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Bodily Experience and Suppressed Female Values

A Pathway through Works of Literature, Art and the Labyrinth

Abstract - by Dr. Bettina Schmitz, Wuerzburg

In my paper I will question the relation between bodily experience and female values. The debate on gender and gender equality has made it quite difficult to use the word ‘female’ or to refer to the female body. Is it possible to presuppose an analogy of body and values similar to the one Immanuel Kant probably had in mind, when in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) he admired “the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me”? Even if my paper will not primarily be about moral values Kant’s analogy may inspire to take a closer look at the relationship between the experience of the own body and the order of the world outside, i.e. the structure of the symbolic order. My analysis of that relationship will take place in the field of culture – I will refer to works of art and literature.

The first part will be based on Julia Kristeva’s theory of language as she presents it in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) and on her understanding of the woman artist in the last chapter of *About Chinese Women* (1974). With the distinction of the semiotic and the symbolic aspect of the signifying process she describes the “alchemy of the word within its sounds”. In part two, I will present some recent research on the labyrinth. The path which leads through the labyrinth can be understood as a metaphor for the path of life, which also is a pathway through your own body. I want to elaborate this metaphoric meaning of the labyrinth especially from a female perspective. This leads to part three of my paper. There I will ask about values in a special way: I will focus on an almost lost female

tradition in our societies which only during the last decades has been rediscovered. I will do so in referring to objects of art and literature.

Part 1: As my former work on Kristeva has shown, the concentration on the emergence of language within the period of early childhood is highlighting two aspects of the signifying process: the first is the bodily bonding of every speech act. Secondly Kristeva is able to explain the female roots of a phenomenon, which in many different languages of the world is called “mother tongue”, “Muttersprache”, “langue maternelle” etc. Various quotations of poetry and literature exemplify this aspect in part II of *Revolution in Poetic Language*. The relation between experience and language acquisition can be described as an interdependent relation and a permanent exchange between the Symbolic and the Semiotic. A closer look at this interrelation reveals that many of the bodily and semiotic aspects were traditionally identified as female and that they were often neglected. To focus on this neglected female aspect shall not lead to draw any normative conclusions neither for women nor for men. Only then Kristeva’s theory of the Semiotic and the Symbolic can be understood as a revolution which takes place within language. The transformation it effects influences not only individual but also social and political structures. A short look at theories of the Social Contract which mostly forgot the bodily aspect of our being and especially the importance of women’s work for our societies can illustrate this fact (see Seyla Benhabib “The Generalized and the Concrete Other”, 1987).

Part 2: The different interpretations of the labyrinth can exemplify what has happened to a female cultural knowledge during the formation of patriarchal civilization. In our times people usually understand the labyrinth as a place where you can get lost. This interpretation is relatively young compared to an older meaning of labyrinth. I here refer to the structure of the labyrinth in Crete. In this kind of labyrinth only one path exists, meandering, making many turns. One cannot get lost in this labyrinth or take a wrong decision. Walking through this labyrinth life feels more like being home than going on an odyssey (also see my critique of the psychoanalytic notion of castration in the article “Homelessness or Symbolic Castration”, Bettina Schmitz, 2005). This insight of the labyrinth

can be completed with the three aspects of the Goddess symbolizing the three ages of a woman: the white one, young and independent; the red one, the woman in her middle ages, fertile and creative; and the black one, old and wise (here I follow Lisa Kuttner “Die drei Lebensphasen der Frau. Ein Heilungsritual im Labyrinth”, 2006). I will also refer to Riane Eisler’s analysis of the problems of suppressed cultures in *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987).

Part 3: Finally this discussion shall be carried forward to the field of art. How can we overcome the aporias of a female culture within patriarchal tradition? This will be demonstrated and discussed along the understanding of the woman artist in the work of Julia Kristeva and Judy Chicago. To refer to bodily experience and to the female body opens up new spaces in art and culture (and in the political order). Art – but philosophy and other disciplines as well – can become a place where the traditional limitations of patriarchal rationality are left behind.