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# **Semiotics of Gender – A Queer Reading of Gender as a Social Construct**

*magisterská diplomová práce*

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Podpis

## Abstrakt

Název práce: Semiotics of Gender – A Queer Reading of Gender as a Social Construct

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Abstrakt: Práce se zaměřuje na téma sémiotiky gender z interdisciplinární perspektivy, spojením modelů ze strukturní sémiotiky, sociologie, generální lingvistiky a sémantiky. Sémiotika genderové exprese, obzvláště v queer kontextu, je fascinující a pořád se vyvíjející téma, které se vyplatí studovat. V současné době, kdy jsou queer identity na Západě více akceptovány, signifikátory queer identit jsou užívány více otevřeně, a dosavadní mnohem striktnější hranice mezi semiosférou queer a mainstreamové kultury se stává mnohem propustnější. Díky pozitivní reprezentaci queer lidí v médiích, jak na obrazkách, tak mimo ně, mnoho signifikátorů queer kultury se stalo jednoduše rozeznatelnými i pro ne-queer publikum. Ve své práci se budu pokoušet krátce analyticky podívat na způsoby, jakými ne-cisgender lidé používají svá těla ke kontinuální realizaci svých identit, hlavně skrze sebevyjádření pomocí oblečení a jiných externích signifikátorů. Hodlám předložit argumenty na podporu konceptu gender jako sociálně konstruované, intencionálně realizované identity. K tomuto cíli budu přistupovat interdisciplinárně, za pomoci užití sémiotických modelů a argumentů z jiných lingvistických disciplín za účelem jeho dekonstrukce jeho pozice jako sociální reality. Cílem práce je prozkoumat kam spadá genderová identita v hranicích horního a spodního prahu sémiotiky, prozkoumat ji v rámci teorie komunikace a signifikace, ostenze, mytologií, a prozkoumat concept binárních opozic v souvislosti s ní. Dále bude také vztah mezi queer identitou a vyjádřením gender dán do kontrastu s genderovou identitou jako inherentně spjatou s binárním biologickým pohlavím. Srovnám queer a ne-queer gendrovou expresi s úmyslem přinést queer perspektivu do sémiotiky.

Klíčová slova: pohlaví, gender, queerness, kultura, binární opozice, sémiotický model

## **Abstract**

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Abstract: The diploma thesis focuses on the topic of semiotics of gender from an interdisciplinary perspective, merging models from structural semiology, sociology, general linguistics and semantics. The semiotics of gender expression, especially in a queer context, is a fascinating, ever-developing subject that is worth studying. In the current time, when queer identities are more widely accepted in the global West, the signifiers of queerness are displayed more openly, and the previously much stricter separation between the semiospheres of queer and mainstream culture is, if not disappearing, becoming much more permeable. Thanks to positive representation of queer people in media, both on screen and off screen, many queer cultural signifiers are entering the mainstream culture and have become widely recognizable even to a non-queer audience. In my thesis, I will be attempting to take a short analytical look at the ways that non-cisgender people may use their bodies to continuously realize their identities, namely through their sense of self-expression through clothing and other external signifiers. I intend to provide arguments to support the concept of gender as a socially constructed, intentionally realized identity. For this purpose, I will be using an interdisciplinary approach, examining the concept of gender and gender identity first in a sociohistorical context, and using semiotic models and arguments from other linguistic disciplines to try and deconstruct its position as a social reality. The aim of the thesis is to explore where gender identity falls within the boundaries of the upper and lower semiotic threshold, examine it within the theory of communication and signification, ostension, mythologies, and explore the concept of binary oppositions in relation to it. Additionally, the relation of queerness and gender expression will be put in contrast with gender identity as inherently tied to binary biological sex. I will compare queer and non-queer gender expression in order to contribute to bringing a queer perspective into semiotics.

Keywords: sex, gender, queerness, culture, binary oppositions, semiotic model



## Summary

1. Introduction.....	6
2. Gender and queerness as sociohistorical social constructs .....	8
2.1 Arguments for gender as a socially enforced institution .....	8
2.1.1 The male and female language .....	11
2.2 The default presumption of cisheterosexuality as a norm in the general society’s semiosphere....	12
2.3 The signifiers of queerness within the queer semiosphere .....	13
3. Gender in semiotic models.....	15
3.1 Sex and gender on Umberto Eco’s semiotic threshold .....	15
3.2 Paradigmatic shift away from binarism in biology and biosemiotics.....	16
3.3 Gender as a myth .....	18
3.4 Communication and Signification .....	19
3.5 People as signs.....	19
3.6 Ostension – signification without intent .....	20
3.7 Gender as a conceptual category in prototype theory .....	21
3.8 <i>Man</i> and <i>Woman</i> as floating signifiers.....	22
3.9 Subversion of gendered expectations.....	24
3.10 Semantic arguments for the nature of gender as a floating signifier .....	25
3.11 Gender expression in situational context .....	28
3.12 Binarism in semiotic models.....	30
3.12.1 <i>Male</i> and <i>Female</i> in participative and exclusive opposition .....	30
3.12.2 <i>Male</i> and <i>Female</i> dichotomy on the semiotic square .....	33
4. Gender identity as a social construct in popular discourse and queer activism .....	37
4.1 The case of Blaire White and the validity of individual non-cisgender identities .....	37
4.2 Vera Wylde and signification of queerness outside the binary .....	41
4.3 Comparing White and Wylde through the application of the cubical model .....	42
5. Conclusion .....	44
References.....	47

# 1. Introduction

The semiotics of gender expression, especially in a queer context, is a fascinating, ever-developing subject that is worth studying. Because of the history of persecution among those who would not conform to the normative sexual and gender identities, throughout history, queer people have often had to employ nebulous coding that would be hard to interpret to observers from outside of the queer *semiosphere*<sup>1</sup>. This separation from the mainstream sphere has aided in the development of a rich queer culture, especially when it comes to the act of self-realization through visual and behavioral coding. In the current time, when queer identities are more widely accepted in the global West, the signifiers of queerness are displayed more openly, and the previously much stricter separation between the semiospheres of queer and mainstream culture is, if not disappearing, becoming much more permeable. Thanks to positive representation of queer people in media, both on screen and off screen, many queer cultural signifiers are entering the mainstream culture and have become widely recognizable even to a non-queer audience.

I will note that while in some circles, *queer* is still understood to be a slur; in my work, I will be using it in a reclaimed context to denote the community of non-heterosexual, non-cisgender people (often commonly referred to using the abbreviation *LGBTQ+* community).

I will be attempting to take a short analytical look at the ways that non-cisgender people may use their bodies to continuously realize their identities, namely through their sense of self-expression through clothing and other external signifiers (as unlike with cisheterosexuals people, where the default assumption in the mainstream semiosphere is that of one's gender being in accordance with their assigned sex at birth, and the sexual orientation with the opposite). Naturally, to do this, we must also examine the nature of codifying gender as a whole, across the board, for people of all identities. Without an adequate framework in which to realize one's identity, be it through adherence or subversion, the queer gender identity cannot be realized. While we may claim that gender expression does not necessarily equate gender identity (and to some extent that is undeniably true), we cannot discount the societal pressure to adhere to certain framework of visual and behavioral signifiers, inappropriate adherence to which tends to be punished socially. For queer people, their inherent physical bodies are often not reflective of their identities. However, the expression of queer gender identities is inherently tied to the expression of gender

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<sup>1</sup> Semiosphere is a term originated by Juri Lotman and used in cultural semiotics, referring potentially to all relations between humans – a semiotic space outside of which semiosis cannot take place (LOTMAN, Juri. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. Indiana University Press, 1990.) According to Torop, “every semiosphere can be studied as a separate totality, but every totality in culture that can be analysed is simultaneously part of a larger totality” (TOROP, Peeter. Semiospherical Understanding: Textuality. *Sign System Studies*. 2003, 31(2), 323-329.), which is how I treat overlapping semiospheres in my work.

identity as understood in the mainstream semiosphere. Therefore, I will attempt to identify the aspects of what constitutes the expression of one's gender identity regardless of queerness or one's sex assigned at birth. In this analytical examination I have also applied some of my own experiences to illustrate some ways to subvert the usual routs of codification of gender identity.

While meaningful contributions to the field of queer semiotics by outside voices have been made in the 20th and 21st centuries, some of which I will be referencing in this work, this field is very broad and warrants an *own voices*<sup>2</sup> approach to reflect the complexity of the queer narrative with the internal understanding of the queer semiosphere. Adequate representation of the semiotics of queer culture and presentation necessitates more research and studies into the topic.

In my thesis I intend to ask the question: Can gender and gender expression in the current paradigm can be divorced from the binary and from its ties to biological sex? Or is even a non-binary identity inherently locked inside the binary due to the cultural semiotic threshold? Is a shift possible?

I intend to provide arguments to support the concept of gender as a socially constructed, intentionally realized identity; for this purpose, I will be utilizing an interdisciplinary approach, examining the concept of gender and gender identity first in a sociohistorical context, and using semiotic models and arguments from other linguistic disciplines to try and deconstruct its position as a social reality. I want to explore where gender identity falls within the boundaries of the upper and lower semiotic threshold, examine it within the theory of communication and signification, ostension, mythologies, and explore the concept of binary oppositions in relation to it.

I also want to look at the relation of queerness and gender expression and critique the claim that gender identity is inherently tied to binary biological sex, and compare queer and non-queer gender expression in order to contribute to bringing a queer perspective into semiotics. Lastly I also want to examine the particular modes and motivations of expression through figures in popular discourse.

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<sup>2</sup> A term used often in fields such as book publishing to describe the literature produced by members of a particular social group, such as queer people or people of a particular racialized minority, featuring themes relevant to that particular social group, or describing the group members' own experiences. *Own voices* may be highlighted for the presumed ability of the members of the group to offer particular perspectives that outsiders may not have, or to promote disadvantaged and marginalized authors.

## 2. Gender and queerness as sociohistorical social constructs

### 2.1 Arguments for gender as a socially enforced institution

For the purpose of my argument in this section, I shall recognize three categories in which to talk about gender. First is what I would dub the *legal gender*, which in relevant situations relates mostly to things such as marriage, the legal aspects of parenthood, the penal code, etc. Then *social* – the way a person may present and declare their gender identity, and the way that such expression is accepted in the context of interpersonal relations. Then the last one, technically the least able to be talked about, the *inherent* – one’s own feeling of self-identification, removed completely from the social sphere and the possibility of social persecution. As one could argue that the idea of gender as we currently understand it is inevitably tied to societal pressure. If removed from the social sphere, gender, or to an extent even one’s biological sex, ceases to bear any relevance.

The concept of so-called *bioessentialism*<sup>3</sup>, which is the argument for the inherent interchangeability of biological sex and gender (or gender expression), based on one’s chromosomal makeup, external genitalia or other physical attributes typically associated with the binary divide into biological males and biological females, is, in fact, a rather recent phenomenon in society. This is not to be understood as a claim to the recent invention of binary gender expression, quite the opposite. Even though in the past, one’s assumed and prescribed gender expression was likewise derived from the physical aspects of their biological sex, the emphasis on the ‘correct’ outward gender role adherence was in fact greater.

To elaborate – among more socially conservative voices in today’s gender discourse, the greatest emphasis is placed on one’s biological makeup – no matter how masculine a human female’s expression is, subverting all the expectation typically associated with the appropriate outward appearance of this sex, it may be claimed that based *solely* on this physicality alone, this person is, by default, a woman.

Removed from a biological essentialist view, while a person’s assumed gender was in the past indeed derived from their biological attributes, it was much more intertwined with the arguably performative adherence to a predetermined gender expression, especially in the European and later American cultures. We may find evidence of this, for example, in frequent criminalization of the wearing of the attire of the “incorrect” gender. The sole act of wearing the incorrectly gendered clothing (and thus expressing one’s gender in a way not societally established by the majority), would have been considered

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<sup>3</sup> *Bioessentialism*, or *biological essentialism*, a term describing the conviction of the necessity of alignment of an individual’s biological sex and their gender identity, treating sex and gender as one inseparable thing. The term is not only limited to biological sex, but dictates that other characteristics such as intelligence are also inherent.

a declaration of deviation from the presumed gender identity. To a point where women studying in universities would have been lambasted as unfeminine, as this action would have only been acceptable to be carried out by the male sex, and thus could have been interpreted as a declaration of *maleness*. This coupling of sex and gender expression would have been reflected in other societal opinions too, such as the view of homosexuality.<sup>4</sup>

Homosexuality would have been, in the first place, just like gender expression in my opinion viewed not as something that one is (as in an identity), but something that a person *does*.<sup>5</sup> Much like the studious woman, who is presumably attempting to approach manhood, the homosexual man is interested in other man because he is attempting to approach femaleness. Operating on the assumption that the only possible valid romantic entanglement may arise between a man and a woman, and thus it is a part of maleness to be attracted to women, and a part of femaleness to be attracted to men, then this implies that the homosexual relationship is a part of gender expression, not sexual orientation (a rather new concept). These days we view these aspects of identity as separate.<sup>6</sup>

I do not attempt to claim that the tying of gender expression to one's gender identity is a thing society has left in the past. Quite the opposite; as long as a framework of gender signifiers exists in society, an individual's expression can only exist within this framework, expressed through a mix of adherence and subversion, each allowing for unique avenues of interpretation. I will look into this concept further in subsequent sections.

The institutional nature of the legal gender is undoubtable; many gender-based interactions with the legal system are based entirely on one's gender. However, extent to which one's legal gender is tied to biological sex is variable across social context based on local laws. It is possible in many nations' legal systems to change one's legal gender, though the difficulty of this act varies. For example, in the Czech Republic, the conditions for this are rather strict, requiring acts such as the legal sterilization of the transgender individual in question who wishes to change their legal gender.<sup>7</sup>

To further talk about the social aspects of the performance of one's gender identity, I would like to borrow John Searle's concept of social institutions<sup>8</sup>. When arguing for the deontic nature of gender and the prescriptive nature of gender expression, we cannot omit the social consequences of an unconventional

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<sup>4</sup> BUTLER, Judith. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. *Theatre Journal*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, 40(4).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> Povinné sterilizace a hrazení operací – ČR a celá Evropa. *Trans\*Parent* [online]. [cit. 2022-08-18]. Dostupné z: <https://jsmetransparent.cz/povinne-sterilizace-a-hrazeni-operaci-cr-a-cela-evropa/#>

<sup>8</sup> SEARLE, John R. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN 0199576912.

gender expression. That which we consider to be the gender identity these days is only the successful result of the performative following of gendered expectations under the threat of social exclusion or other negative social consequences in case of failure. In this way, the broad societal consensus works as a means of enforcement of conformity.<sup>9</sup>

In relation to John Searle's concept of social institutions, Judith Butler talks about the nature of gender a historical situation – there exists an inherited social consensus on how a certain gender expression is to be carried out “correctly”. In different moments in history, there existed different ideas of gender and different conventions for its correct performance. Gender thus exists on the time axis of humanity in perpetuity, and for each individual person, its expression thus stands on a metaphorical tower constructed out of all of its past forms.<sup>10</sup> According to Butler, gender then isn't a stable identity, of which individual acts are born; gender plays out on a time axis and is instituted continuously using repetitive physical and speech acts as a form of its continuous repetitive realization – all acts from dress to acts such as gestures and the manner in which moves are included. If not continuously affirmed, it becomes irrelevant again.<sup>11</sup>

When it comes to thinking of gender in a historical context, what comes to mind is the historical figure of Joanne of Arc as an example. It seems kind of intuitive to look back at her and presume that through a modern social lens, she perhaps could have identified as transgender or even non-binary. However, this would be something of an anachronistic view, as she may have had no way to even conceive of these terms (as it is difficult to think of concepts one may not possess the language to describe). As she is long deceased, we cannot ask her how she understood her identity or how she would have preferred to express it, we only know how she did. It is important to look back at gender as a historical situation in context, instead of imposing modern views of gender identity (or even any sort of queer identity) onto figures who could not have shared them.

The individual gender expression of a particular person is a part of human identity as a whole. It is an act that may help an individual involve themselves in the social sphere by invoking and adhering to certain social conventions, which are followed by a conventional affirming reaction. However, unconventional gender expression may be punished by social exclusion – taboos and a positive,

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<sup>9</sup> SEARLE, John R. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN 0199576912.

<sup>10</sup> BUTLER, Judith. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. *Theatre Journal*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, 40(4).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

affirmative reaction as a form of social capital then constitute the motivation behind the continued perpetuation of stereotypical gender expression.<sup>12</sup>

However, as there is no specifically given “essence” that is externalized by individual genders, and no rigidly specific ideal (only a set of cultural expectations, as gender-specific ideals can be very culturally different), since gender expression is not an unchangeable reality but a set of continuous acts that constitute the idea of it, we can argue that without these acts, gender could potentially cease to be relevant at all – the so called gender abolitionist argument. Gender as a social construct is successful in masking its own artificial nature<sup>13</sup>. By continuously invoking social conventions and ideologies in the social reality in which we live, we contribute to *creating* this reality. John Searle backs this up – social institutions are continuously realized through language and convention, through which they are declared to be real.<sup>14</sup> Through physical and speech acts we incorporate these fictional conventions into reality, and through this we can parade them as biological essentials, natural and even necessary. We can give them social consequences, but this does not detract from their artificial nature.

### **2.1.1 The male and female language**

In their analysis of gender as a social construct in their *essay Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, Judith Butler does not delve into one thing – the importance of grammatical gender in first person singular in highly grammatically gendered languages (Slavic, Roman languages, etc.). The mere act of verbal communication (or even mere verbal *thought* with no interpersonal communication necessary) in any of these languages carries the necessity of continuously declare one’s own gender through speech in most situations. Nonexistence of neutral language then drastically reduces one’s options for declaration of their own’s gender to a mere two binary options, out of which they must pick. The mere act of speaking in first person then becomes declarative, de facto instituting one’s gender as a declarative locutionary act,<sup>15</sup> which, if we use Searle’s concept of social institutions, declares it to be true. The social gender of an individual is then further enshrined in language more universally, even in languages that do not use grammatical gender in first person (such as English), through affirmative speech acts of conversation partners (such as using an individual’s correct chosen pronouns).

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<sup>12</sup> SEARLE, John R. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN 0199576912.

<sup>13</sup> BUTLER, Judith. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. *Theatre Journal*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, 40(4).

<sup>14</sup>SEARLE, John R. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN 0199576912.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

## **2.2 The default presumption of cisheterosexuality<sup>16</sup> as a norm in the general society's semiosphere**

It is important to note that throughout most of modern European (and later American) history, being queer has been seen as culturally deviant from the norm. The long-lasting criminalization of homosexuality (and often not even transgenderism, but merely any form of deviant gender presentation that differs from the accepted cultural norm, such as women wearing typically male garments) that was only abolished in the global West relatively recently as far as the overall timeline of history is concerned, is not necessarily the cause of this.

It is only natural for the dominant groups and ideas in society to be considered the norm to a point that it is automatically assumed to be the default<sup>17</sup> and often no other ideas are permissible. This default is also imposed upon fictional characters – in fiction, characters are automatically presumed to be heterosexual and cisgender until explicitly stated otherwise, and often this reading is not accepted until there remains no avenue of interpretation that could brand the character as straight. The cisgender and heterosexual readings remain dominant, even though theoretically, all characters with fiction should be interpreted as having no disclosed sexual orientation until stated otherwise.

Even when arguing against this interpretation simply being regarded as the automatic default, fans (often male fans, speaking of male-presenting characters) will often argue that a character which is depicted to be showing interest in the opposite sex is thus explicitly presenting as heterosexual. Instead, what is objectively being shown is merely that the character shows attraction to the opposite sex – the fact that this means that this is the *only* way the character experiences attraction is entirely presumptive. A male character who is depicted to be interested in women and never explicitly denies being attracted to other genders could be bisexual or pansexual, but will be presumed to be straight, with their attraction to women being used as proof.

If a character is explicitly depicted to be non-straight with no room for denial, there is often pushback. We can observe this often enough in the discourse surrounding modern Western media – in some circles, fictional characters seem to only come in two possible variants to the socially conservative, queer-opposed viewer: the white, cisgender and heterosexual character (or one that is at best racially

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<sup>16</sup> A *cisgender* individual is one who identifies with their sex assigned at birth. This term is often shortened to just *cis*. A *cisheterosexual* is a shortened term I will use to refer to individuals who identify with their birth sex and are attracted exclusively to the opposite sex/gender.

<sup>17</sup> McKEE, Alan. "How do I know what's a likely interpretation?". *Textual analysis: a beginner's guide*. London Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2003. ISBN 9780761949930.



ambiguous), and *political*. Which is to be understood as deviating from the presumed default, perceived to be pushing a political agenda merely by existing.<sup>18</sup>

Even the words *straight* and *queer* themselves denote *the* norm (*straight* in this context being a synonym for *correct, right*) and *deviation from it* (*queer* being a synonym for *strange, deviant*).

### 2.3 The signifiers of queerness within the queer semiosphere

Most of earlier (meaning developed before the 21st century) means of attempting to signal queerness that were meant to be covert and only decipherable by those who knew to look for them. Talking about queerness was to be done in nebulous language, in code that offered a high degree of plausible deniability, or one could be prosecuted for indecent behavior if caught.

Many common visual indicators used to signal queerness in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were very well mapped in Hal Fischer's *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men*, a photographic study of the visual representations used to indicate queerness among homosexual men. It documents formerly widespread practices such as the *hanky code*<sup>19</sup>, a system of using a bandana or a handkerchief of a certain color and displayed on one's person in a specific way as a non-linguistic sign to communicate certain meanings. A handkerchief, as Fischer notes, is 'also employed in the treatment of nasal discharge', and thus it might in some cases bear absolutely no significance whatsoever, offering a sufficient amount of plausible deniability. To a gay man who knows how to interpret the code, a blue handkerchief in a man's pocket could have signified the other's preferred role in intercourse. To an observer from outside a specific semiosphere, a handkerchief might simply be a handkerchief.

Fischer also identifies the archetypal signs of the many kinds of prototypical gay men, such as the easily recognizable leather-wearing prototype<sup>20</sup> (to this day also known in queer circles as a *leather daddy*<sup>21</sup>), connecting black leather as a signifier of masculinity, sexual conquest, and unlike some other prototypes, explicit break from convention and radical non-acceptance and non-conformity to the mainstream culture<sup>22</sup>. It must be noted that the counter-cultural elements among signifiers of queerness are pervasive even today, if not more so.

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<sup>18</sup> MAJORS, Bruce. "I'm Waiting For a Non-Woke TV Series." *Splice Today*. 24 Jan, 2022. [www.splicetoday.com/moving-pictures/i-m-waiting-for-a-non-woke-tv-series](http://www.splicetoday.com/moving-pictures/i-m-waiting-for-a-non-woke-tv-series)

<sup>19</sup> FISCHER, Hal. *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men*. Los Angeles, California: Cherry and Martin, 2015. ISBN 0976184176.

<sup>20</sup> I further elaborate on the concept of prototypes in a subsequent chapter, see 'Gender as a conceptual category in prototype theory'.

<sup>21</sup> MILTON, Josh. "Ricky Martin goes full leather daddy in thirst-inspiring cover shoot." 28 Apr, 2021. <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2021/04/28/ricky-martin-leather-schon-magazine-cover/>

<sup>22</sup> FISCHER, Hal. *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men*. Los Angeles, California: Cherry and Martin, 2015. ISBN 0976184176.

One of the easiest phenomena to analyze within the modern queer semiosphere is the method of signifying queerness (or queer allyship from cisheterosexuals) through the usage of the symbolism of *pride flags*.

Pride flags are a particular symbolic system developed within the queer semiosphere in order to demonstrate one's affiliation to a certain tribe within the queer community, much in the same way that state flags are used to signal one's affiliation with a country; in this manner both are used the same way in the form of a non-linguistic sign.

Now that queerness is generally more accepted in the global West and no longer carries the penalty of criminal prosecution (though social shunning might still be prevalent in more conservative areas), pride flags are not necessarily meant to only be understood within the queer cultural semiosphere and have been permeating the mainstream cultural narrative.

The most widely recognized pride flag, the 6-stripped rainbow flag<sup>23</sup>, is in fact so ubiquitously associated with queerness, that the mere presence of a rainbow motif is widely interpreted as signaling queerness or queer allyship in mainstream discourse. Rainbow-flag-adorned goods and services often become targets of boycotts or callouts on social media from queerphobic individuals who wish not to be associated with these symbols.<sup>24</sup>

Most pride flags are entirely symbolic in nature, save for some that contain iconic or indexical elements, often in several layers of reference, such as the bear pride flag<sup>25</sup>, which displays the representation of a footprint of a bear paw (in this context, the bear's footprint represents the animal itself, while the animal is used as a representation based on physical likeness between the type of gay man that identifies as a bear, and literal bear the animal – being hairy, large, strong, burly, and so on). While the typical color stripes on pride flags are mostly arbitrary, some of them do reference other arbitrary but widely accepted mainstream cultural notions, such as the lesbian flag<sup>26</sup> consisting mostly of shades of pink, the color traditionally (yet undeniably arbitrarily) used to represent femininity and women.

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<sup>23</sup> DASTAGIR, Alia E.; Oliver, David. "LGBTQ Pride flags go beyond the classic rainbow. Here's what each one means." USA Today. 1 Jun, 2021. [web.archive.org/web/20210601103213/https://eu.usatoday.com/in-depth/graphics/2021/06/01/lgbtq-pride-flags-meaning-gay-lesbian-transgender-nonbinary-intersex-pride-flags-represent/5133381001/](https://web.archive.org/web/20210601103213/https://eu.usatoday.com/in-depth/graphics/2021/06/01/lgbtq-pride-flags-meaning-gay-lesbian-transgender-nonbinary-intersex-pride-flags-represent/5133381001/)

<sup>24</sup> BOLLINGER, Alex. "Florida man arrested for destroying rainbow crosswalk during rally to celebrate Trump's birthday." *LGBTQ Nation*. 18 Jun 2021. [www.lgbtqnation.com/2021/06/florida-man-arrested-destroying-rainbow-crosswalk-rally-celebrate-trumps-birthday/](http://www.lgbtqnation.com/2021/06/florida-man-arrested-destroying-rainbow-crosswalk-rally-celebrate-trumps-birthday/)

<sup>25</sup> BYRNES, Craig. *The International Bear Brotherhood Flag*. 1865. *Wikipedia*, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bear\\_flag\\_\(gay\\_culture\)#/media/File:Brotherhood\\_flag](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bear_flag_(gay_culture)#/media/File:Brotherhood_flag).

<sup>26</sup> DASTAGIR, Alia E.; Oliver, David. "LGBTQ Pride flags go beyond the classic rainbow. Here's what each one means." USA Today. 1 Jun, 2021. [web.archive.org/web/20210601103213/https://eu.usatoday.com/in-depth/graphics/2021/06/01/lgbtq-pride-flags-meaning-gay-lesbian-transgender-nonbinary-intersex-pride-flags-represent/5133381001/](https://web.archive.org/web/20210601103213/https://eu.usatoday.com/in-depth/graphics/2021/06/01/lgbtq-pride-flags-meaning-gay-lesbian-transgender-nonbinary-intersex-pride-flags-represent/5133381001/)

I have previously mentioned that pride flags can be used as symbols for both queer expression and queer allyship, the latter of which has been co-opted and heavily commodified by mainstream corporations, especially during pride month in June (though a wide variety of merchandise bearing pride flag motifs is produced all year round). However, in the mainstream cultural semiosphere, it seems to be a prevalent opinion that displaying a pride flag motif, especially if done so outside of June, signals explicitly one's queerness, as opposed to mere queer allyship. To analyze the display of pride flags using semiotic concepts, this would make the rainbow flag a prime example of a non-linguistic floating signifier<sup>27</sup> – referring to, as semioticians such as Barthes would put it when non-linguistic signs are concerned, a nebulous floating chain of signifieds<sup>28</sup> (being queer, support for queer rights, and so on), open to interpretation.

While the term *virtue signaling* tends to be used with a negative connotation (meaning shallow, performative or even deceitful allyship), much like the much more pejoratively used term *wokeness*<sup>29</sup>, it is a testament to the shifting values of society that presumably virtue signaling one's support for queer rights has become profitable and optically valuable to a point where corporations are not only willing, but culturally pressured to do it.

### 3. Gender in semiotic models

#### 3.1 Sex and gender on Umberto Eco's semiotic threshold

In his theory of semiotics, Eco establishes that there are natural boundaries that exist within the world pertaining to the discipline of semiotics and what can and cannot be considered a sign. In order to determine where semiotics begins and ends, we must set certain criteria for what even constitutes a sign. Eco argues that in semiotic theory, everything can be a sign as long as there exists a convention for it to stand for something else – which directly excludes things such as stimuli because certain behavioral responses are not elicited by convention<sup>30</sup>. Although there exist certain phenomena that could be considered non-signifying stimuli that do in some capacity serve as signifiers to somebody<sup>31</sup>, and so the border becomes somewhat unclear.

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<sup>27</sup> For more on this term, see section '*Man and Woman as floating signifiers*'.

<sup>28</sup> CHANDLER, Daniel. "Semiotics for Beginners". 18 Oct, 2000.  
[web.archive.org/web/20100104093034/http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02a.html](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02a.html)

<sup>29</sup> MAJORS, Bruce. "I'm Waiting For a Non-Woke TV Series." *Splice Today*. 24 Jan, 2022.  
[www.splicetoday.com/moving-pictures/i-m-waiting-for-a-non-woke-tv-series](http://www.splicetoday.com/moving-pictures/i-m-waiting-for-a-non-woke-tv-series)

<sup>30</sup> ECO, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press, 1979. ISBN 0253202175. p.19

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p.20

Eco excludes genetic and neuropsychological phenomena (and other biological phenomena such as blood circulation, etc.) out of consideration for being signs<sup>32</sup>; however, he states that since the encoding of genetic information and genetic heredity can be considered a coded transfer of information, we should not be disregarding these, and rather place them on the lowest threshold of where semiotics picks up from other non-semiotic disciplines, as a missing link of sorts.<sup>33</sup> Biological sex, being nothing more than a physical expression of one's genetic code, would fall here.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Eco places *culture*. He criticizes radical interpretations of culture as only a system of signs, or only a way of communication. Instead, he writes that “the whole of culture should be studied as a communicative phenomenon based on a system of structured significations.”<sup>34</sup>

If we presume gender to be culturally constructed, then this would place it towards or onto the upper semiotic threshold as Eco puts it. As he continues to demonstrate his take on culture in semiotics on the example of tools as an instrument of culture through their communicated function<sup>35</sup>, he introduces aspects that are important for us for defining gender as a culturally constructed phenomenon – namely function, name, communication, and (not explicitly) time.<sup>36</sup> To qualify as a cultural object, the function of something must have been established and later communicated (through time) to establish that object as a sign of its function. In this way, even ideas can be signs.<sup>37</sup>

Eco even references gender in his description of cultural commodities, when he touches on women as a commodity within culture – he even differentiates clearly between *woman the body* (the mere femaleness of her represented by the ability to produce offspring), and *woman the identity*, setting her aside in opposition to others by assigning her the function of wife, which connotes a specific system of social obligations<sup>38</sup>.

### **3.2 Paradigmatic shift away from binarism in biology and biosemiotics**

Starting on the bottom of the natural boundaries of semiotics as outlined by Eco, I would like to talk shortly about the idea of the nature of the biological sex, since we have already set it on a different point on the semiotic axis when compared to the cultural notion of gender.

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<sup>32</sup> ECO, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press, 1979. ISBN 0253202175. p.21

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p.22

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p.24

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p.26

Biology as an area has, for a long time, also been inclined to value binary models and interpretations. However, with recent advances in research, there has been a shift towards a reinterpretation of strict binary opposition.

While humans are undeniably sexually dimorphic, the distinction of the sexes is not nearly as clear as it could seem, and can be in fact considered rather interpretative. Taking an example from physical anthropology and the problems of identification of male and female skeletons, “the estimation of adult sex is most often based on sexually dimorphic features of the skeleton, such as components of the skull and pelvis, and on long bone, dental, or cranial measurements. Adult sex estimation, particularly using subjective, macroscopic traits is not as straightforward as it might seem given the relatively limited number of sex categories... Errors in sex estimation result in 12% too many males, on average, in skeletal samples, as there is a tendency to categorize skeletons of intermediate size or rugosity as male rather than female sex estimates may be partly the result of a reliance upon cranial features for sex estimation, as older skulls of both sexes tend to look increasingly masculine.”<sup>39</sup>

Biological sex in humans is thus finally becoming recognized as a nuanced characteristic. Biological sex is understood in biology as a bimodal distribution<sup>40</sup>, meaning there are two modes (male and female) with possible overlap (in humans, this would constitute *intersex* people). Therefore, the two often cited binary sexes do not exist in a binary opposition, which would constitute two modes with no overlap. Biological sex is defined by many different traits, such as chromosomes, internal and external genitalia, gonads, bone structure, secondary sex characteristics, etc. All of these traits added together creates what is essentially an average, which constitutes one’s assigned sex<sup>41</sup>. One could even argue that since transgender people who have medically transitioned change several of their secondary sex characteristics via hormone therapy and surgery, such as their bone structure or external genitalia, it might be interpreted as factually incorrect to say that they are still entirely the sex that they were assigned at birth. We could thus argue that even if we were to adhere strictly to the biologically essentialist view of equating sex and gender completely, transgender people who have undergone medical transition could be considered to fall within the intersex range of the biological sex spectrum.

Following recent studies, there seems to be a tendency in the field of biosemiotics to abandon the earlier established models based on exclusive binary oppositions, and move instead towards a more

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<sup>39</sup> Demographic anthropology. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* [online]. 2018 [cit. 2022-08-18]. Available at: [doi:10.1002/ajpa.23317](https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.23317)

<sup>40</sup> Sex in humans may not be binary, but it’s surely bimodal. *Why evolution is true* [online]. 2018 [cit. 2022-08-18]. Available at: <https://whyevolutionistrue.com/2018/10/28/sex-in-humans-may-not-be-binary-but-its-surely-bimodal/>

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

synthetic and inclusive approach to the translation of the genetic code into the actual phenotypical embodiment of the organism.<sup>42</sup>

### 3.3 Gender as a myth

Roland Barthes defines a myth in his book *Mythologies* as a type of speech – “myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form<sup>43</sup>”. He does not place any limitations on the border of a myth from a substantial standpoint – anything conveyed through discourse can be defined as a myth. It is not defined by the object of its message, but instead by the way it carries this aforementioned message.<sup>44</sup> He further describes myths as containing three aspects – a signifier, a signified, and a sign, which he clarifies is the associated total of the former two that cannot be separated<sup>45</sup>. Therefore, myth can be viewed as a tri-dimensional second-order semiological system within which the sign on the first level becomes a mere signifier on the second level.<sup>46</sup> sign that encompasses within itself a signifier and a signified.

Following Barthes’ logic, we can deconstruct the nature of gender in the form of a myth by understanding the term of a *concept* that he outlines as being a part of the myth. As Barthes writes, “one must firmly stress this open character of the concept; it is not at all an abstract, purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function.”<sup>47</sup> In this context, if *woman* is a concept we are expressing, it is to be signified through an essentially unlimited number of female signifiers which are culturally codified through her function (as also outlined by Eco).

We can see how Barthes’ understanding of myth builds on Umberto Eco’s concept of culture as the upper threshold in semiotics (as the myth is born from culture and without it, it cannot exist). It also correlates with how Butler outlines the concept of gender in time and society as sociohistorical<sup>48</sup> – myths can come about and disappear in the semiosphere precisely because Barthes argues that they are historical in nature<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>42</sup> LACKOVÁ, Ľudmila. Participative opposition applied. *Sign System Studies* [online]. 2021 [cit. 2022-08-18]. Available at: doi:10.12697/SSS1

<sup>43</sup> BARTHES, Roland a Jonathan CAPE. *Mythologies*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1972. p.107

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>45</sup> BARTHES, Roland a Jonathan CAPE. *Mythologies*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1972. p.111

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem, p.113

<sup>47</sup> Ibidem, p. 118

<sup>48</sup> BUTLER, Judith. Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, 40(4).

<sup>49</sup> BARTHES, Roland a Jonathan CAPE. *Mythologies*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1972. p.117

### 3.4 Communication and Signification

The two main approaches within semiotics and two main directions from which to examine the anatomy of interaction (such as when creating semiotic models) are the concepts of *communication* and *signification*.

There is no established consensus in semiotic theory on how exactly to interpret the relationship between signification and communication. They technically describe the same mental and physical processes using a different approach comprised of different basic concepts and individual parts.

They are undeniably interconnected, however there are solid arguments for putting them in both a complimentary relation and an oppositional one, based on how exactly the issue is approached.

In his Theory of Semiotics, Eco differentiates between the semiotics of signification and the semiotics of communication, one of which requires intentionality, while the other one does not. Communication required the intent to communicate, while signification is an intention-free process.<sup>50</sup>

### 3.5 People as signs

Many established models that conceptualize interaction as communication entirely discount even the option of considering the person themselves as anything other than the originator and the recipient of a coded message. Man is often an integral component across established communication models (such as that by Shannon and Weaver<sup>51</sup>, or Saussure's model that explicitly depicts two humans as the originator and interpreter of a code<sup>52</sup>). However, to properly deconstruct the concept of gender, we must not overlook the reality that in the process of communication, a person's physical form, their deliberate outward appearance, behavior, and other factors can all occupy the roles of a code of signs, conveying a message that may be deliberate or incidental, compounding into a complicated multi-layered thread of elements that constitutes one's identity.<sup>53</sup> This concept is not limited to the expression gender identity of course, but encompasses any facets of identity that a person might project to the recipients (the social group); be it their occupation, social status, or other aspects.<sup>54</sup> By participating in society, one is presenting oneself as an instrument of communication, becoming both the medium and the message.

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<sup>50</sup> ECO, Umberto. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Indiana University Press, 1979. ISBN 0253202175.

<sup>51</sup> POSNER, Roland, Veronika OPLETALOVÁ, Lukáš MOTYČKA a Lenka PETROVÁ. *Sémiotické Studie*. 1. Olomouc: Palacký University, 2018. p.16

<sup>52</sup> DE SAUSSURE, Ferdinand a W. BASKIN, BALLY, C. a A. SECHEHAYE, ed. *Course in general linguistics*. New York: McGraw-HillBook Company, 1966. p.27

<sup>53</sup> POSNER, Roland, Veronika OPLETALOVÁ, Lukáš MOTYČKA a Lenka PETROVÁ. *Sémiotické Studie*. 1. Olomouc: Palacký University, 2018. p.17

<sup>54</sup> Ibidem.

The process of signification takes place even in the absence of any sender who is intentionally attempting to convey anything. In this way, each person conveys a lot of information to other members of society just by their appearance alone<sup>55</sup>, as they would even if not a single thing about how they choose to present themselves was deliberate.

While signification is possible even in the absence of a sender and deliberate intention, anyone who fashions a sign out of themselves may utilize it, having at their disposal complicated systems of signification (in this context, codes)<sup>56</sup> developed and established through time. Clothing is only one such group of signifiers, and it may be used to codify many purposes – such as the uniform of a police officer signifies their occupation, the choice of fine and expensive attire signifies one's wealth and status, and so on.<sup>57</sup>

The nature of a person as a sign was also presented by Peirce, however, unlike Barthes who focuses on the outward nature of signification in the complex signs that constitutes an identity, Peirce looks inwards to analyze the nature of people as signs through the process of thought. According to Peirce, if one's life can be understood as a chain of states of mind, then this this constitutes a complex sign<sup>58</sup>; as he writes, “the fact that every thought is a sign, taken in conjunction with the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign”<sup>59</sup>. Man, to Peirce, is a two-level sign, a sign that is capable of producing signs. This notion can also be connected to the philosophy of Wittgenstein – both can be viewed as interpreting man as a complex system of signs, the acts of which are an active realization of preset signifiers.<sup>60</sup>

### **3.6 Ostension – signification without intent**

Ostension could be considered a borderline case of interpreting individual humans as signs. There is a question stemming from the possible hierarchization of signification and communication: Are any of these acts intentional? Therein lies an important distinction between communicating and signifying – something can be a sign and signify something without necessary intending to do so, whereas communication implies within it the intention to convey a message.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> POSNER, Roland, Veronika OPLETALOVÁ, Lukáš MOTYČKA a Lenka PETROVÁ. *Sémiotické Studie*. 1. Olomouc: Palacký University, 2018. p.25

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, p.26

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p.27

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem. p.26

<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, p.28

<sup>61</sup> OSOLSOBĚ, Ivo. *OstENZE, HRA, JAZYK: Sémiotické studie*. Host, 2003.



Ostension is specifically a type of signification that is carried out without intention, often tied to the natural characteristics of the human body. As an example, something like a rash or a skin condition is exactly such a type of non-intentional signifier.<sup>62</sup>

Tying ostension to sex and gender, we can identify it as the physical foundation upon which one is forced to build the expression of their gender identity, these two then existing either in synthesis, or in contrast.

However, neither ostensive characteristics nor deliberate signifiers are free from being influenced by context, as gendered signifiers are by themselves also not fixed. As an example, let's consider long hair – on a typically masculine physical form. Based on context, we could be looking at a transgender woman who is early in her transition. But also, if this long-haired individual was wearing a T-shirt with the logo of a metal band on it, and studded bracelets, or was spotted at a metal concert, we could simply conclude that this is probably a man who enjoys metal music and wants to express this inclination by adhering to the subcultural convention of male metal fans to grow out their hair.

### **3.7 Gender as a conceptual category in prototype theory**

Utilizing concepts from the field of cognitive linguistics, we can interpret the concept of gender as a conceptual category. Conceptual categories in linguistics can be approached from a few different angles, however, in general, they can be described as collections of individuals, the individual properties of which are distinct from the properties of the group that they fall under<sup>63</sup>. Each category possesses a *boundary* (though to which degree these are permeable or even existent at all depends on the particular approach to the theory) and, in prototype theory, exists in a form of a core and a periphery, which is referred to as *graded centrality*,<sup>64</sup> in which the group members located closer to the center (core) of the group are more representative of the ideal group member.

In the classical model of the conceptual category structure, each group possesses a rigid boundary, designating the exclusive opposition of anything as either part of the category, or not a part of it.

In a classical category, all members of it are technically equal. However, we can observe that people can individually pick out members of a group that represent 'better' examples of it, being more representative<sup>65</sup>, which separates the category into a core and a periphery.

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<sup>62</sup> OSOLSOBĚ, Ivo. *Ostense, hra, jazyk: Sémiotické studie*. Host, 2003.

<sup>63</sup> CROFT, William a D. Alan CRUISE. *Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge: University Press, 2004. p.75

<sup>64</sup> CROFT, William a D. Alan CRUISE. *Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge: University Press, 2004.p.75

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p.77

Prototype theory exists in two versions: one of them resembles closer classical theory of conceptual categories, presenting a list of attributes for a category member to have, however the features possessed by the prototype representation are not required to be necessary and sufficient; the centrality of the category member within the category is then defined by the number of relevant features that the member possesses, while the individual features are weighed based on the degree of how much they contribute to the grade of centrality of the group member.<sup>66</sup> As an example, for the category of *woman*, one such high value feature could be breasts, as it will occur in the vast majority of all women. It is possible that within a group, no actual member possesses all necessary characteristics<sup>67</sup> (however, in a group with as large a population as all members of one gender, this is unlikely). In this case, the prototype member would be an idealized version possessing the full set of features displayed by most of the core members of a category. Another version of this theory chooses to represent the group by an ideal exemplar, and grade group members based on their degree of similarity to this prototype individual.<sup>68</sup>

The concept of gender is far too complex and socially nebulous to easily construct a category out of, partly due to its massive population of members, the cultural and geographical differences that would inf designate it a hard-to-use, arguably superordinate level category<sup>69</sup> that would benefit from division into specific subcategories. As I will outline in the subsequent section, sex and gender signify different things based on approach. Gender expression and gendered expectations also vary based on the social group one is a part of. However, this could still present a useful tool of deconstructing how exactly the ideas of particular gender are socially constructed by utilizing experimental methods from cognitive linguistics to quantify the social expectations of how one fits themselves into the role of a particular gender.

### **3.8 *Man and Woman as floating signifiers***

It is important that we first distinguish whether the floating nature of the terms denoting the two binary genders that broader society currently recognizes lies within the signifier, or the signified.

The term floating signifier can be applied in semiotics to terms such as race, gender, and other concepts without a set definition, where a relatively stable term is used to represent an unstable signified.

The term was first originated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who describes it as an “undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning”<sup>70</sup>. Daniel Chandler

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<sup>66</sup> Ibidem, p.81

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, p.82

<sup>69</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>70</sup> LÉVI-STRAUSS, Claude. *Introduction to Marcel Mauss: Sign System Studies*. London: Routledge, 1987.p.63-64

defines a floating signifier as “a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified”<sup>71</sup>. However, Barthes refers to a “chain of floating signifieds” when talking about this concept<sup>72</sup>, and the term is defined as being stable in itself while referring to a moving (floating) or empty signified – which is why it is sometimes also called an empty signifier.

A floating signifier by definition therefore means different things to whoever uses it. When applied to gender specifically, it becomes clear that especially the terms *man* and *woman* are particularly nebulous. A biological essentialist may say *woman* and refer specifically to an adult human female and nothing else. In a queer context, a *woman* may be any person who presents as such. Phrases such as “*be a man*”, or the concept of a “*real man*” are even more unclear – not only do they refer to a person that the speaker interprets as a *man* (be it an adult human male specifically or not), but also carry within them a prescribed pattern of desired behavior that is being referenced. In such a case, a “*real man*” is a man who performs socially conventional ideas of masculinity that are stipulated by the speaker (and not specified in the term). Such phrases are not even limited to the respective genders, either; phrases such as ‘*man up*’ can be used regardless of the sex or gender identity of the one they are being addressed to.

As I have previously outlined, Barthes defines the concept of myth within the linguistic metalanguage as a ‘second-level’ sign, essentially a compound sign in which the signifier (the form) is already a complete sign of its own, with its own signifier/signified parts.<sup>73</sup>

It is important to understand that views regarding the queer community and adequate representations of queerness exist on an intersection of two cultural semiospheres, one of the wide, cisheterosexual-dominated mainstream culture and one of the queer community. The way myths are created and perpetuated differ.

I would argue that in accordance with how Barthes lays out his conception of myths, gender, the performance of it, and the nature of what it means to be a man and a woman are by definition mythical in at least the mainstream semiosphere. After all, what is the performance of one’s gender (if we take Judith Butler’s concept of the performative nature of expressing one’s gender identity in interaction with society<sup>74</sup> at face value), if not a complex amalgamation of individual signs, when put together, constitute a sign that is *man* and *woman*? By extending this concept, we could even point out specific groups of signs constituting the prototype of a *heterosexual woman*, and a *heterosexual man*.

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<sup>71</sup> CHANDLER, Daniel. "Semiotics for Beginners". aber.ac.uk. Archived from the original on 2010-01-04.

<sup>72</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>73</sup> BARTHES, Roland a Jonathan CAPE. *Mythologies*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1972.

<sup>74</sup> BUTLER, Judith. Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, 40(4).

By the mythical nature of *maleness* and *femaleness*, and their openness to interpretation and permissiveness to deviate from the prototype within reason, terms such as masculinity and femininity become empty (floating) signifiers.

### 3.9 Subversion of gendered expectations

Utilizing the cultural myth of male and female dress, queer people are able to signal queerness by transgressively flipping the visual elements of each. Butch lesbians are an example of this form of queer expression, adopting visual signifiers more typical of male dress (short hair, stereotypically masculine clothing and demeanor) to signify their attraction to women and (not always) their desire to take on the dominant (and thus stereotypically masculine) role<sup>75</sup>.

However, because of this inherent (albeit sometimes unintentionally imposed) pressure to conform to a certain way of transgressive dress as a means of conforming to a ‘queer aesthetic’ of sorts, not looking ‘queer enough’ can often potentially instill a sense of guilt within a queer individual, who might feel that they might be incorrectly signaling cisheterosexuality simply by the absence of displaying queer signifiers.

Non-binary individuals<sup>76</sup> often rely on dress to signify their inadherence to a particular binary gender, by adopting elements of the conventional appearance of the sex opposite to the one they were assigned at birth. However, it must be pointed out that this is by no means a necessity, and this prototypical androgynous appearance of the non-binary look can feel so constraining to some non-binary people that they look to break or reinvent the ‘rules’ (the individual sign) of this type of presentation.

To elaborate more – utilizing prototype theory, in my own personal interpretation the prototype of a non-binary person would probably be a young queer person in the Gen Z age bracket, assigned female at birth, white, thin and petite, conventionally attractive and dressing alternatively in countercultural fashion. They use they/them pronouns, have short or asymmetrical hair, bind their chest and dress in a way that skews masculine. This very specific non-binary look has attained mythicity of its own during the recent decade or so, and many nonbinary people have complained that this development results in a bizarre form of enforcement of, for lack of a better term, a *gender trinary*<sup>77</sup>, as individuals who do not conform to this *nonbinary look* are subject to having their gender (and their non-binary status) invalidated in both the

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<sup>75</sup> ZIMMERMAN, Callen. "Getting Located: Queer Semiotics in Dress". *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 2018. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/1123>.

<sup>76</sup> Non-binary people are people who do not identify with just one of the genders within the gender binary. As indicated by the term, they fall outside the binary on the gender spectrum, whether that be an identity anywhere in between male and female, one constituting both, or neither. Some people within this category place themselves within the transgender umbrella, some do not.

<sup>77</sup> @UhKaren. "I know it's a meme at this point that NB people don't owe androgyny but like... that pressure is so real. Even presenting full masc people misgender me... I'm really intimidated by presenting feminine and having to manage that." *Twitter*, 13 Feb. 2022, 5:15PM, [twitter.com/UhKaren/status/1492895190687879177](https://twitter.com/UhKaren/status/1492895190687879177).

mainstream and the queer semiosphere, landing them right back in the situation of enforcing gender stereotypes that they wished so badly to get away from.<sup>78</sup> Androgyny as a concept how we understand it in our current social context is largely rooted not only in whiteness but also in thinness, a kind of sexless childishness almost, separate from masculinity and femininity in themselves. Androgyny defined as a lack of visible gender signifiers requires embodiment that doesn't have any other meaning signified on top of it – things such as race, age, fatness, etc.

In this transgressive sense, both binary transgender and non-binary expression of identity within the socially established set of gender signifiers is an act of non-linguistic translation heavily dependent on one's assigned sex at birth. In an attempt at signifying a non-binary identity through their ostension, one battles constantly against their physical characteristics, trying to offset them through intentional alteration of their physicality. Individuals assigned female and male at birth must express androgyny differently, should they wish to have their gender expression read as neither that of a man nor a woman.

### **3.10 Semantic arguments for the nature of gender as a floating signifier**

Just as Wittgenstein puts it in his description of language as a game, arguing on the grounds of language could technically be considered ultimately meaningless. People tend to underestimate just how nebulous many terms that we use to describe things are, their meanings not nearly as rigid as many claim them to be. *What is a woman?* is a question often repeated in popular discourse today,<sup>79</sup> one that is often used as an attempt to disparage trans women specifically by attacking their experience of womanhood as invalid. However, this very argument could ironically be used as a self-defeating paradox. In popular discourse, many conservatives tend to use this argument in an effort to undermine the decoupling of sex and gender by claiming that the experience of womanhood is equal to the reality of one's biological body. Yet even in the case of equating physical biology to an experience of gender, our definitions falter.

Let us use womanhood for this argument, even though all of this applies just the same to manhood, and would possibly apply all the same to any other hypothetically recognized genders, were there to be any - I would argue that there are no definitions of womanhood, even if we were to try and based them entirely on biology, that would not exclude completely cisgender women from the list.

Often cited arguments for equating womanhood and biology equate the presence of a womb or the ability to reproduce- it is not hard to see why this particular approach would be limiting, as it would

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<sup>78</sup> MORIAH, Caitlin. @caitlinmoriah. "because she and they both feel fine to my ears, please calm down about my personal choices kathleen | ps why would that ever help my career lol most people in power would much rather i not remind them about gender diversity ever" Twitter, 10 Oct. 2021, 12:49AM, <https://twitter.com/caitlinmoriah/status/1446971208839225345>.

<sup>79</sup> This question has recently been popularized by Matt Walsh's documentary of the same name.

exclude cisgender women who had had hysterectomies, had been born without a womb, were infertile due to biological factors or simply past the age of menopause. Another often highlighted aspect is the presence of XX chromosomes in biological women. However, this argument completely neglects the fact that many people live their entire life never genuinely knowing their chromosomal makeup; they simply assume that their chromosomes match the assumed configuration. Even among other mammals, there exists a variety of chromosomal configurations that do not exactly match the XX and XY configurations most commonly cited for females and males (such as in the case of male calico cats, which have XXY chromosomes while presenting phenotypically as male, but possessing the necessary XX chromosomes to present the calico coloration<sup>80</sup>). A person might go through their entire life never knowing their chromosomal makeup, unless it is directly relevant to them medically, as we do not commonly test for chromosomes at birth. Even when it comes to assigning gender at birth, it is based mostly on the attending physician's best guess based on the child's apparent external genitalia.

Keeping all this in mind, we could demonstrate the nebulous nature of gender in language in a few ways. For example, were we to ask – *What is a chair?*

What a chair actually constitutes is a more insidious question that it may seem at first sight. Is it a thing that has a flat top and four legs? A table would also fit this description. Even if we include a caveat that it is a thing that humans commonly sit on, a table would still fit this description. In fact, so would a horse. Then, is a chair something that we pull up to a table to sit on? This definition excludes armchairs. And table chairs that do not mysteriously stop being chairs once they are removed from the proximity of a table. What about chairs that have fewer legs than three? We could say that a three-legged chair is a stool, however, is a stool not a type of chair, or do they not serve the same function?<sup>81</sup> Which brings us to the point: a chair is any item that fulfills the function of it being a chair by being able to be used as one. A crate pulled up to a table for a person to sit on fulfills the technical purpose of being a chair; it does not matter that it was not meant to be one. The nature of the chair does not matter, and attempting to define it extensively in a way that would exclude all items that are kind-of-chairs-but-not-really (such as stools) is arguably pointless.

We may also get deeper into this argument by examining the language game while using the word and the social function of *water*. Water has been used before in linguistic exercises, such as in the theory

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<sup>80</sup> Why Are Male Calico Cats So Rare?. *Treehugger* [online]. 2022 [cit. 2022-08-18]. Available at: <https://www.treehugger.com/why-are-male-calico-cats-so-rare-4864194>

<sup>81</sup> PECORINO, Philip A. *SOCRATES' DEATH and PLATO's THEORY of the FORMS: Arguments for the Existence of the Soul* [online]. [cit. 2022-08-18]. Available at: [https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialsciences/ppecorino/intro\\_text/Chapter%20%20GREEKS/Socrates\\_death3.htm](https://www.qcc.cuny.edu/socialsciences/ppecorino/intro_text/Chapter%20%20GREEKS/Socrates_death3.htm)

of possible worlds<sup>82</sup>, which argues that a thing that fulfills the function of water and is indistinguishable from water is still water, even if it were to have a different chemical makeup in a different world.

However, we do not even have to go this far to play the language game with water. Even in our world, what water is, or rather, what we *call* water, depends largely on the function that it fulfills. If we were to point at a river and ask what is flowing in it, naturally the answer would be water. However, what is implicit in this name of water is that it is *river water*. If we point to a bottle of water that is being sold at a store, and describe the contents of the bottle as *water* - is this really the same water as the one floating in the river? Are these two types of water the same thing? <sup>83</sup>

The answer is that they are not. However, they both serve the function of water in their respective contexts. Which is important; let us say we were to swap them –handing somebody a bottle of water which were filled with something out of a river or a puddle or a pond – and when asked what the bottle contained, we were to say that it's *just water*. We could make the argument that in the moment, this statement would be a lie. Because in asking for the contents of the bottle, the question contains the implication of asking if the water within is safe to drink, which dirty river water won't necessarily be.

Bottled water is never just H<sub>2</sub>O – it contains trace amounts of minerals and other things, yet these do not impede its function of being drinkable water. However, if the water contained trace amounts of cyanide, it would be unsafe to drink, which would impede its function. The trace amounts of these things in it would be the same, but if we were to describe the former as just water, it likely could not be argued that we are lying; trace amounts of minerals in bottled water are to be expected. If we were to describe the latter as just water, the situation would be different. The function of bottled water, it being safe to drink in order to hydrate, would be disrupted by adding poison into it<sup>84</sup>.

Water is never just H<sub>2</sub>O, unless we are talking about distilled water specifically. However, what water is would be based entirely on the function that it serves.<sup>85</sup>

We could also borrow arguments from translation. For many languages, translation of certain words into other words is in fact nearly impossible; the best we can do is talk around a certain term and try to approximate it through description, or try to find the closest equivalent that simply will not be quite right. As we have already established, the social expectations of manhood, womanhood, and other

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<sup>82</sup> "Addressing the Lack of Debates & Refining The AGUA Argument." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Vaush Pit, 21 Jul 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mISVNZyi9w>.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>84</sup> "Addressing the Lack of Debates & Refining The AGUA Argument." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Vaush Pit, 21 Jul 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mISVNZyi9w>.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibidem*.

established gender roles, such as third genders that have existed in many cultures across history, for example in India or among Native Americans<sup>86</sup>, differ across cultures.

On this basis, we can then argue that a *woman* is any person that satisfactorily performs the social function of a woman in a given social (or regional) context. Just like a stool being a subcategory of chair, a trans woman is simply a subcategory of woman. In social contexts, a woman who satisfactorily performs the expectations of womanhood and makes herself fit the social function of woman for the given context, is by definition a woman.

The borders of manhood and womanhood are of course nebulous, as this argument can go both ways. Cisgender women who do not fit the social expectations of what a woman looks and acts like, such as butch lesbians, can be subject to harassment and other negative social consequences of not performing their social roles appropriately. However, a trans woman who performs womanhood in all the characteristic stereotypical ways established in her geographical area (in other words, one that *passes*<sup>87</sup> as a woman), especially if she had undergone surgical gender reassignment surgery, is practically indistinguishable from a cisgender woman in function, unless we reduce the function of woman to having a womb and being capable of pregnancy only, which are definitely not the only social functions of women, as we have previously established, and trying to reduce them to this is highly reductive. Actually, if we determine woman to be a function that one performs, a transgender woman who acts in compliance with regional gender stereotypes arguably performs the function of being a woman better than a gender-nonconforming butch lesbian would. In fact, the very existence of the term gender-nonconforming would support this notion.

### 3.11 Gender expression in situational context

I would like to outline a particular example of utilizing gendered signifiers for a different purpose; one not necessarily deceitful, but which can be interpreted differently based on context, outlining the importance of it in deconstructing gender expression. It may be an intuitive question to ask – if one's expression of gender identity lies simply in a certain amount of deliberate physical signification, how are we to differentiate between that which is meant to signal genuine identity and that which is not? Notably, what is the difference between a simple act of crossdressing (such as at a drag performance), and the expression of a gender identity? The borders of these two may be particularly nebulous.

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<sup>86</sup> Two-Spirit. *Trans Care BC* [online]. [cit. 2022-08-18]. Dostupné z: <http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/gender-basics-education/terms-concepts/two-spirit#>

<sup>87</sup> The degree to which a non-cisgender individual's outward gender expression may be interpreted by strangers as the gender identity they are intending to express. For example, the degree to which a transgender woman may be interpreted as a woman by individuals without prior knowledge of her queer identity.



What is the difference between performing a character and being transgender? First of all, we may conclude that the declarative act of stating one's gender is an integral part of presenting one's gender identity and social gender role that goes overlooked. Many male drag performers whose stage personas are female drag queens openly state that they do not identify as transgender (however, it is not integral to drag culture to only perform as the 'opposite' gender). We can find such examples in history as well. In many types of theatre, female roles were typically performed by men. In some theatrical genres, such as the Japanese *kabuki* theater, this practice persists to this day. If we do not categorize these performers as transgender, this also lends itself to the argument that gender expression differs situationally, depending on context, which we can support with pragmatics. In absence of any further context clues deciding the interpretation of the gender identity being expressed (such as a simple declaration of it), based only on the viewer's interpretation of the visual signifiers, the situational context is the deciding factor. While a male performer in a female role and a transgender woman may look visually similar in certain situations<sup>88</sup>, situational context is the deciding factor in these circumstances. For example, an actor on stage of a kabuki play who is adopting a female role would likely not be interpreted in context as signaling a transgender identity.

From here, we may establish several important points of clarification in the signification of one's gender expression: the expression of a person's gender identity may differ situationally, but it is always intentional and continuous. A declarative component is also an important factor; although disclosing queerness specifically is not necessary (as this same concept also applies to non-queer individuals). However, we must also account for the experiences of *closeted*<sup>89</sup> individuals who do not openly declare their gender publicly.

Admittedly, the boundaries of the two are somewhat nebulous. Roland Posner offers some insight into the specific semiotic nature of an actor as the conveyor of signification, to help further differentiate the two. Placing the varied signifiers (not just gendered ones) onto a sort of scale, he argues that the more long-term a specific signifier is, the more we are inclined to find it credible and believe it, increasing our level of trust that the person is being genuine. More concretely, the more transient and easy-to-change a signifier is, the more we are inclined to interpret it as deceitful<sup>90</sup> – make-up would be a good example. As

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<sup>88</sup> I must clarify that both crossdressing performers and transgender people vary in appearance, and I am simply referring to a partial overlap of purely visual interpretation of the two by a certain percentage of observers.

<sup>89</sup> *Closeted or in the closet* – used to refer most commonly to queer people who do not make their queer identity publicly known. The term originates from the phrase *coming out of the closet* to refer to the disclosure of one's queer identity to one or more recipients.

<sup>90</sup> POSNER, Roland, Veronika OPLETALOVÁ, Lukáš MOTYČKA a Lenka PETROVÁ. *Sémiotické Studie*. 1. Olomouc: Palacký University, 2018. p.29

the role of an actor or performer is pretty temporary in nature and can be identified as such easily from situational context, it can be distinguished quite clearly that the performance being put on is temporary.

### **3.12 Binarism in semiotic models**

#### **3.12.1 *Male and Female* in participative and exclusive opposition**

The earlier structuralist approaches to the issue of binary opposition trended towards treating binary oppositions as necessarily exclusive. If something is one thing, this prescribes the contradiction that it also isn't another thing on the opposite side of the spectrum. If something is A, it is also a not-B.<sup>91</sup>

Based on the law of substitution<sup>92</sup> as utilized by Roman Jakobson, the male substitutes the female, this is true for example in Slavic and other gendered languages, where the grammatical masculine form of a word encompasses within itself the feminine until specified otherwise. We may observe this in Czech grammar as well. A group of humans referred to using the grammatically masculine term for they, 'oni', is assumed to be of male, other or mixed genders, encompassing within itself any females without a necessary grammatical denotation. However, a group referred to using the grammatically feminine term, 'ony', will always ever be exclusively comprised of women, girls or females. If even one individual that the speaker interprets as neither of these is contained within the group, the marked term is no longer applicable. Naturally, this is not the case merely for pronouns; in languages such as Czech that utilize grammatical masculinity as the default, this can be carried out with many different words. Same as Jakobson's examples with the Russian donkeys<sup>93</sup>, names for certain groups exist not as neutral but as masculine by default and only presumed to be lacking a modifying gender signifier, for example terms such as 'studenti' (students), 'zaměstnanci' (employees), etc. This has been an issue in feminist discourse, and these days we can see some moving away from this trend and trying out terms that more explicitly include a female modifier also, in an attempt at being inclusive, done either using slashes, asterisks, or other means<sup>94</sup>.

I will demonstrate the possible participative and exclusive oppositions of *male* and *female* on an example – the icons on public toilets depicting a male stick figure and a female stick figure to indicate men's and women's restrooms. In this case, the male figure on the restroom door exists in exclusive opposition to the other, distinctly female figure. Comparing these symbols to a different kind of stick

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<sup>91</sup> I will elaborate further on this specific type of opposition in a further section pertaining to the semiotic square.

<sup>92</sup> JAKOBSON, Roman. *Russian and Slavic Grammar: Studies 1931-1981*. New York: Mouton Publishers, 1994.

<sup>93</sup> Ibidem, p.2

<sup>94</sup> Hledáme průvodce pro studenty/ky se socioekonomickým znevýhodněním. In: *Ústav anglického jazyka a didaktiky: Univerzita Karlova* [online]. 2021 [cit. 2022-08-18]. Available at: <https://uajd.ff.cuni.cz/hledame-pruvodce-pro-studenty-ky-se-socioekonomicky-m-znevychodnenim/>

figure, the one depicted on the traffic lights at a pedestrian crossing, we can easily point out that the male figure on the traffic light (or rather, the distinctly non-gendered stick figure, by nature of being a stick figure that carries a bare minimum of human characteristics) represents any human, encompassing in a participative opposition also a female figure, or one of any other conceivable gender. It would likely be ridiculous to argue that the traffic light signifies that only males may cross the road; in the absence of the marked female figure to stand in binary opposition, the traffic light figure encompasses both.

“Skirt” seems to be a universally recognized signifier of the womanhood or femaleness of the depicted, although it can be argued that it is no longer based on a reflection of reality in our current historical context. Turning a simple stick figure without any gendered signifiers into one that is interpreted as female could be achieved arguably by adding any socially recognized feminine attribute onto it, such as a pair of heels, or a mouth with bright red lipstick, or long eyelashes. The skirt-wearing stick figure thus also invites a good argument for the historical transience and socially constructed nature of gendered signifiers that I have already outlined. People who present female are no longer limited to just one particular type of garment that is considered socially acceptable for them to wear (skirts), and are free to clothe themselves in trousers, should they so please. Yet, as it is currently only ever acceptable for people who present as male to wear skirt-like attire in very specific contexts (such as the Scottish kilt), this designates a ‘skirt’ a modifier that turns Jakobson’s zero sign into a marked one.<sup>95</sup>

This also proves that gendered signifiers are entirely arbitrary, which is an important component of the definition of a sign, notably according to Saussure.<sup>96</sup> There is nothing that designates a link between certain gendered signifiers and the gender that they signify, other than the established use of them throughout time and habit (which is, as I have mentioned in a previous chapter, why Judith Butler considers *time* to be an important component of the concept of gender as a social construct). In the present, the depiction of a pair of trousers (or rather, absence of an outline of any clothing at all) on a symbolic depiction of a human may constitute maleness or lack of gender signification based on context. However, throughout history, in certain geographical areas, humans of any gender would have clothed themselves in tunics and (in a modern context) ‘dress-like’ garments, a pair of bifurcated garments may have signified something else.

Therefore, any stick figure exists simultaneously as a symbol for a human of any gender, but also, in the presence of a distinctly feminine-signified figure, becomes exclusively a signifier of the masculine, following the model of the marked and the unmarked presented by Roman Jakobson. Comparing

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<sup>95</sup> JAKOBSON, Roman. *Russian and Slavic Grammar: Studies 1931-1981*. New York: Mouton Publishers, 1994. p.2

<sup>96</sup> DE SAUSSURE, Ferdinand a W. BASKIN, BALLY, C. a A. SECHEHAYE, ed. *Course in general linguistics*. New York: McGraw-HillBook Company, 1966. p.69

Jakobson's model of binary opposition presented in his essay "On the Structure of the Russian Verb"<sup>97</sup> to the model of binary oppositions presented by Hjelmslev, while Jakobson approaches the concept through the notion of markedness (and thus the opposition of the unmarked vs. the marked), Hjelmslev approaches the concept through the opposition of the intensive and the extensive<sup>98</sup>, building on the concept of the law of substitution through the law of participation. In fact, we can claim that Jakobson's act of substituting one thing for another (contained therewithin) stands directly on the law of participation.<sup>99</sup> Hjelmslev's model also works with three elements that are put into opposition. Unlike Jakobson, who resolves the specific relation between the two terms entering into an opposition through the non-signalization of A versus the signalization of non-A (which are distinctly different), Hjelmslev adds a third element into the formula, A vs A + non-A.<sup>100</sup> Though these models can mostly be applied to linguistic signs, it is completely possible to translate them to non-linguistic elements.

In further application of these models of to non-linguistic signs, a good example of this exact type of gendered signification through the use of marked signifiers can be found in animated media. Notably, for example, the popular Disney animated characters Mickey and Minnie Mouse. At a closer look, both of these characters use the very same character model. If we removed all of their clothing and Minnie Mouse's make-up (or more concretely her long eyelashes especially on her animated model), the characters would look practically indistinguishable.



Figure 1: Mickey and Minnie Mouse (Source: pixabay<sup>101</sup>)

This can be simplified further. The practice of only deliberately signifying the 'otherness' of femaleness and femininity is not a new concept in media, practiced notably in animated material by sometimes nonsensical means, such as expressing sexual dimorphism in animated animals by depicting a

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<sup>97</sup>JAKOBSON, Roman. *Russian and Slavic Grammar: Studies 1931-1981*. New York: Mouton Publishers, 1994.

<sup>98</sup> LACKOVÁ, Ľudmila. Participative opposition applied. *Sign System Studies* [online]. 2021 [cit. 2022-08-18]. Available at: doi:10.12697/SSS1, p.14

<sup>99</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>100</sup> Ibidem, p.15

<sup>101</sup>[https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2017/09/09/15/02/mickey-mouse-2732231\\_640.png](https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2017/09/09/15/02/mickey-mouse-2732231_640.png)

pair of human breasts on a non-mammalian creature that would not possess such body parts under any circumstances other than them being deliberately utilized to signify that this particular creature is female.<sup>102</sup>

I would also like to point out a particular aspect of these models that ties into the historical context of gender and gendered reality – based on the historical position that women and femininity have had throughout many cultures (in reference most specifically to the disadvantaged position of women in the past), it is no coincidence that the male is considered the default unmarked sign in these binary opposition models and examples, with the signs of femaleness being considered a modifier.

However, I must also point out that this particular default presumption of masculinity is not always the case in all situations. To borrow an example from the Czech language again, I would argue that with certain words that exist by default in the form of being grammatically feminine, this is what their zero sign state is, with maleness being the modifier. Such as the word ‘kočka’ (cat) that presumes the sex of the animal to be female (I do not consider the distinction between sex and gender in non-human animals to be a meaningful point of discussion), with ‘kocour’ (tomcat) being the male marked sign.

The reliance on binarism (especially in application to sex and gender) is clearly demonstrated here. However, the shortcomings of certain languages’ grammar often barely allow us to conceive of anything different. The area of gender in language and grammar specifically, especially for heavily gendered languages such as Czech, definitely warrants further study.

### **3.12.2 *Male and Female* dichotomy on the semiotic square**

The semiotic square, sometimes also called a Greimas square, after Algirdas J. Greimas who originated it, is a useful tool that can be used to conceptualize meaning in oppositions. The model is comprised of four terms placed in the four corners, and depicts the relations between them. The square acts as a visualization of the contrary relation of two pairs of terms in an exclusive binary opposition (A and non-A), which are contradictory.

While Jakobson only used a mere two binary categories, according to Greimas’ conception of binary oppositions, we must also accept the existence of more complex categories, and that different

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<sup>102</sup> This is such a common occurrence in media that the website TV Tropes, dedicated to chronicling particular trends in modern media, lists quite an extensive number of examples on the page dedicated to this trope, which they have dubbed ‘Non-mammal Mammaries’. (“Non-Mammal Mammaries”, *TV Tropes*, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/NonMammalMammaries>)

categories allow for a differing number of semiotic relations between two terms instead of a mere simple opposition.<sup>103</sup>

Displayed below is a pretty straightforward visualization of the male and the female using the semiotic square.

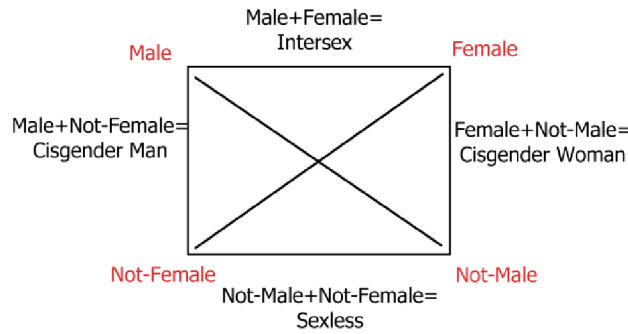


Figure 2: 'Male' and 'Female' on the semiotic square (inspired by Greimas<sup>104</sup>)

We can do the same with the concepts of the masculine and the feminine (below), on which I also demonstrate that we can utilize the concepts from prototype theory in relation to the semiotic square. Positioned over the left and right side of the square, we may place the ideal prototype man that possesses the prototypical attributes of masculinity and maleness, on the other side, the same is true for the prototypical female.

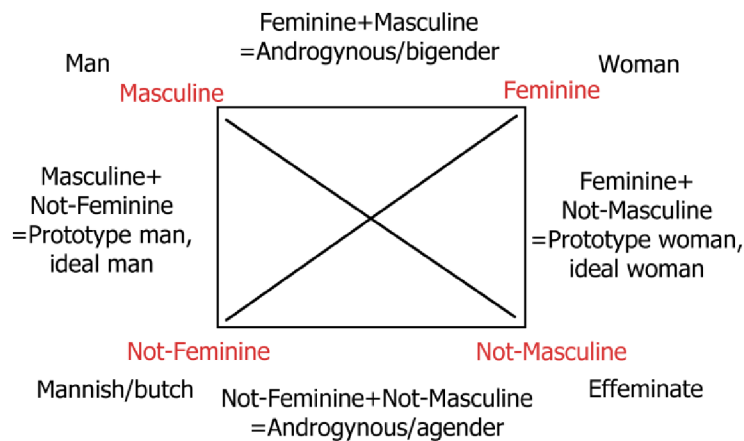


Figure 3: 'Masculine' and 'Feminine' on the semiotic square (inspired by Greimas<sup>105</sup>)

<sup>103</sup> GREIMAS, Algirdas Julien a Joseph COURTES. *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary (Advances in Semiotics)*. Indiana University Press, 1983. p.308-9

<sup>104</sup> GREIMAS, Algirdas Julien a Joseph COURTES. *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary (Advances in Semiotics)*. Indiana University Press, 1983. p.309

While it still deals with the concept of exclusive oppositions, the semiotic square offers better use for the purpose of characterizing the various gender expressions that might arise from just the masculine and the feminine. However, the model, if applied to sex or gender expression, does not allow us to consider a larger amount of variables constituting the compound identity of a person, notably, it could not be used to visualize outcomes that would arise if we were to decouple gender identity and biological sex.

I wanted to explore if this could be done – that is, somehow if it would be possible to visualize the relation between both by constructing a more elaborate model that would join both of these squares. My first attempt to overlay them proved unsuccessful, as the model’s layout made it too difficult to try and visualize the different relations existing between the two squares:

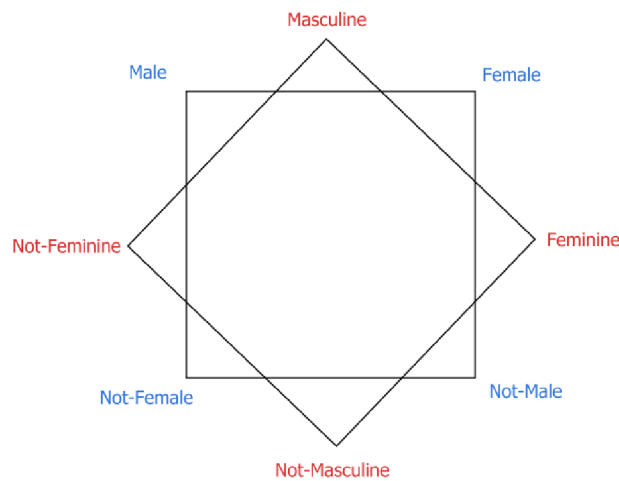


Figure 4: The unsuccessful attempt

However, this was solved by connecting the two squares to each other in a three-dimensional space. Placing the square with biological sex in front and the one with gender behind it, I was able to connect them using new planes of relations, this time between sex and gender, creating a cube (displayed below). These extra planes are not actually Greimas squares (as they do not contain the necessary contrary, contradictory and implicative relations).

A particular individual’s gender identity (in relation to their biological sex) could then be visualized as a connection between the front plane of the cube and the back one. On the uppermost plane of the cube, we can visualize both cisgender and transgender men and women. The entire mass of the cube below that level then allows for the visualization of varying non-binary identities.

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<sup>105</sup> GREIMAS, Algirdas Julien a Joseph COURTES. *Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary (Advances in Semiotics)*. Indiana University Press, 1983. p.309

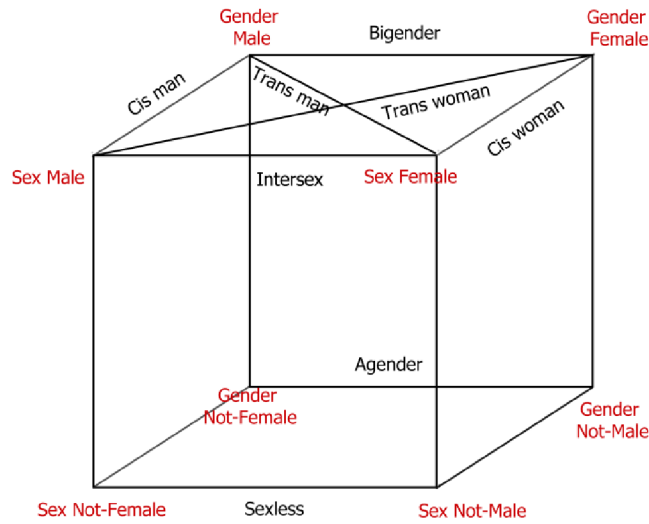


Figure 5: The 3D model connecting the two semiotic squares<sup>106</sup>

This model is not without fault though. While it allows for some freedom, and adding a third dimension to a binaristic model is certainly beneficial in making it more versatile, it is still built within the constraints of binary oppositions, and visualizes a gender identity as defined *through* the biological sex, which, as we try and move away from exclusive oppositions in the ways in which we conceptualize gender and sex, gender and identity as a whole, is not ideal.

<sup>106</sup> A cube-shaped model was also utilized by Hjelmslev in his study of cases (LOUIS, Hjelmslev. *La catégorie des cas: étude de grammaire générale*. Universitetsforlaget i Aarhus, 1935).



## 4. Gender identity as a social construct in popular discourse and queer activism

### 4.1 The case of Blaire White and the validity of individual non-cisgender identities

Blaire White is one of the most well-known transgender activists who mainly concentrate their activities on the internet. She is a famous socially conservative trans woman, who has risen to fame by frequently being in vocal opposition to the more liberal opinions of the queer community on average, often criticizing other transgender people and activists.<sup>107</sup>

We must not fall into the trap of equating the subjective success of one's alignment with gendered expectations and the validity of their gender identity, whether the expression of one's gender identity is purely declarative, or expressed through conforming to established gendered expectations to varying degrees of success (known colloquially in the queer community as 'passing').

Blaire White is not the only figure, public or otherwise, who defaults to using the overreliance on the binarism of established gendered expectations as a crutch to seemingly steer negative attention away from themselves by conforming intensely to stereotypical archetypes of femininity or masculinity. This aggressive conformity appears to be a natural defense mechanism to avoid negative social consequences, which brings us back to both John Searle's theory of social institutions and the prescriptive powers of gender as an institution that one is socially pushed to conform to under the threat of negative social consequences<sup>108</sup>, and Judith Butler's corresponding claims citing the punishment of social ostracization as a consequence of inadequate adherence to a prescribed gender role<sup>109</sup>.

We may use public transgender figures as a metric – a scale, even, of how differently gender conformity is expressed in different social contexts, and how reliant it is on one's particular social situation and standing. I am inclined to argue that Blaire White's particular conformist expression of her transgender identity is influenced heavily by the social circles she inhabits. As a woman of conservative political leaning, she is pushed to try and offset the loss of social capital<sup>110</sup> caused by her queer identity (as many individuals in her orbit may be in opposition to acceptance of transgender individuals) by aggressively conforming to a stereotypical, practically standardized way of what people of a conservative

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<sup>107</sup> Blaire White's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/BlaireWhiteX>

<sup>108</sup> SEARLE, John R. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN 0199576912.

<sup>109</sup> BUTLER, Judith. *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*. *Theatre Journal*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, 40(4).

<sup>110</sup> SEARLE, John R. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN 0199576912.

political persuasion may view as an acceptable archetype of femininity. This is presumably done in the spirit of respectability politics<sup>111</sup>, a practice in which queer individuals attempt to prevent negative social consequences of expressing queerness by presenting a sanitized, ‘respectable’ image in order to set themselves apart from those who do not adhere to social norms as stringently and thus possess lesser social capital. This may apply both to one’s own life, but also creative expression, such as the depictions of queer individuals in media that attempt to present them in the most inoffensive manner possible<sup>112</sup>.

In social interaction, there seem to exist two different goals of acceptance; this is the opposite in queer spaces – it is in fact met with negative social consequences if one appears to conform too heavily to mainstream cisheterosexual social mores. For example, bisexual couples in different gender relationships (one man and one woman), when containing an entirely gender-conforming woman and gender-conforming man can be met with the negative consequence of having their queer identity questioned or invalidated in queer spaces, where a certain degree of nonconformity is expected and desired, whereas in mainstream society, they would blend in without notice. This can also possibly happen to bisexual women in lesbian-dominated spaces.<sup>113</sup> Also, attraction to men (in queer women and non-binary people) can sometimes be devalued and even shamed as a whole<sup>114</sup>.

We may observe two different directions in the self-actualization of one’s identity and signaling one’s queerness, depending on the nature of one’s social interaction and the existent semiosphere that their expression is viewed through. As the goal of attaining social status within one’s group is realized through conforming to the group’s values (and in this case pre-established modes of expression), we could argue that this consensus is attained by two modes of expression on the same spectrum – queerness is signaled to a queer audience, and concealed as much as possible to a non-queer audience, particularly if the target group is hostile to queerness, such as in certain religious contexts, or in socially conservative groups.

However, this pattern of behavior is not exclusive to queer individuals who exist within socially and politically conservative social circles. Even among YouTube activist personalities, we can observe this particular overreliance on the attainment and ‘correct’ performance of gendered signifiers to a satisfactory degree, as the metric for the validity of one’s queer (transgender) identity. It is, arguably, the

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<sup>111</sup> SEARLE, John R. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN 0199576912.

<sup>112</sup> This term originated in reference to the African American community. ("Playing the Game of Respectability Politics, But At What Cost?" Very Well Mind, 15 Feb 2022, <https://www.verywellmind.com/playing-the-game-of-respectability-politics-5215862#>.)

<sup>113</sup> "What lesbians think about bisexuals." *YouTube*, uploaded by Arielle Scarcella, 15 Sep 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUozcqlhX3w>.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibidem*.

expression of the human nature of metaphorically painting a target on the back of individuals who conform to the social mores less satisfactorily in an attempt to elevate one's own self within the group.

A common argument for discrediting the validity of individual transgender people used by figures such as Blaire White or Calvin Garrah<sup>115</sup>, Arielle Scarcella<sup>116</sup> and others in their activism is the overvaluation of physical gender dysphoria<sup>117</sup> as the metric for the validity of one's transness, in opposition to valuing gender euphoria<sup>118</sup> as a metric instead. This stance is commonly referred to in the community as *transmedicalism*<sup>119</sup>. Though it carries a negative connotation in more gender-liberal queer spaces, many more socially conservative queer figures subscribe to this label openly (just as Blaire White<sup>120</sup> herself does).

However, as I am not qualified to speak on the validity of medical conditions in the assessment of an individual's gender identity, I will delve only into examining the gender signifiers that creators such as White claim to base their assessment of who qualifies as a 'real' transgender person.

A common thread that can be observed between activists who present themselves as more socially conservative is the overreliance on the binary opposition of the masculine and the feminine. Blaire White herself conducts herself in a manner that appears to be an attempt at setting herself apart from queer people who conform to binary gender norms less satisfactorily.<sup>121</sup> She would often set herself apart from this group by adopting the commonly used derogatory term *woke*<sup>122</sup> to refer to them.

Due to the strong reliance on binary gender signifiers, and in the spirit of respectability politics, conservative-leaning transgender creators would express negative views of individuals with a less

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<sup>115</sup> Calvin Garrah's channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/KalvinGarrah> (I must note that Calvin Garrah has since retracted many of his transmedicalist views, however, for many years he remained a prominent transgender voice in this area of anti-nonbinary discourse on the platform.)

<sup>116</sup> Arielle Scarcella's channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/arielle>

<sup>117</sup> A medically diagnosed condition designating somebody's gender identity as different from their sex assigned at birth and acknowledging the emotional distress this discrepancy causes to them.

<sup>118</sup> The reported positive feelings of affirmation caused by having one's gender identity correctly interpreted or affirmatively acknowledged in social interactions or in one's own assessment of their appearance or behavior.

<sup>119</sup> Transmedicalists believe that the presence of gender dysphoria is an integral component of being transgender.

<sup>120</sup> "'Gender Dysphoria Is a Mental Disorder" - Blaire White". *YouTube*, uploaded by Triggernometry, 25 Jul 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJvQaBgZSAY>.

<sup>121</sup> "Reacting To Woke TikTokers Who REALLY HATE ME" *YouTube*, uploaded by Blaire White, 30 Jul 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OZ2fYIZDxM>.

<sup>122</sup> The term 'woke' (also used in its noun form, 'wokeness'), originated first within African American Vernacular English and was used to refer to being highly socially aware, 'awake'. Among socially conservative people it is used in a derogatory manner as a highly open signifier to describe individuals and actions that are socially progressive to a highly nonconformist degree, which is arguably considered a negative trait. (What is the history of the word 'woke' and its modern uses?. The Independent [online]. 2021 [cit. 2022-08-18]. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/woke-meaning-word-history-b1790787.html>)

conformist way of presenting their identities. The logic is actually not hard to follow, as it is clear that these opinions might originate from a place of fear or an attempt at self-preservation through deflection. By denouncing nonconformist ways of gendered presentation, a completely archetypally feminine transgender woman establishes herself as a socially non-threatening member of the wider in-group, attaining a higher social status by aligning herself with the social majority.



*Figure 6: Blaire White in her video "Reacting To Woke TikTokers Who REALLY HATE ME"<sup>123</sup>*

While it is admittedly difficult to define a precise list of traits and concrete signifiers that constitute the identity of a feminine woman, as I have already outlined in a previous chapter defining the word 'woman' in itself as defining a concept of a floating signifieds that are both socially and historically constructed, looking at Blaire White's gender presentation, we can clearly observe that she is in adherence to a relatively exaggerated performance of femininity (and therefore a high degree of *womanness*) as it is understood in our current social semiosphere. This being both declarative, as White claims to be, speaks of herself as, and conform to the social role of a woman, and performative, indicated by the gendered signifiers that she exhibits, both in appearance – her long, femininely styled hair, long nails, use of heavy make-up, soft features, feminine dress, etc., and in behavior – a high tone of voice, and learned feminine mannerisms. While it is debatable how the adherence to heterosexuality can be counted as being a part of performing a gendered social role, I must note that in a historical context, interest in the 'opposite sex' has been, and to a degree still is, a large part of occupying the social role of a particular gender. In this respect,

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<sup>123</sup> "Reacting To Woke TikTokers Who REALLY HATE ME" *YouTube*, uploaded by Blaire White, 30 Jul 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OZ2fYIZDxM>.

White has also stated to be dating men<sup>124</sup>, which constitutes another point of adherence to the broad societal concept of womanhood.

We can thus argue that were she not a vocal transgender content creator, White would likely perfectly fit the social role of a gender-conforming heterosexual woman.

To return to the concepts of conceptual categories and social function, White naturally only fits one subordinate category of womanhood, of which there are many – white womanhood, black womanhood, trans womanhood, etc. Woman, a nebulous signifier that many view as inherently biological, while others, notably queer and queer-positive voices in the sphere of gender studies and queer studies, such as transgender activist Jessie Gender<sup>125</sup>, consider it an umbrella term that encompasses many different ways in which womanhood may be experienced<sup>126</sup>. As it can be argued that womanhood is not only something that one independently performs, but also something that is imposed upon them by the social groups that they inhabit<sup>127</sup>, in which case they are not quite so much performing it as they are experiencing it, and will continue experiencing it for as long as they are interpreted by their social circle as a woman, even if this might be misgendering<sup>128</sup> in nature.

#### **4.2 Vera Wylde and signification of queerness outside the binary**

To contrast with Blaire White's adoption of rational conformity, I want to present another activist creator, whose expression clearly demonstrates the difference in intention when it comes to the signification of their identity.

Vera Wylde is a prominent voice in the geek and queer subculture on YouTube. Unlike Blaire White, they identify as gender non-binary, however they likely (as I must admit that this is a presumption on my part) share her assigned sex at birth.

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<sup>124</sup> "Is My Boyfriend Gay?" *YouTube*, uploaded by Blaire White, 10 May 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiFPIfN99N0>.

<sup>125</sup> Jessie's channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/thephilosophytube>

<sup>126</sup> "Revealing My Post-Facial Feminization Surgery Face!", *YouTube*, uploaded by Jessie Gender, 29 Jul 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dnfe\\_yU9GRg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dnfe_yU9GRg).

<sup>127</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>128</sup> Misgendering – a term used mostly in the queer community to describe the act of incorrectly interpreting an individual's gender identity. It is not always necessarily malicious or even intentional.



Figure 7: Vera Wylde in their video “Batgirl, HBOMax, and The Flash, OH MY! (What is going on at Warner Bros. Discovery???)”<sup>129</sup>

Their non-binary identity in fact puts Wylde in a nice contrast with White. As I have already outlined previously, we can recognize two different apparent intentions when it comes to the signification of gender identity: concealment, as in the case of Blaire White, and intentional signaling. Wylde often appears in their videos wearing rainbow motifs, such as a prominent rainbow ring, clearly with the intention to signal their adherence to the queer identity.

I will point out that we could interpret Wylde’s apparently more lax gender presentation closer to the periphery of the conceptual category of female (as they present rather feminine) not only because they are non-cisgender, but particularly because the geek subculture may also contribute to their particular signifiers of presentation, as subcultural dress is often more permissive of bending gender signifiers. In queer culture, taking apart the social signifiers of gender is also not just more broadly accepted, but expected.

#### **4.3 Comparing White and Wylde through the application of the cubical model**

Comparing White to Wylde, we can see even clearer how White sets herself clearly in opposition to anything masculine. White does this quite well, of course, adorning herself in feminine signifiers masterfully enough to become practically the prototype woman. Compared to Wylde’s expression, we can observe a higher degree of synthesis in Wylde’s non-binary realization of identity. In a way, we can view it in contrast with White’s expression as more participative and synthetic, incorporating the masculine into the feminine. While I cannot deny that there exist cisgender women who look just like Wylde when it comes to their physicality, Wylde clearly intentionally chooses not to conceal their more masculine physical body, choosing to build feminine signifiers upon it.

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<sup>129</sup> "Batgirl, HBOMax, and The Flash, OH MY! (What is going on at Warner Bros. Discovery???)". *YouTube*, uploaded by The Council Of Geeks, 13 Aug 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mISVNZyi9w>.

We can observe this synthesis of signifiers in other creators too, notably non-binary models and influencers who embrace a hyper-feminine aesthetic while retaining explicit signifiers of maleness, such as a grown-out beard.

As one last comparison, I tried to visualize the relation between White and Wylde's respective sex and gender on my proposed cubical model. Navigating these relations through what is essentially two planes of binary oppositions has, as I had suspected, continued to prove somewhat non-ideal, however, the actual attempt proved rather interesting.

Even if we simplify the placement on the biological sex plane (and for now disregard the options of nuances of biological sex, simply placing both Wylde and White's sex in the "Female" corner, in accordance with their presumed assigned sex at birth), the relation between the two planes comes out 3-dimensional. Specifically for Blaire White, I would argue that her gender expression cannot simply be placed into the "male" gender corner. White differentiates herself from biological males with such a fervent hyper-femininity, that I have to argue that her gender expression *also* be placed in the "Not-male" corner, which leaves us with the actual visualization of Blaire White's identity in the form of a triangle within the 3D space of the cube.

Vera Wylde's identity is slightly more difficult to place into the cube. They identify as non-binary (specifically genderfluid), and their presentation is neither all feminine nor all masculine, though it definitely doesn't approach the *neither* plane at the bottom of the cube too much. Placing their gender identity in both the male and female corners would have one side of the resulting triangle run along the cisgender male axes (if we operated with male sex here as well), and that does not seem accurate. Therefore, I would be inclined to place the points on the male-female gender axis, but closer to the middle. This might reveal the necessity of perhaps adding some kind of way to project fluidity onto the model.

I recognize that the conception of his model is still a work in progress, however, the general conclusion of this comparison exercise is the resulting vertically-positioned triangle of male sex to female and non-male gender for Blaire White, and male sex to (mostly) female *and* (mostly) male gender for Vera Wylde.

## 5. Conclusion

The key to transcending the binary nature of gender while operating within the culturally ingrained framework of its institutional, sociohistorical nature possibly lies in abandoning the idea of binary systems as existing in exclusive oppositions to one another. Accepting the notion that the masculine participates on the feminine and vice versa, we can defeat the idea that displaying one is somehow the 'wrong' signifier.

While unfortunately we have to accept that by the mere act of existing within the social semiosphere, we are continuously subject to being interpreted as signs by our surroundings whether we intend to communicate meaning deliberately or not.

I think I have sufficiently demonstrated the transient and highly contextual and culturally dependent nature of the concept of gender as a whole.

In general, I would make the argument that the main goal and motivator of forming the fundamental aspects of one's gender expression is offsetting the loss of social capital brought about by not conforming to the cultural mores of society to a satisfactory degree. These social conventions are more stringent in some semiospheres than they are in others. In cultural contexts that are more permissive of deviance from the core of a conceptual category that one is presumed to inhabit, a higher degree of experimentation through synthesis is permissible, granted that this meaning is clearly communicated.

I can sum this up in a simple way by once again comparing the queer to the non-queer – just like with gender, queerness also carries sociohistorical baggage of deviance, otherness (however, this is in no way a negative aspect anymore, and can often become a point of pride that is embraced). Queerness signaled to queer people - in fact, looking too cisheterosexual in a queer context is met with negative consequences also. On the opposite side, queerness is concealed to non-queer people. However, it would likewise be reductive to consider these phenomena to be in exclusive opposition. No one individual is all queer or all non-queer. As semiospheres overlap, there exists a synthesis within them.

This is in no way to imply that the socially constructed nature of gender applies only to those who identify as queer; *all* gender is socially constructed, imposed and enforced, and all who deviate too far from acceptable norm are punished.

Gender exists in a social context as a form of social consensus; while the identity might be inherent, the way gender expression works is very much performative – an individual has to try and 'correctly' adjust the gendered signifiers on your person to correctly 'perform' a social role to encourage the necessary societal consensus to be recognized as their gender. This is highly dependent on context,



however; in queer or alternative communities it is often as little as just a short declarative act of introducing oneself by a name and a set of pronouns.

This kind of view of gender identity and signification admittedly equates gender identity to "gender stereotypes". However, stereotypes exist for a reason – if enough members of a given group display certain behaviors or physical characteristics, these become stereotyped. By gender's social nature, what the broad societal consensus believes it to be is technically what it is. Because in itself, gender is formed by a link of signifieds that are exceptionally vague.

The concept of gender, and most of all gender expression as a part of it, is inherently socially constructed as a set of rules dictated by societal consensus which differs across varying social semiospheres. Inability to carry out the expectations of one's gender are punished by negative social consequences and this set of agreed upon signifiers must be deliberately adhered to and purposefully maintained, built as a deliberate signification with one's ostensive characteristics in mind. As the societal expectation within the mainstream semiosphere is that one's apparent biological sex matches their gender expression, it is in one's best interest to conform to the set expectation by appropriately adjusting the gendered signifiers that they choose to display.

If gender expression really is an act of self-creation, even if we accept that we cannot entirely divorce the process of signification (by ostension) of one's identity through the lense of the gender binary, as even in the act of dismantling the binary gender opposition, we are forced by the act of participating in society to do so through the very instruments of it.

In this work I have demonstrated that the concept of sex and gender are not necessarily inevitably tied, as they exist on completely different semiotic thresholds, however, the process of signification of gendered identities is still highly dependent on binary semiotic oppositions, even in cases where one is attempting to dismantle them, as this proves to be difficult to do when gender as a socially constructed reality exists within structures that skew heavily towards the binary.

However, all we need to do is divorce gender expression from biological sex, and understood both as a broad spectrum instead of a case of option A and option B that are inevitably and unchangeably linked, and we are in a way already dismantling binarism.

Perhaps already established semiotic models are simply too outdated or too rigidly influenced by our social reality to completely and accurately represent the relationship between sex and gender. I have attempted to offer my own proposition of how a model that would rely slightly less on the binary would look like.

We are affected by past said societal constructs and norms, however, there is nothing in place that says that cannot change.

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