

Through the Looking Glass of the Unlovely

Beauty, Love and Narcissism



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MA Contemporary Art Theory Dissertation 2014/15

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(15775 words)

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Abstract:

This paper peruses the production of subjectivities of the unlovely within the context of the libidinal economies of contemporary society. The introduction paints a backdrop of hyperreal beauty ideals that engender *floating narcissism* against which the dialogical production of subjectivities is enacted. It deploys Michel Foucault's notion of 'docile bodies' to signify new ways of controlling subjectivities in neo-liberal society through proselitization of fetishistic cultivation of bodies. The opening chapter taps into the rich literature on psychoanalysis to derive an equation between beauty, love and narcissism and applies it to a Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. The second chapter picks up the skein of the crisis of primary narcissism as it goes on to investigate the 'interarticulations' between beauty and race and the loss of 'corporeal schema' within the framework of Fanonian psychoanalysis and Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The third chapter revisits the structuralist tendency towards 'desomatization' in order to emphasize the centrality of the body to effective understanding and theorizing of desires of the unlovely. Implicit in this section is also a revaluation of the discourse on cosmetic surgery. The last chapter knits together the various themes developed in the previous chapters with a focus on incorporation and posthumanism. The analysis of Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013) serves to bring out the various specificities of embodiment allegedly missing from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account. Finally a glimpse is offered into cybernetic futures suggesting new possibilities of becoming for the unlovely as the paper navigates the final stages of its course towards a corporeal-feminist and Deleuzian model of cinematic relations that foregrounds affect and relationality with the view to denaturalizing prevalent discourses on beauty. The conclusion spells out the different resolutions of the crisis of unloveliness implied in each chapter. In dialogue with the introduction, it animates the possibility of a world without mirrors thus intimating a detour around floating narcissism.

Key Words: Beauty, love, narcissism, unlovely, race, desire, skin, cosmetic surgery, 'body without organs', embodiment, incorporation, posthuman futures, virtual reality.

Acknowledgements

It all started on a train journey from Canterbury to St. Pancras, London last year as I sat talking to the Irish Artist Eimear Friers about her research on Jenny Saville's paintings. The conversation swirled around Foucault's prison, its manufacture of regimented 'docile bodies' and how Saville's paintings as microcosms of Bakhtinian 'carnavalesque' and the 'grotesque' come to signify potential for subverting the practiced and plasticized bodies pervading the contemporary culture. These thoughts, no doubt, were rapidly filed away in my subconscious and in due course furnished the point of departure for my own investigation.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Nadja Miller Larsen for her continuous support, patience and inspiration throughout this dissertation. Ironically in the middle of my research I was afflicted with chickenpox and was faced with my own abject. It was as if my mental quandary was finding expression through eruptions onto my skin in a manner suggested by skin psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu. A tempestuous affair with paracetamols later I found myself trudging along the slow path to recovery. With it came fresh insights, keener for being more personally immediate. Nevertheless, Nadja's confidence in me and those of others around me was crucial in enabling me to pick up where I left with redoubled efforts.

Thanks is also due to Dr. Mark Fisher whose encouraging feedback on a part of this paper that I presented earlier in June under the title *Psychoanalysis of 'Plain Jane': Beauty, Love and Narcissism*, was a constant source of motivation. Last but not the least, I would like to express my warm regards to friends who helped this project with their incisive suggestions, proofreading and editing. Among these are Rachel Claire Hill with her ready recommendations of sources for my research (*The Bluest Eye, Frankenstein, Masahiro Mori, Slavoj Žižek*), Aniruddh Raghavan with whom I spent many long hours over telephone and email trying to smoothen various creases in my argument, and Richard Scott my most reliable editor who helped me frame the thesis title.

*I look into my glass,
And view my wasting skin,
And say, "Would God it came to pass
My heart had shrunk as thin!"*

*For then I, undistrest
By hearts grown cold to me,
Could lonely wait my endless rest
With equanimity.*

*But Time, to make me grieve,
Part steals, lets part abide;
And shakes this fragile frame at eve
With throbbings of noontide.*

- I Look Into My Glass, Thomas Hardy

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