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'EROTIC CAPITAL'?[1]

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In an interview about her new book, *Glittering Images* (2012), American scholar Camille Paglia proclaims that since the 1990s a 'necessary correction' has taken place of 'Stalinist' 'feminist ideology.' Today we witness a 'pro-sex, pro-art, pro-beauty feminism,' as she herself had predicted all along.[2] In *Playboy*, in May 1995, she was more specific on what went wrong with feminism. 'Feminism has betrayed women, alienated men and women, replaced dialogue with political correctness.' Feminist ideology was anti-sexual. 'The problem is that feminists have taken over with their attempts to inhibit sex. We have a serious testosterone problem in this country.'[3]

To understand where Paglia comes from, and to evaluate her claim that 'pro-sex and pro-beauty feminism' is a necessary correction of 'feminist ideology,' we will take a look at her major study *Sexual Personae* (1990), a 700-page treatise which provoked a heated debate in the 1990s. What *did* Paglia say all along, and was she right? Or do we have to re-introduce some 'feminist ideology' today, as my students tell me?

In her book *Sexual Personae* Paglia accused feminism of being Rousseauist, in its rosy conception of nature. Wrong, she said. Nature is 'no picnic' (Paglia 1990: 5), it is violence and death. As to violence, we should adopt Hobbes and De Sade instead of Rousseau. Nature – and sex as nature – is about aggression, it is about domination and submission. Paglia, in the same *Playboy* interview, claims: 'Men do look at women as rapists,' adding that she, as a lesbian, can totally identify with them. Unlike the feminists, she is not against date rape, pornography and SM. Women, she implies, better face the truth of sex. We are dealing here with natural laws. And for Paglia they do not entail freedom and equality as some seventeenth-century philosophers would have it. Natural laws are about violence and women are men's prey.

Secondly, for Paglia, nature is death, mud and rot: as such it is a dark force and women struggle with it all their life. According to Paglia, the more a woman strives for individual self-realization, 'the fiercer will be her struggle with nature… and the more nature will punish her: do not dare to be free! For your body does not belong to you.' Women suffer more from nature than men, since their body is a 'chthonian machine, indifferent to the spirit who inhabits it. Organically, it has one mission, pregnancy' (Paglia 1990: 10).

Futhermore, Paglia argues that, since women through their biology embody the principle of fertility, they are inevitably identified in myths, art and culture, with nature. She demonstrates at length how, out of sexual anxiety, men have tried to master nature and women as part of it, by positioning themselves as *nous,* and women as sexual beings to be tamed and conquered.

Admittedly, I have schematized Paglia's arguments a bit. In her book she presents all of the above as a package deal. Identifying her arguments more specifically, (nature as relation, as substance and in myths), allows us to compare them with Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 study *The Second Sex.*

Paglia was a great admirer of Beauvoir. French feminists who came after didn't even reach Beauvoir's ankles, she said, and she often placed herself at the same foot-level (Showalter 2001: 304, 305, 308). Without any reference to *The Second Sex*, however, Paglia in *Sexual Personae* copied much of Beauvoir's myths chapter – with its 120 pages almost a book in itself –

which deals with literature, sagas, film, religion, and art. Beauvoir demonstrated that in the realm of myths men are to women as Spirit to Body, as culture to nature. Like nature, women have to be mastered, that is, they either have to die or marry.

Comparing Beauvoir and Paglia, we see a similar analysis that men want to control women as part of nature, and a common thesis that women suffer more from nature than men. Beauvoir, like Paglia, had argued that a woman 'is more enslaved to the species than the male is, her animality is more manifest.' However, she added that in women as in men, the body is always 'taken on by existence; she also belongs to the human realm. Assimilating her with Nature is simply a prejudice' (Beauvoir 2009: 277).

There is nature, but there is also such a thing as 'second nature' for Beauvoir, and this is human culture as it develops in history. Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, used a Hegelian framework: like Hegel, she approached society and culture in historical terms. She considered human beings as a 'becoming' and women as subjects on the move…

Beauvoir, like Paglia, had praised De Sade for his courage to highlight the violent dimension of sex. She pitied him, however, for his total emotional isolation (*un isolisme affectif radical*). There is sadism, but there is also sexual love as 'fusion,' when both partners courageously accept their *condition humaine*, and experience emotion, a psychophysiological experience in which we make direct contact with others (*une communication immédiate*) (Beauvoir 1952: 35).

Where Paglia refers to natural laws, and cannot think in terms of any change at all, Beauvoir, in her Hegelian approach, argued in 1949 that things would change for the better, because of contraceptives and access to education and jobs for women. She announced at the end of *The Second Sex* that old myths would disappear, and that new myths of love and eroticism would arise. But was she right?

Beauvoir in her analysis of myths – described as deep-rooted beliefs and dreams – was also talking about films. So let's have a look at today's dream machine, Hollywood.[4] As Laura Mulvey famously analyzed in the 1970s, echoing Beauvoir's analysis of myths, in traditional Hollywood films girls and women either die or marry (Mulvey 1973). How far have we come in today's Hollywood films?

What about the *Twilight saga*, a series of books and films that created a worldwide hype these last years? You may have heard of them if you have a teenager at home. Or you may have heard of the infamous *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, a hype among women which originally began as Twilight fan-fiction.

The Twilight saga is all about love and death. It is about a human girl and a superior vampire man, who cannot reach each other. It is about love at first sight, about irrevocable, impossible and therefore all the more passionate love. It is about the girl constantly being guarded in the vampire world, by her husband-to-be and his family, until the moment she dies and then, finally, turns into a vampire herself. What about *this new myth* on eroticism and love?

It is very appealing to women and girls, yet it destroys everything feminism wanted. The girl has to be protected all the time. She sacrifices her career, her friends, her family, and her life as a human, only to marry him. It's not about the girl having to marry or die: she has to do both!

Where Beauvoir explicitly argued for new myths, Paglia argued that the same old stories will be recycled. They will pop up again whenever we try to suppress them.

When I asked my students last semester to present visual material from the popular media, showing that we have moved on from the stereotypical gender images, they instead presented, week after week, the opposite: that in advertisements, television shows, real life TV, games, Hollywood films, music clips, and so on, the stereotypical myths about women are, indeed, recycled. And girls and women more than ever identify with being sexy, and with the dominant myths about sexual love, surely affecting their own hopes and fears.

Perhaps it was no coincidence that Beauvoir started writing her book with

a lengthy chapter on myths. She may have suspected that these deeply-rooted dreams were most resistant to change. But are we simply dealing here with ingrained patterns and dreams, and nothing else, as Beauvoir would have it? Or was Paglia right, and are these myths based on the reality of sex?

In *Playboy* Paglia said: 'The more a woman takes off her clothes, the more power she has.'[5] According to Paglia, women nowadays understand their role in the sexual realm, and use it in a power play. The 'pro beauty- and sex feminism' which she refers to is all about women taking that role upon themselves.

Referring to *Honey Money* (2011) by British sociologist Catherine Hakim, the Dutch feminist magazine *Opzij*, in February 2012, proclaimed that women should use their 'erotic capital' in the bedroom *and* the boardroom. Men's greater sexual desire leaves them frustrated, and women can take advantage of it 'in public as well as private life.' Instead of abolishing their femininity they should champion it so as to 'bargain for a better deal' in all relationships (8). 'Why does no one encourage women to exploit men whenever they can?' (3).

According to Hakim, *Opzij*, and Paglia this is feminism. But is it? Or was Beauvoir right after all, when she argued that it is high time that women are to be taken seriously as human beings, instead of sexy creatures? And does not the term 'erotic capital' indicate that the 'pro-beauty and pro-sex feminism' endorsed by Paglia is in fact all about a neo-liberal 'self-surveilling subject whose concepts of body and behavior are driven by status anxiety'? Which 'diversity of identities and social experiences' is neglected here? (Negra 2009: 153). Perhaps it's indeed time again for some 'feminist ideology'.

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[1] With thanks to Ton Dekker.

2 Paglia in the same interview added that now that 'all careers have been opened to women,' feminism is only needed 'in Third World countries where women can be treated like chattel.' In what follows I will concentrate on her thesis that feminism is no longer needed in the Western world. http://www.vice.com/read/camille-paglia-believes-that-revenge-of-the-sith-is-our-generations-greatest-work-of-art.

3 *Playboy* interview, May 1995: Camille Paglia. [viewed 29 July 2013] http://privat.ub.uib.no/BUBSY/playboy.htm

4 As a political philosopher mostly interested in dominant patterns and dreams, I rather prefer to discuss popular films than avant-garde ones.

5 *Playboy* interview, May 1995: Camille Paglia.