

JULIANA MOREIRA: AN IDEAL TO STRIVE FOR

Isak Jones

The music momentarily fades, giving way to the rumbling of tribal drums as the host and the participants turn their gaze to the tropical-themed balcony. After a second of anticipation, a woman bursts through the curtain's hanging beads, accompanied by ecstatic music, and dances under the flashing lights, sensually swaying her waist from left to right, swirling her busty physique, barely covered by her tight bikini. As the cheers rise, she walks over and lasciviously slides down the pole to the stage, landing on her high heels, never letting go of the camera with her wanton eyes and her tempting smile.

What I am describing is not an elaborate strip club act, or even a risqué Broadway play, but the opening of *Cultura Moderna*, an Italian trivia show from just a decade ago. *Cultura Moderna* aired on one of the most popular Italian TV channels and was aimed at an audience of adults and kids alike. I watched it more than a couple of times as a child, and once again when, for a job, I had to research sexist moments in Italian television. While this intro scene was appalling enough, making me realize instantly why my parents did not want me to watch it, I could hardly call it the show's worst moment. Throughout its broadcast, Juliana Moreira, the 'dancer' previously described, stands still and smiles at the camera in complacent silence, opening her mouth only to give host Teo Mammucari a chance to mock her Brazilian accent or tell her to shut up. As part of a gag the writers evidently found funny, she occasionally tries to seduce the host, who readily dismisses such attempts, his superiority presumably given by his half-buttoned shirt, or his gel-filled curls. In the show, Juliana is reduced to what Adrienne Rich might have called an "[object] of sexual appetite devoid of emotional context, without individual meaning or personality—essentially . . . a sexual commodity to be consumed by males" (Rich 309). Rich's ideas allow us to deconstruct the role and influence of Moreira's image.

In her essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” Adrienne Rich bravely explores how women like Juliana are forced into displaying and accepting heterosexual desire. According to Rich, even in more traditional work environments, a woman’s “job depends on her pretending to be not merely heterosexual, but a heterosexual *woman* in terms of dressing and playing the feminine . . . role required of ‘real’ women” (310). This requirement to perform allows men to enforce “male power” and control in order to maintain “sexual inequality” (306). Rich’s call for action against such performances is as aggressive as it is urgent, thoroughly detailing the subtle and unjust ways in which the patriarchy traps women who merely want to fit into so-called “compulsory heterosexuality” (302).

To Rich, this insistence on “playing” the heterosexual woman is especially problematic because it prevents women from freely expressing their lesbian dispositions. Rich refers not only to homosexual female love, but also to “a range . . . of woman-identified experience,” including “the sharing of a rich inner life” and “the bonding against male tyranny” (313), as shared by “all women” (314). This range of experiences, which she calls the “lesbian continuum,” “allows [women] to connect” with each other (314, 315). While this concept initially may seem strange, Rich establishes it for a specific purpose, allowing for the possibility of a society where women do not have to rely on men, either to be productive in the workplace, or, more simply, to be content.

A representation of such “*femmes seules*” in a community of women-connected existence can be found throughout history in unexpected places (Rich 303). I found one in *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, even though Pablo Picasso—a womanizer whose works are hardly ever seen as progressive—painted it. The canvas depicts five women, all in various degrees of nakedness, as seen through a distorted kaleidoscopic lens that is typical for Picasso. As in many of his other works, the illusion of depth that many paintings strive for is shattered through the fragmentation of the women’s bodies into faded, distorted flesh. The torso of the second woman from the left, for example, could easily be that of a lower, side perspective, but it is connected to a waist, an arm, and a face as seen from the front. The subversion of perspective in the painting deconstructs the physique of

the female body, but it does not go so far as to make it unrecognizable. Sensuality, for example, is not eliminated, and the shards of female bodies do not hide the rosy color of their skin or their voluptuous curves and breasts. The canvas represents actual women, since it depicts every part of the women's bodies, including their sensuality; it just does so in an unconventional manner. Gathered among themselves, the women share their sensuality with each other, seemingly independently of any male participant or observer, whose arousal is offset by the painting's perspectival distortions. Moreover, the women looking at the viewer do not smile or feign any type of heterosexual attraction to any hypothetical male viewer; they almost challenge the male gaze of the artist painting them. In stark contrast to Juliana's wide, seductive smile, the two women at the center stare numbly while showcasing their full breasts, their lips listless, almost as if to ask: *So what?* Images like these, representing a more complex and rich reality of female sexuality, make me realize the sheer absurdity of images such as that of Juliana.

This earnest realization of mine is a testament to people's acceptance of compulsory heterosexuality, and a hint that Juliana amounts to far more than a mere representation. Its dominance is less surprising if, as Rich suggests, heterosexuality is "recognized and studied as a *political institution*," rooted in the maintenance of male power and control (Rich 305). From this political perspective, the effect of heterosexuality may be compared to that of an institution like colonialism. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes how, after physical subjugation, colonizers in Kenya affected the culture of the colonized through language (346). In particular, Ngũgĩ designates the written language in schools as the British colonialists' most powerful instrument of control because it caused "dissociation, divorce, or alienation from the immediate environment" (347). For Ngũgĩ, the "immediate environment" refers to the indigenous Kenyan reality, which was maintained at home through the indigenous language, but deliberately undervalued at school, where European culture was enforced (347). Ngũgĩ argues that the colonizer's physical subjugation was not sufficient for complete economic and political control—instead, it was key to dominate "the mental uni-

verse of the colonized,” their thoughts, in order to dominate their actions, their identities, and their roles in society (346).

This use of language to dominate a people’s culture resonates profoundly with Adrienne Rich, who characterizes visual media, such as hardcore and softcore pornography and advertisements, as an “influence on consciousness” that conditions the mental state of the viewers (309). While pornography and advertisements are not written texts, they communicate through a system of visual signs and symbols to a widespread audience. Moreover, as influencers of consciousness, they affect the way we perceive women, making one consider a “woman who . . . resists sexual overtures in the workplace” as “dried up’ and sexless, or lesbian” (Rich 310). This dissociation extends further, however, and inward, until it is felt in relation to oneself. Rich writes that “indoctrination in male credibility and status can still create synapses in thought, denials of feeling, wishful thinking, a profound sexual and intellectual confusion” (312). In this way, women become confused about their own sexual role in society. Ngũgĩ agrees that such indoctrination can lead to confusions about identity, asserting, “To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (346). Much as the colonizer’s written word alienates Kenyan children from their own culture and surroundings, the saturation of sexualized heterosexual women in visual media alienates women from their own sexuality. This active process of control and alienation suggests that Juliana represents women who are subject to male power just as much as she enforces such power.

However, women are not purely defined by their sexuality. In fact, understanding the issue at hand requires subverting an even more fundamental notion: that of gender. Writer and theorist Paul B. Preciado challenges traditional ideas of gender and sex in his provocative essay, “Technogender.” Following notions of consciousness and self-definition, Preciado explains how gender enables “the production of inner knowledge about oneself, with a sense of sexual self that appears to be an emotional reality evident to consciousness” by modern technology (117). But Preciado notes that this “inner knowledge” can be threatened by modern technologies, which often conflate gender and sex. This idea arises from the way in which intersex babies in the mid-twentieth century received surgeries to physically resemble

female babies, through procedures such as vaginoplasty and hormone substitution therapy (100). According to Preciado, such treatments were not only supposed to physically modify the subjects, but also led them to construct their own subjectivity and identification as female (100). While this is certainly the most striking example of modern technology striving to affect a person's gender, it is not the only one, and is only part of a range of "technologies of gender" (108). Most of these technologies, such as treatment for hirsutism or the contraceptive pill, are biological modifiers (115). Importantly, Preciado considers visual media and entertainment to be similarly harmful to one's sexuality (118). The role of media makes sense if one remembers that the purpose of such technologies "is not hormonal, but political, normalization" (114). Preciado's concern not only echoes Rich's previous claim of visual media as influencers of consciousness, it also radicalizes it, extending the influence from sexual identity to gender identity. According to this new view, visual media, in tandem with the most advanced biological technologies, aim to enforce a certain image of what it is to be a woman, forcing individuals into accepted socio-political categories.

In light of this view of gender, it is important to recognize Preciado's radical differences from Adrienne Rich. In her essay, Rich writes that in overcoming compulsory heterosexuality, "The work that lies ahead, of unearthing and describing what I call here 'lesbian existence,' is potentially liberating for all women" (318). This claim of universal liberation falls apart in the face of Preciado's argument, who states that "feminism functions, or can function, as an instrument of normalization and political control when it reduces its subject to 'women'" (Preciado 107). The danger is that Rich might be perpetuating the same political "normalization" and "control" that she is supposed to be fighting. While Rich challenges compulsory heterosexuality, she is also entrapping individuals into the category of "woman," which might be more of a social construct than an ontological truth.

However, this potential normalization should not take away from the common ground between the two thinkers, and how they can help us understand the images of which Juliana is but an example. On the basis of these texts, Juliana could be seen as enforcing for the viewing population not only a certain ideal of sexuality, but of gender as well.

I have never met a woman who naturally acted and dressed exactly like Juliana, yet, for some odd reason, I can't imagine being too surprised if I did. She is a fiction that has generated real expectations. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard defined the *simulacrum* as the hollow image that precedes the real entity it refers to—in my eyes, Juliana Moreira is the exemplary female heterosexual simulacrum.

Moreira was not the only woman on Italian television to perform this role. Indeed, she was far from alone, a mere copy of an image that had long been normalized. The medium was flooded with smiling half-naked women in shows that had absolutely nothing to do with them, used as a marketing ploy to lure in a wider audience, including fathers who could enjoy the softcore-pornographic appeal while providing fun for the whole family. Inevitably, these images instilled in children of Italian families ideas about what it means to be a woman, influencing expectations for boys and girls alike. The consequences of this normalization have affected everyone I know who grew up in Italy during that time. This includes an old coworker, Benedetta, an accomplished Italian journalist who regularly tours in the Middle East to film documentaries on some of the bloodiest ongoing wars. “At least we got rid of her, the bitch,” she told me when I mentioned that Juliana had left the newest edition of the show. As I watched Benedetta’s tired eyes flip through hundreds of Italian television clips, all featuring audiences cheering to tightly-clad bombshells and racy jokes, I could not help but wonder about her own hardship, about growing up in a country where seductive, sexualized women were offered as an ideal to strive for.

WORKS CITED

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. “from *Decolonizing the Mind*.” *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 340-349.
- Picasso, Pablo. *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. 1907)*. 1907, oil on canvas, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

- Preciado, Paul B. "Technogender." *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, Feminist Press, 2013, pp. 99-129.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *The Broadview Anthology of Expository Prose*, edited by Laura Buzzard et al., 3rd ed., Broadview Press, 2016, pp. 301-319.
- Ricci, Antonio, creator. *Cultura Moderna*. Canale 5, 2006.