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'...and just set that body on fire!'

Posthuman perspectives on the body, *becomings*, and sticky encounters in vogue femme.

A Master Thesis for the Degree of Master of Arts (120 credits) in Visual Culture

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Abstract

This thesis explores aspects of *vogue femme* as a highly aestheticised, performative and, radically subversive visual phenomenon. The focus lies on the posthuman characteristics of this dance and the possibilities it opens up for *becoming-other*. Vogue femme first appeared as a competition category at balls during the 1990s. It consists of five elements (hands performance, duckwalk, catwalk, spins and dips, and floor performance) and it is characterised by a *cunty* energy, which in ballroom terms signifies soft movements, an exaggerated expression of hypersexual femininity and whimsical playfulness. Adopting a post-anthropocentric point of view and building on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and Rosi Braidotti, I analyse each element and propose different approaches of *becoming-other*. Influenced by the work of Sara Ahmed, *vogue femme* is explored through the lens of affect theory and in regards to the affect and *stickiness* that is produced and exchanged among the bodies that participate in the ballroom ritual. Furthermore, the runway is characterised as a heterotopia / heterochrony, and as an anti-normative social movement that appropriates and subverts semiocapitalist symbols. Stickiness is seen as a generator of intimacy and sweat as a visual indication of transformative somatic labour and as a liquid facilitator of proximity. The research is based on fieldwork conducted in Malmö and Berlin, and includes interviews with voguers and participatory observation. Methodologically, I also reflect on the significance of my body in terms of experimenting with the limits of the proposed *becomings* and creating sticky relationships with the dancers. The engagement of the body plays a central role in arriving at the final conclusions, in regards to the social character of voguing, which is seen as a ritual that needs a *here*, a *now*, and the *methexis* that is generated through presence and skin-on-skin contact.

Keywords: voguing; vogue femme; posthuman theory; affect theory; becoming; stickiness

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Glossary

Ball culture: a significant subcultural / counter-cultural phenomenon for the LGBTQ+ communities since the beginning of the 20th century, with a peak in the 1970s to late 1990s. A ball typically consists of various performances and competition categories, such as lip sync, drag show, runway, face, body, realness, and voguing. The participants walk and compete against each other representing either their House (as *children*) or themselves (as *007s* or *Free Agents*).

Battle: competition and challenge between two voguers. In a ballroom setting, the battle serves as a tie-breaker and the winner walks home with glory, a trophy and – at big balls – a cash prize.

Catwalk: the voguer's walk down the runway in a cat-like, hyperfeminine manner, an upright sashay in vogue femme. The catwalk is inspired by the homonymous walk in fashion shows and it is one of the five *vogue femme* elements.

Chop: to disqualify a performer / contestant in the context of a ball.

Cunt(y) / Pussy: the aura of *vogue femme*. A form of 'exaggerated, clever, powerful femininity'.¹ In general, members of the scene and the community use cunt as 'an aesthetic criterion that signifies ultimate femininity or a feminine quality in a performance'.²

Dip: in vogue femme, a move that involves falling/collapsing to the ground in a soft or dramatic fashion. It follows a spin.

Duckwalk: in vogue femme, a move that involves 'crouching, foot-sliding and scooting movement requiring balance on the balls of the feet. Sashaying in a squatted position'.³

1 T. Lawrence, "'Listen, and you will hear all the houses that walked there before": A history of drag balls, houses, and the culture of voguing', in St. Baker (ed.), *Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York, 1989 – 1992*, Soul Jazz Books, 2011, p.6.

2 M. M. Bailey, 'Engendering Space: Ballroom culture and the spatial practice of possibility in Detroit', *Gender, Place & Culture. A Journal of Feminist Geography*, vol. 21, no. 4, p. 504.

3 The House of Naphtali, *Ball Slang, Categories, and Everything About Vogue*, [website], <http://houseofnaphtali.tripod.com/id3.html>, (accessed 25 May 2020).

Hands performance: the focus lies on the precision of the performer's hands, which tell a story with precision, sharpness, and dramatic or soft and cunty energy (the latter in vogue femme).

House: a space of solace and comfort, an alternative family for queer people that have been kicked out of their homes due to their gender and sexuality expression. The House is led by a Mother and / or a Father, who are in charge of taking care of their 'children' and they all together walk the balls. A lot of the Houses are named after iconic fashion houses – like the House of Chanel, the House of Dior, the House of Mugler, the House of Saint Laurent, and the House of Balenciaga.

Figure (female / male) and Gender System: The concept of gender in ball culture is quite different from the hegemonic binary concept of gender in western heteronormative societies. On a ball setting, the general categories are *female* figure, which includes everyone identifying as female, and *male figure*, which includes everyone identifying as male. Also, the categories are often O.T.A. (*Open To All*), meaning that they do not designate gender or that they include all genders. The gender system is six-part and includes following categories: *butch queens* (biologically born men, identifying as gay or bi, carrying masculine, hypermasculine, or feminine characteristics), *femme queens* (trans women), *butch queens up in drag* (gay men in drag), *butches* (trans men), *women* (cisgender females, identifying as queer, gay, or straight), *men* (cisgender men, not identifying as gay).⁴

Floor performance: the performer's ability to dance, pose, and in general compete on the floor. Sometimes it includes breakdance and krumping elements and poses, splits, locking and popping, and twerking.

New way: a voguing style and a competition category at balls that focuses on 'rigid movements, contortions, flexibility, tutting, and locking'.⁵ New way first appeared in the early 1990s.

Old way: a competition category at balls and, historically, the first style of vogue (also known as *performance* or *pops dips and spins*), since it first appeared in the 1980s. Its main characteristic is straight lines, angles, precision of moves, and, aesthetically, it is influenced by breakdance, African art,

4 M. M. Bailey, 'Engendering Space: Ballroom culture and the spatial practice of possibility in Detroit', p. 492.

5 Portland Mercury, *Ballroom Glossary*, [website], 2017, <https://www.portlandmercury.com/feature/2017/12/06/19526383/ballroom-glossary>, (accessed 25 May 2020).

and Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Realness: the ability to *pass*, to blend into a group where the performer doesn't necessarily belong (for example *schoolboy realness*, *executive realness*). There is also *realness with a twist*, which includes walking the category that the performer wants to pass as (mostly *heterosexual realness*), then returning to vogue like a femme queen.

Vogue / voguing / vogueing⁶: a dance style that was created as a competition category at balls, with roots tracing back to the 19th century, though it was basically formed in Harlem in the 1970s. There are different accounts on how it started, but there is a general acceptance that, at the beginning (old way), it was inspired by models' poses on Vogue magazine, breakdance, as well as African art and Egyptian hieroglyphics. Since the 1980s, and influenced by the pop culture of each era, the voguing aesthetics have changed, becoming more fluid and based on illusion in the early 1990s (new way) and quite hyperfeminine and cunty in late 1990s (vogue femme). Nowadays, all three voguing styles exist as competition categories at balls.

Vogue femme / Vogue fem⁷: contemporary voguing style, characterised by hyperbolic femininity, soft moves, dramatic poses, and cunty energy. It emphasises feminine movements and it includes five elements: hands performance, catwalk, duckwalk, spins and dips, and floor performance. Mostly prevalent after the mid 1990s.

Walking: entering a category, competing in a category in the context of a ball.

6 In some accounts, one may find voguing spelled with an 'e' (*vogueing*). However, throughout this thesis, I adopt the more contemporary spelling without the 'e' (*voguing*).

7 Both spellings are quite common. However, throughout this thesis, I adopt the spelling *vogue femme*.

Introduction

The category is... vogue femme. Anybody walking?

The commentator announces the category, the beat starts playing, and a female and a male figure present themselves on the narrow, incredibly hot and humid, crowded runway of the small, cosy bar in Prenzlauer Berg. As they duckwalk, their hands frame their figures and draw eights around their faces. They spin expressively and dip dramatically, drop and improvise an elaborate floor performance, splitting their legs and twerking with exaggeration. Lost in the moment and concentrated on their own bodies, at times they brush against each other or collide with each other and at times they mirror each other, as they pause and pose with each crash of the beat. The audience cheers and applauds, as the commentator praises and encourages them to keep it up.

And one... and two... and three... now hold that pose for me.

The atmosphere is wild; fingers snap, hands clap, and everyone cheers, as the voguers smile, sweat, and tremble while holding their poses. Finally, the judges declare that the trophy goes to the female figure. Out of breath, she wipes beads of sweat off her forehead, hugs her opponent tightly, takes her trophy, and gives a sassy and cunty final pose to the audience. This was the last battle of the evening, and the commentator announces that, now, the runway is open for the audience. Bodies squeeze and line up to walk, some chat with each other, and some move on towards the bar area. On my way out, I look at the gorgeous chaos around me and I let my body be carried by the flow of the other bodies, catching glimpses of faces, fragments of discussions, bits and pieces. Everyone is excited with the massive turn-up and the thrill of the battles, everyone is fascinated by the beautiful drag show at the beginning, everyone is laughing at the technical issues and sound problems. I hear the commentator say that 'the people at the front complain that it's too loud, the people at the back say it's too quiet, I'm not even a DJ!'. I let my body go with this sticky flow towards the outside and as soon as the door opens, I welcome the cold air that strikes my face and fills my lungs. People cluster in front of the bar to catch their breath,

enjoy this serene winter night, laugh, flirt, and mingle.¹

(Notes from the field, Berlin, February 2020).

The above excerpt from my fieldnotes describes a typical, yet relatively quiet night in the *kiki* ballroom scene.² At a ball, there is usually a short opening (often drag) performance, followed by the presentation of the judges and an open floor for everyone to walk for a few minutes, regardless of whether they will compete or not. Then, the competition begins with the categories one after the other; All American runway, European runway, face, sex siren, various types of realness depending on the ball, and, naturally, voguing. Voguing is the category that most people have in mind as the image of the ballroom. As a result, it is also the category that is subject to most misconceptions. In a nutshell, voguing is a competitive dance style, a form of expression and a social movement, with a rich political history that is interwoven with the history of queer rights movements. It was named after Vogue magazine, and the moves are a freestyle amalgam characterised by a contradictory combination of precision and fluidity, initially inspired by model poses, breakdance, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and African art. Depending on the specific style, the voguer's body may look like a cyborg, an alien trying out human poses, an exaggerated animalistic and mechanic collage of movements, a performance of hyperfeminine exaggerated sexuality, a flow of pure natural energy.

The history of voguing begins around the mid 1970s and early 1980s in Harlem's Black and Latinx queer communities.³ There are different accounts on how it actually started; some trace its origins in Riker's Island prison, where 'black and Latinx inmates created a game where they would imitate the poses and photos in Vogue magazine, seeing who could best serve the *look*'.⁴ In another account, drag queen and Mother of the House of Dupree, Paris Dupree brought life to voguing, during a ballroom challenge. In her attempt to throw shade at her opponent, she took out a copy of *Vogue magazine* from her purse and started flipping the pages, playfully copying the poses on the photographs.⁵

In both accounts, the birth and evolution of voguing is interwoven with the history of queer

1 *Eights* is a hands performance move in voguing, where the dancer makes cyclical movements with the wrists around their face and body, imitating the number eight.

2 A *kiki* ball requires low-key organising and revolves around friendly competition and fun. The kiki scene is focused on community, it is often run by up-and-coming members of the ball community and winning is not as important as in the case of big balls.

3 However, it should be mentioned that an early form of queer ballrooms can be traced back in the 1920s and 1930s.

4 Portland Mercury, *Ballroom Glossary*.

5 *Throwing shade* or *shading* means subtly disrespecting, ridiculing, or diminishing someone verbally or nonverbally. In voguing, it is performed with exaggerated gestures and hand moves.

people of colour, a history of marginalisation, exclusion, fetishisation and violence. Queer Blacks and Latinx – and especially trans women – were ostracised from their homes for failing to live up to the gender norms and expectations; at the same time, they were excluded from and stigmatised by the white LGBTQ communities, which at the time were mostly male dominated. In that context, they started forming Houses, small communities organised as families – with a Mother and sometimes also a Father looking after the youngest members, known as the children. These Houses would compete with each other at balls and walk for trophies and glory. However, even though there was competition, judging and antagonism, the Houses stood up for each other and supported their community.

During the 1980s, the prevalent voguing style was largely inspired by African art, hieroglyphics and breakdance and it was characterised by symmetry and precision. At the time, it was called simply *voguing*, *performance*, or *Pop Dip and Spin*, since the voguer would pop the arms to the beat, do dips and twist around in spins. Today, this category is known as the *old way*. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, *new way* came to the front. This style requires fluidity and flexibility, precise geometry and arm movements that would create a sense of illusion to the viewer. Later in the 1990s, *vogue femme* became the new form of voguing.⁶ *Vogue femme's* main characteristics is the exaggerated expression of hypersexual, raw femininity, the dramatic flair, and the soft, playful, *cunty* energy. Nowadays, all three voguing styles exist as competition categories in the balls. While they are quite different, their main shared characteristic is their extravagant camp aesthetics.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, voguing gained a lot of attention, partly due to Madonna's hit song *Vogue*. Another factor that played an important role in this visibility was Jennie Livingston's documentary film *Paris is Burning* (1990).⁷ While incorporating a lot of the aesthetic conventions and methodologies of ethnographic film, *Paris is Burning* follows members of different Houses for five years, recording their everyday lives, struggles, and performances in balls. The film received a lot of attention and awards from international film festivals. However, it has been criticised by scholars, such as bell hooks, for appropriating, fetishising and misrepresenting black bodies, since Livingston was a

6 There are various accounts that indicate different dates for the introduction of vogue femme to the ball scene. Legendary voguer Jamal Milan writes the following: 'During the timeframe of 1992-1993 another style emerged called BQ Vogue Fem. The category "Butch Queen Voguing Like A Fem Queen" was held on March 28, 1992 at a ball hosted by Alvernia Prestige. After that, the name of the category evolved into "Butch Queen Vogue Fem". It is a style where you had men who wanted to vogue like or imitate women or fem queens and that is how BQ Vogue Fem emerged. It started out as a kiki category as no one really took it seriously but as new comers began to amaze the ballroom with their styles, antics and techniques it became more popular'. See J. Milan, *The History of Vogue* [website], 2017, <http://www.jamalmilan.com/439287344>, (accessed 25 May 2020).

7 *Paris is Burning*, dir. Jennie Livingston, USA, Off White Productions Inc., 1990, [documentary film], available online <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf6Cn2y2xEc&t=2214s>, (accessed 25 May 2020).

young white lesbian who did not acknowledge and problematise her own position in the film. The queer community has also had mixed feelings about this film; on one hand, the people that participated – as well as queer people who watched the film – were pleased to gain visibility and to be heard through this film; on the other hand, Livingston was accused for taking advantage of the participants and not compensating them for their contribution to her film.

In any case, this film has been, to this day, a central point of reference when it comes to voguing, drag, and ballroom culture. Thirty years after it was released, *Paris is Burning* still screens frequently at events in festivals and queer social spaces and it is also available on YouTube. The vast majority of my sources – some of which are in their early 20s – shared with me that their first contact with the world of voguing was through this film. At the same time, the film, together with Madonna's hit song and her subsequent Blonde Ambition Tour – marked the initiation of a process of appropriation and commercialisation of voguing. The latter has led a radical counterculture to become mainstream, and to the spread of misconceptions that voguing was, in fact, 'invented by Madonna'.⁸

Today, voguing has both subversive and commercial elements. On one hand, it is growing in visibility and popularity amongst non-queer people, especially due to the reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-) and Ryan Murphy's television series *Pose* (2018-).⁹ This leads to more and more people trying to practice voguing either in the depoliticised (hence problematic in terms of the history of the community) setting of dance schools and gyms or in the setting of self-organised communities, and non-mainstream queer clubs and social spaces. On the other hand, it is being reclaimed by queer people of colour and other precarious and vulnerable queer bodies of late-capitalist megacities. Today it is being reassociated with Houses, read through the lens of postcolonial theory and intersectionality and re-established as a subversive, anti-normative, political and counter-hegemonic form of expression.

Aim and research question

This thesis focuses on voguing – and specifically vogue femme – approaching it as a complex visual phenomenon and a form of spectacular performance, analysing it through the lens of posthuman theory

8 This is a phrase I often hear when talking to straight people about my research topic. In fact, M., one of my sources told me that, as a teenager, she saw voguing on a television programme for the first time and then asked her mother about it, who in turn argued that this is a dance style 'invented by Madonna' in the 1980s.

9 *RuPaul's Drag Race*, created by RuPaul, Logo (2009-2016) and VH1 Television (2017-), 2009-, [TV program].
Pose, created by Ryan Murphy, FX Network, 2018-, [TV Program].

and affect theory. The intricate character of voguing is rooted in its history, in the deeply political characteristics that it carries, and in its importance for a diverse marginalised community. It is also rooted in the extravagant camp aesthetics, its gender-bending playful techniques, the ironic appropriation and radical subversion of hegemonic discourses and capitalist symbols. Voguing is a way of deconstructing norms, of coming out, of performing and trying out different sides of oneself, an empowering tool for doing and showing one's identity.

There is a plethora of rather diverse descriptions and definitions of what voguing is. To quote some of my sources, voguing is at the same time a 'civil rights movement' (Anonymous Source B) and a 'chance to fag out' (Anonymous Source B), a 'political statement' (S.), an empowering way to 'celebrate what we've learned to see as wrong' (J.), a 'fun way of exploring my feminine and my masculine side' (H.), a coming out ritual and a way to explore and transgress the limits of one's own body. Putting these elements together and basing my research on participatory observation and interviews, I look at voguing as a political statement as well as a non-normative counter-hegemonic choreographed ritual that activates and facilitates various *becomings*. I will not be focusing on ballroom culture in general or the Houses in particular, since I am interested in the voguing body, the moves and what they mean in terms of showing and (un)doing identities. My aim is to contribute to the research on voguing, as well as to experiment with Deleuzian / Guattarian concepts and the research on dance through posthuman theory.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on *vogue femme*, which is characterised by *cunty* energy, soft moves, dramatic poses, exaggerated femininity and whimsical playfulness. I chose this particular voguing style, because it is the most contemporary. It is also the only style that I am personally and bodily involved with, and I believe that, for the purposes of my research, a first-hand embodied experience is of crucial importance. Furthermore, I chose to focus specifically on vogue femme, because it offers the visualisation of a unique, exaggerated, hypersexual femininity that I find both empowering in terms of sociopolitical analysis and interesting in terms of visual cultural analysis – as I will also argue in the following chapters.

Vogue femme includes five elements; the hands performance, the catwalk, the duckwalk, the spins and dips, and the floor performance.¹⁰ A vogue femme performance does not necessarily have all five of these elements – for example, there are battles done exclusively squatted on the knees or there are battles without any duckwalk – however, it is generally better to include all elements in one's

¹⁰ For detailed descriptions of the five elements of vogue femme, see Glossary.

performance. A vogue femme performance is not a linear, consequential process and the elements are performed in messy loops, without clear order, and at times overlapping with each other. However, in this thesis, I will break down vogue femme's elements and analyse each of them separately with the help of posthuman theory and Deleuzian / Guattarian concepts.

The question that motivates this thesis regards the visual and performative characteristics of vogue femme, the posthuman *becomings* that it facilitates, and the possibilities of the heterotopic spaces that open up through the *sticky* encounters among the voguing bodies. The aim of this process is twofold: on one hand, to explore the ways that these posthuman becomings are visualised and enable transformative and subversive performances of self-expression. On the other hand, the aim is to explore the characteristics of the heterotopia that facilitates this process, both in terms of its physical / aesthetic / three-dimensional social spatiality and in terms of the *sticky shared atmosphere* that is generated amongst the bodies that occupy the same heterotopic space.

Background and relevance

Voguing has fascinated me for quite some time. At first, I was watching and admiring it from a distance, as a spectator at balls and performances in queer spaces in Athens since roughly 2015. Then, a research interest in voguing was activated coincidentally in February of 2019. At the time, I watched Gaspar Noé's *Climax* (2018), a horror dance film that revolves around a group of dancers – most of them voguers and waackers – who accidentally trip on acid and violently vogue / waack their descent into madness.¹¹ After many passionate analyses and heated debates on the aesthetic originality and quality of the film on blogs and social media I decided to write a paper about it. In that paper, I analysed the spectacular performativity of violence and the elements of *becoming-other* through ecstatic and erratic dance that fragments the bodies in the film.

While writing that paper, it became clear to me that voguing as a visual phenomenon and, as a body movement, opens up a very interesting space for diverse theoretical explorations. My interest in the posthuman character of this dance developed, and more aspects arose regarding the transgressive and subversive political characteristics that it serves. Progressively, I became fascinated by voguing as a complex, aesthetically rich, and unique visual phenomenon that incorporates a sociopolitical

11 *Climax*, dir. Gaspar Noé, France, Wild Bunch Distribution, 2018 [film].

motivation and interesting historical roots, aesthetics, references to pop and mainstream cultures, and ritualistic performative aspects. I thus decided to explore it through my Master's thesis.

As a visual phenomenon, voguing plays a crucial role to the history of queer movements, especially in regards to the visibility, representation and empowering of the Black and Latinx members of the queer community. At the same time, since it has often been appropriated and misrepresented by mainstream culture and by hegemonic discourses, it needs to be tackled with respect and reflexivity on behalf of the researcher. As a queer white woman desiring to be respectful and reflexive, I needed to disengage from my position as a spectator and talk to people who have different experiences with voguing and ball culture. I wanted to include in my research voices of people who choose to vogue, because they find it important politically and socially, as well as enjoyable and crucial to exploring and performing themselves. I also needed a first-hand experience with voguing – a transformative experience inscribed in my own flesh and skin. After rewatching numerous times and attempting to replicate some of the choreographies of *Climax*, I decided to attempt voguing myself, at the beginning with videos and tutorials from YouTube, and subsequently with a series of workshops at Konstskupan in Malmö, voguing sessions in various spaces and rehearsals and experimentations with my voguing friends. All these elements shaped my research plan and my empirical material, paved the way for this thesis, and throughout the following pages I will be returning to them and letting them guide me through the writing process.

Empirical material

My research is largely based on fieldwork and includes participatory observation and ethnographic interviews with people who vogue. Thus the empirical material mainly consists of fieldnotes, as well as excerpts from the interviews that I conducted between January and March 2020. The fieldnotes reflect participatory observation that took place in three different balls, a series of sessions and classes that spread from January 2020 to March 2020 and two workshops that I attended.¹² Being aware of the counter-hegemonic and political history of voguing, I chose to explore balls, sessions and workshops that are self-organised and non-commercial. For that reason, there will be no reference to balls that are

¹² I started attending sessions and classes before January 2020, but this is the time-frame that I started attending also as a researcher and not just as a dancer. I had intended to continue with the sessions throughout the spring months and at least until June 2020, however the classes had to freeze abruptly due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

organised by bigger and more mainstream clubs, or to dance schools that offer voguing or voguing-inspired courses as a form of exercise in a depoliticised context.

While the fieldwork is conducted in two cities, Malmö and Berlin, this is not a comparative study. I chose these cities based on three factors. First, I considered accessibility, meaning that it was easy and fast to travel to these destinations from Lund and that there was no language barrier that would deny me access to the field. Second, the potential diversity of material was really important to me, meaning that I chose two cities with a vibrant and diverse voguing scene and that I would not have problems meeting with a lot of people from different backgrounds and gathering polyphonic material. Last but not least, affordability was a crucial factor for this decision, meaning that it would be affordable for me to travel to these destinations and I would not have to organise an extra budget for accommodation, since Malmö is only fifteen minutes away from Lund and I had a place to stay in Berlin. Given the fact that I had not applied for funding for the fieldwork, this ended up being a very crucial factor in my choice of places – and this is also the reason why I rejected the idea of travelling to Stockholm, London, or Athens.

In regards to the interviews, I approached both amateurs and professionals and got positive answers, negative answers, and no answers. Since my research does not focus on dexterity but on experiencing and expressing oneself through voguing, I am not going to reveal which of my sources are amateur and which are professional and they will remain anonymous. There are three sources who wished to remain completely anonymous; they have been designated as Anonymous Source A, B, and C. The rest of my sources had little or no inhibitions to be mentioned by name, however I have decided to give them capital letters based on their actual names or the names that they go by when in drag. The reason for this is that I wanted everyone to feel safe to express themselves freely, without having to deal with the weight of their full names in print.

Initially, I wished to incorporate visual material, i.e. videos from ballrooms, sessions and rehearsals. However, as soon as I entered the field officially, as a researcher and not just as a ball-goer, and as soon as I met the first group of voguers, it became clear that filming would be a problem. Most of the people I have talked to are quite young and some of them are not completely *out* yet, so even though they have been very open and welcoming, willing to share their experiences with me, they were not comfortable with showing their faces to the camera. As a non-experienced researcher and as someone who understands the difficulties of not being quite *out*, I did not want to push boundaries and

seem assertive. On the other hand, even in cases where I could film – for example, at balls, where pretty much everyone holds up their phone to make Instagram stories– I realised that I was uncomfortable with using the material that I had shot. Giving it very thorough consideration, it seemed somewhat ethically blurry to publish images of people that I did not personally know or have not asked for their permission directly.¹³ Consequently, I decided to abandon the initial idea of visual material from the field and to rely solely on the interviews, my notes from the field and my bodily experiences.

However, this absence of the visual became an issue during the writing process, and especially in regards to putting complex body movements into words. Eventually, a creative solution that would respect the sources' anonymity was needed. My supervisor suggested that I could create my own material by drawing, so I made sketches of the poses and the elements that I wished to describe. Since I do not have experience with drawing, this gave me the chance to experiment with an unknown and unfamiliar medium, to challenge my abilities to describe the body, and to show the poses without violating anyone's privacy. The simplicity and the lack of technique might as well reflect the 'provisional or unfinished' character of the sketch as a visual method which 'will generate further thoughts or ideas', as Philippa Lyon defines it.¹⁴ The sketches that accompany this thesis serve illustrative and analytical purposes and are loosely based either on photos that I took or on photos that I found in online repositories and social media.

Methodology and theory

As mentioned in the previous section, this research is fieldwork-based and the main methodological tools of the fieldwork are ethnographic interviews and participatory observation. I am not conducting a comparative or quantitative study and I do not wish to draw general conclusions about vogue femme, voguing, or ballroom culture in general. The interviews with my sources serve as a collage of voices

13 I have had long discussions with friends about this and we all seem to have different and contradictory opinions on what sort of visual material can and cannot be published on a thesis, shared on an Instagram story that only has a 24-hour lifespan or be permanently posted on social media. My position is that images should not be published without clear verbal consent, unless the other person is a professional or known performer with public social media profiles, that is used to this kind of visibility.

14 P. Lyon, 'Using Drawing in Visual Research: Materializing the Invisible', in L. Pauwels, D. Mannay (eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Visual Research Methods*, SAGE Publications, 2020, p. 298.

and looks on voguing. The thesis aims to propose an understanding of what voguing means as a visual (counter)cultural phenomenon, how it feels, what kind of spaces it opens up and what possibilities it facilitates.

I started by asking voguing enthusiast friends who live in my chosen cities to connect me with people, and by contacting voguers online via social media or email. I found Facebook and Instagram very helpful, since using these platforms created a sense of transparency and openness between me and my potential interviewees. I would friend or follow the potential sources and, since my accounts are private, they would accept or follow me back, scroll my profile, check my interests and our mutual friends who could vouch for me, before agreeing to meet with me. However, after a certain point I would be sent spontaneously from location to location and from person to person, without having the chance to previously make contact with them online. This was mostly the case in Berlin, where there are so many balls and so much activity, that it was best to not waste time with online communication and instead present myself straight in the field. Usually, whenever I would go to a ball or workshop, I would start by introducing myself, describe my research, request permission to watch and /or dance, ask if anyone would like to talk to me and if I am allowed to film. Most of the times I got positive responses, and whenever I got a negative response, I decided to just move on, since I did not want to push boundaries which could result in my losing access to the field.

On my official first day on the field, I made the beginner's mistake of mis-introducing my topic and using too much academic jargon in front of a group of thirty voguers that I had never met before. This clumsy start led to an awkward silence, strong looks, followed by a 'why don't you leave us your number and we'll call you'. Naturally I was very disappointed, especially given the fact that one of the people present is a very prominent member of the voguing scene that I really wanted to interview. As I was about to gather my hurt ego and move on – and maybe even find another research topic – someone in the crowd acted as my guardian angel and invited me to stay, watch and dance, if I felt like it. As soon as the music was on and we all started to sweat, we progressively grew closer to each other and this clumsy start was forgotten. Soon people started approaching me and expressing an interest to talk. I ended up conducting really interesting interviews in a very friendly atmosphere, as well as deep discussions and exchange of literature with a lot of them. This was definitely a rough start, but it taught me that I should be mindful of how I present my research interests in an understandable way, and that my own body was, in the end, the most important feature to be integrated in the field.

Another time, not pushing boundaries and relying on my body instead of my words also proved

to be fruitful. I attended a workshop and before we started, I approached the instructor, introduced myself and expressed my interest to interview them.¹⁵ I saw that they immediately felt very uncomfortable and mumbled a series of polite excuses on why they would decline, including that they were not a seasoned member of the ballroom scene and did not wish to take someone else's position. I reassured them that they did not need to excuse themselves, that I already had a lot of material and, in any case, I had come for the workshop and would enjoy it nonetheless.

We started the warm-up and for the next two hours, we proceeded to work on our hands and arms, the catwalk, the duckwalk and the dips. The music was getting more intense and we got more sweaty, losing our breath and feeling our toes, knees and backs hurt and tear apart. Then something interesting started to happen. Even though we were far from each other, we grew closer and closer. We were exchanging glances from the mirror, sharing an intimate bubble, a sticky atmosphere, where we both lost our roles and identities. They were no longer a voguer / potential source of information, but a body passing their performative knowledge through a series of spasms, spins and dips. And I was no longer a researcher, looking for a voice to interview, but a body eager to receive performative knowledge, and to embrace this new knowledge. When the class was over, I took my water and went downstairs with some of the experienced dancers, to breathe in some fresh air and chat. A few minutes later, the instructor came to me and said 'so, tell me more about your project and what exactly you'd need from me'. We booked an interview for the next day.

My goal from the beginning was to conduct the interviews in relaxed, informal settings. The ideal setting would be right after a session or a ball – which was possible in some occasions and proved to be really enjoyable – but I was also open to meeting in different settings. Thus I have conducted interviews outside of voguing venues right after a session, on the staircase of a university building, at the backyard of Universität der Künste Berlin, inside a metro station, in parks, even on the way to get a falafel in Möllevången in Malmö. The interviews were semi-structured and loosely based on open questions.¹⁶ During the discussion, new questions and topics would come up, depending on the general mood or what the sources wanted to share.

I tried to lead the interviews as little as possible, so I let my interviewees guide me through their experiences and share as much as they wanted. As a result, some of the interviews went on like

¹⁵ I will not provide more information about it, since the person who talked to me wishes to remain incognito.

¹⁶ For example, 'how would you define voguing / what does voguing mean to you?', 'what is your favourite move and how do you feel doing this particular move', 'is there any ritual or routine you do before a ball?'

monologues, with the source talking for as long as they wanted and sharing whatever came to their minds without me interrupting them or changing the subject. Other interviews were more journalistic and I continuously came up with follow-up questions based on what the interviewee had said. Some sources kept a dialogue going, bouncing back questions to me about my own embodied experiences. This resulted in interesting reflexive moments, where I was put in a position of looking at voguing through different theoretical lenses and problematising my own choices of references and methodological approaches. Looking back at the transcriptions of these dialogical interviews, I find a lot of very diverse material that could be used for further research on other aspects of voguing and ball culture; for example, representation of ball culture in pop culture, evolution of camp and evolution of drag, the importance of Houses in queer communities, to name a few.

Furthermore, doing participatory observation in a ballroom setting meant that I had to rely a lot on my vision and my optical reflexes, to be tense and aware, in order to catch the smallest details in terms of body movements, audience and judges' reactions, trans-body interactions in one-on-one battles. Most importantly, it meant that I had to rely a lot on my own body, which – as previously described – served as an important tool to gain access to the field as well as in terms of relating to the topic and of experimenting with the theoretical approaches that I was proposing. In many instances, I trusted my sources to guide my body, to show me their favorite poses and instruct me on how to do them, and this led to transparency, intimacy, and to forming of *sticky* relationships between us. This was a truly liberating experience. It gave me the chance to test in my own skin, flesh, and bones the effect of the five vogue femme elements and, subsequently, the feel of the becomings that I am proposing throughout this thesis. I had to push through my pain, challenge my physical limits, and this was empowering and very interesting in regards to immersing in my research topic.

My optical perception and my body were also challenged in a different way, when I started working on the sketches. The finalised sketches are the result of ten days of intense and intensive drawing attempts towards the end of April 2020. When I started drawing, I had already written most of my thesis and I was struggling with the COVID-19 self-isolation. Being physically away from the field was causing feelings of alienation, of disembodiment. I was lacking motivation to write, because the research was mostly fuelled by the fact that I could *dance my way into the field*. In that sense, drawing as a method opened up a new (to me) way of embodied engagement and challenged me to look at my topic from different angles – quite literally since I had to draw the bodies, and therefore had to reconsider the poses I thought I knew. Besides, as Lyon argues, drawing is an embodied experience, an

'experiential as well as a visual methodology and one that can be used by and applied to one's own perceptual experience as a researcher as much as to other "participants" in research'.¹⁷ I embraced different materials and experimented with techniques, before deciding that nothing else was working and I would have to resort to very basic body outlines. In the end, I produced a series of simple sketches loosely based on existing material, by looking closely at the images, trying out the poses with my body to better grasp them, and then drawing them. The six most presentable of these sketches illustrate this thesis.

These methodological approaches have resulted in material that will be analysed through the lens of posthuman theory and affect theory. For the analysis, I draw on the works of theorists, such as Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Sara Ahmed, Michel Foucault, Karen Barad, Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, Melissa Blanco Borelli. The main point of reference, however, lies on concepts from the theoretical works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Specifically, I am interested in experimenting (bodily and theoretically) with the concepts of *affect* and *becoming*.

In their book *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari define *affect* as 'non-human becomings of man',¹⁸ and not as a 'passage from one state to another'.¹⁹ In this affective sense, *becoming* is not an imaginary identification, an imitation, a resemblance, but rather an active, never-ending process of embodiment, an 'extreme contiguity within a coupling of two sensations without resemblance'.²⁰ *Becoming* does not consist of playing or imitating, it 'produces nothing other than itself'.²¹ In general, *becomings* cannot be linked to 'either notions of progress or teleology and they do not form subjective identities', as Kathrin Thiele comments.²² It is rather a transformative, embodied, climactic process that is never completely fulfilled. For Rosi Braidotti, 'becoming is the actualization of the immanent encounter between subjects, entities, and forces, which are apt mutually to affect and exchange parts of each other in a creative and non-individual way'.²³

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari approach these becomings as processes embodied by non-

17 Lyon, 'Using Drawing in Visual Research', p. 305.

18 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, transl. H. Tomlinson, G. Burchell, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, p. 169.

19 Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 173.

20 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, p. 173.

21 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. R. Hurley, M. Seem, H.R. Lane, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000, p. 238.

22 K. Thiele, 'Of Immanence and Becoming: Deleuze and Guattari's Philosophy and / as Relational Ontology', *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, vol. 10, n. 1, (n.p.), [https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/dls.2016.0215](https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/full/10.3366/dls.2016.0215) (accessed 25 May 2020).

23 R. Braidotti, *Metamorphoses. Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Polity Press, 2002, p. 58.

majoritarian entities. The majority is not necessarily the group that is bigger in numbers, but the group or entity that 'assumes a state of power and domination', by making this domination seem as natural and inevitable.²⁴ In their work, the white Man is seen as majority/majoritarian, and all (philosophical) others of man – women, animals, insects, minerals, machines – are minority / minoritarian. Deleuze and Guattari make it clear that 'there is no becoming-majoritarian; majority is never becoming. All becoming is minoritarian'.²⁵ The concept of becoming is inherently radical, subversive and transformative, since it revolves around marginalised, oppressed and othered entities. It is also counter-hegemonic and anti-authoritarian, because it revolts against the existing majoritarian status quo, which is the (anthropocentric) white heteronormative patriarchy. As Braidotti puts it, all becomings 'move into the direction of the others of classical dualisms – displacing them and reterritorializing them in the process, but always and only on a temporal basis'.²⁶ This indicates that *becoming-minoritarian* is non-binary and anti-normative.

I find the concept of *becoming* to be a very useful tool for the purposes of this research, since voguing – and ball culture as a queer counter-culture in general – is all about active, affirmative embodiment, as well as radical subversion and rejection of the norm. Apart from *becoming*, I also employ and explore other Deleuzian / Guattarian concepts that I find inspiring on a philosophical level, but also fascinating on feminist political level. Their body of thought is chaotic and radical in such a creative way, that it offers a plethora of theoretical material to reflect on, in terms of studying *vogue femme* as a radically queer and posthuman visual phenomenon.

Also, a crucial part of this research is stimulated by Rosi Braidotti's works on *nomadic ethics*, a concept that she explores in most of her works inspired by Baruch Spinoza's ethics and Deleuze and Guattari's collective works. Braidotti's *nomadic ethics* view the subject as a 'radically immanent, intensive body, that is, an assemblage of forces or flows, intensities and passions that solidify in space and consolidate in time'.²⁷ Since she is influenced by Spinoza, there is an inherently positive attitude towards the ethical subject, however this positivity does not deny 'conflict, tension, or even violent disagreements between different subjects'.²⁸ Nomadic ethics are ethics of sustainability, focusing on how much a body can take. There is a sense of limit in this concept, what Braidotti calls the *threshold*

24 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, transl. B. Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2005, p. 105.

25 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 106.

26 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 119.

27 R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti*, Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 302.

28 Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, p. 303.

of sustainability, and according to this concept, the body indicates the reach of a limit with the form of a warning. In this exploration of ecstatic and erratic dance – which is so much more than a dance – I am interested in researching the experience of this limit and what happens once it is reached and transgressed.

In Braidotti's work, *becoming-nomadic* is the process through which one learns 'to reinvent oneself and to desire the self as a process of qualitative transformation'.²⁹ I find this conceptualisation very appropriate for my research, since it points to a direction of queer radicalisation. Braidotti names this *nomadic queer theory*: 'The nomadic or intensive horizon is a sexuality “beyond gender” in the sense of being dispersed, not binary, multiple, not dualistic, interconnected, not dialectical, and in a constant flux, not fixed'.³⁰ As I show later on this thesis, this nomadic queer sexuality *beyond gender* is visualised and embodied/performed in voguing, while the ballroom opens up an anti-normative space – both in terms of physical three-dimensional space and in terms of shared atmosphere – where posthuman / nomadic subjectivity can be explored and performed.

Previous research

Voguing, as well as ballroom culture, has not been absent from academia. In social and gender studies, there are some interesting and thorough dissertations and articles, mostly focusing on the aspects of gender, sexuality, race, and class. Some of these are quantitative and others are following qualitative, ethnographic methods. Marlon M. Bailey's works are emblematic in this field.³¹ Being an active member in the queer ballroom community, Bailey uses participatory observation to study topics like black queer masculinities, gender performativity, and social relations within the ballroom. Bailey's work is thorough and I find his (auto)ethnographic approach very inspiring, since he focuses on social and gender relations in the ball setting, on performances of gender, sexuality and racial identity in black queer males that walk and vogue.

Another body of work on voguing stems from social studies, media studies, and cultural studies and focuses on the aspects of reception, representation, commercialisation and cultural appropriation.

29 R. Braidotti, 'Nomadic Ethics', *Deleuze Studies*, vol. 7, n. 3, 2013, pp. 344-345.

30 Braidotti, 'Nomadic Ethics', p. 350.

31 For example, see the articles 'Engendering space: Ballroom culture and the spatial practice of possibility in Detroit', *Gender, Place & Culture. A Journal of Feminist Geography*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2013, pp. 489-507, and 'Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2011, pp. 365-386.

This category is relatively small and includes Master's theses and publications mostly from institutions that deal with cultural products that commodify and appropriate voguing and queer ball culture. In this category, one finds articles on *Paris is Burning*, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *Pose*, and even Madonna. A lot of these theses reference bell hooks' critique of *Paris is Burning* and drag which is included in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, as well as Judith Butler's defence of the film and proposal of drag as subversive, which can be found in her book *Bodies that Matter*.³² This frequent return to hooks and Butler is not surprising, since, after all, their referenced books have formed the most prevalent discourses on drag and ball culture until fairly recently.

Finally, an even smaller category of academic works focuses on the history of voguing, deriving from gender studies, cultural studies, and aesthetics. In this category I would place Tim Lawrence's well-known article "'Listen, and You Will Hear all the Houses that Walked There Before": A History of Drag Balls, Houses and the Culture of Voguing'.³³ This article was used as an introduction to the 2011 book *Voguing and the Gay Ballroom Scene of New York City, 1989-92*, with photographs by Chantal Regnault. Even though this article may not strictly belong to the academic writing genre, it is referenced a lot by scholars who research voguing.

This project differs from the existing research on voguing. Deriving from the field of visual culture and with references to affect theory, this thesis focuses on the *look* and the *feel* of the five *vogue femme* elements, proposing that *vogue femme* opens up a space for posthuman *becomings* and facilitates exchange of affects within an intimate shared space. In regards to other, purely practical projects, this thesis attempts to oscillate between practice / fieldwork and the exploration of abstract theoretical concepts.

Disposition of the thesis

In Chapter 1, I will explore the ritualistic and performative character of voguing, approaching the space

32 In Chapter 9 of *Black Looks*, with the title *Is Paris Burning?* (pp. 145-156), bell hooks criticised the film *Paris is Burning* for misrepresentation and fetishisation of the black interviewees. She also spoke against drag, since she saw it as a misogynistic form of expression with racist connotations. On the contrary, in Chapter 4 of *Bodies that Matter*, with the title *Gender is Burning* (pp. 121-140), Judith Butler spoke in favour of the film and of drag in general, seeing it as a subversive and radical queer way of gender performativity. See b. hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, South End Press, Boston, 1992, and J. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Routledge, New York, 1993.

33 Lawrence, "'Listen, and you will hear all the houses that walked there before": A history of drag balls, houses, and the culture of voguing', pp. 3-10.

that opens up as a heterotopia. Consequently, I will touch upon the element of hands performance as an embodied initiation to the heterotopia and as a facilitator of a simulated tactile relationship among the bodies that occupy this space. The element of the duckwalk will be analysed in regards to its posthuman possibilities and I will propose that *becoming-duck* actually entails a *becoming-child* and a *becoming-animal*. Finally, I will explore the subversive feminist characteristics of the catwalk and I will analyse the process of *becoming-pussy* as well as the radical, transformative and political perspectives of *cunt* as a key characteristic to vogue femme.

In Chapter 2, I will focus on the most abstract types of becoming that, in my understanding, are facilitated by the elements of vogue femme, through the lens of affect theory. In regards to the spin and dip and analysing this element's aesthetics, I will propose that the body enters a process of *becoming-electric* and *becoming-cyborg*. I will also research the affect of the shared atmosphere that is created when the bodies meet and collide with one another. Moving on to the floor performance, I will propose possibilities of fluid *becomings* through the improvisations and the interactions among all the bodies that meet inside this big sticky bubble. Finally, I will draw inspiration from Melissa Blanco Borelli's work on 'Bifo' Berardi's spasm, and I will interpret the spasm as a recurring theme in voguing and the various literal and metaphorical connotations of sweat as facilitators of intimacy and as subversive elements against the proper bodies within the sticky runway.

Chapter 1 | *Dance me to the end of anthropocentrism. Hands, catwalk, duckwalk and their posthuman becomings.*

1.1 Performing (in) the Heterotopia | To judge and to be judged

During my fieldwork, I met and had discussions with a lot of voguers and voguing enthusiasts, all of whom had different, fascinating and quite intimate experiences to share. One of the first things I did was to ask everyone to define voguing in their own words, in terms of what it means to them personally. As seen in the definitions included in the introductory chapter, they are very diverse, emphasising radical, political, social, competitive, transformative as well as visual / aesthetic characteristics and the pleasure / fun that this dance generates. However, despite this plethora of different views, all of my sources seem to point towards the same direction: at its core, voguing is a political and visually spectacular performance, characterised by presence and *methexis*, in the same sense that *methexis* is understood in Ancient Greek drama.³⁴

Richard Schechner suggests that the functions of a performance are 'to entertain, to make something that is beautiful, to make or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach, to persuade or convince, to deal with the sacred or the demonic'.³⁵ With the exception of the latter, all of these functions can be applied to voguing. Following Schechner's definition, voguing is a queer celebration, a happening with a strong aesthetic value, a radical / political way to construct, embrace, show, and perform intersectional queer identities, literally the making of queer communities, a cathartic way to deal with collective trauma, a protest against inequalities, and a way to produce and circulate situated knowledge, counter-knowledge and counter-narratives.

I find the counter-knowledge production function really important. As Michel Foucault makes clear throughout his works, knowledge is power and knowledge is produced within power relations. Bodies that have historically been marginalised, othered, and subjected to all forms of violence seize the means of production of their own histories, make their own knowledges and discourses, in order to reclaim and define themselves. It is already widely known that *queer* has become a self-defining and

34 *Methexis* (Ancient Greek μέθεξις, Modern Greek μέθεξη) is a term that refers to the participation of the audience in Ancient Greek drama. Theatre was a collective and ritualistic experience and everyone was expected to feel and react with the actors, to improvise, to share, to participate in an appropriate way and to be transformed by the spectacle taking place on the stage.

35 R. Schechner, *Performance Studies. An Introduction*, Routledge, New York and London, 2006, p. 46.

empowering term, after being used as a pejorative for decades. In a similar manner, the ballroom as a shared atmosphere and voguing as a performative act offers a space to do and show identities by reclaiming elements that are regarded as problematic or taboo within the hegemonic knowledge and discourses. In this sense, *pussy* and *cunt* are radicalised and become terms of empowerment. Gender realness – or, in the past, race realness – becomes an ironic powerplay and a way to mock the system. Capitalist symbols, like fashion houses or product brands, are taken over and given different symbolic meanings. Counter-discourses are being produced and, subsequently, they are brought out to the outside.

In Foucauldian terms, this space and shared atmosphere is a heterotopia. Foucault defines heterotopias as 'counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'.³⁶ Heterotopias are created by societies to serve very special functions through specific rules³⁷, but my application of this definition refers to a space that is not created *directly* by society and its norms, but much rather by the society's marginalised, othered, precarious and vulnerable bodies – in this case, the non-normative and non-conforming queer bodies. Hence, the ballroom and the runway are heterotopias. The ballroom is a heterotopia in much the same sense as the theatre, which has the ability to juxtapose 'in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible'.³⁸

Foucault also argues that heterotopias are both isolated and penetrable at the same time. This is a key element of the ballroom scene. Even as an outsider, one is welcome to stay and watch – in some cases even walk – but there are certain rules, certain codes, even a certain language, that need to be understood and respected.³⁹ This set of codes is crucial for the existence and the perpetuation of the ballroom as a space. The ballroom is the physical shared space of the runway as well as the cultural / ideological shared space of the ball. It can physically take place in various settings, such as clubs, social centres, parks; it has precisely this ability to transform any pre-existing space into a heterotopia. This space is also marked by affect that is produced and interchanged between the bodies, as I will show later on this thesis. It is an ethereal and radical atmosphere.

36 M. Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', transl. J. Miskowiec, in *Architecture / Mouvement / Continuité*, October 1984, p.3. Available at: <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf> (accessed 25 May 2020).

37 For example, the cemetery is a heterotopia and it is created by the society to serve as place to keep / bury the dead.

38 Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p.6.

39 I use the word 'outsiders' to refer to (usually cisgender and straight) people who do not normally go to balls, or have very limited experience of balls, and are curious to explore them. I have to clarify that this is not an 'official' ballroom term and I came up with it solely for the purposes of this thesis and in order to better illustrate my arguments.

Since this heterotopia is both isolated and penetrable, (almost) everyone is welcome to come and to look. However, they should bear in mind that this counter-culture is built on subversion of elements that can be decoded in different ways or may even be seen as controversial out of the context of the ballroom. One needs to be familiar with the agreed-upon terms, in order to be able to decode the elements. As my source, A. describes it 'I kind of like the irony of it – the things that are “normal” in the ballroom are not normal outside and I'm like, what alternate reality is this!'. This reversal of what is accepted and how things are decoded can be confusing for the newcomers and the outsiders.

In January 2020, I attended a ball in Berlin with a cis-male friend; his only connection to the ball culture was through *Paris is Burning*. The ball ended and we – a group of four, including two queer and two straight people – started walking towards the bus stop. My friend immediately problematised the fact that there is a sense of competitiveness and a lot of judging which, to him, did not seem subversive at all. I explained to him that competition is part of the ball culture and that historically it has always been this way. 'Yes', he carried on, 'but this doesn't mean that it should stay so. It just doesn't seem very empowering to me, being eliminated and having to work with winners and losers'. Astonished, my friend and I, the two queers of the group, rushed to respond 'you just don't get it, this isn't your world and you're not the one to say how this should be done' finding ourselves unable to defend something that we see as completely acceptable and take for granted. This led to a very short and slightly awkward conversation that concluded nowhere, and we hastily carried on with a different topic. But thinking about it on the trainride home, I realised that, for voguers, for seasoned ball-goers, for my queer friends, the element of competition and judging at balls is obviously and a priori not problematic, it has a certain charm and it is fun and empowering – but why was this so hard to explain it to an outsider?

According to my sources, ball competition and being judged is actually different to competition and judging in other contexts. 'As I see it, it is about self-improvement. Not being better than the other ones, but being the best version of yourself. It's very personal', said J., a very talented young voguer whom I had the chance to watch walk his first show in drag. According to M., 'a lot of the thrill of the ballroom comes from the fact that people are able to give you points, but this doesn't mean that they will give you points [based] on how you look, or the body, but it's the skills you have and the energy that you are able to project which isn't the case with other competitions [that are based on looks – for example, pageants]'. For M. it is empowering to be 'judged' for your ability to perform with precision, and not for your body and your ability to perform your gender in a conforming way; so, it is the exact

opposite of what happens in society, in the heteronormative world outside.

A. made a clear distinction between the balls in the 1980s and today's scene in Europe. She argued that, nowadays, competition and judging is more focused on the fun of this social interaction, and it is just part of the game. In the past, she argues, it was much more competitive and 'shady', because life for queer people – and especially trans women and queer Black and Latinx – was much harder and really dangerous. As a result, they were hard on themselves and on other people around them, because they had to be hard all the time, to *pass* all the time, as 'realness was a question of surviving'. They had to be tough, they had to learn to cope with harsh critique in order to survive in very hostile and violent environments. On a similar note, Anonymous Source C said that, 'if you didn't *pass* in the runway, you'd get chopped and if you didn't pass in life, you may actually die'.⁴⁰ Of course this does not mean that life today is really much easier for queer people, but it is undeniable that through decades of struggles there have been some crucial achievements.

A. rationalises the competitive element by focusing on the criteria of judgement.

Yeah, you get judged, it can be hard for your ego, but you're not gonna get judged for things that you get judged [for] in other contexts. You're not gonna get judged because you're too weird or you're gender non-comforming, or you have specific features that would conventionally make you non-attractive. You're being judged for your voguing abilities [...] The question is, if you go to balls and you agree to be judged, if you're also ok with the criteria that are used to judge people. (A., February 2020).

For A., there is inherent space for subversion and empowerment in judging, because the judging criteria are not imposed by the society outside the ballroom, but they are designed by the bodies that occupy the heterotopic space of the ballroom. The judging is done amongst equals and on their own terms. Even when the competitions seem to be incorporating norms of the patriarchal society that may be perceived as problematic in a queer context, this does not happen blindly, but very consciously, in an ironic and radically subversive manner.

The above paints a picture of the different rules and situations that come to play in the context of the ballroom, thus constituting it as a heterotopic space. Within this space, the body tells a story

⁴⁰ To *pass* means to be generally and undeniably perceived as the desiring gender or as the desiring race, usually to be seen as a white cis-woman.

using every limb and every muscle, and every element that is performed has a specific role in visualising the story. In the following pages, I will look closely at vogue femme as a distinctive and radical voguing style and visual phenomenon. I will analyse its elements and explore the posthuman *becomings* that are potentially activated with each element.

1.2 The hands that (simulate) touch | The duckwalk as *becoming-child* and *becoming-animal*

In a performance, the body needs to be present and conscious, to define the space that it is going to occupy as well as point to the fact that it will remain open to transformation. In a ballroom, the bodies that come to be transformed are not only the bodies of the voguers, but also the bodies of the audience and the judges, of the people that are present to watch. Methexis is shared among them, since all these bodies create and occupy the same heterotopic space. However, each body experiences and participates in the methexis in a different way, as it moves and is moved differently. Some bodies may even stay (seemingly) still, sit down, and watch. Regardless of the role they take up inside the heterotopia and of their level of body engagement, what all bodies have in common is that they never stop using / moving their hands.

In my approach to vogue femme, the hands mark every presence and activate all bodies, from the voguers to those who came to look or judge. On a visual level, the hands that clap, snap, praise, and chop signify assemblages of bodies that are physically and consciously present, thus constructing bubbles of intimacy. These bubbles are shared atmospheres of trust amongst everyone who made the conscious choice to occupy this particular space at that particular time with their bodies. On an ontological level, the very movement of the hands grounds the presence of the body and opens it up for transformative posthuman possibilities. Even when sitting down, even when squeezed between a lot of bodies and gasping for air, the hands activate whole-body movements. They break the illusion of stillness.



Fig. 1: Willi Ninja doing his famous mirror move. The voguer keeps his palm open and moves it around, 'facing' various imaginary opponents. The hands indicate that his opponents are *ugly and bad at voguing* and they could never beat him. Screenshot from *Paris is Burning* (1990).

Furthermore, the hands are very important for the performance of voguing. They frame the face, create boxes and flows of energy, they tut, twist and draw eights, they tell a story, point to certain parts of the body that need to be looked at and admired, indicate charm and elegance, show realness.⁴¹ But they also throw shade, thus serving as a powerful weapon against the opponent or as a general statement of confidence. In *Paris is Burning*, we see voguer Willi Ninja doing an old way freestyle at a park in New York while explaining his moves with a voiceover. We hear him talk about the use of the *mirror*, which is a move where the voguer looks at their closed palm as if it was a combat mirror, checking out their face for flaws, simulating the application of make-up or admiring their beauty. Willi Ninja liked to turn his palm / mirror towards his opponent, thus indicating that he may be very pretty, but his opponent is a hot ugly mess and does not stand a chance of winning. This is an example of a shady use of the hands (Fig.1).⁴²

41 *Box*: this is the name of a move most common in the old way and new way, rarely also seen in vogue femme. It is literally creating a box with one's arms and hands to frame and draw attention to the face.

42 The mentioned scene takes place in 36:52, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xf6Cn2y2xEc&t=2212s> (accessed 25 May 2020).



Fig. 2: A hands performance. The voguer is using the hands to frame and draw attention to the face. Sketch based on a photo taken by the writer.

In *vogue femme*, the hands are *soft and cunt*, facilitating an empowering becoming-woman, a ferocious or sensual becoming-feline. The hands performance serves as an initiation to the visual storytelling that will take place in the heterotopic, shared atmosphere of the runway. The hands tell an introductory story, visualise a 'once upon a time' in a mysterious, sensual, or playful, mischievous, *cunty* way – 'like a tiger or like a kitten, but always a pussy', as Anonymous Source C told me with a smile on their face. When the voguer uses their hands to indicate touch, they activate what Karen Barad calls 'an uncanny sense of otherness of the self, treating the self as an other that needs to be discovered, explored, unfolded before everyone's eyes.'⁴³

43 K. Barad, 'On Touching – The Inhuman that Therefore I Am', *differences*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2012, p. 206.

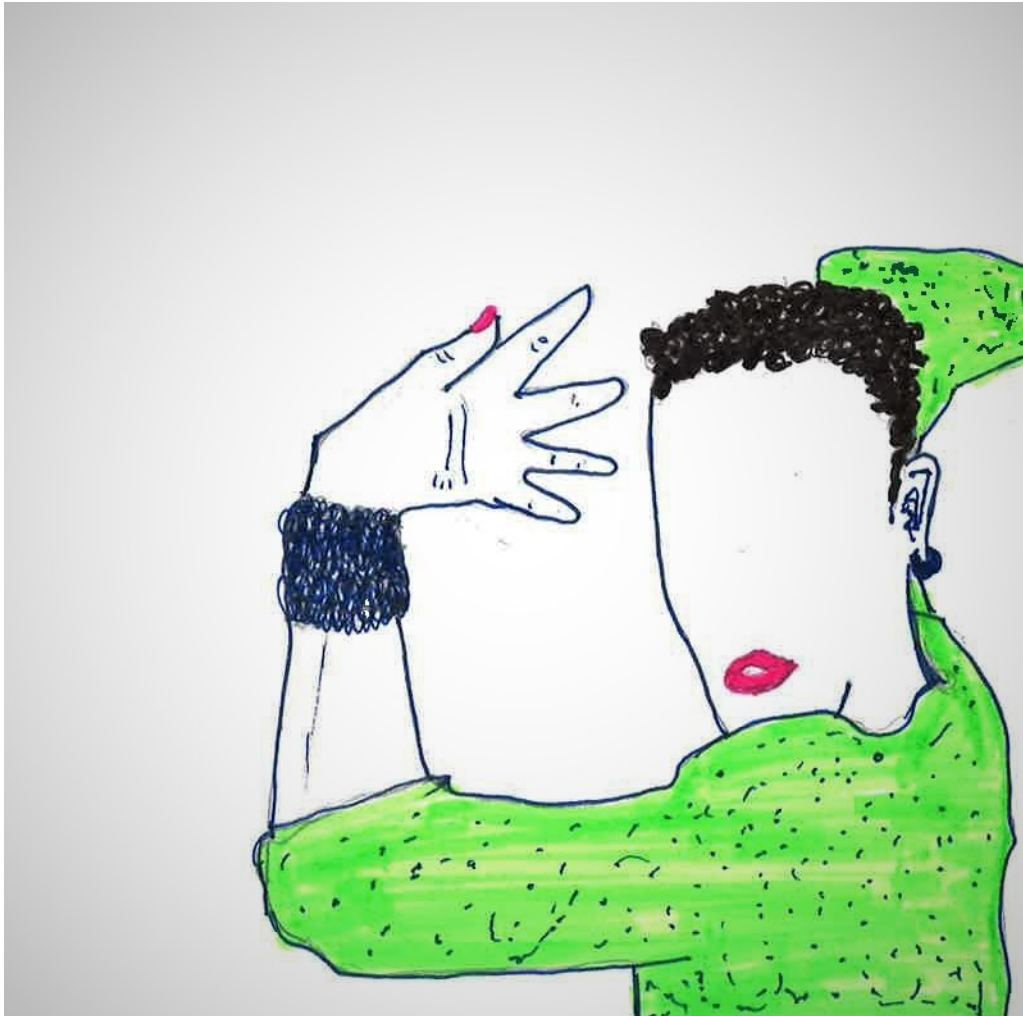


Fig. 3: Vogue femme hands performance. The hands are soft, drawing eyes close to the face and inviting attention to the voguer's facial features. Sketch loosely based on photo found on Google.

The hands rarely touch the face or the body in vogue femme. They point and come very close to touching, they almost caress, but they rarely actually touch (Fig. 2 and 3). Theatricality and illusion make this element even more mesmerising. There is a simulated tactile relationship between these sharp, precise, yet soft hands' movements and the restless hands of the viewers that sit or stand around the runway. It is an imaginary tactile relationship between all these bodies, that disrupts the boundaries of space and time and is visualised through illusions and affectively felt, even when it is not actually performed. As Karen Barad puts it, 'all touching entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the Other is touching all Others, including the "self", and touching the "self" entails touching the strangers within'.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Barad, 'On Touching – The Inhuman that Therefore I Am', p. 214.

This is a self-reflexive moment; the 'strangers within' come to the surface and the body (haptically) explores different possibilities of self-expression. It is also a transformative moment of methexis between all participants, and a construction of a shared emotion, where the lines between consciousness and entrancement become blurry.

I argue that this is the moment when the body's anthropocentric structure dissolves from within and initiates processes of *becoming*. In my theoretical approach, vogue femme is performed post-anthropocentrism. I propose that this is a political form of performative expression that actively rejects the domination of the majoritarian subject-anthropos, the white, western, able, proper, male body, and his systems of power. In other words, it rejects the traditional anthropocentric view, where man is seen as the epitome of reason, the 'rational animal, which is expected to inhabit a perfectly functional physical body'.⁴⁵ It also actively negotiates binary thinking and dualisms and subverts them in an ironic manner. Hence I approach voguing as a political form of dance that stands for the philosophical and political *others* of man – woman, animal, insect, machine, mineral, nature, world, chaos.

These embodiments of the *others of man* are visible in all the elements of vogue femme, and especially in the duckwalk and the catwalk. They signify a political, antipatriarchal and counter-heteronormative choice. And they do this by becoming all the other forms of embodiment, what Braidotti lists as 'zoomorphic, malformed, or ill-functioning', the embodiments that, in a heteronormative context, are 'pathologised and classified on the other side of normality, that is to say, monstrosity'.⁴⁶ Embodying, performing, and visualising the nightmare of the heteronormative patriarchy – ie, the woman, the gender non-conforming, the animal, the machine, the nature – , is a subversive and political act of defiance, as well as an act of empowering, of enabling visibility. In this sense, vogue femme is a performative way of activating minoritarian *becomings*; a facilitator of processes of becoming-child, becoming-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-nature / world / or chaos.

What sparks my interest in this process, is the visually spectacular ways in which all these minoritarian becomings are performed. One of these highly spectacular elements is the duckwalk, a move that involves 'crouching, foot-sliding and scooting movement requiring balance on the balls of the feet. Sashaying in a squatted position'.⁴⁷ In order to do the duckwalk, the voguer squats on the toes and stays squatted while keeping the back straight and the chest open, and consequently moves forward literally by doing small jumps and kicks (Fig.4). As the dancer remains squatted, all the weight is

45 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 123.

46 Braidotti, p. 123.

47 The House of Naphthali, *Ball slang categories and everything about vogue*.

placed on the toes, so as to stay in balance and in motion. The heels of the feet do not touch the ground and the body has to be low and as close to the floor as possible (Fig. 5). The spectacular effect is magnified by the fact that vogue femme is usually done in high heels and it involves improvised soft hand moves that work like brushes on the air around the face and in front of the body. This move is elegant and graceful, playful and whimsical, as well as extravagant and spectacular. In a ball setting, it looks like it is done effortlessly – lighter than air bodies bouncing up and down. The aim is not to go high, but far; the body never actually leaves the ground, it just creates an illusion of elevation, of hovering for a brief moment. This elegant and spectacular move is one of the hardest in vogue femme. As one of my sources, R., has described it, this is the move 'that will literally tear your knees apart'.



Fig. 4: An example of the duckwalk with *soft and cunt* hands. Screenshot from the introductory scene of the film *Climax* (2018), available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hwkacrln26o> (accessed 25 May 2020).

The duckwalk serves as a way of building and visualising a character in the story-telling metaphor. The duckwalk shows a playful, childlike, innocent yet mischievous character that bounces nostalgically. In my interpretation, it is an indicator of the *nomadic* characteristics of vogue femme. For Braidotti, nomadism is a rather creative process and nomadic becomings are 'the affirmation of the unalterably positive structure of difference, meant as a multiple and complex process of transformation, a flux of multiple becomings'.⁴⁸ The move is performed in such a way that it breaks the restraints and boundaries of the physical body and urges it to go beyond its limits. Braidotti approaches the subject 'as a radically immanent, intensive body, that is, an assemblage of forces or flows, intensities and passions that

48 R. Braidotti, *Transpositions*, Polity Press, 2006, p. 145.

solidify in space and consolidate in time'.⁴⁹ The subject has a *threshold of sustainability*, a limit that indicates how much the body can actually take. When this limit is met, the body informs the subject that they have gone too far. 'The warning can take the form of opposing resistance, falling ill, feeling nauseous, or it can take other somatic manifestations, like fear, anxiety, or a sense of insecurity', Braidotti argues.⁵⁰

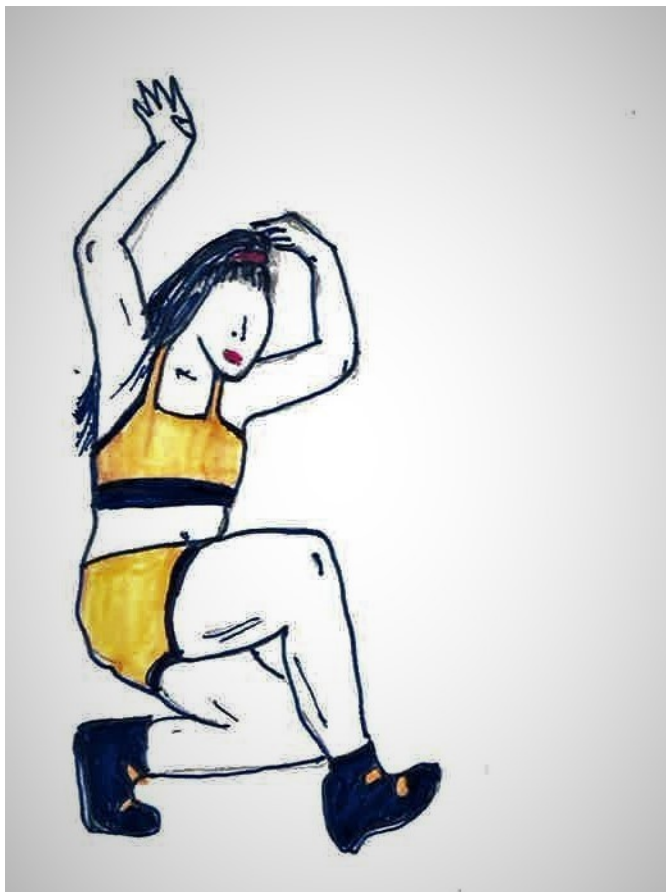


Fig. 5: An example of the duckwalk. Putting all the weight on the toes, the body balances on the left leg, as the right leg kicks and sends the body forward for a fragment of a second. Sketch loosely based on a photo taken by the writer.

But in voguing – and, generally, in dance – this threshold is often met and transgressed and the pain plays little role, unless it becomes actually unbearable, which would indicate injury. The pain that the

49 Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, p. 302.

50 Braidotti, p. 308.

voguer feels during and after doing the duckwalk is irrelevant and unimportant, because the body is urged to go beyond that. Of course this characteristic is shared amongst most types of dance – the body is put in a situation of pain and discomfort, but still goes on. And once the body moves past the extreme pain, it actually feels good, because it gives an indescribably wonderful sense of unrestrained possibilities, of lightness, as if the body might reject the laws of gravity and actually fly.

In this sense, the duckwalk has a flair of childish innocence and nostalgia, which is further underlined by this element's *bouncy* character. Every bounce – no matter how uncomfortable – is an oscillation between the adult body, heavy from its affective flows and impressions, and the inner child, light in its own potentialities. Thus there is a very interesting juxtaposition; on one hand, an almost masochistic endurance of pain, a self-motivation to reach the threshold of sustainability and just go beyond, and on the other hand, a playful childlike lightness, that rejects any sense of pain.

The *becoming-duck* is not only a process of *becoming-child*, but also a process of *becoming-animal*. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have extensively written about this process, while following on Borges' classification of the three types of animals – the oedipal, the jungian, and the demonic.⁵¹ In this context, I approach the duck as an *oedipal* animal, an 'individuated, family pet, sentimental' animal, that 'draws us into a narcissistic contemplation'⁵². *Becoming-duck* entails a certain sense of familiarity, of a return to what once was. The duck as an animal evokes childhood memories for many of us raised in western societies, as it is a frequent figure in toys, games, as well as children's clothing. In a way, we already train in becoming-duck from our childhood by performing the well-known song and dance. Many of us also share the childhood memory of going to the park to feed the ducks, as well as bathing with little plastic ducks. The duck is an animal that is not exactly a pet, but still feels like a pet, because it is always there. It comes close, we feed it bread and seeds and we know what it sounds like. There is a great deal of familiarity and proximity in this process.

Also, the carelessness and the playfulness of the duckwalk, the way that the body *just* bounces up and down, adds to its nostalgic character. This playful carelessness was a recurring theme in some of the interviews, since some of my sources talked about voguing as a see-saw game or as a chance to bounce around like a child. J. describes the first time he managed to do the duckwalk: 'I was laughing so hard, I was so happy that I started jumping and bouncing, not caring about my knees and ankles. I almost broke my leg!'. The voguer feels that they are approaching the threshold of sustainability, but do

51 For a detailed account on Borges' classification, see Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, polity press, 2014, p. 68, and Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 239-242.

52 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 240.

not really care. There is no goal, there is no rational *telos* in performing this move in loops, much like children's games. The duckwalk looks effortless but feels excruciatingly painful; it takes effort to immerse into it and to move towards the blurry line where pleasure and pain meet and, eventually, balance. But again, this goes with any attempt to do a child's game with an adult body; it takes some effort to immerse into the game, to stop feeling painfully embarrassed and actually find pleasure in the experience, in the *becoming-child*.

However, vogue femme does not focus solely on generating this childlike energy and innocent playfulness. As I will show in the following section, vogue femme is also a radical, empowering and spectacular celebration of hypersexualised exaggerated femininity. In this sense, it is clear that voguing offers a space where contradictory elements coexist and are employed in a subversive manner; on one hand, the bouncy innocence and the becoming-child of the duckwalk, on the other hand, the exaggerated femininity and the cunty energy of the catwalk.

1.3 Demonic animals of the catwalk | *Becoming-pussy*

Vogue femme can be described as a whimsical and spectacular celebration of exaggerated and hypersexual femininity, performed by any gender. This celebration partly takes place through the appropriation and radical subversion of clichés and pre-inscribed notions of *what counts as feminine* in a capitalist heteronormative patriarchal context. This subversion is particularly visible in the context of the catwalk and, in the following pages, I will attempt to analyse this element as a way of undoing, redoing, and overdoing femininity.

The catwalk is an upright sashay, that can be very elegant, soft – like a literal cat's walk – shady, or grandiose and kitsch, always depending on the voguer's attitude and the story that the voguer chooses to tell (Fig.6). Even though it is very flamboyant as a move, it must look effortless at all times. The catwalk is inspired by the homonymous term of the fashion industry, which is essentially a model's elegant sashay on the runway. In its turn, this fashion industry term took its name from the way felines walk. As a feline move, the catwalk is audibly silent, yet visually distinct, soft and sensual, playful and mysterious; in ballroom language, *cunty*. The fashion industry catwalk adopts a discreet, almost invisible and mute femininity. The fashion runway is occupied by clean, slender, proper, transparent bodies with quiet, gentle and imperceptible moves. This is deterritorialised in the context of voguing.

Here, the body is big, visible, loud, the figure desires to take space, to be noticed, and the moves are glamorous, sharp yet fluid, and sensual. In the context of vogue femme, the catwalk is very camp and oscillates between soft, playful discretion and loud, hyperbolic tackiness.



Fig. 6: An example of the catwalk. As the voguer sashays, the hip movements are exaggerated and the body's curves are pointed out. Sketch based on a photo found on Google.

Following the story-telling metaphor, in a voguing performance – as in the case of the duckwalk – the

catwalk serves the purpose of building and presenting a character. This catwalk character is described by R. as something grotesquely femme:

You are wearing really fierce stilettos, you keep your knees a bit bent – not too much, just a little in order to be able to drop at any point. Imagine that you're Nicki Minaj, Azealia Banks, whatever works! Your back is straight; you have a big set of breasts and a teeny tiny waist, but you don't crouch, because your big round butt keeps you in balance. And you're wearing a super tight skirt that ends at your knees, so you can't open your legs, you don't want to spoil the goods! So you walk like a cat, on an imaginary line at the tip of your toes, one leg in front of the other, your gigantic hip moving left-right-left-right, but DON'T rotate! See how the cat walks, see how easy it is for her to move her hips and walk the line.⁵³ (R., January 2020)

R.. uttered this monologue in a room full of women, non-binary people and some men, dressed in leggings and oversized T-shirts and standing awkwardly in front of the mirror. The music on the background was *Work this pussy*, a beat with a lot of crashes that usually plays for vogue femme walks and battles. During her speech, she walked among us, fixing our posture with her hands and pointing to different parts of our bodies with her long red nails. I could sense everyone in the room hanging on her lips, envisioning this loud and kitsch persona she was describing, and anxiously watching themselves transform to the beat. Exaggeration is generally approved and applauded in the catwalk; as R. very often points out, 'don't be afraid to go over the top! There's no such thing as “too much” in here!'. The catwalk character and the duckwalk character may appear to be quite different – even at times contradictory. However, voguing is a performance that manages to bring these contradictory characteristics together, to cohabitate in the same voguing body.

In terms of minoritarian *becomings*, the catwalk activates processes of *becoming-animal* and *becoming-woman*. Following the Deleuzian / Guattarian classification, this *becoming* adheres to the category of *demonic animals*, 'pack or affect animals that form a multiplicity, a becoming, a population, a tale'.⁵⁴ This is callback to the radical political characteristics of voguing and generally the ballroom,

53 Transcribed notes from the field. The capital letters are used to underline how R. emphasised these words while she talked.

54 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 241.

the space and time occupied by a high density of bodies that are present to form a multiplicity, a community. Embodiment, performativity and visualisation are the three key components of this type of becomings. In ballroom terms, becoming is not an imitation, but rather a question of realness.

Characteristics that are perceived as shameful or sinful in the heteronormative western societies, are visualised, glorified and celebrated with the catwalk. At the same time, generally offensive, problematic and stereotypical characteristics, which are inscribed to the cis and trans female and non-binary bodies by men – in some case even violently enforced – are hijacked and ironically subverted. By way of example, in February 2020, during one session of vogue femme, D. pointed out that we had to embrace a hypersexualised feminine energy, as if we were embodying every *slut-shaming* stereotype that we had ever heard regarding women. We were expected to visualise a set of characteristics that activate slut-shaming reactions in patriarchal contexts, but we had to perform them with pride and realness, with a *cunty* energy, as if they were precisely our most important and natural characteristics. The goal was to performatively subvert their negative meanings and utilise them for empowerment. In that context, we were encouraged to embrace characteristics that we had traditionally learned to hide and to be embarrassed of. As D. argued, 'it's about attitude and confidence, believe it, own it. It's about feeling it. Shyness? I don't know her, I've never heard of her. Confidence? Yes, HER I know!'

D. explained exactly how we should build, visualise and embody our radical hyperfeminine selves. 'This may sound weird' she said in a reflexive and slightly ironic tone 'but I want you to become an exaggerated version of what a man would think you would be. (at this point, she started catwalking and working her hands bouncing off the shoulders, talking with a sarcastic sensual, Lolita voice) What, this? This is how I look, this is how I walk, this is how I move. Is it too much for you? But isn't this what you expect me to be?' This ironically over-the-top hyperfeminine *cunty* energy is a crucial component of visualising and performing oneself on the vogue femme runway.

At this point, it is important to clarify that the hyperfeminine energy of vogue femme does not mean that this is *the* feminine voguing style. As both R. and D. have more than once pointed out, a very common misconception about voguing is that the old way is masculine and vogue femme is feminine, with the new way being somewhere in between.⁵⁵ For R., this misconception is partly rooted in the fact that most known visual material around voguing from the 1980s and early 1990s shows Butch Queen voguers, whereas nowadays we can easily find really diverse visual material. Since voguing at the time was what we now call *the old way*, there is an unconscious link between this style and masculinity. To

⁵⁵ The new way look is a mixture of extraterrestrial ethereality, precision and clear lines in the arms control and a general gender-neutral aesthetic aura.

this, I would add that the dominant visual material from the 1980s was mostly produced for capitalist, profit-driven reasons, so the makers would naturally choose to show the most acceptable bodies of this least accepted community – that is, the masculine presenting cisgender bodies.⁵⁶ In any case, vogue femme is not about existing and performing oneself in a feminine / masculine polar. It is about *becoming-woman* in the most exaggerated, radical, subversive manner; it is about *becoming-pussy*, about embracing the cunt energy and showing it in every possible way.

I often like to ask my sources, what they perceive as the most distinguishing characteristic of vogue femme. Most people reply that 'it is cunt'. And when they give me that answer, I find the diversity in their reactions to the utterance of this word very interesting. Some people just say it, some blush and excuse themselves, explaining why they used it, some even lower their voices. But what is cunt, really? According to Marlon M. Bailey, in the ballroom context cunt it 'an aesthetic criterion that signifies ultimate femininity or a feminine quality in a performance'.⁵⁷ Cunt is a visualisation and performance of the most exaggerated version of femininity, or at least of what counts as *femininity* in a binary patriarchal context. It is an ironic subversion of the most commercialised images of womanhood in late-capitalist societies. It is a reclaiming and a repurposing of an aesthetic that has been imposed to women for decades, but also the reclaiming and subversion of an aesthetic that facilitates rape culture and slut-shaming. Cunt is the performative act of transforming a swearword that has been used to diminish, to hurt, to silence, to eradicate, and making it empowering.

In the heteronormative patriarchal outside, cunt is read as passive, receptive, submissive. In the heterotopic anti-normative inside, cunt is performed as active, assertive, dominant, not in a violent way, but in a playful, whimsical way. In this sense, vogue femme is an empowering queer feminist form of expression, an appropriate intersectional answer to the sex-negative decades of white-centered second wave feminism.

Following on the quote from D. that was previously mentioned, the body plays with the notion of 'what we are expected to be' and shamelessly embraces alternative ways to perform itself. The body celebrates elements that it has traditionally learned to feel embarrassed of and hide. As various poststructuralist, feminist and gender scholars from Beauvoir to Foucault and from hooks to Halberstam and Spivak have argued in their works, the non-cis-male body is educated by society and family in such

56 I am referring to Madonna's song *Vogue*, which was the cultural product that appropriated voguing and made it visible to larger and non-queer audiences. Both in the music video and on the subsequent tour, all of Madonna's vogueurs were virile cisgender gay men. Of course there is a much better representation of diverse bodies in *Paris is Burning*, but even there, we mostly see Butch Queens voguing and Femme Queens walking other categories.

57 Bailey, 'Engendering space', p. 504.

a way as to be very careful with performing itself in the heteronormative public space. It must always remain aware of the fact that, at any moment, it is vulnerable to violence, to unsolicited sexualisation, to othering. This tragic experience of vulnerability and of precarity is shared amongst cis and trans women and queer people. In that sense, the politics that are proposed and performed in the context of voguing form a queer, intersectional, inclusive, *nomadic* feminism, somewhere between Rosi Braidotti's *nomadic queer theory* and her posthuman approach to feminism. For Braidotti, the subject of feminism is:

a complex and multi-layered embodied subject who has taken her distance from the institution of femininity. [...] She, in fact, may no longer be a she, but the subject of quite another story: a subject-in-process, a mutant, the other of the Other, a post-Woman embodied subject cast in female morphology who has already undergone an essential metamorphosis.⁵⁸

In my interpretation of this, the 'other of the Other', 'post-Woman embodied subject' is a cunt subject. Braidotti's sex-positive posthuman feminism is a feminism that approaches the body as 'an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces', an intersectional surface with multiple inscribed codes.⁵⁹ For this approach on the body that Braidotti proposes, sexuality is contained as a process and as a constitutive element'.⁶⁰ This does not mean that vogue femme is necessarily sexual. It means that it employs sexuality to empower the 'post-Woman' subject. This happens with the appropriation of hypersexual characteristics that are usually embodied by personas and capitalist icons, by capitalist sexist aesthetics, or by capitalist sexist industries. Hence R.'s reference to Nicki Minaj, the attention to the grotesque hyperfeminine persona, and the callbacks to the fashion industry, respectively.

These characteristics are appropriated and subverted in order to generate a cunt look. The cunt look is one that celebrates the radical Other of the man. It is performed by any gender that feels like it and it is magnified by the music that accompanies the performance on the runway. Historically, it is linked with high heels, impossibly long nails, and the voluptuous body type that R. described, but this does not necessarily mean that one *must* have the heels, the nails and the body type. The right

58 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p.11-12.

59 Braidotti, p.25.

60 Braidotti, p.25.

attitude is necessary to *become-pussy*, even when the voguer is not necessarily *pussy* in their life outside the voguing runway.

I have asked many women – mostly friends and acquaintances – in personal discussions why they choose to do vogue femme, and they seem to agree that it feels good to connect with their bodies and perform in safe spaces without feeling embarrassed and without getting harassed or shamed. One of my sources, M., defined the vogue femme energy as the 'straightening of the soul', as she feels empowered and confident when she does it. For her, the pussy energy of vogue femme creates an environment where femininity can be tried on and out, shaped, formed and played:

You know this feeling when you're just sitting and someone comes and straightens your back? It's similar also with voguing, but straightening up your soul. It's like the typical thing of feeling yourself when, for example, you put on something that fits your personality and your body and your style and it makes you shine and you look in the mirror and say “wow I look fine!”. [...] Especially if you're a man and you want to explore your femininity, because society shuts you down, but also if you're a woman and you're trying to be your own kind of femininity and, I don't know, perhaps wear short skirts or something, you're also shut down. You can't win. It [the runway] is a space where you can be over the top, you have the right to show your sexy side and not be shamed of it, even if you don't have the “perfect body” or whatever, as long as you have the energy that carries through. It's like writing a love letter to yourself through dancing and other people signing it.

(M., February 2020).

During my fieldwork, I noticed an interesting pattern among my sources. When talking about *becoming-pussy* and experimenting with a feminine energy, the male-identifying sources told me that they were happy and curious to have a space / performative way to explore their feminine sides, whereas my female identifying sources pointed out that they were glad to finally feel empowered and celebrated for their sexual energy. Of course, this does not indicate a clear and general conclusion – this is not the nature or the goal of my ethnographic research – however it underlines an interesting potential attitude and points to a direction that could be researched and analysed in the future.

Sometimes my sources – and I – ended up contradicting our previous thoughts during our conversations, adopting different positions on different contexts regarding how we experience, do, and show gender. I became aware of this situation as I transcribed the interviews and compared them with my fieldnotes. Then, I realised that this non-conformity and fluidity is, in fact, the essence of queer.

This can be further explained with the following extract from an interview with an anonymous male identifying source (Anonymous Source B), where he said:

It's actually a very liberating experience – and don't quote me by name on this – to fag it out, to be like really really fag, and it's true, it's not that you always want to fag out, it's actually also a category, “fag out”, but it's also an idea; if you want to, you can. For me, if I was like a “new gay boy” and I was trying to seem supermasculine, I can now exaggerate being super-feminine, and even though now I don't think that this is me, if I wanted to, I could.

(Anonymous Source B, January 2020).

Speaking of cunt later in the interview, he came to adopt quite a different position:

What I realised is that I'm not so confident and comfortable with having female energy as I had thought. It's like I said, it's nice to fag out some times, but... [pause to think] I actually feel more comfortable with the male role, the male role comes quite easy, more or less, it's a bit of focus and work on your shoulders, it's not...[pause to think] but I thought walking with the male role is way easier than the female, because I don't shake my hips when I walk.. but then that might depend on the type of gay that I feel that day... [pause to think] You know what I mean? This I find interesting.

(Anonymous Source B, January 2020).

Another one of my male sources, H., pointed out that vogue femme was actually his first chance to explore his femininity. I had the chance to watch him walk a ball in January 2020 and interestingly, he chose to walk All American runway (a very masculine-looking category) and vogue femme; in a way, two opposite energies. He justified this choice by jokingly referring to pop culture: 'I really like All

American runway, but I also really like vogue femme, so I can explore all sides of myself. It's kind of nice, one time acting really masculine and then the next time very feminine, so I get the best of both worlds, like Hannah Montana'. Later in the conversation, he also referred to how he experiences the relationship between gender performativity and realness: ' [on the runway] I did things that I don't normally do, as I usually hide this part of me because people shame me for it, and yesterday [at the ball] it was the opposite. I'm not really *out* yet. But on the runway I get celebrated for these things, I got a lot of energy from the people. Something like “wow, who are you!”’.

The vogue femme catwalk opens up a shared space, where *compulsory heterosexuality* is visually and performatively deconstructed as the bodies dance beyond the boundaries of heteronormativity. Through the processes of *becoming-pussy*, as well as the processes of *becoming-duck*, the subjects dance beyond anthropocentrism and subversive possibilities come to the surface. Either by embodying childlike playful elements or by resorting to an exaggerated sexualised femininity, the dancer is given the chance to perform in contexts that go beyond the expected norms. However, even though they are posthuman, all these becomings are still biocentric. In the following chapter, the focal point of this thesis will move beyond this biocentrism and explore more abstract and non-biocentric types of becoming of this fluid and fragmented posthuman experience.

Chapter 2 | *I dance the body electric* | From spins and dips to floor performance, posthuman bodies that sweat and spasm

2.1 A spin and dip into posthuman experiences | Becoming-cyborg / *becoming-electric*

'If voguing is a sentence, the dip is an exclamation point.'

(R., March 2020)

Characterised by a *cunty* dramatic energy and theatricality, and popularised through mainstream culture, the spin and dip is a widely recognisable image even outside the ballroom. This move has many variations, the most popular being the so-called *dramatic spin and dip*. While in most variations the dancer spins and slides to the floor, in this particular variation the dancer abruptly collapses straight to their back. The *dramatic spin and dip* is an element that most voguing enthusiasts dream of executing while being terrified of actually executing it. This uncanny and contradictory feeling is connected to its relatively high level of difficulty, and to the macabre name that the move has been given in the notorious reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race*: the *death drop*. However, this commercial terminology is not actually used by voguers and, as R. says, by referring to the dramatic spin and dip as the *death drop* at a ball, you will probably get shaded or even chopped.

During a vogue femme session in March 2020, R. explained the basic vogue femme spin and dip by breaking it down into three or four poses. As a result, I could visualise and understand the element, deconstructed in a series of freestyle twirls, followed by consecutive poses on different levels, starting from an upward position and finishing laying on the floor. Eventually, this element is not a literal drop, but much rather a progressive slide. The most dramatic characteristic of the spin and dip is the final pose, as it twists and bends the body in a very unusual angle. On the final pose, one leg is bent and placed right next to the dancer's backside, the other leg is lifted and the coup-de-pieu faces the ceiling. The back is arched, the arms spread to the sides like open wings, the fingers – or the nails – are slightly touching the floor, but do not support the body's weight, the neck is arched and the head slightly touches the floor (Fig. 7). In order to perform a successful spin and dip, my Anonymous Source A explains that we need to clear our mind, dispose of unnecessary thoughts, 'let the spine do the work and just set that body on fire'. It takes time to actually absorb these deconstructed moves and to

programme the body into doing them as organically and naturally as possible.

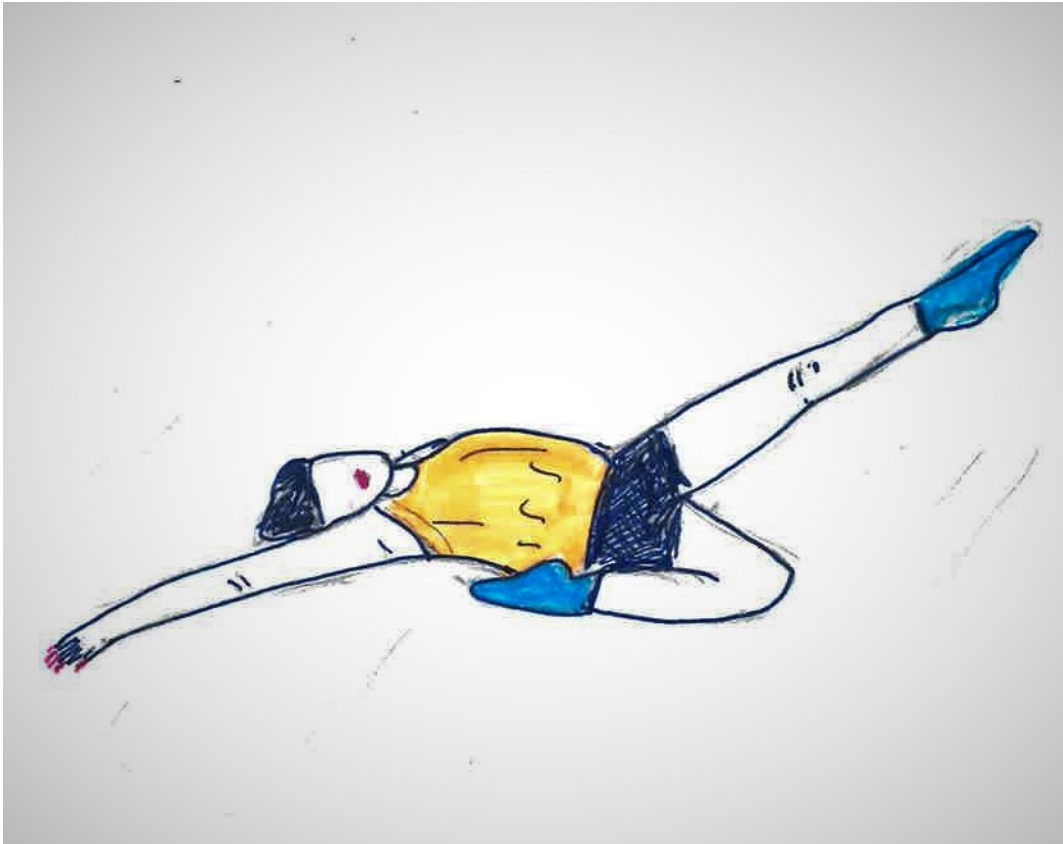


Fig. 7: An example of the final pose of the dip. The right leg is bent and placed next to the torso, touching the dancer's backside and the left leg is lifted. The arms spread like a triangle, slightly touching the floor, while the spine and the neck are arched. Sketch loosely based on a photo found on Google.

The previous chapter focused on the posthuman character of vogue femme, analysing gender and *becoming-animal* aspects. This chapter focuses on the *post-posthuman*, post-body, post-gender, fluid character of vogue femme. Looking at vogue femme as a powerful statement that involves what Anonymous Source A calls 'setting the body on fire', I propose that it enables a becoming that is not only human, animal, child, gender, but rather machinic, imperceptible, elemental, or even *electric*. Hands, catwalk and duckwalk are linked with illusions of touch and contact and, in my approach, with posthuman, but still biocentric becomings. Spins and dips, and floor performance do not simulate touch; they involve actual 'material on material' contact and skin on skin brushes. In my approach, these two elements are also linked with posthuman *becomings*, only this time, the *becomings* are non-

biocentric, but rather mechanic, machinic, ethereal, *electric*.

According to Braidotti, the posthuman embodied entity is fundamentally prone to pleasure and remembers 'in the sense of being able to recollect and to repeat its experiences. The body is not only multi-functional, but also multi-expressive: it speaks through temperature, motion, speed, emotions, excitement, fluids and sounds and a variety of rhythms'.⁶¹ Motions, speed, emotions, fluids, rhythms; these are the elements that are performed, danced by a body that *becomes*, reaches its various potentials, and transforms the space around it through spasmodic spins and dips. It seems as though there is an internal and eternal vibration that is repeated in loops and in waves of intensity. These intensities indicate that the dancer has total control of the body, to the point that they trust it to be set free, to be 'set on fire'. The body may remember its own journey and find ways to visually narrate fragments of its story through movements. The story is a patchwork of memories, traumas, anecdotes, hopes, dreams and nightmares, all stitched together, and every spin and dip is an exclamation point that marks the surprise, the drama, the various affective responses.

Sara Ahmed argues that affect is 'what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects'.⁶² With every spin and dip, with every vibration, every breath and every bead of sweat, the body leaves sticky impressions and creates sticky intimate relationships to the objects and the other bodies with which it shares the same space. This is a social and collective process. Movements (motions) and emotions are connected, not only etymologically but also practically and performatively. As bodies, we move with, around and against others, we collide with them, and we leave impressions on them – both literally and metaphorically, as we may stain or *contaminate* them, or affect them emotionally and transform them. As Ahmed argues, 'emotions are about movement, but also about attachments' and, respectively, attachment takes place 'through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others. Movement may affect different others differently'.⁶³

In the spin and dip, the exchange of affects among the sticky bodies that walk and compete happens through skin-on-skin contact, through flesh brushing against flesh, even if this brushing only lasts a couple of seconds. Usually, the runway in the kiki scene, and in self-organised underground balls in general, is very small and the clubs are too crowded. This lack of space leads to accidental and coincidental brushes among the voguers or between the voguer and the crowd members. Those who sit or stand on the first row, often get accidentally hit, kicked or have props thrown at them. These brushes

61 R. Braidotti, *Transpositions*, p. 97.

62 S. Ahmed, 'Happy Objects', in M. Gregg, G. Seigworth, S. Ahmed (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 29.

63 S. Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotions*, Routledge, 2004, p.11.

and disruptions are very common in one-on-one battles and especially during the spins and dips, as the body stretches, becomes bigger and takes up more space. Also, the voguers often collide with each other, and end up dancing on, with, against and despite each other. This type of contact can be so incidental and quick, or the voguer may be so focused and entranced, lost in the moment, that they do not even notice it.

As an example, I recall a beautiful chaotic moment I witnessed during a self-organised ball at a student building in Berlin, in January 2020. During a battle, a female and a male figure were spinning and dipping, dropping on the floor and giving a series of extreme acrobatic poses, holding legs behind the head, doing splits on the floor and immediately getting back on their feet. As they were both sunk into the moment, they started to cluster and orient their energies towards the same spot on the floor. They were drawn to each other like magnets.

At some point, the male figure got up and attempted a kick which almost landed on the female figure's head; she avoided it by ducking instinctively and she crawled on the floor, accidentally mingling with the male figure's legs and brushing her whole torso against them. This went on for a while, with them literally dancing on each other. The audience was mesmerised by this very intense battle and everyone was holding their breath. When the commentator called it and they held their pose, they were so intertwined that they looked like a weird teras with two heads, four hands and legs and a weirdly fused torso. I met the female figure the next day for a chat – she is M., one of my sources – and I told her how fascinating I found this battle. Interestingly, she did not remember any of these details and said that she was so concentrated on the precision of her moves that she lost sight of what was happening outside of her own body. 'It's almost like a spiritual experience, because your body exists and you exist, but you're not really there. Perhaps with meditation you could get to a similar state. Like being present, but being removed at the same time and your body does things but you don't really have control over them', she said.

This oscillation between presence and absence was often discussed and proposed by the voguers that I have encountered. As they describe it and as I experience it, there is a paradox at play. Being completely in control of the body means trusting the body to be let loose, free and limitless, to do what it desires to do and dance as it desires to dance. Once again, this is not a characteristic of voguing only, but much rather a characteristic visible in any kind of dance, from the nauseating freedom of performing a perfect triple pirouette to the spasmodic pops of krumping on the beats of aggressive hip hop. What these moves have in common with the spin and dip is the spectacular, literally breathtaking

visual effect and the performative contradiction in terms of disciplining and liberating the body.

What I find particularly interesting to explore in the spin and dip is the potentiality of reaching a cathartic or climactic peak. The dip is indeed the exclamation point, the spectacular cry. However this does not mean that the performance is over. The body drops, but – as it will be discussed below in the section of the floor performance – it still performs on the floor, or gets back up on its feet to drop again. The spectators feel the intensity of this energy, but there is no subsequent catharsis, since the body goes on, and there is no big and intense climax, since the effect is so momentary and fragmented that it barely sinks in. Instead of a big climactic moment, there is a series of fragments of moments, of rapid glimpses of catharsis, like sparks of electricity piercing through the skin. I call these rapid glimpses *electrocutions*, in an attempt to describe this effect both visually / aesthetically and in terms of its sensation. I came up with this term quite liberally, by asking myself: 'how would you describe the feeling of a spin and dip to someone who has never done it? How would you describe the look of a spin and dip to someone who has never seen it?' What I took into consideration was my own embodied sensation when I look at spins and dips and when I perform them (poorly, yet whole-heartedly), as well as my anonymous friend's statement that this move lets the spine go crazy and 'sets that body on fire'.

In this move, the minoritarian becoming that is activated is no longer a biocentric becoming, but much rather, a *becoming-electric*. This is a *becoming* that trusts the body to spasm out of control as if it was populated by electric intensities as if it was experiencing mini electrocutions stimulating the nerves to take over. Following a Deleuzian / Guattarian approach, I would suggest that this electric body is a *Body-without-Organs*, in the sense that it *becomes* and it is made in such a way, 'that it can be populated, occupied only by intensities'.⁶⁴ The electric *Body-without-Organs* has had 'enough organs and wants to slough them off, or loses them'.⁶⁵ Here, the word *organ* is not necessarily used literally, but rather it signifies hierarchy, discipline, a sense of logical and normative organisation. I will return to this Deleuzian / Guattarian concept and analyse it further in the following part of this thesis.

These processes of *becoming-electric* motivate the body to challenge the boundaries of its human identity, not only through processes of becoming-animal, but also through becoming-intense, becoming-machine, becoming-mechanic. The electric feel stimulates the body to electrocute itself, to get rid of all physical and sociopolitical boundaries, to 'slough off' its 'organs' – the skin, the flesh, the bones, the Cartesian dualisms, the gender, the sex, the race, the class, the size, the age, the space, the time – and start *dreaming of electric sheep*. On the floor, the electric body is a cyborg, incorporating the

64 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 169.

65 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 166.

aesthetics and the political characteristics that are crucial for the existence of a ballroom as a sticky, anti-normative, and radically queer nomadic statement.

Donna Haraway defines the cyborg as a creature 'in a post-gender world. [...] the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense – a 'final' irony since the cyborg is also the awful apocalyptic telos of the “West's” escalating domination of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency'.⁶⁶ In my understanding, Haraway's cyborg is queer to the core, since it is committed to 'partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity' while being 'oppositional, utopian, and completely out of innocence'.⁶⁷ The oppositionality of the cyborg falls in line with Ahmed's definition of queer as not simply 'anti-heteronormative, but anti-normative' and the utopian character becomes affectively enacted in the heterotopia of the ballroom.⁶⁸ Also, the term can be used in various different ways for the purposes of posthuman feminism. To quote Haraway, 'the cyborg is text, machine, body, and metaphor – all theorized and engaged in practice in terms of communications'.⁶⁹ Hence the cyborg body that spins and dips is not only mechanic, machinic and electric in terms of its aesthetics. It is also a cyborg body that spins and dips, performing its identity and its nomadic, minoritarian, postanthropocentric (radically queer) political values both inside the ballroom and outside, in the heteronormative patriarchal society – and this is what differentiates this cyborg body from the non-cyborg, docile, anthropocentric bodies.

In terms to performing the cyborg aesthetics, it is also worth mentioning that some of my sources have used the term 'cyborg' while talking about voguing. M. talked about the voguing-inspired dance duo AyaBambi referring to them as 'beautiful cyborgs', whereas Anonymous Source C described their experience saying that they feel like an 'extraterrestrial, alien, cyborg-entity'. In general, and influenced by pop culture, we tend to visualise the movements of the human body as inherently different from the movements of the machinic / biocybernetic posthuman body. According to pop visual culture, human and posthuman bodies initially cannot always be told apart easily, since they might look quite similar, but it is the moves that actually differentiate them, since they have the ability to perform weird acrobatic moves and twist their bodies in impossible angles.⁷⁰

In that sense, dancing can in general blur the lines between the human and the posthuman – let alone vogue femme, a dance style that incorporates acrobatics, spasms and unusual angles that at times

66 D. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The reinvention of Nature*, Free Association Books, London, 1991, p. 151.

67 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 152.

68 Ahmed, *The cultural politics of emotions*, p. 149.

69 Haraway, p. 212.

70 For example, in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*; the replicants look like the humans, they even appear to develop emotions and experience existential crises, but what really distinguishes them visually is their ability to bend their bodies in unusual angles and do impossible acrobatics. See *Blade Runner*, dir. Ridley Scott, USA, Warner Bros, 1982, [film].

literally seem to be extraterrestrial. It is also a dance style that aims at looking completely different, not being part of the normative world, an aesthetic political statement in itself. As my source, A. puts it: 'I feel not human, like I'm a show, I'm not from this world and I guess it's kind of my goal for people to see me and wonder "what did just happen"'. The spin and dip paves the way for actually passing as a cyborg, for *cyborg realness*, for electric becomings, for experimenting with boundaries that go beyond our human(looking) bodies.

2.2 The Floor performance | *Becoming-a Body without Organs*

The spins and dips, as well as the hands performance, the catwalk and the duckwalk, are very technical elements in vogue femme. These elements need to be performed with precision and attention to detail, while it is important for the voguer to develop their story based on their own interpretations of the elements. Since voguing is a visual narration of a story, a voguer is judged for their ability to execute the moves in a seemingly effortless manner, with clear lines and accuracy, while giving heart and soul to them, embellishing them with distinct personality traits. Improvisation is expected and encouraged in the performance of all the elements. Yet the element that offers the grounds to exploring and showing one's freestyle skills to the fullest is the floor performance.

Apart from the general rule of keeping the moves clear and precise, which applies to all vogue femme elements, in the floor performance there are no other rules and the body is free to do whatever it desires and to employ other dance styles, more theatrical elements, even acrobatics. This limitless potentiality makes the floor performance a surprising and unpredictable element in the vogue femme performance. Thus continuing with the story-telling characteristics of voguing, the floor performance is the plot twist, the scene that everyone anticipates but no one really knows when, where and how it will develop.

One never really knows what to expect when going to a ball, although one may have a general idea, that there will be certain categories and, probably, a certain theme. Voguing as a performance is an improvisational and spontaneous encounter, since it is based on the dancer's own interpretation of the elements and it develops on the spot, in the here and now. It is also an ephemeral encounter. It has a specific beginning, which is marked by the moment the commentator asks if anybody is walking. It also has a specific ending, which chronologically coincides with the moment the battle is over and one

of the two final voguers gets the trophy. Voguing is a performance that can never be physically repeated; it is unique and coincidental. Even if you put the same two voguers to battle each other again and again, their performance will never be the same, because the improvisational character of this dance changes dramatically every time.

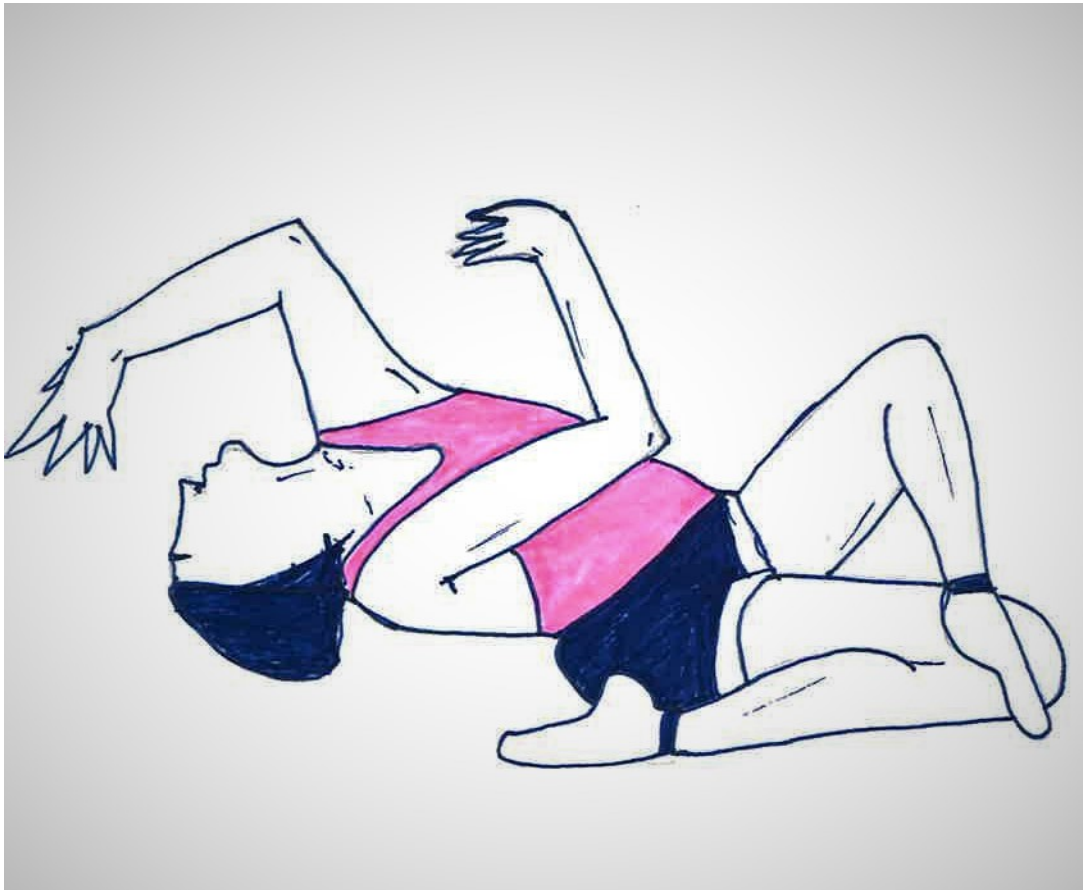


Fig. 8: An example of a floor performance pose. This pose came right after the spin and dip, hence the right leg is still bent and placed next to the backside. The back is arched and the dancer is starting to get back up. Sketch loosely based on a photo found on Google.

These characteristics apply to all vogue femme elements to some extent, since they are all based on more or less solid moves, around which the dancer is encouraged to improvise. The floor performance, however, is the most incidental, liminal, and freestyle of the elements. Nobody, not even the voguer can know a priori how their floor performance will develop. This development depends on a variety of factors, for example the energy of the voguer, the music, the theme of the ball, the person that the voguer walks against, the judges, the audience. In a nutshell, every session is different, every ball is

different and every battle is unique. There is no choreography and, even though everyone has some preferred moves or even some signature poses, it all depends on the feeling of the moment.

Like most non-choreography based dancers, the voguers constantly respond to each other's energy and feed off of the audience and judges' reactions. I like to schematically picture the affective atmosphere of the runway like bubbles within bubbles. Following this schema, there is a bubble that includes the commentator and everyone else. The commentator plays a crucial role, since they set the mood, the rhythm, the heartbeat of the ball. A bad commentator can ruin the ball and a good, charismatic commentator can lift the spirits and make the audience feel like they are one entity. The commentator has the power to encourage or discourage the voguer to the point of elevation or annihilation; in fact, some of the shadiest remarks are often made by the commentator.⁷¹ They can even influence the response of the judges, and they have the ability to build or break the participant's morale.

Consequently, there is the bubble shared among the voguer, the audience and the judges. As many of my sources have told me, the support from the audience can be really beneficial for the voguers, give them confidence and make them feel love, support, and acceptance. And even when they do not receive support, but shading, the atmosphere is still enjoyable, since they are never actually excluded or judged for not fitting in. There is a relationship that develops between the bodies that participate in different ways; some are walking / voguing, while others are praising / shading (encouraging / discouraging). In each case, the embodied involvement differs from body to body, but all are present and active. They produce and exchange affect, not only through speech acts, but also with gestures, body language and distinct moves that have specific meanings and can be decoded within the context of the ballroom.⁷²

Finally, there is the bubble between the bodies that walk and vogue. Especially when there are only two figures left and they are battling with each other, they will often end up voguing on, around and against each other or mirroring each other, like the battles I described in the previous chapter and

71 I have heard a lot of stories about snarky commentators in past balls where friends and acquaintances have walked or watched. This practice is also a recurring theme in FX' *Pose*, where Pray Tell, the commentator, seems to almost have personal issues with ball contestant Candy and keeps throwing shade at her from his microphone (for example, see 'The Fever', *Pose*, Season 1, Episode 5, FX, 2018, [TV program] and 'Never Knew Love Like This Before', *Pose*, Season 2, Episode 4, FX, 2019 [TV program]). In general, the commentator shadiness is a common cultural myth in ball culture. However, personally I have never witnessed this kind of ferocity in any of the balls that I have attended.

72 For example, in the outside world when someone moves their index finger in front of someone else's face, they indicate negation ('no, you are not allowed to do this'). In the ballroom, the same move indicates admiration and awe with sassiness ('snap, she didn't'). Since the ballroom is a penetrable and closed heterotopia, as I already argued, one needs to be familiar with the decoding mechanisms in order to take in these reterritorialised verbal and somatic codes.

the introduction. And since there is no way of knowing beforehand who they will be walking against, the way that they walk and – even more – the way that they do their floor performance largely depends on how the other person walks and does theirs. This is indeed a loop, characterised by entrancement and methexis, as the voguer is influenced by the energy they receive from the opponent's body and let their body take them wherever it wants to go.

The construction of these bubbles, the encounters of the bodies in this looped circle create what Deleuze and Guattari call 'machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another'.⁷³ This multi- and transbody space is also a 'collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies'.⁷⁴ The floor performance as an assemblage opens up the space for body-to-body transactions and interactions, deterritorialisations and reterritorialisations, liquidations of identities and fluid *becomings*.

These overlapping and intermingling body-assemblages add to the heterotopic atmosphere of the ballroom, which is temporary and liminal, constructed on the *here* and *now*. This atmosphere could be governed by what Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos defines as *spatial justice*, 'the conflict between bodies that are moved by a desire to occupy the same space at the same time'.⁷⁵ Here the conflict does not indicate aggression or a polemic atmosphere, but rather a corporeal conflict in the sense that I have previously described it: bodies literally dancing on, against and despite other bodies. For Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 'spatial justice emerges from a movement of withdrawal from the atmosphere',⁷⁶ while an atmosphere is 'an enclosure of affects that spread through affective imitation between bodies'.⁷⁷ Precisely, the atmosphere is defined as 'the affective ontology of excess between, through, and against bodies'.⁷⁸ This atmosphere is fluid, temporary and incidental; it will withdraw as soon as the contact between these bodies stops, as soon as the bodies return to the outside. It is a liminal experience, with every collision offering radically different possibilities of encounters, the outcomes of which are countless.

As a result, the floor performance is the element which, to the largest extent, signifies the fluidity of voguing. Whereas the other elements are performed on different levels of a vertical axis and rely heavily on fixed moves, the floor performance, performed on a horizontal axis and relying heavily on improvisation, generates the liberty to do anything that seems fitting and feels organic at the

73 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 88.

74 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 88.

75 A. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, *Spatial Justice: Body, Lawscape, Atmosphere*, Routledge, 2015, p. 3.

76 Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, *Spatial Justice*, p. 6.

77 Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, p.5.

78 Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, p. 5.

moment. There is not a *right* moment to drop on the floor and there is no specific routine that one needs to follow while on the floor. At this point, I should clarify that the voguer may or may not choose to do a floor performance depending on how they feel, or depending on whether it seems to them necessary for their performance. They may do it whenever they want to do it, and this is a decision that happens on the spot.

By way of example, during a playful and spontaneous rehearsal, my Anonymous Source A and I were improvising and trying out different hand movements to combine with our duckwalk. We were too lazy to do a proper warm-up and we were both wearing jeans, so at some point, as we were kicking and walking on our toes, my friend slipped and fell on the floor. Instead of getting back up and while giggling like a child, they embraced the moment and started doing a series of silly poses on the floor. However, after a few seconds, my source sunk into the music and got carried away, so they gracefully spread on the floor and progressively started doing more fierce poses, giving me splits and twerks, until the song was over. When it was over, they turned to me – I had stopped duckwalking and was simply observing them speechless – and, out of breath, they said: 'I guess there is no bad moment to do some floorwork, right?'. There may be whole battles done entirely on the floor, and there may be whole battles, where the dancer just drops for a second – after spinning – and immediately gets back up on the feet to resume the dance on a vertical axis.

The floor performance is an element that underlines the point where the individual and the collective meet. It indicates the encounter between the unique / monadic and the nomadic character of vogue femme. As the dancer follows their spontaneous and fluid interpretation of the moment, the body once again gets rid of pre-inscribed notions and pre-conceived interpretations of what it *should* be or what it *should* look like. To speak with Deleuze and Guattari, the dancer's body *becomes a Body-without-Organs*, which, as I previously explained, is a body that can be occupied only by intensities. This concept is inspired by Antonin Artaud's famous poem *To be done with the judgement of God* and plays a prominent role in Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalytic works.⁷⁹ Being influenced by Spinozian ethics, they are interested in exploring the bodies that do not have a limit – or, in Braidotti's terms, a *threshold of sustainability* – and for that reason, they mostly research schizoid subjects, drugged bodies, masochists. This is definitely not the case in hand, however – as I briefly argued earlier on this thesis – the dancing body is a body that desires to move beyond its limits, to ignore the pain and to redefine its own threshold of sustainability.

79 A. Artaud, *To have done with the judgement of God*, available at <http://www.surrealism-plays.com/Artaud.html>, (accessed 25 May 2020).

The concept of the Body-without-Organs initially seems to be bleak, catatonic, or violent. However Deleuze and Guattari frequently point out that it can also be 'full of gaiety, ecstasy, and dance'.⁸⁰ In Braidotti's analysis of their work, there is an affirmative creative chaos in their thought, or precisely a 'joyful anarchy of the senses, a pan-erotic approach to the body'.⁸¹ This ecstatic approach of the concept is what motivates me to use it here. In vogue femme, the Body-without-Organs is not a catatonic or schizo body, but a body that dances itself beyond the threshold of sustainability, that explores its possibilities while adopting weird angles and spectacular anti-normative aesthetics, immersing in and embracing the moment, and responding to any affect that the space and the atmosphere have to offer.

As Deleuze and Guattari argue, the Body-without-Organs is not opposed to the organs; rather 'the BwO and its "true organs" which must be composed and positioned, are opposed to the organism, the organic organization of organs'.⁸² This organic organisation is linked with the majoritarian subjects, the norms and dualisms, the society by and large. In Artaud's poem, the Body-without-Organs wants to be done with the organic organisation of organs, which are represented by the judgement of God, or else the early-capitalist Christian / clerical ethics. And once this process is initiated, the body is free to dance 'wrong side out as in the frenzy of dance halls'.⁸³ In my application of this concept, the Bodies-without-Organs that *become* on the runway and through the floor performance, seek to be done with the judgement of capitalist heteronormative patriarchy, to be done with the organic organisation of organs that is represented by sex and gender binaries, fixed race and class representations and intersections, power relations and pre-existing hegemonic discourses. And this opposition takes place in a visually spectacular way, through the development of the posthuman *becomings* on the floor.

This is not a lonely process. The Body-without-Organs of the floor performance is a nomadic body, in the sense that it is 'open-ended, interrelational, and trans-species'.⁸⁴ It is also a nomadic body in the sense that it needs the interaction with the other bodies to actually *become-nomadic*. It is a nomadically monadic body, as it unfolds its uniqueness while being fuelled, challenged or supported by other bodies that form assemblages. This works as a political metaphor on togetherness, solidarity and resistance. In this sense, the floor performance underlines the sociopolitical dimension of voguing, because it indicates that the body needs the other bodies in order to walk, to dance, to battle, to merely

80 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 150.

81 Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 124.

82 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 158.

83 Artaud, *To have done with the judgement of God*.

84 Braidotti, p. 124.

exist, to transform, to become, and to subvert.

Voguing is, above all, a social movement, a political statement, that is generated visually by an assemblage, a multiplicity of bodies. It stems from a collective need for expression, for protest, and for celebration. Even though it is possible for someone to practice on their own, at home, in front of a mirror, it is not the same, because voguing without the presence of other bodies that observe and participate is not really voguing. It is training and rehearsing; it is a very interesting and important thing in itself, but still it is not really voguing, as it lacks the encounter, the temporality, the tactile and affective relationship that develops on the floor. Voguing is largely based on ephemerality, on accidental body encounters and collisions, on improvisations and on performative trans-human communication. As a result, it needs a shared space / atmosphere in order to *be* voguing.

The spin and dip and the floor performance are the elements that highlight the importance of presence and skin-on-skin contact for the existence of voguing. They are also the elements that motivate non-biocentric posthuman becomings and can thus be read through abstract concepts of the Deleuzian / Guattarian thought. Having explored the individual and collective transformative possibilities of vogue femme, I will now attempt to briefly look into the anticapitalist dimension of this space and explore sweat as a marker of togetherness and collective becomings.

2.3 Capitalism, spasms and sweaty encounters | Against proper bodies

Throughout this thesis, the five vogue femme elements were analysed as ways of enabling the body to fragment, to *become*, and to transform itself in various ways. In order to carry out these fragmentations, *becomings* and transformations, the body adopts a variety of choreographic moves, including pops, splits, locks and, most frequently, spasms. Even though the latter does not have a distinct place in the voguing lingo and although it does not exist as a separate move (as do the pops and the locks in the old way, for example) or as an element in itself, the spasm is a visually captivating and recurring movement in battles and in solo performances.

Spasms can be spotted in every voguing style, carrying radically different visual characteristics. In the old way, the spasms are influenced by breakdance, locking, hip hop and African art, and they require a lot of upper body strength. In the new way, the spasms are concentrated mostly on the arms control and the hands performance, creating an illusion of fluidity and ethereality. In vogue femme, the

spasms seem to be aesthetically influenced by contemporary pop music videos, electronic dance and rave culture, hip hop and a reclaimed erotic femininity, often including a lot of twerking and splits while lying on the floor. There is a clear connection between the spasm aesthetics and the popular / mainstream / youth culture aesthetics of each (voguing) era. Even though voguing is part of an anti-normative counterculture, it is still influenced by the aesthetics of the pop / mainstream culture and, as I have already mentioned, it is largely based on appropriating and repurposing / subverting these characteristics. Besides, every voguing style is the product of its own era and was born as an amalgam of the queer movements' political characteristics and pop culture's elements. Hence, the visual aesthetics of the spasm in each voguing style are linked with the characteristics of the sociocultural conditions that gave birth (or contributed to the birth) of each said style.

In general, the spasm as a performative element is aesthetically captivating and awe-inspiring. There is something intrinsically archetypal, majestic, eerie and electric about a body that vibrates as if it was hit by lightning or as if it was plugged in a socket. It is liminal and uncertain, as the spectator does not really know what motivates the dancer to spasm. The dancer may resort to spasm because they are in trance, or because they have an excess of energy, or because they desire to indicate and to underline visually and performatively their process of *becoming-other*. In that case, the spasm is clear, both internalised and externalised, visible and comprehensible – even though it cannot always be decoded. The dancing body also spasms because of pain, as it reaches a threshold of sustainability. In that case, the spasm can be internalised but not externalised, quiet, invisible imperceptible to the spectator, but all the more loud, intense, uncontrollable and unbearable for the body.

Spasm as a movement and as a somatic condition has interesting political and philosophical connotations. In some of his latest works on semiocapitalism, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi links the spasm with the hectic speed of semiocapitalism, the inexorable exhaustion that it causes, and the depression that it leads to. Berardi defines the spasm as 'a sudden, abnormal, involuntary muscular contraction, or a series of alternating muscular contractions and relaxations. A spasm is also a sudden, brief spell of energy and an abnormal, painful intensification of the bodily nervous vibration'.⁸⁵ For Berardi, the spasm is a painful psychic and somatic experience. Inspired by Félix Guattari's *chaosmic spasm* – a concept that is only briefly introduced at the very end of his swansong, *Chaosmosis* – Berardi claims that the spasm is a 'panic response of the accelerated vibration of the organism' as well as the 'hyper-mobilization of desire submitted to the forces of economy'.⁸⁶

85 F. 'Bifo' Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*, Verso, 2015, p. 113.

86 Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*, p. 115.

In this semiocapitalist reading of the spasm, there is a strong connection between the psychic and somatic movement and their political / economic implications. As Berardi states:

The rhythm that financial capitalism is imposing on social life is a spasmogenic rhythm, a spasm that is not only exploiting the work of men and women, not only subjugating cognitive labour to the abstract acceleration of the info-machine, but is also destroying the singularity of language, preventing its creativity and sensibility.⁸⁷

The spasmogenic rhythm is deterritorialised, reterritorialised and, I would argue, queered and radicalised through dance expressions. Dance generates alternative aesthetic and affective experiences, as well as different experiences of rhythm, of space and time. The body's labour is not exploitative, but expressive and the body does not move around carrying enforced identities, but deconstructs them. In a talk cited by Melissa Blanco Borelli, Berardi claims there is an inherent precarisation in regards to the spasm, since it is a condition where 'the body is less able to live and breathe in harmony with other bodies'.⁸⁸ However, through dance the body is not only able to live and breathe with others, but also to create its own radical space and time where the harmonious coexistence is interrupted by creative, chaotic / chaotic, subversive collisions and withdrawals. There are constant shifts of energies that pave the way for posthuman affirmative actions.

In her work on choreographing the spasm, Blanco Borelli employs Berardi's work, in order to analyse spasmodic representations and choreographed undoings of masculinity in three music videos by the Talking Heads, Radiohead, and Atoms for Peace.⁸⁹ Her analysis focuses on the ways that the frontmen of these bands (David Byrne in the Talking Heads, Thom Yorke in the other two bands) dance, move, spasm and sweat while confronting and performing their own gender discomfort.⁹⁰ For Blanco Borelli, the bodies that spasm perform a heavy labour in order to redefine their pre-inscribed

87 'Bifo' Berardi, p. 116.

88 M. Blanco Borelli, 'A Dance between Chaos and Complexity: Choreographing the Spasm in Music Videos', in *The International Journal of Screendance*, Vol. 6 (2016), pp. 57-77. Full text available here: <https://screendancejournal.org/article/view/4994/4256#.XqbQ7GgzblU> (accessed 25 May 2020).

89 *Once in a Lifetime*, by the Talking Heads (1981), *Lotus Flower*, by Radiohead (2011), and *Ingenue*, by Atoms for Peace (2013).

90 Gender discomfort: not to be confused with gender dysphoria. I use this term to briefly illustrate Blanco Borelli's argument that, in these two cases, the frontmen / protagonists do not embody the (semio)capitalist heteronormative hegemonic masculine (proto)types, but rather they are *uncomfortable in their own skin* when it comes to embodying these precise roles.

symbolic role(s) as white masculine profit-makers within a (semio)capitalist context. They spasm awkwardly, as if their own bodies are about to dissolve, adopting machine-like dance movements and appearing dressed in costumes – an ironic subversion of corporate clothing in a capitalist context. I find Blanco Borelli's interpretation fascinating because she manages to analyse a very somatic and affective element of dance both in terms of visibility and aestheticisation and in terms of gender and political theory. Building on her arguments and in line with my project, I propose that the voguing bodies in spasm are undoing / deconstructing semiocapitalism as a majoritarian system, not only by rejecting it, but also by ironically appropriating and subverting its signs. This is a long and progressive process organically interwoven with the history of the ballroom.

This practice of appropriating and subverting semiocapitalist signs is visible as early as the 1980s. At the time, the voguers would use Vogue magazine to get inspiration for looks and poses, and they would refer to big fashion houses to name their own Houses. This was an active, political appropriation and repurposing of one of the most lucrative and exploitative capitalist industries, which, to this day is built on very sexist and capitalist standards. Also, especially in the case of haute couture, the fashion industry is an industry that promotes classism and elitism, since it has a very specific symbolic value and requires big cultural and monetary capital in order to be attained and decoded. At the time, this was also an industry almost exclusively dominated by white and cisgender bodies – models, designers, photographers, with only a few, yet significant, exceptions. The slender white cisgender female body was the core of the hegemonic narrative dictating what should count as *beautiful* and normatively acceptable, and there was little to no room for deviations from this norm.⁹¹ By claiming and using the symbols of this industry to create a counter-culture, a counter-narrative and heterotopias of subversion, the abject, marginalised, vulnerable and Othered Black and Latinx queer bodies, claim something that was always denied them. This appropriation serves the purposes of removing the fashion industry's aesthetic norms, rejecting its capitalist, classist, racist and heteronormative patriarchal connotations, and giving it a radically subversive meaning.

Furthermore, a general ballroom practice from the 1980s to this day, is having specific themes inspired by heteronormative capitalist cultures. There are walking categories such as *businessman* and *executive realness* for example, where the person who walks has to pass as a businessperson from Wall

91 This is an issue that often comes up in *Paris is Burning*, where some of the Black and Latinx trans women talk about the importance of *passing*, not only as cisgender but also as white. During an often quoted scene, Venus Xtravaganza, one of the interviewees at the documentary who was later murdered by a man, says that in her dreams she is a rich white girl and that is all she ever wanted. This scene is discussed a lot in Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, as well as bell hook's *Black Looks: Race and Representation* – the latter offers an interesting critique about racism and misogyny in regards to this scene.

Street. There are whole balls with themes like *Disney*, *popstar* and *gameboy*, where every category adheres to a subcategory related to the general theme and the participants are required to produce a certain look and a certain way of walking and voguing to fit in the subcategory theme. In these cases, the voguers take over the hegemonic understandings of each subcategory and interpret them aesthetically, performatively and creatively. As a result, they visualise these themes in ironic and spectacular ways, creating their very own personas with distinct – usually handmade – outfits, hair, and make-up and with a set of moves that amplify these radical subversions.

As I mentioned above, in her analysis, Blanco Borelli focuses on sweat as a visual aestheticisation of the labouring body. She proposes that Byrne and Yorke, two white male musicians have to be stripped of various symbolic roles imposed on the male body by neoliberal capitalism in order to embrace a state of chaos and become-other. Neither of them is a dancer per se, and neither of them embodies a conventionally *hegemonic* masculinity, following on R.W. Connell's typology.⁹² In the sticky atmosphere of the ballroom, this overstimulated labouring body that Blanco Borelli describes might not (usually) be that of a white (straight / masculine-looking) male; still, the voguing body is a body in labour that is trying to get rid of pre-inscribed identities and symbolic values and perform itself with pride and freedom. In both case studies – Blanco Borelli's and mine – the labour is quite literally a dance-off, a dance battle between the pre-inscribed role and the true expression of the self.

Even though my project differs a lot from Blanco Borelli's, her analysis deeply resonates with my research in many levels, especially in regards to her focus on sweat. As I pointed out at the beginning of this thesis, sweat is a fluidity that has been a crucial facilitator of immersion and trust while accessing the field and engaging with the research topic and with my sources. In my project, sweat is not only the visual proof of an intense somatic and spiritual process of immersion and *becoming*. It is also the fluid materiality that constructs or weaves this intimate bubble between the bodies that occupy the shared, heterotopic space of the session or the ballroom. It is the natural and universal element that speaks against proper bodies and rejects the domination of the clean and the spotless, the normatively beautiful and physically *perfect* that parade in the planes of neoliberal patriarchal (semio)capitalism.

In a queer sense, sweat is the subversive fluidity that enables messy take-overs, occupations and constructions of spaces and affective intimate sticky bubbles. It also marks the boundaries of these

92 In R.W. Connell's Gramscian typology, *hegemonic masculinity* is the normative (majoritarian, to speak of Deleuze) type of masculinity that is built on maintaining dominant roles, oppressing the Other, and perpetuating hierarchies. See R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, University of California Press, 2005.

bubbles and indicates that they can only be occupied by specific (sticky / sweaty / *becoming-other*) bodies. Thus, these heterotopic bubbles belong to these bodies only and can be decoded by them. In his work on soft and hard pollution, Michel Serres points out that, 'to make something its own, the body knows how to leave some personal stain [...] appropriation takes place through dirt', consequently the *becoming-other* bodies appropriate the space through sweat.⁹³ Intimacy and stickiness are generated whenever a body comes across, holds, uses, or consumes something that has been stained by someone else's bodily fluids. Sweat is the fluidity that marks the stickiness of the body-objects within the bubble, thus facilitating what Ahmed defines as 'the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near'.⁹⁴

The sticky ballroom, the sticky runway within the ballroom is not only a heterotopia, but also a *heterochrony*, a term defined by Foucault as 'slices in time [...] structured and distributed in a relatively complex fashion'.⁹⁵ In comparison to the outside of the bubble – i.e. the heteronormative capitalist society – this heterochrony offers a different conception of time; no longer linear and consequential, but cyclic, rhythmic and chaotic. Normative time is conceived in numeric relation to aging and to money-making, to how much profit is produced by the labouring bodies. On the contrary, the heterochronic time of the sticky runway does not age, it is merely rhythm and tempo, marked and motivated by desire and nomadism. The sweat here is not the result of a heavily labouring oppressed body, but the result of a desiring body, that is let loose to dance freely.

In this process, the concept of pain is also redefined. Of course the body is in pain; any dancer experiences pain and, as I already mentioned, the spasm is not only a dance move but also an involuntary muscle movement induced by heavy labour. But in this sticky process, the pain is not experienced as the agony of the oppressed suffering body. It is a pain generated by a liberated, nomadic body that has reached its threshold of sustainability and desires to move beyond. I would suggest that this is a pleasurable and ecstatic pain, quite similar to the kind of pain that Deleuze and Guattari explore and analyse in their works on the Body-without-Organs and the desiring machines. In this context, the sweat is an indication of this spasmodic and spasmogenic pain. The sweat is the result of a free body that experiences the pain of moving beyond, of moving without a telos, against the usual notions of space and against capitalist notions of time.

In this line of (nomadic and postanthropocentric) thought, the sweaty voguing body and the

93 M. Serres, *Malfesance. Appropriation through Pollution?*, Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 2-3.

94 Ahmed, *Happy Objects*, p. 30.

95 Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', pp. 6-7.

sticky ballroom atmosphere is presented as the radical Other of the majoritarian body of semicapitalism and the heteronormative capitalist outside. The majoritarian, proper body of semicapitalism must be clean, spotless, fully-able, and its pre-inscribed roles and fixed identities need to be visualised and performed in a crystal-clear fashion. On the contrary, the nomadic, minoritarian and post-anthropocentric body oozes fluids. Animals sweat, drool and piss everywhere; machines leak and leave oily imprints – perhaps cyborgs have wet dreams or shed 'tears in the rain' but we have yet to discover this. The facade of the semicapitalist profit-making space indicates a clean and clear, sterile, anosmic environment, where the proper bodies glide avoiding any skin-on-skin contact. On the contrary, the ballroom heterotopia is crowded, narrow, sticky, full of colours, noises and smells. Despite the literal lack of space, the bodies still move around the ballroom freely, colliding and brushing against each other. They desire to leave repeated impressions on skin, to be seen, to be heard, and they desire contact and touch.

In the heterotopic and heterochronic context of the ballroom, sweat marks the shared atmosphere and orients the bodies towards each other. With the repeated impressions of sweat, bodies and space become sticky – literally and metaphorically. Hence the methexis within this shared space is stronger, not only visually – *I see that we both sweat with this song, so we both feel something with it and there is something intimate between us* – but also affectively – *I feel your sweaty skin against my sweaty skin, we both 'contaminate' the space as we dance, so this is our space*. As I am writing these lines, I realise that, in a world *contaminated* by the COVID-19 pandemic, this need for sticky spaces, sweaty *contaminations*, and methexis through dance is redefined and underlined. It is indeed hard to imagine a social distancing ball, a battle without fluids, and stainless floor performances.⁹⁶

Additionally, sweat functions as a proof and as a reminder of presence. As we immerse into the dance, as we reach and – potentially – surpass our *thresholds of sustainability*, as we *become-other*, we might lose the conscious connections to our body and forget about our physical dimension. As my source M. described it – and as I quoted her earlier on this thesis – 'it's almost like a spiritual experience, because your body exists and you exist, but you're not really there'. In these moments when we forget that we are *really there* and we get lost in the moment, touching and feeling our own sweaty skin works as a reminder that, despite our best attempts to dissolve into thin air, we are still present.

96 However, in the 2015 film *The Lobster*, Yorgos Lanthimos and Efthymis Filippou imagined a *social distancing dance*. In the film, the Loners – who are not allowed to form relationships in a world where relationships are compulsory – are dancing in the forest, each of them on their own, keeping distance from the others and listening to electronic music through headphones. Their leader informs the newcomer Loner that 'we all dance by ourselves, that's why we only play electronic music'. The scene is available on YouTube, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6pquk1zWYc> (accessed 25 May 2020).

That moment, as we return to our sweaty, dehydrated, dancing bodies, we once again become aware of the methexis that we experienced, the entrancement, and the spasmogenic chaotic conclusion of the voguing ritual that took place before our eyes, with all our senses, in the heterochronic heterotopia of the runway, inside the sticky bubble of the ballroom.

Conclusion and further perspectives

Throughout this thesis, I approached and analysed the five elements of vogue femme through the lens of posthuman theory and affect theory, and following Deleuzian / Guattarian concepts. Adopting a post-anthropocentric and nomadic point of view, I proposed different minoritarian *becomings* for each one of the elements. Thus I explored the tactile and ritualistic aspect of the hands performance, the possibilities of becoming-animal and becoming-child through the duckwalk, as well as the characteristics of becoming-woman and becoming-pussy with the catwalk. Further, I looked at the spins and dips as facilitators of becoming-cyborg and becoming-electric, and the floor performance as an initiator of a becoming-Body without Organs process.

Apart from this theoretical reading of the five elements, I also explored voguing as a ritual, as a heterotopia / heterochrony, and as a political anti-normative social movement. In this sense, voguing was approached as a way of ironically appropriating and subverting semiocapitalist tropes. The effects of stickiness and the various connotations of sweat as a visual indicator of intense somatic labour and as a liquid facilitator of intimacy also came to the surface. Throughout my exploration(s), I frequently drew on my sources within the voguing community. They told me their stories, I watched them dance and sometimes danced (and sweated) with them. These experiences helped me to become immersed in, and navigate, the field, and to consider vogue femme and voguing in general from different angles.

Browsing the material I have gathered in the course of this project, and putting together recurring patterns and questions that frequently came up during the interview process, I can see a variety of different research questions, different projects and theses potentially arising. I could have approached my initial topic from a different theoretical angle, focusing more on a post-structuralist, linguistic and philosophical level, and basing my literature on Jacques Derrida's *différance* and Judith Butler's gender performativity theory. An exploration of the Derridian theory of hospitality would have been possible and I could have reflected more on my position as a researcher / *guest* on the field or as someone who wishes to remain closely attached to the field for a longer period of time. I could have linked this reading with a postcolonial approach, basing my research on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's works on the *subaltern*. Alternatively, I could have insisted on a (even more) phenomenological approach and I could have analysed experiences of tactility and the body's *becomings* through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's works on the senses. All these possibilities point towards the same direction: that research on voguing and ball culture in general offers a wide field for experimentation and can be

approached with various theoretical tools.

Even though I did not have as much time as I would have liked due to the unexpected conditions that the COVID-19 outbreak imposed, doing fieldwork was an eye-opening experience. From the beginning, my goal was to not have a specific time-frame for data gathering and to remain in the field throughout the writing process, by attending classes and sessions, going to balls, watching videos and talking to people. The aim was to methodologically approach this thesis as a work-in-progress, to keep gathering material, notes, and information. In regards to motivation, my body served as an invaluable instrument that enabled me to dance my way into the field, to connect with my sources on a deeper, meaningful level, and to embrace my material and the topic itself. My body has been both reliable and unpredictable; it surprised me positively, lacking inhibitions in regards to presenting and dancing myself into the field, and negatively, with its physical limitations and inability to perform the elements as well as I would have wanted.

As the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, my whole research and writing process changed. Sessions and balls were cancelled, things got pushed, and I could no longer access the field physically, because there was no field to access. Also, the communication with a lot of my sources – as well as ball-going friends and acquaintances – was reduced and some interviews I had planned fell through. I did not want to reschedule through Facebook Messenger or Zoom, because I was worried I would lose the stickiness, the intimacy, the sense of direct contact with my interviewees. Apart from this, I started feeling detached and demotivated, as I was unable to explore the topic with my body. Dancing on my own was nothing more than trying out poses in front of a mirror and sweating on my own felt like a simple workout. At that point, it became apparent that, without a shared physical space, without a sticky atmosphere, and without other bodies to connect with, voguing – as I have come to understand it – hardly exists. As a transformative, political and radically subversive form of expression, voguing needs a ballroom and bodies on bodies, skin on skin, electric feels and sweat: a shared heterotopia.

At that point, the decision to start drawing the elements really helped me to re-align with my topic and involve my whole body in the writing process. Since I was not familiar with this form of expression, trying to put the poses into sketches offered a great deal of experimentation and physical struggle. Lacking technical skill, I had to repeat each drawing again and again. Every time I completed a drawing, I became aware of some very obvious errors, such as palms with nails or weirdly long bodies that made no sense. I would then put on a vogue femme beat, stand in front of the mirror, replicate the pose and *hold it* until I could figure out how to translate it into a sketch. These moments,

where the method of drawing forced me to reconsider poses I thought I knew, ended up being crucial in my motivation to write. Even though I was isolated and far from the runway, my body was once again present, aware and active.

Finally, the sociality and togetherness of voguing also reflects in this dance's visual aspect. In contrast to other forms of dance which, in spite of the COVID-19 outbreak, the lockdowns and the quarantines, currently flourish on social media and via Zoom classes, it seems that balls could not really take place in the cybersphere. Of course there are voguers who do Zoom sessions, solo performances and choreographies, but this is something crucially different. My position is that voguing as a competition and especially in terms of the one-on-one battle cannot take place in the digital world and through distancing, because it loses its stickiness as well as its political character as a civil rights movement.

As I have argued throughout this thesis, voguing is inextricably intertwined with the sociality and togetherness of the ballroom, the feeling of skin against skin, the battle, the audience, the judges, its ritualistic characteristics. In order to exist, it needs a commentator to open up the runway, to announce the category, to ask if anybody is walking. It also requires a series of present bodies, willing to immerse, to become entranced, to sweat and to spasm, to bump against each other, to share their bubble. And, once the ritual concludes, once the commentator calls it, these bodies will need to return to their physical dimension and leave their intimate bubble. The doors will need to open, and the bodies will move to the outside, fill their lungs with cool, fresh air. The heterotopia will dissolve, only to be rebuilt the next time the commentator announces the category and asks if 'anybody's walking'.

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