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Feminist Metaphilosophy

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RAHNA MCKAY CARUSI, *Lacan and Critical Feminism: Subjectivity, Sexuation, and Discourse*, Abingdon-New York, Routledge, 2020, pp. 188 (ISBN 9780367197094).

Defying both the wide-spread prejudice of Lacan's work being centered on a phallogocentric perspective, and the established traditional reading of Lacanian psychoanalysis as having the phallus as its unavoidable pivot, Rahna McKay Carusi's book is devoted to an intriguing, although very ambitious aim: «As a feminist and a Lacanian, I want to argue that we don't need the phallus to represent the master signifier or *point de capiton*» (p. 124).

The displacing of the centrality of the phallus in Lacan's theory is, according to Carusi, instrumental to bring to light and legitimize forms of subjectivizations which exceed the one produced by phallic jouissance and coincident with the binary of traditional masculinity and Lacan's ~~Woman~~, which Carusi reads as that femininity which attempts to conform to masculine imaginary expectations. Most crucially, the recognition of other possible forms of subjectivization, or better, of desire, allows for more 'ethical' forms of inter – and transsubjective relations – i.e., more 'ethical' forms of the subject's relation to itself, or self-perception and self-understanding, as well as more 'ethical' forms of relations among subjects.

Both the opening up of the possibility of different forms of subjectivization, as well as their 'more ethical' characteristic are presented by Carusi through an analysis of the feminine position and of feminine desire, as presented in the 'sexuation graph' introduced by Lacan in Seminar XX. Carusi combines the feminine position thereby presented with Lacan's diagrams for the four formulae of discourses from Seminar XVII, suggesting that the feminine position should be read as equivalent to that of the hysteric: the feminine position reveals the farce of the master's discourse – identified with the masculine, machist and colonialist subjectivity – by experiencing another kind of *jouissance*, other than the phallic one, which reveals not only the insufficiency of the Symbolic order but the constitutive lack and fragmentation which it so desperately tries to cover. This way, a better understanding and recognition of the feminine position, or desire, could lead to forms of subjectivization which do not remove and foreclose the Symbolic

inherent lack of consistency, and which therefore do not attempt at imposing a one single and ‘universal’ way of being and desiring: «Woman’s other *jouissance*, the subject’s relation to the barred Other, is, I think, a more ethical function of inter- and transsubjective relations in that it refuses the totalization of any hegemonic logic by always keeping present the absence of Symbolic content, i.e., the emptiness of the Symbolic» (p. 138).

The book tries, through perceptive and accessible analysis of several fundamental concepts in Lacanian psychoanalysis, and several incursions in popular literature (David Foster Wallace), cinematography (Lars von Trier, David Lynch, Quentin Tarantino), and contemporary resistance practices (the protests of *Las mujeres negras* and the ‘I am a man’ 1968 sanitation worker’s protests in Memphis), to produce a ‘new’, reversed master discourse, following a path which could be considered analogous to that of psychoanalytic therapy: first, the therapist pushes the patient in the position of the hysteric; second, they invite them to recreate the master’s discourse, but from an inverted perspective (discourse of the analyst). More specifically, Carusi aims to produce this shift through demonstrating the disposability of the phallus as ‘privileged signifier’. Crucial to this is a re-reading of the weight and role of metonymy and metaphor in Lacan’s understanding of subjectivization: counter to the majority in Lacanian scholarship, Carusi argues against the fundamentality of metaphor over metonymy, and uses her argument to ‘de-essentialize’ Lacan’s understanding of the masculine and the feminine: resisting the centrality of the understanding of ~~Woman~~ as metaphor (claiming this comprehension is what produces the illusion of rigid gender structures proper of the masculinist ‘master’ discourse) and recognizing its essentially metonymical character instead, allows to acknowledge the essentially ‘contingent’, non-fixed and non-definite character of subjectivization and desire, thereby allowing to «consider possibilities of a non-phallic consciousness available to anyone regardless of their sex and gender» (p. 4).

In order to give a better perspective on the whole trajectory of the volume, I will briefly summarize each chapter.

After a programmatic introduction (Chapter 1), Chapter 2 is devoted to an understanding of Lacan’s notion of discourse.

In Chapter 1, Carusi introduces us to discourse by clarifying how discourse identifies in Lacan the ‘social link’: it is (in the common or traditional sense of the term) an inter-subjectively participated structure which precedes and defines subjects, both in their relations with one another (what Carusi calls ‘transsubjective relations’), their relation to themselves and their body (Carusi’s own narrowing of the meaning of ‘intersubjective’), and their perception of reality. This sets the frame for Carusi’s understanding of sexual difference (not to be confused with sexuality) as the «fundamental social determination» and as «the primary meaning written on the body and psyche that determines its functions within cultural narratives and practices» (p. 16). So understood, sexual difference is an effect of discourse, with no biological root; the body is here always-already signified through discourse, or as the ‘mark’ of the discourse’s grip on subjects: «The content within the master’s discourse inscribes sexual difference on the psyche and the body, or, rather, makes sexuality figural. Sexuality as such is reined in, symbolized mythically through discursive narratives of sexual difference. The sexual difference myth is segregating both inter- and transsubjectively in that it segregates men from women, but also segregates the subject in that the subject always fails to be one or the other sexually scripted category» (p. 20).

This becomes especially clear in Carusi’s subsequent analysis of the four discourses, with a special focus on the hysteric’s discourse. The latter is a specifically ‘feminine’ (not equivalent of ‘female’) discourse insofar as it speaks from a place of non-phallic *jouissance*, without mystifying her own desire and is therefore aware of the split that the master’s discourse imposes on her in the attempt of excluding her *jouissance* as Other. In other words, the hysteric’s discourse reveals the ineliminability of an excessive, non-phallic *jouissance*, which remains as a remainder of the master discourse’s attempt at absorbing and regimenting desire through language and sexual difference, and which unveils the traumatic and shape-less form of sexuality. In this sense, the hysteric’s discourse also unveils the fundamental experience of every subject which, while having necessarily to be part of discourse, ends up being split between ever-failing Symbolic and Imaginary mystifications of sexuality and desire through sexual difference, and that remainder of *jouissance* which has no place in discourse and is at the same time an essential part of subjectivity. The chapter ends with a very poignant and acute critique to

Butler's understanding of sexuality and gender, which I think constitute one of the most interesting and strong points of book. In claiming that subjects can break free from dominant understandings of gender and sexuality within discourse, Butler entirely misconstrues the dimensions at play into subjectivization, reducing them to the one plane of discourse. In doing this, Butler ends up reiterating and reinforcing the master's discourse, on the one hand, and, on the other, mythologizing some pure, authentic 'beyond' which would imply the total annihilation of subjectivity itself. In this sense Butler «rather than queering the problematic of identity politics itself by recognizing the liberatory emptiness afforded by the social and Symbolic relationship, she inserts her argument into traditional heteronormative discourse» (p. 23).

After a brief detour combining Schklovsky's and Nietzsche's discussion of metonymy and metaphor and Saussure's and Jakobson's linguistics, Chapter 3 reconsiders the body as an always-already metaphorized domain: the body is in psychoanalysis never a matter of concrete biological traits, but it is rather a 'troped body'; it is always the effect of discourse and, in this sense, cannot be perceived as anything else but 'a symptom'. This is the framework in which Carusi's understanding of sexual difference as the 'fundamental social determination' is set: sexual difference is the primary example of discourse's metaphorical mark on the subject, and is the 'symptom' of the censoring of sexuality: «Because language is always already in operation before the subject's entrance into it, Lacan argues that language, not biology, determines one's sex» (p. 44).

Carusi's understanding of sexual difference as an effect of discourse is combined with the consideration that metaphor implies a more fundamental level, at which the metaphor itself refers, while metonymy is more horizontal, exchanging two things that are both on the same level. Provided that discourse is though entirely constituted of signifiers, without any possibility of actually 'overstepping the bar' towards the signified, the 'more fundamental level' of metaphor is only an illusion of depth, which remains metonymically constituted. Metaphor can henceforth be understood as the key trope of the master's discourse, as it produces the illusion of a totalization of meaning, a full connection between thought and being. Metonymy, on the other hand, preserves the inherent lack which inhabits discourse, revealing that there is no 'being', no stable ground to which thought refers and opening any act of meaning to

infinite slippages and modifications. Revealed in its metonymical grounding, from an 'hysteric' perspective, sexual difference is never complete, always failing: «A subject can never fully or finally be a man, or woman, or trans being; a subject can only (fail to) mean discursively as such, i.e., attempt to represent or disrupt the characteristics expected socio-culturally of these signifiers. And, most importantly, these signifiers' meanings do not have stable, absolute definitive characteristics» (p. 47).

The chapter ends with a discussion of Lacan's 'L schema' and of the experience of 'the gaze', i.e. the subject's self-perception as if observed from outside, by some other, and the consequent displacement experience by the subject itself. Here Carusi suggests that it is precisely because the subject is metonymically constantly misplaced and split in itself, that the 'letter', that is discourse's metaphoric imprint on the subject, manages to mark and inform it.

Chapter 4 develops these insights further through a reconsideration of Lacan's discussion of *The Purloined Letter*, and prepares the transition to the discussion of Woman (to which Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 are dedicated) through a discussion of shame and guilt as different, respectively feminine and masculine, affective reactions to anxiety. Whereas guilt presupposes the conformation to a one, moral law, to which one is entirely subjugated, shame is connected to the access to some form of excess, which cannot be absorbed by any order, cannot be confessed and absolved, and needs therefore to be hidden and veiled.

Chapter 5 brings all the previous elements of analysis to bear on a discussion of 'Woman and women as subjects': 'Woman' is usually conceptualized metaphorically within the master discourse, as representing some Imaginary essential *object a*, or as the 'embodiment' of male phantasy. The feminist aim of devising ways of understanding women as subjects here coincides with the psychoanalytic endeavor of revealing the subject's desiring nature: understanding women as subjects, in fact, implies eliminating the metaphorical understanding of femininity as Woman, revealing its inherently metonymical nature. In the feminine position, then, subjects in general have better access to their desire, can experience non-phallic jouissance and experience more 'ethical' forms of subjectivization: «Woman as metonymy, brings forth an analogy that does not assume identity but forwards the idea of a method for possible avenues of identification» (p. 82).

Carusi then analyses the protests of the ERA movement; of *Ni Una Más!*, of *Mujeres de Negro*, of *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa*, and of *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* as practices revealing the metonymical character of the typical elements of Woman as metaphor by reclaiming them in a context in which they are effectively used to advocate for women as subjects.

The distinction between Woman as metaphor and women as subjects is also the basis of Carusi's sharp and acute critique of Irigaray, a counterpart to Butler's critique in Chapter 2. Irigaray is here accused of persisting in considering Woman as metaphor, and on this ground ending up to advocate for some form of originary 'pre-linguistic' being, to which women would have access in virtue of their being the essential other to the male subject. Even though not in the terms of the most traditional straw-man argument, Irigaray seems to remain then essentialist.

Clarified that the proper understanding of women as subjects requires the recognition of the essentially metonymical dimension of the subjectivization and desire, Chapter 6 moves on to an analysis of the non-phallic jouissance the access to which is characteristic of the feminine position. Through an analysis of von Trier's *Antichrist*, Carusi shows how non-phallic jouissance induces in the subject an experience of its own *extimité*, a liminar encounter with the Real, while having a disruptive function towards discourse, as the order of phallic jouissance, and threatening to metonymically dislodge it, too: «If there are subjects, specifically women, who do not function discursively in relation to the master signifier, or, at the very least push up against it, then that means the discursive positions that prop up the dominant social structure are not necessary, are not the Truth» (p. 116).

This experience of *extimité*, the access to non-phallic jouissance and the metonymical relativization of the master's discourse should according to Carusi not be limited to women, or subjects of oppression, but should rather be extended to all subjects, in order to foster productive political change. In order for this to be possible, this requires the giving up of the phallus as only possible 'quilting point'. This reconsideration of the phallus' importance as 'privileged signifier' is already implied in the metonymical character of subjectivization: any signifier, outside the master's discourse, can function as 'quilting point', provided that subjects

are willing to «act as the ‘switchpoint’ rather than merely filling the allotted positions within already scripted metaphors of ‘identity’» (p. 119).

Chapter 7 brings all the elements acquired throughout to bear on an analysis of Lacan’s sexuation graph, especially focus on the quadrants devoted to the feminine position. There, once again, the subject’s *extimité*, their excessive character due to their access to non-phallic jouissance, as well as the split, non-univocal directionality of their desire, are found in the feminine position’s being ‘not whole’, ‘not entirely subjugated to the Law’ and split between phallic and non-phallic jouissance.

An analysis of von Trier ‘feminist trilogy’, as well as of Lynch’s *Lost Highway*, *Mulholland Drive*, *Inland Empire* provides glimpses into form of subjectivization ‘beyond’ the phallus.

In chapter 8, Carusi substitutes the phallus with S1 in the sexuation graph, and revisits the main points of her analysis.

I think Carusi’s book is a very compelling and inspiring read, which not only provides significant and original insights into Lacan’s theory, but also offers a very interesting contribution to feminist and critical social theory.

Even though Carusi herself provides a pretty convincing argument for her choice through Kristeva’s notion of the ‘writing subject’, I still think the book would have benefited from not having all-male references when it came to the so-called ‘Quilting points’, i.e., the moments of literary/cinematic analysis. It would have been good to see different experiences or perspectives altogether than that of cis-het men and (W)omen (a lack that is sometimes perceived also in Carusi’s discussion of sexuation: her analysis never moves from the experience of intersex and transgender subjects, for example). Other than this minor remark, I think the only other flaw one can find in the book is its – indeed contagious – optimism: once we would have shifted ‘beyond the phallus’, are we so sure the master’s discourse won’t be able to find ‘an opening’ to sneak back in?

(Elena Tripaldi)