

## **Giulia Niccolai's Abandonment of Photography: An Act of Subaltern Self-Awareness**

Bes Arnaout

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *Using various feminist thinkers as a scholarly lens, her own primary source material from an interview she conducted, and a close reading of multiple artistic mediums, Bes puts forward a **thesis** that is clear, original, and motivated. In addition to containing all of the key ingredients for a powerful argument, though, Bes's **thesis** is an exemplar model due to the way she deepens and refines that thesis as the paper progresses and as she gradually exposes the reader to more key concepts, relevant scholars, and pieces of evidence. In this excerpt, which appears towards the end of Bes's paper, we see her **thesis** in its full complexity and nuance and get a taste of how Bes strategically goes about uncovering that complexity in gradual stages.*

*Excerpt*

### **SUBALTERN GIULIA NICCOLAI**

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak begins her seminal work “Can the Subaltern Speak?” with the claim that, like any Western commodity, knowledge and thought systems of the dominant are produced to support their own economic interests. In the world of photojournalism, the dominant creator and participant in the photographic act is a man. “Newspaper photographer is young, white, male and college educated,” concluded Beverly M. Bethune in the 1984 survey on the sociological profile of an average American photojournalist.<sup>1</sup> If the survey were conducted three decades earlier in Italy, the results would hardly vary: photography has historically been a male-dominated field, in which women like Niccolai were pioneers, or rare exceptions. Sustained by the capitalist value of the photo, patriarchal photojournalistic world created and maintained the violence of photographing, and women who joined the profession unknowingly participated in these destructive practices.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly M. Bethune (1984). “A Sociological Profile of the Daily Newspaper Photographer,” *Journalism Quarterly* 61:3, p. 606. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/107769908406100318>

<sup>2</sup> For decades since its birth as a profession, photojournalists were exclusively men; women were not allowed presence at dangerous fronts which were covered by their male contemporaries. For more details

Spivak's answer to the question posed in the title of her essay is that no, the subaltern, "whose identity is its difference,"<sup>3</sup> cannot speak because *the dominant group* is incapable of relating to the subaltern through any means other than its own system of thought. The woman artist who attempts to authentically express her experience in a patriarchal world is unable to do so, because the dominant paradigm completely excludes her subaltern experience. But the subaltern might, instead of remaining voiceless, borrow the voice of the dominant discourse. Spivak claims that the only opportunity for the oppressed to be heard is to adopt the language of the rulers, compromising own values. The male hegemony over photojournalism of the 1950s required of women photographers, who were equally interested in the artistic and narrative capacities of the photographic view, to adopt photographic practices established as violent from their conception, and nurtured as such in the capitalist framework. The voice that photography lent to Niccolai was incapable of being consistent with her incorrupt desire to genuinely express her view of the world, without destructive side-effects or possibilities for misinterpretation of her intentions. In addition, the adopted voice proved the impossibility of the subaltern to express herself within a hegemonic framework in an unfiltered and unmodified manner.

### **FLAWS OF THE BORROWED VOICE**

The relationship between patriarchal hegemony and capitalism is deeply rooted in the history of the western world. As a consequence, the female subaltern has, on many levels, existed just as long. According to the Italian feminist theorist and art critic Carla Lonzi, capitalism has merely inherited women's oppression, rather than birthing it. Lonzi states that private property "expressed an imbalance between the sexes" while men created power hierarchies in worlds inaccessible to women.<sup>4</sup> The model is easily recognized in photojournalism, where the capitalist

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on the beginnings and history of photojournalism, see Roth "The Encyclopedia," Good "Understanding Photojournalism," Morris "Get the Picture" and Golden "Photojournalism."

<sup>3</sup> Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak," 80.

<sup>4</sup> Carla Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel: La Donna Clitoridea e la Donna Vaginale*. (Milano: Gammalibri, 1982.)

potency of the photograph was monopolized by male photographers for decades before women were allowed to participate in the profession. Niccolai's photographic career developed in mid-twentieth century when women increasingly campaigned for fundamental rights, and de Beauvoir published *Le Deuxieme Sexe*, generating the second wave of the feminist activist movement. At this point, European feminists were concerned with equality past suffrage, seeking their places next to men in thus far male-exclusive structures. Carla Lonzi argues that such attempts to find egalitarianism in the world constructed by men are unavoidably disadvantageous for women:

What is meant by woman's equality is usually her right to share the exercise of power within society, once it is accepted that she possesses the same abilities as man. But in these years women's experiences have brought about a new awareness, setting into motion a process of global devaluation of the male world. We have come to see that at the level of power there is no need for abilities but only for a particularly effective form of alienation. Existing as a woman does not imply participation in male power, but calls into question the very concept of power. It is in order to avoid this attack that we are now granted inclusion in the form of equality.<sup>5</sup>

Lonzi states that the participation of the woman in patriarchal hegemonic systems is problematic because of the issues essential to their nature. The equality women are granted by being allowed into spaces created and dominated by men (after proving their worth by possession of equal skills and values), means supporting a system responsible for *othering* of groups against whom that system is designed to operate, whether they are groups of women or not. Lonzi urges women who seek equality to question whether they will truly prosper by participating in the "world planned by others."<sup>6</sup> In this analysis, the male-dominated world of photojournalism, in which the powerholding photographer is the violator, is not a space women should seek to gain

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<sup>5</sup> "Per uguaglianza della donna si intende il suo diritto a partecipare alla gestione del potere nella società mediante il riconoscimento che essa possiede capacità uguali a quelle dell'uomo. Ma il chiarimento che l'esperienza femminile più genuina di questi anni ha portato sta in un processo di svalutazione globale del mondo maschile. Ci siamo accorte che, sul piano della gestione del potere, non occorrono delle capacità, ma una particolare forma di alienazione molto efficace. Il porsi della donna non implica una partecipazione al potere maschile, ma una messa in questione del concetto di potere. È per sventare questo possibile attentato della donna che oggi ci viene riconosciuto l'inserimento a titolo di uguaglianza." In Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel*.

<sup>6</sup> Lonzi, *Sputiamo su Hegel*.

access to, not only because the existing male-constructed photojournalistic discourse would be incapable of apprehending an unmodified subaltern expression, but additionally because equality reached by women in photojournalism remains fundamentally ungratifying on a political level.

### **A FEMINIST “NO” TO PHOTOGRAPHY (AND WHAT ABOUT WRITING?)**

Giulia Niccolai did not participate in feminist activism, but has openly supported the cause: “I certainly approve of the economic-social victories and the battles for the freedom and dignity of women in a more free and dignified society. I don’t think that an isolated battle for women, disjoined from other problems, can be conducted.”<sup>7</sup> Niccolai’s thoughts resonate deeply with those of Lonzi; she believed in the intersectionality of the movement,<sup>8</sup> a term decades later established by bell hooks, and only recently mainstreamed in feminist theory and activism. Niccolai hints at a covert consciousness of the politics of her work, inseparable from her subaltern status, and the framework within which she created. Shining the light of Lonzi’s critique on Giulia Niccolai’s switch of mediums, in particular considering that one of the declared reasons for change was a dissatisfaction with the unintended consequences of her photographs, reveals that Niccolai’s change of profession was a consequence of a subaltern self-awareness. In other terms, Niccolai’s abandonment of photography was a consequence of a subliminal understanding that the voice lent to her by photography was burdened with an undesired potential for violence and oppression.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview by Biancamaria Frabotta with Giulia Niccolai, translated and quoted in West, “8. Giulia Niccolai,” 215.

<sup>8</sup> Intersectionality is defined as an identification of the interlocking systems of power and oppression that affect those marginalized through difference in race, class, gender, and sexuality; in Brittney Cooper, “Intersectionality” in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016,) 1.

## *Author Commentary*

Bes Arnaout

In spring of my sophomore year, I started thinking about what my first independent project could be. I made a change from science to Italian late, so while I knew it is a field I would eventually be most content with, I felt ill prepared for the challenge of self-guided research. One of my mentors at the time handed me Giulia Niccolai's novel *Il Grande Angolo* along with two papers they had published on her work. I read it all, and did research on the artist. She was amazing: a poet, a visual artist, an essayist, a translator - I was shocked to learn that only a few scholars wrote about her work. I knew it then: that was it, Giulia Niccolai's work was my project. I sent her an email, to plan a visit during the summer, and considering she was both responsive and welcoming, we quickly arranged a meeting in Milan.

Unable to actually meet in the summer, I did more planning and research instead, and postponed my visit for fall break. Together with my advisors in Italian and Visual Arts, and the mentor who put me in touch with Niccolai, I created a big, interdisciplinary project which encompassed shooting a short profile doc as part of my Film certificate, and writing the paper for Italian, based on the interview I would conduct during my visit to Giulia in person - there were none yet available publicly, in English. I made a website to centralize my work, and read almost everything she made - still, I was nervous to meet her in person, for she was so accomplished and grande!

Equipped with a backpack full of filmmaking equipment and extensive notes and questions I prepared, and with the generous support of the Fred Fox Class of 1939 Fund, I went to Milan. Giulia Niccolai was one of the warmest and most generous people I've ever met. We spent hours talking, a camera and a mic between us, about her many fascinating experiences that influenced decades of prolific work. I would come to her small apartment early morning after an espresso I grabbed on the way from the room I was renting, and we'd talk until dinner, pausing only for lunch that she would prepare for us, stoically refusing my help. She would send me off in the evening with a bottle of wine to get me through nights of transcription and preparation for the following day. She arranged for me to interview her publisher, editor, her friends and a scholar, and at the week's end, we both struggled to say goodbye.

Upon my return from Italy, film editing was on pause until the spring- I had to write the paper first. Although I originally intended to examine *Il Grande Angolo* in light of Walter Benjamin's reflections on photography and the avantgardian *il nouveau roman*, after the

insights Giulia shared with me, I knew I wanted to expand and encompass the trajectory of her artistic creation from photography through the *nouvelle vague* and to experimental poetry in the decades that came and for which she is best known. The evolution itself was fascinating, not only because of the unique, lucid consciousness with which she had made these moves, but because I recognized in them an intimacy, a thoughtfulness particular to and perhaps exclusively tied to her identity - a binational, bilingual woman artist in Italy in the '60's. And that's what happens in the paper of which the excerpt appears here - I recognize the abandonment of photography in favor of poetry as a move inherent to the identity of the artist.

I am aware now, having read more theory both related and not to gender and modernity, that my interpretation stands well informed and even inadvertently supported by aesthetic philosophy I was not aware of at the time. My film screened with other visual arts work in the spring of 2019, and Giulia received it as an online link. "Waiting 84 years for your documentary, was all worth it! It makes perfect sense!!!" she wrote, and days later followed up with useful feedback about details that needed additional edits - as I would expect from this fantastically selfless, cheerful, amazing artist who changed my life, academically and personally, beyond what I could ever convey in words, or film.

*Editor Commentary*

Danielle Hoffman

In the opening paragraphs of her paper, Bes states the following: “[Giulia Niccolai’s] exploration of the marginalized experience is identified in her experimental poetic methods of the 1970s, yet the conscious abandonment of photography in the interest of literature is wholly neglected in scholarship of gendered readings. To improve the existing discourse on the life and work of a critical neo-avant-garde artist, the palpable potential to decipher Giulia Niccolai’s change of medium as a feminist gesture is substantiated through a conscientious inspection of photography in photojournalism, and her choice to renounce it.” Here, Bes introduces her reader to the primary project of her paper, namely to develop a gendered lens through which to understand Giulia Niccolai’s pivot in artistic mediums from photography to literature. Now this statement captures exactly what a thesis statement should accomplish in the introductory moments of a paper: it clearly poses the author’s central claim (Niccolai’s abandonment of photography and turn to literature can be understood through a gendered lens as a feminist gesture); it motivates that claim on numerous levels (a gendered reading of a shift in artistic mediums has not been taken up in existing scholarship and has the potential to strengthen our understanding of an important artistic figure and potentially other artists as well); and it anticipates the primary means of evidence that will be used to support that claim (a conscientious inspection of photography in photojournalism). In turn, Bes’s readers move on to the body of her paper with a clear sense of what she is arguing, how she is going to develop that argument, and why we as readers should be interested in that argument in the first place. This is exactly what a good thesis should do.

The reason I chose to highlight this particular excerpted section from Bes’s paper, though, is that it masterfully exemplifies the way in which a good thesis evolves and deepens throughout a paper. A really good paper does not have a stagnant thesis that is just restated with slight changes in wording as the paper progresses. Rather, a really good paper introduces the thesis in a way that can be easily digested by the reader who is not yet familiar with the key ideas the paper is dealing with and then brings the reader on a carefully constructed journey, complicating, refining, and nuancing the thesis along the way. This does not mean, of course, that the thesis should radically change so as to contradict or undermine itself as the paper progresses. It does mean, though, that as new analytical resources and key terms are introduced throughout the paper, the thesis should similarly evolve to reflect that growing degree of nuance and complexity. In other words, the thesis as it appears on page two of a paper should not be identical to the thesis

as it appears on page 15 of a paper since by the time the reader gets to page 15, they have a firmer understanding of the paper's mode of analysis and can thereby be trusted to handle a thesis that brings in the more complex layers of that analysis. And I think Bes's paper does a really excellent job of navigating the challenge of developing a thesis that is accessible to the reader from the start but that still achieves nuance and refinement as the paper progresses.

In the end of the section of text excerpted, Bes writes, "Shining the light of Lonzi's critique on Giulia Niccolai's switch of mediums, in particular considering that one of the declared reasons for change was a dissatisfaction with the unintended consequences of her photographs, reveals that Niccolai's change of profession was a consequence of a subaltern self-awareness. In other terms, Niccolai's abandonment of photography was a consequence of a subliminal understanding that the voice lent to her by photography was burdened with an undesired potential for violence and oppression." Now, compare this iteration of Bes's thesis (let's call this thesis\*), which appears in the closing moments of her paper, and the iteration of the thesis that appeared in Bes's introduction, which I highlighted at the start of this commentary (let's just call this ~thesis). Notice how ~thesis and thesis\* are completely consistent and in alignment with one another. However, also notice how much more specificity and complexity we get in thesis\*. Had I read thesis\* in Bes's introduction, I would have been lost, as I did not yet have the evidence, key terms, analysis, etc., at my disposal to understand the thesis in these more nuanced terms. However, now that Bes has provided us with a close-reading of the "male-dominated world of photojournalism," used Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Carla Lonzi to delineate and problematize the "voice" available to the subaltern in the realm of photojournalism, and brought in primary evidence from an interview she conducted with Giulia Niccolai, we can understand Bes's gendered reading on this deeper level. We can understand what Bes really meant by the more accessible language of "feminist gesture" that she used when she first introduced us to her argument.

In Bes's paper, we begin with the more general idea that we can apply a gendered lens to understand Niccolai's abandonment of photography as a feminist gesture. We eventually reach the more refined, nuanced idea that using feminist scholars such as Spivak and Lonzi as a lens, as well as a close analysis of photojournalism and the language Niccolai herself uses when speaking about her relationship with photography, allows us to see that her eventual abandonment of photography and turn to literature was deeply informed by her gradual realization of the impossibility of being a female photographer without unintentionally contributing to the violence against and oppression of her own subaltern status. And the way Bes strategically brings us along this journey from simplification and generalization to incredible nuance and complexity, I believe,



demonstrates how a good paper develops a thesis with a meticulous awareness of the reader and how to best get the reader on the same page as the author.

*Professor Commentary*

Professor Simone Marchesi, French &amp; Italian

What is most impressive about Bes's work is the agility with which it moves between engaging in wide-scope conversation with major theoretical works in the field and close readings of the material she analyzes in her essay. Such ability to have her readers at once see the large cultural picture she reconstructs and appreciate the fine grain of the texts she dissects has, I believe, two sources. On the one hand, it is the effect of time. Bes's writing is the sediment of her long-lasting intellectual involvement with both the questions she addresses and the literary and visual works she reads for us. On the other hand, it is the product of her devotion to the process of thinking-in-writing, something that extends beyond the skillful practice of a technique. Bes' producing of prose is both the way in which she reaches clarity about her topic and the space in which that clarity is achieved. It has been a pleasure to have an opportunity as her adviser to see that process unfold in her writing over time.

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## **Bios**

**Bes Arnaout '20** is an Italian major, a comparatist at heart, spends time on literature, art, and critical theory. Bes wrote this essay as a junior, as part of her fall independent work research.

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