

The Performativity of the Self: Subjectivity Formation in Althusser, Foucault, and Butler

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“I want to be somebody. I am somebody.” This uncertain feeling toward the “self” is expressed by one of the drag performers in the film *Paris Is Burning* (1991). It is a documentary film about the drag balls in Harlem, where a number of men, either African-American or Latino, compete with each other through their performances, dressing and acting under categories such as “executive” or “model.” The enthusiasm of both the performers and the audience in the balls immediately strikes us, the viewers; the film appalls us — it may even disgust us. Indeed, confronted with these performers, all of whom are ethnic minorities and financially disadvantaged, we cannot help projecting onto them an ethnographical gaze; that is, by creating a boundary between their world and our own, between their reality and our own, we secure our sense of self. Nevertheless, a moment’s reflection makes us wonder whether we can really look at them as the Other. Threatening as it may be, there seems to be a room for a question: Isn’t there a way in which we identify ourselves with these performers in the present cultural condition, in which the notion of self has been damaged, in which the idea of the individual has been blurred, in which the question of who we are presents the greatest perplexity of all. In short, the ways in which we talk about the “self” are, on the one hand, multiplied, but, on the other hand, obscured.

What is at stake in *Paris Is Burning* is the concept of “subjectivity,” one of the major concerns within Cultural Studies.

Various post-structuralist enterprises have elaborated the concept of subjectivity in order to theorize a subject being who is constituted in and by the social forces which surround him. As opposed to the humanistic idea of the autonomous individual who possesses the determining force over the course of his life, this post-structuralist subject is destabilized and susceptible to the transformation required of him by the power relations in which he lives. John Fiske explains the ambiguity of this concept as follows:

This is not to deny that we are all individuals, that is, that we inhabit different bodies with different and unique genetic structures, but it is to say that that part of us which forms our individuality is essentially biological, part of nature, and does not, therefore, form a major part of the study of culture. What cultural studies are concerned with, of course, is the sense that various cultures make of "the individual," and the sense of self that we, as individuals, experience. This constructed sense of the individual in a net work of social relations is what is referred to as "the subject"(48).

In the above conception, what constitutes a subject, the relationship between an individual and a network of social forces to which he is subjected, is by no means simple and clear. Responding directly to *Paris is Burning*, Judith Butler argues that the film is "about simultaneous production and subjugation of subject" (*Bodies That Matter* 124). Furthermore, by examining the performativity of these drags, Butler presents the notion of "performance" as a mode of resistance, as a means to expose the naturalized hegemonic cultural and social power networks in which gender identity is constructed. In this paper, I would like to examine the process by which an individual becomes a subject as it has been presented by three different cultural theorists: Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler.

Finally I would like to return to the question of “performativity” and self presented by the film in an effort to pose the following question: To what extent do the performances of the drags in the film reflect our state of being ?

Louis Althusser has developed the notion of subjectivity according to a relatively traditional line of Marxism. In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus,” he approaches the issue of subjectivity through the social structure which is constructed according to the principles of the capitalist system. At the outset of his essay, he repeats the crucial question in Marxist theory, that is, the question of the reproduction of the relations of production. In the course of his examination of this question, he rephrases the basic Marxist structural analysis of society, namely, the interdependent relation between base and superstructure. The base is the economic foundation of society shaped by its material productivity, whereas the superstructure is social practices and consciousness determined by the base. Althusser suggests that, while this topography of social structure is significant insofar as it “reveals that it is the base which in the last instance determines the whole edifice”(8), it is necessary to redefine this model “from the point of view of reproduction,” especially in terms of the reproduction, which requires not only “a reproduction of its skills, but also at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression”(8).

Althusser argues that according to this orthodox Marxist notion, in this base-superstructure model of society, the reproduction of the relations of production is secured, for the most part, by the legal-political and ideological superstructure. However, he insists that we should go beyond this simplistic

model of social structure, and he suggests that the reproduction of the relations of production is secured, for the most part, "by the exercise of State power in the State Apparatus"(22). Here, he introduces the new concept of the State Apparatus, that is, the Repressive State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatuses. The Repressive State Apparatus is reminiscent of the Marxist notion of the State, which "functions by violence" (17). Such an Apparatus can be found, for instance, in the Government, the Army, or the Police, belonging to the public domain, and thus, is always singular. On the other hand, the Ideological State Apparatuses "function by ideology"(19), the most of which belong to the private domain, such as the systems of religious organizations, the systems of educational institutions, or the systems within families. For Althusser, all these Ideological State Apparatuses "contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production"(28). Therefore, they present themselves by means of making an individual a subject of ideology who submits himself to the established order of society.

Thus, in Althusser's notion of subjectivity, it is through ideology that an individual becomes a subject. However, his definition of ideology distinguishes him from orthodox Marxists. For Althusser, ideology is not simply a matter of systems of ideas being imposed on an individual by the ruling class or "false consciousness," which makes an individual believe that there is no paradox between the interests of the working class and of the dominant class. Ideology, according to Althusser, is like the "unconscious," having no history and existing eternally, and it is not altogether negative, as in the Marxist notion of ideology, insofar as it provides an individual with "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (36). Ideology, he goes on, "interpellates" the individual as subject. The famous example of this interpellation is the

policeman's hailing "Hey, you there!" and an individual's recognition that it is he who is being hailed. Through this "mere one-hundred-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*" (48). Furthermore, Althusser explains that "there is no ideology except by the subject and for the subject. Meaning, there is no ideology except for concrete subjects, and this destination for ideology is only made possible by the subject and its functioning" (44). In this way, Althusser continues to say that "you and I are always already subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects" (47). Interestingly, Althusser's account of subjectivity recalls the Lacanian notion of the subject as an individual who is subjected to the law (the name of the father) upon entering the Symbolic stage through the acquisition of language, which enables him to distinguish himself from others — "I" from "you" — and thus to acquire his identity. In short, while ideology forms the life of an individual, making him a subject, it also provides the only means for him to perceive the reality he lives in — a means for him to make his existence intelligible.

The way in which Michel Foucault analyzes subjectivity presents a different approach from that of Althusser in that, while Althusser seems to attempt to create a universal theory of subjecthood in which power is assumed to come from a single inevitable source, Foucault rejects a deterministic structural analysis and avoids the psychoanalytic approach. Foucault, instead, tries to reveal the different techniques of power, which make themselves defused as well as natural so as to be effective in the creation of the subject. He suggests that the power which is exercised on the body of an individual should be "conceived not as a property, but as a strategy," and he continues that:

Its effects of domination are attributed not to 'appropriation,' but to dispositions, maneuvers, tactics, techniques, functioning; that one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess; that one should take as its model a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory. (*Discipline & Punish* 26)

Nevertheless, Foucault shares much with Althusser, especially in his notion of the reciprocal relationship between power and the individual; that is, for him power not only subjugates an individual but also affirms the individual's own being. In other words, it is power that creates an individual in the first place. He explains that it is through the subjugation by power that the body of the individual becomes a socially "useful force." In this way, "this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or prohibition on those who 'do not have it'; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them"(27). To illustrate his notion of power, Foucault studies local and specific tactics of power operations through which an individual being is naturally and inevitably caught up in the micro-network of power relations.

In *Discipline & Punish*, Foucault approaches the concept of subjectivity through a genealogical analysis of judicial practices. He suggests that there have been three modes of power developed since the eighteenth-century: the absolutist, the rationalist, and the disciplinary. The absolutist mode depended on theatrical executions, in which a criminal, whose illegal act was always conceived of as an offense against the king, was punished through public physical tortures so that the rest of the society would recognize the absolute power of the sovereign. However, under the influence of reformers, this torturous aspect of punishment eventually disappeared, and the mode of rationalist power came to be exercised as a more "humane" way. At this

point, the question was no longer simply “who committed it” but: “How can we assign the causal process that produced it? Where did it originate in the author himself? Instinct, unconscious, environment, hereditary?” The work of the judge became “judging something other than crimes, namely, the ‘soul’ of the criminal”(19). In this shift, “knowledge” came to play a major role within the penal system; that is, “knowledge of the offence, knowledge of the offender, knowledge of the law,” which made it possible to create “truth” within the power operation, according to which a criminal was examined not only by “what they do” but also by “what they are”(18). In this mode of power, a criminal became a “sign” of illegality or abnormality, whose circulation in society reinforces the idea of justice under the law.

The operation of the disciplinary mode of power depends on the knowledge of human beings, which is based on “truth” developed within the penal system. Its concern is no longer with how to punish a criminal or how to define him, but with how to produce “a productive body and a subjugated body” out of him(26). Foucault argues that this mechanism of power also operates within various social institutions, which echoes Althusser’s notion of the Ideological State Apparatus. One such institution is the military, in which a soldier is controlled and trained on his military performance in a microscopic way — how he is supposed to walk and how he is supposed to hold a rifle as an ideal soldier. Another example is the school, especially its system of examinations, in that a student is taught in order to meet “the norm” created by the pedagogical system so as to become a good student. Foucault argues that this technique of power also operates in a more subtle and effective way. Here, he introduces Bentham’s notion of Panopticon, the special architectural design which allows for a controlling tower to be placed in the center of a prison to observe the inside of each

room of the surrounding buildings without making itself visible. The significance of this mechanism is that this controlling tower can supervise the inmate without imposing on him direct force; it is “to induce in the inmate a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power”(201). Therefore, it creates and sustains “a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmate should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers”(201). Foucault argues that modern society shares these features of the panopticon insofar as it is through one’s own consciousness that one is constantly and permanently observed and controlled, thereby becoming a subject of his own.

In examining the discourse of sexuality, Foucault elaborates this account of the mechanisms of disciplinary power, the notion of a subject through the self-application of power. In *The History of Sexuality*, he argues that the repressive model of sexuality of the Victorian regime, in which sex was considered to be something hidden, thus associated with a sense of guilt, a sin, has created the discourse of sexuality, in which “power and knowledge are joined together”(100). Under this discourse, power operates as a confessional model in which one feels compelled to talk about his own sexuality. Foucault suggests that this mode of power not only proliferates the knowledge of human sexuality, but also produces “truth” — sex comes to be understood as the essence of one’s being. Thus, Foucault explains that “it is through sex - in fact, an imaginary point determined by the deployment of sexuality - that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility (seeing that it is both the hidden aspect and the generative principle of meaning), to the whole of his body”— to his identity (155). In this way, he suggests that “homosexual becomes a personage”(43). Moreover, because of the medical intervention

which associates certain illnesses with abnormal sexuality, and the political intervention which is concerned with the control of population, this discourse comes to present itself as “bio-power,” creating “the norm” of sexuality so as to confirm that society maintains its functioning operations. Thus, Foucault suggests that the discourse of sexuality shares characteristics with the mode of disciplinary power in that an individual is made to feel compelled to talk about his sexuality and is constantly controlled and regulated according to his sexuality. In short, it is through one’s consciousness, that is, self-application of power, that one regulates one’s sexuality, thus creating an identity.

Although Judith Butler’s account of subjectivity is confined to the discussion of gender identity, she develops her argument along the lines of those of Althusser and Foucault in that she reworks their accounts of subjectivity by combining their approaches despite the differences they present. As in Foucault’s account of subjectivity, Butler presupposes that insofar as “gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts,” it is “impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersection in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (*Gender Trouble* 3). Much as Foucault argues against the repressive model of sex, which has created the discourse of sexuality, Butler, by examining the contemporary discourse of feminism, argues against the expressive model that the discourse is problematically caught up in. In this model, some feminist theories assume that there is a silent substance within a woman which is repressed, and thus not recognized, within a patriarchal social system. By invoking Foucault’s account of the discourse of sexuality, Butler argues that feminist discourse creates the object of its investigation; that is to say, despite its effort to undo the patriarchal social system in which women are subjugated, by making theories about women, the

discourse itself has ironically created the universal category of “woman” to which all women come to be subjected. Thus, she suggests that insofar as there “is no gender identity behind the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”(25), the “feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing concept of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism”(13).

Butler particularly opposes the distinction between sex and gender that feminist theories presuppose; that is, that sex is fundamentally a biological principle, whereas gender is a reflection of social norms. For Butler, this distinction is inappropriate insofar as it is based on the faulty Cartesian notion of the duality between mind and body in which mind is assumed to possess certain prestigious freedom over body. At this point in her argument, she reworks Foucault’s account of the discourse of sexuality by suggesting that sex is also culturally constructed, not “‘a cause’ of sexual experience, behavior and desire,” but rather “‘an effect,’ the production of a given regime of sexuality that seeks to regulate sexual experience by instating the discreet categories of sex as foundational and causal functions within any discursive account of sexuality”(23). By taking this notion of the arbitrary relationship between “cause” and “effect” into account, she argues that it is the gendered body that the social and cultural discursive practices seek to regulate and control, and thereby turn into a subject. Here, she introduces her notion of gender as performance by suggesting that gender identity is “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being”(33). She explains as follows:

Gender ought not to be constructed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition*

of acts. 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”(140).

Referring to Nietzsche’s claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that “there is no ‘being’ behind the doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed — the deed is everything,” Butler argues that there “is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results”(25). In short, she argues that it is not a doer who determines the deed, but it is the deed, one’s performance, which constructs the doer.

Butler’s notion of gender identity as performance shares a fundamental assumption with Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power insofar as both argue that it is the body onto which external power is applied in order to control an individual and to create a subject out of him — the body becomes an inscription of power which is always open to resignification. However, Butler’s notion of a parodic repetitive act makes her notion of subjectivity distinct; that is, while Foucault’s account of disciplinary power seems not to leave any room for resistance because of his notion of a special technique of power through which one becomes a subject by self-application of power, Butler’s notion of gender as performance, which is reinforced by her discussion of “drag” performers, presents itself as a mode of resistance. By examining the ambiguity of “drag” performance, she argues that the discontinuity between the gender identity of “drag” performers and the gender identity that they perform exposes the constructed nature of gender identity so that “in the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of performance which avows their

distinctness and dramatized the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity”(138). Furthermore, with this assumption, she reworks Althusser’s notion of the interpellated subject by directing our attention to “bad subjects” who might refuse to recognize the interpellation of the law. What Butler suggests is that Althusser’s notion does not allow for the possibility that the refusal could be the very production of the law itself. Thus, she suggests that the interpellation is not formative, but rather “performative,” and the question here is not whether one can escape from the law, but how one performs within this law so as to redefine and reshape its effects.

By reworking Foucault’s and Althusser’s notions of subjectivity, it seems that Butler’s notion of performance can go beyond the discussion of gender identity; that is, it can be conceived as a mode of resistance against the discursive practices to which we all are subjected - whether it is ideology, disciplinary power, or the discourse of sexuality. However, it seems necessary to emphasize that this mode of resistance does not present a way out; it merely exposes the strategies of social and cultural discourses which present themselves as natural so as to weaken it. Thus, Butler suggests that “drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes” (*Bodies That Matter* 125). In this way, she argues that the film “*Paris Is Burning* documents neither an efficacious insurrection nor painful resubordination, but unstable coexistence of both” (137). In the drag balls, “realness” is the underlying major principle by which the performers are judged. The juxtaposition of the “realness” that they perform and the scenes from the real life of ordinary people that the film presents makes us wonder whether we can make any distinctions between these realities. In other words, seeing the

competition as performativity of “the norm,” which is implicated in reality, we are given a sense that that is what we are left with in talking about the “self.” In this way, the feeling of “I want to be somebody. I am somebody” no longer echoes away from us.

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