

Gender, Body and Subjectivity: A Study of Ballroom Gender Culture from the Perspective of Post-Modern Gender Theory

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Abstract: With the in-depth discussion of individual independence and self-consciousness in the post-modern social context, the construction of social identity has increasingly become an important part of individuals seeking their own interests and the legitimacy of existence. The problem of social identity essentially points to social stratification and the flow of social structure, and it is social culture and mass culture that play a key role in it. Corresponding to the mainstream mass culture, the minority culture and subculture accommodate the marginalized groups. Among them, ballroom culture is an important foundation for homosexual and other sexual minorities and vulnerable groups to resist the mainstream cultural discipline. Ballroom provides certain material and spiritual support for the marginalized vulnerable groups in society, which is the cultural space for the survival of sexual minorities. This article attempts to start from the theoretical writings of Foucault, Butler and other scholars in postmodern gender theories, and explore the corresponding issues of gender, body symbols and subject identity involved in ballroom culture.

Keywords: Deployment of Sexuality; Gender Performance; Cultural Identity; Identity Politics

1. Introduction

The ballroom culture can be traced back to the first annual fantastic ball “Faggots ball”, held in 1867 at 710 Hamilton Inn, Harlem, New York City, USA. With the increasingly sharp racial discrimination and social contradictions in the United States, there was a split within the ballroom community. Black gays began to hold their own cross-dressing shows and produced a series of cross-dressing projects. Among them, the most ballroom cultural

elements of the cross-dressing show “Realness” are the most important issue of full reflection and gender differentiation [1].

At the same time, in the documentary film “Paris in Burning” about homosexuals and transgender people, it is mentioned that gay men will hold a man realness cross-dressing contest, that is, gay men are required to disguise themselves as cisgender heterosexual men without being identified. Its essence is not only a joking parody, but also a profound reflection that cross-dressing is precisely the means of survival that gay men have to adopt in the face of mainstream social concepts and ethics. From this point of view, ballroom can never be simply understood as the self - carnival and self - satisfaction of gay underground dance. It actually reflects the possibility of essential destruction and deconstruction of gender identity. Furthermore, it re-proclaims not only the repressed same-sex orientation, but also the redistribution and deployment of sexuality. Therefore, in order to understand how ballroom culture becomes the living space of sexual minorities, it is necessary to deeply explore the gender proposition of modern society. This article is divided into the following three points, trying to analyze the subversion and resistance of the ballroom costume culture to the hegemony of the mainstream gender structure through the dismantling of the mainstream gender cultural structure, and the construction of subjectivity and identity after the subversion [2].

2. Helpful Hints

Each competition unit of “Realness” has a certain gender orientation, or the Ballroom culture has its corresponding gender label. The members' cognitive positioning of their own gender constitutes a unique gender system in Ballroom culture. The system is still in the binary framework of male and female physiological gender, which is divided into “Male Figure” and “Female Figure”. In “Male

Figure”, it is divided into butch queens, butch women and transgender men; the “Female Figure” is also divided into transgender women, cisgendered women and drag queens. Different gender subcategories also divide the ballroom races into different tracks, attracting more people's attention and participating in the ball. For example, “Butch Queen Schoolboy Realness” requires those butch queens to deceive judges by dressing up as students. The final winner of the award should have the best dress and stage performance in line with the student's identity; “Drag Queen Realness” requires male contestants to decorate themselves as the most cisgender women [3].

3. Results

3.1 The Tamed Body: Gender Representation in the Reproductive Economy

Modern society requires the establishment of a series of systems conducive to social development, so as to realize the rational order of an ideal society. In the rational order, once an individual enters the process of socialization, he or she must face the shaping of personality by social norms and mainstream values, thus becoming an individual existence that meets the requirements of society. In this process, the individual has actually completed the acceptance and domestication of the social mainstream cultural codes, and became a sub-machine that conforms to the operation of the social machine. In other words, the individual person is not only the product of society, but also constitutes a part of the continuous operation of society.

The process in which the individual is constantly naturalized as a social machine is essentially a process in which the body is constantly disciplined. The social machine collectively bets the individual's body organs, “This collective social bet is to truly transcribe the body through adult markers, which turn the individual's biological body into a social body and encode the organs according to the needs of social survival” [4]. Once the body is completed and matures, it is no longer just a body at the level of biological significance, but extends into a field of social production and turns to a social tool at the level of cultural significance.

The mainstream culture of society dominates

people's shaping of the body, and ultimately achieves the economic purpose of promoting social development. When the individual's body is instrumentalized and commercialized under social norms, the individual's desires have to succumb to the needs of social economy, and the network of power relations has also been formed. “Discipline power not only takes physical training as important content, but also takes the production of the body as the object of regulation. Therefore, gender and sexuality are included in the scope of power. The purpose is not to suppress sex, but to serve the energy, health and longevity of the bourgeoisie through the deployment of character” [5]. The disposition of the male-dominated society is a reproductive economic system based on the masculine logocentrism. Under the reproductive economy, the construction of sexuality serves the stability of social structure and the advancement of social production, which requires that the gender category should not only be divided into two, but also maintain a stable and self-enclosed whole. Masculinity and femininity are constantly divided in the binary opposition, which tends to be a kind of gender essentialism, aiming at establishing the boundary of gender identity that cannot be confused. In other words, there is an absolute and constant correspondence between the physiological gender and social gender of the body. In other words, physiological gender and social gender is also artificially constructed identity labels, which are only covered by the sexualized body appearance.

The individual's desire, as the body's appeal, is also artificially produced and constructed. “The main function of the social field is to encode, engrave and record the flow of desire, so as to ensure that all flows are completely cut off, dredged and adjusted” [4]. Therefore, the individual's desire production and social production constitute a complete integration, forming a mandatory heterosexual lust mechanism under the reproductive economy, thus realizing the discourse system of heterosexual hegemony. Judith Butler has pointed out that the heterosexual matrix's hegemonic mechanism regards physiological gender as a part of the gender discourse system, and its essence is “to construct the body's discourse / perception according to the principle of sexual difference, so as to create

and formulate social reality” [6]. This so-called social reality just kills the possibility of sexuality and the existence of same-sex lust. The gender dual structure from the perspective of postmodernism is no longer tenable, because the absolute and essential category of gender identity does not exist, and everything is only a social product born under the discipline of artificially cast social norms. In contrast, it also affirms the rationality of the existence of sexual minorities. “Culture does not exist after its intended suppression of bisexual lust : culture constitutes a matrix of understanding, through its original bisexual lust itself can be considered ... bisexual lust is a result achieved by regulating the mandatory and generative exclusion practices of the heterosexual system” [7]. Homosexual lust, as a heresy that is not accepted by the public, is suppressed and also exists through the division of binary differences, so it is also the product of the artificial production of heterosexual desire.

Based on this, the difference is indeed the embodiment of the cultural hegemony of social norms. Once the emphasis of sexual minorities on same-sex lust enters the extreme tendency of binary opposition, it may consolidate and deepen the cultural hegemony of heterosexuality. Although the ballroom cross-dressing culture is developed by the black gay community, it is not intended to create gay cultural hegemony, or that it criticizes the sexual essentialism behind gender stereotypes. The reason why Ballroom's events are constantly subdivided is that it replaces the old binary gender structure with multiple gender differences, thus breaking the masculine logocentrism. Just as the OTA (Open To All) competition that welcomes all participants of gender and sexual orientation, it represents the inclusiveness and openness of ballroom. But on the other hand, ballroom's gender culture is still not completely out of the binary framework, and masculinity and femininity seems to become more stubborn, especially in the ball game “Sex Siren”, which emphasizes sexual glamour, and still distinguishes between male figure and female figure. In ballroom gender culture, gender traits become an abstract and stable cultural category, which is not limited by physiological gender. Admittedly, this treatment of the nature of sexual

characteristics does not seem to remove the suspicion of creating another stereotype. But it is undeniable that that ballroom has become a unique cultural field of gender mobility.

3.2 Gender Performativity: Parodying the Body Symbol under Disguise

The rational order of modern society requires the establishment of normative power mechanism. Under this mechanism, gender and sexuality cover up the strong control of social discipline with naturalized representations. Sexual minorities, as marginalized members of society, seem to have to step into a desperate situation under the collective norms of society. However, through Butler's gender performativity theory, we can find the resistance and subversive power of ballroom cross-dressing culture.

Dressing is a kind of parody and disguise. Homosexuals have to show their social identity as heterosexual men and women through disguise for the purpose of making a living in society. Butler compares the disguises of lesbians and gay men [7], as shown in the Table 1.

Through the Table 1, it can be seen that the desire of sexual minorities for heterosexual identity, whether gay or lesbian, is derived from a set of defense mechanisms of “male identity”, and this defense mechanism can run for a long time. It is precisely because the social legalization of heterosexual culture and reproductive economy has gone in an extreme direction. As gay men, they like to show more masculinity and integrate into the heterosexual community. Although they have a male body, they cannot get the recognition of heterosexual men, so actually they cannot really occupy the “penis”. On the one hand, gay men are afraid of losing their identity as heterosexual men because they are born with male identity and the power that this identity gives them; on the other hand, it is because gay men themselves cannot recognize their own penises that they subconsciously resist their physical and sexual desires. However, as lesbians, they have to pretend to be delicate heterosexual women to weaken themselves to achieve social recognition. Lesbians yearn for the social power behind the masculine and they tend to castrate men with masculine to gain some kind of power, so that they can realize the subjectivity in the symbolic order. In the

matter of fact, there is a huge difference between gays and lesbians to hide their true faces, under the disguise of one layer after

another, but they are all affected by the male psychological defense mechanism.

Table 1. The Different Gender Disguise of Gay and Lesbian

Gender and sexual orientation	Gender disguise	Purpose and reason	driving factors
gay	Exaggerate heterosexual masculinity, disguise masculinity and hide femininity	The gay group attempts to “own” the penis forever, but in fact, it cannot really occupy the penis. Through gender camouflage, it can realize the position of heterosexual males and maintain the male-centered dream of the penis economy.	Male psychological defense mechanism
lesbian	Hide male traits, and wear “mask” disguise, strengthen their own female traits	The castration anxiety and identity anxiety of lesbians make them eager to obtain paternal identity and discourse power through castration of men, so as to realize the subjectivity in the symbolic order; but fear of touching the male defense mechanism and being “punished”, resulting in mental anxiety.	

The identity anxiety of sexual minorities is fundamentally derived from the cultural castration of heterosexism. Butler pointed out, “Perhaps the femininity as a disguise was originally intended to deviate from male homosexual lust - this is a lust presupposition of hegemonic discourse” [7]. That is to say, femininity has become a possible path to dominate masculine identity. The ballroom costume culture pays more and more attention to the release of femininity, especially the voguing fashion dance developed from ballroom. Among them, “vogue fem”, which has attracted more and more attention from participants, is a style that emphasizes boldly highlighting the charm of femininity. On the one hand, cross-dressing deconstructs the masculinity economy and heterosexual matrix hegemony that produce sexual desire, gender traits and gender identity. In essence, it is intended to jump out of the gender structure of masculinity logocentrism and re-examine the relationship between physical body and gender traits. It is a weapon for sexual minorities to resist gender hegemony.

On the other hand, cross-dressing pursues a kind of pleasure brought by sexual transformation. This special sexual pleasure is realized through the rewriting of body symbols. Its essence is to regard the body as a certain extension of the social and cultural field. By reversing the body symbols and naming under the mainstream cultural structure, the masculine economy and the mandatory

heterosexual mechanism are broken, and the gender discourse of multiple coexistence of sexuality is constructed. Heterosexuality “is not only a mandatory system, but also a comedy farce in essence, a constant parody of oneself” [6]. Butler believes that what is really to be opposed is not heterosexual sexual orientation, but social violence that mechanically incorporates sexual desire and gender identity into the production system. Ballroom rejects the simplification of gender identity through cross-dressing, and the gender category is by no means an internally stable independent system; on the contrary, gender is a cultural symbol that can be expressed and performed. On this basis, the body cannot be absolutely divided into biological body and social body, and gender cannot be briefly divided into physiological gender and social gender. Just like Lacan's mirror theory, once people begin to be sexualized and individualized, they enter the social language system and are constantly constructed, and the body is part of the language of being spoken and is the product of maintaining the patriarchal symbolic order. In this sense, the natural attributes of the body have been murdered, and the disguise essentially affirms the symbolization and socialization process of the physical image, and tries to achieve the purpose of subverting and resisting the mainstream by the same means.

Butler proposed that “the normative focus of gay and lesbian practice should be placed on

the subversive and parody of power” [6]. The ballroom cross-dressing culture is carrying out some kind of subversive practice. The existence of homosexuals and transgender people is itself a deconstruction of the gender structure. They blur the gender characteristics of the body with strange and exaggerated costumes, and even imply a special language system in the dance movements, showing the body parts through the body language. Transgender men unabashedly display their transgendered female sexual identity, which is not changed by the physical part, but by the sexual markings imposed on the body. In fact, the existence of cross-dressing completely exposes the body to the markings. Symbolizing women means not only breasts and fat buttocks, but also skin, fingers, hair, facial contours, etc. When the labeling of sexuality no longer becomes the exclusiveness of a certain gender, the distinction and exclusiveness pointed to by gender production itself also disappear. In other words, the only way to eliminate gender hegemony is to eliminate sexism and no longer try to find a fixed gender category and gender identity. In this way, gender is only a fiction, so in essence, we are just wearing our physical body in the imitation of the heterosexual system. Gender has become a body style, deconstructing the natural representation of the myth of gender identity that we have always regarded as the standard. Since the naming of sexual meaning has already regarded the body as a gendered language symbol, then costumes, makeup and so on have changed and subverted the natural awareness of the body by acting on the form of the body level. It is precisely the recognition of sexual differences at the level of thinking. Conceptually speaking about the nature of gender performativity, that is, “gender is a fragile identity established in the process of time, and is established in a superficial space through repetitive actions of style / stylization” [3]. It is a temporary state that subverts the gender identity hegemony under social traditional ethics through performativity. Furthermore, the identity of their own gender has also been subverted and deconstructed with the transgression of the body by performing and parody. The theory of gender performance essentially doubts the constancy and decisiveness of the existence of the body.

We no longer believe in our body, or the correspondence between the so-called “body” and “gender” in the social culture based on compulsory heterosexuality. This requires us to rethink the possibility and diversity of identity, no longer imprisoned in the self-identity of the reproductive economy, and re-establish the subjectivity of the individual.

3.3 Arrogated Power: Different Subjects under Decentralization

Butler believes that it is the judicial system of power that produces the subject and constantly reproduces the subject under the structure of judicial power. In other words, the judicial system of power, for the purpose of controlling society and politics, has already constructed a set of standard system on how the subject is generated. As individuals under the control of the existing judicial structure, we have to adapt and obey the system to complete those matched social behaviors and political practices. The so-called subjective identity construction fundamentally serves the country's political power system and social machine. As Beauvoir said, “a person is not born a woman, but actually becomes.” [8]. And this argument is applicable to any individual in the network of social power relations.

The subject constantly constructs itself in the process of understanding desire, and desire just needs the other and the object to bear. The subject cannot escape from the comparison of the other, so the subject can only be relative. The relativity of the subject essentially reveals that the individuals within the society and among the individuals are always in a dynamic change, and the so-called cultural differences and gender differences are also the products of social construction. As mentioned above, social identity is gradually naturalized into the mainstream cultural structure through institutionalized exercises, and needs the intervention of social discipline to constantly consolidate itself. This is exactly the revelation of the performability and hypothetical nature of identity. Identity is ultimately a condensation of cultural symbols. “Man” and “woman” are just abstract and constantly produced concepts in the symbolic order of language, while men and women can only tend to this unstable concept and complete their own identity, but this does not mean that men

or women have reached the ultimate in the sense of gender, because they or they cannot truly become “man” or “woman”.

Therefore, the assumption of identity determines that identity is also a kind of parody and dress. What really establishes subjectivity is not gender and character itself, but the difference between gender and character. In the perspective of postmodernism, differences often become the means of hegemony construction; but at the same time, differences also become the possibility of deconstructing hegemony. Since everything is a practical result that can be produced and performed, the cultural behavior of sexual minorities that regards ballroom as the soil for survival and integrates cross-dressing into their daily life is precisely the dissolution and blurring of gender boundaries. Through the arrogation of body, gender and identity, they subvert the manipulation of male cultural hegemony on personality, aiming at eliminating the obliteration of subject identity by centralism and essentialism. The construction of heterogeneity and difference, in the postmodern context, is the appeal of the rejection of ontologicalism. It is under the dual dilemma of racial discrimination and gender discrimination that black homosexuals seek a kind of cultural support and cultural resistance [9].

4. Conclusion

The ballroom cross-dressing culture cannot be regarded as a protective shell for sexually vulnerable groups. Its existence itself indicates the appeal of the political identity of sexual minorities. Cross-dressing has always been political. This has always been a legal issue that a country is trying to sanction. Harlem, New York, the birthplace of ballroom, has become a unique cultural field and political space, which also fueled the gay culture and black culture. Therefore, the new power relations of sexual minorities have also quietly emerged. Up to now, disguise is no longer a disguise with survival characteristics, but a cultural symbol of the swearing identity of

sexual minorities.

Through the analyses of the survival dilemma of sexual minorities, the truth of heterosexual hegemony finally surfaced. As a kind of artificially produced products with social attributes, individuals cannot completely get rid of the constraints from social norms, even if they have a great degree of freedom in modern society. However, postmodernist gender theories confronts this pessimistic fact and tells people in a subversive way that it is precisely because individuals have undefined freedom that they can be shaped. The intersection of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and ballroom culture illustrates the subversion of essentialism behind the act of cross-dressing.

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