

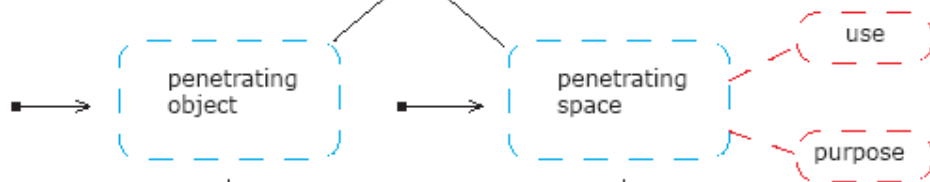
Illustration #5: Stormy Leather® Malibu Terra Firma Harness

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Female Spatiality on the 'Strap-On' culture  
*Strapping-on a functional theory through the performance of penetrating space*

*performers:*



*determinants:*



*invariant:*  
culturally constructed [essentialist/relativism]



TITLE:

*Strapping-on a functional theory through the performance of penetrating space*

*Everywhere you shut me in. Always you assign a place to me.  
Even outside the frame that I form with you...  
You set limits even to events that could happen with others...  
You mark out boundaries, draw lines, surround, enclose.  
Excising, cutting out.  
What is your fear? That you might lose your property.  
What remains is an empty frame. You cling to it, dead.*  
--Luce Irigaray<sup>1</sup>

1. Spatial arrangements between the sexes are socially created; when the organization of space provides access to valued spaces for men, while reducing access to women, such organization may perpetuate status differences and differentiated spatial understanding between the sexes. The implications of gender with respect to spatial arrangements—the ways in which space may be ‘gendered’—vary historically and socially. We may say that a space inherits its gender either teleologically (through its masculine or feminine *purpose*) or circumstantially (through its *use* by either men or women). The focus of this paper is on how the female’s use of the strap-on could in some way alter the gendering of the space inhabited or penetrated by the strap-on. Since the essentialist notion of ‘penetration’ rests on male phallogocentric ideality—the privileging of the masculine in social relations—the aim is to problematize the view that only the ‘masculine’ penetrates and only the ‘feminine’ is penetrated.

2. On the essentialist view, the vagina, *qua* female sex organ, is gendered feminine, whereas the strap-on, *qua* artificial replacement for the male sex organ, is gendered masculine. Moreover, just as a butch woman entering a room arguably defines the space as queer<sup>2</sup>, the strap-on’s penetration of a space arguably subverts the femininity of that space, since the vagina’s ‘purpose’ is to be penetrated by the male. (Here we may consider, by way of comparison, the female who relieves herself in the male urinal.) Most contemporary architectural spaces are created without presupposing notions of feminine and masculine roles: Both genders ‘penetrate’ space through ‘entering’ the space. Still, some spaces are built with an eye to ‘feminine purposes’, others to ‘masculine purposes’: Consider, for example, the

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Grosz, Elizabeth, “Women, Chora, Dwelling” in *Space, Time, and Perversion*. New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 111.

<sup>2</sup> Munt, Sally, *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Culture Space*, p. 54.

Josephine Baker House, by architect Adolf Loos—a space created for feminine performance and the voyeuristic pleasure of the masculine gaze.

It is difficult to determine whether a space should be classified as female or male without reverting to the notion that some spaces are 'created' for either feminine or masculine purposes. For instance, through cultural and historical factors, the kitchen is socially tied up with notions of femininity because the actions within are performed by the 'mother of the household'. However, if a replica of that kitchen is constructed in France, within a *Five Michelin Star* restaurant where only males are allowed as chefs, then the same gendering will not apply; that particular kitchen is now 'created' for masculine occupancy only. That the kitchen *qua* 'mother's domain' implicates the female identity does not automatically gender the space feminine.

The vagina, like the kitchen, might inherit its gender from whomever inhabits it. If a female were to 'inhabit' another female with a strap-on, that mediating device might be said to reenact and reinforce masculine-centered relations of power and domination. Judith Butler claims that: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; ... identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."<sup>3</sup> Still, the prosthesis in this case is worn by a female, and so the mediating device might be said to inherit the feminine qualities of extravagant artifice and exaggerated performance.

3. One perspective on the female strap-on is put forth gracefully as follows:

*I felt an aggression that I could control and work this person under me; I could be the engine, the hammering piston. I've also seen expressions of painful bliss, pain that women know so well, for each stroke that pleases could be easily followed by a stroke that hurts. Women negotiate, tolerate, and synthesize pain into pleasure as part of the penetrative process. Being the fuckee forces you to compromise your sensations with the intentions of the fucker keeping aware, keeping communication open, and keeping lubed up.*

*After strapping on a few times, I felt I could understand parts of the sexually aggressive behavior of men much better. To my horror, I could see why the illusion of raping a woman would make the penetrator feel alive. I was looming over a creature, who was impaled*

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<sup>3</sup> Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble* Routledge, 1999, p. 25.

*on my latex cock, and I could please or harm them, purely based on my desires.*<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Virginia Vitzthum describes the experience of becoming the penetrator in her “Strap-on Epiphany”:

*As ‘my’ huge appendage disappeared inside him, his eyes showed shame, trust, fear, and a sort of helpless adoration. In a way I’d never understood those words before, he was mine. The knowledge I could really hurt this person by being less than careful made me feel responsible, protective. The vulnerability appalled me at the same time; it was vaguely disgusting that he would let someone do this to him. Mixed in with the disgust was possessiveness. The thought of anyone else penetrating him seemed revolting. These observations clicked into place in a quick succession; I felt like a projector being loaded with slides of maleness, or male seeing.*<sup>5</sup>

Vitzthum claims that using the strap-on enables her to ‘see’ as a masculine character, ‘seeing’ through her own ‘female eyes’ with a particular ‘masculine gaze’—not unlike the vivisectionist’s ideal of seeing through the cow’s eyes, and thus acquiring the ability to ‘see’ as a cow. Vitzthum views her use of the strap-on as a role reversal within societal terms, one that allows her to exercise the controlled power of the fucker. It is not who wears the *pants* in this relationship that matters; it is who wears the *cock*.

4. Michel de Certeau, in *the Practice of Everyday Life*, examines the notion of ‘propriety’ in the context of the sexualized organization of public space. de Certeau examines the neighbourhood as a formalization of a collective space, where the neighbourhood is the convergence point of differences in ages and gender. For de Certeau, the collective space is typically de-genderised: There is no ‘common’ label for the space, there is neither feminine nor masculine penetration; there is just a collective unification. However, were the female to ‘penetrate’ the space of a predominately *masculine* neighbourhood—for example, a neighbourhood inhabited by a dozen female prostitutes and their many male patrons—the penetrating female would be perceived as an ‘object’ (read: artificial strap-on) within the space, rather than a bypassing ‘subject’ (read: anatomical penis) occupying and observing the penetrated space. Yet if a male were to be placed in the same scenario, he would be

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<sup>4</sup> Personal interview with online sex consultant Melissa [aka: AskFSK Feral Sex Kitten].

<sup>5</sup> Vitzthum, Virginia, “Strap-on Epiphany: In becoming the Penetrator, a woman learns to see sex—and the world—through male eyes” [<http://archive.salon.com/urge/feature/1999/01/28feature.html>]

perceived as a 'subject' due to the 'propriety' announced by the neighbourhood. Each character here plays a role, perhaps unwittingly, a role "presented by his or her sexual definition within the limits imposed by propriety".<sup>6</sup>

Such roles figure prominently in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, which draws surprising correlations between mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of genders.<sup>7</sup> Butler argues that we all put on a 'gender performance', whether traditional or not, and so it is not a question of *whether* to do a gender performance, but *what form* that performance will take. By choosing to perform subversively, we might work to change gender norms and the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity.

5. The strap-on defines an abstract spatial interlocking of activities and of bodies which brings about an enfolding of space that carries the individuals attached by the mediation as they create, mold, and invent a shape which supports every position. Through the interlocking of the sexual activity, the action is sculpted by the performance within the space, and carved by the individuals of the space. Because of the nature of the beings—two female hosts—the sensitive qualities of the thrust become an exchange of movement rather than a conversation of gender. It is a 'slippage' of space—the experience of space here has no gendered definition. Yet, the notion of incorporating vision into understanding space offers an additional complex thoroughfare which complicates the gender-defining roles of femininity and masculinity. Since 'seeing' enables an additional 'power' of understanding, over and above the sensorial and the tactile, 'seeing' often redefines space through different 'points-of-view', dependent on the individual in the space. These 'points-of-view', or relationships between the viewer and the observed, are often understood in terms of the 'gaze'<sup>8</sup>, which is determined by the moving bodies and the peripheral penetration of bodies through space. The penetrating strap-on, like the penetrating 'gaze', surveys its object of desire. The space of the female vagina—the most personal of spaces—becomes the accessed space which the fucker surveys.

It is common practice for architects to use visual presentation as a mode of representation and marketing to the client, more so than spatiality during the initial

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<sup>6</sup> de Certeau, Michel, *The Practice of Everyday Life Vol 2*, University of Minnesota Press 1998, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup> Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge: New York 1990.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Lacan's analysis of the gaze's role in the mirror stage development of the human psyche. This concept is extended in the framework of feminist theory, where it can deal with how men look at women, how women look at themselves and other women, and the effects surrounding this.

stages of a project. Space is usually 'drawn-out' to the client, and form is often represented visually rather than in a built mode of representation. In architecture, visibility holds more 'power' than tactility in the early stages of a project. Where built architecture encompasses tactility, spatiality, and material affects, visibility enables the audience to appreciate space with colour, light, and tonal aspects, which provides a compliment for enhancing the 'lived' experience.

6. The traditional strap-on might be seen to *deny* the subversiveness of lesbian sex by assuming that lesbians, like straight women, want to be penetrated by a penis-like object. On the other hand, variations on the traditional strap-on—like the upper-thigh harness variety—might be seen to *affirm* the subversiveness of lesbian sex, since they allow for the dislocation of the phallus away from the penetrator's genital region. Sally Munt, in her *Heroic Desires*, is particularly sensitive to this dilemma: "... fitting the plastic penis onto the female body simultaneously yearns for and derides phallic power; the masquerade is both homage and burlesque."<sup>9</sup> For Munt, the butch who wields the dildo is "an auto-erotic spectacle", dramatizing "this fantasy image [that] is the corrective corollary to the shamed castrated butch of homophobic fable." (Here is it instructive to consider Teresa de Lauretis' argument that the butch embodies a potent fusion of female desire, in which she is both "the desiring subject and desiring object".<sup>10</sup>)

This brings us, quite naturally, to psychoanalysis, with its acute treatment of 'desire', 'fetishism', and 'voyeuristic tendencies'. If the development of the desiring subject is attained *through* the object of desire, then the derivative version of the strap-on would be a degenerate version of occupational space. Thus, prior to the use of the space, the space does not have a gender. The vagina may be socially labeled as an intrinsically masculine space, or a space prepared for masculine occupation. However, the feminine qualities of the space—as observed by the keen 'eye' of the degendered strap-on—are solely based on the performance of the user. The penetrated vaginal space is no more than a subversion of the degendered desire space, where the space 'housed' within the female body is nothing more than a pleasure space for the entrance of a degendered object. It might then be argued that the penetrated space is an *articulation* of pleasure through subversion, where

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<sup>9</sup> Munt, Sally, *Heroic Desire: Lesbian Identity and Cultural Space*, London: Cassell 1998.

<sup>10</sup> de Lauretis, Teresa, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desires*, Bloomington: Indiana U. Press 1994, p. 156.

particular properties, qualities, or characteristics of the strap-on and the penetrated space become stereotypically 'labeled' feminine or masculine, determined again by the performer acting upon penetrating the space. The strap-on, *qua* plastic object, hides itself from biological sexual reference, yet *qua* phallic icon, it embraces references to masculine qualities. We might view the strap-on, 'housed' in the vagina, as a masculine attempt into feminine space. However, since the gender of the space might be determined by the occupant's gender, the vagina might be seen as a "co-ed" space, much like the kitchen in the previous analogy.

7. Perhaps a space owes its gender not merely to the spatial use or the purpose announced by the space, but also to the process of caressing the space. (Here the vagina is best conceptualised as an envelope or container of space, devoted to the calibrating of endless shifting sensations and moods of a perceiving subject whose perceptions have less to do with what is projected and seen *within* the space, and more to do with what is objectively done *with* the space.) The notion of space would then be a notion of a receptacle for objects and bodies, impinged on by the motions and geometries which determine the envelopment that qualifies the space. Gendered space would then be dependent on usage and occupation, rather than intrinsic and social values which pertain to a certain entrenched gender schema. As architects and designers, we must be able to *clarify* and not *classify* such spatial understandings—to manipulate, reconstruct, and extend the boundaries of gendered space.