

'Judith Butler claims that gender is performative - discuss'

Visual Culture

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Year of Study: Second Year

Semester: 2

Department (if applicable): School of Design (Illustration) & School of Education

Are you on the Joint Course? ☐ Yes ☒ No

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Essay Due Date: 4th April 2022

Word Count: 2,500 words

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Judith Butler claims that gender is performative – discuss:

Alex Fortune

The questions surrounding the definition and meaning of gender, sex & sexuality are heavily debated by many, and often result in the creation of more questions & new ideas, rather than explaining and exploring the labels themselves. The term ‘gender’ at its core can be defined as the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed, including societal norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. This concept is examined and questioned thoroughly by postmodern philosopher & gender theorist Judith Butler, who’s key theories are attributed to Feminism, Queer Theory, and Ethics. Their main ideas, explored in their essay “*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*” (1988), and book ‘*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*’ (1990), centre around deconstructing the apparently fixed, natural, and conventional definitions of gender, sex, and sexuality. Throughout this essay, I aim to explore, explain and question the theory of gender performativity, and look at its relevance and place in relation to the world of modern literature and cinema. The current nature of modern media allows for ideas of gender and sex to be explored in dynamic, interesting and thought provoking ways, particularly when considering complex and subversive pieces of literature such as the text ‘*Kiss of the Spider Woman*’ written by Manuel Puig (1976), and its film adaption of the same name directed by Héctor Babenco (1985). Gender plays a pivotal role within our lives, and we can see this reflected clearly when we look inward and examine our own ideas surrounding gender, and what is innately ‘Male’ or ‘Female’ to us. Who are we to decide what belongs where? How do a series of actions reflect a gender identity? Or simply,

can there be a completely non - binary existence, with all actions belonging to the space in between? When considering the concept of gender performativity, we must explore it within all its aspects, and ask ourselves the question - is gender truly a performance for a conventional society, or is it something we innately explore and perform for ourselves?

‘One is not born, but rather becomes a woman’ is one of the most famous statements made by french philosopher Simone de Beauvoir in her book ‘*The Second Sex*’ (1949, Cited in Butler 1986, p.35), and cannot be left undiscussed when examining the work of Butler. Examining the concept of gender binaries, Butler argues that “The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”(1988, p.528). According to Butler, gender can be labelled as a performative construct - something we ‘do’ more so than we ‘are’, and a journey that has no definitive beginning or end point. When considering the definitive ‘norms’ of gender within modern society today, there are many traits that we can believe to belong to a specific gender, such as the ‘man’ of the home being the breadwinner, and the ‘woman’ of the home becoming a housewife. However, when we consider something a little more unconventional than perhaps the imagined nuclear family or the ‘American Dream’, we soon see that these heavily structured gender archetypes & binaries are often broken. If a woman becomes the sole earner of a family, does she become the ‘man of the house’? - or perhaps we can consider the family dynamic of a single father or mother. When looking at this dynamic through the lens of gender identity it poses a question - can a person play the roles of both genders at once? A single parent playing both parental roles may not have the notions of their sex or sexual identity questioned, but if we consider again the idea of gender as a performance, are these people conforming to either archetype? If a person displays societal behaviours or

characteristics related to both masculinity and femininity, how is their gender identified? Or is it possible that someone could live in a complete liminal existence, conforming exactly to neither gender binary?

When considering this concept, Butler goes as far as to argue that gender does not exist of its own accord, and in fact 'is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed' (1988, p.527). From this theory, one can argue that when drawing upon Butler's work, the concept of gender & gender identity is a complete social construction, and reflects a natural and innate human desire for order. A desire to have an identity & to fit into a justified 'box' within society - to complete the actions that are seemingly laid out for us depending on which gender box we wish to confine ourselves to. Herein lies the question - if the concept of gender refers to the actions, behaviours & roles associated with being male or female, is there not a natural human desire to want to live and remain in the space between? To 'perform' differently daily depending on our mood and feelings, and to be able to constantly inhabit the liminality between genders? However - there is a catch, as what is required for the hegemony of heteronormative standards to maintain power is our continual repetition of specific gender acts in the most mundane of daily activities. Our most personal acts are often scripted for us by society, almost forcing us to perform for acceptance & comfort, and drawing from Butler (1988), the distinction between private and public acts is itself a fiction designed to support an oppressive status quo.

Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, (1976) and its aforementioned film adaption, Babenco (1985), are both pieces of extremely popular modern Latin American literature & cinema with a significant global impact within the realms of gender identity and gender subversion. Considering questions of gender, sex, sexuality, effemininity & intimacy, the

work explores the story of Valentin Arregui Paz, called Valentin, and Luis Alberto Molina, called Molina - cellmates in an Argentine prison, and similarly to many of Puig's other works, explores 'the restriction of human freedom resulting from popular social models and authoritative sexual codes', Zimmerman (1988, p.106). The story itself depicts the restricted gender and sexual identities of two men: the homosexual Molina who has been imprisoned for the corruption of minors, and the macho Valentin who is imprisoned for his Marxist political activities. Intertwined throughout the story are discussions of dreams, retelling of stories, inner monologues and deep conversations, through which the men begin to reveal themselves to each other, and progress from cellmates, to friends, and finally, to lovers. On the surface, the novel appears to be about the story of two men exploring sexual binaries & liberating themselves from their political & social environments to fall in love with another man. However, upon a closer reading of the text, we discover that '*Kiss of the Spider Woman*' is an exploration of and commentary on traditional gender binaries and behaviour. The concept of gender performativity cannot be ignored when discussing the character of Molina - a biological male explicitly distinguishing herself from homosexual men, and instead heavily identifying with the female gender, stating that 'Since a woman's the best there is, I want to be one' a quote from her appearing in Puig (1976).

Throughout the film, her effeminate desire and gender identification serves as a critique of traditionally male behaviour exhibited by other characters within the novel. However, her binary gender identification also serves to limit and confine her to heterosexual norms - the enticing sense of belonging and traditional womanhood trapping Molina within the deigns and ideology of yet another set of heteronormative standards and gender roles. When reflecting upon this, it leads us to ask once again is gender a performance for oneself, or for others? Who is to say Molina or others like her could not live in a liminal existence,

constantly floating in the space between genders - yet this may not be what is desired. One may wish to 'perform' as one set gender or another solely to be accepted socially, or perhaps to feel defined and have a sense of belonging within a pool of others of the same gender identity. When reflecting on the work, we see how different forms of media lend themselves to different explorations of gender - namely, seeing the physical form and identity of Molina on screen, played by William Hurt, allows us to see a physical and more tangible subversion of gender, and the physical implications and results of gender performativity are clearly laid out for us on a physical level. Yet when considering the text in its written form, we discover the nuances of the work, and we see the subversion of gender identities unfold more slowly. However, no matter the form, one central point of the story is that Molina's gender is determined by what she does - not what she is, demonstrating Butler's claim, (1990) that gender is a choice.

The nature of the work '*Kiss of the Spider Woman*', allows for areas of slippage - slippage between speakers, slippage between fiction and reality, and slippage between gender identities & sexualities. We see this clearly throughout the work, with the effeminate actions of Molina acting as a direct foil to the overly-masculine archetype portrayed by Valentin. Throughout both adaptations, as discussed by Alan (2014), Molinas femininity is inherently aligned, bizarrely, with Valentin's heterosexuality, propelled forward by her acknowledgement that she would never fall in love with 'the other kind who fall in love with one another', Puig (1976). Her desire for a masculine man to juxtapose her feminine traits results in almost a heterosexual homosexual dynamic within herself, yet it is important to note that despite this her gender identity remains unchanged. This is particularly evident in the film adaptation of the novel, Babenco (1985), as we get to see Molina in a physical, tangible form. Through her use of language & motion, we see Molina perform actions and exhibit

behaviours in line with the gender identity she creates - both her narratives and language become a seductive tool for escape and reform for both her and Valentin from the confines of the prison cell.

When exploring Molina as a character, she is often used to disrupt our sometimes overly simplistic understanding of gender binaries & she creates a sense of gender fluidity throughout the story. She herself has the power to 'perform' as whoever she pleases, and we understand that we as humans 'Act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman' and 'We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that's simply true - Actually, it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start.', Butler (2011). The differences between the roles of a typically 'weak woman' and 'strong man', portrayed by Molina & Valentin throughout the film are often subverted and questioned, and leave room for us to examine them in the context of gender performativity. When looking at particular scenes from the film we can see the blossoming relationship between the effeminate homosexual Molina and the supposed heterosexual & overtly masculine Valentin, all reaching a climax as the two make love, Molina's true intentions as a spy within the prison cell are revealed and she ultimately, meets her demise - due to Valentin's involvement in politics & her relationship and desire to care for him. When we consider the journey of their relationship, we can see the slippage between the supposed binaries each should adhere to in relation to their portrayed gender. Valentin begins life in the prison cell opposed to any and all affection or compassion, and as the story unfolds and becomes intertwined with concepts of fiction, identity, and the circumstances of living within the prison, Valentin allows himself to open up and be cared for by Molina, 'and what is wrong with being soft like a woman?'

Why can't a man-or whether-a dog, or a fairy- why can't he be sensitive if he feels like this?', Puig (1976). Ultimately, albeit unknowingly, he is stepping away from his overly masculine appearance for a short while, leading us to question whether he truly feels that this virile appearance is a result of his innate desires, or he feels that it is something he must project & perform given the climate and circumstance of the story. This begs the question - do we as humans naturally slip between genders without realising it? When we consider seemingly everyday actions, particularly in a modernist society, it becomes difficult for us to distinguish between what is essentially 'male' and 'female', reflecting Butler's theory of gender as a performative construct, displayed by the everyday existence of 'feminine' men and 'masculine' women. When we consider seemingly everyday instances, like the fashion statement of the female 'power - suit', or the introduction of men portraying more effeminate roles within the modelling and music industries respectively, it leads us to question whether or not these gender binaries really make sense at all. If it is so easy to slip between them and portray whatever role within society you wish, is there a necessity to have such a strict set of behaviours and actions we are supposed to adhere to?

When once again examining the work of Beauvoir (1949, cited in Butler 1986), Butler explains that one is not born a certain gender, but rather, through repetitive actions, choices & behaviours, becomes it. The concept of gender itself is referred to as a process, something for one to become or construct that does not have a definitive origin or end. It is ongoing - completely open to reimagination and resignification. When considered within the context of '*Kiss of the Spider Woman*', we see how notions of gender performativity can impact us and those around us, and lead us to question whether we 'perform' for others, or for our true selves. Butler's theories are central to the exploration of gender binaries in any realm, and result in the creation of even more thought provoking points. Considering the central

characters in '*Kiss of the Spider Woman*', we see a significant contrast within their gender identities, but not their sex or sexualities. Within this lies the key - gender is a social construct, created for those who wish to conform to something; To a society, to a group of people, or to something they themselves feel drawn to. It is each individual person's choice as to where and how they wish to identify, and if they want to be in line with a specific gender identity at all. The concept of gender at its core is that it does not exist - it only exists as much as you let it. Gender is not definitive, and as demonstrated throughout my research & writing, it allows space for slippage, between different genders and through the space between them. Gender refers to the acts completed daily by humans, almost in a ritualistic way, but when using the analogy of a stage, each and every day we step out to perform these actions, knowingly and unknowingly, as a role, and the beauty of this role is it is often one we select for ourselves.

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