

Gender Rituals

Robin Yerlès — Spring 2020

“Traditional people and, I think, people of the Paleolithic had very probably some... two concepts which change our vision of the world. They’re the concept of fluidity and the concept of permeability. Fluidity means that the categories that we have... Man, woman, horse, I don’t know, tree, et cetera... Can shift. A tree may speak. A man can get transformed into an animal and the other way around, given certain circumstances. The concept of permeability is that there are no barriers, so to speak, between the world where we are and the world of the spirits. A wall can talk to us, or a wall can accept us or refuse us. A shaman, for example, can send his or her spirit to the world of the supernatural or can receive the visit, inside him or her, of supernatural spirits. If you put those two concepts together, you realize how different life must have been for those people from the way we live now. Humans have been described in many ways, right? And for a while, it was Homo sapiens and is still called Homo sapiens, ‘the man who knows.’ I don’t think it’s a good definition at all. We don’t know... We don’t know much.”

Jean Clottes¹

“We are responsible for the world within which we live, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing, but because it is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping.”

Karen Barad²

¹ French prehistorian, interviewed in *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* by Werner Herzog

² Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, p.203

Introduction: the malleable real

Every smoker should one day find a good acid to live the experience of the ritual of the cigarette through the gaze of the little primitive being that slumbers in him, thus revealing in all its power the shamanic significance of this operation.

Of course, there will undoubtedly be the moment when, curled up like a miserly homunculus in search of the necessary material, the smoker will have to go through the acceptance stage of his addiction, letting himself be guided by his guilty desire to compromise the purity of the healthy air that generously penetrates his body with each of his puffs. Thus, passing over his air of a scavenger snooping the depths of a corpse in the moonlight, the ceremony can be set up so that it can begin in all its spectacular glory.

The first gesture is to grab the pack of rolling papers, a pocket monolith unfolding like the most precious of grimoires. From fingertips, the shiny sheet of paper slips out of the slit in a subtle, oily undulation, just as Masamune's soft, pure blade crosses the river stream in the legend of the two swords.

The opening of the tobacco packet is also a plunge into a miniature world, when the two universes suddenly come face to face and penetrate each other, the big outside and the pocket of matter, releasing its fragrance that spreads through the ripples of the air currents.

Then comes the most hilarious, the most danced, the most carnivalesque and the most baroque step: Once the skin has come into contact with the moist softness of tobacco, when the smoker has slipped the precious lump of material into his reed, will it be a question of facing the famous rodeo of wild and indomitable hair, escaping from all sides of the structure like the thousand legs of a laughing horse, wild spaghettis which will nevertheless let themselves be snuggled up in the tender cocoon that the smoker has concocted for them.

The smoker's mind will then burst with a lightning realization. The apparition of the totem which suddenly rises between his fingers, indicates the entry into the territory of the real of the most exalted element, the most phenomenal that can manifest itself: fire, the absolute antithesis of the freshness of the night whose control strengthens the smoker of a volcanic force. Each human carries within him the ancestral memory of the acquisition of this mystical power, in this respect there is no more venerable

gesture than taking a lighter out of one's pocket.

The wacky sparks of the lighter enter into a trance with the wicks of the stick of flames. A ball of fire then forms, which suddenly aspires the smoker into a spatial black hole making him reappear by propulsion in a cosmic scale as he finds himself face to face with the glowing sun, as if he himself had for a moment borrowed the gaze of a galaxy.

The incandescent star palpitates before his amazed eyes, while the tunnel between the flaming star and the smoker's throat fills with a heavy, intoxicating mist like the toxic kiss of a mermaid with a poisonous tongue. It is the penetrating rise of the substance, which passes in an instant from the mouth to the smoker's lungs, irrigating in a frantic race all his blood channels until it reaches the synaptic receptors of his dopaminergic neurons which flash and finally explode in a crash of cartoonesque onomatopoeia. A masterful wave of excitement will then overcome him, accompanied by the polytonal scream of a trumpet hurdle turned towards the universe, the miraculous orgasm of nicotine having fulfilled its final destiny.

Transported by his senses, fascinated by the event, the smoker will then observe the accelerated life of the meteor piercing the canal of his lips, pushing its burning veins into the diaphanous furrows of the paper until its heat finally, calmly, runs out in a furnace of volutes dispersing towards infinite space. With tenderness, the smoker will then slumber the soothed fire, offering it rest in the bowels of the ground where it will hide until its next celestial appearance.

What is remarkable about this psychedelic experience is that it brings to light the fascinating scope of a ritual tirelessly repeated by the nicotine addict, scope that is imperceptible when it vanishes into the busy daily life of contemporary man, essentially disconnected from his body and his sensations. If there is indeed a virtue in the experience of a drug such as LSD, it is in this revelation of the unconscious processes that permeate us in each of our actions, without us being able to pay attention to them as we are plunged into the rational torments of modernity. The intensity of this experience resonates with Michel Foucault's thought that drugs can and should be a part of our cultural and political experimentation¹.

While the experience of a cigarette only primarily concerns the smoker in his solitude, there are other rituals with a more social dimension that can be revealed by the temporary lifting of cultural presumptions caused by the absorption of psychedelic mole-

1. *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews*, Edited by Sylvère Lotringer, p.384

cules. For example, the tendency of adolescents to let themselves plunge into cannabis addiction can be partly explained by the ritualistic intensity summoned during its use.

My first hallucinations, at the age of fifteen, occurred after taking a large dose of cannabis. I remember having mentally projected myself into a kind of chivalric brotherhood, the ritual of the passage of the bong¹ inscribing itself in my psyche as a profoundly significant event, a rite of passage. Sitting in a circle like Indians passing the calumet, the bravado of family and societal prohibitions gave me the feeling of belonging to a secret society, of accessing the mysteries of a new social order built around the heady volutes of the weed. Once again, there is a call to something ancestral, a form of human connection, which stimulates a psychic desire buried in the depths of the body's memory. In fact, it is not so difficult to imagine the first prehistoric men spinning a joint around the fire in their cave², just as a bunch of teenagers would do today around their bluetooth speaker.

I therefore insist here on the postulate that certain forms of ritualized sociability have a psychic significance that is interesting to study in order to understand the complexity of their gears and their anchoring in our human relationships. A large part of the information that reaches our brain disappears behind the mask of our habits. Overcoming the tyranny of the familiar is no easy task, it is thus a matter of identifying which of these rituals we would like to study in order to improve our lives, and analysing them in all their perceptual complexity, just as quitting cigarettes cannot be reduced to a simple fight against nicotine addiction, but rather to the realisation of all the social codes and sensory phenomena that govern its absorption.

Gender rituals and their daily impact on the psyche of individuals are an important subject of study in order to approach individual well-being and a more egalitarian society. Indeed, it is nowadays demonstrated by many researchers³ that the psychological structure of gender relations is at the origin of profound failures of the social order⁴. In this paper, I will present my own observations based on my lived experience of de-

1. Water pipe used for marijuana consumption.

2. It should be noted that prehistoric men most likely did not live in caves. Like the image of the Indians passing around their calumet, these are imaginary references that are culturally situated in the author's contemporary and Eurocentric prism, and do not attribute any historical truth to them.

3. I make this statement based on my study of the research in psychology conducted by Carol Gilligan and Naomi Snider, the work of sociologist R.W. Connell, and the philosophers Judith Butler, Donna Haraway and Karen Barad.

4. It is also interesting to draw a parallel between the established presence of these psychological mechanisms and the domination of the capitalist economic system in our contemporary societies, these two value regimes nourishing each other through certain common logics.

constructing gender. I will therefore focus primarily on the question of patriarchal or hetero-normative masculinity, since this is the embodied position from which this research has developed.

Thus, let's go back to my last acid trip and what followed the cigarette episode. While I was finishing to marvel at my fiery adventure, my lover who accompanied me on this trip let herself float in the open sky, having then transformed herself into a star sower. Standing on top of a mound, she manipulated her twig like a magic wand while I watched her silhouette stand out in the lunar light.

I seemed to notice that she was trembling. In anguish, I put my jacket on her shoulders. I tried to ask her if she felt the cold, if we should not warm up; she was unable to speak at all, for she was lost in her starry world. Scared, I kept telling her, "E., you are cold, you must move, dance with me, warm yourself, please!" "In vain. As her little teeth chattered, I kept trying to warm her up in every way I could.

I understood later on that it was the episode of the cigarette that had led her to close in on herself, cutting off all forms of communication between us. What I had experienced as a transcendental experience, she understood as a distancing, a rejection. The journey that we had shared until then in complicity had suddenly stopped when I pushed her out of my intimate space with a barrage of smoke.

I then realized something disturbing. As I watched her shivering body, I could not help but find her so beautiful, in her sadness and fragility, lost in the cosmos. I could sense the ambivalence of the situation. Why, at that very moment, was my fascination for her image resurfacing whereas the urgency was rather to concern myself with her well-being? Was I experiencing the seduction of a performative gender ritual that let me embody the role of the male protector, and, even worse, by constantly repeating to her that she was cold, wasn't I myself constructing this fragility in accordance with the cultural codes of femininity?

In my language confused by fatigue and drugs, I still managed to express my concern: "E., I am afraid of losing myself in the beauty of your sadness". I am afraid to let myself be seduced by your fragility, since it offers me the comfort of being in the role of the protector, of the strongest, a role that was assigned to me from birth when my organism was integrated into the binary epistemological framework of gender imposed today and implemented by Western medicine¹. In the same way, I am afraid that you

1. Paul B. Preciado, *Le prix de votre normalité sexuelle est notre « intersexualicide »* in *Libération*, june 2nd

lock yourself up in the role of the weakest, that you let yourself suffer, because my gaze and my desire codify some of your social attitudes. I'm afraid that you won't be able to speak, because the construction of femininity under a patriarchal regime requires the silence of your own voice¹.

Indeed, through their fieldwork with children, researchers Carol Gilligan and Naomi Snider have shown that the initiation into the gendered roles of patriarchy subverts the ability to repair relational ruptures by enjoining men to separate their minds from their emotions (thus not to think what they are feeling) and women to remain silent (thus not to say what they know)². I then recalled the Walt Disney movies that make up our common cultural baggage, the passive princesses and the princes charming saviors. I recalled the distance I established so many times with women who were trying to build a form of intimacy with me. My female friends who had been told that they were not mysterious enough to attract. The countless times I made women cry even though I loved them with all my heart.

Of course, I was still completely high. Not being able to rely on my senses complicated the situation somewhat, at the same time as it opened up new avenues of reflection. At this point I asked myself the following question: is she really shaking, is she really cold or am I just hallucinating it? And, if so, is this not a consequence of my masculinity trying to reconcile reality with its preconceptions? Thus, would it be possible that the mirage of gender essentialism is literally manifesting itself through the hallucination of its structural codes, in the same way that certain mechanisms of masculine domination occur in an unconscious manner?

Sometimes what is believed to be a physical and direct perception is only a mythical and sophisticated construction. Gender, in the cultural sense, is only an imaginary formation, a construction of the mind³. Once again, LSD allowed me to question my entire existence by revealing so obviously the malleability of reality. If I hallucinate totally and absolutely unquestionably by simply swallowing a small piece of paper, can't I hallucinate according to the same principle by repeatedly ingesting the principles of gender hegemony since my earliest childhood?

In view of this experience, it is not so difficult to conceive that our daily life is populated

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1. "When it comes to silencing women, western culture has had thousands of years of practice" (Mary Beard, *Women & Power*)

2. Carol Gilligan and Naomi Snider, *Why does patriarchy persist?*, p.13

3. Monique Wittig, *One Is Not Born a Woman*, p.48

by hallucinations that maintain us in the illusion of the ideological constructions that dominate our sociability. Everyone constructs his own reality as best he can, with a concern for comprehension necessary for his proper functioning. Within this framework, normative gender schemes offer us a simplification of reality that is easy to cling to.

Deconstruction as *art de vivre*

It is here that art takes on its full meaning, and that the artist has a duty of prior emancipation before any act of creation. Because to create is above all to widen the field of possibilities. Creative art produces a new sociability, because it must be understood, as Deleuze says, as an *experiment*. The writer is a surveyor, the philosopher a cartographer: both extract new visibilities from the social body¹. Their work therefore requires a certain distancing from the dominant cultural codes.

It should be noted here that it is not a question of distinguishing between the work of artists, philosophers or other actors in society. I'm talking here about the art of living, thinking of Joseph Beuys' famous formula, "*everyone is an artist*". We must even make a clear distinction between pure artistic creation, which necessarily incorporates an ethical dimension, and cultural production, which merely provides structural support for the normative principles that govern society. Artistic creation is therefore an insurrection against the established order of culture. As Paul Audi wrote in his *Discourse on the Current Legitimization of the Artist*, art never makes the apology of society, culture always does². Another formula, that of the sculptor Carl André, sums up the posture of the artist in times of cultural hegemony: "*Art is what we do; culture is what is done to us*".

Freedom is not a choice, it is an invention³. Faced with the rituals of normality, the challenge for everyone consists in unmasking their mechanisms in order to develop other modalities of expression and sociability. It is a fight for imagination, an opening that can only be achieved by becoming aware of the cultural automatisms that we reproduce. Creation (of the self, philosophical or of works of art) therefore involves a struggle against ignorance, this being the ethical basis of all existence. To paraphrase good old Spinoza—as far as human things are concerned, the essential thing is to understand.

Of course, we must not lose sight of the need for a political struggle which, beyond

1. Anne Sauvagnargues, *Art mineur - Art majeur: Gilles Deleuze*, p.129

2. Paul Audi, *Discours sur la légitimation actuelle de l'artiste*, p. 53

3. Brian Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy*, p.54

an individual approach to the emancipation of norms, establishes through a collective project the possibility of a new world. In the end, deconstruction is only ever a form of self-learning, it is not intended to change the world. It is simply a process that is preliminary to any conscious politicized reflection and action: caring of the self is the prerequisite for caring of the other. One is never completely freed from modern Western ideology; the challenge is to confront it with sufficient detachment. In short, we are not dealing here with politics, but with deconstruction based on the study of different modes of experiencing reality. Although it resonates with societal issues, this work builds itself on a completely different field of action and through a completely different research methodology that could be described as semio-materialist¹.

It is easy to draw an analogy between the wave of privatization that characterizes our neoliberal era and the privatization of the heart of the human being, the erasing of the sense of a shared destiny and the weakening of the social bond. Empathy and openness are values to be defended at a time when withdrawal into oneself and the various forms of division and social exclusion are jeopardizing the future of our ecosystem. It is by creating open and inclusive spaces for exchange, by sharing our experiences, by developing common languages and narratives, that we may be able to reverse this trend. The urgency is to get out of our echo chambers and denounce the gross simplifications, narrative tricks and lies that make the bed of the most necrophagous policies. In particular, the challenges related to our techno-mediated sociability will be decisive for the future of our democratic societies and of humanity as a whole, but this will not be the topic of this text².

Another obvious analogy of the deconstruction of social norms is offered to us by the practice of individual conscientization of marketing methods influencing our experience and attitudes as consumers. Why is a product sold at this price, why does this advertising appear at this time of the year... Apart from those who do not commit themselves to it or who do so little, there are those who have the privilege of being able to think about it, and those who have the privilege of not having to think about it. In any case, it is a code underlying the experience of reality, which like social norms is inscribed in relationships of power and domination and can be analysed, discussed and debated, since it brings us together in its permeability to society.

1. This methodology explores how social practices can be mapped in relations that are simultaneously material (between things) and semiotic (between concepts). For a precise development of this approach, see *Material Semiotics* by John Law.

2. There is an abundance of publications on this subject, notably the followings: *The Power at the End of the Economy* by Brian Massumi, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* by Shoshana Zuboff and *Digital Materialism: Origins, Philosophies, Prospects* by Baruch Gottlieb.

It is by selecting specific areas of focus or by choosing to emphasize certain things over others, by identifying and highlighting particular points of intervention and not others, that we make ethical choices continuously, moment by moment, throughout the research we conduct¹. By creating opportunities for particular worlds to emerge and not for others. It is in this way that deconstruction, understood as *art de vivre*, always engages us in ethical work².

Gender rituals: selected study cases

What are these modes of experience of reality that constitute the possible grounds for deconstruction? Three options can be distinguished. For the first one, this involves social situations that find their insertion in everyday life, in the ordinary life of the researcher in deconstruction. For this, it is necessary to find codified spaces with conditions close to an experimental framework. Ideally it will be a closed socio-material terrain, with a limited number of elements. Home, work or leisure constitute privileged spaces for this type of research. I will use the example of a singular case of confinement in cohabitation that I have lived through to illustrate this type of situation and expose the gender rituals that were revealed during this experience.

For the second, it is a matter of breaking out of one's habits by developing experiences of new sociability. This method combines the contributions of a scientific approach of observation of a given field as well as those of a subjective experience in self-reflection. I will refer here to an experimental framework set up in spring 2019 in Brussels' public space, which has enabled me to make a number of observations related to gender rituals in this highly codified territory that is urban space.

Finally, for the third, we will examine how these performative rituals fit into social spaces constituted around another socially recurrent ritual. Collective procedures such as celebrations, legislations or competitions can then constitute adequate terrains. I will focus here on the socio-material and semiotic space of chess, a game with a millenary history and a sporting discipline today eminently concerned by gender imbalances. As a bonus, and to finish on a spicy note, I will add a short reflection related

1. "Learning to know is learning to discriminate, learning to recognize what matters, learning how differences matter, and learning it in the risks and effects of the encounter, that is, connecting with the inherent multiplicity of what matters to those beings we want to know and what they make matter. It's an art of consequence." (Isabelle Stengers, *Civiliser la modernité? Whitehead et les ruminations du sens commun*, pp. 135-138).

2. When Methods Meet, *Socio-material approaches: Actor-network theory and Karen Barad's diffractive methodology* (<https://www.sgsss.ac.uk/methods-resource/socio-material-approaches/>)

to sexuality, a codified gendered space par excellence and mostly dominated by the mechanisms of heteronormativity. For this I will look at the question of the female orgasm in a heterosexual setting and from the masculine point of view.

In approaching these different real-life cases, I will try not to omit the sensorial, somatic and psychological scope of these social phenomena, which beyond their inter-individual mechanisms, contain keys of comprehension buried within the individuals themselves. In a culture that values the separation between reason and emotion, coupled with an educational system that promotes the separation between thoughts and feelings, distinguishing our body consciousness from our intellectual brain is an act or process associated with the idea of growing up¹. Conversely, since we live, think, and act through our bodies, their study, care, and refinement should be at the heart of this critical work of deconstruction.

A final word about the specificity of this methodological proposition. Deconstruction can only take place through a dynamic process in which the idea of a persistent rational subject would be an obstacle to the proper development of its practice. The illusion of a fixed identity is a constraint from which one must extricate oneself in order to be able to approach social reality in all its complexity. In the context of a work of deconstruction, the inseparability, emergence and co-constitution of the object of observation and the observer impose a work consisting of the gradual implementation of the qualitative changes resulting from the conclusions obtained. It is therefore characterized by a constant questioning of its own practitioner.

Thus, to develop this work, it is essential to understand gender rituals as phenomena that integrate in their complexity the mechanisms (temporalities and displacements) of observation (material) and understanding (discursive) deployed following or in parallel to their concretization. The way in which they “perform” or “create” a world—in other words, a social reality—is not limited to that particular event but also depends on their recognition and formulation in a given social field, thus the study and analysis of the ritual is an integral part of the phenomenon we are trying to understand and deconstruct.

In this framework, a condition of deconstruction as a production of knowledge is that one refers to a phenomenon, and not to an object independent of its observation. Since it is a question of deconstructing social phenomena, we ourselves are instruments of observation. Thus, the challenge of deconstruction, particularly when it is part of a col-

1. Carol Gilligan and Naomi Snider, *Why does patriarchy persist?*, p.36

lective dynamic, is to develop observation practices. To create a new world, we must first invent a new way of looking at things. Referring again to the allegory of marketing, it is for example, instead of saying “I buy this product because it is cheap”, to say “I am being convinced by a price and not by a product”.

What I am proposing here with this conceptual interpretation of deconstruction is a framework and a *modus operandi* that does not require extensive prior knowledge to be initiated. Indeed, I will assert here that everyone is already practicing it at different levels and towards different points of focus. In a given situation, the best tool is the one you have and are able to use. The purpose of this text is therefore simply to make explicit an already common practice and to share some of my own experimentations for the purpose of further opening.

First case study: confinement

In Spring 2020, the populations of the world, hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, saw their social habits suddenly disrupted by the measures put in place to contain the epidemic. With nearly four billion human beings in deliberate or forced confinement, this episode constitutes to date the largest calibration experiment of the social order in human history.

For many people in Western countries, especially among the youngest, it was also the first time they had to face a situation that profoundly shook the society in which they lived. The embarrassing panic over toilet paper only revealed the clumsiness and naivety of whole sections of the Western population in the face of this crisis. For some, this historical episode nevertheless marks an opportunity to question certain aspects of their existence, whether it be their dependence on production and distribution systems, the types of fields and social relations in which they evolve, or their critical relationship with their methods and sources of information.

As the central nerve of a confined person’s daily life, the household is a fertile terrain for such questioning. In times of crisis, we tend to take refuge behind the material and psychological ramparts that offer us, if not protection, at least the illusion of protecting us from external elements that may put us in danger, whether that danger is actually real or fantasized. The boundary of the home is thus one of those barriers that we tend to consolidate and defend, in the same way as national borders or the limits of our bodies.

My confinement, opportunely, gave me the chance to observe a quasi textbook case of gender relations, since I found myself spending several weeks with as my only physical social relations, a cis-gender man¹ (J.) with whom I had a friendship relationship, and a woman also cis-gender (E.) with whom I had a love relationship. Indeed, while we had been living together for over a year, J. agreed to welcome into our home E. who had become homeless due to the repercussions of the pandemic.

This constellation had a number of advantages for experimental observational work. For one thing, since it was a novel configuration, the developments in this situation were unknown to me, so I observed with redoubled curiosity the changes that took place during this period of collective confinement. Moreover, the promiscuity induced by this singular situation could only exacerbate and thus make more visible the mechanisms governing the human relationships of our trio.

Finally, the fact that I was the only one to focus on the issue of gender relations gave me a privileged observer's posture, a bit like the Strip-Tease² journalists found themselves immersed in an unfiltered reality by letting the presence of the camera fade from the consciousness of the people being filmed. I therefore adopted a kind of latent attention close to the posture of a psychoanalyst, allowing me to highlight the significant markers without disturbing the experimental apparatus too much by focusing too much.

At first, the arrival of E. in our home was welcomed as an appreciated addition to the duo initially formed by J. and myself. The anxiety of the destabilization that this new element could have caused in the precarious balance of our small community was replaced by the joy of welcoming an additional member. However, I quickly observed changes in J.'s attitudes which alerted me to the gender dynamics that were going to take hold in our home.

At first, I observed from J. a certain form of distance towards E.. At first, I understood this distance as a period of adaptation necessary for the new balance of our home. J. somehow embodying the archetype of an independent and strong masculinity, kind of farouche bear-like, this appeared to me simply as a phase allowing him to tame the situation. Furthermore, J. having expressed his will to leave some space for us to reunite

1. A cis-gender individual is an individual whose perceived gender corresponds to his or her biological sex assigned at birth.

2. Belgian documentary television programme created in 1985, developing a cinematic language close to an anthropological viewpoint. According to its creators, its aim is to deal with subjects "caught in the facts of society".

with E., I didn't worry too much about this situation.

Quickly enough, however, I had the impression that this distance revealed something more deeply rooted. That it was not a circumstantial pattern, but a recurring motif that could be explained by the gendered nature of our relationship. I was then able to formulate this hypothesis: that by marking his distance from E., J. was probably trying to point out to me the absence of any sort of dueling between us, the fact that I didn't have to worry about his rivalry with regard to E. By excluding the possibility of a form of competition between us, it was as if he was tracing the limits of our respective territories.

In a regime of possessiveness such as patriarchal heterosexuality, built around the norm of exclusive monogamy, men are often anxious to show signs of affection towards the partner of one of their relatives. They will therefore prefer to pretend that she does not exist. This is one of the mechanisms by which, for example, men often prefer to address the man when they interact with a heterosexual couple. Not only is the woman reduced to the status of an object, but an object belonging to someone else. By acting as if this object did not exist, the man signifies the fact that he is not trying to appropriate what he considers to be the property of another.

In the case of J., it was probably first and foremost a conscious attitude of withdrawal in order to leave us a maximum of intimacy with E., but this gendered awkwardness nevertheless implied that a certain period of time elapsed before a form of peaceful cohabitation between J. and E. was established. However, it is only afterwards that the events proved to be most instructive.

What characterizes the experience of living in confinement is the isolation that this restriction brings with it on a daily basis. In this case, the most destabilizing fact was to have to accept this almost total absence of social stimulation. Apart from the few faces that populated our supply expeditions, we were truly withdrawn into ourselves, shipwrecked and lost in the middle of the desert caused by the pandemic.

Disoriented, our psyches found themselves faced with a void that they could only fill by using our imaginations. Thus, at the beginning of our confinement, we had the opportunity to amuse ourselves one morning with J. because we had both experienced erotic dreams of people we met during a virtual class or meeting, as if these pixelated icons were now the only ones able to feed our needs for fantasy and projections. In the same way, the closed-door nature of our trio was conducive to the repetition of gen-

dered social patterns that would have usually unfolded in wider circles.

After this first period of adaptation, I observed a significant change in the relationship between J. and E., a change that I understood first of all as a kind of relaxation, signaling that each of us had finally found our feet in the small group that we were composing. Indeed, their relationship suddenly seemed to me to be quite relaxed, and I was pleased to observe their budding complicity.

Nonetheless, I realized that there were clues that could indicate the reinscription of gendered patterns in our confinement relationships. One evening, while the three of us were usually eating together but without formalities, E. and I decided to invite J. to join us for dinner in our private space, and to celebrate the moment by dressing more elegantly than what the confinement had reduced us to in terms of fashion nonchalance. We had chosen a soundtrack, placed a candle on the table, E. had put on makeup. In short, this event was a kind of small escapade out of the routine of our cohabitation.

On this occasion, I watched J. express a set of attitudes that he didn't seem to have adopted since the beginning of the confinement; as if he suddenly embodied a new character. His manners were all of a sudden more playful, his words more mischievous. Even his body language differed from the other conversations we had shared that day: the bust lifted and the shoulders back, the hands more playful, his expressiveness surprisingly belonged to a completely different register. Thus I had the impression that the fact that he was somehow "out" of his home led J. to recover the role of the charming man he would have played or "performed" during a social event.

In fact, J., a young man with an otherwise very pleasant presence, suddenly became particularly charming. This charm manifested itself in a relatively targeted way: I observed with curiosity how his attitudes towards E. became softer, more attentive. His usually uneven listening ability suddenly seemed flawless, and his way of showing his zest for the conversation with E. or of acquiescing to her words seemed to me to be clearly out of the ordinary.

The phenomenon was particularly remarkable because of the one-sided dimension of its address. Towards me, his attitude had not become more positive, and I observed on the contrary a greater propensity to conflict in the discourse; asserting his ideas in a trenchant way and cutting off debate, he appeared to me as particularly self-confident. Boosted by his position in the gendered schema we were forming, he was displaying the signs of the young rooster ready to fight.

I was also troubled by E.'s reaction to this manifest change in attitude. She did not seem at all disturbed and appeared to be enjoying a pleasant evening in the company of J. and myself. Gradually, I had the impression that she too had become a character, lightweight in her words and fleeting in her looks. Fueled by J.'s new attention, she began to address us with playful smirks, shining brightly in her bursts of laughter.

Unable to assert it with certainty, I nevertheless had the feeling that she embodied the codes of femininity more forcefully than usual, particularly in a form of passive receptivity to the signals sent by J., the latter leading the dance by occupying the majority of the speaking time. This situation left me relatively circumspect. In fact, it was almost out of the question for E. and J. to be consciously engaged in a relationship of seduction, even though the little scene I was watching looked very much like a courteous love play, with J. as a valiant knight actively courting E., restricted to the passive role of the damsel making sweet eyes at him.

I then asked myself the following question: am I myself putting myself back into a competitive pattern, fed by the latent paranoia induced by the pandemic? Perhaps J. is simply happy to share this dinner with us, and expresses his joy in a different way to the words of E. and mine; perhaps I am simply in a bad mood, and my words less conducive to cheerfulness. Likewise, maybe E. always acts that way, and by focusing on gender I end up seeing it appear everywhere.

Later, when I asked E. about this, she told me that she hadn't noticed any change in her relationship with J. Was she used to "play" the girl without realizing it? Or was it an unconscious way for her to tilt the power relationship that could exist between her and me, especially since she was at that time dependent on me welcoming her into my home? Moreover, could the scarlet lipstick worn by E. explain in part the change in J.'s behaviour, or the change in E.'s behaviour in anticipation of the male gaze on her?

What is apparent in this story is probably my own paranoia intensified by my focus on the issue of gender relations. But also, it is perhaps the fact that the roles we assign to ourselves in gender rituals constitute landmarks in our sociability that we easily give in unconsciously. In fact, I don't think there was any construction of a sexual tension between J. and E., but simply that finding oneself in normative gendered social patterns was a kind of reassuring landmark in this period of anxiety and emotional instability. I, Myself, through the jealousy-tinged irritability I displayed during this event, was merely replaying a constitutive scenario of the normalized image one has of a couple.

We are also touching here on one of the limits of the work of deconstruction: by playing the psychologist's apprentice, we can very often delude ourselves in analyses that will only accentuate the illusions in which we can be lulled into, assured that we have seen right where social relations are often the result of non-intuitive mechanisms or a degree of complexity inaccessible to human understanding. I will therefore insist on the fact that this type of reflective work can only be imagined in conjunction with a sharing of observations and perceptions, and that it is only in a form of open communication that progress in terms of collective functioning can take place.

Second case study: urban space

“The internalization of this enclosure is effected by positive training and also by negative training. The first kind goes thus: ‘Your place is here, you are the queen of the house, the magician in the bed, the irreplaceable mother. Your²⁷ children will become autistic, psychotic, idiots, homosexual, failures, if you don’t stay at home, if you are not there when they come home, if you don’t breastfeed them until they are three months, six months, three years old, etc.’. In brief, you are the only one who can do all this; you are irreplaceable (most of all, by a male). The second kind of training goes something like this: ‘If you go out, other guys like me will pursue you until you give in, will threaten you, will make your life impossible and exhausting in a thousand ways. You have permission (it is an order) to go to the grocery, the school, the market, the town hall, and down the main street where the shops are. And you may go there between seven o’clock in the morning and seven o’clock in the evening. That’s all. If you do anything else, you’ll be punished in one way or another, and in any case I forbid it for your safety and my peace of mind”

Colette Guillaumin¹

In my artistic work, one of my research axes is the development of situations that create stories and open up new forms of sociability. Thus, I have developed a performative practice that consists of perching myself in the trees of the city. This simple apparatus, in addition to the poetic image it conveys, offers me the possibility of embodying a singular character in the theatre of the urban space, a vector of encounters freed from any relationship of power or production, evocative of apertures tending towards the imaginary. In fact, this posture offers an essential quality to a work of observation. Because of the novelty of this presence, not fitting into any box and bearing no label except that

1. Colette Guillaumin, *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir*, p.40

of a sweet artistic madness, I incarnate an external, innocent and accessible actor, offering me a privileged access to the social mechanisms that characterize a place.

Another factor that also facilitates a work of observation is the spatial singularity of this high perched position. In addition to the vertical shift from our usual view of the street, being in a tree all day focuses my attention on a reduced universe: from my unique observation post, reality stops with my field of vision. Behind the street corner, it is no longer part of my world. This restriction makes it easier to focus on a precise field of study and brings a particularly situated value to my observations.

I will evoke here one of these interventions, the first one, which took place in spring 2019 in the Anneessens district of Brussels. In an surprising public space, wedged between a small street and housing towers, I found a tree that became my shelter for the whole month of May. There I forged many links and had rich encounters, which allowed me to gradually draw the human landscape of this small corner of a popular district. I will share here my observations related to gender and the way it was ritualized before my eyes during this period.

My first and most striking observation concerns the significant disparity in terms of occupation of public space between men and women. This can partly be explained by the fact that the jobs carried out in the street involve a majority of men: construction workers and technicians, delivery men, garbage collectors, policemen, grocers and shopkeepers, plumbers, sweepers, pruners, gardeners... these are exclusively male-dominated professions. Other actors present in the urban space, the homeless are also overwhelmingly men. All this leads to an occupation of public space that is imbued with masculine codes, shared by men among themselves, which then fragilizes women's incursion into a territory experienced as foreign.

A ritual particularly evocative of this dynamic, as an activity with no other purpose than simply to mark the presence, is that of the men, generally young, who devote themselves to turning around in the neighbourhood. On many occasions, I have observed cars going around the block several times, loaded with men calling out to passers-by. Thus, it is through the iteration of movement that the territory is marked, inscribing presence in space in a repeated, visible and sonorous manner.

In a similar way, the police forces seemed to me to be invested with the same concern of drawing a form of authority over the space by the insistent repetition of their patrols. However, this tasteful rapprochement between the behaviour of the young peo-

ple of the neighbourhood and that of their “opponents” from the police force only reveals their common characteristic, that of a masculinist logic of domination over the environment.

The latter sometimes manifests itself with violence, and is revealed in the behaviour of children from a very young age: I have observed young girls being literally chased by boys, being shot at with foam darts, or even being stoned. This last incident was the only time I had to intervene during my observation work. The fact that it took place in broad daylight and in full view of everyone is indicative of the normalized violence of gendered territorial relationships that permeate the public space.

Generally speaking, this territorialisation takes place in a more subtle way. It is largely achieved through education. Thus, the movements of young girls are often modelled on those of their mothers, determined by the imperatives of matrimonial work¹. Girls obediently follow their predetermined path, whereas boys are more easily left to their own fate. This state of affairs is also reinforced by the discourses addressed to young girls and internalized from childhood, which consolidate their role and position within the home as opposed to that of a legitimate presence in the public space.

The notion of danger is also central to explaining the effacement of women in the public space. In fact, the street is often not a safe space for women. In Brussels, street harassment is a widespread and systematic phenomenon, taking place without distinction in terms of geographical location or social environment. Stories of aggression and rape, far from being marginal facts in the women’s psyche, form a conscious base of fear that is revived with every move in the city.

However, it is interesting to note how ageing, in that it de-sexualises, frees women from some of the risks associated with their presence in the public space. Several elderly women have echoed to me how their advanced age, exempting them from the predatory male gaze, has allowed them a certain form of relaxation in their presence in the city, even if a lifetime of conditioning and violence as a marker of virility mostly hitting the weakest still keeps them in a state of fear and constraint.

To sum up, one formula that seems to me to be fairly accurate, given the extent to which it confirmed itself during my observations, is that men occupy the space where women only pass through it. An obvious expression of this rule is that when girls stopped to talk to me, they were very quickly annoyed by boys, while the latter could sometimes

1. On this notion, see Shoshana Grossbard, *Travail des femmes et « marché du mariage » aux USA*

hang around for several hours without interruption.

Moreover, while the boys in the neighbourhood approached me on the first day, it took almost two weeks before girls did the same. Generally speaking, the girls are more distrustful, remain stoic and silent in the face of my presence, while the boys laugh or call out to me. On the street, talking to a stranger is a privilege usually reserved to boys. Of course, the fact that I am a man necessarily distorts this observation; again, I can only convey my observations from a subjective point of view, and it would be perfectly stupid to defend the absolute neutrality of my position in this research setting.

To conclude on this notion of the gendered distribution of space, a possible and striking parallel in that it concerns another everyday terrain in a child's experience is that of the schoolyard. Indeed, the codes used in the street and in public space in general are often the same as those of the schoolyard. This is one of the recurring motifs I observed during my presence in Anneessens, the gendered distribution of space following a centre-periphery model: by observing the use of the small square near my tree, I came to the conclusion that boys generally occupy the centre of the space and are more mobile, while girls almost always settle near the walls and engage in more static activities. In fact, my childhood memories are consistent with the findings of many researchers: in the microcosm of the schoolyard, the seminal space of gendered attitudes in open settings, boys tend to occupy the centre and girls tend to occupy the periphery. This pattern was clearly reproduced at the foot of my tree.

If I focus on the children, it is partly because being present only during the day, that is, while the adults were working, they were my main interlocutors. Furthermore, to insist on what seems to me to be the most essential issue around this question of gender in the public space, the fact that the street is an important place of expression and acquisition of male domination. Literally, in my conversations with the old people of the neighbourhood, I was able to observe how their patriarchal values were transmitted to the children through their discourse on masculinity. The question of what it is to be a man has indeed arisen many times, and each time it was an opportunity to insist on the normative matrix of an imposed heterosexuality: a normal man is a man with a woman; a man who does not like women is suspicious.

In fact, boys often told me about their categorical rejection of homosexuality, through homophobic jokes that were transmitted and repeated to me on an almost daily basis. This phenomenon clearly shows how heterosexual culture reproduces itself in part

through the decisive operation of a prohibition of homosexuality¹: it is through the rejection of homosexual desire that man finds his place and forges his identity, and through the constant affirmation of a desire turned towards femininity, coupled with a total rejection of identification with the latter.

The children, victims of this mechanism which they cannot understand because it touches on the taboo of sexuality, are completely delirious and allow themselves to be drawn into the most extravagant mental constructions. A particularly striking illustration of this phenomenon was offered to me during my dialogues with two young boys, through the apparition of a presumably fictional character: Camélia. One morning, the two children promised me the arrival of this mysterious Camélia. They described her to me as their cousin, a girl of my age, very beautiful. They were offering to “give” her to me: when I explained to them that that’s not how it works, that you can’t “give” a girl away and that she also has to want to meet me, they didn’t really seem to understand what was wrong with what they were saying. On the contrary, they insisted on her availability (“*she doesn’t have a husband*”) and her sexual attributes (“*she has a big butt!*”, “*she has a nice pussy!*”).

The scenario seemed to have a particularly stirring texture for the two pre-teens as they came at it three times, raising the tension gradually with the talent of aspiring Hollywood screenwriters. The first time, they backed up their previous comments with additional anecdotes. The second time, they told me that she was on her way from France and would visit me the next day. During their last visit, they let the fantasy of their imaginations express itself freely, multiplying lustful projections, one of them confiding to me that he had “*already fucked her*”. What is significant in this anecdote is the extent to which the child psyche is traversed by the societal fantasy of an objectified femininity reduced essentially to its sexual dimension, as well as the prevalence of a heterosexual matrix in the construction of gender.

Two conclusions seem to emerge from this brief sharing of experience. The first is the systemic tendency that keeps women out of the public space, since they only find their place there through masculinist projections of a femininity fantasized as submissive and objectified. Women’s lack of visibility in the public space also makes them less visible as citizens, reducing their participation in the life of the city. The street is therefore a structural obstacle to their civic involvement, which needs to be addressed as

1. To go further, I recommend reading Judith Butler’s *The psychic life of power*. In the fifth chapter of the book, Butler develops how melancholic identification is central to the process by which the ego ensures a gendered character.

part of the development of a democratic society.

The second is that in order to “degender” the public space, it will not be enough to invest in terms of infrastructure, but rather to carry out experiments in the social field itself. One of the issues related to the way in which gender in the public space is ritualised, or becomes performative in Butler’s sense, is in the way in which the street is a lived space, codified by social events that are not written in stone but in habits. The street is a rhythmic space, traversed by affects, where space defines itself or takes on its qualities according to coordinates of time and use¹. Thus, urban space is a territory that shapes social ways of being. Seeking to make it accessible to all can only be done by bringing about changes in habits, ways of doing things and ways of living.

Third case study: chess

Chess has long been recognized as the intellectual activity par excellence² and male dominance in chess is frequently cited as an example of innate male intellectual superiority³. In 2017, during the debate on the gender pay gap, the European Parliament’s Janusz Korwin-Mikke MEP made the following statement⁴: “*Of course women must earn less than men because they are weaker, they are smaller, they are less intelligent.*” In the unfolding of this loathsome speech is an argument that will be the subject of our present review: “*Do you know how many women are in the first 100 of chess players? I tell you, no one.*”

Chess is a board game that appeared in Asia around the 7th century A.D. It spread over the centuries throughout the world. The rules of the modern game were roughly established around 1650. Today, it is estimated that there are more than 600 million chess players in the world⁵. Another dizzying number related to the game of chess has even been given a name, the Shannon Number: 10^{120} , an estimate of the complexity of the game of chess, i.e. the number of different possible games⁶. This mathematical rich-

1. Vinciane Despret, *Habiter en oiseau*, p116

2. A. Newell, J. C. Shaw & H. A. Simon, *Chess-playing programs and the problem of complexity*

3. For example, R. W. Howard, *Are gender differences in high achievement disappearing? A test in one intellectual domain*; P. Irving & L. Lynn, *Sex differences in means and variability on the progressive matrices in university students: a meta-analysis*

4. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/14/polish-mep-janusz-korwin-mikke-punished-saying-women-less-intelligent-men>

5. <https://www.chess.com/news/view/how-popular-is-chess-8306>

6. Actually, it is the number of different games having a “chess” meaning, that is to say being able to constitute a reasonable game. For comparison, current physics gives an estimate of the number of

ness and the complexity of mental representations that chess players manipulate during a game are at the origin of the association of chess with the notion of intelligence in our collective imagination.

Now, intelligence is a normative concept intrinsically linked to hegemonic discourses aiming at asserting the domination of a social group on another one. Historically, the concept of intelligence is at the heart of the articulation and construction of a rhetoric of male superiority that positions women in a state of inferiority and subordination to men. Our use and understanding of the term intelligence is therefore of major importance in an affectively charged discursive space where philosophy, science and politics intermingle¹.

For multiple reasons, the chess game as a gender ritual thus constitutes a privileged terrain for our study. Since it is a board game, its unfolding is perfectly codified and follows precise rules. Since it is a sport, its practice is articulated around a given social and discursive field that can be analysed with the help of comparative and statistical tools. Because of its popularity and mode of operation, it transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries and is deployed on a global scale. Finally, it is particularly relevant in the context of our enterprise in that it constitutes an extremely masculine social arrangement, organized around a semiotic space consolidating a binary understanding of gender.

What can be learned by looking at the sociological, discursive, material and semiotic arrangement of the game of chess from a feminist perspective? How do these different fields inter- and intra-act together? Far from constituting an exhaustive study, this chapter proposes a first articulation of the stakes that revolve around these questions.

There is a long tradition of misogyny among the greatest chess players. One of the most remarkable illustrations of this phenomenon is the statement formulated by the young Bobby Fisher, who in 1962 affirmed²: “*They’re all weak, all women. They’re stupid compared to men. They shouldn’t play chess, you know. They’re like beginners.*” Ten years

atoms in the observable universe between 4×10^{78} and 6×10^{79} .

1. What is intelligence? What stories are told about it? Which agencies develop its definitions, which power structures consolidate and impose them? What happens when they become commonplace? In a feminist account that seeks to formulate a definitive response to the question “Are women less intelligent than men?” “I would have had to address each of these questions in depth. If the chess game seems to me to be a suitable demonstrative tool to initiate a counter-discourse to the partisans of biological determinism, here I will only scratch the surface of the problem of gender and intelligence in general.

2. *Portrait of a genius as a young chess master*, Interview by Ralph Ginzburg, Harpers Magazine Jan. 1962

later, the American will become world champion and influence a whole generation of young players. Another candidate for the title of the greatest chess player in history, Garry Kasparov, world champion from 1985 to 2000, said in 1990 in an interview in the New York Times¹: “*Women, by their nature, are not exceptional chess players: they are not great fighters.*”

Finally, the most recent iteration of this type of discourse in the media goes to Grand Master Nigel Short, number three in the world from January 1988 to July 1989. In a magazine 99% read by men², he concludes his article on the place of women in the chess world with the following paragraph³: “*Men and women’s brains are hard-wired very differently, so why should they function in the same way? I don’t have the slightest problem in acknowledging that my wife possesses a much higher degree of emotional intelligence than I do. Likewise, she doesn’t feel embarrassed in asking me to manoeuvre the car out of our narrow garage. One is not better than the other, we just have different skills. It would be wonderful to see more girls playing chess, and at a higher level, but rather than fretting about inequality, perhaps we should just gracefully accept it as a fact.*”

These essentialist discourses nourish sexist worldviews when they are formulated by people who are highly respected in their milieu. This is what makes the case of chess so intensely symptomatic of the *boys club* phenomenon, or how men, isolated from women, construct and consolidate between themselves the myths of an allegedly masculine and feminine nature. In fact, it is enough to enter a chess club to notice it: here, even more than in the street, we are in male territory. Considering this specific arrangement and the types of discourse propagating within it, it is fair to say that the study of the social milieu of chess constitutes a fertile ground for an anti-naturalist and materialist criticism of the processes of social domination.

Let us return to the words of Nigel Short. This is an account based on biological determinism, a theory that justifies the hierarchy between sexes, races and social classes by biological criteria. This type of discourse has repeatedly put forward the idea that science would unquestionably reveal the inferiority of women’s intelligence. A quick genealogy of this scientific current, however, reveals the embarrassing history of these practices and their biases⁴. Notably, craniometry, a practice that correlates the volume of the brain and its performance, has for a long time nourished the discourse of an al-

1. *King Kasparov*, interview by Fred Waitzkin, New York Times Oct. 7, 1990

2. Nigel Short, *VIVE LA DIFFÉRENCE!*, volume 2/2015 of *New in Chess*

3. *ibid.*

4. Catherine Vidal, *Le cerveau, le sexe et l’idéologie dans les neurosciences*

leged intellectual inferiority of women, although no work resulting from this type of research has ever had the slightest scientific credibility¹. Today we know that there is no relationship between brain size and intellectual ability.

The theory of the two brains is equally emblematic of this type of dubious scientific practice, which is at the root of tenacious popular beliefs. According to this theory, an individual's personality would depend on which region of the brain he or she uses most. A creative and emotional individual would thus tend to be *right-brained*, while an analytical and rational individual might be labelled *left-brained*. A myth frequently conveyed in the press and alternative media, this theory has never been validated by rigorous experimental data². Yet it is part of the way thousands, if not millions, of people conceive intelligence and the way their brains work.

So far, no rigorous studies have been able to prove the importance of biological factors in explaining the superiority of humans in the game of chess. Yet this idea is well established in the social chess world, conveyed by comments such as those of Nigel Short. The most conclusive example that goes against the natural superiority of men in chess is the champion Judit Polgár, ranked eighth in the world in 2005. Her success was the result of a unique experiment led by her father, László Polgár. For the latter, genius is acquired, not innate. In order to prove his theory, and the fact that excellence can be achieved through training in any particular field, he educated his daughters with the goal of turning them into chess champions. And in fact, that is precisely what happened: all three girls now bear the title of International Grandmaster (note the gendered formula), the highest possible distinction for a chess player.

While the experience is questionable on many levels, it nonetheless demonstrates without the slightest doubt that by receiving the same support as her male counterparts, a woman is quite capable of rising to the highest level. Judit Polgár has also proved to be an excellent emissary of the female voice, publicly revealing on numerous occasions the sexism she has had to face systematically throughout her career. Through the account of my own foray into the chess world, I would now like to address the question of the place and image of women in the chess world.

Personally, I only set foot once in a chess club, in a country whose language I did not speak. That evening, I was greeted by a group of men between 40 and 70 years old,

1. *Le cerveau d'Einstein*, La Recherche, vol. 326, décembre, 1999

2. K.-M. Bishop & D. Wahlsten, *Sex differences in the human corpus callosum, myth or reality?*

against whom I lost 12 games in a row before leaving, not humiliated but rather embarrassed by the feeling of having wasted their time. That's how I discovered online chess, allowing me to progress by playing against opponents of my own level. Besides, I quickly started watching game analysis videos on the internet.

The most popular content producer for the Youtube platform in the chess world is called Antonio Radic, better known under his nickname "Agadmator". The clarity of his analyses, his charisma and his love for chess history have quickly made him an ambassador for the sport with more than 600.000 subscribers. Today he is an influential figure among a new generation of players. It is actually my passion for his videos that prompted this study, as a friend once remarked to me that the game analysis videos I watched were only about games played by men.

Indeed, if we analyze the last 1000 videos posted on her channel from May 23rd, 2020, only 17 feature games played by women. By way of comparison, 35 are games played by computer programs. We touch here on one of the potential explanations of the gendered disparity among chess players: the absence of female representation and role models. For Antonio's audience, 95% male, it is clear that since men are stronger than women, their games are more interesting to watch. However, the question of the causal relationship between these two phenomena is not raised.

It is also interesting to look at the image of femininity conveyed by these videos. Among the 17 videos featuring female chess players, one has the following title: "*Anna Rudolf Accused of Cheating with an Engine Hidden in her Lip Balm!*" Indeed, during the tournament from which the game was taken, a group of players could not conceive that her performance against male opponents was simply due to the level of her play, hence the absurd and sexist accusation against her. Another: "*Banging his Head Against an Elevator Door After Losing to 11-Year Old Judit*". The latter refers to a game played by Judit Polgár in 1987, her first victory over a grand master. This story evokes a recurring phenomenon in the masculinist chess culture where the defeat of a man against a woman is experienced as an intense humiliation whose absolution can only be achieved through self-flagellation.

Another important actor of the chess culture on Youtube is a duo, the Botez sisters. The success of their videos can be explained by their use of the codes of reality TV: the girls express themselves in front of the camera on the topics that are close to their hearts, show joy and pain in the face of the challenges they are facing, and grow up through their videos. Their youtube channel surfs on the aesthetics of the *girl next*

door: the two sisters appear in their room, playing next to each other in front of their computer, in the illusion of a direct access to their intimacy.

The Botez sisters' Youtube channel is a professional and lucrative audio-visual production that develops the Botez brand. It is particularly problematic in that it capitalizes on the sexualization of the bodies of the two young girls, the youngest being only 17 years old when she first appears in the videos. Attached to their videos, many comments refer to their physical appearance, a factor that may also explain their success on other platforms such as Instagram. Young, beautiful and emotional, Alexandra Botez (24 years old, 60.000 followers on Instagram) and Andrea Botez (18 years old, 14.400 followers on Instagram) are public figures corresponding to the normative image and acceptable position of women in the chess community.

In one of their most popular videos, the Botez sisters challenge Hikaru Nakamura, one of the highest ranked players in the world. During this match, the latter plays his games blindfolded, a practice regularly used by chess masters to showcase their cerebral prowess. The preview image of the video plays with the codes of pornography: in it appear Nakamura, blindfolded, displaying an expression of pleasure, and the two Botez sisters, one biting her lips and the other seemingly letting out a scream of orgasm. Of course, Nakamura wins the match with a relaxed attitude that contrasts with the exasperated cries of the young girls, reinforcing the cliché of female emotionality and the idea that for a man, winning against a woman is easy, even with his eyes closed.

Alexandra Botez is president of the Stanford University Chess Club, where she graduated in International Relations. In an article¹ published in Pulse Magazine, a publication aimed at the university's students and also serving as a promotional tool for the prestigious institution, one can read that "*her femininity shines through her style and demeanor*". We also learn that she has become immune to the recurring sexism of the game after being subjected to it for so long. She testifies: "*The amount of men over forty hitting on underage girls at chess tournaments in creepy, outward manners is overwhelming*". The article also alludes to women's tournaments, which are necessary in that they provide a safe space for female players to pursue their interest in the game.

While the text pretends to raise awareness on the issue of sexism, the photographs accompanying the article reveal a disturbing objectification of the girl's body: In one of the images, she appears in a summer dress in a framing that highlights her bare legs, the silhouette of her thighs and her chest discernible through the thin fabric of the

1. Katherine Eisenbrand, *Alexandra Botez: You Just Got Powned*, PULSE Magazine April 18, 2016

dress; cut at the neck, her face is absent, probably considered superfluous by the photographer and the editor of an article whose subject is that of an academic career. In short, sex sells, even universities. But also, what the article reveals, in the dissonance between its form and its discourse, is the socio-material arrangement of chess where many systemic factors reinforcing gender stereotypes are inscribed, and where the agents who promote such codes are privileged and rewarded.

So far, we have been interested in the question of gender in the social space constituted around the game of chess. Let us now turn to the semiotic space of the game board. Of course, the risk of foolishly sinking into easy allegories is very real. Nevertheless, it may be interesting or at least amusing to wonder what this small codified universe evokes in relation to phenomena taking place at the scale of our reality.

Of course, it is important to note the war reference of the course of the game. This can obviously be a factor explaining the majority of men among chess players. Indeed, for example, if we look at the 100 best Counter-Strike¹ players, we will also find only men: it does not mean that they are more skilled with the keyboard and the mouse, but simply that they are culturally more pushed towards playful activities staging war and combat.

Let's focus on the two pieces corresponding to the royal couple. The queen is the most valuable piece, she personifies the ultimate objectification of the feminine. She is also the strongest: it is on her that the fate of the battle rests, she is irreplaceable, her labour is indispensable. The king, for his part, is beyond the scale of value; he is the subject par excellence, the one who remains until the end. Without him, nothing exists. As for his role in the course of the game, it generally consists of hiding in a corner and intervening only at the end of the game, very often when the queen has already sacrificed her life to the job.

When I look at the roles and movements of these two chess pieces, I can only think of my grandparents, the archetype of a patriarchal couple: if you ask my grandmother, it's my grandfather who does everything at home. In reality, the latter only agitates himself by giving orders around, relying on his charisma to lollygag, leaving almost all the domestic mental load to my grandmother, whose way of life is characterized by a permanent stress. In chess, the king moves with pompous majesty and puts the finishing touch; the queen runs all over the place and does all the dirty work.

1. Counter-Strike is a famous first person shooter videogame.

By the simplicity of the patterns and symbols of its unfolding, the events of a chess game are inscribed in the psyche with a singular clarity. Any chess addict will tell you: the pieces move all day long in his head. As it relies largely on the mental incorporation of tactical and strategic motifs, the level of a chess player depends on this repeated incrustation. Since they stage archetypes of masculinity and femininity, each move of one of these pieces on the board culturally reinforces these archetypes, as well as a strictly binary conception of gender, in an unconscious way.

Let us now return to Janusz Korwin-Mikke's argument, which served as an opening to this chapter. There are many factors that may explain the under-representation of women among high-level chess players. A statistical study¹ suggests to explain this phenomenon by a simple disparity in terms of engagement, the number of women playing chess in general being largely lower than that of men. According to this study, it is possible to justify 96% of this under-representation of women on this simple basis, thus excluding any cultural or biological factor. As for the reason why men play much more chess than women in general, it is probably the effect of multiple and indirect systemic causes².

Science is a field of knowledge full of biased experiences, dubious positions and conciliatory discourses. There is a tendency to hide behind the banner of scientific objectivity when citing scientific work without taking into account the intentions behind its realization. Take, for example, an article regularly cited by those defending the position of biological determinism, "*Explaining male predominance at the apex of intellectual achievement*". I could not read it since it is an academic article inaccessible to the common people, contrary to almost all the other sources of my research: its unavailability is already a marker of elitist superiority. But regardless of its content, the question here is rather: what could be the motivation that could push someone to write an article with such a title? Isn't it likely that from the outset, even before his research has begun, the author's psychological bias makes any conclusion from his work inadmissible? To go even further, imagining that this writing would be of rigorous and impartial scientific quality, what could be the use of such knowledge?

Humanity today faces remarkable challenges. There are so many urgent issues to be addressed in this world. One of the great tragedies of our time is that there are so many

1. Merim Bilalic, Kieran Smallbone, Peter McLeod et Fernand Gobet, *Why are (the best) women so good at chess? Participation rates and gender differences in intellectual domains*

2. To draw a link with our previous subject of study, it is notable that chess is often played in the public space, and that there is a real urban culture built around the game. And, as we have seen, this type of social practice is very often reserved in great majority to men.

refined minds who, instead of working to build a better world, are busy nurturing sterile theories, their bank accounts or their egos.

In our case, the main question is whether it's really smart to spend our time playing the game of "who's right". Everyone, depending on his or her initial position and given the current logic of overproduction in terms of academic knowledge, will be able to find a study demonstrating the correctness of his or her point of view or a counter-study denouncing the biases of a competing study. Any conclusion can only be speculative, even if until now, no conclusive study could prove the importance of biological factors to explain the superiority of men in the chess game. The real stake around this problem is to build in full consciousness the stories we want to tell. A happier approach would perhaps be to put forward the stories of the women players, to make clubs and tournaments more open, or even to invent a new chess game stripped of its old pots and pans.

Thus, what would be a chess game freed from its belligerent, royalist, religious and gendered references, adapted to today's stakes and not to the codes of the past? What could a post-humanist chess game look like, or one that is not anthropocentric? These questions are complex, and invite us to ask ourselves how our actions fit into a cultural field in constant transformation. What to do with our patriarchal history? Can we get rid of the founding narratives of our culture? What metaphors and stories should we build for a future that matches our ambitions?

Gender rituals: conclusion

As we approach the end of this essay, I think it is necessary to clarify my intentions and my commitment to the issue of gender rituals, within the framework of this practice that I have previously defined by the notion of deconstruction. Rather than a display of knowledge, it is more of a sharing of tools and a draft methodology. It is through the accumulation of experiences and their retranscription, through their sharing in a setting that subjects them to criticism, that a posture is constructed, one that is certainly fragile, but that leaves room for the emergence of a mode of understanding reality that is unencumbered and eager to emancipate itself from the norms that govern social relations in the field that it is given. Thus, I defend a conception of deconstruction in the line of Donna Haraway's notion of "situated knowledge", that is to say, knowledge that is localized, historically and culturally dependent. Deconstruction only makes sense when it is shared between different actors linked by a shared future, in the development of a common attitude to political and societal issues.

In this framework, experience is not a direct access to knowledge, but a platform for developing alternatives to normative dynamics. In the course of these different studies, I have tried to link real-life experiences and theoretical research, while maintaining the perspective that none of my assertions can be definitive, or claim any form of scientific objectivity. Discourses on the gender issue are enamelled with residues of obscurantism. Facing the habits of ritualized patterns, deconstruction does not have the task of informing, but that of slowing down, of disagreeing, of hesitating. By cultivating new regimes of attention, it picks up signals and gestures to which we have become too accustomed. At the same time, it must be accompanied by new positions and attempts of movement. It is not enough to interpret, we must experiment.

There is always a risk involved in drawing general conclusions from particular facts. As Vinciane Despret writes¹ in her book *Habiter en oiseau*: “*Illuminating a situation with the lights offered by another is a gesture that must be aesthetic and creative. It requires taste, curiosity, tact, and a little bad faith.*” To remain aware that we are only telling a story; nevertheless, to give ourselves the legitimacy to make it an assumed discourse, having its place in the horizon of possible understandings, of situated theories.

Science, especially in its so-called “hard” fields, has become expert at producing truths, sometimes to the point of turning itself into a massive legitimation machine with exclusionary and hegemonic tendencies. Deconstruction, like philosophy, often remains a task for explorers, hesitants and feelers. It is a slow science, which delicately unfolds new arts of living and new ways of thinking. One of the challenges is to broaden its community by defending precisely this humble tonality, as essential to any act, to any effort, deploying itself in the real with a prudence that does not curb any ambition. That the change may be slow, certainly, but gradual and qualitative, far from the sirens of revolution or paradigm shifts. This brings us back to the notion of creation and in that it is at the heart of the transformation of the world: activist of the imaginary, the worker of deconstruction defends the idea that everything is still possible. Together, lets celebrate the youth of the world!

Addendum: the feminine orgasm

I would like to open this last chapter with a warning: if the tone differs from the previous ones, already very disparate in terms of discursive rigour, it is because this is more of a fantasy on my part, a literary surge rather than a real sharing of experience, argued and precise. Also, at the risk of exposing myself through a masculinist soliloquy, I dare

1. Vinciane Despret, *Habiter en oiseau*, p.52

to hope that a certain humoristic scope can be found in the presentation below, in order to conclude this already compromising corpus with a touch of lightness.

Why are men so obsessed with the female orgasm? For a long time, I believed that this obsession simply stemmed from a performance culture, a code of manhood where men would ensure their masculine strength by positively evaluating their ability to make their partners come. In fact, the female orgasm in its supposed complexity feeds the myth of femininity as an elusive mystery. Unlike the masculine orgasm, which men themselves would easily reduce to a purely mechanical model, it is a real challenge to the sexual adventurer with whom the male identifies, an epic worthy of the great masculine heroes of mythology.

However, I ended up raising another explanation: within a patriarchal culture, sexuality is the only space where man can express the desire—repressed or atrophied in all other areas of his sociability—to care for the other, not to be selfish. The altruism that he otherwise exercises on a daily basis is almost always inscribed in a logic of self-interest, hence the coin given to the beggar that buys him his dose of self-satisfaction mixed with a sense of good conscience. Singularly, it is in the relative intimacy of the conjugal bed that he is offered the possibility of giving freely, of escaping for a short moment the role of the rational man centred on his own interests, as it has been constructed over the last few centuries and particularly imposed as the neo-liberal subject par excellence. As a result, they overdo it. Another fundamental aspect of patriarchal masculinity is that it cuts men off from their capacity to listen emotionally. The female orgasm, a quantifiable and therefore collectible marker, is a clear and unambiguous signal of their partner's well-being. It then becomes the site of a clumsy expression of their willingness to be generous.

In fact, I have several times heard from heterosexual men, otherwise perfectly self-centred, the declaration of their pronounced taste for cunnilingus, insisting on the altruistic dimension of this practice (“I could do that for hours!”) as if they were astonished themselves by this affinity. Admittedly, one can also discern the fantasy of a return to the prenatal stage, but this phenomenon nevertheless manifests a kind of abandonment in the pleasure of giving, a pleasure that would be considered guilty by the male subject, or even insane by his rationalist consorts outside the intimate framework of sexuality.

To make their partners come thus reassures men not only about their virility, but also about the existence buried in them of this capacity to offer unilaterally. I would there-

fore like to propose a playful solution to get away from a patriarchal logic of masculinity: let us generalize the practice of cunnilingus. Cunnilingus for everyone! Every day, cunnilingus, literally or metaphorically, to something or someone, or to the whole world, keeping this idea in mind: that humans are deeply connected to the world around them, that they are good and generous, that it is society that makes us forget all that, and that there is nothing more pleasant than to reconnect with our own nature!