Postmodernism

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For Jean Baudrillard, transsexuality symbolizes alienating postmodern transformations across economics, aesthetics, and politics. "We are all transsexuals symbolically," he argues, as the body is reduced to a mere canvas on which the traffic of gendered signs is grafted or torn in antipolitical play (2009: 23). Baudrillard understands the postmodern body as the extended site of integration into networks and circuits of superficial political action and cybernetic capitalist complicity. Similarly to Fredric Jameson, he employs the spatial metaphors of depthlessness and flattening to emphasize the subject's reduction to artifice. These metaphors reveal postmodern cultural production as underpinned by the disruption of mere appearance from identity or inner desire. The disruptive element

of postmodern aesthetics underlies the denaturalization of sign from referent, such that the technologies of gendered and sexed transformation reveal the symbolic systems through which categories of gender and sex gain meaning. Thus the modernist aesthetic is put into crisis when the body, moving through time and space, is no longer the site of a stable, natural, and objective referential truth of gender or sex, despite the search for new relationalities constructed out of that very denaturalization (Stryker 1999: 170–71).

Baudrillard's analysis falls into unsubstantiated fatalism because he emphasizes meaning's liquidation, while postmodern aesthetics shifts the grounds for understanding meaning through subjective rupture itself. The technologies and discourses of transsexuality reveal the tensions of transforming the body and its adornments across, between, or outside the policed confines of a gender/sex binary while also being reinscribed into multiple discourses of fractured referentiality. Some discourses appeal to an unchanging sense of gender identity and relocate a "truth" of gender to be revealed from within the body, while others emphasize dialectical movements of identity and embodiment or otherwise challenge the ontologized terms of gender identity and desire. Tensions among these multiple narratives are salient in the uneven ethical-material topographies of corporeal transformation across which conflicts of late capitalist modernity play out, including state and medical apparatuses and other trans community spaces. In these spaces, the boundaries of authentic transness are often policed by appeals to deep relationality between materiality and inner desire or identity, regardless of its stasis or dynamism, against merely superficial drag or the unfettered play of gendered signs. Yet all of these references to corporeal mutability emerge from particular conceptual constellations that reveal sex/gender as regimes of coding and producing bodies. These possibilities appear with the understanding of the subject as ruptured.

Thus, the 'postmodern' condition must itself be denaturalized as a particular regime of meaning-production, rather than as meaning's mere liquidation. The denaturalization of both sex and gender offers possibilities for refiguring embodiment, but the posited disjunctures between materiality and signification or body and inner desire may lead to a reinscription of authenticity through rupture itself. The conceptual mediation and latent unfolding of such categories problematize rupture as tenuously policed between these concepts: sex's referent as body meets the body's materiality as symbolic/signifying and interpersonal; gender's referent as social action, role, or symbolic representation meets the materiality of these processes produced out of and on to the body; identity's referent as inner desire

or mind meets these terms as interpersonal and corporeal. Appeals to trans authenticity through statically constructed bounds of sex, gender identity, and gender performance thus encounter the body as site and product of deep relationality and that relationality's own latent unraveling. The deployments and subversions of these ontological 'layers' reveal tensions in ascribing through them authenticity of identity and embodiment.

Baudrillard's reduction of transsexuality to the symbolic realm presumes appearance as domineering the essence of the subject, such that the subject is hollowed of authentic content. Yet, Baudrillard does not consider adequately (at least in his discussion of transsexuality/sexuality) how conflicts about meaning emerge through the relation between the conceptual/symbolic and the materiality to which it refers. The referents of concepts are irreducible to their conceptual signification, as concepts constitute moments in a dialectic of meaning-production. Thus, rather than having a neutral and ahistorical significance, the concepts of gender and sex are transformed or employed through various discourses and technologies that restructure meaning in relation to the ruptured subject. The struggle to produce meaning in view of new relationships with the materiality of the world engenders confrontations around somatic and ethical questions of human life. Contrary to Baudrillard's lamentations, the "deep" political questions about meaning thrive through these tensions: What is the very nature of being gendered/sexed? Must sex and gender remain categories through which to classify and produce bodies? Is there something about the materiality of their referents that prevents us from reducing these categories to mere social constructions? More generally, how do uneven conditions of meaning-production open possibilities for resistance to or change of them?

In imagining new forms of meaning and value, it is necessary to confront spatial metaphors of superficiality that continue to haunt analyses of postmodernism. Thus far critical queer responses to the projects of Jameson and Baudrillard have left these metaphors unchallenged, perhaps in fear of slipping back into modernist aesthetics of authenticity based on the "mimetic reproduction for subjectivity of a stable, material objectivity that lies outside the subject" (Stryker 1999: 164). The tension between critique and appropriation of postmodernism synthesizes, in Jack Halberstam's work, as the reclamation of superficiality, which he claims "may not be a symptom of a diseased political culture but a marvelously flat and uninhibited repudiation of the normativity inherent in 'deep' political projects"

(Halberstam 2005: 124). Halberstam explores two-dimensional transgender art as anticapitalist resistance but, in assuming the unidirectional gaze of the surgeon or the artist, flattens the body to a mere mimetic canvas on which technologies operate. He thus objectifies and alienates representations of the body from the shifting acts of embodiment and performance that catalyze conflict over the very terms and alignments of identity, aesthetics, and politics. Against such static analysis, it is necessary to reveal the competing metaphysics of desire, ontological layering, and appeals to authenticity that enable dynamic conflict over trans subjectivities. Moving forward, we do not need to "reclaim" superficiality from such analysis as much as recognize that depth has never left these struggles in the first place, manifesting instead in the debate over superficiality itself.

References

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