

The Consummated Body: Ana Curra¹

Isabel Clúa Ginés

From Style to Self-care

In one way or another, all bodies are a tale that deserves to be read; an iterative tale that constantly repeats itself, hiding its own narrative condition in order to pretend that it is pure nature. Only in the cases when this tale is twisted, filled up in paradoxes and breaks its own rules, its narrative condition is revealed. Those tears in the corporal tale may come from a huge variety of ambits and an even wider variety of practices that make it evident: the experience of transgender, the virtual recreation of the body or the incursions made on it, such as plastic surgery, body-building, body-art, etc. All these are practices situated in the realm of the quotidian, which are apparently banal but that at the same time defy -with very different meanings- the notion of a fixed and immutable identity, of an essential subject limited to being.

I think that one of the areas in which that subject and that being are more clearly revealed as a result of will and as a consequence of an unending exercise in construction is that of subcultures, whose first and classic definition (Hebdige 1979²⁰⁰²) could not have been more accurate in emphasizing the link between identity and style, if we understand the latter as a complex practice of re-reading and re-signifying certain cultural elements with a clear political intention of opposing the hegemonic discourse. Both Hebdige's and his followers' focus on certain objects that materialize that will of style turns out to be quite clarifying: Neo-Edwardian jackets, safety-pins or scooters -just to mention a few examples of those

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observed in the classic studies on this theme- are clear samples of just how any object can be used in the construction of a spectacular identity. I'm using the latter term in a somewhat biased way, utilizing the sense given to it by Hebdige when he speaks of spectacular subcultures; that is, as those that construct their difference both visually and stylistically, but at the same time suggesting that the concept of spectacular identity is a pleonasm. What identity is not constructed precisely through difference?

What I contend is that all identities are spectacles; and the body is their scenery. The elements that subcultures subject to the process of bricolage are not only pieces which are given a new meaning within the subculture, but that themselves grant meaning to the support in which they are displayed: they give a new dimension to the body and place it in the centre of the construction of identities. It would be important to say that, as is logical, I do not understand the body as something natural, organic, given, but as a whole that can only be intelligible through the use of extensions, prosthesis, supplements that make it visible and give it a reality. This idea has been mainly developed in studies about fashion and clothing, a subject that already in Roland Barthes's works is revealed as a signifying system. Clothes are not a mere group of items that cover our nudity, but, as Warwik and Cavallaro point out (1998) by means of a very daring metaphor, clothes, in the same way as a confession, turn the body into a discourse. Kraik also suggest this idea: "Codes of dress are technical devices which articulate the relationship between a lived body and its lived milieu, the space occupied by bodies and constituted by bodily actions. In other words, clothes construct a personal habitus (1994)".

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I find the concept of habit particularly suggestive, since it evokes two different meanings: on the one hand, that of dress that denotes a determined identity made public precisely through it; on the other, habit as repetition, as an acquired practice that points to self-care, that is, to an "intensification of the relationship with oneself through which one is constructed as subject", which is expressed through "those practices in which man makes an exercise on himself and through it he will try to elaborate, transform and access a certain way of being" (Foucault, 1988: 107). Both meanings thus, allude to identitarian constructions and displace the core of this process to bodily experiences and practices that make it legible, and finally allow the transformation of the body in a text.

The gothic body

In my opinion, focusing on the body and the habit when we are dealing with determined subcultures is an approach that has not been fully developed; furthermore, it can be enormously useful in the study of the "siniestra" subculture, that is, the gothic subculture born in London in the eighties.ⁱⁱ I am not interested in the revision of its origins, initial developments and basic informations about it, because the same facts and data are repeated in an enormous variety of works -scholarly or not- devoted to the gothic culture.ⁱⁱⁱ But I want to check two elements that, in my opinion, are essential: first, the splitting from the punk which gave birth to the gothic subculture, is mainly a musical change. So, as Tricia Henry Young points, the classic gothic sound is defined by the enrichment of the musical resources, which in general, are wider than those used by the punk.^{iv} Then, before the opening of the mythic venue, Batcave, in 1982, the evolution of the

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musical lines was still clear (the hymn of the subculture "Bela Lugosi's Dead" was composed in 1979; the albums *Three Imaginary Boys* and *Faith -The Cure-* were edited in 1979 and 1981, respectively; and the classical and influential *Unknown Pleasure* and *Closer -Joy Division-* in 1979 and 1980; only to mention some cases).

Secondly, and maybe this is more important, I think that the intensification of the concept of otherness is essential in the gothic subculture, in its own discursive articulation as well in its public projection. Of course, every subculture focuses on otherness as a key element that reveals the tension between the subculture and the normative frame; but, while the great majority of subcultures place themselves in a combative relationship, "against" the system, the gothic subculture is placed on the margin, in an undefined and ambiguous zone that becomes very meaningful. The strategy used is -we have to admit it- amazing: it is based on the incorporation of elements previous to the subcultures, directly imported from the gothic narratives appeared at the ending of the XVIIIth century, and developed at different moments of the XIXth and XXth centuries. So, gothic subculture takes hold of the cultural narratives that erode and deconstruct the ideal of subject fixed in the modern age, as well as the domination of the subject by means of the domestication of the body. This is the reason that explains, as Spooner points out, the continuity between the literary gothic narratives and the manifestations of the subculture that have in common the readings of the body; not casually the concept of docile body (the place where the political anatomy projects disciplines in order to obtain submissive subjects, always exposed to the power) and gothic body emerge at the same moment.

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The gothic body, as it has been studied in the scholarly tradition of Gothic Studies, is defined as a body that resists the process of domestication and deconstructs the ideal of a rational subject, stable and immutable.

Halberstam, for instance, defines the gothic subject as multiple and performative, dispersed across a continuum of appearances. The idea that appearance and essence are interchangeable concepts is pointed, too, by Sedgwick, who shows how the strategies of construction of this body are related with discursive topics such as masquerade, fragmentation, hyperbole, dissolution, etc. Then, "the external appearances are represented as more constitutive of personal identity than the apparently interior aspects of the self, suggesting a kind of 'possession' by appearances: a device of substantive presence beyond a profoundly instable continuum of surface effects" (Spooner 2004: 7).

Obviously in this constitution of the body as a place of resistance to power, gender and sexuality are essential categories; in fact, as Haggerty, among others, affirms, the transgression of sexual normative is one of the thematic bases of gothic narratives. Haggerty's work explains the gothic discards the dichotomical logic (homosexual/heterosexual, for instance, being one of these terms normal and the other abnormal) and develops an alternative logic built around the sexualization of power or viceversa, the empowerment of sexuality:

charged with a sexual force -sexuality- that determines th[...]Gothic fiction is not about homosexual or heterosexual desire as much as it is about the fact of desire itself (...) This desire is expressed as the exercise (or resistance to) power. But that power is itself e action and gives it shape. By the same token, powerlessness has a similar valence and performs a similar function. This creates an odd sexual mood in most Gothic Works,

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closer to what we might crudely label sadomasochism (a binary I will go on challenge) than to any other mode of sexual interaction (Haggerty 2005: 384)

In brief, all the references to the gothic tradition evoke a kind of subjectivity whose potential exceeds the social connotations and comes up to the field of the ontological; thus, the gothic body becomes a place of dissolution of the power, in a way that intends the ambiguity of power as something that subjects and, at the same time, gives form to the subject. The possibility of resistance is bounded to the act of questioning nature and the "natural" categories through we are built; this idea is obvious -translating all these considerations to the study of the subculture- in the Spanish denomination of the phenomenon: "siniestro" which evokes the Freudian definition of "unheimlich" and the uneasiness felt when something familiar becomes strange and threatening. From my point of view, the idea of the body as a representation is a key concept in the gothic subculture as well as playing with this representation and questioning the normal ideas about body, power and desire.

Nevertheless, occupying a place between the categories, focusing the discourse on appearances and being so creative in the use of the references and strategies for defining itself, are features that make this subculture particularly vulnerable to the mainstream. Furthermore, many of the homological breaks that the subculture has experienced in the last fifteen years must be related with this phenomenon: the use of strategies that, out of context, loose all their potential and give rise to topical definitions and fetishistic bodies which are devoid of subversive strength.

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Masks, doubles and limits

In order to expose how all these gothic narratives are materialized in the gothic subculture, I would like to focus in a classical and foundational example of the Spanish gothic scene. In particular, in the figure who has become -using the words of Pedro J. Pérez (www.nuevaola80.com) "the dark lady o Spanish pop", that is, Ana Curra. She is really interesting because of many factors: first of all, because her career in different bands (Alaska y los Pegamoides, Parálisis Permanente, Seres Vacíos, Ana Curra) is bounded to a process of mythification whose key concepts allude to the central point of the gothic narratives. Secondly, because Curra's image and position is more controversial than the image and position of other punk and post-punk divas, as, for instance, her own colleague Alaska, an artist of a very different style and projection. The analysis of both artists, Curra and Alaska, is very useful to understand how similar contexts can produce icons so different. I don't want to develop a discussion about the role of women in the punk and post-punk scene, as there are plenty of works devoted to this topic, as well as much online stuff which reports the presence, the impact and the contradictions of this phenomenon.^v But I want to point that the participation of women in the punk and post-punk scene engenders a wide variety of images and attitudes: some of these women have a stake in eluding the parameters of representation that sexualize and objectify the feminine body; for instance, So Catwoman or Poly Stirene, whose ironical declarations are unequivocal. Other relevant figures, on the contrary, use the erotization of feminine body as a strategy of self-presentation and the game with the stereotypes that have demonized women as a source of empowerment, as Siouxsie does. Anyway, all these women are placed in a position

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that openly expose them in front of the audience and the members of the scene; and this is a double-edged position that, on one hand, extends the logics of visual consumption of the feminine body, and on the other hand, denaturalizes it.^{vi}

Ana Curra, on the contrary, is located in a darker place not only because of her role as a keyboard player, that places her physically on "the second line" of the stage, but because of her declarations assuring that her participation in Pegamoides and Parálisis are defined for standing in the shadows (see, for instance, the interview appeared in Rock Special, 1984, where she declares that Alaska and Eduardo Benavente were the leaders of the respective bands). The fact that the gothic muse would be a keyboard player instead of a vocalist is a point that deserves, in my opinion, further consideration. As feminist musicologists have pointed the usual role of women in music is, precisely, as a singers because of -among other reasons- the instrument used, voice, is defined as natural, irrational and physical; therefore, their presence on a stage doesn't disrupt any expectation about femininity; on the contrary:

The instrumentalists question more sharply the act of display because they adopt a control position. The fact of being able to play and instrument show that they have mental capacity and technical dominion, two features usually connected with manliness. Furthermore, the instrument acts as a physical and ideological barrier between the female body and the audience; the female instrumentalists are focused on their instrument and they acquire power over the audience because of their dominion of technics. In consequence, they question the traditional characterization of female identity; their gender occupies a standing position in the reception of the music, because women in a control position are an exception to the rule (Viñuela and Viñuela, 2008)

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In my view, the most interesting point in Ana Curra's public presentation is the displacement of expectations that she produces: if we consider the images of the performer, the ideological barrier alluded by Viñuela and Viñuela is clearly defined by the instrument, keyboard, that hides literally the major part of her body (fig.5). But this fact, that cancels by itself the logics of visual consumption of the feminine body on the stage turns out if we take a look to the background. If we observe Ana Curra's pictures taken from the back of the stage at the live shows, the exhibition of a body extremely sensual is stunning. Really, the strategy is brilliant and produces a feminine subject who challenges, twice, the parameters of public presentation: first, assuming a non-feminine role as instrumentalist; second, displaying a hyperbolic femininity which finally can only be suspected by the audience, and never seen completely. Body, power and desire are the axis of a presentation whose core is the management of the other's desire (in this case, of the audience); it is an exposition that breeds desire but hides the body in order to differ the desire itself, which will never be fulfilled and will keep on existing.

The splitting between Curra's sensuality and Curra's technical control of her instrument are commonplaces in the accounts of her fans; then, we find diverging statements that show -without resolve it- the fascination for Curra's sensuality as well for the astonishing talent as a musician, always hidden when we are talking about composition but unavoidable when referred to interpretation and her majestic and powerful way of playing the keyboard, the so-called "toque Curra".^{vii} The strategy of hyperbolization of femininity confronted with the empowerment arisen from her condition as an instrumentalist

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becomes even more interesting when she joins Parálisis Permanente. The most famous LP of the band, *El acto* (1982), alludes directly to the sado-masochist scenery. Right from the start, the election of this image is a categorical declaration of principles since the practice of sado-masochism challenges -as Foucault point out- the heterosexual normative frame because reveals the strategic positions always involved in the erotic relationships. Nevertheless, the signification of the album cover has wider implications; in first place, there is an open and obvious challenge of the established roles by means of using the image of the female subject as a dominatrix; in second place, the game with gender stereotypes becomes more intense: the theatricality of the sado-masochistic paraphernalia is emphasized and it is projected on Curra's body, more and more hyperbolic by means of the attire she wears. At the same time, the body is -one more time- masked, hidden under a wig unmistakably artificial that doesn't allow us to see Ana Curra's face. This negation of the face is present in the cover as well in the back-cover. At the same time Curra's figure saturates the ideal of femininity understood as an object of desire and is presented as a desiring subject, Eduardo Benavente's body opens a new set of signification. We can see him completely feminized, not only in a submissive and vulnerable position that complements the sadomasochistic image of the cover, but in a self-presentation whose outstanding feature is androgyny.

The confluence between Curra's hyperbolic femininity and Benavente's androgyny is still more complex if we take into account the sentimental relationship between them. This private aspect is soon added to the imaginary about the couple and the band. And it is curious to see how in the

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narrations of their colleagues and their fans about the couple, there is an emerging necessity of impose an ideology of the romance (using McRobbie's term in a somewhat biased way) to this relationship. Then, Ana Curra is evoked by some people as a muse and, after Benavente's death, as a metaphorical widow, marked by grief and permanent sorrow. Then, the fact of leaving Pegamoides and joining Parálisis Permanente is understood and related as an act of authenticity, complicity, and mutual comprehension between the couple; and, in short, the couple is imagined as an unquestionable example of love beyond death. Nonetheless, Ana Curra seems to be more controversial, and these same facts are considered by part of the audience in a very different way; then, Curra is viewed as a source of discord, as a black widow, as a manipulative woman who is responsible of the dissolution of Pegamoides, Benavente's death and the legal battle in order to attain the copyright of the songs.^{viii}

So, the speculations about Ana Curra allude, finally, to the classical victorian dychotomy about woman: angel in the house or femme fatale. And this is really curious, in my opinion, because of two reasons: first, because the same identity supports confronted readings and interpretations; second, because the necessity to lead backs the narration to well known figures of femininity. Faced with this obsessive exercise of enclosure in established categories, I find very suggestive Derrida's comments on "undecidibility" (well explored by feminist criticism); as Cragolini points: "The undecidable ones are simulacrum unities that live in the binary organization of philosophy and disrupt it from the inside, and question it, and don't allow a third term, a solution or a synthesis" (Cragolini 1999). The point is not only this impossibility of

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resolving the signification and the disarticulation of the binary logic that we usually apply, but the idea of "simulacrum unity" which alludes to a strategical decision built across masquerade, duplication and defying of the limits.

Strange bodies, strange texts

Masquerade, ambivalence and suspension of meaning which fill Ana Curra's public image implies, in consequence, to surpass the normative frame: the exchange of gender roles, the theatricalization of the body, the emphasis on sexuality are revealing, here, that generic and sexual normative is a construct or at least, a place more stranger than it seems. The ascertainment of the strange condition of the body grammars in the public presentation is present, too, in the musical legacy of the artist, in particular in the pieces composed with Parálisis Permanente, whose songs evoke clearly the concept of gothic body: a monstrous, duplicitous body, which allows to materialize desire but, at the same time is vulnerable, rebellious, treacherous and tricky. Checking the lyrics of Parálisis Permanente (composed or not by Ana Curra) would demand another essay, since the themes they develop are richer than the topoi related with the "siniestro" imaginary and their quality has not equal in the Spanish scene. In general, since many bands are satisfied with the inclusion of macabre motifs in the lyrics, Parálisis Permanente deals with more complex ideas, specially with the concept of abjection which, according to Kristeva's definition, is everything that disturbs the order and the identitarian principles and trespass the borders between the self and the other. This disrupting presence is brilliantly tackled in some pieces as "Esa extraña sonrisa", a song that relates an abjected romance using precisely a motif previous to the subculture,

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but enriched with carnality and an acid revision of the habits of the daily life. In fact, the lyrical development of the song is completely "siniestro" as it deals with something usual (dates with a boyfriend or girlfriend) which becomes strange.

The capacity of converting a daily life fact -and more concretely desire- in a strange situation is present, as well, in other compositions signed by Curra, as it happens in "Tengo un precio". The song tackles the sexual consumption of the body in a very affirmative way; the song projects an ambivalent reading about the phenomenon and the consumed and prostituted body eludes victimization. The strategy is closer to that one used by Las Vulpes in their famous "Me gusta ser una zorra": "Prefiero joder con ejecutivos que te dan la pasta y luego vas al olvido" (I prefer fucking with some executive, who pays and forgets you). Of course, in this case the consumption of the body has a clear meaning as an opposition to the sexual heteronormative and monogamic models; but the subversive potential of the piece -that has been pointed and celebrated in many works- is, in my opinion, weaker than the expected. In the end, being a bad girl can be very spectacular and, without doubt, very funny but, finally it is a strategy that encloses the subject in a unique position; although it can be understood as an strategic essentialism, simplifies the whole thing. In this sense, I find more interesting the strategy used in another key song of the movida: "Quiero ser santa", signed by Ana Curra among others. Apart from the concrete circumstances that gave rise to the composition, it becomes a paradigmatic example of the elusion of normative models, using precisely the literal and hyperbolic reading of these models. The interest of the song lies, in my opinion, not only in the excessive assumption of the more normative model that we

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can imagine, but in the way in which this model is built, displaying all the bodily disciplines that allow to reach this ideal. These disciplines are extreme and make clear that the body is a place where power is inscribed but at the same time -because of the parodic perspective of the lyrics- is the place where it can be dismantled. In brief, the song is a carnivalesque appropriation -using the Bajtinian term- of the normative order that denies its ideological bases and, above all, chooses ambivalence as a form of action (an ambivalence reinforced in the execution of the piece, where the voice expressing the desire of the female self belongs to Eduardo Benavente).

Somehow, the literal reading of a normative model that, precisely for being excessively literal becomes disruptive, is the key to understand Ana Curra's role as a myth of the musical scene of the eighties: hyperbolically feminine, excessively technic, openly exhibited and, at the same time, fragmented and unfathomable, Ana Curra embodies an ambivalence that anticipates the ambiguous feminine presentations appeared from the nineties and claimed by Third Wave feminism. Presentations which refuse the normative frame, as well as the implicit normative identity of feminism, "el deber ser feminista" as Beatriz Ferrús points out, and develop a sharp revision of both concepts.

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ⁱⁱ Strictly, "siniestro" and "gótico" (gothic) are not synonyms. "Gótico" is an adjective used in the scene from the nineties; the first spanish manifestations of the subculture are defined as "siniestro". In fact, nowadays, defining oneself as "siniestro" instead of "gótico" has a generational sense, trying to mark the difference between the younger members of the scene, whose musical and aesthetic background is supposed to be more erratic and incoherent and the old ones whose subcultural references are more coherent and "genuine"

ⁱⁱⁱ See, amongst others, Hodkinson 2002, Goodland and Bibby 2007 and Siegel 2005

^{iv} "In the mid 1980s what became known as the 'classic Goth' sound was characterised by a preference for minor keys (often incorporating a descending minor third bass pattern reminiscent of Chopin's Death March); thin, reverberating electric guitars (often referred to by Goths as 'jangly mandolin-style' guitar); heavy use of synthesizers or effects processing; and gloomy lyrics performed by an angst-driven basso-rojiindo. While the melodic and vocal ranges tended to be constricted, the rhythms were richly varied suggesting a wide range of influences from Latin clave, rhumba and basanova beats to Arabic music to reggae to disco. In general, Gothic music drew from a much broader base of musical resources than did Punk" (Young 1999: 75).

^v It is very interesting to read the affirmations of women involved in the punk scene, such as those compiled in *Women in L.A. Punk* <http://www.alicebag.com/connieclarksvilleinterview.html>, where we can find statements as : "The punk scene has been and still is an All boys scene" (Dinah Cancer). We can find, too, comments that, on the contrary, emphasize the liberating character of the punk experience.

^{vi} I am alluding to the idea of visual consumption developed by Mulvey in her influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975)

^{vii} Among the comments, we find: "It is said that Ana Curra was shy and she preferred to be on the background although she was very talented; even she composed songs in Pegamoides as "Estrategia Militar", "Redrum", "Apariciones", etc." (<http://nuevaoladelos80.iespana.es/>). I find very curious the form of talking about Ana's role as a composer; a skill absolutely normal if we consider the solid musical formation of the artist.

^{viii} This image of the artist is strangely persistent and, even, surrealistic. She appears, for instance, in an article published in the magazine *Man*, whose title is "25 girls who destroyed bands" (<http://www.revistaman.es/Ser Man/25-chicas-que-rompieron-08-2006-13246.html>). Apart from the fact that the article recycles the old misogynistic topic about women as the source of all-evil, it is clear and very symptomatic how the break-off is explained; of course, Ana Curra is the responsible: "Before the accident, Nacho leaved because

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of artistic differences with Ana, who wanted a darker sound. Canut founded Dinarama"