

Excess: The Possibility Of Disruption On The Side Of Woman/Women.

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In this paper I explore the tropic figure 'woman' as a disruptive 'excess' in the field of architectural theory. My curiosity about this term is due to its associative relations to another tropic figure, 'space.' In recent social theory there is extensive use of these two figures - 'woman' and 'space.' In *Gynesis*, Alice Jardine puts forward an interesting interpretation of poststructuralist theory's dependence on this association between 'woman' and 'space,' and its implications for female subjectivity. It is a way of incorporating that which has eluded or engulfed the master narrative. She argues that the term 'space,' which stands for 'nonknowledge,' has been coded as feminine, as woman.¹ My interests are specifically architectural in that I want to focus on 'space' as architectural space, a space in which the metaphoric associations cannot leave behind the materiality of space on the ground, but also in which metaphoric space cannot simply be superimposed onto space on the ground without careful translation. The other level of architectural specificity is in the use of woman and/or its associative term, the feminine, within architectural discourses. This is most often implicit in the infrastructure of the text and it has taken strange turns within recent sexualisations of texts.

Some recent architectural theory demonstrates a dependence on the use of the feminine and woman. It is interesting to note a recent text like *The Architectural Uncanny*, by Anthony Vidler,² in which some of the key theoretical points such as 'the uncanny' and 'the body' depend on being read as feminine and yet nowhere in the text is there an acknowledgement of this dependence or an interpretation of it. Other texts foreground a 'feminization' of both textuality and spatiality, yet often do not provide an interpretive explanation of this position. My argument is that the inclusion or dependence on the figure 'woman' or 'feminine' does not necessarily claim a discursive space for sexual difference or female subjectivity in architectural theory. More specifically, in architectural theory the circularity and conflation of 'woman' or (female) 'body' as 'space' can act as a non-theorized mire that displaces important questions which might claim theoretical space for (sexual and cultural) difference in architectural discourse. In other words, how can 'woman' be a 'disruptive excess'

and not merely remain an 'accessory' to architectural discursive practices.

My method in this paper is to provide a theoretical turning point for architectural discourse via two very brief readings. One of Luce Irigaray's arguments about the figure 'woman' and the other of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's arguments for the 'woman of difference,' and the differences between woman as opening the discourse onto the intersections of cultural and sexual difference. These set the scene for the rest of the paper which is an attempt to explore architectural theory through layered interpretations of spatial practices on the ground. In this moment 'theory' is seen as the privileged site of transcendence by which spatial practices are textualised and therefore given over to a 'public.'

The figure 'woman' is an exemplary metaphor crucial to western narratives of the subject/object bifurcation.

IRIGARAY

"Plato's *Hysteria*" is Luce Irigaray's reading of Plato's 'Myth of the Cavern.' My own very brief reading of it is a way to explore the intrinsic relations between 'woman' and 'space' that philosophy depends on, and to open the use of 'woman' in architectural theory to questions of sexual difference. In "Plato's *Hysteria*," Irigaray has overburdened the original with its own textual excesses, especially its dependence on the material, spatial, corporeal, as she argues, "the 'matter' from which the speaking subject draws nourishment in order to produce itself, to reproduce itself."³ Thus Irigaray reads the implicit spatial and sexual ordering that is repressed in Plato's text. Her argument is that Plato's division between the cavern and the world of Truth is division between the *sensible* and *intelligible* realms. The *sensible* realm is the condition of materiality, sensibility, sexuality. It is a realm that is essentially spatial. In Irigaray's interpretation the role of the imaginary mother is attributed to the cavern itself, and the imaginary father to the Idea: truth/knowledge has come to mean leaving behind the *mother* (the cavern) and her role in reproduction. Irigaray argues that the myth or 'idea,' in this scene of origins, is that there is only one engenderer and that *he* is male. The *mother* has been

excluded from having a role in *creation*, her role is progressively stripped away.

What does it mean to say that the cavern is attributed to the Imaginary mother? Whilst the cave represents, as well as constitutes, the scene of 'man's' origin, it is also a *space*. It is a reminder and the remainder of man's forgotten origin - the maternal body of woman. There are two steps which need to be identified for this claim to be understood:

1. As a spatial metaphor, the cave is a trace of spatiality, a trace of the 'matter' of space - sensory, sensual, sexual and sensible. I have formulated the term 'metaphor-matter' to bring to the surface this remainder and reminder of the metaphor's difference from and reference to the matter. A 'metaphor-matter' implies the impossibility of a 'pure, transparent concept.' Plato's myth of the cavern is not able to completely obliterate the cave's reference to the maternal body or to *spatiality*. The concept constructed on the figure of the metaphor cannot easily shake off its own *materiality*. To read the cave as a 'metaphor-matter' indicates that it is impossible to represent a metaphor merely as a concept: the absence of those other spaces which are different, the cave's spatiality and the maternal space threaten the cave's self-identity as a concept.

2. The second step is the process of metaphorisation: what does it mean to say that the cave is a metaphor for the maternal body of woman? It is clear that the cave is a metaphor for the maternal womb. Through the processes of metaphorisation the attributes of the maternal body are transferred over to this *space*, over to the figure of the cave. Sue Best has described this process as "actually a 'transportation'," rather than a transfer, because "it captures the sense of woman being (op)pressed into the service of spatial discourse."⁴ Then the very moment of the 'birth' of architecture is a metaphoric process in which the maternal-feminine is produced as the space of the cave.

The spatial subtext in Irigaray is a way of burdening the text with woman's (lack of) spatiality. If woman is the cave via her metaphoric transportation, then *space* as such is already feminized. *Space*, which according to the myth is pre-architectural, is already constituted through woman as body-matter. The metaphor of the cave turns the body of woman into a spatiality that is *not hers*.

The concept of *place* which is predetermined in the figure of the cave as a metaphor for the 'origin of place' is only possible on the condition of the absence of a place for woman. Irigaray argues: "The maternal-feminine remains the *place separated from 'its' own place*, deprived of 'its' place. She is or ceaselessly becomes the place of the

other who cannot separate himself from it."⁵ If the object of architectural discursive practices is to 'make place,' it follows that these practices are contingently and *discursively* constructed on the maternal-feminine in the 'place' of the *other* for the (masculine) subject, for men.

The frailty of the relations between spatiality and subjectivity need to be recognised, for the possibility of a place for 'woman' in discursive practices.

Irigaray is attempting to wrest (the body-matter of) woman from her [sacrificial] *embedding*. In order for woman to both attain and preserve her *spatiality*, woman needs to re-organise the architectural economy of the spatial metaphor: the 'cave,' the 'tomb,' the 'monument.' Thus Irigaray is careful in her deployment of the spatial metaphor not to presume the 'woman' is the *a priori* condition of substance, matter, body or space, that needs to be formed by the scopic skills of a 'gifted' (man) architect. In fact, her text attempts to write the spatial metaphor as the 'architectonic' condition by which 'woman' can invest her *spatiality* about her.

Implicit in her text is the plea that we need to be very careful in our approach to the *female other*.

SPIVAK

My reference to the post-colonial theorist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is a way to interrogate the figure 'woman' in terms of the division within woman and the (cultural) difference between woman. For a privileged woman theorist the figure of *excess* is an *other* woman, an other woman who does not fit neatly into both dominant feminist and phallogocentric discourses. Spivak's statement that her project "is the careful project of unlearning our privilege as loss,"⁶ is crucial to a self-critical position. The dominant discourses of feminism are likely to repeat the imperialist project whilst claiming a subjectivity, or more precisely, a textual figuring of 'woman' as a general concept. The figure of the *other*woman, perhaps traced by race, class, ethnicity, though not entirely defined by these terms, is a repression in architectural theories even if they are located around the issues of sexuality and space. Post-colonial concerns have yet to enter the stage of architectural theoretical scrutiny and enquiry.

In *Outside the Teaching Machine*, Spivak attempts to decipher the metaphoric figure, 'woman,' arguing that it is a historical catachresis. Metaphors carry an historical and philosophical materiality, they are crucial to our thinking and they cannot be easily dismissed by a deterministic feminism or by repeated phallogocentric phantasy. Metaphors signal the contradictions, the

ambiguities, the blindspots, the oversights of the text, they are the sites of the text's undoing. Spivak's focus on 'woman' is a call to feminist theorists for the recognition of the division within the figure 'woman.' She argues that woman is not woman generalized; "Let us divide the name of woman so that we see ourselves as naming, not merely named."⁷ As women in theoretical practice we participate in the project of naming. Spivak proposes that the name 'woman' is in the space of the irreducible other. Her name for this feminine other is the 'gendered subaltern' of contemporary (de)colonisation.⁸

The (im)possible task is how to approach this feminine other with care.

I will return to the scene of the cave for the moment to lay out the possible dangers of assuming a symbolic feminine *other*. I am interested in the figure of the screen which is named the *little wall* in Plato's myth of the cavern. The *little wall* is not representative of the 'gendered subaltern.' Rather it is exemplary of the way the *other woman* is figured in the scene of the cave, the scene of the origin of production.

In Plato's myth there is a *little wall* onto which all the illusive projections are made, the shadows produced by the fire in the cave. The fire is seen as the false light, the sun is the true light. It is perhaps clear that this *little wall* is a metaphor for the hymen, just as the cave is a metaphor for the womb. The *little wall* represents the site of artifice and projection. It is seen as false production. It is seen as the site of untruth, and it is entangled with the projection of a false feminine reality.

The little wall as the site of men's focus in Plato's myth displaces the original site which cannot be faced by the men prisoners - the cave as metaphor for the womb. Already the transportation of the maternal feminine body over to space is not acknowledged. The *other woman* in the logic of the discourse takes attention away from the maternal feminine. The other woman, a false one, takes attention away from the woman which precedes others, the mother.

The little wall is a projection screen which divides woman. It filters a division between the maternal body (the matter of space) and the other woman (false accessory). The *little wall* stands within "woman" as the division between the mother and the lover. It is a division within woman and between woman.

The myth of the cavern disavows multiple femininities. Femininity is limited to two binary figures: the figure of the *cave* - the maternal feminine - or the figure of the *little wall* - woman as untruth.

SPATIAL PRACTICES

My specific siting is an event in a Macedonian Orthodox church in the village of Za`voj, in the Republic of Macedonia. It is an annual event for which all the emigrants return, the day of the Goddess, the Holy Mother. The women's spatial practices during the religious ceremonies produce imaginary relations between dressing and ad-dressing the Divine figure of transcendence. My method here is to explore the relation between sexual and cultural difference, architecture and transcendence.

On arrival at the church the woman and men parted way. The women walked through the side door into the church building, and the men merged with other groups of men outside in the church ground. Men were standing away from the church building, many of them leaning on the fence which marks the perimeter of the church ground. Inside the church women lit candles, bowed towards the altar, kissed the icons and placed flowers beside them, gestured the sign of the cross. They performed these rituals individually, in silence, and in a solemn manner. The women continued: they discreetly placed the specially prepared foods on a large table which was to one side of the church interior. Along the screen of the altar (the iconostasis), they hung money, white shirts, socks and white towels on a line, like 'clothes hung out on a line.' These rituals constitute a dressing and a domestication of the church interior.

Women's domestic practices (re)create an architectural space of fluidity, excess and ambiguity. Uncontainable movements of the scents of flowers and foods, of the temperatures of candles and bodies breathing, of metallic ringing, of bodies brushing against iconographic saints and of lips touching other surfaces. All these movements were in play in and around the 'architecture' - around the structural timber beams, curling their way through the carvings of the altar screen, hovering in the recessed space of the ceiling, precipitating at the architraves, and lightly hanging like an invisible veil over the exotic drapery of the frescoed saints. These sensual movements intertwined with the structure, the form and the composition of the architecture of the church, they played "on and with a terrain" that was already imposed and foreign.⁹ The church interior *becomes* a 'full' (fully sensual) space, all crevices, all structures, all hierarchies, all spaces were 'touched' and 'moved' by the spatial effects of the women's practices.

This moment marks a significant intersection of forces and effects. Questions about the relations between women and architecture surface with the literal practices of 'dressing' the church interior. It is by and through the women's dressing that architecture's sensuality surfaces

and is literally entangled with the structural, formal and compositional configuration of the church. The effect is of a displacement of the worship of regulating lines, proportional orders and perspective framings. The transcendental signifier for an architecture of the Divine cannot be simply the inscription of an absolute geometry. This displacement is partly effected through the construction of this particular Divine: what are the attributes/desires of a Divine that is worshipped, appeased and ad-dressed through these maternal, feminine *and* seductive practices of and by women?

WHITE SURFACE

The effect is of a veiling that is a signal for other veilings and for what is foreclosed to architectural discourse.

1. The way that women's spatial practices veil or cover over architecture's other sensualities, is figured in the gauze like layers that blur the geometry and image of the interior.
2. These veils are a trace of what is not represented or representable in existing architectural discourse.

The white surface on the exterior of the church is a most significant 'veil.' It reveals the formal order of the architecture by dissolving the materiality of the building. The rustic surface of the stone walls of the church are covered with a cement render, and then on this smooth surface a whitewash is applied to give it an architectural image of 'purity.' The surface appears as luminous, it produces an architecture that is dependent on what Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*, has called an 'illusion of transparency.'¹⁰ It produces a formal order by covering over the building's materiality and by 'veiling' over other spatialities which are behind this white surface. Behind the wall are other spatial practices which it condemns to obscenity.

The white surface also produces architecture as a mirror. The configuration of the men encircling the church building, produced an image of the white wall reflecting the shadows of men's bodies. It is a strange reversal of the shadows on the *little wall* in Plato's cave, in which the men are seduced into watching a (false) appearance. In its pursuit for purity and order, architecture produces a white surface which functions as a screen, it reproduces the *little wall*, in which the men are reflected as shadows. This white surface entrances their vision because it reflects back to them the myth of the scene of origin and production. This image signals the relationship between gender and phallogocentric economies, an isomorphic relationship between a male imaginary and a masculine symbolic.

Gender is separate from, but reflected in, the image of the white wall sexualized by the imprints of men's bodies. Lefebvre, using the term 'white skin,' argues that it unleashes desire:

It presents desire with a 'transparency' which encourages it to surge forth in an attempt to lay claim to an apparently clear field. Of course this foray comes to naught, for desire encounters no object, nothing desirable, and no work results from its action. Searching in vain for plenitude, desire must make do with words, with the rhetoric of desire. Disillusion leaves space empty - an emptiness that words convey. Spaces are devastated - and devastating; incomprehensibly so (without prolonged reflection at least). 'Nothing is allowed. Nothing is forbidden,' in the words of one inhabitant. Spaces are strange: homogeneous, rationalized, and as such constraining; yet at the same time utterly dislocated.¹¹

In the scene of the church, 'desire' is gendered: men's desire surges forth to lay claim on the white skin by the reflections of their bodies. It is the relationship, between the men and the white skin, that produces both (a masculine) desire and a dislocation in and of space. The dislocation is constructed as a 'spatially symmetrical' division of gender: the white skin is a white wall that envelops the women inside the church. The men gaze at the white wall, knowing that the women are behind it.

In this scene, *masculine* desire is produced by and through the covering over of *female* sexuality. The white wall is 'empty' of sensory stimulation, so that desire can fill the interval between the men on the perimeter and the church wall/object. Masculine desire fills the space between gender and architecture. What is the object of men's gaze - the women or the church? The white wall is an effect of masking sexually whilst at the same time producing gender. Gender serves to mask masculine desire for the white wall/object in which their bodies are reflected. The white wall serves to mask sexuality on which architecture is dependant. Architecture depends on the veiling of its dependence on sexuality and gender.

Why are the women inside and the men outside? Why is the interior richly ornamented and the exterior a 'pure white skin?' Considering the two surfaces as screens, the men *face* a pure white screen, a pure form, a truth; this is what is reflected back to them. Their spatial positioning engenders the facade as masculine. The women are *enveloped* by a 'dress,' a surface that is produced as 'appearance.' Truth, on the other side of the screen, is foreclosed to women. Women 'wear' the church as another envelope. Moreover, through their spatial practices they *merge* with the ornament, with the interior space of the church, rather than women 'occupying' the interior space, they become a part of its aesthetic condition. There is a blurring of boundaries; the women

are subsumed within their (already gendered) bodily processes - food, nurture, caress, dress. They do not/cannot *face* a subject/object configuration. Their spatial practices blur the boundaries between 'walls' and 'spatiality,' between the solid/permanent ornament and the textile/temporary ornament. Architecture is immaterialized not as a 'transparency' but as a 'sensuality.' The flickering flames of the candles and the incense effect a dramatic intoxication - the women breathe and touch and absorb space as though through a 'porous' skin. This is read as the effect of the interior, it is read as one side of the white wall, the dressed side. The exterior is read as naked and Truth. In a sense the two wall surfaces - the interior and exterior - are just two sides of the one screen, the one wall, the one architecture. The production of gender is within an economy of the *same sex* subjectivity. In this economy there is only space for one sex subject, the masculine. *He* occupies the subject position within the 'proper place' of the church.

The moment in which the women's spatial practices produce the interior space as an architectural excess, is the moment in which the women's bodies are reproduced as servile, subordinate, surveilled, subjected. In contrast to the uncontainable movements of an architectural sensuality, the women's bodies are disciplined and contained, they are already dressed, in the same way that the church is already 'dressed with ornament.' Sexuality in relation to architecture is doubly veiled: once through the women's 'dressing' of the church, and once through the prior 'dressing' of her body *for* the church.

A (metaphoric and material) cross section of the church building would reveal a division within woman and a division between women. Inside, women are preoccupied with addressing the Divine, producing an effect of a fluid spatiality. On the other side, women, who are barred from entering the church, are preoccupied with their own bodily fluidities. On both sides there are constructions of femininity metaphorically in association with 'fluidities' but the wall of the church, the architecture of the white skin is a tight fabric that does not have a porosity. It is like the *little wall*, a screen onto which woman is projected as man's other, as his 'geometric prop.'¹² Architecture is a territorial act that imprisons women at the same time as it banishes *other* women. It prevents women (inside) from *touching*, speaking to, acknowledging women (outside). Women, Irigaray argues, cannot use the same mechanism for separating from the mother as men, without detriment to themselves. To leave the threshold between inside and outside unsymbolized means that women fall into a fusion/confusion of identity. To close off the threshold between mother and lover is

murderous to female subjectivity. And yet to simply deconstruct and formally dissect architecture would not ensure that woman's sexuality is given space to be.¹³

The discourse of architecture produces a masculine mask over the scene of production by turning the scene of the cave inside-out. Via the construction of the white wall, architecture reproduces the *little wall* in Plato's cavern as a sort of a 'truth.' It is a tricky and complicated reference because the white wall is both pure form and projection screen. It is both 'Truth' and 'false Appearance.' The white wall is central to the symbolic language of architecture. In this sense it is given over to the masculine scene of production. Architecture reproduces the *little wall* as pure form, pure object, pure surface. Architecture transforms 'Appearance' as an order of 'Truth' via the technologies of form, object, composition, geometry. The body of woman and of the cave in which the men are seen to be imprisoned.

Given this masculine white mask that architecture gives over to philosophy, ornament is seen as an application that covers over the pure form. Ornament constitutes a 'dressing,' a feminine dress of untruth.

The white surface is the (masculine) wall of purity, Truth. It filters a division between the maternal body (the matter of space) and the other woman (ornament). The masculine white surface is a crucial figure in the master narrative of architecture. Pure form stands in between "space" and "ornament." This role of the white wall requires methods of repetition/interpretation if architecture is to begin to approach its feminine *others* with an ethical intimacy.

THE CLIMB

So far I have described the women's spatial practices as a mode of action that is no surprise, it is 'women making do' in the sense that de Certeau describes that this very activity of 'making do' might displace the formality proper to the place.¹⁴ Another response to this impossible question is by way of example, by way of a specific 'event' that took place at the church. In this sense I am implying that the power of the church is perhaps 'omnipotent,' it is a 'totalizing discourse,' except for 'particular moments and movements,' in which 'the weak' are where they are least expected; they create surprises.

I want to talk about a climb up a jerry-built scaffold on the west wall of the church building, by an old frail woman dressed in black, in order to ring the church bell.

There was no climax to her climb, or rather the climax was not hers, the church bell rang, but she climbed

down in the same humble and dutiful way that she climbed up and disappeared into the crowd. This act was again a way of 'making do' in de Certeau's sense, only unlike the women's spatial practices inside the church this act was indeed a surprise, it was specifically, a *visual* surprise. A black figure of an old woman against the white surface of the church, perhaps an artistic feat. The congregation pretended not to notice, and yet the danger of climbing and balancing on the steps supported by the (unstable) scaffold *surreptitiously* engaged their gaze. The congregation was relieved when the woman was back on *terra firma*, the pretence that it didn't really happen (anyhow it would soon be forgotten) attested to the non-event status of her act. The woman herself seemed self-absorbed in the task, not the physical task but her duty as a servant of the church. But as she climbed did she not unwillingly, from the corner of her eye, see the horizon stretch before her. The congregation beneath her, did she not exalt in her momentary sense as a messenger from the divine - an angel?

The angel wore black, she drew a 'black hole' in the white facade of the architecture. She was the 'matter out of place' in the visual economy of the white surface. The congregation cannot allow itself to judge her for this, (they cannot tell her to get down) for it is part of the rules of the *proper place* that insists she wear black, as a sign of her lack (of a man). The effect of a black hole on the white surface is the effect of the *body* within the discourse of architecture; the *female body* that the discourse must guard itself against.

While the architecture of the church makes a vertical gesture towards the divine (both through its raised roof form, and through its raised altar), the feminine represented in the female figure can only make a vertical gesture by and with the scaffold. But the scaffold is separate to the proper architecture of the church. It is an 'event' in which two bodies - the body of woman and the body of the church - are entangled in a struggle for access to the Divine. The female figure physically climbs up the external face of the wall of the building. The wall of the church is not her support, her prop, it is what she must overcome, corporeally, *in order to address the Divine*.

In order for woman to both attain and preserve her *spatiality*, woman needs to re-organise the architectural economy of the spatial metaphor - the 'cave,' the 'tomb,' and the 'monument.' In this sense woman needs to climb out of and over her architectural embedding in the text and in space in order to address the journey of her transcendence.

NOTES

- 1 Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of woman and modernity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 25.
- 2 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992).
- 3 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 75.
- 4 Sue Best, "Deconstructing Space: Anne Graham's Installation for Walla Mella Park and Jeff Gibson's Screwballs." *Transition* (1993), n. 42, p. 28.
- 5 Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of sexual difference* (London: Athlone, 1993), p 10.
- 6 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 7 Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* p. 139.
- 8 Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* p. 139.
- 9 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- 10 "The illusion of transparency goes hand in hand with a view of space as innocent, as free of traps or secret places. Anything hidden or dissimulated - and hence dangerous - is antagonistic to transparency, under whose reign everything can be taken in by a single glance from that mental eye which illuminates whatever it contemplates." Henri Lefebvre *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1991) p. 27.
- 11 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* p. 97.
- 12 Irigaray, *Speculum* p. 108.
- 13 See Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader* ed Margaret Whitford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 161, on the idea that the *little wall* prevents woman from touching. See Irigaray, *Ethics* p. 105, on the idea that it closes off love between mother and daughter.
- 14 de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life* p. 34.