

Spectacular Castration:
Labiaplasty as Body Negation in the Age of Globalization

by

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Abstract

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This thesis explores labiaplasty as a point of inquiry in order to understand how representations of the female body have changed with the transition to global capitalism. Through the analysis of contemporary, mainstream media representations within “body genres”, including pornography and horror films, this thesis explores notions of affect and the production of subjectivities as central modes in contemporary capitalism that signal a new and unique form of biopower whereby representation works to affect subjectivities from which new cultural practices – such as labiaplasty – may emerge. To argue this point, this thesis conducts a discourse analysis from the personal stories told by women seeking labiaplasty on the Internet, in order to examine how representation may influence subjectivities of women to the point of seeking labiaplasty.

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother Rousudan Mushelishvili.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Background.....	3
1.3 Purpose of the Thesis Research.....	8
1.4 Research Question.....	10
1.5 Rationale.....	10
1.6 Theoretical Framework.....	12
1.7 Scope and Limitations.....	15
1.8 Outline.....	15

Chapter 2

Literature Review.....	18
------------------------	----

Chapter 3

3.1 Biopower: Production of Affect and the Disappearing Body.....	35
3.2 The Pornographic Spectacle and Affective Labour.....	38
3.3 Pornographic Spectacle.....	43
3.4 Contemporary Pornographic Representations of Empowerment and Exchangeability.....	46
3.5 The Late Modern Horror/Postmodern Film and the Monstrous Feminine.....	57
3.6 Contemporary Horror Film and the Absent Female Body.....	64
3.7 Personal Stories of Labiaplasty.....	78
3.8 Methodology.....	80

3.9 Personal Labiaplasty Stories Analysis.....	83
Chapter4	
4.1 Summary.....	99
4.2 Conclusion.....	101
Bibliography.....	110

Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

“This is my labia. You know I think she looks better in the jar,” states Frances Marques, the star of the TLC reality program *Plastic Wives*, as she holds up a jar with a disembodied piece of her genitalia floating pickled within. Marques, a Beverly Hills wife of a cosmetic surgeon, is one of the main cast members of *Plastic Wives*, a show profiling the lives of four strong-willed women who are married to plastic surgeons and who consequently have the means to transform themselves in any way that they or their husbands desire. Plastic surgery is the central theme of the program, however there is a major emphasis on vaginal cosmetic surgery specifically. "Vagina comes up more times than [on] any show in history" (Shuter 2014, 1), said one cast member Dayna Devon, in an interview with *The Huffington Post*. Devon describes her own preoperative vulva as, “Two soy hotdogs with a bad carpet” (TLC, 2014).

In recent years vaginal aesthetics has become a major topic on the internet, reality television and several women’s magazines including, *Cosmopolitan* and *Harper’s Bazaar*. It is subsequently becoming an increasingly common part of beauty practices for women. Amongst the varying forms of vaginal aesthetic practices “labiaplasty” is perhaps the most prevalent and subject to the greatest amount of public comment. Labiaplasty is a form of vaginal cosmetic surgery aimed at “improving” the appearance of a vulva by trimming or entirely removing the labia. Since its emergence as a beauty trend, there has been an increase of

demand in North America, Australia and the U.K for this procedure. Popular media has been inundated with the discourse of female genital aesthetics, particularly due to TV shows like *Plastic Wives*, *The Doctors* and *Embarrassing Bodies*. Today female genitals are becoming the subject of more intervention and attention than ever before.

I first came across the phenomenon of labiaplasty on social media channels like Facebook around 2012. There were several articles my news feed engaging the rising new trend of vaginal aesthetics in North America and the UK. When I realized that labiaplasty involved the surgical augmentation of female genitals I was immediately reminded of clitorrectomy and other surgical procedures historically forced upon women in attempts to control their bodies as well as their reproductive difference – meaning the reproductive ability relative to the female body. It appeared, however, that now some Western women were seeking out such interventions and paying significant amounts of money to have these procedures performed. Furthermore, while reading about labiaplasty, I came across other articles – calls to action – to stop “forced genital mutilation” or FGM in other parts of the world. Several examples include the organization stopfgmnow.com that raises awareness and funds towards various foundations in order to fight FGM. Another example is endfgm.eu an Amnesty International campaign that pledges to battle FGM around the world. I became intent on understanding why female genital surgery appears to be valued in some twenty first century North American and Western European cultures as augmentation,

signalled by the willingness to pay exorbitant fees for the procedure. At the same time North America and Western Europe continually condemns similar practices as *mutilation* when performed as a coming-of-age ritual on young women in some African and Asian societies. The obvious answer seems to be that the former is performed in accordance with a woman's *choice*, while the latter are *understood* to be performed against a woman's will. This brings me to question: why do some North American and Western European women opt to *have* their genitals augmented when given a choice? And what constitutes "choice" within this context?

1.2 Background

The risks involved in genital cosmetic surgery are substantial. Jen Loy (2000) suggests that risks include scarring, loss of sensation to the modified area, infection and continuous pain. In fact, each incision made to the genital area results in loss of sensitivity. Virginia Braun (2010) stresses the imperative within vaginal cosmetic surgery discourse to convey that all surgical intervention has potential for complication and failure rates. Despite these obvious risks involved in the procedure, more and more Western women seek out plastic surgery for their genitals each year. According to *Express Journal*, in the UK the number of women seeking labiaplasty has increased by forty-five per cent since 2010, rising from 24,000 to 35,000. It also seems that the clientele for this procedure is getting younger as the article also stated that the average age of women seeking vaginal cosmetic surgery has dropped from thirty-five to twenty eight. According to The

American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASAPS), 3,500 labiaplasty surgeries were performed in the U.S. in 2012, marking a sixty-four percent increase since 2011, and a five hundred percent increase in a four-year span (ASAPS, 2012).

In her writing on the issue of labiaplasty in Australia, feminist psychologist Jane Ussher (2013) states that within the past decade the number of Australian women requesting labiaplasty has increased from 200 to 1,500. Fifty percent of Australian women express dissatisfaction with their vaginas and forty percent have considered vaginal plastic surgery. These statistics signal a significant increase of interest in female genital aesthetics, with more women – and younger women – going under the knife with each passing year. This suggests a cultural shift in how female genitals are perceived in Australia and what constitutes an attractive and desirable vulva today.

There have been several cultural shifts in this century including changes in representation that must be examined in order to understand why labiaplasty has become a rising contemporary trend. This thesis will examine how the popularization of pornography as well as the changing themes within the horror film genre are indicative of a new set of cultural anxieties. This thesis links some of the changes in contemporary, mainstream representation to the changing face of proletarianized labour within the context of the digital age, helping to establish a new form of biopower relative to global capitalism.

Jane Ussher (2013) and feminist scholar Sheila Jeffries (2005) both attribute

the increased cultural interest in pornography in the current digital age as part of the reason for the rise in the new labiaplasty procedure. Virginia Braun (2010) posits that current cultural depictions, including those in pornography hide female genital diversity by only depicting one very specific type of female genitalia where the inner labia is occluded. Pioneering porn studies scholar Linda Williams (1989) describes pornography as visual or cinematic depictions of sex or sexuality aimed to elicit sexual arousal in the viewer. Citing the theoretical work of Michel Foucault (1978), Williams further elaborates on hardcore pornography describing it as a form of “knowledge-pleasure” of sexuality. According to Williams, systems of power that deploy sexuality through discourse produce a desire for knowledge around the subject. The deployment of this discourse creates a condition where power and pleasure continuously feed into one another, producing further discourses around sexuality plus “commodified forms of sexuality” (Williams 1989, 3). This paper aims to analyze how pornography aids in producing new cultural norms of desires, new behaviours for female sexuality and a new ideal for female genitals that are reduced in appearance.

This paper seeks to understand labiaplasty in relation to mainstream pornography, understood as depicting female sexual empowerment as increasingly mimicking stereotypically masculine sexual behaviours, in post-feminist terms. According to Fien Adriaens (2009), post-feminism has many different interpretations some of which define it as a “backlash against feminism” particularly the second wave feminist movement which has been critiqued for

essentializing femaleness or womanhood within binary thinking. Post-feminism operates instead outside of binary discourse focusing more on the “fluidity” of gender. Furthermore, post-feminism, according to Adriaens “needs to be situated in the contemporary neo-liberal, late-capitalist society characterized by consumer culture, individualism, postmodernism and a decreased interest in institutional politics and activism” (Adriaens 2009, 1). According to feminist theorist Jenny Coleman (2009), some interpretations of post-feminism include the understanding that gender equality has been achieved; suggesting women are empowered to make their own choices. Post-feminism often rejects the theoretical discourse of feminism which claims that social inequality between genders is ongoing, leaving individual women to act out their empowerment in individual ways. Often, the perceived equity amongst genders is attributed by post-feminist rhetoric to societal progression into a more egalitarian future rather than the efforts of feminism itself; this leaves feminism devalued – and sometimes viewed as unnecessary, outdated or too extreme – in post-feminist culture. Feminist researcher Juanita Elias (2013), who specializes in political economy, argues that post-feminism emerged at a time of late-capitalism – which coincides with the rise of digital technology relative to the rise of immaterial (symbolic) labour. This thesis argues that the new form of biopower relative to the rise of immaterial labour creates new codes for femininity and female sexuality that can be linked to the increased popularity of vaginal cosmetic surgery.

According to scholar Tiziana Terranova (2003) digital media signals a shift

in “biopower” from industrial production at a time of modernism to the new central position of immaterial labour in the globalization era. Terranova suggests that the labouring body loses its centrality in capitalist production as physical labour becomes replaced by intellectual or immaterial labour. According to Slavoj Žižek (2012), today's immaterial labour is a two-tiered system of intellectual or symbolic labour that deals with information and knowledge production, and affective labour that deals with the affects of the body directly, exercised by, doctors, cosmeticians, trainers, etc. What capitalism produces today is often highly managed affect, which helps to shape subjectivities, bodies and social-relations directly, “what thereby emerges is a vast new domain of the ‘common’: shared knowledge, forms of cooperation and communication, etc.” (Žižek 2012, 9). The increased emphasis on the intellect over the labouring body today changes how the body is conceptualized in contemporary culture. Susan Bordo (1992) identifies this shift in the conceptualization of the body in Western culture within the transition towards post-industrial capitalism. The modern era produced the understanding of “the body as dominantly conceptualized as a fixed, unitary, primarily psychological reality” (Bordo 1992, 288). In the transition to postmodernity the body became understood as a more fluid form, “mediated” by history and culture. This paper understands the body as a physical and material entity that is increasingly mediated through culture – including language and representation – towards a reflection of values and ideologies within that culture.

In seeking to understand the recent rise of vaginal augmentation, this thesis

explores the increased cultural interest in body augmentation in twenty first century North American and Western European cultures during a contemporary time where the labouring body seems to be disappearing and being replaced by intellect, within capitalist systems. In contrast, distinct consequences on subjects are produced by dominant modes of capitalist labour; namely, media representations that work to shape subjectivities directly towards a state of autonomous self-regulation.

This thesis also seeks to touch upon the paradox found between the normalization of genital augmentation, whereby some subjects feel empowered by the practice of body augmentation while others experience outrage at – what is understood to be – *forced* genital augmentation within the same discourse. This thesis interrogates the notion of “choice” in the context of vaginal cosmetic surgery – as the ability to independently determine what happens to ones own body. According to Braun (2010), many critics favouring vaginal cosmetic surgery hail the procedure as a form of “choice” that women are given in regard to their sexuality and body image, while others argue that the “choice” to undergo vaginal cosmetic surgery is highly coerced by commercial pressures and through media representations. This thesis will probe the discourse around “choice” in the context of vaginal cosmetic surgery specifically to understand what role the systems of power play within this practice.

1.3 Purpose of the Thesis Research

The purpose of this paper is to understand how labiaplasty became a rising

trend amongst young women in some North American and Western European cultures during a time of globalization beginning at the start of the twenty first century and how this may be indicative of a new and unique form of biopower, relative to a shift in representation of the gendered female body. This paper uses both poststructuralist feminist and political economy approaches to understand cultural representations of female bodies, particularly the new understanding of normalized or ideal female genitals in the context of contemporary media images in North America, Western Europe and Australia. This thesis explores the transition from industrial to post-industrial capitalism – a period that signals a shift in biopower from the industrial production of material goods and the biological reproduction of bodies to the immaterial production of communication and social relations. Capitalism today gives priority to the production of subjectivities rather than to bodies. This thesis asks if gender differences are being increasingly deemphasized within cultural production as a result.

According to post-Marxist philosophers Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000), modernism produced difference within a system of binaries, which often resulted in the exclusion or subjugation of otherness. Today, however, diversity is embraced due to an imperative of constant market expansion. Diverse subjects are now equalized within capitalism and understood to be potentially exchangeable with one another within the market. The power systems increasingly encourage subjects to self-regulate towards the realization of their potential exchangeability. For example, female subjectivities appear to be increasingly shaped towards

exchangeability with those of male subjects. Bordo (1992) investigates a system of power in late capitalism where women are encouraged to replicate the norms and values traditionally understood as masculine – this includes control, austerity and rationality – in order to enter the male dominated workforce. This often results in a negation of the “out-of-control” body traditionally associated with femaleness. The systems of power working directly on subjectivities help shape the desire in subjects to reproduce the workings of power out of their own freewill. This thesis seeks to understand labiaplasty as a phenomenon that arises in North American and Western European global capitalist cultures at a time when gender difference becomes subject to exchangeability.

1.4 Research Question

This paper asks why women would risk diminishing genital sensation and consequently sexual enjoyment in favour of achieving an “enhanced” aesthetic appearance that reduces their labia. This query also investigates what, specifically, is understood to be normal (aesthetic) or abnormal female genitalia and at what point historically the labia became problematic so that it, today, is subject to surgical augmentation that reduces its appearance.

1.5 Rationale

As mentioned above, one of the major risks of labiaplasty is the loss of genital sensation, potentially resulting in diminished sexual enjoyment. According to Loy (2000), however, vaginal cosmetic surgery is often hailed as “sexual

enhancement surgery” for women especially by popular women’s publications like *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, which seems to have normalized labiaplasty as grounds for sexual enjoyment. This double bind represents two streams of my argument: the first stream is supported by the works of French feminist, sociologist and cultural theorist Luce Irigaray (1974), who states that in patriarchal culture, female sexuality is understood only in relation to male sexuality, with no sexual autonomy for women. Female sexual pleasure, in this instance is affirmed by the visual spectacle she provides for her male partner, rather than the enjoyment she gains from her own anatomy. The second stream of my argument relates to the work of Michel Foucault (1978), who shows that power in the twentieth-century is often masked as freedom and transgression, particularly in the deployment of sexuality – where discourses shape sexualities of subjects towards a system of control over labouring and reproductive bodies – giving subjects the impression that they are outside of the reach of power. As such, through discourse, power is able to enact its dictates through willingly participating subjects, and thus autonomously.

The rhetoric found in popular media including *Cosmopolitan Magazine* and *Plastic Wives* that hails body augmentation as a form of sexual empowerment and liberated choice for women effectively masks the workings of patriarchal power. At stake is not only autonomous female sexual enjoyment but also the cultural conceptualization of sexual difference, which might then allow for female sexual autonomy, rather than women reproducing stereotypically masculine

sexualities, relative to global capitalism's rhetoric of market-defined exchangeability. This exchangeability, according to Negri and Hardt (2000) is shaped by a consumer culture which emphasizes market expansion. In other words advertising images create ideals of sexualities and behaviours that encourage women to work upon themselves towards the realization of these ideals in order to self-actualize within a male normative economy.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

Working from poststructuralist, feminist, discourse analysis, political economy and psychoanalytic frameworks, this thesis explores labiaplasty as a point of inquiry to understand how the female body is depicted within a new spectacle of gendered representation; this spectacle, I would suggest, is a product of immaterial production practices within global capitalism. The notion of the spectacle in this thesis varies from that described by Debord (1967) where the spectacle is a system of mass media that produces passive subjects whose lives become centered around appearances and images rather than lived experiences. This paper argues that the spectacle of representation is one element within a complex dynamic of images and affects that today help shape desires within subjects toward work upon the self. The spectacle does not "produce" or entirely control the subjects but rather exerts a considerable amount of influence over many subjects' decision-making processes.

In order to understand the shift within the spectacle of representation

relative to global capitalism, this thesis traces the lineage of socio-cultural systems of control, which contribute to the emergence of phenomena that considerably alter the body to accommodate the new, affect driven economy. As well, this thesis explores the biopolitical origins of these representations particularly in the eras of industrial and post-industrial capitalism. This thesis specifically addresses how ideals of normal and representations of deviant female bodies change in the transition to post-industrial capitalism and how mechanisms of power function within the current ideologies of globalization. My aim is to also understand and shed light on how gendered representation extends into cultural practice relative to various cultural shifts brought about by global capitalism.

This thesis explores these notions through the works of Tiziana Terranova (2003) and Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000), particularly to address how this shift in biopower changes the understanding of the body within cultural production practices in the age of global capitalism. I also employ Susan Bordo's (1992) *axes of continuity* as a lens through which to explore gender-specific issues within the context of the new biopower in post-industrial capitalism, focusing on the "variety of cultural currents or streams"(Bordo 1992, 142), which converge in the practice of labiaplasty. I am specifically locating labiaplasty in a "gender/power" axis, as labiaplasty is a gender specific phenomenon, which I argue is shaped by a phallogocentric representational economy. I will argue that a kinship becomes revealed between labiaplasty and other contemporary body negation practices, which have included excessive dieting and cosmetic

psychopharmacology. There is also a lineage of body negation practices, which arise in relation to past cultural forms, most specifically the forced practice of clitorrectomy, which was prevalent in the Victorian era mental asylum. I link the cultural practice of labiaplasty to the male focused spectacle of representation in contemporary North American, Australian and Western European cultures, specifically the phenomenon of mainstream pornography as a site that normalizes new ideals of female genital aesthetics.

Linda Williams (1991) identifies pornography as well as horror films as “body genres” dealing specifically with “bodily excess”. Such films depict bodies that are overcome with “sensations” and “emotions” the spectacle of which affects the viewer directly. In light of this, the thesis links the practice of labiaplasty to the horror film spectacle, which cultural critic Barbara Creed (1993) has identified as a medium that historically pathologizes female reproductive difference, often signified by female genitals as a visual sign of that difference.

Although there are many forms of pornography produced today dealing with a vast variety of bodies and sexualities, this thesis specifically interrogates mainstream pornographic movies as they are more widely distributed and have greater potential to influence public consensus. Contemporary, mainstream pornography works to enforce ideals for the desirable female body devoid of its threatening, reproductive difference pathologized within the horror film spectacle. This affects viewers in a way that can lead subjects’ to work directly upon their bodies in order to reproduce these new ideals.

1.7 Scope and Limitations

Genital cosmetic surgery, as a fairly new and popular phenomenon, is subject to much media attention, but has been exposed to much less medical literature or theoretical analysis. While a few feminist writers, including Jane Ussher (2013), Jen Loy (2000), Virginia Braun (2010) and Sheila Jeffries (2005), have engaged the subject of genital cosmetic surgery, there is a conspicuous absence of medical data or peer reviewed journal articles on the subject, perhaps due to the newness of the phenomenon. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG) (2007), charged that vaginal rejuvenation procedures need “further scientific study to determine efficacy and that none of the cosmetic vaginal surgeries are considered ‘accepted, routine procedures’ by the ACOG” (Nunez 2013, 1). As such, much of the research on labiaplasty in this paper comes from mainstream publications as well as self-published sources on the Internet, posted by women who share their experiences with labiaplasty in their own words, in the form of blogs, discussion forums, on-line support groups and community sourced articles. These sources indicate the popular sentiments around female genital aesthetics. This thesis focuses on analyzing the language used by the women undergoing labiaplasty in order to understand how representation produces affect, which can lead to new cultural practices of body negation.

1.8 Outline

Chapter two contains a literature review investigating the works of various

scholars who theorize biopower, in order to establish the shifts towards post-industrial capitalism as they culminate in body negation phenomena including labiaplasty. This includes the ideas and theories of Michel Foucault, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Gilles Deleuze, and Tiziana Terranova. This section specifically locates the conceptualization of the ideal and deviant female body as well as the systems of control around the female body, through the works of Jane Ussher, Luce Irigaray, Dale Spender and Mady Schutzman. The theory around hardcore pornography is addressed through the work of Linda Williams. This section also explores the shift in biopower resulting from mainstream visual practices representing the female body, in body negation phenomena closely linked to late-capitalism, through the works of Susan Bordo and Jacquelyn Zita. Lastly, this section includes a summary of prominent cultural debates on the topic of vaginal cosmetic surgery, through the work of Virginia Braun.

Chapter three investigates immaterial labour and the production of affect as central modes of production in global capitalism, referencing the work of Tiziana Terranova (2003), addressing how the body and physical labour begin to become outmoded and replaced by communicative and affective labour. This chapter also addresses new trends in pornography and horror films, deeming them “spectacles” of representation indicative of the current global capitalist shift towards a system of exchangeability. This chapter aims to understand how these changes depict ideal and deviant female bodies in the context of global capitalism, specifically through the works of Susan Griffin (1981), Linda Williams (1989)

and Barbara Creed (1993). This chapter, lastly, performs an analysis of self-published data, posted on the Internet by women seeking or having undergone labiaplasty, in order to understand how their own stories help us to read into cultural discourse as well as new media spectacles of gendered representation as they affect subjectivities that result in new cultural practices upon the body.

Chapter four of this paper summarizes my findings while providing evidence of the need to further investigate the implications of labiaplasty as well as stressing the need for greater feminist critique around representations of femininity and the female body.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

To discover the conditions that made possible the increase in labiaplasty in the period which marked the shift from post-industrial to global capitalism, this review addresses analyses of biopower and self-regulation, in order to inquire how these concepts help to shape cultural understandings of the female body, which lead to various cultural practices upon the body itself.

The notion of biopower, in this thesis, is informed by Michel Foucault (1977), who contends that power works through bodies to produce autonomously self-regulating subjects. Foucault describes biopower in the nineteenth century as a two-tiered system involving the labouring body of industrial production and the reproductive body. Foucault shows that punitive systems once controlled the body of the population directly through brutal physical punishment. In the transition to industrial capitalism, however, social norms were instilled to produce disciplined subjects. These productive subjects worked in line with social order willingly. The new punitive systems worked to reshape the subjectivities of prisoners, while the schools, factories and barracks helped shape subjects to be autonomously self-regulating in conjunction with capitalist productivity. The authoritative gaze of power became internalized and turned inward by the subject to produce docile bodies, who autonomously self-regulate within a system of social control.

Foucault's (1978) understanding of the deployment of sexuality as a system of control around the body is central to modern biopower, as reproduction

is central to industrial capitalism. The nineteenth century saw a mass phenomenon of women being diagnosed with hysteria. The hystericization of women served as a system of control around women's sexuality and reproductive ability towards the progress of capitalism. The discourse around sexuality was a practice of "civilizing" sex from its real, biological origins into the symbolic realm of culture – meaning that sexuality was put to use towards the progress and ideologies dictated by that culture – where it could be negated and controlled. In the transition to the twentieth century, speaking about sex socially took on the guise of resistance – a deliberate transgression that leaves the appearance of the subjects as working outside of power – hence further hiding the mechanisms of power. In a culture where sex appears to be "repressed" or prohibited, speaking about sex, is understood as a subversive act while simultaneously the act of speaking about sex reduces it to the symbolic field where it is mediated through culture.

Historically, women have been regulated differently from men creating a different cultural condition for women as well as a different understanding of their bodies. In order to understand how power works upon the female body in capitalism, it is important to understand the conceptualization of the female body in patriarchal culture. Luce Irigaray (1977) employs a feminist, poststructuralist framework informed by psychoanalysis to explore the origins of Western civilization as predicated on the exchange of women on the market. Irigaray argues that functions of the economy help shape our subjectivities as language works to shape our reality. In an economy framed by patriarchy, women's ability

to reproduce threatens the symbolic order, since production and exchange is the domain of men, therefore, the female body becomes reframed as a tool to aid in the male production of children. The male libidinal force is understood as progress into the future, through industry as well as reproduction. His sexual domination over women becomes a testament to his libidinal strength, which is also iterated economically. Women become a product of a man's labour: women's use value is in her reproductive ability, while her exchange value is equated to the symbolic value she represents to men, often determined through cultural practices upon her body. Mothers represent pure use value and cannot be ascribed with the sexual codes of a commodity. Consequently, a mother is understood to be devoid of sexuality. Virgins represent pure exchange value, a commodity yet to pass hands. Desire is pathologized in women specifically because her "purity" is greatly valued on the market.

Women's reproductive abilities are seen by many feminist theorists as presenting a threat to patriarchy. As a result, changes in the female body have historically been pathologized. Ussher (1989) explores how female sexuality is framed strictly through reproduction, so any failure to reproduce, including menstruation and menopause, is understood as a deviation. Premenarcheal or postmenopausal women are seen as entirely asexual as they are not reproductive. Ussher notes that female biology has been used historically to justify women's subjugation and exclusion from the public sphere. The nineteenth century saw a rise in the diagnosis of hysteria in women. Clitorectomy was a frequent treatment

for hysteria as women were understood to have no autonomous sexuality outside of reproduction; when they exhibited evidence to the contrary, often through masturbatory behaviour, the clitoris and often the labia were removed to restore the woman to a proper, culturally prescribed femininity. Subsequently, cultural representation has framed female genitals as lacking in contrast to prominently represented male genitals. Female genitals are historically understood in Western culture to only have the purpose of reproduction and not pleasure, and as a result many girls grow up in fear of their sexuality and develop feelings of disgust towards their genitals.

Historically mental illness has been employed as a system of control over female bodies and subjectivities. Ussher (1991) theorizes that these systems of control were aimed at denying female desire in order to maintain the patriarchal order. Whereas the systems of control around bodies and later subjectivities controlled men through the punitive system by criminalizing them, the same power controlled women through psychiatry by pathologizing them. Discourses of normalcy and deviance were established to instil self-regulation in women. Women in modernism were understood as inherently different – or “other” – and were frequently pathologized for being women. Ussher shows that madness in women is often a response to oppression. When women are labeled and pathologized, their oppression can be dismissed and ignored by the dominant order. For example, the nineteenth century self-regulatory mechanisms instilled in women through the mental health industry taught women to perceive themselves

as the problem to their own unhappiness and discontent, rather than their social conditions. Extending to the present day, many women seek treatment autonomously, inherently understanding themselves as deviant when not in line with the dominant patriarchal reality. This can be applied to the practice of labiaplasty, where women, affected by dominant ideology, autonomously seek changes to be made to their bodies akin to clitorrectomy in order to gain normalcy within patriarchal culture.

The question of patriarchal reality – which shapes women’s subjectivities often leading to a state of self-negation – is explored by Spender (1980) in her analysis of the English language. Woman is a constant *other* in language, occupying a negative space in meaning. Femaleness is understood to be a deviation from the norm. As men construct meaning for women, female reality does not coincide with dominant reality, so women often experience themselves as deviant from the norm. Women will often negate themselves to restore normalcy. Spender states that the understanding of “humanity” is defined as masculine, so for women to achieve humanity they must reframe themselves as male often negating their own femaleness. In the English language, sexuality is also constructed as primarily masculine and lacking in the feminine. Women as well as men learn to perceive this lack of sexuality in women in language and work to reproduce it in reality.

Luce Irigaray (1974) further elaborates on how patriarchy affects female subjectivity through her theory on the production of “sameness” in patriarchal

culture. Irigaray posits that women are understood as same – as men – but since women have no male sex organ, they are understood to have no sex at all. There is no possibility of difference. There can only be presence or lack. The production of “sameness” is the castration of women’s difference, through the negation of her sexuality and desire. As there is no language for female sexual autonomy, her actual desire and bodily drives become diminished through her own understanding of the patriarchal cultural production, which shapes her subjectivity. The phallus remains the primary signifier of desire and sexuality. To acknowledge female genitalia is to open up space for otherness, which threatens patriarchy. Women become castrated at the level of language, and female genitals become understood as non-existent; phallic desire is understood as the only possible desire. The phallus becomes the ultimate signifier and the source of pleasure for both sexes. When women are offered no autonomous discourse, they are left to reproduce the meaning and discourse of masculinity. His language becomes her language, which she appears to autonomously reproduce.

Beyond language, female subjectivities are also shaped through representation. Mady Schutzman (1999) addresses the role of advertising as a system of control over female subjectivity in late capitalism, which she links directly to the nineteenth-century phenomenon of hysteria, arising out of a system of control over female bodies during a time of industrial-capitalism. Nineteenth-century psychiatry used photography in the treatment of hysterics in order to transform the patient into a visual object – promoting self-regulation towards

recovery. Hysteria becomes so indistinguishable from femininity that the image of hysteria, propagated through photography, created standardized and stereotypical codes for femininity, which were further circulated through advertising.

Photography created a new mode of enacting femininity as women learned to constantly adjust themselves for the visual plane.

Schutzman posits that hysteria is a response to a condition of living two irreconcilable realities: of embodied femininity versus culturally defined femininity. Advertising promises a redemption from the “natural” or “unclean” femininity, giving women a cleaner more symbolic option through consumption while constantly reminding women of the abject feminine that is present within them. As the project of patriarchy is to domesticate the naturally defined feminine – to castrate her into a symbolic femininity – advertising produces a femininity that is understood to be inherently castrated. The female bodies defined through patriarchy – as for example small, fragile and clean – are understood by both individuals and society as more real than actual material bodies or understood as abject in culture. Advertising creates a hysterical cultural condition wherein the lines between reality and phantasy are blurred, and at times indistinguishable; through such means capitalism creates a state of hegemony, which subjects reproduce willingly. Women learn to speak in the voice of capitalism and to autonomously reproduce patriarchy. Moreover, the voice of capitalism in advertising targeting women is often disguised as resistance, portraying women as empowered and liberated. The illusion of choice that is offered by the marketing

of commodities effectively masks oppression. The liberated and empowered women portrayed in representation are ultimately understood as exchangeable with men, but when the individual reality of women does not fit this construct women are taught to perceive themselves as the problem and are urged to either consume commodities to remedy their situation or as explored by Bordo (1992) to negate their femaleness in pursuit of norms defined by masculinity.

Bordo explores Anorexia Nervosa as a body negation phenomenon relative to late capitalism. The origins of Anorexia stems from the origins of Western culture coded by mind/body and nature/culture binary dialectics, according to which women are historically framed on the side of body/nature while men, are framed on the side of mind/culture. In late capitalism the negative space occupied by femaleness is internalized by female subjects who work to negate it by punishing their bodily desires, resulting in body negation, which includes self-starvation. Slenderness is thus a cultural ideology that idealizes control and frames the body and desire as antagonistic to the primacy of the mind. In capitalist consciousness, wherein austerity is promoted while the body and desire are denied, women who historically are linked to the body are urged to occupy less space, consume less and curb their desires. Although women in late capitalism have gained entry to public space, the patriarchal, symbolic order has not similarly altered, so it is women who become marked for this alteration.

Noting that pornography is often cited by many critics as a contributing factor in some women's decision to seek labiaplasty this paper examines Linda

Williams' (1989) analysis of hardcore pornography. Williams shows that pornography is a form of "knowledge-pleasure" around sexuality, which Foucault describes as intrinsic in the deployment of sexuality in which power and pleasure inform one another as a system of control over bodies. Pornographic hardcore has its origins in the nineteenth century stag films that stem from a desire for documented knowledge of sex and sexuality. Williams terms the desire for visual proof – in pornography's case, proof of pleasure – as "frenzy of the visible". Pornography attempts to reveal the truth specifically of female pleasure as its primary object, particularly because female pleasure is culturally occluded in pursuit of a "proper" and austere femininity. The "frenzy" occurs because the genre can never be sure of the authenticity of the female orgasm, as it can be sure of the male orgasm through the visual evidence provided by ejaculation. In the earlier days of the genre, many devices and scenarios were employed to attempt to capture an "involuntary confession" of female pleasure, which Williams argues is pornography's argument "for fundamental sameness of the male and female pleasure". The ejaculating penis or the "money shot" in pornography is captured proof that pleasure has taken place. Pornography's quest for the truth about female pleasure and difference becomes depicted as a male orgasm. Female sexual pleasure is often understood through a phallogentric standard without accounting for difference. Some pornography, Williams argues, is a response to a male viewer's desire for his enjoyment to be that of his female partner's.

Williams traces the changing history of the hardcore genre in relation to

the changing views around the body and its pleasures; formerly pornography was produced exclusively for male viewers but in the early nineteen seventies the genre opened up for women for greater market expansion. In this attempt to grow the market a greater amount of pornographies and sexualities become mainstream. Pornography has become more democratized in its content. The pornographic movies beginning in the nineteen seventies and onwards became “integrated” to engage female viewers. Many of these films attempted to depict women with more sexual “power” and “authority” but through stereotypically masculine codes, which Williams describes as “Zeus-like philandering” (Williams 1989, 238).

Crucial to understanding labiaplasty as a subject’s willing negation of the body in global capitalism is Negri and Hardt’s (2000) notion of autonomously self-regulating subjects who mask the working of power by enacting its dictates out of their own freewill. The shift from industrial to post-industrial capitalism is marked by Negri and Hardt as a transition from a disciplinary society to a society of control, where subjects begin to reproduce the workings of capitalism of their own accord. As capitalism moves outside of nation-state boundaries, power becomes increasingly decentralized and integrated into the social fabric. In the transition from industrial to communicative labour, production becomes information-oriented, producing a new form of biopower. This biopower is no longer centered on the production of material goods and bodies but rather on the production of subjectivities and social relations. The binary dialectics of

modernism, which firmly established the boundaries between *self* and *other*, have become destabilized and replaced by fluid hierarchies. Diversity is no longer excluded but embraced towards constant market expansion. Towards that end, capitalism works to manage diversity so that diverse subjects autonomously reproduce the workings of capitalism; thus, multitudes are transformed into a people who reproduce capital through all the functions of their life.

Updating Foucault's description of disciplined subjects to respond to late-capitalism, Gilles Deleuze (1992) draws attention to the shift in the production of subjectivities in the society of control. Otherness, once negated, is now managed to reproduce the logic of capitalism. While the factory of industrial capitalism was understood as a single body comprised of workers organized around a common goal, workers in a corporation are increasingly alienated from one another, as competition and revelry are understood as normalized modes of labour. These workers are transformed into "dividuals" – homogenized units produced through consumer culture. The society of control is notably a service industry; it produces affect and communication – mediating relations amongst people.

Tiziana Terranova (2003) further explores autonomously self-regulating subjects who produce labour willingly, at times with no compensation. These subjects reproduce the society of control through the free digital labour, of "NetSlaves," many of whom work for free due a "desire for affective and cultural production" (Terranova 2003, 36). The networked structure of late-capitalism creates a desire for communicative, networked social relations. The networked

subjectivities that are shaped as a result become producers out of an autonomous desire to produce, whether compensated or not. Terranova stresses that commodities have not disappeared on the Internet, rather they have simply become immaterial. The value of digital commodities becomes pure exchange value. Similarly, the body becomes dematerialized, as the mind becomes the central means of production.

As the transition towards late-capitalism moves outside of binary discourse as seen through the works of Negri and Hardt (2000) and the body appears to lose its centrality in capitalism, the mind and body once placed in opposition seem to have achieved separation. Late-capitalism shaped new understandings of subjects having new agency – power to work upon – over their bodies with the aid of medical and cosmetic technologies. The body became conceptualized as a system of autonomous functions over which subjects now have control. One example is “personality sculpting” as explored by Zita (1998), which offers the subject control over biochemistry in pursuit of a “better,” more culturally defined self. Zita explores cosmetic psychopharmacology in response to the 1990s rising popularity of the anti-depressant Prozac, which was hailed as a means to liberate women from the “tyranny” of their bodies and the subsequent emotions that are framed as a by product of those pathological bodies.

Personalities and temperaments can now be altered to suit the needs of capitalism; subjects are offered a new form of freedom and choice over the functions of their bodies. With the aid of Prozac women can transform themselves

into empowered subjects, in demand within the new, post-modern job and sex markets. Prozac created a liberated and emancipated personality in a context defined by dependency and oppression. Capitalism was continuously understood as blameless, egalitarian and democratic; on the other hand women were being framed as flawed and in need of pharmaceutical intervention.

The medicalization of women's bodies extends to the medicalization of women's sexualities, which greatly influences the rise of female genital cosmetic surgery. Virginia Braun (2010) summarizes current critical debates around female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) focusing on sociological and psychological concerns. Braun finds that many plastic surgeons promise to improve women's sex lives through the practice of FGCS, even though there is no clear evidence that FGCS can improve sexual functions. The discourses medicalizing sexuality often problematize female anatomy, promoting surgery rather than any other form of solution for women's sexual concerns. Notably, there are also very few studies conducted on the safety, efficacy, long-term effects or potential for complications of these procedures, which greatly impairs many women's ability to make an informed decisions about undergoing such procedures.

The reasons given by women seeking FGCS include a perceived abnormality in regards to their genitals and many claim that the appearance of their genitals has a negative impact on their sex lives. Much of the marketing for FGCS promises aesthetic and functional improvements to both sexual pleasure and psychological well-being. In the case of labiaplasty, many women seek the

procedure due to psychological concerns as a labia that is deemed “enlarged” produces psychological distress related to aesthetic or social “inconvenience”, which can lead to a lack of self-esteem and decreased libido. Psychology in this case provides justification for cosmetic surgery. A condition termed “hypertrophy” of the labia minora – described as a labia minora that protrudes beyond the labia majora – is used to create a medical need for labiaplasty and to simultaneously pathologize the unoccluded labia minora.

According to Broun some arguments favouring labiaplasty state that women “choose” to have the procedure performed without external pressure or coercion, while other arguments stress the fact that many women seeking labiaplasty recall negative comments or teasing on the basis of the appearance of their labia, usually by peers or sexual partners. Some studies argue that women should not be denied the right to have surgery performed on their bodies. Other studies proclaim that the notion of “informed consent” is compromised as commercial factors and a lack of reliable information greatly influence women’s decisions to undergo such surgeries. It is reported that patients are often uninformed about the risks involved in FGCS procedures. Although I firmly believe in women’s right to choose whatever procedure they wish to have performed upon their bodies, I do agree that the current state of knowledge surrounding FGCS tremendously impedes many women’s ability to decide what happens to their genitals beyond aesthetic factors. I also feel that focus needs to be drawn to the societal and cultural coercion to have FGCS, as for example in the

pathologization of female genital diversity. This is best exemplified by the term “hypertrophy” of the labia minora, which is not in fact a medical condition but rather a name given to a form of genital diversity.

According to Braun there are many sociocultural influences that inform a woman’s decision to undergo FGCS. This includes the negative representations of female genitals, which results in feeling of disgust in society at large.

Normalization of cosmetic surgery across North American and Western European cultures is also a factor. As well, very specific visual representations of vulvas are culturally depicted, including depictions in pornography, which occlude genital diversity and create the notion of what Braun terms the “vulva ideal”, which is further perpetuated by FGCS marketing. Braun references the work of Sander L. Gilman (1985) in stating that historically, beginning with nineteenth century Europe, longer labia have been used to signify sexual pathology in women. Braun elaborates that current medical discourse works to further pathologize female anatomy; for example, an unoccluded labia is often described to be “enlarged”, implying pathology.

The main debates regarding FGCS are centered around the question of whether the procedures create the problems they aim to fix, such as impaired sexual functions or lack of self confidence, and whether the procedures are actually helping women with issues around self-esteem and sexuality. Currently no conclusive evidence exists to support either argument.

Historically in Western European cultures the female body has been

pathologized in pursuit of colonizing her reproductive ability, and so female genitals are framed as particularly threatening as a sign of reproductive difference. As a result, female genitals have been reduced in or excluded from representation. At a time of industrial capitalism, explicit coercion was employed primarily through the Victorian insane asylum, to dominate the female body often through surgical intervention including clitorrectomy. In the transition to post-industrial capitalism the systems of control began to work towards altering subjectivities in order to produce docile subjects who autonomously reproduce the working of power. Media representations, including representations in mainstream advertising, created a system of norms for women and consequently, women began to negate their bodies willingly. Global capitalism, which employs the use of advertising amongst other means, helps shape subjectivities towards capitalism's autonomous reproduction. The shrinking global economy and its ideology of austerity and regulation of excess enjoins subjects, specifically women, to produce slender, non-desiring bodies with highly controlled excesses and desires. Similarly, the augmentation of the labia can be seen as the augmentation of female bodily difference towards a projection of a highly managed and well controlled inner self that works in service of a phallogentric sexual economy.

Women, according to Schutzman (1999), are culturally shaped as visual objects that learn to take sexual pleasure from the enjoyment, including visual enjoyment they bring to their male partners rather than taking enjoyment in the

physical sensation of their own bodies. The discourse around sexuality according to Foucault (1978) creates a desire for knowledge about sex and sexual difference understood to be culturally repressed. Pornography according to Williams (1989) is often a response to a desire to liberate knowledge around sexuality, especially female sexuality understood to be particularly hidden in dominant culture. Despite pornography's quest for the knowledge of sexual difference it is subject to a phallogentric representational economy. As a result the cultural conceptualization of sexual difference becomes greatly diminished, which causes many women to actively negate their bodily difference – deemed pathological – in pursuit of new, culturally defined norms.

Chapter 3

3.1 Biopower: Production of Affect and the Disappearing Body

The aforementioned literature review helps to describe how the body is depicted and understood in contemporary culture. Led by the work of Negri and Hardt (2000), I understand late-capitalist body negation phenomena in the context of autonomous self-regulation as indicative of Deleuze's society of control. This is propagated, I would suggest, through a new spectacle of representation that is distinct to the digital age and locatable in the popular media images that represent female bodies, particularly within pornographic as well as horror films, identified by Linda Williams (1991) as the two most notable "body genres". This thesis observes a historical lineage of power working upon the body to understand how these practices shape the current expectation of the female body conceptualized through a new form of biopower that aims to shape subjects towards a system of exchangeability.

The transition from industrial to post-industrial capitalism is marked by a shift in biopower. The evolution of power in capitalism beyond nation-state boundaries into a global sphere marks the emergence of a new ideology, which embraces diversity towards market expansion. Gender difference was produced and clearly defined as a threat to the dominant order in previous forms of capitalisms. Today, while diversity is included in the dominant order, it is highly managed to work in line with the dictates of power. The transition towards post-industrial capitalism is also characterized by a shift from a disciplinary society to

a society of control as observed by Deleuze (1992). The systems of power which once punished the body directly began to inform subjectivities towards a production of autonomously, self-regulating subjects who are endowed with liberty and freedom to do as they please. Such subjects will inevitably make the right decision – the decision which reproduces and reactivates capitalism and its ideologies.

The labouring body loses its central position in contemporary capitalist production, and is replaced by the mind which takes a privileged position in the production of the information/knowledge economy. Consequently, the threat of the female reproductive difference appears to have declined also, as the need for sexual difference as well as for all otherness has become outmoded – towards a movement that autonomously reproduces exchangeability based on a male normative, consumer culture. Spectacles of representation, including that of advertising, produce affect – an emotional response that works to produce changes in the body ranging from arousal, tears, goose bumps, etc. Such responses can help to influence specific desires within subjects. This leads many women towards self-regulation within the market. In relation to the work of Terranova (2003) and the state of global capitalism, one can argue that capitalism today helps to shape subjectivities directly, resulting in a desire towards productivity on the part of the labouring subjects. In the example used by Terranova, immaterial labour, such as the production of online content, spurs the desire to participate culturally in capitalism whether one is compensated or not,

which often results in the production of free labour on the Internet. Negri and Hardt (2000) state that in order for capitalism to produce surplus value subjects must “practice abstinence” in regard to expenditure. They must accumulate capital in order for it to be reinvested towards the production of more capital. As Negri and Hardt (2000) propose, “Capital itself demands that capitalists renounce pleasure and abstain as much as possible” (223). Capitalism negates enjoyment that is deemed unproductive and does not fit with its dictates, while simultaneously propagating productive pleasures and desires that operate within the precepts of capitalist ideology. Capitalism, which propagates an ideology of austerity, cautions against bodily excess and desires of the body. This is evidenced by the practices of dieting observed by Bordo (1992), but also by practices such as labiaplasty, in the context where the “enlarged” labia signifies sexual promiscuity – sexuality and desire – in women. Simultaneously, capitalism produces its own excess. The ideology that creates the “slender body” produces its own ideological excess in the form of the “overweight” of the desiring body, which is subject to fear and negation. Consequently, bodies deemed “overweight” become a site of market expansion in the promotion of weight loss products and cosmetic alteration. It is argued that labiaplasty creates the very problem it aims to fix (Braun 2010). The newly termed “hypertrophic” labia minora becomes another locus for market expansion in the field of cosmetic surgery while the discourse of austerity, which propagates a normalizing “sexually pure” or “clean” aesthetic of the female body further perpetuates a desire towards the negation of

this newly discovered “excess”.

Where, female difference historically pathologized female pleasures and desire, women today are culturally represented as equal and exchangeable to male subjects. The penis is often depicted as the centre of pleasure for both sexes; consequently the risk to female genital sensation is rarely addressed within the discourse of vaginal cosmetic surgery.

The following section examines the spectacle of media representation as well as the production of affect by media, in order to understand how contemporary biopower has helped shape the specific cultural practice that is labiaplasty. First, I will address contemporary mainstream pornographic movies, which I deem the pornographic spectacle; this phenomenon helps to shape new bodily norms and ideals by depicting female genitals as small and ‘discreet’. I will later look at the horror film spectacle as a cultural artefact, which helps defines the abject in our culture primarily as the excess of unregulated emotions and desires. This analysis addresses how femaleness or female difference is pathologized and negated, manifesting in such cultural practices as labiaplasty.

3.2 The Pornographic Spectacle and Affective Labour

Contemporary capitalism primarily produces immaterial labour (Žižek 2012), which includes affective labour, which deals specifically with bodily affects, and intellectual or symbolic labour, which deals with information and communication. Information and communication industries also often work to

produce affect – emotional responses aimed to influence specific thoughts and actions on the part of consumers/viewers. As Schutzman (1999) argued, the advertising industry “moved” women to constantly work upon the self. Today, immaterial labour creates productive desires and thoughts in consumers/viewers.

Tiziana Terranova (2003) explores Internet labour and production of affect in the context of contemporary capitalism, where economic flows help structure the social world at large. Here social relations and capitalist production are inextricably combined, where producing culture becomes part of nearly all facets of life, including leisure, recreation and social interactions that range from the use of social media, interactive games and content sharing platforms. Within this paradigm producing culture becomes primarily desirable for the subjects.

Autonomous, self-regulating subjects are encouraged to desire to contribute to economic flows and capitalist production, whether compensated or not. This type of immaterial labour described by Terranova is highly dependent on collaboration and networking both within digital space and outside of its bounds. Therefore, it is simultaneously the production and participation of simultaneous labour and social relations.

Today, social relations are increasingly mediated through cultural industries. I would argue that this largely shapes subjectivities towards a desire to reshape bodies in order to facilitate contemporary social relations. Labiaplasty, in other words, is not a direct response to the conditions of contemporary biopower, but rather it arises in relation to the spectacle of bodies increasingly altered within

popular TV and film narratives, including pornography. The symbolic exchange value of commodities is given priority over use value; this is best exemplified by digital commodities, which signal pure exchange value as many such commodities are immaterial. Even material goods function to produce affective responses. For example, cars provide the *feeling* of power, safety and comfort or vacuum cleaners provide the *feeling* of ease and control. As such, culturally mediated, symbolic bodies, observed within digital space produce new norms, which other subjects then desire to comply to. Many subjects desire to reshape their bodies willingly, much in the same way NetSlaves desire to produce free labour willingly. The rhetoric of choice and the pursuit of personal desire masks the function of economic power. As Terranova explains: “The Internet advertised on television and portrayed by print media seems not just the latest incarnation of capital’s inexhaustible search for new markets, but also a full consensus creating machine, which socializes the mass of proletarianized knowledge workers into the economy of continuous innovation” (Terranova 2003, 39). The Internet contributes to the direct shaping of subjectivities by producing social consensus for trends, tastes and norms. This produces a desire for cultural participation resulting in a networked system of consumers and producers.

Material labour begins to disappear in the contemporary digital age; industrial production becomes increasingly less visible and loses its central position in both capitalism and the consciousness of the subjects. As a result, physical labour becomes a less desirable activity and mode of economic

participation. The presence of the body, once disciplined and worked upon like a labouring machine, is now overshadowed by the mind, which becomes central to economic participation in communicative or intellectual labour.

To understand biopolitical practices around the body in the transition from modern to postmodern capitalism, Emily Martin (1990) compares how the body is imagined in modern capitalism in contrast to postmodern capitalism. She posits that the state of economic flows shapes how we understand our bodies. Martin examines “the Fordist body” at a time of standardized, industrial capitalism. Fordist methods of factory organization are intrinsic to the way even biology became framed in modernist discourse; the body was increasingly understood as a machine that is *part* of the Self. In the transition to late capitalism however, the body is imagined as a networked system of autonomous functions *outside* of the Self. “The ‘I’ who used to wear the body like a closely fitting set of clothes is now miniaturized, and is dwarfed by its body. The ‘I’ is made passive and powerless to the doings of the components of the body. Somewhere in the system lives agency; the ‘I’ can only watch (Martin 1990, 125). Discourses that pathologize bodily functions produce the understanding that the body is an “autonomous” entity that is out of the subject’s control. Affective industries, such as medical, pharmaceutical and cosmetic industries, provide the subject with new agency (ability to act upon) over the body through various surgical and chemical interventions. This discourse further perpetuates the understanding that contemporary capitalism is a liberating or emancipating system from the

“tyranny” of bodies. One example of this new agency is cosmetic psychopharmacology, which aids in personality sculpting which is examined through the works of Zita (1998). Labiaplasty is another example that promises to improve women’s sex lives and self-esteem by exerting agency over their bodies which are understood as the cause of impaired sexuality or a lack self-esteem.

The female body is no longer understood in a reproductive sense as was central in modern capitalism. Female subjects themselves often learn to understand their own bodies as mediated through the systems of normalization perpetuated through the spectacle of representation; as exemplified by Bordo (1992). The visual sight of the slender body carries with it the late-capitalist ideology of austerity and control over desires – a visual projection of the inner self. As subjects begin to alter their physical bodies to conform to the new norms of immaterial bodies depicted in representation, the spectacles of representation and embodied reality become inextricably linked. Past practices of biopower, such as clitorrectomy in Victorian medicine, intervened on the body directly, attempting to excise its female difference and bodily desire. In the case of labiaplasty, contemporary power works on many feminine subjects effectively, negating their femaleness and bodily desire towards a projection of a more culturally defined self, while simultaneously masking the workings of power.

3.3 The Pornographic Spectacle

The problem for us is not are our desires satisfied or not. The problem is how do we know what we desire. There is nothing spontaneous, nothing natural about human desires. Our desires are artificial. We have to be taught to desire. Cinema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn't give you *what* you desire. It tells you *how* to desire (Žižek 2006).

The contemporary spectacle works to shape our gendered subjectivities, often towards a system of self-regulation and social control. According to Slavoj Žižek (2006), we must enter the social world through the symbolic field of language, which radically negates our bodies as observed through labour that is now immaterial. Beyond Foucault's (1978) notion of sexuality as a system of control over bodies, the body today seems to be effectively mastered through both medical and cultural mediation. Sexuality is continuously shaped by culture. This thesis looks at the pornographic spectacle as an aid to shaping sexuality. Pornography is cited by critics as an influential factor in the practice of labiaplasty. Jeffreys (2005) states that labiaplasty is a procedure that was initially popular amongst pornographic actresses, but became increasingly more mainstream in contemporary culture when other women began to gain interest in the procedure.

In other words, the pornographic spectacle created a new ideal female body by creating a new system of standardized norms, including those for female genitals. The spectacle creates common understandings of new and highly reduced female genitals as normalized. Statistics collected by Nunez (2013) and

Ussher (2013) suggest that these ideals are increasingly emulated by women today. Braun's 2010 study demonstrates that pornographic material helps to perpetuate the notion of the "vulva ideal" by only depicting one, very specific type of female genitalia. Subjects, in other words, desire to enact practices upon their bodies which are highly mediated by cultural norms established through representation. I argue that today, representation helps shape subjectivities directly through the production of social consensus, which often results in cultural practice such a labiaplasty.

Susan Griffin (1981) is a leading theorist of the pornographic spectacle of the modernist era of film and literature. Griffin posits that pornography functions as symbolic mastery over nature, a space associated with women, in order to sustain a phallogocentric discourse by undermining female pleasure and desire. This discourse maintains a state of female castration – the female positioned as *lack* in the symbolic order. In her reading of the 1975 pornographic film *Inside Marilyn Chambers* directed by Artie Mitchell, Griffin proposes that the imagery of secrecy and mystery in the film work to slowly reveal narratives of explicit masculine sexuality and aggression hidden within. This works to enforce the notion that women who on the surface might appear delicate and modest, in fact, can potentially wield a sexual power over men that can cause men to lose mastery and control over themselves. Women's bodies are thus dominated as men exercise *their* mastery over women.

Williams (1989) argues that modernist era pornographic films were in fact

preoccupied with knowledge and revelations of “truth” about sex and sexuality, particularly female sexuality and sexual difference, which is often culturally obscured. Capturing visual proof of female pleasure became a central theme for the genre, but as female orgasm is difficult to verify visually, the genre became intent on finding ways to capture authentic depictions of pleasure. The aggressive or sometimes violent direction of the pornographic spectacle of the last century was an attempt to depict an “involuntary confession of pleasure”, often through rape scenarios where the victim eventually gives into a pleasure she could no longer deny. As argued by Williams, “pleasure for women is damning whether she experiences it with or against her will. If it is against her will, of course, the drama of her conversion to consent is of special interest to the male viewer: it vindicates his desire to believe that what he enjoys she enjoys” (Williams 1989, 164-165). This relates to Irigaray’s (1974) understanding of female *jouissance* as non-existent in phallogentric language. Any possibility of difference or different desires becomes strongly negated within this discourse.

Despite the fact that Griffin and Williams have distinctly different readings of the modern era pornographic spectacle, both theorists posit that the phallogentric representational economy within such films fails to depict female pleasure/difference adequately. Griffin stresses that this failure of representation is particularly detrimental to some women’s embodied reality by further enforcing negative association with female sexual pleasure/difference. This causes some women to perceive their own desires as frightening or abject.

Problematically, Griffin's analysis operates with the assumption that pornography is primarily there for male consumption and pleasure. According to Williams (1989) traditionally pornography was primarily targeted to male viewers but during the shift towards post-industrial capitalism pornography began to target female viewers for the purposes of market expansion.

Today, pornography ever more increasingly invites female viewers to participate in consumption. I argue that the mainstream pornography of the late modern/postmodern era was indicative of an ideology where the body, particularly the female body, was controlled and negated. The contemporary, mainstream pornographic spectacle, in contrast, often poses an ideology of female liberation and works primarily on the subjectivities of women through the depiction of a sexually "liberated" or "empowered" femininity. To argue this case, in the following section I examine several pieces of contemporary mainstream pornography, including the popular 2005 movie *Pirates*, to explore how contemporary pornographic content influences female subjectivities to potentially desire the augmentation of their labia, while at the same time masking the internalized workings of patriarchal power.

3.4 Contemporary Pornographic Representations of Empowerment and Exchangeability

This section reviews the mainstream pornographic movie *Pirates* (2005), directed by the contemporary pornographic director Joone. According to IMDb

(2005) this movie won nineteen adult movie awards in 2006, 2007 and 2008. The movie, which boasted one of the highest budgets in pornographic film history was consumed by male and female mainstream audiences alike. This analysis suggests that mainstream pornography such as *Pirates*, are produced to include an increasing number of female viewers, where pornography of the previous century was primarily targeted at a male audience. The women in *Pirates* appear strong and sexually empowered. The narrative is focused on the female's pleasure as well as her male partner's and Griffin's notion of misogyny is difficult to locate. However, the pleasure depicted in *Pirates* is distinctly male centered.

Pirates is a comedic journey of a pirate hunter Captain Edward Reynolds, played by Evan Stone and his sexually insatiable first mate Jules Steel, played by Jesse Jane. The two characters embark on a journey to rescue a newlywed young couple captured by evil pirates. The character of Jules is notable, as she is a strong and adventurous warrior with a voracious appetite for sex. In fact, Jules is reminiscent of classic male action heroes of entertainment history past, who were usually portrayed as womanizers and fighters. This is a definitive twist on tradition. Captain Reynolds, who would normally be expected to be the hotshot ladies man, is actually both sexually naive and incompetent in battle, leaving the "leading man" archetype to his female first mate, Jules. Women are not objectified or humiliated in positions of subservience in *Pirates*; rather they partake in both the sex and the narrative in equal manner to the men, and act increasingly like the men in the film by displaying the same aggressiveness and

sexual prowess. In the context of the movie, female identities are fluid, individual and not apparently prescribed by a traditional female gender role. However, most of the women share a striking resemblance to one another; they all have bleach blond hair, tanned skin, full lips, slim bodies with significantly enhanced breasts and very small vulvas. The men, though all muscularly built, are more diverse in appearance but all share strikingly large genitals, as is typical for pornographic male actors.

Pirates breaks with tradition because women are not physically dominated, as in the case of late modern/postmodern pornography described by Griffin and Williams. In *Pirates*, women are depicted as sexually aggressive – not as abject subjects with insatiable desires, but rather they are “like the boys” – displaying equal footing with men and acting very similar to them. However, I posit that this depiction of sexually voracious women is a direct product of a phallogocentric representation economy.

Pirates isn't portraying a new language of female autonomy. Sexuality is still understood to be a primarily masculine language; however, it is now “spoken” by women rather than *against* women as was evidenced in modernist era porn. On the surface, pornographic movies like *Pirates* appear as a form of liberation for women by simultaneously depicting women as sexually empowered and by engaging female viewers to participate in the act of consuming pornographic material traditionally considered transgressive for women. Williams (1989) states that the pornographic movies that began to emerge during a shift

towards post-industrial capitalism began to depict women with greater “sexual power and authority” but did so only through stereotypically masculine codes of sexual behaviour.

Phallogentricity is further iterated in *Pirates* because the penis is positioned as the primary source of pleasure for both sexes. The sexually insatiable women are primarily hungry for the penis rather than for sex – the women appear to derive pleasure from pleasuring men. This iteration is mostly indicated by the character of Jules, the free-spirited manizer who is exceptionally fond of phalating her many partners. Williams (1989) states that because the female orgasm is difficult to document visually, beginning in the early postmodern porn genre, the male orgasm or “the money shot” began to represent verifiable, visual proof that pleasure took place, standing in as proof of pleasure for both sexes. In *Pirates* female pleasure is not in her orgasmic response but in the orgasmic response of her male partner.

The character Jules is very much an extension of Jesse Jane's pornographic persona. The front page of the Jesse Jane official website states, "Jesse Jane is THE All-American dream babe and she is one horny little minx! If you are looking for this Digital Playground Exclusive pornstar, then you have come to the right place.....Gorgeous, blonde, busty, sex starved and always craving cock, what more can you ask from the All-American Pornstar babe!" (Digital Playground 2014).

Jules/Jesse Jane has an intense desire to please men – she appears to

derive pleasure from their pleasure. Essentially her desire is exchangeable with that of her male partner. Her autonomous enjoyment is not of consequence here. Employing Irigaray (1974), woman is understood as *same* – as a man (meaning she is devoid of irreducible sexual difference), but without possessing a male sex organ. She is represented as having no sex at all – as lack. In *Pirates* woman's desire is depicted in essence as a man's, or similar to man's. The new pornographic spectacle varies from the pornography analyzed by Griffin because it invites women to participate, but through a phallogentric, masculinist ideology of aggressive pursuit of male centered pleasure; this presentation fails to acknowledge the female body and constrains pleasure by occluding difference. Pornography produces affects by sexually arousing viewers, helping shape consumer's sexual identities while failing to provide representations of autonomous female sexuality not fixated on the male orgasm. The primacy of the penis and centrality of its desire diminishes the presence of female genitals within the new pornographic spectacle – often extending to embodied practice.

One example that iterates the primacy of the penis as the centre of pleasure for both sexes can be observed in the marketing of sex toys on the Internet. The adult movie company Digital Playground has launched a line of Jesse Jane sex toys including The Flashlight Girls synthetic vagina. The Flashlight is a polymer vagina housed in a tall sleeve, which resembles a flashlight and comes conveniently with a lid to cover the “vulva” – making the device look

convincingly like an actual flashlight. It is a hand held masturbatory device for men. The Digital Playground website advertises the item as follows:

Feel every one of Jesse's intimate folds and curves with her signature Flashlight, created from her actual body casting and cradled in an exclusive pearlescent case. Designed to provide the most realistic vaginal intercourse sensation ever created, the Lotus texture begins with a smooth ultra tight entry that quickly blossoms to a slightly more comfortable canal. Further adding to the complex fantasy is the inverted entry and four pleasure chambers, making this a texture unmatched in realism and sensation (Digital Playground 2014).

What The Flashlight offers is pleasure to the male subjects, in a form of "sensation" and "fantasy". The "realism" offered by The Flashlight implies that the device offers the same affect as that produced by the female body, specifically the female genitalia. The promotional video for The Jesse Jane Flashlight iterates this point further. The video, then, is a clear example that women in the pornographic spectacle are depicted as sexually liberated on one hand but devoid of autonomous desire and enjoyment on the other.

The "vulva" of The Flashlight is a tiny slit, surrounded by small and discrete labia lips that barely protrude outside of the fleshy looking convex circle within which the "vulva" is housed. Most of the detail seems to have been carved in to the convex matter rather than protruding outwards. The video promoting The Flashlight features Jesse Jane initially weight training. She is vigorously working out for over a minute in the video then stops to masturbate – a quick jerk off after a work out, like one of the boys. She takes off her briefs, lies back on the work out bench with her legs open and places The Flashlight on her stomach just above

her vulva, facing the viewer, which draws attention to the striking resemblance between her actual anatomy and the advertised item. She caresses her own vulva and the replica interchangeably in a state of continuous pleasure, implicitly stating that the two “items” are so strikingly similar she finds exchangeable pleasure in caressing either one. The Flashlight is depicted as a comparable substitution for her actual vulva. This also states that the pleasure she experiences comes primarily from her fingers that she uses to caress the “items” and not from her lower anatomy. The marketing video suggests that a liberated woman today is exchangeable with a man, therefore physical enjoyment is irrelevant even to her, as she has no penis. The man’s physical enjoyment is central as his penis represents pleasure proper. Jesse Jane derives pleasure from her penis – symbolized here by her finger – not from the sensation she experiences in her own “lacking” sex organs as the pleasure she enacts appears to take place whether she is caressing her own vulva or that of The Flashlight. The desire that is shaped through such representation in the female subject is the desire to produce affect upon the male body, to gain pleasure from pleasuring the penis; thus producing desires that are exchangeable with that of male subject’s.

In the contemporary mainstream pornographic spectacle women are invited to have sexual “power and authority” if they continuously reactivate patriarchal desires, autonomously granting male desire a central position in the economy of pleasure and sexuality. The previous century’s pornographic spectacle’s depictions of force and domination, attempted to provide visual

“proof” of female pleasure – eliciting an involuntary confession of her pleasure to be the same as that of the male subject. Today, women are depicted as willingly and even aggressively “confessing” their pleasure to be that of the male subject’s.

Producing affect for the male subject is depicted as a new pleasure for the female subject in the contemporary mainstream pornographic spectacle, which many female viewers desire to autonomously reproduce. Female pleasure becomes defined by the pleasure she gives to the male subject, whether it is the visual pleasure of seeing a sexualized ideal of the female body or the physical pleasure she gives to the male body.

Pirates is but one example of contemporary mainstream pornography that portray women with a greater degree of sexual power while maintaining a phallogentric ideology. *Fighters* (2014) is another example of a popular porn movie where the female protagonists portray stereotypically masculine roles. The women of *Fighters* are depicted as boxing champions in an epic fight for triumph. *Loaded* (2004) is yet another exemplary movie where the leading female characters not only have increased sexual liberty but also take on action hero roles as fierce police officers. The women of *Loaded* exhibit stereotypically masculine traits of violent aggression and sexual voraciousness. *Code of Honor* (2013) is a movie in which gun wielding female heroes fight for justice with brutal force and rampant sexuality. The women in *Code of Honor* revel violently amongst explosions while scantily dressed and highly sexualized. The women in these movies all embody traditionally masculine roles as warriors and action heroes,

embodying sexually and violently aggressive behaviours while at the same time finding pleasure primarily in the male orgasm.

There are numerous pornographic movie examples that cater to many different themes, preferences and sexualities. This thesis focuses on mainstream pornography because it is more widely distributed and therefore travels faster in the public consciousness, having greater cultural sway. Mainstream pornography is constructed meticulously in line with cultural codes and the symbolic order, one that still fails to depict female sexual autonomy. In the new pornographic spectacle, women indulge their sexual appetites by enacting masculine desire, by taking pleasure primarily in pleasuring the penis and by sustaining themselves as visual objects. This is akin to robbing women of *jouissance* or denial of autonomous female pleasure and meaning, as explained by Irigaray:

It is *true* that women don't tell all. And even if one begs them to speak, if he begs them to speak, they will or would never express anything but the will and the word of the 'subject' who rapes and robs them of their *jouissance*. Women have already lost something more intimate – something that finds no communication in 'soul' – and 'gained' only propositions in exchange. They are already dominated by an intent, a meaning, a thought. By the laws of *a* language (Irigaray 1974, 230).

While the mainstream pornographic movies described above are but a few examples, I argue that their representation practices are indicative of contemporary cultural ideology of gender exchangeability; as such, one can cite these examples as different representations of female sexuality that sharply contrast with those of the late modern/postmodern era. In the example of contemporary pornography, small, inconspicuous female genitals appear in

startling contrast to the imperatively large male genitals. Autonomous female sexuality, made apparent in the *presence* of her sex organs, would apparently threaten the patriarchal symbolic order. Women's sexual appetites are permitted, even desired and applauded, but only when they replicate exchangeable phallic-centered desires of masculine subjects often resulting in their own different genitals to be viewed as less desirable as they are occluded from such representations and thus become viewed as deviant in the production of sexuality.

The representation of the pornographic female of the late modern/postmodern era signifies culturally defined desire; her image is slim, never fertile, never aging. The reduced, slender, undesiring body of the past extends now right down to the genital region, where even the vulva no longer signifies sexual difference but rather an exchangeable, phallic-centered pleasure. As there is only room for one set of genitals, *desires*, in the phallocentric representational economy, and those genitals are masculine; any presence of female genitalia, any deviation from her 'discreet' or lacking sex organs, becomes understood as excess.

I posit that contemporary pornography exists in a post-feminist space, where women are represented as sexually liberated and empowered, endowed with distinctly masculine attributes of aggression and sexual voraciousness, yet with strikingly 'discreet' genitals. This not only produces norms but also desires, at times potentially for reduction, which often leads to self-alteration as in the case of labiaplasty. As observed earlier by Mady Schutzman (1999), women who find

that their reality may not fit the dominant reality perpetuated through spectacles of representation are taught to view this inconsistency as their own failing and to alter themselves to fit the dominant reality. Women who may not perceive themselves as empowered and liberated, in the manner by which the mainstream pornographic spectacle portrays them to be, can be led to desire to reproduce the image of the liberated, pornographic woman. Representation often produces desire for self-regulation and as women desire to undergo such procedures, the workings of power become increasingly invisible. Women are encouraged to desire to autonomously reproduce dominant, phallogentric ideologies; understanding pleasure to be the production of affect for the male subject which is understood to be achieved through “small” and “discreet” vulvas.

The female body of the last century, understood as different was dominated by the systems of power directly related to the production of industrial capitalism. Similarly, the pornographic spectacle of the last century dominated the female body in representation. Today the female body is “liberated” within the capitalist system as well as the mainstream pornographic spectacle, because the systems of power now work directly on subjectivities to produce autonomously self-regulating subjects within the phallogentric capitalist order. Labiaplasty, as one example, works to assist some women to conform to new cultural norms but, importantly, at the risk of lost sensation and thus lost sexual enjoyment. The risk to damaged female genital sensation present in the practice of labiaplasty is deemed acceptable because, as I have argued, phallogentric discourse positions

the penis as the center of pleasure for both sexes, shaping female desires to derive pleasure from the affect produced upon the male body. As a result female difference and desire are framed as pathological excess – a potential breakdown in the symbolic order – most strongly within the horror film genre, which confronts female viewers with the excesses they must fear and negate.

Braun and Tiefer (2009), in a critical study of female genital cosmetic surgery, attribute the historical pathologization of women's sexual and reproductive bodies as a significant factor in today's medicalization of women's sexualities. Braun and Tiefer draw on the theory on the abject stating that the "protruding" labia is understood as tissue that resists being "neatly" contained within clear boundaries. The following section examines the horror film spectacle, which helps define what is abject in culture often pointing specifically at female sexual/reproductive difference. This, I argue, helps create a condition in which women learn to revile that which is defined as abject in their own bodies, thus encouraging such cultural practices as labiaplasty.

3.5 The Late Modern/Postmodern Horror Film and the Monstrous Feminine

This section of the thesis examines the horror film spectacle as a medium that reflects the abject within culture. This thesis looks firstly at the horror film spectacle as a site that confronts cultural anxieties around female reproductive difference, in order to understand how the modern horror film spectacle worked to frame the female body as a site of deviance. I will argue that the late

modern/postmodern horror spectacle gives way – at a time of global capitalism – to a contemporary horror spectacle in which sexual difference is no longer strongly iterated through representation. Sexual difference is consequently no longer the primary object of cultural anxiety as during modern capitalism, where female reproductive difference was feared and controlled at times to the point of forced clitorrectomy and institutionalization in the context of the Victorian insane asylum. As argued earlier, present day capitalist ethos often works directly on subjectivities; as such, uncontrolled emotions and primarily unproductive desires such as desires of the body that do not contribute to the capitalist system, are the primary objects of cultural anxiety and antagonism.

Barbara Creed's (1993) work on the monstrous feminine is crucial to understanding how the female body is historically represented as abject in the horror spectacle and thus becomes a subject of negation in cultural practice. Here, I examine the shift in representation within the horror spectacle during a time of global capitalism through a feminist, psychoanalytic lens in order to understand how anxieties around the female body have changed within the new horror spectacle and how this influences a new popular understanding of current female deviations. These values produce actions that can extend into work upon the self, including practices such as labiaplasty.

Barbara Creed's reading of David Cronenberg's 1979 film *The Brood* explores how the pathologization of the female reproductive system is symbolized through the fear of the vagina as a sign of a deviant woman's reproductive

difference. Creed conducts her reading of the monstrous feminine in “relation to Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject and the material” (Creed 1993, 7). Creed argues that the horror film is a form of “defilement ritual” by which a society confronts the abject in order to “exclude that element” from society and redraw the “demarcation lines...separating out the human from the non-human and the fully-constituted subject for the partially formed subject” (Creed 1993, 8). A partially formed subject is understood to be abject because this subject signifies a disturbance in identity and order. Thus excluding the abject elements from society helps enforce the formation of the subjects’ symbolic identities within that society.

Creed further argues that the woman’s representation as monster “is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions” (Creed 1993, 7). I am using Creed’s approach in my own analysis of the 2002 film, *28 Days Later* which exemplifies a contemporary horror spectacle. In this film, cultural anxieties are portrayed in a radically different form from that of the previous period, relative to anxieties around uncontrolled emotion/desire and unproductive excess. Through this analysis, I seek to understand how these new cultural anxieties correspond to new trends in mainstream pornography, where gender differences (female pleasure and desire) appear to be on the decline. As I have argued, this shift creates new normative subject positions, which affects the body towards a new standard of body norms for women, some of whom are impacted to the point of choosing vaginal augmentation to conform to these norms.

Drawing on Julia Kristeva's work (1982), Creed identifies the abject as something that is "cast off" from the body in order for that body to continue living; this includes urine, excrement, vomit and blood. Creed observes that "the ultimate in abjection is the corpse" (9) because the corpse is a body that has entirely been "cast off" while at the same time reminds living subjects of their own fragility as well as the fragility of meaning. The feelings of loathsomeness and disgust accompany the abject so that the subject is compelled to cast those things away in order to secure the preservation of life. Objects, substances as well as people that threaten our sense of reality are also understood as abject. Criminals are one example, because they are cast off from society and also threaten the subjects' sense of proper social reality.

The abject is threatening to the symbolic order as it is outside of meaning and threatens the order of meaning within the symbolic. The abject is also threatening because it points to corporeal indifferenciation, and is particularly disturbing to a system where the subject is strongly differentiated from otherness. The female body points to the infinitely degrading and regenerating natural world because it is reproductive and therefore understood as abject in the symbolic order of culture. The maternal body specifically points to abjection because the subject must part with the body of the mother in order to have a formed, symbolic identity. The framing of the female reproductive body as abject closely relates to the pathologization of the changes in the female body as examined earlier through the work of Ussher (1989). Female reproductive difference is historically

pathologized as it threatens the patriarchal order because the reproductive female body “owns” a crucial mode of production – that of bodies.

The Brood (1979) is a film analyzed by Creed that deals most specifically with the cultural anxiety surrounding the reproductive female body. *The Brood* specifically symbolizes culture’s fear of a women’s fecundity especially as typified in modern culture. This is indicative of a late modern anxiety as many of the films in the late modern spectacle read by Creed negotiate the themes of parthenogenesis; a form of asexual reproduction, which does not require the presence of sexual otherness. Parthenogenesis is represented in films like *Aliens* (1986) and *The Hunger* (1983). Fecundity is particularly threatening in this context, not just because it signals a threateningly abundant female reproductive ability, but because the mother is a parthenogenic mother who does not require a male other to procreate. According to Irigaray (1977) one of the main missions of the Western patriarchal project is to reframe women’s reproductive ability as a tool for the male production of children – to castrate her. Parthenogenesis would create redundancy – symbolic impotence on the part of the male – a state of castration. In *The Brood*, parthenogenesis is paired with woman’s desire expressed, particularly, in her rage. Rage, according to Creed, is an emotion traditionally repressed in women as a means of producing a more culturally idealized femininity. This repression results in greater social control over female subjectivities within patriarchal culture and consequently control over women producing meaning that can threaten the patriarchal order.

The Brood is exemplary of the cultural fear of the fecundate female body; it demonstrates a state of representation in which the autonomous reproductive female body creates disorder and horrid death in a patriarchal system that is otherwise ordered and highly controlled. *The Brood* is a story of a mentally disturbed woman, Nola, played by Samantha Eggar whose rage alone enables her to create a brood of monstrous children who commit brutal murders on her behalf. Nola spawns her brood by tearing open a sack of skin, which miraculously appears on her stomach, in order to pull out a tiny deformed infant from the bloody gash. Nola's expression of rage and her uncontrolled reproduction function symbiotically within the film, paired with the imagery of a bloody wound. Historically, female genitals have often been symbolized by a bleeding wound, framed as abject and serving as a signifier of women's reproductive difference.

Creed elaborates on cultural representations of female genitals as monstrous by discussing the image of the *vagina dentate*, which has historically shaped the cultural understanding of female genitals as threatening, and signalling castration anxiety. In the modern horror spectacle, the imagery of the *vagina dentate* is often evoked by the portrayal of horror movie monsters' mouths. As Creed describes, "Close-up shots of gaping jaws, sharp teeth and bloodied lips play on spectator's fear of bloody incorporation – occasionally with humor" (107). The late modern horror film spectacle confronts the viewer with the anxiety around female reproductive difference, signalled by imagery symbolizing female

genitals, as an unoccluded sign of her deviant sexual difference. In the late modern/postmodern era female reproductive difference threatens the primacy of the male in the production of bodies as well as the production of meaning; signalling castration anxiety for male subjects.

Significantly, this representation takes place at a time when the body is still central in capitalism and is systematically dominated to promote capitalist progress. The central narrative in *The Brood* deals with Nola being separated from her husband, which leads to the unleashing of her reproductive horror. Creed maintains, “The implication is that without man, woman can only give birth to a race of mutant, murderous offspring” (45).

Many of the horror films identified by Creed focus on female genitals as sign of female reproductive difference deemed abject by patriarchal culture. This helps lay the groundwork for the cultural pathologization of female reproductive difference associated with the fear of the female reproductive autonomy, which threatens the dominance of patriarchy in late modern culture. Importantly, Creed’s readings begin with the modern film spectacle and end with the films of late-capitalism where biopower begins to shift dramatically away from the production of bodies and towards a greater emphasis on the production of subjectivities; the reading moves from a time where female difference is strongly defined and demonized, to a time where female difference seems to be declining in representation as women are increasingly portrayed to embodying many of the same values, norms and behaviours as male subjects. Crucially, labiaplasty is a

new phenomenon reflecting, I would suggest, the deeply rooted horror associated with female sexual difference – which can also undermine the culture’s production of meaning – and the need on the part of twenty first century global capitalism to manage difference through consumer culture. Women are now depicted within the contemporary spectacle of representation, effectively exchangeable with male subjects, undermining female difference as argued earlier in the example of contemporary mainstream pornography. As a result otherness and uncontrolled emotion/desire are antagonized today within the mainstream horror spectacle because they are not mediated through the forces of capitalism and may threaten the very system itself. Global capitalism’s representations of the abject horror associated with loss of control over one’s emotions, desires and drives, works to influence subjectivities of viewers and thus to sustain the economic system autonomously.

The following section examines the contemporary horror film spectacle as a site depicting new cultural anxieties associated with uncontrolled emotions and desires, which help shape new forms of gendered subjectivities.

3.6 Contemporary Horror Film and the Absent Female Body

Having examined the depiction of deviant femininity through the modern horror film spectacle, I will now interrogate how this discourse changes with the shift towards contemporary representations of femininity in today’s horror media. This section seeks to analyze how subjectivities are shaped through representation

in relation to contemporary excesses, which leads to new forms of cultural practices including labiaplasty.

The late modern/postmodern spectacles emphasized female corporeal difference, as the body was still present in capitalist production and the female genitals were framed as abject and deviant as a sign of that difference. The shift towards contemporary global capitalism carries with it a shift in representation. Female difference is reproduced as male defined exchangeability; consequently the sight of her sexual difference – her genitals – also disappears. In order to understand the new cultural anxieties which arise during this shift in biopower, I will investigate the contemporary horror spectacle through my reading of the 2002 film *28 Days Later* directed by Danny Boyle. My analysis will illustrate how cultural anxieties relating to the female body have shifted at this moment in time, when capitalist production is centered on the production of subjectivities rather than bodies. I have chosen the film *28 Days Later* because it is exemplary of a current rise of zombie films within the contemporary horror spectacle that according to John Marmysz (1996) address the cultural anxiety around unmanaged drives. I argue later that this increased cultural interest in the zombie trope can be applied to the anxiety surrounding the presence of female sexual otherness.

28 Days Later is one of the most acclaimed zombie films in contemporary Western Europe. It was also produced in 2002, at the very onset of global capitalist culture. The film *28 Days Later* is well known by zombie movie

enthusiasts and is very much illustrative of the current zombie movie genre in its popularity and critical acclaim. The film is about a zombie apocalypse which arises out of medical experimentation gone wrong and unleashed by those unwilling to accept the capitalist order. The primary antagonist of this film is not a female monster but rather an indeterminate otherness – the “infected,” motivated by unmanaged bodily drives, potentially manifested in any subject and disruptive to the entire human existence.

28 Days Later begins with a close-up of television screens depicting riots and upheaval across the globe; much of the chaos depicted appears to be Muslim violence around the world. This is especially relevant to the film’s context within global capitalism because of the issues surrounding terrorism and security that become increasingly prevalent during this economic shift. This first scene takes place in a laboratory populated by caged animals. There is a break-in by two men and one woman who appear to be radical activists. A scientist pleads with the intruders not to free the animals because they have been infected with “rage”. The woman becomes overwhelmed by her emotions at the sight of the test animals and acting on a contrary impulse opens a cage. She is immediately attacked by an ape who gnaws hungrily at her neck. She begins to spew blood from her mouth while making guttural noises and grunts. There is a distinct focus on her heavily bloodied mouth as the camera lingers on her image for a few seconds before she attacks and chaos breaks loose.

The main story line of the film centres on the protagonist Jim (Cillian Murphy), who wakes up after a coma in the midst of this zombie apocalypse. Jim is rescued from the “infected” by two other survivors, a white man and a black woman, Mark (Noah Huntley) and Selena (Naomie Harris) respectively, who signify the diversity and inclusivity amongst the last remaining “civilized” humans. After Mark becomes infected, Selena kills him and the pair meet two more survivors Frank (Brendan Gleeson) and Hannah (Megan Burns). The presents of a middle-aged father and his obedient, pubescent daughter signify the paternal law and a young girl’s proper place within the symbolic, which is threatened by the abject horror of the zombie apocalypse.

The group ventures off to find other survivors. They arrive at an abandoned army blockade with no signs of survivors. Losing hope, Frank, the cool, controlled, rational patriarch, begins to break down and becomes unstable and angry. He wanders off and soon becomes infected by a bird. Immediately he is gunned down by army officers hiding nearby. The infection signals a breakdown in paternal law and illustrates how uncontrolled rage leads to degradation and immanent death.

The plot further unfolds with an encounter with the army platoon who have set up base in an abandoned mansion. The soldiers signify an oppressive regime of the modernist era past. Major West (Christopher Eccleston) explains, “Secondary to protection our real job is to rebuild, start again” (Boyle 2002). West shows them Mailer (Marvin Campbell), a soldier who was infected with the

rage virus two days prior; a large black man chained outdoors by his neck. He is frantically grunting and spewing blood. West assures Jim that keeping Mailer is necessary to learning about the infection, “He's telling me he'll never bake bread, plant crops, raise livestock. He's telling me he's futureless” (Boyle 2002). The soldiers signify a system that is predicated on binary dialectics towards progress and industry. West confesses to Jim that after catching one of his men attempting suicide, he promised that he would provide them with women for procreation, “I promised them women, cause women mean a future” (Boyle 2002). Selena and Hannah are taken away to be washed and dressed for the purposes of sexual enslavement while Jim escapes. At sundown Jim attacks the mansion by letting in the “infected”. He frees Mailer from his chains, and Mailer attacks the other soldiers. Jim finds Selena and Hannah, and together, the three cunning fighters escape. The film ends with the infected beginning to die off from hunger and hope for the future is renewed. The antagonists have destroyed themselves and the protagonists managed to survive long enough to prevail.

The film primarily pathologizes uncontrolled otherness, signified by the “infection”, which is unleashed by the radical activist woman and her unruly emotions. In the state of chaos that the woman unleashes, the symbolic order crumbles and women's difference is briefly revealed through the imagery of the bloody wound symbolized by her mouth. This takes place just as she is infected – overcome by ravenous hunger – the satiation of which infects anyone she confronts. The first scene of the film depicts a woman unleashing a breakdown in the

patriarchal symbolic order within a rational and controlled culture, but as the story unfolds the protagonists are confronted by multiple antagonistic agents who threaten that culture and its ideologies.

The break in the paternal law signals the resurgence of otherness, which threatens the symbolic order of contemporary culture. This is illustrated by Frank's emotional breakdown, followed by his infection and immediate death. In their first encounter, Selena explains the apocalypse to Jim, "It started as rioting and from the beginning you knew this was different. It started in small villages, market towns. And then it wasn't on the TV anymore, it was in the street. Outside, it was coming through your window. It was a virus. Infection. Don't need a doctor to tell you that. It was the blood. It was something in the blood" (Boyle 2002). Selena is referring to two simultaneous threats; the first is "blood," which traditionally points to the woman's "bleeding wound" genitalia and her threatening otherness. The second threat is observed on the TV, much like the rioting seen in the first shot of the film prior to the outbreak of the virus. The film is made a year after the September 11th 2001 attacks on the New York World Trade Center; it attempts to point to the total civil breakdown which first starts with the rioting and the unrest observed in the other part of the world, which can potentially "infect" the rest of the system. Mark states "cash is completely useless" (Boyle 2002), pointing to everything that keeps the reality in place; every iteration of Western Europe's production of meaning becomes useless, and demystified through the absolute Real of the encounter with death in its

uncontrolled excess of inchoate drives and desires.

The “infected” subjects signal otherness with their uncontrolled relation to nature and the object. The civilized body of the uninfected humans can control itself – its drives, impulses and emotions – towards total respect and preservation of life. In contrast the “infected” will attack without fear in order to fill their ravenous hunger – to satisfy their desire to feed. They will walk into a line of fire and risk physical destruction for the mere chance to feed upon the uninfected and therefore reproduce through contagion.

The voice of the “infected” is neither male nor female; it is the undifferentiated, inchoate, guttural growl of the body, not unlike a death rattle. This voice is the sound of the pre-symbolic being without a language, as language comprises the symbolic field of culture. This being is not dictated by culture, but is, rather, driven by an instinctual desire to which it points in a sickening cacophony of vocal noise. This can be understood through Žižek’s (2006) analysis of the presence and absence of voice within cinema that he outlines in the 2006 movie *Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*, directed by Sophie Fiennes. Žižek posits that the voice occupies a “terrifying dimension” of the obscene, where it points to the materiality of the body. Speech is an expression of the “libido,” a means of “domesticating” the voice, of reproducing symbolic meaning; a civilizing agent from the voice’s naked terror. The “infected” then can be understood as possessing pure instinctual drive with no reason or determination that threatens meaning within the symbolic; the “infected” are “futureless” – which is signified

by their inchoate voices and lack of language, as language would signify determination as well as a fully formed identity. This places the “infected” – or the unmanaged drives, emotions and desires they represent – in the abject of the symbolic order, positioning them as other in opposition to fully formed symbolic humans. The sickening cacophony of noise produced by the infected, accompanied by the visual spectacle of gnawing at flesh and the spewing of blood aims to induce affect in the viewer in a form of terror and disgust when confronted with the “partially formed subject” (signified by voice in opposition to speech), unmanaged desire and drive (signified by the gnawing at flesh) and materiality of the body (signified by horrific death). This affect works on the viewer to redraw “demarcation lines” between the abject and the subject in order to finally exclude the abject element, further enforcing the boundaries of ones patriarchal symbolic identity/reality.

The “infected,” in other words, signify the new, contemporary threat of the traditional monstrous feminine – a “bloody incorporation” that at times, signals either castration (becoming feminized) or death (becoming abject). The infection, after all, “was the blood” (Boyle 2002). This is symbolized in the first scene in the film, where the female radical, the original human to become infected, is shown to have a bloody mouth which she used to infect – to incorporate – all of society. All the “infected” appear with bloody mouths, but the first “infected” is a woman. The “infected” however, are not female monsters but are potentially anybody, indicating global capital’s logic of exchangeability. Women are now understood

as non-threatening as long as they can embody control and mastery over themselves – as long as they can be exchangeable with male subjects and reproduce the meaning of the patriarchal symbolic culture; this embodiment shows their allegiance to the patriarchal symbolic order rather than a will towards its dismantlement.

This is best exemplified by the character of Selena, the properly symbolic other in the contemporary, social order. A black woman, she is embraced and respected within the new, democratic logic of Western European culture. She is thin, rational and has perfect mastery of the self by remaining in constant control of her emotions in the face of immanent danger. She is a former chemist and is most hurt and jaded by the circumstances of the fallen order, which force her to accept the futility of simply needing to survive, rather than having the opportunity to use her immense intellect. After killing Mark, Selena remarks, “He was so full of plans. Have you got any plans Jim? Do you want us to find a cure and save the world or just fall in love and fuck? Plans are pointless, staying alive is as good as it gets” (Boyle 2002). Selena is pointing to the horror of the absolute reality of reproduction and death within the broken symbolic order that no longer cherishes intellect and productivity. She points to life’s absolute insignificance and fragility and how, once the system collapses, the things held most dear in Western European ideology are lost; as such, finding cures for diseases or producing families are completely meaningless. Selena ultimately stresses the utopian ethos of the contemporary civilization and its idealistic dreams of progress and future

that can be easily disrupted by the cruelty and indetermination of unmanaged forces, which are constantly present. In fact, this cruelty and indetermination is not just out there – in nature or in the *other* part of the world – but in all of us, at the root of our most instinctual, natural drives and desires. Regardless of her disenchantment, Selena effectively rises to the occasion and fights for survival, demonstrating her exchangeability with the white men with whom she joins the fight. As the plot unfolds, Selena reveals her affection for Jim at which point her fight becomes no longer about mere survival but towards a *future* with Jim. Selena's revelation reminds the viewer that the system and its symbolic order are worth fighting for in order to sustain the utopian ethos they represent.

It is important to note that there are two antagonists in *28 Days Later*. The first is the “infected” which as seen above represent the unmanaged, human instinctual desire and drive. The second is Major West's platoon, which represents the outmoded system where difference is strongly iterated and subjugated – a modernist system understood as oppressive and in the past. The soldiers represent the tyrannical, patriarchal order of the modernist era, striving towards progress and the restoration of civilization. Mailer, the infected black man chained in the yard by his neck, provides a visual cue of modernism's colonial sins. Major West reveals his intent toward sexual colonization of the women in his pursuit towards rebuilding civilization. This is clearly symbolized by the men trying to force the women to dress in preparation for the group rape they had planned. “Women mean a future” (Boyle 2002), provided they are made

civilized by being passed into the symbolic order through grooming and the decoration of their bodies, by adding symbolic exchange value to the already inherent use value of the women's reproductive systems. This draws the viewers' attention to a past era where sexual difference, but also racial difference, are iterated and pathologized, subjugating otherness. This draws a sharp contrast to the contemporary liberal global capitalist system, which according to Negri and Hardt (2000) manages all difference through consumer culture, towards market expansion, which establishes an understanding that everyone is exchangeable. The contemporary system of control is represented as a champion of freedom and equality in contrast to the modernist system of the past. *28 Days Later* follows a contemporary logic of egalitarian, democratic ideology. It suggests that if the liberatory, democratic symbolic order of contemporary global capitalism is broken, it will open up a space for outdated forms of tyranny and oppression.

The anxieties depicted in *28 Days Later* point to various things that can upset the contemporary symbolic order of global capitalism; it foregrounds the radical, anti-American Muslim other, who is shown causing unrest in the world in the first shot of the film. The "terrorists" are placed in the abject and are understood to be related to unmediated drives as they are not working through the logic of Western European capitalism. Significantly, the main threat towards the contemporary capitalist utopia in the film was unleashed by the people who refused to accept the logic of the system – the ill-informed radical activists who unleashed the "rage" virus onto an otherwise peaceful civilization while trying to

resist the system itself. Crucially, it was a woman, the original other, who, unable to control her emotions – her bleeding heart – unleashed nature in its uncontrolled force. Through this unleashing, she falls back into her own uncontrolled ravenous desires and her unmediated tendency to incorporate everyone in sight, men and women equally, into hungry, rage filled monsters, ending civilization in its tracks. The film implies that those who are not mediated by the liberatory, contemporary culture to reproduce its working autonomously are a threat to the very system itself and if cultural antagonists ever succeed in upsetting the system's order, they will themselves suffer the consequences.

Lastly, the ravenous hunger (desire) of the “infected” causes them to feed incessantly, while simultaneously reproducing without control. As such uncontrolled reproduction, as evidenced by the rampant reproduction and consequent self-destruction of the “infected” is still pathologized but more implicitly, by firstly pathologizing uncontrolled desire relative to the declining sexual difference. Bordo (1992) stresses that women's hunger and sexuality are pathologized in tandem and are often depicted interchangeably in representation. Consequently for the “infected” feeding and reproducing are one in the same act. Ravenous hunger and rampant desire signal self-destruction, as the “infected” die out after having fed and reproduced without restraint thus depleting their resources. As the contemporary global capitalist system embraces diversity towards content expansion, it denies overt sexist practices and thus does not pathologize female biology overtly. Instead in *28 Days Later* uncontrolled

emotional excess and desire, which are – historically associated with the female reproductive difference – are pathologized. The affect produced by the sight of the horror associated with unrestrained feeding/reproduction and unmanaged drives/desires confronts the viewer with the abject associated with loss of control, and works to redraw “demarcation lines” between “the human and non-human” toward cultural exclusion of the abject elements. Consequently, the contemporary female subjects of global capitalism are encouraged to desire productivity rather than to seek unproductive pleasure and desire associated with the abject difference of their bodies that is understood to threaten the production of meaning in a patriarchal symbolic order. Thus, the contemporary spectacle of horror produces affect in a form of fear and disgust that helps manage subjectivities away from unproductive or destructive excesses, simultaneously shaping desires towards autonomous productivity.

28 Days Later is one example of the contemporary horror movie spectacle, but it is indicative of a much greater trend within the horror movie genre, which shows a significant rise in popularity of zombies as the primary monster of the contemporary era. Zombies signal a new cultural anxiety associated with global capitalism and are largely indicative of the primary antagonisms of this contemporary moment. Such concerns are centred around a loss of control over one’s self or one’s own body signalling a cultural preoccupation with control over bodies as well as subjectivities.

Zombies have become the most popular monsters in the horror films of the

past decade; recent popular movies include titles such as *28 Weeks Later* (2007), *Beneath Still Waters* (2005), *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Resident Evil* (2002) and many more. John Marmysz (1996) posits that the rise of zombie films is indicative of the cultural anxiety around “passive nihilism.” Zombies exhibit an “instinctual drive” placed in opposition to culturally defined reason or purpose. This is particularly threatening to a culture predicated on progress and determination through the means of control over drives and desires. As emotionality and carnality are historically associated with the female body, unmanaged femaleness is continuously pathologized today towards male defined exchangeability.

This thesis has thus far argued that there is a shift in mainstream porn and horror film representations of the female body in the contemporary timeframe. The late modern film *The Brood*, while representative of the anxiety associated with the woman’s reproductive body, closely links reproduction to woman’s desire for expression of emotion, particularly rage. *28 Days Later* is indicative of a contemporary time when the body is no longer central to production; culture primarily antagonizes emotions, particularly rage – which is also the name of the zombie virus that is unleashed in the film. As seen in the works of Bordo (1992), emotions are traditionally associated with women and are linked to women’s “deviant” biology. Zita (1998) points to how personality sculpting, such as through the means of cosmetic psychopharmacology is designed to obliterate women’s “pathological” emotions in the pursuit of embodying male defined

norms. Today, emphasis is placed on shaping highly controlled subjectivities that autonomously regulate their own desires, emotions and drives towards capitalism's endless reproduction. Women's corporeal difference is consequently faced with constant mediation as women are enjoined to self-regulate towards their own exchangeability with masculine subjects.

Labiaplasty is an example of a cultural practice that aims to reproduce a highly managed and controlled female body. A labia that is not occluded by a culturally defined border of the female body becomes understood as abject. The unoccluded labia is also often associated with promiscuity and sexual maturity in women – traditionally signifying different drives and desires – also pathologized as abject. Female difference poses a threat to the patriarchal symbolic order because difference can undermine the production of meaning within the phallogocentric representational economy. A woman whose body adheres to culturally defined borders produced by the phallogocentric symbolic order is understood as a subject of that order. To step outside of that border is to step outside of culturally prescribed meaning opening up space for difference, which can potentially undermine the system itself.

3.7 Personal Stories of Labiaplasty

Dominant media representations often frame women's bodies through a production mode of male defined norms that, according to Bordo (1992), privilege mastery, rationality and control over the disorder of emotions and drives

associated with the body, framing the body as outside the self and antagonistic to the self. This is most significant to the female body as historically framed to be out-of-control and irrational. In order to understand how women's contemporary subjectivities are shaped, specifically in relation to their own "disordered" bodies, it is crucial to understand the ways in which women speak about their choices to undergo labiaplasty. I am particularly interested in what motivates some women to undergo the surgery and how they articulate their relationship to their labia.

This section examines the stories of several women who have either undergone labiaplasty or have considered undergoing the procedure. There firsthand accounts offer the reader an understanding of what creates the desire for genital surgery. The works of feminist theorists including Bordo (1992), Ussher (1989), Creed (1993) and Schutzman (1999) presented earlier in this paper are employed to interpret how the body is conceptualized through discourse and representation, which extend to cultural practices such as labiaplasty. I deploy notions of the abject and affect to analyze trends in the selected women's stories, in order to gain clarity on how phallogentric representational economies affect women's subjectivities to act upon their bodies. This phenomenon suggests a cultural framing of female genital difference as pathological and subject to negation. This section also cites several critical, social and psychological studies on influential factors of labiaplasty to help frame and compare my own analysis in the context of academic research on the subject. This includes studies conducted by Veale, Eshveravi, Ellison, Costa, Robinson, Kavouni and Cardozo (2013),

Braun (2010) as well as Braun and Tiefer (2009).

3.8 Methodology

The labiaplasty stories employed in this paper have been drawn from various self-published sites on the Internet as well as several documentaries, which feature interviews with women on the topic of labiaplasty. Sites of research include, *Experience Project* - an online support group where people share experiences in discussion forums on various topics. It features twenty-four discussion categories, including labiaplasty. The section entitled *I Had Labiaplasty* consists of fifty-nine members so far. I chose experience project specifically because it features stories posted by women in their own words addressing their own personal concerns in regard to the subject. I chose three posts from the forum specifically because they included a large amount of detailed description in the text, with particular emphasis on each woman's experience prior to the surgery allowing for greater analysis of influential factors. These posts include, *Secret Labiaplasty* (2013), *I Had Labiaplasty* (2012) and *Positive Experience of Labiaplasty* (2012). As the posts were written by anonymous subjects I will designate the author of *Secret Labiaplasty* as "Anonymous 1", the author of *I Had Labiaplasty* as "Anonymous 2", and the author of *Positive Experience of Labiaplasty* as "Anonymous 3". All three of the posts are very positive in regard to labiaplasty surgery, as all three women claimed to be happy with the post-operative results.

Other sites employed in this paper include a story featured in *XOJane*, an online woman's magazine concerned primarily with health, beauty and fashion and which features community sourced articles about readers' personal experiences. The article I have chosen is entitled "It Happened to Me: I Had Labiaplasty Surgery" (2012), the author of which I will designate as "Anonymous 4". The article positively reviews labiaplasty as the author was happy with the results of the procedure. I have chosen to include this article because it featured a large amount of detailed description of the reasoning behind the woman's choice to undergo the procedure as well as for the language used by the author, which is striking in its reference to the "monstrous" and "excessive" vagina.

Another source includes an article from *Think Catalogue*, an online magazine which features community sourced articles on a wide variety of topics many of which deal with sex and sexuality. The article I am citing in this paper is entitled "The Time I Almost Performed Labiaplasty on Myself" (2013) written by Fruzsina Eordogh who is a freelance journalist specializing in the topics of digital culture and technology. The article is written with humour, seemingly aiming to provoke a bit of feminist critique by framing labiaplasty as perhaps an unnecessary practice. Regardless of the intended affect, I have chosen to include the article as an example of a woman's story where she decided against undergoing labiaplasty after initially desiring the procedure.

The documentaries cited in this thesis include *Sexy Baby* (2012), directed by Jill Baur and Ronna Gradus, which features interviews with a woman who is in

the process of undergoing labiaplasty surgery. The documentary is a critical interrogation of how the notion of “sexiness” changes in the digital age. The documentary follows the narrative of a woman named Laura, through her experience of undergoing labiaplasty surgery. Although the documentary depicts many emotionally charged scenes relative to Laura’s experience, it does not seem overtly critical of the procedure or Laura’s decision to undergo the procedure. The documentary seems rather more concerned with – and a bit critical of – how a “sexual landscape” is formed in the context of digital media. I have chosen to include interviews with Laura in this paper because they provide her personal concerns and desires that inform her decision to undergo labiaplasty.

The second documentary included in this paper is *The Perfect Vagina* (2008) directed by Heather Leach, which conducts interviews with three women who either undergo labiaplasty or are considering undergoing the procedure. The documentary takes a very critical and emotional view of vaginal cosmetic surgeries in addition to the discourses and representations that may inform such practices. I have also chosen to include this documentary because of the variety of narratives featured. This includes a woman named Rosie who undergoes labiaplasty throughout the course of the documentary as well as two other women, Kelly and Reagan, who elect not to undergo the procedure after initially desiring to do so. The documentary also features a discussion with a group of women from the baby boomer generation who express having almost no concept of female genital aesthetics. Their accounts seem to illustrate a generational shift in the

conceptualization of female genitalia. None of the documentaries provide the last names of the women interviewed, so they will be cited in this paper by their first names only.

3.9 Personal Labiaplasty Stories Analysis

Virginia Braun's (2010) study suggests that the primary reason given by many women to seek genital cosmetic surgery is a perceived abnormality in regards to their genitals. Amongst those women many claim that the perceived abnormality has a negative impact on their sex life. In fact, a large portion of women cited in this paper attribute a perceived abnormality to be their primary reason for seeking labiaplasty. Anonymous 1 explained her situation, "When I was about 14 I felt like my labia weren't normal. I had no idea what 'normal' was but for some reason I didn't feel right in a swim suit with my friends" (2013). The woman resisted being sexually intimate with men prior to her surgery,

Sophomore year came and suddenly boys started to talk to me. I liked the attention but knew I would never go past first base because what if they were grossed out? What if they told everyone in school 'yeah, she's pretty but there's something wrong down there.' It was my worst nightmare. I would talk to boys but even if I really liked them, I would find something wrong and tell them I didn't want to talk anymore. It broke my heart because I saw all of my friends get in relationships but I was to[o] embarrassed to be in one myself.
(Anonymous 1, 2013)

Another woman writes, “I couldn’t tell you exactly when I became aware of the fact that I was ‘different’ (or at least felt I was different), but it was around the age of twelve or thirteen” (Anonymous 2, 2012). She continues,

I was a pretty innocent twelve/thirteen year old but my anxieties around my protruding labia were, I’m sad to say, mainly rooted in the fear that when I did eventually get to the level of intimacy with someone, they would be repulsed and, worse still laugh. I imagined horrific conversations in the boys’ changing rooms about my genitals, cruel jokes, whispering in corridors. This may sound dramatic but it really did haunt me and a lot of the time it was the only thing I can think about (Anonymous 2, 2012).

The woman added, “I had seen other women kind of like me in places such as swimming pool changing rooms, but still felt abnormal and unattractive...I felt unworthy of any boy I liked and as if I had some dirty secret I thought that it was almost as if I was unfairly tricking them into liking me, with them unaware of the hideous monstrosity I was hiding underneath my clothes” (Anonymous 2, 2012).

Rosie – featured in *The Perfect Vagina* (2008) – described her desire to undergo labiaplasty, “I just thought that I was so different to everyone else that I just wanted that to be changed” (Leach 2008).

Psychologists Virginia Braun and Leonore Tiefer (2009) state that vaginal cosmetic surgery offers women “a sexual body”, understood by many women in contemporary culture as “entitlement” and “obligation”. A “long” labia or a “loose” vagina that often culturally signify sexual pathology or sexual immorality, signal to some women “a body that is ‘unfit’ for – undeserving of – sexual activity” (Braun and Tiefer 2009, 5). This point is indicated most clearly by

Anonymous 1 and Anonymous 2, both of whom avoided sexual activity prior to labiaplasty citing that they felt either “unworthy” of a sexual partner or deterred by fear of “repulsion”, or a “grossed out” response on the part of a potential sex partner.

Many women cited in this paper claim to seek or desire the surgery for the purposes of improvement to their sex lives. Kelly – also featured in *The Perfect Vagina* (2008) – states, “My husband and I have watched pornographic films together and all I think about then is why are we watching this, because he wants this image of perfection?” (Leach 2008). Laura – featured in *Sexy Baby* (2012) after having undergone labiaplasty surgery stated, “I’m completely happy with the results of the surgery I think that my sex life will be changed dramatically. I...um...it hasn't happened yet but I’m anxious for it and I feel excited to just show off my new body” (Baur and Gradus 2012).

Prior to having the surgery, Laura recalled, “My first serious boyfriend watched x rated movies and stuff and he was like ‘oh its bigger than most girls, like what’s wrong?’ And I just feel like it would be a huge turn on to a guy [for his partner] to look like a porn star” (Baur and Gradus 2012).

Braun and Tiefer (2009) suggest that cultural idealization of very particular bodily forms – as in the case of the occluded labia minora – creates a significant amount of body distress particularly amongst women. According to Braun’s study (2010) representations of female genitals, particularity within cosmetic surgery marketing, work also to occlude genital diversity resulting in the

concept of the “vulva ideal”. This concept is also heavily reinforced in pornography which often fails to provide diverse representations of female genitals, helping to further conceptualize and enforce an “ideal” form. In contrast the Veale, et al. (2013) study of risk factors for women seeking labiaplasty, claims that pornography is not a significant influential factor in women’s decision to undergo the procedure as only twelve percent of women in their research admitted to having watched porn. The study concluded that the most significant influential factor for women seeking labiaplasty in their research was teasing or negative comments made by peers or sexual partners in regards to their genitals. Laura’s last statement suggests both pornography as well as a comment made by a sex partner to have had an impact on her decision. For Kelly, the concept of the “vulva ideal”, what she calls “image of perfection” does suggest that pornography – or at least the lack of genital diversity in representation – is an influential factor. Negative comments made by peers or sexual partners are in fact significantly common amongst the women cited in this paper.

One woman recalls, “The first guy I had sex with actually commented, ‘Wow...you've got some...big lips...’While I already knew that, the fact that a guy NOTICED it was horrifying” (Anonymous 4). When asked why she is seeking labiaplasty, Rosie responds, “I don’t know, I’ve been picked on about it before” (Leach 2008). Rosie recalls bullying she had experienced primarily at the hands of her sister. She quoted her sister in saying, “Rosie’s got a hanging ham” (Leach 2008). Rosie describes specific experiences where her sister would

disclose the state of Rosie's genital appearance to her friends, "It ends up that I'd be out, on a night out and sit there with all my mates, it's like eleven guys and they'd be ripping me to shreds about it in the club and I'd be like FUCK! Like what do I say?!" (Leach 2008).

Reagan's anxiety about the appearance of her labia did not begin until the relationship with her male partner was coming to an end. She recalls a particular argument where her partner claimed "...you've had two kids, big floppy fanny, its like a mosey tunnel. No one will ever want you" (Leach 2008). Reagan's distress began after having received the negative comments. It is not clear whether Laura's distress began before or after the comment made by her sex partner, while Anonymous 4 stated that she already felt distress, which was exacerbated by the comments made by her partner. Although Rosie does not make clear whether the comments made by her sister were the initial cause of her distress she does point to it as a significant factor in her seeking labiaplasty.

Many women cited in this thesis recall instances where comments were made about other women's genitals as a source of concern about their own genitals. Laura states, "A lot of my male friends just joke around with each other about girls that they've hooked up with and they'll say 'it's like roast beef' or 'she had a meat curtain ha ha ha' and I was just like oh! Laughing along with them but like, 'oh my gosh! I do! I have this problem!'" (Baur and Gradus 2012). One woman cited in this paper wrote,

I remember friends of mine talking about other girls gross vaginas, none of them had seen mine, but I remember my best friend talking about a friend of hers that she saw her vagina and said it was this big lump of skin and told her friend that it was disgusting and not normal and she should go to the doctor. I felt so sorry for that girl, I don't know her at all though, and felt sick for myself knowing I was in the same boat (Anonymous 3, 2012).

Fruzsina Eordogh recalls that the first time she felt distress in regards to the appearance of her genitals was after a conversation with her classmate who had just undergone labiaplasty. She quotes her classmate as saying “Well, one of my labia was larger than the other. It was gross and wrinkly,” she laughed, ‘like a monster of a Frankenstein labia. It really bothered me” (Eordogh 2013, 1). After the conversation Eordogh examined her own labia, “I realized my vagina was like Sarah’s old one; one of my labia minora was bigger than the other. ‘Gross and wrinkly’ and like a monster. Oh god. My vagina is deformed too. How did this happen?” (Eordogh 2013).

Conducive to Veale, et al.’s (2013) study, the negative comments experienced by women in regard to their own genitals plays a very significant role in the decision to seek labiaplasty amongst the women cited in this paper. The comments made about other women’s genitals play a significant role also, specifically in perpetuating the concept of the “vulva ideal” as well as its inverse – the deviant vulva. This is indicative of an existing discourse in culture that is further perpetuated amongst subjects through social interactions, both negative and non-negative alike. According to the study by Veale et al.’s (2013), pornography does not play a significant role as a primary influential factor in

women's decision to seek labiaplasty. In fact, only two women cited in this thesis claimed that pornography played an influential role in their desire to seek labiaplasty. I would argue however, that pornography is significant because it is a reflection of dominant cultural ideologies shaped by a phallogentric representational economy that presents a normative vulva and thus limiting the depiction of female genital diversity.

I would suggest that the concept of the "vulva ideal" – produced in marketing – travels through discourse and representation as well as social interaction and individual subjectivities. The "vulva ideal" produces its own excess, which it aims to negate, resulting in the notion of the "deviant vulva" further conceptualized by the fear associated with female corporeal and reproductive difference. Braun's (2010) study notes that negative cultural representations of female genitals often result in societal feeling of disgust in relation to female genitalia. Braun and Tiefer (2009) state that historically, the unoccluded labia is associated with promiscuity and sexual pathology in women. They further add that the unoccluded labia is often understood as abject because it resists being 'neatly' contained within clear, culturally defined boundaries. According to Creed (1993) horror is the genre that confronts the viewer (or reader) with the abject – the culturally produced excess – so that the abject element can be excluded in culture. It is not surprising then that the language of horror is used by many women to describe their genitals which they deem socially unacceptable.

As seen above, Eordogh's friend described her pre-operative genitals to look "like a monster of a Frankenstein labia" (Eordogh 2013, 1). Anonymous 4 (2012) describes her pre-operative genitals as "Monstrous. Excessive". She also stated that having a sex partner notice her labia was "horrifying". Anonymous 1 (2013) writes, "...in my eyes I had this freakishly ugly vagina". She described the imagined ridicule she may experience as a result of her genital appearance as a "nightmare", while Anonymous 2 (2012) described her genitals as "a horror show" as well as a "hideous monstrosity", further describing her genitals to look "like two dead slugs and imagining a guy's horror when faced with the pair of them". She described a "fear" in regard to the imagined "horrific conversations" about her genitals that "haunt[ed]" her. Rosie attempted to describe her labia while illustrating it on paper. She struggled to even think about its appearance remarking, "That is just horrible. I'm sorry I'm just looking at the picture thinking that it's really horrible" (Leach 2008).

Many of these women describe a state of horror when confronted with an element understood to be abject. Although I have not come across any women citing the horror genre as an influential factor in seeking labiaplasty, I would argue that the horror spectacle that often works to pathologize female corporeal and reproductive difference affects subjectivities, resulting in feelings of deviancy and disgust towards the pathologized vaginal difference. Braun and Tiefer (2009) suggest that cultural pathologization of the unoccluded labia that links it to sexual promiscuity helps generate the desire for a pre-pubescent or pre-sexual genital

region understood to be “clean” and desirable.

According to Ussher (1989) changes to the female body are historically pathologized. Puberty in particular is understood to be deviant, signifying the emergence of women’s corporeal and reproductive difference. Many of the women cited in this paper claim to initially have become distressed at the sight of their genitals at puberty while one – Reagan – recalls noticing the unwelcomed changes to her labia after child birth. Anonymous 4 (2012) states that her anxiety began at the age of eleven or twelve. Anonymous 1 (2012) recalls becoming distressed at the sight of her genitals at the age of fourteen describing it as "A huge embarrassing secret". Anonymous 2 (2012) began to feel “different” at the age of twelve or thirteen describing her genitals as “some dirty secret”. Anonymous 3 (2012) recalls initially finding herself to be “repulsed” at the sight of her genitals at the age of fifteen. Although Kelly does not state the age at which she first became troubled at the sight of her genitals, she attributes part of her discontent to her experience at puberty. Kelly describes being raised by her grandparents and when her body began to develop her grandmother strictly forbade her to talk about her changing body, especially her vagina, “automatically that area of your body is bad and secret and you mustn’t say anything at all about it” (Leach 2008). At puberty, “the seeds of contempt and disgust towards a woman’s body and her reproductive function [are] first sown” (Ussher 1989, 18). It is notable that several of the women describing their pubescent genitals use the language of secrecy and shame.

Creed (1993) posits that many horror films pathologize puberty in women not only because it signifies the emergence of women's reproductive difference but also because it signifies the emergence of women's different desires and "out-of-control" emotions. William Friedkin's 1973 film *The Exorcist* as one example, draws a connection between puberty and demon possession, depicting acts of violent masturbation and murderous rage on the part of the pubescent female monster. As argued, it is not women's reproductive difference that is primarily antagonistic, but rather the potentially out-of-control emotions and drives associated with that difference that are culturally pathologized today. The perceived promiscuity associated with the "enlarged" labia points to women's sexual desires and drives. As I have argued earlier regarding *28 Days Later* (2002) the horror depicted in the film is specifically a result of unmanaged drives and desires which for the "infected" are simultaneously a drive towards consumption and reproduction, portrayed in a violent display of blood and dismemberment. This horrific representation aims to produce affect in the viewers' towards fear and revulsion of bodily drives; these drives are most strongly associated with the female body historically deemed out-of-control and excessive. Cultural practices such as dieting (Bordo 1992) and personality sculpting (Zita 1998) negate the perceived excesses associated with femaleness, which are simultaneously iterating the notion of those excesses. Similarly, many descriptions of female genitals cited in this paper point specifically to excess, including; "enormous", "excessive", "big lips", "bigger than most girls", "a huge

embarrassing secret”, “big lump of skin” and “big floppy fanny”. One woman recalls her visit with a cosmetic surgeon, “After examining me, he said I was pretty normal but that yes, there was some excess that he could remove” (Anonymous 2, 2012).

Schutzman states, “Culturally defined femininity required suppression of naturally defined femininity. Medical science reconstructed gender to safeguard against their own dreadful interpretations of natural female processes” (Schutzman 1999,18). After having undergone labiaplasty one woman observes, “I look feminine. I look alright” (Anonymous 4, 2012) while another states “It was neat and pretty and all I had ever wanted to be” (Anonymous 2, 2012). It seems that for Anonymous 4, looking “feminine” is a direct opposition to the “monstrous” and “excessive” female genitalia in its pre-operative state. For Anonymous 2, “neat” and “pretty” appears to be an opposition to the “different”, “abnormal” and “unattractive”, implying that neatness and prettiness are not simply an aesthetic desire but an imperative norm.

Braun and Tiefer (2009) suggest that the medicalization of women’s sexuality – as a result of historic pathologization of women’s sexual and reproductive bodies – is a significant factor in the rise of vaginal cosmetic surgery. The practices of femininity are frequently enshrined in medical discourses producing both norms and new pathologies. For example the condition termed “hypertrophy” of the labia minora used to describe the inner labia that is unoccluded by the outer labia, provides medical justification for labiaplasty.

Braun's (2010) study suggests that vaginal cosmetic surgery creates the very condition it aims to remedy, exemplifying a cultural practice that produces its own excess. This is best exemplified by Eordogh's account where she did not have any distress in regard to her genital appearance until she had learned about her friend's labiaplasty.

There are several women cited in this paper that decided against undergoing labiaplasty surgery. Kelly's decision against labiaplasty was informed by her having a cast taken from her vagina by the artist Jamie McCartney who was creating a wall of one hundred vagina casts. When Kelly first saw the other casts she stated, "My initial reaction is, they all look really, really different. I wasn't expecting to see that variety" (Leach 2008). Reagan opted out of having the surgery after visiting a holistic sexual educator, Rachel Foux. Foux encourages women to reveal their genitals to one another in a safe and supportive space, which facilitates group conversations. Reagan finally concluded that the postpartum changes to her body were a very small price to pay to have had her children. Eordogh wrote "I got over my complex without going under the knife, and I can even say I love my pussy, its uneven labia minora and all. It happened in college after I saw a bunch of cocks up close; every guy's penis I looked at had lopsided balls" (Eordogh 2013, 1).

Kelly overcame her anxiety in regard to her perceived abnormality after being confronted with evidence of female genital diversity. It stands to reason that seeing female genital diversity may have played a role in Reagan's decision not to

undergo labiaplasty. Eordogh also overcame her anxiety after being confronted with genital diversity even though it was a diversity of male genitals and perhaps less relevant to my argument. As Braun's (2010) study suggested, media representation including that in pornographic material, occludes genital diversity by only depicting one type of genitalia. Women whose genitals do not resemble the depictions and who fail to see adequate representations of diverse female genitals often feel abnormal or deviant as a result.

The rise of plastic surgery in popular culture is a prevalent influential factor for women seeking labiaplasty. Veale, et al. (2013) suggest that an increase in reality shows like "Embarrassing Bodies" and others that promote body shame may be a factor in many women's decision to seek labiaplasty. They also suggest that an increased discourse around plastic surgery found on Television, Internet and print media may also be a significant contributing factor. This calls me back to *Plastic Wives*, in which Dayna Devon describes her pre-operative genitals as "two soy hotdogs with a bad carpet" (TLC, 2014). I would imagine that such glorification of cosmetic interventions, simultaneously paired with absurd yet striking statements iterating pathology, can produce affect – in the form of laughter and shock – potentially leading the viewer towards simultaneous revulsion – towards "pathological" genitalia – and desire – towards the glamour of cosmetic surgery.

It is important to note that there are many women who have never desired genital augmentation. *The Perfect Vagina* (2008) documentary provides such

examples by featuring a discussion with a group of three women from the baby boomer generation. None of the women in the group ever recall having anxiety around the appearance of their genitals and all were very surprised to learn about the rising new genital cosmetic trends. One woman commented on the topic of genital discourse, “It’s not a natural thing to talk about amongst my generation, we didn’t talk about anything like that when we were youngsters” (Leach 2008), while the second woman remarked, “but you didn’t see each other’s [genitals] in those days anyways” (Leach 2008), to which the entire group agreed. The first woman pondered, “So are girls looking at themselves and thinking it doesn’t look right and if it doesn’t look right how do they know if you haven’t looked at anyone else? I wouldn’t have known if mine looked right or not.” When the notion of plastic surgery was mentioned the first woman responded, “I don’t think its necessary at all” (Leach 2008). The third woman stated, “It’s a part of your body that you can’t see” (Leach 2008), to which the first responded “...and maybe you are not meant to see it” (Leach 2008).

These women clearly stated that they did not see or talk about their genitals, as female genitals were encouraged to be hidden. Some of the women still operated under the notion that perhaps female genitals are something “you are not meant to see”. The women of the baby boomer generation do not claim to have been aware of genital diversity per se, as they claim that they were not aware of the appearance of any genitals other than their own. These women were not subject to the same culture of representation of contemporary norms and

pathologies as the younger women cited in this paper and consequently they were not influenced to conceptualize the notion of the “vulva ideal” nor the “deviant vulva” as its subsequent excess. However, I have already argued that female genitals have been historically pathologized as a marker of women’s corporeal/reproductive difference that requires occlusion in patriarchal culture. Today, power systems exert themselves primarily over subjectivities rather than bodies while simultaneously reproducing gender difference as exchangeable rather than irreducibly other. As I have argued earlier through my reading of the contemporary mainstream pornographic spectacle, women today are encouraged to reveal their genitals and participate in the sex market, exchangeably with masculine subjects. I would now argue – drawing on Braun’s (2010) study – that the “vulva ideal” is a product of advertising that functions on the basis of a phallogentric representational economy. The women of the baby boomer generation cited above have no concept of the “vulva ideal” because the vulva – as a sign of irreducible female difference – in the modern era was understood to be pathological and subject to occlusion.

Advertising, according to Schutzman (1999), hystericizes women by producing ideals for femininity – through a phallogentric symbolic order – affecting women’s subjectivities to desire the reproduction of these ideals upon their own bodies. Simultaneously the advertising spectacle breeds its own excess – in a form of the deviant abject femaleness – which the marketed commodities/services aim to remedy. Contemporary, mainstream pornography,

while it works to occlude genital diversity, is merely a reflection of the mediated ideal vulva, aimed to sexually arouse male and female viewers – both understood exchangeably to desire male centered pleasures that the vulva ideal is designed to produce.

Chapter 4

4.1 Summary

Labiaplasty aims to augment female sexual *difference* as an excess of a culturally defined ideal that shapes the understanding of the exchangeability of gender and sexuality. Significantly, labiaplasty is a phenomenon that emerges during a shift towards global capitalism. With the emergent form of capitalism we see the rise of affective labour production which helps shape subjectivities towards autonomous reproduction of cultural norms.

Modern era biopower worked on the body directly to produce material goods and bodies. In the transition to contemporary global capitalism, focus is increasingly placed on the management of subjectivities as the intellect becomes central to the dominant knowledge/information economy. Global capitalism requires diversity – including gender diversity – for the purposes of constant market expansion; simultaneously it highly manages diversity towards exchangeability, for capitalism's autonomous self-reproduction. Women now enjoy increased participation in the sexual and economic markets while simultaneously being mediated through a phallogentric representational economy, which often occludes sexual difference, which was strongly iterated in the previous century.

The late modern/postmodern pornographic spectacle – targeted primarily towards male viewers – often attempted to depict the culturally negated female difference/pleasure, frequently through aggressive or violent acts upon the female

body. The late modern/postmodern horror film spectacle confronted viewers with the abject – the culturally produced excess – associated with the female corporeal/reproductive difference. The contemporary mainstream pornographic spectacle – still subject to a phallogentric representation economy – reflects ideals produced by dominant culture, further propagating the ideal of masculine desire for female bodies and subjectivities. In the global capitalist arena women’s subjectivities are portrayed as exchangeable with male subjects, shaped to replicate stereotypically masculine sexualities, while simultaneously iterating the penis as the centre of pleasure for both sexes. These culturally defined ideals are depicted as devoid of their subsequent unmanaged excesses, often associated with irreducible female difference. The contemporary horror spectacle, often works to confront the viewer with cultural excesses that are now associated with unmanaged or uncontrolled drives and desires. While these uncontrolled drives and desires are potentially relative to all subjects exchangeably, they primarily point to the pathological and out-of-control excesses historically associated with the female difference.

The “vulva ideal” emerges as a sign of a culturally defined femininity, that adheres to culturally prescribed borders and is devoid of the uncontrolled, bodily desires traditionally associated with female bodily difference. This is relative to previous body ideals and their subsequent body negation phenomena, including dieting, (Bordo 1992) and cosmetic psychopharmacology (Zita 1998). Labiaplasty, for the most part aims to control the very excess it produces through

marketing discourses and representations. The vaginal procedure does however work in line with a phallogentric representational economy that excludes difference from representation, either occluding it or framing it as pathological excess.

4.2 Conclusion

Through my research above I have concluded that labiaplasty has become a rising trend for young women in North American and Western European cultures during the time of global capitalism due to a shift in biopower, resulting in “changing social views on what is a ‘normal’ vulva and vagina” (Ussher 2013, 1). Ussher attributes some of these changing views to the depiction of exclusively ‘discreet’ female genitals in pornography. Although, I have argued that the contemporary mainstream pornographic spectacle produces affect, which further helps shape subjectivities towards autonomous reproduction of ideologies and norms, pornography does not influence or cause the practice of labiaplasty; rather it is a reflection of the ideals already present in dominant cultural productions. These ideals work to sustain the phallogentric symbolic order by shaping female subjectivities to autonomously reproduce that order by reproducing male desires and sexualities that prioritize the pleasure of the penis.

The “vulva ideal” is primarily a product of marketing, specifically relative to the cosmetic surgery industry that is further perpetuated in dominant representations such as reality television, including *Plastic Wives*, *The Doctors*

and *Embarrassing Bodies*. Such marketing and representation breeds its own excess, producing the notion of the deviant vulva, relative to the deviant femaleness as excess of contemporary femininity. I argue that the conceptualization of contemporary femininity aims to shape contemporary women to be exchangeable with masculine subjects in the ever-expanding global economy that privileges rationality, austerity and control. The excess this conceptualization produces – the unmanaged drives desires and emotions – although are potentially relative to all subjects are historically linked to the “out of control” female difference. The labia that is deemed to be “enlarged” often signifies the abject different drives and desires that threaten the production of meaning in the patriarchal symbolic order, by introducing different potentials in meaning and signalling a breakdown of that order.

In contrast, the vulvas produced by vaginal cosmetic surgeries often aim to mimic a pre-pubescent or pre-sexual genital appearance, greatly valued in the contemporary sex market. As seen earlier through the work of Irigaray (1977), women were traditionally understood as commodities with a use value – in their reproductive system – and a symbolic exchange value – signalled through the cultural mediation of their bodies. Virgins signified “pure exchange value” as they signified “relations amongst men” in the exchange of women on the market, supporting the phallogocentric economic order. In today’s contemporary market of immaterial labour, the symbolic value of commodities greatly overshadows their use value. Similarly to contemporary commodities, women are encouraged to

embody “pure exchange value”, while no longer requiring the original referent of sexual “purity” – as visual signs of “neat” or “discreet” genitals – conceptualized through representation – come to produce the desired affect once sought in the bodies of virgins, which simultaneously symbolizes the support of the phallogentric economic order.

Today, the immaterial and affective economy helps shape subjectivities towards autonomous self-regulation, which is indicative of a society of control. Systems of power that exerted themselves upon women’s bodies directly, often through surgical means, as in the case of clitorrectomy within the Victorian insane asylum, now work increasingly upon women’s subjectivities towards productive desires. As Žižek explains, “Enjoyment serves nothing, and the great effort of our contemporary hedonist-utilitarian ‘permissive’ society is to incorporate this un(ac)countable excess into the field of (ac)counting” (2012, 47-48). Labiaplasty produces a female body that is devoid of women’s genital difference understood to signify unproductive enjoyment of the body. Female subjectivities are shaped to autonomously desire to reproduce the workings of the phallogentric economic system by desiring to produce affect upon the male body, often through the means of culturally prescribed “discreet” genitals.

Terranova’s (2003) analysis of free digital labour on the Internet shows that immaterial cultural products formulate desires in subjects to participate culturally to a point of producing labour for no compensation. Negri and Hardt (2000) describe the paradigm of labour in advanced capitalism, “The great

industrial and financial powers thus produce not only commodities but also subjectivities. They produce agentic subjectivities within the biopolitical context: they produce needs, social relations, bodies, and minds – which is to say, they produce producers” (32). In the context of labiaplasty, female subjectivities are shaped to autonomously desire participation within the affective culture by desiring to produce culturally prescribed affect associated with the “vulva ideal”. Consequently, the risk to female genital sensitivity posed by the practice of labiaplasty is rarely addressed, as many female subjects today – similarly to NetSlaves – desire to produce pleasure for the penis without necessarily receiving pleasure in return.

What becomes understood as unproductive excess are unmanaged emotions, drives and desires frequently associated with the body, as is illustrated by my reading of *28 Days Later* (2002). The abject horror associated with the “infected” signifies uncontrolled otherness, which failing to control its drives and desires (hunger and reproduction), annihilates itself by depleting all resources. This may also help to explain why risk to genital sensitivity is rarely addressed in the discourse on labiaplasty as a surgery that, according to Braun (2010) promises to improve women’s sex lives. What is offered by plastic surgeons and vaginal cosmetic surgery marketers is a normalized, culturally prescribed sexuality, often reflected in the contemporary mainstream pornographic spectacle – managed through a phallocentric representational economy – where the penis is represented as the centre of pleasure. Hence the risk to the female genital enjoyment – the

unproductive excess – is deemed acceptable within the market’s pursuit of gender exchangeability.

Žižek (2008) describes the self-regulatory condition of contemporary capitalism as “freedom with responsibility”. He writes, “You are given freedom of choice, on condition that you make the right choice” (Žižek 2008, 129). This leads me to address the contradiction between the normalization of vaginal cosmetic surgery in North America and Western Europe – often hailed as a new form of “freedom” and “choice” for women over their sexuality and body image – while at the same time many North American and Western European subjects experience outrage at the notion of – what is understood to be - *forced* genital augmentation, in *other* parts of the world. Women, as all diverse subjects, are encouraged to participate economically in contemporary capitalism as long as they reproduce the logic of that system autonomously. As such, individuals are also encouraged to act in accordance with the system that is typified by ideologies of freedom, liberty and choice, but in order to sustain this system the subject must assume the responsibility of maintaining it – of participating in the cultural norms that further perpetuate this “freedom” ideology. The rhetoric of freedom, liberty and choice often works to mask the workings of power; further enjoining subjects to participate of their own accord.

As to freedom of choice, liberalism is also marked by a strong bias. It is intolerant when individuals of other cultures are not given freedom of choice-as is evident in issues such as clitorrectomy, child brideship, infanticide, polygamy, and incest. However, it ignores the tremendous

pressure which for example, compels women in our liberal society to undergo such procedures as plastic surgery, cosmetic implants, and Botox injections in order to remain competitive in the sex market (Žižek 2008, 144-145).

“Forced genital mutilation” signifies the terrifying otherness – the unregulated excess – that functions outside of the logic of capitalism and threatens to undermine its liberatory and democratic order by introducing a different system of meanings, ideologies and economic imperatives. This pathologization was made evident in *28 Days Later* (2008), where the zombie apocalypse mirrored what appeared to be uncontrolled Muslim violence in the other part of the world. While capitalism attempts to manage all difference amongst its subjects towards the autonomous reproduction of exchangeability, it simultaneously maintains the neoliberal ideology that pathologizes those outside of the capitalist order. The rhetoric of freedom and liberty is based largely on exclusion, because, according to Negri and Hardt (2000) capitalism always needs an outside for constant expansion.

This notion is mirrored within the discourse of femininity, which today increasingly includes labiaplasty. Capitalism requires the production of the abject femaleness – the pathological excess – in order to continuously expand the market for female consumers. As this function is enshrined in the rhetoric of liberty, freedom and choice, often within the post-feminist discourse, the presence of patriarchal power becomes effectively hidden, often leaving many women few

alternative other than to continuously reproduce and reactivate the workings of a phallogentric representational economy that aims to reduce gender difference into a system of exchangeability.

Although my analysis of the personal stories of labiaplasty helped support my argument that the new anxieties many women now experience in regard to the appearance of their genitals is largely due to the recent shifts in representation, I cannot discount the fact that most of the women cited in my research who have undergone labiaplasty were very happy with the results of the procedure and many claimed that it helped them with their issues around self-esteem. I do not wish to suggest that these women in any way lacked the capacity to make choices in regards to their own bodies, and I would not suggest that women should not have the right to undergo any procedures that they may desire. However, it did become increasingly clear throughout the course of my research that vaginal cosmetic surgery aims to remedy the very “problem” it helps to produce, while pressures propagated by marketing – and further supported by many, various forms of representation – greatly shaped the context in which the desire for the surgery arose. Labiaplasty is an example of the cosmetic surgery industry creating a new market for expansion that became a common subject in mass media, eventually turning into a cultural practice amongst some women.

Furthermore, as Braun (2010) pointed out, many studies argue that “informed consent” is greatly compromised in many women’s decision to undergo vaginal cosmetic surgery, as many patients are frequently uninformed

about the risks associated with the procedures. In fact, Rosie, featured in *The Perfect Vagina* (2008), elaborated on her decision to undergo labiaplasty stating: “It might seem extreme to other people but I don’t think of it as like - you know - dangerous, anything like that” (Leach 2008).

Even while conducting my research I have found it very difficult to locate any substantial medical or academic literature on the topic of vaginal cosmetic surgery suggesting that these practices do not receive enough medical or critical attention. As stated earlier The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology charged that vaginal cosmetic procedures require greater scientific inquiry than currently exists (Nunez 2013, 1). Braun (2010) addresses the fact that the studies on the safety, efficacy and long-term effects of the procedures are greatly lacking.

While I remain deeply critical of any representational economy that pathologizes female genitals and generates greater pressures for women, specifically in regards to their bodies, my primary concern is that more medical, scientific and critical analysis be conducted around vaginal cosmetic surgeries as there procedures have permanent and potentially devastating effects on female bodies.

Lastly, I would like to stress a need for greater feminist critique towards dominant modes of representation in pursuit of resistance. Contemporary mainstream pornography – that which is most widely consumed culturally – is still subject to a phallogentric representational economy and while it increasingly invites women to participate in both production and consumption, in doing so it

occludes the need for interrogation of its representational practices. Feminist pornography is one example of resistance, which according to Williams (1989) often represents autonomous female desires that don't necessarily end with the "phallus", but with the possibility of exploration of the self. Feminist pornography resists the representation of women as "idealized objects" which I would argue is key towards greater cultural emphasis on autonomous, female sexual subjectivity.

In regard to labiaplasty, one example of resistance that I came across in the course of my research is Fruzsina Eordogh's article "The Time I Almost Performed Labiaplasty On Myself", 2013. Published online, this article is easily locatable when one is searching "labiaplasty" on the Internet. Her story reads like most of the stories found in the discussion forums about labiaplasty; Eordogh describes many of the same feelings, anxieties and concerns commonly conveyed by the other women cited in this paper. Eordogh's story however, has an alternate ending, where instead of finding happiness in plastic surgery, she returned the gaze to the penis thus relieving herself of the (vulva) ideal form, stating "...I love my pussy, its uneven labia minora and all" (Eordogh 2013, 1).

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