

“Nostalgia for Eden”: Joseph Kosinski’s *Oblivion*, An Apocalyptic Genesis

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Abstract

Through the science fiction genre, Joseph Kosinski’s film *Oblivion* is a modern parable for contemporary contexts. The film encourages viewers to leave constructed narratives of patriarchy that constitute notions of oblivion, and seek for origins and truth found in sacred relationships with God, each other and the earth. *Oblivion* is a theological odyssey set against a backdrop of an apocalyptic future earth which is explored through three main characters in narratives of Eden/paradise. Themes explored in the film encourage an Ecofeminist theological resolution by simulating the defeat of patriarchy and gender symbolism. The film’s ending seems to suggest that whatever separates us from achieving ecological and theological healing is still to be overcome - it is up to us.

Introduction

Joseph Kosinski’s film *Oblivion* (2013)¹ can be read as a contemporary interpretation of the Garden of Eden myth (Gen 1-3). The film is set in an apocalyptic future where a computer generated alien ‘God’ figure named Sally continually repeats the act of genesis on a future Earth. In the film narrative, the Genesis myth acts as a symbolic stage for human relationships which are continually interceded by the alien Sally whose intentions are to deplete the oceans of water and transform it into energy for her

departure from Earth. The significance of the Genesis myth is that it supplies a narrative of humankind's nostalgia for the idea of 'home' and origins: paradise and Eden. In effect, *Oblivion* places the repetition of Sally's permanent present, the resetting of paradise over and over again, into a timeless now, against a true genesis narrative of the heroes, Jack and Julia, who break through the veneer of this ever-present to reclaim true time and place.

As a contemporary allegory, *Oblivion* uses the alien, Sally as a divine figure that personifies chaos. The film exposes a patriarchy that is manifested as an alien invasion which uses cloning, technology and militarism, to exploit the resources of God's earth. This revelation of destruction challenges the viewer to come to terms with their own imagined constructed ideas of paradise and the realities of a sustainable future on Earth. Significantly this parallels the Western Christian theology of Eden with the themes of creation, apocalyptic destruction and healing (Ruether 1992: 6). These themes are explored through the film's three main protagonists; Jack (Tom Cruise), Julia Harper (Olga Kurylenko), and Victoria (Andrea Riseborough) who are representative of humanity's struggle to see the true reality of the environmental challenge facing our contemporary world.

This article will explore narrative strands in the film that connect to a contemporary theological context. The value of such a discussion is that they present the fears that surround the potential environmental destruction of the earth, as well as a fear about the authenticity of human relations, both between humans and also the planet. Western Christian theologies interpret Eden as a factual narrative that explains male and female relationships in the fallen world (Armstrong 2009: 28). I consider *Oblivion* to encapsulate Tina Beattie's assertion that: "Adam and Eve persist in the consciousness of

post-Christian society, and they continue to have a subliminal influence on attitudes towards gender, sexuality and God" (2002: 45). Similarly Mircea Eliade affirms a belief in "camouflaged religious behaviour ... ideologies in which we can discern traces of the "nostalgia for Eden"" (1961: 207).

This article suggests that the film *Oblivion* leads the audience to privilege wholeness through "ecological and theological healing" (Ruether 1992: 4). This follows the theology of Eden, particularly expressed in Genesis 1, which is in sacred relationships; nostalgia for home (the earth) and origins (creation). In the film's context patriarchy is an alien invasion. *Oblivion* can be read as a feminist theological odyssey, both using and providing a myth for our contemporary context (Armstrong 2009: xi).

Reading *Oblivion* as a Theological Text

Oblivion evokes mystery through a series of flashbacks that continually take the audience back to the beginning. Jack's dreams and visions imply some sort of apocalyptic disaster. This is reminiscent of Eden and an emulation of the "deep sleep" that came upon Adam and created the woman of his dreams (Genesis 2.21). When he slept, Eve was born. This relationship between "the woman" and Jack is the foundation myth of the film just as our myths of Eden are a foundation for western society.

Oblivion retells the horror of an alien invasion that occurred 60 years before the present time. In 2017 while preparing for a research mission to Titan, one of Saturn's moons, an alien ship is detected in deep space. The research spacecraft "Odyssey" is diverted to intercept. The story follows the fall of earth and the cataclysmic events that change all creation, and represented in the lives of the three main characters Jack, Julia and Victoria.

Jack, Julia and Victoria are astronauts on the *Odyssey* spacecraft. When “The Tet” draws their space ship in, Jack ejects the sleep module, which is programmed to enter earth’s orbit with the other astronauts inside, leaving him and Victoria as captives. Jack and Victoria are cloned and become the overseers of the technological equipment that allows the alien known as Sally to enact an environmental catastrophe upon the earth. In the aftermath, amidst a devastated Earth, Jack and Victoria’s roles, as clones, are enhanced by gender and skill performance as they function in the architecturally advanced Skytower, undertaking tasks set by the alien Sally. In effect, the Skytower is presented to “man (Adam) and woman (Eve)” as a kind of paradise. This is their “mission”. They must keep the drones flying - all except for Drone 109 which the audience later discovers is in the dock, ready to destroy them both and reset paradise with new clones if they disobey Sally and she loses control. The Skytower is a replica of domestic modern living that subsumes the clones into a false sense of security.

In her role, Victoria receives instructions from “The Tet” via the Sally interface and relays them to Jack who is out in the field. Sally, as represented by an appropriated NASA interface, is also part of the cover story of the resettling of humanity on Titan, one of Saturn’s moons. What we find out as the narrative continues is that Sally programs Jack and Victoria with a story about their purpose in the Skytower. They believe that there are few humans left on earth to protect the hydro-rigs. Only “Scavs”, remnants of the alien invaders, disrupt their operations. However these Scavs turn out to be human and their leader Malcolm Beech, who has been watching Jack (Clone 49), and wants Jack to help him destroy Sally. Victoria is in the centre of these communications, influenced by the Sally interface, which fuels her dreams of going to Titan. “The Tet” spaceship is part of the story as the vehicle that will transport them to Titan, when their

mission is fulfilled. But Jack, a clone, has dreams/memories/flashbacks of his “real” wife Julia that feel authentic. These images of another woman constantly undermine Sally’s operations and put her designs at risk.

The world of Jack as a clone technician fixing drones is interrupted when a “Scav” beacon on earth sends a signal and he must investigate. The signal originates from the ruins of the Empire State Building and is being directed “off planet”. As he disables the beacon he has flashbacks of being there with Julia. A ship comes into land at the beacon coordinates and Jack goes down to investigate against the command given by Sally, relayed through Victoria. He rescues a survivor from a pre-war spacecraft called “The Odyssey”. The mysterious survivor is the woman from his dreams.

Jack, Julia, and Victoria: The Mystery of the Real vs. the Mystery of the Fake

Significantly the first word spoken in the film is “earth” and that establishes our connections and orients the viewer in the world of the film where we view a contemporary New York City. The opening images in *Oblivion* seemingly sets up a familiar cinematic story where a romantic encounter sets the scene for our interest in the main characters Jack and Julia Harper (00:00:40-00:01:20). They meet on the street outside the Empire State Building. The scene is shot in black and white, stylistically highlighting a romanticised image of nostalgia; a lost fragment of a distant memory from a long time ago. Symbolically this is a representation of Eden. It is Jack and Julia’s Eden, before the fall, earth before the war. But ironically this is actually the presentation of a dream—Jack’s dream.

Jack tells the viewer that although he has been subjected to a memory wipe, his dreams feel ‘like memory’. It haunts Jack because he knows this woman and begins to have visions of her during his waking hours. He says in the voiceover of his visions of Julia, “I know you but I don’t know your name.” (00:01:06) When Jack awakens from this dream he is in the Skytower, in bed with another woman and the year is 2077. The voice over is Jack as he explains the incompatibility of he and his colleague Victoria who are on assignment together. The story of Jack and Victoria is a corporate partnership²: Jack is there to fix the drones that protect the alien machinery that suck up the sea water, crucial for the alien to produce fusion power, and Victoria’s role is the communication officer assisting Jack to carry out repairs to the drones. They take part in the rituals of patriarchy in the guise of “missions” that attempt to recreate human experience. Significantly it is Jack who finds a fragment of humanity that awakens his desire for freedom. In a spiritual sense, Jack’s soul is awakened and this enables him to assume a proper sense of individuality while Victoria stays a prisoner to Sally’s “dream”. All of this is set for the viewer within images of the alien’s destruction of the Earth’s environment: the destruction of God’s creation.

Creation

In *Oblivion*, “The Tet” (short for “Tetrahedron”) is a huge spaceship where a God-like entity, known as Sally, is actually an artificial intelligence that is the creator of this world. The entity images creation mythology, and is repeating the act of genesis as a narrative “cover” story. The alien clones are given a mythos and logos (Armstrong 2009: xi) that allows their human nature to attach purpose to their actions. This Genesis

model, appropriated by the alien creation of clones, is morphing Eden into a capitalist model of corporate goals and ideals.

The Tetrahedron is represented as a feminine symbol shaped like a “V” that reminds the viewer of a womb. Veiled behind the symbols of “The Tet” is a technological social system that has all the features of patriarchy. This social system of production and control is transposed on the earth in the Skytower with the clones and the drone maintenance. One sees, for example, the way that Jack and Victoria work together on their mission to monitor, repair and keep the drones flying. The artificial intelligence uses a familiar female interface; the NASA mission controller for the Odyssey mission known as Sally. Taking on the persona of Sally (and using her image) the entity is able to issue the commands to Victoria in the Skytower. The Skytower is an enclosed modern parody of the Garden of Eden where Sally has placed her cloned children so that she can keep the means of production, the hydro-rigs, working by taking the sea water.

God’s design and divine power is manifested in acts of creation (Boadt 1980: 114). The creation accounts in Genesis outline God’s sacred history for human kind where chaos/the void has been set in order through a series of divisions (Gen 1: 4-19). God’s creative “work” brings order through these relational constants in earth and heaven. In replication of Biblical theology, Sally is dividing the waters from the earth, taking away the images of God’s divine creative activity. Sally uses her own story to explain how the earth has been shattered in a simulation of origins for the war that has returned the earth to chaos. In emulation of Genesis and the prohibition on the tree of knowledge, Sally wants to keep the clones in her constructed, enclosed paradise of the Skytower and

keep them from the knowledge that she attacked the earth and is enacting an environmental catastrophe on the planet.

In the Hebrew Bible sacred history relates the story of an enclosed garden known as Eden (Gen 2: 8) where order and the creation of plant and animal life support human kind. Eden is typified also as a state of innocence before Adam and Eve partake of knowledge, as symbolically represented by the tree. Hampden-Turner interprets this “myth as the birth of consciousness” (1982: 25). In this myth Eve is the holder of the forbidden (fruit) knowledge which Yahweh has denied humankind. She shares this with Adam who now has knowledge of good and evil. For Yahweh, their new relationship signals that they become “like the Gods”, with knowledge, able to act for themselves (Gen 3:5). Jack and Julia follow this narrative of Eden. The Empire State building acts as “the axis mundi” a “cosmological image” (Eliade 1961: 37) and “symbol of the world tree” (1961: 212).

Julia as Eve

The original meeting between Jack and Julia at the Empire State Building is their Eden. Like Adam and Eve drawn to the tree, they are drawn to this building, “a hierophany ... a center” (1961: 21). After the war, in the year 2077, on the ruins of the Empire State building, Julia, speaking of their original meeting there, said Jack wanted her to “meet him at the top of the world” this is symbolic of “the cosmic pillar... a sacred space or precinct... a center of the world” (Eliade 1961: 37). Jack as clone 49 will return to the Empire State building a further two times both relating to Julia: The first time is in response to the signal that has been directed off planet by a Scav beacon which brings

Julia down from orbit, and the second time he is with Julia that recreates the first, or original “real” moment.

There are a further two scenes in the film that support Julia’s role as Jack’s Eve and her attempts to give him the forbidden fruit of knowledge: At the scene of the crash site, Julia finds the flight recorder, she offers the truth to him knowing that he and Victoria have “no knowledge” (Gen 2:17) of the Odyssey mission and their relationship to each other. On the ruins of the Empire State building Julia literally shares with Jack the knowledge of good and evil and he partakes and his “eyes are opened” (Gen 3:5). Jack, clone 49, is awakened to his relationship with Julia (her identity as his true wife) and the real purpose and identity of “The Tet”. This revelation of Julia’s identity as Jack’s Eve, his real wife, ends the simulated relationship of Jack and Victoria. Victoria sees this intimate moment between Jack and Julia on the ruins of the Empire State Building via the bubble ship camera. This camera is an extension of her eye of desire for, and attempt to control Jack. However, in this scene they are aware of her gaze and immediately look toward the camera.

After Jack finds out the truth and realising the implications for Victoria back at the Skytower, he and Julia return to try and save her from Sally. Victoria’s illusions concerning her life with Jack are shattered and she does not want to open the door and let them in, typical of her resistance to knowledge that could end her oblivion. Victoria says to Jack, “It was always her wasn’t it?” To which Jack replies, “She’s my wife”. Now that Jack’s eyes have been opened by Julia he wants to disobey Sally and save Victoria but she says to him, “I don’t want to know!” and she is incinerated by Drone 109 from the dock, a technological angel of death (Revelation 4:8). Julia destroys the drone, saving Jack, and they leave the constructed space for the house by the lake.

Sally clones Victoria, as the appropriation of (Jack's) Eve, who uses the power of female sexuality in an attempt to control Jack, Tech 49, and keep him on mission. Victoria's paradise narrative is to trap Jack in the “Sally” dream of ‘us’ in the “temptress Eve motif” (Daly 1973: 45). It is Victoria’s forbidden desire for Jack that lives in her consciousness even as a clone, and which drives her oblivion. The destruction of earth depends on her staying a prisoner in her desire to have Jack. Mary Daly claims these types of depictions of Eve highlight “destructive patterns in the fabric of our culture” (1973: 45). Kosinski is using this portrayal of Victoria as an exposé of these myths of the feminine and the effects on our religious and social world.

Chaos as “gendered”- The Tiāmat Effect.

“The Tet” is portrayed in the film as a female monster devouring the earth and enacting a return to chaos. Chaos is before time and history began and even before God’s creative acts brought order from the “formless void” (Gen 1:2). Western Christian theologies from the Biblical canons are imbued with these ancient associations or mythic resonances from the ancient near-east filled with war, the cosmic and the chaotic. The Babylonian creation myth Enuma Elish, a myth from the ancient near east, highlights the war between Marduk and Tiāmat. (Heidel 1951: 33-34) Tiāmat personifies chaos and is a goddess of the ocean. The Bible includes many elements of this tradition, for example in the ordering of watery chaos. (Genesis 1:9) Jack slays the creator of this chaos, thus emulating Marduk as the hero-God of the story. In Babylonian creation myth the cosmic war dominates the narrative in an apocalypse of beginnings, a cosmic struggle for supremacy. Earth and heaven were created from the torn body of the mother goddess Tiāmat.

Oblivion is set against the backdrop of an apocalyptic chaos with a narrative of the tearing apart of the earth. At the beginning of the film the viewer is shown in detail how history has led us to the present day of the film. Jack narrates—in voice over—how the alien force arrived and destroyed the moon and, in the attempt of man to defend the earth, resulted in nuclear war. These narrative strands form an apocalyptic discourse adopted by patriarchy through Western Christian Theology that obfuscates responsibility for the human destruction of earth's systems and courts these fascinations with a worldly apocalypse. An apocalypse or unveiling, in the Western Christian tradition, transforms chaos, destruction and upheaval in nature into signs of the second coming and the promise of divine intervention (Rev 22:12). This includes “the escape from mortality” (Ruether 1992: 83). Using this narrative Kosinski gives the viewer a horror replica of the divine; Sally destroys the earth and does not need the processes of human birth and imitates immortality. The clones can die and be reborn over and over again. However the divine mystery of “The Tet” is never completely revealed, to either the audience or to Jack, as clone 49.

Reminiscent of the apocalyptic genre (Dan 7, Rev 13), Jack undertakes an “other worldly journey” to “The Tet” carrying Julia’s sleep pod. Like the story of Horatius, in *The Lays of Ancient Rome* (Horatius XXVII: 425) Jack, the clone 49, arrives at “The Tet”, the temple of his God (01:50:01).³ Re-living the fear of his first encounter with the alien, and playing back the flight recorder from the *Odyssey* mission; he is drawn toward the space ship. When the spaceship opens he is bathed in a ray of light, this is the interior lighting of the ship but it emulates a common depiction of divine presence. The organ plays and a choir sings further evoking an association with religious worship and sacred awe. There are three doors that Jack must pass through to gain admittance to

Sally. The scene is shot as an imitation of ritual, a challenge or test for the initiate. In the first area is the challenge of truth. Sally asks Jack questions ascertaining his worthiness, truthfulness and purpose to enter into her presence, while it scans his bio-signs and uses voice analysis to make sure he is not lying. The second door opens and he flies past the creation chambers lined with the clones of (himself) Jack and Victoria as they are suspended waiting for adult birth.⁴ The third door is admittance into the presence of the entity which is a “V” shaped bridge. Jack retrieves the sleep pod which to our surprise contains Malcolm Beech and not Julia.

The alien entity that speaks and confronts Jack and Malcolm is a representation of borrowed images, a technological Tiāmat, a metal tetrahedron; scaly like a snake/dragon, a reminder of the Enuma Elish, with a single red eye at the centre which is only a camera eye. Sally’s conversation with Jack in “The Tet” begins with the alien continuing its deception by using human colloquialisms: “You’re doing the right thing Jack!” (01:53:20) Like her snake-like exterior, which is a metal writhing scale, the now deepened Sally voice converses with statements that are similar to that of the snake in Eden. In Genesis it says: “You will not die” (Gen 3:4), Sally says: “no one has to die”. “You don’t have to die Jack, she doesn’t have to die.” Jack replies, “Everybody dies Sally” (01:53:54-01:53:58). Jack and Malcolm detonate a bomb and “reiterate the paradigmatic victory of the gods over the dragon (that is, over chaos)” (Eliade 1961: 48).

Ruether states that “Gnostic and apocalyptic thought contained elements of social protest against patriarchal and imperial domination” (1992: 184). It could be argued that Kosinski is using the film in the apocalyptic genre to engage the audience in a simulated defeat of patriarchy. The expected revelation that the alien invader would reveal itself is

an illusion. It is a computer system or entity that is artificial/virtual but mimicking selfhood, a simulation of reality, reinventing our constructs of what is biological/sentient or gendered. “The Tet” in this manifestation represents the domination and deceit of corporate companies and governments who use “Communication systems long misshaped to distract people from reality, rather than inform them intelligently” (Ruether 1992: 87). This is evidenced by Sally’s continual deadly deceits which human kind has to overcome.

Deceits in Our Programming – Exposing Patriarchy, Embracing Ecofeminist Theology

The film *Oblivion* explores reversals such as the depiction of Ecofeminist theology as it’s opposite in the divine figure of Sally. Daly says: “We can correctly perceive patriarchal myths as reversals” (1992: 47). The feminine tropes and symbols do not lead to a gendered invader however. This supports the assertion that a new “symbology” is needed that is genderless (Ruether 1992: 4). Kosinski is both using and challenging the “gendered” programming that post-modern humanity has inherited. Anderson writes that “the pressing realism of a theme that threads through the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation of John: [is] the chaos that ever threatens to overwhelm the order of creation and to plunge history into meaningless confusion” (1987:7). The history of the world is a meaningless confusion because it has been deceitfully portrayed in signs and symbols of a personified chaos as gendered. The legacy of Babylonian creation myth is a reversal, Barring and Cashford describe this as “a rupture in the order of being ... [that] turned Tiāmat from a life-giving mother to a death-dealing dragon, bringing trouble into the world” (1993: 276).⁵

The film's ideology, like eco-feminist theology, resists these distorted relationships (Ruether 1992: 6). According to Ruether, eco-feminist theology requires "the end to domination" and poses the question of the relationship between the living planet, earth and the concept of God" (1992: 4). The mantra of the film is Jack's earth communion (Ruether 1992: 254), that regardless of the narrative that he has been told to believe, he affirms that "the earth is still my home" (00:04:06). In re-creating the world⁶ Kosinski's portrayal of Julia resembles a manifestation of these Ecofeminist theological principles. Her return to earth from orbit signals a transition to a "more ancient...gynocentric civilization" (Daly 1978: 47). At the end of the film she is shown with a daughter she has to Jack, the clone 49. Kosinski is destroying the myth of patriarchy and re-establishing the creative power of women. This signals the return to "original goodness" and "restoration and renewal of all creation" (Beattie 2002: 46).

Conclusion

Joseph Kosinski is influenced by Western Christian traditions that have a residual effect on story and narrative. However his theology and vision is not a return to patriarchy or Eden, it is a narrative of leaving oblivion. Kosinski is using a type of protest narrative which Ruether says is endemic in the apocalyptic genre (1992: 184). The "nostalgia for Eden" (1961:207) is a return to earth as home that is sustainable and respectful to the systems that "multiply and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). Kosinski exposes modernity as just an image (Paradise lost) of its original creation, the audience lives in the Skytower. Like Victoria, the audience must confront the chaos and destruction brought by the military, technology or our failure to protect the earth from capitalist exploitation as symbolised by "The Tet" and it's branding.⁷ The theology of Eden is therefore in "real"

relationships with God, each other and the earth (Gaia) (Ruether 1992: 4). As human kind created in God's image the film places the relationship of Jack and Julia Harper, before the fall of the earth, "at the centre of the world" (Eliade 1961: 37).

Because Julia is "original" (she was suspended in the sleep pod) she can be interpreted as the image of God. The ultimate sadness of the film in the final ambiguous scene is where Jack is looking at Julia across the lake, a dream that will never be fulfilled because Jack is really dead (having been cloned). The original relationship between Jack and Julia is lost and can remain nothing other than a memory; the "dream of us" (01:43:20-01:49:23). Thus, for this Adam and Eve, Eden is forever out of reach and they can never return. *Oblivion* ends on a note of loss, death and sacrifice. In the final line Jack, the clone 52, says "I am Jack Harper and I am home", yet the fact that Julia is looking at him with a child from across the lake signifies that he still is separated from whatever home that this is (01:58:10-01:58:16). Thus the question arises, how can it be Eden? The ending remains ambiguous and left to the viewer's judgement. It may be that many viewers interpret this as a feel good ending; that Jack is home. However one can equally argue that these people are caught in a constructed narrative that bears some resemblance to Sally's constructed earth. In contrast to the sacredness of Jack and Julia's relationship in the flashback that constitutes shared "real" moments, Jack is an image. His return is the viewers yearning for the "nostalgia for Eden" (Eliade 1961: 207).

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Endnotes

¹ All time stamps are from the Blu-ray version of the film *Oblivion*.

² Ruether describes the Genesis 1 creation account in a similar depiction to Sally’s clones in the Skytower. She says that “humans are thought of as a unified corporate entity, made in God’s image, to be the representatives of divine sovereignty” (Ruether 1992: 20).

³ Plato’s Tetrahedron: ‘The Tet’ is too overt a symbol to not tell the story of Plato’s influence on Christianity. Ruether explains: “Christian cosmology also inherited certain problematics from the Platonic tradition. One of these is a geocentric and hierarchical world picture” 1992: 27). With regard to ritual in “The Tet “and the experience of the Jerusalem Temple; Armstrong describes Solomon’s temple as “designed as a replica of Eden, its walls decorated with carved cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers... there was even a bronze serpent.” (2009: 30). In “The Tet” Sally’s walls are covered with her clone creations suspended in simulated womb pods; cloning as simulated virgin birth.

⁴ Daly gives examples of patriarchal myths such as the second birth of Athena from the head of Zeus, or the birth of Eve from Adam’s rib as stolen mythic power (Daly, 1978: 46). Sally’s creation of clones is using the same motif as these patriarchal myths that dispense with the creative power of women.

⁵ Ruether 1982: 16-18, Daly 1978:110-111, Anderson 1987: 17-23 and Armstrong 2009: 43 all note the influence of this myth on the Bible. The consequences resonate in the world order established as the supremacy of Patriarchy.

⁶ S. Brent Plate discusses how “films create and recreate the world” and are a religious experience. (Watkins, Teaching Religion and Film, 2008: 230) He gives the example of the Sabbath as the “day we turn to the mystery of creation” and “from the world of creation to the creation of the world”... “Film mimics this very process.” (2008:222-223) This is especially evident in *Oblivion*’s creation of “origins” that overlap with apocalypse. He sees weekend movie going as replacing traditional Christian/ Jewish religious services (2008: 222).

⁷ Victoria is tied to the brand of ‘The Tet’, (dressed to kill or be killed?) in what Anthony Elliot describes as “fashion sexuality through repeated gender performances in day-to-day life” (2014: 127).