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The Natural Beauty of Sexes

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1. Table of Contents

1. Table of Contents.....	1
2. Introduction.....	2
2.1 Sexes.....	2
2.2 Nature.....	2
2.3 Beauty.....	3
3. Purpose.....	6
4. Limitations.....	6
5. Disposition.....	7
6. Earlier Research.....	8
7. Nature.....	13
7.1 Domination.....	13
7.2 Denaturalization.....	14
7.3 Classifications.....	15
7.4 Beauty.....	16
8. Art.....	18
8.1 Otherness.....	18
8.2 Suffering.....	18
8.3 Paradoxicality.....	19
8.4 What, where, when.....	20
8.5 Negative Utopia.....	21
8.6 Incommensurability.....	22
9. Conclusion.....	24
10. Popular Science Summary.....	27
10. Bibliography.....	28

2. Introduction

“The Natural Beauty of Sexes” might at first glance seem as an odd phrase, composed of outdated words with dubious meanings. Perhaps, the first thing it brings to mind is a pretty girl without make-up, with loose hair flowing over her naked shoulders, surrounded by green leaves, singing birds and a waterfall splashing somewhere in the background. But this thesis is not about that girl; it's about Theodor W. Adorno's philosophy of nature and art, Judith Butler's theory of subversive bodily acts and a little bit about Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando*. So let's begin with a closer look at sexes, nature and beauty, and outline the processes that have brought these troubling words down from the shelves.

2.1. Sexes

Why “sex”? Is not “gender” a better word, since it carries with it the insight that sex is culturally constructed? In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler questions the distinction between gender and sex which “[o]riginally [was] intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation”, but instead, it seems to have split sex into one part that is considered to be biological and fixed, and another that is regarded as a cultural construct.¹ Thus, the word “gender” might contribute to preserve the notion that the sexed body is a prediscursive, anatomic reality. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler digs further into “sex”, defining it as a “regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled”², or in other words, “as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies”³. The concept of sex is neither a material reality nor a cultural construct, and at the same time it is both, since it must be understood as a *practice* that have materiality and constructs (sexes and genders, if one so wishes) as its products. Such an understanding entails a fundamental critique to the ancient split between mind and matter, requiring not only a rethinking of the powers of fantasy but also a reinvention of nature. “The forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of 'sex'”⁴, Butler writes, and in this thesis, that powerful phantasm will serve as a metonymy for the complex spectrum of power, materiality, desire, fantasy and performance that masculinity, femininity and sexed otherness constitute together.

2.2. Nature

In feminist discussions of sexes, nature often seem to be a vile word, used without quotation marks almost only by essentialists that try to claim a fundamental difference between women and men. One of the exceptions is Donna Haraway, a science historian who in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*

1 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 6.

2 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: on the discursive limits of “sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

3 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.

4 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.

examines many different connections between descriptions of nature and feminist thoughts.⁵ The subtitle of the book is *The Reinvention of Nature*, and Haraway's main concern is how feminist scholars might describe nature without repeating the oppressing distance between subject and object. In this project, she often comes close to aesthetic approaches, for example in the statement that we don't need "sorting consciousness into categories of 'clear-sighted critique grounding a solid political epistemology' versus 'manipulated false consciousness', but subtle understanding of emerging pleasures, experiences, and powers with serious potential for changing the rules of the game"⁶. This "subtle understanding" seems to be more sensuous than conceptual, which hints at a nature that is perceivable rather than determinable; a nature that is something in itself. As Butler puts it: "This rethinking also calls into question the model of construction whereby the social unilaterally acts on the natural and invests it with its parameters and its meanings."⁷ But how can nature be described without establishing a system of concepts that preempts it?

2.3. Beauty

In the context of feminist theory, "beauty" seems to equal prettiness, a quality demanded of women which imprisons them as projections of male desire. But here, I would like to invoke another meaning of the word, semantic neighbor with the aesthetical concepts of disinterestedness and sublimity.

Since Kant, aesthetics has been a field for reflective understandings about things that we can never receive final knowledge about. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant outlines the possibilities for pure reason (based on the sensible realm of nature) respectively the possibilities for moral reasoning (based on a supersensible realm of freedom). But there seems to be an insurmountable gap between the two realms. "Hence, neither of them can furnish a theoretical knowledge of its Object (or even of the thinking subject) as a thing in itself;" Kant concludes, "this would be the supersensible, the Idea of which we must indeed make the basis of the possibility of all these objects of experience, but which we can never extend or elevate into a cognition."⁸ To bridge the gap, Kant presents his *Critique of Judgment*, which has become the foundation for western, modern aesthetics.

During the Age of Enlightenment, when everything became subject to human reason, aesthetics emerged as a way of reflecting upon what could not entirely be thought. As Andrew Bowie puts it

5 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the reinvention of nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

6 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 172-173.

7 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 4.

8 Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Critique of Judgment*, transl. J.H. Bernard (London: Macmillan, 1914), 11.

in *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*: “Philosophical aesthetics responds to [the process of rationalization] by providing a reminder that there are other ways of seeing nature and human activity, apart from the instrumental views offered by science and commerce.”⁹ To Kant, aesthetic judgment differs from reason in that it is not a process of subsumption, i.e. ordering perceptions after given universals. It differs from the moral judgment in that it is *disinterested*, i.e. is not yearning for the morally good or the sensually pleasurable. Aesthetic judgments thus take form in the tension between imagination and determination. Camilla Flodin describes it as following: “In the free reflection on the aesthetic object (in contrast then to the judgment of reason's determination of the thing) an atmosphere (*Stimmung*) and proportion between imagination (the ability to combine a plenitude of perceptions to a conception) and reason (the ability to order this plenitude under a concept) is awakened, which belongs to knowledge in general, even if no specific judgment of reason has been made.”¹⁰

Reflections on the *beauty* of nature might then change the relationship between imagination and reason, bringing us closer to the actual object of exploration without investing it with the parameters of reason. In focus of this thesis is Theodor W. Adorno's notion of natural beauty, which to a great extent draws on Kant's. But, as Flodin discusses in more detail in her dissertation, even though Adorno agrees with Kant in that an aesthetic approach is free of direct desires, he sees this disinterestedness as a sublimation of something repressed. This view is inspired by Sigmund Freud, but in contrast to him, Adorno does not think of the sublimation as an individual process (within the artists, who sublimates their lower desires into works of art) but regards the aesthetic field as a sublimation of something repressed in society as large.¹¹ Herein, Adorno's notion of disinterestedness becomes political, dialectically concerning the domination of nature. Through aesthetic disinterestedness, we can approach what too much interest (i.e. the capitalist logic of utility) has made indiscernible to us. According to Flodin, the most important thing that Adorno repeats from Kant is the regard of the beautiful as something indeterminable: “indeterminableness is even something that characterizes natural beauty and the art that incorporates the element of natural beauty”.¹²

9 Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 4-5.

10 “I den fria reflektionen över det estetiska föremålet (i motsats alltså till kunskapsomdömet's bestämmande över tinget) uppväcks en stämning (*Stimmung*) och proportion mellan inbillningskraften (förmågan att kombinera en mångfald sinnesförmågelser till en åskådning) och förståndet (förmågan att ordna denna mångfald under ett begrepp) som hör till kunskapen generellt, även om inget specifikt kunskapsomdöme fölls.” Camilla Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda* (Göteborg: Glänta Produktion, 2009), 79. The title translates to *Expressing the Suppressed*.

11 Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 82-85.

12 “obestämbarhet är rent av något som karaktäriserar det natursköna och den konst som inkorporerar det naturskönas moment”. Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 83.

Thus, the reflection over the natural beauty of sexes becomes not a description of un-styled feminine prettiness, but an investigation into the indeterminableness of sex.

3. Purpose

Departing from Theodor W. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, my aim with this thesis is to investigate how his theories on natural beauty and art beauty can be applied when thinking about sexes. With support from Camilla Flodin's dissertation *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, where Adorno's notion of art's ability to express the suppressed nature is carefully outlined, I will discuss how this complex relationship can be used to gain a new understanding of bodily nature and bodily acts. For decades, feminist debates have been twisting and turning ideas of nature and sex, ranging from a belief that anatomy is destiny to the standpoint that everything about sex is socially constructed. The focus of this essay is not to evaluate these discussions, or to seek an answer to the notorious questions about what may or may not be natural about sexes. Instead, I implement Adorno's perspectives on nature and art to create the aesthetical concept **the natural beauty of sexes**. Since nature in his view is muted and made inaccessible by the enlightenment's disenchantment and domination, natural beauty must be discussed through art, which is said to imitate natural beauty as such. So, to illustrate how the natural beauty of sexes might be expressed, I turn to aesthetic depictions of gender that contains some of the characteristics Adorno holds as important for art: Judith Butler's description of the subversiveness of drag and Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando*.

4. Limitations

The limitations of the analysis in this thesis are several. Firstly, this is no feminist critique of Theodor W. Adorno. There already exists a number of works under this subject¹³, and my comments on his ideas of sexes are strictly limited to contribute to the concept of natural beauty of sexes, i.e. not for example equality between women and men. Secondly, even though my understanding of sexes at large is founded on Judith Butler's theories, and even though I implement her description of drag as an example of the natural beauty of sexes, this is not an attempt to describe or analyze her philosophy. Again, there are several earlier works devoted to this task. And thirdly, my argument does only concern Adorno's view of natural beauty. An even more complex aesthetical description of sexes could of course be formed against a broader background discussion of natural beauty and art beauty, and Adorno's predecessors, contemporaries and successors have all, due to limited space, been left outside of this picture.

My discussion of sexes does not regard the complex intersectionality between gender, class, race, age and functionality, and does only touch lightly on sexuality, which may be considered as a very crucial lack. To gain a complex understanding of sexes, and in extent the natural beauty of sexes,

13 See for example Sabine Wilke och Heidi Schlipphacke, "Construction of a gendered subject: a feminist reading of Adorno's 'Aesthetic theory'", in *The semblance of subjectivity*, red. Tom Huhn och Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 287-308.

other normative classifications of bodies must indeed be taken into consideration. In the discussion of what is a "natural" body, many repressive stereotypizations come into play, and I wholeheartedly encourage further discussions departing from the lackings of this thesis. Many feminist theorists argue that sexes cannot be thought outside the idea of sexualized difference and imposed heterosexuality, among them Judith Butler. Again, the limited space for my argumentation prevents me from taking this into further discussion. This is only a first attempt to outline how the natural beauty of sexes can be thought.

5. Disposition

After the introduction, where I present the background for my usage of the words sexes, nature and beauty, a clarification of purpose and the limitations of this thesis are presented. Thereafter, I turn to earlier research, focusing mainly on the very few pieces of feminist writings that reflect on the matter of sexes from an Adornian perspective, all of them directly or indirectly referring to Judith Butler. In the chapter named "Nature", I continue with a deepening presentation of the domination of nature as described in Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. To establish a connection with sexes, I focus on the concept of denaturalization of nature and woman in *Dialect of Enlightenment*, moving on to a comparison between their critique of enlightenment thinking and Foucault's notion of productive power in *The History of Sexuality*. Following the perspective in Camilla Flodin's thesis *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, where art is described as the mediator of nature in Adorno's philosophy, I then turn to his concept of natural beauty. Next chapter, "Art", goes into more detail about how art could be said to imitate the "more" of natural beauty and how aesthetic expressions of sexes can be understood in the light of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. Describing some characteristics that he assigns to art, I liken them to the paradoxicality in Butler's analysis of drag show, turn to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* for another example of an aesthetic appearance of sexes, and finally comment, against the background of Adorno, how the "more" of the natural beauty of sexes could be described as the suffering of incommensurability. In the last chapter, Conclusion, I summarize the thoughts of the thesis, stressing the importance of an aesthetic approach to the problem of sexes.

6. Earlier Research

Feminist theorists have struggled for a long time with the problem of accessing “true” female experience within a patriarchal discourse. Our knowledge of women seems to be inseparable from the heteronormative idea that men and women are made to desire each other, and the sexist notion that men are superior to women. How can one describe the repressed subject without repeating the act of repression? Maybe a woman, as Simone de Beauvoir claims, is something one is made rather than born as. Or maybe “woman” cannot even be said to exist, she might just be a projection of a male consciousness, as Luce Irigaray argues.¹⁴ The sexed body as such seems unreachable.

In this thesis, I will implement Adorno's theories of nature and art to achieve a new perspective on this problem. He tackles a correspondent subject matter, namely the difficulty of accessing nature within a society of nature domination. And, as Camilla Flodin describes in her dissertation *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, art is to Adorno what holds the political possibility of making the muted nature eloquent. Departing from his and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Flodin outlines their description of the domination and repression of nature, and progresses to an analysis of how this is connected to the birth of modern art. Art emerges besides the nature-dominating enlightenment as a preserved memory of nature, and the “more” of natural beauty (“that which transcends our attempts to define nature”¹⁵) exists more accessible in art than in what we regard as nature. In the following chapters, I will present Adorno's notions of nature-domination, natural beauty and art beauty together with Flodin's clarifying interpretation.

Approaching sexes from the perspective of natural beauty seems to be an entirely unwandered path. When searching for earlier thoughts on the same theme, I only came across one piece: symptomatically enough entitled “Feminist Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty”.¹⁶ In this article, Sheila Lintott sheds light on the perhaps not so curious disinterestedness of natural beauty among feminist thinkers. The usual sexist associations between beauty, nature and women brings about a legitimate frustration with the subject, Lintott suggests. And there might also be a tendency among feminist thinkers to consider natural beauty as an almost superficial matter in comparison to for example equality or violence, but, she argues, all of these matters are interconnected. Lintott focuses more on possible reasons for the neglect than what may be gained from exploring natural beauty, but she concludes that “feminist theory's commitment to the importance of experience, including perceptual and sensual experience, can be better informed by investigation into

14 For an extensive discussion of earlier feminist answers to this problem, see: Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1-34.

15 Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 179.

16 Sheila Lintott, “Feminist Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty”, *Environmental Values*, no. 19 (2010), 315-333.

experiences, evaluations, and descriptions of natural beauty.”¹⁷

But perhaps a few steps on adjacent tracks can shed some light on the way of this analysis. Earlier feminist writings on Adorno contain a decent number of text exploring how woman or femininity can be conceptualized through his philosophy.¹⁸ For example, Christine Battersby turns to Adorno in one chapter in her book *The Phenomenal Woman*, a project to create a feminist metaphysics.¹⁹ By thinking in constellations, an Adornian way of juxtaposing different elements without reducing them to common denominators, Battersby finds that “registering and expressing female specificity becomes less of a conceptual impossibility and more of a historical potentiality”²⁰. She holds his perspective on language and matter in contrast to Judith Butler's, who in Battersby's view thinks that language and matter are identical. Adorno's constellations, where words are not used as identical to their objects but are gathered around an object to make its uniqueness perceivable, provides for Battersby a possibility for femininity to emerge.

Parallel to her analysis is Carrie L. Hull's article “The Need in Thinking”, who contrasts Butler with Adorno to find support for her belief that women and men are materially different.²¹ Hull “do[es] not agree with her [Butler's] implication that there are no meaningful distinction between matter and discourse”²², and makes a comparison between her and Adorno's thoughts on ontological nature. She stresses the difference between Butler's insistence on the totality of the discourse and Adorno's notion of non-identity, according to which a concept can never completely represent an object without creating a rest that eludes intelligibility. Adorno should therefore always consider “[t]he baby girl [to be] something other than what we have labeled her.”²³ However, this strikes me as being true for Butler's theory as well,²⁴ but Hull's exaggeration of their differences still gives an interesting picture of the difficulties in reading them together. Hull states that following Adorno's view, “some things are indeed rooted in a sexed material reality”, and progresses without hesitation to claim that “the creatures we call women do share some material ground even as they share other

17 Lintott, “Feminist Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty”, 322-323.

18 For earlier feminist research on Adorno at large, see *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor W. Adorno*, ed. Renée Heberle (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006) and *Adorno, Culture and Feminism*, ed. Maggie O'Neill, (London: Sage, 1999).

19 Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: feminist metaphysics and the patterns of identity* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1998).

20 Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, 134.

21 Carrie L. Hull, “The need in thinking: Materiality in Theodor W. Adorno and Judith Butler”, *Radical Philosophy* vol. 84, no. July/August, (1997): 22-35.

22 Hull, “The Need in Thinking”, 23.

23 Hull, “The Need in Thinking”, 24.

24 For example, in her essay “Contagious Word: Paranoia and 'Homosexuality' in the Military”, Butler is describing a “distance between 'homosexuality' and that which cannot be fully interpellated through such a call” (Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York : Routledge, 1997), 126), suggesting that homosexuality always in part will be something else than what is labeled.

with the creatures we call men”.²⁵ In my opinion, there seems to be no definite support in Adorno's philosophy for the last binary statement, and nothing in Butler's writings that says that sexes are not material.

Nevertheless, both Battersby's and Hull's writings are inspiring attempts to read Adorno in search of a way to describe sexes. In contrast to them, Jennifer Eagan provides a reading of the similarities between him and Butler in her essay “Unfreedom, Suffering and the Culture Industry”.²⁶ Instead of attempting to describe a prediscursive materiality, Eagan focuses on what limits our perception of reality. She consequently criticizes Hull for understanding gender as anatomy rather than ideology:

“What is missing from her analysis is how gender functions as an ideology, and a virtually totalizing one at that. If this is the case, whatever bodies are in any natural or raw form, we cannot perceive them because they are prefigured for us in a discourse that makes them intelligible to us only as sexed and gendered. [...] Last, Hull uses Adorno's acknowledgment of suffering as evidence that the material body has some ontological priority, while ignoring the possibility that gender itself could constitute a kind of suffering.”²⁷

Eagan links together Adorno's and Butler's understandings of suffering, in part by discussing the passage in *Gender Trouble* about the 19th-century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin. Suffering is not only understood as pain, but as how the culture industry (Adorno) or the discourse of intelligibility (Butler) “limits the reality that we can receive”.²⁸ She also makes some interesting comments on aesthetics: noting that “Adorno holds out the greatest hope for *art*”²⁹, she concludes with the statement that “Adorno's and Butler's projects expose ways in which an autonomous and aesthetic way of being and becoming is increasingly impossible in modern society”³⁰. In my thesis, I will develop this coherence further, and describe Butler's concept of subversive bodily acts as a possible example of how Adorno's notion of natural beauty and art beauty can be used to understand sexes.

Another text important to mention is Juliet Flower MacCannell's “Adorno: The Riddle of Femininity”, where an almost involuntary comparison between Adorno and Butler emerges when MacCannell tries to picture an Adornian liberation of women.³¹ In Adorno's pessimistic descriptions of the political struggles in modern society, equality always seems to amount to an eradication of differences, and emancipated individuals seems to be those that fit better into the machinery.

MacCannell imagines his utopia as a place where “no one should have to sacrifice their specific

25 Hull, “The need in thinking”, 33.

26 Jennifer Eagan, “Unfreedom, Suffering and the Culture Industry: What Adorno Can Contribute to a Feminist Ethics”, i *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno*, ed. Renée Heberle (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 277-299.

27 Eagan, “Unfreedom, Suffering and the Culture Industry”, 297-298.

28 Eagan, “Unfreedom, Suffering and the Culture Industry”, 292.

29 Eagan, “Unfreedom, Suffering and the Culture Industry”, 280.

30 Eagan, “Unfreedom, Suffering and the Culture Industry”, 296.

31 Juliet Flower MacCannell, “Adorno: the riddle of femininity”, in *Adorno, Culture and Feminism*, ed. Maggie O'Neill, (London: Sage, 1999), 141-160.

difference, their 'thing'³², and she is troubled by where that would leave women. According to her, Adorno's writing entails both a political correctness in his descriptions of women, and an almost resentful depiction of femininity. He seems to be against a categorical femininity, and “if we want to imagine or dream ourselves beyond both the family and capitalist society *as women* we do not get much help from him”.³³ And so, in the end of her text, she touches on the possibility that an Adornian liberation of women might be a liberation from “the prevailing form in which their lives are reproduced”, which would mean the end of the category of “women” as we know it.³⁴ MacCannell stands doubtful to such a utopia, but in a footnote, she refers to Judith Butler's explorations of these ideas.³⁵

Andrew Hewitt also concentrates on how Adorno would imagine female emancipation. In “A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment?”, he makes a close reading of the place of woman in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.³⁶ Hewitt describes how the identification of woman as closer to nature is a pattern of power that both enslaves her and self-alienates man. Since man's domination over nature brings about self-alienation rather than power, the position of the repressed woman is perhaps closer to freedom than that of the dominating man. True experience for Horkheimer and Adorno is described as pain from domination. Hewitt explains how the woman's painful experience of domination, and partial exclusion from power, makes her into Horkheimer's and Adorno's fantasmatic truth-point of escape from the self-alienating domination of nature. But in Hewitt's regard, this is just another version of stereotypization of women. “The question remains, however, whether Horkheimer and Adorno move beyond the instrumentalization of woman within their own analysis, and whether they do not – as I have indicated at key points – replicate at a more sophisticated level that denial of the 'honor of individualization' practiced both practically and theoretically upon women.”³⁷

In conclusion, earlier research on Adorno and sexes are at large concentrated on the female sex. But when reading his works in search of the emancipation of women, the picture of what women are and may become seems ambiguous. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, there is even a hyperbolic passage that suggests that female equality can bring about greater weapons of mass destruction, since the amount of self-alienated workers dedicated to this task can be doubled. Flodin's

32 MacCannell, “Adorno: the riddle of femininity”, 143.

33 MacCannell, “Adorno: the riddle of femininity”, 144.

34 MacCannell, “Adorno: the riddle of femininity”, 156.

35 MacCannell, “Adorno: the riddle of femininity”, 159.

36 Andrew Hewitt, “A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment? Horkheimer and Adorno Revisited”, in *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno*, ed. Renée Heberle, (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 65-96.

37 Hewitt, “A Feminine Dialectic of Enlightenment?”, 92-93.

interpretation is that this “does not mean that Adorno and Horkheimer have a negative attitude to female liberation as such, they are rather questioning the way that this liberation is possible in the current society.”³⁸ Their critique of the current nature-dominating conditions makes it difficult to imagine a liberated subject, which may be irritating to feminist thinkers. As Christine Battersby puts it: “For Adorno, it is 'art' and not 'woman' which bears within it the seeds of a singular subject-position that eludes the quantifying equivalences of the Enlightenment self.”³⁹ But if we would dare to look at sexes as Adorno looks at art, there might be an aesthetic way to make eloquent what has been muted by patriarchal discourse. Since men as Hewitt's reading suggests might be just as enslaved in this structure as women – perhaps even more because they don't experience this self-alienation as a suffering – the object of our research should not be just the female sex, but sexes. And following MacCannell's reading of Adorno's concept of freedom, sexes would perhaps be imagined as an indefinite and uncategorizable plural, so that “no one should have to sacrifice their specific difference”⁴⁰.

An exploration of the natural beauty of sexes seems called for. To begin with, let us turn to Adorno's understanding of the suppression of nature, and with the guidance of Flodin's dissertation continue to how art imitates the forgotten “more” of natural beauty.

38 “Det betyder förstås inte att Adorno och Horkheimer är negativt inställda till kvinnors frigörelse i sig, snarare vill de ifrågasätta det sätt på vilket denna frigörelse är möjlig i det rådande samhället.” Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 30.

39 Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman*, 142.

40 MacCannell, “Adorno: The Riddle of Femininity”, 143.

7. Nature

7.1. Domination

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno criticize the popular image of the Enlightenment as a success story about progress.⁴¹ Even though man has improved the possibilities of survival through an increasing mastering of nature, this freedom has come at a high price. The disenchantment of the mystic aspects of nature is an ongoing process in the name of rationality. As Flodin summarizes it: “At each stage in the history of Enlightenment, earlier belief systems are criticized as myths, while what oneself is advocating is knowledge; knowledge that is to be used for a better and better control of nature, according to Adorno and Horkheimer”.⁴² But this system of control, that holds every value as countable, has petrified into a second nature: capitalist society, that enslave us under its laws under a semblance of freedom. To put it bluntly: men are no less helpless before economic crises and unemployment, than when facing tidal waves or drought. Furthermore, the separation of mind and nature brings about a self-alienation, since humans not only are dependent on nature but also are nature in ourselves.

As described above, the Enlightenment becomes a myth in itself, perhaps even more deceiving than the religious systems it tried to do away with. The perceivable world, understood as “mediated conceptual moments which are only fulfilled by revealing their social, historical, and human meaning”⁴³, is reduced to its abstract mathematical representations. Adorno and Horkheimer describe this as how “the machinery of thought subjugates existence”⁴⁴, and becomes satisfied with reproducing its own parameters of truth. “Enlightenment thereby regresses to the mythology it has never been able to escape.”⁴⁵ In my opinion, this mythological thinking is also apparent in the current understandings of sexes. Scientific classifications and the stereotypization by the culture industry are two sides of the same coin, where all bodies are treated as representations of the abstract ideas of the female and male sexes. “The subsumption of the actual, whether under mythical prehistory or under mathematical formalism, the symbolic relating of the present to the mythical event in the rite or to the abstract category in science, makes the new appear as something predetermined which therefore is really the old.”⁴⁶ In other words, every newborn baby is understood as merely a representative of an ancient sex.

41 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: philosophical fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, transl. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, Calif. : Stanford Univ. Press, 2002).

42 “Vid varje stadium i upplysningens historia kritiseras tidigare trossystem för att vara myter, medan det man själv förespråkar är kunskap; kunskap som ska användas för att kontrollera naturen allt bättre, menar Adorno och Horkheimer”. Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 30.

43 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 20.

44 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 20.

45 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 20.

46 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 21.

Interestingly, this process of subsumption is actually recognized in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as relevant to the discussion of sexes.

“Man as ruler refuses to do woman the honor of individualizing her. Socially, the individual woman is an example of the species, a representative of her sex, and thus, wholly encompassed by male logic, she stands for nature, the substrate of never-ending subsumption on the plane of ideas and of never-ending subjection on that of reality.”⁴⁷

Horkheimer and Adorno also identifies, already on the second page of the book, the process on Enlightenment as corresponding to male domination: “The 'happy match' between human understanding and the nature of things [...] is a patriarchal one: the mind, conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanting nature.”⁴⁸ Repeatedly, they identify this split as a mythological construction, where man becomes self-alienated and “[w]oman as an allegedly natural being is a product of history, which denatures her.”⁴⁹

7.2. Denaturalization

The key word here is denaturalization. Just as the domination of women, carried out by the subsumption of bodies under the idea of the female sex, the domination of nature is exercised by the creation of a separated, fetishized picture of “nature”. So, whatever (human) nature actually is, it has become inaccessible within the current system of classifications that is inseparably tied to mastering and control. In Adorno's words: “so long as nature is defined only through its antithesis to society, it is not yet what it appears to be”⁵⁰. The same might of course be said for sexes. We cannot simply access the true feminine essence, or walk out into a pure nature. In *Aesthetic Theory*, the tourist industry is said to have subsumed nature to an exchange relation, “and nature became a nature reserve and an alibi. Natural beauty is ideology where it serves to disguise mediatedness as immediacy.”⁵¹ As I quoted from Jennifer Eagan above, gender also works as an ideology, and the stereotypes of women and men obscure the complex power relations that creates them. In the separation of the sexes, femininity has become a nature reserve for “irrational” qualities, such as empathy, beauty and sensitivity. And just as the alpine tourist imagines that he achieves a contact with the wild nature when climbing a mountain, the heterosexual man does perhaps imagine that he penetrates the qualities that have been rejected from his own self-understanding, when having intercourse with a woman.

47 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 87.

48 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2.

49 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 87.

50 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 90.

51 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 94.

7.3. Classifications

This self-alienation is, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, brought about by the complex system of mastering classifications known as the Enlightenment. In current society, it becomes as impossible to be true to oneself as to have real relationships with other people. “Not only is domination paid for with the estrangement of human beings from the dominated objects, but the relationships of human beings, including the relationship of individuals to themselves, have themselves been bewitched by the objectification of mind.”⁵² So, if we return again to the classic enigma of feminism, the objectified category of “women” has been questioned as standpoint for political struggle. As Butler has described it: “There were many who asked whether they were women, and some asked it in order to become included in the category, and some asked it in order to find out whether there were alternatives to being in the category.”⁵³ During recent years, queer feminist activism and intersectional analyses have often taken the form of demanding a more complex system of classifications. For example, a great deal of new words have emerged to describe different ways of being trans*⁵⁴. But will a larger number of possible categories really solve the problem of sexes?

“Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings”, says a very often quoted paragraph in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. “He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them.”⁵⁵ A similar understanding of sexes and science can be found in Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*.⁵⁶ The bureaucratic, enlightened society knows sexes to the extent that it can regulate, produce and direct their powers. When terms are coined for sexualities and sexual identities (heterosexuality as well as homosexuality), they are determined as species, and become something that Adorno and Horkheimer most likely would describe as a second nature. In Foucault's words, this power must be described as productive rather than repressive. “The machinery of power that focused on this whole alien strain did not aim to suppress it, but rather to give it an analytical, visible, and permanent reality: it was implanted in bodies, slipped in beneath modes of conduct, made into a principle of classification and intelligibility, established as a *raison d'être* and a natural order of disorder.”⁵⁷ For an individual, a self-understanding as for example homosexual or transsexual can of course make life easier, but a political struggle grounded in these

52 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 21.

53 Judith Butler, “The Question of Social Transformation”, in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 209.

54 “Trans*” is used as an umbrella term for a wide variety of gender identities, including for example transvestites (cross-dressers), non-binary people and transsexuals.

55 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6.

56 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An introduction*, transl. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

57 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 43-44.

definitions risks to reinforce “the stamp of individuality” that sexual identity has become, which is “what enabled one to analyze [...] and [...] master it”.⁵⁸

The categorization of qualities, no matter how detailed and sophisticated, does in fact deplete the sexes it is said to proliferate. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, the mindset of the enlightened individual is the root of the matter. She lacks knowledge about everything that is not countable, disregards the incommensurable and “makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities”.⁵⁹ The world, and the human beings in it, gets impoverished. To be ones true self is impossible; one can only strive to find a category that seems bearable to live within. “Whatever might be different is made the same. That is the verdict which critically sets the boundaries to possible experience. The identity of everything with everything is bought at the cost that nothing can at the same time be identical to itself.”⁶⁰

7.4. Beauty

In popular media, the natural beauty of sexes seems to equal women being pretty without the use of products.⁶¹ But just as a fresh spring morning – portrayed in a commercial or experienced as a repetition of it in reality – these beautiful faces are only false semblances of natural beauty. Accessing inner and outer nature is, according to Adorno, not as easy as to simply walk out into the wilderness or leave the house without make-up. The concept of natural beauty is a historical construct, and a symptom of the distance to nature. Flodin summarizes: “Before man had started to distance himself from nature, there was no room for natural beauty. In western history, men begin to experience the beauty of nature only when nature had been subdued.”⁶² Natural beauty, seemingly as close as the sun on your skin, becomes ideology “where it serves to disguise mediatedness as immediacy”⁶³, and “is transformed into a caricature of itself”⁶⁴.

But as Flodin stresses, the experience of natural beauty need not *only* be ideology. Adorno himself traces a sublimity in the rare moments when nature becomes perceivable as a deceptive phantasm:

58 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 146.

59 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4.

60 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 8.

61 See for example: “3 Ways A Woman Is Naturally Beautiful”. <http://www.marieclaire.com/sex-love/men/natural-beauty-and-katy-perry>, Rich Santos, marie claire, published 2011-01-10, accessed 2014-11-20 and “7 All-Natural Beauty Tips From A Supermodel”. <http://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-15159/7-all-natural-beauty-tips-from-a-supermodel.html>, Molly Sims, MindBodyGreen, published 2014-09-04, accessed 2014-11-19, and “How to Become a Natural Beauty”, <http://www.wikihow.com/Become-a-Natural-Beauty>, 107 editors, wikiHow, last edited 2014-11-08, accessed 2014-11-19.

62 “Innan människan hade börjat distansera sig från naturen fanns det inte utrymme för det natursköna. I den västerländska historien är det först när naturen har kuvats som människorna börjar uppleva den som vacker.” Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 87.

63 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 94.

64 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 92.

“The song of birds is found beautiful by everyone; no feeling person in whom something of the European tradition survives fails to be moved by the sound of a robin after a rain shower. Yet something frightening lurks in the song of birds, precisely because it is not a song but obeys the spell in which it is enmeshed.”⁶⁵ That frightening something stands in opposition to the subjugation, and this is why fem(me)inist strategies can be effective: by hyperbolization of the seemingly normal, the feminine movements and sounds of a femme in action can make the frightening in the song of birds into a powerful gesture.

This ambiguity of natural beauty reoccurs at many places throughout Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. At times, it is described as a sudden, involuntary and almost painful experience: something that strikes you but cannot be expressed. “Natural beauty remains the allegory of this beyond in spite of its mediation through social immanence.”⁶⁶ Adorno does believe that there is something in nature that is other to capitalist society, an unmeasurable otherness that has become almost inexpressible. “What is beautiful in nature is what appears to be more than what is literally there.”⁶⁷ There is something in it that “withdraws from universal conceptuality”⁶⁸, i.e. something “natural” that is not identical to our concepts of “nature”. Undoubtedly, it is this view that have attracted feminist scholars to Adorno's philosophy in search for an essence of femininity. Perhaps their quest need not be dismissed too quickly. The belief in something other than the categorizing discourse of language, a nature or materiality that we are dependent on, is indeed present in Adorno's works. But what is missing in Battersby's, Hull's and MacCannell's analyses is exactly what Jennifer Eagan points out: that gender functions as a virtually totalizing ideology. So, if anything that can be called sexes actually exists, and even though it might be an urgent thing to explore, it would probably not be anything like modern society's ideas about women and men. As Adorno himself points out: “the subject's powerlessness in a society petrified into a second nature becomes the motor of the flight into a purportedly first nature”⁶⁹, as the “true” female body, a semblance of material ontology that we cannot trust. In fact, the most artificial, aesthetical expressions of sexes could be the one's that can give us a hint about what has been lost in the patriarchal taxonomy of men and women.

“Wholly artifactual, the artwork seems to be the opposite of what is not made, nature. As pure antithesis, however, each refers to the other: nature to the experience of a mediated and objectified world, the artwork to nature as the mediated plenipotentiary of immediacy.”⁷⁰

In other words, Adorno believes that nature is very difficult to describe, and that it may be best understood through its supposed antithesis: art.

65 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 91.

66 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 94.

67 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 97.

68 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 96.

69 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 90.

70 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 85.

8. Art

8.1. Otherness

Camilla Flodin's dissertation *Att uttrycka det undanträngda* focuses on what she calls “a central, but neglected aspect of the aesthetic theory of [...] Adorno [...], namely his notion of art as a mediator between mankind and nature”.⁷¹ But how can art express what nature can not, or rather, what is it in “nature” that art expresses? An often quoted passage in *Aesthetic Theory* says: “Art does not imitate nature, not even individual instances of natural beauty, but natural beauty as such”.⁷² What art imitates is the “more” of natural beauty, that which is a lack and a surplus at the same time, that which withdraws from categorization: in other words, an otherness. This ever returning otherness is in fact something that has hunted feminist theory. As Butler writes: “The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and ablebodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed 'etc.' at the end of the list”.⁷³ But the inability to complete the list can, she suggests, instead pose “a new departure for feminist political theorizing”.⁷⁴ So, instead of searching for the essence of femininity, or trying to create a complete taxonomy over possible sexual identities, a theory of sexes could seek inspiration from Adorno's insistence of an otherness that can never be pinned down. “Natural beauty is the trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity”, he writes. “As long as this spell prevails, the nonidentical has no positive existence.”⁷⁵ Thus, the “more” of natural beauty cannot be *determined*, but Adorno still believes that it can be *expressed*. Let's take a closer look on how.

8.2. Suffering

According to Flodin, the expression of “more” is always an expression of suffering, since the suffering states that something should be different.⁷⁶ Thus, the violence of “the spell of universal identity” does not manage to absorb all things, not without creating a rest of suffering that reminds us that *it could be different*. But this suffering can not be expressed directly – this would suggest that there is a pure, first nature separated from our historical understanding of it.⁷⁷ Here is where the essentialist feminists goes wrong in their interpretations of Adorno: he does believe that there is something other than human discourse, but not that this “nature” is accessible to us. If we try to give

71 Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 177.

72 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 99.

73 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 143.

74 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 143.

75 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 100.

76 Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 109.

77 Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 110.

this nature a face, for example that of a beautiful girl without make-up, it would serve “as an aid for cloaking and legitimating the unreconciled as one in which – as the claim goes – beauty is indeed possible.”⁷⁸ Instead, the suffering of the suppressed nature must take an indirect expression: in the artwork. Since nature is misunderstood as something completely other to man, man is also misunderstood as something completely different to nature. Thus, within what to us might seem most artificial, most secondary to nature, we can find the remembrance of nature's suffering. The artwork does not pretend to be nature; it affirms itself as artificial, and can therefore express the “more” of natural beauty better than the supposed direct representations of a true nature.

8.3. Paradoxicality

All that has been outlined above describes a very paradoxical status for the artwork. This paradoxicality is exactly what gives art its critical potential according to Adorno. In Flodin's words: “The sublime work of art is that which expresses the inherent contradictions, that which does not appear to be a harmonic unity but reveals its refractions.”⁷⁹ To me, this analysis holds a remarkable resemblance to Butler's description of the subversion of sexes through drag show. By embodying an indeterminate contradiction between the “inner” and the “outer” sex, drag imitates a persistently present otherness of sex. Butler quotes Ester Newton: “Drag says [Newton's curious personification] 'my outside' appearance is feminine, but my essence 'inside' [the body] is masculine. At the same time it symbolizes the opposite inversion; 'my appearance outside' [my body, my gender] is masculine but my essence 'inside' [myself] is feminine.”⁸⁰ Since these both claims of authenticity contradict one another, “the entire enactment of gender significations [is displaced] from the discourse of truth and falsity.”⁸¹ This destabilization of inner and outer is eerily close to this quote by Adorno: “[t]he instant in which these forces become image, the instant in which what is interior becomes exterior, the outer husk is exploded; their *apparition*, which makes them an image, always at the same time destroys them as image.”⁸²

Just as a true artwork in Adorno's view never tries to give voice to a “true” nature, the drag show (in contrast to the so called cross-dressing of transvestites) is a parodic *show* of sexes. Aesthetic expressions of sexes, i.e. artistically beautiful sexes, thus (in Adorno's words about artworks)”emancipate themselves from mythical images [the image of man and woman] by

78 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 94.

79 “Det sublimes konstverket är det som uttrycker de inneboende motsättningarna, som inte ger sken av att vara en harmonisk enhet utan avslöjar sin brutenhet.” Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 113.

80 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137. From: Esther Newton, “Role Models”, in *Mother Camp: female impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

81 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137.

82 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 119.

subordinating themselves to their own unreality”⁸³. There is no original that is being imitated in the drag show; “the parody is *of* the very notion of an original”⁸⁴, Butler writes. This entails a resistance to conceptuality; Adorno describes it as “the tendency of artworks to wrest themselves free of the internal unity of their own construction, to introduce within themselves caesuras that no longer permit the totality of the appearance.”⁸⁵ Similarly, the expression of sex in a drag show is not meant to be fully identical to the idea of a sex, and is thus never completely subsumable under a concept. This is why the natural beauty of sexes never can be expressed by an identity. The aesthetic act negates the categories of female and male as unreal, and thus entails a hint of something else. Adorno describes this as a promise, perceived from the “nonexistent” that the artwork points at by assembling fragments of the existing. In drag, the assemblage of female and male fragments of body, personality, longings and clothing, together creates such a nonexistent “more”. Just as art, it becomes hopeful and melancholic at the same time; it is “the ever broken promise of happiness”.⁸⁶

8.4. What, where, when

The drag show is in Butler's work only an example of what a subversive bodily act may be. She is actually very concerned, already within *Gender Trouble*, with the possible generalizing interpretations of presenting the parody of a drag show as a feminist strategy, since it seems to be very complicated to determine *when* it has the critical potential described above:

“Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. A typology of actions would clearly not suffice, for parodic displacement, indeed, parodic laughter, depends on a context and reception in which subversive confusions can be fostered. What performance where will invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality?”⁸⁷

In the foreword from 1999, she has also commented on how even “subversive bodily acts” by stereotype repetitions risks to become a powerless cliché. Obviously, it is impossible to create a taxonomy to determine when a sexual expression holds critical significance: but could not an aesthetics of sex fill the same purpose? What Butler calls “the giddiness of the performance”⁸⁸ seems indeed very close to the “shudder” that Adorno describes in *Aesthetic Theory*, which is the sensual perception of the “more” of natural beauty.⁸⁹ As Silvia L. López explains in an essay⁹⁰, to

83 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 119.

84 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 138.

85 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 122.

86 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 185.

87 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 139.

88 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 137.

89 “Artworks remain enlightened because they would like to make commensurable to human beings the remembered *shudder*, which was incommensurable in the magical primordial world.” Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 111, my italics. For a close examination of how the shudder can be applied as a feminist and anti-racist sensibility, see Sora

Adorno the adequate response to art should be a sense of concern (*Betroffenheit*) rather than feeling (*Gefühl*), which gives a “shudder in which subjectivity stirs without yet being subjectivity”⁹¹. This aesthetic response makes it possible to approach the object without subsuming it under a concept, and could be a different premise for descriptions of sexual expressions.

The question of how one should look aesthetically upon sexes naturally brings to light the question of where one should look. In contrast to art, there is no obvious field for sexes, or rather, sexualizations occur everywhere. And where does “sex” end and “sexualization” begin? This problem need not entirely be thought of in contrast to Adorno's understanding of art. Admittedly, the relative autonomy of the art field holds a great significance to his aesthetics⁹², and a lot of ink has been spent to print opinions on whether his theories only concern modernist art;⁹³ but Adorno does in fact not only discuss the relevance of works as old as the *Odyssey*, he also repeatedly moves outside the field of art to find his examples. In the chapter of art beauty, he states for example that “The phenomenon of fireworks is prototypical for artworks, though because of its fleetingness and status as empty entertainment it has scarcely been acknowledged by theoretical consideration.”⁹⁴ He is very clear, as Butler is about the subversive bodily acts, that there can be no typology of aesthetic value: the critical potential of art is something historical. “Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by a relation to what it is not.”⁹⁵ Much that earlier was considered to be art is no longer viewed as such today, and “much that not was art – cultic works, for instance – has over the course of history metamorphosed into art”⁹⁶. So, it remains to be discussed when and where a sexual expression holds aesthetic significance. My guess is that it – just as with art – has as much to do with audience, context and interpretation as the appearance “in itself”.

8.5. Negative Utopia

The scope of this thesis provides a very limited space to create a conclusive aesthetics of the “more” in sexual expressions, so I will luckily not be tempted to commit the crucial mistake to posit a purportedly exhaustive list of examples. But since I don't think that Butler's subversive bodily acts

Y. Han, “Intersectional Sensibility and the Shudder”, in *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno*, red. Renée Heberle, (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 173-191.

90 Silvia L. López, “The Encoding of History: Thinking Art in Constellations”, in *Adorno, Culture and Feminism*, red. Maggie O'Neill, (London: Sage, 1999), 66-74.

91 Silvia L. López, “The Encoding of History: Thinking Art in Constellations”, in *Adorno, Culture and Feminism*, ed. Maggie O'Neill, (London: Sage, 1999), 68.

92 See for example Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1-21, and Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 47-49.

93 See for example Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 16-18.

94 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 112.

95 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 3.

96 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 3.

alone can be said to imitate natural beauty as such, I will mention one more appearance that could be interesting to view from an Adornian perspective. In Virginia Woolf's parodic biography *Orlando*, a playful myth in part construed by biological facts from the life of her lover Vita Sackville-West, a person of nobility lives through several centuries.⁹⁷ Halfway through the novel, when he is an ambassador in Turkey, he wakes up to find that he during the night has been turned into a woman. To Orlando, this does not create so much concern, but it soon leads to many experiences and reflections about gender roles in society at large and in his/her own past and future. The hyperbolization of the phantasmagorical qualities (the impossible time-span), together with the mimetic impulses of the novel, rhymes well with the refractory and paradoxical qualities of art described above. Perceived through a historicity both unbelievable and biographical, Orlando's sexual transformation seem poorer in its binarism, and crudely prosaic in its consequences, than wondrous. This estrangement of the expected chock prevents one from enjoying it as a fantasy, but the transformation is still so very fictional that one who longs after such a transformation can not read it as a description of a utopia. However, it can easily be read as what Adorno calls a "negative appearance of utopia": "it is, in its unrelenting renunciation of childish happiness, the allegory of the illusionless actuality of happiness while bearing the fatal proviso of the chimerical: that this happiness does not exist".⁹⁸ *Orlando* moves beyond the hetero- and cisnormative ideas of sex, in a fantastic way that surely enacts the "more" of natural beauty. But at the same time, it circles worriedly around its own portrayal, making the reader feel the strain of reality in the fiction and vice versa. Flodin describes this negative appearance of utopia as an objectification of the "more", together with an exposure of this "more" as just a semblance in current society.⁹⁹ The sex of Orlando/Sackville-West can only be portrayed in a tension between the real conditions of a world much alike our own, and the unrealness of the story; thus utopia is never depicted, but it appears to us as a negated possibility.

8.6. Incommensurability

So, even though Woolf's depiction is at large a joyous one, the artwork nevertheless entails a "suffering at the inadequacy of the appearance"¹⁰⁰, which stems from its mimetic impulse. This might be described as the suffering of incommensurability: that something in Orlando's (and/or Sackville-West's) sex seeks an expression that no category or concept can fully represent. Sometimes in the novel, the "biographer's" voice can be heard, commenting both playfully and urgently on the impossibility in describing a life: "For she had a great variety of selves to call upon,

97 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: a biography* (London: Penguin, 2000).

98 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 178.

99 Flodin, *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, 135.

100 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 100.

far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have many thousand.”¹⁰¹ Woolf never constructs an identificatory type or a clear-cut representation of Orlando's sex, and thus portrays it as something that in Adorno's words “refuses to let itself be nailed down either as an entity or as a universal concept. [Arts] ether is bound up with particularization; it epitomizes the unsubsumable and as such challenges the prevailing principle of reality: that of exchangeability.”¹⁰² But this is also where art can slip into ideology, according to Adorno, by suggesting that something in this world can exist outside the all-engulfing discourse of exchangeability. Therefore, aesthetical expressions of sex must always stress their own unreality: they must be incommensurable also as incommensurables, since the suffering of incommensurability is unavoidable within current nature-dominating conditions.

101 Woolf, *Orlando*, 213.

102 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 115.

9. Conclusion

Ideas about nature are since long back tied up with ideas about female inferiority – weakness, passivity and sentimentality – and a heterosexual, binary taxonomy. All feminist strategies struggle, explicitly or implicitly, with this problem. To fight the patriarchy, some notion of sexes is necessary to gain an understanding of the battle ground. But as Judith Butler famously has pointed out, perhaps a subject of the struggle is not necessary – perhaps every description of this oppressed subject, “the woman”, repeats and reinforces the power mechanisms that keep her prison. So perhaps the problem is located in our understanding of sexes, which makes the struggle less about fighting oppressors and more about a reinvention of reality. Or, as Donna Haraway puts it, a reinvention of nature.

In Adorno's and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the self-alienation of man in modernity is stressed. His domination over nature (and, in connection with it, his domination over women and animals) is described as something that makes him a slave to a second nature rather than a liberated subject. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno digs further into the perceptual consequences of this order. Nature has been so thoroughly repressed that it is hardly present, neither in majestic forests nor in so-called female sensibility, whom both appear merely as semblance, as caricatures of themselves. Since the dichotomy between society and nature is false – which might as well be the case for femininity and masculinity – we cannot access nature by visiting nature. Rather, as Camilla Flodin explains in her dissertation, natural beauty is closest to us in art's self-reflective artificiality, which maintains the hope of a reconciliation with nature by imitating the “more” of natural beauty.

So, instead for a quest after some common material ground that defines women, as for example Carrie L. Hull undertakes in her comparison of Butler and Adorno, or the metaphysical search after feminine specificity as Christine Battersby struggles with, a discussion about sexes should perhaps begin in our perceptions rather than in our pre-formed ideas about them. As all of our perceptions are mediated through our ideas, this is of course a rather complex path, but through the refractory and paradoxical qualities of art, a forgotten otherness can be remembered. This otherness or “more” of natural beauty, when thought of in relation to sexual expressions, suggests that there indeed is something that the heteronormative, patriarchal society has repressed. Perhaps this might not be a female essence, but the suffering of incommensurability, suggesting that whatever sexes are can never be captured by any categorization or representation.

Butler's description of gender as performative and fictive have sometimes been interpreted as a liberal utopia where everything is possible. Even though insubordination to one's assigned gender

behavior is punished, it seems to propose that everyone could choose to be whatever sex they would like to be. This is a problem Butler comments briefly on in *Gender Trouble*: “The controversy over the meaning of *construction* appears to founder on the conventional philosophical polarity between free will and determinism. As a consequence, one might reasonably suspect that some common linguistic restriction on thought both forms and limits the terms of the debate.”¹⁰³ Even though Butler repeatedly states that “there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have”¹⁰⁴, and dismisses the idea of ontology as an insidious way of power to mask its own mechanisms, she never really comments on *what* it is that is suffering within the current system of gendering. There are some insinuations of limitations to one's ability to perform different genders; for example, she comments about drag queens that “it quickly dawned on me that some of this so-called men could do femininity much better than I ever could, ever wanted to, ever would”.¹⁰⁵

What I in this thesis has termed **the suffering of incommensurability** repeatedly reoccur within conceptualization as an unexplainable “more” of sexes, an unseizable otherness that will elude every attempt to be captured by descriptions. This is the “more” of natural beauty that in Adorno's philosophy is said to be imitated by artworks. “Artworks say that something exists in itself, without predicating something about it.”¹⁰⁶ By aesthetic expressions, the “more” of natural beauty can become perceivable to us, even though it at the same time is negated as unreal. Thus, in self-consciously artificial depictions of sexes, such as drag shows or the fictional gender transformation in *Orlando*, the natural beauty of sexes is hinted. As Butler stresses in the end of *Gender Trouble*, the struggle is about stretching the abilities to imagine new possibilities, rather than salvaging a true sex from its repression.

To Adorno, this is about something that differs from the world ruled by human intentions. “Art attempts to imitate an expression that would not be interpolated human intention.”¹⁰⁷ This otherness to the enlightenment's all-engulfing system of abstraction is in his works called “nature”, but at the same time, “nature” signifies the mediated false idea about nature. In this thesis, I have tried to use the term sexes in a similar way: as a double concept that both entails the repressive ideas of sexes and the returning “something” that transcends these ideas. As Adorno's notion of nature, this does not point to an ontology, but to a possible future. “The being-in-itself to which artworks are devoted

103 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 8.

104 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 148.

105 Judith Butler, “The Question of Social Transformation”, in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 213.

106 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 105.

107 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 106.

is not the imitation of something real but rather the anticipation of a being-it-itself that does not yet exist.”¹⁰⁸

An aesthetics departing from classical notions of disinterestedness, beauty and the sublime can seem like a futile concern for feminist strategies, since it does not, at least not in a noticeable way, intervene to (for example) stop the violence against women, gay and trans* people, or change the unfair distribution of resources. Accordingly, Adorno has often been criticized by other leftist thinkers for his pessimism, since he does not advocate any specific course of action. Holding out a great hope for art can easily be regarded as turning to a world of illusions and avoid the so-called central conflicts.

But to me, there is great hope in finding an approach to sexes that makes it possible to describe them without ever claiming to exhaust them. Beauty reminds us that every analysis has an endpoint, and that there is something in the world that captures *us*, something more than our ideas, that we never can nail down with a concept. The natural beauty of sexes is something that we are unable to perceive immediate, and that we cannot force into life. As such, it holds a critical potential to every false representation of sexes that holds us prisoner. Aesthetical expressions are insistent attempts to embody this suffering of incommensurability. In Adorno's words:

“If the language of nature is mute, art seeks to make this muteness eloquent; art thus exposes itself to failure through the insurmountable contradiction between the idea of making the mute eloquent, which demands a desperate effort, and the idea of what this effort would amount to, the idea of what cannot in any way be willed.”¹⁰⁹

108 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 105.

109 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 106.

10. Popular Science Summary

The title of this thesis is *The Natural Beauty of Sexes*, an aesthetic concept that is herein created, discussed and exemplified.

According to Theodor W. Adorno, nature has been suppressed in enlightenment society, to the point that natural beauty has become inaccessible. Natural beauty is instead best perceived through art, which is said to imitate natural beauty as such. With support from Camilla Flodin's dissertation *Att uttrycka det undanträngda*, which analyses the relationship between nature and art in Adorno's philosophy, this thesis implements his concept of natural beauty and art beauty into an understanding of sexes.

The analysis is split up into two major parts, Nature and Art. In the first part, the enlightenment domination of nature as understood by Adorno and Horkheimer is described, and a correspondence between this and the repression of the sexed body is suggested. The subheadings *Domination*, *Denaturalization*, *Classifications* and *Beauty* provide four different perspectives on the suppression of nature. In the second part, *Art*, I move on to analyze how art (according to Adorno and Flodin) can be said to imitate the "more" of natural beauty, a concept that in the thesis is compared to otherness and incommensurability. Judith Butler's theory of subversive bodily acts and Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* are used as examples of how the natural beauty of sexes might be thought.

Conclusively, I suggest that this interpretation of Adorno's aesthetic theory can make it possible to approach the problem of sexes as a double concept, that both entails the repressive enlightenment ideas of sexes and the returning "something" that transcends these ideas. An aesthetic approach to sexes, or an interpretation of the natural beauty of sexes, can thus hold a critical potential to the supposedly natural stereotypes of sexes that keeps us prison.

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