

Feminine Self-Representation: Gender Subversion in Jeanette Winterson's Writings and Jenny Saville's Self-Portraits

Co-supervised by Professor Bernard Vouilloux, an eminent specialist in the history of art and of interart studies at the Sorbonne University, and by Professor Anne-Laure Fortin-Tournès a national and international specialist in gender and intermedial studies at Le Mans University, the projected Phd dissertation will use a transdisciplinary intermedial methodology to analyse the way contemporary British female art and fiction can reconfigure gender norms and traditional ways of representing women. The corpus, which will include a selection of Jeanette Winterson's autobiographies and of Jenny Saville's self-portraits, will be chosen for its capacity to foreground female characters and narrators ready to transgress traditional forms and contents so as to assert singular visions and voices. Using gender and intermedial theories, the thesis will investigate how the conversation going on between the textual and the visual in the texts and images of the projected corpus redefines and renews the traditional representation of men's and women's attributes and roles.

Traditionally, most representations of women were produced by men. Only recently have women entered the histories of literature and art. As a reaction against the patriarchal view of women as obedient housewives and caring mothers, the contemporary British writer Jeanette Winterson and the contemporary British artist Jenny Saville choose to depict women in ways that subvert those traditional gender attributes. Indeed, the women whom Winterson depicts and whom Saville paints are intentionally grotesque, disturbing and gender-fluid. While Winterson's fiction promotes the alternative values of power, energy and forceful affect in her depiction of women and of their bodies, Saville's self-portraits embody a form of representational violence conducted against the traditional canons of female beauty. In her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble*, Butler asks the question "to what extent does the body come into being in and through mark(s) of gender?"¹ Like Judith Butler, Saville perceives that the body, which she pinpoints as a cultural construct, can be questioned and considered as discursive as it is able to speak a different language that moves beyond the markers of gender and sex. Thus Saville's self-portraits play with the traditional representations of the female body as conventionally beautiful to reveal their ideological background. She challenges the established conventions of the female nude by painting disfigured female bodies, which are her signature style. *Propped* (1992) and *Branded* (1991-1992), for instance, portray naked bodies on which quotes and words of the French feminist writer Luce Irigaray are inscribed² which "arouse ideals of femininity with which this body fails, or refuses to comply"³. Saville's delight in anti-beauty paintings chimes in with Winterson's deconstruction of heteronormative values in her novels. In *Oranges, Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* and *The Powerbook*, Winterson deconstructs normative gender identities and foregrounds the discursive nature of gender, by using characters and narrators whose gender fluidity asserts itself as a strength, an asset, a step towards emancipation. As Sondergaard claims, "gender is not a consequence of an inner power or a result of bodies, gender is something we are constituted by and which constitutes the conditions of the being and appearance of our bodies. Gender is something we all do as cultural repetitions and quotes"⁴. It is by questioning those repetitions and quotes that

¹ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 13

² Michelle Meagher. « Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust » *Hypatia*. Vol.4 (fall 2003), p. 27

³ Ibid

⁴ Marie Jorgensen. *Empty Space and Points of Light : The Self, Time, Sex and Gender in Selected works by Jeanette Winterson*, University of Copenhagen : Museum Tusulanum Press, 2005, p. 118

Winterson, like Judith Butler, promotes the idea that gender is performative, something her characters and narrators experience literally in her fiction as they envisage their bodies as alternately male, female, or non-binary. If, according to Butler, gender is not a state but an act, a “doing”, not a “being”⁵ then Saville’s and Winterson’s images/texts of wo/men contribute to destabilising the conventional associations between texts-to-be-pondered-over and masculinity, and images-to-be-looked-at and femininity.

Winterson’s novels and Saville’s self-portraits complement one another in the way their descriptions of their female characters stray from the norm. While Winterson uses a blending of fictional and non-fictional autobiography to conflate facts and fiction, Saville’s fragmented portraits use multiplying viewpoints to tear her representations away from realism. The artist’s works *Branded*⁶ and *Propped*⁷, for instance, are reassembled out of fragments of words and paint in collage-like style which explode the traditional ideal of female beauty as forming a unity. Winterson’s semi-autobiographies rely on the alternative qualification of her lesbian narrators and of their families as monstrous to allow for the emergence of singular female voices that bypass traditional gender clichés, while Saville’s large-scale obese and imperfect female nudes question the viewer’s pre-established conceptions of the monstrous and the beautiful. Although Winterson’s and Saville’s works pertain to different artistic disciplines and have different modalities of representing women, they intersect structurally as well as semantically. Technically, recalling Hélène Cixous’s idea that “[a] woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor, [...] will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language »⁸, both Winterson and Saville produce multiple discontinuous narratives, which make their female representations escape linearity and the traditional wholeness and unity of the work of art associated with a male-centred conception of art history. In Winterson’s novels the resistance showed by Jeanette as a lesbian against the norms imposed on her by her family and milieu is displayed in the technique of telling the story itself. The fragmented plot is constructed through criss-crossing narratives with different and conflating temporal scales. This fragmentariness recalls Susan Lanser’s feminist narratological theory which argues that feminine writings are frequently considered as plotless because they seek to eschew the chronological straightforwardness of the phallogocentric narrative. Likewise, Saville rejects the traditional pictorial techniques of perspective and three-dimensionality as she uses fragmented and multiple perspectives to explore the complexities of the female body and beyond, of female identity. Her self-portrait *Reverse* (2002-2003), for instance, painted in a mirror reflection style, decomposes her image to revisit the subject/object, female nude/male onlooker binaries. Moreover, the blemished skin Saville represents in the portrait recalls the trauma of being reduced to one single woman identity and the scar-like lines painted on her face shed light on the represented woman’s fragmented psyche. Thematically, both writer and painter redefine female sexuality in their own subversive ways, outside the boundaries of traditional heteronormativity. Like Winterson, who asserts in *The Powerbook* that the world she constructs is « an invented world » where one « can be free just for one night » and who invites the reader to « [u]ndress » and « Take off your clothes. Take off your body. Hang them up behind the door »⁹, Saville inscribes in her self-portrait *Propped* a quote by the

⁵ Judith Butler. *Gender trouble* op. cit., p. 33

⁶ Jenny Saville. *Branded*. 1992 (209.5 x 179cm) Saatchi Collection of British Art, London.

⁷ Jenny Saville. *Propped*. 1992 (213 x 183 cm) Saatchi Collection of British Art, London.

⁸ Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohe, Paula Cohen. « The Laugh of the Medusa », *Signs*, The University of Chicago Press, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer 1976), p. 885

⁹ Susan Pelle. « 'When Is a Tulip Not a Tulip?': Grafting, Exoticism, and Pleasure Gardens in Jeanette Winterson’s *The PowerBook* » in *A Journal Of Women Studies*. University of Nebraska Press, Vol 33, 2012, p. 31.

French feminist writer Luce Irigaray saying « If we continue to speak in this sameness-speak as men have spoken for centuries- we will fail each other ». ¹⁰ By undressing the female body, both writer and artist strip it of its cultural dimensions and recreate it through their unique voices, their own individual and feminine modes of writing. In her essay “The Laugh of Medusa”, Cixous refers to feminine writing as the way for a woman to write her body into the texture of the text as a form of resistance against phallogocentric discourse. According to Cixous, « writing gets done by women that go beyond the bounds of censorship, reading, the gaze. This writing frees itself from the masculine command ». ¹¹ This type of writing of the transgressive body into the text and the image is driven by the notion of “narrative desire” ¹² which is central to freeing feminine representation from the patriarchal gaze. Self-portraiture and autobiography can be liberating “visual form[s] of self-writing” ¹³ which aim at debunking the traditional historicist view of self-narratives as chronological accounts of the author’s and artist’s life experiences. The gender-based and intermedial approach to Jeanette Winterson’s semi-autobiographies and to Jenny Saville’s self-portraits will contribute to shedding light on the atypical mechanisms supporting female bodily representations and will pinpoint the specificities of those artists’ and writers’ feminine modes of creation.

The dissertation envisaged could be divided into four chapters which will have to be written within the three years of the Phd scholarship. During the first year the doctorate student will start elaborating an exhaustive bibliography providing the theoretical background for the transdisciplinary methodology, combining the gender identity approach with the intermedial study of self-narratives, while investigating state of the art criticism and literature on the primary corpus. The fine-tuned understanding of Winterson’s semi-autobiographies, Saville’s self-portraits and gender theorists’ and semiologists’ philosophies will be reinforced through an attendance to seminars and study days while the necessary readings of the literature on the primary and the secondary sources will be conducted. This should enable the Phd student to write the first and second chapters of the dissertation over the first two years while digging into the intersections between visual and textual narratives with a focus on female sexuality, body aesthetics and gender implications. The research results gathered in the first and the second chapter will be presented at conferences to demonstrate the originality of the research and to fish for insightful feedback. The third chapter, which will be written during the first half of the third year, will look more closely at the interrelationship between literature and the visual arts with a focus on the polyphonic aspect of storytelling in Winterson’s as well as Saville’s works. The fourth and last chapter, which will be written during the second part of the third year, will shed light on the use of the grotesque and the monstrous in feminine representation with a focus on the carnivalesque as the place where norms related to gender and sexuality are subverted. This chapter will be finalised during the summer of the third year which will also be the time when the introduction and the conclusion to the dissertation will have to be completed. The beginning of the fourth year will be devoted to rereading the dissertation, making the final necessary corrections, printing the dissertation and preparing for the defense.

¹¹ Hélène Cixous. *Castration or Decapitation*. University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 53

¹² Peter Brooks. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. London: Harvard University Press, 1992, pp. 37-61

¹³ Maria Tamboukou. *Nomadic Narratives, Visual Forces*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010, p. 58