

At the salon: Addressing dynamics of space, intimacy and ritual

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The first thing I notice about the place is the smell: chemicals, dyes, shampoos, lotions and conditioners all come together in an orgy of scent that seeps and settles deep into the nostrils and permeates the fibers of my clothes. The senses are never at rest here, escalating in sync with the stop-motion rhythm that characterizes the quotidian of the salon stylist. Foregoing any warning, the all-too familiar noise of old hair swept across the floor and dunked into the bin, will suddenly rise to an overwhelming cacophony where the roar of the hair dryer competes with the song on the radio, the running water with the snip of the scissors, the opening door with the ringing telephone; all the while interspersed with the confessional tone of the words exchanged between hairdresser and habitu . These shifting nuances set the scene at Exciting Hair, where established notions are subverted and juxtaposed, and the unexpected dynamics of social complexities at play begin to emerge.

Initially a hair salon might appear to be little more than a place where a service is rendered. Of any preconceived notions, this is perhaps the most erroneous of them all. A hairdresser – or *this* hairdresser at the very least – quickly revealed itself to me as a site of anthropological encounter that was perhaps the thing furthest from a place where a service was merely the thing expected or delivered. For the duration of my project, I became privy to the knowing looks between the girls and the desires and motivations of the customer. I began to understand the telling body language and the information exchanged between hairdresser and client, and I was able to recognize the finely drawn line between what was one thing and what was entirely another. Sifting through pages and pages of notes, I come to reassess the questions I formed at the outset of my encounter. My original fascination with the social importance of hair has been replaced with a curiosity about the hairdresser itself as a crucial locale for rich societal interchanges. Running fingers through my hair now, I think about the meaning

of this soft amalgamation of dead cells. Hair as identity, hair care as cult, hair and everything its maintenance entails...Hair, I have come to realize, is not necessarily the crux, but rather the trigger which sets into motion the ritualistic activity of the visit to the salon, which constantly hovers in between obligation and social indulgence as relationships start to be formed by hair, and hair is transformed through relationships.

It seems a small space at first, oscillating between the hustle and bustle of peak points of activity and the ennui that descends upon the girls when the weather gets bad and customers trade the trim for the telly. The salon is certainly compartmentalized. While there are no doors that separate the space into individual rooms, or block access from the customers, the walls themselves create smaller areas designated for different purposes. The first point of contact is unsurprisingly the waiting area, immediately facing the small reception counter. In front of a few chairs, turned away from the big window that allows for a panoramic view of the street, is a small coffee table littered with magazines. The focus is an inward one, directed towards the activity within the space. The action in the salon is prioritized, allowing the customer to be immersed in the small world of the hairdresser. In fact, the waiting 'room' is not excluded from the remaining space in the salon; on the contrary, it is immediately permeated by the ongoing activity therein. In the words of Augé, "In the concrete reality of today's world, places and spaces, places and non-places intertwine and tangle together" (Augé 1995: 107). Indeed, the "non-place" of the waiting zone is only divided from the space of the hairdresser by the little table. Directly beyond the stack of magazines is a line of three mirrors and chairs, and instantly to the right of the door begins the longer assembly of chairs and mirrors perpendicular to the entrance of the hairdresser, continuing to the far end of the space. The waiting person is therefore physically contained by the arguably more purposeful space of the salon, absorbed by the action they await for themselves.

Contrasting and dualistic, the space of the salon is instrumental to understanding the dichotomous nature of the hairdresser at large and the unusual nature of the

relationships and actions formed and performed inside it. The waiting zone of the salon is one where the “performative practice” (Parkin 1992: 22) that characterizes the ritual at the salon begins. The magazines, a small library of old and new issues of titles including ‘Woman’, ‘More’, ‘Hello’ and ‘Bunkered’ are essential to this practice, and are simultaneously objects which demarcate the small subsection of the salon’s waiting area. Augé claims that “ ‘anthropological place’ is formed...through complicities of language, local references...non-place creates the shared identity of passengers, customers” (Augé 1993: 101). The magazines are essential in the creation of the identity shared by salon-goers. By reading them, the person “becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of...customer” (Augé 1993: 103). For the duration of my ethnographic encounter, I did not once see someone pull out a book, or resort to an alternative form of literary genre. I asked several people why they read the magazines, and if they enjoyed reading a literature that was created by tabloid-media and to a great extent focused on gossip and superficial news snippets about celebrities and jet setters. The answers rarely varied: “I only read them when I’m here, so why not?”, or “I *never* buy these magazines myself, but it’s fun to read them when I come to the salon”. The magazines are situational objects, directly related to a specific kind of experience that customers expect, desire or abide by when at the hairdresser’s. The readers at once define the space around them whilst becoming defined by the images and the text with which they engage.

The waiting space, and the salon at large, is characterized by the constant activity of looking, whether into a magazine, at others, out the window, or even still at oneself through a mirror. The salon is both a place of visual introspection and outward gaze, as observed through the perpetual dialogue between town and salon. People may be looking at the activity on the street through the big, luminous glass-paneled front of the building, or be entirely absorbed in their own self-reflection. In fact, the notion of the salon as small can be a deceptive one. The mirrors that line the walls at times give the impression of a spatially deep, and highly engaging hall of mirrors. “Sometimes it

freaks me out that I can see the back of my own head in another person's mirror", one student told me. The experience can be surreal, fragmenting and shattering visual references, and paradoxically expanding the space in this way. The mirrors are also used as a device for an all-round contact by and between the stylists, who can remain a constant level of alertness and communication while working. I often saw them exchanging looks, smiles, laughs or comments, or turning around to see first hand the new customer coming in who they had caught a glimpse of in the mirror. Sitting in a chair at Exciting Hair, I was able to at once see myself, anyone standing behind me, and, depending on what chair I chose, either the activity on the street, customers getting their hair washed, the entrance door, obscure angles of the room, or a variety of these combined.

Arguably, the complicity created between customers as a result of the salon's objects and spatial components is also elemental to the ritual activity performed by all of the agents in the hairdresser. This activity in turn requires a pluralistic reinterpretation of Durkheim's ritual. Durkheim sees ritual as "crystallizations of basic values uniformly endorsed by communities that perform them with a view to themselves, ultimately to create and confirm their cohesion as communities" (Baumann 1992: 113). Collectively, Western societal hairdressers might in fact fit with this perspective; however, an interpretation of the activity at the salon without a consideration of 'them' in addition to "the quasi-Durkheimian 'us'" (Baumann 1992: 113) would be incomplete. The activity in the salon at once entails not only the customer, but also the hairdresser; not only the regular, but also the new client; not only the elderly, but also the student; not only the sheltered, internal reality of the salon, but also the external world of the town; not to mention the " 'invisible' categorical referents" (Baumann 1992: 113) which inform the conversations in the salon, and determine the bases for relationships between individuals.

For the stylist, the space has real value as the stage set for the ritualistic articulation of both trade and talent in a professional institution. But in fact, the space

of the salon is never exclusively the hairdressers' domain; rather, it is a shared ground for the ongoing dialogue between both stylist and customer. As customers take a seat in front of the mirror, bib tied and ready around their necks, it is not uncommon to hear the girls ask, "So, what are we doing today?" It is a colloquialism, of course, but at the same time the *we* employed by the stylist is not by chance. It creates a sense of collectivity, of familiarity and proximity between client and hairdresser. Above all, it points to the joint nature of the affair at the salon: client and stylist are a team, two parts of a whole, indissoluble, one without which the other, and the ritual as a whole, is unable to function. While this seems at times to be a feeling recreated in other commercial, service-based businesses such as restaurants or coffee shops, it is never on the same level as the sense of communion found in the act of hairdressing. The restaurant, after all, is not preparing a different dish made especially in accordance with the tastes of each customer. The menu determines a pre-established order, a limited list of options which the client must select from in order to best suit their desire. In these cases, the feeling of "we-ness" is lost as the customer is subject to the laws of that particular institution. Instead, at the salon, the customer is directly implicated in the act of creation. This too, is a part of the ritual of the place. In the words of Parkin, "it is less that persons opt to set up and maintain these rituals than that, in criticizing others' competence in bodily movement and direction, they may be left with the task of organizing the ritual" (Parkin 1992: 12). Some customers have detail-specific requirements for a cut, and are knowledgeable practically to the same degree as the hairdresser regarding the number of a blade or the name of a trim. Others give the stylists imperative indications: "It needs to be shaped around my face like this", one customer said, gesturing and tugging on her hair to show Sam exactly what she intended. Unlike other commercial spaces, the floor is thus a communal zone, a platform shared by hairdresser and hairdressed, where both directly contribute to shaping the end goal. One cannot be fully understood without the other, and they are perpetually extending and feeding off each other in order to attain the ideal balance for

either agent.

Sometimes, this balance isn't found, and compromises have to be made by either one or the other. For example, some clients leave dissatisfied when the end result is not akin to a photo they brought in at the start. While she was wary of speaking about unhappy customers, Polly, the manager and part-owner of Exciting Hair, told me that the greatest dissatisfaction came from customers expecting the unreal. Enter the influence of the 'invisible' Other mentioned earlier. "Sometimes people want very particular styles they see on famous people and they're unhappy if they don't look like the person in the picture by the end of the cut!", she laughs. Anyone specific?, I ask. "Oh I don't know...Cheryl Cole was a big one for a while, it keeps changing. Some people don't realize that a haircut won't make them someone else, it's impossible!" Some customers, it would appear, attempt to elevate the hairdresser's ability and responsibility as a creator to quasi-magical heights; the stylist is regarded as a wizard of transformation. In this light, the hairdresser must attempt to cater not only to the physical coherency between the cut and the person on the chair, but also between the cut, the person and a third, non-present entity who exerts a parallel agency on the stylist's labor, mediating the relationship between hairdresser and customer. To reference Parkin, "Ritually 'proper' spaces, positions, and directions may be prescribed by those in authority, but individuals can slip, if only slightly and gradually, beyond boundaries and can widen, narrow, or shift these spatial orientations" (Parkin 1992: 19).

Authority in the hand of the customers can also be shifted by the actions of the hairdressers. In principle, the ritual enacted at the salon operates within a contractual framework respected by both stylist and customer, where trust is the order of the day. This is epitomized by one boy who told me he was not in the least scared of what they might do his hair: "they know my style", he said. Polly also told me that some customers give the stylists full freedom to do what they see fit, because they feel the hairdresser's know them so well. Sometimes, the girls take this intimacy to the next level. With a cheeky smile, Jamie confessed that she sometimes feels like she knows the

customer so well, she will simply shape their hair in accordance with what she feels a person will look better in, instead of what they might have originally requested. One customer named Karen told me that her fifteen-year friendship with a previous stylist ended over an argument about a hairstyle which the hairdresser had deliberately cut against her wishes. 'Slightly' and 'gradually', the hairdresser can become a place where roles in ritual are reversed, authority is perpetually shifting, and the lines between knowing oneself and being known by another become blurred. This is seen in other instances of contact between stylist and client. In answering my questions about the intimate act of touching another's hair and scalp, the same Jamie who confessed to stepping beyond the boundary of the customer's trust, also told me that sometimes she discovers physical alterations that would otherwise go unnoticed by the hairdressed. "There was one time I noticed a small bump that had not been on Mrs. Smith's head before...It turned out it was a tumor and she's had to have it removed twice since". As the domestic act of washing and grooming hair is propelled onto the public sphere, so the stylist begins to develop an instrumental role in overseeing activities that were once very private and individual, and continue to be highly intimate and personal.

In fact, strong and lasting relationships are formed between the girls and their customers, some of who take great pride in openly declaring, categorically and unequivocally, "My hairdresser is Sam". There is a fierceness in an assertion like this, which seems to hang in between a sense of ownership and belonging. One informant I spoke to, had been coming to Polly every week to "get [her] hair done" for the past twenty-one years. There was a loyalty between the two, Mrs Jones explained, which had allowed for an evolution in their relationship. More than a stylist, "Polly is my friend", she said. Polly went on to tell me that hairdresser was seen as an oasis from the commotion of daily life, a place where people could rest and disconnect from the reality outside, even if for an hour. Jamie also told me that they have been seeing customers like Mrs. Jones come in weekly for years, and as time goes by they witness the progression of their physical degeneration. "Some clients get quite poorly and die. If

they come in every week, and then suddenly one week they don't show, we all worry and I check the obituary in the paper to see if there is any bad news...Polly has even been to some of the ladies' funerals". Polly also told me, "People trust us as they trust therapists. They know what they say will stay safe, there is a confidential relationship between the girls and the customers". Paradoxically, the market economy of a capitalist society in which the hairdresser is inserted, provides the possibility for personal and relational debt to be canceled. In other words, money allows acquiring without a reciprocal social obligation created by that acquisition. According to Graeber, the market is "a purely imaginary, abstract totality where all accounts ultimately balance out" (Graeber n.d.: 13). And yet, unlike a supermarket, a restaurant or a bank, the originally commoditized relationships formed in the hairdresser transform into long-term friendships that extend far beyond the domain of the salon.

The hairdresser is a place in continual flux, home to a dialectic of meanings and relationships that are as dichotomous as they are akin. During my encounter I came to realize that there is a lot more to the chairs, the mirrors, the hands, the bodies, and the words exchanged between the agents active in the space of the salon. As I collect my thoughts I realize there are so many questions still unanswered. What kind of stories would the salon have to tell about gendered relations? The activity ongoing in *Exciting Hair* revealed to me that "rituals, however they are defined, are not just expressive of abstract ideas but do things, have effects on the world, and are work that is carried out – that they are indeed performances" (Parkin 1992:14) which reveal an enormous importance in the overlooked spaces of our quotidian, both to anthropology, and to our own relations as social beings.

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