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The Visible Body Pierce

The piercing of body parts in 1995 does not just mean ears anymore. What began thousands of years ago as “primitive” cultural practices of ancient African, Indian, and Native North and South American peoples (Vale 4-5) has very quickly established itself, along with tattooing, as a mainstay of contemporary bohemian and “alternative” American culture. Indeed, one can hardly ignore the nose rings, eyebrow pierces, and other multiple facial manipulations which have proliferated even at the suburban mall, let alone in hotbeds of nonconformity such as college campuses and Greenwich Village. What does it all signify — is it fashion, aestheticism, rebellion, or masochism? Does the new found popularity of piercing, until very recently “enjoyed” only by gay subcultures and fetishists, mean that some primal archetype has been tapped, or is this a mere fad — with the bandwagoneers only a few years away from plastic surgery in an attempt to “fix” former youthful indiscretions? Why do those newly attracted to piercing mostly seem to be straight, white middle-class youths? Fact or fad aside for the moment, these questions and the topic deserve analysis for the simple reason that the concept so strongly defies conventional logic: why would anyone want to experience pain, permanent scarring, and societal rejection? Or does it work the other way: is the violation of the taboo the whole point?

Certainly, power constructions are crucial to the discussion: “Amidst an almost universal feeling of powerlessness to ‘change the world,’ individuals are changing what they *do* have the power over: their own bodies” (Vale 4). Pierced people, like most modernists, are intensely aware of the seeming futility of late XXth century life and the intrinsic alienation inherent to contemporary bureaucracy and society. Taking control of the one object or material thing readily available, one’s own body, can be empowering in this world of seeming powerlessness. The simple act of having a visible pierce, though, provides an instant stigma by daring to be, and insisting on being, interpellated, since even ignoring the pierce signifies a “reaction.” That becomes the inherent paradox of self-stigmatization: the manipulation of the body is empowering because it claims autonomy but only because it is based on assumed societal rejection; in a way the disapproval of others is necessary to feel the empowerment that comes, paradoxically, from not caring what society thinks. Those who subscribe to alternative culture desperately *need* the mainstream society and cultural norms they despise or there would be nothing to rebel against, nothing to feel powerless against (and thus empowered by the piercing), and nothing to contrast with as an “individual.”

Subject-position relationships, then, are crucial to the understanding of body manipulations. Pierced people want to live on the fringe and need to feel marginalized as part of their individuality, but this has two sides: the pierced “individual” does not want his or her identity determined by someone else (an onlooker, a parent, society in general, etc.) and so uses his or her own body to define (or re-define) his or her identity, since it is an immediately identifiable visual element that ideally does not allow the spectator to define the subject. Unfortunately, it may have the opposite effect — the pierced “individual” is not thought of as individual or autonomous at all, but immediately lumped together with some pejorative group or label — anything from “crazy” to “freak” or worse. The subject’s defense is to state that the mainstream, disapproving onlooker is wrong to generalize, that “no two piercings can be identical, because no two faces, bodies, or genitalia are alike” (Vale 5), but the result of using piercing to take the power of creating identities

away from the onlooker probably has the opposite effect of, in fact, giving the onlooker even more power to define the subject's identity.

In addition to the questions of power and identity, piercing raises certain gender and ethnic questions. Unlike tattoos, hyper-masculine or misogynistic pictorial images are seldom associated with piercing, making it more enticing to either sex. Moreover, from looking through articles on piercing (which often do appear in tattoo magazines since there is a strong overlap in the subcultures) and from talking to piercers, there seems to be a (relatively) large number of women who choose this type of body decoration over others. Some of this might have to do with American culture's acceptance of the female earring (perhaps unconsciously assimilated as an act of decoration-through-penetration). In addition, the current prevalence (not to mention tolerance) of multiple earrings among men can be seen as a move towards a more androgynous image of masculinity. With body piercing, gender identities (and even physical appearances) become more interchangeable, as male and female are capable of both piercing (penetrating) or being pierced (being penetrated). In addition, pain (an obvious side effect, whether wanted or unwanted, of piercing) "is a uniquely personal experience [and] it remains loaded with shock value" (Vale 5). This shock value (again related to power over identity and desire for marginalization) to an extent transcends gender separation: piercing is amazingly equal opportunity in its offensiveness, and part of the reason for this (in addition to the connotations of pain and the affront to American cultural standards of beauty) may be that, like hairstyles, pierces confuse gender identity. Unlike hairstyles, they are more permanent and altering, and thus more disturbing.

The notions that pierces defy American standards of beauty is important, since the origin of piercing (as well as tattooing and scarification, *i.e.* causing permanent marks on the skin through cutting or branding) can be traced to "primitive" (*i.e.* non-Western) cultures; in fact, tattooing and piercing are forbidden by the Bible in the Book of Leviticus (Vale 95). Turning to non-Western forms of body alteration can be looked at in two very different ways, either as the appropriation of other cultural standards of beauty and practices, or as the ignorant

exploitation of other cultures in the name of shock and fashion. Certainly this seems dependent on the situation as well as the individual, but in either case the act of middle class whites appropriating the image of ancient African and Indian rituals is certainly meant to be shocking as a defiance of cultural (*i.e.* white America's cultural) standards. One may be shocked when white teenagers listen to rap music and wear baggy clothing (extremely mutable fads), so parents certainly are outraged that their child would do something as "ugly" (*i.e.* in defiance of their cultural standard of beauty) as piercing to themselves.

When an Indian or African-American (particularly a woman, since many forms of jewelry are considered feminine cross-culturally) wears a nose-ring, the effect is different than when that same piece of jewelry is sported by a white person. Only a few years ago, it was almost unheard of for whites to pierce anything other than the ears, since there was no cultural tradition for any other practice. This was never a problem for a people whose ancestry goes back to Asia or Africa; their nose-rings affirm their roots and traditions, while pierces on whites merely assimilate (or, to be more pejorative, usurp) the practices of marginalized people. This, however, is often the very desire of the counterculture — to "self-marginalize" in a way that they are not "born into" as members of the white middle-class. To obtain the desired degree of shock value, appropriations must be borrowed, or more accurately, bought.

The piercing process and the jewelry is not cheap (anywhere from about \$60-150 and up, depending on the size and place of the pierce), and when white middle class youths spend money on these practices, they borrow from the culture of people marginalized by race (as said previously) but also by class (since the two sometimes overlap). This becomes the paradox: these middle class people seek to confer a non-Western, non-middle class status upon themselves (something both the *status quo* and even the truly marginalized see as undesirable) by spending money. The object of piercing then is to use their power to create a more "credible" anti-establishment posture by buying the (at least superficial) stance of the oppressed — the poor, the non-white. By linking themselves in this way, their own "un-hip" status as members of

the white middle class can be challenged. No matter how they try, though, it cannot be eliminated, since the only way to create this link is to pay for it.

Piercing is objectionable to the *status quo* for its thorny gender, race and class reappropriation, but also for its bending of normal notions of what space is. The middle class associates space directly with time and money; nearly all of the descriptions take these factors into account by definition. But while many (particularly Post-structuralists) attempt to analyze the significance of space in the world and society (especially in architecture), the pierced person's notion of space turns inward, and his or her very own body becomes subject to spatial interpellation. Space traditionally means everything outside the self, but to the pierced, the very body itself becomes so much space to be filled or manipulated. Instead of using outside space and structure to determine power constructions (like the ones I have previously discussed) all discussion instead stems from the basic premise that one's own body, like any other structure, is itself defined as space. This seems to fly in the face of the normal connotation that space is everything outside the body — everything *except* the body.

In many ways, the whole concept of piercing begins and ends with a loaded question of aestheticism: does the individual like the way a pierce looks? Most of the people I spoke to had piercings for purely aesthetic reasons — just as another place to wear jewelry (although some experience physical and sensual pleasure from having the pierces touched or moved). Of course, the question is loaded because what determines the standard of beauty raises the same issues of individuality vs. conformity, gender, and ethnicity all over again, and the question seems trapped in a tautology — beauty defines the pierces and the pierces define (or *don't* define) beauty.

Clearly, rebellion against norms, societal taboos, gender, and ethnic identities will continue to cause people with the time and money to afford it (again, middle class white teens) to resort to more and more drastic measures as the envelope gets pushed further and further. Perhaps what continues to make piercing so extreme is the way it

flagrantly defies our cultural standards of gender appearances and roles, Western beauty, and conformity. As the shock value wanes with familiarity, though, one can only wonder what people will do to be shocking, to further violate that which is taboo, once piercing becomes assimilated into the mainstream, as perhaps is happening now.

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