Patriarchal power patterns turn out to be more resilient than Beauvoir presumed. But what is the ‘bottleneck’ today that keeps processes of change from definitely heading in egalitarian directions? In terms of our metaphor of a multi-headed monster, we argued that its ‘immortal’ head, which must still be defeated, is the ‘presentational’ realm of rite, art, and myth that conveys ideas not in a grammatical scheme of expression, but in the shape of ‘forms’, i.e. holistic ‘pictures’ or patterns that currently seem to be most resilient to change. Struggles within each of these realms are necessary in order to replace these dominant ‘forms’ that, in their arrangements of elements, or picturing of a ‘relational order of things’ (Langer 1960: 59), articulate a power asymmetry between the sexes.

The previous chapter discussed the multiple voices of the gender egalitarian movement of Muslim women. Muslim women today are involved in freedom practices in the religious realm that involve ‘keys’ of rite and verbal language, thus re-articulating beliefs and idea(l)s that matter deeply to Muslim women and men. But what is the dominant face of the hydra’s ‘presentational’ head in the West today? And do we find women’s freedom practices in this realm as well?

Discussing in particular popular culture, I will argue that media-hypes today fulfil the role of mythical tales, which, in the words of Langer (1960), are dream-narratives, made of dream-material, i.e. images and fantasies. According to her, ‘(t)he Gods have their twilight, the heroes are forgotten; but though mythology has been a passing phase in man’s mental history, the epic lives on, side by side with philosophy and science and all the higher forms of thought’ (165). But while to Langer, the heyday of mythology is over, as its epic has passed into ‘a new symbolic mode, the mode of art’ (165), popular culture today suggests otherwise.

Art historian Camille Paglia, in her 700-page study Sexual Personae (1990) – ‘personae’ meaning characters in a play or public setting – argues that the Hollywood stars of the 1930s revived pagan myth. Western popular culture and especially Hollywood restored ‘the pagan pantheon of physically perfect, openly sexual gods and goddesses’ (Paglia 2013: 2). The creation of ‘glamour’ in early Hollywood had magical properties, since ‘ordinary men and women were turned into divinities by the vast machinery of the star system’ (3). In subsequent books, Paglia analyses other media ‘celebrities’ in similar terms, going into the ‘sexual personae’ of, among others, Elizabeth Taylor, Judy Garland, Princess Diana, Barbara Streisand, and Madonna – the latter
being her favourite (Paglia 1992, 1994). Since popular culture – expressed in the popular media, such as advertisements, magazines, popular television, mainstream film, and internet – sidesteps politically correct feminists and other liberal censors, according to Paglia, it speaks the truth: popular media tell us what is, and not what should be.

Erving Goffman (1976), in a similar vein, assumes that popular culture tells us who we are. In his well-known study *Gender Advertisements* (1976), Goffman looks at the different representations of men and women in advertisements, pointing out that their apparent normality tells us something about ourselves: gender advertisements are to Goffman the most concentrated form of our contemporary ‘gender codes’. While Goffman uses advertisements for a diagnosis of the time, specifically for a diagnosis of who men and women are, in a similar vein, I will use popular films for a gender diagnosis of the present. I specifically look at the five films of *The Twilight Saga*, which caused a ‘hype’ among girls and women, for a diagnosis of today’s collective ‘dream-narratives’. Do current Hollywood-hypes still only comprise men’s fantasies, and do girls and women in that sense ‘still dream through men’s dreams’ – in the words of Beauvoir? (Beauvoir 2010: 166).

Capitalizing on Paglia’s approach – and partly on Beauvoir’s, as we will see – I take current Hollywood-hypes as the new face of the mythical genre. From this perspective, the leading characters in the Twilight ‘hype’ can be discussed as mythical sexual personae, and the Twilight hype as one of the mythical tales of our time that through its ‘visual forms’ spread its ideas on a mass scale (cf. Chapter 2).

‘Presentational forms’ can be studied in a variety of ways, so Langer claims (cf. Langer 1960: Preface). While in her own view they are rooted in man’s natural activity of symbolic transformation and ultimately in man’s fantasy, to Lévi-Strauss myths are secular stories that are strongly structured in terms of the constitutive, essentially binary, structures of any society. As discussed, Beauvoir historicizes Lévi-Strauss’ approach, suggesting that new myths will emerge, expressing new, non-hierarchical relationships between the sexes. Her approach in this respect comes close to a Foucauldian one, which takes all discourses, including mythical narratives, as crystallizing and developing over time, and this also includes ethical practices of freedom – re-articulated by us in terms of distinct sets of critically creative ethical life projects. Comprising new concepts and

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1 ‘Gender codes’ to him are ingrained cultural signals that make us position people in the categories male / female.
models for self and society, in various ‘keys’, freedom practices equally emerge at a certain time and cannot be forced or simply be made to happen.

Do we find any slow movements at the mythical level of collective dream-narratives that take place under the radar, so to speak? Have freedom practices emerged in this realm, are women and girls involved in processes of change?

In search for an answer to these questions, I will first examine the current ‘post-feminist’ climate in the West and its new dominant model of womanhood, in the shape of a female sexual agent. Does she represent a new liberating moment, or is she the newest face of an old male projection, i.e. the newest version of the old myths of Woman? To answer to this question, I first explore the classic myths of Woman as analysed in the work of Beauvoir and Paglia. Next, I will focus on some mythical tales and sexual personae of our time, so as to answer the question whether the new female sexual agent of today is a recycling of old myths or a new liberating mythical figure. As argued above, I specifically examine the dream-narrative of the Twilight hype that moves masses of girls and women today. What story does it tell and which sexual personae does it present? Is Paglia right that the old myths of femininity will always pop up, or is Beauvoir right in her prediction that change will take place?

Super Woman Revisited

The concept of ‘post-feminism’ has a variety of meanings, ranging from a backlash to feminism, to an academic perspective of postmodern anti-foundationality, to the pastness of feminism as such (cf. Gill and Scharff 2011: 3), McRobbie (2004) articulates the concept in yet another sense; namely, in terms of a current entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist elements. Processes of liberalization today are intrinsically intertwined with neo-conservative values. The popular Bridget Jones books and movies illustrate how feminism today is both taken into account while at the same time ‘fiercely repudiated’ (McRobbie 2004: 255). A desperate 30-year-old, sexually liberated Bridget, secretly dreams of a traditional wedding that would rescue her from her demanding working life as a single woman. While Bridget is totally aware that this is not how young women today are supposed to think, she – and the audience with her – escapes this censorious politics and freely enjoys that which is disapproved of: ‘feminism is invoked in order that it is relegated to the past’ (262).
To more fully understand what is going on, McRobbie argues that we need Foucault’s concept of neoliberal governmentality in the sense of a ‘day-to-day’ organizing of people’s behaviour ‘at a distance’ (McRobbie 2011b: 180; cf. Chapter 1). Current neoliberal governmentality also involves a new gender logic or even a new ‘sexual contract’. Women and girls are provided with sexual freedoms and with all kinds of opportunities for achievement in education and employment. But, as part of the same package, ‘modes of patriarchal retrenchment have been digging in, as these conditions of freedom are tied to conditions of social conservatism, consumerism and hostility to feminism in any of its old or newer forms’ (McRobbie 2011a: xi). The new sexual contract allows young women and girls to earn their own wages, provided that they prioritize consuming and spend their wages on fashion and beauty. It organizes their ‘consumer-citizenship’ (McRobbie 2008: 90), omitting ‘any encouragement to a more active form of political participation’ (McRobbie 2011b: 182).

French writers’ collective Tiqqun, in Raw Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl (2010), discusses the Young-Girl in similar terms. She symbolizes the total and sovereign consumer that is ‘good for nothing but consuming; leisure or work, it makes no difference’ (Tiqqun 2010: 2). The Young-Girl is someone who ‘resembles her photo’ (7), she does not love but only ‘loves herself loving’ (20). The new social organization of consumption and seduction has freed women and youth, the slaves of the past, only to meet the demands of mass consumption: it has ‘freed them AS SLAVES’ (2).

Beauvoir, in line with her critique on the neoliberal ‘Organization Man’, criticized the model of personhood of ‘Super Woman’ (femme totale), who aims to ‘be successful at all levels’ (Beauvoir 2011: 226; Chapter 1). In a similar vein, McRobbie (2015) introduces the notion of the perfect woman, i.e. the neoliberal woman or girl who is perfect in all realms of life. Facebook’s board member Sheryl Sandberg, in her book Lean In (2013), advises women on how to succeed in business while having a family life. Anne Marie Slaughter, in a famous newspaper article entitled ‘Why Women Still Can’t Have It All’ (2012), vice versa argues for women to reaffirm their commitment to their family while pursuing a career. Catherine Rottenberg (2013) concludes that both Sandberg’s and Slaughter’s approaches are phrased in the same neoliberal feminist language: both address women in competitive individualist terms, and encourage them to pursue career success, but also a successful family life.

In the words of McRobbie (2015), being a Super Woman – ‘having it all – demands an inner-directed self-competitiveness’ next to ‘an outer-directed competition or antagonism towards other women’ (McRobbie 2015: 14).
The ‘perfect’ as a horizon of expectation involves an increase in levels of (self) competition, triggering economic growth, innovation, and a more entrepreneurial outlook, and pathologizing failure, since if one is not excellent one can only be, at best, mediocre. McRobbie signals a new ‘competitive femininity’ with ‘older reprehensible features of traditional female culture being reactivated and having new life breathed into them’ (McRobbie 2015: 9, cf. 7, 15). The ‘neoliberal feminism’ of today, which wants women to lean in, has done away with social critique and solidarity.

While McRobbie (2008) speaks of a new ‘sexual contract’ on neoliberal terms, Oksala (2013) argues that neoliberal governmentality no longer needs any ‘sexual contract’ due to its increasing commodification and marketization of domestic and care-work. It no longer needs ‘feminine’ subjects who surrender their self-interest to the well-being of their husbands and children: ‘the self-interest of particular women can now be bought relatively easily with the subordination and exploitation of others’ (Oksala 2013: 42). Women today, like men, increasingly function as egoistical subjects of interest, making choices on the basis of rational economic calculation. They not only want a happy home, but ‘they too want money, power and success. They are atomic, autonomous subjects of interest, competing for the economic opportunities available’ (39).

Ladelle Mcwhorter (2013) likewise concludes, albeit from another angle, that the sexual contract has lost its meaning, and that many women today live ‘in a state of post-liberation’ (Mcwhorter 2013: 71). However, the appearance of Super Woman as the perfect femme totale, shows that old heads of the patriarchal hydra are still alive and kicking, and are still vital to many women’s lives. Neoliberalism might not necessarily be patriarchal in character, but it converges with older features of ‘femininity’, to paraphrase McRobbie, culminating in a new dominant model of womanhood.

Beauvoir already outlined this new figure of Super Woman, but today she has yet another face. British feminists Rosalind Gill, Angela McRobbie, and Christina Scharff, in reference to Foucault’s concept of neoliberalism, have pointed to a new kind of sexualization of women and girls that is taking place in mainstream popular media – including social media.

Foucault’s earlier concepts of disciplining and normalization have been extensively used in gender studies. Bartky (1988) analysed how women’s bodies are disciplined into docility. They are trained to take less space than men’s bodies; gesture, posture and movement and bodily comportment are restrained; dieting, smiling and make-up are a must and skin should be soft and smooth at all times. The bar of femininity is raised so high, and demands such radical technologies, that virtually every woman is destined to fail and consequently

Building on Foucault’s concept of neoliberalism, and on the work of authors of the ‘governmentality school’ (cf. Chapter 1), McRobbie (2004), Gill (2008), and Gill and Scharff (2011) analyse that what marks out the present, post-feminist, moment as distinctive is not only a dramatically increased intensity and extensiveness of the hostile surveillance of women’s bodies and psyche, ‘but even more fundamentally that notions of choice, agency and autonomy have become central to that regulatory project’ (Gill 2008: 443). Television make-over shows, women’s magazines, advertising campaigns, and billboards organize women’s self-regulation ‘at a distance’, to act in accordance with the model of the new female sexual agent that they spread. Gill identifies this model that emerged in the media over the last decade as the new face of neoliberal woman, a new figure ‘constructed to sell to women: a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always “up for” sex [...] an increasingly globalized figure who appears in different transnational sites in magazines like Cosmopolitan’ (437).

Gill, in reference to Rose (1990), assesses the new female sexual agent that has emerged involves a neoliberal, postfeminist moment of ‘governing the soul’ (cf. 443). Rather than a remoulding of the body, we face a remaking of women’s subjectivity; women are no longer sexually objectified, they are sexually ‘subjectified’ (cf. 440). It is not just that women should look nice, or even that they are entirely judged on their looks. But more fundamentally ‘a particular kind of beauty and sexiness has become a prerequisite for subjecthood itself’ (440). Women’s autonomy, choice, and self-improvement today ‘sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the “wrong” “choices” (e.g. become too fat, too thin or have the audacity or bad judgment to grow older)’ (442). Gill concludes that we deal with a remaking of female subjectivity, in terms of a ‘compulsory (sexual) agency’ (440).

In a similar vein, Bauer (2015), in a discussion of the current sexual hook-up culture among American college students, speaks of women’s sexual ‘self-objectification’. She notices how her female students choose to spend their weekend evenings ‘giving unreciprocated blow-jobs to drunken frat boys,’ enjoying the sense of power it gives them (Bauer 2015: 10). In reference to Beauvoir’s argument in The Second Sex that women often consented with their role as bodily Other (Beauvoir 2010: 10; cf. Chapter 2), Bauer argues that women should resist an ‘allure to self-objectification.’ Whereas Bauer points to the girls’ behaviour in terms of their choices, from Gill’s perspective their
behaviour emerges as a compulsory sexual agency, reflecting their ‘sexual subjectification’ in a post-feminist-neoliberal area.

Super Woman, who must be perfect and successful in all realms of life, today is supposed to be sexy as well. Girls and women, including women professionals like lawyers, CEOs and consultants, are advised to dress in sexy ways. A website with tips on ‘how to not dress boring to work’ advises ‘all those sexy women who rule the world’ to do so ‘in bright lips, sky high heels and outfits that can go from 9 am to late dinner cocktails. The TIP is always in the posh fabulous heels.’ If women and girls decide not to comply

2  http://thefashiontag.com/2014/05/05/7-office-wear-ideas-how-to-not-dress-boring-to-work/ (last accessed, 21 September 2016).
with the new norm of sexiness, they run the risk of being neglected, or even fired. As blogger ‘Abbeysbooks’ – a pseudonym for feminist film critic Janet Abbey – comments: ‘men today only see the signs that say hot: make-up; hair color bright of course; designer clothes; higher than high heels, so read hyper high stilettos; cleavage and well you get the idea I am sure. Scrub it all off and they think she is plain, not worth the attention’ (Abbeysbooks n.d.).

The dominant image of sexiness that girls and women identify with, surely affects their own hopes and fears. Annemarie van Oosten (2015) shows that girls’ posting of sexy selfies on social network sites influences their sexual behavior and sexual self-image. Jessica Ringrose (2011) equally shows how British fourteen-year-old girls’ ‘performing slut’ on social media affects their identity in a negative way, involved as they are in a narrative of ‘servicing the phallus’ and ‘non-reciprocal’ pleasure (Ringrose 2011: 112).

While according to Gill and Scharff (2011) girls and women have to be sexy on penalty of not being noted at all, according to Paglia (2012), they are taking control of their capacity to inflame men with sexual desire, using it in a power play. As she expresses it in an interview in Playboy: ‘(t)he more a woman takes off her clothes, the more power she has’ (Paglia 1995). Women today have finally understood their role: a new ‘pro-sex, pro-art, pro-beauty feminism,’ triumphs over the politically correct, oppressive kind of feminism of the 1970s and 80s, as she had predicted all along (Paglia 2012).

British sociologist Catherine Hakim (2011), in a similar vein, calls for women to use their ‘erotic capital’ in the bedroom and the boardroom. As Hakim argues, men’s greater sexual desire leaves them frustrated, and women can take advantage of this in public as well as private life, bargaining for ‘a better deal’ (Hakim 2011: 8). According to Hakim, ‘(p)atriarchy has tried hard to […] control women’s public dress and behaviour. As I see it, radical feminism has gone down a dead-end by adopting similar ideas that belittle women’s allure. […] Why not champion femininity rather than abolish it? Why does no one encourage women to exploit men whenever they can?’ (3).

Similarly, Dutch feminist magazine OPZIJ recommended its readers to use their erotic capital in the workplace, in a positive appraisal of Hakim’s book Honey Money – in spite of its rather alarming title.

Whereas Hakim (2011) speaks in terms of women’s ‘erotic capital’, does she perhaps – unintentionally – transmit that we need a Marxist analysis of how capitalist principles of profit and commodification have reached

3 Paglia adds that now that ‘all careers have been opened to women,’ feminism is only needed ‘in Third World countries where women can be treated like chattel.’ In what follows I only discuss her stances regarding women’s positions in the West.
women’s bodies today? According to Power (2009), the capitalist labour market today demands that all people be an all-round self-seller, and especially impels women to include their bodies as part of the package and expose themselves.4 Is capitalist economy currently invading women’s bodies?

As discussed earlier, McRobbie (2011b: 180) argues that Marxism’s conceptual tools are too blunt to grasp the ways in which subjectivities, and especially those of women today, are restructured. Instead, a Foucauldian concept of neoliberalism, in terms of a ‘conduct’ of people’s conduct ‘at a distance’, allows for a more specific analysis of how women and girls are activated to copy and embody the new female figure outlined above.

Foucault characterized the neoliberal homo oeconomicus as ‘entrepreneur of himself,’ being for himself his own capital, i.e. a source to produce earnings (cf. Foucault 2008: 226). He pointed out how, today, we are supposed to improve our human capital – our abilities, skills, health – which is made up of acquired elements, alongside hereditary ones. From this approach, and paraphrasing Hakim (2011), it can be argued that women today are stimulated and advised by all kinds of experts, to improve and invest in, their ‘erotic capital’, as part of their human capital and, furthermore, they are advised to make the most of it. Their erotic capital can be seen as made up of hereditary elements, such as good genes, as well as of acquired components. Women and girls today are activated to optimize the latter, by practicing self-techniques such as constant full-body exercise, cosmetic surgery, wearing porn-chic fashion, and enhancing their skills in the sexual realm. They are stimulated to, on the basis of their own cost benefit calculations, make the most of their erotic capital, to enhance their success in all domains of life. The new female figure that emerges is the woman who is an entrepreneur of her own erotic capital.

At stake is not a literal marketization of womanhood, but one being shaped and governed to conform to the model of the market. Neoliberalism’s dissemination of market-shaped systems in the social field, and especially its generalization of the model of the entrepreneurial self to every form of behaviour, involve an optimizing management technique of governing the population. It has converged with older forms of femininity, and culminated in the emergence of a new form or myth of womanhood namely’,

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4 Power (2009) in this context refers to Alain Badiou’s explanation of the hatred in the West against the veil: according to him, the French law on the hijab is a purely capitalist law, since it ‘orders femininity to be exposed. In other words, having the female body circulate according to the market paradigm is obligatory’ (Badiou 2004).
of Super Woman, and Super Girl, who have to manage their erotic capital as part of their being perfect.

Laura Harvey and Gill (2011), in their discussion of the television show ‘The Sex Inspectors’, argue that a new female ‘sexual entrepreneur’ has emerged that cannot easily be judged in binary terms as either a liberated or a compulsory sexual agent. Others in the same volume similarly point to the complexity of women’s and girls’ negotiating of, and navigating between, sexual regulation and agency, some of them framing the new female sexual agency in a ‘context of persistent coercion and inequality,’ others deploying ‘a more upbeat language of freedom and choice’ (Gill and Scharff 2011: 9).

Does the new figure of the female sexual agent who manages her erotic capital, as part of her being perfect, involve a new liberating moment, or is she the new face of old constraining myths of femininity? For an answer to this question, we will first investigate the dominant myths of Woman as they were analyzed by Beauvoir (2010) and Paglia (1990).

**Myths of Woman**

As discussed earlier, Beauvoir’s concept of Myths covers the ‘presentational’ realms in terms of Langer (1960); namely, ritual religion, art, and mythological tales. In what follows, I focus on Myths in the latter sense; that is to say – in Langer’s terms – on mythical stories that comprise mankind’s collective dreams and fantasies, dealing with themes of ‘human desire frustrated by non-human powers, hostile oppression, or contrary desires’ (Langer 160: 143; cf. Chapter 2). For her analysis of mankind’s mythical tales, Beauvoir refers in *The Second Sex* to Lévi-Strauss’ thesis that the incest taboo – i.e. the prohibition of marriage between close relatives – marks the transition from nature to culture. According to Lévi-Strauss, the incest taboo is constitutive of society since it involves ‘exogamy’, i.e. an exchange of women among men, which creates the kind of alliances that society consists of. Lévi-Strauss saw this basic asymmetry between the sexes as well reflected in the myths of mankind, which he took as the voices of our ancestors. In his study on myths, he analyses how they are always structured along binary oppositions, manifesting among others the rule of exogamy, which involves that ‘between groups, women are exchanged like foodstuffs’ (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1971: 49).

In line with Lévi-Strauss, Beauvoir argues that the mythical tales of mankind comprise a hierarchical relationship between men and women. But for the roots of this asymmetry she refers to the mechanism of Othering: man establishing woman as the negative of himself is, in her view, a phase
to be overcome (cf. Chapter 2). She thus situates the myths of mankind in historical perspective; namely, as developed by patriarchal society ‘for the end of self-justification’ (Beauvoir 2010: 281). Beauvoir places Lévi-Strauss’ findings in a broader, historicizing framework, arguing that patriarchal patterns will be surpassed in a new age. She states:

After studying the diverse forms of primitive society in depth, Lévi-Strauss could conclude: “The passage from the state of Nature to the state of Culture is defined by man's ability to think biological relations as systems of oppositions; duality, alternation, opposition […] are not so much phenomena to explain as fundamental and immediate givens of social reality.” These phenomena could not be understood if human reality were solely a Mitsein based on solidarity and friendship. On the contrary, they become clear if, following Hegel, a fundamental hostility to any other consciousness is found in consciousness itself; the subject posits itself only in opposition; it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object (7).

While to Lévi-Strauss the status hierarchy between the sexes is constitutive for society, to Beauvoir it represents a historical, passing phase of mankind (cf. Rubin 1975 for another historicizing approach).

In her chapter, Beauvoir argues that the Myths of Woman seem to fluctuate and to be contradictory. However, their unity can be discerned as soon as we realize that Woman embodies Nature for men. Man’s carnal contingency dooms him to death. Woman, who symbolizes nature and flesh, therefore inspires horror in man: ‘the horror of his own carnal contingency that he projects on her’ (171). But nature also involves giving life. Nature therefore ‘inspires ambivalent feelings in man, as has been seen. He exploits it but it crushes him; he is born from and he dies in it; it is the source of his being and the kingdom he bends to his will’ (167).

Nature, to man, is life and death, ally and enemy, chaos and supreme reality (cf. 167). And he views woman as ‘akin to nature, she embodies it: animal, little vale of blood, rose in bloom, siren, curve of a hill, she gives humus, sap, tangible beauty and the world’s soul to man’ (270). Man longs for her, but fears her as well; he wants to subdue her, as an untamed animal. And as every desire, man’s longing for woman involves ‘consuming the desired object, entailing its destruction’ (178). Woman to man is ‘Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena, woman is both Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, source of life, power of darkness; she is the elementary silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip and lies; she is
the medicine woman and witch; she is man’s prey; she is his downfall, she is everything he is not and wants to have’ (166).

Man not only wants to possess woman, he also wants to be validated by her for his strength, his beauty, his courage. ‘She is one of the privileged prizes promised to heroes, adventurers and individualists. In ancient times, Perseus saved Andromeda, Orpheus went to rescue Eurydice from Hades and Troy fought to keep the beautiful Helen. Novels of chivalry recount barely any prowess other than delivering captive princesses’ (206). But conquering is more fascinating than rescuing. ‘(I)t is far better to tame Penthesilea than to marry a consenting Cinderella: man’s true victory is ‘that woman freely recognise him as her destiny’ (207). Apart from prey and prize, she is a sexual vamp as well. ‘She is the mermaid whose songs dashed the sailors against the rocks; she is Circe, who turned her lovers into animals, the water sprite that attracted the fisherman to the depths of the pools’ (188). The woman ‘who freely exercises her charms – adventuress, vamp, femme fatale – remains a disquieting type’ (213). The mythical tales of mankind, according to Beauvoir, express men’s – contrary – desires. But women, like men, do identify with them, experiencing themselves through men’s eyes: ‘woman knows and chooses herself not as she exists for herself but […] as men dream of her’ (159).

Beauvoir also discusses the insinuation of myths of femininity in the shape of films (Beauvoir 2010: 281), and paintings (204). She especially discusses Hollywood films, with women in the role of femme fatale or vamp adventuress ‘as the bad woman’ (213), or as enfant terribles to be ‘tamed by the healthy brutality of a lover or husband’ (374). Films like Citizen Kane and The Razor’s Edge show how men fantasize themselves as benefactor, liberator, or redeemer of women (cf. 207, 214). The female movie star typically is the ‘most recent incarnation of the hetaera,’ who flanked ‘by her husband or serious male friend – rigorously required by Hollywood – […] delivers Woman to the dreams of men who give her fortune and glory in exchange’ (625). Female Hollywood stars are ‘a passive object in the producer’s hands’ (591) whose bodies are no longer their own: ‘the producer decides on their hair colour, weight, figure and type; teeth are pulled out to change the shape of a cheek. Diets, exercise, fittings, and make up are daily chores’ (628).

Beauvoir not only includes films in her discussion of the dominant myths of Woman, she also points to a shift in the myth of Woman in her discussion of a new female film ‘character’ that was created by French rebel movie star Brigitte Bardot (Beauvoir 2015d). Beauvoir suggested in The Second Sex that new myths of eroticism will emerge (Beauvoir 2010: 283) that will display that ‘man is also flesh for woman; and woman is other than a carnal object’
and that the flesh for each person, in each situation ‘takes on singular significations’ (277). Similarly, in a 1950 article written for the American style magazine Flair, titled ‘It’s About Time Woman Puts a New Face on Love’, she argues that a new type of ‘equalitarian love’ will arise (Beauvoir 2015b: 78).

According to her, in Roger Vadim’s film And God Created Woman (1955), a new character of woman as ‘erotic hoyden’ emerges, in a replacement of the myth of woman as the magical and mysterious vamp (Beauvoir 2015d: 116). While the attraction the magical vamp exercised ‘was that of a passive thing’ and men went to their doom when she cast a spell, ‘Bardot does not cast spells; she is on the go.’ When she strips her clothes off ‘she is not unveiling a mystery. […] She walks, she dances, she moves about. Bardot’s eroticism is aggressive instead of magical.’ In the game of love ‘she is as much a hunter as she is a prey. The male is an object to her, just as she is to him’ (119). The character that Bardot created thus surpasses the traditional Myth of woman, asserting that between woman and man there is ‘mutual desire and pleasure’ (119).

However, Vadim’s movies remain abstract, Bardot never turns into a real human being. Vadim ‘de-situates sexuality’ (121): the world is absent in his films, which puts the spectator in the position of a voyeur. Vadim’s films lack any erotic emotion. It is a good thing that he portrays sexuality in an honest way; but he is to be blamed, Beauvoir argues, ‘for having gone so far as to dehumanize it.’ The ‘human factor’ has already lost its importance in many spheres. Man today ‘is regarded by politicians, brains-trusters, publicity agents, military men, and even educators, by the entire “organization world” as an object to be manipulated’ (120-121; cf. Chapter 1). Vadim, in a similar vein, strips sexuality of its humanity. ‘In real life, and usually in good novels and films, individuals are not defined only by their sexuality. Each has a history, and his or her eroticism is involved in a certain situation’ (121). Vadim instead reduces the world, things, and bodies to their immediate presence.

Whereas Beauvoir recognizes ‘the subversive feminist potential’ of Bardot’s character, she concludes that it ultimately involves a new embodiment of the old myth of the ‘eternal feminine’ (Boulé and Tidd 2012: 8). Tidd (2004) aptly summarizes that, to Beauvoir, Bardot ‘challenges the consuming tyranny of the male gaze and ultimately loses’ (Tidd 2004: 46).

Paglia, in her study Sexual Personae (1990), likewise deals with the mythical tales of mankind. She also discusses Hollywood films and movie stars from the perspective of myths, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Paglia was a great admirer of Beauvoir. She felt that the feminists who came after her were never capable of filling Beauvoir’s shoes, or for that
matter hers (Showalter 2001: 304, 305, 308; Paglia 2013: 9). Paglia discusses the mythical narratives of mankind in a similar way to Beauvoir. She, too, argues that, in myths, man is to woman as Culture is to Nature, rephrasing this opposition in terms of a contradiction between Apollonian and Dionysian – pagan or ‘chthonian’ [of the earth – KV] forces, respectively. Like Beauvoir, Paglia concludes that women live and imagine themselves through the fantasies of men, and never created their own dreams.

But unlike Beauvoir, Paglia accepts all this as a given. According to her, ‘(w)oman does not dream of transcendental or historical escape from natural cycle, since she is that cycle’ (Paglia 1990: 10). The dominant myths on women are based on reality since women, because of their biology, embody the principle of fertility and thus are inevitably identified with nature. In contrast, men embody the Apollonian principle that has to restrain nature: ‘(m)en, bonding together, invented culture as a defense against female nature’ (9). According to Paglia, women are not only assimilated to nature in myths and art, they ARE the nature that man seeks to master.

Nature pops up in yet another meaning in Paglia’s work. Contra rosy feminist Rousseauist conceptions of nature, we must recognize that nature is ‘no picnic’ (5). We should adopt Sade’s views rather than Rousseau’s. Nature – and sex as nature in us humans – is all about aggression: Sade was right to consider sex a demonic force. Sex is ‘a far darker power than feminism has admitted’ (3). In an interview, Paglia clarifies what this means for women; namely that men ‘do look at women as rapists,’ adding that, as a lesbian, she can totally identify with them (Paglia 1995). We are dealing here with the reality of nature; in other words, with nature’s laws, which are about violence and war, with women being men’s prey.

To Paglia, moreover, nature is not only violence, it is also death, mud, and rot. It is the Dionysian realm of ‘liquid nature, a miasmic swamp whose prototype is the still pond of the womb’ (12). Nature ‘is the dehumanizing brutality of biology and geology [...] the squalor and rot we must block from consciousness to retain our Apollonian integrity as persons. Western science and aesthetics are attempts to revise this horror into imaginatively palatable form’ (6). Women suffer more from nature than men, since, as we have seen, they are nature, their body being a ‘chthonian machine, indifferent to the spirit who inhabits it. Organically, it has one mission, pregnancy’ (10). Nature is the enemy and woman is its necessary victim.

Admittedly, I have schematized Paglia’s arguments to an extent, whereas in her work all of the above is presented in one package. Identifying her

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5 Paglia (1990) only refers to Beauvoir’s essay on Marquis de Sade (Beauvoir 2012).
arguments more specifically, however – 1) nature as female corporeality that men seek to master; 2) nature as violent relations of domination and submission, with women as men’s prey; 3) nature as a substance of mud and rot of which women suffer more than men – allows us to compare them with Beauvoir’s arguments in *The Second Sex*.

The violent dimension of sex, in line with Sade’s view, is a common theme in their work. Like Paglia, Beauvoir wrote about the Marquis de Sade (Beauvoir 2012), but her conclusion is totally different. Beauvoir praises Sade, for his courage in showing the violent dimension of sex; but she pities him for his total emotional isolation. There is sadism, but sexual love is possible as well, when both partners accept their human condition and transform into an incarnated consciousness: a ‘psycho-physiological unity.’ In a state of emotional intoxication, existence is grasped in oneself and in the other as at once subjectivity and passivity. Through this ambiguous unity, the two partners merge: each is delivered from its self-presence and attains an immediate communication with the other’ (Beauvoir 2012: 59-60).

Sexual love thus involves ‘an apprehension of the other person as consciousness through the flesh’ (60), and is an erotic encounter between unique embodied consciousnesses. Paglia instead only conceives of sex as violent relations and considers all talk of love-sex as outdated ‘PC’ (politically correct) feminism. Sex, as Sade has revealed, is a dark side of mankind, ‘a dangerous sport,’ and a combat in which especially women are in danger of being possessed and killed. Unlike PC-feminists, Paglia is not against date rape, pornography, and SM, since they are the reality of sex (cf. Paglia 1992).

There are similarities and differences with regard to Paglia’s claim about Nature’s substance as well. To Beauvoir, nature represents life, ‘a warm spring, [...] rich in regenerating forces’ (Beauvoir 2010: 168). But, as in Paglia, it is also ‘the soft viscosity of carrion,’ and the ‘rotting of death’ (169). They both share the thesis that, generally, women suffer more from nature’s grip on them than men. Beauvoir, like Paglia, argues that woman ‘is more enslaved to the species than the male is, her animality is more manifest.’ But she immediately adds: ‘in her as in him, the given is taken on by existence; she also belongs to the human realm. Assimilating her with Nature is simply a prejudice’ (277). Society and culture can compensate women for their reproductive roles. Paglia comes remarkably close to Beauvoir’s outlook in this respect when she states: ‘nature’s burden falls more heavily on one sex. With luck, this will not limit woman’s achievement, that is, her action in male-created social space’ (Paglia 1990: 9). Here, Paglia seems to argue that women can achieve individual self-realization in work and life. But she immediately returns to nature’s laws, concluding that the more woman
strives for individual self-realization, ‘the fiercer will be her struggle with nature […] And the more nature will punish her: do not dare to be free! for your body does not belong to you’ (10).

Finally, Paglia’s claim that women’s bodies are represented as nature, which men want to master, is identical to Beauvoir’s argument that, in myths, women are nature to men, who aim to tame, conquer, and even destroy women as part of nature. However, unlike Beauvoir, Paglia prefers to speak of ‘reality based’ myths: the identification of women with nature is based on the reality of nature’s laws that ‘limit eroticism, that is, our imaginative lives in sexual space’ (9). Since woman is nature, our imaginations and dreams will never change. History has no chance. It is the character of women’s bodies, as the immanent principle of fertility that makes the dichotomy of Man as Culture and Woman as Nature inescapable.

By contrast, Beauvoir sees nature and culture as intertwined and she posits that nature is always culturally embedded and shaped. To her, human beings are a ‘becoming’, and woman is a subject on the move. While Paglia refers to nature’s laws, and cannot think in terms of any change at all, Beauvoir argues that women’s access to contraceptives, education, and jobs will allow them to escape confining stereotypes and practices. Like Paglia, she is aware of an always remaining dimension of power struggle between the sexes, but to her it can be overcome given permanent effort (cf. Chapter 1).

Paglia’s work can be classified as a ‘politically realist’ theory of gender: her work ‘genders’ the ‘political realism’ of authors like Quentin Skinner and others, who build on seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes’ concept of the state of nature as a state of war. In addition to Hobbes, Paglia refers to Sade and Nietzsche, conceiving of the relations between the sexes in terms of a state of nature, where women necessarily are men’s prey (cf. Paglia 1990: 2). According to her, the popular media – uncensored as they are – prove her theory; namely, that the sexes are eternally at war. In film, popular music, and commercials, ‘all the daemonic myths and sexual stereotypes’ pop up again that movements like Christianity and feminism tried, in vain, to eradicate (26). Women should face reality and embrace their role. Feminism ‘has betrayed women, alienated men and women, replaced dialogue with political correctness’ in its attempt to ‘inhibit sex’ (cf. Paglia 1995). The stereotypical myths of woman as Nature will, however, pop up again the more we try to suppress them, since they are based on reality.

Returning to our discussion of the new figure of the female sexual agent as manager of her erotic capital, we can conclude from the above that to Paglia she recycles the traditional myth of woman as Nature, by finally accepting
the Battle of Myths

it. We have seen that, unlike Paglia, Beauvoir suggested that new myths, especially on erotic love, will emerge, and she cites the character created by film star Bardot in this regard. Her image of female sexual agency was liberating, in that it broke with the myths of woman as passive, mysterious Flesh. But it fell short where it remained an abstract figure. For a model of female sexual agency to really break the mould of the old myth of Woman, it has to involve a situated woman of flesh and blood, rather than an abstract – male – projection.

Is the post-feminist-neoliberal female sexual agent, in the shape of manager of her erotic capital, a new liberating figure from this perspective? While her agency breaks with the myth of Woman as Nature and passive Flesh, she remains an abstract projection. As discussed earlier, the popular media bombard women and girls with the stereotypes of female hotness and sexiness, stimulating them to embody these stereotypes, by choosing cosmetic treatments, including plastic surgery – even recommending the use of Botox to very young girls.

Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen (2006) argue that girls should be taken seriously when they choose to wear porno-chic fashion. Girls’ agencies should be taken into account, where it concerns the way they dress. What are girls saying with their garments?

Does a belly shirt mean fashion, sexual availability, pride in one’s body, that it is incredibly hot outside, or sheer habit? Is girls’ clothing a consistent language, or does its meaning change across space and time? For academic research, the consequences of such an approach are uncomplicated: in the tradition of feminist analysis, research should be aimed at giving girls a voice (Duits and Van Zoonen 2006: 115).

Gill (2007), however, argues that the authors’ call to respect girls’ ‘autonomous’ choices for porno-chic fashion, such as belly shirts and G-strings, remains trapped in a neoliberal discourse. It ignores the fact that girls’ choices are taking place in conditions that are not of their own making; namely, in a context in which a particular kind of sexualized self-presentation ‘has become a normative requirement for many young women in the West […]’ ‘Porn star’ is no longer just a slogan on a T-shirt – it is a vital component of many young women’s CVs, at a moment in which pole dancing classes are the biggest ‘fitness’ craze sweeping the UK and young women’s magazines instruct on ‘how to make love like a porn star’ (Gill 2007: 72-73).

Girls’ choices for wearing a headscarf are discussed by them in similar ways. Cf. Chapter 3 for further discussion of girls’ choices regarding veiling.
Gill’s response puts the focus on girls’ compulsory sexual agency in current post-feminist, neoliberal societies (cf. 74), but her approach implies a concept of postfeminist-neoliberalism as an all-encompassing System. While Gill rightly argues that an approach in terms of women’s and girl’s own choices is not enough, and that social conditions should be taken into account, Duits and Van Zoonen (2006) rightly imply that societies are more open and dynamic, and that one model does not fit all.

As discussed in previous chapters, rather than an overall System, neoliberalism comprises a set of dominant power patterns and techniques, alongside others, among which freedom practices, i.e. distinct sets of critically creative ethical life projects. While Foucault’s mid-work positioned people as docile bodies, his later work conceptualizes how people can develop into free agents within the context of relatively independent cultural collectives, or into minimally free subjects in the context of moral systems, or a neoliberal frame that allows them some room to manoeuvre.

From this perspective, in what follows, I investigate whether other figures of female sexual agency have emerged within the realm of the popular media. Do we find women’s freedom practices in this domain? Like Paglia, Beauvoir referred to films as the vehicles of mythical tales, our dream-narratives in the sense of Langer (1960). In what follows, I look in particular at today’s dream machine, Hollywood, and to other media’s celebrities or sexual personae. As Laura Mulvey famously analysed, in traditional Hollywood films, girls and women either have to die or marry, an observation that resonates with Beauvoir’s analysis that women in myths are typically tamed or destroyed (cf. Mulvey 1999). Do current Hollywood hypes suggest that the stereotypical myth of woman as Nature is immortal, as Paglia would have it? Or is Beauvoir right in suggesting that new myths on love will emerge and has a new female sexual agent emerged who truly breaks the mould?

The Twilight Hype

As a social philosopher mostly interested in dominant social patterns and dreams, I focus on popular films rather than avant-garde ones, and especially on Hollywood-hypes. In what follows, I focus specifically on the five films of The Twilight Saga, in search of an answer to the question

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7 Here, and in following sections, I insert authentic comments from the internet without always referring to name and place, since the sites they are drawn from are often obscure or no longer existent. I follow the spelling of the comments as I found them.
of whether new myths on love and new female figures have emerged. The films, based on four novels by American author Stephenie Meyer – translated into 37 languages – caused a hype over the last decade, especially in ‘the mediascape’ of the internet.8 Not being a media scholar, or a trained feminist media critic, I focus on the Twilight ‘hype’ mainly for a diagnosis of the present, and especially of present collective dream-narratives.

The Twilight fan base, which at its peak in 2011 reached an estimated 26 million, mainly consists of girls, but also includes women of all ages. The hype around the films and the actors is often compared to Beatlemania, with screaming girls all over the world camping out days before the arrival of their stars. The Twilight fan base reaches across continents, ranging from the US to Brazil and Argentina, Kuwait, the Philippines, Japan, Australia, Korea, Chile, and from Eastern to Western Europe, spreading over about fifty countries. The fans use social media such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and internet sites. Discussions take place 24/7 among fans from several continents, who exchange, in addition to Twilight-related gossip and ‘fan fiction’,9 weather reports, news events, and the time of day or night in their respective countries.

Several academic studies have looked for an answer to the question of why so many girls and women worldwide are so obsessively involved – with titles such as Bringing Light to Twilight (2011), Twilight and Philosophy (2009), Bitten by Twilight (2010) and Seduced by Twilight (2011). As blogger Abbeysbooks aptly notes, the author of The Twilight Saga, Stephenie Meyer is in no way a great literary writer: ‘she is an awful writer, it was by coincidence’ – meaning that Meyer accidently hit on something big (Abbeysbooks n.d.).10 But what exactly did Meyer accidently create?

The four original novels, Twilight, New Moon, Eclipse, and Breaking Dawn are all about life and death, as illuminated by the title of a recently added publication, Life and Death: Twilight Re-imagined (2015), written on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the series. In this last novel, Meyer has swapped the gender of all the main characters, in order to refute the dominant interpretation of the saga as a clichéd story of a ‘damsel in distress’. A quick look at the storyline of the four novels makes clear where this interpretation comes from.

8 The term ‘mediascape’ was launched by Arjun Appadurai (1990) to describe a new global cultural economy that transgresses the boundaries of nation states.
9 The Fifty Shades of Grey book series by Erika Leonard James as well started as Twilight fan fiction, on the internet.
10 Her personal blog ‘The Twilight Saga: Irruption into Simulation’ (Abbeysbooks n.d.) comprises astute analyses of The Twilight Saga’s sexual personae.
Teenage girl Bella has moved to a new village to live with her father, and falls in love with a remarkably beautiful and gifted seventeen-year-old boy at her new high school. Having discovered that he is a vampire, she decides that ‘it does not matter’ and cannot live without him. Edward, the vampire boy, is, in fact, a 100+ year-old man, who excels in beauty and knowledge and, moreover, reads minds. He lusts for the girl’s blood, which to him is like ‘his personal brand of heroin,’ but he remains faithful to the ‘vegetarian’ lifestyle that he and his family have adopted, feeding only on the blood of animals.

Worshipping the girl as his unique destiny and craving for her blood, he constantly fears he will kill her. While she struggles with her all ‘too human hormones,’ he puts the brake on their erotic encounters, for fear of killing her during lovemaking. The girl moreover is accident prone, falls, and hurts herself and ‘attracts danger’ mainly in the shape of attacks by non-vegetarian vampires. Edward and his family have to repeatedly protect and rescue her with the help of a pack of werewolves consisting of native American boys, one of them, named Jacob Black, being equally ardently in love with the girl. After her marriage to Edward, and the delivery within a few weeks of a half-man-half-vampire child, which kills her, her husband turns her, just in time, from a human into an immortal vampire. While vampires cannot procreate, Bella in the end has it all: baby, husband, and eternal happiness. Or does she?

From the above, it is clear that many elements of traditional mythical narratives are present, such as nature, death, desire, and semi-gods. Unlike more standard romance novels, *The Twilight Saga* thus entails themes that mythical dream-narratives are made of. According to Julia Pearlman (2010), *The Twilight Saga* is ‘a revision of American mythology’ (Pearlman 2010: 4): the narrative reconstructs conservative gender, class, and race relationships, and instructs the reader on ‘how to be American’ (14). Pearlman astutely analyses the racist subtext of the series, such as the fact that the girl Bella prefers the love of the white – superior – vampire man Edward, above the equally passionate love for her of Jacob, whose surname ‘Black’ is no coincidence.

But which model of love is preferred here, what do the millions of female fans of *The Twilight Saga* dream of? Is it the love of an overall superior figure,

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11 Anthropologist William Bascom (1965) clarifies that mythical narratives, other than fairy tales, ‘account for the origin of the world, of mankind, of death, or for characteristics of birds, animals, geographical features, and the phenomena of nature. They may recount the activities of the deities, their love affairs, their family relationships, their friendships and enmities, their victories and defeats’ (Bascom 1965:4). In contrast to the genre of myth fairy tales and folk tales are stories that present existential dilemmas for us to identify with (cf. Bettelheim 1976).
i.e. the love of the father, as Freud would have it? Is it the worshipping by werewolf and vampire of the girl Bella, out of a childish narcissism? Is it marriage, pregnancy, motherhood? Is Paglia right, and do the girls dream in terms of the eternal ‘natural laws’ that, according to her, lie at the basis of every myth? Is The Twilight Saga merely a new copy of stereotypical myths?

Paglia’s laws of nature totally apply to the storyline: women are men's prey in violent sexuality and suffer more than men from nature as death. According to Paglia, ‘In the day we are social creatures, but at night we descend to the dream world where nature reigns, where there is no law but sex, cruelty and metamorphosis’ (Paglia 1990: 4). The picture of sex as a demonic force totally applies to the Twilight story. The Twilight story featuring werewolves and vampires, symbolizes the nightly, animal world of sex and violence. Sex is even literally dangerous in the story since lovemaking would involve killing the girl. Paglia’s picturing of nature as death and mud is also present insofar as pregnancy is a struggle for survival, the unborn vampire child destroying her as a human.

While in the typical Hollywood films woman has to be mastered by being tamed through marriage or killed – in terms of Mulvey (1999) – the Twilight story is not about the girl having to marry or die: she must do both.

Feminists have complained about the patriarchal storyline, arguing that Meyer, who at the time she wrote the books was a stay-at-home mum from a Mormon background, not surprisingly focused on early marriage and pregnancy as a girl's ultimate desire and destiny. Pearlman (2010) argues that the storyline involves an outspoken conservative backlash against feminism. Diane Negra (2009) specifies how numerous film scripts since the end of the 1990s entail four messages that together involve a feminist backlash. Firstly, they propound family values and the social fantasy of the hometown. It is safe and rewarding for a woman to go ‘back home’, away from the big city, and back to a task as care-taker. Secondly, time is frozen. There is no ageing. Thirdly, work is in line with women's essential femininity; female professional achievements are an expression of an unbalanced life. And fourthly, ‘self-care’ consists of a hyper-aestheticization of everyday life, a luxurious lifestyle consisting of an excessively celebrated elective domesticity and a self-stylization through cosmetic surgery, dieting, and exercising.

The storyline of The Twilight Saga fits Negra's four criteria perfectly. Heroine Bella has gone to the countryside, only to ultimately become part of an extended vampire family as a mother and wife. She will not age: as a vampire she will stay eternally young and super attractive. All the vampire women in the series are involved in domestic virtues, not aspiring to any
professional training, but spending their time as spouses, with hobbies like fashion and house styling. The luxurious lifestyle of the vampire family is all about super cars, super houses, and super clothing, and Bella is given diamonds, phones as well as cars from her beloved vampire.

While, from this perspective, the Twilight story can be qualified as a conservative backlash against feminism, some feminist scholars have argued in contrast that its female first-person narrative allows girls and women to positively identify as sexual agents. The girl Bella pursues her own sexual desires and, in the end, has it all. Bonnie Mann (2009) concludes that since it is the male character that puts the brake on the erotic encounters, the story provides girls with a thus far missing narrative of ‘male accountability’ and ‘female pleasure without penalty’ (Mann 2009: 140). From The Twilight Saga’s female first perspective, we experience the sexual world of a seventeen-year-old girl, who can act out her desire since the male figure, for once, is the one who is accurate and sensitive. This allows girls and women the space to experience their own sexual feelings, instead of having to defend themselves constantly against male sexuality.

In this sense, the story can be seen as opening ‘pockets of agency’, to borrow a term from Maryn Wilkinson (2014; cf. Wilkinson 2014: 1). But, as Mann adds herself, there is a price to pay, since Bella dies in childbirth. Moreover, the storyline clearly conveys that it is the male figure that decides, in line with stereotypical patriarchal patterns. First marriage, then sex, and only then a vampire transformation. This is the right order as Bella herself ultimately admits. Early marriage is indeed the message, and early pregnancy is the happy outcome of it all. Women’s sexual agency in the Twilight world appears to be totally in line with the static Myth of Woman described by Beauvoir and Paglia. Bella’s agency remains firmly confined within the limits of patriarchal moral rules and, as such, can be qualified as a minimally free, limited agency. But, then, do the millions of girls and women who respond so emotionally to the Twilight world today, still live out their fantasies through men’s dreams, to paraphrase Beauvoir?

A New Face of Love

By adding a fifth gender-swapped novel to the Twilight series, Meyer aims to prove that the Twilight story surpasses gender stereotypes and deals with ‘the magic and obsession and frenzy of first love’ (Meyer 2015: Foreword). But Meyer does not fully understand what she wrote, blogger Abbeysbooks
argues (cf. Abbeysbooks 2013). According to her, *The Twilight Saga* in fact is a final retelling, in a modern variation, of the myth of Tristan and Isolde, which is about Courtly Love. The lady is courted and no consummation of love is allowed in the ritual:

Love was pure so to speak. This is Edward. [...] Twilight is perfectly named. It is the end of the Tristan and Isolde legend which ruled Western Civilization concerning all the rituals of love and marriage for 800 fucking years until the pill. As Nietzsche has said, “Only what is over can be fully understood.” And that is what she has given us. The full understanding of Courtly Love in all its splendor, passion, death, courtship, engagement, marriage, and ritualistic behavior.

While the pill in the 1960s put an end to the entire ritual, we are ‘still struggling to put a new one in place and haven’t succeeded yet. We are the FIRST culture in the history of the world that does not have a ritual for mating, betrothal, marriage.’ Twilight is a re-introduction of the ‘passion-myth’ that goes back to the medieval Tristan and Isolde legend, about love that can only be satisfied by death. It comprises ‘many inversions,’ but it is ‘a MYTH, not a story about healthy relationships in reality. It’s a MYTH!’ While *The Twilight Saga* is heavily criticized by many, she argues: ‘All these addictive, healthy, destructive, etc. [labels] DON’T apply to the Symbolic Order where mythology is. Myth doesn’t tell you how it should be, it tells you what is’ (Abbeysbooks 2013).

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir describes the model of courtly love, born in the twelfth century in the Mediterranean south of France, as only a certain ‘improvement in woman’s lot’ (Beauvoir 2010: 111). Courtly poets did exalt love and ‘many codes of courtly love appear, [that encourage] young men to devote themselves to the service of ladies’ (118). In this ‘gallant tradition, woman is no longer an animal creature but rather an ethereal being, a breath, a radiance’ (203). Yet, Beauvoir adds, woman remains the essential Other of man. ‘While courtly love might ease woman’s lot, it does not modify it substantially’ (112). The role of woman is still passive, being the one who is conquered, loved, and worshipped. She remains an outsider to men’s activities, and ‘does not take part in their jousts and combats: her entire

12 The following quotes are taken from Abbeysbooks (2013).
13 Abbeysbooks (n.d.) refers in this respect to Denis de Rougemont’s *Love in the Western World* (1956), which describes the passion-myth as rooted in the medieval Tristan and Isolde legend, resonating in twentieth century romance stories, popular music and films.
situation predestines her to play this role of onlooker. The chevalier jousts in tournaments for his lady’ (206).

This highly gendered model of courtly love is *The Twilight Saga*’s original scheme, which explains why Meyer’s gender-swapped fifth novel – not ‘backed’ as it is by the original myth of courtly love – does not ‘work’, to say the least. In the original storyline of the books, several tournaments with bloodthirsty creatures (werewolves, non-vegetarian vampires) have to be fought by the chivalrous lover, with the girl as onlooker and privileged prize. The courtesy of the lover who worships the unique lady-girl is without limits. Courtly love obviously differs from Sade’s model of sex as violence and rape, which, according to Paglia, is the truth of sex. From this perspective, the Twilight hype among women and girls emerges as a desire for the old type of romantic love, and as an alternative to the sex dates and the compulsory sexual agency neoliberal society inflicts on them.

The Twilight story is about the uniqueness of the beloved, and about impossible and all the more passionate love – as is also suggested by the story’s literary references to the classics *Wuthering Heights*, *Romeo and Julia* and *Pride and Prejudice*. As Abbeysbooks notes, Twilight’s focus on the uniqueness of the beloved has ‘a huge reverberating circuit of an impact. Girls who did not want to “put out” by the 3rd date (you have to or he moves on and you are dateless) who wanted to wait for love/intimacy were given the courage to decide not to be meat in the market place. That’s not insignificant. Twilight gave them that courage’ (Abbeysbooks 2013).

But in addition to girls’ and women’s – implicit – critique of a compulsory sexual agency, might there be another explanation for the Twilight hype? To understand it more fully, the five Twilight films must be considered. The director and scriptwriter of the first film were women, as, of course, are the author of the original books and main actress Kristen Stewart. Have these women perhaps created a new – more egalitarian – face of love, in a way Beauvoir was hinting at?

While Meyer suggested ‘hotness’ in her books, the Bella character in most of the films is the opposite of a (post-feminist-neoliberal) sexy agent. She looks nerdy in green and brown coloured sweaters and pants. Especially in the first film, by director Catherine Hardwicke, the camera identifies with the Bella character: she is the one who looks, instead of being looked-at herself (cf. Edwards 2009). This female gaze clearly departs from the dominant Hollywood film that privileges the male gaze. Mulvey’s famous article ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (Mulvey 1999), originally published in 1973, argued that cinema by its nature, steeped as it is in the act of seeing, satisfies a primordial wish for ‘scopophilia’, i.e.
the pleasurable looking at an object for sexual stimulation. But it also has a narcissistic dimension in that we identify ourselves with the image on screen. The film screen functions as a mirror in which we see ourselves and, as such, touches the primary level of self-identification of the very young child in front of the mirror, as described by Jacques Lacan. Both narcissistic identification and scopophilia explain why people invest their libido in movie stars.14

Cinema involves, in fact, a triple act of seeing, in that characters look at each other, the camera looks at them, and the audience looks through the camera's eye (cf. Edwards 2009: 28). Traditionally, in Hollywood films, the woman is the visual object of desire, since the triple act of seeing is male, i.e. the male character looks at the female character, the camera identifying with his perspective, and the audience with the camera. But in Twilight, the typical visual object of desire is Edward, ‘thus the implicit male authority of the gaze in fetishizing an image as sexual stimulant is claimed by Bella, and by extension her empathizing audience’ (29). While the ‘triple gaze’ shifts in other scenes to the female character, the power shifts back and forth between male and female characters, ‘between pursuer and pursued,’ (30) and ‘the obsessive pleasure in looking is shared between the characters, the camera and the audience’ (32). The pockets of female agency in the storyline thus are enhanced in the Twilight film, allowing for an interpretation of the story in the direction of an egalitarian model of love.

Yet other, ‘extra-textual’ factors are relevant for an interpretation of the films in this direction, especially the ‘sexual persona’ of main actress Kristen Stewart. Raised by a feminist mother, she calls herself a feminist as well and, on the whole, is not the pleasing female star that Hollywood is used to. She swears in public, and flips off the constantly harassing paparazzi. She does not smile constantly and swaps high heels for Converse on and off the red carpet. The fact that she does not make the most of her erotic capital, i.e. she refuses to always provide visual pleasure to men, generates a lot of hostility towards her. As Stewart comments, ‘(i)f a woman isn't happy and un-opinionated and long-haired and pretty, then she's weird and ugly. I just don’t get it.’15

14 The mechanisms of people's libido investment in movie stars have been further analysed in psychoanalytical film studies. From a Foucauldian perspective, Lacanian psychoanalysis can be re-articulated as comprising a useful toolset for analysing major patterns, suspending its all-encompassing claims (cf. Foucault 2003: 6; cf. the Introduction). Contra the Lacanian approach, Hall (1973) famously emphasized the active role of the audience in interpreting ‘texts’.
15 Quotes are taken from the official webpage of the actress, imdb.com/name/nm0829576/bio (last accessed, 21 September 2016).
As a method actor, Stewart blends her personal experiences with the role of Bella, creating a ‘visual form’ that allows for a reading of Bella as a female sexual agent – all the more since, in interviews, Stewart emphasizes the free sexual agency of the character. Yet another important, ‘extra-textual’ factor is the alleged off-screen affair of the two main actors. Whether it was a real relationship or a PR-orchestrated one is of no importance, since we are dealing with their public ‘personae’ and perceived relationship. Both actress Kristen Stewart and actor Robert Pattinson – referred to by fans as ‘Robsten’ – presented themselves as artists who are passionate about their jobs. They supported each other’s careers and never confirmed an off-screen relationship. However, the perceived affair also contributed to a feminist subtext in the films. From this blending of the love couple in the movies with the supposed real life couple, who allegedly shared love and work on equal footing, in combination with the female first-person narrative and camera perspective, ‘a new face of love’ appeared. The new myth of love that emerged, by accident, due to the several factors mentioned, is that women’s self-realization in work can go together with romantic love.16 Actress Stewart, who is passionately identified with by girls all over the world, is – according to her official webpage – totally involved in her work. She states, ‘as an actor your life is so wrapped up in your job. It’s not normal. People’s jobs don’t affect their whole lives. Mine is why I love my life.’ She is not only into acting, but also aspires to become a film director. And yet, this feminist actress seemed to be loved by the ‘sexiest man of the planet’, British actor Pattinson.

It was especially this Robsten Saga that made people invest their libido in the films. As one of the directors said, they saw real love unfolding on screen. And as one blogger commented: ‘[they] became friends and fell in love and somehow the whole damn world fell right along with them.’

The Battle of Myths

The fact that people invested their libido in the couple not only explains the obsessive love of the fans, but also the intense hatred of anti-fans – who call themselves ‘Nonstens’ – who were over-invested in the couple

16 Beauvoir’s own ethical life project involved a personal attempt to put up a new face on love: her life long relationship with her friend Jean Paul Sartre, in the shape of a ‘contract’ involving ‘necessary’ love next to other ‘contingent’ ones, has been an inspiring model to others. But this new face on love had its negative sides, especially for women who were often the sad ones left behind by adulterous men. Beauvoir’s relationship to Sartre is often discussed in these terms, but in fact it was more complex (cf. Vintges 1996).
themselves. Others routinely debunked the films as girl stuff, loathing Twilight and especially Stewart in overtly sexist ways. Most of the hatred against the actress came, however, from the female fans of male actor Pattinson. Right from the beginning of the media frenzy, Stewart was targeted by traditional female fans of the actor, who wished for their heartthrob Pattinson a woman with domestic values, like themselves. They expressed their anger that Stewart refused to take second place and kept pursuing her own career.

A fear of identity loss seems to play a major role in their extreme disgust and hatred towards the persona Stewart. Neither sexiness, nor domestic virtues proved to be decisive for a woman or girl to be loved by the most wanted man on earth. The old Myth of Woman was trumped by an egalitarian model of love that involved equal self-realization in projects in the world, rather than women’s ‘being-for-men’ (Beauvoir 2010: 159).

The hatred against Stewart reached a new peak in July 2012, when a so-called ‘cheating scandal’ hit the internet. Fifty photos were published of ‘best paid Hollywood actress of the year 2011,’ a twenty-two-year old Kristen Stewart, ‘caught’ by paparazzi in a ‘make-out’ session with a forty-one-year-old married father of two children – the director of a film in which Stewart played a major role, which was supposed to be followed up by a sequel. The pictures, published online by the gossip site *US Weekly*, show the two hugging (described in the press as ‘steamy lovemaking’) in the middle of the road, plus somewhere inside a car.

Stewart, at that time, was allegedly in a three-year relationship with Pattinson. During the years of filming the Twilight series, both young actors – Stewart was 17 when filming began, Pattinson was 21 – were hunted by the media to the point that they had to hide out and sometimes adopt military-style strategy to escape paparazzi and harassing fans. With the upcoming premiere of the final Twilight film, many wondered how the two actors would survive increasing hysteria, which seemed to heighten to a point where their lives were in danger and they could even be killed by a crazy fan or anti-fan, as Stewart herself formulated it.

‘Nowadays it’s harder because everyone is on Facebook and everyone knows where you are all the time, and everyone’s Twittering. I’m going to die because somebody is going to say where I am and somebody is going to kill me. Someone’s going to twitter my location and it’s going to be, like, BOOM!’

With the ‘cheating pictures’ published a few months before the final premiere, the heat around the two actors reached a new peak. While the fans initially claimed that the photos were fabricated, what really finished them were the alleged public apologies of Stewart and the director two days later, Stewart’s saying:

I’m deeply sorry for the hurt and embarrassment I’ve caused to those close to me and everyone this has affected. This momentary indiscretion has jeopardized the most important thing in my life, the person I love and respect the most, Rob. I love him, I love him, I’m so sorry’ (People, 25 July 2012).

Stewart’s supposed apology for ‘momentary indiscretion’ made the infidelity into a real deal. All the more astonishing to many fans was her so-called statement, since the actors had always refused to talk to the press about their private lives, and certainly never turned to a tabloid like People before.

For about two weeks, people reacted in shock. Twilight fans worldwide were heartbroken, and shared their grief. Lizzy on 7 August posted:

‘i am very very very sorry for them. i cant keep my feelings. i love them. i love. and i am very sorry and tired.’

Fan sites closed down, with declarations such as

‘Thank you and Goodbye. These past days have been very difficult but I believe I’m coping just fine. What to say, how to say it? This is not going to be easy’ (fan site Robstenation, 3 August).

Many other fans reacted in excessive ways in the media. Girls who had totally identified with Stewart cried and even spoke of suicide.

‘Robessed’ fans – infatuated with the male actor, obviously sided with him, and reacted furiously against Stewart. For example, Twiharder117 posted:

‘HOW DARE SHE CHEAT ON HIM!!!!!!!!! I WILL NEVER FORGIVE HER. SHE JUST LOST LIKE A MILLION FANS!!! SHE IS DEAD TO ME NOW.’

18 The quotes that follow are from the internet sites Hollywood Life and Gossip Cop, the fan sites Robstendreams and Robsessedpattinson, and Robstenation, and from the website of the journals Daily Mail and Huffington Post. I copy the spelling used.
Funnyface 1064 posts:

**BOTTOMLINE KRISTEN IS A LIAR!!!!! CHEATER!!!!!!! HOMEWRECKER!!!!!!!**

Stewart’s fans were devastated. B_dog01 on August 7, comments:

‘What she did was wrong, but people are being way to mean about it. Kristen was like a role model to me, she still is I just see her in a different way.’

Pati2002 posts:

‘Kristen if at all u read this, just know that some of us are still with u in each and every bad situation u r in, love you kristen.’

For many days the gossip press repeated itself, recycling stories of an ugly break up between Stewart and Pattinson, involving fighting about their dogs, plants, and homes. Explanations included that she had become bored with the relationship, or that she wanted to move beyond the Twilight personage of the cute teenager Bella, who she symbolized for so many years. Others suspected the director of serious sexual harassment.

A few voices, especially ‘Twilighter’ who claimed to be a lawyer, and sites like ‘Justiceforkristen’, and later ‘MyHappyRKWorld’ stuck to their suspicions about the so-called scandal, analysing the pictures as photoshopped and even staged. After one week the tabloids moved on and only ‘fillers’ were published, such as advice by therapists or gossip publicists as well as wild speculations concerning Stewart, with headlines such as ‘Inside her Betrayal’ and ‘How Many Other Men?’

On national television, comedian Will Ferrell called Stewart a ‘trampire’ (*The Conan show*, 4 August). T-shirts with the text immediately hit the market, with other text options as well such as: ‘FUCK Kristen Stewart’, ‘I wanna take a dump on Kristen Stewart’, and ‘Robert Pattinson deserves better’. Stewart was supposedly dropped from the planned sequel by Universal studios for being ‘damaged goods’, and because ‘[n]o one wants to cast the emotionally unstable slut that America hates.’

Donald Trump, who at that time was considering running for the presidency, warned Pattinson in a tweet not to take back Kristen Stewart. Trump writes: ‘She cheated on him like a dog & will do it again – just watch. He can do much better!’

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19 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QuwgoIFgQpY (last accessed, 21 September 2016).
‘Cuckolded’ Pattinson, when appearing on the *Daily Show* on American television was advised by host Jon Stewart to ‘kick her to the curb,’ to which he added:

‘when you are young and break-up, it feels like the world is ending but this is the first time I have actually seen the world react that way. It’s insanity!’ (*Daily Show*, 14 August).

Meanwhile, many fan-girls, via social media, fan sites, and YouTube, had started to defend their heroine, posting videos and selfies under labels like ‘Stay Strong Kristen’, Robsten is Unbroken’, and ‘We Believe in Kristen’. They launched a campaign to ‘Hide The Lies’, sampling visual proof of their hiding of the tabloid *US Weekly* in shops all over the world behind the dog food and other places, a type of global action unique thus far. Many girls clearly were not willing to let go of Stewart as their role model.

Other internet commenters started to get seriously worried about the public lynching of Stewart – characterized by some as a witch hunt or a stoning to death – that necessitated a permanent safeguarding of the actress, by official and informal bodyguards, the latter comprising a group of lesbian women friends. As one blogger commented:

‘They will probably harm her physically or attempt to [...] I hope no one actually kills her. With the hate and judgment that’s going around. I wouldn’t be surprised.’

And another:

‘This is insane. The psycho James Holmes who massacred people in Aurora isn’t even getting 1% of the hate directed at Kristen.’

And yet another:

‘Rob is not just an ordinary guy [...] He is the sexiest man in the world, he is a fenomen, he is the most loved one on the planet – what kind of
reaction cheating on him might cause? Robsten was the most beautiful couple of the decade, now Kristen is the most hated slut of the decade.’

People also noticed the unfairness of the incredible amount of public hate for Stewart compared to the milder critiques about the movie director. Especially men were taking up the task of defending Stewart against the hatred. US feminists at the time were not taking notice of the attacks on the actress, since it was ‘too far out from the real world.’

When, after a few months, pictures showed the two actors together again and when they engaged in a common press tour for the last Twilight film, the hype about whether or not they were a couple reignited. As blogger ‘Christopher Dark’ commented: ‘this kind of response is unprecedented. Perhaps ancient monarchs of old engendered this kind of response. Royalty is one thing. They were the movers and guiders of life then. But so much love for two actors is inexplicable to me and yet here I am among the second group. Bewildered but hopeful.’

Many other fans, however, were disappointed about the renewed ‘relationship’. Nicola comments:

‘Rob is such a dissapointment still being with the cheater. [...] Then obviously he is as fake and as much of a fame ho and has as much love for drama as the skank [...] And for all his millions he will be using a used Vagina and the whole world knows about it.’

Deepika writes:

‘he is a pussy whipped lap dog, doormat wussiness is definitely not an attraractive trait in a man. he is such a joke of a man.’

But while the actor is merely debunked as a pussy, the actress is openly threatened and harassed as being ‘a cheater, a liar, a cretin, a loser.’ Today, people are still not willing to let go: the cheating issue is brought up time and again.

Beauvoir, in her chapter on Myths, concludes that man’s failings are often lightly dismissed; even if he disobeys community laws, the man continues to belong to it, he is merely an enfant terrible, not a profound threat to the collective order. If, on the other hand, the woman deviates from society, she returns to Nature and the devil, she triggers

23 Personal communication, 10 February 2013.
uncontrollable and evil forces within the group. Fear has always been mixed with the blame for licentious behaviour. If the husband cannot keep his wife virtuous, he shares her fault; his misfortune is, in society’s eyes, a dishonour. [...] And the community will take it upon itself to punish the guilty woman in his place: because she offended the group as a whole and not only her husband (Beauvoir 2010: 213).

Stewart apparently has ‘offended’ society. According to some, the ‘cheating affair’ allowed her to get out of the character of the decent Twilight girl. However, the affair evoked the projection on her persona of the other side of the dominant Myths of Woman, i.e. being death and the devil. From the above, we can analyse the clashes on the internet, spilling over into the regular media, as a battle between two competing myths of love, which like many internet wars has ugly faces. The old Myths of Woman are taking revenge on the new egalitarian face of love, i.e. the Robsten Saga that a substantial part of the fan base had identified with. The new myth of egalitarian erotic love that had ‘happened’ as a result of the above-mentioned factors – and maybe myths overall ‘happen’ in such ways – is not so much about female sexual pleasure without penalty (cf. Mann 2009: 140), but rather about female ambition without sexual penalty. This new dream-narrative for girls, with hindsight, has to be unmasked as the egotistic project of Stewart, being ‘a hateful, vile little backstabber.’

Today, the Twilight fans that ‘read’ The Twilight c.q. Robsten Saga as a new dream-narrative of egalitarian romantic love, have moved on to the HBO series Outlander – the female counterpart to the archaic masculine series Game of Thrones – with the female first-person narrative of a female sexual agent in the role of a time-travelling medical doctor. Kristen Stewart, in the meantime, continues working and successfully survives the violence of the old Myths of Woman that still try to crush her. She challenges and replaces the dominant Myths of Woman at the heart of Hollywood’s dream machine, with a feminist freedom practice shared with others. And certainly, overcoming millennia old Myths – to paraphrase Paglia – is ‘no picnic’, Hollywood being not only still predominantly white but male as well.

The nomination of an all-white group of actors for the Oscar 2016 is an indication for what today is called ‘the unbearable whiteness of Hollywood.’ For an overview of the male character of this film industry, by the New York Film Academy, among others on the typical ways women are portrayed in most films (including absurd and ridiculous straw feminist characters), and the lack of female directors, see http://www.nyfa.edu/film-school-blog/gender-inequality-in-film (last accessed, 21 September 2016). In the wake of the Twilight hype, a contest for female directors was organized by ‘Women in Film,’ with among others actresses Stewart and Kate Winslet as
A similarly ‘dangerous’ domain of myth production is the male dominated gaming industry, with its stereotypically sexist video games, in which female characters are either absent or represented in passive, often hypersexualized ways. Anita Sarkeesian, Brianna Wu, and Zoe Quinn, among others, are engaged in feminist freedom practices in this domain. Fighting the sexism of games and installing new egalitarian ‘visual forms’, they have been heavily harassed and even received death threats. An anonymous hate campaign, ‘Gamergate’, organized against them via online fora such as Reddit, became ugly to the point where all three women had to go into hiding. As a result of her experiences, Wu considers the internet an increasingly unsafe place, where women and girls who speak out against sexism are routinely and seriously intimidated. Recent protests against the typical sexist representations of female characters in comic books and magazines have also caused much controversy.

Female singers, performers, and dancers who are hyped as ‘sexual personae’ in the media trigger a lot of hatred, and controversy too. Feminist women today read Miley Cyrus’s hyper-sexy performances – in combination with her postings on Instagram – as a freedom practice that critically creates a new sexual persona, subverting the traditional gender binary. Equally, male performers such as Stromae function as inspiring gender fluid new sexual personae. Kristen Stewart, who in recent years defies any labels – by refusing to ‘tell all’ and preferring to live in ‘the grey zone’ – likewise is a role model to many.

Singer and dancer FKA Twigs, born Tahliah Debrett Barnett has also been heavily criticized, in sexist and racist terms, for her porno-chic performance style. FKA-Twigs refuses however to conform to standard norms of heterosexual beauty, often wearing a nose ring and dressing up in unexpected ways. She produces and controls her own video clips and performances, takes the lead in her group of dancers, and speaks in a voice that is outspokenly anti-racist and implicitly feminist. Her style is overdetermined as a freedom practice conform our five core characteristics – expressing new ‘forms’ that break the moulds of submissive femininity through the performance of dance and music, within a circle of friends, in a shared artistic practice, comprising various ‘keys’.25

members of the judging panel, for directing five spin-off films focusing on different characters from the story, to be released via social media.

25 Feminist ‘total’ disapprovals of cosmetic surgery as well should be reconsidered from this perspective. Other than Kathy Davis (1995; 2003), Heyes (2007) outlines cosmetic surgery and dieting as disciplining and normalizing techniques per se, and recommends for women to turn to yoga and other practices that counter ‘the mental anguish and dis-ease caused by corporeal
normalization’ (Heyes 2007: 121), so as to move us into freedom without ever dieting again (cf. 129). But cosmetic surgery as well can be a self-technique in the context of an ethical life project, involving a freedom practice, as was dieting in ancient Greece according to Foucault (cf. Foucault 1986a). ‘Beauty’ as such can be overdetermined as a self-technique in the context of a freedom practice, as is illustrated by Muslim women who use beauty in the context of their ethical life projects challenging patriarchy (cf. Chapter 3).
From the examples discussed above, we can conclude that new ‘figures’ of female sexual agency are emerging that comprise women’s singular personalities, created in critically creative, slow, and arduous work within the mythical realm of the popular media, in a grim fight with its dominant ‘visual forms’. While the dominant figure of the female sexual agent spread by the popular media comprises stereotypical behaviour and characteristics of female sexiness, as analysed by Gill and others, a new female sexual agent has appeared that breaks the mould of the old Myths of Woman: a female ‘sexual persona’ who walks, dances, and moves, to paraphrase Beauvoir, and that is involved in work and in concrete activities in the world.

In that sense, post-feminist-neoliberal models of woman- and girlhood are to be conceived of as dominant models of personhood, rather than exclusive ones. New kinds of female sexual agency that emerge today in the context of collective freedom practices in the mythical domain of popular culture, prove Duits and Van Zoonen (2006) right in arguing for an open and critical eye for the various relationships of women and girls to porno-chic fashion. A bottom up approach of ‘studying upwards’ is necessary. Many girls and women, however, are unaware of the ways the popular media manipulate their own choices to be sexy ‘at a distance’. Many lack the vocabulary or tools to distinguish more liberating ‘forms’ of female sexual agency from schematic sexist ones. The truly new figures of female sexual agency that are emerging today in freedom practices within the mythical domain, may, and already do, inspire and encourage them to resist the sexist ‘visual forms’ and expert advice of the popular media that we are bombarded with on a daily basis.26
