SEDUCTIVE DIGNITY: COUNTERING SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN MAINSTREAM SPECTACLE

“My body will never be yours. From this fatality, in which a certain human affliction can be epitomized, there is only one means of escape: seduction: that my body (or its sensuous substitutes, art, writing) seduce, overwhelm, or disturb the other body.” 1

Writing about the work of Cy Twombly, the French philosopher Roland Barthes found himself obsessed with Twombly’s scribbles. Barthes was so fascinated by the way Twombly’s gestural art bore evidence to the body in motion that he attempted to imitate it: “I am not copying the product, but the producing. I am putting myself, so to speak, in the hand’s footsteps.” 2 Barthes realized that he could not reproduce Twombly’s art because he was not in Twombly’s body and posited that the only way to encounter someone else’s lived experience is by proxy: by going through the motions (here, literally) in order to experience the feelings of that other person. He described this process as seduction: Twombly’s art calls, and Barthes responds.

Implicitly, Barthes was arguing that there is no pure, unmediated experience of another person’s reality. Our closest approximation is through means of seduction that simulate experiences. Not quite fictional, these are nonetheless the product of imagining something happening to you that happened to somebody else: for Barthes, it meant retracing Twombly’s feelings through analysis and imitation. Importantly, this imitation built an emotional relationship based on a desire for catharsis. That is, Barthes sought to reproduce the sense of freedom he saw in Twombly’s hand so that he himself could benefit from that emotional release. I would argue that seduction is a powerful device precisely because it allows for moments of emotional build-up and catharsis.

Experience-by-proxy is ever-present in mainstream accounts of social exclusion and can be used to generate empathy for vulnerable people. As an undergraduate sociology major, I worked with maximum-security inmates at the New Jersey State Prison to create a magazine that broached the relationship among class, race, and incarceration. There, I met Luis Beltran, a kind and soft-spoken man who was serving a life-term sentence for committing a double homicide at age 16. He and his friends were caught breaking into a house when the older homeowners returned early. Luis shot them both in the head. Over the course of his incarceration, Luis has come to terms with his fate and believes that he deserves it. Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, the professor who initiated the prison partnership, writes: “Not a day passes by when Luis Beltran doesn’t talk to the couple that he shot dead. In silence, he calls out their names so that their memories will not perish. It is a delicate gesture judged by the magnitude of the crime, but it’s all that he can do now.” 3
Luis wants desperately to be understood, and creates poems and drawings to visualize his hauntedness. He also serves on the board of a nonprofit that advocates for prisoners and encourages outreach to at-risk youth. Luis has no desire for exculpation; he simply wants to provide enough context so that his experience will not be reduced to an easy stereotype. His story is powerful because his interior world is exposed, offering substantial psychological material for audiences to build a relationship to his narrative.

By contrast, most mainstream portrayals of social exclusion inadvertently deprive their subjects of dignity, more concerned with advertising “social good” than with probing the lived experience of exclusion as it is internalized in the hearts and minds of marginalized people. There are two customary design tactics: to evoke pity to raise donations (starving African children) or to create blithe, celebrity-driven vehicles that elide suffering in favor of empty, Messianic empowerment (go to a Bono concert and save Africa). These tactics play out everywhere: in our daily commutes, media culture, and public spaces. The effect is that audiences have become inured to overplayed human rights narratives and associate them with a broader numbness towards media spectacle.

When seduction is used to promote broad-based rights that we can all already agree on, it refuses to submit to the very vulnerability that is central to talking about social exclusion in the first place. The image of the starving African child elicits pity and strong emotions, certainly, but it is not vulnerable; it makes an unnuanced, irrefutable argument that strips the child subject of dignity and props him up as a dehumanized symbol, raising donations on the basis of guilt rather than emotional connection. Instead of inviting audiences in, corrosive images emphasize difference and dull the ability to do little more than feel bad, thereby creating narrative distance. As Rick Poynor argues, these “pictures, each one torn from its context, puncture your sense of yourself and your own boundaries, where you end, and a hostile, violent world begins, and one way to deal with these monstrous revelations is to try to detach yourself, to push them away and deny they relate to your own life far from these terrible events, even though you know the images are real and will fester inside you.”

Dignity relies on vulnerable narratives that give a full sense of people’s lives instead of reducing them to props. Seductive dignity relies on an emotional connection to the personal, psychological effects of social exclusion, and not just the obvious notion that people are suffering. This argument parallels theorist Anne Cheng’s insistence that we are a culture accustomed to grievance but not grief. Grievance is the process of redressing social exclusion through legal or political means: the right to your day in court or to march on the street. By contrast, grief is the traumatic, interior experience of denigration that accompanies marginality—the sense of shame you live with every day on account of your social class, race, or sexual orientation, for instance.
As an example, Cheng cites the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown vs. Board of Education, which famously desegregated public schools. In the majority opinion by Chief Justice Earl Warren, the Fourteenth Amendment right to equal protection under the law was interpreted as an inadequate basis from which to rule. Instead, the opinion argued that segregating schoolchildren “solely because of race generates a feeling of inferiority... that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone.”

This is not to say that we should sensationalize the experience of trauma. But if we’re serious about achieving equality beyond surface legal guarantees, it is necessary to create design that examines the consequences of marginalization on a wider human scale. Our work should not merely address the political injustices wrought by discriminatory laws: it should register the sense of loss inflicted on those who suffer them. The language of rights is a shaky basis on which to build a case for human dignity. Instead, dignity is the recognition of people’s expressions of their inside lives beyond what they look like on the outside, and narratives about exclusion need to map that interiority in order to be effective.

---

The above is excerpted from Seductive Dignity: Countering Social Exclusion in Mainstream Spectacle, a master’s thesis by Andy Chen, available at the Fleet Library at the Rhode Island School of Design.