

Make Me Yours:

How Art Seduces

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FOREWORD

AVANT LA LETTRE

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Here is the first scene: it comes before any introduction. It is an image. Perhaps you must turn back to it now. Look, a woman, a tiny woman (or a small girl), stands on the tiptoes of her little black pumps, which have a low wedge heel and an ankle strap. She is in front of a wooden door, embellished with bolts, mounted in a brick wall, but no, it is not outside, I do not think so, for the floor is smooth; it is in an interior space. We should, you know, be curious about this door, as curious as the little woman/girl who is stretching upwards to look at something that lies behind the door. We should be curious, too, about the woman who is trying so hard to see what is beyond the door. There is, one might say, a scene within a scene, a *tableau* within a *tableau*, and already, before having read a word, the stage is prepared for seduction. Later, you will recognise the scene, even if you have not seen it, for it is registered in the history of art; it is significant and enigmatic. Hold on a minute. Hold your breath like the woman in the black wrap-around dress, with the black shoes and black hair, who so much wants to see what is hidden behind the inviting door and, in short, invites you to join her. There is always a moment before giving in to temptation, before the fall (a moment of judgement). You remember what is said about curiosity? Well, you can say that about seduction and desire, too. You know it, but all the same, *quand même*. It is a little like *Alice*, climbing onto the mantelpiece, about to step through the looking-glass from the space of one room to the space of another, where she will forget the names of things, and even her own, where (later) sense must be made of what has no sense at the time.

This first scene—may we think of it as a staging? Yes, I think we might, for as you will find, our desire is not even our own, but rather, is assumed, following the unconscious script of the past, figured in the present, as or through another or others; that is why there are so many of us here, you, we, I, and she (I am profligate with pronouns, but they

perform various functions as substitutes). *Jamais deux sans trois*, in any case, and you might hear that as no couple, no pair, without another always in the room (*en scène*), excluded by the two of *them*. The child is positioned as the one who looks. There is something that does not translate in this encounter—that of the child and its parents, one without language, two with; the coupling of the parents in the primal scene is observed, or its observation is fantasised (it does not really make a great deal of difference), but there are no words for it, not at the time. Desire is the stuff of language, raising a question, producing a gap in knowledge; it does not keep still, but there is a delay between desire and pleasure, as any seducer knows, and pleasure may not be all that enjoyable anyway. Shifts in structure have effects and consequences, and logical moments or sequences, recognised in the life of each subject, constitute structure itself and, in the encounter with the work of art, form a certain object. To be a subject is not to have some ineffable essence, but to hold a position in relation to other subjects (or other signifiers). The relations between positions remain the same, whatever elements are put into them. The elements do not react because of any inherent property but because of the position they occupy in the structure. There is still the woman in front of the door, holding her position, and we are positioned to look at her looking.

In *Seminar X*, his work on anxiety, Jacques Lacan says (yes, he says, for a woman writes it down as he speaks, and then a man edits it, and then another, whom I know also to be a man, translates it—and I must say that I would prefer to translate *angoisse* as anguish, just as I would choose to leave *jouissance* alone. There is a great difference between speaking and writing) that he has made his listeners move along the path of the Don Juan fantasy (neat, the way a seducer so suddenly appears, no?).¹ It is, he says, a woman's fantasy because it corresponds to the wish—the wish of a woman, all women—for an image that would fulfil its function: that there might be a man who has *it*, which, from experience, is clearly a misrecognition of reality—“better still, he always has it, he cannot lose it”. Don Juan is the man who has everything, and so he is an impostor, because no man has it; it is a role he accepts, to be always in the place of another. In the fantasy no woman may take it from him, “and that's the crux of it. That's what he has in common with women, whom one cannot take it from, of course, because they don't have it”. There is a relation to

1. Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, tr. by A. R. Price, London: Polity, 2014 [*Le Séminaire livre X—L'angoisse*, Paris: Édition du Seuil, 2004].

an object, an object that the woman does not have (the man does not either but does not have *differently*), and so she cannot lose it. Something else, behind the door, might have it, if only it were possible to reach it: in a landscape, in a gas lamp held in one hand, in a splayed body, in twigs, velvet (the velvet that lines the dark passage of the viewer's gaze, and if you look carefully, you will see that there is nothing to be seen through the many fissures in the door), leaves, parchment, brass piano hinges, synthetic putties and adhesives, steel binder clips, plastic clothes pegs, tape, cotton, and more, in a list from memory, one that is not complete. But the work of art does not have it, either, though it may be expected of it, nor is it *it*, and this is where seduction begins (seduction, then, might be the answer to the anguish or anxiety in the desiring subject, the anxiety produced by lack). I fear, however, that I am conflating the *objet petit a*, the object cause of desire, with the phallus—that is so easily done with a part object, which becomes an object only when it is taken for an object of desire, when it is infused with what is desirable.

I told you to hold on. There is a script; it is printed across the image, across the back of the woman who is blocking your view with her body, making you await your turn. *Make me yours* lies over her body. Language screens the scene and directs attention to it at the same time: inside and outside. Language, here as words, is as exactly positioned as the body it overlays. What is a speaking body, especially if the body is an image, one that confronts other hidden bodies, off-stage yet part of the staging, which are known to be *there*? There is the touch of the hand, in what looks like lettering, a direct address, but one that does not take the vocative, does not name you, the command: make me yours. Who, me, you? Is me the book—*ah, suis-je le livre?* The woman? She is like a promiscuous letter; goodness, anyone could read her, anyone could have her, and it would not be her fault, because it is never, never the fault of the seducer, not if you were stupid, weak enough to succumb to seduction, if you did not have the force of will to tie yourself to the mast of your expectation. If the title is an imperative, it demands something of the reader. Demanding, it is a voice, another part object. It commands, and thus is the voice of a master, a woman raised to a high and powerful position (on her toes). Or it is a sly or pleading or charming voice, requesting to be taken (which is just as masterful, in its quiet way). This is rather slippery, another move on my part to take one thing for another, to hear the title as well as to read it, and to consider its tone, its inflection, the manner in which it may be spoken and received. I think you will find that you will become a keen listener to what follows, attentive to delivery, embellishment, and gesture. The subtitle, set in a semi-transparent frame, is more revealing, if one takes it to be

an instruction for use, like a manual to follow, a set of instructions or information: how art seduces; or an explanation: this is how it happened, the story of a romance; or even another promise, if one reads it erotically both with and against the image it veils. There will, you know, be some rules to this engagement.

I assumed she is a woman. That was easy, for I know that she is. You might not be so certain, of course, and that produces anxiety. The indeterminacy of gender always does. I suppose any ambiguity is troubling, even when, perhaps especially when, it produces some kind of pleasure. We do not know much about the desire of the other—that is, if we are hysterics—but we want to know all about it. The hysteric assumes the desire of another in her identification with that other, but that desire is only sustained on the condition that she is not its object (what do you take me for!). The name is feminine, of course, but a name denotes only what is known by that name. And some say that the hysteric escapes the mastery of knowledge even as she articulates it. Casanova is far more confusing than Don Juan in his performance as a seducer. I used to think they were the same. The former ends his life as a librarian while the latter is dragged down to hell, but books or flames are not the only difference. Casanova devotes himself to the staging of his seductions, and often, sexual difference is reversed or dissolved. He lets himself be seduced and deceived in order to seduce and deceive. Casanova is torn between the other as a fixed being and the other as malleable. In the end it is no more than the assumption of “correct” comportment, a taking up of a symbolic position or a sexual etiquette that may have little to do with *politesse* or good manners, but has everything to do with a “correct” identification with a certain signifier, made at the “correct” time and under “correct” circumstances—the circumstances in which desire may circulate in its ferret-like way. This is a structure at work. Is that what will be asked of you, this folding of inside and out?

The image (let us return to it) is not a usual scene of seduction; the lighting is harsh, without the soft dimness that produces blindness (love has to be blind—for not to see the other as s/he is useful, making desire possible where otherwise it might not work, like when finding out a woman is really a man, for example). There is a drive to know, and any locus of knowledge produces transference. Others have preceded this woman; the surface of the door is unpleasantly discoloured where faces have rubbed against it. There is a woman-like thing behind the door, what we may think to be a woman (a body in parts), and there is a woman, no, two women, behind that woman-object exposed in the painted scene, gas lamp in hand: Maria Martins and Alexina Duchamp, the latter always

called 'Teeny', a diminutive coming from her mama, because of her tininess at birth—am I making too much of size? And there is a woman behind this book, as much as there is one in front of it.

Yes, things being as they are, I will leave it there, unlike the usual libertine conception of the desired object as a contingent goal: the woman is possessed, then the seducer moves on to another object of prey. In this scene, the encounter with the work of art is repeated. This is, then, the second scene: an introduction made *avant la lettre*, a lovely term which etymologically derives from the engraving made before the caption is added that will describe what is seen in the image; it comes before lettering, before letters. It is delivered with a warning, however, my short foreword (words before words, words that will frame or be echoed in what follows, words that could only be produced afterwards). This is *before*, before there are words for something, words that are yet to come, words from one who is other than the author, and who is now residue—a foreword of (erotic?) stimulation that precedes the event to come, preparing the way like some panderer in an amorous intrigue. Objects and words seduce; works of art are taken as making promises of gratification (not on offer, impossible in the structure of representation), which are imagined, must be imagined as seducers or agents of seduction—for they would not work, do their work, if they were not—and so the affair is set in motion, *à la lettre*.

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