

EXPLOSIONS IN VISUAL ART, LITERATURE AND MUSIC

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UDC: 7.017:82-7:78.03

Original Scientific Paper
Izvorni znanstveni članak
Received: September 28, 2004
Primljeno: 28. rujna 2004.
Accepted: January 14, 2005
Prihvaćeno: 14. siječnja 2005.

Abstract — Résumé

The article explores somatic metaphors related to explosion, outburst and eruption in diverse media. This inquiry lies in the intersection among philosophy, literary criticism and history of art and its conclusions are relevant to musicology. It is argued that there are various basic orientations, persuasions and biases underlying specific uses of metaphors of somatic eruption. The article endeavours to propose an alternative reading of body fluids as metaphoric sites of festive critique in subversively humorous discourse and art, which differs from more prevalent psychoanalytic interpretations. A text by Hélène Cixous, as well as visual material by Jenny Saville, Cindy Sherman, Bruce Nauman and Pieter

Brueghel the Elder is scrutinized. The most appropriate musical example in this context is probably (especially the introduction to) the *Háry János Suite* by Zoltán Kodály.* By grouping male and female artists together, an underlying picaresque or subversively humorous, non-binary and geneticist match is suggested in their work. Yet, at the same time it is argued that female body fluids present women with metaphoric vantage points that facilitate understandings beyond the borders of patriarchal culture.

Key Words: ideology critique; feminism; picaresque; body fluids; Hélène Cixous; Jenny Saville; Cindy Sherman; Bruce Nauman; Pieter Brueghel the Elder; Zoltán Kodály.

* Other 'picaresque' musical works were produced by Erik Satie and Serge Prokofiev. Not merely titles like *Three pieces in the shape of a pear*, *Veritabily limp pieces*, *Chilled pieces* (Satie), and *Love for three oranges* and the ballet title *The buffoon* (Prokofiev), but also the distortion, acerbity and mockery in the sound textures they produce, could be described as picaresque. So too the humour, reckless enticement and deliberate circus- and cabaret-like parodies of honoured musical works, and the joyful marauding of existing forms and musical vocabulary. It must be stressed however, that festive metaphors of explosion in music, comparable to those described here, must be researched further.

I, too, overflow [...] I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst — burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune (CIXOUS 1991: 335).

1. Introduction*

This article explores somatic metaphors related to explosion, outburst and eruption in visual and verbal texts. In her well-known 'manifesto' *The laugh of the Medusa* (1975) Hélène Cixous made the memorable association of eruption, milk and *écriture féminine*. The association of female body fluids with the idea of excess has a long history and in recent decades many feminist artists have exploited this association with subversive intent. Can their subversive use of somatic metaphors of excess simply be accounted for by their common interest in dismantling patriarchy? It could rather be argued that there are various basic orientations, persuasions and biases underlying specific uses of metaphors of somatic eruption. One strand in the use of metaphors related to bodily eruptions will be explored here to divulge matching underlying directives or ideological allegiances in art and discourse, sometimes across centuries. Such an inquiry lies in the intersection among philosophy, literary criticism, and history of art. It endeavours to propose an alternative reading of the textual functions of body fluids in subversive discourse and art, which differs from more prevalent psychoanalytic interpretations.

Body fluids have distinct qualities which render them particularly appropriate as metaphors of subversion. These have been theorized by writers drawing principally on psychoanalytic and anthropological insights, like Julia Kristeva, Mary Douglas and Luce Irigaray.

Kristeva (1982) theorizes body fluids in the context of the phenomenon of abjection. She analyses how its loathsomeness has often been portrayed in literature as evil incarnate. It can be deduced from her explanations of ritual cleansing and the sources of pollution that the abjection of body fluids is often based on dualistic distinctions between sacred and profane. Her theorization of excretions within the context of abjection highlights the capacity of body fluids to fascinate while inspiring overpowering sensibilities of degradation, fear and loathing. The potential significance of body fluids as metaphoric sources of celebration of a life force or of festive critique is ignored. Her theories precludes more optimistic perspectives on body fluids based on non-dualist conceptualizations of mind and body, and of sacred and profane, which evaluates such orders as expressions of a fundamental unity.

Mary Douglas's (1991) key insight in *Purity and Danger* is to recognize that, because of its orifices which are boundaries dividing the self and that which is

* I would like to thank the following people for their valuable suggestions with regard to this research: Anelle van Wyk, a former honours student, my colleagues Dirk van den Berg and Johann Visagie and my relative and former colleague, emeritus professor in music, Japie Human.

external to it, the human body stands as a metaphor for social structures. According to this position, the passage of bodily fluids over the outer bodily margins to the outside, has the potential to signify cultural anxiety and disgust. Her theory, stressing margins, can stand to confirm that body fluids from marginalized bodies, that are deformed, grotesque, hysteric, insane, overweight, etc. lend themselves all the more aptly as metaphoric sites by means of which societal conventions can be (humorously) probed.

Luce Irigaray (1985) uses the concept of fluidity to define »woman«, thus restoring the favourable metaphoric significance of body fluids. For Irigaray fluidity does not dissociate or set apart the otherness of masculinity and femininity — it dissolves boundaries and connotes that which cannot be contained. She celebrates the »unadulterated happiness from ... giving oneself fluidity« (IRIGARAY 1985: 221) and applauds the »shapeless flux that dampens, soaks, floods, channels, electrifies, lights up the apartness in the blaze of its embrace« (IRIGARAY 1985: 238). Mucous or the concept of mucosity is used to elaborate on the idea of the threshold and the exchange between the sexes. Mucous is more accessible to touch than sight, it is not a part object like the penis, and cannot be separated from the body, it is neither simply solid nor fluid, it is not stable, it expands, it has no fixed form, it cannot be swallowed (incorporated) or spat out; it corresponds both to sexuality and to speech (WHITFORD 1991: 158-165). The redeeming critical and subversive power of the metaphor of body fluids to overturn basic 'masculine' or fixed beliefs and to underscore the idea of *écriture féminine* is evident from its association with the metaphor of spiral movement and eternal change:

Everything, then, has to be rethought in terms of curl(s), helix(es), diagonal(s) spiral(s), roll(s), twirl(s), revolution(s), pirouette(s). Speculation whirls round faster and faster as it pierces, bores, drills into a volume [read: 'liquid', SdVH] that is supposed to be *solid* still (IRIGARAY 1985: 238).

Her writing supports that of the Algerian-French Hélène Cixous.¹ A close analysis² of Cixous's well-known *The laugh of the Medusa* which was first published in *Signs* in 1975,³ reveals the essence of the optimism inherent in the subversive humour of this 'manifesto'. On the basis of the exposure of its regulative ideas through close analysis, comparisons with visual material can be made.

¹ Cixous is considered a major representative of *écriture féminine*. As lecturer in English at Vincennes she founded the centre for *Recherches et études féminines* where women were taught to liberate themselves from patriarchy through writing. She has written more than thirty novels and dramas in which theory and literature flow over into each other. Between 1975 and 1979 she produced a whole series of semi-theoretical writings, all of which set out to explore the relations between women, femininity, feminism and the production of texts, and in which many central ideas and images are constantly repeated.

² We are indebted to Johann Visagie for invaluable assistance in the philosophical scrutiny of this text.

³ *Signs* 1975, 1(4): 875-893.

2. *Hélène Cixous*

Hélène Cixous's writing has been described as »often intensely metaphorical, poetic and explicitly anti-theoretical« (MOI 1985: 102), locating it on the border between art and theory.⁴ Her style lends itself excellently to the analytical approach of »conceptual semantics«⁵ which concentrates on the power of metaphors to uncover basic beliefs and dispositions underlying texts.

At the outset it can be very generally asserted that the uncontested subversive character of *The laugh of the Medusa* is borne out by the use of metaphors of explosion, change, transition and metamorphosis. Although the humour of Cixous's 'manifesto' often goes unrecognized, we contend that it is in exactly these carnivalesque and exaggerated metaphors of explosion, outburst, laughter and wildness that the humour of the text lies. At first sight then, this subversively amusing text seems picaresque.⁶ In it Cixous represents and celebrates women as robbers, wanderers, monsters, servants and hysterics — figures that often present themselves in picaresque novels and picaresque visual cultural products. The poetic style of Cixous's text, moreover, attests to a picaresque anti-intellectualism and a refusal to be dominated by 'theory'. Rather than in linear succession the arguments are presented in an energetic, dynamic and seemingly spontaneous and impulsive manner, resembling the metaphors of unbridled movement used by Irigaray in the quote above. There is no development towards fulfilment in a climax, and the structure of the essay is organic, suggesting metamorphoses, fertility and bounty.

The key idea in Cixous's text is that of bisexuality, which she embraces in an effort to abandon, in Derridian fashion, the opposition of masculine and feminine. She distances herself from the common meaning of the term bisexuality, describing it as »this self-effacing, merger-type bisexuality« (CIXOUS 1991: 341), and formulates an »other bisexuality« which is multiple, variable and ever-changing, and

⁴ »Her central images create a dense web of signifiers that offers no obvious edge to seize hold of for the analytically minded critic« (MOI 1985: 102). And: »It is not easy to operate cuts into, open vistas in or draw maps of Cixous's textual jungle« (MOI 1985: 102).

⁵ The method used to analyse Cixous's text, as well as the method used to scrutinize the metaphors in the visual images to be discussed here, is based on Johann Visagie's (1990) »semiological hermeneutics for archival discourse«, a sub-theory of his »archaeological discourse analysis«.

⁶ The term picaresque is used in a much wider sense than it is usually defined in literary circles. A 'picaresque imaginary world' which is implied here is neither bound to any specific literary or artistic form, genre or convention, nor to any specific subject matter or type of discourse. Yet it defines a distinctly subversive and humorous manner manifest in typical strategies and in the imaginative modes of presenting motifs, *topoi*, metaphors and subject matter. Its foundational ideas in philosophical terms, as well as its visual cultural manifestations is briefly outlined in this article. The prolific research on the literary phenomenon of the picaresque novel is an invaluable aid in defining this manner more closely, yet the picaresque 'imaginary world' is much more broadly understood. The idea of an imaginary world is inspired by and adapted from both Paul Ricoeur's (1984) and Nicholas Wolterstorff's (1980) notions of worlds projected respectively »in front of« and »behind« texts or works of art. Cf. HUMAN 1999.

»which doesn't annul differences but stirs them up, pursues them, increases their number« (CIXOUS 1991: 341). She believes that »woman is bisexual« (CIXOUS 1991: 341) and it may be concluded that for her, conversely, bisexuality is also woman, because as we shall see below, the laudable characteristics associated with bisexuality are also those attributed to »woman«.

This ultimate unification in Cixous's text, of masculinity and femininity, into »woman« or »bisexuality« attests to its non-binary strategies of conceptualization. In Cixous's philosophy »woman's nature« or »bisexuality« is a venerated value of that which should be liberated to be expressed in the world, in culture, history, society and ultimately in textuality.⁷

The governing power of »bisexuality« or of »woman« is described, accordingly, in terms that evoke royal metaphors. In philosophical and other texts it is usually a clear indication that a foundational idea (an origin, center, root or goal) is at stake when it is described in majestic metaphors, as in this case:

I wished that that woman [referred to in Cixous's text] would write and proclaim this unique empire [of femininity] so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, over-flow ... (CIXOUS 1991: 335).

Having established the basic or foundational idea of the text,⁸ the means by which it is described can be considered. The characteristics attributed to the key idea of »woman« or »bisexuality« attest to what can be termed the geneticist allegiances of the text. About woman's nature Cixous writes:

Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity (CIXOUS 1991: 342).

In thus defining the central theme, what is infinite is valued above the finite, and what is complex, above the simple. What is dynamic and changeful is valued above that which is constant. Structuralist order is answered with geneticist »chaosmos« (CIXOUS 1991: 344).⁹

When Cixous goes on to describe »writing«, i.e. that in which »women's nature« or »bisexuality« must find expression, metaphors of becoming, change, activity and explosion also abound. This is already evident in the first line of the text: »I shall write about women's writing: about *what it will do*« (CIXOUS 1991: 334),

⁷ »Woman must put herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement« (CIXOUS 1991: 334).

⁸ An analytical strategy which is of course at odds with deconstructionist goals.

⁹ In other descriptions she states: »If there is a 'propriety of woman', it is paradoxically her capacity to deappropriate unselfishly, body without end, without appendage, without principle 'parts'. If she is a whole, it's a whole composed of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros, an immense astral space not organized around any one sun that's any more of a star than the others« (CIXOUS 1991: 344, 345). And: »Woman un-thinks the unifying, regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield« (CIXOUS 1991: 344).

and further on, in: »writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*« (CIXOUS 1991: 337).¹⁰

Metaphors of explosion, like »the fantastic tumult of her drives« (335), »seething underneath« (335) and »upheaval« (337) are used.¹¹

In the context of such explosions, the metaphors of monstrosity, madness and hysteria, as eruptive reactions against systematic suppression of expression, recur. The more common negative valuation of monstrosity is first given:

Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a ... divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster? (CIXOUS 1991: 335).

And then madness and hysteria is exulted:

They have furiously inhabited these sumptuous bodies: admirable hysterics who made Freud succumb to many voluptuous moments impossible to confess, bombarding his Mosaic statue with their carnal and passionate body words, haunting him with their inaudible and thundering denunciations, dazzling, more than naked underneath the seven veils of modesty (CIXOUS 1991: 343).

The central idea of »woman« expressed in »writing« is even identified with the »admirable« hysteric woman:

You, Dora, you the indomitable, the poetic body, you are the true 'mistress' of the Signifier (CIXOUS 1991: 343).

The subversive inversion of the hierarchy of »rational« above »hysteric«, and of »composure« and »calm« above »madness« (CIXOUS 1991: 335), are paralleled

¹⁰ Elsewhere in the text: »I, too, overflow [...] I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst — burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put up in frames and sold for a stinking fortune« (CIXOUS 1991: 335). And: »We're stormy, and that which is ours breaks loose from us without our fearing any debilitation. Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching and end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writings; and we're not afraid of lacking« (CIXOUS 1991: 336). And: »Because she arrives, vibrant over and again, we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather of a process of becoming in which several histories intersect with one another. As subject for history, woman always occurs simultaneously in several places« (CIXOUS 1991: 339).

¹¹ »Her appearance would necessarily bring on, if not revolution — for the bastion was supposed to be immutable — at least harrowing explosions. At times it is in the fissure caused by an earthquake, through that radical mutation of things brought on by a material upheaval when every structure is for a moment thrown off balance and an ephemeral wildness sweeps order away, that the poet slips something by, for a brief span, of woman« (CIXOUS 1991: 337). And: »When the 'repressed' of their society returns, it's an explosive, *utterly* destructive, staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions. For when the Phallic period comes to an end, women will have been either annihilated or borne up to the highest and most violent incandescence« (CIXOUS 1991: 342, 343).

by other typically picaresque inversions of high and low.¹² The most obvious inversion — »turning propriety upside down« (CIXOUS 1991: 344) — lies in her notorious injunction: »Women must write through their bodies!« (CIXOUS 1991: 342) and her declaration that women »write in white ink«, because there is »always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk« (CIXOUS 1991: 339). An exulted intellectual activity associated with the mind is described in carnal terms.

An affinity for what is »normally« considered to be low, is also seen in Cixous's choice of »root metaphors«.¹³ »Woman« for her is the traveller returning from afar (once more ranking 'process' above 'structure'), the wanderer in exile — in picaresque terms: the marginalized Fool or *picaro*:

Now women return from afar, from always: from 'without', from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond 'culture' (CIXOUS 1991: 335).

And:

Flying is a woman's gesture — flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques: for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. It's no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds (CIXOUS 1991: 353).

Cixous's picaresque affinity for what is low is also seen in her exultation of the role of the servant or worker. On the one hand she describes the »normal« lowly status of the servant¹⁴ (CIXOUS 1991: 338). On the other hand she celebrates the serving, nourishing and caring functions of women:

In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation: a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes (CIXOUS 1991: 339).

¹² This description amounts to a subversive reading of picaresque subversion, or an ideology-critical perspective on picaresque inversions of what is considered to be higher and lower expressions of a fundamental unity.

¹³ Visagie (1990) sees 'root metaphors' as thematic centres around which many other metaphors are clustered, and which involve some basic human actions, like travelling, playing, fighting, serving and loving, to which I add eating, each involving a variety of bodily postures and gestures. Such key metaphors reveal themselves in texts of various kinds. Furthermore, they not only embody and incite human behaviour to a great extent, in the sense that Lakoff & Johnson (1980) and Johnson (1987) have argued, but also are expressive of dynamic knowledge and belief systems.

¹⁴ »A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant male, his shadow« (CIXOUS 1991: 338).

Here the metaphor of female motherly love subversively opposes order, reason, or 'structure'.

The central picaresque root metaphor of play is evident in the recurrent image of laughter, in the image of the child, and of creativity and playing.¹⁵ Although Cixous regards her argument as a whole as an act of war — a heroic metaphor that generally recurs in theoretical writing¹⁶ — using terms like »violence«, »shattering«, »break«, »destroy«, »plowing«, and »battle« (CIXOUS 1991: 340-342), her representations of struggle are rendered hyperbolically and with picaresque playfulness.¹⁷

3. Visual culture

The resemblance between the fundamentally geneticist and non-binary use of somatic metaphors of excess and outburst in Cixous's text and that in the work of some feminist visual artists who represent body fluids, is a singular key to their work. The subversive co-presence of body fluids and excess, outburst, laughter or ecstasy that characterizes Cixous's text is visually in evidence in the work of Jenny Saville and Cindy Sherman.

*Hem*¹⁸ is the title of a monumental painting of 300 x 210 cm by the young British artist Jenny Saville that was exhibited in the *Territories* exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in New York in 1999 (Figure 1). In it a towering female nude seems to burst through the limits of the picture plane and frame, into the space of the overpowered spectator who is afforded a worm's eye perspective from below.

¹⁵ »The child is the other, but the other without violence, bypassing loss, struggle« (CIXOUS 1991: 342). And: »The relation to the 'mother,' in terms of intense pleasure and violence, is curtailed no more than the relation to childhood (the child that she was, that she is, that she makes, remakes, undoes, there at the point where, the same, she mothers herself)« (CIXOUS 1991: 339). And: »Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking. What happiness for us who are omitted, brushed aside at the scene of inheritances; we inspire ourselves and we expire without running out of breath, we are everywhere!« (CIXOUS 1991: 336).

¹⁶ Cf. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) about the metaphor »argument = war«.

¹⁷ »The new history is coming: it's not a dream, though it does extend beyond men's imagination, and for good reason. It's going to deprive them of their conceptual orthopedics, beginning with the destruction of their enticement machine« (CIXOUS 1991: 340). And: »Such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread (just a tiny little thread, they say) which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord, assuring them — otherwise they couldn't come — that the old lady is always right behind them, watching them make phallus, women will go right up to the impossible« (CIXOUS 1991: 342). And: »A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he. If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter« (CIXOUS 1991: 344).

¹⁸ 1999. Oil on canvas, 300 x 210 cm. Nochlin 2000.



Figure 1. Jenny Saville. *Hem* (1999). Oil on canvas. 300 x 210 cm. *Territories* exhibition (1999), Gagosian Gallery, New York. (Nochlin 2000). (Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photograph by Robert McKeever)

The figure swells grotesquely and expands across the picture plane in transgression of its own limits. The nude is hemmed in from all sides and presented in extremely foreshortened perspective, seemingly straining the lower part of her body forward. Her effort to exhibit herself in spite of her gargantuan form seems objectionable.

The title *Hem* might refer to the figure's constriction. However, it might also convey the meaning of 'containing blood', or 'of blood'. In this painting, as in an earlier work, *Branded* (1992)¹⁹ purplish areas emanate from underneath the transparent skin of the nude figure reminding the viewer of undercurrents of body fluids, in spite of pain. Indeed, Saville collects photographs of bruises and other injuries from medical textbooks (NOCHLIN 2000: 96) to transpose them into luscious pigment onto the surface of her paintings of female nudes. The enjoyment with which Saville applies paint to represent such repulsive subject matter is disturbing. Nochlin (2000: 96) describes her brushwork as both delicate and brutal.

Similarly, the white paint that seems to have spilled across the right side of the nude's body in *Hem*, is apparently applied with enjoyment in the »pure act of painting itself« (NOCHLIN 2000: 96). In the light of Saville's interest in metaphors of female bodily excess, as well as of her fascination with the presence of blood underneath the skin, it may well be interpreted to connote another body fluid: milk. From within the body of the represented nude who has apparently outgrown herself through the excessive and indulgent intake of food and liquid, there is an unstoppable eruption of milk. The female character's abandonment to her lower drives seems irreversible. There is a smouldering sense of ecstasy for having passionately violated the social norms of acceptability. The perverse gesture of indulgently clutching the flabby rolls of skin and fat in *Branded* underscores the sense of shy celebration which is evident in both paintings.

Her indulgence in the luxuriant application of paint is especially visible where Saville represents blood and milk, as if the injunction to »write through the body« in »white ink« has been taken at face value. The act of painting itself is characterized as an expression and a celebration of 'lower' natural processes. We are reminded that female body fluids, milk and menstrual blood, are distinguished from male bodily fluids by their unrestrainable flow. For this reason milk is all the more exploitable as a metaphor of the eternal life force.

The work of Cixous and Saville are related by the picaresque optimism inherent in their subversive humour. This optimism is fundamentally linked to a geneticist belief in eternal physio-organic becoming and recurrence. The aim of these visual and verbal works to make a political difference have their bases in a belief in the eternal renewal, the organic rhythm, and the perpetual generosity of Nature. This rhythm is manifest in the bounteousness that is ridiculously exaggerated in carnivalesque explosions and eruptions, related to body fluids.

¹⁹ 1992. Oil on canvas, 213.4 x 182.9 cm. London: Saatchi Collection. Borzello 1998.

Social habits, conventions and institutions are considered to be 'unnatural', alienating cultural artifices, and therefore subject to criticism and change. The vitality of human naturalness is considered to be constricted by cultural artificiality, by rigid man-made structures, conventions, formulae, habits, customs, stereotypes and clichés. Human naturalness is idealized as being a norm for social behaviour.

Their use of the low or comic mode is linked with an interest in banal everyday life and detail, and in grotesque lower bodily functions, immodest gestures and rude poses, obsessions with obscenities and bodily appetites and desires, like hunger, thirst and lust. In a reaction against spiritualism and heroism, the lower orders in all hierarchies are favoured. There is no disjunction between the spiritual and the natural or organic — body and soul diverge from an underlying unity in integrationist or non-binary fashion.²⁰

The emancipatory potential of carnivalesque parodying of social norms and mores has been optimistically celebrated by Bakhtin (1982, BACHTIN 1985). On the other hand, anthropologists, historians and other cultural theorists have noted that the transgressions of carnival are licensed and 'contained' by dominant culture, thereby attributing to carnival the function of enhancing and revitalizing social mores, and diffusing social tensions.²¹ In picaresque contexts, as in the work of artists like Brueghel, Steen and Hogarth, however, the carnivalesque serves to bring to light the pretensions of social role-playing, and to rekindle society's vigorous natural 'roots'.

It should be evident that there is more at stake than a close affinity between the feminist work of Cixous and Saville. As a broad trend in cultural production, feminism creates fertile soil for the picaresque tradition to flourish in. There is strong picaresque strand weaving through contemporary feminism.

Another feminist artist who works in this tradition is Cindy Sherman. The unstoppable flow of the feminine body fluid milk is also a motif in Sherman's *Untitled, #225*. (Figure 2). This photograph from the group of History Portraits that she photographed during the period 1988-1990 is a parody of the well-known medieval *topos* of the 'mystical lactation of St Bernard' (*lactatio Bernardi*), the visualization of a theophany that manifested itself as a stream of milk from the Virgin's breast to St Bernard's lips. The *lactatio* is an allegory of the soul being impregnated with divine knowledge and it is due to this suckling that St Bernard acquires the divine knowledge that he divulges in his sermons and books. In such representations the Virgin and St Bernard are usually represented on different planes with

²⁰ Picaresque critique of the higher orders in all hierarchies amounts to the veneration of 'process', above 'structure'. From an ideology-critical perspective their critique could be re-interpreted to target not 'structure', but rather 'stucturalism'.

²¹ Cf. WILLIS 1989, HIRSCHKOP & SHEPHERD 1989, and STALLYBRASS & WHITE 1986, 1993.

Figure 2. Cindy Sherman. *Untitled*, #225 (1990). Colour print. 48 x 33 cm. Edition of 6. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures Gallery (Krauss 1993: 167).



no physical contact between them, stressing the dualistic division of sacred and profane spheres. According to a passage in the best known of St Bernard's manuscripts, the *Sermon on the Song of Songs*, the Virgin's »distended breasts abound with a milk far superior to the wine of secular knowledge« (STOICHITA 1995: 133).

Like most of Sherman's photographs, this is a 'performance' in the sense that spectators are made aware of her as female director, garderober director, make-up artist, photographer and model. She leaves deliberate traces of her manipulating hand in the process of production e.g. in the unconvincingly disguised plastic prosthesis of a full breast, in the awkward artificiality of her wig, in the obviously painstaking application of make-up to emphasize her prudish and demure facial expression and in the intensity of her obsessive pose which disturbs the serenity and composure which is usually attributed the madonnas of this *topos*. Representations of this *topos* are far removed from the painful realities of swollen and overflowing breasts — an indissoluble part of acquiring the specialized skill of lactation: the art of attaining the correct and 'natural' balance of milk secretion, which is more often either gushingly abundant or scantily insufficient. In Sherman's photograph all signifiers of containment characteristic of male representations of the *topos*, are de-sublimated by a sense of ludic disintegration. St Bernard is not part of the scene and the sacred sphere which is normally inhabited by the Virgin has

been secularized, eliminating the dualistic division of sacred and profane spheres through inversion. Mystic revelation is substituted with obvious posing in exaggerated vaudeville style. The mechanisms by means of which women are exploited in the obsessive and unremitting masquerade of idealized 'femininity' are uncovered. The unchecked stream from the feminine body is a reminder of nature's bounty, whereas the prosthesis and the stiff and obsessive posing stresses human narrow-mindedness and inflexibility. By using her own body over and again in her art, Sherman re-directs attention to the de-carnalized female body not only in fine art, but also on the slick surfaces of the mass communication media with which her audience is familiar.

By thus characterizing the underlying match between the works of Cixous, Saville and Sherman a main concern in feminist scholarship, the discovery and establishment, on various levels, of female traditions, or genres, or sisterhoods, or penchants, stressing commonalities among female scholars, artists, writers, thinkers is addressed. This concern is understandable as one of the fundamental justifications for feminist academic and artistic commitment. Scholars that have tried to trace such commonalities in fields related to the picaresque tradition are Regina Barreca (1988) who endeavours to find a common female tradition in humour, and Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar who attempt to find a distinctively female literary tradition cohering in theme and imagery related to madness and hysteria, in *The madwomen in the attic* (1979).

However, the success of such endeavours is precarious. Irigaray and Cixous's problematic non-binary conceptualization of bi-sexuality which debilitates their theories through the exclusionary force of its essentialism, has received due criticism. If female cultural production is relegated to separate or 'alternative' female traditions, it has no relevance for, and can have no significant impact on patriarchal culture. Such a view obscures the analysis of the ways in which women have negotiated and disrupted, and still are negotiating and disrupting, artistic, social and other cultural conventions in order to open up a gender sensitive cultural space.

The representation of body fluids and the subversive and humorous exploitation of the metaphoric significance of their eruptive capacities have longer histories than their feminist uses. The underlying picaresque ideologies of male and female representations of erupting human body fluids are comparable, even though each sex brings its own bodily and social experience to such representations and even though the effect of their critiques are diverse.

Whereas the unstoppable eruption of milk and menstrual blood is typically female, the deliberate squirting of urine in an arc shape is a typical action of masculine prowess. In a work of the sixteenth-century Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel the Elder who often openly portrayed eruptive bodily fluids in male characters, this boasting action acquires cosmic proportions. In Brueghel's *Wat ick vervolghen*

*geraecke daer niet aen ick pisse altyt tegen de maen*²² (1558) (Figure 3), one of *Twaalf Vlaamse spreekwoorden*²³ — a series of portrayals of the folly of manic behaviour in a topsy-turvy world — a male figure portrayed against a monochrome blood red background is relieving himself in a powerful arch-like spurt right across the lowest point of the sickle moon. It is exactly this wilful and foolish public display of human rebellion against Nature that is picaresquely ridiculed by Breughel in the low mode, by literizing and re-carnalizing the proverb into the male body. We are reminded by Vandenbroeck (1987: 90-91) that in customs related to the body in various cultures, female secretions are mostly considered to remain within (or private) whereas male body fluids are supposed to go outward and are more readily tolerated in public. He argues that the fundamental opposition between within and without is a basic hermeneutic category operative in various cultures and related to basic divisions, including that between the sexes.

It is ironic that when Marcel Duchamp wanted to overturn stereotypical convictions about Art with his *Fountain* (1917), he used the urinal, a receptacle specifically designed for communal male discharge of urine. Bruce Nauman's picaresque *Self-portrait as a fountain* (1967) (Figure 4), another reflection on the role of art and the artist, refers ludically to Duchamp's readymade, but also to the tradition of grotesque gargoyles, and to pretentious baroque fountains of spurting gods and goddesses. *Self-portrait as a fountain* shows the male artist from the waist up, spitting water in a high semicircular arc. The photograph is part of a set of eleven colour photographs (*Photograph suite*, taken in 1966-1967) satirizing everyday actions of the artist. *Photograph suite* includes *Eating my words*, *Bound to fail*, *Coffee spilled because the cup was too hot*. According to Nauman (VAN BRUGGEN 1986: 91) these photographs address the question »What is art? And art is what an artist does, just sitting around in a studio ...«. In a previous work (1966) satirizing the role that art had assumed in western society, the banal words: »The true artist is an amazing luminous fountain« was positioned onto the edge of a pink Mylar window shade and subsequently (1967) Nauman drew *Myself as a marble fountain*. By activating and carnalizing Duchamp's *Fountain* in *Self-portrait as a fountain*, by spoofing fashionable self-centredness in art in *The true artist is an amazing luminous fountain*, and suggesting marble material in his drawing of *Myself as a marble fountain* Nauman subverts conceited ('masculine') artistic strivings to eternalize and enlighten. Rather, through the metaphor of eruption, he highlights process and transformative engagement.

By grouping these male and female artists together, an underlying picaresque match is suggested in their work. Yet, at the same time it is argued that female body fluids present women with metaphoric vantage points that facilitate

²² »No matter what I pursue I never reach it/I always piss against the moon.« Cf. CLAESSENS & ROUSSEAU 1969: 38.

²³ *Twelve Flemish proverbs*.



Figure 3. Pieter Breugel the Elder. *Wat ick vervolghe en geraecke daer niet aen ick pisse altyt tegen de maen maen* (No matter what I pursue I never reach it/I always piss against the moon). One of the *Twelve Flemish proverbs* (1558). Distemper on oak. Diameter 16 cm each. Total: 74,5 x 98,4 cm. Museum Meyer van den Bergh, Antwerpen © collectiebeleid (Claessens & Rousseau 1969: 38).



Figure 4. Bruce Nauman. *Self-portrait of the artist as a fountain*. From the series *Photograph suite* (1966). Chromogenic colour print. 51 x 60,8 cm. Whitney Museum of Art, New York. (Phillips 1999: 253). © 2005 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

understandings beyond the borders of patriarchal culture. The uses of somatic metaphors of eruption by male as well as female picaresque artists are thereby distinguished from fundamentally dualistic uses of the same metaphors in e.g. *écriture corporelle*.²⁴ Although the strategies used to subvert mainstream textual, artistic and social conventions often show similarities with picaresque art, such art also sometimes comprises dangerous Surrealist play or mystic transcendence, which falls outside the non-binary picaresque frame of reference. Likewise, certain manifestations of the grotesque, like the sublime grotesque does not have the picaresque quality of infectious festive critique. The attempt to distinguish a picaresque strand or tradition in the subversive uses of metaphors of eruptive (rationally unchecked) female and (deliberately) eruptive male bodily fluids, and to oppose some of its ideological biases to other strands, is an ideology-critical effort of double subversion.

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²⁴ »Philippe Sollers, in a long essay devoted to Bataille's book on eroticism [...] suggested that all modern literature, from Sade's *Juliette* to Bataille's *Histoire de l'oeil*, was haunted by the idea of a 'bodily writing' (*écriture corporelle*), to the point that the body had become the 'fundamental referent of [modern literature's] violations of discourse' « (SULEIMAN 1990: 75). Suleiman quotes from Sollers's *L'Écriture et l'expérience des limites* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968: 122).

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Sažetak

PRSKANJA U LIKOVNIM UMJETNOSTIMA, KNJIŽEVNOSTI I GLAZBI

Članak se temelji na većem istraživačkom projektu koji pokušava sagledati griješnu i komičnu ili feminističku likovnu umjetnost unutar šire pikareskne tradicije vizualne kulture. Termin 'pikareskno' (koji se rabi u širem smislu nego što je to uobičajeno u literarnim krugovima) služi da bi se opisalo specifične ideološke iskaze. Povratne pikareskne metafore pomno se ispituju zbog njihova potencijala da priopće takve iskaze, i to ne samo u umjetničkim djelima muških i ženskih umjetnika i u predstavljanjima muških i ženskih tijela, nego i među umjetnicima i teoretičarima. Analizira se tekst Héléne Cixous, kao i vizualni materijal Jenny Saville, Cindy Sherman, Brucea Naumana i Pietera Brueghela st. Najprikladniji glazbeni primjer u ovome kontekstu je vjerojatno (osobito uvod) suita *Háry János* Zoltána Kodályja. (Druga 'pikareskna' glazbena djela skladali su Erik Satie i Sergej Prokofjev.) Kao pikareskni mogu se opisati ne samo naslovi poput *Tri komada u obliku kruške*, *Pravi mlitavi preludiji* i *Hladni komadi* (Satie) te *Zaljubljen u tri naranče* i baletni naslov *Priča o lakrdijašu* (Prokofjev) nego i izvrtanje i izrugivanje u njihovim zvukovnim teksturama. Isto je i s komičnim i bezbrižnim napastovanjem i namjerno cirkusantskim i kabaretskim parodijama cijenjenih glazbenih djela te veselim pljačkanjem postojećih formi i glazbenog vokabulara. Međutim, valja naglasiti da živahne metafore prskanja u glazbi, usporedive s

ovim likovnim opisanim ovdje, treba i dalje istraživati. Motivi u njihovim djelima čitaju se kao motivi ili temeljne orijentacije.

Članak je zamišljen u kontekstu istraživanja o načinima interpretacije koje likovni povjesničari rabe za predmete vizualne kulture i o retoričkim mogućnostima koja umjetnička djela sugeriraju kao svoju interpretaciju. Na primjer, osobito je poučno čitati tekst H. Cixous kao dio prastare i heteroseksualne pikareskne tradicije. Njezino djelo prikladno je za lako odbacivanje od strane ozbiljnih kritičara kao revolucionarno, kontradiktorno i bezobzirno. Pa ipak, prepoznajući njezine pikareskne sklonosti i slijepa mjesta očituje se dubina vizije koju se inače poriče. Feministički zaključak povezan je s idejom da ideološke iskaze komplicira rod. Pokušaj da se razlikuju pikareskno tkivo ili tradicija u subverzivnim upotrebljavanjima metafora prskajućih (racionalno nekontroliranih) ženskih i (namjerno) prskajućih muških tjelesnih tekućina, te suprotstavljanje nekih od njihovih ideoloških sklonosti spram drugih tkiva, ideološko-kritički je napor dvostruke subverzije.

