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Reception, deception, illusion and magic: feminism and theoretical practice

This article is an exploration of the relationship between ideology theory, feminism and "theoretical practice". It is an attempt to formulate a "figurative semiotics" in which theory is "seen" to be done. There is a tendency within feminist art whereby, as a strategy to address "actual readers" and to concretely affect the "real" world, artists humorously exploit the association of art, magic, illusion and deception in order to shock, move or activate their audiences. We argue that such feminist art, which humorously enhances art's potentially carnalising impact on a gendered spectator, can be linked to a longer tradition of ideology-sensitive picaresque art which humorously keeps alive an awareness of art's power to deceive.

Resepsie, illusie, bedrog en die magiese: die feminisme en teoretiese praktyk

Hierdie artikel is 'n ondersoek na die verhouding tussen ideologieteorie, feminisme en "teoretiese praktyk". Dit is 'n poging om volgens die "figuratiewe semiotiek" te werk te gaan, waardeur teoretiese onderskeidinge "visueel waargeneem" word. Daar is 'n onderskeibare neiging by feministiese kunstenaars om die verwantskappe tussen kuns, illusionisme, bedrog en die magiese op humoristiese wyse in te span as 'n strategie om toeskouers te skok, te ontroer en te aktiveer. Die outeurs argumenteer dat hierdie soort feministiese kuns, met 'n liggaamlike en geslagtelike impak op toeskouers, gekoppel kan word aan 'n langer tradisie van ideologie-sensitiewe pikareske kuns, waarin kuns se vermoë om te bedrieg op humoristiese wyse lewendig gehou is.

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Since the 1980s, in the wake of the paradigm shift in literary studies that brought the reader and the audience to the centre of attention, the German art historian Wolfgang Kemp has promoted reception aesthetics[1] as an approach in both the Anglo-American and the German contexts of art history. For two recent orientating articles in reception aesthetics written as introductions to art historiography and theory — *Kunstgeschichte. Eine Einführung* (Belting *et al* 1986) and *The subjects of art history* (Cheetham *et al* 1998) — Kemp chose to present his model by means of an interpretation of a painting by Rembrandt's pupil Nicolas Maes: *The eavesdropper* (1655) (Figure 1).

1. The curtain

Maes, who produced a large group of paintings about eavesdropping, associates this theme with a curtain in this painting alone. The motif of the represented curtain which simultaneously blocks vision and stimulates the imagination concerning the invisible events behind it is central to Kemp's discussion. He records that fitting curtains to works of art is as old as the tradition of painting itself.

Religious art derives its effect from the dialectics of unveiling and concealing; it deals with cult images hidden in the most holy places — behind curtains, or in shrines or folding altars whose interiors are revealed only on high feast days (Kemp 1998: 191).

The first secular art collectors probably adopted the custom of veiling pictures from the religious sphere, and seventeenth-century depictions of art collections usually show some paintings fitted with curtains, probably to protect them and increase their aesthetic value (Kemp 1998: 192). Illusionistically painted picture curtains and

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1 The approach of reception aesthetics has offered this article some inspiring leads, but we would like to place this influential approach within the context of a broader hermeneutics. This means that we aim to present an overall perspective which can not only accommodate both generalisation and individualisation without tension, but also maintain a delicate balance between the interests of the artist, the work, and the reader or viewer. Like reception aesthetics, various postmodernisms tend to make too little of what a work has to say about its own interpretation: an imbalance which Umberto Eco (1979) has sought to correct in recent years, after having famously explored the role of the reader.
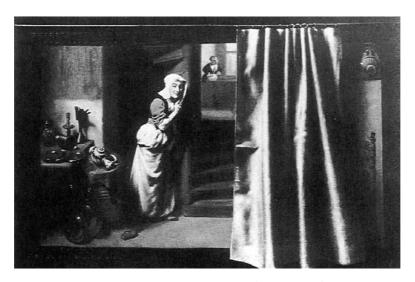
Figure 1: Nicolas Maes, *The eavesdropper* (1655). Panel, 45.7 x 71.1 cm.
London: Collection of Harold Samuel.

frames became increasingly popular in the second half of the seventeenth century.

Maes's painting represents an eavesdropping maidservant who interacts directly with spectators, motioning them to be silent. Her double role as the accomplice of the voyeuristic audience as well as a character in the narrative is mirrored in the function of the painted curtain: to activate the beholder by means of illusion as well as disillusion.

The motif of the illusionistically painted curtain, in the context of its early introduction into the theory of the reception aesthetics of art history, introduces our argument. Representations of curtains, those "everyday instruments of veiling and unveiling", revealing and concealing, have the ability in art to mediate between art and the audience, fiction and reality. The curtain is a substitute for the invisible events behind it. The absence of the representation of these events excites the spectator's imagination.

In this sense the curtain may also be regarded as a metaphor for the mediation between theory and practice — an invitation to "see"

more concretely what is veiled by theories and concepts. The absence of real events and objects in the expositions of theories and concepts excites the imagination and is strongly suggestive of concrete phenomena. The metaphor of the curtain, then, introduces our attempt at "theoretical practice".

2. Theory/practice

Certain postmodern efforts to bridge practice and theory have come to be associated with feminism. The postmodern project of denying the legitimacy of various Enlightenment dichotomies, including that of theory/practice, has been extended in feminist thought. Feminists like the Marxist- and neo-Freudian-inspired Sandra Harding (1992: 351; 1983a; 1983b) characterise as "masculine" the use of methodologies that valorise the preferred member of such dichotomised pairs. They believe that such pairs formed and still form the structural basis of the "male European worldview and mindset". On the other hand, they attribute standardised cognitive traits like concrete thinking to women. Even though this claim is inconsistent with the denial of an essential female type by most feminists, it must be conceded that recent feminist thought is characterised by a kind of "practicality", whereby theory is assumed to be in principle subservient to practical interests such as power or emancipation (Klee 1997: 181-205).

However, though the conceptual domination of theory by practice represents one of the pitfalls of feminism, this does not mean that theory may not be intertwined with practical goals. In our view "theory" results from thinking abstractly about any of the various "aspects of the world" (terminology also used by Chomsky, among others). This theoretical mode of thinking is to be explained as embedded in the practical contexts of the life-world (in a sense similar to that in which Habermas uses the term). It is from these contexts that theoretical thinking proceeds and to them that it always returns. In this sense the practical may be said to enclose the theoretical.

It is characteristic of ideology theory to isolate the social and cultural aspects of the world from other aspects, and to link them to the theme of domination. Ideology theory is anchored in the practical contexts of the everyday world in which (female) ideology theorists

exist, within an interconnected series of life-worlds such as family, public life, city, state, and so on. By broadening the limits of "the political" (the ideological), feminist ideology theorists like Nancy Fraser (1989) encompass issues classically viewed as "private", "personal" and "domestic" within its field. However, the danger for feminists lies in letting these life-world contexts be imprinted on the fabric of theory itself, forgetting that theory (to be worthy of the name) distances itself from the everyday environment in which we find ourselves — even when this environment is itself the object of study. Like the curtain, theory brings us very close to practice, while simultaneously estranging us from practice.

It is important to note that ideology theory — like any kind of theorising — must not automatically be assumed to contradict our ordinary everyday experience. Often the theories belonging to various disciplines will convey an understanding on a level different from that of ordinary experience. On the other hand, in certain cases, theory will in fact run counter to everyday experience (as in the case of the theoretical world-pictures presented in nuclear physics). At least some ideology theories (some feminisms) also seem to fall into this latter category, attempting to expose the falseness of our everyday social experiences.

3. Metaphors and figures

In our endeavour to "do" theory practically we draw inspiration from, but also differ with Mieke Bal's semiotic version of "theoretical practice" (Bal 1994: 44). For Bal, the practice of theory is regarded as analogous to metaphorically substituting words, concepts, frames of reference or objects for one another. The "rubbing against each other" of the substituted terms produces changes in the perspectives on each, revealing unexpected meanings by hiding others.

However, it should be noted that metaphorical substitution as such defines neither theory nor practice. Metaphorical conceptualisation occurs in ordinary everyday contexts of speech and cognition as well as in scientific or theoretical thinking, and it can also occur in the context of theoretical practice. In fact, any fully developed (ideo-

logy) theory will comprise a network of metaphors and should of course also be sensitive to metaphors in the discourses it studies.

The metaphoricity which we wish to link to ideology and to theoretical practice forms part of what we choose to call a "figurative semiotics". We use the inclusive encyclopaedic concept of "figure" to denote concepts such as symbol, sign, metaphor, model, narrative, and so on, for the sake of maximal generalisation. This is desirable from the viewpoint of "theory" (or one of the hermeneutic poles of theory). Ultra-technical distinctions between the various figures are often immaterial to the figurative logic we wish to trace here.[2]

In our "figurative" version of theoretical practice we aim neither simply to "theorise", to "espouse" or "illustrate" theories, nor to "apply" theories to concrete cases, but rather, even more imaginatively, to let theory be "seen" to be done. We hope to align a network of (theoretical) concepts with a series of images, visually demonstrating those concepts at levels of the utmost individuality and even sensuality. One can even go a step further by not simply aligning concepts and images, but rather attempting to distil (a necessary recourse to metaphor here) concepts (and arguments) from the juxtaposition of selected images. This very metaphor allows for the fact that one usually has foreknowledge of what can actually be distilled from something. For theory cannot really be extracted from pure singularity. What the distillation process can do is to convey the visual import and connotations of those concepts and arguments. In this our version of theoretical practice differs from that of Mieke Bal, because we do not "metaphorise" between concepts, words, and frames of reference, but rather in terms of "imagining" and "imaging" or "figuring" theory.

This ultra-concrete way of "doing" theory does not in itself contradict more conventional theorising or even a very abstract and formalised "structuralist" type of theorising. However, within the context of a kind of "depth hermeneutics", there is space for both the ultra-concrete and the ultra-general, and they are actually related to each other as different levels of analysis.

In addition, we aim to link the focus of our "figurative semiotics" with what we take to be the central theme of ideology theory, namely

2   For views on a "semiological hermeneutics", cf Visagie 1990.

relations of domination. Such relations are not only situated at the social level; they also emerge at both the level of conceptualisation and that of semiotic figuration. It is from this combined viewpoint that our "imaging" or "figuring" of theory will be attempted. Ultimately we will even endeavour to metaphorise our own viewpoint.

4. Feminism, magic and ideology theory

Let us return to the motif of the *trompe l'oeil* curtain. We wish to argue that the represented curtain does not only imply artistic illusion and disillusion, but also refers to those aspects of artistic reception usually considered to be naïve and often associated with "primitives" and children.

The motif of the painted curtain evokes the well-known antique legend of the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasius to establish who held the highest rank in painting. According to Pliny, Parrhasius won. Zeuxis, whose name remains associated with this well-known legend, fooled only the birds which approached to peck at his painted grapes, but Parrhasius's painted curtain fooled even another painter, Zeuxis himself, who approached the painting to draw the curtain away. The cardinal point is that the deception is considered perfect only when the ability to expose illusion through reason, an ability possessed exclusively by humankind, is undermined. This subversion of reason is associated with magic and sleight of hand.

In their *Legend, myth and magic in the image of the artist*, Kris & Kurz (1979) have shown that variations on this legend about the confusion between reality and illusion characterise artists' biographies from classical antiquity to the present day. The legend of Zeuxis and Parrhasius pertains to objects — a curtain and grapes — but is related to another group of anecdotes with the same underlying motif, concerning human images mistaken for living beings. One example is Daedalus's lifelike statue of Hercules, which tricked Hercules himself into throwing a stone at it. This equation of the picture and the depicted is also associated with a belief in magic. The common and centuries-old diffusion of the belief in the magical powers of images is not a phenomenon of the past, and in its extreme forms is still evident in iconoclasm and pornography.

The motif of the illusionistic curtain, then, does not only suggest illusion and disillusion. It also implies the subversion of reason, deception and magic.

In contemporary research it has been important for feminists in various disciplines to stress that visual images, in their construction and support of ideologies related to gender, influence the reality of people's everyday lives. To this effect, feminist artists, writers and theorists have stressed the affective power exerted by art over actual, real-life gendered viewers.

Feminist narratology is a case in point. In explaining one of the central concepts of narratology, namely focalisation, Gerard Genette concentrates on the linguistic construction of texts, whereas Mieke Bal realises her broader "project" of investigating "subject positions" in works of art by associating focalisation with character and personalised watching. Bal's position can be seen partly as a feminist expansion of the issues of narratology. It has even been suggested that feminist narratology distinguishes itself from the practice of narratology in general by its treatment of characters largely as if they were people, rather than "as patterns of recurrence, motifs which are continually recontextualised in other motifs" (Lanser 1991: 613).

There is a tendency within feminist art whereby, as a strategy to address "actual readers" and to concretely affect the "real" world, artists humorously exploit the association of art, magic, illusionism and deception in order to shock, move or activate their audiences. We would like to argue, however, that such a feminist art, which humorously enhances art's potentially carnalising impact on a gendered spectator, can be linked to a longer tradition of ideology-sensitive picaresque[3] art which humorously keeps alive an awareness of art's power to deceive. A comparison of the strategies used in such feminist art and in earlier picaresque painting opens up new perspectives. Like

3   Cf section 5 below for a short exposition of the term "picaresque". Cf also [De Villiers] Human (1999), De Villiers Human & A van Wyk, "Metaphors of excess: eruption and outburst", in *Blood, sweat and tears: body fluids in art and art history*, a forthcoming volume of essays edited by Bruce Barber and Mary Douglas, as well as De Villiers Human, "Art and magic: the mask of wildness", in *Africa and Europe: myths, masks and masquerades*, forthcoming proceedings of the 2001 conference held at the University of the Witwatersrand.

the painted curtain, such comparisons are revealing in that they also conceal.

Many philosophers and historians consider the seventeenth century to be the starting point of "modernity". In line with Stephen Toulmin's (1990) project of discovering the "agenda of modernity", one might try to recover lost or marginalised "pre-modern" themes that can be usefully taken up in order to enrich our understanding of post-modernism.

Jan Steen's most exquisite evocation of the deceptive illusionism of the art of painting is his *Girl offering oysters* (Figure 2), which creates an interplay between sexual and artistic seduction. One of the precedents for this work was probably Gerhard Dou's *A girl with a basket of fruit at a window* (Figure 3), which is a subtly erotic image of a maid with a market basket drawing away a curtain in an illusionistic architectural frame (Chapman 1996: 126-8).

Figure 2: Jan Steen, *Girl offering oysters* (1658-1660). Panel, 20.5 x 14.5 cm. Den Haag: Koninklijk Prenten Cabinet, Mauritzhuis (Chapman 1996:127).

Figure 3: Gerhard Dou, *A girl with a basket of fruit at a window* (1657). Oil on panel. London: The National Trust, Waddeston Manor and the Courtauld Institute of Art.

The *trompe l'oeil* curtain which the girl draws aside to reveal her image in Dou's painting is a tool used to suggest that painted images simultaneously impinge on and effects an estrangement from the world of the viewer. Here the painted curtain, together with the architectural frame, implies a threshold of transgression between fictive characters and the actual space of viewers. The suggestion of such transgressions is a reminder that art has the power to influence the real lives of human beings.

In Steen's very small, witty painting the curtain of its precedent has been omitted, as has the arched frame of the illusionistic architecture which has now become the shape of the canvas. The intimacy of this fine rendering of a wholesome-looking young woman who flirts with the viewer as she sprinkles salt on an oyster is thereby reinforced. The direct inviting glance leaves little doubt that the girl is offering her favours along with the delicious aphrodisiac. Not only the oysters, but also the curtained bed behind her, suggest a sexual proposition. The half-length figure is close to the picture plane and

this makes the work more intimate and direct in its appeal. The fine brushwork and precise rendering of the various sensuous textures of the fur jacket, sparkling ribbon, wispy hair, and soft flesh as well as the juicy succulence of the oysters, strengthen the seductive power of the image. The girl's invitation in this picaresque work is earthy and unabashed and Steen succeeds in fusing the themes of salacious sexual seduction and artistic deception. The lifelikeness of the image of the girl promotes belief in the magic identity of the picture and the depicted, while the alluring appeal of the temptress to a gendered spectator is humorously real. Chapman (1996: 128) suggests:

> Depending on the viewer, who is no longer protected by the distance that allows moral judgement, the painting's assertiveness heightens pleasure or discomfort.

Figure 4: Abigail Lane (b 1967), *Blue print* (1992). Installation. Chair with felt inkpad seat, blue ink, framed print, 122 x 46 x 91 cm. London: Saatchi Collection (Kent 1994: 172).

Chapman infers that there was a clientele for such risqué paintings depicting salacious themes in a polished style by painters like Van Mieris and Steen. The very small format of Steen's painting suggests the intimate and private use of the painting by such a client.

In ideology-alert picaresque art, even before the age of the museum, the creation of intimate, surprising and playful relationships with spectators subverted the distanced appreciation of isolated art objects. The illusive and deceptive powers of art, however, have also been exploited in humorous, ironic, grotesque and carnal ways by picaresque feminist artists of the post-modern era.

Abigail Lane's installation, *Blue print* (Figure 4) is a personalised address to the gendered spectator. The re-carnalisation of the gendered viewing subject is made obvious in this installation of a chair with a felt ink-pad saturated with blue ink as a seat, located in front of a framed blue imprint of seated buttocks. The chair which facilitates the spectator's steady and prolonged contemplation of the print simultaneously reminds him/her of his/her corporeal participation in and understanding of the work, seated on the ink pad as he/she could be in order to gaze at the print. It slowly dawns on the spectator that he/she could have been duped, that his/her "real" presence completes the process of the installation. Gender difference is playfully conjectured and the importance of the nether body in the process of signification is brought to one's attention in a physical and humorous way.

Abigail Lane's installation draws attention away from the eyes to the nether body by suggesting physical contact. Similarly, the exquisitely painted still-life of the oysters and the knife in Jan Steen's earlier picaresque contribution to the carnalisation of reception evoke the organs of sexual reproduction.

Jana Sterbak's feminist picaresque *Flesh dress for an albino anorectic* (Figure 5), a fashionable design sewn together from sixty pounds of raw flank steak, dupes the female spectator into a closeness with the garment. The fact that this grotesque feat in dress design hangs on a dressmaker's hanger, *prêt-à-porter*, is an invitation to the female viewer to try it on. Indeed, Sterbak had the clingy, wet work of art modelled by a professional. Allusions to closeness are immediately and ironically expunged, however, in order to expose gender ideologies. The dress brings the repugnant and violent effects of the gender ideologies per-

Figure 5: Jana Sterbak, *Flesh dress for an albino anorectic* (1987). Flank steak, dimensions vary daily (Spector 1992: 99).

meating everyday aesthetic styling and art to the fore by means of its grotesque association of chic design with the horror of decay.

The cutting and sewing of meat involved in making the grisly dress suggests the violence of social shaping. As a food type, steak is one of the most expensive cuts of meat, and it is associated with virility, strength and masculinity (Sahlins 1990: 94-101). The use of this "material" thus suggests the pains taken to enhance heterosexual attraction. This monstrous artistic design reveals how close to the body the effects of gender ideologies are in our everyday experiences.

The cusps cut into the "seam" of the dress are reminiscent of a Fool's attire, suggesting not only the function of role-playing for social entertainment by both fools and females, but also the sinister associations of the Fool with deception, illusion and magic. For the viewer, the replacement of the presence of the female body by the presence of a flesh dress, an object, is analogous to such magic.

However, the power of art to subvert rationality — to evoke belief in the numinous and diabolic powers of art — is not only suggested by the mediation of the Fool, but also by the affective and magical force of the grotesque.

The propinquity of female sexual seduction and death is made grotesquely palpable and discernible in the decomposition and stench of dead flesh. In the work's appropriation of the associations of the *femme fatale* with seduction, horror and death, the idolatrous provocation of stereotypical images of femininity is made grotesquely evident.

In Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #155* (Figure 6) there are overtones of fear and horror. In her oeuvre the gendered artist herself usually plays various roles as the ironic interpreter of the male gaze, drawing attention to the ways in which women are "spoken"/"shown" in various ste-

Figure 6: Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #155* (1985). Photograph, 72.5 x 49.25 cm. Edition of 6 (Krauss 1993: 136).

reotyped poses reflecting male experiences of sexuality. Besides being the photographer, Sherman is usually also the model, the wardrobe mistress, the make-up artist and the director. The active female artist as a subject humorously and subversively re-plays the roles permitted her as a passively depicted object in patriarchal culture.

In this instance, however, she uses a glistening plastic doll as a substitute for her own familiar presence in her work. The doll is not only substituted for the female buttocks, but also has overtones of rape, violence and perverse sexual exploitation, which are enhanced by the dark, wet, desolate features of the background. The juvenile female body, staged as a victim of violence, may be seen as related to the association of clowning with violence in Jana Sterbak's *Flesh dress for an albino anorectic*. Conventionally subordinating male-female patterns of socialisation are suggested by means of the metaphors of the girl and the clown.

At this stage one realises that the power of all three feminist examples which have been compared to Steen's work lies in the substitution of metaphorically-related objects for the represented female body. Like the curtain that simultaneously associates and estranges, the presence of human beings (in their absence) is suggested very strongly by means of the doll (the metaphor of the child), the dress (the metaphor of the clown), and the bodily imprint and chair (the metaphor of the nether body). Although spectators are presented with likenesses of objects, rather than of gendered human beings, they are all the more forcibly made aware that living beings are at issue.

Kris & Kurz (1979: 77) conclude that the stronger the belief in the magical function of the image — in the identity of the picture and the depicted — the less important likeness becomes:

> Where the belief in the identity of picture and depicted is in decline, a new bond makes its appearance to link the two — namely, similarity and likeness. Formulating these remarks differently, we would say: the closer the symbol (picture) stands to what is symbolised (depicted), the less is the outward resemblance; the further apart, the greater is their resemblance.

According to Kris & Kurz (1979: 77), therefore, the stronger the belief in the magical powers of art, the less need there is for a close resemblance between the picture and the depicted. A relatively strong

belief in art's magical powers renders the substitution of objects for humans acceptable and does not require those objects to bear a close resemblance to the human beings they signify.

Kris and Kurz's research on the magical powers of images assists us in drawing a conclusion here. The post-modern feminists' move away from the illusionism practised by Steen towards the substitution of objects for human images suggests a reinforced belief in the power of art to exert an ideological influence over even the most intimate aspects of real, everyday lives.

This ideology-sensitive appreciation of the "magical" power of images to influence our everyday lives can be contextualized in terms of a somatic metaphor:

Imagine the ideological culture of modernity modelled in the form of a human body. The head (enclosing the mind/brain with its analysing and planning faculties) represents the steering powers of modernity: techno-science, economics and political-administrative rationality. These powers have an ideological aspect, insofar as they are afforded excessive competence and allowed to overrule and distort the inner logic of various other cultural systems. Picturing this imaginary head as that of a male makes sense in terms of the metaphor, given the sub-text of patriarchy that has traditionally accompanied the discourses generated by this steering system.

Now imagine the trunk of the body, its intestines and organs. Consider how the heart and stomach, for example, can be (psychosomatically) affected by the intense, uncontrolled activity of the planning, analysing, grasping mind; by ceaselessly racing thoughts, driven by all-consuming ambitions that grant no rest, no respite, no limits. The stressed response of the organs of the mid-region can be compared to what we find in the middle region of ideological culture: the activity of social movements. Especially since the sixties such movements (focussing on sexual liberation, new consciousness, feminism, ecology and so on) have registered cultural imbalances and served as organs of protest against the steering dynamics "heading" cultural evolution. However, it is extremely important to realise that these protests themselves often become ideological, introducing new discourses of domination in cases where the concern with nature preservation or gender, for example, tends to "colonise" and control cul-

tural systems with their own inherent guiding values. (Criteria for evaluating the success of scientific theories, for instance, cannot, as such, be "gendered", but this is not to say that the application of such criteria to specific social contexts is not often deeply influenced by gender issues).

And then there is the nether body, the region of intimate pleasures, of intense gratification and satisfaction. The lower body equates with the micro-levels of ideological culture. It is the location of those "pastoral shelters" that are maintained by our ideological culture in its own interest — havens that individuals can enter to create meaning, joy, or consolation for themselves. Examples include romantic love and sexuality, power and prestige, buying and possessing, being entertained, being entranced by elitist art, being highly moral, or being highly knowledgeable. Again, these shelters for body and mind become ideological when their various goals begin to overrule other goals and norms with their own "regional" demands of respect and obedience. But this level of ideology can scarcely be escaped — such is the power of these pastoral illusions and of the magic and deception they practise on us.

The conceptual distortions generated within ideological culture are instrumental in socially distancing real live bodies from each other. Factors such as class, race, sex, age, and so on, serve as criteria which establish one body of people in a position of dominance over another body of people. This distance is the space within which various types of relations of domination can be constituted. Thus, ideological culture is complemented by an ideological society.

The ideological society can also be viewed in terms of the body — or rather bodies. Thus we have (metaphorical) bodies or groups of (real) bodies established in asymmetrical communicative relations. One may give some thought to the marks which these relationships actually leave on individual bodies, or even to the characteristics that are "selected" or favoured for success and privilege in such relations. These range from the work-worn appearance of the slave or wage labourer of earlier societies to, say, the glowingly healthy physique of today's (increasingly) youthful business elite.

Against this background of ideology theory, the metaphor of the female body may be re-introduced in order to highlight the effects of some of the pastoral shelters referred to above.

It goes almost without saying that the idealism of sexual love creates body types commensurate with the erotic ideals of successive cultural eras. Consider the sexual liberation of the sixties, ostensibly aimed against the "System", but infiltrated by the economic component of that very system (as Foucault pointed out), in that the look of "natural nudity" which came to be promoted actually depended on certain consumer products. Or consider the body type projected by the cover illustrations of countless "Mills & Boon" romantic novels: slim women in submissive poses, forcefully held captive in the muscular arms of men embodying the quality of "rough sensitivity".

The shelter of personal power and prestige projects its own body images, which differ markedly from those of the heroines of romantic novels. They range from the glamorous or studiously informal posturing of celebrities from the entertainment world to the smart, sober, "efficient" look of business executives. Glamorous images of women executives efficiently concealed the additional strain to which their bodies are subjected in order to court success.

The shelter of consumerism comprises a plethora of "personalised" products, including items from the techno-scientific realm of health, lifestyle and longevity research. In this pastoral shelter women are urged to focus with excruciating intensity on the appearance of various parts of their bodies and on techniques claimed to have the ability to modify these parts, in order to conform to achievable "ideals". In fact, they often strive to embody the meaning of "achievement" for the contemporary informed and "critically-minded" woman.

The shelter of morality, for instance a project serving a worthy cause like environmental or feminist awareness, can also project its own ideal bodily appearance. The activist often looks the very opposite of the showbusiness celebrity, and not at all like the company executive either. Smartness and slickness are not always compatible with an advanced moral conscience. What is sometimes required is a certain "down-to-earth", ruggedly individualistic look, with minimal (but stylish) allowances for fashion, and signs or signals of a "no-nonsense" attitude. On the other hand, some activist groups are

spearheaded by "smart", "slick" and very presentable people. And let us make no mistake: even anti-ideological morality needs and produces bodies in keeping with its own brand of pastoral magic and illusion.

The pastoral shelters used in the art works analysed above may now be identified. They are sexuality (in Steen and Sherman), buying and possessing (ownership of a Steen, ownership of a stylish outfit, like Sterbak's dress), entertainment (by the Fool and the female, as in Sterbak), and the pleasures of art itself, in combination with the theme of sexuality (as in Steen).

5. Picaresque critique

The feminist art works selected for our visual argument evidence common traits and similarities of style. These ideology-sensitive artists all resort to a similar kind of protest, which we would like to call "picaresque". We take the notion of the picaresque to represent a model that forms part of a set of such aesthetic ontologies, finding its expression in the works of artists of various centuries and artistic paradigms. In the following characterisation of picaresque art, two concepts from the figurative-semiotic encyclopedia (referred to in section 3) play a leading role, namely the model and the sign. This model gives us access to the world, but it chooses to bring us to a world that is eminently under the sign of the Natural. Other macro-signs of reality, such as Knowledge, Culture, Personhood or Society, are seen in relation to, and from the vantage point of, the macro-sign of Nature. But this is a specific kind of Nature: invested with and infested by, signs of anti-culturalism (or anti-culturedness). Paramount among these is the "form" sign of the dynamic/flowing/ever-changing, which merges with the macro-sign (Nature) in question, depicting not a structured but a vibrantly pulsating world of the Natural. Then there are the "content" signs that merge with the "form" signature: signs of the uncultured, the coarse, the frivolous, the earthy, and the banal.

Various structural relationships exist between the picaresque tradition, the patriarchal steering powers of modern culture, feminism, and the pastoral shelters described above. For one thing, the feminist protest against the steering powers, within the context of art, may

avail itself of the picaresque mode of anti-culturedness to create images and visual metaphors in which the pastoral shelters feature in various ways, most notably by means of the pastoral function of art itself. In availing itself of the magic of art and the illusions of all the other shelters depicted in the work of art, the feminist picaresque makes a stand against a patriarchal steering culture. But by the back door of art, something strangely similar to the primitive irrational is let in. This constitutes the end point of the historical antithesis to modernity.

We have represented modernity itself in terms of the female body. Even the steering rationalisations of modernity, the ideals of instrumental reason and politico-economic emancipation, work their own ideological magic on our bodies. We seek shelter in another realm of magic and illusion, the region of individual pastoral havens.

This paints a rather dark picture of the modern condition. Yet, simply to recognise it as such implies a degree of critique, a degree of freedom. To recognise that even our protests lapse into ideological excesses and magical experiences and to attempt to define these from a certain theoretical distance is a self-conscious and necessary form of ideology critique.

If the curtain is an apt metaphor for the mediation between reality and art, and between theory and practice, and if it also implies the subversion of reason, deception and magic, we must conclude that the ideologies which permeate art as well as theory powerfully influence even the most intimate realms of our everyday lives.

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