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Part I

Introduction







Chapter 1

Disciplining Girls' Bodies

1.1 Headscarves and porno-chic

In 2003, several Western-European countries faced so-called 'headscarf affairs'. Fuelled by incidents of Muslim girls being expelled from school because they wanted to wear a headscarf in the classroom, countries like France, Germany, and the Netherlands debated the place of Islamic symbols in the public sphere. However, a headscarf was not the only attire that could get a girl into trouble at that time. The French Assistant Secretary of Education talked about banning G-strings in schools, because 'school is not a nightclub' (quoted in Van Beemen, 2003: 56). In 2002, a Dutch school banned belly shirts (also known as crop tops), going so far as to suspend a girl for coming to school with such a bare belly in February 2004¹.

These two debates form the antecedents of this study. As disconnected as they may appear, they are in fact related in three ways. First, most of these issues are centred on the school: a crossroads between the public and the private. Second, they are part of a single hegemonic discourse about women's sexuality. Third, both debates deny girls their agency and autonomy. I first discuss these three connections in more detail, and then go on to define the central question of this study.

School and the multicultural

In discussions about both the headscarf and porno-chic, adversaries focused on the school, and argued for government intervention and self-regulation. Situated halfway between the public and private spheres,

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the school is an extraordinary place, and it is no coincidence that one of the major historical Dutch political struggles centred on such an institution. The so-called 'school struggle' (1878-1917) addressed the limits of government intervention and the separation of church and state (De Liagre Böhl, 1993: 116). Since then, 'special education' has had a different legal status in the Netherlands, meaning that the government cannot control all parts of the curriculum. Henceforth, treating all religious and non-religious groups equally ensured the neutrality of the Dutch state towards religion. In France, at about the same time, a comparable school struggle led to the opposite system of *laïcité*, in which government neutrality in religious affairs is ensured by the "irreligiosity of the public sphere" (Göle, 1997: 64). Some one hundred years later, the headscarf affairs seem to have produced a new school struggle, which also deals with the place of religion (Islam) in the liberal state and the extent to which the government should intervene in religious matters.

The headscarf issue is also part of the much wider debate that multiculturalism has placed on the agenda. Indeed, an extensive analysis of the headscarf debates in Western-Europe (Duits & Van Zoonen, 2006) has revealed that these discussions are actually about Islam as an alleged misogynistic religion, about the place of the Other in the West, and about the separation of church and state. The term 'multiculturalism' is contested. Pierik (2006: 887) distinguishes three different denotations of it. First, it is a factual description, i.e. it describes a reality of cultural pluralism. Second, it can be a normative prescription of the organisation of society, arguing that cultural differences should be respected and accommodated. Third, it sometimes refers to certain governmental policies (e.g. language and/or integration courses, the subsidising of cultural festivals and community centres). In Europe, Pierik states, discussions about multiculturalism focus mainly on migrant workers. In the Netherlands, the largest such groups are Turks and Moroccans (see appendix I), and other minorities, such as the Chinese, hardly ever enter the debate (Chow, 2007). As a result, the discussions about multiculturalism tend to focus on Islam as an Other religion, which shares no common ground with Western culture. The headscarf plays a central role in representing this difference. As Göle (1996: 1) puts it: "No other symbol than the veil reconstructs with such force the "otherness" of Islam to the West". Currently, the furore about headscarves has abated. However, the school regularly features in debates about multiculturalism, which have recently moved on to focus on the issue of 'black' and 'white' schools (Pauille, 2007).

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Sexuality

The discussions about porno-chic also centred on the school, and brought media and public debates about decency, and norms and values into the school setting (again see Duits & Van Zoonen, 2006). In addition to the call to ban porno-chic in schools, it has been proposed that the alleged sexualisation of girls should be countered by making media literacy a compulsory part of the curriculum. A number of incidents led to the media and government's obsession with an alleged sexualisation or 'pornofication' of society. A gang rape involving an eleven year old girl was connected to 'MTV-culture' (e.g. El Barkany, Van Keken, & Kiene, 2005) and the argument that MTV gives girls the wrong idea about sexuality. A report in 2006 by the Dutch Health Service (Van Dijk, 2006) also caused considerable concern, as it suggested that girls were having sex in exchange for small gifts (e.g. a CD). Although the report did not draw any conclusions about media influence or effects, the Dutch press quickly blamed the media², particularly gender representations in hip-hop music videos. One of the gifts the report mentioned was a breezer, a fruit-flavoured rum drink, from which the term *breezersletje* [breezer slut] was derived, denoting a 'vulgar, dumb girl that can be easily seduced to sex'. The term even made its way into Van Dale's leading dictionary. The Dutch publication of Ariel Levy's (2005) book, *Female chauvinist pigs*, in 2007 also identified with the concern about 'bimbo culture' and unruly girls' sexuality. Indeed, Plasterk, the Dutch Minister of Education recently linked these issues in his emancipation memorandum, arguing that "overtly sexual acts, innuendos and advances" have become "a 'normal' part of youth culture" through their dissemination in the media (Plasterk, 2007: 10). The following quote summarises the issues at stake:

Teenage girls conducting sexual acts in exchange for a drink, a prepaid phone card or expensive jeans; provocative underwear for young girls on the shelves of the department store; girls who undergo surgical operations on their genitalia. We are confronted with these kinds of phenomena through the media on an almost daily basis. This development has been called the 'sexualisation of society'. At the moment, there is a societal debate in which one questions the representation of girls and women as sex objects, unobtainable beauty ideals and the increasing commercialisation and sexualisation of the female body in the media. In this debate, such developments are not only ascribed to the influence of men; the role of girls and women themselves is also exposed. They are thought to (want to) turn themselves and other women intentionally into sexual objects through appealing to a feminist principle (sexual liberation) (Plasterk, 2007: 61, my translation).

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The memorandum goes on to suggest a policy that is directed specifically at girls. According to Plasterk, the emancipation of girls in the next five years should be aimed at educating them about media literacy and sexuality.

Plasterk's formulation is suggestive, as one cannot establish whether this sexualisation is factual, or just purported by media that disseminated these incidents and labelled them 'contemporary culture'. The emancipation memorandum similarly suggests that aesthetic vaginal labioplasty is now common amongst girls, which is highly questionable. Quantitative data about these phenomena are absent. In the journal of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, Mendonça et al., argue that "[a]esthetic surgery of female genitalia is an uncommon procedure" (Mendonça et al., 2006: 1237). Moreover, the Health Service report about 'breezer sex' explicitly states that the data are based on qualitative interviews, which were mostly hearsay, from which no quantitative conclusions can be drawn.

With this intense spotlight on sexualisation, it is easy to forget that just one or two years earlier the media were obsessing about the headscarf. In that debate, the headscarf was articulated with gender inequality, multicultural excess, and lack of separation between church and state. Although the basic religious motive for covering the head relates to sexuality, this understanding did not enter the debate and was thus deemed irrelevant in a Western context. Implicitly, then, the headscarf is constructed as too decent. The debate about porno-chic was more explicitly linked to the issue of girls' sexuality but headscarves and porno-chic are, in fact, two sides of the same coin, i.e. girls' sexuality. Despite this connection, they are treated as separate phenomena. This suggests a rather one-sided perspective on girl culture. For instance, in response to our analysis of these debates, Gill argues that porno-chic is "mandatory wear" and "virtually hegemonic" (Gill, 2007: 71). A similar suggestion resonates in the discussion about sexualisation. However, such a designation is only possible if one overlooks the presence of headscarf girls. Islamic and Christian critiques on the sexualization of society are discounted as prudish and moralistic (hence non-modern)³, making the old virgin/whore complex a schizophrenic phenomenon in multicultural Europe. Furthermore, this double standard promotes an exclusive understanding of both Western and girl culture.

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Agency

A third connection between the headscarf and porno-chic debates lies with the neglect of girls' agency. Girls' own understanding of the clothes they wear hardly ever features in the discussions taking place, to which they are seldom invited. As a result, girls' bodies "have become the metonymic location for many of the social and cultural struggles in West European immigration societies" (Duits & Van Zoonen, 2006: 114). Their bodies function as carriers of broader discussions about decency, feminism, Islam, and consumer culture. Opinion leaders adopt an almost Foucaultian perspective, construing girls as 'docile bodies'. The power of Islam, capitalism and 'men' is, according to them, not only inscribed on girls' bodies, but the girl has also become "the principle of [her] own subjection" (Foucault, 1995: 203). In other words, Islam, capitalism, and 'men' have influenced girls to such an extent that they have internalised these controls and discipline themselves accordingly. What appears to be 'self-determination', Foucault's argument goes, is actually submission to disciplinary power. From such a standpoint, girls cannot be expected to make any independent rational contribution to the debate and therefore, their voices are excluded. Thus, girls are relieved from having the power to define their own actions: their actions cannot be the result of their own choices since these come from Islam or capitalism.

The articulation of a lack of agency *only* with girls is remarkable. The relationship between agency and social structure is an important theme that has occupied many philosophers and sociologists. At the core of the debate is the question whether (and how much) capacity individuals have "to act independently of structural constraints" (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 2000: 9). At the one extreme, it is argued that individuals create the world around them; at the other, the argument is that structure determines all individual action⁴. Whichever position one chooses, in scholarly writings about agency it is unusual to distinguish between groups. Thus, to Foucault no-one is outside power. Whether one is a twelve-year-old girl or a highly learned scholar, all individual subjects are the results of power and are unable to act outside the social inscription of power.

In the debates about headscarves and porno-chic however, a distinction is made between those with power and agency (men – who hold the power to subject and discipline others) and those without (girls – who docilely fall victim to structure). The ascription of agency to one

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group, and the denial of it to another, thus differs from philosophical or sociological discussions about agency. Instead, such a distinction suggests that girls – as non-adult women – have a fundamentally different status. This perspective is seemingly at odds with feminist politics. As Andermahr, Lovell and Wolkowitz (2000: 13-14) maintain, the ability of women to be actors in the world has been central to the feminist project. The possibility of women's agency has been a vexed question, and a fundamental tension lies within feminism's dual understanding of women as both victims of patriarchy *and* as self-determining actors. Notwithstanding this legacy, several feminists deny the possibility of girls' agency in their critique of headscarves and porno-chic. Gill's (2007) response to Duits and Van Zoonen (2006) is an example of this rather striking manoeuvre.

Gill argues against girls' agency and their ability to choose, claiming that girls' understanding is infused by neo-liberalism. Gill argues that young girls are disciplined by a "technology of sexiness" (Gill, 2007: 72). She states that neo-liberalism requires "individuals to narrate their life story as if it were the outcome of deliberative choices" (2007: 74). In other words, girls internalise the demands of neo-liberalism, and present these as their own choices, whereas in fact they are not. Gill herself realised that she too falls victim to her "daily exposure to a cultural habitat of images" (2007: 73) and she describes how she is often surprised by the ways in which she follows fashion. She thus confesses and presents an understanding of her clothing choices, whilst at the same time rejecting the call to listen to girls' understandings as these are false to begin with. Thus, "Gill considers her own reflections on her clothing choices as worthy of publication and reading, while she considers those of girls themselves, the centrepieces of the debate, as problematic" (Duits & Van Zoonen, 2007: 166). The special position of girls, vis-à-vis women and men, is thus at the heart of these debates.

1.2 Problem definition

The debates about headscarves and porno-chic contain several assumptions about girls, namely who they are, what they do, and what to make of that. These are assumptions about girls' identities, their culture, and their agency, but they are unsubstantiated by systematic, empirical research. I argue that such research is necessary to understand contemporary girl culture. Furthermore, I hold that such research implies a

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respectful and critical investigation of girls' own understandings of their culture. This study aims to do so, in order to theorise the ways young girls understand and position themselves in Dutch multicultural society. The following research question (which contains the tensions between identity, culture, and agency) guides the study:

How do girls position themselves in the multicultural society?

To answer the research question, I conducted an ethnographic study at school. This was an obvious research setting, because most of girls' interactions take place there, and school is – as I argued previously – the location in which the public and private meet. This dualism allows investigating how the structure of the school interacts with girls' decisions. To further explore the impact of structure, the study follows girls during their transition from primary to secondary school. In the Netherlands, this transition occurs when children are, on average, twelve years old. It coincides (for most girls) with the bodily changes that accompany puberty. Expectations for girls change drastically. In the final year of primary school, the 8th form, they are the oldest children in school, but secondary school and puberty awaits them.

The central theoretical concept of the study is identity performance. As I demonstrate in chapter 3, this concept emphasises the collective nature of identities, and is especially useful for investigating both micro and macro levels of culture. We can now formulate a first series of sub-questions:

- Which spaces exist at primary school for identity performance?
- How do schools position girls?
- What are the differences between primary and secondary school, and how do these affect identity performance?

A second series of sub-questions will be formulated at the end of chapter 3.

1.3 Approach

My approach is multidisciplinary, making use of the theoretical and methodological contexts of media studies, anthropology, philosophy and cultural studies. In chapter 3, I draw from these diverse fields to build the theoretical framework that directs this study. Before doing so, however, I here briefly elaborate on my approach to girl culture as a subculture.

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Dutch society is diverse, and in Amsterdam, about forty per cent of the population is of non-Western origin. Earlier in this chapter, I argued that in speaking of 'girl culture', commentators and opinion leaders only include white girls, thus excluding a large part of the relevant population. To avoid such a one-sided perspective, I employ a sub-cultural approach. I understand the subculture of girls to be a more-or-less-identifiable group within a larger culture, who share a more-or-less coherent set of norms, values, and beliefs. Thus, girls of the same age share a more-or-less coherent perspective on their social world. Such an approach allows me to emphasise the *shared* characteristics of girls aged between 11 and 13 who are living in Dutch society. This is not to say that I approach this subculture of girls as a homogenous or coherent social group, and put aside all the criticisms that the subcultural approach has received (see Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003). Instead, I speak of multi-girl-culture. In the Dutch multicultural society, girl culture is diverse and constructed by both autochthonous and allochthonous girls (appendix I discusses these terms).

The subcultural approach also means that I only focus on girls. Controversial boys' wear, like Lonsdale clothing, has been placed in the realm of freedom of speech. For instance, the then Minister of Education, Van der Hoeve commented:

Sometimes people show with their clothes that they identify with certain (political) ideas. A bomber jacket, for instance, combined with a black sweater of a certain brand [i.e. Lonsdale] and black army boots and cropped hair are associated with beliefs of the extreme-right. Prohibiting such clothes may affect the freedom of speech guaranteed in the Constitution (Van der Hoeven, 2003: 3, my translation).

As such, controversial boys clothing has a different status. Controversial boy culture usually consists of violent behaviour, and in the sexualisation discussion boys are exempt. Even in the case of gang rapes, the perspective is that of girls. The striking exclusion of boys' sartorial choices and boys' sexuality can only be understood as being rooted in a fundamentally different cultural construction of men's and women's bodies (Duits & Van Zoonen, 2006). As a result, any comparison between boys and girls would lead to an understanding of these differences, and not to an understanding of girls in their own right. Furthermore, the subculture of girls is fluid and transitory, and it exists in negotiation with many others, and not only boys. I occasionally discuss these others – parents, teachers, boys – but my main interest lies with girls.



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1.4 Outline of the book

This study investigates the ways that girls position themselves in the multicultural society, and as such focuses on identity and agency. The book consists of three parts. The first part introduces the research in more detail. It presents an overview of girls' studies, so as to enable an investigation of the ways in which previous research has approached and constructed girls (chapter 2), and it builds the theoretical framework around the concept of performance, through which girls' identities are investigated (chapter 3). At the conclusion of that chapter, I further specify the main research question in a second set of sub-questions. Chapter 4 describes the methods and methodologies used to answer these questions. Part II of the book (chapters 5 and 6), deals with the first set of research questions, which themselves address the contexts of girls' identity performance. Part III (chapters 5 to 10), addresses the second set of sub-questions, which involve actual performance practices. Throughout this work, agency functions as a leitmotiv. In the conclusion, chapter 11, I tie all sub-questions together in order to answer the main research question and to locate girls' agency in identity performance.

