**Reading Response #1**

**Evaluating *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler**

This paper will examine key concepts regarding identity and intersectional representation and evaluate social constructions of gender within queer cinema. Judith Butler’s book *Gender Trouble* (1990) chronicles the perceptions and definitions of the author, who focuses on the constructions of gender specifically relating to feminine and queer identity rooting back to the period of poststructuralism to New Queer Cinema. *Saving Face* (2004) directed by Alice Wu explores themes of feminism, one’s identity against the expectations of tradition, and social construction of gender which ultimately paved way for New Queer Cinema and contemporary films. Contributing to post-cultural debates of gender and feminism, Butler’s book and *Saving Face* focuses gender as a performance (of tropes), a social construction that normalizes heterosexuality and binary systems, a hypothetically outdated terminology to categorize one’s sexual orientation. This paper will analyze Butler’s evidence for these assertions, as well as their historical context within post-structural and New Queer Cinema periods and critical reception.

Best known as the author of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler is the author of numerous books such as *Undergoing Gender*, films such as *Simone de Beauvoir* and *no se nace mujer*, and research focusing on gender, feminism and identity. She is a gender theorist and American philosopher who studied philosophy at Bennington College and Yale University. *Gender Trouble* expanded upon post-structural ideologies, indicating film theory as a cultural study to decipher the metaphor of language. Butler borrowed ideas of poststructuralists, to challenge the assumption that gender is a social construction that mirrors sex and to instigate queer cinema.

*Saving Face* directed by Alice Wu examines themes of normative binary systems and queer identity within conservative Chinese American communities. Best known for her contribution to the latter New Queer Cinema movement, Alice Wu is a screenwriter and filmmaker who studied at MIT and Stanford University. Her first film, *Saving Face*, produced ten years after the New Queer Cinema movement (a period of gay independent cinema amidst the AIDS crisis), underscored similar themes of Butler’s performative theory of gender and sex defined by heterosexual identities as well as queer theory. She proposes that sexuality is not restricted to binary systems but rather a complex arrangement of gender identities.

Butler argues that gender is performative and fluid in a sense that individuals of certain cultures are prone to act differently according to the social norms of gender. According to Amy Blackstone’s entry “Sex Versus Gender Categorization,” the classification of sex is “biologically-based,” in which is determined by the individual’s “primary sex characteristics;” whereas gender is a “socially constructed phenomenon.” Often used and defined interchangeably, Butler agrees that gender is distinct from sex in that it is performed and derived from culture rather than biology. This is because gender refers to the meanings ascribed to the sexes and to the beliefs, values and norms that are attached to masculinity, femininity, and other expressions of gender. New Queer Cinema films such as *Saving Face* portrays women performing and challenging normalized, patriarchal Chinese tropes of women being “feminine” or the “filial and lovely daughter” through gender performance. Alice Wu borrows the ideas of encoding tropes such as inverted roles of women being a tomboy and experiments with characters who both meets and challenges their community norms. She portrays this by depicting a daughter (Wil) who meets the expectations of her family by pursuing a sustainable career as a doctor but also fails to meet the feminine trope as a tomboy, lesbian daughter. Wu encodes her experiences as a queer Asian-American to the character, portraying realistic social interactions between second generations and their Chinese American communities when dealing with taboo subjects. For example, Wil has to perform to act as a non-queer daughter and her mother has to perform as the filial daughter who sacrifices her happiness for the honor of her family. By including controversial characters who challenge restrictive definitions of sexuality, Wu forces audiences to confront new gender norms. Another example includes *Paris is Burning*, a queer documentary that complicates concepts of reality and masculinity by emphasizing the performative nature of human lifestyles. Ultimately, Butler’s argument that gender is a continual improvisation of social construction is reflected within the movement of New Queer Cinema. As films during this period actively broke down filmic categories and presented diverse gender performances, it challenged heterosexual performances and interpretations of gender. This is crucial as it promotes positive reception and tolerance to alternative lifestyles and sexual orientations.

Butler asserts that gender is a social construction that normalizes binary systems through reinforced daily activities (our performance). According to “Queer Images” by Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, human sexuality is not a singular thing nor a choice two singular things. Rather, sexuality is “multiple, varying and diverse,” and queer is a term to include “multiplicity of sexualities” and identities within the gray areas. This is certainly the case for Wil, whose family and Chinese American community don’t tolerate her queer identity. They pester her to find a husband and constantly criticize her tomboyish attire and actions for not meeting socially acceptable standards as a Chinese American female. Having a sense of belonging and power is crucial for individuals who identity themselves within the gray areas in order to feel accepted by their community. However, Wil’s community normalizes binary systems through images of successful and honorable heterosexual couples with children, making Wil feel as an outcast. Indirectly, homosexual couples are rewarded as they are praised by the older generations, whereas deviants such as Wil’s mother -- a pregnant widow without a husband -- struggle to feel welcomed by their judgmental community. Butler compares essentialists – believers of homosexuality as a biological phenomenon and queer identities are traced back into history – and constructivists – believers of homosexual identity as a cultural product and social construction in the perspective of a constructivist. As a constructivist myself, Butler’s claim that gender is socially constructed and normalized through daily activities is agreeable from personal experience. Specifically, my high school unintentionally promoted binary systems by showing instances of heterosexual relationships and educating students to practice abstinence only in order to avoid pregnancy. The outdated lessons failed to touch on queer intercourse and broader sexual orientations in a historical context, rooting back to the early 1900s where queerness was marginalized by mainstream society and labeled as pathological abnormality by heterosexuals. Because of homophobia and diseases associated with homosexuality, Butler reinforces the collective terminology queer as a way to positively connotate those who did not fit into traditional gender roles. Thus, I believe that it is quintessential that both heterosexual and queer filmmakers include a wide spectrum of sexual orientations and add their own twist to depict queer lives and issues until it is normalized by the audiences who remain skeptical.

Butler argues that any individual who do not categorize/ label themselves into the binary system will feel alienated due to the long stigma of negative stereotypes towards homosexuality. Backlash from *Sign of the Cross* acted as a catalyst to enforce censorship and production code. In 1930, Hollywood wrote the production code in order to remove “sexual perversion” and to reinforce traditional gender roles. Fortunately, the New Queer Cinema movement with queer films such as *Baby* and *Saving Face* rectified the negative reputation of queerness. In *Baby*, Ali, a queer teenager, confronts his queer desires and toxic masculinity. While the community of Bronx exhibits themes of external hegemonic masculinity defined by old patriarchal systems where men dominate women, *Baby* challenges these definitions and argues that masculinity manifests according to the interpretation of the individual (Connell, 1992). Additionally, Butler claims that the separation between gender and sex is pointless, as “perhaps it was always already gender with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.” This raises the question: what if the concept of gender was eliminated completely, would that lead to binary systems and homophobia to be naturally eliminated as there is not a clear standard of what’s normal and abnormal? In order to eliminate hostility towards homosexuality, gender should be reformulated as a term that does not limit to queer and binary systems but rather an open interpretation based on the user’s preference.

Works such as *Gender Trouble* and *Saving Face* evaluates topics of gender system and relationships between an individual to their community. While the book highlights the perspective of the author who resides more with the constructivist’s viewpoint, the theory of gender performativity, the ideology that gender is a social construction defined by heterosexuals and alienating to those deviating from the binary categorization provides readers with insight on the development of gender and queer identities since 1990. Because gender is fluid and exclusive to an individual’s interpretation, it is important to first recognize whether that individual wants to be associated with a categorization, especially if they do not fit within defined terms of the binary systems. Butler quintessentially asserts that because “gender is neither essential nor biologically determined,” it is vital to acknowledge and update oneself to the constantly modified spectrum of gender identities.

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