

# Artikel

*dunst* 2001-07

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## **Aesthetics of Abjection**

*By Peter Vadim*

*Dunst is a Danish term that describes a strong, uncomfortable and nauseating smell; odour; vapour; fog; nausea; reek; stench.*

### **Intro**

*dunst* is a Danish gender political association that emerged out of the underground queer scene simmering in the late 1990s as an alternative to the established and stereotyped lgbt scene accepted by heteronormativity. *dunst* was most active in the period up until around 2007. It developed from a few members in 2001 to more than 100 members, spread out in various subgroups like the performance group, film group, radio group, dj group, etc. This article accounts for and discusses how the performance group succeeded in exploring repressed aspects of gender by balancing between the political, commercial and artistic, through the use of images of trashy, sexual fantasies.

The article is based on the personal experience of being an active member of *dunst* performance group. Yet, the emergence of the article came from conversations with associate professor Karen Vedel, trashdrag Dennis Agerblad and composer Mathuresh about issues regarding artistic experimentation in the queer movement in general. In this way, they have contributed a great deal to the article.

In an attempt to clarify and put into perspective various dilemmas that have been motivators of the reflections and conversations, I critically consider *dunst* through theories and concepts of disidentification, abjection, the semiotic, counterdetermination and rematerialization. My critique of heteronormativity and queer normativity is directed at a system rather than people. In this sense, I discuss the anger of us *dunst* members towards a system that would not accept a diverse view on gender as a rebellious motivation that kept *dunst* running on the one hand, while, on the other hand, it was a threat to *dunst*, in the sense that the anger represented the counterdetermination and demonization produced by the system itself as a demarcation. I experienced the destructive manifestations of the anger through creations of stereotypes that worked as a means to gain power, acceptance, revenge and/or recognition, both commercially and politically. The constructive aspects of this rebellious energy are explained through an understanding of the semiotic as the need to express repressed aspects of the identities of the members of *dunst*; aspects that found new meanings through an artistic language that differed from the heteronormative and at the same time used symbols from the heteronormative. I will discuss how this approach may be seen as a survival strategy that departs from counterdetermination and thereby is connected to the notion of disidentification and rematerialization. Thus the article puts into consideration and further reflection the significance of artistic approaches within the queer movement.

### **Disidentification**

At the time, we *dunst* members were not aware of the notion of disidentification. Looking back, it makes sense to me today to explain and understand what we did artistically through an understanding of disidentification. Disidentification is understood, through the reading of queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz (1967-2003), as a performative survival strategy used by people placed outside

of the dominant ideology. In the present article, heteronormativity is referred to as the dominant ideology. Disidentification is thus seen as a performative tool to comment on contradictions in heteronormativity by using the logic of heteronormativity. It is a method to rework the cultural codes of the mainstream to read the disidentifying subject into the mainstream. Muñoz's theory is built on linguist and philosopher Michel Pecheux's (1938-83) understanding of disidentification: Pecheux formulates disidentification as the third mode of dealing with a dominant ideology, where the first mode is the "Good Subject" and the second mode is the "Bad Subject" (Muñoz 1999 p. 11). A "Bad Subject" is explained as a person who counteridentifies with the "Good Subject":

*"Bad Subjects" resist and attempt to reject the images and identificatory sites offered by dominant ideology and proceed to rebel, to "counteridentify" and turn against this symbolic system. The danger that Pecheux sees in such an operation would be the counterdetermination that such a system installs, a structure that validates the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of "counterdetermination"* (Muñoz 1999 p. 11).

Muñoz further explains how Pecheux argues in favour of disidentification as a third alternative to this dead-end: "Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this "working on and against" is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within..." (Muñoz 1999 p. 11). In the following, disidentification is explained in relation to the work of *dunst*. It is used as a reflective tool to understand how artistic approaches helped us *dunst* members from being trapped in a stereotype.

### **dunst happened**

*dunst* emerged as a reaction against the established lgbt scene. We *dunst* members wanted a space where we were not stereotyped by heteronormativity. A place to deal with our anger toward a system that would not accept us. *dunst* was started as a safe space by Ramona Macho, Miss Fish, Ulle Dulle and Mixen for people who were not accepted in the heteronormative world because of deviant gender views. But no one had a clear definition of *dunst*. We had a flat organizational structure, so no one had the last word. At our weekly meetings, the definitions were debated and often changed, while more people were let in. Questions around gender, politics, art and the commercial came up: If *dunst* was a community for gay men, then, what is a man? Is it the heteronormative man or a person who feels like they are a man? Should we open up the community to lesbians? Is 'lesbian' a heteronormative notion? Should it be a left-wing community? Then, what about the right-wing people who also struggle with gender identity? And is the left-wing not heteronormative? How do we represent *dunst* in the commercial world? The conclusions to most questions were that anything heteronormative was ruled out. This meant that *dunst* ended up with a very broad definition of who could be members. The definition came so close to notions of queer that it would have been arrogant to not call ourselves queer. Many of us had similar backgrounds: The freedom to explore various aspects of our bodies and gender in everyday life was not accepted by the heteronormative world in which we grew up in the 70's and 80's. Instead, we were told to follow the norms and act like cisgendered bodies according to our biological sex, male or female. It did not feel right. But when we expressed other aspects, we were considered deviant in regard to identification, or mentally ill. I believe I can speak for the other members of *dunst* and say that we felt wrong. In *dunst*, we approached these problems from an artistic point of view.

## Abjection

Looking back, identifying with anything other than cisgender bodies meant identifying with rejections of heteronormativity. Paradoxically, however, these rejections were immanent to the creation of the heterosexual subject. According to feminist philosopher Judith Butler (b. 1956):

*... the heterosexual imperative enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications. This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. (Butler 1993 p. 3).*

Butler argues that the domain of those unthinkable, abject, unlivable bodies, those who are not yet subjects, is produced "... through a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge. This is a repudiation which creates the valence of "abjection" and its status for the subject as a threatening spectre." (Butler 1993, p. 3). In this sense, looking back, as non-heterosexuals we were abject beings existing as inseparable parts of the heterosexist subject. Being who we were raised to be by heteronormativity, was a threat to heteronormativity, and this allowed the majority to punish us; we were demonized and opposed to the majority. We were cast in the role of the "Bad Subject" and the more we opposed and rebelled, the more we reinforced the dominance of heteronormativity. *dunst* was a place where we did not have to hide our abject identities. A place where we did not feel wrong.

## The semiotic

As a consequence of heteronormativity, a cisgender social construction that was called homosexuality had emerged. As non-heterosexuals we were told that if we identified as homosexuals, we would be accepted. Those of us who tried it out realized that this was actually not the case. We gained only very limited rights. We were not considered to be as valuable as heterosexuals. We were only considered as being not mentally ill. I tried identifying as a homosexual and it meant living a lie, hurting myself and everyone around me by constantly being forced to avoid the conflicts that inevitably emerged in the jungle of lies. And when my lies were discovered, the right to punishment was executed by excluding me from the privileges of belonging to certain communities. Many believed they were fighting for non-heterosexuals by empowering the homosexual identity that had been forced upon us. Our attempts to explain that we had individual identities and did not consider ourselves to be homosexuals were swept away, with the message that we were being ungrateful because we were finally accepted. As if attempts were made to make the homosexual identity slightly more attractive and thereby make us less of a threat. So we were still being punished for not being like the majority.

The conclusion made by us *dunst* members was that we would never be accepted by the heteronormative world. We accepted that we were not accepted. We were abjects. By not accepting the homosexual identity we chose a life of uncertainty, and with *dunst*, we had created an undefined space, existing in uncertainty. So what started as a sense of being wrong and a fear of exclusion turned into the privilege of having our own unexplored territory, with the potential to rediscover and redefine ourselves. Not knowing who we would turn out to be, we used our artist names; names that would not refer to or create images of our 'normal' selves. Rather, they referred to hidden elements of ourselves inspired by androgynous 70's and 80's rock stars and performance artists like those from the trashy world of John Waters. But in various senses, we still depended on the majority. For instance, the way to organize ourselves with the same rights as any other organization was through an NGO, a non-profit organization, that had its own rules, while at the same time being under the influence of the rules of the society in which it exists. So in effect, we created a community that changed the meaning

of the heteronormative world in which it existed, but still used the language of the heteronormative world by being structured as an NGO.

Still, the space we had created provided rich opportunities for disidentification. As such, it allowed us to enter a space of uncertainty that can be understood in relation to feminist linguist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's (b. 1941) notion of the semiotic. The semiotic is a sphere that expresses without words or classification as opposed to what she calls the symbolic: According to Kristeva all human beings go through an identification process at a very early stage in life in order to become a subject and become recognizable as such in society. In this process, we enter the symbolic order of social and discursive norms through repression of the semiotic field of incoherent, prediscursive bodily experience and sensations. These early sensations of the semiotic sphere at the same time are the basis for our development as subject, and what threatens our status as an independent subject. As understood in this article, the semiotic is the place, *chora*, that exists before or outside the subjectification process and the heteronormative symbolic language that follows: "[The] semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him." (Kristeva 1984 p. 28).

It is in this early identification process that human beings identify with what is accepted in the social world into which we are born: In this process, experiences of bodily openness and incoherence – like vomit, blood, faeces, etc. – are rejected as abject, i.e. belonging to an order outside the neat symmetry between a well-defined, independent subject and a world of objects clearly differentiated from the subject. The abject is everything that threatens the neat distinction between subject and object, and as such, it is associated with disgust, fear, nausea, etc.

Since one of the most basic distinctions in our society is the heteronormative gender distinction, everything that threatens the symmetry between male and female risks being experienced as abject. When we members of *dunst* identified with norms of sexuality and bodily experiences that were not accepted by heteronormativity, we expressed experiences that were otherwise suppressed, and we opened for different symbolic meanings. Thus,

*dunst* became a place to express and develop these aspects of ourselves that had been suppressed by heteronormativity. As such, the meanings of our new selves varied from the meanings of our 'normal' selves and consequently the relations we entered changed meaning. We did not have a language for what we did. We expressed ourselves artistically through music, film, performance, poetry, painting, etc., and the poetic language describing it referred to repressed elements in positive ways; ways that were not accepted by heteronormativity. Literary scholar Jon Cook comments on Kristeva's writings: "Poetic language marks the return of the repressed elements of the semiotic within the realm of the symbolic ..." (Cook 2004 p. 437).

## Rematerialization

Today, I view those feelings of being wrong through the reading of Butler's explanation of how sex is forcibly materialized through reiteration of norms favoring a hegemonic force. Butler argues that the necessity of this reiteration

*... is a sign that materialization is never quite complete, that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled. Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law. (Butler 1993 p. 2).*

Heteronormativity held subjects trapped in its understanding of sex and gender, but at the same time, it provided the possibilities of proving it wrong by using its own logic in disidentificatory ways. This gave us *dunst* members opportunities to rematerialize ourselves.

### Artistic strategies

The artistic elements of *dunst* needed outlets, and we needed money to pay rent for our whereabouts. So we decided to throw electro/techno club nights. We built on a club culture popular at the time in Denmark and the rest of Europe. But instead of simply entertaining our guests we made gender political performances throughout the nights inspired by the concept of happenings, where activism has an artistic and provocative twist with possibilities for audience participation. We mostly performed in squatted houses and underground clubs around Europe. Occasionally we were invited to and participated in various lgbt festivals.

We all more or less experimented artistically with sexual fantasies. The artistic intentions were many, and I can only account for my own: I was not sure where my sexual fantasies and sexual tensions came from, but I suspected that they had something to do with the tensions of the society I was born into: Some of the fantasies resembled the abusive relations in heteronormativity; older men in positions of power taking advantage of me sexually. If so, then heteronormativity had a part in creating the sexual fantasies it rejected. And this would make sense in connection with Butler's notion that abject beings are produced "...through a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge." (Butler 1993 p. 3). In this sense, living out the fantasies would mean taking part in the reiteration of heteronormativity. I did not appreciate the fantasies that made me connect with heteronormativity in abusive ways. Not because they were considered wrong by heteronormativity, but because they felt like assaults in themselves.

I set out to explore these questions artistically by displaying my sexual fantasies in front of an audience. I created a persona called Johnny Warehouse. He identified as a lesbian who wanted to be a gay male. He was "the cheapest whore in the whole, wide world". Anyone could treat him in any way they wanted, and the ashes from a cigarette would be payment enough. One image I created was at an lgbt pride on a stage at Copenhagen City Hall Square. *dunst* was invited to perform on the square, filled with thousands of people, and each *dunst* member made their own image. The image I made was Johnny Warehouse sparsely clad with two older men groping him while he sang a song with the lyrics: "You can treat me like a slut." and "Do you think I'm a nasty girl?" This image was made to explore how the garbage I had become, growing up in a heteronormative world, turned me on sexually. By displaying the sexual fantasy in a new light, not hiding it because it was shameful, I hoped to turn around the relation by not being the sexual object and instead display the ambiguities in the relation. It raised questions about *dunst* accepting sex offenders. To be clear, *dunst* did not accept sex offenders. On the contrary, those were the ones our anger was aimed at: heterosexual men who believed it was their right to offend and punish people for not being like them and use any other individual as a sexual object. Another image I made was at a *dunst* party in Ungdomshuset, an underground venue for music and meeting place for varying autonomous groups. The trashdrag Puta was urinating on me on stage while I was dancing and singing my song "Suck My Cock" (still as Johnny Warehouse). An image meant to confirm that we are the garbage and we are not hiding it. Rather, we swell in it in joyous ways – the other *dunst* members did not mind performing afterwards in the urine left on stage

### Sublime fun

I believe all *dunst* members had individual intentions and approaches. We were approximately 45 performers. Some were proud of their sexual fantasies, others did not have abusive fantasies, others

again did not have fantasies regarding heteronormativity, etc. This created a variety of images. Regardless of what the other *dunst* members' intentions were, the images were not to be mistaken: Dennis Agerblad performing his song "I Want Your Shit"; Liebling Siebling and Arthur alternately swallowing each other's vomit by vomiting into each other's mouths; Ramona Macho creating images of smiling, obliging girls with a twist of filth. On one occasion when we were invited to Filmhuset to perform, Ramona walked smilingly through the adjoining but not partaking restaurant Sult (Hunger) with her dirty underwear hanging down her ankles. We were told it was unacceptable to provoke their guests like that. Happenings included Hairwerk performing his song about removing all taboos; Miss Fish as a person living in the shadow; prostitution in various images; Alexis performing his song "I'm a Cock Slut"; Tina Träsch being trash; Lene Leth Lebbe squeezing large, festering abscess, made out of eggs, off her body turning them into food for the guests; Knud Vesterskov making sure that everyone was doing their worst.

There were many other images. Most of the images displayed our various understandings of our gender and were sexual in the sense that they emphasized how we were not heterosexual. The accompanying music can, in general, be seen as a parody of the popular music of the time. The songs were meant as serious productions but produced in the same trashy ways that characterized *dunst*. They can be described as anti-music in the sense that they did not attempt to please an audience, but still used the same effects as popular, heteronormative music.

The freedom we represented and the empowerment it gave us attracted people who wanted to take part in it, at least for one night. More and more people turned up at our parties. It culminated at the parties in Ungdomshuset. We had parties there with around 800 guests. It was a blast. All those tensions that were released felt amazingly satisfying and extremely fun. It was a great celebration of the joy of trash. What was supposed to be a heteronormative punishment, banishing us to live as trash, turned out to be sublime fun. This was the real gift that heteronormativity had given us and not the limited rights we could have as homosexuals. It was surprising to ourselves what we had created because it was an atmosphere that grew out of the space we built together. In this sense, no one could take the credit for it in a competition of being the best. *dunst* became an artistic process in itself, in the sense that everything the members and our guests did individually was in the spirit of *dunst*. We wrote ourselves into the concept of participatory and relational art that was burgeoning in Denmark at the time, partly as a reaction against the elitist stand-alone artist. Like many other danish artists we took a step away from theorizing and into exploring our bodies. Only, we drove anti-elitism to a trashy level where only few would follow.

### **Aesthetics of abjection**

*dunst* was a threat to heteronormativity because we turned the shameful into fun. We proved heteronormativity wrong. We were a threat in the sense that we did not oppose heteronormativity as rebels. Rather, we accepted the trashy identities that heteronormativity had given us. If we were told that we were wrong, we replied: Yes, we are wrong and we love it, it turns us on sexually. We were what heteronormativity wanted us to be, only we did not hide it. In this sense, we had developed a method that can be described by the notion of disidentification: to heterosexual culture, the images were satisfying because they were heterosexist in that they acknowledged how non-heterosexuals were seen as garbage and heterosexuals were not. As such, we worked within the dominant ideology using its language. At the same time, the images were disturbing to heterosexuals, because they showed how their garbage, that was supposed to suffer, actually had fun, and in this sense empowered non-heterosexuals. Thereby the images removed the sexual pleasure, if any, that would arise from taking



advantage of non-heterosexuals. In this sense, we worked against the dominant ideology by working with it. We used heteronormative language in favor of ourselves. And so we rematerialized ourselves. It became a cooperation with heteronormativity in the sense that heteronormativity produced the abjection and we produced the aesthetics of abjection.

### **Producing a rebellious stereotype**

The more notorious we became, the more opportunities we had to become known for our arts, and the more the internal competition grew. Sometimes we were hired as a group and sometimes only certain individuals were hired, and this would cause friction. We got hired to events for being rebellious, and the employers wanted us to create just enough tension and drama to make it an exciting night for their guests. In other words; we were the entertainment. In this sense *dunst* came to produce a stereotype rebellious queer.

We were aware of the destructive impact this commercial development could have on the cohesiveness and diversity of *dunst*, so we did everything we could to control the development: One approach was to interpret whatever the commercial world wanted from us in our own trashy ways. We were trash and they had bought trash. With our dirty underwear, urine, vomit, shit and otherwise “unacceptable” behaviour we did not make it an exciting night for the guests. Instead, the guests were appalled by us. The reactions we got was being thrown out or banished. It became our thing to accomplish at least one of those things because we saw it as a victory to the idea of *dunst* not aligning with the values of the established, commercial scene. But the commercial world quickly adapted to our chaotic and unpredictable style. Many people were obviously entertained by the surprising scandals we accomplished. So now we got hired as scandal makers, and the employers could promote their parties with the promise of a scandal. This again gave the commercial world the power, and we slowly saw ourselves turning into an entertainment group.

The power we thought we would get as we became more notorious turned out to be the opposite. This was also a fact on the European queer scene. As mentioned earlier, the definitions of *dunst* are very close, if not similar, to those definitions of queer that allow the genderqueer or non-binary. Genderqueer describes people who identify as being outside the cisgender, with gender views that span from gender-fluidity to experiences of a third or other gender. So we thought that the queer places we went to had open minds about our exploration and development of our gender. But in many instances, we were met with prohibitions. Our sexist images, that were meant to mock and set us free from heteronormativity in disidentificatory ways, were seen as just sexist. The queer movement had become rebellious in a hardcore opposition to heteronormativity, and the counternorms that followed felt as rigid as heteronorms. Many of us felt wrong again, and at the same time, it felt good to have a place to vent our anger at heteronormativity. The fact that we worked commercially was seen as deceiving the queer movement because we let the commercial world, run by heteronormative exploiting colonialists, take advantage of us. But similar things could be said about queer normativity, in the sense that it let itself become the image of demonization produced by heteronormativity to demarcate itself.

### **Counterdetermination vs. disidentification**

I was not aware of the concept of counterdetermination at the time, but *dunst* made me realize that rebelling did not make the world more open to people marginalized as a result of their gender identification. However, rebelling was a necessary step to take, for me at least, in order to move towards more productive survival strategies. I believe that in *dunst* all of us had taken the step to realize



these relations. Yet, at the same time, the rebelliousness simmered in the background. The idea of the power and satisfaction it would give us if we destroyed heteronormative supremacy was tempting. And even though being a rebel implied a fight, it felt safe, in the sense that it was an already existing identity, that was accepted negatively by the majority; we knew our place in society in that sense. Taking a step away from this place to look for other survival strategies was a step into uncertainty and fear of not being able to rematerialize ourselves. On the other hand, there was a great freedom in letting go of the destructive relationship. Our urge to free ourselves from these relations and define our own identities won, at least for a while.

Despite our good intentions, I believe that a motivational power that most of us possessed, was anger towards a system that did not accept us. This was embodied in various feelings and intentions towards the dominant ideology, like wanting revenge, to take the power, recognition and acceptance. Two approaches we saw to achieve this was through commercial recognition and a strong political manifestation. A danger in these approaches was that they were both rebellious, in the sense that the goal was power and control through counteridentification, and this would provide fruitful conditions for counterdetermination. Another danger was the stereotypes it would cause in the creation of commercial and political role models. *dunst* was not about stereotypes. On the contrary, it was about creating a space accepting of the exploration of our different bodies and gender. Regardless of the good intentions, the internal competition in *dunst* was a both motivational factor and a dilemma, in the sense that it gave us direction and energy to achieve our common goal, while at the same time, it was a threat to the cohesiveness of the group.

Using the theory of disidentification to reflect on *dunst* has made me aware of ways to artistically create attention to and comment on issues regarding relations between a dominant ideology and its abjections, by exposing one's own identity in tragicomic ways. As such it has been a useful tool for analysing and seeing *dunst* from new perspectives. At the same time, it has revealed how the continuous reinvention of *dunst* in disidentificatory ways contributed to the creation of new stereotypes and ultimately the creation of a rebellious queer stereotype – a parody of itself, that is seen as entertaining while remaining controlled by the system it wanted to change. So while *dunst*, as the community I knew, may have come to an end, I believe that the spirit of *dunst* is important to pass on – how to continuously strive to expose the repression of a dominant ideology, whether heteronormativity, queer normativity or any other normativity, by digging into the semiotic sphere artistically in order to point out those uncomfortable aspects of society that on the one hand are not accepted and on the other hand are necessary for the evolution of a society as a whole.

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