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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/15653/gender/v04/GCB-04

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The Power of Objectification:  
Consuming the Feminine

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Starting with the separation between subject and object, this paper attempts to present issues that have to be articulated before a discourse on the power of objectification can be launched. The difficulties with the modern categories of self, individual, and subject are brought to attention, and the centrality of the construct of desire is claimed.

INTRODUCTION

I have been wanting to write a paper on "the power of objectification" for quite some time now, having thought about this issue and, in my mind, having come to some conclusions. My interest in the topic was initiated, if there ever is a single point of initiation, with the dawning of the recognition that the modern categorizations of subject-object, producer-consumer, masculine-feminine contained many paradoxical, seemingly incompatible aspects. It happened that the subject was often the object, and the object often ruled -- acting upon the subject -- and the consumer became the consumed while the producer was (often) the consumer (Fırat 1994). In the end, the separations and categorizations did not make much sense, and were indefensible. Yet, our modern history is so much built upon these construct(ion)s.

My curiosity was especially excited by the idea that objects held much power over human beings as they became "objects of desire," and that, therefore, being or becoming an object meant a claim to power, to control. There were, and are still, examples of this, especially in show business. Actors, musicians, celebrities who are objectified and become objects of desire, idolized, seductive, and marketed, hold much power over others. Yet, the stories of two such examples, the actor Marilyn Monroe and the musician Madonna, do represent some major differences. It seemed that who was objectified, who objectified, and other similar issues needed discussion, but that this was a possible project to undertake. Thinking that I had some potential answers to provide in this vein, I sent the following abstract to this conference:

"It is probably no longer necessary to discuss the feminization of consumption and the objectification of the feminine. These are issues that have already been given quite a bit of attention in varied disciplines. Of course, the cycle of the three (consumption-feminine-object) is completed by the fact that what is consumed, the item of consumption, is an object, while the consumer has generally been presumed to be a subject (in the grammatical sense of "the one who acts" -- upon objects). In this framing of things, the control is to be in the hands of the subject, the consumer, whose purposes are to be served by the objects. The object is the servant, in a servile capacity.

We also know that such conceptualization of human affairs is under increasing questioning. Many scholars, including Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Galbraith, and Jameson among others, have come to the conclusion that objects produced to serve consumer needs often end up in..."
control, influencing and directing human lives. These objects and their relations to each other tend to define some of the more significant human goals or ends: success, happiness, achievement. As such, these objects become "objects of desire," causing consumers to be seduced by, seek, wish for, and lust after them. Having some of these objects becomes the goal of life at times, or can define the "American Dream:" owning a certain (kind of) house or an automobile, for example.

In a patriarchal culture, the feminine, embodied in the female, also became the object of desire; objectified, to be owned, consumed, and controlled. Yet, objectified and an object of desire, she also must have caused those by whom she was desired to yield to her control, as do other objects of desire. This, at least, seems to be Baudrillard's position. The object of desire has the power to seduce, and this power of seduction is the power to have control.

Yet, we know from now voluminous studies that the patriarchal culture was defined by the power of the masculine, the male, over the female. Men, powerful men, owned and used women, held them under their control, and many times oppressed and abused them. Women suffered from such oppression and their lives were determined by men who controlled their destinies.

Clearly, it is not possible to equate women in a patriarchal culture completely with other objects. However, there are similarities due to the fact that they share the status of object. We know that many men, sometimes powerful men, have been destroyed or have become desolate by their desire (love?) for a woman in patriarchal western culture(s). We also know of cases where women have held much power over men with whom they associated. Where did this power come from? Was it the power of objectification? How and when did relationships of equal power develop between a man and a woman? How much does an understanding of relationships between one man and one woman contribute to our understanding of relations between men and women in general?

The brief discussion above and the questions certainly demonstrate the complexity of the relationships between gender and consumption, a complexity that is often unduly simplified for the sake of research or arguments. The purpose of this paper is to recognize the major factors that contribute to this complexity and, specifically, to interrogate the power of objectification."

My main argument is going to be that while objectification does provide power, that is, that the object of desire has, indeed, claim to power, this claim to power lies not with the object but with that which controls the process of objectification. Power, that is, is not constituted in the end result but in the process. The question is, then, how does the process of objectification happen, and when and how does the "object of desire" take shape?

SUBJECT-OBJECT ISSUES

As I try to grapple with these issues, however, they seem to become more complex. Consider, for example, the distinction of object and subject. Relating to the human being, there would probably not be much argument that our bodies are objects. If we were to define an object as an entity (anything) that can fill a void -- or any entity that will leave a void if removed, however momentary -- our bodies are surely objects. The distinction between the subject and the object lies in the argument -- the origins of which may well be
in the Cartesian meditations, and related to the separation of mind (soul) and body as Ricoeur articulates (Ricoeur 1992, pp. 5-11) -- that this human body is a vessel for the cogito. It is the cogito that enables the body to act as an agent of its own independent will and power. It is the existence of this ability that constitutes the subject.

A further necessity of subject-hood is the recognition of the subject self, which requires the cognition that one exists ("cogito ergo sum"). In short, then, that which has this cognition possesses the ability to be a subject, while that which can only be recognized -- but cannot re(cognize) -- is the object. That is, the subject lies in the mind (cogito), the body is the vessel object to carry the mind. But, more important, objects are things that often lack life, or if alive lack a mind, upon which the subject acts for her/his purposes.

We are aware of the difficulties with the separation of the mind and the body, both philosophically and in terms of more recent medical findings (Giddens 1991). For our purposes, this reflects onto the separation between the subject and the object, maybe signalling their inseparability. After all, within our world, no subject exists without object. That is, to exist, the human subject of mind needs the body -- the object. Every subject is, thus, simultaneously an object. Every moment that we act upon our bodies -- putting fluids into it, or cutting our nails -- we certify its object-ness. The subject that has the will acts upon the object! But where does the subject, the cogito, acquire the will to act? Is it not the encounter with the object that gives it this will? Is it therefore not the object that is acting on the subject? It seems that the only separation between the object and the subject is made possible by momentary perspectives -- that is, the separation is only in the perspective. And, the only one who can recognize the separation(s) is the one who can have a perspective.

What I am trying to say is, maybe, that in our investigations we need to abandon the idea of "steady" subjects and objects, and adopt the idea of "momentary" subjects and objects. In every moment of our lives we are a subject-object. Our investigations may provide rich insights if we explore the continual tension between these two modalities of our existence rather than insist that there are subjects and there are objects.

Can we say, then, that the subject is the one who recognizes oneself and her/his ability to act independent of the other? What happens, however, when the subject is "moved" by his/her desire for the object (the other)? What happens, that is, when the independence of the act is in question? Furthermore, what happens, what happens, when one acts on the basis of one's "desire to be desired or possessed by the Other as the object of the Other's jouissance" (passive anaclitic desire) (Bracher 1993, p. 21)?

A way to satisfy passive anaclitic desire is, clearly, to objectify oneself in order to have the power to incite other's desire. That is, one way to lay claim to power is to take control of the construction of the other's desire -- by constructing oneself as the/an object of desire.

**DESIRE AND SELF**

In order to continue this train of thought, I want to propose a simple definition of desire -- largely by simplifying Lacan. This definition is going to be related to the definition of the object -- maybe indicating the inevitable connection between the two. I defined an object as an entity that filled (or, when removed, left) a void. What, then, is a void? It is space (or, time-space continua) that does not contain any recognizable (perceivable) existence. When such a void is perceived or felt, it constitutes a lack. Lack is the reason for desire. Any
entity or phenomenon that is considered to have a potential of removing lack -- or fulfilling desire -- is transformed into an object -- it becomes an object of desire.

My definitions of object, void, and lack may sound too physical. May we remedy this by simply asserting that space that may contain a void may be psychological space as well as physical space? I shall continue with this assertion, leaving its discussion and articulation to possible future discourse.

Following Freud's distinction between anaclitic and narcissistic libido, it is often argued that desire can take two forms: desire to be and desire to have. I think that this distinction can be simplified or removed by recognizing that desire is always a relation between an object and a subject, in the sense that whenever desire takes shape, it does so in conjunction with the constitution of an object. The image of an object must be present in order for desire to configure. How, then, can we explain the desire to be?

The answer may lie in an understanding of the formation of self identity. The term identity indicates one-ness. The cognition of the self is the recognition of being one distinct from other(s). In modern culture, while the subject recognized his/her self through the cognition of the other, as the one that is not the other(s) -- while argument goes that in premodern cultures the self was often the replication or continuation of other(s) -- the future orientation of modern culture constructed the self as one in continual construction, a project that was perpetually in the process of completion. Thus, the self is that which one desires to obtain by completing this project. In that sense, the self becomes an object one desires to have: That is the self I want to have!

The objectification of the self, especially in modern culture, is indicated further by psychoanalytic studies. For example, in trying to understand self-estrangement in and through desire, Kovel (1981, pp. 66-69) provides cases of his patients and of himself (as an exercise of self understanding). In times of feelings of elation or depression or anger, it seems, many are taken to binging behaviors. Finding reasons to give oneself a treat, because one deserves it, often leads to uncontrollable amounts of treats. The patient, in such circumstances tends to construct a self to attribute this unruly behavior to: "I was not myself." An "other" self has indulged, not my self. The indulgences often promoted and desirable in our culture can then be experienced without complete self-hatred through construction of other selves. Among the selves that enable the pursuit of desires -- surely seductive, but not completely acceptable desires -- is the self that is itself desired. In modern society, construction of "other" selves that enable indulgence with objects of desire facilitate objectification of the self in the image of the desired existence.

It is questionable that the urge to have this one desirable object-self is as strong in postmodern culture (Gergen 1991). Self identity can be more readily expressed by the metaphor of the player than by the metaphor of the pilgrim (Bauman 1996). In effect, all attainable selves that enable the pursuit of desires may be becoming equally desirable and, thus, the objectification of self increasingly more culturally acceptable.

CONTROL OF THE OBJECT-SELF

When the subject tries to attain the self because it is a desirable object, that is, when s/he is seduced by the image of an object of desire in acting to attain a self, furthermore, when the cognition of oneself is in the image of the object of desire, can it ever be argued that subject-ness exists? I do not know how clear I have been able to make this point, but given
that all action is in response objects of desire, including even the cognition of oneself, the idealized construct of the modern self -- one who is in control of her/his actions -- certainly seems suspect. What can replace, if anything, this ideal but unachievable existence? Here, I think we need to turn to the subject-object unity and (re)construct the cultural complex of individual selves, recognizing, in effect, the inseparability of the individual from the social, in other words, from the total system of objects.

Let me go back to the examples of Marilyn Monroe and Madonna. In the first instance, we may argue that they both represent objects of desire, specifically as sex objects. Yet, there are the differences. Marilyn Monroe, it seems, had little control over her object status as she seems to have had little control over her own life. As an object of desire many men -- powerful men included -- lusted after her. This lust took different forms. For many it was vicarious, actualizing itself in physical relationships with substitutes. She was seduction! It could be argued that, as a result, she had some power, allowing her to have, while she lived, access to privileges and possessions that very few can have. Something about the quality of her powers, however, made her, in the end, a plaything. We find that even in the heyday of her popularity and stardom, her life and her possessions were often controlled by others. It may seem, therefore, that she fit the image of the objectified feminine well.

Take, on the other hand, Madonna. Here we see another star/celebrity, who also commands the admirations and desires of many. She also has played the sex object image, and her sex life has been very much in the public eye. Yet, she seems to control, to a great extent, her career, her image(s), in general her life, as well as command possessions and a lifestyle that only the powerful very few can have access to. She seems to have the many qualities of the subject -- independent will, ability to act upon her environment with impact, that is, agency. In Madonna's case, transformation of (her)self into an object of desire, her seductiveness, seems to imbue her with power.

Yet, is Madonna powerful in the true sense of a subject? How much control does she really have over herself as an object? Is she constructing her object-self or is she constructing herself in the image of an object of desire that is already constructed? Could we compare her to the courtesan of the aristocratic society? The courtesan commanded quite some wealth and power over her life, accessing most of the pleasures and possessions that only a few had in her time. Yet, as an object of desire she allowed herself to be used by those she chose, as Madonna may be said to be allowing herself to be used -- if vicariously through her voice, art, photographs, etc. -- by those she chooses to please and who can afford "her." In making herself alluring to a market of tastes, how much artistic licence and control of object-self is she giving up? Does she have any control once her image of the desirable self is one of being marketable, seductive, and desired?

Who, then, has control of the object-self, who has claim to power?

DESIRE, POWER, AND THE SOCIAL

When investigating the issue of power at an individual level, it seems possible to say that no individual has claim to power, unless s/he is independent of desire, an impossibility. It is very enticing to think that the only one who may have a true subject-hood and claim to power may be the one who strives for the undesirable self. Yet, even then, the impetus to strive for the undesirable must lie in the desire to reject the social, and why would anyone have such a desire unless there are elements in the social that indicate a lack -- constituting a
desire to be different, better, or ahead of other(s)? I am, consequently, tempted to say that seeking subject-hood or power in an individual may be a futile endeavor. Both are rooted in the social, and it is momentary perspectives of an individual's placement in the social that presents the effect of having power or being a subject.

It may have been a similar insight that prompted Baudrillard to declare that seeking control over one's life is akin to death, that (excitement of) life is to be found in abandoning control to (an)other (Baudrillard 1993). The question is where the control of the other lies! Who or what ever has control?

I shall venture to say that all power may lie in the social construction of desire, that is, it is always in the moment of social encounter among subject-objects. No definition of power seems possible without the constitution of desire. Power is always access to that which is desired. Consequently, understanding power, including the power of objectification, requires an interrogation of the social (cultural) complex of significations of desire.

BEGINNINGS?

Giddens claims that "the constraints of the body ensure that all individuals, at every moment, are contextually situated in time and space (Giddens 1991, p. 187). The recognition of self, and the individual existence are also, at every moment, contextually situated in the social. This social context provides the cultural complex of significations of desire (complex of desire). I cannot in this paper articulate this complex for it requires still further discourse and discussion based on the premises of the inseparability of subject and object, and individual and social. I am willing to propose, however, that since the constitution of each individual self already assumes an anchoring to the set of desires within this complex, no individual can, as an individual, lay claim to power or subject-hood. At each moment of (re)cognition of individual self, the status of power and subject-hood may always already be predetermined by the placement of this recognized individual within the complex of desire.

For this reason, giddens is at once right, in articulating the dilemmas of the self as "unification vs. fragmentation," "powerlessness vs. appropriation," "authority vs. uncertainty," and "personalized vs. commodified experience," because these dilemmas are integrated in the modern human experience due to the modern ideologies, but also futile, because these are signified not in the constitution of the individual self but predetermined in the social. The tyranny of modern subject-hood may well be in the insistence that once a self is recognized, it has to be articulated or developed in and through the same perspective. Thus, the feminine has been imprisoned to powerlessness when multiple perspectives could and do imbue it with power that cannot otherwise be attained.

If any momentary subject-hood exists, it must be in the choice of a perspective, since once the perspective into the complex of desire is set, so is the destiny of the individual self. How and if we can enhance the choice of multiple perspectives in recognizing the self within the complex of desire may be our designed search towards freedom after modernity. Another necessity for such freedom may be the insistence on the perpetual complexity of the process rather than on attempts to reduce the complexity.
REFERENCES


