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She's just not that into you

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Tiqqun, *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl*, trans. Ariana Reines, Semiotext(e), Intervention series 12, Los Angeles, 2012. 144 pp., £9.95 pb., 978 1 58435 108 5.

How best to describe the colonization of the body at this particular juncture of capitalist life? Much recent theorizing has focused on a kind of war of affects where depression, euphoria and other states of being are read not merely as signs or symptoms, but as directly produced by (and productive of) particular economic relations. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's notion of 'semio-capitalism' has attempted to track the implications of cyberspace and cybertime for the increasingly depressed mind and body of the contemporary subject. Herve Juvin in the recent *The Coming of the Body* (reviewed in [RP 165, January/February 2011](#)) has similarly attempted to describe what it means for contemporary life when the body has become the 'bearer' of all meaning, where every aspect of existence is exchangeable and where nothing is hidden or hideable. While the trajectory of this kind of analysis is not exactly new, even where it occasionally remembers the vast feminist literature on embodiment, affect and labour from the 1960s onwards, there is something novel about the peculiar combination of consumerism, despair, visibility and immaturity that characterizes postwar life in its later stages. It is this 'new physiognomy of Capital', where 'the generalized credit that rules every exchange ... strikes within the image of its uniform emptiness the "heart of darkness" of every "personality" and every "character"' that Tiqqun address in this short, wilfully fragmentary text first published in France in 1999. The question of gender is raised here, there and everywhere – from the title of the book, to the extracts from magazines marketed to women that Tiqqun scatter throughout the text, to something much more nebulous and disturbing at the heart of their endeavour.

Theory of the Young-Girl is a text that both parodies and mirrors the misogyny that resonates at the heart of a culture that celebrates youth and beauty above all else while simultaneously denigrating the bearers – young women, overwhelmingly – of these purportedly desirable characteristics. The translator of the text, poet Ariana Reines, has written of the visceral reaction the task engendered. The translation, she writes in the online magazine *Triple Canopy*, 'gave me migraines, made me puke; I couldn't sleep at night, regressed into totally out-of-character sexual behaviour'. It is indeed a book that disturbs in its relentless depiction of the fully weaponized, consumerist body of a world in which '[although everyone senses that their existence has become a battleground upon which neuroses, phobias, somatizations, depression, and

anxiety each sound a retreat, nobody has yet really grasped what is happening or what is at stake.’ The language of colonization, immunization, meat and fluids seeps through the abstract framework of image-analysis, economic structure and ruminations on modernity: ‘the Young-Girl doesn’t kiss you, she drools over you through her teeth. Materialism of secretion.’ If parts of the text read like a theoretically inflected revenge manual for male nerds, one assumes that this effect is – on one level – intentional. The quotation from *Hamlet* that appears at the beginning of the text, ‘I did love you once’, hints at past betrayals, as does the claim that ‘the “male sex” becomes both the victim and the object of its own alienated desire.’ But who is this ‘male sex’ if everyone is required to permanently ‘self-valorise’, that is to say, to be a Young-Girl? What is left of the body, love, personality when all life resembles a cross between a spreadsheet and a horoscope? ‘Unhappiness makes people consume’ reads one aphoristic statement, and yet unhappiness appears to be all there is, even as everything shrieks of fulfilment and perkiness.



But why Young-Girl? Who is she, and what kind of ‘theory’ is presented here? Stylistically, Tiqqun operate in the speculative void-space created by situationist-style and Agambenian portentousness – *detournement* meets poetic ontologizing. The style is assertoric, even where the claims made are highly evaluative. Hundreds of sentences begin ‘The Young-Girl is...’ This grinding repetition is ameliorated only slightly by the use of varied font styles and the insertion of quotations not only from women’s magazines, but also from Baudrillard, Witold Gombrowicz’s 1937 novel *Ferdydurke*, spiritual instruction manuals and texts on eating disorders. To imagine that Tiqqun are talking about ‘real’ young girls would be an ontic grotesquery, of course, as the Young-Girl is ‘obviously not a gendered concept’ and besides, the book is little more than ‘trash theory’. Tiqqun explain that every postwar consumerist subject, every ‘model citizen’, every bearer of power is the Young-Girl: ‘All the old figures of patriarchal authority, from statesmen to bosses and cops, have become Young-Girlified, every last one of them, even the Pope.’ And yet the book is precisely not called ‘Theory of the Wizeden-Pope’. So what to make of the embrace of gendered rhetoric in the service of a theory of the ‘total war’ waged on the bodies of everyone? The political point is the claim that ‘the process of valorization, in the imperial phase, is no longer simply capitalist: IT COINCIDES WITH THE SOCIAL.’ Love has transformed from ‘Fordist seduction, with its designated sites and moments, its static and proto-bourgeois couple-form, to post-Fordist seduction,

diffuse, flexible, precarious and deritualized, which has extended the couple factory to the entire body and the whole of social time-space'. Tiqqun's equation of the social with 'youthitude' and 'feminitude' is, however, oddly old-fashioned, harking back to stereotypes of women as fundamental bearers of sociability in the form of gossip: 'Chatter, curiosity, equivocation, hearsay, the Young-Girl incarnates the fullness of improper existence, whose categories Heidegger identified.' The Young-Girl is idle talk substantiated, inauthentic life made Queen: 'Precisely because of her nothingness, each of her judgements carries the imperative weight of the entire sovereign order, *and she knows it.*'

So, to remain at the level of the inauthentic, the temptation to read ontically, for a moment, is this a book about women, or about 'women' (or, rather 'young women')? The translator notes: 'the genderedness of French is not the only way to account for the fact that this book, as it accumulates, does become – in some sections more than others – a book about women.' It is indeed impossible not to reify the critique as the book progresses, to map the claims onto real, if vague, images of particular kinds of bodies ('The Young-Girl sees herself as the holder of a *sacred* power: the power of commodities'; 'THE YOUNG-GIRL RESEMBLES HER PHOTO'; 'There is surely no place where one feels/as horribly alone/as in the arms of a Young-Girl'). While Tiqqun focus on women's magazines, much as Mary Wollstonecraft did two hundred years before, it is easy to expand their analysis to encompass developments in social media that have taken place since the book's original publication: the direct facial and self-valorizing imperatives of Facebook, the endless memetic re-postings of tumblr, fashion blogs, and so on. But what does this domination of the Spectacle really mean? The Young-Girl is 'Living Currency', Tiqqun claim, picking up on Pierre Klossowski's phrase. Her arse is a war-machine: 'The Young-Girl's ass doesn't possess any new value, but only the unprecedented depreciation of all values that preceded it' But does the spectacular domination of Pippa Middleton's posterior, say, really tell us anything about the economy? 'In the time of the Young-Girl, woman becomes the metaphor of money' claim Tiqqun, and a thousand billboards would surely agree: yet this cover story masks rather more dowdy truths – women may be the metaphor of money, but they don't empirically have very much of it at the moment. Tiqqun come close at points to pinning the blame on the Young-Girl herself, even as the reader struggles in her mind to replace an image of a socially integrated teen with that of, say, Berlusconi (he is quoted here: 'They have offended the thing I hold most dear: my image'), the Pope or any number of male authority figures. But the Young-Girl is above all alienation in the sense of being profoundly unhappy – that the book finishes with a discussion of anorexia is no accident: 'She is a body without soul dreaming she's a soul without a body' Anorexia is 'the desire to free oneself from a body entirely colonized by commodity symbolism'. The Young-Girl may be 'against communism' as one section has it, but she is well aware of the world she finds herself in. What, ultimately, would it mean to let the Young-Girl speak for herself and not through the categories imposed upon her by a culture that heralds her as the metaphysical apex of civilization while simultaneously denigrating her, or even the categories that Tiqqun mobilize to take her apart in a subtly different way? Behind every Young-Girl's arse hides a bunch of rich white men: the task is surely not, then, to destroy the Young-Girl, but to destroy the system that makes her, and makes her so unhappy, whoever 'she' is.

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