

Gender and the troubled Gaze: We're here and we're queer!

The adoption of alter egos has become a popular trend among contemporary visual artists such as Lady Gaga. The alter egos are used to portray alternative genders. Society already punishes gender identifications that do not bend to heteronormativity, so the creation of an alter ego to represent alternate genders adds to the problem of authentic gender representations, ultimately reinforcing the invisibility of Others. Heteronormativity insists on gender binaries where cisgender is compulsory. The representation then of gender such as in the case of Lady Gaga/Jo Calderone can make a joke out of the struggle of the Others as she can dress up into any of her alter egos as she pleases and be any gender at her convenience. On the other hand, the fluidity of her persona can also show heteronormativity for the social fuck up that it is, aiding in the liberation of the Others from the rules of gender binary. Beyoncé is also another artist who has adopted an alter ego, which exaggerates femininity and attempts to manipulate the passivity associated with the female gazing structures. The thing to ponder is whether alternate genders cannot be represented without creating alternates of existing individuals.

We live in a world that places a vast importance on the biological capabilities, needs and desires of a body. Merleau Ponty (Butler 1990 : 483) asserts that the idea of a body is historical and not natural and it is still open to many examinations. If a body is indeed a historical idea then it must have some medium through which its history is communicated. Butler (1990 : 484) describes the body as an incessant materializing of possibilities rather than matter. The history of the body is communicated through the body and of that Butler (1990 : 481) says a person is not just a body but they also do their body based on learned behavior. The biology of a body is sex and its performance is gender. To support this Beauvoir (Butler 1990 : 481) claimed that sex is a biological facticity and gender is a cultural interpretation of the biology.

Beauvoir (Butler 1990: 484) further claims:

To be female, according to that distinction, a factity which has no meaning but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman', to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project (Butler 1990: 484)

What this means is that one is not born with their gender but learns what their gender is and performs it to become it. However, the historical ideas of what certain genders should be are already in place and as can be expected; those who do not fit into their cultural signs of gender are punished for it. Who does the punishing? Who are the gender police? It is important to note that we live in a heteronormative society. Heteronormativity is the normalization of behavior tied to the presumption of heterosexuality, which adheres to a strict gender binary.

Gender binary is a vital part of heteronormativity as it acknowledges feminine and masculine and nothing else and promoting compulsory heterosexuality. Foucault and others (Butler 1990: 486) view anything other than heteronormativity as a disservice to the reproductive interests of society. So in a heteronormative society such as ours, a body that performs unexpectedly is a threat to society reifying the importance of gender performance, not just a performance but correct gender performance.

For there to be a performance there has to be a subject and an object; the subject being the one who looks and the object being the one who performs. The subject makes the meaning while the object bears the meaning. Mulvey (2010: 61) describes how in the heteronormative society there is also a focus on the phallus as a symbol of dominance. This phenomenon is known as phallogentrism; it is the system that places an importance on the power that comes with having a phallus thereby creating patriarchy. Where heteronormativity creates a system where heterosexuality is the only

acceptable sexuality, phallocentrism creates a system where those who bear a phallus have power. The world comes to be seen through the view of those who have a phallus in what is known as the male gaze Mulvey (2010: 63)

The male gaze is a term that was coined by Mulvey (2010: 63) in which the woman is the image and the man is bearer of the look.

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey 2010:63)

Here Mulvey describes women as performing their gender to the pleasure of men. To explain this I will look at the music video 'You and I' by Lady Gaga.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

The video is created in a camp style format of high theatrics. It begins by showing Lady Gaga in the middle of what appears to be a road in a country setting in which she is wearing very high heels. Her feet are bloody in these heels indicating that she may have been in them for a long while and has perhaps walked a long distance. A lot of the performance takes place in barn next to a cornfield where it seems Lady Gaga is being fixed up until she embodies a mermaid. Her mermaid body does not hold most attributes that would entertain the male gaze; the breasts are bound and the legs are bound by a tail. The scene in the barn is the primary scene and has a secondary scene, which is performed in the middle of the cornfield.

In the cornfield Lady Gaga is playing on a piano. The placement of a piano in a cornfield also adds to the theatrics of the performance. In what can be described as a paradox, the video began with her wearing a black dress and showing pain through her bloody feet and it ends with her in a white marriage gown, marrying the man who has been giving her electric shocks. This paradox, illustrated in the comparison of figure 1 and figure 2. The employment of wardrobe in these images plays on the expected gender performance for a female. She begins lonely wearing colours that represent darkness, sadness and all things effeminate and the video ends with her in a representation of innocence, purity and femininity. Figure 3 shows the transformation that took place from the black dress to the white wedding gown. There is employment of the visual tool terror and fascination when she is shown being shocked electronically and transformed into a mermaid. While she is transformed and shocked in the barn, right outside on the cornfield she is herself and yet not herself. The presence of Lady Gaga and her alter ego Jo Calderone may indicate a conversation within herself where she is resisting the requirements of the male gaze on her body. The scene in figure 3 is also a paradox of the scene of figure 4. Figure 3 shows the high expectations of the male gaze on the female body and figure 4 may be an offer into the insight of the female gaze. Through Jo Calderone's eyes, Lady Gaga looks at herself through her own gazing structure.

Gender performance is shown in the body of Gaga through the bloody feet in heels. It is interpreted that she is going to meet a former lover in this video and it is unthinkable to remove the pain causing heels and dare look any less feminine. When the element of terror and fascination comes up as Lady Gaga is getting fixed up in the barn with the use of electronic shock, he can be said to be performing his gender. He is performing the heterosexual male gender with some added theatrics. While man is the bearer of the look (Mulvey 2010: 61), here he goes on to create the correct look that fits the taste of his gaze. The result is the transformation of a woman who was in pain into a mermaid being watered by the man who can be presumed to be the lover she has come back for. In a phallogocentric world, the absence of a phallus on a woman is seen as a weakness but even more so as a wound and a symbol of castration (Hook 2000: 71). By creating a mermaid, he has removed the symbol of castration, weakness and lack and turned her into an object of mythically exaggerated beauty; her body has become right for the male gaze without the parts that threaten the gaze.

In the cornfield, Lady Gaga is playing the piano while another man is sitting and smoking on top of the piano. It is confirmed that this man is the alter ego of Lady Gaga herself. This imagery confuses the reality of the male gaze. The basis of the male gaze is that women perform to the pleasure of men. In this case, is Lady Gaga to be looked at as her in the male makeup or as a man and does having both alter egos in the same shot make each its own identity. The question is a difficult one to think about because it all goes down to whose pleasure this imagery is meant for.

In a heteronormative society, all is made for the male gaze but in the case of representation like these, which confuse the male gaze, could it be that there should be consideration for alternative gazing structures. The representation of alternative genders in visual culture in this video does not last long enough. Even though Lady Gaga makes out with her androgynous alter ego in the cornfield, all heteronormative order is restored when she marries the heterosexual man at the end of the video. Even though she reverts from the marginal territories to the mainstream she does represent the possibility of

alternative gazing structures. Lady Gaga was questioned on her alter ego to which she replied in her V magazine column saying:

How can we remodel the model? In a culture that attempts to quantify beauty with a visual paradigm and almost mathematical standard, how can we fuck with the malleable minds of onlookers and shift the world's perspective on what's beautiful? I asked myself this question. And the answer? Drag. (Lady Gaga: 2011)

Hutton (2000 : 8) describes Lady Gaga's performance as destabilizing the concept of gender because of the presence of androgyny. The destabilization of heteronormativity that Lady Gaga does open up conversations about sexuality and questions the binary of sexuality by presenting a somewhat uncomfortable third dimension. Black (2011 : 32) describes the representation of the queer as a tragic spectacle in which the queer and the homosexuals are failed men bonded to failed women (Black:8). In the video 'You and I', the presence of Lady Gaga's androgynous alter ego creates a spectacle and proves the tragedy which Black (2011 : 32) describes as the queer did not end up with the girl.

Beyoncé is another cultural phenomena whose career parallels that of Lady Gaga. She exemplifies cultural feminism where the female takes the place of male representation altogether (Dolan 1988:7). Cultural feminism embraces the male gaze and uses it to have women speak their narrative. Beyoncé's famed performance at the 2016 superbowl is an example of gender representation that bends to the male gaze but alludes to an independent female narrative. The mise en scene of the performance was a worldwide stage where Beyoncé can be described as an erotic prop. Mulvey describes eroticization as a product of the objectification of the female body through the male gaze. Freud (Mulvey 2011: 63) describes this pleasure of looking as scopophilia, a sexual pleasure derived from looking. The wardrobe of Beyoncé and her performers aids the male gaze in what is described as decontextualized outtake (Hall 2000:142) in which an image is erotic because it engages the viewer to construct the hidden narrative. This performance was sexy and empowered, in order to have done such a performance a few years

ago, Beyoncé needed to employ her alter ego – Sasha Fierce. Sasha Fierce was a persona that Beyoncé embodied to make her sexuality more palatable for her spectators.

Employing an alter ego to communicate the uncomfortable aspects of gender makes the alternative gender structures a fantasy world where the cisgender come out to play and go back to their binaries when they are done. If Sasha Fierce could exemplify radical feminism on stage and Beyoncé goes on silently then the conversation on radical feminism cannot possibly exist. Jo Calderone, Lady Gaga's alter ego represents the third dimension of gender; androgyny. Jo Calderone is not entirely male or female in appearance but identifies with the male gender and opens up the conversation but this representation is also part time.

The conversation of gazing structure is not one that can be addressed on a part time representation, after all, we're here and we're queer. It is a good thing that Beyoncé retired Sasha Fierce and has taken head on the issues of representation in her own persona. In contemporary visual culture, the representation of gender is inclusive of alternative gender structures as long as the representation takes a heteronormative majority.

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