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THESE SHOES AREN'T MADE FOR WALKING
RETHINKING HIGH-HEELED SHOES AS CULTURAL ARTIFACTS

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Figure 1. Feminist remix video, *These Shoes Aren't Made for Walking*, by Claudia Wobovnik, 2012. of the artist.

Abstract

A feminist remix video is a visual arts approach to critique social constructions of gender expectations. In my interrogation of the cultural phenomenon of high-heeled shoes, I remixed media messages about high heels into a video (see Figure 1) that included my video interviews with six people from six different countries, each different from the other in ethnic, work status, age, gender, and sexual-orientation identity. I asked interviewees about their understandings of and associations with high-heeled shoes. In the accompanying essay to my video, I reflect on my personal sense of self in high heels as both an acknowledgement and reinforcement of gender constructions of desire/luxury, femininity, elegance, restriction, and oppression. A possibility for inversion of given gender categories; as well as how my research-based video art re-envisions high-heeled gender identity, then is also explored.

Keywords: gender construction; meaning construction; femininity & womanhood; high-heeled shoes; patriarchy & oppression; visual culture; feminist remix; cultural agency

Desire, Femininity, Oppression

Most women have at least one pair of high-heeled shoes in their shoe closet. Whether worn on formal or festive occasions, at the workplace, or on a good night out, it is almost obligatory for a woman to wear high heels. Women and high-heeled shoes are like butter and bread; you cannot separate the one from the other – at least not very easily. In fact, high-heeled shoes do something really magical to their owners: They give her a sense of grace, elegance, and luxury – a sense of self esteem. Most men, too, love the sight of a woman in high heels for the aesthetic, erotic, and sexual sensation such a sight creates. In other words, her shoes pronounce her femaleness, her ‘womanliness’, her sex appeal. However, there is also a deeper layer of the symbolism of high-heeled shoes: Oppression, power, domination, and restriction in the sense that high-heeled shoes have become visual cultural markers of femininity.

Identity: Sense of Self in Heels

My own experiences and associations with high heels constituted the starting for opening a dialogue about different cultural meaning systems and sources of meanings of shoes. Usually, people do not think about the symbolic power cultural objects communicate due to the banality of these objects in everyday life. However, when engaging in philosophical reflection, deeper structures of understanding gradually become apparent. According to Flusser (1993), a Czech philosopher of communication and media theory, philosophical reflection never just aims at understanding but always involves the moment or possibility of change. In this sense, when I started my reflection on the symbolic meanings of high-heeled shoes and its impact on life in general, and the construction of gender identity in particular, I always tried to keep in mind the creative power of myself as a cultural agent to understand, highlight, criticize, challenge, and ultimately change the underlying meanings of cultural artifacts.

My understanding of high heels has changed in the course of this art project of creating a video that remixed mass media images of high heels with my interviewees’ perspectives on high-heeled shoes, along with political and medical media video clips about walking in high heels.

I realize now that I had applied a rather uncritical and unreflected understanding of the influence of high heels on the (rather narrow) construction of gender. For example, I never asked *why* high-heeled shoes have become so indicative of femaleness and femininity. Moreover, I did not question why high heels are considered by society at large an accessory for women only. I just accepted that men never wear (or are not supposed to wear) high-heeled shoes. Also, I was unaware of the way in which high-heeled shoes can function as signifiers of power, control, and authority.

In the making of a remix video on high-heeled shoes, I became sensitive to the (alarming) triad of femaleness, power, and eroticism, which I discuss in further in this essay. As my understanding of the symbolic power of high-heeled shoes deepened, I gained confidence in acting against the “hegemonic structures of meaning, knowledge or subjectivity” (Meskimmon, 2001, p. 46). By remixing contemporary understandings of high-heeled shoes in order to create alternative meanings from my emerging feminist perspective. In a nutshell, the feminist remix video not only is a critical piece of media art work and also a philosophical re-valuation, which is witness to the creative power of the cultural agency that I have acquired in the process of making the video. My agency has been to break free from the prefab values dominant discourse constantly imposes on society, and to share different perspectives in my remix video art in a way that offers viewers an opportunity to form their own re-valuation of high-heeled shoes.

Walking Tall or Falling Walk: High Heels Feminist Remix

In the interview process the multilayered ‘nature’ of high-heeled shoes became apparent, which highlights the ways in which meaning is culturally and socially constructed. I translated the videotaped interviews into a feminist remix with the purpose of underlining the polysemic character of the symbolism of high-heeled shoes on the one hand, providing a feminist critique of dominant discourses of femininity and femaleness on the other. Thus, the video is not only a linear presentation of different associations of high-heeled shoes but raises awareness of different discourses that constitute high-heeled shoes as a cultural artifact, and, in doing so, may directly influence everyday behavior in wearing, viewing,

and constructing meanings of high-heeled shoes. The video (see Figure 1) is a feminist critique of dominant understandings of high-heeled shoes, which glamourize restricted mobility: Social conditioning of desire, beauty, luxury, and prestige associated with high heels, can also be oppressive.

The overall impression shared by all six interviewees was that high-heeled shoes communicate some sense of elegance and aesthetic taste, which is directly influenced by the media that conjures images of elegance, sex appeal, and luxury. Video feminist remix, a visual arts approach to critique dominant narratives of visual culture, particularly as communicated in popular and mass media, constitutes a highly effective means of highlighting the process of meaning production and circulation. Also, the idea of remixing circulating readings of high-heeled shoes casts a new light on the ways in which cultural artifacts are not just constituted by cultural agents but also condition our behavior and thinking patterns in a dynamic process. High-heeled shoes have become such powerful signifiers of femininity that gender-identity is almost shaped around and adapted to include high heels as significant cultural artifacts to identify self as a *woman*.

The video includes excerpts from the interviews, which revealed a tendency of gender-specific differences of interpretations of high-heeled shoes. While the three men I interviewed tended to associate sexual and erotic images with high heels, the three women referred to the inner change – the gain in self-confidence and self-esteem –, high heels can initiate. Regarding the tendency to link the literal adding-in-height with a metaphorical gain in self-esteem, it is ironic to see that in practice (e.g., see Figure 1), this association does not always work. It seems to be quite difficult to maintain balance while walking in high heels. In this sense, the title of my feminist video, *These Shoes Aren't Made for Walking*, runs like a central theme throughout my remix video drawing attention to this paradoxicality. Likewise, it pinpoints the arbitrary connection of high-heeled shoes with specific meanings.

The interviews yielded gender-specific associations, varying from high-heeled shoes as indicating social status, higher education backgrounds, success, and career on the part of the female interviewees, to rather eroticized associations on the part of the male interviewees, name-

ly, high-heeled shoes as being a sign of eroticism, seduction, lust, and sex. The video makes visible the relationship between power and high-heeled shoes, even if in strikingly different ways. Similar to the feeling of an inner change when wearing high-heeled shoes, all female interviewees referred to the impression that the additional height by wearing high-heeled shoes metaphorically stands for an enhancement of status and reinforcement of power, control, and authority.

Similar to the symbolism of high-heeled shoes and self-confidence, the symbolism of high heels and authority is also paradoxical. On the one hand, women in high positions seem to – often unconsciously – underline their status by physically elevating themselves. On the other hand, by doing so they lose some of their bodily power and flexibility. Dramatically speaking, they accept the loss of mobility or at least an impairment of their walking abilities by putting on shoes, which add in height to show their authority. In essence, the interviews reveal that the high heel is quite important to project authority and to communicate *female* power.

High Heels: Sex Appeal and Female Power

Male interviewees did not necessarily associate a woman who wears high heels with higher status, authority, and power. On the contrary, high heels at the workplace are interpreted as being a seductive tool, a sexual weapon women use to distract and ‘bewitch’ their male colleagues. In a nutshell, it was argued that the only function of high heels is to emphasize a woman’s sex appeal. My feminist remix video (see Figure 1) takes up this dual symbolism in order to point to gender-specific readings, and to underline the way in which cultural artifacts function as markers of gender and identity.

The interview underlined the importance of high heels to the construction of femininity *and* womanhood, and the wearing of high-heeled shoes was regarded almost synonymous with the statement, “I am a woman.” In other words, high-heeled shoes as markers of gender-identity are considered to underline a human female’s womanly nature. As the emblem of femininity, high heels are exclusively reserved for women. Even though we live in a time that is regarded as open, tolerant, and flexible, a time that seems to know no taboos, the look of a man in high-heeled shoes in public remains unusual and strange. Interestingly, while

women have adopted almost all forms of menswear – which has become generally accepted by the public fairly – men continue to struggle with the ‘restrictions’ in their everyday wardrobes. While it is true that high heels are popular among rock musicians, cross dressers, drag queens, or men who are involved in the fashion industry, most the heterosexual men, it appears from what I see them wear, will find a hard time to take pleasure in wearing ‘women’s shoes’. Like an unspoken norm, high-heeled shoes are emblematic for femininity and womanhood.

Returning to the symbolism of power, the gender-specific readings of high-heeled shoes can be problematic. If high-heeled shoes serve as an important symbol of being a woman and femininity, and metaphorically stand for a heightened status and position, then it can be concluded that high-heeled shoes communicate *woman* power. When including the notion of eroticism and seducement, however, the symbolism becomes more complex. On the one hand, women in high heels are perceived as glamorous, sexy and seductive, and on the other, women in important positions wear high heels to communicate authority and power.

The mentioning of sex-appeal and power in the same breath is in my opinion, quite problematic, as it might reduce women’s power to a very limited scope. In both contexts, high-heeled shoes are worn to communicate power. However, often it is sexual power that women gain when wearing high heels, rather than authoritative power (as suggested by the interviewees the symbolism of wearing high heels for women in higher positions is a tool to seduce male counterparts). Power, then, is not reduced, but shifted to another layer of perceived reality. Keane and Monte (2010) point to the complex problems of reducing women’s power to sexual power and argue that if it is true that women’s power is indeed based only on her sexuality, interpreted by some as the potential to become pregnant, women are permitted a very limited time to be powerful. This assumption opens up another huge dimension when talking about the way in which cultural objects condition the construction of gender identity, which is the issue of age and aging. The reduction of women’s power to sexual power would mean that if women become pregnant or have children they will not be able to focus or give time to a high level position in the workforce. In such a patriarchal context, (sexual) power is predominately associated in popular culture, art, and literature with

youth, childlessness, and beauty. Aging or having children, then, may threaten women’s ability to be powerful in moving upward in their career goals. Reducing female power to sexual power means that the time frame for women to be powerful is not only restricted by ideals of youth and beauty but by her biological constitution as well.

A more positive approach to the intertwinement of women’s power and sexual power suggests that a woman’s sex appeal encompasses only one dimension of her rich power repertoire, which she can *deliberately* use. This makes her a cultural agent herself, rather than a passive victim of her sexualized symbolism¹. Moreover, the visual culture of high-heeled shoes entangle with concepts of youth, beauty, childbearing bodies, age and aging, which are cultural phenomena themselves that constantly undergo transformations, shifts, and changes within the individual and one’s relationship to high heels.

Cultural Politics of High-Heeled Shoes

Meanings are not fixed and stable but change according to wider cultural, political, and social developments. Moreover, depending on their social and cultural backgrounds, people have different – and very often conflicting – associations with one and the same cultural artifact. Meaning is not fixed or inherent in a particular object, but rather it is cultural agents who bring the object into meaning by using it in meaningful ways. In other words, high-heeled shoes are constituted as meaningful objects because they connect with “a distinct set of *social practices*” (cf. Hall et al., 2003).

As it is assumed that there is no true or original meaning in an object, it follows that meanings are fluid, fragmented, and very often controversial (Hall, 2003), an argument which is also part of the underlying message of my feminist remix video (see Figure 1). Despite the common acknowledgement that meanings are arbitrary and unstable, some objects, images, or symbols seem to have a very dominant, stable and fixed, almost natural meaning. Due to habitation and the constant repetition of certain social practices some objects are covered with a thick layer of

¹The stimulus for this idea I owe to Dr. Karen Keifer-Boyd and Dr. Debbie Smith-Shank.

a particular meaning that does not allow for alternatives. However, as cultural agents, we have the power to un-cover objects from their dominant meanings, from their “invisible imperatives” (Flusser, 1993, p. 17) in order to create alternative understandings of the world. Herein lies the freedom and power of the cultural agent.

Issues of power, privilege, and cultural politics come into play in the process of meaning construction, production, and circulation; and the question of which meanings are privileged. My feminist remix video in (Figure. 1) draws attention to the fact that meanings are not inscribed in objects but rather highlights the ways in which different and in some cases controversial ‘readings’ of high-heeled shoes co-exist. An example to illustrate that some objects have dominant meanings concerns the way in which high-heeled shoes are directly associated with women. Despite the historical background of high-heeled shoes, which reveals a complex relationship between high heels and gender, in contemporary culture they are considered signifiers of femininity and womanhood only. By processes of socialization and cultural education (even female babies sometimes wear high-heeled shoes) (see Figure 2) this underlying understanding of what it is to be a woman reinforces the way in which we ‘gender’ cultural artifacts.

Consequently, the symbolic meaning of high-heeled shoes can develop into a dynamic myth in which ironically only few women can participate. In this myth, high-heeled shoes have become so seemingly *natural* to women and the construction of femininity that women seem to be born at least with the potential to be a future-wearer of high-heeled shoes. The Australian artist Julie Rrap picked up this myth to highlight the way in which high-heeled shoes have become like a natural extension of their bodies. In her image *Overstepping* (see Figure 3), which is also part of my feminist video, Julie Rrap caricatures future women who have feet in shapes of high heels. In her work, the boundaries between object and human have completely merged – high heels are no longer a particular type of shoe principally free to be worn by all sexes instead of they are now a natural, inborn prerequisite of the female body.



Figure 2. Her first high heels by Heelarious.



Figure 3. *Overstepping* by Julie Rrap. Used with permission.

Pain and Impairment

As has already been mentioned, certain readings of high-heeled shoes are quite paradoxical. Yet another absurd example entails the question of pain and medical impairment. Interestingly enough, although all female interviewees admitted that high-heeled shoes are dreadfully hurtful – the references to the physical dangers and distorted feet in my remix video (Figure 1) are only logical consequences – they said that they were, in principle, willing to put up with the pain to have the feeling of being elegant and appealing. This is indeed hard to understand and it seems as if there is no rational explanation. The only reasonable answer is that the symbolic function of high-heeled shoes must be so strong that women often risk destroying their feet to wear them. Rather than abandoning high heels because of health risks (see Kerrigan et al., 1998; Kerrigan et al., 2001; Dixon et al., 2008), women bear discomfort, pain, and physi-

cal impairments to reap the symbolic benefits of high-heeled shoes. This phenomenon has even brought forth a new niche market in cosmetic surgery. In her article *Going Under the Knife for the Perfect Pair of Heels*, Sherr (2006) describes how women nowadays handle the pain of wearing their beloved pair of high heels that can enhance both body and soul (O'Keete cited in Sherr, 2006, p. 1). Sherr (2006) argues that women would rather alter their feet than dispense with their shoes, which reflects the general attitude of my interviewees. This bizarre development seems to be the ultimate confirmation of the importance of high-heeled shoes to the construction of femininity, which can indeed be dangerous and should therefore, not be left unquestioned. In fact, this example pinpoints the enormous power and influence cultural meaning can have on people and reveals the dynamic relationship between cultural artifacts and cultural agents.

High Heels: Quo Vadis?

As the title of my feminist remix video indicates, high-heeled shoes have long transcended their function of protecting feet. *These Shoes Aren't Made for Walking* (Figure 1) highlights the way in which cultural artifacts as trivial as high-heeled shoes reveal a whole world of different and often conflicting underlying associations which structure everyday life. The video points to the multilayered symbolism of high-heeled shoes and highlights the ways as which high-heeled shoes constitute the concept of femininity in an ongoing process. In this connection, the video (Figure 1), which is based on a collection of different readings of high heels, raises awareness of the arbitrariness of meaning in general and specifically, gender construction by the particular way in which these understandings are arranged and juxtaposed. Thereby, alternative meanings are constructed to challenge the dominant, often suppressing discourse of femininity that dictates what the norm is. In sum, a visual arts approach is a powerful tool to politicize gender constructions and de-construct dominant gender discourses. Similar to a collage, my feminist video remix circulates associations of high-heeled shoes and offers a critique of gender inscriptions through cultural artifacts in general, and in relation to constructions of femininity and womanhood in particular.

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