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# Imagined Hierarchies as Conditionals of Gender in Aesthetics

**Abstract**

The attributes of gender in the media are disputable. This can be explained by a conflict generated by culturally acquired alternative imagined hierarchies which are not compatible or may be even contradictory. This article is a philosophical enquiry that examines the representation of gender and the environment in which it is conditioned.

The visual portrayal of gender in the arts, mass media, social networks or in social media websites create aesthetic conditionals that shape the relative environmental acquisition and representation of gender from culturally conditioned methods. A broad range of visualizations of a particular gender is internalized by a person due in part to that persons availability and exposure to images portrayed in different forms of cultural representation in art (street art, fine art, amateur and professional creations, visualizations, renderings and so on), images, popular culture, media, aesthetics, and other sources of visual description, including pornography. The internalized representations are dependent upon an individual's internal mental environment or belief system, and the external descriptive and visual environment other individuals create, who are in relation with the first individual or who contribute to the visual environment of that individual.

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For example, Philip Zimbardo and Nikita D. Coulombe warned in 2012 that the image of men in mass media has had a major impact on the way men imagine and perceive masculinity and the resulting consequences in shaping their behavior and their mental hygiene are leading to a decline in their overall condition when compared to men of earlier generations or their peers of the opposite sex.[1] In this case, the attribution of masculinity to the behavior of males in the generations and sexes examined by Zimbardo and Coulombe are correlated with a change in the visual environment. This can be described as a set of varying visual and descriptive sources that portray gender within a particular tradition or as a reaction to a certain tradition that an individual has exposure to. Because mass media (especially advertising) formally distributes similar images in popular culture, the portrayal of masculinity has been standardized, so to speak. The exposure to images in mass culture can statistically overwhelm the access to and the availability of any other gender representation in a particular individual's mental heuristics within the Western tradition. This "universal" representation of gender leads to a version of masculine homogeneity that may be normalized and defended or, on the contrary, challenged and questioned. The contradictory representations that challenge the dominating representation of a particular gender, available not only on the Internet but also in other sources an individual has access to, lead to confusion in regards to the representation of masculinity or the "proper" gender role a "real man" should adopt in a particular culture. The belief system an individual has is shaped by these environmental factors, experiences, and by varying representations. The contradicting portrayals of masculinity are not necessarily easily settled within a particular cultural paradigm in an individual's environment, thus the regulatory and normalizing function of male gender roles are paralyzing for men, who cannot resolve contradictory images or decide upon what the male gender looks like and what roles it should undertake or simply distance themselves from culturally constructed roles. According to Zimbardo's and Coulombe's research, culturally constructed masculinity, including heterogenetic images available in their environment, are threatening some men, who may feel confused about their expected gender roles and rather retreat to virtual realties which offer a safe and controlled environment than enter any discourse that is not voiced with

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[1] See: P. Zimbardo, N. Coulombe, *Gdzie ci mężczyźni?* [The Demise of Guys], tłum. M. Guzowska, Warszawa 2015, pp. 11–13.

a "black-and-white" axiology. This can be explained by a conflict generated by culturally acquired alternative imagined hierarchies which are not compatible with each other or which are contradictory. This article is a philosophical enquiry that examines some representations of gender and the environment in which it is conditioned.

The role of gender present in a society is related to the way certain behaviors, symbols and representations function within that society. Limiting this discussion to Western culture, traditional gender roles have completely changed within the last few decades. From the women's suffrage movement onwards, the emancipation of behaviors, symbols and representations from particular cultural stereotypes partially resulted in the creation of conflicts within the social paradigm of acceptable representations and behaviors. Yet, not all abstract symbols are universally interpreted the same way within the same culture, just as symbolism in stories may be interpreted with different conclusions, when using different cultural criteria in making judgments. Different narratives create different descriptive stories about gender and its representation. I would like to make it clear, that not only gender is created by such stories, but it also can include the stories of sex, race, or the way the dis/able body is represented, sexualized, and gendered. However, I will only be focusing on gender as an imagined hierarchy rather than on the (under-/mis-) representation, sexualization or genderization of the dis/abled body or bodies with different abilities.

Some gender representations may claim to be "objective" and refer to facts, while others may contradict such claims. They both believe their respective story to be absolutely (or at least dialectally) true (or negotiated, which is a temporary mode of truth by itself). And, ideologies usually have the regulatory function of claiming how things "should" be.[2] In Poland, the subject of gender remains a controversial topic and is still misunderstood, as the interrupted lecture at the Poznan Economic University in 2013 illustrates.[3] The speaker, Piotr Bortkiewicz, when asked later, claimed to refuse to debate with the so called "gender-scum" and criticized it as not being a field of study but as an ideological dogma aimed at

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[2] See: Y. N. Harari, *Od zwierząt do bogów: krótka historia ludzkości* [Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind], tłum. J. Hunia, Warszawa 2014, p. 330.

[3] See: kai, kid, *Ks. prof. Bortkiewicz o przerwanym wykładzie w Poznaniu: z gender-hołotą się nie dyskutuje* [Fr. Prof. Bortkiewicz on the interrupted lecture in Poznan: don't talk with gender scum], [online] www.wyborcza.pl/1,76842,15095636,Ks__prof__Bortkiewicz_o_przerwanym_wykladzie_w_Poznaniu_.html [accessed: 08.12.2013].

destroying Roman Catholic family models. On the other side of the fence are members of academic circles who contest such approaches as forms of propaganda and as being dogmatic too.[4] In addition, the influence of technology and new media created by advances in technology also widen the schism between expectation and reality when regarding the way in which gender is aestheticized; technological change has been one of the key factors in spearheading change in regards to what is deemed "natural" within cultural norms that regulate the representation of the particular sexes because of its ability to propagate and replicate the distribution of images, representations and aesthetizations created by culture, including the feminist, gay, lesbian, and queer activists and scholarship in the environment of individuals whose mental heuristics internalize different imagined systems of representation, which is a set drawn from the plurification of acceptable bodies, sexualities, and gender options. Such conflicts and contradictions allow for provocative artists to create works and events which challenge the conditionals present in mass society, such as the 2015 Gender in Art exhibition in Kraków, Poland.[5] They also give room for amateur creators to create their own modes of representations in networks like YouTube or images in their personal life, which are influential to their immediate environment. Technology can give new possibilities in the ever growing pluralization of different forms of aestheticizing the body, including artificial limbs and embodiment with mechanical and electronic body parts. It can also give rise to the sexualization of inanimate objects like ones created by the new sex robot industry. Each creator may draw upon different values and representations, which are available to them in their environment, in order to create or copy the aestheticized genders of their choice. The attributed representations of each gender can be carried over to anthropomorphic beings, such as sexualized robots present in the film *Ex-Machina* (2015), which are objects/sentient beings that have been personified.

First, I will focus on the work of Noah Yuval Harari presented in his book "Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind". His book describes *Homo Sapiens* as a species that is distinct because of the use of language, or

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[4] See: M. Bryl et al., *List otwarty ludzi nauki w sprawie wykładu ks. Bortkiewicza* [Open letter to scientists in regards to Fr. Bortkiewicz's lecture], [online] http://korabita.salon24.pl/553813,list-otwarty-ludzi-nauki-w-sprawie-wykladu-ks-bortkiewicza [accessed: 09.12.2013].

[5] See: *Gender in Art*, MOCAK Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków, [online] https://en.mocak.pl/gender-in-art [accessed: 27.09.2015].

more importantly – the consequences of using abstract symbolism collect-ively in shaping life, where cooperation with strangers on a large scale is a key component in the distribution of power. This form of large scale cooperation in the animal kingdom is possible thanks to the power of sto-rytelling in convincing people what ontological and epistemological order is true, hence imagined realities metaphysically shape social structure. This also implies that the field of aesthetics is the study of how the stories told in culture condition and shape the behaviors of its members, includ-ing regulatory levels and ethical dilemmas rooted in the values shaped by imagined hierarchies. One of his conclusions or claims is that thanks to language, humans can debate about things that do not exist in the ma-terial, physical world. And with that discourse, they shape the reality of different orders of shared imagination, such as the belief in the statement: "real men don't cry," which on biological grounds would disqualify every male on the planet, since anatomically speaking, males create tears and can psychologically suffer from emotional neglect. However, activists do fight with this imagined reality, with non-crying males, by creating films and videos that represent the opposite or fight against such imagery, like in the documentary film *The mask you live in* (2015). In that social movement, the proposed alternative is a belief that a males expression of emotions is not a signifier of weakness, but of being a member of an equal society.

Next, I will elaborate on the consequences of such realities in the field of aesthetics. Thus, aesthetic power inadvertently comes to shape the social structure which leads to the formation of gender and how it is perceived in social circles. Aesthetic behaviorism can describe how the portrayal of gender in the arts is evaluated, judged, and conditioned. The role of new technology is also a major influence in shaping the environment in which people interact with each other and with works of art or representation or creation. Thus, the stories of gender roles condition representations, which also circularly create the cultural climate that reinforce those con-ditionals as the respective symbols. The Representation Project promotes the film *Miss Representation* (2011), which also addresses the available heuristic in creating an environment that is more populated with images and stories of women in power within mainstream media and culture. Harari makes the claim, that the current state of affairs is neither neces-sary or historically inevitable nor natural, which means that humans have more power in shaping their belief systems and environment than they may believe, since none of the systems imagined are more legitimate than

alternative versions.[6] The belief systems promoted by such empowering movements can in part inspire communities to make bottom-up changes in their environment in regards to what images and behaviors are acceptable, hoping to eliminate any negative or oppressive models.

Taking an interdisciplinary approach, I argue that the environment in which people interact is a key factor that shapes the cultural world of aesthetics and how it conditions the shaping of gender. Thus, a changing environment leads to a changing circle of reinforcement and representation of stories that tell us what it means to be a man or woman or neither or both.

## Imagined Hierarchies

Human psychology, and especially imagination, allows for more than one reality to be perceived, as Noah Yuval Harari notes. When experiencing the touch, taste, or smell of a physical object, the perceived thing is considered very real and very much existent. This sensory experience is very intense and seldom questioned, since it is very practical to believe in the reality of eating a meal, or worse the reality of feeling hunger from the lack of food. However, sensory experience may also be fooled, as the research of Mel Slater and others in 2010 shows:[7] a body transfer illusion was created, which fooled biological males into claiming ownership over a virtual female representation of the female body. The belief of ownership in this situation is just as real as the feeling of hunger in "reality." Although images created by virtual reality may not necessarily physically exist in the same way material things do, this electronic or virtual reality is still one that gives significant sensory input data, so that stimulations can override top-down brain processes, and are just as ineffable as data input into sensory organs by photons or other carriers of sensory information. Nevertheless, the physical reality is part of the same reality we can take a picture of, or agree upon its existence, but debate upon its attributes and properties. Still, this reality is not only the intersubjective world of humans. Animals, plants, living things and rocks also can be categorized into this reality. It arises from the real world of material things, of

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[6]  See: Y. N. Harari, op. cit., p. 292.
[7]  See: M. Slater, B. Spanlang, M. V. Sanchez-Vives, O. Blanke, "First Person Experience of Body Transfer in Virtual Reality", *PLOS ONE* 2010, 5(5), e10564, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0010564.

physical objects. Harari calls this reality the objective reality. In this literal and physical reality, the sex of a man or woman is biologically defined with scientific criteria by the distribution of X or Y chromosomes and other biological conditionals, which may be later used by the imagination in attributing properties in an axiological hierarchy of relevant genders. In addition, this is also the reality in which electronic mediums distribute electric signals in a way which creates patterns and images that are later to be interpreted or recognized as "showing" or representing something or another set of patterns on a screen or visual medium. Any image, in the most basic form, is simply a bunch of spots that need to be interpreted by a mind or pattern recognizing machine.

On the other hand, we also feel the effects of what Harari calls the imagined reality in our everyday social and private lives. This is the domain of nations, ideas, religion, economy, aesthetics, and philosophy. It is also where being a man or woman is culturally constructed, represented and imagined. In this reality, abstract principles may be reflected upon, and nonexistent beings (in the material sense) may be believed to interact with the objective reality. As an example, money, most universally, would be one of the abstract ideas that manifest themselves from the imagined reality into the objective reality and make a significant impact in the way people live, value things, and symbolize other imagined structures. Physically, money is just a stained and dirty cellulose based product or a piece of metal formed into a peculiar shape. It may also be the digital information stored in bank databases (most of it)[8] and represented with many different mediums across cultures (who may or may not have money). Yet, the imagined reality of scarcity (money) allows people to value certain things in the physical reality over others, and especially trust strangers.[9] It also makes the misusage of power possible and shapes the values present in society. Most interestingly, this also means that the imagined reality is an intersubjective reality, as Harari argues. If people believe a certain imagined hierarchy to be true, they can agree upon the abstract attributes that are a part of the particular system of thinking and visualizing. Think of debates fans of Star Wars have in attributing properties and traits to characters such as Darth Vader, where the personal motives of Anakin

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[8] See: M. McLeay et al., *Money Creation in the Modern Economy*, [online] http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/Documents/quarterlybulletin/2014/qb14q1prerelease moneycreation.pdf [accessed: 9.12.2013].

[9] See: Y. N. Harari, op. cit., p. 221.

Skywalker can be debated upon by fans, even though physically Darth Vader only exists as a meme or in the collective imagination of mass culture. Other fictitious scenarios are played out in pornography, where imaginary roles of particular sexes thrive in a plethora of categories, fetishes, acts, and sexual orientations. However, the make-believe of sex media often corrupts the imagination of men and women in regards to gender roles, who then transfer what is imagined into believing that visualized roles are factious, which is one of the contributing factors in the *Demise of Guys* that Zimbardo and Coulombe study. One of the properties of this intersubjective discourse would be the attribution of certain properties to a particular way of contrasting genders, such as the idea that blue is for boys and pink is for girls, although historically the reverse has also been considered true within the cultural discourse that shaped past imagined realities.[10] Such representation or imagined hierarchies can be a basis for creating new concepts, such as the idea of unisex clothing, as Jo Paoletti writes:

> The sexual revolution and the women's liberation movement affected people of all ages across the spectrums of gender identity and sexual orientation. After all, so much of the way sex and gender are conceived and expressed in our culture is in terms of relationships between opposites or complements. Without a commonly understood gender binary, there can be no unisex or androgyny. Advocates for cultural change recognize this, and so do those who oppose any alteration in traditional gender roles or sexual mores.[11]

In a nutshell, an imagined reality is rooted in the objective reality, shapes the wants and desires of people, is intersubjective, and requires societies to believe in them as something authentic, real and to be true, which results in the prohibition of questioning its hierarchy as being imagined.[12] It is like make-believe taken seriously. Subsequently, arguing that something is "natural" or forbidden by a deity or the laws of nature is a characteristic trait of imagined hierarchies. This naturalistic fallacy is an element of the social hierarchy that regulates which images of a particular gender are acceptable and which cause controversy,

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[10] See: "List of historical sources for pink and blue as gender signifiers", [online] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_historical_sources_for_pink_and_blue_as_gender_signifiers [accessed: 29.01.2016].

[11] See: J. B. Paoletti, *Sex and Unisex: Fashion, Feminism, and the Sexual Revolution*, Bloomington 2015, p. 152.

[12] See: Y. N. Harari, op. cit., pp. 142–150.

disputes, and are considered offensive. They also create the base from which any socially constructed genders may be challenged and create an environment of topics upon which artists and amateurs may criticize, reshape or reinforce. Digital culture is much more accessible in modern society, which also allows the field of art to gain new mediums of transmitting aesthetic representations of the body. Companies such as Alphabet (formerly Google) are making the physical space accessible in digital versions. Most users of the Internet are familiar with Google maps, which is the digitization of the outdoor environment, but the website Google will be adding a feature called Google Indoor, which will map and digitize the interior environment, mostly aimed at businesses, including museums and art galleries. The digital revolution, for the sake of argument, can be held responsible for making access to plurified gender norms, body images, standards and representations much more easily available. But, this does not mean that users will go to sites that challenge their personal imagined hierarchy, since the experience of their immediate environment also has just an impact in creating their own belief system in the way they may identify with gender. Thus, artistic or creative or expressive endeavors of all sorts are equally vital to creating a multitude of imagined hierarchies that particular communities identify with, which ties together the members of such communities, but separates them from members and circles of opposing views on what is acceptable. The strengthening or weakening of the status quo, or dominant imagined hierarchies, depend upon the success of a particular work in replicating itself within a society, which can be accomplished through force or through authentic belief of people in the imagined hierarchy that a particular subcultural claim to be true.[13] Publicity itself is crucial for any idea to gain popularity, which may be viral in nature or forced upon a group of people by means of dictatorial decree, such as a constitution. Even the idea that all people are fundamentally equal is based on myth, as Harari claims.[14] An imagined hierarchy gains success, not because of its real-world truth values, but because they allow a group of people to work together and reach common goals.[15] Thus, the everyday practices performed by non-artists, or (quasi-)artistic, amateur, community-based activities such as drag shows, or other

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[13] Ibidem, p. 144.
[14] Ibidem, p. 137.
[15] Ibidem, p. 140.

subcultures constitute their own imagined hierarchies within a system of hierarchies that compete with each other for survival. However:

> [...] in the end, when the ethics of representation are at stake, it is the image that has the final say in the matter. Not the artist. Because no matter what was originally intended in shaping this image, if that intention is not brought across to the viewer or reader, or if the viewer or reader has a different reading of the image or text, then only analysis of the work proper will yield the decisive argument for attributing meaning.[16]

The criteria for such analysis will be different to each imagined hierarchy. A study by Elizabeth Bloomfield in 2015 titled "Gender role stereotyping and art interpretation" concludes that most participants attribute gender role stereotyping in regards to the written narratives provided by the participants when interpreting the gender of artists when judging paintings.[17]

However, these hierarchies are subject to change. Paoletti makes an interesting remark about the results of fashion of children born in the 1960s and 70s:

> As children of the unisex era grew up, their reaction to ungendered clothing became apparent in the ways they dressed their own children. Not that we are that much closer forty years later to knowing where gender comes from. We're still arguing over gender, gender roles, sexuality, and sexual orientation. Whether the hot topic is marriage equality, the Lilly Ledbetter Act, or gender-variant children, beliefs about nature and nurture in determining our personal characteristics are fundamental to the arguments. Some of those beliefs are based on religion, others on science, but many of them are likely echoes of forgotten lessons learned in early childhood.[18]

Stereotypes in themselves are only mechanisms created by the mind that organize people into a "one of us" and "not one of us" groups at the most fundamental level. From an evolutionary perspective, the hierarchies represented by stereotypes may have proved to be very useful in

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[16] See: R. Buikema, "The arena of imaginings: Sarah Bartman and the ethics of representation", [in:] *Doing Gender in Media, Art, And Culture*, eds. R. Buikema, I. V. Dertuin, New York 2009, pp. 79–80.

[17] See: E. A. Bloomfield, *Gender Role Stereotyping and Art Interpretation*, MA (Master of Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 2015, p. 52, [online] http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/1550 [accessed: 18.01.2016].

[18] See: J. B. Paoletti, op. cit., p. 93.

surviving long enough to reproduce and when evaluating who to trust. It can be maintained that there are no innate properties in stereotypes that are true in the objective reality. Harari says that imagined hierarchies, such as stereotypes, emerge from random historical events, which lead to a certain dispersal of power and value.[19] Those randomly distributed values applied to gender enter society in the form of laws, symbols, and other abstract ideas and representations. In turn, this creates an environment which reinforces the axiology a culture constructs, such as discrimination, and create attitudes that inhibit the free movement of individuals, equalizations or gender identity within a social structure. Cordelia Fine, who describes how gender stereotypes are acquired by infants, shows the environmental associations that take place in creating gender imagery:

> This tagging of gender – especially different conventions for male and female dress, hairstyle, accessories and use of makeup – may well help children to learn how to divvy up the people around them by sex. We've seen that babies as young as three to four months old can discriminate between males and females. At just ten months old, babies have developed the ability to make mental notes regarding what goes along with being male or female: they will look longer, in surprise, at a picture of a man with an object that was previously only paired with women, and vice versa. This means that children are well-placed, early on, to start learning the gender ropes. As they approach their second birthday, children are already starting to pick up the rudiments of gender stereotyping. There's some tentative evidence that they know for whom fire hats, dolls, makeup and so on are intended before their second birthday. And at around this time, children start to use gender labels themselves and are able to say to which sex they themselves belong.[20]

An imagined gender hierarchy is also one the imagined realities that Harari describes.[21] He shows that humans have been universally split into men and women, historically and across almost all cultures in the favor of men.[22] Asides from biological differences, the images and aesthetics associated with masculinity and femininity lack biological foundations.[23] Anything that is possible is acceptable in nature, only culture inhibits or

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[19] See: Y. N. Harari, op. cit., p. 178.

[20] See: D. Fine, *Delusions Of Gender: How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*, New York 2010, p. 211.

[21] See: Y. N. Harari, op. cit., p. 181.

[22] Ibidem.

[23] Ibidem, p. 183.

allows those possibilities to manifest themselves.[24] Nothing can "break" natural laws. Harari observes that no culture worries about making it illegal for men or women to run faster than the speed of light.[25] It is pointless, since it is impossible. Only the human imagination creates structures, which arise from the objective reality, but that limit and regulate what is acceptable for men and women to do, or how they should look, or what is considered normal. The categories of being a man or woman are cultural and a part of an imagined social structure or mythology, and their attributes are intersubjective and constantly change.[26]

When considering the arts, mass culture or other mediums of creative pursuit, the imagined hierarchies are stories present in a culture's axiology. Those imagined stories reinforce, create, and transmit social structures because of their existence within a tradition or particular discourse relevant to believers in particular imagined hierarchies that attribute certain properties to gender. One example is the effect of Disney cartoons on the self-image on girls, which convey influential messages on their self-image.[27] In the book *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation and The Body* by Robert Leppert, the author discusses sexual identity in the aesthetics of the nineteenth century amid other topics. Historically, amongst the fine arts, which were one of the structures that helped propagate a particular historic imagined structure, he points out that "music […] has always been a contending force in society, not only as it reflects and reacts to social forces but also as it helps shape a society and its culture."[28] He points out the gendering of objects such as the piano in the Victorian era, and the aesthetization of violence towards women in paintings.[29] These processes are part of a larger system of ideas that create a hierarchy of how art in that era is to be perceived, and how each gender relates to it partly because of the commentary that is attributed to certain visualizations. It creates vicious circles similar to the stereotypes that existed a few dec-

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[24] Ibidem, p. 184.

[25] Ibidem, p. 185.

[26] Ibidem, p. 187.

[27] See: A. Bispo, L. Schmid, *Fairytale Dreams: Disney Princesses' Effect on Young Girls' Self-Images*, p. 13, [online] http://dialogues.rutgers.edu/all-journals/volume-9/148-fairytale-dreams-disney-princesses-effect-on-young-girls-self-images/file [accessed: 28.01.2016].

[28] See: R. Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body*, London 1995, p. 116.

[29] Ibidem, pp. 119–122.

ades ago, such as the idea that Africans are inferior to Europeans. This in turn created social circles that reinforced this belief, since they would not allow "inferior" people access to education or other activities that give social mobility. With regards to gender, or sexism, certain representations are deemed to be inappropriate for men or women, and the banning of such visualizations reinforce the normalization of a particular imagined hierarchy, since alternatives are publically condemned, at least until they get enough followers, who may "overturn" the existing structure because of a change in the perception of the norm or a change in belief systems. This discriminatory behavior then makes an argument that there are no "black" or "female" lawyers, for example, more plausible in a racist or sexist society, proving a point which is a logical fallacy, a vicious circle. Returning to Leppert's remarks about music, in the Victorian era the piano was like furniture, a domestic instrument, and played mainly by women and girls. Most interestingly, Leppert states:

> [...] musical notation was developed to give people orders to follow. [...] Thus the inability of many classically trained musicians of our own day to improvise is hardly accidental; indeed, it is planned as a 'natural' outgrowth of the felt need to transmit the fully texted traditions of canonic practices. The disgust shown in music schools toward nonschool musicians, especially performers of popular music who cannot read music, is a coin form the same mint.[30]

Summarizing, the ability to talk about things that are nonexistent in the objective reality give rise to imagined realities. These imagined realties are arbitrary and subject to random change and chance. They are believed to be true by the society that has an imagined hierarchy that regulates what is permissible. The imagery created are part of the motors that communities and societies value gender or the gendered body, which includes all images available to the individual within a particular belief system, such as expressions from art, image, popular culture, media, aesthetics, and are not equally distributed because the individual's imaginary hierarchy will vary from person to person, which is why an intersubjective discourse on the role of gender and the aesthetization of the body or objects is even possible. The imagined hierarchies are like stereotypes and are irrational and come from random encounters with environmental associations and conditioning. The conditioned images then can be believed to be models that can or do represent what an imagined hierarchy claims

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[30] Ibidem, pp. 133–134.

to be true. The association of particular images and aesthetics are part of the way a society aestheticizes gender. Next, I will argue how culture can behaviorally manipulate, challenge, change, or maintain the imagined hierarchies in a society in a reward mechanism.

## Aesthetic power within a behavioral paradigm

> Aesthetic power is often hidden or overlooked; when one thinks of aesthetic value, the qualifier 'mere' is often implicit, indicating the presumption that practical or moral values not only take precedence over aesthetic value but are cleanly separable from the way something looks, sounds, feels, or communicates emotions and ideas. Arts programs are among the first items to be cut from municipal budgets; they are often classified as contributors to the "enrichment" of public life that may be eliminated without major loss, comparable to skipping dessert with no sacrifice of nutrition. This is a grave error; art and aesthetic taste are powerful framers of self-image, social identity, and public values.[31]

When regarding cultural gender and how it is presented, the imagined hierarchy contains a set of rules that frame the way a man or woman is presented and how mobile they can be within those structures. Even the framing isn't separate from the parameters that set up the structures that represent each gender. In the words of Leppert, who describes framed mottos: "The border decorates, to be sure; but like the frame of a painting, or like a fence, it also articulates a space. It informs us that what is contained within the borders matters and what is outside them does not. It includes by excluding."[32] And as Carolyn Korsmeyer remarks, the framing of a particular aesthetic is a very important factor in setting up values or imagined structures. Such framing can also be understood as association, such as Pavlov's dogs drooling upon hearing a bell. The mechanisms that exist in the objective reality, the biological predisposition to drooling when food is near, can be reconditioned, so that symbols of food seem to be "tasty," so that a dog would drool upon hearing the conditioned stimulus, the bell.

When considering the environment in which art and creation itself exists, it is also framed by a part of social custom that separate it from

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[31] See: C. Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction*, London 2004, p. 1.
[32] See: R. Leppert, op. cit., p. 120.

other functions of life. Currently some arts are separate from the intimate lives of people, who spend much more time in the presence of popular culture and the mass media, because it is simply much more accessible. The individual will have varying degrees of contact with the arts in general, because of the way it is framed within a community, and that itself comes from an imagined reality, which conditions how sexualized images are valued. This segregation is a sign that members of a society do not need to value classical artistic endeavors as an integral part of the human experience as understood in the paradigm of classical imagined hierarchies, or in the tradition that philosophers such as Roger Scruton, who accuses modern mass culture as suffering from ugliness and wandering away from romanticized ideals of beauty, which he claims to defend. The former has been in part replaced or completed with participation in pop culture, different subcultures, and other mass cultural and digital cultural roles in creating other gender representations that compete with each other and may spread in viral patterns, such as the role of kitsch, mass culture, rock and pop music and aesthetics in LGBTQ or feminist imaginaries. Each create respective frames which interpret the objective reality within the paradigm of their respective imagined hierarchies. The current capitalistic imagined hierarchy is a belief system that values foremost economic growth. Harari even categorizes consumer capitalism as the only religion (as a system of beliefs) where the followers do for the first time in all of human history what is required of them.[33] Because of the choices of a select group of people, who grasped the most breakthrough technology of their respective era, such as agriculture, the printing press, or the industrial revolution, the imagined systems that frame culture create different social structures. Before machines, rarely have people tied any value to time nor did they care about the precise hour. When late to work, as Harari points out, it didn't impact the work of others.[34] Mass production and the industrial revolution flipped this value system on its head, and all of a sudden, a change in the way society produces its goods changed what was valued. This revolution resulted in weak family households and loose social bonds, a strong government and market, and in strong individuals.[35] An alternative imagined hierarchy with new conditionals that reward different actions, attitudes, and beliefs, which could give rise to new artistic

[33] See: Y. N. Harari, op. cit., p. 422.
[34] Ibidem, p. 426.
[35] Ibidem, p. 436.

endeavors and aesthetizations of values. The same can be said of the digital revolution, which further weakens some bonds between communities and strengthens other values. Such systems of belief may give rise to more people, who identify as asexual, or simply feel that gender representation is part of a competing memetic system. Technological advances may even lead to the decline of sexual reproduction, which is a problem in Japan's demographics, in favor of alternative means or in elongating one's own lifetime, as proposed by transhumanists. Similar imagined hierarchies are visible in the valuing of the earth's ecological system, when taking in consideration groups such as The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement. It can also lead to the aesthetization or embodiment of other kinds, since "people attribute personality traits and gender to computers and even adjust their responses to avoid hurting the machines' 'feelings.'"[36]

What is insightful is that only a few members of society need to be capable of changing the reward mechanisms that lead to changes in the conditionals that create regulatory systems of abstract and intersubjective ideas. Famously, behaviorists focus their studies on the actions that their subjects take in response to stimuli. Classical conditioning of dogs to drool after hearing the sound of a bell can be a simplified version of how imagined systems lead people to appreciate or reject certain forms of gender, or any other concepts they imagine. Just as the biological function of drooling is a biological phenomenon rooted in the objective reality, the reaction of drooling to a bell is learned, just as imagined hierarchies need to be learned. Of course, there are no centrally controlled environments that create conditionals, but the social constructs and imagined realities do create the environments that allow people to learn what is desirable or not through social reward systems. Most aesthetic power depends upon how each generation trains itself to react to certain sets of symbols and ideas and how prevalent those symbols are within a society's environment.

Modern men live in the constant fear of not presenting themselves as being manly enough.[37] Many products do service to this fear, and offer products "just for men," who then can assure themselves that being clean is not only an activity that women partake. The same can be held true for women, who could be ridiculed for not having enough femininity, since

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[36] See: S. Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology And Less From Each Other*, New York 2011, p. 139.

[37] See: Y. N. Harari, op. cit., p. 189.

they may desire a career as an aggressive businessperson and not want to raise children. Many boys and girls learn, according to Warren Farrell, that even the act of sex itself is worse than violence and murder because parents condition them by censoring any nudity on TV but allow them to watch westerns.[38] Most cues in our environment become conditionals that model how a sex should behave as a particular gender. The aesthetization, which is not only the result of the processes but also the frames,[39] of particular properties leads to imagined stereotypes of what an ideal man or woman should hold. Because a certain imagined hierarchy exists, and because that structure impacts the everyday lives of people, artists can choose to negate the existent hierarchies and show alternative imagined hierarchies that create conditionals which would, for example, lead to replication of standards of beauty created by an artist, such as photographers JJ Levine, "Alone Time"; Jon Uriarte, "The Men Under the Influence"; Yijun Liao, "Experimental Relationship"; Rion Sabean, "Men-Ups!"; or the street art project "Stop Telling Women to Smile" do; or propagating traditional values in essays as aesthetic philosopher Roger Scruton does, who in his article "Modern Manhood" laments over the confusion in gender roles as negative to the imagined hierarchy of marriage.[40] But, change can also happen by accident. Or they could do the opposite and reinforce the existent models in their cultural group to be superior to others because of vicious circles that justify sexism for instance. As a result of such a condition, the emotional responses do not necessarily need to be positive or just. They may, in fact, more often be based around fear of rejection.

Therefore, the consequences of learning mechanisms in a particular cultural environment result in the creation of particular associations, that may be random in causality, that are reinforced within a culture because the stimuli or conditionals serve as criteria that dictate what representations are acceptable for someone to be categorized as a particular gender. Change to an alternate imagined hierarchy does not require the participation of all members of a culture, but only the few that have a greater means of rewarding its participants or in propagating in larger number the imagery that it believes to be proper.

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[38] See: P. Zimbardo, N. Coulombe, op. cit., p. 99.

[39] See: R. Leppert, op. cit., p. 119.

[40] R. Scruton, "Modern Manhood", *City-Journal*, [online] http://www.city-journal.org/html/9_4_a3.html [accessed: 29.01.2016].

## Conclusion

The anonymity that the information age has to offer, which is not only responsible for a change in imagined hierarchies, often eases the social tensions related to acting out appropriate social roles and offers more alternative imagined hierarchies than closed social groups do. Usually each person is expected to behave in a certain manner in their respective associated environments. This orthodox mechanism allows for the social construction of gender identity to be more black-and-white and leaves no tolerance for ambiguity. But, with the change of the environment (because of feminist movements or the backlash towards) or technological land-scape, the previous groups which had the power to filter out incompatible behaviors and tastes are now losing explicit control. The digital revolution seems to also allow for a greater repertoire of representing the body, sexuality, and gender.

But it also ushers in injustice, alienation, and most definitely is a precursor to the dawn of a new imaginary hierarchy. In our current structure, it is assumed that the individual is the ultimate authority in judging what is right for him and her, regardless of sex. However, with the growing database of knowledge on the psychology of mind and the field of consciousness and artificial intelligence it may very well turn out, that the ultimate authority in deciding what is "best" for a person is not the fallible human, but the power of information technology. It may be safe to speculate that Internet based companies with access to Big Data and powerful statistics may make better judgements for an individual than the people could make for themselves.

One of the humanist religions, or imagined hierarchies, are the transhumanist movement, where many gender identities can be combined into one entity, or create fembots, cyborgs, or designer babies without genitalia. It has been recently been claimed that:

> In the future, transhumanist technology and science will complement the LGBT movement and help push it forward in the face of continued social oppression and closed-mindedness. This is important, since LGBT people are devoted to freedom. They want to be free to do anything they please without condemnation so long as it doesn't hurt others. Transhumanists – a notable number who are LGBT themselves – want the same exact thing. And they can work together to better achieve their goals.[41]

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[41] See: Z. Istvan, *The Future of the LGBT Movement May Involve Transhumanism. Huffington Post*, [online] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/zoltan-istvan/the-future-of-the-lgbt-movement-may-involve-transhumanism_b_7657388.html [accessed: 29.01.2016].

Thus, imagined hierarchies play a major role in the aesthetic judgement of a man or woman because of the conditional artifacts they create, which presented to individuals in a social environment, who still need to make decisions for themselves, play a major role in the imagination of the desired traits of a particular gender in that culture. Because of a changing environment, alternative imagined hierarchies are emerging, which condition different standards of beauty that artists elaborate upon, philosophers analyze, and people strive to achieve in their everyday lives.

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