

SAHT2642: Art, Gender, Sexuality, and the Body

Lecturer: Susan Best

Outline for Question Eight:

Why is masquerade seen as a useful theme for understanding art  
concerned with identity?

Student: Josh Harle

There are several approaches to examining issues of identity. An essentialist theory holds that our identity is determined by our essential (biological) properties, whereas theories of social constructivism and performativity see identity as both taken from society (socialised) and projected back onto it (performance). Typically, art that aims at criticizing the repressive ideologies of a privileged group does so by de-naturalising the attribution of identity to the other. These identities are often bundled up with implicit denigrating features, such as the patriarchal concept of feminine as close to nature, and therefore further from the civilised and rational.

The concept of the masquerade was formulated by Joan Riviera, and used in conjunction with psychoanalysis to examine gender issues. Masquerade can be used to aid understanding of both performative and essentialist theories. Masquerade in fact denotes a pretending/putting on a mask – this is important to Freud’s psychoanalytic (with regards to gender), as it is fundamentally essentialist. It all rests on the possession of the penis.

Guy Debord posits contemporary society as one of Spectacle; intersubjective social relations mediated by a collection of images. These images are abstracted and simplified from “reality”, and take on a higher value, such as in the case of stereotypes and – much more subtly – naturalised within everyday discourse itself. The spectacle represents the dominant *model* of life, i.e. a hegemonic ideology that includes the structure of patriarchy. The womanliness that Rivera’s patient was attempting to hide can be seen as constructed from this sort of feminine Spectacle.

The Gaze governs the intersubjective relationship between male and female. In fact the mask which is worn as masquerade is taken from a male Gaze, at the same time as the woman feeling the need to wear the mask under the scrutiny of the male Gaze.

This male Gaze is described by Laura Mulvey through examination of mainstream cinema. A selection of films are taken as examples for how female characters are offered to the scopophilic voyeur/audience. Freud defines scopophilia as a fundamental sexual response to watching others engaged in intercourse. He associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. These films reflect socially established interpretation of sexual difference that controls images.

This gaze can be seen in contrast, though confusingly usually synonymous, to Sartre’s Look. The Look represents a bi-directional, generally much more balanced relationship between the two parties. Mulvey’s Gaze would come closer to the Look in performance art, where subject and object come face to face and have a reversibility to their relationship. Within film the actress does not return the Gaze, although on one level the gaze is reversible because the film is created for a specific audience. The concept of Reversibility comes from Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of flesh of the world, though it is not difficult to criticize the equal footing of both parties when it is likely that the exhibited woman will also see herself through the male Gaze.

**Bibliography:**

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