

# On the Aesthetics of Self-Representation: Mustached “Female” Youth on Flickr.com

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## 1 Introduction: Youth Culture & Web 2.0

In what follows, an attempt will be undertaken to shed light on a phenomenon that appears within the contents of the Web 2.0 platform Flickr.com that takes as its starting point the medium of the music video clip as “shifting image” (Richard 2003): the image of the woman with a mustache. If the mustache is staged plausibly enough, this image functions as a “gender bender,” but the credibility of the performance can also have both intentionally and unintentionally humorous associations.

Before this particular phenomenon can be delved into, a brief overview of the changes that Web 2.0 has effected on young people should first be given. For many young people, Web 2.0 has taken over the function of an examination of their environment, of questions of worldview, of fashion, love, sexuality, violence and death, where positions are relative and a reaction is called for. Here not every ironic twist is discussed, ironically acted, always appropriately classified, satirized or simply just hated (Richard, Recht, Grünwald and Metz 2010).

In addition to the classic “real existing” locations of youth interaction, the internet in particular, in its form as “Social Web 2.0,” presents itself as a space that, if nothing else, is oriented towards youth culture. In a different form, the idea of the “Street Corner Society” (Whyte 1996) can be transferred to Web 2.0 and its communities. In 1943, the term “Street Corner Society” was coined in the course of the Chicago School’s groundbreaking gang study, and it has profoundly influenced the subsequent historical research on youth culture. Whyte’s observation that street corners constituted congregation and meeting places for young people from marginalized social milieus due to the lack of alternatives would later be addressed by British cultural studies in the course of subsequent youth studies. The lack of representation spaces is perpetuated with the internet in the age of Web 2.0, with seemingly unlimited space at its disposal, which, given the media literacy of young people, is easy to conquer. At the same time, the virtual network is comparable in quality to the original street corner, because Web 2.0 guarantees visibility and, as a place for two-way and multi-pronged interaction, offers the potential to be a provocation space, as will also be seen

in the selected examples of young women with mustaches. Web 2.0 has become a new form of the virtual street corner, ensuring visibility as a meeting place for young people from marginalized social milieus or from parts of the society which have no other alternative places in “real life” (Richard, Recht, Grünwald and Metz 2010: 13). Photos shot with mobile phone cameras, webcams or with professional cameras become a stumbling block to the media. Thus, self-expression, as will be shown below using the images of women with mustaches, can exhibit exploratory traits, not least by playing with gender identities.

In addition to the level of showing oneself and being seen, the photographs take on yet another function: they become, as it will be argued, a virtual mirror instance, which allows, in contrast to the “analog street corners” of the previous generations, even the spectators to have their own self-representation which itself is assessed (through the distance granted by the medium). This procedural ambivalence has been overlooked by the previous research, in which the representation of the other has always been assumed. At the center of such a presentation is the *ego shot*, the kind of photograph in which young people capture themselves as participants in youth cultural styles.

For the young generation, media poses are natural and commonplace. Their behavior before the camera is professional and trained. The reference to previous formats is central: such precursor images originate from pop culture media and are moreover peer images. Thus synthetic image hybrids take shape out of *me* and *I* – new forms that are not comparable to “classic” images. A very common type is the so-called *mirror shot*, in which the people photograph themselves in the mirror. This category is distinguished from the aesthetic known as the *one arm length shot*, in which the subject photographs him- or herself with a reversed camera held at arm’s length. In contrast, in the mirror shot, the individual person, the visible camera and possibly a visible flash are all a part of the picture.

This youth self-presentation is reflected in a *media ego*, following its own image socialization. This can be a star double (Ullrich 2002), but in any case, an image product arises that serves the requirements of media formats and, within this framework, seeks an individual access. The *media ego* in the image always moves in predetermined categories. This is complemented by an expanded “masquerade” idea (Weissberg 1994), which applies not only to the depiction of gender relations but also to the self-presentation of young people on the internet, to refute the ideology of an “authentic” youthful appearance in images as natural or genuine. The images in general are not about the “illustration” of an authentic social reality, allowing direct inferences on the life of young people to be drawn.

## 2 The female mustache as “shifting image”

At this point one of the phenomena of Web 2.0 on the Flickr photo platform will be examined from the gender aspect: the representation of “mustached” femininity by youthful females. This phenomenon, based on me-

dia precursor images, is thus part of a mimetic self-representation; Web 2.0 serves here in any case as a mirror instance.

Prior to this, the term "Queer Theory" has to be specified, which was first coined in 1991 by Teresa de Lauretis (1991) as a way to transcend identity politics and categorical restrictions. The groundwork was set up for example by Judith Butler (1990), however, who showed both terms "gender" and "sex" to be socially and culturally constructed. Butler offers a critique of both terms, even as they have been used by feminists. Butler argued that feminism made a mistake in trying to make "women" a discrete, ahistorical group with common characteristics. She believes this approach reinforces the binary view of gender relations because it allows for two distinct categories: men and women.

The concept of Queer Theory was heavily influenced by the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), Judith Halberstam (1998) and Michel Foucault (1978). Later it was established in the U. S. as a term for political activism (for instance as Queer Politics) and a mindset (as Queer Theory and Queer Studies). Queer works with the politics of visibility, with the critique of heteronormativity and heterosexual bisexuality as the norm, as well as criticism of all gay and lesbian identity models. Queer Theory emphasizes several sexes, the notion that gender can be divided not only into men and women, girls and boys. The novelty of Queer Studies is a comprehensive critique of heteronormativity and the emphasis that there are people who are not just dividable into the strict categories of man or woman: intersexuality, transsexuality, cross-dressing, transgender, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery, etc. By demonstrating the impossibility of any "natural" sexuality, Queer Studies calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as "man" and "woman."

The queer image of the bearded woman possesses a certain history. José Ribera's painting from 1631, titled "Magdalena Ventura," (figure 1) should be considered the "queerest" example from art history. Magdalena is defined as a woman by her bare female breast, her child in her arms and her clothing, but she wears a long and thick beard. Another example of a bearded woman is Marcel Duchamp's Ready-Made with the title "LHOOQ" from 1919. It shows Mona Lisa with a mustache and goatee. The title is pronounced in French as "Elle a chaud au cul" and means something like "she has a hot ass." As part of this sexualized alienation of arguably the most famous painting through the appended text, the woman takes on a humorous aspect, which can also be found later on the photo platform Flickr. Another painting depicting a woman with a beard is Frida Kahlo's portrait "Autorretrato con Collar de Espinas y Colibrí". Unlike with Duchamp, however, a humorous intention of the artist is not intended in this work.

A continuation of this "pop image" can be found in professional music videos. A key example is the music video "Rainbow Warrior" by Coco Rosie; in this video, Bianca Casady dons a painted-on mustache. Another "biologically" female musician who wears a conspicuous mustache is JD Samson from Le Tigre, who ensures visual deviance in her videos with her tousled, characteristically male hair. JD Samson also has bushy eyebrows,

*Figure 1: Jusepe de Ribera: Magdalena Ventura with Her Husband & Son, 1631*



which is typically gendered masculine in our culture. As the final example, the singer known as Peaches must be singled out, who posed for her album “Fatherfucker” with another kind of beard. It should be emphasized at this point that the nature of the facial hair in each of the three examples is very different: for Peaches, it is a glued-on classic Dutch chin beard that Abraham Lincoln also wore, which in combination with her glued-on eyelashes and a typically feminine top with spaghetti straps appears rather “queer.” The other examples differ even more: JD Samson’s mustache is genuine, however, and in conjunction with male-connoted clothes, produces an unflamboyant image of masculinity. The same applies to the painted-on mustache of the singer CocoRosie, which, in combination with the classically male uniform, produces a playful but authentic-looking image of masculinity.

### 3 Female mustaches on Flickr

This study has its origins in a quantitative analysis of the tag combination “girl” and “mustache,” which resulted in 6,840 hits (as of 28 April 2011), and because of its quantity, what follows provides the basis for an investigation into images of women with mustaches and results in three categories of beard-usage. A prerequisite in the research and the subsequent

investigation is the analysis of the "pure visual," excluding the accompanying text, such as the comments of other users, which would clarify what the image was intended to mean or from what situation it has emerged.

## Mustached women remaining women

There are many possibilities for staging mustached femininity on Flickr. One can also find a few variants of "portable mustaches," such as those painted on the finger, as with "Jay Wolf" and her photo "Mustache Girl," or the in form of letters spelling out the word "mustache" on the finger placed above the upper lip, as in the image "Mustache" posted by "the robots revenge."

*Figure 2: topupthetea: non pas!*



Let us therefore consider a representative photograph by the author "topupthetea" which bears the title "non pas!": The image is, first of all, a self-portrait of the photographer in landscape format, taken possibly by her own hand from an elevated angle. The cropping shows her face from the middle of the forehead to the chin. Due to the low depth of field (on closer examination, digitally generated using a filter), only a small portion of her nose is truly sharp; due to the camera angle, her visible uncovered shoulders melt into the background blur. The coloring of the image includes dark reddish-brown tones that harmonize well with her curly red-hair. The pictured Flickr user has plucked eyebrows, the viewer can see green eyes with large pupils in the middle; her face has light freckles. Her eyelashes are blackened with mascara and her eyes are framed by a discreet eye liner. On the slightly parted lips, behind which one can see a glimpse of her teeth, a subtle red lip gloss is applied. Last but not least, on her upper lip, a thin handlebar mustache drawn with kohl can be seen, which seems at first glance to cause a disruption in the construction of femininity.

The representation of femininity within the described photograph involves a classic-romantic to sensual staging. The romantic is constructed by the dark brown tones of the photograph, as well as by the cliché of the red-haired women – particularly if she is depicted out of focus to such a large degree – as a symbol for rustic naturalness. The sexualization is produced by the presentation with slightly parted lips, and especially by the large pupils, which are dilated in a state of excitement but at the same time look challenging. Furthermore, her direct glance at the observer destroys any possibility of a voyeuristic gaze, because the viewer is in this case caught in her vision (see the chapter on “Gaze” in Recht 2011). The romantic and sensual elements of the photo are classically feminine; an erotic charge is generated through the direct eye contact with the subject captured at a high camera angle. The mustache functions more like a “comical” element, because, as can be seen at first glance, it is only painted on and does not by any means effect a deconstruction of gender. The remainder of the subject, the image genre, clothing and makeup are too feminine for it. The binary gender matrix is not disrupted by such an image.

With many female members of Flickr, facial hair often functions in a similar way, emphasizing the female performance all the more as a point of contrast, so that it functions in the sense of a gender bender.

## Fun enactments of mustached masculinity

It should not be neglected at this point that the representations of mustached femininity on Flickr take many forms, some of which are humorous representations of an event requiring a costume. One such example is the image bearing the title “the real janelle,” (fig. 3) which shows two women with rather imprecisely glued mustaches as part of a playful American “police detective” costume. Both are wearing sunglasses and neckties which seem to have designs originating from the 1970s; the tie on the woman to the left is so wide as to support this time period. The allusion to this era in conjunction with the visual genre of the U. S. police detective seems to make mustaches indispensable to such a masculine form. As in the history of the military (Corson 2001 and Severn 1971), mustaches were not as legally regulated with the police, but seem to follow a stylistic requirement as an element of a masculine performance.

The woman on the left is wearing a kind of weapon holster around her shoulders, which emphasizes her female form slightly underneath her rugged khaki shirt. While the woman on the left is in a speaking pose with her mouth open, her upper teeth bared, she smiles self-assuredly at the camera. The woman on the right is holding a beer can in her hand and wears eye liner behind her slightly transparent glasses.

This photo seems to be a fun party performance of uniformed masculinity. Unlike the previously discussed photographs, the “biological” femininity of the subjects is not stressed directly, but there is a convincing presentation of masculinity – rather more playful and humorous.

*Figure 3: the real janelle*



### **Becoming mustached men**

While a feminine appearance is still in the foreground in the previously discussed category, the women of the final category are presenting themselves as men in a convincing way and thus deconstruct their assigned gender.

*Figure 4: ksen: drag - pleased*



As one such example, the photo by “ksen” with the title “drag: pleased” can be presented: the self portrait is once again photographed at a high angle, as it is a “one arm length shot.” The head is turned away from the body towards the camera. The nearly square photograph is cropped from the forehead to the upper fifth of the torso. Initially, the big brown eyes that are looking directly into the lens stand out. The pupils are directed to the recipient as well. Through the use of flash, the image lacks depth perspective, and the face casts small, harsh shadows on the white unpressed collar protruding from the round neck of the black sweater. She has neck-length, intensely black layered hair and, last but not least, a little short mustache, which runs with a slight curve only to the corners of the mouth and has a central gap at the middle of the upper lip. Up to there, this is a successful boyish presentation. There are no recognizable feminine body forms, no make-up around the eyes or on the rest of the face. Even the eyebrows, by their enormous thickness and size, function as classically male. Then there is the facial expression, which lies between seriousness and expressionlessness and therefore can also be read as “gendered” classically male (Mühlen Achs 1998: 80). The only irritating point, in the truest sense of the word, is the nose piercing visible in the picture: a pinpoint-sized silver stud that in our society – particularly if it is a stud and not a ring – is typically considered feminine. The author is not aware of this, as is evident from the discussion within the Flickr commentary, but it only actuates the ambiguity that a truly interesting photograph is able produce and makes the subject into a “drag king,” as the title of the photo already indicates. This is the disruption that “Gender Trouble” (Butler 1990) produced and with that a deconstruction through the confusion of gender can be triggered.

#### **4 Conclusion: three perspectives on mustaches/ three feminisms**

The woman with facial hair permeates the so-called “shifting image” of classical art, “professionally”-produced music video and finally the Web 2.0 platform. The three main types of productions on Flickr in which women are staged with a mustache are also applicable to the representation of mustached femininity and can be interpreted from three different feminist perspectives. The question that now arises is what these three different mechanisms bring about and to what respect this promotes “equality.”

The use of the mustache in all categories forms a parallel to the different interpretations of feminist practice in the late 1970s and 80s, which is known as “power dressing.” At that time, businesswomen in particular wore masculine suits that, with the help of shoulder pads, attempted to imitate an even more “masculine figure” and simultaneously conveyed the feeling that a woman could be whatever she wants to be. This image



was quickly put into perspective through the elaboration of diffuse power structures, which society imposes as gender mechanisms (Bordo 1993). Furthermore, the strategy of power dressing as a mimicry of the male form was put in a negative light particularly by third-wave feminism: women should rather imbue feminine attributes with "positive qualities" instead of blindly imitating the masculine characteristics of success or power. In the case of power dressing or the use of a mustache, the feminist subject proves itself to be discursively constituted by the very political system that makes its emancipation possible.

Especially with regard to the *first* group presented here, the bearded woman remaining a woman can be interpreted in a similar way: These women adopt the symbol of the mustache, but without taking on the associated symbolism of, for example, power, wisdom, potency, etc.; they remain, all in all, typically female. This can also be linked to the form of the mustache, as the thin, dainty French mustache fits a classic dreamy female gender performance and is anything but a potent symbol of male power.

All the more it seems surprising that the strategy of the *second* group, which uses the beard for humorous purposes, can be seen as following a feminist agenda. They follow, of course maybe without knowing it, the example of the American feminist B. Ruby Rich, who supported the female use of comedy as a powerful political weapon with a "revolutionary potential as a deflator of the patriarchal order and an extraordinary leveller" (Rich 1998: 77). It was time for the power of female laughter, which questions the symbolic and political systems that keep the woman in her classical place. To use Luce Irigaray's words: "Isn't laughter the first form of liberation from a secular oppression? Isn't the phallic tantamount to the seriousness of meaning? Perhaps woman, and the sexual relation, transcend it 'first' in laughter?" (Irigaray 1985: 163). In this form of fun staging, the mechanisms of power are brought together with a masculine presentation and adopted as a political weapon. Here also the distinction between pastiche within the first category and parody with the second group is made clear. While the first group can be seen as the imitation of a neutral practice of mimicry without laughter, the second group, with its satirical and humorous elements, stands for parody (Jameson 1998: 114).

The *third* group is a more serious presentation of masculinity, providing the viewer with a paroxysm that brings the gender-binary system to collapse, thereby creating "Gender Trouble." This is mainly due to the fact that gender is no longer identifiable in these cases because of the mustache. The question of the actual gender of the mustache wearer has already been dealt with in the section on of the third category, and points to the difference between the three distinct types of bearded representation: While the first category takes up *gender* as an issue, and the second already partially deconstructs the same, but it is in the third that *sex* undergoes a deconstruction. Following Foucault's model of emancipatory sexual politics, the overthrow of the category of biological sex brings with it the liberation of a primary sexual diversity (Foucault 1977), which is also found in the third category described here. It makes no difference whether it is a woman who

gives such a convincing male performance, or whether the “true gender” is no longer recognizable. The fact that one such form of travesty imitates gender identity implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender identity itself. This means that gender and sexual identity are de-naturalized by the performance.

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## Illustration sources

Figure 1: Jusepe de Ribera: Magdalena Ventura with Her Husband & Son, 1631. Online: <http://www.kunstgeschichte.uni-mainz.de/1025.php>

Figure 2: topupthetea: non pas! Online: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/topupthetea/388467313/>

Figure 3: the real Janelle. Online: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/janelle/76457186/>

Figure 4: ksen: drag – pleased. Online: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/the-skyeisfalling/150210699/>