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Desire and the symbolic transformation of the body: singing, painting, inhabiting

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Abstract

Through a series of vignettes describing interpretative encounters between psychoanalysis and other disciplines such as structuralist anthropology; architecture and dance; writing and painting; psychiatry and shamanism, this essay explores the key role played by the representation of the body, and especially the feminine body, in theorizing the therapeutic effects of symbolization. It aims to show the centrality of the psychoanalytic clinic of psychosis and its understanding of the relationship between desire and the body image to two 'primal scenes' of psychoanalytic theorization: Melanie Klein's 1929 theory of reparation and Claude Lévi-Strauss' 1949 theory of symbolic effectiveness. Maternal, erotic and exotic bodies; dissociated psychotic bodies; metamorphosis, suffering and desire, constitute the mythic geography that these theories attempt to render inhabitable.

A medicine song

A medicine song of the Cuna people of Panama, collected by Guillermo Hayans from an elderly informant of his tribe, published in 1947 by Nils Holmer and Henry Wassén, succeeding in the ethnographic work of Erland Nordernskiöld, and famously interpreted by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 'The Effectiveness of Symbols' (1949), draws a mythic itinerary inside the body of a pregnant woman. It is called Mu-Igala or the path of the Muu. The shaman or *nele*, seer, performs the song at the request of the midwife, in cases of difficult childbirth and in order to facilitate it (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 188). The Muu, which ordinarily means 'grandmother', stands in the song for the female 'power responsible for the formation of the fetus'. The Muu's way leads to her abode (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 182).

In his analysis of the text, Lévi-Strauss finds of 'exceptional interest' the literalness with which the song describes the journey into the sick woman's sexual and reproductive organs (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 183). Auxiliary spirits of the shaman penetrate her vagina and make their way to the uterus where a battle for the woman's soul is fought. The womb, Lévi-Strauss notes, is not treated as a victim but as the responsible party in the pathological disorder: Its *purba*, or soul, has overextended its domain, causing a disharmony in the body and decreasing its vital force or *niga* (Lévi-Strauss

1967: 184-185). The task of the spirits is to liberate the *purbas* or souls of the organs that have been captured by the *purba* of the uterus. Once this power abuse is brought to an end, the organs can renew their collaboration and health be restored.

According to Lévi-Strauss, the shamanistic cure would consist in making the sick woman, whose sensibility is already heightened by pain, experience as intensely as possible a myth in the theatre of her own body. The ordered events expressed in a verbal form can thus organize an experience of intolerable suffering. 'The shaman', says Lévi-Strauss, 'provides the sick woman with a *language*, by means of which the unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible psychic states can be immediately expressed' (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 193). This structuration of experience is a symbolic operation that produces effects at the organic level, clearing the way for the child to exit the mother's body. The myth thus accomplishes a '*psychological manipulation* of the sick organ'; it transforms the signified through the signifier (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 187).

If the medicine song can heal, says Lévi-Strauss, it is because the 'sick woman believes in the myth and belongs to a society which believes in it' (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 192). This is perhaps why, searching for a therapeutic effectiveness in his own interpretation of it, Lévi-Strauss transports the song to the mythical universe that he and his society still believe in: namely, that of Freudian psychoanalysis. In his presentation of it, the song becomes a delicate choreography of an exotic amorous encounter.

First, says Lévi-Strauss, 'we are surprised to find that the song devotes very little attention to action proper', when 'the preliminaries, on the other hand, are highly developed' as if 'filmed in slow-motion' (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 187-188). 'The next ten pages offer in a breathless rhythm, a more and more rapid oscillation between mythic and physiological themes' in order to produce, in the mind of the sick woman, an in-differentiation between the two (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 188). Here, 'the penetration of the vagina … is proposed to the woman in concrete and familiar terms' (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 189). The *nelegan* or auxiliary spirits, represented by wooden statuettes carved by the shaman and placed on either side of the sick woman's hammock, 'take on the appearance and the motions of the erect penis' (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 189).

The penetration constitutes, for Lévi-Strauss, a clarifying vision of the 'geography' of the sick woman's pain. The effective symbol is the phallus, and the thing symbolised, a suffering of 'cosmic proportions' whose site is the woman's uterus transformed by sickness into 'a hell à la Hieronymus Bosch' (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 189, 191):

> The *nelegan* enter the natural orifice, and we can imagine that after all this psychological preparation the sick woman actually feels them entering. Not only does she feel them, but they "light up" the route they are preparing to follow—for their own sake, no doubt, and to find the way, but also to make the center of inexpressible and painful sensations "clear" for her and accessible to her consciousness. (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 189-190)

Earlier in his description, Lévi-Strauss had observed that what the shaman is trying to do is to 'induce the sick woman… to relive *the initial situation through pain*, in a very precise and intense way, and to become psychologically aware of its smallest details' (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 188, my italics). Since this 'initial situation' is coitus, could it be that Lévi-Strauss' implicit theory is that the song heals because it poeticizes, structures and eroticizes the act of conception that initiated the process culminating in difficult childbirth? Although Lévi-Strauss never comments on the poetic value of the song, a passing reference to 'Rimbaud's intuition that metaphor can change the world' could be read as a hint in this direction (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 197). Why and when conception would constitute such a painful experience, however, has historically specific and singular answers.

Beyond these speculations, 'The Effectiveness of Symbols' can be read as a primal scene for the encounter between structuralism and psychoanalysis. Not only because Lévi-Strauss himself makes in it an explicit parallel between the recitations of the shaman and the 'gestures' of the analyst, but also because of the influence it would have in the work of Jacques Lacan. As in a gore tableau of the *Genesis,* the bleeding body of an Indian woman in difficult childbirth is central to this scene. God's punishment to Eve for acquiring the knowledge of good and evil, however, is here restaged as a punishment for the maternal function acquiring too much power over the organism as a whole.

As in the psychoanalytic version of the Oedipus myth, where the pathological fusion between mother and child is only brought to an end by the intervention of the father, who asserts himself as the woman's legitimate sexual partner, in Lévi-Strauss' version of the Cuna myth, the female powers of the womb, having 'gone awry', are tamed by an invasion of penis representatives, which help her release the child. Significantly, in 'The Effectiveness of Symbols', this is the counterpart of Marguerite Sechehaye's psychoanalytic treatment of a schizophrenic patient, also published in 1947, in which the cure consisted in recreating the process of weaning. Lévi-Strauss' re-interpretation, presents the medicine song as a poetic and erotic journey through the 'mythic anatomy' of a sick woman; in this way, a feminine 'emotional geography' of pain is symbolised as a geography of desire.

A medicine house

Twenty years before the publication of the medicine song, in 1927, the Austrian architect Adolf Loos, who had moved to Paris placing hopes of success into his project of Tristan Tzara's house in Montmartre, drew a house for Josephine Baker. He had met the artist on a few occasions and had great admiration for her. From second-hand accounts, mostly from his wives' memoirs, we know that at a party in Paris, Baker had complained

about the drawings an architect had made for refurbishing her house, which displeased her. To this, Loos is said to have promised her to design 'the most beautiful house in the world' for her.

The house's main attraction is a large swimming pool on the second floor illuminated by skylights. Labyrinthine corridors surround this volume with windows from which to observe underwater. As José Quetglas i Riusech remarks in his commentary, this is the most achieved of Loos' 'uterine interiors' (Quetglas 1980). Playing on the proximity of the Spanish word for pleasurable (placentero) and placenta, he suggests that Baker's house was, for Loos, the plan of a rebirth through her body. Following this clue, and perhaps, that of the anecdote that Baker herself had taught Loos how to dance the Charleston, Elana Shapira argued that 'in his design, Loos actually pays tribute to Baker as his chosen mentor in a romantic journey to claim his own body' (Shapira 2004: 8). Although the house was never built, Loos, who at the time of the drawing was living in cheap hotels, and was almost deaf, regarded it as his best project (Shapira 2004: 21).

Many insightful feminist readings have dissected the 'economy of desire' that underpins Loos' design as being that of a bachelor's seduction machine. This could hardly be an accusation for someone who in 1908 had declared that 'all art is erotic' (Loos 1971: 19). In Loos' humorous and controversial manifesto 'Ornament and Crime', he stated:

> The first ornament that was born, the cross, was erotic in origin. The first work of art, the first artistic act which the first artist, in order to rid himself of his surplus energy, smeared on the wall. A horizontal dash: the prone woman. A vertical dash: the man penetrating her. (Loos 1971: 19)

After the transparent pool, the most iconic element of Loos' project for Josephine Baker's house is its black-and-white striped marble façade. As many have pointed out, drawing connections with Loos' theory that a house should be like a dress for those who occupy it—his 'principle of cladding'—this pattern matches that of an haute-couture dress which Baker featured in magazine photographs circulating at the time. The lines in Baker's dress, however, are vertical. Following on this association, a second point of impressive coherence between Loos' design and his theory emerge. Namely, that in Loos' project for her house, Baker is lying down.

Like the Cuna medicine song, which traces in time a healing itinerary through a feminine 'emotional geography', Loos' unbuilt project for Baker's house traces an itinerary in space. The project makes literal Lévi-Strauss' idea of the woman's body as the theatre in which a myth can be lived; in this case the myth – it has been suggested – of a rebirth through seduction. As in the case of the song Lévi-Strauss read in Holmer and Wassén's publication, the woman is there as a character, absent. Baker never inhabited Loos' sensual fantasy of her body as a uterine interior. Perhaps the fact that

she had become infertile because of a STD transmitted by her first husband, placed a role in this rejection. Be what it may, the Cuna song and Baker's projected house may be artifacts through which Lévi-Strauss and Loos, respectively, symbolized difficult births of their own.

The empty space

The German-British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein introduced her theory of reparation a short article from 1929 entitled 'Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in the Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse'. In it, she discusses a newspaper article by the Danish writer Karin Michaëlis in which the latter recounts the peculiar case of a friend, a 'rich, beautiful and independent' woman who nevertheless suffered from episodes of melancholia that could be suicidal: She felt 'an empty space' inside her that nothing could fill (Klein 1929: 441). This friend, according to Michaëlis' account, had married an art collector and her house was like an art gallery. One day, however, her brother in law, who was 'one of Denmark's well-known painters', had removed one of the paintings from the wall, which was his, as he had sold it. This 'empty space' had subsequently reactivated her depression. She felt as if the empty space on the wall coincided with the empty space inside her. In an impulse, she had gone out, bought paints and brushes and decided to 'daub a little on the wall', in the space left by the departed painting (cited in Klein 1929: 441). The result, in the opinion of the experienced painter himself whose piece had been replaced, was a masterpiece.

Klein receives this story enthusiastically and it helps her develop her theory of sublimation, which has to do with the child's early sadistic phantasies of destroying the mother's body and the subsequent guilt that these phantasies produce, which in turn gives rise to a desire to make the mother's body whole again. This interplay between guilt and desire for atonement is both at the root of the creative impulse as well as of many inhibitions. Klein goes on to describe the paintings that the artist, who in the article appears by the name of Ruth Kjär, makes after her debut. One is the picture of an old woman who looks bitter and has given up on life, which for Klein represents the aggressive impulse towards the mother. The other is one of the artist's Canadian-Irish mother as a beautiful and strong woman, which for Klein symbolizes the mother's body restored to wholeness.

Significantly, as Jean Walton has remarked, Klein makes very little of the first painting described in the article as 'a life-size painting of a naked Negress' while Michaëlis herself suggests that Kjär, who is said to have had 'a few specks of black blood' might have identified with this woman (Walton 2001: 32). While it is not inconceivable that for a rich woman of Canadian origin in the early twentieth century the 'black nanny' could have been one of the real or imagined maternal figures, Klein's dismissal, leaving aside

the possibility of a racist omission, might have had to do with the fact that the body repaired in the painting was not that of a mother.

Daubing on the wall

In an article published in English in 2004, Ole Andjaer Olsen identified the artist in question as the Danish painter Ruth Weber, who had married the dentist and art collector Axel Kjär. In his view, nearer to the context of the artist, Klein's intuition had not been so far-fetched even if optimistic. The painting that Klein had interpreted as representing the old and destroyed mother figure was a portrait of Weber's mother in law and the painting of her mother, supposedly restored to wholeness, had been subsequently destroyed. Apparently, destroying, painting over, being unwilling to exhibit and unwilling to sell her paintings had been characteristics that accompanied the painter's career. The debut painting that in Michaëlis' story was done directly on the wall had also been destroyed, but a photograph, reproduced in Olsen's article, and a sketch survive. In it, a sitting nude has her face turned towards a large vase that occupies the right-hand side of the canvas. It is a portrait of Josephine Baker (Olsen 2004: 39).

It has been speculated that a reason for not building Loos' house was that Baker embarked, the following year, in a world tour. On June 22 1928, she premiered in Copenhaguen. As in many other European capitals, her performance caused a scandal in the public sphere and was well received by the avant-garde artists and intellectuals. Like Baker, Weber had become sterile from contagion of an STD by her first husband, which adds yet another layer of meaning both to the 'empty space' she felt as well as to her possible identification with Baker. What is certain is that Weber, too, like Loos, searched in the image of Baker's body a possibility for inhabiting her own.

Perhaps as an unconscious tribute to Michaëlis' clinical eye, Jacques Lacan once mistakenly called the writer a 'psychoanalyst'. Yet if Klein read the story as a psychoanalytic cure, Michaëlis' sardonic style in speaking about her friend, suggests their relationship was one of rivalry rather more than therapeutics. A friend of Loos, and witness of his meeting with Baker, Michaëlis seems to have applied on Weber, Loos's ideas of the origin of the creative impulse. Her peculiar image of Weber daubing directly on the bare wall the 'naked' body of a black woman the first time she held a brush, reminds one of Loos' depiction of the art of children and primitive people in the Ornament essay.[1] 'In the child', he says, art 'is a natural phenomenon: his first artistic

1 A further hint to that Michaëlis' description is a direct reference to Loos' essay is her line, cited in Klein's text, that she attributes to the painter's brother-in-law: 'If you painted that, I will go and conduct a Beethoven Symphony in the Chapel Royal tomorrow, though I don't know a note of music!' (cited in Klein 1929: 442). Loos' citation about the drawing of the cross as the first creative act

expression is to scribble erotic symbols on the walls.' (Loos 1971: 20) That this action could equally well describe his design for a façade suggests that his problematic evolutionism should not be taken too sanctimoniously.

Whether Michaëlis' remarks about Ruth Weber were intended as well-meaning jokes, lay diagnoses or straight-out insults, they seem to have struck a chord with the clinicians. Perhaps unconsciously picking up on this primitivistic depiction of Weber's relationship to art, Olsen, an analyst himself, claims that 'Weber's apparently pervasive destruction of her own paintings may be interpreted as a schizoid defence against feelings of depression' (Olsen 2004: 40). He then associates Weber's painterly gesture to that of Mary Barnes, the famous patient of R. D Laing's Kingsley Hall in London, who, in an episode of psychotic regression during her internment, began her career as a artist by smearing her feces on the walls of her room.[2] Olsen recounts the act of interpretation that helped Barnes transform this expression into the more socially acceptable activity of painting with paint: She was told that her drawings were beautiful, but lacked color. Without a similar therapeutic relationship, Weber seems to have thought, inversely and tragically enough, that her paintings were 'shit' (Olsen 2004: 41).

The empty unconscious

In Lévi-Strauss' 1949 account of the shamanistic cure, he defines the therapeutic function of myth as to re-integrate 'the incoherent and arbitrary pains which are an alien element in her [the sick woman's] system ... within a whole where everything is meaningful' (Lévi-Strauss 1949: 192-193). It will not be surprising if his essay attempts a similar 're-integration' through the structuralist myth of the universal symbolic function. This re-integration would consist in a process of abstraction, where all the mental images, all the 'incoherent and arbitrary pains' stored in individual memory will become 'reducible' to a universal function. The unconscious commonly thought as content will be reduced to form. Or, in Lévi-Strauss' own words, as a result of his analysis:

> ...the unconscious ceases to be the ultimate haven of individual peculiarities—the repository of a unique history which makes each of us an irreplaceable being. It is reducible to a function-the symbolic function, which no doubt is specifically human,

continues: 'The man who created it felt the same urge as Beethoven, he was in the same heaven in which Beethoven created the Ninth Symphony' (Loos 1971: 19).

2 Psychoanalysis generally draws a parallel between primitive forms of life, the baby's fusional relationship to the mother, and psychosis.

> and which is carried out according to the same laws among all men, and actually corresponds to the aggregate of these laws. (Lévi-Strauss 1949: 198)

If the medicine song interpreted by the shaman helped evacuate the sick woman's uterus, Lévi-Strauss' essay will attempt to evacuate singularity from the unconscious, until it becomes 'empty' (Lévi-Strauss 1949: 198). Yet, assuming that a metaphorical relationship between the 'sick woman's uterus' and the Freudian unconscious is here at play, the risk is that the structuralist unconscious, by this process of reduction, becomes sterile. 'The unconscious', says Lévi-Strauss, 'is always empty—or, more accurately, it is as alien to mental images as is the stomach to the foods which pass through it.' (Lévi-Strauss 1949: 198)

In an essay largely dedicated to the ritual manipulation of the contents of the uterus, Lévi-Strauss' use of the 'stomach' as the exemplary organ that should be thought of as empty and separate from its content, is surprising. Furthermore, this alienation of form from content and the strange qualifier of 'always empty', thought both in regard to the uterus as to the stomach, seem to have made of separation a new pathology. In other words, it seems to have stagnated the dynamism between empty and full, inside and outside, which characterizes these organs. It would take another to analyze what this symbolic transformation of a sick uterus 'à la Heronymous Bosch' into an 'always empty' stomach might mean in the difficult marriage between structuralism and psychoanalysis, but it would seem that some of the poetic possibilities present in the Cuna song have been lost in this process.

Tree-woman, tree-man

Carlo Severi's later interpretation of the Mu-Igala song introduces an aspect of the ritual's content that Lévi-Strauss' early analysis had left out entirely; namely that the song narrates a metamorphosis: 'In a first moment, the body of the mother is progressively transformed into a tree' (Severi 2002: 28). This tree is bleeding and its roots reach the center of the earth. Its branches are flexible and leafless. Then the body of the baby is transformed into a bleeding fruit that will grow from the tree. The fruit then becomes a pearl.

This process of 'symbolic transformation realised through action' takes place, Severi argues, independently of belief. Rather, it is the result of the establishment of a different order of reality through ritual actions such as the form of enunciation of the shaman, or his use of language as an 'acoustic mask' (Severi 2002: 37). Severi's analysis of the 'preliminaries' that had called Lévi-Strauss' attention is that by talking about himself in the third person and by narrating in detail the actions that happened in the past in the present tense, such as the midwife calling the shaman and the shaman walking to the

sick-woman's hut, a recursiveness or *mise-en-abyme* is created which allows a passage from immediate reality to mythic reality.

This de-erotization of the song that reveals its mythic content to be the metamorphosis of the woman's body into a tree produces other echoes in psychoanalysis. In the very case that Lévi-Strauss mentions in his essay, one of the 'symbolic acts' performed by Mme Sechehaye in her cure of the schizophrenic patient, for example, is to give her apples instead of giving her the breast.

The German-French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Gisela Pankow, influenced both by Sechehaye and Lévi-Strauss, focused her treatment on psychotic patients on deciphering the way these patients inhabited their bodies. Her theory was that in cases of psychosis, the body image had suffered a process of destruction, leaving empty places that made inhabiting difficult. The devastated body image produced an experience of the body as limitless, with no distinction between inside and outside, and where the dynamism between content and form, part and whole, had been lost.

As a first step in any analysis she therefore tried to fill as many of these gaps as possible and attempted to outline the limits of a body image. This limited and dynamically structured body image was, for Pankow, the spatial condition for accessing the temporality of lived existence in which desire as an openness to the other and to the future made life worth living. Thus, she declared that in cases of psychosis, 'the whole effort of the therapist will be to reunify the body's dynamism in such a way that this body, apprehended as desire [se saisissant comme désir], would find again its image and enter the domain of time' (Pankow 1956:17).[3]

Importantly, Pankow did not understand psychosis as a 'desiring machine', nor as being deprived of desire, but as a condition that required, following the horticulturalist metaphor, a 'graft', in order for desire to be accessed. In the aftermath of destruction, the analyst could, with the help of the patient's hallucinations, dreams, modeling work or drawings, construct a 'phantasm' of a body image that could then be grafted onto the patient and worked with to conduce him or her to the recognition of their unconscious desire. Like Loos' blueprint or Ruth Weber's painting, the modeling work of the analysand constituted for Pankow, a language in which the former 'shows us one of the ways of being in which he has retired', as a defensive measure, given an initial difficulty in inhabiting his physical body. (Pankow 1968: 240)

In an article published in 1968, Pankow tells the case of a young man who had suffered from hallucinations for ten years and had had a psychotic breakdown after joining a monastery. After some sessions, the man brought a drawing in which his body, lying on the ground, was traversed by the trunk of a tree, whose visible roots dug deeply into the earth. About this Pankow concluded that 'this fusion of the tree-world with the

[3] All citations from Pankow are my own translations.

human body to create a "tree-body" was the mode of existing of the sick man in which he could meet me' (Pankow 1968: 243).

In other drawings, this man, who came from a noble family in France, drew his body encapsulated in rock or a castle. Pankow thus treated the image of the tree-body as a 'catalyser', or as a signifier, where 'castle' was the signified. In this way, helped by the metaphor of the family-tree, 'the structuring image of the tree-body led to a dynamism between family-body and individual-body' that eventually allowed the access of a memory. The family castle had been refurbished by a great-grandmother, and had gone from being a fortress to a bourgeois palace. With this material, Pankow presents this transformation of the castle to the sick man, who liked to cross-dress, 'as the way in which he inhabits his body, which he often feels dressed in women's clothes' (Pankow 1968: 242).

It is as if Pankow, as Lévi-Strauss anticipated in his essay, had learned from the Cuna shamanistic cure that the body in crisis could adopt a different mode of existence in order to escape pain, and that accessing this mode could serve as an aid to structure experience. The main difference between these cases, beyond the distinction between a physical and a mental illness which may or may not hold, is that while Pankow's schizophrenic patient 'creates a "tree-body"' to communicate with the analyst, it is the shaman who creates a "tree-body" for the sick woman to be able to deliver.'

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