenophobic and anti-European parties). The excessive power of Internet oligopolies (Dean 2010) such as Facebook, Amazon and Google should also be mentioned, with their collection and ownership of an excess of data, a more apt term instead of the polite scientific language which calls the enormous amounts involved Big Data. Today’s art market and the art auction world, providing an arena in which huge sums of money can be blatantly consumed (Crosthwaite 2011), offer another apt illustration of hyperbolic exaggeration.

‘At times it has appeared,’ Pawlett notes, ‘that excess, rather than utility, has become the dynamic of contemporary social transformation, that the endless pursuit of utility has driven society into excess’ (Pawlett 1997, 96). If we limit our argument to the examples listed above, it is no surprise that the supporters of Trump, Brexit and Marine Le Pen view the output of their favourite as rational definitions of economic and social issues. Due to the lack of concern shown by users when they provide information about themselves while pursuing personal utilities, including the construction and maintenance of social networks of friends and creating an appealing online persona to promote their own activities and skills, Facebook is allowed to act as ‘the biggest surveillance-based enterprise in the history of mankind’ (Lancaster 2017, 10). This is why ‘utility and excess must not be conceived as binary oppositions, as mutually exclusive’ (Pawlett 1997, 95).

Gambling is an apt terrain for an investigation of the controversial relationship between utility and excess. On the one hand, gambling is a phenomenon characterised by many nuances ranging from excess in problem and pathological gambling, to recreational activity, a socially acceptable behaviour. On the other hand, it highlights a moral definition of excess whereby gamblers who have ‘lost control’ are labelled as pathological, yet the term used by the state when increasing the possibility to gamble, through more games, more gaming sites and an increased frequency of extractions, is *legalisation*. Gambling, then, reveals that excess is declared or not depending on the agent who exceeds. I term this the social hierarchy of excess gambling. Losing is a noble action when performed by wealthy classes as a form of ostentatious expenditure through games of skill that assume that players are skilled, while it is ignoble when associated with lower socio-economic groups addicted to ‘games of chance.’

According to Bataille’s vision of excess, the modern calculation of utility is not able to provide a full sense of existing as a human being. The market economy acts as the ideological framework legitimating utility as a principle of social action; manifestations of excess are discouraged, if not explicitly limited. Bataille’s attention focusses in

particular on unproductive and profitless expenditure. In his influential essay, *The Notion of Expenditure* (Bataille 1985, 116-129), the French intellectual sees utility as theorised by classical approaches to be something to be aimed at because it provides pleasure, 'but only in a moderate form, since violent pleasure is seen as pathological' (ibid., 116). If this *material* pleasure is reduced to acquisition and conservation of goods, its role is that of a concession instead of a diversion. It is tolerated when productive, or at least when it does not conflict with productive and utilitarian needs. *Non-productive expenditure* is identified as the opposite of any rational consumption, and consequently denied and stigmatised. But, as 'human activity is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation' (Bataille 1985, 118), unproductive expenditure remains a part of the behaviour of any social agent.

Bataille's list of 'useless' activities includes 'luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality)' (Bataille 1985, 118). Unproductivity, in these examples, lies in the lack of ends and the enormity and irrationality of the loss. As to gambling, cited early by the author, 'the loss of insane sums of money is set in motion in the form of wagers' (Bataille 1985, 118), so that gamblers are led to losses disproportionate to their possessions. What they betray is the utilitarian faith in the principle of balanced accounts. This faith claims to compensate expenditure with acquisition. Excess gamblers destroy and do not create any capital, winning is merely a result either accidental or statistically unlikely action whose expected consequence is losing. The win is the apparent utilitarian goal of a process where economic rationale is achieved only from the perspective of the cashier, in line with the refrain 'the house always wins,' and not from that of the bettor. Fighting a perpetual battle to balance previous losses, 'players can never retire from the game' (Bataille 1985, 123) and are 'at the mercy of a need for limitless loss' (Bataille 1985, 118).

There is no doubt that unproductive expenditure may be viewed as functional if, in a sociological framework, it is interpreted as an ostentatious form of leisure class consumption (Veblen 1989). This is the type of gambling accurately described by Dostoyevsky in *The Gambler*, where the money wasted by the aristocracy and wealthy classes is a means of displaying their fortune. However, the rise of gambling in recent decades has mainly affected the middle and lower socio-economic groups, where the Veblenian-flavoured ostentatious loss is replaced by a different form of profitless expenditure. Such an excess represents, for these consumers of the entertainment industry, both a trap and a symbolic revolt. Many scholars and journalists denounce gambling as a trap because they claim that lower socio-economic groups are 'deceived' by a coalition between the State and commercial concessionaires. This alliance has created a market able to exploit the citizen's desire for social and economic redemption through the chance of a better life paid for by a scratch card or a coin inserted into a gaming machine. Actually, the word 'deception' risks becoming misleading here as it implies that these groups neither recognise nor understand the mendacity that lies at the base of the gaming industry, and the promise of a state of well-being that cannot be attained. It would be more correct to state that it is an ideological trap where gamblers continue to lose money and to take pleasure in it precisely because they know exactly the system works. As Kuldova points out, 'knowledge has very limited power to unsettle ideology' (Kuldova 2016, 99) and its efficiency in material and everyday practices.

Gambling, in its extreme, compulsive and pathological forms, is also a revolt, it enhances a rebellion because it represents a direct challenge to the value of money and to the rational principles of the *homo aeconomicus*.



Figure. 2. A bar in the centre of Milan, close to Piazza Duomo. Scratch cards are displayed together with candies, with food offered nearby as another commodity good

### Places of Excess

Excess gambling in the form of Bataille's non-productive expenditure takes place behind closed or partially closed doors (gambling halls, hidden corners of public bars). This spatial separation may support the idea that excess has disappeared from public space – or at least that the designers of those spaces try to confine excess to a more private sphere. The word 'designer' is used here in the broad sense and includes those social agents who contribute to the establishment of both the structural features and the social meaning of the space. This means not only the gaming industry professionals responsible for the architecture of the rooms, the creation of gambling environments where both light and sounds are studied to lock the gambler in a timeless bubble, the design of the machines and the elaboration of the game schemes able to create a compulsive relationship between the individual and the machine (Schüll 2012), but also legislators who design regulations inspired by the protection of public health (for example, the placement of video lotteries in an area inaccessible to minors and separate from the non-gambling public, or the use of opaque glass to obscure the 'dangerous' behaviour from public view). Within the public space of a bar or a store, a private zone is created for compulsive games as slot machines, while what is perceived as 'recreational

gambling' may take place in openly. The designers seem to be concerned that the privacy and habits of certain categories of gamblers are protected from scrutiny, and that the public role of a person does not include the exhibition of an addiction to machines. The boundary between the public and private realms, progressively removed over the last century (Sennett 1977), is artificially rebuilt by the gambling industry through the architecture of the space.

To have contact with gambling as a real phenomenon, we must first access gambling sites. With this in mind, I conducted a three-month ethnography in 23 Milanese locations where gambling took place to learn about the world of gamblers by observing their activities, and to assess to what extent space can enhance excessive behaviour. Despite the popular image of the bright nightlife in Las Vegas, the contemporary gambling industry generates its main profits not in casinos but through a ubiquitous and capillary urban network of shops and corners where gambling has become a daily activity rather than an occasional and adventurous escape. This example naturally excludes the new online gaming industry – a world that is not investigated in this essay, but that is a prominent part of contemporary gambling (Williams et al. 2012).

This landscape is a product of the progressive legalisation of gambling in most European states over the last 30 years. Its evolution in Italy may be divided into three phases (Pedroni 2014, 76-79). The first involved a drawn-out childhood period from 1946 with the launch of *schedina*, a popular prognostic game based on football matches, followed in the mid-80s by a restricted gambling industry and a clear distinction between gambling venues such as casinos and racecourses, and places of daily contact, bars and tobacconists for example, with little or no presence of games. The second phase may be termed the unruly adolescence. This period of maturation was characterised by legalisation and the progressive introduction of new games, including slot machines, video lotteries and online products, until the beginning of the 2010s. The Italian normative model which emerged from this process is characterised by a strong presence of the State as a regulator, even if gambling is actually managed by private concessionaries within a competitive and government-licensed market (Pedroni 2014, 71). This is in effect a perfect example of the neoliberal alliance between the State and private companies, where the search for a mutual benefit has shaped a legislation that other European countries are imitating. This is the premise of the third and more adult phase, whose maturity is visible both in the economic structure of gambling (a flourishing industry supported by a State interested in maximising fiscal revenues) and in the growing awareness of its social costs. The available data on incidence reveals that more than half (54%) of the general population aged 15-74 gamble at least once a year (Serpelloni 2013), while problem gamblers in Italy are estimated at between 1.3% and 3.8% of the population (767,000 to 2,296,000 adults), and pathological gamblers vary from 0.5% to 2.2% (302,000 to 1,329,000 persons) (Dipartimento Antidroga, 2015). Anti-gambling organisations and local administrations are pressuring for a public debate on (and against) gambling, and the first restrictive law (Balduzzi Decree) was presented by the Health Ministry in 2012 (Pedroni 2014, 78), accompanied by regional laws approved by 16 out of 21 Italian local authorities (19 regions and two autonomous provinces) and aimed at combating the proliferation of gambling sites.



Figure 3. Entrance of a BT in Milan, Piazza Piemonte. The space is dominated visually by evidence of gambling, ranging from the names of concessionaries and products (Sisal, Intralot, Gratta&Vinci) to two huge posters, on the left and on the right, claiming that a win of up to €500,000 is possible with a single scratch card.

Gambling has become an everyday presence in Italy, especially after the legalisation policies promoted by both centre-left and centre-right governments in the 1990s and in the 2000s, thanks to (or because of) two types of venues. Bars and tobacconists (BTs) are of the first type. Accessible to any member of the public, they are the most visible proof that gambling has become a ubiquitous phenomenon within consumer culture (Raymen and Smith 2017). The second are specialised outlets (SOs), such as Bingo halls, slot rooms and betting rooms, and are locations devoted exclusively to gambling and forbidden to minors. SOs do not contradict the trend towards the ubiquity and normalisation of gambling as a mainstream entertainment, since they are widely spread throughout both urban and rural areas. Far from being radically isolated from everyday reality, as casinos or racecourse are, they paradoxically make an escape from routine part of the daily experience. BTs licensed for the sale of games represent a hybrid environment in which the supply of food, beverages and tobacco is found side-by-side with a range of lotteries, scratch cards and bets. Upon entering a BT, I often noted that the visual elements related to gambling (ads, walls full of scratch cards, corners with slot machines etc.) were more prominently displayed than other goods and services sold by the shop. 'It is only later that one understands that the site is also a tobacco store', I wrote in one of my fieldnotes.

It is true that SOs are recognisable from outside as sites for gambling, but at the same time it is not possible externally to know the details of what is happening inside. Dark glass facades and solid walls prevent citizens from seeing gamblers and their activities. This ‘protection’ means that passers-by are spared the sight of the actual gambling practices. However, such concealment creates an ideal environment for the excessive behaviour of whoever is inside the premises.

The differences between BFs and SOs may also be highlighted in the following five juxtapositions:

- (a) *BT disorder vs. SO maniacal order and cleanness.* The former has an atmosphere of familiarity due to the coexistence of games, cafeteria and tobacco products, together with a sensory hyper-stimulation through screens and loudspeakers tuned to a radio or sound source. In the latter, the space is extensive and has been organised in order to avoid overlapping or confusion between rooms dedicated to gambling and the refreshments areas.
- (b) *The small spaces of a BT (with overlapping areas) vs. the expansive spaces of a SO.* The spatial organisation in BTs requires consumers to interpret where the different closely placed services (gambling, food, tobacco) are, while SOs offer the freedom to circulate, inviting people to follow the shorter route to reach a specific product or service.
- (c) *BT naturalness vs. SO artificiality.* The chaos in bars appears synonymous with a natural and spontaneous environment. The artificial lighting, cautious design, and consistency with the brand image of the particular gambling concessionaire make an SO a space separated completely from the flow of everyday life.
- (d) *BT noise vs. SO silence.* An analysis of auditory stimuli underlines the contrast between the raised voices and normal, day-to-day confusion of BTs and the aseptic extra-ordinary dimension of SOs. Here, sounds such as coins won in the slot machines sometimes interrupt silence, but the background noises of city life are far away.
- (e) *BT mobility vs. SO stability:* BTs are dynamic sites with consumers entering and leaving non-stop, while gamblers in an SO stay longer, move less and remain focused on one activity at a time.

This description is a necessary premise in order to clarify the spatial landscapes offered to gamblers, and to make some assumptions on how the spaces of gambling may favour excess and profitless expenditure. This seems to be possible in at least three ways. Firstly, BTs as highly diffused stores make gambling ubiquitous. They allow an *everyday excess* made of seemingly limited bets, whereby the regular monthly sum may be a considerable amount. For example, I observed during my research that it was common for many retirees to spend more than €30 on scratch cards every morning. Secondly, SOs are constructed behind walls where playing is possible without the activity being visible from the outside. Social stigma is reduced and the passing of time is not perceived in these artificial places. They become ideal places for cultivating excess, and are even more captivating when devoted to highly compulsive games such as slot machines and video lotteries. The third aspect is a transverse dimension to both categories. The adolescence of gambling noted above was characterised, among other features, by the diffusion of games with a higher pay-out frequency. Lotto extractions

take place three times a week instead of weekly, *10eLotto* extractions occur every five minutes, and scratch cards and slot machines can be played at any time for an instantaneous win. In short, the games introduced or modified in the last 30 years have produced a shorter interval between purchase and win/loss, and subsequently between the first purchase and the next.

Dependency, in the form of a compulsion to gamble, is facilitated both by the availability of everyday opportunities to gamble and by the contexts capable of creating a kind of space-time bubble, a player's isolation from the flow of daily life. This is particularly evident in the case of slot machines which are in an isolated location in the marginal areas of BTs and along the walls in SOs combined with structural features offering visual stimulation and the sound of coins falling during wins, capable of creating a complete immersive experience. During my visit to a video lottery terminal site, a 65-year-old man sitting in front of a machine and holding a glass full of coins said 'Call me at 11 o'clock, as I should go home to have lunch.' His request to the shop owner demonstrated an awareness of his incapacity to maintain control, and the possibility of losing temporal cognition.



Figure 4. Slot machines and video lotteries in a Milanese gambling site, close to Viale Zara. Machines offering games defined as addictive are located in a separate room on the ground floor, while bingo (an example of recreational gambling usually not associated with the risk of addiction) is offered one floor higher.

### **Biographies of Excess**

If we assume that the observation of gambling sites is able to provide elements to understand how space can act as a facilitator of excess, then in-depth interviews with pathological gamblers may better illuminate players' reasons and practices. Adrenaline

is the most oft cited word used to describe the relationship between a gambler and games, and it is linked to both well-being, excitement and obsession.

If I don't play I don't feel well [laughs], it makes me feel good [...] The competition, the adrenaline rush when I see the results in front of me. As far as I am concerned, that is the reason to bet. (Fabio, M 48)

I liked playing because it was a challenge. (Edoardo, M 44)

This adrenaline rush is surprisingly not linked to a state of full enjoyment. The emotions observed in gambling sites, both positive and negative, are always moderate and controlled. 'When you win you feel satisfied, but not euphoric' (Fabio, M 48), and when one loses there is disappointment, not despair.

I have no happy memories of those afternoons in the bar, because I always left upset because whether you win or always lose, you are never happy. (Simone, M 63)

When I lost I felt a little bored, I wanted to change my life. I was so nervous and melancholic when I went home. (Raffaello, M 44)

In any interviewee's account there is a moment where a behaviour which appeared under control was subject to a progressive increase in frequency and number of bets, leading to a lack of control and a separation from reality.

I remember when I started, I was at the Cascina Gobba [tube station], where the machines are. I had stopped for a coffee [...] I paid with €5 and they gave me €4 change. There was someone playing the machines and I heard ti-ti-ti-ti-ti and all these coins fell out. I said to myself "Why not? What the Hell do I care, it's only €4." I put the money in, and a Bonus came up. I didn't even know what it was. It gave me €200! I said "This is better than working", if this happens every day [...] I went to the bar, and cashed the €200 Bonus. I put it into my pocket, went home and felt satisfied with myself. The next day I left home and went again because I take the metro there every day. I saw the machine and changed €50 [...] when I had finished I had won €200 plus what I had in my pocket, another €150. At that point I said to myself "Tomorrow I am coming earlier. I will give up work and come here." And that is how I started, coming every second day, and then I went somewhere else, and in the end a huge hole had formed. (Simone, M 63)

Similar stories mark the decline into excess gambling, an evolution which goes hand-in-hand with an alienation of the player who becomes totally immersed in a parallel universe.

I played the slots, I couldn't even tolerate someone standing behind me. I lived in another world and when I got home at night I was half mad, I didn't eat. (Simone, M 63)

I lost all my friends, especially in the end when I went out only to play. (Edoardo, M 44)

A player is alone [...] When you enter the world of gambling nothing else exists, you don't feel hungry, thirsty, you don't go to the toilet, don't drink, don't smoke... At that point you no longer exist, you're inside a shell. You play and that's all. (Attilio, M 54)

The dimension of excess appears to function as a separate realm, at least at the beginning of the pathological phase. Evidence can be found in interviewee's accounts describing the clear separation between every day and professional life, and the time devoted to gambling.

I went to work as normal, [but as soon as] I left work I had my routine appointment. (Simone, M 63).

I am a man people respect, I have 35 people who work for me and in 15 years I have never been accused of anything. But when I leave work I become another person. (Raffaello, M 44)

A man who plays games of chance is a man with three personalities—his work persona, which is respected by his clients, [as well as] the man who gambles, [...] and then there is the man who enters his home in the evening and has to account [to his family] for what he has done during the day. (Attilio, M 54)

However, in any story of excess gambling there comes a time when it is no longer possible to conceal the addiction, and the consequences for work and family begin to appear. The deterioration in family relationships ranges from the quality of everyday life ('When you gamble on-line you become one with the PC, with your smartphone, the TV, and therefore you have no time for your children nor your wife,' said Fabio, M 48) to separation from loved ones (the wife asks for a divorce, the children no longer speak to their father), not to mention lies and theft ('I asked my mother for her ATM card to collect her pension and I stole the money,' admitted Gianni, M 62. Similarly, Giorgio, M 57 said 'I was signatory on my mother's bank account, I took her money without telling her. Later I confessed because I was disgusted with myself.') These gamblers suffered from feelings of complete failure, and often regretted wasting their lives.

I threw away everything I have ever achieved as a man, as a carpenter, the faith everyone around me had in me. Perhaps I only imagine it, but I think that people now look at me very differently, I destroyed myself, I gambled away the chance to be a good father, which is what hurts most, I gambled away my chance to be a good husband. (Attilio, M 54).

The economic consequences are devastating. Every interviewed, without exception, reported debts of thousands of euro, mainly with banks and financial companies, together with an accumulation of other debts with private individuals ('I get between 30 to 40 phone calls a day, from people who want money from me,' Raffaello, M 44). Loss of business is another frequent issue in interviewees' accounts.

We had a bar and we had to close because of the debts. (Gianni, M 62)

I am self-employed, I had a car transport business with my brother... The problem began with the financial crisis in 2008, up until then gambling was just a pastime. [I told myself] I was playing to recover the money. [...] It came to the point where my brother noticed that I was taking money that was not mine...it was the company's money. (Edoardo, M 44)

Excess gambling may also lead to health and psychological problems.

I was under so much stress that I had 2 heart attacks. (Gianni, M 62)

I also tried to kill myself, I was riding my motor bike and I closed my eyes. (Raffaello, M 44)

For the purposes of this study, a gamblers' relationship with money is of particular interest. Every interviewee remembered their fall into excess as strongly associated with a lack of control over money and its value. The inner logic of excess gambling lies exactly here— money is no longer perceived and used as money. Gamblers are far beyond over-spending in an unproductive manner. The sums they spend/invest in gambling are undeniably disproportionate to their incomes. Moreover, a return to gambling after a significant loss does not serve the purpose of only recovering money, but rather that of rebalancing the account with the 'fates'. The rational part of the gambler perfectly knows he has no statistical chance of winning against the bank, but his need for excess keeps him gambling.

[I understood I had gone too far] when I ran out of money! [laughs] Because when you are at it you don't notice how much money you are spending, not even when it is €150 a day... The money has no value for you. There is no specific moment [when you understand you have lost control]. When you are immersed in it, it is as if you have been caught by an avalanche and you can't fight your way out. (Fabio, M 48)

I remember one day that I had gone to finish up a job, and they paid me €1,000. On the way home I found a gambling hall, I won €900 with €30... I then went to the video lotteries and I lost everything... proof that I had lost all control. And then I had to pay a supplier and borrow the money to pay him. (Gianni, M 62)

I spent more than half of my salary. (Simone, M 63)

I have had winnings of €3,000, 4,000 5,000, and in three days I had nothing left... if I had €100 in my pocket I wasted €100, if I had €1,000 in my pocket I would have wasted €1,000. (Edoardo, M 44)

You never get the money back; you keep falling till you hit rock bottom.  
(Simone, M 63)

The biographies I collected illustrate a recurring process where economic problems, once discovered by family members, lead to a familiar crisis. In parallel, the gambler is no longer able to hide his addiction from colleagues or employers, because the excess gambling begins to affect his performance in the workplace. Family and work complications make it obvious to the gambler that he has lost the control he thought he had over his gambling, and that a therapeutic pathway is needed to recover his social relationships. What I have described in few lines is a process which develops over many years, a period during which the gambler becomes familiar with excess through the negation of the value of the money he has spent in an unproductive manner. This is an implicit negation of the utilitarian values which characterise a productive and capitalist society, one where profitless activities are regarded as dysfunctional for individuals and society as a whole.

### **Extreme Losers**

Both excess and excessive gambling are cultural constructs where the definition is largely indebted to an epistemology of disease and disorder (Reith 2007, 37) as used in psychiatry. In fact, the term 'pathological gambler' was introduced by the American Psychiatric Association in its 1980 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-III, followed by two successive editions, DSM-IV and DSM-V), and is connoted by the presence of a set of 'symptoms' and measured through diagnostic tools.

Excess is an activity which may also have a further significance for our purposes. In Baudrillard's interpretation, excess is the result of the proliferation of the ideology of utility (Pawlett 1997, 197pp), a kind of reaction to the sovereignty of functional obligations.

Ours is a society founded on proliferation, on growth which continues even though it cannot be measured against any clear goals. An excrescential society whose development is uncontrollable, occurring without regard for self-definition, where the accumulation of effects goes hand in hand with the disappearance of causes. The upshot is gross systemic congestion and malfunction caused by hypertelia – by an excess of functional imperatives, by a sort of saturation. (Baudrillard 1993, 31).

In biology, hypertely is an extreme overdevelopment of an organ which then becomes disadvantageous and damaging to the animal concerned, an exaggerated degree of

growth not explainable by utility. Baudrillard coined *hypertelia* to describe the excessive degree of consumption and production not based on utility and observed within contemporary societies, where our needs and the objects we purchase to meet them are no longer related through their usefulness.

The paradox of excess gambling is grounded in its two-fold nature of entertainment and of reaction to utilitarianism. Gambling expanded within liberalised markets and became a mainstream leisure activity for consumers (Reith 1999, 2013). It is also a response or backlash to the hypertelic profit and utilitarian mentality. Whereas the utilitarian ideology prescribes useful and profitable activities, to invest money despite the evident statistical probability of loss is an act of resistance to the values of utilitarian and capitalistic society. Gambling may therefore be seen as a perfect example of the 'insubordinate function of free expenditure' in Bataille's words (Bataille 1985, 129), as well as a form of sovereignty of the Self over social constraints. This sovereignty, which 'constitutes the region formally exempt from self-interested intrigues to which the oppressed subject refers as to an empty but pure satisfaction' (Bataille 1985, 148), reveals the unwillingness to submit oneself to the household economy through a feeling of *superiority*, a moment where instead of serving life, life serves the individual. Curiously, excess gambling particularly demonstrates its potential as a tool of sovereignty in the most recent advertisement campaigns promoted by Italian gambling concessionaries, where the used keywords are 'safety' and 'responsibility' – an attempt by the industry to distance itself from the negative image of gambling (Pedroni 2016, Pedroni 2017). Consumers find it difficult to trust current marketing trends which present 'a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol' (Žižek 2004) and gamblers do not believe in gambling without risk, nor the 'decaffeinated' representations offered by advertising. On the contrary, they are eager to experience passion through excess and risk where individual forces are liberated in a state of excitation, rational laws of calculation are substituted by pseudo-rationality, unproductive values are created. Though it may seem a paradox, one true within the realm of intellectual argument and not linked with the reality of gambler behaviour, gambling functions as a liberation from the constraints of a market economy, where individuals are dominated. Pathological gamblers fail as citizens because they are not able to grasp the chances of personal growth offered by society, as husbands and parents because they cannot take care of their families, as consumers because they are unable to enjoy gambling as merely a form of pleasure and entertainment just as the commercial industry of gambling invites them to do. However, in extreme gambling, where money is no longer money (Bjerg 2009, Raymen and Smith 2017), a new sphere of action is created, excitation is freed and the illogical becomes logical.

The rational choice model underlying utilitarianism states that individual actions are the consequences of a motive. In line with this, excess gambling is irrational and, which is the same, immoral, both for an industrial society where it stands as an example of an unproductive activity, and a post-industrial consumerist one where the dysfunctional gambler fails as a consumer. The difference lies in the attitude toward recreational gambling, which is tolerated in the latter but not in the former. Despite this, one might argue that the excessive gambler is the *ultimate* consumer. As the only thing a gambler does is consume, their behaviour is in fact harmful to consumer society because they

overspend rapidly to the point of bankruptcy, while the *ideal* consumer maintains an ability to spend over time.

A seductive image of a process to describe excess gambling is that of *creative destruction*, not in the economic sense of a process of industrial mutation that revolutionises the economic structure from within (Schumpeter 2013), but as a desire to remove what came before in order to set up what will come next. Such a tension of opposing experiences, destructive and creative is typical of modernism (Harvey 1990, 10-13), and seems to act as the perversion of excessive gambling. An extreme behaviour destroys wealth, through endless losses, to create the illusion of a world ruled by non-utility laws. The interviewees illustrate this well when their debts have caused the failure of a family company or they have brought about their own destruction through non-stop slot machine gaming.

An approach oriented to viewing excessive gambling as an act of sovereignty also leads to a reconsideration of the notion of utility. Players appear to derive a form of pleasure while immersed in the act of gambling, despite the evidence of economic losses. This activity is deemed useless if utility is measured in terms of the (catastrophic) consequences of the gambler's behaviour, but has a usefulness if we take into consideration the utility of the whole process (Le Menestrel 2001). Gambling, in fact, may provide social rewards (Binde 2009, 16-18), such as prestige, in specific contexts where the excessive player measures themselves with other gamblers and, in Goffman's dramaturgical terms, attempts to favourably impress others by demonstrating skill (Goffman 1969).

Masculine gambling, when excessive, creates an extreme loser, one who is devoted to an expenditure so profitless and useless that money has no longer meaning as such, it is merely a medium to experience excess. Gambling has been often read as a mechanism of a social domination (Volberg and Wray 2007) and a tool for mass distraction and a relief valve for subordinate classes (Nibert 2000). What if a further function of gambling is a form of resilient consumption in which socially oppressed or marginalised individuals and groups may experience freedom, breaking the social constraints linked to utilitarian values by denying them through an extremely unproductive expenditure? Following Bataille's lexicon once again, such a function may be viewed in terms of a (momentary) recovery of sovereignty, where a compulsive, addictive, profitless, exaggerated (in short, excessive) session of gambling acts as a means to control the forces to which gamblers are submitted. Marginalised victims of neoliberal capitalism, economic failures unable to attain the material success they desire, they regain sovereignty through the destruction of economic capital. If money is, from a Marxist standpoint, the ultimate foundation of any social relationship and the goal of any productive activity, its destruction serves the double purpose of dismantling one's network ties and of denying capitalistic values, as clearly testified by the interviewees' biographies collected in this essay. Here lies the contradictory nature of gambling – the compulsive loss of control as defined under the psychiatric approach becomes, in the topsy-turvy world of gamblers, a way to take control by challenging the rules to which they feel subjugated in the utilitarian realm. When conceptualising gambling as submission, guilt and anxiety, the interviewees are expressing a retreat from an exceptional state of sovereignty and, through medical and psychological care, they are

regaining a condition of ‘normality’ where their past behaviour can only appear inappropriate. The rebellion and sovereignty are now in the past.

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## Article

# The Hyperreal Gambler

## On the Visual Construction of Men in Online Poker Ads

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**Abstract** Online poker, like gambling in general, is predominantly a male activity. Thus, poker ads most often depict men as their protagonists. According to Jean Baudrillard, advertising can be seen as a ‘plebiscite whereby mass consumer society wages a perpetual campaign of self-endorsement.’ Ads often use stereotypical imagery for establishing a shared experience of identification with the consumer, and since their role is to sell rather than to portray the realities of life, they often have an exaggerated and monolithic – or, hyperreal – way of representing gender. This article offers an analysis of the ways in which men are portrayed in the ads of *Poker Magazine Finland* in the volume of 2009 (all six issues), at the peak of the so-called online poker boom. Theoretically, the article draws on postmodern theorists such as Jean Baudrillard and particularly on his concept of hyperreality (exaggerated and media-saturated reality) to analyze the way males are portrayed in the ads in question.

**Keywords** hyperreality, media, advertising, poker, online poker, Jean Baudrillard, masculinity, males, poker players

### Examining Men in Poker Ads

When I began to conduct ethnographic research on online poker, more than a decade ago, its everyday reality seemed to me curiously relaxed, even languid and mundane. Physically, internet poker was like most online computer games: people sit in front of their computers, click and press keys to play against other people. It was best played in an environment free of distractions, but it could be also played very casually while having a coffee break, putting children to bed, or when in bathroom. For most players, it was a hobby, but for some it was a source of rather significant additional income or even a profession. In poker, one could lose or gain a fortune, but most players I knew seemed to play with relatively small amounts of money for the occasional excitement and/or in hope of some extra money, the value of which was rather symbolic.

That was the ethnographic reality of the game, but the players and the game represented in poker advertisements on television, poker websites and special poker magazines seemed like another world: there, elegant players with high sex appeal are surrounded by luxury and women, and battle with each other in a context saturated with masculine connotations. This was not particularly surprising, as most poker players offline or online are young males (Mäyrä and Ermi 2014) and advertising, while being known to exaggerate, is an important cultural factor reproducing gender, among other things, through images and language (Romaine 1999, Schroeder and Zwick 2004). Images in advertising reflect the coding system embedded in our societal, cultural, and ideological environment. However, in the case of poker, the ads seemed like a condensed



reality in which collective narrative elements such as clichés, stereotypes, aesthetics, morality, irony, and gender manifested in a hyperreal form (Kurpiers 2009, O'Donohoe 2001, 96-97, Schroeder and Zwick 2004). The advertisements were not misrepresentations of the poker culture, let alone fake, but rather, as Jean Baudrillard would put it (Baudrillard 1994, 81, Berger 2014, 15), 'more real' than the real. By looking at the advertisements, an anthropologist could learn what is considered hegemonically significant or essential in a culture – or even what *is* this culture. As Baudrillard argued, advertisements do not just 'reflect culture' but are an intrinsic part of it:

[A]ny analysis of the system of objects must ultimately imply an analysis of discourse about objects – that is to say, an analysis of promotional 'messages' (comprising image and discourse). For advertising is not simply an adjunct to the system of objects; it cannot be detached therefrom, nor can it be restricted to its 'proper' function (there is no such thing as advertising strictly confined to the supplying of information). Indeed, advertising is [...] an irremovable aspect of the system of objects [...] (Baudrillard 2005, 178).

We shall analyze here the advertisements for online poker sites published in the 2009 volume of *Poker Magazine Finland* (henceforth: *PMF*), which used to be the leading poker magazine in Finland during the so-called poker boom (Bjerg 2011, 114, Google Trends 2017). Most of the content of the magazine was translated from the international *Poker Magazine* published in the United States, but some articles and columns were written by Finns. Most of the advertisements were translated from their Scandinavian, Western European or American originals. Hence, the magazine under examination was international with a strong American emphasis, and can thus be interpreted as representing 'Western' poker culture with a Finnish touch. The readers of the magazine, like online poker players in general, tended to be young men (*Poker Magazine Finland* 2010). Most of the articles in the magazine featured professional poker players, poker tournaments, and columns by gaming specialists, and its advertisements portrayed mostly male poker professionals or other celebrities who had been known to play poker. Hence, *PMF*'s articles portrayed the hegemonic representational elite (Fron et al. 2007) of poker culture. My approach to the advertisements in question is explorative and essayistic (Cornelissen et al. 2012, 198-199). I aim to present and discuss the typical visual content (Lister and Wells 2011) of the poker ads, and to show how men and, to some extent, women are portrayed in them. For the analysis, I have examined all the ads that featured a person and took up at least one whole page. To analyze the visual construction of online poker in the ads and its relationship to the actual playing of online poker, I will draw on Jean Baudrillard's notions of hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994, 2005).

If one were to summarize the meaning of hyperreality in Baudrillard's thought, it could be described as something 'more real than the real itself' (Baudrillard 2005, Eco 1986). However, one should not understand the description in a strictly literal way, but more as a heuristic concept to make sense of the representational techniques that affect our perception of what is meaningful in the world. As Nick Perry explains, the concept of

hyperreality can be defined as culturally valuable situations where the copy (or the derivative/representation) is actually more significant and important than its original (Perry 1998, Prasad 2005, 229). Perry's example of hyperreality is a televised baseball match where a great catch is filmed from many angles and broadcast in slow motion so that viewers can enjoy it fully in its enhanced reality. Thus, the copy (or in this case, copies) of the incident becomes 'more real' – more significant and more fulfilling – than its original. In the same vein, Merkhofer describes how, for example, a well-groomed garden is a copy of nature but 'better' or 'more real' than nature itself; or how pornography is a sort of condensed reality of 'regular' sex and thus 'sexier than sex itself'; or how film stars, super models and Olympic athletes in their media-saturated representations are 'excessively real', or hyperreal, manifestations of their counterparts in everyday, 'plain' reality (Merkhofer 2007, Baudrillard 1994, 28). A tourist in an exotic land gazing at an organized 'authentic' local dance performance can be seen as consuming hyperreality; the carefully orchestrated experience conducted by professionals is a highly refined version of its everyday counterpart, and an enhanced and 'better' (or 'more than real') version compared to what one can experience in a mundane reality. One can also see televised soap operas as hyperreal - in their fantastic plots the problems and challenges of everyday human relationships have been condensed into exaggerated archetypes (Perry 1998, 28).

Often, Jean Baudrillard's understanding of the hyperreal can seem extreme or cynical compared to that of Umberto Eco (1986), who thought that the real functions as a reference to the hyperreal (or, to the condensed representations of reality). Baudrillard – at least in his most postmodernist mode – seems to think that the connection between the hyperreal representation and reality has actually vanished and was replaced by *simulacra*, a world of copies without originals (Baudrillard 1994, 2005). This seems to be his view especially in the case of media. In this polemic sense, the media (understood broadly), including advertisements, do not only exaggerate reality but are themselves the state of reality that has meaning. To Baudrillard, everyday ordinary life is 'the desert of the real' (Baudrillard 1994, 1), short on or entirely empty of meaning. People gaze at the hyperreal, tap into it for values, norms, aesthetics, morals and so on; the hyperreal is the saturated icon, or a model from which everyday lives derive their meaning. Therefore, hyperreality resembles a system of meaning, an ideological formation, and/or an abstract dimension of a culture.

According to my interpretation of Baudrillard, a minimal example of hyperreality would for instance be a retrospective narrative of what I did last summer. Because I would not be able to *re-present* every detail of my summer, I would have to select issues and events that are significant and valuable and I would thus end up condensing or exaggerating reality by leaving out a huge amount of what I feel are insignificant details. This would make the narrative 'more real' than the real. If I were to include selected stills, video and hyperlinks to illustrate my narrative, it would make it even more (hyper)real. In the Baudrillardian sense, only this hyperreal condensed re-presentation would hold any meaning to anyone because the world itself without being narrated, mediatized, represented or condensed in some way is not significant. It would be 'the desert of the real;' only a selective representation would give it meaning. This interpretation of hyperreality is to some extent similar to Botz-Bornstein's concept of *culturéalité* (Botz-Bornstein 2006), or Hanson's understanding of hyperreality, in which

the signifier dominates or improves the representation process so much that it becomes more effective, more memorable and thus 'more real' than what is represented (Hanson 1992). Thus, I suggest that a close equivalent to the concept of hyperreal would be *self-consciously media-saturated* (Tajbakhsh 2001, 'media' here meaning any kind of mediated act from a verbally narrated story to ads for Hollywood movies). As a crystallized expression of the values of the system of meaning in question, I view the ads portrayed in this article as hyperreal manifestations.

Perhaps a simpler way of defining advertising would be to say that it is a communication from a vendor to a potential buyer, about a certain product. It provides essential 'information' about a product in an inviting form. Often, it draws on emotive stimuli such as the charisma of a celebrity promoting the product, romantic imagery associated with the product, assumed positive emotions (enhanced gender identity, happiness etc.) that would be experienced as a result of obtaining the product, or other cultural elements not directly connected to the product (Malefyt and Moeran 2003.) In Baudrillardian sense, advertising is hyperreal in that it is a relatively systemized and large-scale phenomenon where reality is condensed and selectively filtered to focus on particularly significant, key elements.

As advertisements can contain only a limited amount of information and associations, they seem to be written in shorthand, producing stereotypical images of low semantic resolution. The economics of advertising rarely allows the individuals depicted in the ads to transgress the limits of their caricatures, and where there is no room for complexity, stereotypical or mythological archetypes must be used for impact (Rubin and Sander 1991, 15, Romaine 1999, 253). Despite the fact that advertising content is very selective, over-representing some aspects of society while under-representing (or concealing) others, it does correspond to existing values in society. In other words, even though ads may be 'fake,' fantastic and highly exaggerated, advertising and its gender imagery cannot go too much against the grain of the hegemonic values of the surrounding culture (Wiles et al. 1995, 36-37).

### **PMF Ads: Men of Danger and Battle**

Although professional poker players might be as easy-going and convivial as the boy next door, the traditional stereotype has them as serious people with 'poker faces' meant to hide feelings that might give away any information about the player's cards. In advertisements, the stereotypical seriousness associated with poker is evident, sometimes extending itself into aggressiveness and suggestions of violence. This is not unique to poker ads; in general, men in ads have been associated with more seriousness and violence than women (Lucas, 2010, Gentry and Harrison 2010, 81). In the ads in *PMF*, this tendency is most evident when the ad is carefully staged, stylized, and illustrating either a real-world poker champion or a fictional character that looks like a professional poker player. Thus, it seems that when an advertiser has carefully considered what kind of image and mood they want to construct to represent poker, they most often go for images traditionally associated with masculinity: seriousness, gravity and power or aggression. As we shall see further in this section, a man portrayed in such an ad is usually wearing dark-colored clothes and black sunglasses, the symbols of a professional player. His mouth is a tight line and he might be holding a pile of chips, the size of

which does matter as it is the most commonly used symbol of poker and the measure of a player's skills. The way the character is composed implies that poker is a competition for no-nonsense, tough men (van Ingen 2010, Jouhki 2010, 65).



Tee ensitalletus  
ja pelaa  
tiesi huipulle!

Kaksi tapaa aloittaa  
huipun valloitus:

**400\$**

Ensitalletuksestasi lähtien tienaat jokaisesta Summit Pointsista 7 senttiä aina 400\$ asti. Ansaitsemasi bonus talletetaan vähitellen pelitilillesi, jokaisen tienatun Summit Pointsin yhteydessä.

Bonuskoodi:  
PMAGAZINE400

**300\$**

Kerää ensitalletuksestasi 30 vuorokauden sisällä 3.000 Summit Pointsia ja tienaa 300\$. Ansaitsemasi bonus talletetaan pelitilillesi, kun olet saavuttanut tarvittavan Summit Points määrän.

Bonuskoodi:  
PMAGAZINE300

Pelaajat ansaitsevat jokaisesta reikillä (rake) kerätystä yhdestä dollarista (1\$) yhden (1) Summit Pointsin.

Lataa ilmainen pokerisofta ja aloita pelaaminen. Lisätiedot Everest Pokerin kotisivuilta.



Image 1. Heavy rock and online poker (PMF, 3/2009, 85; see also 3/2009, 4-5 for another heavy rock musician endorsing poker.)

Perhaps the most serious poker player in the 2009 volume is portrayed in an ad (Image 1) by *Everest Poker*, an online poker cardroom owned by GigaMedia Ltd., based in Singapore. The ad presents Voitto Rintala, a Finnish heavy rock musician and poker professional. He is wearing a black leather jacket and black jeans and is shown against a black/grey background. Rintala is staring at the camera with a look sharpened by contact lenses that make his eyes appear beast-like. The text encourages the reader to make an initial deposit and *Play your way to the top!* Although Rintala's figure is visually dominant, as celebrity endorsers go, his role is rather passive (Awasthi and Choraria 2015, 215). The text merely informs the viewer about the rules of the gaming site and does not refer to Rintala in any way. However, the viewer is encouraged to feel that the combination of shades of black and grey, the heavy rock habitus, the leather, and the eyes of a beast make Rintala an ominous figure, hinting at danger (Vaisman 2016, 300), which is also associated with online poker.

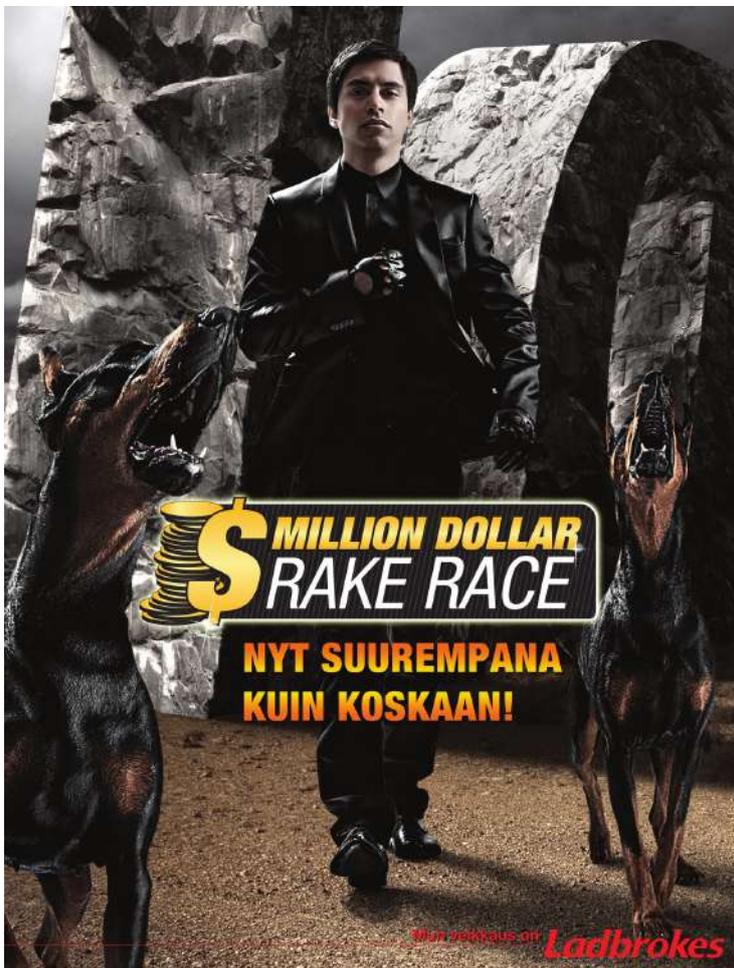


Image 2. Player with rocks and dogs (PMF 2/2009, 31).

Another ad hinting at danger is one by *Ladbrokes*, a London based international online betting company. In the ad, the Swedish poker champion Jonas 'Nebuchad' Danielsson (see e.g. *PokerWorks*, 8 July 2008) walks towards the camera, treading firmly on gravel, surrounded by rocks, and looking straight at the viewer (Image 2). Like Rintala, he is wearing only black, but he is also wearing leather driving gloves. The ad introduces a '10 million dollar rake race *now bigger than ever*'. The number 10 is made of a stack of chips and a dollar sign in the text, and of rocks in the background. Two black bloodhounds are barking on either side of Danielsson. Knowing Danielsson's real life genial appearance (e.g. *PokerRed*, 11 January 2010), it is evident that his habitus

has been made more menacing for the ad (Crawford 2006). The dogs, gloves, rugged terrain and dark colors reinforce Danielsson's dark and serious appearance. On the surface level, the ad connotes determination, if not physical threat, although the symbolic message seems to be that the rake race has determined competitors.

In some ads, the elements of gravity and danger are created by making explicit references to fighting and battles. In an ad (Image 3) by *PokerStars* on a spread, the title states that ‘*tournament poker is a battle of minds*’ and ‘*a duel is an endurance battle where the last man standing will win.*’ The ad goes on to challenge the reader: ‘*If you love a battle, the biggest and the best tournaments are played at PokerStars.*’ The reverse page shows the Canadian poker professional Daniel Negreanu, a multiple world champion (see <http://danielnegreanu.com>), staring solemnly in the camera, raising his bet at a poker table. Behind him there is a boxing ring with a boxer staring in the camera at least as solemnly as Negreanu. The manner in which the poker table and the boxing ring are positioned suggests a similarity between the two practices, both being games where (mostly) men engage in battle and where only one man emerges victorious. In real life, Negreanu or ‘KidPoker’, as he calls himself in online poker, is well known for his friendly appearance at poker tables, but to reflect the mood of online poker he has been turned into a fighter.



Image 3. Battle of minds (PMF, 1/2009, 4-5; for a similar slogan see 4/2009, 4-5; for another ad referring to poker as boxing, see 1/2009, 15).

Sometimes the signs of danger have to be even more explicit, like in the ad by *Pokeri*, a magazine about online and live poker (Image 4). The textual side of the ad lists *Pokeri*'s services and campaigns with its affiliate online poker sites, and remains strictly informative, with no slogans or suggestive emotional statements about poker. However, the shadowy picture in the background portrays a man with a short beard and intricate tattoos on his arms. Again, the tone is dark, as he is wearing a black tank and the background is dark grey. The man brings to mind a member of a heavy metal band. What might be puzzling to the viewer is why he is shouting. There is no explanation for it in the text but it seems like the man's emotional outburst has something to do with the

intensity of the game. Maybe he is in pain after losing, or it is his war cry. Either way, the viewer is led to feel that some strong emotion, if not some form of aggression, is to be associated with poker.

KATTAVIN SISÄLTÖ SEKÄ NETTI- ETTÄ LIVEPOKERIIN

# POKERI

- Highstakes Database nettipelien pelaajatilastot
- Päivittäiset alan uutiset
- Pokerikauppa
- Liveturnaukskalenteri
- Kaikki maailman korttihuoneet
- Suomalaisten pelaajien liveturnaustilastot
- RawVegas-videouutiset päivittäin
- Pokeritarjouksia
- Raportointia turnauksista paikan päältä

Pokeri.com raportoi paikan päältä EPT-kierruetta. Seuraa liveinä suomalaispelaajien turnausmenestystä ja katso tuoreimmat videohaastattelut. EPT-kierrueseen tarjoaa PokerStars.

## KAMPANJAT

- Mermaid Poker, Boss-verkko, 30% rakeback + 200% bonus €500 asti
- NoiQPoker, iPoker-verkko, 100% bonus \$600 asti
- NordicBet, Prima-verkko, 100% bonus \$500 asti
- RedKings, OnGame-verkko, 500% bonus \$5000 asti
- Pokerihuone, Entraction-verkko, jopa 60% rakeback + bonus
- William Hill, Crypto-verkko, 30% rakeback + bonus \$500 asti
- Betfair, itsenäinen, 30-37% rakeback + bonus \$1500 asti

WWW.POKERI.COM

Image 4. Shouting (PMF, 1/2009, 53; see also 1/2009, 6-7 for another ad where intimidating male look is used for effect).

The ad by *NordicBet* (Image 5), a Scandinavian online gambling company providing online poker services, promotes a ‘superweekend’ of live poker hosted by the company in Tallinn, Estonia. In the picture, a man wearing a black suit, black glasses, and a red cape is flying over the Tallinn cityscape towards the viewer. The man has raised his right fist and it seems to be aimed at the viewer, coming straight at him or her. On his ring finger he is wearing a ring with the symbol of a spade on it. The man brings to mind a mix of Superman, because of the red cape, and the character Agent Smith or Neo from *The Matrix* (1999), the suggestion heightened by the similarity between the grey background in the ad and the shade of green employed throughout the movie. The man’s face is as grim as Agent Smith’s, and the fist implies battle. The ad suggests that only the most qualified will be allowed to take part in the fight between supermen.



Image 5. Superman ready to fight (PMF 1/2009, 30-31).

It is evident that the advertisements presented for analysis might exhibit various degrees of irony – a notion that I will discuss in the last section of the article. But it is clear that the next ad, by the Swedish online betting company *Betsson*, does so most definitely (Image 6). It asks if the reader has ‘bad gaming friends,’ and offers ‘free and safe online poker.’ Illustrating the consequences of bad gaming, the image portrays the bottom of a lake and the lower half of a person whose feet have been sunk into a block of concrete, suggesting a clichéd mob-style punishment. In another Bettson ad (PMF 2/2009, 89), there is also a reference to a hyperreal mafia – a room with a bed and a horse’s head in it just like in *The Godfather* (1972). The ads seem to humorously suggest that the online poker service in question is trustworthy and has no connections to organized crime – unlike some other online poker companies, according to recurring claims (Spapens 2014, 411, Wood and Griffiths 2008).



**IKÄVIÄ PELIKAVEREITA?**

WWW.BETSSON.FI. ILMAISTA JA VAARATONTA ONLINE-POKERIA.

Betsson.fi on ilmainen, suomalaisille suunnattu pelipöytä, jossa pelataan pokeria sekä kasinopeliä. Betsson.fi on vain kansainvälistä ja pohjoisamerikkalaista Betssonin pelikampania.

**betsson.fi**

Image 6. Bad gaming friends (PMF 1/2009, 33).

### What About Happy People?

In *PMF*, there are also online poker ads that show people who are not serious or aggressive and do not connote violence, but are happy and smiling. They are most often female, and if they are men, they are poker players who have just won a game (Image 7) or have been photographed outside of a game room, or they are clearly not poker players themselves.

There was no smiling man portrayed playing poker in any of the ads in *PMF* in 2009. Women players were portrayed smiling, however, they were either luring potential players into a game room or playing strip poker almost naked (see lower left-hand corner of Image 8). The latter was depicted in an image that was a part of a *Ladbrokes* ad and included four images framed like poker cards on a red background. Three of the pictures showed people with smile on their faces, while the fourth showed nobody, just a boat on a beach. In one image (top left-hand corner) there were two smiling women wearing evening dresses and a serious man – not smiling because he was the player – wearing a suit and sunglasses. The man was holding a woman’s hand and was throwing



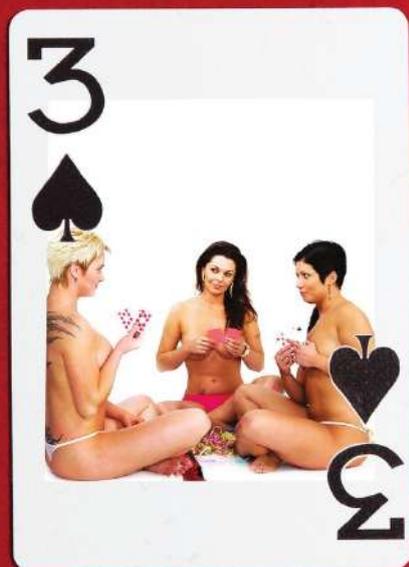
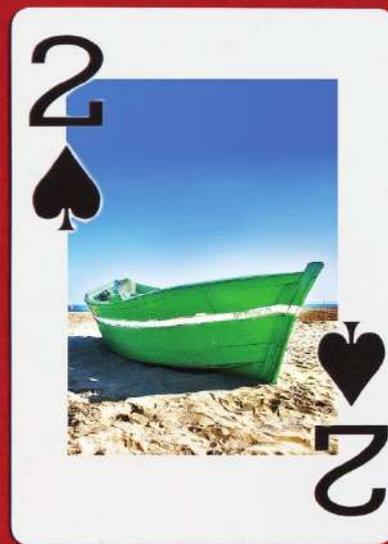
Image 7. PokerStars ad has winners smiling (*PMF*, 3/2009, 19, partial image of an ad; for more ads portraying victory and joy see 3/2009, 11-12; 4/2009, 2-3).

a deck of cards into the air. Although he is in the background, and there is a woman in the foreground, in terms of poker it is he who is the agent in the image, as he holds the sunglasses and the cards, both essential symbols of poker.

In another image of the same ad (the lower right-hand corner), there is a peephole through which two men, in real life former Finnish *Big Brother* contestants and comic sidekicks for the online poker company, are wearing top hats and black suits. They are carrying walking sticks and are holding a bottle of champagne and a plate of gaming chips and cards. The men are smiling cheerfully but they are not poker players; rather, they seem to be croupiers of some kind, and are offering the viewer cards. The title of the ad declares that the poker room is ‘The gaming man’s paradise.’ The term for a gaming man in Finnish is *pelimies*, which can also be translated as a man who has

# PELIMIEHEN PARATIISI

1.5.-30.6.2009



Mun veikkaus on **Ladbrokes**

Image 8. Smiling people on cards (PMF, 1/2009, 65; see also 1/2009, 67; 3/2009, 65).

frequent simultaneous sexual relations and/or is otherwise skilled and cunning in social relations and negotiations.

In the last ad presented here (Image 9), by the Malta-based poker company *NoiQ*, we see what could be called a prototypical male poker player and his female companion. The

man in dark glasses and a black suit is sitting at the poker table and staring soberly at the viewer. The woman, in a red evening dress, is leaning toward the man but is facing the viewer, *smiling*. The viewer can tell that the man is the player because he is holding playing cards, wearing sunglasses and there is a stack of chips next to him, both symbols of poker. Moreover, he is *not* smiling. Again, it is the serious man who is the player and the central agent in poker (DuBrin 2011, 2); the woman who is not playing, is free of responsibility and seems to be a spectator. The text of the ad suggests that the man is one of the ‘European Masters of Poker.’



**NoiQ tarjoaa:**  
Pokerikoulun ja jopa 225€ aloituskassan  
100% up to 5000€ ensitalletusbonuksen  
Suurimmat rakeracet  
Jopa 45% kuukausittaisen VIP Bonuksen

**MASTERS**  
EUROPEAN MASTERS OF POKER™

**European Masters of Poker**  
Pela NoiQlla ja voita paikka Maltalla järjestettävään EMOP Finaaliin. Paketteja jaossa useissa kampanjoissa.  
>>> Tutustu etuihin kotisivuillamme

Rekisteröidy koodilla **CPSUOMI** ja olet oikeutettu kalduin näihin etuihin

**NoiQ**  
POKER CASINO SPORTS BETTING

Image 9. Serious man, smiling woman (PMF, 5/2009, 89; see also 1/2009, 2-3 and 35 for more prototype pictures).

## Discussion

According to Wiles et al., advertising is a method of using stereotypical imagery for 'establishing a shared experience of identification with the consumer,' and it has a special and, at least at times, monolithic way of representing gender (Wiles et al. 1995, 36). This is because the purpose of advertising is not to problematize or to portray the complex realities of life but, simply, to sell products. As Benwell argues, the traditional representation of masculinity in the media celebrates attributes like physicality, violence, autonomy, and silence (Benwell 2003, 153-160). This is evident in the *PMF* advertisements most of which portray serious males dressed in black, against a black or other dark background which conveys the message of poker being a serious business to be handled by specialists (De Groot et al. 2016, 188, 195). Also, the mood often suggests danger or combat, as if poker was about men fighting each other in a way that can be seen as normalizing masculine danger and the atmosphere of violence (Katz 2003). Perhaps depicting poker as a fierce battle (Messner 2012, 116) or at least as a solemn activity makes it more attractive to the young men who play the game and who are the primary audience of the ads.

Hence, it may be safe to say that the modern expansion of the male role in advertisements (Schroeder and Zwick 2004, 26) has not influenced poker ads – or at least, had not done so by 2009 – and the hegemonic masculinity which is nowadays more flexible and contested in ads than ever (Jackson et al. 2001, 13, 43-47) is rather stable, if not stereotypical in poker. In other words, there is no hint at 'masculinity in crisis' (Gauntlett 2002, 250-251) in the ads: the gaming men are rock solid, and operate in the 'masculine mode of exigency and competition' (Barthel 1988, 183). However, it might be precisely the actual crisis of masculinity that demands the advertisers to 'man-up' and dispel the contested and jeopardized masculinity in reality by producing a hard-rock masculinity (Cheryan et al. 2015). Regardless of whether a crisis is a recent phenomenon or if it has always been a part of masculinity (or femininity), particularly for young adult males in search of an identity, manliness seems to be compressed into an inviting and comfortingly intact form in advertisements. This hyperreal male is a lucid and powerful compensatory model for young male gamers, the online poker players in the real world, who acknowledge that being 'a gamer' might be associated with stereotypes that go against traditional images of masculinity (Beynon 2002, 75–97, Weaver 2016).

Irony is one likely interpretation for some of the ads examined here and a plausible interpretation for all the images that seem overly stereotypical and reactionary. On the other hand, even if the ads are supposed to be ironic (Jackson et al. 2001, 8), they could still be seen as manifesting masculine fantasies. A viewer of an exaggeratedly masculine advertising image can justify enjoying the image by narrating it as irony. Moreover, even ironic images can uphold traditional gender roles.

When the setting is less formal and/or the greatest heroes are not portrayed in action, there is room for smile and even play in the poker ads. This is possible for women, 'lesser' (non-specialist) men, or poker champions who are shown outside of the game. However, the role of women seems to be mostly limited to being a companion to a male poker player. Also, there seems to be a '(sun)glass ceiling' for female poker players.

Curiously, in the ads in *PMF*, women never wear sunglasses, the ultimate symbol of a cold, serious, player in charge (Hochschild 2003, 45).

Baudrillard sees advertising as a totemic system, or 'a plebiscite whereby mass consumer society wages a perpetual campaign of self-endorsement' (Baudrillard 2005, 198). In the Baudrillardian view, postmodern consumption – of which online poker is a perfect example – is about culture in the process of commodification (Prasad 2005). In this realm, advertising is a peculiar kind of production of significance influencing (if not infiltrating) the structures of thought and language where everything is subordinate to economics. There is no doubt that commercial imagery influences how we interpret our experiences, what we desire, and the way we define ourselves. In online poker marketing, the model for identity construction is rather straightforward:

The most important thing in poker is playing. Nothing compares to the gaming experience and the sharp psychological gaming skill that comes with it, and the ability to manipulate one's opponents. It is extremely important that instead of twiddling one's thumbs and mulling over questions like 'do I dare - do I not dare' one just jumps right into the game (A Finnish online poker site [Nettipokeri.info](http://Nettipokeri.info) in 2009).

Poker players are accustomed to use their chips also outside of the poker tables, and are willing to invest in their style (Poker Magazine Finland 2010 describing the magazine's readership).

Advertising, as a hyperreal phenomenon, dominates the central stage of postmodern life, and functions as a new linguistic system where words are linked with objects with which they have had no relation before. Jean Baudrillard used to be amused by how, in a televised commercial, floor wax was promoted by associating it with a couple dancing romantically on a shiny floor coated with the product (Prasad 2005, 253 referring to Baudrillard 1975). In other words, the ad linked floor wax (signifier) with romance (signified) in the same way that a dog is symbolically linked with loyalty. In the same way, advertisements link cars with adventure, career success and sensual pleasure, or link financial institutions with the warmth and comfort of a family. Even shoes manufactured for jogging are linked with youthful rebellion. Advertising imagery thus attempts to change our system of meaning by combining and fusing fantasies (romance, adventure etc.) with banalities (floor wax, car etc.). According to Baudrillard, these connections affect our cognitive and emotional structures. That is how an object (a product) in the everyday 'desert of the real' is given meaning from the hyperreal plane of selectively emphasized or even invented significance. In the same vein, masculine poker advertisements connoting battle can be seen as hyperreal sources for the desert of the real that is the clicking of a computer mouse and playing a game of cards to pass the time.

Real online poker, in the Baudrillardian view, is empty of meaning until it is provided with a feeding tube, the source of which is the 'more-real-than-real,' hyperreal plane of advertising or another mediatized realm. Even though Baudrillardian hyperreality and the way it has been used to theorize postmodern society might sound too abstract, polemic or even fantastic, as 'fashionable nonsense' (Sokal and Bricmont 1999, Turner

1993, 151-152), if we understand hyperreality as an exaggerated, selective, media-filtered way of amplifying the representation and meaning given to cultural phenomena, it is certainly useful for empirical research.

The selected attributes of poker are often amplified by profiled celebrities or other iconic heroes whose habitus is, in turn, boosted by symbols of battle in advertisements. Exaggeration is certainly a recurring technique in most poker advertising, and advertising in general, because advertising is after all about adding elements to enhance the image of the promoted object, or to compensate a lack of a desired attribute. In my discussion, I am not attempting to criticize any commercial construction of culture on moral grounds. However, it is evident, and curiously interesting, that the advertisers set out to impress young males by referring to rather reactionary connotations of battle and aggression when they have countless other and perhaps more more convincing options for reproducing iconic manhood available to them. Maybe the explanation is more biological than cultural, and despite recent renegotiations of gender in advertising and in modern society in general, male evolutionary psychology still draws on and finds solace in personality traits and physical abilities that are less and less useful in contemporary society, where everyday life is increasingly automated, domesticated and peaceful. The new political economy of masculinity has made traditional masculinity obsolete (Connell 1987, Edwards 2015, Sandu 2017, Van Vugt and Grabo 2015, 487–8). Perhaps the longing for the relic of the physical man materializes in the hyperreal, where it is optimized for neoliberal marketing purposes to produce the most effective reservoir of male imagery, the kind that as many young male poker-players as possible find either desirable or ironic and thus relatable to and enjoyable (Dyer 1984, Firat 2012).

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## Article

# Bandas beyond their 'Ethnographic Present'

Neoliberalism and the Possibility of Meaning in Mexico City

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**Abstract** Mexico faced significant financial crises during the late seventies and early eighties emanating from the Mexico City, due to its centrality. These crises were connected to the introduction of neoliberal reforms in the country. Simultaneously, a form of children and youth organization appeared in some of the incipient and impoverished neighbourhoods in the West of the city, the *bandas*; parallel to the inception of 'City Santa Fe,' a luxurious utopia. Difficult urban and social conditions, violence and uncertainty not only gave birth to the *bandas*, but became their insignia. A temporal distance of nearly three decades from the birth of the *bandas* allows for a procedural analysis that overcomes the temptation to limit a research on youth groups to their 'ethnographic present.' The *bandas*' members narrate their life trajectories as search for better scenarios and, along the way, find meaning and order in otherwise chaotic events. Belonging to a *banda* serves as a coordinate from where to array a set of events and processes, and assess their outcomes, a coordinate for framing certain 'masculinity projects', allowing feelings of progression, satisfaction and even redemption.

**Keywords** *Bandas*, life trajectories, masculinity projects, neoliberalism, meaning

Mexico faced significant financial crises during the late seventies and early eighties, which led to the introduction of neoliberal reforms. In Western Mexico City, this coincided with the proliferation of a form of urban children and youth organization known as *banda*, and later on with the birth of the 'City Santa Fe' project, the setting for luxurious residences, big shopping centres and office buildings. The *bandas* became a much studied topic. They worried authorities as much as they intrigued academics and journalists. However, the analysis presented here differs from the earlier works; with the temporal distance of nearly three decades, it favours and offers a procedural perspective.

Let me first offer a general contextualization of the development of the area of study and an analysis of its physical characteristics. This will allow us to reflect upon the economic and social processes that enable certain political practices that extend throughout these neighbourhoods, relating them to discussions about political practices in Mexico at large. Consequently, we will discuss some of the life trajectories and 'masculinity projects' that were constructed among the *bandas* (Connell 2003). In doing so, we avoid the temptation to confine the research to the 'ethnographic present,' broadly found in gang and youth group research. Instead, we will investigate how individuals search for better material, educational and social conditions (*alivianes*) at the same time as certain local political mechanisms tend to perpetuate urban poverty, paving the way for local and extra-local actors to take advantage of this situation. Whereas *bandas*' members incarnate urban misery, it would be wrong to portray them as marginal subjects or outcasts; some have successfully entered local politics either through political



parties, unions, and even clash groups<sup>4</sup> or make their way into criminal networks. This methodological choice derives not from the author's wittiness (it would be too presumptuous to pretend that), but from the moment at which the interviewees stand today. It is this moment that insists on the complex interplay between past and present; the past is built in (and for) the present.

The research was conducted in several neighbourhoods located in the *Delegación* Álvaro Obregón and *Delegación* Miguel Hidalgo, in Western Mexico City. Formally, the fieldwork was conducted from August 2015 to February 2016; however, by that time, I had spent three years involved with an NGO and a religious centre performing different activities in the area. I was able to interview 18 members belonging to 7 *bandas*, searching to understand the formation and development of their groups and their life trajectories. In addition, I interviewed several locals that were not members of a *banda* but had important information regarding them. Also, I assisted in cultural, social and religious activities organized by *banda* members and was invited to walk around the area in order to get to know particular landmark spots to the *bandas*' development. All of the *bandas* members interviewed were male (I tried to include a female perspective, but could not manage to contact any woman that was involved with the *bandas*, although in my interviewees' narratives female figures appeared as *banda* members<sup>5</sup>) and aged somewhere between 45 and 60.

### A Brief Contextualization

'[We are the] children of the marginalized ones' stated Sapo, a member of Verdugos. Lack of public services, uneven and unpaved streets and unsafe constructions were common conditions in the *Delegación*<sup>6</sup> Álvaro Obregón and *Delegación* Miguel Hidalgo neighbourhoods from where the *bandas* originated. Harsh surroundings partly owed to the fact that a large portion of the territory was located in the Tacubaya and Becerra rivers' gullies, but also to the land exploitation carried out over decades in order to extract building materials that partly supported the construction and industrialization of greater Mexico City. The area saw a burst of unplanned and mostly self-constructed houses that shaped the new neighbourhoods. Even though these circumstances posed a significant danger for the populations, they also translated into stimulating and attractive spaces for kids and young people: abandoned mines, caves, gullies and rivers, and even the nearby belated rubbish dump (forever buried beneath luxurious buildings and a park) were excellent places for adventure, shelter from police, hanging out with friends and even finding time and space for intimate moments with partners.

The surroundings were heavily polluted (even more so today) due to the effects of the industry settled for many decades in the area, and later mass human settlement. The

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<sup>4</sup> Known in Mexico as either *porros* or *grupo de choque*, they are usually related to either university or governmental authorities, and exercise an illegitimate use of violence. They have been vastly used to repress and delegitimize social mobilization, but may pursue other political, social or economic interests.

<sup>5</sup> Recently I have met several women that belonged to different *bandas*, therefore their perspective could be addressed in future research.

<sup>6</sup> While the rest of the states in Mexico are divided into *municipios* (municipalities), Mexico City is divided into *delegaciones*. Throughout the article I will refer to the *delegaciones* also as municipalities.



Fig. 1. Becerra River gully's streets with a football field, seen from the other side of the gully. A big office building can be seen on the far left. Image: author.

setting (as many others in Latin America) has been strongly polarized since the late eighties, as luxurious residences, universities, schools, office buildings and malls have developed oftentimes directly next to impoverished neighbourhoods. Not unlike urban spaces in other parts of the world, such as India (Kuldova 2017). Even though water, soil and air pollution know no income boundaries, and may trespass from one side to the other, there are some urban preconditions and political mechanisms that augment and focus the vulnerability on the impoverished populations more heavily than on others. In Butler's words, it magnifies their precarity (Butler 2009).

For instance, contaminated rivers are tubed as they pass through the upper class neighbourhoods in 'City Santa Fe', but then run freely as they pass alongside impoverished neighbourhoods. Precisely for this reason, some of the most vulnerable areas are those closest to the rivers, fundamentally to the Becerra River. Even more worrisome is that the few playgrounds, football fields and open air gyms in these areas tend to be on the banks of the rivers, as 'recovered spaces' fostered by governmental programs, local populations and NGOs, since the overcrowded area has no other space to develop such recreation facilities. These spaces have also become drug dealing and consuming spots as they are somewhat concealed and there is little police surveillance. Interviewees assert that the conditions that prevailed when they were growing up,

combined with the overcrowding experienced inside their homes and parental absence due to work schedules, resulted in their expulsion to the streets, where they could gather with their peers.

‘For us the streets are something symbolic, right? Because while for other young people or for other children the physical space was the park, right? Recreational spaces, spaces with better conditions, ‘*alivianados*’<sup>7</sup>; for us... the streets. But our streets were the mines, the caves, right?’ (Luis Guerrero, Verdugos)

According to Luis, being on the streets with peers gradually progressed into the creation of the *bandas*. Even though he admits that this process is not exclusive to this area, its specificity comes from the environment, with its caves and mines. But this specificity is also attributable to the presence of government buildings and schools in the area that later on linked the *bandas* with key actors and contributed to their local strength which, for some, translated into their positioning in governmental offices,<sup>8</sup> government-related unions and public universities.

### The Industrial Footprint

Let me take a step back and briefly narrate the industrial development of the area, since it is accountable for the settlement processes and proliferation of certain political devices. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1930, an agricultural exportation model prevailed in Mexico and then coexisted with an import substitution industrialization model, which influenced the centralization of the economy within Mexico City. Prioritizing Mexico City’s industrialization to the detriment of peasant work outside of the city (obliged to produce cheap products to feed the workforce as well as to export at low prices), led to significant migration waves toward the capital in search of work opportunities. Even at the peak of the government-assisted industrialization process, the city could not employ all of the migrants, increasing the informal work sector. Moreover, these populations tended to settle in the margins of the city, expanding Mexico City’s borders, especially between 1930 and 1970 (Gillingham and Smith 2014, Márquez López and Padilla Lobos 2008).

Wheat and paper mills were the first industries in the area, settling in Tacubaya (today Miguel Hidalgo Municipality) from the 16<sup>th</sup> century; in the 18<sup>th</sup> century a gunpowder factory relocated to the vicinity and the lands were exploited in order to obtain building materials. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, more factories appeared mostly in the Álvaro Obregón Municipality, predominantly for construction materials (cement, asbestos, etc.). By the 80s, the construction material industry had such a profound impact that 70% of the Álvaro Obregón Municipality found itself on mine zones and more than 40% of the land was considered highly dangerous for human settlement (Camarena Ocampo 2000).

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<sup>7</sup> *Alivianado* in Spanish literally means ‘lightened’ but, in this context, it refers to having better conditions, being well-off.

<sup>8</sup> An interlocutor recently (after my fieldwork was over) suggested that the Álvaro Obregón Municipality is unlike others in Mexico City, partly due to the characteristics imprinted by former members of the *bandas*; he argued that some entered municipality offices through reintegration programs that offered them working opportunities.



Fig. 2. An artificial cave created by the construction material industry, viewed from the inside. Image: author.

The import substitution industrialization model ceded by early 80s as a series of financial crises hit Mexico (and mainly Mexico City), starting in the late 70s. In Álvaro Obregón, from 70s to early 80s, a significant number of factories closed their doors, some of them relocating to other states in accordance with a decentralization effort. The industry moved northwards, both within Mexico City, and to northern states, aiming to export to the U.S. and supply big cities like Monterrey and Guadalajara (Cruz and Garza, 2014). Evidently, we cannot speak of a deindustrialization of the country as such, but of certain areas. These deindustrialization processes promoted a polarized tertiarization of the industry, in both the formal and informal sectors (Márquez López and Padilla Lobos, 2008).

Simultaneously to the closing of the factories, and not unrelated, the ‘City Santa Fe’ project emerged near the rubbish dump. The Universidad Iberoamericana, a private university, where I studied, was relocated to the area in 1983, unveiling the titanic project: one that seemed to give its parting wishes to the worn-out industrial Mexico City and open itself to a new era of transnational enterprises and enormous mirror covered buildings. During the 80s, taking advantage of the country’s crises, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank encouraged/coerced or else ‘throffered’ (threat/offer) the introduction of neoliberal reforms that would open the

market and privatize services, among other measures. In Mexico, as in other Latin American countries, from the 40s to the 60s, government workers and organized labour achieved a certain amount of social security and workplace related comradeship that also translated into sports, religious and family events.

When they first came into being, most of the neighbourhoods in the area lacked proper infrastructure; the only exceptions being those connected to certain factories, whose workers experienced the above referred social welfare and individual and familial belonging strengthened through sport teams, music bands, civic and religious festivities and adoration of a holy patron. This set a precedent for aspirations that much of the population never achieved; political practices learnt from unions spread and were used in adjacent neighbourhoods. Perhaps certain strategies of belonging observed among the *bandas* are distorted remnants of the once glorified working class identity, only this time revolving around the streets rather than the workplace.

### Political Practices

Living under difficult economic and social conditions forced the population to organize locally and to pressure municipal authorities to meet their needs. This allowed a permanent link that at times translated into political support and cooperation through corporatist mechanisms, but also resulted in violent confrontations, as when the municipality tried to evict people that lacked the proper land ownership documents. As early as the 30s, Mexico City saw 'invasion-expropriation-regularization' processes of land linked to housing insufficiency (Ortiz Madariaga 2015). By the 60s, the authorities tolerated (or even encouraged) the informal occupation of land which, in turn, intensified the migration waves into the city (Davis 1994, Rojas Quincosa 2015). The 60s also saw an increase in local organization in the city, whose demands included access to urban services and land regularization.

Accordingly, in the research area, poor neighbourhoods with no links to factories or unions had a greater need to create pressure mechanisms in order to demand services and resolve their problems and shortages (Yáñez Reyes, 2003). Undeniably, this led to the constant re-creation of the link between authorities and populations, but also to the appearance of local leadership that have been studied in Mexican political literature as either intermediaries, brokers or *caciques* (for a thorough examination of the *cacique* role in 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexican politics, see Knight and Pansters 2006).

Mexico City and the State of Mexico were the cornerstone of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party), which ruled the country for 71 years (from 1929 until 2000); its corporatist practices rested partly on its linkages to organized labour and capital, and relied to some extent on class identifications. However, the population growth, the lack of services and infrastructure (mostly in low income neighbourhoods but also among the middle classes) and the limited mechanisms through which urban needs could be channelled to the authorities fostered increasing dissatisfaction with the PRI in the city (Davis 1994). The PRI's support decreased in the 60s, but more so during the 70s<sup>9</sup> and reached strikingly low levels in the 80s, after the

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<sup>9</sup> After the 1968 student protest that ended with strong repression and the killing of civilians.



Fig. 3. The view from an ascendant alley: the Becerra River, some neighbourhoods on the other side of the gully and City Santa Fe on the far right. Image: author.

fiscal crises hit the city and then expanded to a national level.<sup>10</sup> Corporatism became more difficult as urban demands brought urban populations and social movements closer, as it alienated them from the party's institutional mechanisms (Davis 1994). However, the PRI plays a central role in party politics to this day; Mexico's current president, Enrique Peña Nieto, comes from a *priísta* (that is, related to the PRI) lineage: the Atlacomulco Group (based in the State of Mexico).

During the 80s, when neoliberal reforms took place, urban services and industries were privatized, the industry underwent a certain decentralization, and the government implemented tough austerity measures in the city. By 1985, urban services in Mexico City worsened and crime increased (Harvey 2005). The outrage felt by much of the population paved the way for the birth of the *Partido de la Revolución Democrática* (PRD, Party of the Democratic Revolution), created by former PRI members. The PRD succeeded in the incorporation of different organizations and achieved significant support in Mexico City since its program aligned with local demands and dissatisfactions

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<sup>10</sup> Also due to a deficient response from the authorities during the '85 earthquake, as contrasted with the reaction from civil society and individuals.

(Davis 1994). It is not surprising then that some of the *bandas*' members joined the PRD and even became its local representatives.

Either through the PRD or otherwise, some people from different *bandas* currently work or have done so in the administration offices of the municipalities (both Miguel Hidalgo and Álvaro Obregón), as well as in other government offices. This is not necessarily the case in other spaces, or in other municipalities in the city. This exposes the local strength of the *bandas* and their not-so-marginal state; some of its members can now claim access and know-how of political procedures, though certainly not all of them.

### **The Search for *Alivianes* as an Active Process**

Julio was born in 1956 in Tacubaya, but then moved with his family to a neighbourhood in Santa Fe. When they arrived the area was getting populated, only the main avenue was paved and a few plots were connected to the water system. He remembers that *on the other side of Santa Fe* (now the wealthy side) only mines and dumpsters were to be seen. The first floor of his house was built with bricks made out of materials found on the surroundings by his own family.

Julio belonged to the Golfos and Pantanos *bandas*; both were related to the Panchitos, but also to small-scale drug dealers. He himself sold drugs and eventually got caught by the police in 1987 and spent seven years in jail. While imprisoned, he met several high-rank drug dealers that guaranteed a good drug supply, hence he continued to sell. He got caught three times for selling drugs in prison, but was never sentenced by it; 'it's just like here, outside, if you pay they let you work.' He claims to have had a good relation with both the guards and inmates due to his chores, but also for his religious inclinations.

'I was looking for God, looking for God in many ways, I started to know him in jail. As the people in jail already knew me as a drug dealer, but also close to religion, but in a traditionalist way, so that, well, I hadn't learned well about God, [...] we all hold on to God to our own convenience, right? And, the boys came to me to pray the rosaries for their dead people, right?'

Looking back, Julio points to tough experiences that he attributes to drug abuse; such as being shot on the leg and thereafter spending 13 years walking with crutches, and losing a finger while doing carpentry. He recalls that quitting drugs was an unequivocal action for him, already being *on the outside* (of jail) when his kids were old enough 'to realize.' When released, he approached a priest who recommended some Bible lectures, but he did not find them appealing. Subsequently, he met a group of nuns that lived and worked near his house, who preached Liberation Theology.

'And when I was out I started to look for God in churches, in the parishes, until the moment that some people taught me [...] Jesus Christ's practices through Liberation Theology, that I liked very much, and that is how I started, well, to find God through men, through service, not just being shut in in a temple and beating myself in the chest, right? Without acknowledging others.'

It was with them that he learnt that God is in the actions and not in contemplation. It was also through them that he was sent to the US to have his leg treated (and healed), after some doctors had already condemned it to amputation as it showed signs of gangrene. Working with the nuns, they established a kindergarten to assist single mothers and particularly those who struggled with addiction. They managed to get old clothes, shoes, books and toys as donations from local churches. Likewise, they received furniture from a charitable foundation, supplies from companies, and courses by the Universidad Iberoamericana (a Jesuit university). After some years in operations, Julio decided to leave the project resulting from internal disagreements. However, he reengaged with the nuns to work in ‘addiction damage reduction’ actions. Under the same line of work, he joined a Jesuit priest known as *‘padre Banda’*, after his closeness to *‘banda boys’*. With time, he has taken various courses and certifications about drug-dependency to complement his experiential knowledge.

Assessing his life, and considering different stages, he concludes that it was all needed for him to have the proper tools to work with people struggling with addictions and those related to criminal networks:

‘When you learn about the Bible, you realize that all of the people that are inside [of it] first had to live their reality in their community to be able to announce and denounce, right? [...] you realize that God sets for us the path of love, the path of science, the path of faith, and the path of reality. Some [go] through the path of science, some go through the path of faith and others through reality, right?’

Julio has assembled football teams with young addicts to make sure that, at least for a few hours, they will not consume and instead enjoy a physical activity they like. He constantly visits prisons, rehabilitations centres and walks the streets to make a presence so people can approach him if they want help dealing with an addiction or just want to talk to someone. He also works at a parish making repair and carpentry work, and regularly attends dance halls, as he is deeply passionate about dancing.

‘When people [in Santa Fe] saw me, when I was on drugs, well, they saw me with dread, with fear, “so there goes that addict, drug addict:” that’s the way they call us, “*mariguano*”, whatever you want, right? So today, I go by with my forehead high and the same people tell me: “Well Julio... what a turn have you given! Really, what a turn have you given, a hundred and eighty-degree turn because, from what you used to be, now you don’t even have a ten percent, right? Now I congratulate you on working for the parish, working for the people in our community, now you devote yourself to being the doctor of the boys, through the experience you have.”’

## Youth

Although it may sound somewhat predictable, for the interviewed *banda* members, youth is considered as a time in life meant to experiment, have extreme bodily experiences, and to challenge parental, police or school authorities. Many attribute at least some of their practices both to their youth and the use of drugs. Youth, more than a strictly

determined age group, is constructed by a series of attitudes and actions; some of the *banda* members were as young as 8 or 9 years old when they started partaking in them.

This construction of youth aligned with the introduction of rock as youth music, even if some *bandas* and individuals preferred other music genres, there is a clear connection between *bandas* and rock, specifically urban rock (and later punk and hard-core). The consumption of alcohol and drugs as means of experimentation and enjoyment, and the production of violence as a way to earn respect and relate to others marked their practices, denoting an environment of hedonism and presentism. The place and time when music, alcohol, drugs, gathering, confrontation and even flirtation converged was in the *tocadas*, events where different local or extra-local bands play, usually on the streets in the organizer's neighbourhood, but sometimes in bigger institutional or commercial establishments. Attending the *tocadas* allowed incursions into new territories which, in turn, established alliances with other *bandas* or created the perfect setting for massive collisions, sometimes topped by police disruption.

In this respect, *bandas* and police forces had an ambivalent relationship; usually characterized by open confrontation, but at certain times the police approached the *bandas* trying to add them to their ranks, as a way to make use of their violence and exploit the situation of limited employment and educational opportunities. These attempts were unsuccessful in the area of this study, but apparently prospered in other municipalities. Police forces and the media depicted *banda* members as delinquents and addicts, this in turn led to their constant chase by the police. Sometimes they were apprehended just for 'looking like *chicos banda*' (*banda* boys). The results of such apprehensions included police practices such as torture and extortion of the *bandas*' families.

The familiar triad youth-violence-masculinity arises. Abarca and Sepúlveda discuss along similar lines football followers in Chile, where creation of masculine identities is related to territorial domain and violence (Abarca and Sepúlveda 2005). Similarly, Jorge Quintero, a member of the Salvajes refers to the 'power of the *barrio*' (hood) and is certain that the growth and strength achieved by the *bandas* are because of this particular power:

'When we started to gain fame, a shitload of assholes started to look for us [...]; "what's up, we want to mess around with you" and that is how the power started; more and more power. To draw more power from all of the hoods around, they started to gather here, here in the Cuernito. [...] The fame we started to create made a lot of *bandas* want to join us. [...] But first they had to go through a beating, dude, it wasn't that they would show up and fine; no, no fucking way. They had to go through the entire *banda*, through a beating, we gave them some hitting. If they held up the beating: "dude, ok, you are part of the *banda*."

[He indicates that part of their power came from activities like robbing people on buses, even raping women; though he hurries to explain that he never agreed on the latter.]

So, as I tell you, the power began to emerge thanks to the power of the hoods, for having... for wanting to feel tough [...]. There were struggles of a hood against another, whoever dies, dies.' (Jorge Quintero, Salvajes)

This power of the hood rests upon gaining a reputation for being violent, inspiring fear and respect among other *bandas* and making clear that entering their territory would be a dangerous endeavour. On the other hand, it relied on creating a desire among local people to join them as a way to gain respect and tactical capabilities. Another member of the same *banda*, after participating in an Alcoholics Anonymous group, explains this search for power as follows:

'Now I know that we were sons of plumbers... it was a lower socio-cultural extract, and that's why we were more aggressive. They used to say: "don't go through the Cuernito, dude, because they rob your tennis shoes, they take your jacket, they beat you." Because it was a way of freeing ourselves, to make us look meaner, right?' (Nicho, Salvajes)

It should be clarified here that the Salvajes, as well as the Panchitos, managed to create an image of particularly violent *bandas*; whereas the Verdugos favoured an image of social struggle, activism or social movement.<sup>11</sup> Nicho's claim resembles Cohen's theories: belonging to a gang serves as a mean to reconstruct one's self-esteem after it has been eroded by middle class expectations that collide with low class settings and conditions, relying on working class virility and dignity (Cohen 1965).

Connell on the other hand claims that among the working class, the body is not only an 'economic asset' but also a core element for the definition of masculinity; but when working class identification processes are no longer available, masculinity does not confine itself to the working place, but instead oscillates in a back and forth process between employment and unemployment (Connell 2003). In this context, violence and belonging to a peer group gain utmost significance. Connell refers to this as the 'masculine protest', which objects to their structurally weak conditions and tries to resolve the contradiction in which they find themselves (being underpowered males in a patriarchy) by displaying a violent facade (Connell 2003). However, the 'masculine protest' does not resolve the contradiction and even works to the person's own detriment. Rudeness and respect building, besides materializing through territorial defence, is reflected physically on bodies, attitudes and attires. Being strong and prompt was needed to confront others, and displaying a coherent outfit helped achieve this ruthless image. While the gathering of tens could achieve an intimidating effect; intimidation was also embodied in the leaders themselves.

'Without wanting to praise him, but he is someone of high level and respect for me. I mean, I don't want to talk bad, [...] or praise him as

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<sup>11</sup> This image was strongly supported by the creation of the *Consejo Popular Juvenil* (Popular Youth Board), attributed mainly to the Verdugos, although most of the other bands, at one time or another, collaborated with them.

a God, but... [...] he is feared inside [jail] and outside. [...] Outside, when we met him as a kid [...] he *moved* others because of his height and he was skinny, not like now. He was skinny but well built. He wore jeans and Converse [shoes] and a denim or corduroy jacket. And corduroy pants and his little hats, right? [...] He was handsome, that mother fucker. He was handsome.

[...]

What he used to tell us, what he ordered us to do we had to do because otherwise, the following day, he would see us and hurt us or even kill us or let us die for disobeying him. That was his law for us; we were young.’ (Anonymous)

In this context, there are some concepts that are used to describe the respect and admiration inflicted by the *bandas* with shades of gender constructions: ‘*ser chingones*’ (being badass, cool and/or great), ‘*huevudos*’ or ‘*de huevos*’ (having a lot of balls):

‘Even... I will tell you one thing, it used to be very tough; if you didn’t act badass (*si no te ponías verga*), they’d kill you. [...] It was really tough. So the power of the *bandas* was gained through having balls (*huevos*). And also the multitudes, the multitudes; we used to be a shitload.’ (Jorge Quintero, Salvajes).

It is important to point out, with no intention to offer a semantic analysis, that ‘*verga*’ is a slang word for penis and ‘*huevos*,’ as said before, for testicles. They are linked to aggressiveness and courage. Also, this set of rude attitudes is somehow connected to being urban, seeing rural boys as less brave, less articulated when engaging girls, less stylish, more self-conscious, close-minded and even repressed. Even though *banda* members would have a family in the countryside or in other cities, they actively tried to erase any hint of rurality or traditionalism. Despite the fact that the *chavo banda* (*banda* boy) personifies urban misery, he is still urban and therefore, superior to his rural counterparts.

## Body

The body becomes central for experimentation, violence and encountering others in this context. Focusing on it, and allowing myself a brief reflective interlude, I would like to turn to Butler’s deliberation about precariousness and precarity (Butler 2009). Precariousness is the vulnerability common to all bodies and what gives way to our contact with others. Precarity is the magnification and focalisation of this vulnerability on certain populations or groups. Both are necessarily corporeal. Both emerge in my interlocutors’ accounts: the possibility for the bodies to confront, collide, and feel, while simultaneously manifesting and incorporating (giving body) the wretched conditions observed in the physical space that surrounded them and in the limited educational and employment possibilities offered to them during times of deep financial crises. For the *bandas*, the body was used as a means to intimidate, communicate and confront. One-on-one fights as much as ‘pitched battles’ demanded physical strength, tactics, and body contact, unlike the use of fire weapons that allow for an attack from a considerable distance. Also, alcohol and drug consumption, as well as listening to music or dancing,

are all intensively sensorial experiences. The *tocada* is the paramount moment for the confluence of bodies and the manifestation of intensities.

Nevertheless, due to my Spinozist inclinations, I will offer a somehow vitalist lens.<sup>12</sup> Not as to erase or diminish the weight of violence and injustice, but to understand the way people seek relief and better conditions, what my interlocutors define as '*aliviane*.' Being as complex and contradictory as it is, sometimes these *alivianes* may end up adding more violence and suffering for themselves or others. I will attempt to connect the *alivianes* with Connell's outline for a study of 'masculinity projects', but first, let me devote some lines to a different subject.

### Establishing the Limits

An issue that sometimes arose in the conversations I held with my interlocutors was rape. It was an uneasy matter, even to a greater extent than talking about murder. Perhaps because I am a woman, but also for its great moral burden. Possibly some masculinities can be negatively affected by admitting to having participated in a rape; an example of such repercussions is when someone is incarcerated for rape charges – he would get raped as a 'welcome', so that the offender receives as a punishment from the other prisoners precisely the same treatment that landed him in prison. Every man that mentioned this subject clarified that he did not do it, they were mere witnesses to other's actions. Only one person, eventually, admitted his own participation:

'I will look bad and everything, or, well, I haven't talked much about it, there the other time, well, I did not participate because I felt bad and everything, but I did watch how they raped a girl and her partner. Well, I did participate with that dude: I stole his money, I took the clothes I liked, [...] I beat him until I got tired. [...] You know, right? Having the devil inside and the drugs. [...] And yes, the girl, she was crying, traumatized, all beaten up, teared up, asking from us to pity her because she stayed there with her partner all beaten up, nude, I don't know, I felt panicky, but inside of me I was having fun as a psycho.

[Later on he adds] The truth is that we brought them [the girls] here and we raped them, from [another *banda's*] *tocada*. We left them stacked up and we left to continue messing around and who knows what they did or what the fuck. That easy. I mean, that was the deal a while ago. And now no, now you think over and over before you do stupid things, even to kill an asshole or hurt him, hitting a woman [...] or raping a girl: you think it once and a thousand times, right? Even if it is in a solitary place and all that shit, even if you get her high and that. You think it once and a thousand times more. No, back in those

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<sup>12</sup> Spinoza's *conatus* is a vitalistic drive: the power performed in order to preserve oneself and it is undeniably relational (Deleuze 2001). Spinoza differentiates between affection (bodily) and affect (of the soul) and they can be either beneficial or detrimental to one's *conatus*, depending on the outcome of the confronting powers (Spinoza 1958). Affects cannot exist without a body and bodies cannot exist without affects, as it is the way we relate to others, get to know and preserve ourselves (Spinoza 1958; Deleuze 2014).

days even if she was dead I think we would have raped her and no big deal. No, I mean, we had no compassion, we didn't feel... We were cold blooded, we were cruel.' (Anonymous)

As the conversation flows, we get to a point where this person has switched from a violent and even bragging tone to one weighed down with regret: 'I acted wrong, may God forgive me'. The conversation fluctuated from moments of sincere repentance, verging on a confession, and others used as a way to manifest his great deeds and fearlessness, much needed in his hood and way of living. But still, at the end, he feels he paid for all of his wrongdoings; he spent time in jail and some convalescent months after an injury. His imprisonment and bodily suffering may be seen as legal and extra-legal (perhaps even divine) justice. Addressing this issue points, first, to the ethical limits that the *bandas* members draw around their actions in their violent and rebellious youth. On the other hand, it suggests that, in spite of having participated in violent and even shameful activities, going through specific processes (be it imprisonment, physical injuries or others, as we shall see) opens up the possibility of rectifying one's path or feeling that all of the wrongdoings were paid for.

### ***Cabrones* or Well-behaved, but Never *Putos***

One time, during fieldwork, I was with two interlocutors, Fido and Cholo, it was getting late, and I pointed out that I would leave soon. Fido assured me that they would walk me to the bus stop (as always), and Cholo went as far as to offer to accompany home. After they joked about how they would not be allowed into my house, Cholo added with a serious voice: 'so you see that with us you are with the *banda*, the *machines*'. Here, the term '*machines*' alludes to their strength and respectfulness, as well as to their caring facet. '*Machines*' has a positive connotation, even though it derives from *macho*, which is considered to be a negative characteristic. I faced this attitude throughout my fieldwork, as my interlocutors protected me not only thanks to their social and cultural capital, but also due to the working of gender relations (Gutmann 2000, Abarca y Sepúlveda 2005). '*Machines*' are men that helped me with my research and accompanied me, but also who cared for me, being a woman almost twenty years younger than them and from a radically different social background. Gutmann highlights the fact that the men with whom he worked (in a popular neighbourhood) devote considerable time and energy to household activities and caring for their children; problematizing the idea that Mexican men are (only) *machos* (Gutmann 2000). However varied and fluid these facets of 'being a man' among my interlocutors may be, there is still a clear line drawn in respect to what type of masculinity is unthinkable:

'Over there [in jail], as they say, you have three options: either you come out *cabrón* [badass], the second one, you behave and stay out of trouble or the third one, you became *puto* [pejorative for homosexual].' (Pinacate, Salvajes)

My interlocutors would position themselves either as *cabrones* or well-behaved, often switching between them; avoiding being seen as *putos* at all costs. Likewise, as shown before, avoiding being seen as rapists; or at least avoiding showing themselves as such to me. Future works could enquire if there is a relation between the categories of 'rapist'

and 'puto', the most visible one could be the threat of *becoming puto* (being raped) in jail if one raped outside of it.

### Looking Back...

No longer considering themselves young, as they are between 40 and 60 years old, *banda* members still enjoy some practices that date back to their youth; however, inappropriately youthful behaviour is looked down upon. *Banda* members may indulge in dancing, drinking and partying during the weekends but, usually, they are aware they have domestic and/or occupational responsibilities. Nowadays, members of the *bandas* that still gather in *tocadas* and identify themselves as rockers or punks disdain those who, throughout the years, have joined the *banda* scene but were not 'original' members of a certain *banda*, those who did not get involved in the violence, those who did not suffer the consequences and who cannot display their past participation in certain activities. This can be manifested when pursuing recognition and legitimation mechanisms. Comparing today's youth from their neighbourhoods to their own, *banda* members find some considerable differences. One such difference is the current easy access to guns; in the past guns were difficult to obtain, and the violence was mostly performed with bare hands, sticks or rocks, sometimes even with Molotov bombs. Or things like today's lack of respect on the streets, the arbitrariness of violence, the worsening of the drugs' quality and its proliferation, the loss of values and the superficial and money oriented youth are common differences acknowledged among the interviewed.

Perea Restrepo argues that contemporary gang members distance themselves from previous 'historical will-driven' actors, and increasingly incarnate the 'market cultural project' subject: they are individualistic, pleasure-oriented, with no responsibilities, detached from the adult world, and responding to desire rather than reason (Perea Restrepo 2007). Although my interviewees would surely agree that today's youth falls into this category, most of the characteristics apply to their youth as well. I suggest we look at the *bandas* as a transitional moment towards this incarnation of the 'market cultural project,' but also evaluate it considering the passing of time and the nostalgia for *banda* members' gone youth. Even though it was not the case for most of the *bandas*, there was an attempt to generate an identity in the *chavo banda* (the *banda* boy) as the foundation for a social movement, and a means of returning to the 'historical will-driven actors.' This project achieved a limited centralization of the *bandas* in the area and there are still some remnants of its identity building and the creation of cultural activities, such as organizing *tocadas* with altruistic purposes, artistic workshops or sports tournaments.

### The Possibility of Meaning

Stressing the argument that being part of a *banda* is strongly linked to the creation of 'masculinity projects' and life trajectory narratives, and understanding them as constant processes and projects, necessarily implies that they are not coherent, monolithic, or stable. Although the time when the *bandas* emerged seemed to be a moment of uncertainty, and many would argue that this instability has stretched and even worsened as the years went by, my interlocutors offer linear and progressive narratives. Being part of a *banda* offers meaning, a logical progression, satisfaction and even a sort of redemption. This, of course, presents itself with different intensities for different individuals.



Fig.4. A *tocado* organized by some Panchitos to celebrate their anniversary, seen from the stage. Image: author.

I offer the following categories to better understand the different aspects that can be found in a life trajectory: 1) occupational-criminal, 2) domestic-occupational, 3) spiritual, 4) social struggle-political career. This model is not an attempt to try and fit each life trajectory into one category, but rather to emphasise some specificities. Usually, two or more aspects intertwine in one person's experience during different moments, or even at the same time. The trajectories that portray a fluctuation between occupational and criminal moments tend to show an important degree of satisfaction, owing to the feeling of having paid for wrongdoings, seeing themselves in a better scenario than some years ago, but also bragging about surviving risky and violent activities.

Regarding the domestic and occupational trajectories, becoming parents often distanced the *banda* members from their peers (evidently when paternity is assumed), although the experience of fatherhood did not necessarily imply a total rupture with the *banda*. We tend to think of maternity as a turning point for domestication, but here we also see that paternity has domestication effects, similar to what Abarca and Sepúlveda observe among football followers who are no longer considered young (Abarca and Sepúlveda 2005). As a part of domestic and occupational trajectories, there is an acknowledgement of being better-off and less violent and irresponsible, although responsibilities may become overwhelming at certain points. *Tocadas* are perfect getaways to release some of the stresses accumulated at work or home. This being said, simply attending a *tocado* may

lead to disputes in the household, especially when the partner/spouse does not share the same music and entertainment preferences.

Spiritual trajectories (like Julio's narrative, presented above) not only promise redemption, but also a radical resignification and functionalization of the *banda* past; according to some members, without having participated in a *banda* they would have never arrived at their spiritual path. In Julio's case, linked to Liberation Theology, the past is considered to be part of the very preparation the person needed in order to obtain knowledge and capacities to work with drug addicts and incarcerated individuals, finding God in other people. Alcoholics Anonymous presents a similar approach, as manifested in the case of another informant. For two other cases, related to a Pentecostal and Mormon Church respectively, the *banda* past and consequent conversion turns into a majestic example of God's existence and power, which is shared through testimony. Also, in these two cases, the conversion serves as a rebirth, a start from scratch, but one that does not forget the past. The spiritual path becomes a strategy for coping with one's wrongdoings and recasting them as having been necessary for getting to where one is now. The domestication of men described above takes new dimensions in the spiritual trajectories, as these demand one leaves behind certain practices, such as substance consumption and even some entertainment activities that take place on the streets; as is also the case elsewhere, e.g. for Wolseth (2011) in his research with Honduran gangs or Pfeiffer, Gimbel-Sherr and Augusto's research (2007) on conversion practices in Mozambique.

Conversely, in respect to the social struggle and political path, the scenario is less inspiring; although those *banda* members who have achieved political success may live under better conditions, they often feel a huge amount of disillusionment for not achieving what they set out to, for not being able to bring better conditions to their surroundings or observing an active, educated and promising youth today. The figure of the social struggler almost seems outdated, a vestige of an era prior to the incarnation of the 'market cultural project.' The sense of disillusionment can be partly palliated through the organization of cultural, sports or social activities. Throughout my research, this was manifested in carrying out *tocadas* inside jails as a way to bring music and entertainment to old fellow *banda* members that are still locked up, *tocadas* accompanied by mastography and prostate cancer detection services or the recollection of donations for the needy. Although alcohol and drugs are still consumed by *bandas* members, and even a few are still involved in low-scale drug dealing and other criminal activities; some *tocadas* are intended to offer 'healthy' entertainment sending a message of no drug and no violence during the events.

The *banda* sense of belonging and sharing a common past becomes a central issue in the *tocadas*; where the *banda* members yearn for their youth. There is a revitalization of the *bandas*, sometimes attached to a dispute for carrying the name of the *banda* as a banner, with a concern in telling their story and highlighting their membership to the *banda* and their experiences with them. This situation is related to their present moment in life and their pursuit of transcendence:

'What does a man want? He wants to be immortal; stay in the history in a book... that in the year 5,000 people will come and see what

happened here in Mexico; that they will say “those Panchitos were *cabrones* [badass]” (Fido, Salvajes)

Aside from their possibilities to transcend through their offspring or occupation, they have a great opportunity to do so in relation to their histories and past; they are the survivors, they are the reformed, they are the complex characters sometimes defamed and sometimes glorified. They want to tell their story and be heard. It is no coincidence that simultaneously to my research, there were two documentaries being filmed about the most (in)famous *banda* in the area (and the city): the Panchitos.

Being part of a *banda*, while not the only way, has given its members a core element in their life narrative – a pivotal point from where to topographically arrange different events and processes that have happened throughout their lives. These narratives imply mechanisms of belonging; taking some of their practices from working class or urban-popular neighbourhoods that needed to be strongly organized and active in order to attain basic urban infrastructure and services.

We should look more closely into *affect* to further introduce profound, bodily and chaotic experiences into a discussion about politics. Neoliberalism is not only an economic, political and cultural project, but also an affective and sensorial one. With neoliberalism and the supposed end of the paternalistic phase of the state and of its clientelistic practices, citizens must step forth and enter a model of co-responsabilization. Organized society, and even the unorganized one, takes some responsibilities and activities previously adjudicated to the state. But what we often neglect in this account is that the co-responsabilization of citizenship opens up a broad spectrum of affect and meaning. That is, it sets an affective horizon where we can locate ourselves. We could speak about affects as ubiquitous flows and intensities that then crystallise into social relations, narratives and institutions. But these crystallizations concede the creation (or rather, reconfiguration) of affects. In consonance with this understanding, we can observe the state not only as a rational apparatus, but also as an affective and even visceral one (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015). So, at this point, how far from each other are the most intimate and intense experiences my interlocutors have gone through and the political mechanisms of, let's say, the municipalities? Nonetheless, a succinct note should be made here: under no circumstances am I implying that ‘politicians’ (or ‘businessmen’) plan and perform Machiavellian orchestrations that perfectly designed and programmed the *bandas*. It is far more complex than that. It is a combination of the pre-political and the political; the irrational and rational; the chaotic and the planned.

The disappearance of factories, internal migration, limited job and educational opportunities and decadent conditions that were offered to *banda* members closed down important possibilities of meaning; but being part of a *banda*, and through it even re-functionalising those lacks, enabled other meanings and with them certain affects. The aesthetic, vitalistic and affective do not overshadow the political; they are interrelated. What kind of political practices are we talking about? Maybe not identitarian ones based on a project; maybe ones that while complying with ‘official’ politics, through bureaucratic and quotidian practices, legal and extra-legal mechanisms, generate affects in activities such as the *tocadas* and narratives that deliver meaning to our lives. As Adler Hellman has shown, compliance is not limited to imposed top-down mechanisms, as it



Fig. 5. Dancing in a *tocada*. Image: author.

also feeds the relations in the opposite direction; she specifically points to the creation of the PRD as a perfect example (Hellman 2009). And, not by coincidence, some of my interlocutors participated locally in the creation of this party and entered governmental offices when it ‘won the city over.’ In the diverse and complex universe of the *bandas*, traditional party politics dances side by side in the *tocadas* with criminality, entertainment and altruism.

### **Conclusions**

Mexico has faced financial crises during the late 70s and early 80s; Davis (1994) understands it, first and foremost, as a Mexico City crisis that, because of its centrality (industry, power and investment) that later expanded into the rest of the country. Simultaneously, in the area of study, the apparition of *bandas* and the inception of ‘City Santa Fe,’ emerged. The latter, a neoliberal utopia at the outskirts of the city, built ‘from scratch,’ away from the industrial and overcrowded central areas. Difficult urban and social conditions, violence, and uncertainty, not only gave birth to the *bandas*, but were the perfect insignia for them. The ‘no future’ punk emblem have reigned during the youth of the *banda* members, supporting hedonistic practices and the disregard for work, study or family related fulfilment; they opposed their parents’ expectations as they moved to the city from the countryside.

But this has changed with time: maybe *banda* members still do not hold great expectations for the future (of the new generations' or their own), but their past is full with meaning, and personal narratives are linearly and progressively organized. They express, surprisingly, the previously uncared for sense of fulfilment. Still, some have informal and unstable jobs, and others are still fighting with addiction and its health, social and family consequences, others remain involved with low-profile drug trafficking and criminal activities. What we observe in this case is how under a neoliberal frame, having belonged to a *banda* and going through specific experiences, results in a starting point from where to make sense of one's life, to order all the otherwise chaotic and meaningless events. This is not to praise neoliberalism and forget (or erase) some of its disastrous effects; but to observe its facet as a paradoxical producer of meaning and expectations in a world of harm. Its most affective and intimate side.

Whereas neoliberal construction of expectation and the responsabilization of the individual may lead to the potentialization of uncertainty and anxiety, it seems that having been part of a socialization process such as the *banda* opens a possibility for signification and a feeling of progress, retroactively constructed, and, possibly, even a coping mechanism. These processes, in part, serve as ways to deal with and assimilate violent, guilty and even shameful incidents. Sometimes, interviewees express a sense of having paid back for what they did when they met with unfortunate events; this allows one to be at ease with one's wrongdoings. It favours an accomplishment route gained mainly through individual responsabilization, but with a degree of social commitment. This is even more evident when a spiritual process is undertaken (related to either a church or faith, or accompanied by an organization like AA); as acknowledging one's responsibility is fundamental.

The individual accomplishment can be obtained by the search for *alivianes*, which can be seen as having better conditions, being able to surpass an addiction or even consuming substances that momentarily help forget responsibilities and concerns. I like to see the *alivianes* as a vitalistic mechanism that helps overcome unwanted situations, even though they can have disastrous outcomes. *Alivianes* need to be evaluated in comparison to a prior moment; some *banda* members assess that, currently, they are in a better situation than when they were young realizing that, although their parents may have struggled to supply them with footwear and clothes, they are currently in a position to choose from a variety of designs. Accessing the consumption economy and the supposed freedom of choice can be of importance when evaluating one's trajectory.

These affective and aesthetic experiences do not exclude party politics and other political mechanisms. Neoliberalism is seen as an ever individualizing process, but it also gives way to new forms of socialization. We can find this socialization in the *tocadas*, but also in the organization of charity events or devoting oneself to others, which works perfectly with the co-responsabilization expected by different policies in varied areas such as security, education, health, and so on. Aside from the government's sharing (or avoiding) some of its previous responsibilities, citizens, may altruistically feel as though they are truly helping solve severe and structural problems by 'doing one's bit' and feeling good about themselves. Sometimes, these actions may even take place on the government's doorstep, as in the case of a *tocada* organized by *bandas* members (and other people) in order to collect clothes and goods for the needy, which took place in the

municipal administration's facilities and with its blessing (permits). So, where do party and formal politics end and aesthetic, visceral and affective experiences begin?

We may say that the experiences of the *bandas*' members are 'extreme' ones, as we evaluate their violent behaviours or their radical change. But this may insinuate that they are marginal, which I think would be a misconception. In that respect, they move away from the violent, erratic but mostly powerless behaviour which Bourgois (1995) describes among the Puerto Rican youth in the Harlem or the 'mute protest' depicted by Perea Restrepo (2007); as they gain local strength, some of them have access and know-how of political procedures. Shoshan (2008) scrutinizes the concept of 'extreme right' in Germany and asserts that tagging it as extreme helps to see it from afar, to detach oneself from those nasty behaviours, negating or trying to invisibilize the 'centre's' (our) own hatred, intolerance and xenophobia. We could think about the *bandas* in a similar manner: even though we tend to cast them away, they can help us understand 'the centre' in terms of the shift towards neoliberalism, local politics or the most personal significations and experiences. Or even better, the conjunction of all of them in complex and contradictory trajectories and characters: fearless and violent, yet protective and caring.

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## Article

# Burhan Wani and the Masculinities of the Indian State

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**Abstract** Burhan Wani, the pin-up boy of Kashmiri separatism was shot dead by Indian Special Forces in July 2016. Wani, a commander for Kashmir-based militant outfit Hizbul Mujahideen, was popular on social media for his advocacy against Indian rule in Kashmir and his calls suggesting violent insurrection against the Indian state. As a Kashmiri Muslim, Wani was doubly marginalised by the dominant Hinduised space of the imagined Indian nation; his reactive masculinity directly challenged the Hindu bravado he encountered in the state-sanctioned hyper-masculinity exemplified by the Indian Armed Forces. The article is inspired by the theoretical contributions of Jasbir Puar and Sudhir Kakar, who argue that the heteronormativity of society is produced through the homosexual and that the Hindu is constituted through the Muslim Other. Furthermore, utilizing Dibyesh Anand's critical conceptualization of Indian nationalism as 'porno nationalism', the article argues that the way the Muslim is constituted is by fetishisation of the Muslim body as 'hypersexed', 'abnormal' and often criminal. Wani's masculinity and his public representation constitute a nexus between the technological advancement that enables growing linkages between elements of the global jihad, the emergence of a transnational jihadi culture and him as a role model for young men, whose class and religious identity is superseded by the irredentist claims of the freedom fighter. Refocusing our attention from the superstructures of global masculine posturing to localized, individual experiences of violence, this article aims to reposition Wani, and Muslims, as integral to the masculinities of the Indian State.

**Keywords** Kashmir, India, masculinity, Hindu nationalism, violence, separatism

How do we understand masculinity relative to a nation, specifically the Indian nation state? What can be said of the masculinities created under the duress of civil war-like conditions, as in Kashmir, and how does the violence of resistance shape masculinity? Collier & Hoeffler claim that 'the most likely people to participate in militancy are men between the ages of 15-24' (Collier and Hoeffler 2004, 563). Why is this? Regarding young men and their involvement, worldwide, in armed struggle, Cock has argued for a direct link between masculinity and militarism, suggesting that war provides a 'social space for the cultivation and validation of masculinity' (Cock in Honwana 2011, 53). Historically, male bodies have dominated global warfare. These have often been boys and young men. Regimes in The Congo, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Sudan are notable for their use of boy soldiers, but contemporary instances, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), demonstrate a continued preference for young men who are caught up in political violence. Carrigan et al. emphasise 'the importance of violence (...) as a constitutive practice that helps to make all kinds of masculinity' (Carrigan et al. 1985, 589). They also recognise that violence often comes from the state, and insofar as the historical construction of masculinity and femininity 'is also struggle for the control and direction of state power' (Carrigan et al. 1985, 556-57).



This article is inspired by the theoretical contributions of Jasbir Puar and Sudhir Kakar, who suggest that the heteronormativity of society is produced through the homosexual and that the Hindu is constituted through the Muslim Other. Further utilising Dibyesh Anand's theory of 'porno nationalism', the article suggests that the Muslim in India is constituted by the near fetishisation of the Muslim body as 'hypersexed' and 'abnormal' (Anand 2008, 165). Anand's critical engagement with nationalism in the Indian context points to a 'pornographic imagining of Muslim men and women that does not disrupt the asexual-but-virile self-understanding of Hindu nationalism since stereotyping allows for this displacement of desire and disgust onto the Muslim Other' (Anand 2008, 165). In the context of Kashmiri separatism, we see Burhan Wani the subject of institutional and media vilification, as the ultimate terrorist Other. This is what, in the North American context, Puar has called the 'monster terrorist fag' (Puar 2007, 78).

Initially, this article contextualises the current conflict in Kashmir within the longer legacy of resistance in the region. Secondly, the gendered politics of bodies will be discussed, noting how gender relations are considerably affected and altered by the entrenched misogyny in both state and non-state actors. Then, while discussing how the various physical means of resistance, notably stone throwing and armed struggle, contribute to aspirations of hegemonic masculine identity in Kashmir, this article will draw comparisons with the Palestinian intifada making special reference to youth masculinities, especially those created under the duress of near civil war-like conditions. Following this, the article discusses Burhan Wani's appearance and actions, which are at once specific, like all articulations of masculinity, to his location and temporality, but also link him to global jihadist endeavours as they do to resistance movements elsewhere. Here, an analysis of Wani's public presentation is presented, and the relationship between his masculinity and his popularity highlighted. Finally, this article will engage with the Indian media's proposition that Wani represents a 'new age' militant and what his position as an educated, middle-class, Indian born separatist means.

### **Understanding Kashmir**

Kashmir has a complex history. While International Relations theorists argue that the intractability of the Kashmir conflict is due to issues as varied as 'state repression, elite manipulation' (Ollapally 2008), sovereignty (Bose 2009), truncated power asymmetry between India and Pakistan (Paul 2006), and political mobilization and institutional decay (Ganguly 1996), it will be argued here that, in addition to the abovementioned, the intractability of this conflict might also be attributed to a reactive, collective masculinity constructed in response to what Anand describes as Hindu nationalism's (being read here as the modern Indian State's) 'political move to create, awaken, and strengthen a masculinist-nationalist body which is always vulnerable to the exposure of the self as non-masculine' (Anand 2008, 180).

Although Dar and Khaja have claimed that the militancy currently seen in the Kashmir Valley is a 'byproduct of British legacy in Jammu and Kashmir since 1947', the history of resistance in the region goes back further (Dar & Khaja 2014, 104). For instance, Hassan charts the Kashmiri movement for resistance against the repressive measures of the Afghan and Sikh rule and later the Hindu Dogra kingdom during the colonial

period, especially when the region was under the administration of Maharaja Hari Singh (Hassan 2011). The current conflict is broadly understood by the Indian and Pakistani establishments to be a territorial dispute as a result of British colonial disengagement. This is complicated from the outset by the political demands for Kashmiri independence and the many interpretations of *azaadi* (freedom) as articulated by Kashmiris. This is what Ashutosh Varshney has described as competing visions of nationalism: Kashmiri, secular and Islamic. Hassan has demonstrated that the movement for self-determination, particularly in the post-1988 period, has passed through many phases, at times being guided by the Islamic nationalism of Jama'at-i-Islami Jammu Kashmir (JIJK) and at others by the more secular ideologies traditionally espoused by the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF). Of interest to the present discussion is the way in which limited political authority has left a vacuum for a variety of protest movements to flourish and has created a space for militancy and extra-state actors to place demands on the Indian State, which seeks to politically and economically disenfranchise Kashmiris.

Constraints on political leadership in the region include widespread corruption and the misallocation of state funds despite enormous patronage from the central Government. This regularly places Kashmir among the most corrupt states in India. Further, the efforts of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), a multi-party coalition dedicated to Kashmiri separatism, has been undermined by hardliners, such as Conference spokesman Syed Geelani, who has advocated the use of violence through armed insurgency, discrediting the more moderate views of the coalition and the chances of moving forward with a multilateral political solution to the conflict. Finally, the Chief Ministership of the state passed from the popular Mufti Mohammed Sayeed to his daughter, Mehbooba, after his death in 2016. Her Peoples Democratic Party's unlikely coalition with the ruling Right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has discredited the party amongst loyal followers. This is underscored by Pakistan's periodic attempts since independence to wrest the state from India by force, through explicit moves of war, state sponsored terrorism and by proxy wars.

Decades of election malfeasance on the part of successive Indian governments and earlier, by the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference (JKNC), have discredited the peace process in the region, leading the APHC to appeal to Kashmiris to boycott the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly elections and the parliamentary by-elections, witnessed earlier in 2017. The Kashmiri people's reluctance to participate in electoral processes under the framework of the Indian constitution have at times lead to violence on polling days and the undermining of democratic political processes. Participation in elections is seen by some as renewed interest in mainstream politics and acquiescence to Indian authority, though many see high voter turnout not as an endorsement of Indian rule by the Kashmiri population, but as demand for daily issues such as food and electricity.

This is the context in which we find the 21-year-old Burhan Wani, the poster boy of Kashmiri militarism (DNA 2016). A recruiter for the Pakistan-based separatist group Hizbul Mujahideen, he was shot dead by the Indian security forces on July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Wani's death triggered the most significant civil unrest in Indian occupied Kashmir since

2010. While his prominent social media presence was highlighted, little has been written about the way his masculinity was disseminated and how this might be read. As a Kashmiri Muslim, doubly marginalised by the dominant Hinduised space of the imagined Indian nation, Wani's masculinity directly challenged the Hindu bravado exemplified by Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi and his metonymic '56-inch chest' (in Hindi, the onomatopoeic *chhappan ki chhati*). The Indian media, at pains to correlate Modi's muscularity with strong, stable leadership, have seized upon this aspect of his anatomy, an extension of which might be read as the masculinity embodied by the virile, young jawans (soldiers) as arms of the state, omnipresent in Kashmir. Wani's masculinity and his public representation constitute a figure of desire for other young men, whose class and religious identities are, at times, superseded by the irredentist claims of the freedom fighter type. Moreover, militancy facilitates a reactive masculinity in response to the state-sanctioned, hyper-masculine, Modi-type encountered by Wani through its materialization in the Indian Armed Forces. Refocusing our attention from the superstructures of global masculine posturing to local, individual experiences of violence may help us reposition Wani, and Muslims, as integral to the masculinities of the Indian State.

### **Gender and the Politics of Bodies**

As Seema Kazi has argued, the conflict in Kashmir is heavily gendered and affects individual bodies as well as communities and nations. A gender analysis, she says, 'illustrates that state and inter-state military processes are embedded in the social and cultural realities of the population at large' (Kazi 2010, 135). It 'underscores the paradox of the state's claims to "security" that, in fact, have little meaning when the struggle for bodily integrity is a daily challenge' (Kazi 2010, 175). Reading gender for women, however, as Kazi does, can at times erase the kinds of violence men experience – often enacted by the State. This is not to say that the picture of bodily warfare is entirely male. Kazi observes that while men are often 'disproportionate victims of direct violence', women's experience as the physical beneficiaries of neo-colonialism in Kashmir finds them raped and assaulted by Armed Forces and militants alike (Kazi 2010, 136). Khan, too, insists that 'the militarisation of the state has led to violence not only on the macro level for women at the hands of Indian security forces and Armed Opposition Groups (AOGs) but also on a localized societal level where violence against women is increasing' (Khan 2015, 349). While the use of women's bodies as vehicles of resistance in the conflict in Kashmir is well documented (Butalia 2002, Cheney 2007, N.A. Khan 2010, Manchanda 2003, Shekhawat 2006), the focus of this essay is the way male bodies are deployed, how acts of violence during war may be interpreted as intrinsically masculine and how men attain or perform manhood in relation to the exigencies of life under Indian occupation.

Mrinalini Sinha has argued that 'the discourse of de-masculinisation that accompanies colonialism is reactively countered by the assertion of control over the domestic or personal realm' (Sinha 1995, 140). While women may be involved with militancy, they are prevented from traditional domains of warfare such as the front line. In the Congo, while boys are conscripted into warfare, girls may function as property in the transaction of marriage or sex, a pattern we see repeated in the recruitment of child soldiers to ISIL and the selling of Iraqi women into sexual slavery. Honwana notes that while girls were

also abducted to participate in the civil war in Mozambique and Angola, only boys were subjected to military training and authorised to kill. Kashmiri males involved with militancy, therefore, mediate their masculinity through traditional social structures (gender, class, age) as well as through structures of war in which men exercise domination and women are forced into submission or relegated to non-combative and domestic roles. Patriarchal norms of society, as outlined by Kazi, are thus re-entrenched in the theatre of war.

Endowing exceptional powers to the Centre in Kashmir as well as in the North East of India is the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). The Act, applied to Kashmir in 1990, permits army officers to arrest without warrant, search any vehicle, shoot to kill and receive immunity from prosecution. Acting with impunity under the terms of the Act, 'the Indian Armed Forces have used severe forms of intimidation—torture, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, kidnapping and rape—to curb resistance,' (Batool and Rather 2016) without fear of reprisal, in both of these militarized zones. National and international human rights agencies have documented rapes committed by members of the Indian Armed Forces. Systematic violence against Kashmiri women by state authorities experienced during insurgency was particularly egregious during the atrocities committed at Kunan and Poshpura where men from the 68th Brigade of the Fourth Rajputana Rifles raped women and girls as young as eight during an army crackdown in the twin villages in 1991. The effect, not only on women but also on men from the community – rape being used as a weapon for emasculating men and further stigmatizing women - has the damaging effect of breaking communities irreparably and disrupting gender relations. The lack of official retribution for sexual violence in Kashmir is part of an attitude, endemic in the Indian military, that is 'part of a larger theme of masculinity that rules the army paradigm, and which is used to justify the actions of the soldiers' (Batool and Rather, *The Caravan* 2016). 'The image of a young, male soldier, a jawan, serving the nation in a hostile land far away from home, strikes at the heart of the Indian population, insulating soldiers from any blame' (Batool and Rather, *The Caravan* 2016). Further, perpetuating the idea of Kashmir as a 'disturbed' region is advantageous to the Indian state, which seeks to continue its heavily militarized presence in the region and justify excessive defence spending. Protests in response to this and the 'disappeared' sons and husbands of Kashmir have formed the bedrock of anti-India civil movements, placing gender relations and instances of sexual and bodily assault at the forefront of the Kashmiri resolve for self-determination.

### **Weapons of War**

Images of Wani before his death often depict a genial environment where militants seem untroubled by intense homosociality. Stringently heterosexual in their performance, this camaraderie is religiously inflected through iconographies such as flags, Islamic symbols and placement of The Quran, marking the space as a distinctly Muslim environment. These scenes suggest a fraternity or band of brothers that invokes the sub-continental notion of bhaichaara, or brotherhood, simultaneously linking their jihadist endeavours with the global Islamic Ummah or Muslim community. Some authors, however, de-emphasise the role of religious ideology in the fusion of militant group solidarity and the will to die for that group. Whitehouse and McQuinn's (*Pacific Standard* 2016) research on the 2011 Libyan Civil War suggests that one of the most powerful causes of extreme

pro-group action was the ‘sharing of self-defining experiences’, namely the ‘intense fear and pain of warfare’ (Whitehouse and McQuinn 2016). By placing more emphasis on the revolutionary’s end goals, rather than seeing militarism as a job, Whitehouse and McQuinn view the submission of the individual to the group and the enjoined transformative experiences as an ‘inescapable expression of the bonds of kinship’ (Whitehouse and McQuinn 2016). This has parallels to Western forces serving as ‘cannon fodder’ in World War One and highlights the potential for violent self-sacrifice in ‘every human being’, rather than being merely motivated by extreme religious beliefs, although these are acknowledged to have an amplifying effect (Whitehouse and McQuinn 2016). This line of reasoning is appropriate for Kashmir where self-determination has historically been articulated along both secular and religious lines.

Sanjay Kak explains that stone throwing as a mode of protest gained particular traction after 2008, as a ‘new generation of young men born and brought up during the brutal warfare between Kashmiri rebels and Indian troops, became the foot-soldiers of this new civilian army’, though he traces the origins of stone-pelting back to the anti-feudal struggles of the 1930s (Kak 2017, 326). As in the Palestinian intifada, stone pelters are most often younger boys. Kak describes the more skilled stone throwers (*sang-baz*) in Kashmir as the ‘front rank of the people’s protests outside mosques’ (Kak 2017, 326). The ritual of stone throwing seems to serve a fairly explicit role as a rite of passage in society for which ‘premarital sexual exploits within the community are taboo and economic opportunities (and therefore possibilities) are extremely limited’ (Hudson in Shiva 2014, 130). This, Hudson contends, ‘will be sustained as long as the oppressor allows no other way for boys to become men and as long as the culture of resistance legitimises the sacrifices and violence’ (Hudson in Shiva 2014, 131-32). Hudson has shown that clashes with the Israeli army play an important part in the construction of young Palestinian men’s sense of gender roles. This resonates with the Kashmiri experience.

Wani and his fraternity are often dressed in military fatigues combined with plain T-shirts. They frequently tote Kalashnikovs and carry smart phones, but appear without the long beards associated with extremists and the trademark *kohl* (eyeliner) that has come to be associated with the Salafis (the ultra-conservative branch of Sunni Islam) of the region. Guns facilitate higher status within the hierarchy of Kashmiri masculinities when compared with stone pelters. The desire for prestige as represented by the graduation from stones to guns exemplifies the quintessentially masculinist post-colonial fascination for technology as modernism, established during the Nehruvian era, but also the designation of higher, more sophisticated forms of weaponry linked to the Cartesian division of mind over body evident in the distinction between the sophistication of weaponry and the primitiveness of stones with their rough, earthy connection. It should be noted that the introduction of backshots (sophisticated pellet-firing shotguns originally designed for killing birds) has inflamed the situation in Kashmir considerably owing to the thousands of civilians the army has blinded and maimed as a result of the lead bullets.

Contra to the picture of Wani is the aesthetic of militants in the country’s North East, as described by Arundhati Roy. ‘I have never seen anyone like them before, the boys wear



Fig. 1. Burhan Wani (centre) surrounded by fellow separatists. 'Top Hizbul Militant Burhan Wani Killed in Anantnag Encounter'. Accessed June 12. <http://www.tribuneindia.com/news/jammu-kashmir/community/top-hizbul-militant-burhan-wani-killed-in-anantnag-encounter/262999.html>

jewellery, headgear, some in frayed olive-green fatigues' (Roy 2011, 6). This suggests we cannot assume the picture of militant masculinity to take one form regionally, nor in the Valley itself.

Gander observes that indulging in traditionally masculine pursuits and forging intimate bonds with male friends is seen as important, particularly for younger men (Gander in *The Independent* 2017). Militancy facilitates the desired homosocial bonding not afforded in an otherwise heavily policed public sphere. In photos and videos, the boys are clustered around Wani at all times. Following on from Freud, Kakar notes that 'ties of a group come into existence through their emotional bond with the leader. Love as the vital cohesive force of a group' (Kakar 1996, 148). Whitworth, in her work on North American army conscripts, observes that 'many recruits report that the emotional bond with fellow soldiers and the military itself is stronger than any relationship they had previously experienced (...) Most have come to see themselves as members of a new common family, a warrior brotherhood, which is very distinct from the larger world around them (...) military indoctrination promotes loyalty and conformity to a set of militarised and highly masculinised values and behavioural expectations' (Whitworth 2008, 115). The conspicuous absence of women in Wani's milieu repudiates notions of

the hypersexed Muslim, not through explicit actions of piety, but through the rigour and discipline of their militaristic organization and presentation, which combat the Indian army's own. One could argue, however, that such an environment could potentially promote the submission and sexual objectification of women, consistent with the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity as performed through heterosexual, homosocial relations.

Militants, like Wani, may be seen as objects of desire. If we relocate the Osellas' argument for wider South Asia to the Kashmir context, we see the attraction in being subsumed by a wider male body, linking one to a larger cause 'by means of immersion in a more potent and larger male self' (Osella and Osella 2006, 164). The masculine self 'is at once connected to and embodied within a collectivity of men' (Osella and Osella 2006, 164). Militants are 'mimetically connected through emulation of their masculine styles' (Osella and Osella 2006, 7). As with young Palestinians, who occupy a similarly marginalized position, this corresponds to the inheritance of a 'cultural resistance to domination' that is indoctrinated into Kashmiris in the Valley and inscribed into and onto their bodies (Peteet 1994, 31). Because boys are the ones who occupy the public spaces, they are the ones who get to partake in warfare. The will to fight and die is etched in the hegemonic masculinity of the Kashmiri imagination.

Othered by a state that seeks to exclude them politically, Wani's critique of the India he is begrudgingly a part of is wrought through his bodily posturing, which might be read as directly mirroring the heavily militarized Indian Armed Forces. The contestation of his citizenship is underpinned by an emasculation that denies him the status of a full citizen of the nation. He seeks to devalue the nominally secular ideals the Indian state stands for using violence to directly challenge its oppressive regime. Wani's masculinity both opposes and re-inscribes the militarized masculinity of the Indian Armed Forces that has affected Wani and his comrades on a deeply personal level. However, given the Kashmiri people's historic lack of support for the political Islam that Wani's party espouses, his popularity must be approached differently.

### **Being Burhan**

It appears that Wani's interaction with the masculinity of the state began when he was 15 years old. In interviews before his death, Wani spoke openly of his reasons for joining the militancy. 'I have faced a lot of problems after 2010, especially in 2012. They [police] used to detain me whenever militants used to strike. One day, unknown men snatched rifles from the police; they detained me and my brother for four days' (Focusweb 2016). Independent Kashmiri and mainstream Indian media alike have highlighted the fraternal relations of separatists killed in conflict with the Indian State. In one report by The Caravan following Wani's death, one separatist claimed 'that his brother had been severely beaten and tortured by personnel of the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force' (Donthi 2016). 'Tomorrow, I might join [the militancy]. Look at my brother. We are even ready to take a bullet now' (Donthi 2016). NDTV drew attention to Wani's co-separatist Ishaq Ahmad Parray's older brothers, who had been unable to find work. Another, Zakir Bhatt, is the youngest of five boys. Most significantly, the death of Wani's older brother, Khalid, by the Indian army, foreshadows the method of Wani's demise. Here, a narrative of emasculation is constructed. 'Wani's

path to militancy began in another one of Kashmir's bloody summers – back in 2010 when Indian security forces killed 120 protesters. Wani (...) is said to have joined a small group of homegrown militants after he and his brother were humiliated and abused by the Indian soldiers' (Waheed The Guardian, 2016).

The bodies of young Kashmiris are inscribed with violence before they become politicized. Kashmiri boys may see joining the militancy as an expected behaviour of a man in their region. Once boys are politicized, militancy is then seen as part of the wider cause for self-determination and so the narrative shifts to the political particularities of the struggle, infused with an Islamic sense of duty and the rejection of injustice. This is visible in Sumantra Bose's interview with JKLF leader, Yasin Malik, and others who feel that they 'owe it to their political forbears, their people, and their 'martyrs' not to (...) be marginalized and destroyed by state-led authoritarianism' (Bose 2009, 171). Wani's masculinity illuminates India's fascination with and fear of 'the angry young man', now recirculating as a privileged, media savvy, gun toting separatist unafraid of anonymity. His familiarity with social media enables the growing linkages between elements of the global jihad and the emergence of a transnational jihadi culture, challenging representations of the over-sexed Muslim and the cloaked Mullah as an instrument of terror. Wani could be an engineer, a cricket player or a doctor, like any archetypal Indian son. Breaking his silence on the on-going protests in Kashmir, Prime Minister Modi tweeted that 'it is sad that boys who should be holding laptops and cricket bats have been handed stones in their hands' (India.com 2016). Wani's persona evokes and mocks, simultaneously, the myth of the archetypal Indian son.

Following Wani's death, it was no surprise that during the Indian State's crackdown, the government deliberately cut the internet to the entire state, thus preventing the organisation of any rallies or demonstrations via social media channels. Ironically, it was later through calculated WhatsApp messages that the army disseminated a picture of Wani's bloodied head (emulating other high profile assassinations such as Saddam Hussein and Osama Bin Laden), which was used to prove that he was dead. The Indian State was utilising the same technology that facilitated Wani's popularity in the first place. The link between the way technology is implicated in powering the corresponding, yet polar mythical statuses of Wani as regional martyr and Modi as the national 'strongman' is perhaps best encapsulated by a 'Modi versus Wani' game developed for Android phones after his death, which depicts Wani's ten-stage 'fight for freedom'. This was downloaded thousands of times in the Valley and popularized through file sharing Apps after his death. In the game, the user assumes Wani's character to take on figures resembling 'Modi to win points and advance. The goal of the game appears to be azaadi (freedom) as the user shoots, kicks and punches to eliminate the Modi-like characters to gain points'(Saha 2016).

### **The Masculinity of a New Age Militant**

Both pleasure seeking and religiously disciplined, Wani was indeed a new breed of a militant. Kashmiri novelist Mirza Waheed has observed that unlike the first generation of Kashmir separatist fighters in the early 1990s, Wani did not cross over into Pakistan for training. 'He didn't use a nom de guerre, and he amassed a huge following on social media, where he issued brazen challenges to the Indian state' (Waheed 2016). The

Indian media, largely responsible for calling Wani ‘new age’, however, forget that, despite its pro-Pakistan stance, the Hizbul Mujahideen has a tradition of indigenous recruitment (Ollapally 2008, 125). This only changed in 1993 with the blowback from Afghanistan, which reinvigorated the militancy with a host of Pakistani freedom fighters dispossessed of their cause there.

Wani and his cohorts signal a return to a majority of Indian-born militants in the Valley for the first time in years. This is crucial to the Indian state’s rhetoric of terror, which sees Wani’s cohort described as ‘Islamic fundamentalists’ or ‘terrorists’ of the State. The separatist, in this form of discourse, is identified through a specific religious identity and his machismo is distinctly linked to terrorism. While Hindu masculinity - linked to duty and service to the nation stands legitimated - Muslim masculinity - linked to Islam and reterritorialized outside the limits of India - is seen as an ideology, not faith and stands delegitimised by the Indian State. Wider options of the secular or ‘liberal’, ‘egalitarian’ masculinities are now seldom open to young Kashmiris indoctrinated into Islamic values (Ouzgane 2006, 133). Although implicated as terrorists owing to their organisation’s relationship with Pakistan, Wani actually employs a reformist position to challenge what he sees as the failure of secularism in India.

Wani’s class background is important. His middle-class upbringing affords him a level of agency and education otherwise off-limits to young men from poorer backgrounds. Leading Hizbul separatists are often ‘school toppers’. Bhatt, the son of a doctor and a civil engineering student, joined armed militancy when he was 18 after being singled out for police profiling after the 2010 mass protests in the Valley. Tral, where Wani and Bhatt are both from, records some of the highest literacy rates in the state. Wani’s privilege as a member of the middle-classes (his father is a school headmaster) allows him and others like him to leave their families without the fear of the socio-economic repercussions poorer families might face in the absence of a male child.

The involvement of educated youth in militancy is not new in Kashmir. The resistance movement has historically found support among educated youth who are not clamoring for jobs but for substantive demands of freedom and the right to self-determination. Joining the armed struggle in the form of militancy has been left as the only way to satisfy the sense of duty towards the Kashmiri nation. ‘From Che Guevara in South America to Al Khatib in Chechnya to the present day Al Zawahiri of Al Qaeda, young, educated militants’, Dar and Khaja tell us, are ‘not a rare breed’ (Dar & Khaja 2014, 105). In Kashmir, ‘the ordinary masses normally make up a good percentage of the people who actually fight. But the educated youth, particularly unemployed, serve as the guiding forces’ (Dar & Khaja 2014, 105). These educated militants are not only committed to their cause but also have the advantage of giving any resistance movement credibility in their societies. Zaza writes about the recruitment of young, male university graduates to Syrian militancy outfit Jaish al-Islam, who have monopolised the local labour market with attractive salaries. In Douma, a city ravished by Syria’s civil war and where humanitarian aid regularly fails to reach civilians, the lack of jobs for young Syrian men expected to provide for their families, forces them into militancy. Men of Pakistani origin involved with militancy in Kashmir are, Fair (2007, 2008) tells us, predominantly well educated. Modelled on Latin American guerrilla movements, the Red Brigade was a terrorist organization whose founders met at



Fig. 2. The police station in Kashmir. 'Get them by their balls hearts and minds will follow.' Image: Hassan, Khalid Wasim. 2011. Reproduced with permission.

university and, through armed struggle, attempted to destabilize Italy throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Wani, it should be noted, was not violent himself. He was a recruiter who incited violence in order to reach a political goal. 'In 2008 and 2010 agitations, there was no militancy,' Farooq Ahmad Bhat tells *The Caravan* (Donthi 2016). 'But when the 2010 agitation was quelled through force, then you had reactions in south Kashmir. The people's frustrations had led some to turn to violence' (Donthi 2016). Delinking Wani from the violence that his death inspired, Mukhtar Ahmad Shah tells us in the same publication that 'it is not about Burhan so much. Look at the ground situation. So much oppression. People pelt stones to be heard' (Donthi 2016). Lawyer Ashiq Hussain agreed that the Indian state's use of force was fuelling deep resentment among Kashmiris. 'Why do we take Pakistan's name? Because we hate India' (Donthi 2016). Wani's father, however, focused on the Islamic tenet of *ghairat* (honour) and the narrative of shame and humiliation. 'Someone's *ghairat* got challenged time and again, so he decided to answer back. Others decided to stay quiet. My son couldn't bear to see the atrocities and the humiliation, so he was forced to choose the path which he is on right now' (Mustafa FocusWeb, 2016). Over the next few years, he became 'Kashmir's most famous militant commander and acquired something of a cult following among young Kashmiris, who saw him as a symbol of resistance against Indian occupation' (Waheed, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

By the time Wani was shot, it didn't matter that his goal of *azaadi* remained unfulfilled. As far as his supporters were concerned, Wani was every bit the man, the martyr and

the ‘father of hundreds of new Wanis’ that will replace him (Donthi 2016). ‘Burhan might have had 20 people with him, but now there will be thousands’ (Donthi 2016). Why do boys take to militancy? ‘Because it is there, the way out [of] the system’, suggests Mustafa (FocusWeb, 2016). There is a sense, when reading the media coverage on Kashmir, of desperation and disenfranchisement that Kashmiri men feel might be made right through violence against the State. Militancy offers a way out of hopelessness and shame in a climate where insurgency co-exists with State suppression and violence. Wani made militancy look like a viable option to the many disenfranchised young men who paradoxically demand attention from the State that deliberately seeks to politically and economically exclude them. Recruitment to militancy is thus inflected by class as well as gender. Well-educated young men dispossessed of worthwhile employment seek out an existence, and thereby formulate and consolidate their masculinity, elsewhere.

The denial of statehood and the links to nationalism provide a point of departure of the praxis of young Kashmiri men leading to a precarious masculinity. This truncated sense of manhood seeks validation in the form of violence in the face of state-led oppression. Even those rendered effeminate by the state version of hegemonic masculinity are demonstrably violent in ways just as familiar to those who structurally oppress them, both domestically and in the theatre of war. Given their access to the public sphere, the re-entrenching of hierarchical systems of warfare and the shrinking space for secular debate, the likelihood of men responding to these calls of violence is unsurprisingly high.

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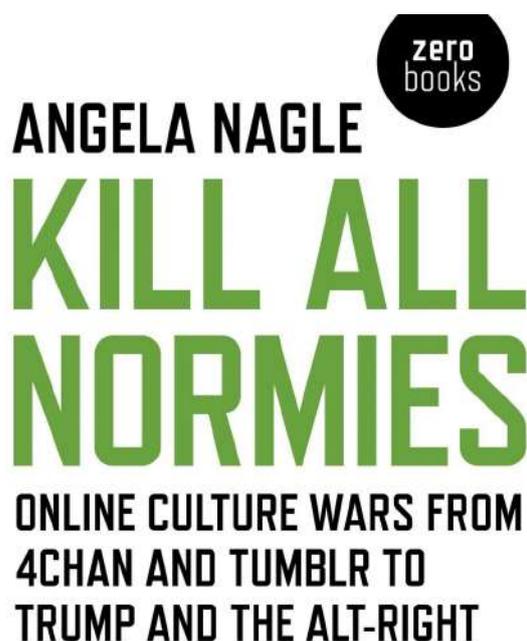
## Review Essay

### Revenge of the Nerds

Recidivist Masculinity, Identity Politics and the Online 'Culture Wars'

On the recent *Kill All Normies: Online culture wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the alt-right* by Angela Nagle, Zero Books, June 2017, £9.99

Udith Dematagoda



A mere seven years ago media commentators, journalists and cultural anthropologists alike talked with optimism and unwarranted confidence of the coming utopia of networked global societies, and the emancipatory potential of the leaderless digital revolution. What has come to pass is a decidedly more amorphous morass of cultural, moral and ethical transgressions – facilitated and propagated by social media – which are governed by an all-encompassing and disquieting ideological indeterminacy. What we are confronted with in Angela Nagle's admirably forbearing study is, disregarding the obviously unpalatable and criminal, something in the manner of a vexing playground dispute. It is a world of maladjusted malcontents of diametrically opposing ideologies but seemingly analogous lives; a world of perpetual adolescence, of misattributed and misinterpreted knowledge, misdirected intellectual energy, ineffectual posturing devoid of any political content, irony without humour,

and tedious transgressive behaviour by peevishly dull obsessives who are prone to tantrums. That serious critical attention is now given to the discussion of such topics, and more so that such focus has become highly necessary, speaks to the moronic and infantile depths to which culture in our late capitalist digital age has descended. Thus far it appears that information technologies, the internet, social media, and so called 'networked societies' – far from liberating and emancipating them – have overwhelmingly made people more annoying, more stupid and more miserable.

As an initial caveat it is necessary to state that Nagle's work – though incisive and original in its scope – is lacking a coherent theoretical framework, in addition to the



standard methodologies expected of a work of anthropological investigation. However, the subject matter itself, which exists on a level of absurdity and frivolousness perhaps rightly dismissed as inconsequential in previous years, almost demands the flippancy and lack of rigour of Nagle's approach – and in this sense, it is extremely apt. The indeterminacy of the subject matter, in short, is captured well (whether intentionally or not) by the author's somewhat chaotic prose and analysis. Despite its weaknesses, Nagle's can be regarded as the first work to initiate an engagement with the newly emerging digital ideologies – and the first work which departs from the facile utopianism which pervades discussions of digital culture to instead explore its darker and more harmful consequences.

The roots of the recent resurgence of right-wing digital populism are to be found in the 4chan internet forum. The forum was once lionised by progressive columnists and cyber utopians in the wake of such events as the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement as the perfect example of a leaderless digital network – a potential harbinger of radical social and political change. Originally a platform for sharing Japanese anime, the site (which has 750 million page views a month) transitioned into a forum for pranks, memes and obscene images – and gave birth to the Anonymous hacker collective. Nagle notes that despite uncritical progressive praise for the site in the early 2010s, from its very outset 4chan was 'deeply and shockingly misogynistic' while also openly self-mocking of the nerdy 'beta' males who frequented it. The site's aesthetic and cultural referents are war based video-games, David Fincher's *Fight Club* and the Wachowskis brothers *The Matrix*. Curiously unexamined by Nagle is the interesting fact that the creators of *The Matrix* and its sequels – apparently a gold standard of the misogynistic aesthetic culture of 4chan, providing many of its idiomatic phrases – no longer identify as Larry and Andy, but Lana and Lilly. They are thus presumably more amenable to what Nagle considers to be 4chan's ideological and cultural opposite: the blogging site Tumblr. Nagle argues that the anonymity of 4chan aided its evolution into an environment of dark, transgressive thought; from incestuous desires to suicidal and murderous feelings; images of violence, shocking pornography, and of course racism and misogyny. All of this comes through the lens of 'nerd' culture; in-jokes based on role playing computer games such as *World of Warcraft*, comic books and the creation of countless ironic memes. The site's happenings and interventions unsurprisingly took the form of trolling pranks, which, for the most part light-hearted, increasingly assumed more sinister motives. This initial incarnation of the site was proud of its degeneracy and moral turpitude but decidedly apolitical. What was it then that turned 4channers from nihilistically perverse basement dwelling jokers into anti-egalitarian far-right race-baiters with a penchant for a clash of civilisations rhetoric, and a propensity to express these desires through the avatar of a cartoon frog? The watershed moment came with the 'Gamergate' scandal in 2014, and here we can easily observe Nagle's analytical patience wearing thin. The name derives from a controversy surrounding issues of sexism and progressivism in the Gaming industry, and the harassment campaign coordinated around the hashtag #Gamergate.

The exact details of this unduly famous cause célèbre will be hazy for anyone who is uninitiated or indeed uninterested in video games or the culture surrounding them – but Nagle attempts to give a concise account of what transpired, and a response characterised by levels of emotion 'more fitting for a response to a genocide' (Nagle

2017, 19). This characterisation does not, however, even come close to adequately describing the chaotic inanity of the scandal and its fallout. The controversy centres on the creation of a relatively rudimentary and lacklustre text-based computer game known as *Depression Quest* by the developer Zoe Quinn. The game was received very favourably by the gaming media; a reception considered disproportionate to its quality by a sizeable majority of male gaming fans. Their opprobrium appeared to be grounded in the proposition that Quinn's text heavy game was not, in fact, a game – indeed it was referred to by one reviewer as an 'anti-game' – in failing to provide the player with an interesting and entertaining experience. *Depression Quest* is instead a game which features, according to Nagle, 'many of the fragility and mental health fetishizing characteristics of the kind of feminism which has emerged online in recent years' (Nagle 2017, 21). The game itself functioned, Nagle asserts, as a parody of many of the characteristics which 4chan's male gamers perceived in their so called 'social justice warrior' opposites. However, something is missing in this analysis.

There is undoubtedly a gendered conflict at play between the naïve insistence upon an uncomplicated *jouissance* on the part of male gamers – and the maladroit *écriture féminine* of Quinn's game. Yet this perhaps obscures some of the more straightforwardly visceral features of the scandal. After *Depression Quest* was released, Quinn's ex-boyfriend, a computer programmer named Eron Gjoni, published a lengthy blog post detailing a litany of infidelities and instances of manipulative behaviour that he claimed to have experienced during their relationship. This included several sexual relationships with video game journalists. Once this blog post was discovered by 4chan, its users began to mobilise against the perception of a grand conspiracy – one in which the video games media were colluding with feminists with the ultimate nefarious aim of making video games more boring. This over-the-top response consisted of a maelstrom of abuse, 'doxxing', revenge porn, rape and death threats being unleashed on Quinn and her supporters. But what Nagle does not adequately address in her section on Gamergate is the aggrieved identification which these 4chan trolls felt with the spurned Gjoni (almost one of their own, after all), and his emotive tale of allegedly being cheated on, sexually humiliated and used in an emotionally abusive way by Quinn. Given the demographic which these men fall into, it was a narrative of emasculating and cruel treatment which many were no doubt personally familiar with. Humiliation factors heavily in their collective overreaction.

Indeed, if Gamergate was the event which precipitated the rise of the Alt-Right, resulting from the amalgamation of 4chan's nihilistic trolling culture with more traditionally neo-fascist preoccupations, its origins are as libidinal as they are political. In this particular vein, Nagle dedicates one chapter to the online culture of pick-up artistry which she views as a gateway to the Alt-right. On these sites, sexually frustrated men are taught to approach the seduction of women in much the same way as one would approach the hacking of a computer system – a methodology that many of these men perhaps excel in. According to Nagle, this represents the first step in the dehumanising of female autonomy that leads to the virulent misogyny of the Alt-Right. This chapter is, like another chapter on the Men's Right's Movement, a tad unconvincing and dilutes her analysis by assuming a uniformity that doesn't exist. Even a cursory examination of these movements reveals a heterogeneity of ideological allegiances, which, in fact, do not act merely as different appendages to the Alt-Right body politic. For instance, the type

of Pick-up Artist culture she describes has obviously been around for quite some time; and was most memorably satirised in the character of Tom Cruise's hilariously manic Frank T. J. Mackey in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999). The platform may have changed from function suites in hotels to internet forums, but I suspect that the snake-oil strategies and 'lessons' are quite timeless.

The notion that this virulent form of right-wing digital populism is distinct from the reactionary or even conservative movements of the past is a recurring thesis in Nagle's book. She views the transgressive ironic culture which surrounds 4chan as having more in common with the dismantling of moral certainties, traditional familial institutions and the opening of discourses on sexuality unleashed in the wake of the 1960s counterculture. The historical and cultural origins she ascribes to this transgressive impulse are wide-ranging, yet at the same time seem woefully incomplete and lacking focus. Everything from De Sade, Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault and R.D. Laing to the Sex pistols and Siouxi Sioux are thrown in for good measure. Absent, however, is a fuller examination of the comparable and equivalent transgressive elements of historical fascistic and right wing populist movements. These include for instance the pornographic and often sexually explicit anti-Semitic caricatures of Julius Streicher's newspaper *Der Stürmer*, which enjoyed a weekly circulation of 450,000 at its peak. Or the distinctive form of the Nazi SS uniform produced by Hugo Boss and designed by the artist and reserve officer Karl Diebitsch – reportedly in homage to the S&M bondage clubs he is thought to have frequented in Weimar Berlin. Nazi ideology was deeply enmeshed in cultural transgressions against the dominant morals and mores of the German Christian society. This took many forms; from the little known interest in extreme and unusual sexual practises of various party members to their well-known interests in esotericism and eastern religions – in addition to other pursuits such as vegetarianism, nudism, numerology, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, bio-dynamic agriculture, astrology, homeopathy, ley lines, and various forms of new-age spirituality and mysticism. Many of these latter pursuits are now more readily associated with the liberal cosmopolitan left in contemporary western societies; even in their time – the Nazis were referred to as 'Armed Bohemians'. Indeed, as the English critic, Jonathan Meades, once remarked: 'at the Heart of Nazism were hippies in uniforms' (Meades 1994).

Nor is there any allusion in Nagle's work to the significant number of young men that were attracted to other, earlier reactionary movements such as Charles Maurras's *Action française*. After a period of national and military humiliation following the Franco-Prussian War, the movement and its accompanying journal espoused a message of national renewal based on a peculiarly anti-establishment traditionalism. Evidently, this is something which still holds sway among the economically disenfranchised working class youth of the northern hinterlands of contemporary France, in a country blighted by unemployment, economic stagnation, societal decay and terrorism. *Action française* was founded in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair by Catholic nationalists who objected to the presence of Jews in their military: the Third Republic's *Gamergate*, if you will. In addition, there are the transgressive elements of fascist modernities within avant-garde art and literature; from the works of Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, Julius Evola, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Robert Brasillach, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle and, to a lesser extent, Wyndham Lewis. Julius Evola, something of a dilettante, made the not uncommon

transition from a Dadaist poet to a fascist ideologue – taking in Buddhism, paganism, orientalism, occultism, new age esotericism, and a somewhat comically baroque misogyny and an attendant (and predictable) interest in sadomasochism. Incidentally, it was a line of thinking inspired in large part by the self-hating Jewish anti-Semitic philosopher and misogynist Otto Weininger – who, disregarding his early suicide and his purported celibacy, was something of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Milo Yiannopoulos. It is interesting to note that Evola is cited as an inspiration by the former US presidential advisor and bargain basement demagogue Steve Bannon. The generation of writers and artists which included Evola had experienced the traumatic and technologically induced brutality of the First World War – which perhaps goes some way to understanding, while not excusing, their eventual ideological paths. Wyndham Lewis, who fought as an artillery officer in the war, and was later an official war artist, captured this sense of post-war crisis in his *Art of Being Ruled*:

[D]uring the war no doubt men too were saying to themselves subconsciously that at last, beyond any doubt, the game was not worth the candle: that the Heroic Age was nothing to this: that the ‘kiss’ they would receive ‘when they came back again,’ if they ever did, did not make them look any less foolish as ‘heroes’, but more so; and that the institution of manhood had in some way overreached itself or got into the caricatural stage (Lewis 1926, 279).

However, the lost boys of 4chan and the ‘Alt-Right’ can count a dispute over a video game as their generation’s watershed moment. In common with past historical examples, the contemporary re-emergence of these putatively destructive masculine impulses has seemingly occurred when the totemic power of the institution of manhood was brought into question. These impulses, however, are rarely coherent or uniform – and are more often than not expressions of powerlessness and symbolic impotence. It is thus masculinity as recidivist criminality – fully aware of its self-destructiveness but temperamentally incapable of acting differently. Hence, the conclusion that we are confronting an entirely new problem is a simplistic inference, one which is easy to make given the unfamiliar technological paradigm. Yet the notion, rather widespread these days, that there exists a pervasive and insurmountable culture of ‘toxic masculinity’ is questionable at best. This has hardly been the first, nor do I suspect the last, crisis of masculinity – though it is undoubtedly one of the least sympathetic. Finally, conspicuously absent in Nagle’s counter-intuitively occidental analysis, is the highly relevant discussion of outcast and excluded young men of immigrant backgrounds, often petty criminals, radicalised online by a potent mixture of Salafist religious fundamentalism and computer game fantasies of guns, taboo-breaking violence and sexual excesses, abandoning their home countries and families to fight for a mind-bogglingly barbaric ‘caliphate’ in Syria and Iraq.

What is apparent within all of these disparate accounts of frustrated and impotent masculinities is the alienation and inadequacy inculcated by our present technological society – one that sits uncomfortably with the dominant Promethean narrative of emancipatory advancement. It is a condition which has become susceptible to the ridiculous posturing and opportunistic entreaties of right-wing zealots and religious fundamentalists alike – a condition which furthermore, much like the fascist populisms of the past, is replete with a tragic gullibility: one that will ultimately be disappointed.

To imply, however, which Nagle to some extent does, that this incongruent collection of culturally alienated males is solely responsible for the absurd Trumpian reality in which we now find ourselves fails to give an account of the full picture. It was after all the voters of America's de-industrialised rust-belt, who voted enthusiastically for America's first black president in 2008 and 2012, which tipped the balance in Trump's favour – and their own narrative is one of the return of the repressed working class, and thus also of the various failures of the contemporary progressive liberal left.

'Everything that was once directly lived has receded into representation', Guy Debord wrote in his seminal 1967 work *La société du spectacle* (Debord 1967, 7). With characteristic bravado, he once described his work as the most important of the twentieth century. In 1994, three years after the internet went public, Debord shot himself – perhaps in despair at the reified world which he had so accurately predicted: a victim of the spectacular society. But Debord was also a victim of the de-radicalisation of his thought, the transmutation of ideas meant to inspire a radical political response into bourgeois subjectivity and academic poses sanitized of their original intent. The prolific left-wing critic Mark Fisher also took his own life in early 2017. He too was a victim, and in many ways he was also betrayed, perhaps ironically, by a left which has become singularly obsessed with the notion of victimhood. Fisher is the tragic hero at the heart of Nagle's book, a ghostly presence whose life and eventual death is deployed as a stark warning against the emergent modes of progressive liberal politics which have facilitated and abetted the rise of the 'Alt-Right'. Tangentially, and unacknowledged by Nagle, Mark Fisher had some contact with one of the shadowy ideologues of a branch of the 'Alt-Right' – the ostensibly more intellectual right-wing accelerationist philosophy of Neo-Reactionism and the Dark Enlightenment conceived of by the English academic Nick Land. Land was a highly idiosyncratic scholar of George Bataille and director of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit at The University of Warwick, which Fisher co-founded as a doctoral student. Since his resignation from academia, Land appears to have gone native; resident in Shanghai – with rare public appearances – writing mainly for his blog 'Xeno Systems.'

Nagle's analysis of contemporary online progressive liberalism denounces an increasingly regressive identity focused but politically impotent movement. Identity has, according to Walter Benn Michaels, surpassed economic equality as the left's central organizing principle (Michaels 2010). This shift, Nagle argues, has 'reached its most absurd apotheosis with a politics based on the minutia and gradations of rapidly proliferating identities, and the emotional injuries of systematic cultural prejudices' (Nagle 2017, 69). 'Symbolic representative diversity and recognition became its goals', she continues, 'it admonished transgressors for 'erasing my identity' and urged white/straight/male/cis people to "listen and believe"' (Nagle 2017, 70). Furthermore, the identitarian liberal left is, as Nagle notes, pathologically obsessed with a 'cult of suffering, weakness and vulnerability' (Nagle 2017, 69), often openly laying claim to a compendium of disabilities which are 'psychological in origin or are unrecognized by modern medicine.' Nagle also notes that in online spaces such as the blogging site Tumblr, young women who self-identify as 'radical intersectional feminists' have imbued ideas of 'under-recognized, undiagnosed or un-diagnosable illness' (Nagle, 2017, 74), with a quasi-political zeal. She also enumerates, not without a hint of mocking derision, an extensive array of different 'genders' which Tumblr users lay claim to within their

highly insular discourse. Here Nagle writes with a sense of incredulity which is surely shared by many slightly older feminists of her generation, one which is astonishingly only separated by a few years, but nonetheless remains at odds with the dichotomies extant within Fourth Wave Feminism; from its insistence on the ‘cult of suffering’ and its over-reliance on a ‘clicktivism’ of questionable efficacy to its widespread, hostile internecine atmosphere of one-upmanship. Equally alienating, as Nagle recounts, are the wrong-headed policies of trigger warnings and the now infamous no-platforming of earlier generations of prominent feminists and gay rights activists perceived to be opposed to increasingly stringent, but constantly changing, central doctrines. As these telling occurrences of self-cannibalising conflict suggest, it would be erroneous to presume that the Munchausean ‘victims’ of this identitarian left are incapable of a febrile viciousness of their own, albeit one that does not quite match up to the more masculinised violent rhetoric of their right-wing counterparts. When Mark Fisher wrote his critique of the emergence of this liberal leftist identity discourse, which he chose to call the ‘Vampire Castle’, he already pre-empted the response he would receive:

The danger in attacking the Vampires’ Castle is that it can look as if – and it will do everything it can to reinforce this thought – that one is also attacking the struggles against racism, sexism, heterosexism. But, far from being the only legitimate expression of such struggles, the Vampires’ Castle is best understood as a bourgeois-liberal perversion and appropriation of the energy of these movements. The Vampires’ Castle was born the moment when the struggle not to be defined by identitarian categories became the quest to have ‘identities’ recognised by a bourgeois big Other (Fisher 2013).

The response to what was a very balanced and well-grounded critical article was such that Fisher permanently quit Twitter. The most purportedly nuanced of the criticism hinged on the fact of Fisher being a white heterosexual male, and thus a winner in the privilege lottery, the execrable and detestable pyramidion of the identity hierarchy – someone incapable of even attempting to speak on these issues. Fisher came from a working class background and spent the majority of his academic career teaching in Further Education colleges – institutions in Britain which remain overwhelmingly working class and cater to young people who for various reasons, such as social exclusion and poverty, have been failed by the formal education system. Fisher wrote in his work *Capitalist Realism* that, as such institutions were removed from public control and became privatised, these places provided the best examples of how an increasingly sclerotic late capitalist society was failing its young people. ‘Education’, he wrote, ‘far from being in some ivory tower safely inured from the “real world,” is the engine room of the reproduction of social reality, directly confronting the inconsistencies of the capitalist social field.’ He continued, recalling his role as a teacher in these institutions:

With families buckling under the pressure of a capitalism which requires both parents to work, teachers are now increasingly required to act as surrogate parents, instilling the most basic behavioural protocols in students and providing pastoral and emotional support for teenagers who are in some cases only minimally socialized (Fisher 2009, 26).

He also noted an inability among his students to demonstrate basic literacy skills, to maintain concentration on rudimentary comprehension tasks – of how technology, social media and various other forms of passive and active consumerism entirely monopolised their attention. They came across as almost physiologically incapable of even the most basic intellectual pursuits – and were politically disengaged, despite their situation under neoliberalism being incomparably worse than their more politically active counterparts in continental Europe. Such a condition derived not from apathy nor cynicism, Fisher argued, but from a ‘reflexive impotence’ – the knowledge that things are bad, but accompanied by a conviction that it is impossible to change them. Furthermore, most were afflicted with some form of acute psychological distress. Such insights were highly astute, and the irony is that they continue to have relevance for many of those same people who excoriated Fisher online, simply because of factors which he had no control over.

As someone who is not white, but who grew up in a country which is 96% white, and in white working class communities – I must admit to an inherent suspicion towards the notion of ‘white privilege.’ To be more specific, I am suspicious of any discussion of privilege that is not also heavily mediated by social and economic class – which despite attempts to displace them, retain their central importance within cultural and political discourses. Fisher defined putatively leftist identity politics as modes of bourgeois subjectivity that have contaminated the cause of progressive politics. Some practitioners of such politics have a vested interest in deflecting attention from the tangible material privilege which their class and economic origins have conferred on them and enjoy a sense of solidarity with oppressed and exploited groups which is both unearned and inauthentic. Two polarising figures on both sides of the ideological divide, who in their different ways are deeply engaged in the online ‘culture wars,’ are Laurie Penny and Milo Yiannopoulos. A cursory examination of their background is telling: both are privately educated English journalists from middle-class backgrounds whose writing thrives on the production controversy. They also appear to be friends, though admittedly Penny appears to be in denial about this. They come from a class which overwhelmingly dominates academia, the media, contemporary art and the wider culture industry – and is unlikely to relinquish this control in the near future. Indeed, neither has shown more than an ephemeral interest in discussing class politics. Penny, even though she started her journalistic career for the socialist newspaper *The Morning Star* and is an editor of *The New Statesman*, only pays obligatory, transitory lip service to class politics in her various columns on intersectional issues. The majority of writings are laden with references to every single conceivable form of the radical pose, alternative interest or passing fad, and are characterised by a level of tedious self-reflexivity that borders on the parodic. Yiannopolous (perhaps more honest in his role as a charlatan) once created a college fund for white working class men and subsequently defrauded it.

Identity politics, as Fisher correctly observed, is a constantly evolving and proliferating narrative of grievance which serves only to obfuscate and distract, to monopolise energies and intellectual resources that could be deployed against the violent economic exploitation and extreme inequality that continues to be inflicted upon our societies. What drives this narrative forward, its appropriately Bergsonian *Élan vital*, is guilt. It is a very specific type of guilt, which Fisher noted was a combination of ‘a priest’s desire to excommunicate and condemn, an academic-pedant’s desire to be the first to be seen to

spot a mistake, and a hipster's desire to be one of the in-crowd' (Fisher, 2013). 'Rather than seek a world in which everyone achieves freedom from identitarian classifications', he noted that this movement which seemingly struggles against racism and sexism, seeks only 'to corral people back into identi-camps, where they are forever defined in the terms set by dominant power, crippled by self-consciousness and isolated by a logic of solipsism which insists that we cannot understand one another unless we belong to the same identity group (Fisher 2013).' The absurdity of this logic was on full display two years ago, when a group of minority Yale University students angrily confronted the medical sociologist Nicholas Christakis, the warden of their dorm house, about an e-mail sent by his wife Erika, and himself, to students. The couple advised against injunctions prohibiting culturally insensitive Halloween costumes – and in favour of confronting the wearer of such costumes by 'telling them you are offended.' 'Free speech and the ability to tolerate offense', they maintained, 'are the hallmarks of a free and open society' (Christakis 2015). 'American universities were once a safe space not only for maturation but also for a certain regressive, or even transgressive, experience,' the e-mail stated. 'Increasingly, it seems, they have become places of censure and prohibition (Christakis 2015).' The uncomfortable confrontation was captured on video. He attempts to engage in dialogue with the histrionic crowd, who in turn spontaneously burst into tears and scream when he refuses to apologise for what was merely an earnest intellectual challenge. Christakis, who worked for years as a hospice doctor in the most deprived areas of Chicago, makes futile pleas for dialogue on the basis of common humanity; the students, unwilling to accept anything but an unqualified apology, and insisting that his job is to provide them with a 'safe space', merely respond that he cannot understand their experience because he is white.

Such are the impasses, both within the 'Alt-Right' and the identitarian left, that we find ourselves in within the online 'Culture Wars' which Nagle attempts to give an account of. It is a digital landscape dominated by two highly vocal and comparably intransigent groups of youth, who hold illusions of power, but are both hopelessly adrift within the contradictory and rapidly shifting chaos of our current societies, cut off from the political struggles of the past, vulnerable to unprecedented levels of precarity and economic exploitation, but without a coherent goal in mind nor any discernible political program to rally behind.

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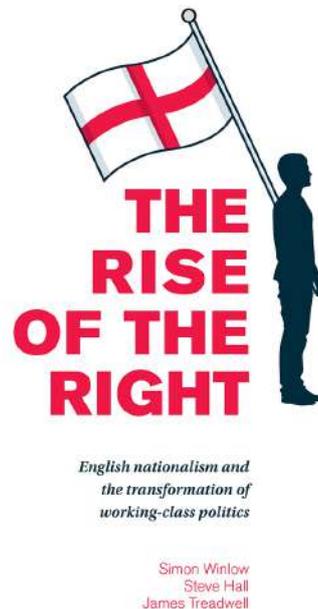
## Book Review

# What Drives the Rise of the Right?

Book Review of Simon Winlow, Steve Hall, & James Treadwell, *The Rise of the Right: English Nationalism and the Transformation of the Working Class*, Bristol: Policy Press, 2017. ISBN 9978-1-4473-2848-3 (paperback). GBP 10.39.

Tereza Kuldova

What does *really* drive the rise of the right and of English nationalism among the working class? This is the question that this timely and extremely important book, written by three leading criminologists, seeks to answer. It does so by placing the emergence of the *English Defence League*, a fringe and disorganized political group of disillusioned and angry men and women, in an uncompromising political and socio-economic analysis. While mainstream media overindulge in bashing the evil figure of the uneducated, racist, homophobic and so on, white working class men and women who voted for Brexit, the British version of Hilary Clinton's 'basket of deplorables', thus further fuelling the anger of these men and women at the establishment, this book provides us with an in-depth perspective at how this resentment and often inarticulate anger emerged in the first place, and often with very good reasons – from loss of job security, low wages, growth of inequality, declining job prospects, downward mobility, to general degradation of working class neighbourhoods. While the book speaks of the English context, it is undeniable that the analysis is equally applicable elsewhere in the neoliberalized and deindustrialized West that has been driven into a state of economic and social decay by the political consensus between the neoliberal right and liberal left. As such, it should be an obligatory reading for anyone attempting to understand the increasing anti-establishment resentment against the self-serving elites across the West.



### **'why have many white working-class areas become alienated from left-wing politics?' (p. 13)**

While there is not much doubt that the destruction of the working class neighbourhoods and the devaluation of their inhabitants and their expulsion from cultural life can be to



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a large degree blamed on the brutal neoliberal policies embraced by the political establishment left and right, and in the recent times on the austerity politics, ‘a kind of fetishistic self-flagellation imposed on the majority in order to guarantee that the super-rich minority were not inconvenienced too much, and could rest assured that with every passing year their wealth would continue to grow’ (p. 20), as the authors themselves brilliantly analyse in detail, the question that emerges is: ‘why have many white working-class areas become alienated from left-wing politics?’ (p. 13). And this is the crucial question, from which the authors bravely do not shy away. Instead, they offer a much needed critique of the liberal left that has abandoned the working class hit hardest by the neoliberal reform, a left that has ceased to care for any true economic reform in the name of equality or for any regulation of the financial sector, and instead began indulging in pseudo-political culture wars and identity politics, completely disregarding people systematically pushed into poverty. To the liberal left, social antagonisms ceased to be economic and became firmly cultural – a fatal mistake. ‘The political establishment no longer speaks to the experiences, hopes and dreams of ordinary people, and dismisses all their fears, no matter how grounded they might be, as irrational and counterproductive to the flourishing of progressive cultural life’ (p. 2). It does not really come as a big surprise, given the actual existential problems people in working class neighbourhoods face on a daily basis (and increasingly also many beyond) that ‘to these discarded workers the metropolitan middle class’s posturing hipster communism and shrill identity politics is particularly galling. Thus eyes turn to the right, and the far right appears on the radar screen as the only alternative option’ (p. 40). The tremendous sense of loss felt across these communities coupled with the total ‘absence of alternative future’, necessarily leads people to ‘seek their own retrogressive escape route from the neoliberal market’s unforgiving insecurity’ (p. 27).

**‘The refusal of neoliberal media and academia to talk honestly about our precarious future intensifies this fear and creates space for conspiracy theories, the consolidation of pre-existing prejudices and the construction of various scapegoats’ (p. 51).**

The diagnosis of the current state of affairs is clear: unless the root causes of this anger are seriously addressed by the left, we won’t witness any significant change in this trend. Instead, we will continue living in times of persistent post-political denial of the increasing insecurity, of denial of the loss of hope and of any future promise of betterment of the common man’s condition, and of fear of precariousness and overall irrelevance and meaninglessness. ‘The refusal of neoliberal media and academia to talk honestly about our precarious future intensifies this fear and creates space for conspiracy theories, the consolidation of pre-existing prejudices and the construction of various scapegoats’ (p. 51). This refusal coupled with the increasingly obvious fact that the ‘vital political and economic moves are now secondary to talk about discourses, narratives, intersectional identities, stigmatisation and so on’ where the ‘talk about real forces, structures and processes that create and reproduce our reality has been replaced by talk about talk’ (p. 56), becomes the perfect breeding ground for the creation of scapegoats (that in my own view follow the very logic of identity politics) – such as the figure of the Muslim invader upon whom the EDL projects its fears and who effectively replaces the market forces that remain harder to grasp and challenge (and that few seriously talk about anymore). However, it is not only politics, as the authors argue, but also academia

that has become complicit in this counterproductive denial of lived experiences. As such, this powerful critique also directs itself at the academics, let me quote at length:

The crime-ridden communal degeneration and abject condition of specific pockets of former working-class residential areas in the UK is denied because supporting data is never generated and the liberal left don't listen to the everyday public discourse of the very poor people they are supposed to represent. Thus explosions of criminal activity and spikes in crime rates occur from what seems like nowhere, out of the darkness created systematic empirical manipulation and epistemological denial. (...) Those who gain access to impoverished neighbourhoods must always present a positive image of the poor – their altruism, sociability, resilience and sense of social justice. Hatred, inarticulate rage and examples of social breakdown and sheer desperation must always be presented as aberrations. Regardless of its rigour or quality, this type of appreciative representations is selected by the left-liberal media and academic research industries to receive the promotion required to compete with the right-wing demonization apparatus for entry into the public consciousness. (...) under no circumstance should either side portray the plight of some sections of the working class as unrecoverable within the current order of political economy, or the inevitable product of the political choice they both made to comply with the economic logic of neoliberal capitalist conjuncture. Avoiding clear representations of the inevitably deleterious outcomes of permanent localised recessions, permanent ejection from tenured work and the permanent removal of social status, both sides collude in the creation of an epistemological vacuum, into which the right-wing media flow to promote their ideological messages of voluntarist degeneracy, and the liberal-left media flow to promote the occasional small successes it manages to achieve in its generally unsuccessful philanthropic rescue mission (pp. 61-2).

*The Rise of the Right* can itself be read precisely as an attempt to counter this denial and to make us understand what has been happening on the ground, while giving voice to the EDL supporters driven by anger, frustration, sense of disempowerment and growing irrelevance and a nostalgia for the time when their labour was valued and considered important, a time when they were respected. Irrespective of how disturbing some statements may appear to certain readers, we need to hear them. While there is a sense of resentment directed at the Muslim Other, which can be discerned across the statements of the informants quoted in the second part of the book, the nostalgia coupled with anger at the current economic and social conditions of the working class clearly takes a precedence. The statements of the informants are always penetrated by deep anger at the system and the conditions they are forced to live in, let me quote several of these informants:

'I need to earn. I can't just sit waiting to get an hour here, an hour there... For Christ's sake, I'm not a kid anymore. I need a proper job' (p. 87).

'The whole thing is just set up to take the piss out of people like me' (p. 87).

'The place has been going downhill for years. (...) I moved away, obviously. That's how it goes. Why would you want to stay now? (...) I used to worry leaving my car parked outside of mam's. It's just all getting a little wild. That's all.' (p. 91).

‘It’s just, it’s gone, hasn’t it, that sense of community. (...) You’ve got drug addicts, you’ve got what, no jobs? No future for the kids? Growing up here now’s not the best start, is it?’ (p. 92).

‘The politicians are just money-grabbing bastards mate, fucking liars and cowards. (...) They’re just lining their own pockets, while places like this disappear. You never hear about this stuff on the news, do you?’ (p. 92).

‘The rich cunts in the city. On the TV and talking in the newspapers, calling us racists. It’s not their jobs on the line, is it? It’s not fucking loads of people moving next to them, is it?’ (p. 95).

‘I’m not racist, not really. Some things I think might come across as racist, but that’s just because of the shit state we’re in, isn’t it? It’s just gone mad, all that political correctness bollocks, the fucking thought police telling you what to think and that. I am just fucking sick of the immigration’ (p. 97).

‘Ten years from now it’ll be all Muslim round here. All immigrant. They’ll have the Sharia law, black flags everywhere. There’ll be nothing left’ (p. 99).

‘UKIP is like a posh version of the EDL, isn’t it? ... I mean, to be honest, I don’t trust them. They’ll probably fuck it up’ (p. 102).

‘...the fucking UAF and the cultural Marxists. They are just queers, dirty spoilt whores who like ethnic cock, and middle-class pricks that don’t know what life is really like when you live on a shitty fucking estate where everything is disappearing except the fucking foreign faces’ (p. 135).

‘All I want is a bit of respect for our history and our traditions, a bit of respect for the white people who sweated their balls off building this country’ (p.137).

Given their perpetual financial anxiety and the intensity of experienced existential problems, it is hardly a wonder that the frustration of these people is channelled at the wrong antagonist and not at the true causes of their frustration. However, it is the task of politics to begin channelling this anger at the proper cause, and to create a movement that can restore hope and alter the course in which we are heading. Instead, the white men have become to the left what the Muslims are to them – atavistic barbarians – they have become the only group that can be openly bashed, chastised and stigmatized. And if we carefully watch reality TV shows, we know that when people are presumed to be idiots (that’s why they are invited to the show in the first place) and they are expected to reveal this on the camera, they always tend to exaggerate and really show us ‘what idiots they are’. It is precisely such a dynamic that we are witnessing here. ‘They talked of the “stupid lefties” who hated the working class. These “stupid lefties” turned up at EDL protests to shout and spit at them and call them fascists’ (p. 117). Now they are certainly bound to show us what fascists they are, vulgarity and the ability to offend being the only resource left to them. Moreover, in the manner of contemporary dominant politics, they are ‘talked down to, patronised, and treated like dull-witted pupils, who failed to absorb the never-ending lesson on cultural tolerance’ (p. 118). It is

my experience that only few (masochists?) like to be patronized. The crucial point here is that ‘the working class was the recipient of the lesson, never its author’ (p. 118) and it is thus no wonder that ‘freedom, like equality and everything else these liberals droned on about, repeating their tired mantra over and over again, was ultimately a load of shit. It meant nothing, and it meant nothing because it was nothing’ (p. 120).

**Instead, it is necessary to create a new type of politics that would render cultural differences insignificant and in their place identify new commitments that could be shared by all, irrespective of cultural background or whichever way people prefer to identify.**

The final crucial question the authors raise is: ‘why has so much emphasis been placed on tolerating diversity and the creation of a just cultural order when so little emphasis has been placed on the creation of the just economic order we need to accommodate it?’ (p. 142). Instead, it is necessary to create a new type of politics that would render cultural differences insignificant and in their place identify new commitments that could be shared by all, irrespective of cultural background or whichever way people prefer to identify. Only new powerful, shared concerns and projects, as the authors argue, can potentially transgress these petty and ultimately insignificant divisions. Irrespective of how we identify, should not our enemy rather be the plutocratic global business class, whose interests it serves only so well that we keep fighting based on our silly identities in an attempt to either offend and be heard or gain moral high-ground? The new politics of universality, for which the authors plead, must take precedence, while ‘the “tolerance of diversity” must take a back seat’. In other words, ‘the acknowledgement of sameness must come to the fore’ (p. 182). This book deserves to be widely read and discussed. It is an incredibly rare intervention that has the potential to place academic work again at the centre of public debate and that, too, without fuelling further resentment of the working class. It’s call for a politics of universality is most needed in our times and we should all, upon reading, feel interpellated to act and mobilize against the destructive forces of capital that only benefit from driving us against each other, keeping us oppressed in our petty battles.

**‘the “tolerance of diversity” must take a back seat ... the acknowledgement of sameness must come to the fore’ (p. 182)**

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## Photo Essay

# Cockfighting in Venezuela

Capitalist Paroxysm within a State Controlled Economy

Henry Moncrieff

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In 2014 in Guasipati, an agricultural and cattle town in Southeastern Venezuela, I witnessed a group of men of all generations who staged themselves through the orgasmic rite of cockfights. In Geertz's famous ethnography of cockfighting in Bali, the 'irrationality' of betting appears at first as surprising. But cockfighting is a game that dramatizes status and tests group solidarity, it is a measure of moral import and of meaning. This photographic record of masculinities at play in cockfighting builds on Geertz' interpretation. The images were taken in the *gallera* (cockpit) of Guasipati during a clandestine night. It is here that the participating men engage in a form of capitalist communication that directly questions the Bolivarian Revolution. Many are workers within socialist enterprises, and they tremendously enjoy this illegal and transgressive activity. Within this space, the patterns of exchange become competitive and inscribed in subterranean capitalist circuits, evoking a symbolism of masculine power disputes (who is a man and who not) vis-à-vis the prohibitions of socialism. It is here that illegal enrichment that serves as a source and mark of status within the state controlled economy is effectively played out. Behind the individual and collective euphoria seen in the photographs, there are even more euphoric social tensions of betting and status at work.

Geertz, C (1972) 'Deep Play: notes on the Balinese cockfight', *Daedalus* 101(1): 1-37.

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**Antonio (45) is an agricultural worker. He takes care of the roosters of the rich men of the sector.**



**Cruz (51) has been a passionate cock player since he was fifteen. In the photograph he reveals his religious relationship to his cock.**



**Andrés (17) wishes his cock good luck before the fight with Cruz's Rooster.**



**Luis (28) shows the spurs of the cocks ready for the fights.**



**Santiago (45) has been a bookmaker at cockfighting events since he was fifteen years old.**



**Manly passions, affects and emotions inside the cockpit.**



**Rómulo (45) is a powerful food trafficker between Venezuela and Brazil. He is whiskey lover, who is famous because his bets are the highest.**



**Everyone's eyes are on the fighting roosters.**



**A man beside himself while his cock dies.**



**Collective celebration of victory.**

