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Michel Houellebecq surrounded by journalists after winning the Goncourt prize in 2010 (AP Photo/Thibault Camus, File)

BOOKS | THURSDAY 8 JUNE 2023

Michel Houellebecq's bad experience as a porn actor, or maybe not

In his latest book, the writer talks about the troubles that followed his participation in the project of a Dutch art collective, but not everyone believes him



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The writer Michel Houellebecq is often much discussed in the newspapers, not only in France, his country, but also in Italy because, in addition to being very famous and appreciated as an author by a large number of readers, he deals with controversial topics in his novels and when is interviewed frequently expresses extreme political opinions, in recent years especially with regard to immigration - he is against the reception of migrants - and Muslim or misogynistic people.

This year, however, he was mostly talked about because of the trailer for a film by the Dutch art collective KIRAC and what happened after. The trailer, [released online in January](#) and then removed, showed Houellebecq naked in a bed kissing a young woman on the mouth, while a voiceover, that of artist and director Stefan Ruitenbeek, head of KIRAC, explained that he had invited the writer to Amsterdam to introduce him to girls who would like to have sex with him. In a short time, the KIRAC project – whose previous films are also distributed by the Mubi streaming platform – began to be talked about online as «Houellebecq porn».

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The writer then sued Ruitenbeek in both France and the Netherlands, thus far blocking the release of KIRAC's film. And now a book has just come out, both in French and in Italian, in which Houellebecq tells his version of the whole story: *[Few months of my life](#)*.

The book is published in Italy, translated by Milena Zemira Ciccimarra, by La nave di Teseo, the current publisher of almost all of his novels including the one that made him famous in the world in 1998, The elementary *particles*. On the other hand, Submission is still published by Bompiani, the previous publisher, the novel in which we imagine a France governed by a traditionalist Islamic party that by chance came out on the same day as the attack [on the Charlie Hebdo headquarters](#) in 2015. Houellebecq, now 67, is generally recognized as a capable literary writer and intellectual maverick, but since the beginning of his career and more and more as time has gone on both he and his books have annoyed many people, for characters and stories linked to extremely nihilistic, misogynistic or discriminatory ideas.

Few months of my life is 105 pages long and begins with Houellebecq's conflicts with the French Muslim community caused by a controversial interview of his - the umpteenth - in December 2022, and then mixes a chronicle of the periods immediately preceding and following with considerations more extemporaneous autobiographical reports on his sexual habits, on his television and book consumption, as well as more generally on his convictions.

The facts at the center of the book, net of the differences between how Houellebecq tells them and how Ruitenbeek reported them, are these: last October the Dutch artist proposed to organize a threesome sexual encounter between the writer, his wife and another woman and to film it; Houellebecq and his wife accepted and the meeting and filming took place in Paris.

In *A Few Months of My Life*, Houellebecq explains his decision to accept Ruitenbeek's proposal by essentially saying that he did so for three reasons: the desire to have a pornographic video of his and his wife's that they could watch, the vanity of being appreciated as a writer by other woman to the point of wanting to have sex with him, and finally the simple pleasure deriving from a sexual act with two women. Houellebecq claims that the experience was not satisfactory for him and for this reason too he decided to «no longer accept appearing in any pornographic film» shot by Ruitenbeek, a statement which however appears to be in contradiction with his subsequent behaviour.

Going back to the facts, after the meeting and filming in Paris, Ruitenbeek invited Houellebecq to Amsterdam proposing sexual encounters with other women. Upon the writer's arrival in the Netherlands, Ruitenbeek immediately made him sign a contract which essentially authorized him to use any shot of Houellebecq made between November 1, 2022 and throughout the following year as he wished; meanwhile he was always filming it. Then he took three women to the writer's hotel room, still filming: on those occasions – from which the images of Houellebecq naked in bed spread in the trailer come from – there were no sexual acts.

The part of *A Few Months of My Life* in which Houellebecq says why he decided to go to Amsterdam is the least credible:

It may seem incomprehensible that I accepted, and in fact, if I could have foreseen what would have ensued, I certainly would not have done so, and in hindsight, my reasons also appear to me very weak. First of all, I had always liked Thalys trains, but until then I had never gone beyond Brussels; the idea of going further north was tempting. I had made several short stays in Amsterdam, mostly in connection with my book releases, and once to work with Erik Lieshout and his crew. That city had seemed beautiful and peaceful to me, although I never really had time to visit it. Furthermore, I would have stayed at the Ambassade, a typical hotel "de charme" – the same one I had always stayed in during my previous trips to Amsterdam – where, perhaps as an old customer,

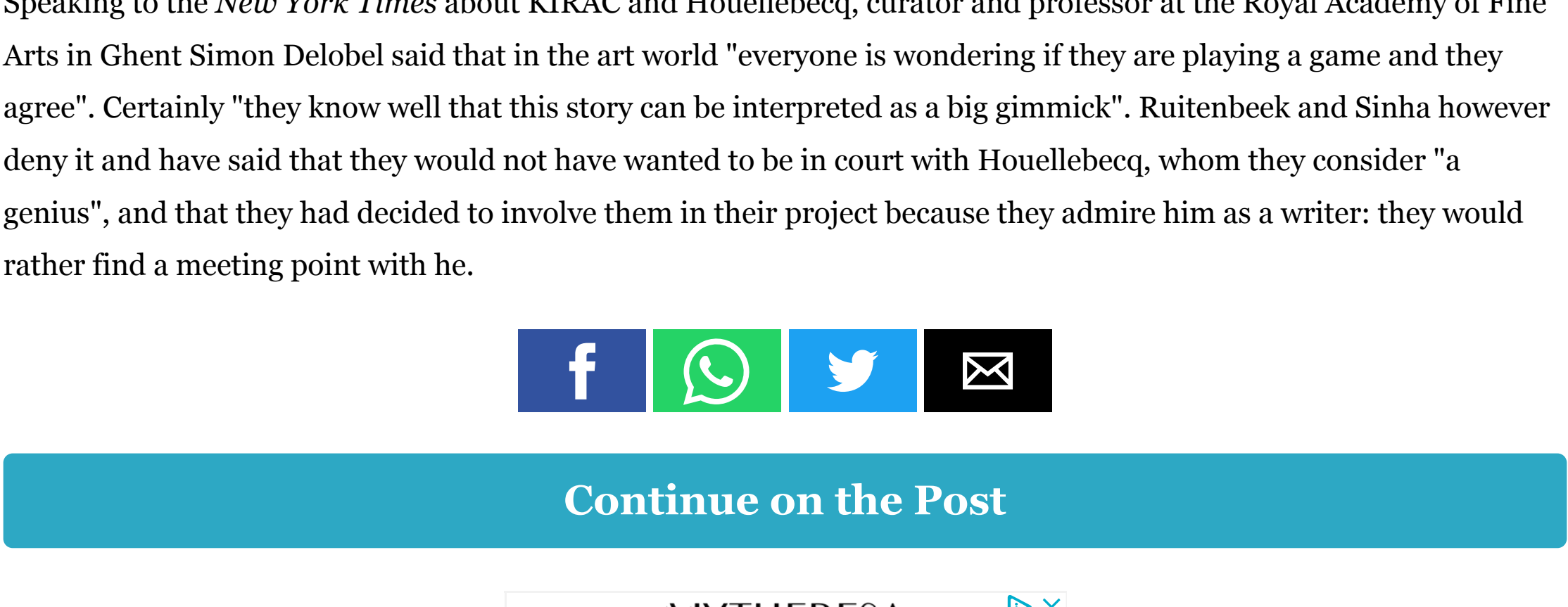
As for the signing of the contract, which is reported entirely translated into Italian in the book, Houellebecq says that in fact he didn't really read it, or in any case he didn't realize what it implied. Referring to Ruitenbeek with the derogatory name 'the Cockroach', he writes offhandedly: 'The Cockroach drew out a contract, presented as a boring but trivial formality, which we had to complete as quickly as possible'.

In late January, after the trailer was released, Houellebecq decided to sue Ruitenbeek to prevent him from releasing the film. In France, the legal case was resolved in March in favor of the Dutch artist. In the Netherlands, after an initial defeat by Houellebecq, the appeal [was resolved](#) in his favour: in mid-May a court established that Ruitenbeek will have to show the complete film to Houellebecq at least one month before its release, which if not he will immediately have to pay a fine of 25 thousand euros; if Houellebecq has something to say about the film, he will again be able to turn to a Dutch court, in the absence of private agreements with Ruitenbeek.

A few days after the sentence and after the release in French of *Few months of my life* Houellebecq participated in an event organized in Amsterdam by the artist Tarik Sadouma, who until recently was part of the collective KIRAC but left for the conflict arose between the writer and Ruitenbeek. Ruitenbeek showed up to the event wearing a cockroach costume, as identified in *A Few Months of My Life*. Ruitenbeek also had a camera on this occasion and documented the events.

In *Few months of my life* Houellebecq does not comment on these latest developments because the book ends on April 16, two days before the first appeal hearing.

In the book, Houellebecq repeatedly defines certain of his behaviors as «idiots», but also describes Ruitenbeek as an evil person as well as a mediocre artist. Neither the book, nor the newspaper articles on the trial events around the film and [the series of Dutch podcasts](#) (with English subtitles) containing the version of the story by Ruitenbeek and various people close to him completely remove the doubt that the whole story could be a kind of artistic performance that the artist-director and Houellebecq actually agree on.



As [an article in the Dutch newspaper de Volkskrant](#) and [another in the New York Times](#) explain, KIRAC's films are usually an apparent mix between documentaries and *mockumentaries* (fake documentaries that don't claim to be fake) usually about the art world, its contradictions and the boundaries between reality and fiction. They contain harsh criticisms of great cultural institutions and well-known intellectuals, some of them generally esteemed, such as the architect Rem Koolhaas, others mostly hated such as the Dutch philosopher and far-right activist Sid Lukkassen; the latter is the protagonist of the best known film by KIRAC, *Honeypot*, in which a young woman presented as a leftist student has sex with him with the declared aim of finding a space for communication despite very distant points of view.

The collective is mainly made up of Ruitenbeek and Kate Sinha, also the director's partner as well as screenwriter of the films (Houellebecq calls her "the Viper"), and her name is an acronym of "Keeping It Real Art Critics", which could be translated as "Sincere Art Critics". Their films are also difficult to interpret because the artists' opinions are intentionally not clear. In the Dutch contemporary art world they are considered controversial, provocative or simply not serious. Over time they have offended or aroused criticism from many people, both with ideas of the right and the left.

Speaking to the *New York Times* about KIRAC and Houellebecq, curator and professor at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Ghent Simon Delobel said that in the art world "everyone is wondering if they are playing a game and they agree". Certainly "they know well that this story can be interpreted as a big gimmick". Ruitenbeek and Sinha however deny it and have said that they would not have wanted to be in court with Houellebecq, whom they consider "a genius", and that they had decided to involve them in their project because they admire him as a writer: they would rather find a meeting point with he.



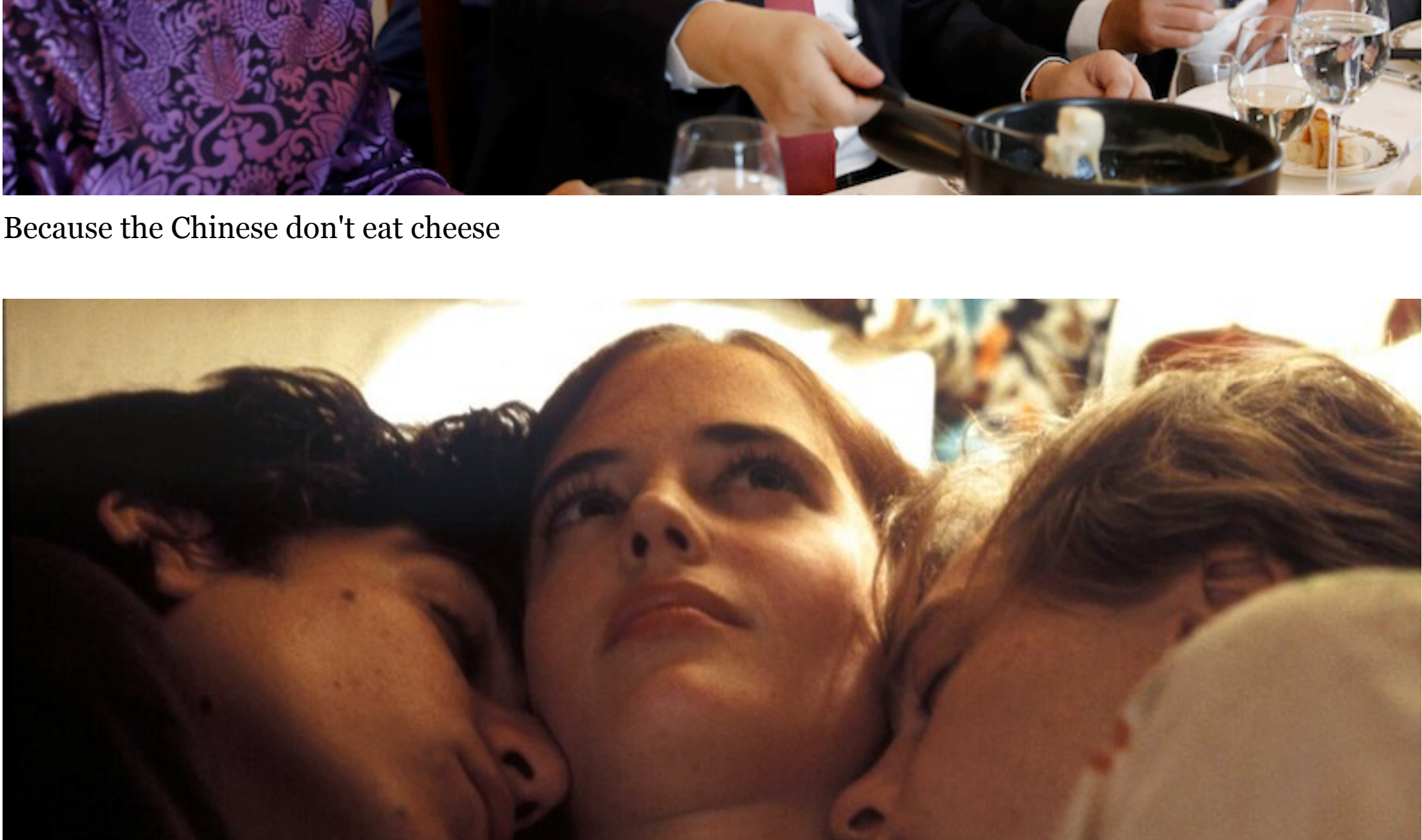
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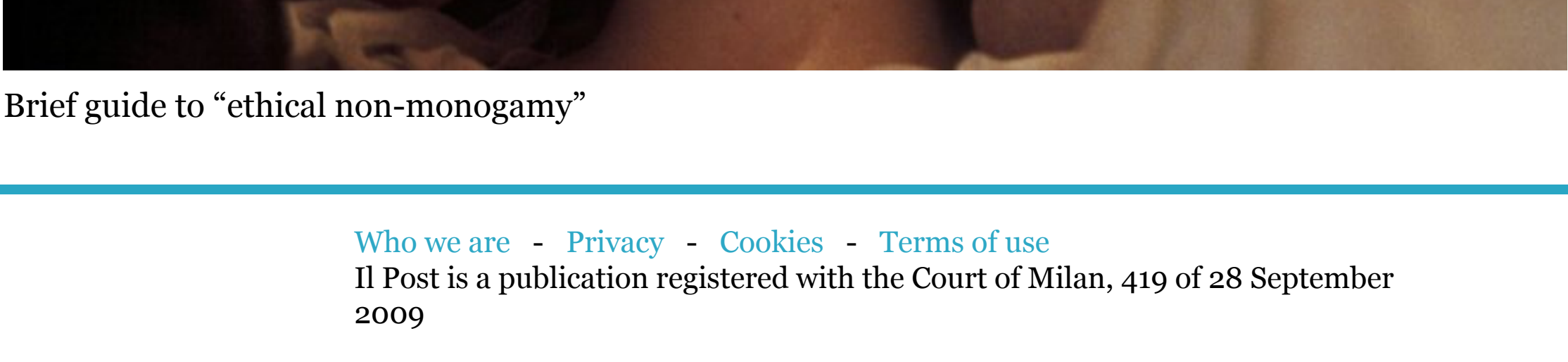
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