The Subject and Object of Art: Lacan, Rose, and Levinas.

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Western metaphysical thought – From Plato through the times of Kant – defined subjectivity in terms of an individualistic autonomy; their understanding was determined by the self-certain and self-contained subject. In general, these thinkers focused on the idea of the absolute truth. Truth being knowledge. This essay introduces the different approaches between the western metaphysical thought and the scholars Jacques Lacan, Jacqueline Rose, and Emmanuel Levinas – particularly the contributions to the notion of the ‘becoming’.

Lacan expands on Freud’s discovery of the primacy of the unconscious (the id) and concentrates on how the unconscious is structured as a language. He argues that human subjectivity is formed by three realms: The mirror stage which initiates the child into the imaginary, the language which initiates the child into the symbolic and the realm of the real which is always veiled and out of reach.

The mirror stage occurs when a child feels incomplete and looks for an image of the unified self. The child then constructs an image of subjectivity for itself, creating the illusion of a complete and coherent identity. Lacan refers to Roger Caillois’ Meduse et campagnie, as an example of the ‘phenomenon of mimicry’ in terms of adaptation, annihilation, and manifestations (73). He also defines the term ‘gaze’: “in our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded it- that is what we call the gaze” (Lacan 73). Then, he refers to the “stain” as the distinction between the function of the eye (ocelli) and that of the gaze. Furthermore, he defines the
“function of the stain and the gaze is both that which governs the gaze most secretly and that which always escapes from the grasp of that form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness” (Lacan 74). Weighing on this topic, Lacan adds that “[t]he world is all seeing, but it is not exhibitionistic– it does not provoke our gaze.” (75) There is “…the so-called waking state. There is an elision of the gaze, and an elision of the fact that not only does it look, but it also shows. (75) This means that just like when we are dreaming, “…some form of ‘sliding away’ of the subject’…is apparent” (Lacan 75).

The language realm teaches us how to relate to others through language and meanings. When we acquire language, we become conscious, but since we use language that is given to us, the desire is never fully satisfied. Psychoanalysis can help patients find more freedom to better understand the symbolic realm. Lacan argues that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” referring to Claude Lévi-Strauss and his findings on the truth of the ‘totemic’ and ‘primary classificatory’ functions, in his book titled La Pensée Sauvage (20). Lacan argues that “…–it is this linguistic structure that gives its status to the unconscious. It is this structure, in any case, that assures us that there is, beneath the term unconscious, something definable, not accessible and objectifiable” (21). At the core of these issues, Lacan notes the matter of ‘Signification’ or the ‘How’ of meaning. The sign (a word), and the signified (the thing that the sign indicates) combine to form the meaning of the ‘what’. Signification happens on the surface and beneath the surface in the unconscious. Moreover, Lacan argues that we are like ‘signs or selves in search of the other that might complete us.

The realm of the real is where we experience the world as something that has already been structured by our alienating experiences of language and imagination, and where reality is not pure anymore. Then, we live with an ongoing trauma of the distance created by language and
perception. ‘Real’ means that we cannot connect purely. This situation affects us mostly in our unconscious; it is a sense of living an incomplete relation to meaning.

For Lacan, the purpose of our drive is not to reach a goal; but rather, it is to follow its aim (the way itself), which means to circle around the object. Thus, Lacan notes that desire is considered different from a biological need, and never finds satisfaction making us vulnerable. Moreover, Lacan integrates the mentioned elements into the drive's circuit, which originates in an erogenous zone, circles the object, and returns to the erogenous zone. This circuit is structured by the three grammatical voices: the active (to see); the reflexive (to see oneself); the passive (to make oneself be seen).

Jacqueline Rose uses psychoanalysis, theory, and film studies to address the subject of feminism. Rose notes the importance of feminine concerns, sexual difference, and fantasy as key ideas to start an interrogation on contemporary theory. Rose applies Lacan’s notions of the gaze and language to interpret issues of representation, sexual identity and human relations – and doing so for the sake of feminist concerns yet with cautions raised about feminist existentialisms regarding sexual differences. Rose’s idea of the ‘becoming’ is that the unity of the self is independent, and thus, the person is the one changing. Rose notes that ‘these images require a reading which neither coheres them into a unity, nor struggles to get behind them into a realm of truth. The only possible reading is one which repeats their fragmentation of a cultural world they both echo and refuse’ (Rose 230).

To comprehend the process, Rose looks at the relationship between the observer and the camera to detect ‘positions within the apparatus’, to determine ‘the status of the object to be recorded in relation to the apparatus,’ or to examine ‘the status of the image itself’ (mirror stage) (Rose 168-169). She notes, “The same way that I cannot see myself from the place that the other
is looking at me,” (Rose 165) referring to the acknowledgement of the other and its independence.

In each of these representations of the observer and the camera, Rose writes that “the virtual nature of image, object or apparatus seems to be displaceable; the experiment of the ‘inverted vase’ can be used to produce a virtual image of a real object, which is in fact upside down and out of sight” (169).

Summarizing, Rose sees that: “Language can be used to rupture the smoothness of the visual language, but it is language as pure mark uninformed by the psychoanalytic apprehension of the sign. Cultural artefacts are presented as images within images to rob them of the values they seem naturally to embody, but the fundamental sexual polarity of that culture is not called into account. Finally, meaning is seen to reside in these images as supplement, allegory, or fragment, but with no sexual desire or trace– the concept of textuality is lifted out of psychoanalytic and literary theory but without the sexual definition that was its chief impetus and support” (230). In many instances, “…language, sexuality and the unconscious in their mutual relation appear as a present-absent which all these moments seem to brush against, or elicit, before falling away” (Rose 230). The elisions are: “purity of the visual signifier and the unconscious as mystique (no language); language as rupture of the iconicity of the visual sign (no unconscious); cultural artefacts as indictment of the stereotype (no sexual difference); reading as supplement, process of fragment (no sexual determinacy of the signifier or of visual space)” (Rose 230-231).

Rose refers to the role of the contemporary artists engaged in sexual representation noting that “their move is not therefore one of (moral) corrective. They draw on the tendencies they also seek to displace, and clearly belong.” (231) Moreover, she affirms that artists’ emphasis on
sexual representations has specific effects such as: adding to the “...cultural artefact or stereotype the political imperative of feminism which holds the image accountable for the reproduction of the norms...it adds the idea of a sexuality which goes beyond the issue of content to take in the parameters of visual form (not just what we see but how we see it – visual space as more than the domain of simple recognition)” (Rose 231).

For Levinas, subjectivity refers to the priority of the ‘Other,’ you impose an identity to the ‘Other,’ and you decide who the ‘Other’ is. Thus, everything needs “to conform to the subject and the subject is the other” (Levinas 70). Levinas pays attention to how we relate to the world and one another across a field of ‘intentionalities’ (‘Phenomenology’), or how we lean into the world as already interpretive beings. Phenomenology and Ontology are his ways of getting away from ‘objectifying’ modes of thinking and relating to eventually becoming inclusive and applying the ontology of the structure of ‘totality.’

Levinas was inspired by Heidegger who was focused on the question of: what is the meaning of being and how do we experience it in our lives? Unlike Heidegger, Levinas was very concerned with the primacy of ethics and of the Self-Other, or the Face of the Other, challenging Heidegger’s ontology and the Hegelian recognition. Levinas, being a Jewish scholar, connects the Self-Other with the spiritual sense of manifestation of something divine in the ‘Other,’ calling for a responsibility or ‘transcendence’ through the ‘Other.’ He rejects egotism and calls for being ethical and rational as part of his concept of responsibility, intimacy and totality. Levinas notes that:

Human subjectivity, interpreted as consciousness, is always activity. I can always assume what is imposed on me. I always have the capacity to consent to what I submit to and to put a good face on a bad situation. Thus, everything happens as if I were at the beginning,
except at the approach of my fellowman. I am recalled to a responsibility never
contracted, inscribed on the face of an Other. Nothing is more passive than this prior
questioning of all freedom. It must be thought through with acuity. Proximity is not a
consciousness of proximity. It is an obsession which is not an over enlarged
consciousness, but counter consciousness, reversing consciousness. It is an event that
strips consciousness of its initiative, that undoes me and puts me before an Other in a
state of guilt; an event that puts me in accusation. (Levinas 58)

Levinas notes that the relation with the Other is time and that one moment pushes
another. Time cannot be measured. It is the relation to yourself, and it is not related to the
presence. You call upon the ‘Other’ for a response and a responsibility. The temporality of the
inter-human opens-up the meaning of the ‘Other.’ Levinas adds:

A relationship without simultaneity of terms: unless we are to say that time itself lasts
in the guise of this relationship/non-relationship, this question. Time being understood in
its dia-chrony and not as a "pure form of sensibility." The soul in its dia-chronous
temporality in which retention does not annul lapse, nor protention the new
the soul in the passive synthesis of aging and of the to-come \a-venir\ in its life, would
be the originary question, the to-God [d-Dieu] itself. Time as question: an unbalanced
relationship with the Infinite, with what cannot be comprehended. Nor encompassed,
nor touched. (Levinas 73)

All differences are put away, and Levinas notes that “the real world is transformed into a
poetic world—that is, into a world without beginning where one thinks without knowing what
one thinks” (25).
Levinas believes in the imposition of totality and the reduction of a concept and possession. He believes that everything is becoming, and that there is a price to pay for this simplification: “to seek the I as a singularity within a totality made up of relationships between singularities that cannot be subsumed under a concept is to ask whether a living person does not have the power to judge the history in which he is involved; that is, whether the thinker as me—beyond everything he does with what he possesses, creates and leaves behind” (Levinas 25).

Furthermore, he notes that singularity is insufficient, we must consider the experience of the other: “No concept corresponds to the I as a being. That is why the very framework of the “experience” of the other cannot be sketched out by a labor of abstraction applied to oneself and that would end up with the “concept” of the I” (Levinas 26). Our eyes construct everything that relates to the objective reality. The conceptual reality is now dead—a concept that you apply-generalization is now dead. “The I do know itself as reflected in all the objective reality that has constituted it or with which it has collaborated; hence, it knows itself in terms of a conceptual reality. But if this conceptual reality exhausted his being, a living man would not differ from a dead one. Generalization is death; it inserts the I into, and dissolves it in, the generality of its work. The irreplaceable singularity of the I come from its life” (Levinas 26).

Contrary to Deleuzze and Guattari who argue that freedom comes first, for Levinas, freedom comes later.

Contrary to Western metaphysics that separates art from the philosophical discourse, Rose and Levinas’ philosophical discourse of the subject/object relations and the ‘becoming,’ can be compared with their concepts of ‘the relationship between the observer and the camera,’ and of the ‘art as the other,’ respectively. These two concepts are exemplified in the art of Ann Hamilton called ONEEVERYONE (Fig.1).
Considering the idea of the ‘Becoming’ as the process through which things appear to us as existing; it is, then, a process of change of the conscious and the unconscious. Analizing the work of Ann Hamilton’s ONEEVERYONE, as per Landmarks Director Andree Bober, the artwork is a:

…relationship between photographer, camera, and subject …participants stood behind a semi-transparent membrane that focused only the points of the body touching the material. The subjects, directed by the artist to turn in various ways, could not see through the membrane and relied on the sound of her voice for guidance. Hamilton describes this condition as analogous to the experience of medical care… they accept vulnerability and extend trust. Her resulting portraits share an ethereal quality. They capture expressions of intense inward focus as the subjects. (Bober, hamilton-landmarks.org)

It makes me think of Levinas’ idea of an art object that could be the ‘face’ for the phenomenology of empathy. How could this interrelationship of the object of art and the subject trigger empathic praxis? Can Ann Hamilton’s ONEEVERYONE make me think of people’s everyday struggles? Could objects of art be the ‘other’? Levinas notes, “Can things take on a face? Isn’t art an activity that gives things a face? Isn’t the facade of a house a house that is looking at us? The analysis conducted thus far is not enough to give the answer. Yet we wonder whether rhythm’s impersonal gait--fascinating, magic--is not art’s substitute for sociality, the face, and speech” (Levinas 10).

ONEEVERYONE is the public art project by the American artist Ann Hamilton at the University of Texas in Austin. The curator of this exhibit, Jim Butcher, writes that “There is a primal reassurance in being touched, in knowing that someone else, someone
close to you, wants to be touching you. There is a bone-deep security that goes with the
brush of a human hand, a silent, reflex-level affirmation that someone is near, that
someone cares.” (Butcher, hamilton-landmarks.org)

ONEEVERYONE art object is a catalyst to reconnect us with our singularity and the others.
Levinas notes: “This going beyond is not due solely to the prior appearance of the “world”
whenever we touch what can be handled” (Levinas 7). Possibly referring to the concept that just
thinking about and looking at the world is not the same as dealing with it. We enter an empathic
praxis by recognizing the stories of each character in ONEEVERYONE. It is One and everyone
who gives face to the other. The becoming is an event.
Describing ONEEVERYONE Andree Bober, adds: Faces are elusive, obscured by the material
that only renders sharply the contact of touch….a different kind of portrait emerges—one that is
at once intimate and ineffable…. the commonalities of peoples in all their manifestations; and the
power and poignancy of communal exchange. (Bober, hamilton-landmarks.org)
(Fig. 1) ONEEVERYONE, A project by Ann Hamilton • commissioned by Landmarks, the public art program of The University of Texas at Austin
Work Cited

Hamilton, Ann. ONEEVERYONE. hamilton-landmarks.org. The University of Texas. 2017

