

Ways of Thinking Essay-

Myth, Perspective Connotations and Artistic Device

This essay will aim to analyse through critical theory the piece, '*Rückenfigur*' (2009), by artist Glenn Ligon. With focus on ideas of perception both of the self and within greater society through the use of '*Myth*' (Barthes, 1957) and ideas of an African American '*Double-consciousness*' (Du Bois, 1903). The work will be discussed regarding the second prompt- '*De-construct the meaning of an artwork in relation to one of the following topics: the politics of representation, race or violence*'.

The piece aims to display the apparent contrasting nature of America. *Rückenfigur*, displayed within the exhibition '*America is Hard to See*', uses an example of such contrast using Barack Obama getting elected while simultaneously America participating in the torture of individuals within Cuban prisons and going to war with Iraq and Afghanistan. Ligon stated in an interview with Jason Moran, '*...there is this sense that America, for all its dark deeds, is still this shining light. That's how the piece came about, because I was thinking about Dickens's "the best of times, the worst of times"*'.

(Glenn Ligon, (2009), '*Rückenfigur*', [neon and paint]. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.)



Working from the theories of linguist Ferdinand De Saussure, whose work focused on language as a system of signs with speech being of secondary importance. Sound frequencies and the psychological skill to understand

and unify said sounds is believed by Saussure, as the measure of signs within communication through language.

'Speech has both an individual and a social side, and we cannot conceive of one without the other.' (Saussure, et al. 1983)

Saussure's writings revolve around 'structuralism' a term granted to a theory of a greater system being influenced by human behaviour, experience, and culture. While simultaneously influencing the same conceptual order. Structuralism is a broad notion that exists in a linguistic sense for Saussure's work and later expanded into a larger concept using semiology as a way of perceiving a more connotative system.

Roland Barthes questioned language and its perceived '*naturalness*', stating that words (*'the signifier'*) and their connective meaning (*'the signified'*) only exist within their cultural landscape. In removing cultural context, '*rational*' meaning is obsolete. Within the context of a mass consumer culture, Barthes through a structuralist viewpoint, creates the idea of Mythology. Using the ideas Saussure discussed in which the signifier is deemed variable to its secondary meaning, the myth provides examples outside of literature writings. Focusing on '*an ideological critique of the language of so-called mass culture*', (Barthes, *Mythologies*, Preface to 1970 Edition). The myth treats signs as a system of connotations, '*one might hope to transcend pious denunciation and instead account in detail for the mystification which transforms petit bourgeois culture into a universal nature.*'. In a larger sense, historically and socially sign systems are formed through the lens of class, race, gender, and sexuality in which an individual may be influenced by culturally formed myths through those in control of mass-culture e.g., media and government.

Relating Rückenfigur to the writings of Barthes, '*America*' here is used as both a symbol of privilege through use of white neon, calling forth ideas central to an idealist America that is both white, Christian, and heterosexual.

The system of black wires takes up a roll of powering the neon; representing the race dynamic created through a governance system focused on capitalistic endeavours through the continuation of Jim Crow Law within the bounds of the '*Prison Industrial Complex*', seeing this exemplified through The War on Drugs and '*...and an unbroken line of police violence in the US that takes us all back to the days of slavery*' (Davis, 2014). A term that dictates the cycle of mass imprisonment of African American men while generating '*...profits as it devours social wealth, and thus it tends to reproduce the very conditions that lead people to prison.*' (Davis, 2003). Coexisting along side statistical evidence that, '*whites have engaged in drug offenses at rates higher than blacks*', (Rosino, & Hughey, M. W., 2018).

Additionally, high levels of police violence derive from original American police forces being an extension of '*Slave patrols*' which occurred during pre-emancipation, civil war America.

Given the Myth in theory is held up by cultural and historical instances, we must also view '*Rückenfigur*' as both a title and through its literal meaning, referring to the artistic compositional device, in which the figure faces the foreground of a scene. Leaving the face, and the subject's emotions unknown, allowing the viewer to assume the identity and emotional context to the piece.

The word is given greater context from a post-modern experience. The Post-modern artist can use past examples of a subject or device in use to establish historical connection. '*Wander Above a Sea of Fog*' (Casper David Friedrich, 1818) is used as an example when Cambridge Professor Kasia Boddy documents their visit of America is Hard to See. Boddy views the sign as facing the wall, using the romantic painting as historical contrast. '*...what it looks at is a bare wall. Has America come to a dead end? Is there no future? But look again and you notice that the Rückenfigur-effect is not quite right.*'

The European Romantic period main themes revolve around Idealism. An idea used in everyday life to describe something as optimistic. Idealism through the subject of philosophy

is a outlook of 'highest deals', 'Optimists who believe that, in the long run, good will prevail are often called "idealists..."

Within modern philosophy there are sometimes taken to be two fundamental conceptions of idealism:

1. something mental (the mind, spirit, reason, will) is the ultimate foundation of all reality, or even exhaustive of reality, and
2. although the existence of something independent of the mind is conceded, everything that we can know about this mind-independent "reality" is held to be so permeated by the creative, formative, or constructive activities of the mind (of some kind or other) that all claims to knowledge must be considered, in some sense, to be a form of self-knowledge.' - (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2021)

An audience views a literal 'backwards' America, but the piece works to deceive the eye, viewing the work also as 'forward', due to the symmetrical letters. Ligon being both African American and homosexual is inclined to perceive more complex views of his country, he must be made more aware of the representation of both him and the violence minorities endure. Rückenfigur alongside Ligon's other untitled pieces display a conflict of both violence and of perception within America. Here displays an example of the use of the signifier and the signified with America being deconstructed and separated from its connotations in which both perspectives can then be viewed.

Breaking down this piece through the interpretation of America within society, Ligon's piece may also be considered through a notion of double consciousness. Referring to the common perspective seen in African Americans, whereby they are made aware both of their true selves and that of how western society will view and victimise them. Du Bois, who made famous the term, worked from ideas set within Transcendentalism, a movement of the 19th century which primarily saw focus on idealist conceptions of individualism. Followers such as, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) apposed American enslavement, in his text, 'Resistance to Civil

Government', he writes, 'a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize.'

The movement opposed the more classical, common utilitarian practise of the same century. Transcendentalism deemed a romantic belief, spoke of double consciousness as through different terms than Du Bois, '...the double consciousness plaguing the Transcendentalist summarized the downward pull of life in society- including the social forces inhibiting genuine self-realization- and the upward pull of communion of the divine...' (D.Bruce, pp.300 1992). Ralph Waldo Emerson coined the phrase; however, it lacks Du Bois's reflective societal perception being that the history, privileges, and experiences of both individuals differ with Du Bois displaying a self-conscious idea of personhood, opposing Emerson Idealism. '...the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.'

Glen Ligon's post-modern piece, Rückenfigur can be viewed through a variety of critical theories and perspectives. Calling upon both Romantic Idealism and past opinions of what western manhood and racism means in reference to art history and historical literature. The piece created within a post-modern America can't help but reference current political environments and treatment of minorities. 'America', the myth is used to highlight its use of past historical reference as well as present upholding of principles cause the continuation of systemic racism via EXT 'The Prison Industrial Complex', while simultaneously Barack Obama gaining power in office.

In response to, '*De-construct the meaning of an artwork in relation to one of the following topics: the politics of representation, race or violence*', when researching the piece, Rückenfigur is a presentation of both Americas violence and a representation of power and its changes.

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