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Title of Essay: ***QUI HO QUANTO BASTA PER FARNE ALTRI*<sup>1</sup> – THE GENERATIVE JOYS OF EMASCULATION IN THE POST-GENDER WORLD OF DORIAN ELECTRA**

**1.**

The equivocal and expansive term posthumanism has become a coveted landmark in current discourse spreading its ubiquitous antennae through and over a wide variety of fields and studies. To avoid the ill-favoured acrobatics of convoluted universalism I shall lay claim only to fractions of this term's kingdoms and imbue my inquiry with further specificities. My intention is in no way to curb or restrict the ambiguous freedom of posthumanist thought. On the contrary, by utilising fractal analysis and focusing on minute detail, suggesting its possible growth and leaky entanglement with the above-mentioned transient body I hope to 'engage with cultural material with reference to organic patterns of repetition and variation (...) rather than to idealized and static shapes and structures along the lines set out by Euclid' (Omry, 2016). Already in enacting these structural and compositional decisions that precede and outline my pursuit of knowledge I strive to give form to 'the theoretical and political struggle against unity-through-domination or unity-through-incorporation' (Haraway, 1991) and thus gently weave a posthumanist outlook into the writing process per se, subscribing to the implication that such procedures might 'undermine the justifications for patriarchy, colonialism, humanism, positivism, essentialism, scientism, and other unlamented – isms' (Haraway, 1991).

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<sup>1</sup> "*Fatelo, se volete: impiccateli pure davanti a me ... qui ho quanto basta per farne altri!*" ('Do it, if you want to: hang them even in front of me ... here I have what's needed to make others!') is a phrase attributed to Caterina Sforza, who according to rumour climbed the walls of her fortress that has been laid siege to, exposed her genitals and thus answered her enemies who threatened to execute her children, whom they held captive.

Thus the posthumanism that I chose to engage with in a more explicit procedure conceptualising and animating ideas on the plain of content rather than form is posthumanism as a practice of operating through a ‘matryoshka-doll-like ontology of systems and subsystems, ever escalating and diminishing layers of first- and second-order observers, of subject and object’ (Omry, 2016) reminiscent of the nature of the fractal, in ‘a process of transformation whose outcome is a world in which human constructions of difference—most significantly gender—cease to exist’ (Johnson, 2017). In the relation to gender I would posit my posthumanism as ‘a self-identification tool, achievable now through mind-set change’ (Roberts, 2015) this mind-set change being a lean towards disorganisation, as implied above. The thematic and affective beads that may appear tethered to or handled by my discretely disclosed antennae are primarily the questions of sound and voice as nudged and prodded by the concepts of mediation, hybridisation, simultaneity, leakage, and queering desire. The material that I will attempt to analyse and invigorate through these actively shifting lenses and paradigms is the 2019 debut album *Flamboyant* by the nonbinary, gender-fluid singer, songwriter, video and performance artist Dorian Electra.

## 2.

Voice and other vocal expressions have historically been viewed as pathways of recognition and organisation of humans. As Ann Carson writes in *The Gender of Sound*:

It is in large part according to the sounds people make that we judge them sane or insane, male or female, good, evil, trustworthy, depressive, marriageable, moribund, likely or unlikely to make war on us, little better than animals, inspired by God (Carson, 1995).

Prevalently understood as something which is an essential part and expression of the body and adjacent soul of the individual and the natural state and predispositions thereof; the quality of one’s voicings and soundings was long held as proof of concept in delineating and enforcing social and political hierarchies. These decisions can be exemplified by Aristotle, who ‘tells us that the high-pitched voice of the female is one evidence of her evil disposition, for creatures who are brave or just (like lions, bulls, roosters and the human male) have large deep voices’ (Carson, 1995), thus presenting a clear mirror image of the controlled, virtuous

and pleasant voice of the human male and the uninhibited, vile and unpleasant voice of the human female. It is no surprise that under such circumstance the male voice is the one deemed preferable, if not the only voice, which is being heard, since the female voice is highly recommended to be silent or sounded only within specifically designed containers such as women's rituals and festivals, which prevent the contamination of the society and its norms.

Within this system however, the dreaded qualities of female voice can possess also male subjects, who are recommended then to train their voice towards regaining an appropriate maleness represented by a lower pitch and an overall pledge to the commanding logos. Female subjects are deemed beyond the help of such systematic vocal exercises due to their confinement to and determination by their female bodies, which originate said unwanted sounds and the further complications produced by their analogous likewise leaky and undisciplined second – genital mouths, for which there is no known cure.

Even more heavily bound to the body than the speaking voice appears to be the voicing of song:

The singing voice, it seems, is more connected to the human body than is any other musical sound. It is produced with body movements only, mainly inside the body, and as a result of using many smaller and larger body parts, including physical cavities, the voice is characteristic of the individual person and his or her body (Heesch, 2016).

As the female voice is incurably wild and monstrous, so appears the singing voice to be inescapably bodily and natural. Whilst the speaking voice can be tethered to logos, placed on a short leash and subsequently tamed, the singing voice repeatedly escapes into the secretive (connected both to secrets and secretion) darkness in the starkly material nuances of the flesh and is therefore implicitly feminine. The female singing voice found by default 'in that blank no man's land called *to apeiron* („the unbounded“)' (Carson, 1995), because it is female and cursed twice to be subject to the "civilised" hand of the man, because it is also singing, has the doors fortified against it once more adding insult to injure through the bias that the female voice is even more bodily and base than any ordinary – male singing voice:

That stereotype is obviously hegemonic, because it is based on a dichotomy: on one side there is the association of the allegedly natural/bodily voice with black and/or female singers; on the other side we find technology and hence machine-made voices as the alleged realm of white Euro-American men (Heesch, 2016).

It might seem that I have made an unfounded leap from the Greek polis to the various technological voices of the contemporary culture, but the music of Dorian Electra, that I wish to discuss sits on the intersection of these two streams; blocking, muddling and derailing their calm and cool currents.

3.

The history of Western music is riddled with anxiety concerning identity and order. Even though systems and assumptions promoting and upholding clear categories and hierarchies of gender such as those which I have described might be alive and well, it must be evident even to a layman that leaving music in charge of the upkeep of such antics is a foolish endeavour, which cannot lead to anything but frustration in the firm believers in these firm statements of difference. Even disciplined and simplified to death ‘music is notoriously resistant to legibility, let alone monolithic signification’ (Peraino, 2003), therefore any attempts to recruit it as a soldier in the wars of normativity are slippery at best. And the doors repeatedly shut on mouths, first and second, open eagerly for a queer presence such as that of Dorian Electra to do as they wish. Free from anxiety.

Electra assigned female at birth bears in a purely essentialist interpretation a female voice. In their musical expression they assume a wide array of masculine characters and pitches and to an uninterested observer this might simply read as a woman “dressing up” as a man; however, the manoeuvres at hand are much more complex. Electra uses an array of technological devices to alter their voice in a way, which extatically claims and makes public the seams, jumps, disruptions and transitions in a highly mobile and playful fluctuation of male and female vocalities. Even though they present as a variety of masculine characters they do not try to constrain their vocality to one that is read as purely and satisfactorily male. They do not subscribe to the “rules” of male voice and vocality and they allow the illusion of

their alleged maleness to open, blossom and drip into registers and colours, which further exaggerate the permeability and fragility of said illusion. They exploit, foreground and celebrate the fact that their masculinity is “unsatisfactory”. The vocal illusion of Electra’s maleness is particularly seductive, because the offhandedly held technological mask of masculinity does not slip to reveal the “truth” of Electra’s “female” voice, but it is flirtatiously held aside to unmask a far more elaborate bejewelled, dewy body of voice, which does not comply with the simplicity and unified dryness of binary distinctions. It is in this seductiveness which exemplifies the paradox of posthumanism that ‘the reach of technology extends beyond the mechanical, it circles back to the organic, the physical, and corporeal in order to manifest its full potential.’ (Omry, 2016)

In Electra’s vocality there are no givens, nothing is taken for granted, there is no baseline of a “natural” state; everything is ever so slightly tweaked, and recognition suspended. This precise and simultaneously generously leaky ‘hybridity resists any stable identification’ (Roberts, 2015) confusing a binary concept of gender into a ‘vision of sensual homogeneity’ (Johnson, 2017). These strategies are birthing a vocal entity ‘clearly moving away from a notion of the pure and authentic’ (Omry, 2016) and the musical oeuvre is ‘becoming powerful precisely in the ways in which it is mediated and further mediates’ (Omry, 2016) pointing a perfectly manicured finger at the constructed nature of gender and gendered voice. In not trying to inhabit gendered vocalities „naturally” but instead exposing the armament of technological and narrative paraphernalia used to create various gendered effects and affects and their flamboyant inadequacy as something desired and humorous Electra uses ‘reclaimed failure as a site of resistance to normative modes of existence’ (Brooks, 2015). Their vocality is openly performative, relational and drenched in

fantasy resonating with Christopher Smalls' notion of musicking<sup>2</sup>, enacting a 'shift from a holistic or organic view of musical narratives, inherited from a classical model of art, to a distinctly science-fictional view that aims to produce the ongoing, ever-shifting composition of new worlds.' (Omry, 2016)

4.

Besides the technological manipulations of voice, another core aspect that forms Electra's speculative post-gender futurity are their lyrics. In these Electra further elaborates on their hybrid vocality with a hybrid identity and nonetheless important hybrid desire, reflecting and deepening the values of their vocal performativity.

Saint Ambrose (c. 339–97) considered the unison performance of psalms the “agent of silence” and the great equalizer that united all of God's creation: For all speak (together) [omnes loquuntur], and none make noise. Kings sing the psalms with no pride of power. (Peraino, 2003)

Electra opposes the notion of *una voce* in voicing and gendering simultaneously. Their performativity is to a large extent an opposite of this account of the performance of psalms by Saint Ambrose. Where the unified voices as heard by Saint Ambrose work as an agent of silence uniting all of God's creation, the music of Dorian Electra works as an agent of loudness that disorganises and confuses all of God's creation as brought forth in the humorous lyric from the titular song Flamboyant: 'I'm a very flaming flammable guy' insinuating hotness, contagion and intensity. From 'all speak, and none make noise,' Electra does adhere

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<sup>2</sup> The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world. (Small, 1998)

to simultaneity and collectivity of voices, but insists strongly on all voices glitching, twitching and making noise, excess and buzz, as in: 'Turn down? I never do / Turn down, turn down for what? / They ask me / Turn down? I never do / I turn up, I turn up, I turn up / All the way', where Electra explicitly states that making noise is a crown jewel in their agenda. Where Saint Ambrose's kings 'sing the psalms with no pride of power' the kings of Electra's new worlds dance in a space exceeding the categories of domination and submission, but they always engage in their affairs with pride and power. 'No taste for subtlety / And no time for restraint / No, oh, I go all the way / I'm flamboyant,' says it all.

In the song *Guyliner*, Electra sings: 'Wake up, putting on my makeup, yeah / Chicks dig it when they see me cry / Wake up, time to make my face up / Chicks dig it, let me tell you why'. They seamlessly combine a stereotypically macho attitude of seducing countless women with the significantly more femme coding of putting on makeup and even more shockingly crying, immediately rendering an image of crying in makeup desirable and enviably manly. Both makeup and tears are images enhancing especially in their combination resistance against self-containment play on the fear that 'there is something disturbing or abnormal about the use of signs to transcribe upon the outside of the body a meaning from inside the body which does not pass through the control point of logos.' (Carson, 1995) By letting their sultry male lyrical subject cry through his makeup Electra alludes to their process of layering and hybridising gender expression across mediums and reconstructing the body under rules void of clear gender difference. They posit that they are not afraid to have their makeup smeared or stripped in one of the arguably most feminising acts, which is crying, because they are confident that they enhance their desirability by revealing this sensual gender-smudge. They are not afraid to let go of the perfection of their makeup since they are not hiding anything in their layered expression: 'This is the real me baby, and this ain't no disguise'. As I have stated previously, Electra plays on the image of enhancing a „flaw” in their male illusion and placing their art of seduction right in the middle of that crack. In the third verse: 'Everybody coming at me, they want to attack me / They wanna wipe me clean / They can make me cry, but they can't make me bleed / Masc for mascara, the feeling of terror / As they watch these tears rolling down / Rolling down / They can't stop me now' Electra briefly acknowledges the animosity that their guy-lining might provoke, alluding to the fact that their masculinity is threatening precisely because of its unhinged ambivalence

and simultaneous confident flirtatiousness unmoored to a specific sexuality or gender. They express distaste at the pressure to be wiped clean, making a pun on the *masc for masc* stereotype with their own motto ‘masc for mascara’, with the ensuing ‘feeling of terror’ bringing to attention the historical fears that the mixing of forms and styles might bring on all encompassing chaos and the collapse of society, which Electra as a true queer knight of chaos wishes into being.

Other iterations of softening or otherwise queering masculinity and masculine desire can be found in different modalities in the songs *Man to Man* and *Emasculate*. Whilst *Man to Man* emphasises a playful notion of queer friendship in teasing the potential male lover of the lyrical subject, styled merely as not straight: ‘So you want to play rough in the parking lot / See you acting tough, but I know you're not / We can take it outside, scuff up in the streetlights / I just really wanna fight with you.’ Electra once again makes use of the macho pose of their lyrical subject, willing to play rough, scuff up and fight to make a case for a feminine turning inside out and submitting to the female ‘inborn pleasure to always have her current emotions coming up to her mouth and out through her tongue (*Andromache*)’ (Carson, 1995), equalling such a submission confidently with manliness: ‘Man to man, hand to hand / One on one, friend to friend / Are you man enough to soften up? / Are you tough enough to open up?’ In *Emasculate* Electra paints the picture of their lyrical subject as strong and fast and at the same time deeply doubting his position: ‘I got the strength of an ox / I got the speed of a fox / Yeah but I want it to stop / I'm feeling toxic, oh / Hate to say I'm too strong / I've been this way for too long.’ They then proceed to have their intensely phallic subject ask for assistance in a most vulnerable and open way, immediately surrendering his haughty post: ‘Dominate, humiliate / I can't wait to be free / Emasculate me / Cut the man right out of me / Emasculate me / Do it now I can't wait baby / I'm begging for you to come save me / Emasculate me.’ Even when Electra presents such strong, borderline violent imagery, they do so from the position of love for their masculine characters, which is a most endearing proof of queer friendship. They have no need to condemn masculinities, because they have the ability to make sound ‘the mediator of a de-gendered embodiment,’ (Johnson, 2017) and thus mould masculinity in their own image – ever moving, speculative and essentially queer.

5.

That is in the end the biggest strength of Dorian Electra, the hybrid sensuality they are capable to capture in their vocality ‘drawing attention to the essence of voice—the ineffable quality that is left when speech is stripped of logos’ (Carson, 1995) and thus proving that ‘desire can be unfixed from sexual objects and released onto unexpected sexual objects as well as musical and visual objects,’ (Lee, 2018) leading towards grasping music as a medium, which ‘allows for a rethinking of sexual pleasure as nongenital and thus outside the phallic economy of power.’ (Peraino, 2003). In following Dorian Electra, we are released from the anxiety to dwell on difference in favour of simultaneity and solidarity. ‘By releasing the potential for desire to roam, and for fantasy to breakdown, we enact a queer politics.’ (Lee, 2018)

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