Virtual Bodies, Imagined Landscapes: Marginal Corporealities and the Ethical Space

Fiorenzo Iuliano

Department of American and Cultural Studies

Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Italy

f_iuliano@yahoo.it

This paper aims at highlighting some aspects of postmodern reflection about the formation and representation of identity in the urban scenery. Starting from some of the by now canonical issues raised by Jean Baudrillard, such as simulacra, symbolical exchange, iperreality, I mean to relate the dynamics of the "hyperreal" city, as realized by media and the information system, to the pivotal question of the construction and deconstruction of subjecthood, with particular reference to gender and sexual identity. Two different landscapes (the periphery of Nebraska, and the metropolitan reality of Bombay) will be analysed through the layered and decentered perspective provided by two movies (*Boys Don't Cry* and *A Mermaid Called Aida*) revolving around the interaction between the urban scenery and the construction of the marginal transsexual identity.

1

In this brief contribution I wish to speak of the construction of sexual identities in different – urban and non urban – contexts, moving from a critique of the work of the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, and trying to confront his theories with two movies, which feature the lives of two transgender persons.

The movies I will be referring to have been released in the past years in the Us and in India. They are, respectively, *Boys Don't Cry* and *A Mermaid Called Aida*, and narrate the lives of two transgender persons in two 'difficult' places, Falls City in rural Nebraska and postcolonial Bombay/Mumbai. *Boys Don't Cry* reports the tragic case of Brandon Teena, who was, as Judith Halberstam states, "a young white person who had been born a woman, but who was living as a man" (Halberstam 2005, 23) and was killed by two close friends of the girl he was dating at that time. *A Mermaid Called Aida* is a documentary released by the Indian filmmaker Riyad Vinci Wadia in 1996, which deals with the history of the most famous Indian transsexual, Adi Banaji, who in the 'postcolonial' metropolis of Bombay/Mumbai succeeds in becoming a woman, the "fabulous glamorous Aida."

Let me start whith Baudrillard's theme of hyperreality, questioned in most of his work. According to Baudrillard, the world we inhabit is marked by the end of every original presence and positive meaning, and is reduced to its representation. The core of hyperreality lies in the assumption that representation precedes reality, and informs it, providing it with its significance and epistemic frame. When Baudrillard theorizes the notions of simulation and dissimulation, he indirectly underlines that the problem of the real and the question of the origins is an old one, which implies that the task of finding a primitive and original reality is not only impossible, but, nowadays, completely outdated.

These movies are powerful enough to radically question the complex system of hyperreality theorized by Baudrillard, because of their strong ethical stance – their power to address an ethical interpellation, which reconfigures any theoretical construction about media, simulation, and metropolitan reality. To some extent, by configuring spatiality and marginality through the position and the visual frame of "anomalous" bodies and sexualities, they mark the emergence of ethics as an alternative space, a dimension capable of preceding and exceeding both the structures of subjecthood and the limits of urban and/or non urban space. My aim is to trace the hypothetic trajectory of a transitional space, which marks the shifting of the body spatiality and configuration from the cultural constructions of postmodernity – hyperreality and the theories that could be related to it – to a new 'ethical' stance from which reality can be read and filtered. The ethical space amounts to a geography of recognition, a dimension marked by the encounter of the bodies and the political gesture of a mutual response, which breaks away from the omnivorous spatiality of postmodernity and its tendency to absorb and simultaneously reconstruct individual and bodily identities, and is grounded on the 'open space' produced by the encounter.

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When Baudrillard theorizes transsexualism, in his book *The Transparency of Evil*, he states that "We are all transsexual" (1990, 20) – which amounts to saying that transsexualism is the actual condition of postmodern sexuality, a sexuality that goes beyond its natural and original implications (reproduction and/or pleasure), and hinges on the power of mutation, of biological transformation, of artifice. Transsexualism, according to Baudrillard, represents the historical moment that follows sexual liberation, and at the same time its paradoxical but inevitable nemesis. The theory of simulacra, once referred and applied to sexuality, leads us to consider derivative and artificial sex, whether symbolically produced by the mediatic imagination or in the operating theater, as the model that precedes what once was the original,

the 'natural' sexuality, the organic harmony of bodies and sexes. In his famous essay about simulacra, Baudrillard writes:

> When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality -- a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us -- a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence. (Baudrillard 1981, 6-7)

The transgender body is a body deprived of any intimate relation to an alleged notion of nature and origin – it can stand for a prosthetic body, a body whose truthfulness is produced by the technological process from which it springs, and that marks a clear and blatant divide from any received idea of nature as something given once for all, and not subjected to interventions or transformations of any kind.

Theories about post-human body prove to be crucial to this kind of theme. Suffice it to think of what has been theorized about the cyborg corporeality and its power of disrupting the organic structure of the body as conceived by the humanistic tradition. Cyborg, in the work of Donna Haraway, is not only the prosthetic body, produced by the encounter of natural organicity and technological devices, but a rhetorical device capable of questioning the unity of the discourse about the monological linearity of the humanistic subjects and its metaphysical and moral counterparts.

According to the thought of Baudrillard, we could think of the transgender body as a simulacrum, in the sense that Baudrillard gives to this word, to the extent that it escapes the limits provided by a 'natural' order of things.

As Baudrillard argues, the emergence of simulacra marks the end of nature and originality as we used to know them, and the search for foundational origins gives way to the unceasing play between simulacra – that is, between the copy *and* the copy, in a movement that finally dismantles the primacy of any ontological, metaphysical or the like, system, unveiling its insurgent (and historically marked) loss of foundational nature. And also the human body, once it has lost its edenic and original dimension, comes to be denaturalised and made equivalent to a sign – a simple element in a net of signifiers, deprived of any external reference, and simply doomed to be caught in a process of unending exchange with the other signs belonging to the same system. (Baudrillard 1976, 50-86). In her by now classical manifesto, Donna Haraway reminds us that

> A cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity … It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. (Haraway 1985, 150-1)

– perhaps the innocence that belongs to 'pure' creatures, a sort of 'paradise lost' which is by now impossible to recover and to enter again.

In her essay about contra-sexuality, the Spanish philosopher Beatriz Preciado lists some practices and instances defined as 'contra-sexual', among which the transsexual body is included along with a heterogeneous number of 'items' belonging to ostensibly different (bodily and semantic) fields: drugs, sadomasochism, virtual sex, people affected by AIDS, and so on. (Preciado 2000) On the other hand, Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) argues that the attribution of sex to a baby is not automatic and immediate but sometimes implies a number of scientific and medical practices, so as to demonstrate that the attribution of sex is a

voluntary and conscious practice and not a totally natural one. This theory is not so different from the operation that Judith Butler describes as 'girling the girl', that is to say, attributing a sexual identity by pronouncing the illocutory statement "It's a girl" or "It's a boy", which relies upon a pre-given authority by which it is, in turn, empowered. (Butler 2003).

So far with sexuality. Let's see what happens when the problems of sexuality are connected with the urban landscape. When Baudrillard deals with the city and the urban space, he emphasizes the central role played only by the metropolitan reality in our political and epistemic frame, inasmuch as it comes to be the symbolical locus which, simultaneously, enacts and epitomizes the process of signs exchange and of the subsumption of the real under the process of code trading, which is crucial to understand our postmodern condition, characterized as it is by an incessant flux of codes and signs and by parallel, necessary processes of coding production and recombination.

Elizabeth Grosz, too, dealt with this problem. She hypothesizes, in a 1995 book, a posthuman and postmodern system capable of integrating bodies and cities in a mutual exchange, a model of interface:

> What I am suggesting is a model of the relations between bodies and cities that sees them, not as megalithic total entities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between substances to form linkages, machines, provisional and often temporary sub- or micro-groupings. This model is practical, based on the productivity of bodies and cities in defining and establishing each other. (108)

However, this suggestive idea, clearly indebted to the thought of Gilles Deleuze, fails to account for extra-ordinary circumstances, which, I think, are powerful enough to cause this aseptic theoretical frame to vacillate: what kind of body is implied in such a scenario? What kind of city? What happens if the body is, so to speak, a "different" body, and what happens if the city is a peripheral or a rural one, or a Third World and postcolonial city? What is the role played by the systems of information and communication that link bodies and cities together? The pure idea of a machinic assemblage of bodies and territories, thus, needs to face the specific requirements of historically and socially marked bodies and territories.

The peripheral and postcolonial realities of Falls City and Mumbai could stand for two sites 'outside' the central space of production and circulation of modern and sanitized sexual identities – western metropolitan scenery informs and defines sexual models and norms, a paradigm that has been defined as 'metrosexuality'. On the other hand, in an essay devoted to the sexualiztion of suburbia, John Hartley writes:

> Contemporary suburbia is the physical location of a newly privatized, feminized, suburban, cunsumerized public sphere. But suburbia is itself a diffused and dislocated phenomenon. … I would argue that the major contemporary political issues, including environmental, ethnic, sexual and youth movements, were all generated *outside* the classic public sphere, but that they were (and are) informed, shaped, developed and contested within the privatized public sphere of suburban media consumerism. (Hartley 182).

Theories about suburban and peripheral spaces are entangled with issues of identity and the construction of the marginal subjecthood. The cinematic perspective renders this connections more complicated, insofar as it creates a scopic field which questions the position of the spectator/observer and its semiotic and political role in the rendering of the bodies and places portrayed. This open (visual) field could be conceived as the first step towards the geography of the ethical encounter I was referring to before, just because it configures a different frame of spatiality, in which the observer and the observed are encompassed in the same epistemic and visual frame, and caught in a play of mutual recognition.

The act of speaking from the margins of the margins (from a marginal sexual identity in a third-world country or in a peripheral context), from the extreme location of marginality, finally amounts to the complete erasure of the very notion of 'origin': no organic body from which the "newly born woman" can derive her identity, no repressed content upon which she can ground her foundation as an individual, no authentically national (in this case, American/Indian) origins to which she can symbolically attribute her cultural- (and also gender-) specific legacy.

We could argue that the movies lie in order to establish truth – as the transgender bodies whose stories are narrated replicate nature in order to establish *their own* nature – and, on a further layer, as the peripheral scenery (which is the background chosen for these stories) needs to be represented according to the traditional stereotypes ascribed to the margins of the geography of modernity, in order to predicate the fracture of the dyad center/periphery in the wake of global communication. So, three orders of simulation would be needed in order to establish a temporary and precarious paradigm of reality, capable of subsuming the questions of replication of the nature, otherwise quite uneasy to handle. According to Gayatri Ch. Spivak, the female subaltern was not able to speak; on the contrary, in the (alleged) new order of hyperreality, the body of the new (former?) subaltern is, literally, "made to speak" – but it can only speak with the forked tongue provided by the contradictory dynamics of the new global space, tracing its simultaneous belonging to a marginal location and to a global and globalized apparatus of representation and configuration of roles and identities (or rather, roles *as* identities).

At the beginning of my work, I was thinking of outlining the way through which the imagined bodies produced by the politics of gender construction encounter parallel mechanisms of identity construction provided by peripheral landscapes. Both Falls City and Mumbai represent two peripheral realities, at least from the point of view of a queer person, external to the landmarks of modernity and progress, ruled by conservative political forces and, to such extent, 'orientalized' by the global gaze of postmodern metrosexuality, which tend to represent them as different but at the same time similar lands of archaic and anti-modern traditions and styles of life.

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But the reasons of my critique lie in what I have defined above as the ethical stance implied in the movies. There is a "political grammar" of cinema that constructs the actual bodies of Brandon and Aida.

These bodies mark the places they inhabit, define a new sense of belonging to their spaces, and, at the same time, redefine the traditional paradigms through which two cities so distant and different are usually shaped. The body and the city interact in a mutual exchange – and the fact that this exchange occurs on the symbolical and fictive plane provided by the cinematic eye reinforces the idea that places are continually reshaped and re-framed by both the bodies that inhabit them, and the filter through which they are observed.

So, my perspective upon these two different and parallel stories is to some extent puzzled. Where does the order of simulacra end, and where does the order of reality begin? And above all, does an order of simulacra, as such, actually exist?

What I want to suggest, and what accounts for my critique, is the emergence of what has been defined as the 'naked life' (Agamben 1995), the 'precariousness' of existence (Butler 2004a), definitely the utmost experience of the burden of the body, its irreducible materiality, and the subsequent 'interpellation' addressed by the 'body of the Other' that, in this case, comes to be the body *as* the Other. Butler writes, drawing on Emmanuel Levinas, "To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself." (Butler 2004a, 134) The two movies,

and their contradictory relation with the necessity of telling 'the truth', bring the presence of the 'naked life' and its strong ethical and geopolitical weight into my discussion about the power of representation and the order of simulacra.

At stake there is an ethical stance that cannot be subsumed nor reduced to the order of reproductive or mediatic representation, an ethical stance that goes beyond the theoretical assumptions of hyperreality and that constitutes, according to Butler (and Levinas) an 'interpellation', a claim of ethical responsibility towards the Other and for the Other. That sense of precariousness and of naked life is the powerful limit opposed to the order of simulacra theorized by Baudrillard, and applied by Baudrillard to the epistemic meaning of the transgender body.

According to this new perspective, the political role of the transgender body as it is portrayed by the movies I am referring to is interpellated to epitomize the sense of vulnerability and precariousness instanced by the 'open structures' of transgenderism itself. Far from being the symbol of a new technological or cybernetic order, it embodies the possibility of subjecthood and individual position to be continually and eternally rewritten and reconfigured. Identity construction comes to be not any longer the enclosed space occupied by an as much defined 'bodily' (i. e. phenomenological) identity, but the unstable and shifting self-positioning of a body continually reshaped by the space it inhabits – and, at the same time, continually reshaping it.

At the end of an essay devoted to the case of David, an intersexual person, Judith Butler states:

> David does not precisely occupy a new world, since he is still, even within the syntax which brings about his "I", still positioned somewhere between the norm and its failure. And he is, finally, neither one; he is the human in its anonymity, as that which we do not yet know how to name or that which sets a limit on all naming. And in that sense, he is the anonymous – and critical – condition of the human as it speaks itself at the limits of what we think we know" (Butler 2004b, 74).

The notion of the anonymity of the human runs parallel to the idea of anonymous landscapes, territories that cannot be enclosed in the present geography of power and, for that reason, are marginal and peripheral. The anonymity of the human, moreover, speaks at the interstices of our systems of knowledge, and can emerge as a voice that is continually silenced, repressed, and obliterated by the universal norms of the sanctioned and sanitized sexual identity.

The movies I have chosen are paradigmatic just because they offer a decentered perspective, moving from the margins of the modern world, from two peripheral places that stand, symbolically, for the "simulacra" of the former, XIX century, empire, and a marginal location inside the global and neocolonial empire. The power of marginality succeeds in reconfiguring our direction of knowledge, and our sense of belonging to the global world. The epistemic twist that follows the striking violence of replication and simulacra is molded on this new geography of uncertainty. Cities and places acquire a temporary and provisional – maybe a precarious – centrality, which strictly depends on the emerging precarious bodies that inhabit them, and on the gaze cast upon them by an as much decentered and dislocated anonymous observer.

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