

*Athens Journal of Law - Volume 6, Issue 2, April 2020 – Pages 151-166*

## The “Non-favourite”: Neo-tribal Sexualities on Celluloid

*By Anna Chronopoulou\**

*Much academic ink has been spilt over the way in which female subjectivities and sexualities are constructed in the public domain. Issues of female sexuality form a huge part of queer studies and feminist accounts. Surprisingly enough, the construction of female sexualities and more specifically bisexuality has never been worth mentioning in the accounts of subcultures. The transition from subcultures to neo-tribes and neo-tribal sociality has paid scant attention to the construction of female sexualities. Even more importantly, most academic accounts deal with the construction of female sexuality as usually being strictly kept within the limitations of the familiar, familial and predominantly straight sexuality. This article examines the ways in which female subjectivities and sexualities are constructed on celluloid canvas through an examination of a recent movie called “Disobedience” by the Chilean director Sebastian Lelio as forming an integral part of neo-tribes. It takes a different view on the construction of female sexualities as it locates this construction within the transition from subcultures to neo-tribes. This paper puts forward the suggestion that female sexuality apart from being a product of a number of different socio-cultural relationships, norms and laws, it mainly exposes the dynamics of not just subcultures but also neo-tribes at play. The first part of the article places the formation of female sexuality within the transition from subcultures to neo-tribes. The second part of the paper discusses the way in which class informs female sexuality within the context of neo-tribes. The final part of the article places the discussion on the construction of female sexualities within the overall context of juxtaposing neo-tribal lifestyle choices.*

**Keywords:** *Ethics of aesthetics; Neo-tribal sociality; Female sexualities; Subcultural Deviance.*

### Introduction

This article examines how female subjectivities and sexualities are constructed on the celluloid canvas. It argues that the construction of women’s sexualities forms an integral part of the rhetoric associated with neo-tribes. This will be seen through an examination of a recent movie called “Disobedience” by the Chilean director Sebastian Lelio. *Disobedience* narrates a story between two women falling in love with each other. The movie begins with the sudden homecoming of the successful New York City photographer Ronit to the Orthodox Jewish community in North London, more specifically, Hendon, where she had ran away from as a teenager, due to devastating news of her father’s and

---

\*PhD, Senior Lecturer in Equity and Trusts, Westminster Law School, University of Westminster, London, UK Email: A.Chronopoulou@westminster.ac.uk.

the community’s most beloved rabbi’s death. Upon her return, Ronit discovers that her classmate, Esti, with whom she had a same-sex relationship is now married to her best friend and her father’s protégé, Dovid. While old passions between Ronit and Esti rekindle, religious authority is being tested to its limits and the question of whether the support of a close-knit, insular community is worth more than the freedom of choice in love urgently resurfaces.

This article takes a different view on the construction of female sexualities as it locates this within the transition from subcultures to neo-tribes. It puts forward the suggestion that female sexuality apart from being a product of a number of different socio-cultural relationships, religious norms and laws, it mainly exposes the dynamics of neo-tribes at play. The first part of the article challenges the formation of female sexuality as part of the overall context that informs subcultures, deviance. It argues that the formation of female sexuality in *Disobedience* has been constructed as a form of escapism resembling more the neo-tribal rhetoric of the Mafessolian notion of neo-tribal sociality rather than being trapped within the rhetoric of deviance. The first part of the article also argues that it is the act of escapism and neo-tribal affiliations as to the construction of female sexuality that is perceived as an act of resistance. The second part of the paper discusses the way in which class informs the construction of female sexuality within neo-tribes. It puts forward the suggestion that the way in which female sexuality is constructed in the movie *Disobedience* constitutes a reconfirmation of the Mafessolian notion of neo-tribal sociality exposing the logic of identifications. More importantly, it exposes and challenges invisibilities by arguing that the formation of women’s bisexuality could potentially be theorised as a product of neo-tribal affiliations to the middle class. The final part of the article places the discussion on the construction of female sexualities within the overall context of juxtaposing neo-tribal lifestyle choices. It also argues that the construction of bisexuality adheres to a certain “ethics of aesthetics” that comes across in Lelio’s movie, which in turn alludes to a process of survival and sovereignty rather than resistance. The last point conceptualises the Maffesolian notion of puissance as an important component of the realisation of neo-tribal sociality and as such it relates to Lelio’s take in *Disobedience* on neo-tribal sexualities.

### **From Subcultural Deviance to Neo-tribal Escapes of Bisexuality**

Subcultures are commonly defined as distinct groups or communities of people who share common religious and other general beliefs, interests and characteristics, exhibiting similar patterns of behaviour that distinguish them from other groups and from the broader culture.

The prefix sub denotes a smaller culture confined within or outside the fringes of the greater culture. The main theme running throughout Lelio’s movie is the Orthodox Jewish community and therefore subculture in relation to the greater and dominant culture and the relationship of the two female protagonists to it. In a reversal of roles, the religious subculture, namely, the Orthodox Jewish

community, in Hendon represents the dominant culture in relation to the way the two female protagonists identify with it or disassociate from it. From this perspective, this section of the article exposes a close relationship between distinctions and identifications. More specifically, it situates these distinctions within subcultural theories and identifications with alternative lifestyles within the Maffesollian theory of neo-tribal sociality. In this sense the protagonists' sexual identity becomes an issue of transition from subcultures to neo-tribes.

Interpretations of subcultures seem trapped in biases describing debased, deviant and disenfranchised attitudes disassociated from female sexuality and the construction of femininities overall. Subcultural theorists have interpreted subcultures as comprising disenfranchised, deviant and debased people by comparison to the greater, dominant culture. This evokes a mode of operation; a certain lifestyle based on unofficial, often shadowy and subterranean, even chthonian values that directly oppose the official values and norms of the greater culture.

Ironically enough, however, the role of the two protagonists in the movie shares close affinities to the definition of subcultural theorists on the deviation from the norm and the dominant culture, in this case the Orthodox Jewish community. Ronit, one of the main female leads in the movie is ostracised due to her lifestyle choices that constitute deviation from the norm, the lifestyle and patterns of behaviour shared by the Orthodox Jewish community. The promiscuity of Ronit's sexual choices deeply situate the construction of her sexual identity within the theoretical framework of subcultures. With few exceptions, academic work on subcultures has predominantly ignored the construction of gender and sexuality in subcultures. Ronit's sexual identity and more specifically bisexuality, seems to be deeply embedded within resistance processes that are inextricably linked to theorisations of subcultural identity. Subcultural identities are formed on resistance to conformist values as expressed through the pressures and authoritative strategies demonstrated by the parent culture. For instance, Hall suggests that the term resistance in *Resistance through Rituals*<sup>1</sup> signalled non-conformity with practices of the dominant or parent culture. Moreover, Widdicombe and Wooffitt remark that subcultures offer an identity different from the one ascribed to them by their parent culture<sup>2</sup>. Thornton also observes that the majority of the studies of subcultures treat their members as disenfranchised and deviant as challenging the norm and as evoking subterranean values, which exist underneath the surface of official values. 'Underpinning the ethos of the cultures of production'<sup>3</sup> also signals non-conformity. In fact, alluding to the accounts on bisexuality, Ronit's sexuality challenges heteronormativity that constitutes the modus operandi of the Orthodox Jewish community of which she is also a member. Both protagonists' bisexuality challenges the heteronormativity of the religious subculture which is portrayed as the parent and dominant culture. Reminiscent of portrayals of contemporary culture painting bisexuality as promiscuous, greedy, indecisive, duplicitous, confused, fickle and attention-

---

<sup>1</sup>Hall & Jefferon (1990).

<sup>2</sup>Widdicombe & Wooffitt (1995).

<sup>3</sup>Thornton (1995).

seeking, the two protagonists, Ronit and Esti become the target of a politics of delegitimation. Their bisexuality is fundamentally unsettling to the hegemonic institution of heterosexuality and its family-oriented identity featuring as an integral component of the religious community of which they are part of. Yet again, their sexuality remains invisible. The only moments that it becomes visible is during the dialogues between the main characters. Bisexuality, following similar patterns of theorisation in queer as well as feminist studies, remains hidden and tucked away from public view. Bisexuality is silenced by the parent and dominant culture in the movie and instead is replaced by a presumed homosexual identity by the dominant culture, the Orthodox Jewish community. Nevertheless, bisexuality is constructed as a means of escape from the normative processes of the dominant world that surrounds both protagonists in *Disobedience*. From this perspective, sexuality is constructed not just by challenging the norm of the parent culture substantiating in this sense subcultural theoretical frameworks but also by demonstrating affiliations and identifications to other groups, in this instance, the bisexual culture. It is in this sense that the formation of sexuality can be traced into the transition from subcultural theorisation to a conceptualisation of neo-tribal sociality as evident through participation in other groups.

The stylistic requirements of subcultures signify membership and subcultural theorists regard style as an important element of the construction of group identity and of the homogeneity of the group. Although within the context of religious communities, stylistic traits signify membership and conformity to certain patterns of behaviour, the fixation with style in the theorisation of youth culture constitutes another form of disassociation from the dominant culture, simply another form of deviance. Youth culture accounts perceive eccentric clothing, hair-cuts and other traits of neo-tribalism as signifiers of membership and affiliation. The eccentricity required by neo-tribal affiliation directly challenges the normative aesthetic requirements of the dominant culture and in this instance for the purposes of Lelio’s movie, religious community. It is constantly viewed and perceived in the film as deviation from the norm, as dissonance within the dominant culture, but most importantly as transgression. To the protagonists however, this is seen as not necessarily an act of resistance as it is seemingly the case in the accounts of subcultures but as a means of escape, even as a means of formation of sexuality and therefore sexual identity. It is in this sense that sexual identity is formed through the affiliation of temporary groupings and the sharing of similar traits. References to aesthetics and the protagonist’s stylistic choice are replete throughout Lelio’s movie. Ronit is constantly being subjected to criticism on her stylistic choices as means of not fitting in with the aesthetics required by the Orthodox Jewish community. In framing the argument within Bourdieu’s concept of socio-cultural capital<sup>4</sup>, “neo-tribal capital”, as expressed through the stylistic requirements of the affiliation to neo-tribes, constitutes a challenge to the socio-cultural capital acquired by the dominant culture.

Similarly, the notion of “neo-tribal capital”, as expressed through knowledge from participation in neo-tribes, constitutes a form of escapism from socio-cultural capital attributed to what has been termed traditional classical knowledge mandate

---

<sup>4</sup>Bourdieu (1984).

in the religious community. If the notion of socio-cultural capital relies upon its use and ultimately the valorisation of knowledge as it is acquired through training and education, it seems that “neo-tribal capital” challenges the dominant culture’s socio-cultural capital. Instead of reinforcing the limits of neo-tribal sociality, it realises its potential as to the formation of sexual identity throughout Lelio’s movie. It is the very acquisition of the protagonists’ “neo-tribal capital” that constitutes a form of escape as an act of resistance to the conservatism around them rather than deviance as it is perceived. Despite the Maffesolian notion of neo-tribal sociality seemingly discouraging individualisation, it seems that throughout Lelio’s movie, matters of individualisation also reveal the uneasy juxtaposition of neo-tribal identities and parent culture. What becomes abundantly clear in *Disobedience* is the presence of forced disindividualisation as opposed to processes of individualisation through adopting a neo-tribal lifestyle. This is reminiscent of Muggleton’s<sup>5</sup> argument breaking away from the subculturalist theorisation and approach by suggesting that neo-tribal associations reflect individuality and expose individual meanings. This exposes the significance of neo-tribal sociality to the construction of distinctive individual identity and challenges Maffesoli’s notion of sociality on the issue of disindividualisation, echoing Miles’s belief that standing out is as important to the construction of youth identity as is fitting in. Along similar lines, Bauman argues that there are complex interactions between sociality and individualism, since in seeking tribal membership, the individual is simultaneously reminded of the individual aloneness<sup>6</sup>. Bauman argues that ‘the variegated, chequered and fluctuating tribal scene is engaged with the privatised individual in a subtle dialectical game of dependence and freedom’<sup>7</sup>. In the context of Lelio’s movie, these complex interactions, Bauman refers to materialise as part of sexual identity issues.

Both protagonists experience aloneness and isolation due to their sexuality, which, in turn, becomes dialectic of interdependence and escapism between them for freedom to be achieved. For Esti, however, it seems that matters are way more complicated in comparison to Ronit’s situation. Esti is part of the Orthodox Jewish community, she fits in, in the sense that she follows the customs, rituals, dress codes, ceremonies and the overall habitus that characterises the community. In addition, she is also married to a man. It is her sexuality that shares affinities with neo-tribal lifestyles and makes her stand out. It is in this sense that neo-tribal sociality apart from emphatically portraying disindividualisation, the loss of self in a group, in other words, also signals individualisation. This again breaks away from the subculturalist theorisations and fixed identities and exposes the potential of neo-tribal sociality in informing sexual identities. The process of disindividualisation, in Esti’s situation, can be rationalised as a process of invisibility of her sexual identity. It is forced disindividualisation and not voluntary as in the case of neo-tribal sociality. What becomes invisible is her bisexuality through marriage. In the process of neo-tribal sociality her bisexuality is realised and actually formed. This argument now turns into an examination of issues of class in

---

<sup>5</sup>Muggleton (2000).

<sup>6</sup>Bauman (1992).

<sup>7</sup>Bauman (1992).

relation to construction of sexual identities through neo-tribal sociality in the movie.

### **Neo-tribal Affiliations of Class as a Component of Formation of Female Bisexuality**

Subcultural studies are mainly concerned with the working class and working class resistance as it is expressed through youth subcultural affiliations. Subcultural theory also refers to the subcultural practices of the middle class. Despite claims by some theorists that subcultures can only be produced by the working and not by the middle class, a number of theorists have examined middle-class subcultural practices. Brake suggests that middle class subcultures are diffuse, self-conscious and more international. He also suggests that they are more focused on individualism and self-growth and retain a distinct relationship with middle-class values. Muggleton<sup>8</sup> suggests that subcultures expose individualism based on an ethic of the middle classes. Like Brake<sup>9</sup>, Muggleton argues that membership and composition of subcultures are not clear-cut issues<sup>10</sup>. Subcultures also comprise middle-class members even though subcultural theorists focus on working-class membership.

Middle-class subcultural practices of resistance were displayed in the adaptation of alternative lifestyles, exposing political and bohemian rebellion and often challenging traditional modes and concepts of education and morality. Subcultural theorists situated youth subcultural membership as a reflection of class position and parent culture. The interpretation of style was also formulated within the context of class. Apart from being perceived as a means of resistance, styles were interpreted as a response to class location. They were an embodiment of similar characteristics to their class identity and parent culture and conceived as reproductions of the social reality of class corresponding to the composition of subcultures. Hebdige’s account exemplifies this. He borrowed the term bricolage to describe the ways in which subcultures express their resistance to authority using stylistic practices, and their expression of class identity<sup>11</sup>. These practices were mainly perceived as markers or representations of the subcultural group identity.

Forms of middle class consumer-based lifestyles on the other hand, were portraying cultural practices suggestive of indiscipline and thus contrary to the normalisation practices of religion-based subcultures/communities, rather constituting an offence to public morals mainly due to their association with recreational use. References to issues of alternative lifestyle choices are replete throughout Lelio’s movie, and they are deeply embedded in a highly critical rhetoric by the equally middle class dominant/subculture/religious community. Similarly, these consumer-based lifestyles are viewed as closely associated with

---

<sup>8</sup>Muggleton (2000).

<sup>9</sup>Brake (1985).

<sup>10</sup>Muggleton (2000).

<sup>11</sup>Hebdige (1979); Hebdige (1996).

primal states as overthrowing the divine status of the dominant religious subculture by reducing it into a primal state. Participation in these kinds of practices is emphatically perceived as at best unacceptable and at worst, scandalous. Ronit's world is considered a world away from, and in most circumstances completely contradictory to, the values of the Orthodox Jewish community. Nevertheless, Ronit's world challenges but also shares certain affinities with the Maffesolian theory of neo-tribal sociality. The construction of her middle class Orthodox Jewish identity requires conformity to certain values, which directly oppose the formation of her equally middle class sexuality through participation in consumer-based alternative lifestyles. Thus, it follows that neo-tribal sociality is hindered. More specifically, participation in consumer-based alternative lifestyles constitutes a direct challenge to elements of religious identity, which Maffesoli ignores, simply because he disregards the notion of identity. However, the discussion above also challenges the notion of identification, which revolves around the presumption that a person is capable of wearing many masks and moving freely between tribes. It demonstrates that, with the random changing and discarding of masks, Ronit's identification to alternative lifestyles seems a rather difficult, if not impossible task. Nevertheless, Ronit's participation in consumer-based alternative lifestyles reinforces elements of the construction of her sexual as well as class identity. Along similar lines with the theorisation of youth studies accounts on consumer-based lifestyles, Ronit's alternative lifestyle exposes another state of disappearance that of breaking away from the expected affiliation to a religious identity. From this perspective, her middle class sexuality is based upon participation in consumer based alternative lifestyle signalling the disappearance of religious identity.

Neo-tribal accounts theorise the construction of dis-individualisation within forms of escape from everyday routine. Gilbert<sup>12</sup> argues that forms of alternative lifestyles constitute a form of disappearance into a communal ethos resisting modernity and individuality. Rietveld<sup>13</sup> also claims that alternative lifestyles induce states of disappearance from the everyday material realities. In a similar vein, Hemment<sup>14</sup> suggests that neo-tribal and nomadic cultural practices constitute forms of disappearance of the rational subject into the collective. In Maffesolian terms, this amounts to disindividualisation by liberating professionals from the forced individuality offered in the working environment but also a means of escape. In Lelio's movie, Esti is an educator in an Orthodox Jewish school.

When members of the community inform the school's Head teacher that Esti and Ronit were seen to be kissing in the park, she is clearly in an awkward position. Ronit picks up Esti from work and takes her for a day out in Central London as a means of escape from the everyday realities and rational, nevertheless, forced identity reproduced and imposed in the workplace. Neo-tribal accounts liberate women from the pressures of rationality entailed in the working environment. Rief argues that neo-tribal cultural practices could be seen as a

---

<sup>12</sup>Gilbert & Kahl (1993).

<sup>13</sup>Rietveld (1993).

<sup>14</sup>Hemment (1997).

celebration of femininity<sup>15</sup>. Although this seemingly challenges the Maffesolian aspects of neo-tribal sociality in terms of gender, in accordance with the Maffesolian aspects of realising the potential of individualism, neo-tribal conceptualisations of cultural practices were suggestive of attributing another dimension to new middle class femininity.

As a reaction to traditional feminist theories, “neo-tribal” feminists were suggesting that participation in alternative cultural practices of lifestyles created new femininities and subjectivities through a means of deconstructing forced individualised identities, which work environments imposed. Furthermore, neo-tribal accounts share a set of common characteristics that challenge neo-liberal individualism in favour of values associated with sociality and hedonism. In Lelio’s *Disobedience* Ronit, symbolically takes Esti away from the traditional environment imposed on her through her membership to the Orthodox Jewish community. In this sense, the making of new femininities occurs through processes of de-traditionalisation that justifies Maffesoli’s temporary neo-tribal sociality, irrespectively of the absence of a gender or class based neo-tribal theorisation in his writings. These characteristics have been identified by a range of theorists as having the potential to create new forms of identities. For example, in relation to gender and class, McRobbie<sup>16</sup>, drawing on Butler<sup>17</sup>, argues that the intense sociality that characterises the gay culture creates sites of resistance to the individualism of neo-liberal subjectivity since they allow participants ‘to display and even celebrate their radical dependency on others’<sup>18</sup>. Although McRobbie’s argument focuses on the manifestation of gay identity through practices of neo-tribal sociality, a similar claim can be made of the bisexual culture for the purposes of Lelio’s movie, *Disobedience*. What is abundantly clear throughout the movie is that the protagonists have each other. They are socialised in each other’s lifestyle by choice, which creates pockets and sites of resistance through the expression of their sexuality but also ultimately informs issues of creating new forms of femininities through the interplay of class as it is depicted through participation in cultural practices associated with middle class lifestyles.

One of the dominant issues in neo-tribal accounts is the logic of identifications. This is also viewed as another form of disappearance. It stresses the emergence of identifications within the collective. This shares affinities with the Maffesolian notion of neo-tribal sociality, which proposes the replacement of the logic of identity with the logic of identifications. Neo-tribal accounts were quick to notice the replacement of identities through the emergence of identifications. Malbon<sup>19</sup> argues that certain neo-tribal practices establish identifications rather than revealing distinctions or individualities. These identifications would emerge through the emotional experience of cultural practices creating dis-individualisation reaffirming in this sense the Maffesolian notion of neo-tribal sociality. However, there have been studies that have used the notion of neo-tribal

---

<sup>15</sup>Rief (2009).

<sup>16</sup>McRobbie (2001).

<sup>17</sup>Butler (2011).

<sup>18</sup>McRobbie (2001).

<sup>19</sup>Malbon (1999).



sociality as revealing notions of individualism and identity formation. These accounts place specific emphasis on a different interpretation of issues of neo-tribal sociality. For example, Bauman suggests that neo-tribal sociality expresses individualism because it rests upon choices made by the individual<sup>20</sup>. In Lelio's *Disobedience*, the choices made by the protagonists are conscious choices informing their identity through processes of dis-individualisation that are not necessarily forced. For example, bisexuality is a conscious choice informing processes of dis-individualisation and the loss of self in the Orthodox Jewish community. When forced dis-individualisation happens the protagonists rebel, resist and react in their own individual way which again accords to individualised processes of neo-tribalism alluding to the fact that sexualities can be theorised within the context of neo-tribalism. For example, while stressing the liberating qualities embedded in the notion of neo-tribal sociality, Bauman<sup>21</sup> also emphasises the possibility for emerging individualities and identities in these contexts. This signals a form of expression of differences, instead of a mere erosion of differences and distinctions. This is also reminiscent of a Bourdieusian approach on the creation of an individual habitus<sup>22</sup>.

Nevertheless, neo-tribal sociality possesses the potential of a less static approach because it entails both aspects of individualisation and dis-individualisation. In alluding with Bauman's point on the potential of neo-tribalism, Lelio's protagonists in *Disobedience* exemplify these attributes of simultaneous and voluntary individualisation and dis-individualisation which encompasses the logic of identifications. For example, the constant portrayal and demonstration of sexuality and more specifically, bisexuality in the movie, amounts to issues of individualisation for the protagonists. However, it is through the processes of identifications even identifying with each other that bisexuality materialises in the movie. This is usually depicted in the movie through the loss of self in each other amounting in this sense to processes of dis-individualisation.

This in turn alludes to the stance that neo-tribalism provides a sense of realising and gaining identity. Rief<sup>23</sup> claims that, despite neo-tribal cultural practices deconstructing identity, it can also be regarded as constructing it, and that they can be perceived as an expression of differences. Jackson<sup>24</sup> also claims that neo-tribal contexts provide the atmosphere for the experience of differences and his analysis emphasises the creation of individualities and identities. Malbon<sup>25</sup> also asserts that there can be no conceptualisation of the importance of the notion of identification in these contexts without referring to issues of distinctions, which points to issues of individualisation. Bennett<sup>26</sup> has also emphasised issues of identities relating to neo-tribal theorisations of contexts associated with youth

---

<sup>20</sup>Bauman (1992),

<sup>21</sup>Bauman (1992).

<sup>22</sup>Bourdieu (1984).

<sup>23</sup>Rief (2009).

<sup>24</sup>Jackson (2004).

<sup>25</sup>Malbon (1999).

<sup>26</sup>Bennett, Savage, Sillva, Warde, Cayo-Cal & Wright (2010).

culture. This is reminiscent of Hetherington’s<sup>27</sup> argument that issues of identities can be dealt alongside issues of identifications.

The construction of bisexuality and therefore sexual identity in Lelio’s movie is deeply embedded in the exposure of the differences between the protagonists’ roles, which again points to issues of individualisation but also dis-individualisation. These distinctions can be summarised in the dichotomy of liberal and conformist if one takes a closer look to the roles of the protagonists. Both terms, liberal and conformist entail practices and processes of individualisation as well as dis-individualisation in the movie. Esti could be characterised as conformist in the sense that she is married to the Rabbi’s protégé, Ronit’s best friend, she has conformed to the habitus of the Orthodox Jewish community, being Jewish, whereas Ronit is portrayed as the liberal, rebellious character that breaks away from the community. The interplay of practices of individualisation and dis-individualisation from and to the community could be summed up as practices of forming and forging class and sexual identity for both of the protagonists.

### **Neo-tribal Sexualities: Puissance and Sovereignty**

In explicating his theory of neo-tribalism, Maffesoli argued that contemporary social organisation is comprised of small and potentially temporary groups, or ‘neo-tribes’, distinguished by shared lifestyles, values and understanding of what is appropriate behaviour<sup>28</sup>. What distinguishes neo-tribal social formation from traditional social groupings is that people belong to a variety of groups, many of them by choice, so that neo-tribal memberships are plural, temporary, fluid and often elective. Maffesoli’s construction of social organisation challenges notions of society as alienated and individualistic. Daily life is characterised as a continuous shift through a kaleidoscope of social identities and group memberships, each creating a sense of solidarity and belonging that is often enacted in hedonistic cultural rituals. Similarly, in his theory of neo-tribalism, Maffesoli argues that many social groups that people belong to in their everyday lives can be understood as forms of political participation since they create (temporary) forms of community that orient around values of sociality, hedonism and sovereignty.<sup>29</sup>

Maffesoli constructs neo-tribal gatherings as political, since in creating local, informal and temporary spaces in which to live out one’s own values, neo-tribes provide moments of sovereignty over one’s own existence where ‘it is possible to escape or at least relativise the institutions of power’<sup>30</sup>. Maffesoli’s interpretation of contemporary social organisation is thus at odds with an understanding that neo-liberalism has led to an intensification of individualism, and his work has been

---

<sup>27</sup>Hetherington (1998).

<sup>28</sup>Maffesoli (1996a).

<sup>29</sup>Maffesoli (1996a).

<sup>30</sup>Maffesoli (1996a) at 44

critiqued for this. Evans<sup>31</sup>, for example, has argued that in theorizing a shift away from modernist, rational institutions to neo-tribal emotional proxemics, Maffesoli failed to recognise the contradictory nature of social organisation in which both models exist.

Sweetman aims to find a place for the ‘liberatory potential’<sup>32</sup> of reflexivity. He contrasts the reflexivity thesis, which he argues portrays identity as ‘increasingly a matter of choice’<sup>33</sup> with Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus, which, in emphasising an unconscious, pre-rational source of practices is, Sweetman argues, more concerned with deterministic social reproduction. McNay refers to ‘emancipatory processes of refashioning’<sup>34</sup> which she finds in both the reflexive modernisation thesis as well as Foucault’s later work, that she argues fails to distinguish properly between those aspects of identity relatively open to ‘self-fashioning and those which are more ineluctable’<sup>35</sup>. This is contrasted with Bourdieu’s emphasis on a ‘pre-reflexive foundation for agency’, which, she argues, ‘provides a corrective to the voluntarist emphasis that hampers the idea of practices of the self’<sup>36</sup>. Adams suggests that Beck, Giddens and individualistic rational choice perspectives all form part of an ‘extended reflexivity thesis’ which views reflexive practices as allowing self-creation outside the bounds of culture<sup>37</sup> leading to a situation where ‘we can increasingly determine the nature of our identity through conscious choices’<sup>38</sup> through an ‘unbounded reflexivity’<sup>39</sup>. Adams also contrasts concept of reflexivity with the habitus in order to correct the ‘voluntarism’ of the reflexivity thesis.<sup>40</sup>

Maffesoli proposes that contemporary western social organisation has developed into a ‘neo-tribal’ structure in which people move between small and potentially temporary groups distinguished by shared lifestyles, values and understandings of what is appropriate behaviour. Like all tribes, these groups have an aesthetic ethic, a collective bond that involves shared values and understandings of what is appropriate behaviour. What makes this social formation ‘neo’ tribal, rather than traditionally tribal, is that neo-tribal memberships are plural, temporary and fluid<sup>41</sup>.

The key way that neo-tribes may be regarded as political is that in having their own aesthetic ethic they have the potential to create moments in which to live out their own values, creating temporary pockets of sovereignty over their own existence.<sup>42</sup> In so doing, they may ‘make it possible to escape or at least relativise the institutions of power’<sup>43</sup>. For Maffesoli, traditional politics are based on

---

<sup>31</sup>Evans (1997).

<sup>32</sup>Sweetman (2003) at 544.

<sup>33</sup>Sweetman (2003) at 530.

<sup>34</sup>McNay (1999) at 95.

<sup>35</sup>McNay (1999) at 96.

<sup>36</sup>McNay (1999) at 102.

<sup>37</sup>Adams (2003) at 222.

<sup>38</sup>Adams (2003) at 223.

<sup>39</sup>Adams (2003) at 224.

<sup>40</sup>Adams (2006) at 516.

<sup>41</sup>Maffesoli (1997).

<sup>42</sup>Maffesoli (1996b)

<sup>43</sup>Maffesoli (1996) at 44.

modernist institutions (such as national and regional government structures) that are formed on principles of rationality. He argues that human organisation is shifting away from these large institutions, but not through direct challenge. Instead, people employ a kind of power through being aloof, taking an avoidance stance by turning their back on modernist institutions and focusing instead on local, 'proxemic' groups, with which they have an emotional (rather than rational) affiliation. In these groups, cultural rituals are enacted that are characterised by, amongst other things, 'sociality and proxemics', 'solidarity and belonging', 'hedonism', 'vitality and puissance', and 'sovereignty over one's own existence'<sup>44</sup>. In applying the Maffesolian theory of neo-tribalism to Lelios' Disobedience, it seems that sovereignty has been played out in a number of ways through the identity politics of sexuality.

Neo-tribes let us experience belonging, pleasure in being sociable and a sense of vitality. These experiences are enabled through a living for the moment perspective, a Dionysian hedonism of taking 'pleasure in the good things in life'<sup>45</sup>. This hedonistic vitality is linked to Maffesoli's notion of puissance, the will or power to be agentic, and in this way hedonism, vitality and puissance are linked. A central aspect of neo-tribal puissance is sovereignty over one's own existence. The aim is therefore to survive in the world by deploying a politics of survival rather than resistance. Again this seems to be the main theme of Lelios' Disobedience. Neo-tribes create temporary spaces in which to participate in a set of shared practices, creating a common bond. In focusing on creating their own spaces neo-tribes are constituted as independent of official (modernist, institutional) governance. In this way members can have sovereignty over their own existence, if only at a temporary or local level: 'even if one feels alienated from the distant economic-political order, one can assert sovereignty over one's near existence'<sup>46</sup>.

What makes neo-tribal social formations political is the emphasis on having sovereignty over one's own existence, which can be understood as the power, or puissance, to create social spaces defined by one's own aesthetic ethic. Everyday politics is thus understood in terms of its emphasis on creating (temporary pockets) of sovereignty; an 'aloof' stance towards official institutions of power; and a focus on social, hedonistic gatherings that celebrate vitality and belongingness<sup>47</sup>. Everyday politics are thus distinct from both traditional and alternative forms of 'identity' politics, which in one way or another engage with official institutions of power in order to effect social change or critique the status quo. Neo-tribalism therefore produces temporary pockets of freedom, not permanent utopias. However, Maffesoli sees the temporary and fluid nature of neo-tribal formations as their political strength, even if it does carry a tragic dimension<sup>48</sup>. Again, this is a replete theme in Lelios' Disobedience.

---

<sup>44</sup>Maffesoli (1996) at 44.

<sup>45</sup>Maffesoli (1996a) at 53.

<sup>46</sup>Maffesoli (1996a) at 44.

<sup>47</sup>Maffesoli (1996a) at 47.

<sup>48</sup>Maffesoli (1996a) at 53.

Neo-tribes avoid what Maffesoli calls ‘domestication’ through plurality and localism<sup>49</sup>. “Whatever the case, puissance is set against power, even if puissance can only advance in disguise, to avoid being crushed by power”<sup>50</sup> ‘Everyday politics’ is thus a politics of survival, in which pockets of autonomy that are potentially counter-hegemonic may flourish. Despite Maffesoli’s emphasis on understanding political participation in terms of sovereignty, aloofness to official institutions and a celebration of hedonistic social gatherings, there is limited elaboration of neo-tribal theory in relation to how it might be used to theorise alternative forms of political participation.

Theorists have also paid less attention to other aspects of neo-tribal theory, namely issues around aloofness to traditional political structures and a focus on the practices of sociality in creating moments of sovereignty over one’s own existence. However, the suggestion that is put forward here is that sovereignty over one’s own existence can be interpreted as a political act and as the politics of sexuality and in the case of Lelio’s movie as the politics of bisexuality that the erotic moment encapsulates.

Judith Butler writes that the erotic always grows out of a moment of unpredictability and unavailability<sup>51</sup>. Butler stresses that sexual desire is characterised precisely by something left over that eludes control. Sexual identities unfold their appealing authority precisely by taking pleasure in uncertainty and insecurity. From this perspective, the erotic constitutes an act of de-control in the Maffesolian sense. In Lelio’s *Disobedience* this is translated as a form of dialectics of neo-tribalism and sexuality again as a political act through processes of de-control. As Bersani claims the erotic is always aimed at transgressing given everyday identities<sup>52</sup>. The Maffesolian notion of neo-tribal sociality transgresses in a sense the notion of the logic of identities by displacing them for the sake of the notion of the logic of identifications<sup>53</sup>. Nevertheless, the very transgression of identities, constitutes an element of neo-tribalism in the way bisexuality or at least the erotic in bisexuality is constructed. Lelio’s *Disobedience* constituted a paradigm of that.

## Conclusion

This article investigated the construction of female sexualities through an examination of Lelio’s recent movie, *Disobedience*. In a way, it located female sexualities within the theoretical framework of neo-tribalism and neo-tribal sociality. It argued that female sexuality apart from being a product of a number of different socio-cultural relationships, religious norms and laws, it mainly exposes the dynamics of neo-tribes at play. This article challenged the association of the term deviance with a theorisation of subcultures and traced the formation of

---

<sup>49</sup>Riley, Griffin & Morey (2010).

<sup>50</sup>Maffesoli (1996a) at 47.

<sup>51</sup>Butler (1990) at 14.

<sup>52</sup>Bersani (1995) at 141.

<sup>53</sup>Maffesoli (2007).

female sexuality within the transition from subcultures to neo-tribes. It argued that the formation of female sexuality in *Disobedience* rests upon a rhetoric of escapism echoing the Maffesolian notion of neo-tribal sociality rather than being trapped within the rhetoric of deviance.

The first part of the article also argued that it is the act of escapism and neo-tribal affiliations as to the construction of female sexuality that is perceived as an act of resistance.

The second part of the paper discussed the way in which class informs the construction of female sexuality within neo-tribes. It put forward the suggestion that the way in which female sexuality is constructed in the movie *Disobedience* constitutes a reconfirmation of the Maffesolian notion of neo-tribal sociality exposing the logic of identifications. More importantly, it exposed and challenged invisibilities by arguing that the formation of women’s bisexuality could potentially be theorised as a product of neo-tribal affiliations to the middle class.

The final part of the article placed the discussion on the construction of female sexualities within the overall context of juxtaposing neo-tribal lifestyle choices. It also argued that the construction of bisexuality adheres to a certain “ethics of aesthetics” that comes across in Lelio’s movie, which in turn alludes to a process of survival and sovereignty rather than resistance. The last point conceptualised the Maffesolian notion of puissance as an important component of the realisation of neo-tribal sociality and as such it relates to Lelio’s take in *Disobedience* on neo-tribal sexualities. To a great extent the article offered a critique of the absence of the construction of female sexualities from theoretical accounts of gender as well as accounts on queer theory. From this perspective, it exposed the absence of a theorisation of women’s bisexuality from these accounts. Methodologically speaking this absence was traced in the celluloid canvas. Therefore, *Disobedience*, Lelio’s recent movie was used as a methodological tool and a case study for the purposes of this article.

The aim of this article was to offer an alternative to the up to date theorisations of bisexuality through neo-tribal sociality. From this perspective, it challenged but also supplemented and contributed to the Maffesolian theory. It challenged the Maffesolian theory by revealing practices of individualisation and not just dis-individualisation of the self. It contributed but also challenged the Maffesolian theory through producing and forming a neo-tribal theorisation of sexual identity, recognising in this sense the existence of identity that Maffesoli and his writings ignore.

## References

- Adams, M (2003). ‘The Reflexive self and Culture – A Critique’ in *The British Journal of Sociology* 54(2):221-238.
- Adams, M. (2006). ‘Hybridizing habitus and reflexivity. Towards an Understanding of Contemporary Identity?’ in *Sociology* 40(3):511-528.
- Bauman, Z. (1992). ‘Survival as a Social Construct’ in *Theory, Culture and Society* 9(1):1-36.

- Bennett, A. (2000). *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place*. London: Macmillan.
- Bennett, T. Savage, M., Silva, E., Warde, A., Cayo-Cal, M. & D. Wright (2010). *Culture, Class, Distinction*. London: Routledge.
- Bersani, L. (1986). *The Freudian Body: psychoanalysis and art*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Braidotti, R. (1994). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2002). *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Brake, M. (1985). *Comparative Youth Culture: The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures in America, Britain and Canada*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.
- Butler, T. (2011). 'Social Capital and the Formation of London's Middle Classes' in T. Blokland & M. Savage (eds) *Networked Urbanism*. Surrey: Ashgate. At pp. 217-236.
- Riley, S.C.E., Griffin, C. & Y. Morey (2010). 'The Case for 'Everyday Politics': Evaluating Neo-tribal Theory as a Way to Understand Alternative Forms of Political Participation, Using Electronic Dance Music Culture as an Example' in *Sociology* 44(2):345-363.
- Evans, D. (1997) 'Michel Maffesoli's Sociology of Modernity and Postmodernity: An Introduction and Critical Assessment' in *The Sociological Review* 45(2):221-243.
- Gilbert, D. & J.A. Kahl (1993). *The American Class Structure A New Synthesis*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth.
- Hall, S. & T. Jefferson (eds.) (1990). *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain (Cultural Studies Birmingham)*. London: Routledge.
- Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen.
- Hebdige, D. (1996). *Hiding in the Light*. London: Routledge.
- Hemment, D. (1997) 'e is For Ekstasis' in *New Formations: A Journal of Culture, Theory and Politics*, 31: 23-38.
- Hetherington, K. (1998). *Expressions of Identity: Space, Performance, Politics*. London: Sage.
- Jackson, P. (2004). *Inside Clubbing: Sensual Experiments in the Art of Being Human*. London: Berg.
- Maffesoli, M. (1996a). *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. London: Sage.
- Maffesoli, M. (1996b). *The Contemplation of the World: Figures of Community Style*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Maffesoli, M. (1997). 'The Return of the Dionysus' in P. Sulkunen, J. Holmwood, H. Radner & G. Schutze (eds) *Constructing the New Consumer Society*. London: Macmillan. At pp. 21-37.
- Maffesoli, M. (2007). 'Tribal Aesthetic' in B. Cova, R.V., Kozinets & A. Shankar. Oxford: Butterworth- Heinemann. At pp.27-34.
- Malbon, B. (1999). *Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy and Vitality*. (London: Routledge).
- McNay, L. (1999). 'Gender, Habitus and the Field: Pierre Bourdieu and the Limits of Reflexivity' in *Theory, Culture & Society* 16 (1):95-117.

- McRobbie, A. (2001). 'Good Girls, Bad Girls? Female Success and the New Meritocracy' in D. Morley & K. Robins (eds) *British Cultural Studies: Geography, Nationality and Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. At pp. 361-372.
- Muggleton, D. (2000). *Inside Subculture The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. Oxford: Berg.
- Rief, S. (2009). *Club Cultures: Boundaries, Identities and Otherness*. London: Routledge.
- Rietveld, H. (1993). 'Living the Dream' in S. Redhead *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture*. Aldershot: Avebury. At pp 41-78.
- Riley, S.C.E., Griffin, C. & Y. Morey (2010). 'The Case for 'Everyday Politics': Evaluating Neo-tribal Theory as a Way to Understand Alternative Forms of Political Participation, Using Electronic Dance Music Culture as an Example' in *Sociology* 44(2):345-363.
- Sweetman, P. (2001). 'Shop-Window Dummies? Fashion, the Body, and Emergent Socialities' in J. Entwistle & E. Wilson (eds) *Body Dressing*. Oxford: Berg. At pp. 59-78
- Sweetman, P. (2003). 'The Twenty-First Century Disease? in *Habitual Reflexivity or the Reflexive Habitus*' *Sociology Review* 51(4):528-549.
- Thornton, S. (1995). *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. London: Polity Press.
- Widdicombe, S. & R. Wooffitt (1995). *The Language of Youth Subcultures*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.