

Fiche

Many artists have chosen to stage themselves in their work of art putting forward the artistic dimension before any form of narcissism. As a matter of fact, we may think that narrating our life, talking about who we are, writing autobiographies are just a means to flatter our ego, to be selfish and to celebrate our life, exposing it as an example to be followed. But it is far more complicated than what we may think. Most of the time when artists decide to reveal themselves in texts, paintings or in any other ways, it is to try to know who they really are. This is something important as well for the readers or the spectators because they can also discover certain facts about themselves. Thus, some artists, through their works, try to wonder who they truly are, looking for a meaning in their existence in a cathartic way. By laying bare their emotions, they manage to get a clearer vision of who they are even if it means going through pain and suffering before reaching self-awareness. Self-portraits, autobiographies question the personality the subject and his/her identity. So, it is important to bear in mind that staging oneself is not an intention of the author or artist to assert his/her will but a way to question oneself and to show what seems inexpressible or ineffable.

Dandyism

Some artists represent themselves as works of art, staging themselves through their appearance and their attitudes somewhat styled like a "dandy" as Oscar Wilde did. This **dandyism**, historically, refers to a man who gave particular importance to his physical appearance, used refined language, and pursued leisurely hobbies, with apparent nonchalance in a cult of himself. For artists, each day is an opportunity to create a new canvas, a new story using their clothes and outfits in the place of words or colors. They are both playwrights and actors because they decide on what they want to wear and they play a kind of role so as to be observed and to arouse feelings in the people they encounter. They want to be seen, to be noticed, to be recognized and to be celebrated. They enjoy a certain form of **hedonism** and we may think, as mentioned above, that they are just being narcissistic but we can also assume that showing off is just a way to hide themselves and to conceal their true self. Indeed, they just offer a physical vision of who they wish to be. People have to guess their true personality even if clothes are clues on the psychology of the person. We cannot see inside them for what they truly are, and this is what they are looking for because people are just focused on the appearance without paying attention to the person wearing the clothes. It is maybe what the dandy wants, that is to say to be seen without being analyzed. By doing so, it is a way for them to expose their appearance to others, which may be a way to find a meaning in their existence.

Alter ego and avatars

We can find similar situations with artists who reinvent themselves through their alter ego and avatars. The most prominent example is David Bowie who used many aliases throughout his career. *Ziggy Stardust* or even *Aladdin Sane*, which is another way to introduce him as an insane lad, displaying a kind of madness, eccentricity, peculiarity. It is quite **paradoxical** because David Bowie used masks and make-up to hide behind them but we have the impression that he was revealing his true self through his costumes. It was a way for him to show **the different facets of his personality**. For the spectators, it is important since it enables them to have a complete view of a person and each mask he wears is not meant to hide who he is but to disclose another aspect of his personality.

As a result, fashion, clothes, cross-dressing or even misrepresentation are part of this self-achievement, this self-completion and the construction of an identity, a true self. Curiously, in spite of this concealment, artists manage to express their identity and to question their existence. In that case, the clothes become an outfit that defines who we are, a second skin that gives information about our personality like Andy Warhol or Karl Lagerfeld, the ultimate dandy. We cannot underestimate the importance of clothes and the art of fashion which represents a certain identity and many messages can be conveyed through the way we are dressed. It is a social code but also an artistic way of staging oneself.

Autobiographies and self-portraits

There are obviously other ways for artists of staging and expressing themselves. We can indeed write **autobiographies** or paint **self-portraits** and by doing so, artists can control their own names as well as their posterity through the staging of a specific figure. First of all, we may question the name in itself: is it a name that defines our identity? Or is it the other way round? As a matter of fact, a name is just a choice made by someone else and has no real impact on the construction of our self. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet states in her soliloquy in the balcony scene that it is not the name of Romeo that she loves but the person as such no matter his name: if a rose were not called a rose, it would still smell like a rose.

The fact of producing a piece of writing centered on our own existence can be a means to **speak on behalf of a greater community**. It is an opportunity for some to shed a light on the different American identities and to draw people's attention on certain parts of History that could have been silenced or hidden for too long. A writer becomes the spokesperson of a whole people and, by telling their story, they are also narrating what their people went through and what they had to endure all their life. This testimony is a reminder that the United States of America was built by many nations and it is important to remember the origins and the roots of

this new continent. By doing so, the authors can also reconnect with their own roots. The native origins of the country are thus expressed in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie in which the native writer reminds people of the importance of natives in the construction of the identity of the country. In this way, he asserts his identity of a "mixed blood" and his place in this world, which has not always been easy. It is indeed not easy to be trapped between two cultures but it was a way for him to reconnect with his origins. It is also essential to tackle the subject of slavery which is still remains a scar on the American face.

Calling some representations into question

As we can see, there are various ways of staging oneself in an individual way or in a collective one to speak on behalf of those who are forgotten. Besides, some artists stage themselves in order to call into question some representations that are taken for granted and that could be subjects of discussion, debates or criticism. We have two interesting examples when two artists, from each coast of the Atlantic Ocean, managed to give their subversive version of their national anthems to criticize their country and its wrongdoings. Jimi Hendrix played the *Star-Spangled Banner* on his electric guitar before burning the US flag to condemn the US presence in Vietnam. In the UK, the Sex Pistols gave their own version of *God Save the Queen* describing the country as a fascist regime and embodying the anger of the youths who did not recognize themselves in the country's politics.