«Reproduction creates its own origin little by little and through repetition. This seems contradictory at first glance: how can there be a reproduction, if there is no original?»

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«Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself.» [1]
Judith Butler

In this essay we try to untangle how original and reproduction relate to each other in terms of gender-construction and how reproduction as a performance can retrospectively create its own origin. At the same time, we question the meaning of such reproduction: does the construct lose its validity with the realization that reproduction is not based on an original?

The temporal component of the relationship between original and reproduction seems relatively simple: one is there first, the other follows. Reproduction conditions an example, an original. But if one takes Judith Butler's definition of gender, then this behaves exactly the other way around: the reproduction creates its own origin little by little and through repetition. This seems contradictory at first glance: how can there be a reproduction, if there is no original?

Let's make a little journey back in time, looking for that reproduction. To do so, we analyze gender through the European traditional organization of gender, following two principles: The one is that it is binary, meaning that gender is either male or female and putting aside all other genders. The second one is that these binary categories are opposites.

The binary understanding of the world gives rise to the juxtaposition of man and woman. Two different anatomical sexes are assigned different, contrasting characteristics, which are directly connected with a spatial separation of territories of one sex or the other. It must be noted that until the 18th/19th century man and woman are not understood as two entities: The human is man. Woman can be understood as a kind of variation of this one human being. In the Bible, Eve is created from Adam's rib. «Man and his wife», it says in Genesis 2:25. In Ancient Greece, «man» and thus «human» is the free, political man of the Polis. The man's claim to ownership of his wife is central to this. Thus the woman is transferred from the property of her father to the property of her husband, a ritual which is strongly bound to architectural space: she moves from her father's house to her husband's house. She is part of her husband's «Oikos», which includes house, household and family. The walls of the house are the boundaries of the wife's world. The Polis is the empire of the man; «Andron», the place where the master of the house receives his visitors and goes about his business. Entering the «men's room», is just as forbidden to the wife as leaving the house on her own, which is directly linked to the risk of defiling her husband's honor. [2]

Between the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages, the place of women in the city changes regularly according to the policies that are carried out. But even when both genders meet in the city, for instance in the 14th century, they do not behave in the same manner. Women are still controlled by the way they have to walk, dress, look around. [3] Later, especially in the 16th century, witch hunts prove to be a powerful tool to separate women and men even more strongly. Men are taught to fear women's power as well as their independence. [4]

The Renaissance brings not only the architecture and philosophy of antiquity back into people's consciousness, but also the clear association of man and public and woman and private space. Thus, the following can be read in Alberti's Book of the Family: «It would hardly win us respect if our wife busied herself among the men in the marketplace, out in the public eye. It also seems somewhat demeaning to me to remain shut up in the house among women when I have manly things to do among men, fellow citizens and worthy and distinguished foreigners. [...] The character of men is stronger than that of women [...] Women, on the other hand, are almost all timid by nature, soft, slow, and more useful when they sit still and watch over our things.» [5]

This allocation of two territories understood as contrasting each other, runs through the entire history of our Western society. While this understanding seems somewhat more permeable in the centuries of the Middle Ages, it regains importance in the Renaissance. This is perhaps not least due to the fact that the «world of ideas» is experiencing a new upswing. Philosophy, which was strongly linked to theology and the Church during the Middle Ages, gradually detaches itself from this dependence and, together with the emergence of humanism, forms the basis of modern thinking. As Alberti's example shows, theoretical traditions of moral concepts and values also address attributes that are more assigned to one sex or the other. Thus, the idea that the public exterior space belongs to the man and the private interior space to the woman is repeated once again. At this point we can already recognize a steady reproduction of binary gendered attributes and territories. Moving on, the list will only grow.

At the beginning of the 19th century, during the Victorian era, the female ideal is a weak, pale body, that of a woman who stays at home and does not make any physical effort. This image is reinforced by a new bourgeoisie settling outside the city, the wife remaining confined to the house and taking care of the domestic sphere, assisted by domestic workers, while her husband works in the city. Slowly, the image of the interior woman crystallizes, she decorates and maintains the household, does not work. This clear division of spaces is also found within the Victorian house itself. [6] This distinction of female rooms and activities places the woman in a passive role. She waits in front of the window and sews. She is assigned the drawing room, also known as the «Boudoir», traditionally located on one of the upper floors and looking after the gardens. She is the spectator observing the outside world from her window, in a posture of passive contemplation.

The binary oppositions inside/outside, passive/active and static/dynamic as well as weak/strong manifest themselves particularly vividly in the fairytales of the Brothers Grimm. Written at the beginning of the 19th century, they are an integral part of today's education and anchored in our subconscious as role models. Here, the protagonist's spatial context is central. The princess in the tower (Rapunzel), in the glass coffin (Snow White) or in the castle overgrown with roses (Sleeping Beauty) waits for the prince, who comes riding on his horse to free her. Her waiting position is static and located in an interior space, while his is dynamic and un-located on the exterior. This image was already

present in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, which was written in 1597: Juliet is waiting for Romeo on her balcony. The stereotypical idea of the active man and the passive woman shapes the romantic narrative, thinking not least of all of countless contemporary love comedies; they reproduce the Victorian lady as well as the princess in new settings, but the underlying image stays the same. They are good examples of how reproduction combined with romanticizing can be powerful in keeping those images alive and holding up their reproduction even today.

What is crucial to the topic is the change that takes place in the second half of the 19th century, which turns an idealistic understanding of «gender characters» into a realistic one, relating to physical bodies and architectural space. This movement of realism, which begins with the rise of science and opposes itself to the previously dominant idealism, has a decisive influence on the social construction of gender. While the differences between women and men have hitherto been based on social roles and labelling, their differences are now being explained based on pseudo-scientific categorization and biological «facts». These gender-specific attributes are being incorporated into normative social discourse. The stereotypes stay the same, the argumentation changes, the reproduction goes on.

It is in this gendered geography of the 19th century, which is becoming more and more restrictive for women, that the first «passages», followed by department stores, appear. Spaces where women can walk and shop in complete safety. Although they have the typology of a street with many shops, they are inside spaces; they are controlled interiors, protected and designed so that the bourgeoise can move without the presence of her husband or a chaperone.

The first department store is opened by Aristide Boucicaut in 1840 in Paris. «Le Bon Marché», the world of women, in which they are supposed to fill the void of their existence and take care of themselves by spending their husbands' money. These stores are designed for the bourgeoise woman to feel comfortable: «Retailers soon realized that the more homelike the atmosphere, the more likely a woman was to linger. In response, they outfitted their stores like extensions of the home.» [7] A new space of freedom is therefore opening up for bourgeois women. This semi-public space gives a reason for their presence in the city, a presence that is still strictly controlled, and allowed mainly for economic purposes.

Moving on to the 20th century, the model of the nuclear family keeps up the same logic, as we have seen throughout this journey in time: «The breadwinner father, homemaker mother and kids as the quintessential family model, was a great tool of social identity building in the Western world, especially from the 60's as a mainstream middle class ideal to follow, and soon political policy and rhetoric along with consumerist opportunism exploited this general understanding to sell products that would appeal to this lifestyle and push national sentiments along the lines of protecting families. The large media focus on this family type through commercials, tv-programmes and public address has made it seem like the only way to co-habitat as a respectable person.» [8]

In 2020 — to keep it short — a lot of change has been achieved, but still women are more easily associated with staying home and caring for children, while stay-at-home dads are not yet the normality or even seen as «less of a man» when they do.

What do we take from all this? Coming back to our initial question about the power of reproduction, we see that there is an immense pool of examples of the same gender stereotypes throughout history. Coming back to Butler's definition of gender, it is easy to understand that this reproduction in its immense magnitude has the potential to create its own origin. In this case it would state that «woman» is interior, private and passive, whilst «man» is exterior, public and active.

But if there has never been an original, if it is only repetition that has produced it and made us believe that it was immutable, the original loses its claim to authenticity. And, if finally we reproduce an original that is not one, then the whole construction collapses like a house of cards.

Now having established that gender-construction is not about the original, but about the reproduction of imagery and behavior, we realize how powerful the act of reproduction actually is. An interesting approach to understand the power of reproduction is Nietzsche's definition of truth:

«What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions - they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force.» [9]

If we replaced «truth» with «gender», we would be led back to Judith Butler's definition of gender. A myth, which by dint of repetition, has become part of our customs and engraved itself in our common narrative. Even though it is always adapting to our society, it sits so deep, that we mistake it for the only truth and reverse its construction, as if the furrows had always been present. As if the only possibility for the human being was to follow the path that appeared under their feet.

There are most certainly some, who would understand this brief history as a proof of what they believed all along. Namely, that the fact that all of these different cultures and societies throughout time stuck with the same basic understanding of what man/woman is, proves that it is a natural thing and that feminist discourse is misleading and unnatural.

From our point of view that would be the wrong conclusion to make, because it ignores one very central tool of control, that society has been using to control its citizens ever since the Greeks (and even before that): it is called moral standards. And it's as black and white as the basic understanding of gender mentioned above. The arbitrary choice to include some models rather than others, marks the difference between the natural laws of possibilities and the cultural laws of acceptance.

«How can we distinguish what is biologically determined from what people merely try to justify through biological myths? A good rule of thumb is ‹Biology enables, Culture forbids›. Biology is willing to tolerate a very wide

spectrum of possibilities. It's culture that obliges people to realize some possibilities while forbidding others. Biology enables women to have children — some cultures oblige women to realize this possibility. Biology enables men to enjoy sex with one another — some cultures forbid them to realize this possibility. Culture tends to argue that it forbids only that which is unnatural. But from a biological perspective, nothing is unnatural. Whatever is possible is by definition also natural. A truly unnatural behavior, one that goes against the laws of nature, simply cannot exist.» [10]

It is the controlling power of morality in society that helps to keep in place such repetition. And the impossibility of not being seen as «wrong» when daring to disregard the common understanding, the behavior assigned to an individual due to their gender, is not to be underestimated in its weight on somebody's decision making. It can be much easier to reproduce. This repetition, often unconsciously carried on, is explained by Durkheim's definition of the social fact: «A social fact is any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint; or: which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations.» [11] These social facts have a strong influence on the repletion of stereotypes, and this is where we realize it is not only the control exerted by others, which makes us reproduce stereotypes: We are so deeply compromised by these models that we have internalized them. Individuals reproduce what is expected of them. This was the subject of a social psychology study, led by Isabelle Regner and Pascal Huguet, where the same assignment was better performed by girls when presented as a drawing exercise, but the boys outperformed the girls when the same exercise was presented as a geometry test. [12]

This same thing is found even in a child's choice of color. Pink for little girls. They would choose it on their own, almost as if it were written in their genes. But it is not instinctive. Until the 18th century, white was attributed to all children, and in the Middle Ages, pink was the color of predilection for little boys, symbol of vigor and virility. The color blue, considered more delicate, was attributed to girls in reference to the Virgin Mary.

This shows to what extent social constructions such as gender stereotypes are powerful and with that, we slowly grasp the enormous effort it takes to deconstruct them. If children's color preferences have been reproduced in terms of pink for girls and blue for boys, only for a few centuries and have still achieved to become such a fixed idea, just imagine what effort would be needed to actually deconstruct the gender stereotypes that have been circling in our societies for much longer than that.

To conclude, we do not deny the social reality of gender, the fact that our societies have been built around it or that individuals are built around it. Too numerous are the discriminations based on stereotypes. But if it does not have the «original» reality it is responsible for, then these gender roles are not inevitable. They are not an original from which one could not depart. They are a social fact, an element of morality, built through our societies, which is not intrinsic to us.

This leaves the possibility of change. A change that will have to undergo social inertia and in which time, but above all repetition, is an important element. If this repetition is interrupted, or if a modification is made to it, then perhaps the idea of the original could also be changed, or disappear all together.