INTERVIEWS WITH THE VAMPIRE WOMAN: THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELF-MADE-FREAKS FROM SOCIETY TO SELF-IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with non-official "low" culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation.
—Mary Russo (1994)

Society have set boundaries for what is wrong and what is right, or for this instance, what is 'socially' accepted and what not; henceforth society stigmatizes those who break those boundaries, turning them into cast away minorities—into the Others. Erving Goffman explains that there are different types of stigmas, but the visibility thereof is one of the main aspects of social identity. These visible stigmas, besides referring to specific behaviours, are mainly focused to physical abnormalities; among which may be considered all kinds of physical disabilities, skin conditions, body deformities, the unmissable 'ugliness'; as well as the appearance in general, like race, gender, age, size, attire, and plenty other ways to appear before others.

Those unfortunate human beings born with physical abnormalities have historically being stigmatized as aberrant beings or monsters, and commonly labelled as freaks. Robert Bogdan analyzed the social construction of freaks studying the nineteenth-century ‘human curiosities’ exhibitions—the famously known ‘freak shows’—in the United States; these shows were socially accepted and truly popular at the time. Bogdan does not use the term ‘freaks’ to refer to individuals with physical problems; on the contrary, he clears it up as follows:

“Freak” is a frame of mind, a set of practices, a way of thinking about and presenting people. It is not a person but the enactment of a tradition, the performance of a stylized presentation.⁴ Which elucidates the social construction of freaks through spectacle; which on one hand evidences the dissimilarities amongst performers and spectators—reinforcing comparison between normal and abnormal—and on the other hand turns people into consumables to be exploited for profit.

Presenting people with disabilities and body deformities in a show as freaks is no longer socially accepted, it would be considered despicable; notwithstanding, there are different forms of modern freak shows, such as reality shows, talk shows⁵, tattoo and comic conventions, between several other examples; however, what have changed is the performers, if the term ‘freak’ is used to describe a person outside the boundaries of social acceptance, then these performers were not born freaks, conversely they chose to be freaks; one of the most representative cases are people with extreme body modifications.

Body modification is a practice that could be as old as the whole human existence, and it basically consists of the visual and physical alteration of the human body; however, these modifications varied immensely in meanings, purposes, designs, techniques and social repercussions. Body modifications are also known as ‘body art’, and Nicholas Thomas defines it as the aesthetic alterations of the body which can be temporal, as well as permanent. There is a vast amount of practices that could be considered body modification—much of them highly debated; as common as make-up, shaving and nail cutting; as well as fitness plans or tanning⁶; and there are those practices that depending

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⁴ Ibid, 35
⁶ Nicholas Thomas, Body Art (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 11-12
on the region or beliefs, are considered taboo; although, some of these are increasingly gaining acceptance in the last decades, namely tattoos and piercings; different from other rather extreme practices, popularly referred to as ‘hard core’ body modifications, like scarification, branding, and all kinds of surgical procedures, such as splitting, implanting and re-sculpting.

As above mentioned, body modifications have long been practiced; most of these practices were appropriated by western society; practices performed by many different cultures around the world through time. Body modifications—in the past as in nowadays—have different meanings for each culture, group or person; nonetheless, one of the primary aims is to communicate something; that is to say, body modifications are an expression of identity, as Thomas interpret it, and later explicates as follow:

The arts of the body are about not only creating appearances but also seeking effects. We seek to impress, to render ourselves attractive, to give ourselves strength, assurance and poise. Some of us seek to daunt or intimidate others.\(^7\)

Thomas points out the performative and expressive characteristic of body modifications; like messages registered in the body, expressing ideas, beliefs and emotions.

The Mexican Maria Jose Cristerna—mainly known as the Vampire Woman—is one of the most famous body modifiers in the world. She is a well-known person in the ‘underground’ world, where different subcultures meet, groups of subversive ideologies and alternative art expressions; these groups have a close relationship with body modifications, being tattoo conventions the typical space of encounter; the Vampire Woman is a real celebrity in these events, for been a superb and astonishing example of body art, but most significantly of body

\(^7\) Thomas, *Body Art*, 14
empowerment. However, she is also famous for the rest of the world—the most ‘mainstream’ society—by different motives; firstly, she gained world recognition obtaining in 2012 the Guinness World Record of the woman with most body modifications, record she holds to the present.8 Secondly, she has appeared in numerous talk shows and tabloid TV shows around the world; shows where her body and identity are exposed for sensationalist purposes. All these spaces or means, tattoo conventions, Guinness World Records and talk shows could be considered as the ‘modern freak shows’—as it was mentioned earlier—where the peculiarities of some few are exploited for the entertainment and profit of the many others.

Giving some reflection on what has been stated above evoked many general and broad questions, such as how society influences and shapes identities? How a subject can affect society? Which are the boundaries of ‘normality’ and social acceptance? Why people voluntarily cast away from society? These general questions were narrowed and distilled to a more specific interrogation resulting in the research question for this study, which is: What is the role of self-made-freaks in society?

The purpose of this study work is to determine what is the role self-made-freaks play in society, parting with the analysis of identity construction—in perpetual relation to society—through two perspectives, separated in two chapters; on one hand analyzing how society constructs identities and used them as spectacle; and on the other hand, the construction of self-identity through a socially constructed body, specifically the female body. Each perspective will include an historical analysis of the different topics; as well as an exploration of terms ubiquitous in the study of identity through visual culture, related to perception and the subjectivity of visuality. In like manner, the performative and transformative aspects of a body—as the physical

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identity—will be taken in special account. Additionally, the famous Vampire Woman will serve as case study, with the examination of her interviews and performances.

The first chapter, denominated ‘Society and the Spectacular Others’, will analyse how society constructs identity, firstly through an historical and sociological approach to minor and marginalized groups. Afterwards, it will be examined the performative characteristic of the body, its spectacularity and how it is consumed by society; for ultimately analysing the case of the Vampire Woman, through her performances and relation with the media.

‘Identity Under and Over the Skin’, the second chapter, will explore the self-construction of identity in relation to a changing and subjective visuality, and a body normed and signified by society. This chapter will also explore the meanings of body through history and its modifiable property, with a special account on female body. Continuing with the analysis of body modifications as a form of expression and its relation with identity construction; and finalizing with the study of interviews to the Vampire Woman, in search for answers about her identity.

Over the course, various study works will serve as reference for this analysis; study works on otherness, monstrosity, freak shows and the social body for the initial chapter; and, for the second chapter, it will be needed the assistance of study works on identity, body symbology and body modification; all in order to support the analysis through different views and theories, enriching the content.
CHAPTER 1: SOCIETY AND THE SPECTACULAR OTHERS

1.1. The Self and the Other

Otherness is an interesting concept, its mere word of denomination—other—denotes a declaration, a judgement; a term so vague, but powerful at the same time; a term of endless contrast, the other of what? the other from what? from who? The otherness bears mystery, sentiments of curiosity or fear of the unknown; Barry Jones defines it as intriguing, which “can be exciting and attractive, as well as bewildering and unsettling.” 9 There is indeed a constant attention on the Others, especially distinguishing them from the Self; there can be similarities or differences, but comparison is unmissable.

In this regard, Carmencita Serino writes that comparisons between Self and Others would vary depending on a social aspect, that is to say if the ‘Self’ belongs to a ‘group’ or not; to clarify, comparisons between the Self and the Others of her or his group will be aimed to their similarities; on the contrary, comparisons from the Self and Others outside her or his group will be more focused on their differences. 10 Considering this, it would be understood that the identity of the Others will be a determinant for the construction of social-Self, for what Maria Jarymowicz gives the following explication:

On the one hand, the social self can be described by the individual’s social identifications: different forms of syntony with other people and states of prosocial ego involvement. [...] On the other hand, the social self can be associated with people’s ability to perceive and recognize themselves

9 Barry Jones, Exploring otherness: An Approach to Cultural Awareness (London: CILT, 1995), 1
[...] The content of the self-description combined with the representation of other(s) constitutes the social self and we schemata.\textsuperscript{11} Jarymowicz mentions an important element in the social-equation between Self and Others, which is ‘We’. The more similarities one shares with the others, the more empathy will be inspired between the two parts; these means to feel identified in the Other.\textsuperscript{12} In view of this premise, it could be assumed that—for the contrary—the more disparate the Self is with the Others, the more indifference or disdain would be provoked.

According to Marques, Páez and Abram, the conjunction of comparisons in a particular group constructs a specific prototype, a process denominated the “meta-contrast principle”; people are scrutinized and judged in relation to prototypes, and correspondingly, prototypes constitute norms\textsuperscript{13}. These norms could be perceived as social conditions; meaning the conditions to be part of a group, part of society.

When individuals do not meet norms, they are stigmatized; starting the dispute between the ‘normal’ and the Others, those who do not meet the expected, the needed, those who are wrong. On this regard, Goffman believes the normal and the stigmatized are not specific individuals, but perspectives; he elucidates that a person may be stigmatized—be out of normality—in any or many moments in life.\textsuperscript{14} Under those circumstances, it could be understood the same for Otherness; as an instant, a condition, an idea, a decision.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 45-46
1.2. The Human Monster

After a short exploration on the Otherness what could be outlined is the action of contrast, in search for resemblance or dissimilarity. Once differences are detected there is lesser space for affinity; if it is not the same then is Other, something Other, someone Other, that it is not known, not familiar, may be a mistake, could be wrong, might be dangerous. Jones reflects that Otherness when experienced at first hand it can prompt all kinds of questions not only about ‘others’ but also about ourselves and whether we wish to take on or be part of that ‘otherness’ or not.\(^{15}\)

It is common to fear the unknown; understanding unknown as something or someone so different that is hard to understand, so different that breaks the norm, the boundaries of acceptance; in some cases, the unknown takes form as the grotesque, as the monstrous.

There are many studies on human Otherness, being one of them—from a Visual Culture perspective—the study of the British artist Alexa Wright, also an Art and Visual Culture Reader in the University of Westminster; her study resulted in the book *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture*, published in 2013. Her website states that as an artist she is:

Motivated by her own sense of strangeness and displacement, [and her] curiosity is channelled into unsettling works that often take the viewer or listener out of the comfort zone\(^{16}\)

These gives a hint on her motives to carry out a research on odd identities and physics, topics that are never out of controversy; especially in cases where Otherness is seen as equal as ‘monstrosity’. Her study will

\(^{15}\) Jones, *Exploring otherness: An Approach to Cultural Awareness*, 1

serve as a guide to explore the concept of monstrosity in search of a definition.

Monstrosity is a point of view; is subjective and will depend on the accumulation of knowledge, customs and beliefs of a person, group or society; it is a cultural perspective. As an illustration of this, Wright describes that Western cultures have historically established—through visual means—differences on Self and Others, “in the form of strange bodies and unconventional behaviours”\(^\text{17}\); giving as example illustrations of people from different cultures with unknown behaviours, which were depicted with animal features; the more resemblance to animals, the less humanity they possess; signalizing differences as lack of humanity. This way of presenting the monstrous, through contrast, communicated how a human should be or behave, it showed the limits of normality; it was a way of establishing social norms.\(^\text{18}\)

The first introduction ‘card’ of an individual is the body; the appearance of the body is the exposed identity of a person. According to Wright, the human body depends on how a society signify or codify it, expressing that “the visual signals conveyed by the structure and dynamic features of the body, and face in particular, form a basic element of human communication”\(^\text{19}\); hence, the body is like a book containing a person’s life; some books follow the determined social order, and others disrupt this order; it will always depend on the eye reading them. Since ancient times to the present, the ideal body have been represented by symmetry and natural anatomical proportions; perfect bodies symbolized efficient societies.\(^\text{20}\) Although, it is important to remark that these model bodies are not universal; they varied depending on the culture and periods of time.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 10-17
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 47
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 49-52
Another important detail Wright denotes is the relation of body norms construction with religion; in the Sixteenth Century monstrous bodies were signs of God’s punishment, these deformations were linked to the unnatural, to sin, to immorality; thereby, the images of monsters were used to inspire fear, in order to maintain order.21 This followed the idea of the body representing the ‘true’ nature; as Wright explicates it, “a deformed, transgressive or ‘wrong’ body can indicate moral, social and religious disorder.”22 Later, between the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, practices of physiognomy were highly popular, especially for criminologists; it is a practice based in the belief that a person’s appearance—specifically the face—was tied to this person’s inner self; to understand it more simply, those who looked symmetric and attractive were good, on the contrary those who presented physical anomalies had high possibilities of being a criminal or insane.23 In the present, much of these prejudices still exist, is easier to expect or accept (the reality of) the crimes of a person who have a defiant and out-of-normal appearance; the ‘criminal looks’ have been deeply ensconced in the imaginary of people since the early years of life.

Wright’s study continues through the Nineteenth Century, a time where monstrosity was approached differently, oddities and abnormalities were presented as spectacle, these personages—known as freaks—displayed their monstrous body deformities as part of a show; commonly known as ‘freak shows’, which functioned through the commodification of the Others; the monstrous peculiarities of the Others served as entertainment to those who were reassured as ‘normal’. In the present day, these spectacles continue to happen, with different kinds of freaks, and different means and media. This topic will be developed with more detail further on.

21 Ibid., 57-60
22 Ibid., 61
23 Ibid., 60-61
In the final chapters of her study, Wright explores the concept of monstrosity also as a reflection of a faceless image. A monster is not only an abnormal being, a deformed body; but also an idea, an imaginary image of an atrocious behaviour. An evil, immoral, criminal behaviour is not always expressed on the appearance of the bearer, sometimes it is embedded in a ‘normal’ body. Wright gives two compelling examples of famous contemporary killers\(^24\) who committed terrible crimes; however, what made them much-publicized subjects was their ‘normal’ appearance, their similitude to all ordinary citizens, in a way that made them harder to be perceived as monsters. Is hard to perceive the Other as a monster, as freak, as abnormal, when the Other looks as normal as we are. In this regard, Wright reflects the following:

The moment that the monstrous ‘other’ becomes indistinguishable from the image we see in the mirror is the terrible moment when monstrosity fails.\(^25\)

If the sole existence of Others, is to understand what must be or not, and guide people through a specific norm, what happens when they are not recognizable? What happens when these ‘monsters’ cannot be seen? Do they still exist?

In view of this scenario, would not this be proof that appearances are not truthful, nor reliable? Leading to a shift of thinking, and leaving behind all fixations on body image? Wright suggests that this will not happen as long as media keeps embodying monstrosity. In the present, mass media—especially television and the internet—is in charge of remark and reinforce ‘normality’ in behaviour and appearance, releasing and renewing models to follow or monsters to fear; what could be considered as modern freak shows.

\(^24\) (1) **Ted Bundy**: American serial-killer who committed abduction, rape, murder and necrophilia crimes to more than 30 young women between 1974 and 1979. (2) **Anders Behring Breivik**: Norwegian mass-murderer who on 22 July 2011 killed over 70 people, mostly young, for extremist political beliefs. See: Wright, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture*, Chapter 7.

\(^25\) Wright, *Monstrosity: The Human Monster in Visual Culture*, 166
1.3. The evolution of Freak Shows

Throughout history, people with unusual appearance have been stigmatized and treated differently; these ‘different’ treatment have varied greatly depending on the society and epoch. As stated earlier in this study, people with abnormal body were considered monsters—mystic unnatural beings—but this changed a long time ago; Wright specifies that by the end of the Eighteenth Century “the corporeal monstrosity began to lose its symbolic significance” due to modern scientific knowledge, responsible of explaining the actual causes for such abnormalities, denying any supernatural reason. This led to the production of exhibitions of these extraordinary bodies as curiosities, with an air of exotic and marvelousness. Rosemarie Garland Thomson highlights the spectacle per se in Freak Shows, as a result of an already established public ritual based on the act of looking; she writes on this regard as follows:

The exaggerated, sensationalized discourse that is the freak show’s essence ranged over the seemingly singular bodies that we would now call either ‘physically disabled’ or ‘exotic ethnics’, framing them and heightening their differences from viewers, who were rendered comfortably common and safely standard by the exchange. Freak discourse structured a cultural ritual that seized upon any deviation from the typical, embellishing and intensifying it to produce a human spectacle whose every somatic feature was laden with significance before the gaping spectator.

Freaks in display were more than an individual with an unusual body, they were fabricated; depending on the physical condition a fake character would be created with a complete visual experience; which included a specific narrative, with a theatrical oral presentation, as well as stylized

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26 Ibid., 79
banners; additionally, a complete scenography design configured by outfits, settings and performance.28

The commodification of the Others—already mentioned before—or in other words the showmanship of those visually different was the essence of freak shows. There are many ways of being different, to behave or look different. With this in mind, was there any categorization of freaks? Bogdan refers to many different terms that were used to describe people exhibited in these shows, most of these terms were exact descriptions of some performers; some of these terms were ‘oddsities’, “curiosities”, “eccentrics”, “marvels”, “strange people” and “very special people”, terms relatively alike between each other; and terms such as monster and “nature’s mistake”29, which do not differ greatly in definition, but have much more impact. Reading all these terms gives an idea of classes, as different levels of freakishness. Bogdan mentions two main types of freaks exhibited during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, the “so-called examples of new and unknown ‘races’ and ‘lusus naturae’ or nature’s jokes or mistakes”30. The unknown races were tribal people brought from explorations on distant territories; and, lusus naturae31 refers to all individuals with notorious physical abnormalities in general. Bogdan also points out another way of distinction, which is not just related to physiological conditions, but also to the concept of freaks as a social construction; which categorizes freaks on four groups: (1) the first is ‘born freaks’ (Fig. 1), these group refers to all individuals with natural abnormalities, whether these conditions were from birth or acquired, like a person with no limbs; (2) the second is ‘made freaks’ (Fig. 2), referring to people who manipulated their appearance in order to be part of these spectacles, like a heavily tattooed person; (3) the third one is the ‘novelty act’ (Fig. 3), which different from the first two groups, does not rely on

28 Ibid., 5-7
29 Robert Bogdan, Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 3-6
30 Ibid., 6
physical features, instead on extraordinary abilities, like fire swallowers; (4) and the fourth one is the ‘gaffed freaks’, representing the scam of freak shows, like people faking abnormalities.\(^{32}\) It is important not to overlook the fact that these are not categorizations of individuals—the human behind the act—rather the categorization of the way people perceive these individuals, or how these individuals are exhibit.\(^{33}\)

Following this account of freaks categorization, splendidly gathered by Bogdan research on Freak Shows from the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, it is impossible not to recognize the similitude to contemporary ways of perceiving the Others. Freak shows still exist, the exhibition of human curiosities for profit have changed, have evolved, but have not ceased to exist; they exist in many forms, from the surviving old forms as exotic galleries, oddities museums and circuses; to the new ones such as different Internet sources and almost all contemporary shows on TV, particularly talk shows. Taking this into consideration is pertinent to ask why do these spectacles exist? What is so attractive about the heightened differences of Others?

Through the examination of the similarities between earlier Freak Shows and contemporary Talk Shows, Andrea Stulman Dennett demarcates that for both cases “it is about people on display and the public examination of what are essentially private affairs”\(^{34}\), that is to say voyeurism as such was the main attraction; and by this it could be assume that the same applies for all kinds of human spectacles. Show producers take advantage of the voyeuristic attraction on freaks and bodies in general, turning their performers into consumable products. Acknowledging the mercantile advantages of being a freak, it is not hard to comprehend why people voluntarily takes part of all these different forms of Freak Shows. This is one proof of how the Others are a social

\(^{32}\) Bogdan, \textit{Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit}, 8
\(^{33}\) Ibid., 10
\(^{34}\) Dennett, “The Dime Museum Freak Show Reconfigured as Talk Show”, in \textit{Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body}, 321
construction, where the identity and the body are molded to please society.

1.4. The Body as Spectacle

Throughout this chapter it has been defined the way society constructs the concept of Otherness, how society utilize the Others to set the boundaries of normality, thereby the Others conception and image have been manipulated through time at will of the society, in a constant conflict between majorities and minorities. It has been illustrated along these topics that the body as the bearer of identity have been much affected by societies determined by spectacle and consumerist logics, turning the body into nothing more than an artificial case which has worth as long as society dictates it.

Mike Featherstone have accomplished several studies on social and cultural theories, between them the relation between body and society. He defines that the conception of the body has been much influenced by mass consumption, stating the following:

In the 1920s the foundations of a consumer culture became established with the new media of motion pictures, tabloid press, mass circulation magazines and radio extolling the leisure lifestyle, and publicising new norms and standards of behaviour.35

Being these types of media the ones altering traditional norms and values, establishing new ways of life and creating senseless needs. Which have not change in the present—worth to emphasize—apart from the media.

The concept of body as the object of desire have been heightened by the consumer culture in the Twentieth Century; with the evolution of clothing design, bodies were more exposed, there was no shame on the

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display of the body. The more exposed the body, the more scrutiny it received, this bolstered the attention on body presentation and the appearance in general. Images of the ideal body proliferated through all kinds of advertisements and visual media, promoting the use of cosmetics, or practices such as sunbathing, and dietary regimes; the 1920s saw the rise of cosmetic surgery, influenced by the insatiable search for body ‘perfection’. The consumer culture has turned the body into an object; an object which worth depends on its appearance; an appearance dictated by the up-to-day model.

Jean Baudrillard describes two forms of representation of the objectified body, the body as ‘capital’ and the body as ‘fetish’; and observes that the objectification of the body entailed into the affronting and marginalization directed to individuals who did not invested in their appearance. As was previously noted, the marginalization or stigmatization derives from the dissimilarities between Self and Others; Baudrillard demonstrates that not only those who are different are stigmatized, but also the ones who does not do anything to be or look similar; by this, it could be assumed that to break the mold and refuse to follow pre-established appearance norms would be considered a subversive behaviour; under this logic, there is no wonder why people decide to transform the appearance of their body transgressing the limits of acceptance; an example of this are body modifications, while some have been gaining popularity, others surpass the limits of social acceptance, Victoria Pitts express that this “body modifiers create not only spectacle and controversy but also new forms of social rebellion through the body.” This is a way of expressing discontent and defiance; another

36 Ibid., 177-178
37 Ibid., 178-181
reason could be self-empowerment, a topic which will be explored in the next chapter.

1.5. The Extraordinary Vampire Woman

A perfect example of a transgressive image, a person that defies all norms of proper appearance in every inch of her body is the Vampire Woman (Fig. 4). The Vampire Woman has become a celebrity due to her large amount of body modifications; the Guinness World Records Website details she:

has a total of [forty-nine] body modifications, including significant tattoo coverage, a range of transdermal implants on her forehead, chest and arms, and multiple piercings in her eyebrows, lips, nose, tongue, ear lobes, belly button and nipples.40

She has definitely an astonishing appearance, which is what has made her famous; she is famous being a freak for society.

Society uses these freaks as spectacle in the present, just as it did in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century. As mentioned before, in the past Freak Shows nicknamed and used special terms to describe the characters in display, either orally or in painted banners; in the present all kinds of media do the same. Some examples are the headlines of some tabloids, maybe as a way of generating a sense of drama; in reference to the vampire woman, one of them said “Expotattoo: ‘Vampire Woman’ complete with fangs and forked tongue appears at body art festival”41; in another one it could be read “‘I have always been very different’: Mexican lawyer undergoes extreme body modifications to become Vampire Lady

40 Guinness World Records, “Most body modifications - (female)”
(complete with titanium horns inserted into her head)\(^{42}\); and one last example says “Vampire Woman’ bit back with tatts”\(^{43}\); similar to texts in advertising sheets or banners from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century, in images found on Thomson and Bogdan’s book, in which it can be read different personage characterizations such as “Chang, ‘The Chinese Giant’, tallest man in the world”\(^{44}\), “Piramal & Sami, Brother & Sister, Double Bodied, Hindoo Enigma”\(^{45}\), “James O’Connell, The Celebrated Tattooed Man”\(^{46}\). These enunciations, as well as the titles mentioned before, exploit and dramatize these personages’ oddities as advertisement, as a written spectacle.

There are other ways in which the Vampire Woman’s body is exploit for spectacle, some talk shows in different parts of the world have invited her to tell the story of her life. As was already mentioned, talk shows could be conceived as the modern freak shows. According to Dennett in the present day it would be impossible to profit much exhibiting freaks the way it was done before, especially in the case of born-freaks; she considers that a show for the “late-twentieth-century audience” should be “grotesquely fascinating” and “politically correct” at the same time; stating that talk shows would be the perfect example, where “dysfunctional human beings” are the new freaks.\(^{47}\) The Vampire Woman was a guest in Laura’s Show in Mexico (Fig. 5); it is important to mention that this a well-known talk show in Latin America and much controversial, it was investigated for violations to human rights, for exploiting the

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\(^{42}\) Tara Brady, “‘I have always been very different’: Mexican lawyer undergoes extreme body modifications to become Vampire Lady (complete with titanium horns inserted into her head)”, The Daily Mail, November 5, 2013, Accessed August 27, 2016, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2481092/I-different-Mexican-lawyer-undergoes-extreme-body-modification-Vampire-Lady-complete-titanium-horns-inserted-head.html


\(^{44}\) Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*, 99

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 96

\(^{46}\) Thomson, ed., *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, 239

\(^{47}\) Dennett, “The Dime Museum Freak Show Reconfigured as Talk Show”, in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, 320
intimacy of children and teenagers. The Vampire Woman firstly appeared in an episode where she was asked the reason for her body modifications, and about her personal life; but it is not common to see people as extreme as the Vampire Woman in this show, in general this specific talk show presents cases about normal-looking people with dramatic day-to-day or novelish issues, such as infidelity, unwanted pregnancies, domestic abuse, sick children and elders, bullying, forbidden romances, amongst much others; nevertheless, Dennett explains that:

the sensational aspects of the TV talk shows are played down and the educational aspects heightened to legitimize these spectacles. Sometimes midgets or other anomalous or disabled persons appear on talk shows, but mostly these appearances are promoted as enlightening and informative.

This first episode in which the Vampire Woman appeared is titled “They always humiliated me for being ugly”, in which various supposedly ugly women were invited to tell how their ugliness has ruined their lives, and then granted a free makeover; by this it could be assumed that the Vampire Woman was invited to this episode as another example of an ugly woman, not a born-ugly woman but a self-made ugly. Dennett as well mentions how this shows use presumed doctors or other experts testimonials as a way to “validate” any argument or topic. The only moment an expert opinion is requested in the episode mentioned before, is at the end of the Vampire Woman’s interview, after she had explained

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50 Dennett, “The Dime Museum Freak Show Reconfigured as Talk Show”, in Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body, 321
52 Dennett, “The Dime Museum Freak Show Reconfigured as Talk Show”, in Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body, 321
her motives and the meanings of her modifications, and had spoken against bad judgements and prejudice; moment in which the presenter asks the expert to validate the Vampire Woman’s modifications as self-expression; the supposedly expert answers “it might be, yes above all because she looks confident, she doesn’t look hesitant, she doesn’t look embarrassed, nor feels shame at all”\(^{53}\); in a way that it is easy to suspect she may not be an expert giving such an informal and unprofessional answer, even when the presenter proclaimed this woman as “the great doctor in this show”\(^{54}\). This questionable expert gives no psychological or sociological answer to the Vampire Women’s body modifications and appearance; it does not seem there is a serious commitment from this show to inform and educate people on body modification practices, and to question social stigmas based on appearances; another proof of these is the makeover gift the other participants were granted, instead of encouraging self-appreciation; in Dennett’s words, this show “was about voyeurism; it was a freak show.”\(^{55}\)

The episode discussed above was not the only one in which the Vampire Woman has appeared, in the same year she was invited back to the show, episode in which she performed a suspension\(^ {56}\) (Fig. 6); a practice she initiated for economic necessity, more than as a spiritual experience.\(^ {57}\) Through the years she have continued performing suspensions, especially in tattoo conventions; one of the latest is a presentation she did in Ecuador in the International Tattoo Convention of 2016, which can be appreciated in a video produced by an Ecuadorian TV Show\(^ {58}\) (Fig. 7). There are some important differences between this

\(^{53}\) See appendix [No. 1]

\(^{54}\) Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Dennett, “The Dime Museum Freak Show Reconfigured as Talk Show”, in Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body, 321


\(^{57}\) See appendix [No. 2]

\(^{58}\) See: Programa Delivery TV Ecuador [In Spanish]. “Entrevista a la mujer vampiro - Convención nacional de tatuajes” [Interview to the vampire woman - National tattoo convention of tattooing].
Vampire Woman’s performance and the one effectuated five years earlier. Apart from new modifications she has done to her body, she uses far less clothes; her torso, breasts, legs and buttocks are fairly exposed, but her head is covered with a black nun veil; the music sounds heavier and much intense; and more importantly there is a kind of narrative and theatricality within the performance of 2016, with a much more obscure image. When asked about her presentation she responded the following:

- well, is that it is part of the show, suspension is something nice and millenary but we give it a touch something kinda more fun, so it isn’t just elevating and that’s it, right? is like a short plot, a short story.

It can be clearly noticed the spectacularism in this performance, by different resources, such as the dark and wicked-ish concept with the personages, the costumes, and the music; and the over-exposition of her body.

The Vampire Woman not only performs her modified body, but as well her naked body. Society, through norms and boundaries first points her, then exploits her and finally consumes her as a freak and objectified body; and she, as a self-made freak, has learned to live through and take advantage of this marginalizing and consumerist society.

Altogether, this first chapter have illustrated a way in which society constructs, exploits and consumes identities. Society sets the norms to be followed and creates models that changes all the time; when a person does not play by the rules, and looks different from the model, this person is marginalized, becomes the Other, the monster, the freak. But, the same differences that makes this person a freak and distinguish from the majority, are taken advantage for the entertainment and profit of the normal-others. Many people have found a way of living been a freak, whether this person is a born-freak, or decides to become one. The

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59 See appendix [No. 3]
Vampire Woman extremely modified her body to a point where human-like features are starting to fade; she willingly exceeds social acceptance boundaries, she has uglified herself; and beyond her reasons for doing it, she has learned to take advantage of her freakishness.
CHAPTER 2: IDENTITY UNDER AND OVER THE SKIN

2.1. A Visual Culture

We live in a time where images pervade every space, evidencing the dominance of sight. The first chapter in this study analyzed the way society forms and transforms appearances and behaviours through the contrast of Self and Other; vision, plays the lead role in this process. The way people behave and look is manipulated by and for the gaze of others.

Vision is more than the mere physical action of body and mind, it is also a social issue, and from this comes the term visuality. Since the Nineteenth Century many authors have aimed to define vision and its social and historic qualities, and how these concepts have changed through time; in general, determining the difference between ‘vision’ and ‘visuality’. Hal Foster reckoned that

the difference between the terms signals a difference within the visual [...], many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein.  

It could be understood that visuality is the integration of different perceptions and interpretations obtained through sight, charged and influenced by culture.

Whitney Davis analyses various theories on visual perception and its relation with culture, both affecting and changing each other. Davis raises two essential questions, what is Cultural about Vision? and, what is Visual about Culture? With reference to the first question, he differentiates the term vision with visuality, referring to visuality as the culturality of vision; Davis describes visuality as ‘a way of seeing’ the world, and as the depictive and iconographic significance of a formal expression. In regard to the second question, Davis writes about the interaction between

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60 Hal Foster, ed., Vision and Visuality, Seattle: Bay Press, 1988, p. ix
visuality and visibility, implying that visuality is not always visible; therefore, he determines that visuality is not only a cultural interpretation of what is seen, but a culture itself which determines what it is that is seen, regardless of any visible identity.\textsuperscript{62}

Postmodernist views commonly addresses the predominance of vision; Sturken & Cartwright wrote on this regard that the use of “visual culture practice to engage in cultural critique about visual culture, rather than turning to words as if words were a more intelligent or more trustworthy form”\textsuperscript{63} is a postmodernist trend. They as well denote the close relation of Postmodernism to popular culture, accompanied by mass culture, consumer culture and remix culture; Sturken & Cartwright consider that these new kinds of cultural practices are the starting point for the incorporation of new concepts of image and identity.\textsuperscript{64}

From a postmodernist perspective the way people engage in the present to visual culture has resulted in a more reflexive identity, with a ‘performative nature’ as Sturken & Cartwright describe it, and the adeptness to change and be multi-faceted.\textsuperscript{65} From what has already been discussed above about the privileging of vision, it is easy to understand the exaggerated attention on image and appearances, and consequently the construction of identity as a social process; accordingly, the mutative virtue of identity act in response to the self-fashioning desire, in perpetual relation to a social demand or expectation.

\textbf{2.2. The Single, the False, and the Other Identities}

The way people present themselves or how they are perceived by others is an important component of visuality; however, does appearance reflects the true identity? More importantly, is there a true or a single identity? As the aim for this chapter, it will be analyzed the construction

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, p. 278-280
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, p. 314-315
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, p. 324-325
of self-identity and how it is affected by society, beginning with an exploration on the concept of personal identity, and later the relation of identity and society.

There are different theories in respect to personal identity and what it means to be a person. This study will not intend to give a definition to personal identity, nor is there a unique answer, yet. These theories have different approaches, mainly psychological and physical approaches; this study will explore two contrasting theories in order to have two different views for the subsequent analysis of the study case; the study work of Amy Kind will serve as reference for this end.

One of these theories is the psychological theory (1), which defends that personal identity responds to a psychological continuity; Kind explains that the psychological continuity is formed by “overlapping chains of psychological connections over time—connections [...] of memory, [...] of intention, beliefs, desires, character traits, habits, and so on”.66 What could be understood is that people’s identity is what they have lived in the past, how they live in the present and how they envision their life in the future; all these experiences, knowledge and aspirations inside their brains; the mind is the personal identity. Nevertheless, there are some theorists who disagree with the psychological theory, relying on imaginary and futuristic scenarios to prove their views, mainly through the problem of reduplication; this refers to the fictional possibility of transferring the consciousness of a person to another, from one body to the other; if this transfer can be multiply, then more than one person could possess the same consciousness; would it mean they all are the same person, the same identity?67 This generates doubts on the conception of personal identity solely as the consciousness—the psyche—of a person, figuring that the body may also be part of the personal identity.

67 Ibid., 52-53
From a physical approach, one example is the bodily theory (2); according to this theory the body is more than just a mean to express identity, the body is the identity per se; meaning that a person is what her or his body is. Be that as it may, this theory is not agreed by many; Kind gives two examples in relation to the bodily theory as a way to illustrate its consistency or conversely its lack of. On one hand, she refers to a person’s relation to the own body, expressing: “Damage to my body is damage to me, not merely damage to a possession of mine”\(^{68}\), by this perspective she conceives this theory may have some sense; on the other hand she mentions—amongst cases of amputations and body transformations—a case of conjoined twins, in which dicephalic twins share one body, meaning from a bodily theory perspective this would be one single person, but each twin has two separate brains, consciousness and personalities\(^{69}\); this case shows how unconvincing this theory can be. Similar to the psychological theory, the bodily theory falls short on a definite conception of personal identity; identity may be too complex to be understood as only a psychological or a physical matter.

It is of special interest for this study the relation of personal identity—the Self—with society; the self-identity, whether psychologically or physically, is connected to society and both affect each other. In the introduction of this topic, it was questioned if there is a single true identity; in relation to this interrogation Susan Harter expresses that “the construction of a personal self [is] highly dependent on social interaction”\(^{70}\); and for this reason, she considers that a person may construct a false identity, hiding the true one, in order to be accepted by society.\(^{71}\) This is consistent with what was explored in the first chapter, with society as the entity determining the norms that Others should

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 79

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 82


\(^{71}\) Ibid., 82
follow; if a person’s true identity does not meet the demands of society, then the person in search of social acceptance could create a false, or simply a different identity. In view of this, a person may have more than one identity to meet different social demands in different situations or instances. Peggy A. Thoits and Lauren K. Virshup detailed that a person has multiple me’s, different identities that can be combined one another or merge into a unity.\textsuperscript{72}

The transformation of identity or the creation of multiple selves is accompanied by different ways of expression. A person may adopt different appearances and behaviours, specifically intended to be perceived by others. Sturken and Cartwright analyses identity from a postmodernist perspective, in which it is stated that identity is the performance of a person and that appearance is not just an outside look or a style, but rather an image full of significance.\textsuperscript{73} This way of understanding identity seems to rely deeply on the visuality, and the image a person displays. Another question was brought up earlier, does appearance reflects true identity? In regard of this query, Sturken and Cartwright have expressed—recognizing appearance as the surface of a person—the following:

We can no longer look below the surface for depth and true meaning, because we will find no hidden truth there but rather just a different way of seeing.\textsuperscript{74}

Taking into account the subjectivity of visuality, and the different way every single person perceives the world, it can be presumed that every person’s identity would be perceived differently by others, people would perceive only a part of person’s identity; the identity of a person in view of others would not be a single one, meaning there would not be a true


\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 325
one, but an ensemble of different points of views. It is important to note that a person can partially choose what others can see, as mentioned before, an identity can be created or changed. Sturken and Cartwright suggest that the transformability of identity has been influenced by popular culture and mass media, two phenomena commonly associated to Postmodernism; as an illustration of this they use as example two famous personalities from the pop music industry who started in the late Twentieth Century, which are Madonna and Michael Jackson. These music icons adopted or appropriated several different looks and styles throughout their career, with Michael Jackson reaching extremes at physically turning himself into a complete different person, going through many plastic surgeries and skin bleaching\(^75\); their constant image transformations are what constituted their identity, it was one of the reasons they are most known, even at the present.

This account of identity transformation refers to the visual image, to the physical appearance; if the body is understood as one of the physical means to express identity, the transformation of the body may cause the transformation of identity as well. Sturken and Cartwright refers to the transformable body, as the postmodern body; they explain that the postmodern body is conceived as an important part of the image of a person, and that it is malleable and can be re-sculpted, all in order to match with the image desired.\(^76\) Nevertheless, what people’s body communicate—either with how it looks, how it performs, or how much it changes—is not the same for everyone who is looking, as was mentioned before in regard to the appearance. Not necessarily everybody perceived the image changes of Madonna or Michael Jackson the same way; but even if these perceptions were positive or negative, what is important to recognize is that these artists are a proof that everyone can change; choose a different identity; change their appearance and body to match this identity; and do it more than once, regardless of what everyone else

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 326
\(^{76}\) Ibid.
see or perceive. In regard to the construction of personal identity, it was mentioned that a person can change to a different identity in search for social approval, but there may be other reasons besides approval; it can also be a statement, a declaration of ideology, which sometimes can be the contrary to social acceptance.

2.3. The Meaning of Female Body

As was already mentioned in Chapter 1, the body is one aspect of the image of a person; through the body people express their identity, and this identity may be affected by the way society reacts to this body, but what is expected from a body? What is the body for society? Synnott asserts that the body is a social construction, and details the following:

Our bodies and body parts are loaded with cultural symbolism, public and private, positive and negative, political and economic, sexual moral and often controversial; and so are the attributes, functions and states of the body, and the senses.77

It would be understood that society establishes what every part and function of the body means; and by this defines what a body should be, do and look like. It is well known that women are more affected by social scrutiny, but why does this happens? What meanings and symbolisms have society charged on female body? In order to find an answer to this questions, it will be explored the relation between body and society through history, and the meaning of female body for society, referencing the work of Synnott.

He presents an account of multiple theories, understandings and definitions of the body in different cultures and periods of time, starting with the ancient Greece. Greek philosophers, in the years before Christ, had different views on body; one defined the body as the tomb of the soul, seeing body and soul as opposites; and other believed that a body

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the more beautiful, the closer to God. Romans also believed the body was just a burden for the soul; but some thought of bodies as cosmic. In the case of Christians, body can be seen as sacred, for been own by God; but can be seen as well as evil, for being sinful. During the Renaissance the body was considered private; the most famous painters and sculptors like Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Botticelli, perceived the body as sacred and beautiful, similar to some Greeks; nevertheless, the ill and disfigured body kept the equivalence to sin. Some modern philosophers matched body to mindless machines; while others define body and mind as one organism. The Nineteenth Century brought ideas of the body as assets with Karl Marx; but Charles Darwin described the human body as an evolved animal; additionally, new politics conceived the body as property of the state. In the Twentieth Century, the perception of body as a machine was prevalent; but also mass consumption helped establish beauty as a most. Synnott ends these account with the existentialist view of body as the self, as a whole; and lastly the idea of body as bionic, thanks to the advances in medicine, science and technology.78

This promenade through history by Synnott reflects that the meaning of body has changed greatly, but there are some constants that can be notice; there are always contrasting points of view; on one hand the body as beautiful, sacred, cosmic; on the other hand, the body as a tomb, sin, burden, object. Another thing to note is the religious and political influence on this symbolisms, demonstrating their power on society. The constant change and evolution of society and culture, have an impact on the body; meaning on how it is perceived, and correspondingly how it is presented.

There is another construction of body meaning related to gender categorization. In this regard, Synnott wrote that “[m]en and women are polarized in our culture, as opposite, unequal, and at war in a classic example of dual symbolic classification”79; giving different meaning to

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78 Ibid., 8-34
79 Ibid., 38
female and masculine bodies could be a way to accentuate those differences and disparities; then, how have the image of women’s body been constructed in relation to men? The work of Synnott can answer this question with some historic examples, some as old as the story of Adam and Eve; Christian and Greek myths on creation portrayed women as the bearers of evil, and causers of men’s doom. Women, seen as the subject of men’s desire for sexual pleasure, turned their image, their bodies into symbols of sin, of depravity. Long traditions of patriarchy, present until these days, consider women inferior and obliged to serve men. By this way of thinking, women could be seen as objects, as possessions; meaning that their bodies should please men; that is to say, women should manage their bodies according to men requirements. Between the nineteenth and the Twentieth Century there were arguments attempting to prove women inferiority; some owing it on one of their biological distinctions, their uterus, claiming as the cause for women’s physical and mental diseases; and some others based their beliefs just to the fact that women lack a penis. This understanding of patriarchal conceptions of women body infers that women cannot make decisions on their body or worst do something that compromises the visual and physical structure of it, because women do not own them, men dictate what women can or cannot do with their bodies, for two reasons; on one hand, men’s superiority confer them power over women, men are the master and women the slave; on the other hand, women are physically and mentally incompetent, giving them no right for opinion or decision making.

It is important to mention that in the past were also different views on women; some describe them as equal to men, or as their complement, and some even reveal a superiority of women, either intellectually or morally. Nevertheless, all these views and the conceptions before

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80 Ibid., 39-40
81 Ibid., 48
82 Ibid., 54-56
83 Ibid., 52-53
described respond to a male-female duality. Synnott mentions another dualism also created by men, a female-female dualism; for what he expresses that “not only are there two types of people, men and women, [...] there are also only two types of women, good and bad.” The idea of women only as good and bad is deeply rooted in the imaginary of society in general, not only men evaluate and judge women with this only two ways of being, but women as well; a woman is submissive or insurrectionist, is a virgin or a whore, is caregiving or pernicious, is a mother or a waste of womanhood, is thin and beautiful or fat and ugly, have a spruce body or a ruined body, among uncountable other ways of been defined by others. For many years, women were taught this as their only way to comprehend and handle their existence, and it continues to be their reality until these days. Through history some few women spoke out against misogyny and women's oppression, efforts that took strength between the late Eighteenth and the Nineteenth Centuries; gradually gaining rights that were reserved for men, related mostly to education, politics, and labour. The Twentieth Century brought women movements campaigning against women’s objectification, and was also a time for creation of feminist organizations. These organizations are still actively working in the present. Feminist movements, ideologies, organizations, initiatives, literature, and all its forms, will be needed and will not ceased to exist, as long as women do not share the same rights as men all over the world.

As shown above, meanings on female body has been established by men from long time ago. Similar as the different social interpretations on body through time, the female body responds to dual-meanings such as sacred or evil, beautiful or grotesque, immaculate or sinful; all seen from a male perspective. It is commonly acknowledged that women are the object of the male gaze; women are subjected to a society that floods their lives with constant reminders of how the female body should look,

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84 Ibid., 57
85 Ibid., 58-59
through visual mass media. They are under constant scrutiny and judgement; this affects the way they present themselves, the way they manipulate their behaviour and appearance; whether they are seeking to please or break all norms imposed by society.

2.4. Body Modifications and Female Subversiveness

Body modifications are any physical and visual alteration of the body, which can have different purposes. There are various opinions on what exactly would be conceived as body modifications; Thomas wrote that some may think that particularly common activities such as dieting, sunbathing and haircuts could be part of this group\(^\text{86}\), but the most common practices referred as body modifications are "piercing, tattooing, branding, cutting, binding and inserting implants"\(^\text{87}\), as Mike Featherstone have listed; in the present some body modifications of this list, such as tattoos and piercings have become more accepted by society, even ‘mainstream’ as Pitts defined them, explaining that are very popular amongst the new generations\(^\text{88}\); on the contrary the rest in the list are seen as extreme, and it is not common to encounter people who have them.

Body modifications have been a traditional practice since ancient years by different cultures, most of these have been appropriated by western-culture. Thomas refers to body modifications as body art, and describes that for some cultures these practices respond to ornamental and artistic interests, for some others symbolize initiation rites, or for others could be as a way of engraving the body with symbols of political or sociological ideologies.\(^\text{89}\) Body modifications represent the self-construction and self-transformation of the body, in order to express an

\(^{86}\) Thomas, *Body Art*, 11-12
\(^{88}\) Pitt, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modifications*, 2
\(^{89}\) Thomas, *Body Art*, 10-11
ideal, a statement, an identity; either by spiritual, aesthetic or philosophic reasons. In earlier topics it has been mentioned how dependable and at the same time significant are body and self-identity for society; on this matter, Pitts wrote:

Body practices [...] show how the body figures prominently in our notions of self and community, in our cultural politics, and in social control and power relations.\textsuperscript{90}

What has been understood, through the different topics in this study work, is that once a person breaks the norms of image, he or she is marginalized and pointed by society, this person becomes an alien. Some people overtake—by far—the limits of social acceptance bearing in their bodies a large amount of extreme body modifications. For some the image of these characters could be grotesque, monstrous, dreadful; while for others could be marvellous, sublime, unique; but shock would surely be the most common reaction. People with extensive body modifications cause so much commotion that become famous; the way society perceives them is an analogy of the personages of the Nineteenth Century freak shows; they are the new freaks. These motivates some questions, why these people decided to transform their bodies at such a level that no longer look ‘human’? Why would they willingly turn into freaks, into monsters, in the eyes of society? and most importantly does society reacts differently to body modifications on woman, in contrast to men?

There are several studies on the psychological and sociological motivations and effects of extreme body modifications. Some people consider these practices as a pathological issue or caused by mental illness; Pitts expressed in this regard:

body modifications that are not socially acceptable, or do not beautify the body according to social norms, or that are painful, are seen as self-mutilating.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{90} Pitt, \textit{In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modifications}, 3
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 17
Is important to observe that for society it might not only be an issue of senseless self-harming or outrageous amounts of modifications in a body, it could be more an aesthetic controversy. For example, the Kardashian sisters are in the day-to-day of almost every visual media; being in the public eye from a very young age, people have been constantly debating—amongst many other topics—about their body changes; it is of common assumption that these women, more specifically Kim, have been through several plastic surgeries, to alter and shape their face features and body figure. These alterations are a body modification, they change the natural or born-with form of the body, as well as they involve pain in the making; Kardashians reality show, may be considered a modern freak show, but definitely they are not considered freaks, and their body modifications are not seen as self-harm; as can be seen, society marginalizes body modifications that uglifies the person. Pitts defines this perception of ugliness in a body, or more appropriately of grotesqueness, as the body which “defies normativity in its appearance, practices and stylization”\textsuperscript{92}; body modifiers understand the consequences, a certain marginalization, and nevertheless they do it, there is certainly a defiant factor in it; according to Pitts the categorizations given to body modifications in general are as socially-problematic and culturally-disaffected.

In the case of female body modifications, these are recurrently perceived as self-hating and self-harm practices, and even compared to anorexia and bulimia.\textsuperscript{93} These perceptions imply that the only reason for a woman to make decisions on the appearance of their body that are different from the rest, is by suffering a mental illness; it is a way of maintaining the dual perception on women; if women behaves out of the ordinary, they must be crazy, rebellious, dangerous; again, this way of thinking does inspire women’s defiance and subversiveness, as was

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 41
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 24-25
suggested before. Society expects women to maintain, stylize and manipulate their body, in order to keep it within the beauty standards; which would be "to be thin, young, and white, among other things"94, as Pitts details in the case of American women. Even though some feminists have depicted body modifications in woman as self-objectifications, as a victimization and still a patriarchy product95; some others conceive these practices as a way for women to rebel against women’s oppression and gender norms in general, and also as self-empowerment.96

Even in their intend to reclaim their bodies and express discontent on the norms for female body and behaviour, with their body modifications—no matter what they mean or intend to communicate—usually exposed to the gaze of others, women attract massive attention to their bodies; their bodies in return are objectified, fetishized and in a way consumed.97 This might mean that as the same as of identity, no matter what people aim to express with their body modifications, every person will perceive them differently, and society will marginalize and normalize them at the same time.

2.5. The Woman Inside the Vampire

Maria Jose Cristerna is the real name of The Vampire Woman, this nickname was given by a Mexican TV Channel98; which must have been based by Cristerna’s teeth shaped into fangs (Fig. 8), for which she explains that were inspired by the jaguar warriors, part of Mexico’s ancient history99. Many of the interviews she has been through are much interested in Maria Jose Cristerna, the person behind all the body

94 Ibid., 51
95 Ibid., 52-54
96 Ibid., 54-56
97 Ibid., 81
98 See Appendix [No. 4]
99 See Appendix [No. 5]
modifications, the inner self. In one of these interviews, conducted in 2012 by a Mexican TV Show\textsuperscript{100}, Cristerna talks about her personal life, telling about the difficulty she went through when her parents got divorced\textsuperscript{101}, and about the abusive and traumatic experience with the father of her children\textsuperscript{102}, amongst many other things. The interest in her personal life may be to find an answer for something really hard to understand, how can she do that to her body? what was or is so bad in her life, to take a decision like that? Certainly, Cristerna has a shocking appearance, without personally knowing her, her looks must astound or even startle people, especially people not familiar with body modifications. She is used to people calling her out because of her extreme appearance; some people think that another motivation for her modifications is to look as the devil for what she always says: “who knows the devil, to associate someone with him?”\textsuperscript{103} and explains that some of her modifications are symbols of warriors, such as her fangs and piercings inspired in the jaguar warrior from the Aztec Culture, as well as her hairstyle\textsuperscript{104}; and others she says are simply part of her style and does not mean or resemblance anything in special, like her implants.\textsuperscript{105} She started her modifications from a young age, in a time when it was even more disapproved by society\textsuperscript{106}; and from that first piercing her love for body modifications started\textsuperscript{107}; she continued, reaching the ninety six percent of her body tattooed\textsuperscript{108}, by the time of this interview; doing it, as she exclaimed: ”little by little, obviously I never thought it would be that much”\textsuperscript{109}. Her gothic-ish style is inspired by her music preferences, she

\textsuperscript{100} Documentary format interview show in spanish, see: La Historia Detras del Mito, Azteca Trece, http://www.aztecatrece.com/ahistoriadetrasdelmito
\textsuperscript{101} See appendix [No. 6]
\textsuperscript{102} See appendix [No. 7]
\textsuperscript{103} See appendix [No. 8]
\textsuperscript{104} See appendix [No. 9]
\textsuperscript{105} See appendix [No. 10]
\textsuperscript{106} See appendix [No. 11]
\textsuperscript{107} See appendix [No. 12]
\textsuperscript{108} See appendix [No. 13]
\textsuperscript{109} See appendix [No. 14]
mentioned her strong devotion to heavy metal music, particularly when
she was younger\textsuperscript{110}; but apart from showing her metal-style, she seeks to
look different to everyone else, to be as she says: “the being of my
fantasies”\textsuperscript{111}; but most importantly she expresses that she wants to be
herself, that even if she is a human, as the same of everyone else, she
considers that oneself marks the difference\textsuperscript{112}. Cristerna considers Body
Modifications are her life\textsuperscript{113}, that she would never regret about anything
on her body, assuring she has put much thought on everything she has
done, knowing it is permanent\textsuperscript{114}. She acknowledges some people might
think of her as a crazy woman, Cristerna says that people should not
judge her by the way she looks\textsuperscript{115}, manifesting that she is a person of
faith, close to her religion and teaches good values to her children\textsuperscript{116};
indeed, for many people could be difficult to imagine a religious person, if
the appearance of the person shows quite the opposite, from a socially
normed perspective. Cristerna, being a victim of domestic violence, takes
advantage of the attention given to her by the media\textsuperscript{117} to help other
women who have been through the same and make them aware that
machismo is also taught by women, and it needs to change.\textsuperscript{118}

All this account is referenced in the interview mentioned before, and
helps to understand about Cristerna’s personal life, by her own mouth.
But this does not necessarily mean is completely true, or that she is
showing her true self, maybe her answers will depend on the person or
the team doing the interview; one example of this is a previous
interview\textsuperscript{119} which was conducted circa 2011. In this interview she is

\textsuperscript{110}See appendix [No. 15]
\textsuperscript{111}See appendix [No. 16]
\textsuperscript{112}See appendix [No. 17]
\textsuperscript{113}See appendix [No. 18]
\textsuperscript{114}See appendix [No. 19]
\textsuperscript{115}See appendix [No. 20]
\textsuperscript{116}See appendix [No. 21]
\textsuperscript{117}See appendix [No. 22]
\textsuperscript{118}See appendix [No. 23]
\textsuperscript{119}DiaD, “La Mujer Vampiro” [The vampire woman, My translation], In “Vampire Mother
‘Behind her Life’ (Part 1)”, YouTube video, Accessed August 25, 2016,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7hDsliWDbCY
asked the same questions as many other interviews, about her personal life and about her body modifications; unlike the previous one, when asked about her fangs she answered that she was inspired by her fascination with vampires, which she has had from a short age\textsuperscript{120}; and about her forehead implants, she manifested that they meant strength\textsuperscript{121}. In respect to the extent of her tattoos, in this interview she says she has the ninety-eight percent of her skin covered\textsuperscript{122}. As can be noted she has given different answers; in one case her fangs were inspired by the ancient jaguar warrior, in the other to vampires; first her forehead implants represented strength for her, but then they did not meant anything in special, they were just part of her style; and finally, the percentage of her skin tattooed decreased, in possibly a year, from ninety eight percent, to ninety six percent, which is a small difference, but this and the other two examples help deducting that there are no certainties in her answers, and understanding that a personal interview with Cristerna is not necessarily the way to find the true reasons and motivations for her body modifications or the true identity of the Vampire Woman; Maria Jose Cristerna may be another identity, a false identity, the one that society can accept.

In an interview from 2011, Enrique Limón in reference to Cristerna’s appearings in many TV shows and news media, asked her about her sudden rise to fame, for what she answered:

I’m elated because Mariajosé is Mariajosé. Mariajosé never lets fame go to her head. Mariajosé is the face of the Mexican woman. I am the new Frida.\textsuperscript{123}

As can be noted Cristerna is talking in third person, she is talking about ‘Mariajosé’ as another identity, another person; at the last moment she

\textsuperscript{120} See appendix [No. 24]
\textsuperscript{121} See appendix [No. 25]
\textsuperscript{122} See appendix [No. 26]
speaks in first person, then, it could be deduced that the one interviewed is the Vampire Woman. Maria Jose Cristerna is (1) ‘the face of the Mexican woman’, and the Vampire Woman is (2) ‘the new Frida’; what does she meant with each categorization? An interpretation of this may be, that the first person is the same as all Mexican women, a piece of a conglomerate where everyone is equal, is part of the society; in contrast with the second person, declaring to be the new Frida Kahlo—the Twentieth Century most famous female artist from Latin America—this person would be representing also a Mexican woman, but different from the majority, unique, a person outside the norms, an Other. In this case

As mentioned before, Cristerna takes advantage of the attention given to her by all the media, as a way to speak her mind and help generate awareness about domestic abuse; the sensationalization of her appearance, of her body, gives her these spaces and opportunities; nevertheless, her appearance may also distract or deviate people from the message she is trying to send. Many people may only notice her outside being, cataloguing her for what they think she must be, without listening what she has to say. Margot Mifflin analysed the online reader’s comments from an article by the Huffington Post about Cristerna, in contrast with two articles each about the famous male body modifiers Rick Genest (Fig. 9) and Eric Sprague (Fig. 10), known as Zombie Boy and the Lizardman correspondingly; Genest’s body is fully tattooed depicting a skeleton covered in rotten flesh and insects, with few piercings, but no other extreme modifications; comparatively Sprague is covered with green scales tattoos resembling the body of a lizard, as his nickname clearly states, but has many other modifications such as piercings, implants and tongue splitting. What Mifflin could observe in contrast to both male body modifiers, the comments on Cristerna’s article “triggered [forty-five] pages of comments, many addressing her sexual

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124 http://rickgenest.com/
125 http://www.thelizardman.com/
viability”\textsuperscript{126}, but most people referred to her body modifications as a result of psychological issues\textsuperscript{127}, concerns she did not found on the other article’s comments, considering that “by majority rule, [Cristerna is] the ‘sick’ one”\textsuperscript{128}. Cristerna is not only judged by her body modifications, but also by reaching those extremes being a woman, which makes her body more vulnerable to criticism.

Is very common in many interviews and articles on Cristerna to show the before-and-after images, this way people can see how drastic and extreme is the change of her body (Fig. 11). Looking through the different images easily found on the internet, it can be observed how Cristerna have gradually adding or changing her body modifications through years. The first chapter in this study, analyzed two videos containing Cristerna suspension performances, noticing the difference in the theatricality of the performances and how she exposes her body; however, another change that can be notice are two specific body modifications, her breast and buttocks implants, which are commonly related to the objectification of women. This new implants, contrast deeply with the conception of extreme body modifications as disruption of the social normative on female body and notions of beauty; making it even more difficult to understand Cristerna’s reasons, aims and motivations for her body modifications.

In essence, Chapter 2 have explored some theories and understandings on the construction of self-identity and the meanings of body, determining that personal identity is not steady, either single, and it will always depend on social interactions; the same as the body, which is malleable and can be changed; but it will always be under social scrutiny and judgement. Maria Jose Cristerna changed drastically her body, which have made her the object of interest of many media in

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 143
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 144
\end{flushleft}
search for reasons, motives and the woman inside that monstrous body. She performs two different identities to the media, one corresponding to her body appearance, as a person different to the rest, who breaks social norms; on the contrary, her other identity, the person inside that body, is the same to everyone else, who meets social norms; and she uses these identities for her advantage.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of this study work was to determine the role of self-made-freaks in society, to achieve this aim various topics were explored and analyzed, topics inherent to the construction of freaks. This analysis resulted in the following inferences:

- Society in search for order and control defines norms and models, those who not follow these norms are perceived as the Others, the more different and out-of-normal they are, the more marginalized they will be; people fear what they do not understand, what they do not know. The abnormal, the unknown becomes the monster; but Otherness and monstrosity are not a person, but a point of view.

- The subjectiveness of visuality is an essential element in the construction of identity. A person does not possess a sole, true identity, but a conglomerate of identities, which change depending on who perceives it or what the person wants to show.

- The dominance of sight derived in an over-attention to the body, and have influenced in the construction of meanings to the body. Meanings on female body were defined by a patriarchal logic, resulting in the constant scrutiny and judgement of the female body and appearance.

- Society have taken advantage of the spectacularity of the abnormal and monstrous body through freak shows. Nevertheless, people also
take advantage of body consumption, by turning themselves into freaks, and making a living of it.

- Popular culture and mass media have changed the notions on body; perceiving the body as malleable and transformable; and, as the main mean to express identity.

- People can create identities transforming the body. A way to transform body and identity is by body modifications, a practice that depending on the extremity of the changes, it is more or less accepted by society. Extreme body modifiers are perceived as freaks, monsters; and female body modifiers are judged even worse.

- Motives and meanings of body modifications are in constant study and debate. Maria Jose Cristerna, the Vampire Woman, through her performances or interviews by the media, exposes two identities, one that society recognizes as the same, as normal; and the other that makes her unique, different to everyone else.

This study was divided in two views on the construction of identity; one from society, and the other from the subject. These two views are essential as well to define the role of self-made-freaks in society. From a society’s perspective, society uses freaks as a symbol of abnormality; on one hand, society—as producer and exploiter—exposes self-made-freaks, makes a show of them, so everyone sees what should not be, what should not be done; or the (visual) consequences of doing wrong. On the other hand, society—as consumer and voyeur—scrutinizes and marks out freaks in order to prove or re-affirm their own normality. In contrast from the subject perspective, the subject—as the deviant—becomes a freak as a war cry, as symbol of self-empowerment and subversiveness against all social norms; together with, the subject—as the shrewd—who self-exploits his or her freakishness to play with society's consumerist and voyeuristic needs, for profit.
Self-made-freaks have many meanings, which depend on the subject or society’s needs or perceptions. Self-made-freaks are an example of wrongness; people compare themselves with these freaks, to acknowledge what they are not. At the same time self-made-freaks are an example of transcendence; these freaks use their bodies to communicate their ideologies, their beliefs; they express through their disruptive or monstrous appearance that they do not live by society's norms, they decide on their own bodies, decide by their own who to be, and how to look; these freaks are an example of inspiration, to motivate others to be unique, to be different. Self-made-freaks mean all these, all together, at the same time.

With all these points given it can be concluded that self-made-freaks, whether they are perceived as wrong or inspirational, or many other ways, their role is to make people question themselves, to understand who they are, who they are not, and who they want to be; their role is to be a model; a model that no matter the changes it suffers and the meanings it bears, it must exist. There is a constant dependency, and dual way of understanding the world; everything is in contrast, ‘one’ cannot exist without the ‘other’.

The role of the Vampire Woman as a self-made-freak and woman is to question society on the over-critic gaze on women and their objectification, and how patriarchy is still present and strong in all men and women imaginary.

It is recommended for future studies, in order to obtain more holistic understandings on self-made-freaks, to take into account other gender determinants such as masculinity, as well as homosexuality, transsexuality and asexuality.
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“Laura Bozzo Con Maria José Cristerna (Suspensión En Vivo)”


APPENDIX

Video Transcripts
Maria Jose Cristerna’s interviews in Spanish and the corresponding English translations. (All translations were done by the author)


1. **Video 1** (min. 33:26)

S Presenter: “ella es la gran doctora aquí del programa, cada persona tiene el derecho de expresar un poco lo que siente, ésta es una forma de expresar para ti?”

Expert: “podría ser, sí sobre todo porque ella se ve segura, ella no se ve titubeante, no se ve que le de vergüenza, ni le dé pena absolutamente”

E Presenter: “she is the great doctor here in the show (pointing to a
woman), every person has the right to express feelings, is this (referring to the Vampire Woman) a form of expression for you?”
Expert: “it might be, yes above all because she looks confident, she doesn’t look hesitant, she doesn’t look embarrassed, nor feels shame at all”

2. **Video 3** (min. 22:46)

S “al principio me pagaron por hacerlo, y estuvo bien, yo tengo cuatro hijos y estaba sola y tenía que salir adelante”

E “at the beginning they paid me to do it, and it was ok, I have four children and I was alone and I had to move forward”

3. **Video 2** (min. 00:51)

S “bueno pues, es que es parte del show, la suspensión es algo muy lindo y milenario pero le damos un toque de alguna manera más divertido, para que no nada más caiga en elevarse y se acabó ¿no?, es como una pequeña trama, una novela pequeña”

E “well, is that it is part of the show, suspension is something nice and millenary but we give it a touch something kinda more fun, so it isn’t just elevating and that’s it, right? is like a short plot, a short story”

4. **Video 3** (min. 14:28 ... 14:58)

S “ustedes, Azteca, me pusieron de repente el bautizo de la mujer vampiro” ... “en su momento, sí me molestó”

E “You, Azteca, suddenly put me the name of the vampire woman” ... “at that moment, it bothered me”
(Azteca: Referring to TV Azteca, http://www.tvazteca.com/)

5. **Video 3** (min. 15:51)

S “la inspiración para ello fue el guerrero jaguar, entonces era más a un jaguar, a un guerrero milenario de nosotros, los mexicanos”

E “the inspiration of it was the jaguar warrior, so it was more to a jaguar, to a millenary warrior from us, the mexicans”
6. **Video 3** (min. 06:17)

S “mis padres se acaban de separar...”

E “my parents just got divorced” (referring to a moment in the past)

7. **Video 3** (min. 08:06 ... 08:40)

S “fue primeramente maltrato psicológico, represión hacia lo que yo quería hacer y mis gustos” ... “se desencadenaron más aventones, palabras, cachetadas”

E “it was at first psychological abuse, repression for what I wanted to do and my interests” ... “more shoves, insults, slaps were unleashed”

8. **Video 3** (min. 16:22)

S “yo siempre lo he dicho, bueno ¿quién conoce al diablo para poder asociar a alguien con él?”

E “I have always said, well who knows the devil, to associate someone with him?”

9. **Video 3** (min. 12:21)

S “por ese gusto tan profundo por los antiguos, mira aquí están los expansores de mis antiguos aztecas, todo tiene un que ver, vamos, hasta el cabello, la mohicana, la mohicana tú lo sabes es el símbolo de los guerreros, roja porque estoy en protesta por tantas cosas que pasan hoy en día”

E “for that deep fondness for the ancients, look, here are the ear stretchers of my ancient Aztecs, everything has a meaning, come on, even the hair, the Mohican, the mohican you know it is the symbol of warriors, red because I’m in protest for so many things happening nowadays”

10. **Video 3** (min. 16:11 ... 16:28)

S “yo quería experimentar qué se sentía tener los implantes en estas áreas, y los relieves, nunca decidí parecerme a nada ni mucho menos, simplemente es parte de mi fashion” ... “muchas gente no lo entendería
pero es el fashion de una persona que se dedica a la modificación en sí, es una parte más decorativa, pero no, no está inspirada en absoluto”

E “I wanted to experience how it felt to have implants in these areas (pointing to her forehead), and reliefs, I never decided to look like anything else, at all, it's just part of my style”... “many people wouldn’t understand, but it is the style itself of a person dedicated to body modification, it is another decorative thing, but no, it is not inspired to anything”

11. Video 3 (min. 04:59)

S “a los doce años ya me dio la inquietud de hacerme un piercing, que vamos, en aquella época era así como malo, malo, y más en el colegio”

E “at twelve started my interest on having a piercing, which at that time was bad, bad, even more at school”

12. Video 3 (min. 04:42)

S “y bueno de ahí fue surgiendo el amor por la modificación”

E “and, well, from there my love for body modification started”

13. Video 3 (min. 10:33)

S “y empiezo a decir lo bueno y lo malo que quiero, hasta que me veo en un punto en el cual tengo casi un noventa y seis por ciento del cuerpo tatuado”

E “and I start saying the good and the bad that I want, until I see myself at a point in which I have almost ninety six percent of the body tattooed”

14. Video 3 (min. 10:26)

S “poco a poco, obviamente jamás pensé que fuera tanto”

E “little by little, obviously I never thought it would be that much”
15. **Video 3** (min. 05:36)

S  “yo era fiel seguidora del metal, aún lo soy”

E  “I was a faithful follower of metal, I still am”

16. **Video 3** (min. 10:20)

S  “yo quería ser un ser independiente, tal vez el ser de mis fantasías”

E  “I wanted to be independent, maybe the being of my fantasies”

17. **Video 3** (min. 19:01)

S  “busco ser yo misma, o sea soy un ser humano, y por el hecho de ser humano somos muy parecidos todos, la diferencia la marcamos, pero quiero ser diferente porque yo no me quiero llevar a la tumba ganas de nada”

E  “I seek to be myself, that is to say I’m a human being, and by the fact of being a human we all are very similar, the difference is marked by us, but I want to be different because I don't want to take me to the grave any desire”

18. **Video 3** (min. 12:10)

S  “ésto es mi vida”

E  “this is my life”

19. **Video 3** (min. 32:10)

S  “yo jamás me voy a arrepentir de eso porque hice una retrospectiva muy amplia en mi vida y todo me lo he hecho muy convencida, esto con agua y jabón no se quita ni con láser tampoco, es demasiado, yo estoy muy feliz y me estoy aceptando, cada vez que me hago algo lo pienso muy bien porque no hay vuelta de hoja”

E  “I will never regret it because I made a wide retrospective in my life, and I’ve been really convinced of everything I’ve done to myself, this doesn’t wash off with water and soap either with laser, it’s too much, and I’m very happy and accepting myself, everytime I do something on my body
I think it thoroughly because there is no turn of page”

20. **Video 3** (min. 31:09)

S  “hay mucha gente que te sigue juzgando y que puede decir que soy una loca porque tengo estos ideales o soy una loca porque me veo de esta manera, sin entender que quién no está loco en este mundo pues? y que no debemos de seguir juzgando que finalmente esas críticas son las que a mí me hacen más fuerte y me hacen seguir adelante”

E  “there are a lot of people that keeps judging you and could say I’m crazy because I have these ideals or that I’m crazy because I look this way, without understanding that who isn’t crazy? and that we should not keep on judging, because in the end that criticism is what makes me stronger and keep me going on”

21. **Video 3** (min. 04:06 ... 18:32)

S  “muy apegada a mi religión, estuve en colegios religiosos todo el tiempo” … “yo soy una persona que le da valores a mis hijos, que soy creyente”

E  “very close to my religion, I went to religious schools all the time” … “I’m a person that teaches good values to my children, I’m a person of faith”

22. **Video 3** (min. 14:19)

S  “muchos medios han volteado hacia mí, y han visto que tengo más allá de lo que ven físicamente, que tengo un mensaje, soy sobreviviente de violencia intrafamiliar”

E  “a lot of media have turned to me, and have seen that more than what they can see in my body, that I have a message, I’m a domestic violence survivor”

23. **Video 3** (min. 25:54)

S  “mi ideología es cambiar un poquito este planeta, de aportar un poquito y tratar de hacer familias más sólidas, nos quejamos del machismo cuando nosotras lo hacemos, que hagamos una retrospectiva a nosotras las mujeres de lo que queremos cambiar”

E  “my ideology is to change a little bit the planet, to contribute a little and try to make more solid families, we (as women) speak out against
machismo, when we do it as well, that we do a retrospective to us, of what we want to change”

24. **Video 4** (min. 03:32)

S “bueno los colmillos si era así como una fantasía... bueno porque me encantan los vampiros desde que era una niña”

E “well, the fangs were like a fantasy...well, because I’ve loved vampires since I was a young girl”

25. **Video 4** (min. 11:31)

S Q: “¿Qué tienen que ver los cuernos?”
   A: “fuerza, para mi es fuerza”

E Q: “What does the horns mean?”
   A: “Strength, for me is strength”

26. **Video 4** (min. 10:08)

S Q: “¿Digamos que ahora tienes el noventa o el ochenta por ciento de tu cuerpo tatuado?”
   A: “No, esto es el noventa y ocho por ciento”

E Q: “Let’s say that now you have the eighty or ninety percent of your body tattooed?”
   A: “No, this is the ninety-eight percent”
Figure 1. Ella Harper, “The Camel Girl”

Figure 2. Captain Costentenus, “The Tattooed Prince”

Figure 3. Sig Molitamo, “The Cuban Wonder Fire Eater”

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Figure 4. Maria Jose Cristerna, “The Vampire Woman”

Figure 5. Vampire Woman in Mexican Talk Show (Still frames)

Figure 6. Suspension Performance in Talk Show (Still Frames)

Figure 7. Suspension Performance in Tattoo Convention (Still Frame)

Figure 8. Vampire Woman’s Fangs


Figure 9. Rick Genest, “Zombie Boy”

Figure 10. Eric Sprague, “The Lizardman”


Figure 11. Vampire Woman, the Before and After