Laughing at the Un-laughable: The Political Dimension of Gender Parody in Popular Culture

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Abstract

Cross-dressing and drag are old artistic practices that were used by individuals to challenge the existing status-quo of a community. Through parody, dominant normative discourses of beauty, gender relations and social inequality were exposed and publicly deconstructed and questioned. In contemporary western societies, the technological evolution and the new instruments of mass communication have facilitated the fusion of artistic forms of expression and have given parody a new contextual framework. In this paper I will analyze the post-modern reinvention of parody in connection with the new theoretical standpoints of gender identity. My thesis is that contemporary gender parody acts, through their use of technological devices, not only preserved their political aim, but also became an effective artistic tool that shatters the cultural and political power of censorship in all its forms.

Keywords: gender identity, parody, biological determinism, abjection, sexual objectification, popular culture.

Introduction

The rise of identity politics, deconstruction theory and postmodern thought has marked a turning point in the artistic world. Contemporary art has become increasingly concerned with social and political factors of human life. Feminism and gender studies have been a permanent source of inspiration for the art scene, and the problematic aspects of gender

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inequalities enabled different forms of art to develop into active reactions to contemporary hegemonic discourses of power.

In visual arts, the most politically conscious form of expression is performance art, the primary reactionary tool of second wave feminists and activists, but also an artistic space of political awareness that still has a great impact on individuals, especially in western societies. On the other hand, as we have given up to the everlasting binary relationship between high and low art, popular culture has developed into an umbrella term for many forms of artistic expressions, from music to cinema.

In my research paper I am concerned with the intersection between contemporary representations of gender and the rich field of popular culture through the concept of gender parody. In postmodern theory, parody is understood as a critique of the cultural normative models of thought using the very tools of the hegemonic discourse. Its aim is to expose the limitations and oppressive nature of fixed cultural and political norms. Gender parody, in particular, tracing it way back to Antiquity, has been a source of laughter and mockery regarding socio-political taboos of sexuality, desire and gender (Jameson 1998). Usually associated with the old practice of cross-dressing or drag, gender parody is a key-element in contemporary gender studies, and a reaction to structuralist definitions of the masculine and the feminine as opposed and fixed identities (Butler 1990, 181).

In the context of the politically engaged contemporary art, gender parody serves not only as a recreational artistic expression, but also as a political manifest towards preconceived notions of the masculine and the feminine (Hutcheon 1986-1987).

In order to understand the actual manifest of gender parody, and what it stands for, we must first identify the limits and gaps of the hegemonic discourse of gender roles in the cultural field.

**Mainstream Representations of the Body and Their Cultural Content**

In contemporary popular culture, new representations of the female subject correlate femininity with established features of female physical appearance. These features do not define femininity as a
cultural construct or psychological structure, but as bodily property. We can easily trace popular media products such as movies, magazines or music videos where the sexed body is constructed as the referent of femininity, in its idealized form. However, the representation of the female body does not appear exclusively as an aesthetic unity of harmonious features, but as a fragmented one as well, through the process of isolating and ranking the body parts in order to construct them as disconnected beauty ideals. The contemporary ritual of transforming one’s body parts into fetishes marks a serious issue in the process of objectification since one’s individuality is reduced to certain physical features that may or may not conform to standardized perceptions of beauty.

These cultural representations are reinforced through a discourse of shame destined to shape and perpetuate beauty ideals in the audience and also punish it for non-conformity. Moral shaming as a punitive act of women is actually a critique of disobedience of the symbolic aesthetic law and it is often exercised publicly. The construction of shame in numerous TV shows and magazines is based on a critical evaluation of the female body accompanied with ironic comments aimed at discrediting one’s authority and dignity. The most popular case is the public shaming of celebrities for the way they dress and gain weight as a sign of emotional instability in their private lives (Gill 2007).

The concept of femininity as concrete body is linked to the discourse about sex and sexuality in the media. Rosalind Gill identifies two forms of sexual representations of women in popular culture, one that defines women as desirable heterosexual objects, which actually implies the transformation of traditional norms of femininity into individual, self-conscious choices, and the other as the construction of women as fully responsible agents for their sexuality and emotional life, in an attempt to overcome the victim status assigned to them by second wave feminists.

The explicit discourse of female sexuality evokes a questionable stage in women’s emancipatory struggle, as it unfolds a certain imperative in the process of preserving the traditional image which concerns female sexuality, with little efforts to include alternative experiences of their bodies.
Sexual objectification of women, an usual subject of quarrel among feminists, especially during the second wave, is still an important issue in nowadays rape culture which is often associated with the traditional paradigm of gender roles (Nussbaum 1995). The concept of objectification has been used to subvert women’s representations in visual culture, naming advertising, cinematography and pornography, connoting, as Nussbaum would attest, “a way of speaking, thinking and acting that the speaker finds morally or socially objectionable, usually, though not always, in the sexual realm.” (Nussbaum 1995, 249)

Judith Williamson attests the disappearance of the term objectification from public debates enabling, thus, a subtle form of censorship. She explains how sexism has been whipped off from the hegemonic discourse about gender relations, shutting down any possible form of criticism:

This concept (unlike racism) has fallen into disuse in recent years, and is now rarely employed in public debate. So our view of the situation it describes becomes locked in the moment when the term flourished, and increasingly, our culture presents sexism as a kind of 60’s or 70’s phenomenon, to be enjoyed as kitsch, rather than as a contemporary problem to be addressed as unjust. (Williamson 2013)

Sexual objectification derives from the practice of sexism which is based on the masculine/feminine dichotomy which creates and sustains gender hierarchies. In accordance with the tradition of structuralist thought, this type of binary systems implies the construction of the former concept as the opposite of the latter. The interchangeable binary formulas of mind/body, masculine/feminine or nature/culture define the feminine subject as bodily matter in opposition to the abstracted, intellectualized representation of the masculine. Thus, sexual objectification of women is the cultural effect of the overly emphasized female body and of the construction of their bodies as objects of males’ desires (Butler 1990). Sexual objectification is a widely spread tool in advertising, and a marker of consumerism that identifies or strengthens the economic potential of goods. The use of both male and female sexualized bodies and their subsequent assignment to commodities is, in
fact, a contemporary ritual of security check within the fluidity and inconsistent nature of the market.

Gender hierarchies are not exclusively sustained by sexual objectification of bodies. Their instrumentality provides the contexts in which traditional cultural practices are redistributed unequally. For example, the intensive care of a woman for her own body can function as the internalized act of objectification of the male gaze, which enacts the conventional assumption that the primary characteristic of womanliness is nature understood as maternal instinct and a voluptuous physical appearance that praises and emphasizes fertility. Rosalind Gill explains that external forms of power related to the same traditional hegemonic discourse about female identity are internalized by individuals and become the practice of narcissistic self-surveillance (Gill 2007). According to the author, the process of internalization is the result of the systematic exposure of women to the pattern of female sexuality as the object of masculine desire. In contemporary popular culture, however, the process of sexual objectification is resignified as sexual subjectification, which implies the autonomous act of the individual as self-represented sexual object. Thus, the female subject becomes the observer as well as the active judge of her own body (Gill 2007).

Up to this point we identified the way gender roles are enabled both as internalized reactions and external, punishable symbolic laws.

Yet one may ask, how can those gender representations pass as perpetually reinforced truths about one’s identity and how does gender parody subverts them through the act of mocking?

Perhaps we can locate the problem of subversion in the gender debate that has been taken place throughout history.

The Nature-Culture Debate on Gender: A Destinal Encounter?

The hegemonic cultural discourse about gender implies, first of all, a commonly assumed perception of the human body, defined through a set of cultural conventions passively accepted and assimilated through education.

We are assigned at birth to a gender that corresponds to our intelligible sex the very moment we leave our mothers’ bodies. If we see
our birth certificate as a metaphor, we can presume that it stands for our gender ID that marks our entire lifetime and experiences. We don’t usually ask our parents why they used to buy us dresses instead of trousers, or dolls instead of toy cars when we were little. It is in the very constitution of one’s sexed body that these rituals require to be practiced, one might think. Yet how is the body really constituted?

According to Butler, under the influence of Christian and Cartesian theoretical standpoints, the sexed body has been defined as a passive space of denotation, a “politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (Butler 1990, 11). The common assumption that nature or biology creates a set of innate determinants which are being transmitted to human beings at birth defines the body as a pre-discursive and irrefutable ground. Yet this ground is the subject of a historical relation between the concept of nature and culture.

The much debated dichotomy between nature and culture is, in fact, ascribed to a group of interchangeable pairs of concepts that were objects of knowledge for many thinkers throughout history: the mind vs. body, interior vs. exterior, and psychological vs. physical pairs. The binary model of structuralist thought that stands for the defining process of a term by the exclusion of the other has caused a deep, psychological split in the understanding of gender in particular. Not only masculinity and femininity are defined in contrast, but sex and gender too.

Briefly, the problem of perpetuated cultural traits and values is a question of position. The way we position theoretically essential notions for the individual, such as race, gender, class, etc., determines the way we understand their display in the real world. Butler argues that the preconceived split between what is considered to be essential biological and what is culturally constructed in one’s body creates two separate meanings that sustain one another through gender hierarchies.

The most popular, traditional view of the concrete body defines the latter as the referent of the cruel, unrestrained and chaotic nature of the animal, whereas the human mind is the regulating force or the border control of supposedly evil instincts, as Butler would call it (Butler 1990). However, the cultural or rational limits of the human body do not
function as fluid borders, but also as fixed, deterministic lines which are not supposed to be crossed:

“When the relevant culture that constructs gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.” (Butler 1990, 12)

This can be easily traced in examples of public shaming of individuals who do not conform to stereotypes of hetero-normative or gender behaviors. The masculine woman or the homosexual man has always been the target of moral denigration, and her/his symbolic punishment through shame is the most popular practice of cultural reiteration and reinforcement of norms. Reiteration of gender practices through the obsessive public identification of the disobeyer functions as a reassuring act of the reality of the social.

Butler argues that the hegemonic discourse about gender is sustained and culturally transmitted through a permanent repetition of mutually accepted patterns of behavior, named the process of naturalization. Under these circumstances, naturalization does not only imply the process of centralizing a set of gender practices and gestures within the aura of the normal, but also their mechanical internalization into what we usually call gender identity:

In this way, it showed that what we take to be an internal feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, a hallucinating effect of naturalized gestures. (Butler 1990, 15)

Based on repetition, the process of naturalization suggests that gender is a continuous and active series of acts and gestures constantly practiced by individuals. The way a woman or a man dresses or chooses to aesthetically shape her or his own body is, evidently, a re-produced behavior from a cultural background, but the very act of actualizing it reactivates its authority and legitimacy as adequate and socially acceptable reality. This is what Butler calls performativity of gender, a key element in gender parody and subversive sexual manifests.
No Rest for the Excluded: Peripheral Gender Performatives

Up to this point we can identify two types of bodily representations within the hegemonic cultural discourse and popular culture as well: one type of corporeality invested with symbolic power and the other presented as deviant content marked as dangerous for society and the law of the normal. The representations that fill the latter description correspond mainly to sexual minorities and paraphilia, but also to non-conformed patterns of straight female or male behavior.

The binary and exclusionary attitude of the majority towards the minorities is called by Kristeva the process of abjection. Regulatory cultural and political discourses such as sexism, racism and homophobia are, according to the author, products of a constructed reality by means of exclusion (Kristeva 1982). Thus, that which I recognize as valid truth is only recognizable in relation to my decision to eliminate other available perspectives.

In this way, the universal or essentialist truth about gender or any other subjects of matter is constructed in two stages: the internalization of the desirable stances of reality and the expulsion of the alternative as abject. In this regard, the act of internalization implies both recognizing the instance of truth within myself (in my very personal identity) and within others similar to me. In a structuralist paradigm, to act in such a way would mean to dismiss others who are not like me and construct them as the opposition. The repulsion and abjection derived from it is explained by Kristeva as a ritual of security towards one's comfort reality zone that maintains the unusual, the unknown, in a loathsome territory far away from the familiar (Kristeva 1982).

As a reaction to the oppressive binary nature of the normal/abnormal system, sexual minorities developed a combination of terms that suggest a harmonious relation of the opposites. For example, what we may call a masculine woman, queer studies define as the butch-femme, a union between rough and soft aesthetics and behavior:

They are coupled ones that do not impale themselves on the poles of sexual difference, or metaphysical values, but constantly seduce the sign system, through flirtation and inconstancy into the light fondle of artifice, replacing the Lacanian slash with the lesbian bar. (Case 1988, 296)
This call for new appropriation of language and resignification of words is a specific postmodern method of destabilizing binary thought and so it is for gender parody. If gender is not a destinal encounter between fixed biological data that require fixed cultural interpretations, but something that is constantly created through the fusion of physical and psychological processes, how can gender parody, through the act of cross-dressing or drag, manage to show us that?

First of all, cross-dressing and drag are in their very nature theatrical acts. The borrowed ensemble of gestures, clothes and behavior commonly assigned to one’s opposed gender creates an alternative, imagined reality through the act of playing with symbols and significations accepted as factors of the real by the vast majority.

Parody is an act of imitation that reveals the very imitating nature of the “original”. The mimicry of gender roles evokes how easy it is to create gender through its intelligible symbols and practices. Gender parody does not only perform the roles of the masculine and the feminine but also shows how we do it in real life:

Any performer who puts on an outfit to project an image is drag. Everything you put on is to fit a preconceived notion of how you wanna be seen. It’s all drag. (Berrick 2003)

The process of imitation in gender parody contests gender as a natural and innate identity emphasizing the easiness of copying gestures, practices and aesthetics associated with it. Imitating the hegemonic model, gender identity doesn’t appear fixed and irreversible anymore, but fluid and open to interpretation:

(...) gender parody reveals the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin. To be more precise, it is a production which, in effect - that is, in its effect - postures as an imitation. (Butler 1990, 175-76)

It is important to stress the fact that gender parody does not offer an alternative discourse on truth. The act of unmasking a mask using the very features of the mask in question serves as a semiotic play with pre-existent gender signs in order to balance the normal and abnormal and diminish the authority of the normal. It is in fact a deconstruction of the
abject through the denunciation of cultural and political hierarchies based on repulsion towards minorities.

Furthermore, gender parody reclaims respect and social legitimacy for the non-conforming identities by challenging the power of the heteronormative discourse and its practices of exclusions and denials of alternative forms of sexualities, gender identities and desires.

Thus, in the context of its struggle against abusive forms of powers, gender parody becomes a political manifest.

Conclusions

As we have argued, gender parody is, first of all, a critique of the cultural limits of gender identities. Throughout contemporary popular culture, the insistence on conformity to fixed gender roles and practices not only threatens the individual’s right to sexual freedom and speech, but also enables subtle forms of sexism, homophobia and gender inequalities, a concern that defines gender parody as a form of political awareness of oppressive symbolic laws.

Perhaps the best way to understand the usefulness of gender parody in contemporary western culture is to see it as an effort to widen the possibilities of personal identity in a constant awareness regarding existent or potential forms of censorship. Using the act of mocking, the instance of authority loses its idealized position not in favor of an oppositional, demonized image, but as an opened space that can be consciously filled with all the contradictions and irregularities of individual identity.

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