Shame and desire. Intersubjectivity in Finnish visual culture

Laine, T.K.

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Conclusion

Understanding is not a quality coming to human reality from the outside; it is its characteristic way of existing. Thus, the human reality which is I assumes its own being by understanding it. I am, therefore, first, a being who more or less obscurely understands his reality as a man, which signifies that I make myself man in understanding myself as such. I may therefore interrogate myself and on the basis of this interrogation lead an analysis of the ‘human reality’ to a successful conclusion which can be used as a foundation for an anthropology.¹

Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Emotions*
In this thesis, I have proposed an insight into the Finnish visual culture by concentrating on the questions of spectatorship within the terms of the social and the intersubjective. The first conclusion is clear: in order to understand spectatorship, one has to understand subjectivity; and in order to understand subjectivity, one has to take the subject’s reciprocal relationship with the Other into account, since this relationship is not simply an external one, but contributes to the foundation of subjectivity itself. As I have stated throughout this thesis, human experience is intersubjective, and it is through the relationship between the self and the Other that the subject can exist in the social world. It is in relation with the Other than the subject can be in the world, and his or her being in the world can have meaning as a being-looked-at or as being-looking-at in the context of the social.

This means that there is a continuous exchange between the subject and the social world through which the ‘outside’ of the collective experience becomes the ‘inside’ of the subject’s psychic life. The subject exists in the social world in an embodied, active, dynamic manner, anticipating how his or her actions will be seen by others. The subject’s presence to the social world requires that the subject is both aware of the world and aware of his or her presence to the world; the subject always depends on others in order to know him- or herself. We see, hear, feel, and express ourselves through actions that in part always remain beyond ourselves, always beyond the reach of my self-awareness, in the Other. We must look to others to see ourselves and to know ourselves. We can see by ourselves, but only in the presence of others can we become aware of our look. Our self-consciousness emerges and is sustained by taking an external viewpoint on ourselves. This is why, according to Jack Katz, “the identities of others, as anticipated or encountered, are from the start intrinsic to
the shaping of one’s own frames of action and of the self that is inscribed in them.”

The second conclusion of this thesis is that by focusing on the issues of intersubjectivity, it is possible to abandon the model of spectatorship that is based on the opposing positions of subject and object, internal and external, active and passive, seer and seen. In several ways, images look back at the spectators, thereby forming and altering the social discourses that define their relationship with others within and across social communities. Images look back at the spectators in such a way that the cinematic experience becomes a reciprocal relationship of being to being. In the cinematic experience, it is emotions in particular that promote the exchange between the subject and object of look in the social context. Images look back at the spectators, confronting them with their own look, and revealing that they exist for the Other like the Other exist for them. This, as I have shown, reduces the spectators to shame, as it suggests that their desire to look is being observed by the Other, and that the Other’s values come to qualify the spectators.

As Sartre has taught us, the fundamental structure of shame exemplifies the way in which we are all related to each other, the way in which each of us is forced to see him- or herself through the eyes of the others, unable to escape an identity imposed from outside him- or herself. But shame is more than just an ontological relation between the self and the Other, since it is an emotion profoundly embedded in the social. Shame is a mode of consciousness that returns to the society and sensitizes the subject to the social world. In this thesis I hope to have shown the ways in which Finnish national identity has been shaped around notions of shame. Furthermore, I hope to have shown how shame can be used as a method of analysis that can reveal the inner consistency, social dynamics and affective bonds within the work of art and between the work of art and its spectator. The third conclusion of this
thesis is that the national specificity of Finnish visual culture needs not to lie in the question of coherence of the nation, but in the way in which its films, documentaries, photographs, and video installations reproduce the intersubjective modes of social engagement, the modes that can be discovered in the emotion of shame.

In the light of this, consider still another example, from Sam Mendes's film *American Beauty* (1999). In this film, a dark, satirical eye is cast on the supposedly perfect but actually dysfunctional nuclear family through a strongly emotional focal point. In the film, Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey), a disappointed writer living in a loveless marriage is trying to solve his 'mid-life crisis' by freeing himself from all responsibilities. Inspired by the 'existentialist' attitude of Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley), the boy next door, Lester first quits his job and then starts obsessively to pursue Angela (Mena Suvari) the girl of his desire, but also the best friend of his 16-year old daughter Jane (Thora Birch). Yet in his quest for existentialist freedom, Lester damages his personal relationships by violating all the social codes of conduct. As a result, Lester makes the members of his family feel ashamed of him, but each of them in their own way—depending on their personal values and on the way they want to be seen in their own social context. For his insecure daughter Jane, Lester's behaviour towards Angela is, of course, an enormous cause of shame because, as she confesses to Ricky's video camera, a father that is "drooling over" one's girlfriend is just too embarrassing to live with: "I need a father who's a role model, not some horny geek boy who's going to spray his shorts whenever I bring a girlfriend home from school."

Lester's wife Carolyn (Annette Bening) is an ambitious real estate agent who thinks her unpresentable daughter and failed husband do not fit into her picture perfect life. She begins an affair with a colleague, 'The King' (Peter Gallagher), who ends their relationship after
Lester catches them at a hamburger bar where he is working at the counter ("Smile! You’re at Mr. Smiley’s!"). Carolyn understands that the reason for ending their relationship is not that ‘The King’ is afraid of an expensive divorce, but the fact that she does not “project an image of success” because of her husband’s work in a hamburger bar. The whole film thus circles around shame of being seen, of which Lester becomes the catalyst after he has freed himself from his emotional paralysis. *American Beauty*, a character-driven film with a strong emotional motive, serves to demonstrate an important feature of human experience: namely that human experience is intersubjective in the sense that the Other (as another subject) has an impact on the subject’s self-image.

Because of Lester, the characters in the film are unable to hang on to the façade of the suburban life that is the American Dream and keep shame out of the picture. Both Lester’s wife and his daughter are constantly concerned with how they appear to other people in their social environment. As soon as shame renders visible both the unfulfilled desires and the social structures that suffocate those desires, the film turns from a cheerful comedy into a hysterical, twisted nightmare (even the pace of narration changes from sleepy to hectic in the film). This is most clear in the case of Ricky’s father, Colonel Fitts (Chris Cooper), a homophobic ex-marine who collects Nazi-memorabilia. As we shall find out, his homophobia is a masquerade for his suppressed homosexuality. He mistakes Lester for a gay and makes a pass at him only to find out that he is not. This is so emotionally disturbing for Colonel Fitts that, in order for him not having to live with the shame this causes, he kills Lester. Lester has given a face to the social eye that Colonel Fitts imagines looking at and disapproving of him, and by getting rid of Lester—the only person who knows about his homosexuality—he attempts to get rid of shame.
As this reading of *American Beauty* suggests, shame as a method of analysis can be used in other national cinemas and their psycho-historical links; in the case of *American Beauty*, the (hidden) attitudes towards sexuality, sexual orientation, and economic success. Thus although the ‘I’ who speaks in this thesis is positioned in a specific national context with specific reasons of the heart (I lived in Finland until I moved to the Netherlands at the age of 27), and although the focus in this thesis has been on Finnish shame, and Finnish national cinema, I hope to have made a contribution also to a more wide-ranging understanding of how our intersubjective existence can be discovered in shame, and how film epitomizes intersubjective relationships in the context of the social much more generally.

Shame exists not only between the self and the Other, the individual and the social, but also between the national and the international, as the *ontological* structure of shame is the same in every culture.3 What ‘the speaking I’ in this thesis tells may thus actually be crucial for understanding transnational and transcultural positions both in theoretical and political terms. Sartre writes that understanding is not a quality coming to human reality from the outside, but connected to the body of emotions, moving out from within. As Annette Kuhn in her book *Family Secrets* has shown, by turning attention to the deconstruction of images close to home (in her case, photographs from her own childhood and images from her shared ethnographic past) one can move from personal emotions and private experience to the public, collective realm: “Emotion and memory bring into play a category with which film theory—and cultural theory more generally—are ill equipped to deal: experience.”4 Similarly, what this thesis hopes to have shown, is that when personal and emotional understanding is set in motion, it becomes an intersubjective position between ‘home’ and ‘the world’ that can be shared with human subjects across cultures, that can push the limits of national cultures and that can
lead one “back into the presence of one’s history on a composite screen of cultural memory.” By taking my cue from my own experience, I, then, hope to have offered the reader some insights into the configuration of self and Other within the new Europe, and its new cinemas, coming out of the experience of transculturalism. Furthermore, I hope to have made a contribution to a more general understanding of the different ways in which we can be involved by contemporary visual culture as historical, social, and bodily subjects, beyond the opposing positions of self and Other, public and private, local and global.

3 Needless to say, what is not the same in every culture is the nature of the internalized standards, rules, and goals whose violation produces shame. These do vary across cultures and time. See, for instance, Michael Lewis, *Shame: The Exposed Self*. (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 208-9.