

ANNEKE SMELIK

Radboud University Nijmegen

A close shave: The taboo on female body hair

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Abstract

In the past two decades body hair has fast become a taboo for women. The empirical data of sociological and medical research reveal that the vast majority of women remove most of their body hair since the beginning of this century. Body hair is typically a marker that polices significant boundaries: between human–animal, male–female and adult–child. Removal or refusal to remove body hair places the female body on either side of the boundary, thus upholding and displacing binary oppositions between fundamental categories. The new beauty ideal requires techniques of control, manipulation and self-improvement. This article first assesses how empirical studies map and confirm existing trends of body hair removal, and then explores indepth the cultural reasons for the development of the normative ideal of a hairless female body. While body hair functions socially as a taboo, it refers psychologically to the realm of the abject. One line of argument places the taboo in the realm of abjection, while another argument attempts to demystify the Freudian anxieties surrounding the visibility and invisibility of the female sex organ. While the hairless body connotes perfected femininity, it simultaneously betrays a fear of adult female sexuality. The hairless body may be picture-perfect,

but its emphasis on visual beauty runs the risk of disavowing the carnality of lived life. The hair-free trend of today's beauty ideals affirms that the twenty-first-century body is a work in progress.

A taboo on female body hair

Today, at least in the West, the normative standard of beauty ideals requires a virtually hairless body for women. The differences between hair on the head and body hair are huge: head hair is a sign of health, power, youth, vitality and attractiveness (Leach 1958), while hair on the body is traditionally connoted as dirty, ugly, superfluous, sexual and animalistic (Hollander 1993; Lesnik-Oberstein 2006). As the demand for a hairless body is hardly a century old (Herzig 2015), the empirical figures today are quite staggering: in the twenty-first century some kind of body hair removal is prevalent amongst almost all women across various demographic groups in western countries: some claim 99% (Herzig 2015: 9); others even 99.7% (Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi 2005: 402).¹ No wonder that in the past few decades the removal of body hair has become a big industry and the subject of many articles and commercials in popular magazines, websites and TV programmes endorsing methods like shaving, plucking, tweezing and waxing, to 'permanent' removal by electrolysis, laser or light surgery. Women dedicate an enormous amount of their time and money to the practice of body hair removal (Herzig 2015). Although naturally endowed with body hair, adult women have to pretend to be bald from the forehead down with a skin as smooth as an egg shell.

As the practice of hair removal is so ubiquitous, it is quite remarkable that in 2014 several artists and brands featured images of women *with* armpit hair or pubic hair. The first input for 'a more natural look' was instigated by Cameron Diaz in her *Body Book* (2014).² In the same month American Apparel pulled a joke in Downtown Manhattan by featuring a few mannequins in a shop window dressed in transparent lingerie and endowed with fully-grown-out pubic hair.³ In March the French journal *Libération* published a supplement on Women's Day with the title 'Féministes de tout poil', a pun signifying 'feminists of all kinds' where 'à poil' literally means hairy or naked.⁴ The humorous cover image and four more hilarious images inside show images of naked women with large wigs instead of pubic hair. The photos are part of a series *Lady Manes* (2012), eight self-portraits by the American photographer Rhiannon Schneiderman, who 'wants to interrogate our norms, reconsidering femininity, and women's objectification that is still dominant in our society'.⁵ In April 2014, photographer Ben Hopper published his photo series *Natural Beauty*, in which he portrays young women with hairy armpits, arguing against 'the societal "brainwashing" done by the beauty industry' (Hopper 2014).

The counter examples to the contemporary ideal of a smooth and hairless body indicate that a fierce debate is on. Indeed, in 2013 an online article for the *New York Style Magazine* started to

1. In this article I focus exclusively on western culture. As we will see below, empirical research has concentrated on women in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Europe.
2. See Santiago (2014).
3. See for example, Stampler (2014).
4. *Libération*, 8–9 March 2014, p. III of supplement.
5. The photographs were discussed a few months earlier in the *Huffington Post*, 17 December 2013: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/17/rhiannon-schneiderman_n_4455887.html. Accessed 23 September 2015.

6. Article by 'Kimberly', 28 May 2014 on *Ze.nl*. 'Ze' ('She') is a beauty site for women: http://www.ze.nl/p/155895/1_op_de_5_vrouwen_vindt_zichzelf_over-behaard. Accessed 23 September 2015.
7. A completely hairless body and head are conventionally a sign of illness, e.g. of hair disease like *alopecia areata*, or of the chemical treatment of cancer. This aspect of the hairless body falls outside the scope of this article.

question the ideal of the hairless female body, mostly focusing on the 'barren landscape' of the pubic area (Hess 2013). But in spite of some pleas and calls for a more natural look, a Dutch review in 2014 among 1,200 women showed that 96% of women do not want to follow the new trend of letting armpit or pubic hair grow and show.⁶ In the United Kingdom, too, the general consensus is that 'the bush is not back' (Boyle 2014). In fact, the news is that the bikini line in the United States has now been extended to 'the front as well as the back', including the buttocks (Gray 2014).

I argue that in the past few decades hairlessness has fast become an integral part of the western beauty ideal to such an extent that female body hair has become a *taboo*. This new fashion in body grooming has not always been the case; in fact, complete body hair removal is quite recent. As Rebecca Herzig writes, 'The ubiquity of personal hair removal in the United States is particularly striking given its relative novelty' (2015: 10). Exploring the historical and cultural reasons for the recent development of the normative ideal of a hairless body in contemporary western culture, frames the discussion of the female hairless body as an effect of institutionalized discourses and cultural practices in the Foucauldian sense of 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1988). Underlying the notion of the technologies of the self is a belief that the human body can and should be controlled, altered and perfected; a belief that has dramatically increased since the early twentieth century (Featherstone 1991). In fact, the body has become a project, as Chris Shilling argues: 'In the affluent West, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a *project* which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an *individual's* self-identity' (2013 [1993]: 4, original emphases). This usually implies regular practices of aesthetic modification and maintenance of the body, such as dieting, physical exercise, make-up and hair-styling, removal of body hair and cosmetic surgery. Joanne Entwistle explains that when the 'body has become part of a project to be worked at', fashion is an important way of styling the human body (2000: 19). Fashions usually come and go, but the removal of body hair looks like a trend that is here to stay.

I start with a brief survey of empirical studies that map and confirm existing trends of body hair removal. I then move on to semiotic and psychoanalytic interpretations of the taboo on female body hair, especially in relation to its rather recent extension to the most intimate parts of the body. The semiotic method focuses on possible meanings, codes and effects of body images in a particular context (Hall 1997; Rose 2012: 103). The psychoanalytic framework aims at revealing deeper motives for body hair removal. One line of argument places the taboo in the realm of abjection, while another argument attempts to explain the anxieties surrounding the visibility and invisibility of the female sex organ with reference to the cultural fantasy that Freud identified as castration fear. Finally I relate my discussion to the notion of body hair as a biological and social marker that polices and shifts several significant boundaries: between human and animal, adult and child, male and female, human and machine, and health and illness.⁷ Removal or refusal to remove body hair places the female body on either side of the divide, thus upholding and displacing binary oppositions between

fundamental categories. Some aspects of the hair-free trend appear to cement gender and other categorical differences, while other aspects seem to render differences in a state of flux, affirming that the twenty-first-century body is always in the process of becoming.

Empirical data on body hair removal

Academic studies of the hairless body are mostly written from a quantitative sociological or medical perspective.⁸ Although body hair removal is not restricted to our time nor to western culture,⁹ women in the West historically started removing hair from their armpits around World War I (Hope 1982: 93). On the basis of an examination of advertisements, beauty books and fashion catalogues, Christine Hope (1982) claims that the practice of the removal of female body hair was actively promoted between 1915 and 1945 in America as part and parcel of producing a certain kind of femininity for white women. The practical reason was the exposure of skin due to changes in fashion. As dresses and skirts became shorter and bathing suits revealed more skin, armpit and leg hair were looked upon as ugly, dirty, unnecessary and unsexy. Rather than buying into the explanation of an American obsession with 'cleanliness', Hope argues that the absence of body hair is signified as feminine, and hairiness as masculine (1982: 98). In this cultural system the smooth female body 'doesn't really mean "womanly", it means "childlike"', whereas masculinity is equated with adulthood (99).

The literature on women's body hair usually refers to white women, mostly overlooking differences of class and 'race' or ethnicity. In 1991 Basow found in her US sample that 81% of Caucasian women removed their leg and/or underarm hair. Caucasians have hairier bodies than Asians or Africans (Cooper 1971; Hope 1982; Hildebeitel and Miller 1998; Sherrow 2006), hence it can be argued they have greater 'need' for depilation. However, although her sample of black women was too small for definitive conclusions, Basow's study suggests that there may exist different social norms for black and white women. More blacks than whites reported not removing their leg hair, and if they did, they reported fewer reasons related to social norms. However, in a more recent empirical study about grooming of body hair among low-income Hispanic, black and white women, DeMaria and Berenson discovered that 'pubic hair grooming was extremely common among women of varying demographics' (2013: 226).

Figures for the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom confirm that body hair removal for women is on 'an enormous and continuing increase' and is spreading to more body parts, including the pubic area (Tiggemann and Hodgson 2008: 894).¹⁰ In 1998 Tiggeman and Kenyon found in their Australian university female student sample that 91% depilated their leg hair, and 93% their underarm hair. Tiggemann and Lewis found in 2004 that 97% of university women in Australia removed their leg and underarm hair. This was confirmed in 2008 by Tiggemann and Hodgson: 97% of Australian female students regularly removed their leg and

8. Little has been written about the meaning of body hair, contrary to the meanings and symbolism of hair on the head, see e.g. Leach 1958.
9. Most classical accounts refer to practices of body hair removal in Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, with incidental references to regions across the world (Cooper 1971; Hope 1982); Herzig (2015) has included a chapter on the hairlessness of Native Americans.
10. To my knowledge there are no figures available for other western countries. Although anecdotal information suggests that the norm of hairlessness differs slightly for countries as France, Spain and Italy, it can be expected that in a global economy and media culture deviations from the norm are minimal.

underarm hair; 60% removed some of their pubic hair; while 48% removed most or all of it. By 2005, the figures for the United Kingdom are equally overwhelming: Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi (2005: 402) found that 99.71% of women reported having removed some body hair at some time in their lives, which means virtually all women! Most commonly, 98% depilated underarms; 93% legs; and 85% the pubic area, largely the 'bikini line', with 31% reported having removed more than bikini line hair. Interestingly, their data show that age is an important factor: the older the women are (50+), the less they depilate. This finding is confirmed by Herbenick et al. (2010) for the grooming of pubic hair. This may indicate that older women conform less to the norm, or that the norm today is much stronger than it was when these women were growing up (Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi 2005: 404). The findings are by now over a decade old but are corroborated by more recent research that shows body hair removal now standardly includes the pubic area (Herbenick et al. 2010) and is distributed across lines of class, 'race' and ethnicity (DeMaria and Berenson 2013). Rebecca Herzig writes that

more than 99% of American women voluntarily remove hair, and more than 85% do so regularly, even daily. The usual targets, for the moment, are legs, underarms, eyebrows, upper lips, and bikini lines. Those habits, furthermore, appear to transcend ethnic, racial and regional boundaries.

(Herzig 2015: 10–11)

As she wittily puts it in her conclusion, 'we are all plucked' (2015: 191).

Empirical research confirms that today a smooth, hairless body has become the norm for women in western culture; that most women conform to that norm; that body hair removal is increasing; and that it is spreading to more body parts, most notably the private parts of the pubic and perineal area. While in the 1970s to shave or not to shave was still a feminist issue, depilation seems to be 'feminism's lost battle' (Spencer 2003). Sociological studies point to the impact of media in endorsing consumer culture's normative standards of beauty. They point out that the ideological impact of the ideal of hairlessness is 'part of the same sociocultural message that women's bodies are not acceptable as they are' (Basow and Braman 1998: 644). A smooth and perfect skin is a 'taken-for-granted' aspect of acceptable femininity (Toerien and Wilkinson 2004; Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi 2005). The conformity to beauty norms results in 'a cycle of effort to maintain the illusion that femininity is effortless' (Toerien and Wilkinson 2003: 339). However, while media play an important part in disseminating beauty ideals, there are deeper underlying reasons for hairlessness as the norm for femininity. Extending the feminist critique of the troubling normativity of beauty ideals in contemporary western society, I propose to examine the cultural background of those norms and the fears and desires they trigger.

Disgust of female body hair: The abject

Body hair for women is now such a strong transgression of the norm as to have become a taboo (Lesnik-Oberstein 2006). A famous example is Julia Roberts's appearance on the red carpet for the opening night of *Notting Hill* (Roger Michell) in London in 1999. She was glamorously dressed in a sleeveless red glittering gown with exquisite make-up and hairdo, but with a tuft of underarm hair to which the media and the public responded with outrage. The picture of her hairy armpit was reprinted time and again, for example reappearing in 2003 in British celebrity magazine *NOW* as one of the top-ten 'celebrity clangers', as the cover story's title ran. The image circulates on the Internet as a *faux pas* of this popular film star, for example accompanying a short article on *Daily Mail* online in 2008 on the 'unsightly hairy armpits' of Anne Robinson, the presenter of the British television programme *The Weakest Link* (BBC Two, 2000–2012) (Daily Mail Reporter 2008). Such outrage at Roberts's and Robinson's 'transgression' indicates the extent to which hairy body parts for women meet with social disapproval.

Negative attitudes towards female body hair in popular culture are supported by empirical research. In sociological and medical studies, such as the ones discussed above, women report 'femininity' and 'sexual attractiveness' as the main reasons for their hair removal practice (e.g. Tiggemann and Hodgson 2008: 890). Equating 'femininity' with 'hairlessness', or vice versa, 'hairiness' with 'masculinity', points to an idealization of the woman's body as 'naturally' smooth, while body hair is in fact a biological sign of adult maturity. Basow and Braman (1998) have found that both men and women view a woman *with* body hair as less sexually attractive, sociable and intelligent than the same woman *without* body hair. Investigating the relationship between body hair and disgust sensitivity, Tiggemann and Lewis found that both genders respond with disgust to female body hair. In fact, they report 'the almost absurd finding that attitudes toward women's underarm hair have become aligned with attitudes toward flyswatters and maggots in meat' (Tiggemann and Lewis 2004: 386). They explain disgust as a defensive emotion to protect the body and soul from contamination. It also hints at a cultural ambivalence since psychoanalytically speaking, disgust and desire are two sides of the same coin, as we shall see below (Van Lenning, Maas and Leeks 2001: 95).

The response of disgust relegates female body hair to the realm of the 'abject'; that which has been ejected out of the social order as dirty, impure, improper or unclean. Julia Kristeva (1982) explains the abject as something that signifies an unstable boundary between the inside and outside of the body. Hair forms literally the boundary between the inside and outside of the body, and can thus be loathed as '[w]hat disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva 1982: 4).

Being both *in* and *on* the skin body hair polices a boundary: its follicle is inside the body, while the shaft is visible outside of it. For Kristeva, this precarious inside/outside position puts body hair in

the category of the abject. Kristeva argues that the abject has to be made radically other in order to be excluded from the self. Body hair is easily removed, hence can be 'abjected'. Hair is related to corporeal waste, in that hair falls out or can be removed. We all know the disgust at the sight of finding hairs in the drain of the sink. The psychological process of abjection is revealed in the description of body hair by respondents in sociological research as dirty, messy, smelly, unhygienic, gross, repulsive and disgusting.

Mary Douglas's seminal book *Purity and Danger* (2002 [1966]), in which she studies why and how 'dirt' becomes tabooed, may give further insight into the contemporary loathing of female body hair. In her anthropological study of 'dirt' she admonishes 'to remember that there is no such thing as dirt; no single item is dirty apart from a particular system of classification in which it does not fit' (2002 [1966]: xvii). What counts as dirt is contextual; each and every society or time signifies different elements as dirty or impure. In order to understand what is considered dirty and hence dangerous in a particular society, Douglas argues, we need to understand society's 'deepest fears and desires' (148). Bodily symbolism, as the ideal of hairlessness that I discuss here, is, in Douglas's eyes, about confronting 'the great paradoxes of existence' (148). The question then is why in contemporary modern society female body hair has come to be endowed with such meanings of dirt and danger. Douglas argues that bodily margins are 'specially invested with power and danger' (149). 'All margins are dangerous', she writes, but

We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat.

(Douglas 2002 [1966]: 150)

This is an important insight because body hair and especially armpit hair are connected to sweat while pubic hair covers an orifice.

For Douglas, bodily symbolism mirrors cultural and social experience. What functions psychologically as the abject – as an ultimate object of disgust – figures socially as a taboo. Douglas reminds us that a taboo depends 'on a form of community-wide complicity' (2002 [1966]: xii). The empirical figures of 99% of women removing body hair confirm a community-wide, if not worldwide complicity in upholding the contemporary taboo on female body hair. In order to understand the deepest fears and desires that body hair instils and symbolizes, I further explore the insight that both Douglas and Kristeva have given us: that what counts as dirty in a society or as abject in a psyche, has to do with upholding, defending or crossing boundaries.

Body hair as boundary marker

The notion of the abject points to the importance of body hair as a margin or boundary. The danger lies in the challenge to the way in which a society has organized the world in clear categories. In this context it means that body hair apparently challenges established classifications. We already saw that hair is a physical margin that borders the inside and outside of the body. But body hair also points to several socially upheld categories, for example, the boundary between human and animal. Body hair threatens to position the human body as (too) close to the furry mammal, especially the primates that humans evolved from. Kristeva mentions animality as one of the threatening mental images responsible for the primal repression of the abject (1982: 12). The abjection of body hair thus points to a strong desire to reassert a strict boundary between human and animal.

A highly technological society like ours reinforces the border between humans and furry mammals. We saw above that the body is a project. All kinds of 'technologies of the self', as Foucault calls them, help this project along. They include health care, fitness, dieting or beauty care. Technologies assist humans in controlling, altering and perfecting their body. These practices point to a society that pushes the human body further away from nature in the direction of culture. Together with the removal of body hair, the image of the human body is definitely one of ultimate control. Technologies thus help to relegate body hair to the waste bin of contemporary culture, which allows for a high degree of artificiality. By disciplining and controlling the materiality – hairiness – of the flesh, humans turn away from nature with a touch of disgust: they do not want to be a 'naked ape' (Morris 1967) but a hairless human.

Another boundary that body hair establishes – or erases – is the one between men and women. Men are biologically hairier than women because of the male hormone androgen testosterone. Tiggemann and Lewis quite rightly argue that the link between animality and the abject is gendered. They point out that men's body hair does not elicit the same negative reaction as female body hair (2004: 386). In that sense women are positioned more ambivalently with regard to nature and animals than men. However, gender differences are complex in relation to body hair. Not only do more and more men remove body hair, they also treat more and more parts of the body, extending from the chest and the back to the armpits, legs, genitals and buttocks (Boroughs, Cafri and Thompson 2005; Martins, Tiggemann and Churchett 2008). The relative hairlessness of the modern male body brings it closer to the female body, while new grooming practices like the hipster beard reassert sexual difference. The fact that men are more willing to groom their looks (Simpson 2002) shows that both genders subject themselves readily to technologies of the self, exerting practices of control, improvement and manipulation of the body.

Body hair also marks the boundary between childhood and adulthood. Children are naturally hairless while body hair is a secondary sexual characteristic for mature humans. Removing body hair in general and pubic hair in particular makes the adult body look younger and more infantile.

Together with the demand for fit and slim bodies, the hairless body plays into the contemporary beauty ideal of 'forever young'. The cult of youth is promoted in the fashion industry with its deployment of very young models. Additionally, visual culture makes very little room for older models, pop stars or actresses (Sobchack 2004; Church Gibson 2013). In order to further understand the ambiguities surrounding the absence or presence of body hair, I want to place the removal of pubic hair in a historical and cultural context.

The receding hairline

In the past two decades the pubic hairline has receded further and further, revealing hairless pubic and perineal areas (Peixoto Labre 2002; Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi 2005; Lesnik-Oberstein 2006; Herbenick et al. 2013; Herzig 2015). The consensus is that the practice started in the late 1990s when fashion revealed an increasingly greater area of naked flesh with the high-leg cut of swim gear, bikinis and underwear (cf. Trager 2006: 118; Braun, Tricklebank and Clarke 2013). The history of pubic hair is thus, as Louise Tondeur remarks, also a 'history of clothes and fashion' (2006: 58). Pubic hair fashion was popularized by women's magazines in the late 1990s, which promoted the aestheticization of pubic hair by shaping it into patterns, like the 'landing strip', a triangle, a heart or even a logo (most famously with Gucci's controversial commercial in 2003 which depicted a 'G' shaven into a woman's pubic hair). The fashionable trend of the 'Brazilian wax' (small strip of hair) or the 'Hollywood wax' (all pubic hair removed) was made mainstream by an episode of *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004) ('Sex and another City') in 2000 (Herzig 2015: 135). Only eight years later, visible pubic hair is already portrayed as a *faux pas*: in a scene of the first *Sex and the City* movie (Michael Patrick King, 2008) Carrie, Samantha and Charlotte (and the audience) are shocked when they notice Miranda's unkempt red pubic hair peeping out of her bikini. Miranda's friends read it as a sign of her status as a divorcee and single working mother who does not have the time nor the need to keep herself sexually attractive for a partner. The removal of pubic hair was even discussed in an episode from *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) ('Two Tonys') in 2004. When one of the mobsters returns from prison after twenty years, he notes as one of the biggest changes in society that 'women shave their bushes now'. In an article in *The Observer* in 2002, Cath Ripley described pubic hair removal as 'the ultimate barometer of how fashionable you really are'. A few years later, the cover of the first issue of *Observer Woman* in 2006 showed a picture of a nude woman kneeling down on sexy sandals with high heels – the image of attractiveness except for the dark stubble on her legs. In the accompanying article, entitled 'plucking hell', journalist Polly Vernon writes about the unforgiving norm of a smooth skin: 'It's politically indefensible, time-consuming and hurts like hell. Yet, over the last year, British women have spent £280 million removing their excess body hair' (Vernon 2006: 39). In the past decade, women's magazines have featured many articles on genital depilation, thus making it into a new norm of beauty care (Ramsey et al. 2009: 2106).

These examples serve to show that the removal of pubic hair receives quite a lot of attention in mainstream media, but it still begs the question why. Fashion alone does not seem enough of a reason for the incredibly quick and widespread adoption of this practice. The rapid diffusion of genital depilation is even more baffling considering ‘the intense pain of the procedure’ of waxing those highly intimate and tender parts of the body (Herzig 2015: 148). Several studies suggest that visual pornography has been and still is a major influence on body hair depilation (Ramsey et al. 2009; Schick, Rima and Calabrese 2011). Ramsey et al. claim: ‘The acceptance of pubic hair removal as the norm may well be linked to the increased accessibility of Internet-based pornography, and this may lead to ever greater numbers of individuals removing all or some of their pubic hair’ (2009: 2109).

Interestingly, genital depilation is a fairly recent phenomenon in pornography. Schick, Rima and Calabrese found that in *Playboy* between 1953 and 2007, ‘pubic hair became less visible [...] as years increased’ (2011: 76). Their empirical evidence shows that only from 1990 onwards has the pubic hair of female models been modified; until then either the *mons pubis* remains invisible or pubic hair is unaltered.

The recent change towards total hairlessness in pornographic representation is interesting when put in a historical perspective. Until the 1990s pornography was characterized and even defined by the *presence* of pubic hair (Ramsey et al. 2009: 2105). There is thus a suggestion that genital depilation was initially a way of avoiding censorship (Herzig 2015: 141). The development from a hairy vulva to a hairless body in pornography stands in direct opposition to the visual arts where the representation of the female body developed the other way around: from a hairless body to a hairy one. Anne Hollander (1993) argues that the visual arts knew a long tradition, in fact from classical times onwards, of representing a hairless vulva, erasing hair and labia into a blank area of white flesh. In western pictorial art some delicate fleece could be present, but the Renaissance art painters developed an image of an ‘absolutely hairless female body’ (Hollander 1993: 137). Pornographic art of the seventeenth and eighteenth century represented the female body with downy hair as a sign of lascivious sexuality, while in pictorial art pubic hair was either covered by the famous fig leaf or by the model’s hand, or absent, confirming the idealization of the female body into a smooth figure.

This started to slowly change in the nineteenth century with the advent of realism. Visual reality demanded a more realistic approach, making the representation of the ‘natural’ female body more ‘artistically acceptable’ (Hollander 1993: 139). Hollander refers to preliminary studies by Ingres at the end of the eighteenth century, of the female body with thick pubic hair. But such representations were left out of the final version of the paintings. Similarly, drawings by Thomas Eakins at the end of the nineteenth century feature pubic hair, but they were made for private patrons. Hollander does not pursue the first realist renderings of female pubic hair in art, but some contemporary scholars name *La Maja Desnuda/The Nude Maja* (1799) by Francisco Goya as the earliest depiction of pubic hair in a European painting, and Gustave Courbet’s controversial *L’Origine du monde/The Origin of*

11. Surprisingly, neither Trager (2006) nor Ramsey et al. (2009) supply any references for these claims, other than a reference to Wikipedia.
12. Again, popular journalism shows just how strong the norm of a hairless pubic area has become: when a porn actress refuses to shave her vulva, it is described as 'shocking' and a 'scandal' (Mannheim 2012).

the World (1866) as the first painting that depicts the female sex with a dark mass of pubic hair as well as with the labia showing (Trager 2006; Ramsey et al. 2009.¹¹ The reclining female body is only visible from the leg up to the breasts with full exposure of the hairy vulva; in the view of Gaillard and Windish it shows a 'woman reduced by the most archaic male fantasies to her sex' (2012: 168). *L'Origine du monde* was in fact considered so scandalous that it was never exhibited and remained in private property until quite recently (Nochlin 1986); it is now showcased in the Musée D'Orsay. Gradually, the 'female nude, now provided with its primary sexual attributes, assumes its scandalous course into the public' (Baert 2009: 113). Modernist art in the early twentieth century, for example Modigliani's or Schiele's nudes, generally feature pubic hair, but were considered pornographic and hence subjected to censorship (Baert 2009: 113). In spite of the avant-garde attempts to represent the female body differently, Hollander remarks that pubic fleece was still surrounded by discomfort and ambiguity. For example, it remained a photographic convention to blot out pubic hair with an airbrush well into the twentieth century (1993: 140).

The point here is that the representation of a vulva that is both hairless and visible such as we witness in pornography in the last few decades is quite a novel phenomenon.¹² An important explanation may lie in the 'hygienization' of the modern body. Respondents in empirical studies usually refer to the hairless vulva as clean, sexy and attractive, and to the hairy vulva as dirty and disgusting (Tiggeman and Hodgson 2008; Toerien and Wilkinson 2004; Toerien, Wilkinson and Choi 2005; Schick, Rima and Calabrese 2011; Braun, Tricklebank and Clarke 2013). However, hygiene is often a rationalization for much deeper fears and desires. It fits in with the tradition that Anne Hollander uncovered in western art history where body hair is used to signify adult, even 'bestial', 'dirty' and 'sinister' sexuality (1993: 137). Hygiene clearly means more than just cleanliness, because it refers back to the boundary between the hairless human and furry animal, but also exposes the fear of contamination from the abject. To push the argument further, I want to argue that the reasons for hairlessness in contemporary pornography, and in visual culture in general, may well have to do with cultural anxieties and the dynamics of seeing.

To see or not to see

Pornography is obsessed with what Linda Williams calls 'maximum visibility', which she describes as 'the imperative of all pornography to prove that real sex takes place', including low camera angles, the privileging of close-ups of body parts, and the lighting of otherwise obscured genitals (2008: 352). Obviously, hairlessness enables maximum visibility of the female sex organ. Shaving the *mons veneris* makes the pubis noticeably visible: the otherwise hidden labia and clitoris can now be seen. The absence of hair thus reveals the vulva entirely, turning it into a simultaneously vulnerable and sexual site/sight. I stress here the faculty of seeing because of the immense cultural shift of moving

the female genitals from invisibility to visibility. In his short article 'Medusa's Head', Freud (1955 [1922]) describes the sight of the female genitals as frightening and horrifying. They are, however, not terrifying because the vulva, the clitoris or the labia make the (male) spectator 'stiff with terror', but because, in Freud's view, there is *nothing to be seen* (Freud 1955 [1922]): 273; emphases added). Gaillard and Windish (2012) assess contemporary reactions to depictions of the hairy female body at the end of the nineteenth century, such as *L'Origine du monde* (for the privileged few who saw it), as quite ambivalent. Male viewers were disturbed by the graphic representation of the female sex 'that both fascinates and terrifies, attracts and repulses, that worries, upsets and disturbs' (2012: 168–69). Freud's famous text on the 'ugliness' of the female sex is thus another example of underlying male fear and anxiety. His view affirms the fantasy of castration: the female as a vision of the castrated male. Van Lenning, Maas and Leeks (2001) articulate the ambivalence of disgust/desire at the heart of the cultural attitude that the embodiment of the 'castrated' woman invokes. The horror of the sight of adult female genitals is, in the classical psychoanalytic viewpoint, that it invokes castration anxiety. While classical psychoanalysis may explain some of the irrational strength of the public reaction of disgust to hairy female bodies, I wish to put forward a different argument. The hairless body of today allows visual access to the female sex organ as a site/sight of plenitude: fully endowed with a visible clitoris, labia and a vagina. This representational overload may signify quite a cultural shift in meaning.

With the new norm of removing pubic hair we have thus moved away from 'the horror of nothing to see' (Freud 1955 [1922]): 273) to the ambivalent pleasure of seeing too much. Hairlessness points to, and even enhances, immense anxieties and paradoxical desires about the visibility and invisibility of intimate body parts. While it can be argued that the presence or absence of pubic hair is only visible to a sexual partner, visual culture of today is quite obsessed with a voyeuristic play of seeing or not seeing the female sex. The notorious scene where Sharon Stone unwraps her legs in *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992) comes to mind as one of the first instances of playing up to a stunned and intrigued audience. Today, numerous video clips, fashion photos and advertisements display young stars and models in titillating positions with their legs wide open, in tight clothes, revealing the absence of pubic hair although the actual sex is still – but barely – hidden from sight. Another example of today's fascination with peeking into female private parts are the snapshots of stars without underwear who reveal their hairless sex for the lenses of ever-intruding cameras, for instance when they get out of a car as it happened to Britney Spears and Paris Hilton.¹³

The relentless visualization of the body, up to the most intimate body parts, is a characteristic of contemporary visual culture. The Internet has helped to intensify, commodify and disseminate this trend. The question then is if and how earlier fears and anxieties – of animality, dirt and the abject – associated with the female sex have shifted. On the one hand, images of the hairless female sex deconstruct the 'horror of nothing to see' while laying bare the desire to see it all. Genital depilation

13. See for instance, <http://www.staticusers.net/britney-spears-pussy-nude/britney-spears-pussy-pictures-nude.php>. Accessed 23 September 2015.

allows to see the female sex organ as multiple, with a clitoris, minor and major labia, and a vagina. Hairlessness thus reveals the complexity of female genitals, or in Luce Irigaray's poetic words, as 'lips kissing one another' (1985). Hairlessness also undermines the age-old association of the hairy vulva with animality (Gaillard and Windish 2012: 172).

On the other hand, the removal of pubic hair has the contradictory effect of rendering the female body prepubescent. Some scholars have objected to waxing the vulva as a social construction of women as childlike – 'supporting women's submissiveness' (Peixoto Labre 2002: 125) – and protested the body's objectification. Schick, Rima and Calabrese argue that the absence of pubic hair, together with other characteristics of the contemporary image of women in pornography, such as invisible labia minora, narrow hips and a slim body, emulate the unattainable physique of a Barbie doll (Schick, Rima and Calabrese 2011: 79). More disturbingly, a hairless and slim body entertains a rather complex if not ambivalent relation to sexuality, as it both enhances the female body for sexual display while repressing the very signs of adult sexuality such as a curvy body and body hair. As Alice MacDonald puts it, the hairless body results in 'an erotic mix of sensual display and sexual control' (2006: 70).

The ambivalence surrounding the adult female genitals is reflected in the increase of cosmetic surgery of the labia and clitoris to make them look smaller and tighter. According to cosmetic surgeons, women bring porn pictures to their consultations as the genital model they wish to imitate in order to create a 'designer vagina' (Braun 2005: 413, Reitsma et al. 2011: 2383). However, in an ironic twist, the female sex in many soft and hard porn magazines is often digitally manipulated, editing out the labia minora and thus creating a childlike vulva (Braun 2005). The effects of such digital manipulation and even more significantly, of cosmetic interventions, is to produce a 'new "ideal vulva" image', which reproduces 'a youthful, almost pre-pubescent aesthetic' (Braun 2005: 413). Bramwell (2002) also discovered that in fashion shoots and other pictures of tight-fitting clothes in women's glossy magazines, the external outline of the genitalia of the models are either obscured or digitalized into a smooth curve. In her view, this 'is consistent with the premise that within our culture women's genitals are seen as an "absence"' (2002: 190).

One of the ambivalences of the modern hairless body, then, is that the adult female genitals are simultaneously eroticized and infantilized, posed between the pleasure of too much to see and the horror of nothing to see, wavering between presence and absence. Visual culture negotiates and sells the image of the female body, even its most intimate parts, turning it into a spectacle of a visible commodity. The continuous exposure of images of hairless bodies creates a high level of 'sexualization' (Levy 2005) or 'pornification' (Nikunen, Paasonen, Saarenmaa 2007). It has facilitated a pornographic gaze to enter the space of daily life. This gaze renders the hairless body as always on display, potentially available for sex. Linda Williams's (1989) notion of the 'frenzy of the visible' may be helpful here to understand such a visualization of the body as a Foucauldian will to knowledge. To

make something visible is to know it and to bring it under control, i.e. to have power over it. The will to knowledge expresses itself by making something visible and increasing social control by disciplining it (Foucault 1998). The female hairless body makes the boundary between adult and child ambiguous. This ambiguity points to an anxiety surrounding adult female sexuality. Turning the most intimate parts of the female body into a spectacle is one way of allaying any fear of the dangers of sexuality. To discipline the private part of the body by making it hairless and even reshaping its form, is another way of keeping its potential sexual powers under control. The will to knowledge, implemented by technologies of the self that manipulate the body into a flawless perfection, defuses any anxiety over the force of carnal sexuality (Sobchack 2004).

Conclusion

Hairlessness is the new beauty ideal and hairiness the new taboo. Resistance to a prevailing ideal usually signifies just how strong and dominant the norm is, as we saw in the provocative images of American Apparel, *Lady Manes* by Rhiannon Schneiderman, and *Natural Beauty* by Ben Hopper. A taboo is a sociological concept; it is maintained by a society. Women in the West have shown 'community-wide complicity' (Douglas 2002: xii) in upholding the taboo on the female hairy body. The taboo nature of female hairiness can further be explained with the notion of the abject; that which is psychologically considered filthy, dirty and disgusting. 'Dirt is dangerous', writes Douglas (2002: x), and the danger conventionally lies in upholding, defending or crossing boundaries that society has set up. Body hair marks several of those boundaries: between the human body and the furry mammal, between men and women, and between adult and child. Removal of body hair sharply draws the boundary between human and furry mammal, resolutely redirecting women away from the animal realm. Removal of female body hair also re-establishes a firm(er) boundary between men and women, but this is partly nullified by the fact that men, too, resort to removing their body hair.

The third boundary I have discussed in this article is the one between adult and child. The removal of body hair, especially genital depilation, puts the female body firmly on the side of pre-adolescence. The removal of pubic hair points to a major ambiguity as it makes adult female genitals fully visible, uncovering them from a long history of 'nothing to see', but it does so under the sign of infantilism. Hairlessness makes a body look smooth and 'innocent'. Taken together with the practice of digital or surgical cutting away of 'excess' flesh of female external genitals, hairlessness may betray a deep-seated fear of adult sexuality. Sexuality is one of 'the great paradoxes of existence' (Douglas 2002: 148). By disciplining the materiality – hairiness – of the flesh, the paradox of adult sexuality needs to be put under control. The hair-free trend of today's beauty ideals affirms that the twenty-first-century body project is still ongoing. The achievement of hairlessness moves the body wilfully away from nature in the direction of culture and of the artificial, that is, of more control,

perfection and manipulation. By bringing the female genitals into the visual field, contemporary culture turns the private parts of the body into a spectacle that has little to do with the embodied experience of the flesh; its pain and its pleasure (Sobchack 2004). In less than two decades the female body has become a sanitized, hairless commodity: it may be picture-perfect but its smooth contours may well deny the carnality of life as it is lived.

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Contributor details

Anneke Smelik is Professor of Visual Culture on the Katrien van Munster chair at the Radboud University Nijmegen (Netherlands), where she is coordinator of the MA programme 'Creative Industries'. She published widely on identity, body, memory and technology in cinema, videoclips, digital art, and fashion. Her most recent books include *Delft Blue to Denim Blue. Contemporary Dutch Fashion* (forthcoming 2016); *Thinking Through Fashion. A Guide to Key Theorists*; *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*; and a book in Dutch on cyborgs in popular culture. Anneke Smelik is project leader of the research programme 'Crafting Wearables; Fashionable Technology' (2013–2018), funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research. See www.annekesmelik.nl.

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Art as Research *Opportunities and Challenges*

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The new practice of art-based research uses art-making as a primary mode of enquiry rather than continuing to borrow research methodologies from other disciplines to study artistic processes. Drawing on contributions from arts therapies, education, history, organizational studies and philosophy, the essays critically examine unique challenges. These challenges include the personal and sometimes intimate nature of artistic enquiry and the complexities of partnership with social science (which has dominated applied arts research); how artistic discoveries are apt to emerge spontaneously, even contrary to plans and what we think we know; how truth can be examined through both fact and fiction as well as the interplay of objective and subjective experience; and ways of generating artistic evidence and communicating outcomes. Offering examples from all of the arts, this volume will be welcomed by researchers and students in many fields.

Shaun McNiff is university professor at Lesley University, USA, and author of Art-Based Research (1998) and many other books on the creative process.