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La Rabia: Violence, Gender and Childhood in the Argentinean Pampas

Keywords: gender, little girl, violence, spectator, sensory-motor, mother, yell, scribble, compulsion, symptom

1. This paper addresses questions of contemporary gender and feminist theory through an analysis of the figure of the little girl in La Rabia (2008), a film by Albertina Carri, one of the leading young figures of what has been called New Argentine Cinema. La Rabia is a horrific tale of family violence set in the arid Argentinean pampas, focused through the eyes of Nati, a mute little girl who acts as a silent spectator as she watches her mother’s submission to her authoritarian patriarchal father, and witnesses her sadomasochistic sexual relations with another man. Nati unconsciously identifies with her mother, both in the domestic scene with the father and in the sexual act with the perverse lover, and mimics her through a set of autistic symptoms that echo the gendered violence inflicted on the maternal body. Nati expresses herself through three set of symptoms: firstly, letting out some primal, inarticulate, animal yells; secondly, taking her clothes off in public compulsively and spontaneously; and thirdly, drawing some terrified scribbles that take on a life of their own (which are represented in the film through watercolor, ink-based animation). In these three ways, Nati turns her helplessness -her disability-, her speech and general linguistic impairment, into a repetitive performance of gender violence. In Clip1, for example, the father Poldo shouts at the mother and Nati, in turn, compulsively starts yelling (55’19’’), while in Clip2, she witnesses a perverse sexual scene and reacts almost automatically and unconsciously by taking off her clothes (1’06’08’’).

2. I want to propose that Nati, the figure of the mute girl, can help to re-think some of the key theoretical questions of feminist theory. Conceived of as a children’s tale, according to what
Carri herself has said in interviews, *La Rabia*—a Spanish word that refers both to the feeling of anger and to the virus, rabies—, is a great metaphor for new ways of reading, conceiving and theorizing gender. Reading the most recent work within gender and sexuality studies, I look at Nati as a way to conceptualize a subject that is not phallic, oedipalized, structured by family logics, a subject outside patriarchal civilization.

2. A) Firstly, Lisa Cartwright, who has developed a theory of affect and empathetic identification between the spectator and the child with sensory or cognitive impairment, has underscored how the “coming to voice” of the nonverbal female child, marks the achievement of agency in a previously invisible or silent subject. In *La Rabia*, the “mute” female figure of the child enters the space of agency by coming to voice—an animal, primal, inarticulate voice by which she enacts a savage rebellion against the law of the symbolic; what Julia Kristeva has called the “abject”, a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out of repugnance and disgust, excluded from signification and that challenges its master signifier. The yelling is a symptom within the body that turns the defenseless child into an inassimilable monster: an animal, a tumor, impossible to hear. After another scene of yelling in response to the perverted lover, (38’38’ Clip3 Not Showing), which no one can stand, her mother says “hace mal ese ruido”—that noise hurts—“esos ruidos son feos”—those noises are nasty— and later she says to her husband “¿Qué esperás que diga la gente si esta no habla y grita como un chancho? Eso no es normal.” -What do you expect people to say if she does not speak and shrieks like a pig? That is not normal-. The mother’s words underscore to what extent the yells of the little girl are breakages of social conventions and complete interruptions of communication.

2) B) Secondly, the symptoms at the nonverbal level of the tactile—as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has proposed—transmit a haptic experience, through the texture of clothes, fabric, skin
and their physical properties, which is associated with affect, with desire as a social force\textsuperscript{iv}. In Nati \textquotesingle s case, the physical act of undressing –the film actually begins with a scene during dawn in the open field in which the little girl undresses in order to pee (1\textquoteleft 41\textquoteleft Clip4 Not Showing)-, marks the limit of what can be said through texture, through clothes, touch or bodily contact, a theatrical performance of violence, of the unspeakable, the abused, the repressed.

At these two first sensory levels that represent the trauma of the little girl –sound (the aural) and texture (the tactile)-, the spectator has mediated access to the experience of abuse inflicted on the female body. Instead of understanding her trauma intellectually, the spectator experiences the violence inflicted on the body of the child empathetically -through the aural and the tactile senses- turning himself or herself into a receptor of the sort of projector that the little girl is, empathizing with her, who in turn empathizes with her mother and the violence of gender that she is immersed in.

3) However, it is through the third medium, the set of angry drawings, horrifying non-figurative paintings that the little girl mainly channels her nightmarish\textsuperscript{iv}ly pornographic vision of the world. In Clip5, when Nati \textquotesingle s father, in an attempt to threaten her, tells her a horror story about an angry uncle who was cheated on by his wife and returned\textsuperscript{ed} as a ghost to chase and eat women that take off their clothes in public, the first watercolor ink animation appears (15\textquoteleft 52-16\textquoteleft 59). Her father’s tale is intended to punish the cheating mother and, in turn, Nati \textquotesingle s nakedness as a symptom of it. The drawings of the girl come into view through a language that forces the limits of filmic verisimilitude and breaks with realism and its cinematic conventions. Nati turns herself into an absolute projector, a viewer more than an agent, witness of the unspeakable, of her own passive exposure to violence, her own bodily vulnerability.
3) A) On the one hand, Gilles Deleuze, who has studied the figure of the post-war child in Italian neorealist film, has emphasized how the traumatized boy becomes a sleepwalker - a visionary, a helpless but unconventional witness of the crudeness and brutality of the world. Dream or nightmare, the vision of the child, of visual and sound nakedness, emerges through a new kind of image that Deleuze calls “purely optical sound situation”, in which the master signifier is absent. As it is the case in the animation in La Rabia – particularly in Clip 6- the real becomes a spectacle, a drama of color, sound and texture, in which the child illustrator is inevitably included, underscoring her passive, defenseless exposure to the raw and most brutal gender violence and abuse (32’17’-33’31’). Through the language of animation, the spectator has access to what the girl is physically impaired from saying.

3) B) On the other hand, Judith Halberstam, in her most recent book, proposes what she calls “the queer politics of failure”: a new syntax based on the alternative, the non-hegemonic, that uses “low theory” as well as popular knowledge and pop, low culture to find a way out of binary formulations. In her readings, she places the figure of the child, both as spectator, audience of, and character in animated children’s fiction, as vehicle for the transgression of gender boundaries and norms – a “queering force”, as Kathryn Bond Stockton has said. For Halberstam, the child is a metaphor of the naïve, the nonsensical, the silly, the ignorant or the nonsensible. Beyond the oedipal family, the child would open up a new set of knowledge practices and archives, of renovated alternatives for what we think of as “queer”. I quote Halberstam:

a more dynamic and radical engagement with animation understands that the rebellion is ongoing and that the new technologies of children’s fantasy do much more than producing revolting animation. They also offer us the real and compelling possibility of animating revolt (52)
La Rabia’s research into animation, as well as into new technologies of children’s fantasy, may also be conceptualized as a way of “animating revolt”, taking to a different formal and experimental level the topics that Halberstam reads in popular children’s fiction like Monsters, Inc., Chicken Run or Finding Nemo. Therefore, if Chicken Run proposes a stateless all–female utopia in which the Oedipal has fallen away as a point of reference, La Rabia offers a statement of collectivity, class and gender struggle in the absence of the Master- Father signifier.

3) C) Additionally, in her most recent conferences and publications, feminist theorist Julia Kristeva polemically points to the need for rethinking gender and sexuality studies through maternal eroticism, what she calls “reliance”. Kristeva, arguing for a renovated need to reflect on women’s right to choose motherhood without excluding the most recent studies on biology and the new possibilities offered by science, rereads Lou Andréas Salomé ’s correspondence with Sigmund Freud with the aim of coining a new theory of maternal sexuality. Maternal passion, according to Kristeva, is a two- sided Oedipus that combines death drive, negativity, unsatisfied desires, abjection, repulsion and destructive violence with libidinal drives, the power of healing, subjective restitution and the hallucinatory intensity of pregnancy. Kristeva reconsiders infantile sexuality –and, in particular, the little girl’s subjectivity- as formed together with maternal eroticism, with the mother ’s degree of satisfaction in relationship with a lover. This is particularly relevant in La Rabia because the mother and the little girl both inhabit an area of the bio- psychic that defies rationality, of primal affection that challenges a model of masculine, universal subjectivity. In Clip7, for example, after another of the father’s outbursts of violence, the mother, while tenderly embracing the girl, insults the father and says: “Ojalá lo agarre uno de esos monstruos que dibujás vos” (I wish he would be caught by one of those monsters that you
draw). Without delay, a piece of animation that enacts this rebellion against patriarchy comes into view 41’45’. The little girl’s act of scribbling those inarticulate animated drawings leads the mother back to the semiotic, the modality of sense before signification –what Kristeva calls the “chora”: a space before spatiality, nurturing and destructive at the same time, previous to the unified Law of the Father, to the word, the syllable. The drawings, the space of animation, where the violent drives of the little girl come to voice, constitute a becoming-infantile of the mother, her becoming-little girl, in Deleuzian terms.

As I will show in my last Clip (8), the scribbles are a language of aesthetic and gender violence; they enact a breakage of all conventions through the most absolute abjection 1’08’22’.

3) D) As a final point, I am going to make reference to the new framework for feminist studies that author Elizabeth Grosz proposes in her most recent book, *Becoming Undone*. In a move beyond identity politics—the concern with questions of the subject and its identity and the emphasis on the personal—as well as beyond the epistemological—questions of discourse, sign, truth and knowledge, Grosz argues towards a new ontology that would explore the impersonal, the inorganic, what predates and postdates the genesis of the individual. Consequently, she suggests that a new recourse to sexual difference and biology—without positing them in terms of subjective identity but in a becoming imperceptible that would dissolve them into difference—would expand the activities, perspectives and frameworks of feminist studies. This is pertinent because in *La Rabia*, the expressionistic crudeness and nakedness of the view of Nati manifest the little girl’s relation with inorganic, pre–individual forces of imperceptibility that question a unified subject position through the inhuman, the subhuman and the superhuman—the animal, the natural, the specter. Little Nati and her bodily symptoms illuminate a non-identitarian comprehension of biology and sexual difference.
To conclude, this quick tour the force through recent feminist and film theory facilitates a wider consideration of the figure of the little girl as a signifier outside the unified subject of discourse, an enactment of radical perceptual difference that produces the undoing of all stabilities as well as the failure of all identity, humbling the pretension of consciousness and mastery, dissolving identity into difference.

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i “En el campo las espinas” Entrevista de Mariano Kairuz, Suplemento Radar, Página 12, 4 de Mayo de 2008.


v Carri has done some research on the topic of autism in abused children and how pornographic drawings very frequently are the first medium through which they express the abuse. For the controversies around the definition of autism –as a disorder characterized in part by cognitive differences in the feeling and expression of empathy and the ability to attribute –to project- a concept of mind to others” and its relations with allegations of sexual abuse-, also see Cartwright, 2008, p. 8.


viii I quote Kristeva: “L’apprentissage du langage par l’enfant est un réapprentissage du langage par la mère. En parlant les écholalies et le langage de son enfant (retrouvant ainsi les bases pulsionelles de la phonation) chaque mère accomplit à sa façon la recherche proustienne du « temps perdu ». Et remède pas à pas à la non congruence qui sépare affect et cognition, dont se plaint sans fin l’hystérique. » In Kristeva, Julia “La reliance, ou l’érotisme maternel” in http://www.kristeva.fr/reliance.html#_ftn25

ix Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have elaborated this further: “Girls and children draw their strength neither from the molar status that subdues them nor from the organism and subjectivity they receive; they draw their strength from the becoming- molecular they cause to pass between sexes and ages, the becoming- child of the adult as well as of the child, the becoming woman of the man as well as of the woman. The girl and the child do not become, it is becoming itself that is a child or a girl. The child does not become an adult any more than the girl becomes a woman; the girl is the becoming- woman of each sex, just as the child is the becoming- young of every age (…) Sexuality, any sexuality, is a becoming- woman, in other words, a girl” in One Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Minneapolis: Univ. Of Minnesota Press, 1987. P. 277.