

## Body Fluids and Gender in Picaresque Art and Writing

"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)

### 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 between philosophy, literary criticism, and the 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 theorised by writers drawing principally on psychoanalytic and anthropological insights, writers like Julia Kristeva, Mary Douglas and Luce Irigaray.

Kristeva (1982) theorises 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 the sacred and profane.<sup>1</sup> Her theorisation 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 conceptualisations of mind and body, and of the sacred and profane, which evaluates such orders as expressions of a fundamental unity.

Mary Douglas's key insight in *Purity and Danger* (1991) is to recognise that, because of its orifices which are boundaries dividing the self and that which is external to it, the human body stands as a metaphor for social structures.<sup>2</sup> 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 continue to confirm that body fluids from marginalised bodies, that are deformed, grotesque, hysteric, insane, overweight, and so on, 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.<sup>3</sup> 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"<sup>4</sup> and applauds the "shapeless flux that dampens, soaks, floods, channels, electrifies, lights up the apartness in the blaze of its embrace"<sup>5</sup> 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 partial 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.<sup>6</sup> 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. Irigaray writes: "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] that is supposed to be solid still."<sup>7</sup>

Her writing supports that of the Algerian-French Hélène Cixous.<sup>8</sup> A close analysis<sup>9</sup> of Cixous's well-known *The Laugh of the Medusa* which was first published in *Signs* in 1975<sup>10</sup>, 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.

## HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

Hélène Cixous's writing has been described as "often intensely metaphorical, poetic and explicitly anti-theoretical"<sup>11</sup>, locating it on the border between art and theory.<sup>12</sup> Her style lends itself excellently to the analytical approach of "conceptual semantics"<sup>13</sup> 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 unrecognised, we contend that it is exactly in 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.<sup>14</sup> 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 metamorphosis, 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,"<sup>15</sup> and formulates an "other bisexuality" which is multiple, variable and ever-changing and "which doesn't annul differences but stirs them up, pursues them, increases their number."<sup>16</sup> She believes that "woman is bisexual"<sup>17</sup> 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 conceptualisation. In Cixous's philosophy "woman's nature" or "bisexuality" is a venerated value that should be liberated so as to be expressed in the world, in culture, history, society and ultimately in textuality.<sup>18</sup>

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,<sup>19</sup> 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." (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" (344).<sup>20</sup>

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" (334), and further on, in: "writing is precisely the very possibility of change." (337)<sup>21</sup>

Metaphors of explosion, like “the fantastic tumult of her drives”(335), “seething underneath” (335) and “upheaval” (337) are used.<sup>22</sup> 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?”(335)

And then madness and hysteria are 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.” (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.” (343)

The subversive inversion of the hierarchy of “rational” above “hysteric”, and of “composure” and “calm” above “madness” (335), are paralleled by other typically picaresque inversions of high and low.<sup>23</sup> The most obvious inversion – “turning propriety upside down” (344) – lies in her notorious injunction: “Women must write through their bodies!” (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” (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”.<sup>24</sup> “Woman” for her is the traveller returning from afar (once more ranking ‘process’ above ‘structure’), the wanderer in exile – in picaresque terms: the marginalised 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’.” (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.” (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 servant<sup>25</sup> (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.” (339) 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.<sup>26</sup> Although Cixous regards her argument as a whole as an act of war – a heroic metaphor that generally recurs in theoretical writing<sup>27</sup> – using

terms like “violence”, “shattering”, “break”, “destroy”, “plowing”, and “battle” (340-342), her representations of struggle are rendered hyperbolically and with picaresque playfulness.<sup>28</sup>

## 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 of other 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 characterises Cixous’s text is visually in evidence in the work of Jenny Saville and Cindy Sherman.

*Hem*<sup>29</sup> is the title of a monumental painting of 300 x 210 cm by the young British artist Saville that was exhibited in the *Territories* exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery in New York in 1999. In it, a towering female nude seems to burst through the limits of the picture plane and frame and into the space of the overpowered spectator who is afforded a worm’s eye perspective from below. 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* may refer to the figure’s constriction. However, it may also convey the meaning of ‘containing blood’, or ‘of blood’. In this painting, as in an earlier work, *Branded* (1992)<sup>30</sup>, purplish areas emanate from underneath the transparent skin of the nude figure, reminding the viewer of undercurrents of body fluids and associated pain. Indeed, Saville collects photographs of bruises and other injuries from medical textbooks in order to transpose them into luscious pigment on the surface of her paintings of female nudes. The enjoyment with which Saville applies paint to represent such repulsive subject matter is disturbing. Linda Nochlin describes her brushwork as both delicate and brutal (2000: 96).

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” (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 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 characterised 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 has its basis 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.

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 idealised as being a norm for social behaviour.

Cixous and Saville's 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.<sup>31</sup>

The emancipatory potential of carnivalesque parodying of social norms and mores has been optimistically celebrated by Bakhtin (1982, Bakhtin 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 revitalising social mores, and diffusing social tensions.<sup>32</sup> In picaresque contexts, as in the work of artists like Bruegel, 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 in which the picaresque tradition may flourish.

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 her *Untitled, #225* (colour print, 48 x 33 cm, edition of 6, see Krauss, 1993:167). This photograph from the group of *History Portraits* that she created during the period 1988-1990 is a parody of the well-known Medieval *topos* of the 'mystical lactation of St Bernard' (*lactatio Bernardi*), the visualisation 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 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, *garde-robe* director, make-up artist, photographer and

model. She leaves deliberate traces of her manipulating hand in the process of production, for example, in the unconvincingly disguised plastic prosthesis of a full breast from which milk spouts, in the awkward artificiality of her wig, in the obviously painstaking application of make-up to emphasise 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 specialised skill of breast-feeding; 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 secularised, 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 idealised ‘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-carnalised 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 characterising the underlying match between the works of Cixous, Saville and Sherman, I address a main concern in feminist scholarship, namely the discovery and establishment, on various levels, of female traditions, or genres, or sisterhoods, or penchants, stressing commonalities among female scholars, artists, writers, thinkers. 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 conceptualisation 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 Bruegel the Elder who often openly portrayed eruptive bodily fluids in male characters, this boasting action acquires cosmic proportions. In his *Wat ick vervolghen en geraecke daer niet aen ick pisse altyt tegen de maen*/(No matter what I pursue I never reach it/I always piss against the moon)<sup>33</sup> (1558, distemper on oak, each 16 cm in diameter, total 74.5 x 98.4 cm, in the Museum Meyer van den Berg in Antwerp, see Claessens & Rousseau, 1969:38), one of *Twaalf Vlaamse Spreekwoorden/Twelve Flemish Proverbs*<sup>34</sup> — 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 Bruegel in the low mode, by his literalising and re-carnalizing of 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 gender divisions.

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* of 1967 (chromogenic colour print, 51 x 60.8 cm, Whitney Museum of Art, New York, see Phillips, 1999:253) is another reflection on the role of art and the artist and it 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) satirising everyday actions of the artist. *Photograph Suite* includes *Eating My Words*, *Bound To Fail*, and *Coffee Spilled Because the Cup Was Too Hot*. According to Nauman these photographs address the question: “What is art? And art is what an artist does, just sitting around in a studio...” (Van Bruggen, 1986: 91) In a previous work of 1966 satirising 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 (in 1967) Nauman drew *Myself As a Marble Fountain*. By activating and carnalising 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 eternalise 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 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*.<sup>35</sup> 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 carnivalesque 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.

- 1 Kristeva, 1982.
- 2 Douglas, 1991.
- 3 Irigaray, 1985.
- 4 Irigaray, 1985: 221.
- 5 Irigaray, 1985: 238.
- 6 Whitford, 1991: 158-165.
- 7 Irigaray, 1985: 238.
- 8 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.
- 9 I am indebted to Johann Visagie for invaluable assistance in the philosophical scrutiny of this text.
- 10 *Signs*, 1975, 1(4): 875-893.
- 11 *Moi*, 1985: 102.
- 12 “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)
- 13 The method used to analyse Cixous’s text, as well as the method used to scrutinise 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”.
- 14 The term picaresque is used in a much wider sense than how 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 are 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.
- 15 Cixous, 1991: 341.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 “Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.” (Cixous, 1991: 334)

- 19 An analytical strategy which is of course at odds with deconstructionist goals.
- 20 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)
- 21 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 an 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)
- 22 "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)
- 23 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.
- 24 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.
- 25 "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)
- 26 "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)

- 27 Cf. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) about the metaphor “argument = war”.
- 28 “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)
- 29 1999. Oil on canvas, 300 x 210 cm. Nochlin, 2000.
- 30 1992. Oil on canvas, 213.4 x 182.9 cm. London: Saatchi Collection. Borzello, 1998.
- 31 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’.
- 32 Cf. Willis, 1989, Hirschkop & Shepherd, 1989, and Stallybrass & White, 1986, 1993.
- 33 “No matter what I pursue I never reach it/I always piss against the moon.” Cf. Claessens & Rousseau, 1969: 38.
- 34 *Twelve Flemish Proverbs*.
- 35 “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’Ecriture et l’expérience des limites* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968: 122).

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