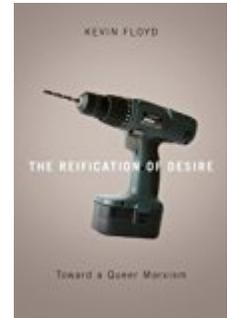


Kevin Floyd. *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 270 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8166-4396-7.



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Of the many striking features of Kevin Floyd's excellent study, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*, certainly the most striking is its second chapter. In it, Floyd reads the truths of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) against the backdrop of capitalism's influences on changing gender norms. I was certain that when the moment came that Butler's work was historicized in this fashion, it would come at the hands of a philosopher. Instead, it has been skillfully performed by Floyd, whose own discipline is English. This is not to say that Floyd's work is not deeply philosophical. In fact, *The Reification of Desire* handles the background figures Immanuel Kant and G. W. Hegel very well: no easy task, even from inside of the discipline of philosophy. It is to say that Floyd's merging of the insights of philosophy with the careful analysis of fiction, a method he uses throughout *The Reification of Desire*, works to illuminate key theoretical points.

It is, indeed, the question of "skillful performance" itself that is most at issue in Floyd's historicization of Butler. Floyd shows how the

deskilling of labor characteristic of capitalist production changes how the gendered body and its desires are conceptualized. Butler's insight about the demand to reiteratively perform one's gender occurs against this backdrop of deskilling. Heterosexism and the gender performances tied to it are not simply timeless mandates, but among the specific and important new skills that capitalism requires and develops, even as it cancels and renders other skills superfluous.

But this tale of labor's deskilling is hardly simple, and it takes Floyd several chapters to tell it. In chapter 1, Floyd documents the series of changes, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in the description of male bodies. As these bodies are reconceptualized, they are no longer active agents that are the sole source of sexual desire. Instead desire becomes, in Floyd's words, "an isolated, autonomous epistemological object; it is dissociated from, made independent of and irreducible to, any particular subject" (p. 62). Desire is thus "deskilled" from being an active capacity of the male body and the male body only.

At the same time, the meaning of this now isolated desire is colonized by the discipline of psychoanalysis. Floyd ties this isolation of desire to the discourse of reification, a technical term from Marxism that describes how what was previously an aspect of subjectivity is made into an external thing, a thing which then dominates the subject from the outside. This is the “reification of desire” from which the book takes its title.

His discussion continues in chapter 2, where the change from nineteenth-century physiological to twentieth-century psychoanalytic accounts of maleness are also reflected in a shift of vocabulary from “manhood” to “masculinity.” Whereas the distinction pivotal to nineteenth-century manhood was the dissociation from childhood and immaturity, the distinction pivotal to twentieth-century masculinity is the dissociation from femininity (pp. 87-88), since this is no longer accomplished straightforwardly by the definition of one’s body as the only desiring body. Masculinity is thereby subject to requirements that manhood was not: the performance of hetero-normative gender and the Butlerian melancholic (dis)identification with other men among them. Here Floyd’s analysis of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) exemplifies both this melancholic (dis)identification and this performance.

The performance of hetero-normative gender is also tied to the deskilling of labor in a more straightforward sense. Manhood was the product of an economic era in which the skilled labors of industrial manufacture were still the norm. Masculinity, however, is the product of an economic era that has passed through Fordism. Instead of skilled labor, its norm is unskilled labor at work compensated by consumption imperatives at home that, particularly for men, parody the ideal of skilled labor. Thus the inverted image of the common household drill that decorates the book’s cover—the use of images is good throughout Floyd’s work—is the mark of masculinity. This explains the gendered economy of the privatized,

mid-twentieth-century household, under a number of imperatives, the most important of which may be consumption.

Floyd’s attention to consumption, and the imperative of consumption, is important. Many scholars neglect the strain of economic theory Floyd calls regulation theory, a strain that puts emphasis on how capitalism periodically experiences crises of accumulation. One way of mediating such crises is to increase consumption of consumer goods. But this is only possible if (1) wages are high enough to produce real demand and, more pertinently to Floyd’s study, (2) if the desires to consume can be both produced and turned into a kind of imperative. The drill, the automobile, and the kitchen mixer: all show how the tools of suburban, heterosexual, white gender expression join hands with this imperative to consume.

In chapter 4, Floyd’s meditation on tools extends from this discussion of deskilling into the queer world of the physique pictorals of the 1950s and early 1960s. These featured a male model carrying a tool like a gun or sledgehammer, and wearing, in Floyd’s words, “just enough of the garb of cowboys or sailors ... to signify a simultaneously iconic and homosexualized masculinity” (p. 155). Floyd’s main theoretical point is to show how the reification of desire has potentially progressive and transgressive consequences for political life, especially through the nascent crafting of queer community that it enables.

He does this against a Marxian tradition of critical theory that—incorrectly in Floyd’s view and also that of this author—has always read reification as unambiguously one-dimensional, negative, and dominating, a tradition including but not limited to the Georg Lukács, later Herbert Marcuse, and Theodor Adorno that Floyd mentions explicitly.

But an even greater merit of the text is that it makes the important insights of Marx and Foucault speak powerfully to one another, against traditions of Marxism that have ignored or dimin-

ished the importance of sexuality as trivial, and against readings of Foucault that have emphasized the sexual in isolation from the economic.

Some of Floyd's complex points and fundamental concepts could have been more clearly rendered: reification, for example, needs a more sustained treatment as a concept before Floyd deconstructs and complicates it, and the introduction is really a conclusion that will be best understood if read at the end of the work. In addition, while Floyd acknowledges the various blind spots of his and other texts (p. 12), his occlusion of discussions of lesbian and other queer sexualities are still noticeable throughout the work.

But these defects are minor. In addition to having theoretical sophistication and range, Floyd's writing is also witty. Do not miss the excellent discussions, woven throughout the text, of capitalism and temporality. Do not miss the illuminating discussion, in chapter 4, of the transition between Herbert Marcuse's early and later work with respect to the issue of sexuality. And, at all costs, do not miss Floyd's reworking, in chapter 5, of the concluding passages of Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism from *Capital* (1867) with respect to the gay male body of contemporary advertising: "if this profitably sculpted male body could speak" (p. 201).

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