Hard Glitter:

Cultural Fringe or Mainstream ideology? Lesley Rogers and Gisela Kaplan take a look at where macho may be heading.

Macho, leather, SM, Hitler fascination and drag-show. Obviously, these are separate issues. They have in common that they are all facets of popular culture. Too little work has been done to date, too little written to bring these phenomena together in some systematic way. There is also too little debate on popular culture ideology, particularly when some of the traits of such popular culture are disconcerting. There is a tendency to hush up some of its practices or to be indifferent to its existence.

Drag shows definitely belong to the cultural fringe although they have a relatively firm place in Australian theatrical productions. We wish to state quite categorically from the outset that we do not share the views of some sections of the community that drag shows are necessarily derogatory of women, decadent or queer. Here is a (transvestite) subculture which has found a medium of playing out its existence in an artful way by creating illusions and often total theatre. But we wish to report on one particular drag show, performed just recently, which had a distinctly different flavour to earlier and other drag shows we have seen, and then summarise our
 impressions.

We are sitting in a drag show. The show is about to begin. The stage is black, hard, white neon lamps light the stage. The loud-speakers are put into action — almost man-sized, facing the audience, screaming, thumping, vibrating. The speakers are large but not good. Sounds are distorted, screeching, grating. The bass is on full, the treble also. Contrast of frequencies. The hard bass rocks the tables, glasses clink, the stomach is hit from below with hard, regular flat blows. The high frequencies are garish and test the eardrums, move even the nostrils and bring a few tears to our eyes.

The lead actress/actor of the show roles in with the large, well-practised strides of a model. A plastic smile, wild silvery blond hair and a glitter garment flowing suitably around the empty stage. The music changes into a new tune. She takes the microphone and pretends to sing. Coloured lights whirl around. She arches back as if she expended enormous amounts of energy to get the vocal cords to high pitch and to the volume of the American singer. Histrionically, she lowers her microphone at the end of the songs. The audience claps. More dresses appear, more plastic smiles, more tapes are played. Sometimes several girls dance together; then its Moulin Rouge style of Paris, only not half as good. At least the imitation is recognisable.

Peculiar to all models are their sharp movements, their slim, curt perfection of female impersonation. Since nothing gives them away as men, is this show then presenting "total" women? No. We, two women in the audience, feel alienated, not in ourselves, but from the show. This is indeed an all-male show, tightly constructed as an ideal of male presence, male performance and male values. Strangely enough, there are no contradictions, no male/female double messages as Dame Edna or even Boy George may have transmitted. The girls in the show are men in outrageous gear. They usurp women's clothes into a male construct. Macho culture in fancy dress. Their smiles are hard, aggressively well placed stances are sent into the audience. Here is no place for humour, for send-ups. Macho is a culture of tedious earnestness.

One song they perform is a rock piece on Adolf (Hitler). Leather hat, leather gear, the swastika as arm-band, legs moving to marching rhythm. The uniform gives anonymity. Someone gets killed in the act without pity. The girls/boys glitter on, their faces hard and uncompromising. The chill down our spines does not stem from being impressed but from anger tinged with fear.

There is a sense of the threatening, partly because the show is derivative to the extreme. Dress as a symbol of stereotype, of uniformity. American Hollywood stuff, not sung even, but pretended, clothes nobody wears, women who are men; a show without soul but with an ideology. Hate, aggression, narcissism and the uniform.

An interpretation of what we saw must be tentative. Much is intangible, much may be merely third rate showbiz. At an intuitive level, we clearly felt discomfort which sprang most probably from a sense of having been bulldozed, and asked to accept an ideology which is much more than hate of women. Independently, we thought of fascism. We also thought of the increasing fascination with the figure of Adolf Hitler, at least in the Western world. We do not wish to simplify or exaggerate the impressions. Yet we can see here a relationship between an event which, although seemingly removed from the arena of politics, is based on psychosocial forces which may have political implications. The drag-show, we believe, was not merely a bad show or an aberration but, sadly, was symptomatic of wider movements and developments in popular culture. Even if the show was derivative and not putting forward its own values, it remains significant what choices were made.

A t one time, certain subcultures endorsed values like "keep loving one another", non-violence, peace, etc. In these subcultures, among them the gay movement, a shift towards a macho culture and framework is at present quite apparent.

Some sections of punk embrace the same fashions and behaviour, as do bikies and growing sections of the average suburban youth. (In a different vein, but certainly worth some scrutiny, one may ask why films like Mad Max I and performers like "Divine" score so well in our culture.) Macho may mean a number of things: a celebration of male culture, rough male to male interaction as a form of approved contact and, of course, the treatment of women as sex objects. Macho is now "enriched" by further variables: the leather uniform, the follow-the-leader mentality, the hard militant line, even the whip. Uniforms give anonymity. Anonymity permits greater licence because, as Agnes Heller argues, the externalisation of conscience is an abdication of an inherent sense of responsibility: one cannot be wrong, one cannot be shamed as long as one follows the leader.

The present fad in leather and uniforms would be of little concern were it not for the fact that the brutality of the costume is increasingly translated into actual behaviour and day-to-day interaction of the predominant culture. Sadomasochism (SM) has been around for
We have moved far away from our description of the drag show which, superficially at least, cannot bear any resemblance to the pornographic films we have just cited.

Our question here is related to the complex issue of mirage versus reality, cultural representation of fantasies versus the mimetic aspects of art or popular culture. We question how far any cultural fringe movement and self-expression can be regarded as innocuous. Those who prefer to argue from macro-social perspectives are likely to dismiss our remarks and intuition as peevish. Those who are concerned with qualitative, i.e. micro-perspectives on aspects of human conduct, may be persuaded to share our concern.

With regard to the leather fad, the macho values, we only want to add the following. If any of these fads and crazes are merely regarded as a healthy sign that we live in a society in which "everybody can do his/her own thing" (an ideological position which we do not find attractive) then some equally important arguments may be overlooked. The leather fad, the uniform, says, rather, that "everybody can be somebody". During periods of economic stagnation, high unemployment, curtailed future hopes for large groups of people, such implicit argument can be a palliative. It is also dangerously seductive. Hitler used it, many dictatorships have drawn on these sources of persuasion and seduction for their own ends and with a great deal of success.

The hard glitter, the strong boys, the uniform, are symbols which, in certain circumstances, can translate quite readily into real social and/or political action or aggression. Moreover, however cynical one may wish to be with respect to the democratic processes of governments at election time, grassroots movements and generally dissipated thought in a culture (anthropologically speaking) merge into a country's political direction. Hard line politics, uncompromising stands on social conflict and international relations are macho cow-boy behaviours. They are not signs of strength, but of weakness, of a sell-out. The hard glitter is an annihilation of human values.

FOOTNOTES

1. Conferences like "Literature and Popular Culture, ASPACL.S conference 1984, Murdoch University (Nov. 29 - Dec. 1) are among the noteworthy exceptions.
3. Heller, Agnes. The Power of Shame, manuscript of a paper delivered at a Sociology of Culture conference, La Trobe University, 1982; forthcoming in a collection of essays by the author under the same title.
4. Cf for instance the discussion of SM by Heresies, Vol. 12, special issue called "Sex Issue", pp. 30-34.

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