Essay by Mary Russo

writing on the body

Female

Embodiment

and

Feminist

Theory

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Female Grotesques

CARNIVAL AND THEORY

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Pretext

There is a phrase that still resonates from childhood. Who says it? The mother's voice—not my own mother's, perhaps, but the voice of an aunt, an older sister, or the mother of a friend. It is a harsh, matronizing phrase, and it is directed toward the behavior of other women:

"She" [the other woman] is making a spectacle out of herself.

Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure. Men, I learned somewhat later in life, "exposed themselves," but that operation was quite deliberate and circumscribed. For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging,

and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap—a loose, dingy bra strap especially—were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy. It was my impression that these women had done something wrong, had stepped, as it were, into the limelight out of turn—too young or too old, too early or too late—and yet anyone, any woman, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful. It is a feature of my own history and education that in contemplating these dangers, I grew to admire both the extreme strategies of the cool, silent, and cloistered St. Clare (enclosed, with a room of her own) and the lewd, exuberantly parodic Mae West.

Although the models, of course, change, there is a way in which radical negation, silence, withdrawal, and invisibility, and the bold affirmations of feminine performance, imposture, and masquerade (purity and danger) have suggested cultural politics for women.

Theory of Carnival and the Carnival of Theory

These extremes are not mutually exclusive, and in various and interesting ways they have figured round each other. Feminist theory and cultural production more generally have most recently brought together these strategies in approaching the questions of difference and the reconstruction or counterproduction of knowledge. In particular, the impressive amount of work across the discourse of carnival, or, more properly, the carnivalesque—much of it in relation to the work of the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin—has translocated the issues of bodily exposure and containment, disguise and gender masquerade, abjection and marginality, parody and excess, to the field of the social constituted as a symbolic system. Seen as a productive category, affirmative and celebratory (a Nietzschean gay science), the discourse of carnival moves away from modes of critique that would begin from some Archimedean point of authority without, to models of transformation and counterproduction situated within the social system and symbolically at its margins.

The reinsertion of the body and categories of the body (in the case of carnival, the "grotesque body") into the realm of what is called the political has been a central concern of feminism. What would seem to be of great interest at this critical juncture in relation to this material would be an assessment of how the materials on carnival as historical performance may
be configured with the materials on carnival as semiotic performance; in other words, how the relation between the symbolic and cultural constructs of femininity and Womanness and the experience of women (as variously identified and subject to multiple determinations) might be brought together toward a dynamic model of a new social subjectivity. The early work of Julia Kristeva on semiotics, subjectivity, and textual revolution and the more recent contributions of Teresa de Lauretis in mapping the terrain of a genuinely sociological and feminist semiotics are crucial to this undertaking. This project is the grand one. More modestly, an examination of the materials on carnival can also recall limitations, defeats, and indifference generated by carnival's complicitous place in dominant culture. There are special dangers for women and other excluded or marginalized groups within carnival, though even the double jeopardy that I will describe may suggest an ambivalent redeployment of taboos around the female body as grotesque (the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body) and as unruly when set loose in the public sphere.

I would begin by citing briefly some of the important work on carnival in various fields (I could not pretend to be exhaustive, since the volume of recent work on Bakhtin alone is staggering). Here, I can only indicate some major lines of interest and weakness in the theory of carnival and cite some similar instances in what might be called the carnival of theory, that is, in the rhetorical masking, gesture, and mise-en-scène of contemporary writing.

Not at all surprisingly, much of the early work on carnival in anthropology and social history dates from the late sixties, when enactments of popular protest, counterculture, experimental theatre, and multimedia art were all together suggestive of the energies and possibilities of cultural and social transformation. In many ways this essay is generated from the cultural surplus of that era. The work of Mary Douglas and Victor Turner, which was as influential in social history as, more recently, the work of Clifford Geertz, saw in the human body the prototype of society, the nation-state, and the city, and in the social dramas of transition and "rituals of status reversal" evidence of the reinforcement of social structure, hierarchy, and order through inversion. In liminal states, thus, temporary loss of boundaries tends to redefine social frames, and such topsy-turvy or time-out is inevitably set right and on course. This structural view of carnival as essentially conservative is both strengthened and enlarged by historical analysis, which tends, of course, to be the political history of domination. The extreme difficulty of producing lasting social change does not diminish the usefulness of these symbolic models of transgression, and the histories of subaltern and counterproductive cultural activity are never as neatly closed as structural models might suggest.

Natalie Davis, in what remains the most interesting piece on carnival and gender, "Women on Top," argues dialectically that in early modern Europe, carnival and the image of the carnivalesque woman "undermined as well as reinforced" the renewal of existing social structure:

The image of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep women in their place. On the contrary, it was a multivalent image that could operate, first, to widen behavioral options for women within and even outside marriage, and second, to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest. Play with an unruly woman is partly a chance for temporary release from traditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society.

Among Davis's very interesting examples of the second possibility—that is, that the image of the unruly or carnivalesque woman actually worked to incite and embody popular uprisings—is the Wiltshire enclosure riots of 1647, where rioting men were led by male cross-dressed who called themselves "Lady Skimmington" (a skimmington was a ride through the streets mocking a henpecked husband, the name probably referring to the big skimming ladle that could be used for husband-beating). The projection of the image of the fierce virago onto popular movements, especially a movement such as this one, involving the transgression of boundaries, is suggestive from the point of view of social transformation. What may it tell us about the construction of the female subject in history within this political symbology? Merely to sketch out the obvious problems in working toward an answer to this question, one might begin with the assumption that the history of the enclosure riots and the image of the unruly woman are not direct reflections of one another; both contain ambiguities and gender asymmetries that require historical and textual readings. These readings are difficult in both areas. First, the history of popular movements has been largely the history of men; a stronger history of women in mixed and autonomous uprisings is needed to assess the place of women as historical subjects in relation to such uprisings. Second, as a form of representation, masquerade of the feminine (what psychoanalytic theory will insist is femininity par excellence) has its distinct problems. The carnivalized
nival festivities. In other words, in the everyday indicative world, women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive—dangerous and in danger.

With these complexities no doubt in mind, Davis concluded her brilliant article with the hope that “the woman on top might even facilitate innovation in historical theory and political behavior” (p. 131). Since the writing of her article, the conjuncture of a powerful women’s movement and feminist scholarship has facilitated further interrogation of the relationship between symbolism and social change. The figure of the female transgressor as public spectacle is still powerfully resonant, and the possibilities of redeploying this representation as a demystifying or utopian model have not been exhausted.

The Carnivalesque Body

Investigation of linguistic and cultural contexts in relation to categories of carnival and the body has been recently inspired by a new reception in English-speaking countries of the work of the Russian scholar and linguist Mikhail Bakhtin. Like the work of Davis and Le Roy Ladurie, Bakhtin’s work on carnival is at one level a historical description of carnival in early modern Europe. It offers, as well, a proscriptive model of a socialist collectivity.

In his introduction to his study of Rabelais, Bakhtin enumerates three forms of carnival folk culture: ritual spectacles (which include feasts, pageants, and marketplace festivals of all kinds); comic verbal compositions, parodies both oral and written; and various genres of billingsgate (curses, oaths, profanations, marketplace speech). The laughter of carnival associated with these spectacles and uncontrolled speech in the Middle Ages was for Bakhtin entirely positive. The Romantic period, in contrast, saw laughter “cut down to cold humour, irony, sarcasm” (RW, pp. 37–38). The privatism and individualism of this later humor make it unregenerative and lacking in communal hilarity. Without pretense to historical neutrality, Bakhtin’s focus on carnival in early modern Europe contains a critique of modernity and its stylistic effects as a radical diminishment of the possibilities of human freedom and cultural production. He considers the culture of modernity to be as austere and bitterly isolating as the official religious culture of the Middle Ages, which he contrasts with the joy and heterogeneity of carnival and the carnivalesque style and spirit. Bakhtin’s view of Rabelais and carnival is in some ways nostalgic for a socially diffuse oppositional context which has been lost, but which is perhaps more importantly suggestive of a future social horizon.
that may release new possibilities of speech and social performance.

The categories of carnivalesque speech and spectacle are heterogeneous, in that they contain the protocols and styles of high culture in and from a position of debasement. The masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society. It is as if the carnivalesque body politic had ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in its bloated and irrepressible state, released it in fits and starts in all manner of recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation. The political implications of this heterogeneity are obvious: it sets carnival apart from the merely oppositional and reactive; carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure. In its multivalent oppositional play, carnival refuses to surrender the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class, and in this sense, carnival can be seen above all as a site of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal.

The central category under which Bakhtin organizes his reading of Rabelais as a carnivalesque text is “grotesque realism,” with particular emphasis on the grotesque body. The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world. Significantly, Bakhtin finds his concept of the grotesque embodied in the Kerch terracotta figurines of senile, pregnant hags. Here is Bakhtin describing the figurines: “This is typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine senile, decaying, and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed” (RW, pp. 25–26). “Moreover,” he writes, “the old hags are laughing” (RW, p. 25).

Homologously, the grotesque body is the figure of the socialist state to come, a state unfinished, which, as it “outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (RW, p. 26). For Bakhtin, this body is, as well, a model for carnivalesque language; a culturally productive linguistic body in constant semiosis. But for the feminist reader, this image of the pregnant hag is more than ambivalent. It is loaded with all of the connotations of fear and loathing associated with the biological processes of reproduction and of aging. Bakhtin, like many other social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic
model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesque remains, in all directions, repressed and undeveloped.

Yet, Bakhtin's description of these ancient crones is at least exuberant. Almost to prove his point about the impossibility of collective mirth over such images in the period of late capitalism, here is a version of the same female grotesque in the voice of Paul Céline:

Women you know, they wane by candlelight, they spoil, melt, twist, ooze! [...The end of tapers is a horrible sight, the end of ladies too. ...]

Quoted and glossed by Julia Kristeva as a portrait of "a muse in the true tradition of the lowly genres—apocalyptic, Menippean, and carneval-esque," this passage suggests the dark festival of transgression that she charts in Powers of Horror. This book, which contrasts in tone with Kristeva's indispensable application of Bakhtin in, for instance, Word, Dialogue, and the Novel and Polylolque, draws on Mary Douglas's categories of purity and defilement to arrive, through the analytical processes of transference, at the brink of abjection.

Through the convolutions of Céline's relentlessly misogynist and anti-Semitic writing, Kristeva as author and problematized subject has projected herself toward the grotesque, which she sees as the "undoer of narcissism and of all imaginary identity as well" (p. 208). Her study is richly intertextual. As Kristeva focuses on Céline, her own text increasingly takes on his rhetoric of abjection, which interestingly comes to rest in the category of the maternal. Kristeva writes: "Abject ... the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses ... on the edge of non-existence and hallucination" (p. 2). And elsewhere: "Something maternal ... bears upon the uncertainty of what I call abjection" (p. 208). The fascination with the maternal body in childbirth, the fear of and repulsion from it throughout the chosen texts of Céline, constitutes it here again as a privileged sight of liminality and defilement. Kristeva writes:

When Céline locates the ultimate of abjection—and thus the supreme and sole interest of literature—in the birth-giving scene, he makes amply clear which fantasy is involved: something horrible to see at the impossible doors of the invisible—the mother's body. The scene of scenes is here not the so-called primal scene but the one of giving birth, incest turned inside out, flayed identity. Giving birth: the height of bloodshed and life, scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), horror and beauty, sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual. ... At the doors of the feminine, at the doors of abjection, as I defined the term earlier, we are also, with Céline, given the most daring X-ray of the "drive foundations" of fascism. 10

While there are many general reasons for questioning the use of the maternal in recent French criticism, here, I think, the point may be that the accumulated horror and contempt that these descriptions of the maternal body suggest generate a subliminal defense of the maternal, which then remerges in Kristeva as an idealized category far from the realities of motherhood, either as a construction or as a lived experience. 11 Jews, unlike mothers, would seem to merely drop out of the field of abjection, as the anti-Semitism of Céline becomes for Kristeva a problem of maintaining the categorical imperatives of identity and the political. 12

The book ends on a note of mystical subjectivity: near "the quiet shore of contemplation" (p. 210), far from the polis. On the verge, at the limit of this avant-garde frontier, there remains, for Kristeva, only writing. 13 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, in their book on the politics and poetics of transgression, have called the exclusion of the already marginalized in moves such as these "displaced abjection." 14 As I have argued, both in the history of carnival and in its theory, the category of the female body as grotesque (in, for instance, pregnancy or aging) brings to light just such displacements. How this category might be used affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty or to realign the mechanisms of desire, would be the subject of another study.

Carnival of Theory

There has been, as well, a carnival of theory at the discursive level, in the poetics of postmodernist criticism and feminist writing. It has included all manner of textual travesty, "mimetic rivalry," semiotic delinquency, parody, teasing, posing, flirtation, masquerade, seduction, counterseduction, tightrope walking, and verbal aerialisms of all kinds. Performances of displacement, double displacements, and more have permeated much feminist writing in our attempts to survive or muscle in on the discourses of Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstruction, avant-garde writing, and postmodernist visual art. It could even be said, with reservation, that in relation to academic institutions, what has come to be called "theory" has constituted a kind of carnival space.
The practice of criticism informed by this theory has taken great license stylistically, and in its posing posed a threat of sorts.

It is interesting to consider the discourse of carnival and poststructuralism together. In 1980, Michele Richman, in her essay entitled "Sex and Signs: Language of French Feminist Criticism," saw in the proliferation of literature on festival in France a reaction primarily to structuralism and to the structuralist economy of exchange within which, as Lévi-Strauss described it, women circulate as signs but are not theorized as sign producers. The festival or carnival discourse drew upon the work of Marcel Mauss (and, as importantly, on the writing of Georges Bataille) on the gift or dépense as that which exceeds this linguistically modeled economy. As Richman indicates, the discussion of dépense was relocated within a more general libidinal economy of desire. The generosity of femininity and feminine writing (écriture féminine) is privileged over male dépense, which is understood as being simultaneously a demand. The female body is the site of this desirous excess.

In terms strikingly similar to Bakhtin's formulation of the grotesque body as continuous process, Hélène Cixous calls this body "the body without beginning and without end." Female sexuality and especially the mother's body, as it figures simultaneously demarcation and dissolution of identity, serve this cultural project of disrupting the political economy of the sign as it is produced in dominant discourse. This écriture féminine, which has been admirably discussed elsewhere by many American feminists, can be and has been done by men (in fact, modernist writers such as Joyce are often mentioned as models); how the male-authored or travestied "feminine" is different, and how the inscription of the female body in the texts produced by women may be usefully contextualized elsewhere are still important and unanswered questions, although the critiques of this feminization of writing as essentialist must be taken into account in reconsiderations of these topics.

Beyond essentialism, there are, as I have indicated earlier, other historical and anthropological warnings to heed. Even within France there have been critiques of the feminine textual festival. Annie Leclerc has chided the "delirious adulors of the festival," and Catherine Clément in La jeune née parallels the carnivalesque with hysterical crisis. In terms similar to earlier critiques of carnival, she sees the cultural category of hysteria as the only form of contestation possible in certain types of social organization, within the context of the village community; it is also a safety valve. This lan-

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guage not yet at the point of verbal expression, restrained within the bond of the body . . . remains convulsive. Men look but they do not hear.

Historically, Clément is right: hystericus and madwomen generally have ended up in the attic or in the asylum, their gestures of pain and defiance having served only to put them out of circulation. As a figure of representation, however, hysteria may be less recuperable. The famous photographs commissioned by Charcot, which chart the various stages of hysteria in the patients of Salpêtrière, fix in attitude and gesture, in grimaces and leaps, a model of performance not unlike the fashionable histronics of the great Romantic actresses and circus artists of the late nineteenth century. These paid performers were, like women hystericus, "seen but not heard," in one sense, since the scene of their livelihood, their context, it can be argued, was arranged by and for the male viewer. Nonetheless, they used their bodies in public, in extravagant ways that could have only provoked wonder and ambivalence in the female viewer, as such latitude of movement and attitude was not permitted most women without negative consequences.

This hyperbolic style, this "overacting," like the staged photographs of Salpêtrière (whatever Charcot's claims were to scientific documentation), can be read as double representations: as mimics of the somatizations of the women patients whose historical performances were lost to themselves and recuperated into the medical science and medical discourse which maintain their oppressive hold on women. The photographs of Salpêtrière especially strike us as uncanny because of the repetitiveness of the hysterical performance. It is not only the content of hysterical behavior that strikes us as grotesque but its representation: if hysteria is a display, these photographs display the display. If hysteria is understood as feminine in its image, accoutrements, and stage business (rather than in its physiology), then it may be used to rig us up (for lack of the phallic term) into discourse. The possibility, indeed the necessity, of using the female body in this sense allows for the distance necessary for articulation. Luce Irigaray describes this provisional strategy as follows:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself simply to be reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasuch as she is on the side of "perceptible," of "matter"—to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible:
the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means to “unveil” the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply reabsorbed into this function. 19

What is called mimESIS here is elsewhere, with various modifications, called masquerade. (Freedman herself reserves the latter term to refer negatively to the false position of women experiencing desire only as male desire for them.) Female sexuality as masquerade is a well-noted psychoanalytic category. Jacques Lacan, a great poseur himself, has written of female sexuality as masking a lack, pretending to hide what is in fact not there:

Paradoxical as this formulation might seem, I would say that it is in order *to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the desire of the Other, that the woman will reject an essential part of her femininity, notably all its attributes through masquerade. It is for what she is not that she expects to be desired as well as loved. 20

The mask here is seen as feminine (for men and women) rather than something that hides a stable feminine identity. Femininity is a mask which masks nonidentity. According to Lacan, that produces an unexpected side effect for the man anxious to appear masculine:

The fact that femininity takes refuge in this mask, because of the Verdrangung inherent to the phallic mark of desire, has the strange consequence that, in the human being, virile display itself appears as feminine. 21

In film theory, Mary Ann Doane has problematized the female spectator, using the essay of Joan Riviere on “Womanliness and Masquerade.” 22 Her argument is that masquerade can “manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by the women.” 23 It is, in other words, a way around the theorization of the spectator only in terms of the male gaze and male categories of voyeurism and fetichistic pleasure. More generally, her discussion of Riviere is extremely useful in explaining the asymmetries of transvestism, which for a woman has always been necessary in some sense in order for her to take part in a man’s world. For a woman to dress, act, or position herself in discourse as a man is easily understandable and culturally compelling. To “act like a woman” beyond narcissism and masochism is, for psychoanalytic theory, trickier. That is the critical and hopeful power of the masquerade.

Deliberately assumed and foregrounded, femininity as mask, for a man, is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition; for a woman, a similar flaunting of the feminine is a take-it-and-leave-it possibility. To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off.

These considerations account for some of the interest in masquerade for those contemporary artists and critics whose work on imposture and dis-simulation tends to stress the constructed, the invented, and (to use Gayatri Spivak’s wonderful phrase) the “scrupulously fake.” 24 Spivak reads Nietzsche’s characterization of female sexual pleasure as masquerade (“they ‘give themselves,’ even when they—give themselves. The female is so artistic”) as an originary displacement, occluding “an unacknowledged envy: a man cannot fake an orgasm.” 25 Reading Derrida, she sees the figure of woman displaced twice over. “Double displacement,” she suggests, might be undone in carefully fabricated “useful and scrupulous fake readings in place of the passively active fake orgasm.” Such readings may suggest new ways of making new spectacles of oneself.

Other work on masquerade has a more explicitly sociopolitical dimension, which greatly enriches psychoanalytic and deconstructive approaches to the material (I am thinking, for instance, of Dick Hebdige’s work on subculture and Homi Bhabha’s recent work on mimicry and the colonial subject). 26 For feminist theory, particularly, a more specifically historical and social use of masquerade may be needed, perhaps in the context of larger discussions of social groups and categories of the feminine mask in colonized and subcultural contexts, or in relation to other guises of the carnivalesque body. Nonetheless, the hyperboles of masquerade and carnival suggest, at least, some preliminary “acting out” of the dilemmas of femininity.

**General Laughter and the Laughter of Carnival**

Feminist theory itself has been travestied, hidden, and unacknowledged in many discussions of subjectivity and gender. It is part of what Elaine Showalter has called “critical cross-dressing.” 27 The fathers of French theory alluded to here are in fact masters of mise-en-scène. Even Derrida, whose persona has been more diffidently drawn in his writings, has been recently showcased as a carnival master.

The interview with Derrida published in Critical Exchange, in which he speaks of women and feminism, is quite as interesting for what he says about feminists as for the mise-en-scène. 28 Derrida restates his reservations about
feminism as a form of phallocentrism (fair enough). Later, he says that feminism is tantamount to phallocentrism (not so fair). James Creech, who edited and translated the interview, states that he attempted "to reproduce its conversational tone, with interruptions, ellipses, suspensions, and laughter that marked a very cordial and freeform discussion. Essentially nothing has been edited out, and the reader can follow the subtext of associations which lead from one moment of discussion to another" (p. 30). The transcription is punctuated by parenthetical laughter and occasionally, in bold face, "General Laughter." For instance:

Certain feminists, certain women struggling in the name of feminism—may see in deconstruction only what will not allow itself to be feminist. That's why they try to constitute a sort of target, a silhouette, a shooting gallery almost, where they spot phallocentrism and beat up on it [sappent dussat]. Just as Said and others constitute an enemy in the image [laughter] of that against which they have ready arms, in the same way, I think certain feminists as they begin to read certain texts, focus on particular themes out of haste and say, "Well, there you have it..." (I don't know exactly who one could think of in this regard, but I know it goes on.) In France I recall a very violent reaction from a feminist who upon reading Spur[s] and seeing the multiplication of phallic images—spurs, umbrellas, etc.—said, "So, it's a phallocentric text," and started kicking up a violent fuss, charging about like a bull perhaps... [general laughter] (p. 30)

This is a startling scene—the feminist as raging bull ("I don't know exactly who one can think of in this regard, but I know it goes on"). The bull in the shooting gallery, spotting and targeting, "kicking up a violent fuss, charging about." Is this textual spotting and targeting a reverse image? Is phallocentrism really tantamount to feminism here? Is this a male dressed as a female dressing as a male? What kind of drag is this? Who is waving the red flag? And, who must join this "general laughter"? The laughter of carnival is communal and spontaneous, but general laughter in this context is coercive, participated in, like much comedy, by the marginalized only in an effort to pass. But it can be heard from another position.

A counter scene is offered in the films of Yvonne Rainer, whose past as a performance artist puts her in a particularly good position to stage theory and intellectual comedy. In her film The Man Who Envi[ed] Women (1985) ("I don't know exactly who one can think of in this regard, but I know it goes on"), the man stands behind a female student, his hands gripping her shoulders as she asks the difference between the subject-in-process and the everyday individual with choices and identifications to make. He replies (paraphrasing Foucault): in the very enactment of the power relations that are being almost simultaneously affirmed and denied.

In another film, Journeys from Berlin/1971 (1980), the joke is Jean-Paul Sartre's in another interview. Reference is made to Sartre's trip to West Germany to visit the imprisoned terrorists awaiting trial. When asked why he visited only the cell of Andreas Baader and not that of his accomplice Ulrike Meinhof, he replies, "The gang is called Baader-Meinhof not Meinhof-Baader, isn't it?" In the voice-over, two people laugh, the man because he is pleased with the old intellectual's intellectual prowess, the woman because she hears the joke as on Sartre himself in decadence.

What Rainer stages is a dialogical laughter, the laughter of intertext and multiple identifications. It is the conflictual laughter of social subjects in a classist, racist, ageist, sexist society. It is the laughter we have now: other laughter for other times. Carnival and carnival laughter remain on the horizon with a new social subjectivity.

For now, right now, as I acknowledge the work of feminists in reconstituting knowledge, I imagine us going forward, growing old (I hope), or being grotesque in other ways. I see us viewed by ourselves and others, in our bodies and in our work, in ways that are continuously shifting the terms of viewing, so that looking at us, there will be a new question, the question that never occurred to Bakhtin in front of the Kerch terracotta figurines—

Why are these old hags laughing?

**NOTES**

I wish to thank Nancy Fitch and Catherine Portuges for their careful readings of an earlier version of this essay.


6. Ibid., p. 148. As Davis points out, this image of the “strong woman” is problematic: “The unruly woman not only directed some of the male festivistic organizations; she was sometimes their butt. The village scold or the dominating wife might be ducked in the pond or pulled through the streets muzzled or branked or in creel” (p. 140).


8. Victor Turner, “Frame, Flow, and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality,” in *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello, Center for Twentieth Century Studies, Theories of Contemporary Culture, vol. 1 (Madison: Coda Press, 1977), pp. 35–55. As Turner puts it, “The danger here is not simply that of female ‘unruliness.’ This unruliness itself is the mark of the ultraliminal, of the perilous realm of possibility of ‘anything may go’ which threatens any social order and seems the more threatening, the more that order seems rigorous and secure. . . . The subversive potential of the carnivalesque feminine principle becomes evident in times of social change when its manifestations move out of the liminal world of Mardi Gras into the political arena itself” (pp. 41–42).


11. I am grateful to Ann Rosalind Jones for this insight. For an excellent critique of Kristeva’s most recent work, see her “Julia Kristeva on Femininity: The Limits of a Semiotic Politics,” *Feminist Review* 18 (Winter 1984): 56–73.

12. “His fascination with Jews, which was full of hatred and which he maintained to the end of his life, the simple-minded anti-Semitism that besots the tumultuous pages of the pamphlets, are no accident; they thwart the disintegration of identity that is coextensive with a scription that affects the most archaic distinctions, that bridges the gaps insuring life and meaning. Céline’s anti-Semitism, like political commitment, for others—like, as a matter of fact, any political commitment, to the extent that it settles the subject within a socially justified illusion—is a security blanket” (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, pp. 136–37).

13. Writing, or “literature,” is a “vision of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted no matter what its socio-historical condition might be, on the fragile border (borderline cases) where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist or only barely so—doubly, fuzzy, heterogeneous, animal, metamorphosed, altered, abject” (ibid., p. 207).


16. Hélène Cixous, quoted in ibid., p. 74. The work of Luce Irigaray and Michèle Montrelay is especially important to this discussion.

17. The dangers of essentialism in posing the female body, whether in relation to representation or in relation to “women’s history,” have been well stated, so well stated, in fact, that “antiessentialism” may well be the greatest inhibition to work in cultural theory and politics at the moment, and must be displaced. For an account of recent debates around the female body and film, see Constance Penley, “Feminism, Film, and Theory and the Bachelor Machine,” *M/F* 10 (1985): 39–61.


21. Ibid., p. 85.
25. Spivak, p. 170. As Spivak quotes Derrida, “She is twice model, in a contradictory fashion, at once lauded and condemned… (First), like writing… But, insofar as she does not believe herself, in truth… she is again the model, this time the good model, or rather the bad model as good model: she plays dissimulation, ornament, lying, art, the artistic philosophy” (p. 171).
29. Derrida says, “So let’s just say that the most insistent and the most organized motif in my texts is neither feminist nor phallocentric. And at a certain point I try to show that the two are tantamount to the same thing” (ibid., p. 31).

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The Empire Strikes Back

A POSTTRANSSEXUAL MANIFESTO

Sandy Stone

Frogs into Princesses

The verdant hills of Casablanca look down on homes and shops jammed chockablock against narrow, twisted streets filled with the odors of spices and dung. Casablanca is a very old city, passed over by Lawrence Durrell perhaps only by a geographical accident as the winepress of love. In the more modern quarter, located on a broad, sunny boulevard, is a building otherwise unremarkable except for a small brass nameplate that identifies it as the clinic of Dr. Georges Bouro. It is predominantly devoted to obstetrics and gynecology, but for many years has maintained another reputation quite unknown to the stream of Moroccan women who pass through its rooms.

Dr. Bouro is being visited by journalist James Morris. Morris fidgets in an anteroom reading

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