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## The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body

By Angela King<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The work of Michel Foucault has been extremely influential amongst feminist scholars and for good reason; his meditations on discipline, power, sexuality and subjectivity are particularly pertinent to feminist analysis. Yet despite his preoccupation with power and its effects on the body, Foucault's own analysis was curiously gender-neutral. Remarkably, there is no exploration or even acknowledgement of the extent to which gender determines the techniques and degrees of discipline exerted on the body. Although this exposes serious flaws in Foucault's work, I don't believe it negates his entire theoretical framework. Rather it can be adopted and adapted; his glaring omissions can be fruitfully exposed, explored and remedied.

In this essay I focus my analysis on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* - a prime example, in my opinion, of his failure to recognise the significance of gender in the play of power despite the obvious pertinence of his material. To illustrate this further I have appropriated a couple of Foucault's subheadings, both in the spirit of *homage*: to acknowledge the validity of his framework, and *satire*: to expose how the female body exemplifies his arguments about discipline yet how conspicuous it is by its absence. In 'The Body of the Condemned' I explore why his gender blindness is so problematic, examining the polarisation of the sexes and the discursive construction of gender itself, and make my case for reading the female body as a particular target of disciplinary power. Then in 'The Spectacle of the Scaffold' I go on to examine how this disciplinary power manifests itself in modern society, taking as an example the ways in which some fashion and beauty practices manipulate, train and mark the female body. In short, I suggest that gender, specifically femininity, is a discipline that produces bodies and identities and operates as an effective form of social control.

*Key Words:* The body, Foucault, gender

### Introduction

Foucault's writing on power and knowledge and the production of subjectivity has been profoundly influential, not least amongst feminist theorists who have extensively critiqued and developed his work. But although feminists have engaged at length with his theories, Foucault himself never showed much interest in feminism or gender issues. For someone whose project was to elaborate on how power produces subjectivity by focussing on the ways it invests the body, his accounts are curiously gender-neutral and he has been roundly criticised for failing to address or perhaps even to recognise the significance of gender in the play of power. He stands accused of "gloss(ing) over the

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<sup>1</sup> Angela was a mature student at the University of North London (now London Metropolitan University) and graduated in 2002 with a First Class BA Joint Honours Degree in Critical Theory and Film Studies. Although not a Women's Studies student, Angela has always had a profound interest in feminism, gender and sexual politics. This essay is an edited extract from her undergraduate dissertation of the same title. Since graduating Angela has worked for the anti-poverty charity War on Want and divides her time between political activism and designing promotional material for the not-for-profit sector. Finances permitting, Angela would very much like to return to full-time study in the future.

gender configurations of power” (Diamond and Quinby 1988, p.xiv); of “neglect(ing) to examine the gendered character of many disciplinary techniques” (McNay 1992, p.11) and of “treat(ing) the body throughout as if it were one, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationships to the characteristic institutions of modern life.” (Bartky 1988, p.63).

He doesn’t seem concerned to explore how or why power operates to invest, train and produce bodies that are gendered and he also appears to be blind to the extent that gender<sup>2</sup> determines the techniques and degrees of discipline exerted on the body. “Where is the account of the disciplinary practices that engender the ‘docile bodies’ of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men?” Sandra Lee Bartky asks. “Women, like men, are subject to many of the same disciplinary practices Foucault describes. But he is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine.” (Bartky op. cit., p.63-4).

How can Foucault analyse power relations, sexuality and the body without discussing gender? I suggest that the female body exemplifies Foucault’s arguments about discipline, yet it is conspicuous by its absence. Although this deeply problematises his work for feminists, I don’t believe it negates his entire conceptual framework. I regard it as more of an (admittedly offensive) lacuna that by definition demands to be filled. It is in this spirit that I shall firstly explore why Foucault’s gender-blindness is so problematic, and then go on to make my case for reading the female body as a particular target of disciplinary power in order to argue that gender, specifically femininity<sup>3</sup>, is a discipline that produces bodies and identities and operates as an effective form of social control.

Foucault’s theoretical framework from *Discipline and Punish* will inform my arguments. This serves as a critique of his failure to address gender issues himself, but also as an acknowledgement that his account of power is instructive. My appropriation of some of Foucault’s subheadings is part parody, part *homage*; it illustrates just how applicable to discussions of the female body his work is, yet how ironic that he never acknowledged it.

### **The Body of the Condemned**

I have chosen to appropriate Foucault’s subheading from *Discipline and Punish* for this section as I think it serves as a particularly apt description of the female body. In it I shall explore how ‘woman’ has been discursively constructed (condemned) as inferior yet also threatening to man, thus in perpetual need of containment and control and subjected (condemned) to particular disciplinary techniques.

The body is an over-determined site of power for feminists as well as for Foucault; a surface inscribed with culturally and historically specific practices and subject to political and economic forces. Susan Bordo points out that it was feminism that first inverted the old metaphor of the ‘body

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<sup>2</sup> It would be ironic if I criticised Foucault for his omission of gender in his discussions of power and the body and failed to acknowledge the significance of race and ethnicity. In recognition of the impact of racist discourses on the bodies of women designated non-white (the exploration of which would demand a separate study in order to do them justice), I want to make it clear that my study is restricted to exploring how the discipline of femininity effects white western women in particular.

<sup>3</sup> By focussing on the disciplining of the female body through the regime of femininity I don’t mean to imply that men’s bodies are not subject to the ‘technologies of gender’ also. I recognise the prescriptive quality of masculinity, though would argue that its rhetoric of strength, mastery and autonomy operates to produce bodies far less ‘docile’ than the bodies of women.

politic' to talk about the politics of the body: "the human body is itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control." (Bordo 1993, p.21). Feminists identified how women have been subjugated primarily through their bodies, and how gender ideologies and sexist reasoning stem from perceived biological differences between the sexes which are supported by dualistic paradigms that have characterised western thought from the philosophers of ancient Greece to the Enlightenment and beyond.

Woman has been measured and judged against the norm of man, the essential human subject, "the active, strong and moral half of a human whole" (Bailey 1993, p.99). Biological deviation from the male standard marks women as biologically (and therefore 'naturally') inferior; as "victims of a pathological physiology" (Balsamo 1996, p.42). Aristotle regarded the female as being "afflicted with natural defectiveness", St Thomas Aquinas saw woman as 'imperfect man' (de Beauvoir 1988, p.16) and a 'misbegotten male' (Tseñlon, 1995, p.11). Women are the 'other half'; necessary evils for reproduction (Bailey op. cit. p.99) and the opposite against which the male can compare himself favourably. The 'one' requires the category of the 'other' in order to be the 'one'.

The idea of men and women as opposites is supported by polarized categories such as mind/body, culture/nature, spirit/matter that have been inflected with gender ideologies. In the mind/body dualism the body and mind are regarded as quite separate, the body is merely the crude container of the mind. Mind and reason are superior to the emotions and senses and divorced from one another. Man is mind and represents culture: the rational, unified, thinking subject; woman is body and represents nature: irrational, emotional and driven by instinct and physical need. Mind/culture/man must harness and control this potentially unruly body/nature/woman through the application of knowledge and willpower.

Woman's association with body/nature is strengthened by biological essentialist and determinist paradigms which define woman according to her reproductive physiology. She is thus feeble and passive, literally a receptacle for the desires of the male<sup>4</sup> and incubator for his offspring; a creature driven by emotion and instinct; a slave to her reproductive organs/hormones. Man may be able to transcend his biological materiality, but woman is entrenched in her physicality - "a thing sunk deeply in its own immanence." (de Beauvoir op. cit., p.189).

Woman as other is inferior but also unknowable, enigmatic and disquieting. She represents that which must be investigated and dissected until her secrets are relinquished. Consequently the female body has been subjected to the scrutinizing gaze of the human sciences far more than the male. Every hint of abnormality has been thoroughly and enthusiastically ferreted out and classified by numerous 'experts' eager to provide indisputable proof of its inherent pathology. Its uncontrolled sexuality must be contained and inherent weakness of character exposed, particularly as it is primarily a reproductive body.

Medical and scientific discourse has confirmed the pathology of female biology and legitimated women's subjugation, prescribing in the past what activities women should engage in, what clothes they should wear to preserve appropriate 'womanliness', their moral obligation to preserve their energy for child birth and so on. Catherine Kohler Riessman argues that since the mid nineteenth century there has been an increasing 'medicalization' of women's lives which has seen more and more female 'conditions' identified in ways "that connote deviation from some ideal biological standard" (Kohler Riessman 1992, p.132). The nineteenth century woman was diagnosed as frigid, hysterical or neurasthenic with mental disorders put down to 'disturbances' in the womb,

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<sup>4</sup> The word vagina comes from the Latin word for sheath.

while contemporary women suffer from vaginismus, pre menstrual tension, infertility, pre and post natal depression, eating disorders and so on.

Of course, the processes that I have been relating - i.e. the role of discourse in producing and determining social identity and as a form of social control - are close to Foucault's theoretical heart. Indeed, he succinctly refers to some of these issues in his description of 'the hysterization of women's bodies' (Foucault 1998, p.104). There are in fact many convergences between the feminist account of power and the body and Foucault's. Feminism has long been preoccupied with theorising how power operates, particularly between the sexes. Like Foucault, many feminists had engaged with Marxism but found its framework fell short. Foucault held particular disdain for 'totalising' theories that claimed to offer the 'truth' through 'scientific' explanations. Feminism was similarly engaged with critiquing the notion of science (with particular regard to their 'pathologising' of the female body), its claims to objectivity and the idea of guaranteed truth. Both of their projects seem to be primarily deconstructive: eager to expose the 'discursive practice' behind the natural and self-evident.

Foucault's theories have been useful to feminism in their challenge to paradigms of western thought taken for granted since the Enlightenment. He critiques the classical ways of thinking about the subject as a rational, unified being with a fixed core or essence, arguing that: "Nothing in man - not even his body - is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self recognition or for understanding other men" (Foucault 1991, p.87-8). There is no 'natural' body or pre-discursive, essential human subject who is "amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies" (Foucault 1977, p.217). In fact, Foucault's commentary of how subjectivity is produced calls to mind Simone de Beauvoir's now famous phrase that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir op. cit., p.295).

This anti-essentialist approach to the body has been a major attraction for many feminists. For Lois McNay his work on the body "indicates to feminists a way of placing a notion of the body at the centre of explanations of women's oppression that does not fall back into essentialism or biologism" (McNay op. cit., p.11). However, although he offers ammunition to tackle essentialist ideas, (particularly with regard to sexuality which he argued was an historical construct and not a 'natural given' or 'furtive reality' (Foucault 1998, p.105)) his failure to address gender as itself a discursive construct, as an "'effect' produced at the level of the body" (Balsamo op. cit., p.21), is deeply problematic. Anne Balsamo rightly points out that it "contradicts his analytical intentions to consider the system of differentiations that make the body meaningful." (Ibid.), whilst McNay argues that:

"If, as Foucault claims, there is no such thing as a 'natural' body and it is, therefore, impossible to posit a pre-given natural sex difference, then he needs to elaborate on how the systematic effect of sexual division is perpetuated by the techniques of gender that are applied to the body." (McNay op. cit., p.33)

Foucault did not address gender as a 'technique', so it appears he did regard something as a 'natural given'. The discourses I have been relating, as extreme and irrelevant as they may appear to us today, have informed contemporary society - inflecting modern thought through philosophy, medicine, law, the arts and so on - and entered into the popular consciousness as forms of self evident truth. They have helped to create a chasm between men and women that appears natural and

ineluctable - as banal as the cliché that women are from Venus and men from Mars.

Foucault's apparent gender neutrality is problematic precisely because we live in a society that is far from gender neutral and in fact constantly seeks to reiterate the polarization of the sexes through these 'techniques of gender'. Failing to be specific about just what kinds of bodies (discursively constructed or not) he's discussing implies that gender has no impact. His analysis sidesteps how woman has been discursively identified with the body and downplays the objectification that feminists argue this results in in order to argue for the subjectifying power of discourse. The cultural insistence on a male/female binary that derogates the female body in relation to the male inevitably leads to more intense policing of women's bodies and specific apparatuses of control. Therefore, treating the body 'as one' is not viable; his concept of power cries out for gender specific analysis and in that analysis gender needs to be acknowledged as a technology of the body in its own right; "a primary apparatus of scientific biopower that constructs the body as an intelligible object" (Balsamo op. cit., p.22)

Many feminists have read his gender-neutrality as androcentrism; he doesn't make gender distinctions, particularly in *Discipline and Punish*, because he is not really treating the body 'as one' but as male and no distinction is necessary when dealing with the 'genderless' body of man - the essential human subject. He seems to fall into the very modes of thought he sought to challenge. Balsamo argues that ultimately "Foucault ends up writing...from a site of power - male-centred discourse" (Balsamo op. cit., p.22) while Bartky claims that his work "reproduces that sexism which is endemic throughout western political theory" (Bartky op. cit., p.64).

I have tried to show that the notion of difference that is articulated by gender is itself a discursive construction. Male and female are designations not as thoroughly opposed as the discourses surrounding them suggest. The differences that do exist are, as McNay points out, "over-determined in order to produce a systematic effect of sexual division" (McNay op. cit., p.22). Though many people may experience gender as a natural expression of their biological sex, it is important to recognise that, in Benhabib and Cornell's words, "it is the way that anatomy is socially invested that defines gender identity and not the body itself" (Benhabib and Cornell 1987, p.14).

Male and female should not be conflated with masculinity and femininity. They are discursively produced identities that invest the body, producing certain characteristics that are taken as evidence of a male and female essence and an ineluctable difference between them. The 'naturalness' of gender is constantly invoked, but masculinity and femininity are disciplines of the body that require *work*. For Judith Butler gender is a performance, "an active style of living one's body in the world" (Butler in Benhabib and Cornell 1987, p.131). For McNay it is an 'imaginary signification' of sex (McNay op. cit., p.22). Femininity in particular has been variously referred to as a myth, a mystique, a masque, an artifice, an achievement (Bartky op. cit., p.64). Paradoxically, while femininity is regarded as the most 'natural' of the genders (as women are biologically over-determined) it also requires the most artifice to be considered successful, whilst those that are unsuccessful or refuse to take part in it are regarded as 'unnatural'.

I shall now go on to explore how the female body is manipulated, shaped and trained to bear signs of its 'natural' femininity using the example of some fashion and beauty practices in order to illustrate how women become practised and subjected in the discipline of the female gender.

### **The Spectacle of the Scaffold**

Adorning and transforming the body with clothes, cosmetics and jewellery is associated with femininity, even though it is well documented that men have been equally engaged in such practices.

Male involvement in spectacular forms of adornment declined dramatically during the 18th century, due no doubt in part to the identification and pathologising of homosexuality that occurred at the time, and the subsequent need to avoid any suggestion of effeminacy. Sexual stereotyping in dress - maintaining a visible distinction between the sexes by exaggerating existing physical differences or constructing artificial ones - also became of overriding concern during this period. According to Elizabeth Wilson fashion is 'obsessed' with gender, and serves to define and redefine the gender boundary (Wilson 1985 p.117). This is evidenced by the anxiety aroused by 'cross dressing' the very idea of which could not be possible if it were not for such rigid gender demarcations.

Female fashions, particularly since the Victorian era, seem to have been especially concerned with marking difference spectacularly on the body by constantly drawing attention to sites of 'otherness' such as the breasts, waist, buttocks and hips which have been exaggerated by corsets, bustles and bras. Considering the well documented discomfort, breathing difficulties and internal organ displacement caused by the 19th century corset in particular, it is possible to draw an analogy with Foucault's writing on torture, which he says must "mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy" (Foucault 1977, p.34).

However, Foucault identified torture as a characteristic of pre-modern times, whereas for women this form of spectacular discipline has extended well into the modern period. The advent of modernity characterised by rationality sees a certain 'rationality' appear in men's attire; women, however, are not regarded as rational agents but as instinctual, inherently pathological bodies, unaffected by culture, outside of modernity. Primitive and 'uncivilisable', these distinctly 'pre-modern' bodies therefore require pre-modern methods of containment and control that simultaneously brand them with the 'infamy' of their gender and the 'irrational' display that becomes regarded as an inherently feminine trait.

Woman's crime of being other - of embodying all that man fears and despises yet desires - finds fitting 'punishment' in clothing that draws erotic attention to the body by simultaneously constraining and 'correcting' it. According to de Beauvoir: "In woman dressed and adorned, nature is present but under restraint, by human will moulded nearer to man's desire" (de Beauvoir op. cit., p.191). By beating down upon and mastering the body punishment was also an emphatic affirmation of power (Foucault 1977, p.49) and superior strength. As Susan Bordo observes, the corset caused women actual physical incapacitation but it also "served as an emblem of the power of culture to impose its designs on the female body." (Bordo op. cit., p.143).

De Beauvoir argued that female costumes and styles have been designed to prevent activity: "Chinese women with bound feet could scarcely walk, the polished fingernails of the Hollywood star deprive her of her hands; high heels, corsets, panniers, farthingales, crinolines were intended less to accentuate the curves of the feminine body than to augment its incapacity". Paralysed by either too little or too much weight, by inconvenient attire or the 'rules of propriety', woman's body could then "present the inert and passive qualities of an object" and "[seem] to man to be his property, his thing." (de Beauvoir op. cit., p.189-90). Thus containing the threat of the potentially unruly, too-physical female body.

Whether or not one agrees with de Beauvoir's comments, which seem to suggest some kind of male conspiracy orchestrated against women that is at odds with Foucault's theories, it must be acknowledged that, although incapacitating corsets may be a thing of the past, certain degrees and techniques of discipline, manipulation and discomfort are still practised on the female body.

High heeled or stiletto shoes, for example, require practice to walk in; they affect balance and restrict mobility, resulting in a particular posture and gait. 'Feminine' shoes bear little resemblance to the shape of the human foot and squeezing one's feet into narrow pointed shoes can cause discomfort and deformity. Corsets and girdles have given way to new hi-tech stretch fabrics and lingerie that claims to 'control' and 'shape' unruly parts of the body that would disturb the required smooth, firm silhouette by compressing them with strategically placed 'control panels'. In the last ten years or so there has been a veritable explosion of bras aiming to transform the shape, size and direction of one's breasts in order to achieve the desired large, rounded bust-line with maximum cleavage. To this end there are maximizers, plunge, push up and cleavage enhancing bras; ones with removable padding, with liquid gel, even with inflatable sections. Breast implants have of course become much more common in recent years and augmentation is now the second most requested cosmetic surgery procedure (Bordo op. cit., p.25).

Bodily discipline doesn't stop with the manipulation of the female flesh, however; the texture and appearance of the skin also requires a profound amount of attention. According to Sandra Lee Bartky a woman's "skin must be soft, supple, hairless and smooth; ideally, it should betray no sign of wear, experience, age, or deep thought." (Bartky op. cit., p.68). To this end women are exhorted to follow a detailed daily beauty regime and to choose the correct preparations, far too numerous to list here, designed for 'treating' and transforming the skin on all parts of the body. Then there are the numerous cosmetics applied with various instruments that women are expected to master, not to mention false eyelashes, hair-pieces and nails. There are specific products and processes designed for the removal of hair from different parts of the body; from the eyebrows, upper lip, underarm, leg and 'bikini' by plucking, shaving, waxing, buffing and electrolysis. And as for the hair that remains on the head, a myriad more treatments and products await.

Women are advised to avoid unnecessary exposure to the elements, such as wind, water and 'damaging UV rays' of the sun in order to keep skin 'fresh and young looking'. Only youthful bodies or bodies with the appearance of youth are considered beautiful and valued in our society, but as Efrat Tseëlon points out: "While both sexes dread ageing, it is the woman who is expected to prevent it." (Tseëlon op. cit., p.82). The cosmetic industries capitalise on the fear of ageing by offering products endorsed by scientific language that claim to prevent or reduce the signs of ageing, which is discussed as though it were some kind of disease that it is every woman's responsibility to try to prevent.

Although cosmetics have been commonly associated with individual expression, indulgence and even emancipation (particularly in the first decades of the twentieth century), the idea that it is a woman's 'duty to be beautiful' has been just as prevalent. Wilson observes that the rhetoric of the beauty routine has at times suggested military ritual or a moral, even eugenic, obligation, (Wilson op. cit., p.111) while Sandra Lee Bartky regards making-up the face as "a highly stylised activity that gives little reign to self-expression" (Bartky op. cit., p.71). Writing in 1985, Wilson laments the fact that cosmetics are now regarded as a necessity rather than as 'daring display' and suggests that they are now worn like a "'uniform' in much the same spirit as most men wear ties - in order to look 'dressed', in order not to stand out from the crowd" (Wilson op. cit., p.114). Bartky concurs that "a properly made-up face is, if not a card of entree, at least a badge of acceptability in most social and professional contexts" (Bartky op. cit., p.71).

In more recent years of course, the measures I have been describing don't go far enough for the increasing number of people who choose (and can afford) to undergo cosmetic surgery, which is fast becoming another necessity in the pursuit of an acceptable body. An ever-expanding range of



procedures are on offer to correct more and more parts of the body to increasingly detailed criteria. Though surgery continues to gain popularity amongst men, the vast majority of people trying to 'correct' themselves are women. Given the obsession in our culture with slenderness it is unsurprising that liposuction is the most requested operation (Bordo op. cit., p.25) with women outnumbering men nine to one (Tseëlon op. cit., p.81). Surgery is also promoted as being about individual choice and self-determination, but the end results aimed for, especially by the most popular procedures, seem to be profoundly normalizing<sup>5</sup>.

Turning woman into an ornamented surface requires an enormous amount of discipline and can cause discomfort, not to mention untold feelings of inadequacy. It cements woman's status as body, confirming her role as primarily decorative. Female styles over the years have also served to confirm myths about woman: as duplicitous, over-sexualised temptress; delicate and weak or narcissistic, frivolous and obsessed with trivialities: "[l]ike fashion itself...ephemeral, changeable, illusory and extravagant." (Tseëlon op. cit., p.23).

Of course fashion and beauty practices can be about play and indulgence, but pressure to conform to certain norms makes them more like a form of gruelling work (Wilson op. cit., p.122). And, as Wilson observes, staying true to the old adage about women's work, beauty care is 'drudgery'; work that can never be done because an absolute, petrified state can never be achieved: "it is a losing battle against the inevitable deterioration of the body...a struggle against life itself" (Ibid. p.126).

## Conclusion

According to Anne Balsamo "gender is one of the primary effects of the discursive construction of the human body" (Balsamo op. cit., p.22). It is a pervasive and powerful method of social control that both produces and restricts one's mode of being. Therefore, by neglecting to address gender in his studies Foucault can only have produced a partial account of the discourses surrounding the body and the discipline that shapes it.

Woman's historical association with the body has resulted in her being judged by and valued for her appearance more than man, often above all else, and has also engendered the fear and dread of otherness. Even in this supposedly equal, liberated and progressive society femaleness is still disturbing enough to require supervision and containment by forms of discipline that men are not subjected to<sup>6</sup>. The story of women's emancipation and increasing self-determination is clouded by the continuing presence of restrictive ideals of womanhood that Myra Macdonald claims 'defensively reinvent' themselves against the cultural and social changes in women's lives (MacDonald 1995, p.220).

However, just as Foucault did in his later work, I would like to stress that resistance is possible. I'm not suggesting that all women clamber to conform to the ideals of femininity. There have always been, and always will be, those who gleefully subvert or ignore the 'rules' or who enjoy the pleasures of fashion and beauty without feeling them to be an obligation or a necessity. As Wilson says, we can "acknowledge that dress is a powerful weapon of control and dominance, while widening our view to encompass an understanding of its simultaneously subversive qualities"

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<sup>5</sup> Tseëlon argues that "the long term success of such operations seems to hinge on how sexually appealing, acceptable, or marriageable a woman becomes" in Tseëlon, op. cit. p.83.

<sup>6</sup> I acknowledge that men are being increasingly targeted as consumers to indulge in 'male grooming' products, though I am inclined to think that this is because the market in women's beauty treatments has been so saturated that companies are having to seek out a new one.

(Elizabeth Wilson quoted in MacDonald op. cit., p.212). Foucault claimed that resistance exists wherever there is normalisation and domination. Power is never total, uniform or smooth but shifting and unstable; if it is exerted on 'micro levels' it can be contested on micro levels; there is "no single locus of great Refusal" but a "plurality of resistances" (Foucault 1998, p.95-6).

In more recent years feminists have been attending to postmodern concepts of the plurality and instability of identity. Foucault's 'docile body', read by some as absolutely passive and manipulated and leaving little room for agency, has been read another way: "not as passive, but as malleable, as a contested and contestable site of power and knowledge" (Gedalof 1993, p.50). If our identities are discursively constituted by power, and that power is shifting and unstable, then we must be also.

The more we challenge traditional dichotomous gender norms the less 'normal' they'll become. Then perhaps we can reject them in favour of a mode of embodiment based more on choice and pleasure than on the desire for acceptance and paranoia about our inherent deficiency<sup>7</sup>. Of course, not all women in our culture experience women's situation as problematic, just as in the eras of Wollstonecraft, the Pankhursts and de Beauvoir. Yet the fact that women of our era would find past conditions intolerable signifies that gains have been made and will continue to be made. Unlike Foucault, who described himself as a pessimist, I am cautiously optimistic; I believe that society can change, but only with continuous struggle and engagement on all levels.

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<sup>7</sup> I'm not suggesting that this is an easy strategy of course. Women's choices have always been constrained by economic and social factors. See Naomi Wolf's chapter 'Work' in *The Beauty Myth* (1990) where she discusses recent cases where employers have discriminated against women on the basis of their appearance (and gotten away with it).

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