

Subjectivity and Identity

The World Wants Your Desire

Kaja Silverman

Psychoanalysis has become very popular among feminist scholars, including yourself. Sigmund Freud's analysis of dreams based on the notion of repressed desires and libidinal forces has opened an interesting path to the examination of other forms of repression, including patriarchy. Jacques Lacan's "split subject", which is a result of symbolic and language productions, radically disturbs any notion of human biological determination. While both of these psychoanalysts can help us today to understand the cultural and social construction of gender and sexuality, they belong to the most phallogocentric theories of the modern period. As Lacan would put it, the phallus is the absolute signifier. Even though you have admitted yourself that 'psychoanalysis is notoriously inhospitable to the notion of "agency"' (The Threshold of the Visible World, Routledge, 1996), you use it to examine such complex issues as the productivity of visuality. How is such a contradictory theory applied to feminist cultural studies?

Early American feminism was very hostile to psychoanalysis. Concepts like the castration complex and the Oedipus complex were seen as prejudicial to women. Somewhat later feminists, beginning with Juliet Mitchell and continuing with Laura Mulvey, Mary Anne Doane and myself, began to understand that we can only effect a partial understanding of gender without looking at the formation of the psyche. If it were possible to undo sexual difference simply by dismantling external institutions, we would have won the battle by now. The difficulties which confront us as women have their roots in desire and identification, our own, as well as those of men, but this feminist appropriation of psychoanalysis was descriptive rather than prescriptive. We didn't want to use it as a model of how things should be, but rather of how they now are. We believed that what you call a "contradictory theory" could have an invaluable

diagnostic value.

In my book, *The Acoustic Mirror* (Indiana University Press, 1988), I attempt to devise another use for psychoanalysis; to find within it the terms for theorising that within the psyche which might be said to be resistant or even antipathetic to patriarchy. My paradigm for effecting this quite different deployment of psychoanalysis is the negative Oedipus complex. I use it to conceptualise a non-phallic access to the symbolic order, a very different way into the domain of language and the law than that described by Lacan. I define the female version of the negative Oedipus complex as the organisation of both desire and identification in relation to the mother, and I contrast the affirmative form that identification here assumes with the destructive form that it assumes in the positive Oedipus complex. This opening up of the Oedipus complex also makes it possible to account for the many different forms which female subjectivity can take, and even to explain the libidinal bases of feminism.

In my next book, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (Routledge, 1992), I go further with this revisionary project, now using psychoanalysis to theorise alternative forms of masculinity to those described by Freud in his most notorious texts. I focus in this book upon kinds of male subjectivity which are situated beyond the phallic pale; those predicated upon lack, masochism, or some other form of identification with the “*feminine*”. Here, too, the negative Oedipus complex plays a central role. *The Threshold of the Visible World* represents a further step along the same path. In it, I use the writings of Jacques Lacan - along with those of Henri Wallon, Max Scheler, and Paul Schilder - to distinguish between two kinds of identification, one of which works to consolidate the ego, and hence to constitute and reinforce the boundaries separating male subjects from female, white subjects from black, heterosexual subjects from homosexual, and the other of which works to dismantle the ego, and hence to erase those same boundaries.

In recent years, however, I have come to feel constrained by the way psychoanalysis conceptualises the mother and the father. When I began seriously reading phenomenology, I realised that its critique of identification or substantialisation is an implicit critique of those categories. Psychoanalysis has a strong tendency to speak of the mother and the father as if they were stable and knowable objects, recognisable from one child to another. Instead, I now believe that what constitutes the mother or the father for a given subject is a heterogeneous host of memories. Any one of those memories can be the starting point for displacement. The parental figures are thus unstable, shifting over time and different from one subject to another. Far from representing a restrictive set of options that both heterosexualises and enforces gender divisions, the Oedipus complex opens each of us up to an infinite set of libidinal possibilities, and so to the world. Of course, most of us do not experience the Oedipus complex as an enabling and expansive structure, but that is because normative ideology works so hard and so effectively to

close down the options which this complex opens up to us.

*Much has recently been published about the crisis of art, history, civilisation, authorship, etc. In *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, you suggested that since 'our entire "world"... depends upon the alignment of phallus and penis...at those historical moments when the prototypical male subject is unable to recognise "himself" within its conjuration of masculine sufficiency our society suffers from a profound sense of "ideological fatigue".' Do we experience a certain crisis of masculinity in today's world, and if so, what consequences does this crisis have for the stability of the patriarchal regime?*

The phrase "ideological fatigue" comes from Siegfried Kracauer. When writing *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, I was fascinated by the idea that ideology can become "tired", and I wanted to look at some instances of this tiredness. I therefore focus in the second chapter of this book precisely on that category of films discussed by Kracauer, the films made in Hollywood in the wake of World War II. I argue there that these films attest to an even larger crisis of belief than Kracauer himself registers: they speak to the "fatigue" not only of American values, but also of traditional masculinity. It is therefore possible to see in them things which are not usually exposed to our view - to apprehend, for instance, that lack is as constitutive of male as it is of female subjectivity. But unfortunately, the films I discuss in the chapter on 'Male Subjectivity' do more than expose male lack; they also work to conceal it once again by inspiring in the viewer a renewed belief in the equivalence of penis and phallus, and real and symbolic father.

I thought for a long time that our own age is more radically and permanently "tired" of traditional masculinity than was American culture of the late 1940s. However, I have become more pessimistic of late. I think that the vast majority of people living in Western culture have had enough of ideological fatigue, and have either renewed their commitment to "manliness" or are searching for a way to do so. No doubt this renewal of belief is occurring once again in response to an ideological solicitation, but it also speaks both to the intractability of the human psyche, and to another kind of tiredness - to a tiredness within feminist theory itself.

I have experienced this last weariness keenly myself. Like many other American feminists, I felt for a number of years as if I simply could not go on endlessly writing about sexual difference. I longed for broader intellectual horizons. It also seemed to me as if many of the battles had been won. My circle of friends consists almost entirely of people who are not only practicing lesbian and gay men, but who also live in conscious defiance of normative sexuality. I was also with a man for seven years who, although he refused to identify himself as a feminist, behaved like one. In addition, I spent much of these same seven years in Europe, a vantage-point from which I was able to develop a certain ironic distance from the didacticism of many current American debates.

However, events in my private life and in the lives of many people around me have

recently made clear to me that the phallus is still a privileged signifier, and that the heterosexual male psyche hasn't changed very much. This is not as surprising as it seemed at first to be. Freud tells us that everything in the unconscious remains in the present tense. The changes that can be made at the social level are consequently far in advance of those that can be made at the level of the psyche. I am not sorry that I devoted the last four years to *World Spectators*, a book whose concerns are more ontological than social, but it is now time to think once again about "difference".

History as a master narrative, a linear scheme of unfolding presence surrounded by a teleological aura, was crucially rethought during the last two decades. Yet, history goes on, and our longing for a magic story which would provide a coherent context to the past is no less strong than it has ever been. Moreover, the whole paradigm is even more complicated since women, black people, and other "minor" historical subjects have started to enter the scene. We can speak about a multiple or plural history, or use its plural form as "histories", but it doesn't answer the question of how to write about the past apart from a great narrative with its predestined conclusion.

The dominant fiction of history and the alliance of individual and collective psyche to the past are constantly examined in your work. Focusing on historical trauma, you have convincingly shown how a mainstream version of history could turn not only against its own production, but also against its own producers (men). You have argued that the conservatism of the psyche is related to the preservation of the wholeness of the world narrated by family and masculine ideologies, but however suspicious you are about a version of history as an 'endless perpetuation of the "same" you still emphasise the importance of an individual's memories, recollections and remembrances. As you put it in The Threshold of the Visible World: 'To remember perfectly would be forever to inhabit the same cultural order. However, to remember imperfectly is to bring images from the past into an ever new and dynamic relation to those through which we experience the present, and in the process ceaselessly to shift the contours and significance not only of the past, but also of the present.' How, then, can one write or tell history with imperfections, discontinuities, and ruptures?

Yes, memory has a privileged place in my work. It figures centrally in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, and is even more indispensable to my present thought. By "memory," I don't mean everyday recollection, but rather what psychoanalysis calls "displacement". When we transfer libido from one thing to another, we do so on the basis of affinities between the two things. An object-choice consequently constitutes an act of recollection. We can displace in two radically different ways. We can savour that within the new object which replicates the old object, and discard everything which is in excess of that relation; or we can privilege what distinguishes

the new object from the previous object. In the first case, displacement is fundamentally conservative; it points backward in time. In the second case, displacement is transformative; it reconceives the past in the form of the present. In my new book, *World Spectators*, as in *Threshold*, I am interested in the second rather than the first kind of displacement, and in a kind of memory which is more on the side of forgetting than memorialisation. When we recollect in this way, we are worldly; we make room in our psyche for new objects and things. This kind of memory is also aesthetic in the most profound sense of the word. It celebrates earthly forms for their shape, colour, and patterns rather than for their latent meaning. I call this kind of memory the passion of the signifier.

When we are passionate about the signifier, we do not merely savour each new object in its specificity, we also connect it to ever new memories and perceptions; we create an associational field around it. A good example of this occurs in Proust's novel *Swann's Way*. In the third part of that novel, Swann, the central character, meets Odette, a woman who is not his type. However, because he often hears a cherished piece of music when she is present, he nevertheless is able to make her his new love object; the music arouses in him a desire which he is able to direct toward her. Until now Swann's libidinal investments have been short-lived; one working woman has replaced another in a seemingly endless succession. But Odette succeeds where the previous women have failed; she becomes Swann's wife and the mother of his child. This is because, once Swann falls in love with Odette, he begins to expand her associational field on the basis of other similarities and proximities. Before long, he has connected her to a particular Botticelli painting; to a valuable variety of orchids; to an exquisite tea-ceremony; etc. In this case, Swann does not so much displace away from Odette, as displace around from her. I am interested in this kind of displacement not only because of its power to augment and expand the value of a love object, but also for its capacity to figure what might be called a "mobile fidelity". One comes back over and over again to a particular love object, but that love object's field of meaning is constantly shifting.

But if you apply this passionate relationship to the past to writing history, what we will end up with is a constant rewriting and rethinking of history.

That's exactly right. The past will be freed from its ostensible fixity, moved from the having-been to the not yet. It will come to us from the future. For me, this ongoing rewriting of the past is the only way that we can be open to the world, and I subscribe to it with as much enthusiasm when the history which is being transformed in this way is broadly collective as I do when it is narrowly personal.

Writing history anew, so to speak, also requires thinking about the concept of the subject differently. As the title of your first book The Subject of Semiotics

(Oxford University Press, 1983) indicates, issues of subjectivity have played a crucial role in your work since its very beginnings. Not only have you been theorising the topic in a new way, but also your own subjectivity is strongly present in your writing. Putting forward the “I” is a way to present oneself to the other, to initiate a dialogue, a communication which is “killed” when the anonymous “we” or “one” is used, as Mieke Bal explained it in her book Double Exposures. You also seem to call for a radical (re)subjectivisation that would open the egocentric self-sameness to otherness and would reconceptualize authorship. How can one remain the “self” and, at the same time, deny his or her self-centeredness or egotism?

In my opinion, the “subject” and the “self” are two very different things. The self or the ego is what Jean Laplanche brilliantly calls ‘an object masquerading as a subject.’ It is an object because it is one of the things we can love, one of the things in which we can invest our libido. This object is able to masquerade as a subject because it is what provides us with our sense of identity, and for most of us identity equals subjectivity. But identity is foundationally fictive; it is predicated on our (mis)recognition of ourselves first within our mirror reflection, and then within countless other human and representational “*imagoes*”. This fiction is impossible to sustain in any continuous way, but the subject classically clings to it anyway. Through a murderous series of incorporations and projections she attempts to close the distance between it and herself. But we are subjects not at the level of our identity, but rather at that of our desire. Desire is based upon lack - not the lack of any identifiable thing, but rather the lack of what Lacan variously calls “being”, “presence”, the “here and now”. Since we are all equally bereft of this same impossible non-object of desire, singularity would seem to be foreclosed at the level of subjectivity. We would seem to be exactly what Lacan describes us as being: nothing and nowhere. For me, this account of subjectivity has come to seem intolerable in its erasure of particularity.

One of the projects of *World Spectators* is to find a way of accounting for individual variation while still remaining true to Lacan’s fundamental definition of the subject. I have done this (or attempted to do this) by focusing upon the infinitely varied ways in which each of us symbolises what all of us lack. I say “symbolises” because when we allow particular memories to give form to the impossible non-object of desire we transform them into signifiers. In their ever-changing totality, they constitute a kind of language - the language of our desire. The singularity which each of us enjoys by virtue of the displacements we have made is not destructive of other creatures and things in the way that the ego is. Rather, as I attempted to explain through the example of Swann and Odette, our desire irradiates towards other creatures and things. When we allow something in the world to signify what we lack, we light it up, confer upon it a kind of more-than-reality.

In your work, you speak a lot about love. Rather than conceiving love merely in its traditional romantic dimension, or as a narcissistic relationship to oneself, you emphasise its role for the political and social transformation as well.

For me, love is about the creation of value not relative or exchange value, but rather absolute value. Absolute value is what we confer upon creatures and things when we allow them to body forth what we lack. This embodiment has important political ramifications, since as a result of our unique libidinal history each of us possesses the capacity to affirm both what others cannot, and what the larger culture renders abject. For the most part, such affirmations remain psychically circumscribed. However, certain subjects succeed in externalising what they see in the form of aesthetic works. A work of art can make it possible for others to see beauty where they themselves could not otherwise see it, and - thereby - to expand their capacity to care.

The distinction between an externalising subject and an externalised object of both history and desire is closely related to visibility. For the last two decades, the feminist criticism of visibility was strongly influenced by Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' In this essay, Mulvey challenged the dominance of the male gaze (and creativity) over the female body that is left as a passive looked-at object. Only recently has this binary model started to be questioned. Most of the authors who challenge this subject-object dichotomy, including yourself, argue that represented models/objects/bodies do return their look back. This provides a new way to read visual representations of women and femininity, but it also radically challenges our own position of privilege as being viewers of art because images look at us as well. In your recent lecture about Jean-Luc Godard, you talked about the 'projective nature of the outer world.' Could you explain this?

In *World Spectators*, as in 'The Author as Receiver', I argue that when we look in the way that I have been describing, it is always in response to an external solicitation. This solicitation comes to us from the world, and it is formal in nature; through their colours, shapes and patterns, creatures and things give themselves to be seen. It is consequently not the seer who initiates visibility, but rather the seen. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the seer could even be said to find her look in what she apprehends.

The train of thought which has led me to this set of conclusions began in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. In that book, I attempt both to distinguish the look from the gaze, and to establish the interiority of all subjects to the field of vision. This represents a twofold assault on sexual difference, since it is the male look which has been most often confused with the gaze, and the male subject who most often aspires to invisibility. The gaze, I argue with Lacan, is "inapprehensible" and "unlocatable", it is the registration of Otherness within the field of vision. A given look can represent

it within a certain context, but it can never coincide with it, just as the penis can never coincide with the phallus. Since each of us can be a subject only in relation to the Other, we are all equally dependent upon the gaze. Whereas the gaze is structural rather than human, the look is emphatically human. As a particularly privileged manifestation of human desire, it has its inception in lack.

The Threshold of the Visible World provides a further elaboration of this argument. In it, I explore the close metaphoric connection for the modern subject of the camera and the gaze, and elaborate upon the ramifications of this equation. I also meditate upon the productive capabilities of the human look - upon what it can make possible. Finally, I attempt to exorcise one of the fictions that has most plagued feminist thinking over the last twenty years: the fiction that the look always effects an unpleasurable subordination of what it sees. I don't know how we managed for so long to think that women don't want to be looked at, or that there is no agency or pleasure in being seen. We all want to be seen. Indeed, we need to be seen - not only by the gaze, but by other human beings. Of course, what we want is not just any look, but rather one which finds beauty in the colour of our hair, the arch of our calf and the way we move our hands when we speak. What we want is the look which allows us to shine. The look confers this radiance when it responds to our solicitation. In *World Spectators*, I finally "phenomenologise" this argument. I use the word "appearance" to designate that ideal meeting of look and world which happens when we respond to the formal appeal of other creatures and forms. Appearance, I maintain, is an ontological event. It lets things "Be", in the strongest sense of that word.

In my essay on Godard's *JLG/JLG*, I elaborate one possible theory of authorship which might follow from this account of appearance. I suggest that if appearance begins not from the side of the seer, but rather from that of what is seen, the author or artist is ideally less a producer than a receiver: she receives what the world gives. But the artist should not just receive; she should also be the relay for other acts of reception. This is the central undertaking of Godard's auto-portrait. In *JLG/JLG*, he attempts there to become the empty screen which both receives what is projected onto it and projects back onto others what has been projected onto it. In this way, one look can make possible a potential infinity of other looks.

This approach is very interesting, but don't you think that if we accept this infinitive mirroring of each other, or of the world, that we will lose a critical tool for dismantling the power mechanisms that constitute subjectivity in the visual realm and consequently in society itself?

Again, I want to insist upon the distinction between self and subject. In the kind of transaction dramatised by Godard in *JLG/JLG*, the self is indeed lost, but the subject is found. And agency resides at the site of the subject, not the object. But more is at

issue here than subjective enablement. Every time an artist becomes the white page upon which the world writes itself (again, the metaphor is Godard's), she expands the visible world. She makes it possible for creatures and things to appear which have been until then invisible. And this expansion of the domain of appearance facilitates all kinds of new libidinal relations, not only for her, but for us.

There was a major one-woman show of Nan Goldin travelling in the U.S.A. and in Europe for the last couple of years that was entitled I'll Be Your Mirror. Photographing her intimate environment, friends and lovers, Goldin proclaims herself to be a mirror of the outer world. She suggests that her artistic subjectivity is reached through reflectivity. According to Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, one becomes a subject in the moment of the first encounter with one's image in the mirror. If we take this theory a bit further, and would think of interpersonal relations or artistic creativity as mirroring, then we can argue that our subjectivity is confirmed only in a dialogical form. That we reach the "self" only through others.

It's interesting that you mention Nan Goldin in this context. I am very interested in her work, and have always felt that there is something profoundly expansionary about it. I think the crucial thing to note about the title of her one-woman show is that it reads *I'll be Your Mirror*. It is a very different thing to position ourselves before another person as if we were her mirror than to position ourselves before her as if she were our mirror. In the latter case, one annihilates the other as other in order to take her place. In the former case, one becomes the white sheet of paper or blank screen that I have been talking about. This appropriation is not a form of colonisation: rather, it paradoxically frees the other to be herself. The issue of appropriation is at the heart of the book I am now writing - indeed, the title of this book is *Appropriations*. I am conceptualising appropriation within phenomenological and psychoanalytic parameters, and opposing it to all attempts to have or possess. It means to make something one's own at the level of one's desire, and thereby to let it "Be".

Jacques Lacan emphasised that it is through the fantasies produced by 'artists, artisans, designers of dresses and hats, and the creators of imaginary forms in general' that certain bodies come to seem more worthy of our libidinal affirmation than others. Using psychoanalysis as the tool of examining, mostly, visual arts, you seem to identify yourself with this presumption. In this context, let me quote a short part of your text which echoes Lacan: 'the aesthetic work is a privileged domain for displacing us from the geometrical point, for encouraging us to see in ways not dictated in advance by a dominant fiction.' Does art really have a power to influence or provoke our desires and to transform our reality? If so, why did the avant-garde's attempt to revolutionise both art and life fail? Or

did it not fail at all?

Even though I am deeply committed to the avant-garde – or, to put it more precisely, to experimental art – I cannot provide a simple answer to your last questions. The avant-garde is a very heterogeneous category. What it signifies is also constantly changing – so much so that a work of art can seem avant-garde at an early moment, and conventional at a later moment, or even conventional in its initial manifestation, and subsequently avant-garde. This renders any attempt to speak of it in terms of “success” and “failure” problematic. It’s also not so easy to know what it would mean for a work of art to “succeed”. For me, artistic success need not imply a broadly social or political transformation. Rather, a work of art – whether or not it is avant-garde – succeeds every time it expands one spectator’s capacity to care, or awakens her to the possibility of speaking her own language of desire. Most of the time, we desire what our culture tells us we should desire. As Heidegger would say, we are absorbed in the “they”, displaced in relation to our subjectivity. The art that matters most to me is the art that wrests us away from this “they”, and assists us in looking from the vantage-point of a singular subjectivity, whether our own or someone else’s.

Artistic practices based on mechanical reproduction or machine-mediacy (as Vilem Flusser would probably put it) occupy a prominent place in contemporary culture and theory, including your own work. Why are you committed to “mechanical” images and what kind of pleasures, challenges and questions do they bring in terms of revealing our singularity?

I’m not so certain that I would refer either to cinema or photography as “mechanical images”. Certainly both rely upon a technology for their production, but this technology does not narrowly predetermine either what the artist sees when she looks through the camera lens, or what we see when we look at the resulting image. I think that the specificity of cinema and photography inhere much more in the fact that both have until very recently depended for their functioning upon what might be called the “participation” of the world. As I have moved away from post-structuralism and become more and more interested in the meeting of look and world, I have been thinking a lot about the Bazinian and Godardian notion that the photographic image, whether still or moving, represents a kind of shroud of Veronique – that it bears the trace of what it shows. I am also intrigued by the fact that Bazin and Godard account for the receptivity of the photographic image in such different ways. Whereas Bazin suggests that this image is most open to the world when all human agency has been eliminated, Godard argues that it can only be open to the world when its human maker succeeds in being a receiver rather than a producer. Which of these claims is correct? Is photography definitionally objective, definitionally subjective, or simultaneously objective and subjective? These are questions which interest me very much at the moment, and which I hope to address

in a future book about photography. I also do not agree with Benjamin that, because they are mechanically created, cinema and photography are essentially anti-auratic art forms. Nor do I believe that an art form is more democratic or progressive when it dispenses with the aura. In my view, both cinema and photography can be profoundly auratic, and this is cause for celebration rather than lamentation. These representational forms can be auratic in part because the aura is not located in the image itself, but rather in the eye of the beholder. It is what something has when it enjoys that more-than-reality which I am calling “Being.” But cinema and photography assist us in seeing in this way, more than art forms like sculpture or drawing, because they are themselves technologies of radiance and because what they show us has etched its trace there with a pencil of light.

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