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Body, Fashion and Transgression – The Aftermath of Creative Performance

Abstract:

Creativity is seen as the driving force of human evolution. An interpretation which will be expanded upon in this paper is that of creativity as an instrument in the emancipation of women. The aim of this article is to expose and analyze the ways in which apparel may be instrumented in the construction of a new identity geared towards a contesting feminist goal. This approach is of interest considering the social pressure women face with the aim of having them conform to pre-established social norms and roles. In spite of this, contemporary society is witness to individuals' tendencies to renew or reinvent themselves in light of ever-changing social values. Nowadays, identity becomes a construct which depends on the way in which individuals define, perceive and interpret themselves and how they present themselves to others; while the adoption of a certain style of apparel is a social action which can attempt to espouse a symbolic resistance to the dominant social order as an expression of democratic sentiment. This research deals with the various aspects of identity construction, emphasizing the role of choice of apparel in the expression and support of feminist values. The case of Madonna and a few contemporary feminist groups, such as the punk group Pussy Riot, which made itself (in)famous through several performances which engaged in a public criticism of the objectification of the female body, serve as our main research subjects. An analysis of signs present in apparel points to and challenges women's submission to the cultural standard. To this purpose, the artists use apparel as a way of expressing ideas. The results of this study can serve in explaining the transformations observed in present-day urban fashion and also point to the reinvigoration of feminism in the younger generations.

Keywords: identity, creativity, feminism, performance, fashion.

Introduction

In post-modernity, political regimes are challenged by the regimes of image (Bertini 2014). The stake of this opposition is the very statute of postmodern political action. The place of protest is no longer the physical location of the action but the image, which represents the substance, the material and symbolic reality of the confrontation. The image

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embodies a reality which it creates on the same occasion, when it becomes performance, or in other words, it creates what it shows the moment it shows it (Bertini 2014, 31). Even if image alone is not capable of sparking a revolution, it can easily serve as a tool in peaceful, symbolic protests.

This is the very strategy of the feminist group Pussy Riot, which has gained worldwide attention after it organized unannounced and provocative performances aimed at the authorities, who did not delay in responding, thereby showing the limits of free speech in Russia. The choice for this particular research subject was influenced by the world-wide interest that Putin's Russia sparks, given how it is a source of disagreement and uneasiness for western states and especially for its neighbours. Hence, through spectacular appearances, the image that the feminist group managed to create is one which has the potential to elicit violent reactions from the authorities. On this occasion, the feminist group managed to discredit political power while also setting the agenda for national and international mass-media. This performative image fulfills what it illustrates, a discrediting of male domination.

Another reason for this choice of subject is that it illustrates a practical example of what Anne Harris (2014) calls a *creative turn*. In other words, the move from a type of performative creativity, inseparably connected to corporal performance towards virtual creativity. Starting from Judith Butler's (1990) interpretation of performativity as a repetitive act which is constitutive to the proliferation of gender and sexual identity, Harris defines creativity as "similarly irreducible to a single identity or fixed person, but rather becomes exemplary of a series of acts, performed in both embodied and disembodied ways, which eventually lead to thoughts, values and ritual practices culturally constituted as 'creativity'. This set of meanings is changing and in this book is identified as a creative turn" (Anne Harris 2014, 4). Therefore, the notion of *creative turn* illustrates the fusion between a physical (embodied) space and a digital (disembodied) space in rituals and the construction of identity. In the case of the actions organized by Pussy Riot, the group's site, *LiveJournal*, played a key part in obtaining international recognition and success. First of all, this is due to the fact that the digital space of expression and action of the group, extended through repeated uploads on YouTube, served as support for preparing and announcing the performance which took place in the Cathedral of Jesus Christ the Savior in Moscow, but also for explaining the intentions of the group, which were otherwise hard to infer and easy to misinterpret. Secondly, but no less important than the preparation and announcement phase, by acting in the virtual space, the group can prove the meticulousness of their prepared action as well as the reactions aroused from those who witnessed the enactment of the performance proper. Therefore, the ingenious conjugation of the embodied and digital actions aided the feminist group in escaping the invisibility of marginal actions and, by blatantly opposing Russian authorities, to break past borders, overcoming an otherwise difficult set-back.

One must mention the fact that these feminists are part of what is known in the literature as well as amongst the militant wings as Third Wave feminism, which has ap-

peared at the beginning of the 1990's, aiming to overthrow the patriarchal order and espousing a critique of neoliberal globalization which also lends certain paradigms to radical democracy¹ (Froidevaux-Metterie 2015, 219) Therefore, these feminists mobilize specific repertoires of action, counting on either militant humor or a spectacular *coup de théâtre*. This type of feminism, as one can ascertain from the feminists who make up Pussy Riot, integrates in their modus operandi the Internet and access to information and communication technology in order to make themselves heard throughout the world. 21st-century feminism must be regarded in the terms of an *identity confusion* which requires noticing the myriad of forms of discrimination that women are subjected to.² (Froidevaux-Metterie 2015, 245). These militants tend to join light, horizontal organizations; leading to the revaluation of "street feminism", which distinguishes itself from "chair feminism" especially through its preferred course of action³ (Lamoureux 2006). In light of the above, this paper aims at refining the understanding of third-wave feminism through a clear-cut and pertinent example offered by the Russian punk group Pussy Riot, who aims its critique at political and religious leaders, counting on women's capacity to act and react against the patriarchal order – a phenomenon known in the literature on feminism as *female empowerment*. This example also reminds of Riot Grrrls, another punk feminist group from America which at the beginnings of the Third Wave found itself revolting against the sexism and androcentrism of the North-American Punk-Rock scene by organizing an underground feminist musical movement. Moreover, this study aims to support more optimistic interpretations of the democratic potential of the Internet, as demonstrated in the case of Pussy Riot.

Many postmodern theories place media culture at the privileged center of identity implosion and fragmentation. Fashion proves to be a domain of imagination and creativity where anyone can construct the image they desire. In this context, searching for identity in physical appearance leads to the emergence of malleable identities, under the influence of new forces, models and styles. Postmodern identities are little more than a game, a pose, a guise which one can easily discard in favor of a new appearance or look, identities which are abandoned when they are all used up, easily replaceable and fitting for the postmodern carnival (Kellner 2001, 307).

Judith Butler (1989) argues that gender does not exist prior to its cultural and social performance. Therefore, communication and gender build themselves reciprocally, they articulate and correlate themselves within the boundaries of a *communicational gender contract* (Bertini 2006). Gender performativity implies its reproduction but also some discrepancies and transgression. The latter is the subject of special attention, as it demonstrates the role played by the media as an arena of debate and undermines hegemonic social norms (Julliard 2012).

In this sense, the example provided by Madonna is emblematic for media culture as the pop star proves, through personal example, that identity is a construct, that it can be in continual change, updated through personal will to changing times. Therefore,

Madonna's message regarding the use of apparel and sexuality with the aim of redefining identity sets the stage for later performative parades, put into practice by feminists such as those from Pussy Riot or Femen, as movements which establish and prove the power of *performative images*, as forms of postmodern action put into practice through the use of image (Biscarrat *et al.* 2014). Therefore, Madonna's relevance to this subject is that she has created a precedent in "media culture" (Kellner 2001) through her critique of the social construction of gender (Schwichtenberg 2009), which combines music, apparel, performance and also the use of religious symbols. Madonna's bottom-line message concerning the use of fashion and sexuality is that you can do and say whatever you want, you can be anything you want and the construction of an individual's identity begins with his choice in apparel, with his *image* (Kellner 2001, 335). Even if Russian feminists, as other women of their generation, have had the model of Madonna during their formative years, one cannot assume a direct influence of that model on their actions as a protest group as long as Pussy Riot themselves do not confirm such a hypothesis. Conversely, one can take notice of the support that the group has garnered from Madonna during the trial as well as after their release from prison. During a concert in Moscow, the pop star pleads for the release of the women who were awaiting judgment: *"I know there are many sides to every story, and I mean no disrespect to the Church or the government. But I think that these three girls - Masha, Katya, Nadya - I think that they have done something courageous. I think they have paid the price for this act. And I pray for their freedom."*⁴ Following this introduction, the singer shows up on stage wearing a balaclava and bra while the group's name was written on her back. Moreover, in interviews offered on this subject, Madonna identifies with the group with regard to the "delicate" relations she has had with the Church over time: *"Yes, I have also upset the Church many times", "Several times they wanted to excommunicate me from the Catholic Church. Yes, I didn't end up in prison for this, but that is because I live in a free country and not in Russia."*⁵ The difference between her and Pussy Riot being, as Madonna has put it, the type of regime in place in the country in which they chose to protest. Following their release, Madonna continued to support and promote the two members of the group which served time by inviting them at Amnesty International's New York concert, something which has upset the other members of the group, who see this as a sidetracking from their original cause.⁶

The choice is therefore made to discuss this performative communication device put into play by the feminist group Pussy Riot in the manner in which it was thought out and presented by them to the public. Therefore, this analysis will comprise the following dimension: 1) performance action which is rehearsed, directed, filmed and disseminated on the Internet with the goal of rendering their intentions and future actions intelligible by all; 2) the performance proper, which took place in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, which was interrupted by security personnel but was recorded and posted on YouTube; 3) the methods of constructing transnational media reception (which imply the reception of the performance in mass-media, mobilizing international supporters and polarizing the Russian public which took to the streets).

Methodological and conceptual considerations

Polly McMichael (2013) sees this performance as a product specifically designed to be disseminated over the Internet. Hence the performance in the cathedral is continued online (McMichael 2013, 110). For this reason, the current essay focuses on this specific performance of Pussy Riot, available in video form on YouTube.⁷ However, aside from the original performance, the group's members uploaded both in their *LiveJournal*⁸ as well as on YouTube a video in which the message of their performance as well as the lyrics of their song is much more apparent. The performance therefore becomes, in the virtual space, accessible to the national and international public in several versions which complement each other, with the purpose of clearly illustrating the feminists' intentions. This *creative turn*, as Anne Harris (2014) calls it, which reunites a physical, embodied performance, accessible only to a small number of people, and a virtual performance, one which is unstoppable and unchangeable by the intervention of security personnel guarantees the transmission of an unadulterated message to the international public. In this fashion, anyone who is interested in the group's action and decides to not limit themselves to the media's interpretation, regardless of where they reside in the world, can access Pussy Riot's performance and can express their support, approval or disapproval as well as their ideas and feelings regarding their actions. This extension of the cathedral performance through uploads on the group's *LiveJournal* as well as *YouTube* proves its ingenuity and power in the ability to mobilize supporters from beyond Russia's borders. Fundamentally, this case is but one example of a new stage of democratization of contemporary societies enabled by access to the Internet. In a broad sense, democratization represents the gradual process whose result is a democratic regime. The term references on the one hand an expansion of voting rights and on the other the strengthening of pluralism and fundamental rights – among which the freedom of thought and expression. Therefore, the process of democratization is inseparable from the existence of a public space which allows for deliberation and the development of an outlook which draws a parallel between the community and citizenship, which fortifies the Rule of Law⁹. In the present case, the meaning of democratization which is most relevant is the process of transformation from a form of authoritarianism to democracy, either through a more or less deliberate democratization of the regime *en place* – as is the case in the present situation – or through regime change.¹⁰ It is a process of democratization which is independent of the decisions of a certain state and which offers a small group of citizens the possibility to oppose an oppressive, authoritarian regime.

In light of the above, the focus of this paper shall be on the second version of the performance, with the aim of discovering to what extent the cathedral performance was a successful one. While the first version is untouched by montage and emphasized the idea of a live transmission, the second version is an edited montage of two separate recordings, one on the 19th of February 2012 at the Bogojavlensky Cathedral followed by the group's notorious performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior on

the 21st of February 2012. The assumption on which this analysis is based is that in the case of the controversial action, the musical performance, or rather, the discursive performance, tends to take a backseat to the *corporal performance* (McKenzie 2001, 19). In order to better illustrate this, an analysis of both levels will be presented.

Herbert Blau (1983) claims that nothing is more encoded than the body (Blau 1983, 458), and this is due to the fact that corporal performance is doubly encoded (Auslander 1997, 90), on the one hand by the codes of a certain performance and on the other by the social discourse that norms it. Hence, in the case of the cathedral performance, one distinguishes two axis on the corporal level; firstly, one notices the special attention that Pussy Riot gives to its choice of apparel and secondly, one remarks the meaning-bearing corporal expressivity of the protesters. With regard to the apparel, it is a transposition of the group's name into its choice of clothing. The colorful balaclavas serve both as a means of concealing identity and as an expression of their refusal to permit their image to be exploited as a marketing tool.¹¹ This piece of apparel references both police forces and criminals who may wear black balaclavas, implicitly juxtaposing order and violence.

In order to answer the question that has been put forth, regarding the success of the performance enacted by the Russian feminists, the method chosen to be employed is that of *frame analysis*. In a review of the literature pertaining to frame analysis, Benford and Snow¹² (2000, 661) explain the descriptive as well as analytical utility of this method, which has been employed in cognitive psychology (Bateson 1972; Tversky and Kahneman 1989), linguistics and discourse analysis (Tannen 1993; Van Dijk 1977), in communication and media studies (Pan and Kosicki 1993; Scheufele 1999) as well as in political science and policy studies (Schon and Rein 1994; Triandafyllidou and Fotiou 1998). In sociology, the notion of *frame* is closely tied to the researcher Erving Goffman (1974) and was defined as a "schemata of interpretation" that enables individuals "to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large" (Goffman 1974, 21).¹³ However, one must make the distinction between *collective action frames* which shall be discussed in the following paragraphs and *everyday interpretive frames* that Goffman was referring to. What is of interest for this study is the first type of frame as in the case of the feminist group that is under scrutiny, one can make out two types of *collective frames*, one constructed by national and international mass-media and one created by the group itself through the use of the Internet as means of communication to broadcast the meaning of their actions. "Collective action frames, like picture frames, focus attention by punctuating or specifying what in our sensual field is relevant and what is irrelevant, what is "in frame" and what is "out of frame" in relation to the object of orientation. But frames also function, perhaps even more importantly, as articulation mechanisms in the sense of tying together the various punctuated elements of the scene so that one of the meanings rather than another is conveyed, or, in the language of narrativity, one story rather than another is told (...). Collective action frames also perform this interpretive work via the focusing, ar-

tication and transformative functions of frames, but in ways intended to activate adherents, transform bystanders into supporters, exact concessions from targets, and demobilize antagonists"¹⁴ (Snow *et al.* 2004, 384). The utility of this method resides in the fact that it helps understand the course and nature of the analyzed action and also the specificities of this feminist movement. Moreover, it helps in contextualizing this analysis by eliminating the ambiguity of possible interpretations.

Hank Johnston¹⁵ (2009) draws attention to the fact that social movements are not just any type of performance, rather they are a particular category which he calls "oppositional performances" (Johnston 2009, 9). These are part of the diversity of the conflicts inherent in a culture and Johnston adds that "a culture is always a community of outsiders – in varying degrees. This helps explain new social movements – ecology, animal rights, gay rights, autonomy – whereby agents of resistance are created by virtue of alienation from aspects of the dominant culture and through their own self-affirmation" (Johnston 2009, 10). It is in this category, that of a "new social movement" that one aims to place the feminist group Pussy Riot in the attempt to discern the specificities of their actions, focusing on their "creative turn" (Harris 2014) towards the online environment in the attempt to build their own *frame*, their own key of interpretation for the actions undertaken. However, while video material offered by the group is readily accessible, as it is posted both on the group's site as well as on YouTube, in English, one cannot say the same for journal articles in the national press, as they are in Russian. The one accessible route for this information is through international press articles which present the *frame* that the group has built as well as their own version of said frame.

Pussy Riot – Who are those girls?

Pussy Riot is a Russian feminist punk band which stages performance-type actions, both unannounced and provocative towards the authorities. The meaning of the group's name is revealed by the members themselves, in an interview granted to Amnesty International.¹⁶ Therefore, they explain the contradictory association of the two terms: "Pussy" has a pejorative, sexist connotation referencing women and is regarded as something which is gentle, obedient, it is in fact humiliating, while "Riot" means revolt.

The group's inception is closely tied to the controversial reelection of Vladimir Putin as Russia's president, an event which elicited protests in the capital. The group's first public appearances took place on the 7th of November 2011, with performances being staged in key hubs of Moscow's public transport system. From November 2011 to August 2012, Pussy Riot have recorded six songs, five of which were performed publicly and promoted on the Internet as videos: "Liberate the Cobblestones" (7 November 2011), "Kropotkin-vodka" (1 December 2011), "Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest" (14 December 2011), "Putin Pissed Himself" (20 January 2012), "Mother of God, Drive Putin Out!" (19 and 21 February 2012). The aim of these performances, car-

ried out in unauthorized locations, but carrying a powerful symbolic payload, was to critique the Russian political system and primarily, the chief of state, Vladimir Putin. The group garnered national and international attention after five of its members carried out a performance in front of the altar of the Cathedral of Jesus Christ the Savior in Moscow. The performance itself only lasted for a couple of seconds, during which the group's members, accompanied by a camera crew and a few supporters and journalists, undertook an energetic and symbolically charged interpretation of one of their songs – “Mother of God, Drive Putin Out!” – aimed at Russia's President. The performance was cut short by the intervention of the cathedral's security personnel and three of the performers ended up charged with *hooliganism and inciting religious hatred*. The punishment for this “sacrilege” was not immediate, as the women were arrested almost two weeks after the incident and not on the spot. What appeared to be an action with little in the way of consequences turned out to be a pretext for the state to exercise its exclusive right to more or rather less symbolic violence. Furthermore, the Russian state made full use of its discretionary power, the three arrested women receiving the treatment one would expect only for the most hardened of criminals. According to the defense attorney Nikolai Polozov¹⁷, nothing about the three women's trial was “ordinary”. Hence, all of the conditions were set up to have a less than equitable trial: the three women were placed in custody, denied bail and their defense was denied requests to have more time to prepare their case.

In an attempt to reestablish its credibility, Russian authorities permitted the live broadcasting of the trial. This strategy was on the one hand aimed at creating the illusion of a transparent trial while on the other to exclude direct media participation in the trial. What the Russian state actually managed with this was to remind everyone of Stalinist show-trials so common in times past. The trial was an opportunity to present to the media the life and background of the protesters prior to the key moment of the performance. One discovers the age of the women, their academic background, cut short by their arrest, the fact that two of them, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina were mothers of young children but also activists involved in other protest actions aimed at challenging the established power structure. Tolokonnikova, considered the mastermind behind Pussy Riot's actions, is also, together with her husband Pyotr Verzilov, part of the street-art group Voina, also known for actions aimed at provoking the authorities and challenging the regime. A student of philosophy, she formulates the group's intentions thus: “The words we spoke and our entire punk performance aim to express our disapproval of a specific political event: the Patriarch's support of Vladimir Putin, who has taken an authoritarian and anti-feminist course. Our performance contained no aggression towards the audience, but only a desperate desire to change the political situation in Russia for the better.”¹⁸ Alyokhina is a student at the Moscow Institute for Journalism and Creative Writing and an activist of Greenpeace Russia. Her incisive comments throughout the trial went viral on YouTube, making her the unofficial spokesperson of the group.¹⁹ In parallel to this bi-

ographical tracing of their histories, on state controlled television channels, an intense anti-Pussy Riot propaganda was being aired, further exacerbating the confusion and misunderstandings surrounding the group. These women were depicted as agitators backed by foreign governments or even agents of Satan (Cadwalladr 2015).

One must mention, however, that Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, 22 years old at the time of the performance, Maria Alyokhina, 24 years old, and Yekaterina Samusevich, 29 years old, known as Nadia, Masha and Katya are not the only members of the group as was also made apparent through a *The Guardian* interview with Pussy Riot members known only under the *stage names* of Sparrow, Squirrel and Balaklava. Apart from the three young, educated, middle-class women, the punk feminist group numbers upwards of ten women, including the two which took part in the performance but managed to avoid arrest. The identities of the three protesters were unveiled at the time of their arrest while the other members of the group remained anonymous and representative to the idea which they embodied. For this purpose, *The Guardian* journalist Carole Cadwalladr states that the women which make up Pussy Riot are not individuals but embodiments of an idea and the fact that Russian authorities arrested an idea drew worldwide attention (Cadwalladr 2015).

Subversion and feminist performance

Members of Pussy Riot have chosen to wear brightly colored balaclavas and military boots which they match with short, casual dresses which are just as brightly colored, in order to reference typical female clothing and in the process femininity. Colored stockings and bare arms complete the image of these protesters, a real parade of subversion. Nonetheless, the chromatics employed in the garments of the feminist group force a separation from the idea of violence, their protest being merely symbolic. The aim of this oxymoronic association of pieces of apparel from totally different registries is to symbolically represent the order specific to patriarchal societies, which institute a difference between the masculine and the feminine in a classification of superior and inferior.

The balaclavas are part of the feminist answer to a patriarchal culture which relegates the woman primarily to the role of sexual object but the choice for bright colors has led not only to a dissociation from the idea of violence, but also to the adoption of the brightly colored headwear by individuals not belonging to the group. Hence, people from all over the world have shown their solidarity with Pussy Riot and their opposition to the dominant culture. Moreover, the balaclavas have enabled the group's members to maintain their anonymity, at least during their public performances. This strategy has enabled them to overcome national, language as well as religious boundaries, permitting, at least hypothetically, any individual to join Pussy Riot. It is in this aspect that the power of anonymity as a vector of freedom of expression and instrument of subversive performative parades lies. The Internet played a major part in this dynamic, being the premiere choice as space offering freedom of expression, where

citizens under the mask of anonymity have the possibility of voicing their adherence, support or ideas on any issue without fear of reprisal. To this end, Colin Jager (2014) considers that the balaclavas used by these feminists a “vehicle of revelation paradoxically dependent upon its impersonality. Revelation is a process, and what it reveals is not a person (“I am”) but a relation (“I met”)” (Colin Jager 2014, 25).

On a gestural level, the group’s members offer a truly shocking image for any conservative society in which the woman should be delicate, feminine. Their dance involves graceless moves constituted mostly of punching the air, jumping, careless kicking, having the semblance of a fight rather than a dance. These energetic movements, which bear the message of revolt, are one of the ways through which Pussy Riot decided to challenge the society in which they live and the politico-religious establishment. Aside from the “dance”, one may notice another type of gesture, mock prostrations. In Christian Orthodox religious practice, these gestures serve as means of punishing the body in the hope of spiritual cleansing. One cannot deny the shock value attributed to mocking prostrations inside a church and it is to this that one attributes the group’s choice for this gesture. The striking contradictions put forth by the feminist group through their non-verbal communication are an illustration of the contradiction which marks the existence of women, which are torn between their aspirations and the roles imposed on them by a patriarchal society. It is from this coding of the corporal performance that the confusion of the public stems, fact which has led to the condemning of the unfeminine behavior of the protesters as immoral and atheist.

The Internet is not a cornerstone of the feminist group’s revolt but has proven to be a powerful instrument for the propagation and elaboration of their actions against the authoritarian Russian regime and the patriarchal order of Russian society. The case of Pussy Riot is that much more interesting as a small group of women had the courage to stand up against an oppressive regime while simultaneously finding a way to make their voices heard throughout the world, gathering a large number of supporters and, through the Internet, to create their own *frame* of interpretation and comprehension for their actions and the performance which took place in the Moscow Cathedral. Therefore, the Internet is the method of rendering their protest and subversive actions comprehensible while avoiding the digressions and interruptions inherent to an illegal performance. Consequently, piecing together a montage of recordings from two separate events – one which took place two days earlier at the Bogojavlensky Cathedral – and the other being the notorious performance at the Cathedral of Jesus Christ the Savior in Moscow on the 21st of February 2012, the feminists have managed to present their performance in the manner in which they intended to carry out. The product of this montage was distributed on the Internet on the group’s site and on YouTube, rendering it accessible, in the form in which they desired, to the entire world. As a result, the feminists had become actively involved actors in the process of negotiating the meaning of the action – an essential element for the success of their action – as the confrontation was not carried out in the streets, as is the case of other antigovernment so-

cial actions, but through the media. In this way, the meaning and content of their performance cannot be hijacked and irremediably truncated by the mainstream national media which serves the interests of the regime.

The virtual environment offers, in this case, the frame of interpretation for a political action based on computer-assisted empowerment (Bertini 2014, 35), becoming an alternative protest environment which puts into practice Anne Harris's (2014) idea of a "creative turn". Therefore, it is in the online environment that a personal, feminine space of expression can be created, a space which presents the group's views on reality. The combination of a corporal performance with a virtual one proves to be ingenious and effective, leading to the creation of a new form of subversive action which evades the censorship of Russian authorities and their abilities to react, leaving them the only option of physically oppressing their revolted subjects – following an inequitable trial, the two women, Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were imprisoned as dangerous delinquents. This reaction of the Russian authorities betraying the extent to which they were affected by this particular act of defiance, an act which rendered frustrating through the lack of means to control virtual dissent.

Pussy Riot's performance in the cathedral is based on multimodality, as it combines text, *image*, as well as *sound*, so that the musical message, while not the most important, cannot be ignored without losing sight of the depth of the interpretation. Defined as "political, oppositional, disruptive, loud and confrontational" (McMichael 2013, 100), this song as well as the performance as a whole, "is set out to challenge authority and shock the listeners" (Mc Michael 2013, 100). The video which resulted from the montage of images from the two events begins with a prerecorded choral segment inspired from the cappella choir composition "Vespers" – "Rejoice, O, Virgin" by Rachmaninoff interpreted by Pussy Riot. In the original version of the group's video, the melodious part is not heard, the song commencing instead with an overflow of energy and hate expressed in the lyrics of the song and the voices of the punk band accompanied by an electric guitar. McMichael compares this transition from melodious to alert with a crossing from prayer to critique and protest (McMichael 2013, 108). The lyrics of the song "Mother of God, Drive Putin Out!" (**Annex 1**) are also part of this registry of protest. They express the disgust of the protesters towards the Church and the regime embodied by president Putin and especially condemns the relationship between the two.

Taking into account all of the aspects presented up to this point, one tends to consider Pussy Riot's performance in the Muscovite cathedral as a protest through music rather than musical project in itself. However, can this be considered successful performance? This discussion should begin with the chosen location of the protest, as location offers meaning to a performance. In this case, the declared purpose of the performance was to challenge the relation between political power and religious hierarchy and also to contest the patriarchal system that the institution of the Church maintains. Considering the established purpose, the location appears to be adequate, however video recordings of the event illustrate a perplexed, even vexed public witnessing

the event. In the aftermath of this action which gained worldwide notoriety thanks to the Internet, the feminist group was accused by Russian authorities of having discredited the cathedral and offended Christian believers.

The performance has therefore violated two types of spaces: a physical space, the sacred location of the cathedral and a spiritual space, by offending the beliefs of churchgoers who were an involuntary public to the performance. In these given conditions, could one still argue for the success of the performance? In broad strokes, the performance can be considered to have achieved its purpose. One must point out its political consequences as, on the one hand, it led to a raising of awareness concerning the role of the Church in the State, in family and private life and, on the other hand, it achieved the purpose of contesting the legitimacy of the president. The cathedral performance was therefore an attack against the macho image of President Vladimir Putin, who was defied by a group of women who had the courage to voice their opinion on the illegitimacy of the regime he rules. More important than the political consequences are, however, the social consequences, as this event aroused many heated debates on social media and split the Russian society in two camps, it mobilized defenders of the group against the oppressive regime and drew international attention on the situation of human rights in Russia. Moreover, this performance, which offered Pussy Riot unprecedented notoriety was real marketing stunt²⁰ for Russian feminism. In spite of extremely negative reactions, feminism garnered a lot of attention from both national and international publics and led to a mobilization of feminists in solidarity with Pussy Riot both within and without the borders.

Frame analysis and results

Reservations in declaring the cathedral performance as wholly successful stem from the fact that the group was interrupted after only a couple of seconds. Moreover, it was misunderstood by those who witnessed it. The shock that the participants had felt is due to the feminists' unexpected arrival, their clothing, their dance and also their song which go against all established behavioral norms in that specific location. Churchgoers, therefore, did not even begin to decipher the message that the group was trying to communicate, as they were deeply upset by the blasphemy, the sacrilege that the women were committing against all they held holy, their faith and the Church. A *The Guardian* journalist nuances this reaction of the Russian public by likening the condemnation the feminists felt for their *sacrilege* with that directed against Jesus Christ himself: "The legal case against Jesus was that he violated the holy. He was criticized for allowing his disciples to eat without washing properly and for picking corn on the day set aside as holy. He said he was God yet he was born in a filthy stable and willingly laid hands on lepers. He had no problem with being touched by menstruating women or eating with those regarded as unwholesome. In the context of second temple Judaism, this constituted a thoroughgoing deconstruction of holiness – or, specifically, of the way unquestioned holiness had become an alibi for political injustice. The

prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures made exactly the same challenge. And being profane is precisely the point.”²¹ The conclusion which he reaches by drawing parallels between the two cases is that when religion is perverted into becoming an adjutant of totalitarianism, “a pussy riot is an absolute moral necessity” (Fraser 2015).

The moral condemnation of the group for its choice of location for its protest is almost unanimous in Russia, although this was perhaps the only way in which they could make themselves heard by the whole world. It is worth noting, however, that ordinary people, the feminists’ co-nationals which were insulted in their beliefs by the women’s performance do not approve the exaggerated punishment which they received (Gradskova 2015). Moreover, Pussy Riot’s supporters tried claiming that the performance was not valid as a way to dissuade authorities from imposing a drastic punishment as it was disrupted by cathedral security, however, what the group did not manage to do at the cathedral, they achieved with the video that they uploaded.

Mass-media in Russia places Pussy Riot’s performance in the muscovite Cathedral of Christ the Savior in the frame of Russian nihilist tradition (Cadwalladr 2015). Nadezda Petrusenko delves into the history of Russian radicalism and presents the nihilistic movement in the terms of free thinking which considers institutions and laws as artifacts that must be destroyed. Moreover, the nihilistic movement is the first social movement which has declared gender equality, instituting in Russia the revolutionary image of the *new woman* (Knight 1979, 140-141). Nihilistic women, similarly to Pussy Riot protesters, have expressed their radicalism through apparel, have changed social models of femininity and feminine behavior. The purpose of this mass-media undertaking is to discredit Pussy Riot’s performance at the cathedral as a feminist provocation which is radically opposed to current society and the political power structure. This frame has permitted an association of Pussy Riot’s members with emblematic figures of Russian nihilism as Vera Zasulich and Sophia Perovskaia (McMichael 2013, 100). The latter being Russian women involved in political assassinations.

Conclusions

The performance “Mother of God, Drive Putin Out!” from the Cathedral Jesus Christ the Savior in Moscow represents a protest through music aimed at Russia’s authoritarian regime and at the patriarchal societal structure upheld by the Russian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, the feminist group opposes the relationship between the institution of the Church led by the Patriarch Kirill and the authoritarian Russian state under the control of President Vladimir Putin. To this end, the choice of location for the protest inside the cathedral is not at all random. Supposedly the holiest place in all of Russia, it is also an important governmental symbol. Nonetheless, it is a highly commercial establishment, offering a large underground parking lot and renting out conference rooms. Within the cathedral, the Patriarch himself officiates mass and occasionally engages in propaganda at the behest and on behalf of Putin and his regime. Pussy Riot have therefore chosen the perfect location for protesting and publicizing their revolutionary views.

The undertaking was a success with regard to making their message heard by the whole world but at the same time they were mostly misunderstood as Russian society proved to be a soil most unfertile for this type of manifestation. However, the extension of the performance into the virtual environment has helped it reach its full potential by clarifying the protesters' intentions, who have thus managed to make themselves heard beyond Russia's borders and have succeeded in gathering a large number of supporters. The ingenious merging of the physical cathedral performance with a digital performance, disseminated through the group's *LiveJournal* and *YouTube* had the effect of proving to the whole world that the action had indeed taken place and, through editing and montage, to offer an intelligible view of the intentions behind the performance, thus presenting the complete story, untouched and uninterrupted by the intervention of the state's repressive apparatus. This second version, a product especially designed for dissemination on the Internet, represents a manifestation specific to this new phase of democratization of contemporary societies, which enables ordinary citizens to freely express themselves and challenge authoritarian regimes.

Moreover, this performance is a strategy for "undoing gender", as Judith Butler (2004) puts it. Gender is a *corporal style*, an act, a cultural strategy to which those who do not adhere are punished by society (Butler 1990, 139-140). Pussy Riot's case is exemplary in this sense as in conservative Russia, the unfeminine behavior of the feminist group was deemed immoral and atheist. Therefore, the political use of gender constitutes, as Virginie Juillard (2012) argues, is one of the ways in which gender performance is accomplished.

From the feminist perspective, this performance was a resounding success as, in spite of the risks to which they exposed themselves, a handful of women have shown that they have the courage to stand by their opinions, to denounce a regime they consider illegitimate and the condition of women in Russian society. However, the frame established by the Russian media for this performance fuels the misunderstanding of the goals of Pussy Riot's protest, discrediting to a certain degree Russian feminism as a whole. In spite of the obstacles and controversy that this performance has stirred, Pussy Riot has become a worldwide phenomenon, a symbol of feminist fight through art which defies political power and a patriarchal society sanctioned by religion. Thus, the frame that the feminists have constructed has been more effective than the frame constructed by the national media and the effects are visible both nationally – through the discord and confrontation they sparked – as well as internationally, where they have enjoyed ample support. The effect of this performance or of this creation of transgression, in the words of Hannah Arendt (1989) is that of a domino, as a crisis of one form of authority is a crisis of all forms of authority which shape the world.

Regarding the limits of this study, one must underline that only a particular performance undertaken by the feminist group was analyzed, however, this particular case was chosen with regard to the large number of reactions, the degree of mobilization it provoked and, of course, the reprisals it prompted. The use of the Internet as an

integral part of the action, fact which has aided the group in gaining the worldwide notoriety it enjoys to this day, was also a determining factor in the choice of subject. Nonetheless, not all of the relevant aspects necessary to fully understand the group were presented. This renders the present article a starting point for further analysis, this time focusing on the actions of the group as a whole, and integrating different perspectives as well as dimensions for the study – the discourse analysis dimension, for example. To these limitations, one must add the author’s unfamiliarity with the Russian language, fact which has limited access to materials concerning the subject, leaving articles published by international mass-media outlets as a means of understanding and dealing with the frame that Russian mass-media had created for Pussy Riot.

Notes:

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3. Diane Lamoureux. “Y a-t-il une troisième vague féministe?”, *Cahiers du Genre*. 3.1, 2006, 57-74.
4. David M. Herszenhorn. “In Russia, Madonna Defends a Band’s Anti-Putin Stunt”, *New York Times*. 7 Aug., 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/08/world/europe/madonna-defends-pussy-riot-at-moscow-concert.html>.
5. Idem.
6. Pussy Riot on stage with Madonna. http://www.lemonde.fr/europe/video/2014/02/06/sur-scene-avec-madonna-les-pussy-riot-defient-poutine_4361616_3214.html.
7. Pussy Riot Journal. 03 March, 2015. <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/12442.html>.
8. Pussy Riot Journal. 03 March 2015. <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/8459.html>.
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10. Guy Hermet, Bertrand Badie, Pierre Birnbaum, Philippe Braud. *Dictionnaire de la science politique et des institutions politiques*. 6th ed. Paris: Dalloz, 2005, 91-92.
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21. Giles Fraser. "Pussy Riot's crime was violating the sacred. That's what got Jesus in court", *The Guardian*. 04 March, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/aug/10/pussy-riot-crime-jesus>.

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Annex 1

The English lyrics of the song "Mother of God, Drive Putin Out!" Presented in Tayler Jeffrey's article on Pussy Riot published in *The Atlantic* on November 2012. [03 March, 2015. <http://m.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/what-pussy-riots-punk-prayer-really-said/264562/>].

*Virgin birth-giver of God, drive away Putin!
Drive away Putin, drive away Putin!*

*Black frock, golden epaulettes
Parishioners crawl bowing [toward the priest, during the Eucharist]
Freedom's ghost [has gone to] heaven
A gay-pride parade [has been] sent to Siberia in shackles*

*Their chief saint is the head of the KGB
He leads a convoy of protestors to jail
So as not to insult the Holiest One
Woman should bear children and love
Shit, shit, the Lord's shit!
Shit, shit, the Lord's shit!*