

THE SPECTACLE OF DISINTEGRATION AND THE TRANSSEXUAL EXCEPTION

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Let's call what our friends do to get by the *aesthetic*. What I mean by the aesthetic in this context is the production of appearances. Everyone produces appearances. Everyone is capable of participating in the aesthetic.¹ The aesthetic is the surface of every social, or rather social-*technical*, relation.

While everyone is capable of participating in the aesthetic as something they actively produce, most people do not. Most people act within their social-technical relations using aesthetic forms, gestures, languages that were made by others. Most people do so unconsciously, performing near the norm.² Just as well, as this is why our friends can get by. Our friends belong to that class who are active, confident producers of appearances, what Asger Jorn ironically called a "creative class."³ Most belong to that class that produces appearances for a living. One way or another their capacity to produce appearances enters the market. They make language or gestures or images or sounds or objects to which others pay attention, that others value.

Some of our friends belong to this class of appearance-producers full time. Others don't make enough to live by from it, and do other jobs. Some of our friends make money from appearances, but are more interested in a different kind of appearance-making. The appearances they make for money might not be those they'd most like to make.

Solidarity with all those whose labor is the making of appearances! Not all who do this labor are our friends. That's different. Friends also make appearances for each other that are different to the appearances they make as either a full-time or part-time job. Friends make appearances that are peripheral to the aesthetic economy.

My friends are mostly transsexuals, mostly trans women, and those who love us and share space with us, interact with our surfaces. It can be hard to make any sort of living as a trans woman.⁴ Many of my friends have had to find ways to become professional or semi-professional producers of the appearance of their own transsexuality. They work in fashion or nightlife. Others model, many do

sex work. Some have a job that is actually called *aesthician*. Or, they do social work, usually around sexuality or mental health. A few, like me, have regular jobs in the straight world, and make appearances on the side, for our friends.

It's a paradoxical time for us. On the one hand, trans culture is thriving. We're making art and music, writing books, throwing raves, and it's all fabulous. We perceive the world like nobody else, and nobody can put appearances into the world like we can. Whatever you thought the sex of the body was about, we've revolutionized that several times since the last time you even thought about it. This is our time.

On the other hand, we're always negotiating the *cis gaze*.⁵ We're always perceived as a thing, not a subject, to be looked at as an object of amusement, fascination, as a fetish. Or to be looked at as an object to be classified, judged, policed, pathologized. We are still included among those denied the faculty of reason. Someone else has the power to decide the fates of our bodies. Cops, doctors, or the cops among doctors—psychiatrists. And the aestheticians among the cops among the doctors—psychoanalysts.

The cis gaze is a fragile thing, anxious about the instability of sexed flesh and gendered language, always on the lookout for the *transsexual exception*. The cis gaze is both repelled and attracted by that exception. By us. Trans-ness is actually the prior to term, what precedes and validates by its exclusion what would rather be unqualified terms—man, woman. The cis gaze clocks us in order to other us. All it can see is the exception. It's a bore, frankly, to be seen this way. Which is why we keep certain appearances among our friends. We are denied a right to the world. This is why we don't show just anyone how we like to appear to each other. It's why we are often good at the aesthetic. We have to be. Often, we have to pass, as one or other of the sanctioned genders. Often, we have to tell the sanctioned stories about our lives to get what we need.⁶ We become artists of the self. We can produce the appearances expected of us, but if we're lucky, if we have friends, we learn that we can produce other appearances for each other, ones that are more convivial.

You have to earn our trust to see us as we choose to be seen. And if you side with those who deny us the world, you will never see us as we see each other, and never see the things we can see. Your loss, hun. Our more interesting appearances are not public, but are not

private either. We are often expelled from a private life of origin, from family and community, but are refused entry into the public sphere. We fall into an *interzone*.⁷ We have to make our own world, among friends.

The fantasy of the bourgeois liberal public sphere of right and reason has never included us. We never appeared there as anything other than objects that mark an outside to its perimeter. For a long time, we were objects of the techniques of discipline, and in many places still are. For a long time, we were excluded from the formal workplace, and in many places still are. We exist in the margins of law and labor. Ours is a bodily, communal, material, self-organized life: the aesthetic, among friends. Such might be one of the lessons of that trans Marxist classic, Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*.⁸

My friends and I, we've been around a long time. We're not new. We just experienced an uptick in visibility, somewhere around 2013–2014. In the Anglophone world, this was the moment of Laverne Cox, Geena Rocero, Janet Mock.⁹ One might pause to wonder why such exceptional trans women of color were the avatars of this heightened visibility. It looked like we were now to be granted entrée to the public sphere—but as it turned out, only to its simulation. And as it turned out, there was no public sphere. The whole thing being simulated, and perhaps always was.

We live in an era of the *spectacle of disintegration*. Given that we and our friends were always marked off as exceptions, it's tempting to celebrate that disintegration, to even put our queer shoulder to the wheel to push along its unraveling. Maybe history still advances bad side first, as Guy Debord once thought, but then again, maybe it doesn't.¹⁰ Maybe the disintegration of the spectacle, and the spectacle of its disintegration, might make our marginal existence even more marginal.

One way to read Walter Benjamin's writings on media is to pick out the red utopian thread: What if the modern, technical mode of perception was actually able to collectively sense *itself* and its relation to the world?¹¹ What if the social-technical as an ensemble of relations was able to become self-organized? What if organized labor could organize its world?

The neglected work of Alexander Bogdanov shows less interest in the technical conditions of the possibility of self-organization, and

more in the form of social relation that might make it possible. Could there be a comradely form of the production of the perception of the world, of knowledge of it, and out of that production of perception and knowledge, the production of another world? The world-historical defeat of the labor movement puts a damper on such imaginings. The constitutive pessimism of transsexuals and our friends seems like it was always closer to the mark in its assessment of the possibilities for the good life. If things are as bad as they appear, then everyone might want to start practicing the kind of discreet life known among transsexuals and our friends.

If only we'd be left alone to live. The transsexual has become a point of condensation for all sorts of hopes and anxieties within the matrix of the disintegrating spectacle. Images that purport to represent us populate the news feeds. Even when such an image is celebratory rather than hostile, this public *trans image* doesn't have all that much to do with us.¹² Nevertheless, some examination of our public doppelgänger might help us understand where certain tensions within the spectacle can be found. On the one hand, there's the attempt to reboot faith in the bourgeois liberal public sphere through the celebration of our entry into it. A "new" kind of potential rights-bearing subject has been found—the transgender! The negative right to freedom from discrimination is extended to this category of subject as an act of benevolence—at least in principle.

This right bestowed on the transgender is to be an individual right, based on the recognition of the agency of the subject, but an agency that is qualified. Rights to modify the sex of the body are still to be gatekept by professionals—doctors and psychiatrists. This right comes with rules for proper comportment if one is not to forfeit it.

The history of these terms is complicated, but here let us think of this right as a qualified right to be *transgender* which falls short of the existence of the free *transsexual*. Use of the term transgender was a tactic for encouraging solidarity and agency among all gender variant people, but has now become co-opted as a narrow form of the liberal rights-bearing subject. It replaced the term transsexual, a narrower term for those who could gain access to care by accepting the medical and psychiatric authority to define them. With the co-opting of transgender, perhaps we want to be transsexual again, but now defined as those who take into our own hands the aesthetic practices of reshaping the body's sex.

There is extraordinary pressure to rescind even the partial rights extended to the transgender. Even the modest claims for recognition that go by the name of the transgender are resisted. It appears as a transgression of a gender division (and hierarchy) that is also a division (and hierarchy) of public and private life. Homosexuality may be (barely) tolerable as a choice in private life, but the public existence of “transgenderism” is too much for the reactionary project of a restoration of gender as the organizing principle of both public and private life, which is at the same time a claim to reverse the hierarchy of public and private life, making private life sovereign, but subject in turn to the counter-public authority of religious community.

Our “visibility” in the public sphere turned out to be a two-edged sword.¹³ Stepping out of our discreet production of appearances for each other and our friends, allowing ourselves to become tokens of the liberal public sphere, all that just made us a target. We rely on appearances to even know who we are, to find each other, to find the resources of our ongoingness. Our art has always been one of marking the path towards transsexual becoming for our sisters, brothers, and others without alerting the authorities as to our whereabouts.

Transsexuality, particularly transfemininity, has long been a figure onto which modernity displaced its anxieties and desires—the exception held at arm’s length so that the norm may breathe easier. James Joyce, Djuna Barnes, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Genet—the pleasure and danger of modernity passes through our bodies treated as allegorical figures for someone else’s needs and wants. A nervous habit that queer theory may have repeated rather than displaced.¹⁴ Perhaps our reappearance on the screen of the contemporary marks the return of a certain panic about the reconfiguration of public and private life, under pressure, this time, not of industrial modernity, but of information economy.

One side of it is panic about the restructuring of private life in the era of the spectacle of disintegration. The spectacle has passed through several world-historical forms. Debord dates the origins of the society of the spectacle to the defeat of revolutionary workers in Germany and Russia in the 1920s. The former subsumed into social democracy, the latter into Bolshevik bureaucracy. The labor movement moves from world-historical actor to a representation, giving birth to the *diffuse spectacle* of the capitalist West, and the *concentrated spectacle* in the Stalinist East.¹⁵

The defeat of the insurrections of the sixties engenders a new era of the spectacle, what Debord called the *integrated spectacle*.¹⁶ In the West, the spectacle acquires characteristics of the concentrated spectacle, particularly its heavy reliance on secret police, to the point where the latter act not only against enemies of the state but acquire the capacity to shape the state itself. Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Petrolio* is a fine account of this moment—and possibly the work that got him killed.¹⁷

What I call the *spectacle of disintegration* marks the incapacity of the state, inherited from the era of industrial capitalism, the state of the integrated spectacle, to act as a world-historical agent on behalf of the new ruling class.¹⁸ The motto of the spectacle had been “that which is good, appears; that which appears is good.”¹⁹ The spectacle functioned as the double in the world of appearances of realm of the commodity. Appearances were to be managed in the interests of maintaining the circuit of commodified time on an ever-expanding basis. The spectacle of disintegration marks the unraveling of time and space ordered as the unfolding of a historical destiny in which everyone will eventually participate in an ever-upward spiral of desire and the commodity.

The ordering principle of appearances within the spectacle are what Roland Barthes called *doxa*.²⁰ The key principle of *doxa* is the overturning of history into nature. The conceit of the naturalness of the spectacle is hard to sustain in an era of climate disruption and accelerating rates of extinction. The locus of the *doxa* of eternal natural has to be found elsewhere.

The human body becomes the site of an eternal nature. The struggle over “transgender” is one over whether bodies can appear in public as other than what they were assigned at birth by the state—as if what the state validated was a natural body. At stake is a private right to appear in public how one chooses. The differentiation of gender from sex allows a conflict over the appearance of the body which leaves untouched the question of its nature.

That there may be no natural body brings with it panic of an almost theological kind. What if the body was always an artifact made with historically contingent forms of technics? What if it always existed in a multi-species muddle, as Donna Haraway says?²¹ This is where the existence of the transsexual poses more of a challenge than the transgender: that not just the social codes of gender but the very sex

of the flesh is malleable undermines doxa on two fronts. Firstly, it takes away the body as the legitimating anchor for the naturalness of the spectacle. Secondly, it interrupts the conceit of naturalness of the current, historically contingent, form of social reproduction.

The figure of the transgender subject marks a point at which the spectacle of disintegration—disintegrates. While this applies to all gender variant people, it's the figure of the trans woman that is more often than not the blunt end of the discourse. It is she who became the “everlasting irony of the public sphere” (Hegel). Dragging unseemly matters into the light, from hacking sexed flesh to who gets to shit where. If she is to be admitted as a rights-bearing subject it will be provisionally so. A right revocable at any time.

The inclusion of the transgender woman is not the inclusion of the transsexual woman and all she implies. The transsexual does too much to undo the metaphysical theatrics upon which the fiction of the public rests. She undermines the power of the state to assign sex to the body and to have it stick. She takes that power back into herself. She shows the sexed body for what it is: not nature validated by the state, but the raw material for a technics of autonomous (re)creation.²² But in so doing she ungrounds culture from nature where human flesh concerned.

The transsexual woman is the scapegoat for panic about the loss of the doxa of the natural body—nature's last redoubt in a world denatured. Casting her out as monstrous, unnatural, mutilated, enables the cis body to avoid confronting its own ungrounded, ungovernable relationship to nature.²³ All bodies are technical artifacts, a prosthesis extruded from what Paul Preciado calls the *pharmaco-pornographic regime*—pills-n-porn.²⁴ The transsexual woman is to be cast out so that everyone else can pretend to be normal, natural.

While to herself she is just going about her daily life, to the reactionary spirit she is a constant provocation, to be silenced, mocked, or killed (and at the same time fucked—so long as nobody knows about it). As the spectacle unravels the ruling order turns, as it does in such times, to the most basic, violent, restricted forms of doxa: family, nation, god, nature. The reign of the patriarchs.

Some say a changing climate destroyed the Aztec empire.²⁵ Their sacrifices of human flesh did not save them. Sacrifice is all power knows when its earthly methods fail. There's a long list of sacrificial

flesh in preparation. We transsexuals are not the only ones on the list. Solidarity among those whose last labor is to produce their own death for imaginary ends!

Let's call what our friends do to get by the *aesthetic*. We're good at appearances. Have to be. It's a living. It's also how we live. In the interzone between public and private, making a show aimed at a public to which we're only temporarily invited. And making other appearances, less seen, for each other, for our friends. The best art of our time is unseen by anyone without love of the world.

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- 4 Kay Gabriel, "Gender as an Accumulation Strategy," *Invert Journal* 1 (March 2020): 21–35.
- 5 McKenzie Wark, "The Cis Gaze and its Others (for Shola)," *eflux journal* 117 (April 2021), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/117/387134/the-cis-gaze-and-its-others-for-shola/>.
- 6 Sandy Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *Transgender Studies Reader Remix*, eds. Susan Stryker and Dylan McCarthy Blackston (London: Routledge, 2022).
- 7 William Burroughs, *Interzone* (New York: Penguin, 1990).
- 8 Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Boston: Alyson Books, 2003).
- 9 Katy Steinmetz, "The Transgender Tipping Point," *Time Magazine*, May 29th, 2014, a cover story featuring Laverne Cox. See also Geena Rocero, *Horse Barbie* (Dial Press: New York 2023), which recounts her very public coming out via a TedTalk, and Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness* (New York: Atria Books, 2014).
- 10 Guy Debord, *in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, trans. Lucy Forsyth (London: Pelagian Press, 1991).
- 11 Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).
- 12 On the "trans image," see Cade Mark Gardner and Willow Catelyn Maclay, *Corpses, Fools and Monsters: The History and Futures of Transness in Cinema* (Repeater Books: London 2024).
- 13 Eric Stanley, et al ed., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022).
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- 16 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 2011).
- 17 Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Petrolio* (New York City: Pantheon, 1997).
- 18 McKenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (London: Verso, 2013).
- 19 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1990).
- 20 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977).
- 21 Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 22 My sister Luce deLire has really helped me think this through. See Luce deLire, "Nature is a Transsexual Woman: Lucretian Metaphysics Reconsidered," *Classical Philology* 119, no. 2 (April 2024): 203–233.
- 23 Susan Stryker, *When Monsters Speak* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024).
- 24 Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2013).
- 25 Matthew D. Therrell et al, "Aztec Drought and the 'Curse of the One Rabbit,'" *American Meteorological Society* 85 (September 2004): 1263–1272.