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Postmodern Metamorphosis: Deformation, Performativity, Capitalism, and History, Part 2*

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The postmodern deformation of the subject has much to do with what Oedipa describes as the “chances” of some other thing “happening” — this means, parenthetically, that it has also to do with what we may tentatively call a “cultural figure-ground reversal,” which we will be discussing later — and it has nothing to do with Jameson’s “having to happen.” Here we must have recourse to examples outside literature and practices in the field of photographic performance, mainly because of the need to demonstrate that this deformation (and the reversal) *does* happen there. Cindy Sherman, on the one hand, in her series of photographic self-portraits entitled *Untitled Film Stills*, repeatedly transforms herself in a characteristically postmodern schizophrenic fashion into versions of, to borrow Arthur C. Danto’s phrase, “The Girl” (10), by self-consciously putting on those fetishized images of Hollywood and New Wave heroines which form an important part of our contemporary collective unconscious.¹ Jo Spence, on the other hand, in her self-portrait called *Exiled* exposes her own aging, ugly body, including its disfigured breast because of lumpectomy, with a text “MONSTER” inscribed upon it, in an attempt to reappropriate and reclaim that body which has become an object of the male-dominant medical discourse.

It is here that the link between performance and the type of utterance which J. L. Austin has defined as the performative ceases to be a mere pun or a not-so interesting example of

metonymic contiguity; and it is also here that the relationship between the postmodern deformation of the subject and the performative becomes manifest. Indeed, what makes Sherman's and Spence's self-portraits "performances" should be located in the fact that they are *implicit* performatives or photographic equivalents for the *explicit* performatives, "I name myself The Girl," in Sherman's case, and "I hereby declare myself a monster," in Spence's. Moreover, it should not go unremarked either that the aesthetic force of their nonverbal acts of naming and declaring derives less from their originality than from their parasitism; their performative "utterances" are repetitions and citations, made possible by their artistic medium, the camera, of the verbally self-effacing patriarchal imperatives/interpellations — "Hey, you there! I name you The Girl" and "Yes, you! I hereby declare you monstrous" (it is these "performative interpellations" that link Austin with Althusser) — that they keep encountering in the world as a normal course of events.

On the most basic level, it seems self-evident that their acts of self-consciously repeating the very patriarchal mechanism of interpellating and naming, as well as the resultant self-confinement in what Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Guber called the ineluctable "angel/monster double bind" (36), are morbidly self-destructive, since they are subversive of their own identities as real individuals; Sherman and Spence seem deeply intent on repudiating and disowning their own "social character," to return to Marx, and perpetuating their primary status as male images through these self-disruptive performances. Nevertheless, their apparent skepticism toward the possibility of escape, their self-imprisonment not only in the stereotypical images of femininity but also in such a dark chamber as the *camera obscura*, or what amounts to the same thing, their "claustrophilic" art of what we may call "triple

binding" – all these paradoxical and suicidal features seem indicative of something positive in them, which, I would say, is their necromantic desire to speak to their own already dead selves. This addressing is accomplished in their photographs; but the point is that this accomplishment is achieved by making an impossible attempt – a redundant and therefore excessive *essay* – *to put to death once again the already dead individuals, namely, themselves*, in the totality of their photographic performances. And importantly, this essay, a grotesque inversion of the rhetorical figure of prosopopoeia, is at the same time an attempt to repeat and restage the process of subject-formation – or more succinctly, to "re-form" themselves.

But their photographic performances have even graver implications, and they are closely related, to use the word with which Foucault concluded "What Is an Author?" to the "indifference" (138) to the gender differentiation and the space where that indifference can happen, as well as to the link between repetition – or the "general iterability," as Derrida puts it (325) – and alterity.² On the one hand, their restaging or citation requires them to speak the very patriarchal language of the male interpellant; this means that in the process they become the represented object and the representing agent simultaneously, and hence both female and male at once. In this respect, their photographic performance is not so much feminist as postfeminist in that it produces, by virtue of their mastery over repetition, androgynous individuals who embrace internal conflict, not neutral androgynes like those Virginia Woolf envisioned. Moreover, if the medium at issue, the camera, is basically a technological and therefore phallic extension to the male body, their reappropriation of it necessarily makes them self-warring hermaphrodites. Thus their photographic performances, or more

precisely, what Austin would have called their “primary” utterances (69), are also reducible to another explicit performative, “I declare myself a man,” which in effect constitutes a scandalous declaration of a difference — women simulating men — and an indifference: “What difference does it make which gender I belong to?”³ It is because this declaration gives birth to an event and an accident — such elusive, anomalous, and “agendered” subjects as their *deformed* figures — that the postfeminism of Sherman and Spence must be designated postmodern; and it is also postmodern because in that process it provokes a question (mark): “Is it really happening?”⁴

On the other hand, if we turn our attention to the conditions for the “happiness” or felicity of this declaration, we immediately find that what Sherman and Spence in reality do with their photographic images is not only to give birth to these malformed subjects but, true to Derrida again, to engender or make happen a new space or context — photographic self-portrait, or performance art — in which these mutations, errors, and indifferent beings are permitted to exist.⁵ What is particularly relevant here is Austin’s conception of “appropriate circumstances” in which saying something counts as doing something. (Indeed, a general shift of focus is required in the field of theory and criticism, I would insist, so that more importance is given not to the performative utterance proper but rather to its relationship with its immediate context.) Austin says:

Speaking generally, it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether “physical” or “mental” actions or even acts of uttering further

words. Thus, for naming the ship, it is essential that I should be the person appointed to name her, for (Christian) marrying, it is essential that I should not be already married with a wife living, sane and undivorced, and so on: for a bet to have been made, it is generally necessary for the offer of the bet to have been accepted by a taker (who must have done something, such as to say "Done"), and it is hardly a gift if I say "I give it you" but never hand it over. (8-9)

All we need to do is reverse this formulation and say: if an unprecedented performative, which is therefore most likely to be considered accidental and even erroneous, has somehow been uttered successfully or "happily," this *necessarily* means that we *must* suppose the existence of an accompanying set of new appropriate circumstances, a new context, a new convention – but at the same time a new ideology even – totally *other* than any preexisting total context. It follows that this new space – a *postmodern* space which abounds with its own "native" postmodern deformed subjects – appears to the inhabitants of the older ones as a totally different and indifferent, hence absurdly *ec-centric*, space which threatens to undermine the valuable "-centrism" that their already established rules are meant to reinforce. It is precisely in this way that Sherman and Spence effect a cultural figure-ground reversal, reducing the formerly spotlighted "figure-world" to a mere foil.

A postmodern metamorphosis as it relates to the deformation of the subject happens, therefore, when an already "dead" individual subject *essays* to repeat the very ideological process of subject-formation in order to refashion or "re-form" him- or herself and thereby accidentally though self-consciously give birth to *both* an erroneous event-subject *and* a new space in which it can happen.

To return to Oedipa and her sense of history, it is precisely

what she describes as the “chances” of something other “happening” itself that exemplifies the historicity of this postmodern subject-deformation. But if we duly underscore the terms “chances” and “happening” in her remark, not the “other,” then we find that this historicity is not only what one can depend on when he or she sets out to remake his or her body, but also what one was born with. Hence the following conversation with Sherman:

NF [Noriko Fuku, the interviewer]: In an interview from around 1985, you said, “If I had not been born at this time and place, I would not have been able to use this form of expression, and if I had been a man I could not have created work based on my own experience in this way.” Could you tell us more about “this time and place,” and why being a woman enables you to create this work?

CS: I was referring to being aware of everything going on in the media, which is really what has most influenced the work. If I’d been raised in Africa, I would have had a totally different set of cultural stimuli. And some people say my art is very American – although the Film Stills, I think, are influenced more by European films than American films.

Even though I’ve never actively thought of my work as feminist or as a political statement, certainly everything in it was drawn from my observations as a woman in this culture. And a part of that is a love-hate thing – being infatuated with make-up and glamour and detesting it at the same time. It comes from trying to look like a proper young lady or look as sexy or as beautiful as you can make yourself, and also feeling like a prisoner of that structure. That’s certainly something I don’t think men would relate to. (Sherman 163)

“How has it ever happened, this American woman, this ‘me,’ with the chances once so good of my becoming, say, an

African woman, an African man, or an American man?" It is this almost Nietzschean sense of contingency and groundlessness in the face of the singularity of one's existence — "I happen to *be* the way I am" — that at the deepest level makes Sherman's art what it is. But this singularity is by no means mysterious nor even religious but rather discouragingly ideological, and it is again Althusser and especially his notion of interpellation that is extremely pertinent here: since every interpellation is an asymmetric or "one-way" process, an encounter with it always-already appears to the interpellated subject as a coincidence, a contingency, an "event." It is this primary historicity of ideological interpellation that is prior to and makes possible the simulated historicity of the postmodern deformation (note that this observation does not contradict Althusser's proposition that "ideology has no history" [159]); indeed, our second type of metamorphosis is not only an attempt to create contingencies but also to reactivate one's innate contingencies — it is a self-conscious attempt to approximate a contingency.

I can give two literary examples of this second metamorphosis, which have not usually been explicitly associated either with deformation or with postmodernism. The first one is those nineteenth-century women writers who, to borrow Gilbert and Guber's key phrase, "attempted the pen." Genealogically speaking, this "attempt" is not only feminist but also postfeminist and, above all, markedly postmodern, since, if the "pen" is a masculine technology and above all a "metaphorical penis" as they argue (Gilbert and Guber 3), then their "attempt" in effect constitutes a literary equivalent for the explicit performative, "I declare myself a man," just as Sherman's and Spence's performances are photographic equivalents for the same utterance. Hence swarms of hermaphroditic subjects,

“freaks,” “monsters.” In retrospect, therefore, the alternative female tradition Gilbert and Guber and other feminists like Elaine Showalter have excavated — “a literature and a culture of their own,” as they say (xii) — cannot be anything but a postmodern eccentric space.

By the same token, a rethinking of Chinua Achebe’s postcolonial reading of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* seems urgently required so that we can deal more adequately with the novella’s postmodernity. According to Achebe, what worries Conrad is “not the differentness [between the River Congo and the Thames, which are metonyms for Africans and Europeans respectively] . . . but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry” (263); thus he insists that Conrad’s racist attitude is most pronounced in the passage, “what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity — like yours — the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly” (Achebe 264; Conrad 69). From our perspective, however, it is precisely this “ugliness” that makes these “prehistoric” black men — who appear to be saying, despite their “bestiality” and deformity, “We declare ourselves human beings, your ‘kith and kin,’” but at the same time also appear to be defiantly talking back, “What difference does it make whether we are men or beasts?” — paradigmatic “postmodern” subjects living in another genuine postmodern space, the Dark Continent.⁶

I hasten to add, however, that this postcolonial example may be seriously misleading if we are not careful about the link between the postmodern deformation and self-consciousness. For the postmodern self-deforming subject’s essay to remake its own body, or its endeavor to approximate a contingency, can only be a self-conscious attempt; this is exactly the reason that both Lyotard and Foucault associate postmodernism/modernity

with art. It is this self-consciousness, however, that is entirely absent from Conrad's Africans. To put this another way, they lack agency, which I define as the individual subject's capacity for such a self-conscious attempt to deform oneself, an attempt that often takes the form of an oxymoron, a paranoid attempt to transform oneself into a schizophrenic.⁷ Moreover, as long as our notion of human agency embraces forms of schizophrenia, the personality or "identity" of such a subject is necessarily discontinuous and fragmentary.⁸ In light of all this, the postmodern self-deforming subject emerges primarily as an agent, or better still, a *critic* who, knowing that his or her identity is always-already ideologically constructed, uses his or her own local identity crisis as a material means of bringing social system as a whole to a crisis.

But ironically, this critical moment that does evidence the actuality of resistance coincides with Jameson's "moment of truth" of postmodernism, since the self-deformed subject thus given birth to is so easily co-opted by capitalism, "re-formed" as a capitalist subject, and falls prey to its dynamic rhythm of commodity production. Or if this is not the case, then it is only that its *salto mortale* just proves fatal, contributing only toward making it excluded, invisible, hence nonexistent. It is exactly this latter group of unsuccessful leapers that Deleuze and Guattari wanted to foreground when they introduced the notion of "sick schizos," those "mad" subjects rescued, however, at least from oblivion:

Our society produces schizos the same way it produces Prell shampoo or Ford cars, the only difference being that the schizos are not salable. How then does one explain the fact that capitalist production is constantly arresting the schizophrenic process and transforming the subject of the process into a confined clinical entity, as though it saw in

this process the image of its own death coming from within? Why does it make the schizophrenic into a sick person – not only nominally but in reality? Why does it confine its madmen and madwomen instead of seeing in them its own heros [sic] and heroines, its own fulfillment? And where it can no longer recognize the figure of a simple illness, why does it keep its artists and even its scientists under such close surveillance – as though they risked unleashing flows that would be dangerous for capitalist production and charged with a revolutionary potential, so long as these flows are not co-opted or absorbed by the laws of the market? Why does it form in turn a gigantic machine for social repression-psychic repression, aimed at what nevertheless constitutes its own reality – the decoded flows? (Deleuze and Guattari 245)

But Deleuze and Guattari's powerful articulation to the contrary, we are quite familiar with “salable” schizophrenics, the examples being Sherman and Spence. Indeed, it is only after, first, the institutional process of definition – Althusser's cultural ISA includes “the Arts” (Althusser 143) – and the capitalist processes of “re-formation” and the extraction of surplus value are completed, and then their hard-won “eventness” is thus dealt with and they themselves are turned into “fashionably sick schizos,” that is, it is only *post festum*, that the otherwise perpetually nameless postmodern space they have engendered – “photographic self-portrait,” “performance art” – comes to be known as such. And significantly, this co-optative process of institutionalization or, to borrow again the phrase Achebe employed in characterizing Conrad's racist attitude, of “keeping something in place” (Achebe 264), is marked not by direct confinement but by its generosity. Hence the appropriateness of Deleuze and Guattari's idiosyncratic use of spatial terms “deterritorialization” and “reterritorialization” in describing not the “coding” but the “axiomatizing” function of money.

It is the totalizing power of this capitalist process of co-optation, which makes even such critically self-deforming agents as Sherman and Spence formally indistinguishable from commodities like "Prell shampoo" and "Ford cars," that finally enables us to realize the full implications of Marx's *salto mortale*. Indeed, what Marx referred to was the fatal leap of the *commodity* itself, when it is involved in its first metamorphosis or sale. Accordingly, in capitalism this leap proves doubly fatal: if it is fatal in Marx's sense, the "former commodity-to-be," to appropriate Althusser's way of designating the unborn child, can never become a commodity, can never be born and visible in the first place, and therefore can never find its place in a capitalist system (though it can become irrecoverably "sick"); but if its leap is successful, this only means that it has undergone the leveling process of commodification, which constitutes the capitalist counterpart to the ideological process of subject-formation. It follows that if social reality, including postmodern self-refashioning agents, is totally commodified, what awaits them cannot be anything but either co-optation or nonexistence — that is, what awaits them is *either death or death*.

I would argue that, if the moment of truth of postmodernism comes in the form of this inability to escape from the capitalist double bind, the key to surviving it can be found in a temporality totally other than the schizophrenic's "perpetual present" that Jameson deems the authentic postmodern mode of relating to time ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 119), a temporality that is still less compatible with Deleuze and Guattari's spatial approach to the logic of late capitalism. This alternative temporality is the paranoid's durability — paranoia, unlike schizophrenia, is not characterized by breakdowns — and it is his or her excessive, and almost solipsistic,

self-consciousness indispensable to this durability that enables the already (re-)formed agent to deform him- or herself over and again, that is, to metamorphose into another new form *ad infinitum*. We must count this duration as one of the defining features of the agency of the postmodern self-deforming subject. Furthermore, we must add that this agency is inseparable from the Kantian theme of the sublime: the masochistic sentiment in which pleasure derives from pain, which, in other words, is a contradictory sentiment caused by the conflict between one's faculty to conceive of something and his or her faculty to present that something.⁹ For on the one hand, the self-disfiguring paranoid, by virtue of his or her chronic capability for metamorphosis, inevitably appears to others as a sort of plastic subject whose impending another transformation is expected, the exact form of which, however, is both unpresentable and unpredictable (since it has all the characteristics of an accident). On the other hand, his or her sentiment embraces neither disconnection nor discontinuity but a contradictory combination of pleasure and pain: the pain that his or her attempt to criticize society should be made at the cost of his or her identity, but the pleasure that it is this very pain that should give him or her the power to critique. This postmodern sublime subject, accordingly, has no alternative but to become an ascetic who substitutes agency for the pleasure of an identity.

*This is a sequel to my essay, "Postmodern Metamorphosis: Deformation, Performativity, Capitalism, and History," in *Essays Presented to Professor Haruhiko Fujii on the Occasion of His Retirement from Osaka University* (forthcoming).

Notes

1. Her self-deforming tendencies are becoming increasingly explicit as her career progresses, and they are especially pronounced in *Disasters*, *Fairy Tales*, *Civil War*, and *Sex Pictures*. (I am indebted to the critic Rosalind Krauss for these titles and the grouping of her works. See Krauss, *Cindy Sherman 1975-1993*.)
2. Drawing in his characteristic fashion on etymology, Derrida observes that “*iter*, once again, comes from *itara*, *other* in Sanskrit” (315).
3. This declaration also raises the problem of the “rhetorical question.” On its close connection with deconstruction, see Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (9-12). Suffice it to say here that their rhetorical question engenders the following tension between its literal and figurative meanings, hence an indifference: while the male interlocutor, taking it literally, is urged to reply, “It makes all the difference,” they have the power to dodge and say, “I just meant it figuratively — that is, *I don’t give a damn what the difference is.*”
4. “The event happens as a question mark ‘before’ happening as a question,” Lyotard writes in “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde.” He goes on to suggest that “*It happens* is rather ‘in the first place’ *is it happening, is this it, is it possible?*” (197).
5. On the production of new contexts, see Derrida (320).
6. On the link between bestiality and the “cyborg,” see Haraway (152). Also note Deleuze and Guattari’s attribution of revolutionary potential to both bestiality and negritude; quoting Rimbaud, they say: “No, I am not of your kind, I am the outsider and the deterritorialized, ‘I am of a race inferior for all eternity.... I am a beast, a Negro’” (105).
7. My formulation of “agency” must be distinguished, therefore, from Paul Smith’s definition of the “human agent” in which self-consciousness plays no part. See Smith (xxxv).
8. I insist on this point despite feminists like Nancy Miller, who once urged us to forget Barthes in order to save identity: “So why remember Barthes, if this model of reading and writing by definition excludes the question of an identity crucial to feminist critical theory?” (22).
9. But Lyotard does not forget to point out that “[t]here is something of the sublime in capitalist economy” (“The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” 209). On the relationship between the sublime and masochism, see Lyotard, “Answering” (77), and Nick Mansfield, *Masochism: The Art of Power* (23-32).

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