

The vulvic network - Appeal to contributions

By Clémence Ortega Douville



Illustration 1: Doll by Olluna Dolls - Photographic credit : Anna Rakhvalova

*Psychoanalysis has many times been attacked and accused of maintaining a narrow, patriarchal and outdated vision of gender division. Lately, a prosecution film titled *Le Phallus et le Néant*¹ even compiled some aberrations of orthodox freudian and lacanian analysts. In order to defend another vision of the discipline, I wished to make an appeal to contributions, to give a proper symbolic representation of the female sex. The elaboration of a vulvic structure would permit the switch from a vision of gender based on a system of difference, to one based on the singularity of personal experience.*

Part of my work here has been to bring new tools to the theory and practice of psychoanalysis, with the idea of a better understanding of our societies' wounds. The next part of it will be to adress the question of gender, and how the lack of symbolic representation of the female sex affects us all in our societies' structures.

In his precious book on psychosis titled *What is madness?*, psychoanalyst Darian Leader summarised Jacques Lacan's ideas of the mid-1950s (which change later on) on the phallus as a symbolic structure. I largely quote :

¹ *Le Phallus et le Néant*, Sophie Robert, Océan Invisible Productions, 2019

'In a third phase, [the child] understands that the magnet beyond the mother cannot be him or herself, but is linked in some way to the father.

Children will often protest this connection, doing their best to separate the parents, but beyond the drama and turbulence of their thwarted ambition lies a basic question of what other pathways are open to them. Will they remain in the world of the mother or choose another direction? The father's function here does not just signify to the child that it is not the unique object of the mother but will equally affect her, **situating a limit to her own propensities to cling on to her child**. It establishes a barrier between both child and mother and mother and child, an active negation of the wish to reintegrate her offspring.

Both the boy and the girl must now learn to give up their efforts to seduce her, to be the object of her desire, and **reorganize their world around certain insignia of the father**, which they identify with. These provide a new compass point, a way out, as it were, of an ill-starred situation. In analytic terms, the child must renounce trying to be the phallus for the mother – at the imaginary level – and accept having or receiving it – at a symbolic one: for the boy, as a promise for future virility, for the girl as a hope for future maternity, with her baby unconsciously equated with a phallus.

For both the girl and the boy, this transforms the relation to the mother, as it establishes a horizon for her, a meaning that her actions are now linked to. First, the child registers that the mother is not all-powerful but lacking, and second, this lack is named. The father's function here is to make sense of things: it allows **an interpretation of the mother's desire**. It gathers the thoughts about her into a set that is constructed around the father and, specifically, the phallus. The phallus here is not the real penis, but a signification, **an indicator of what is lacking**, an index of the impossibility of completion or fulfilment. As such, it has no visual image, it can't be caught or clearly defined. If it signifies potency or plenitude in the first moment of the Oedipal process, it now takes on a more fundamental value of **loss**, what we cannot be and cannot have in the present. Always out of reach, it is a way of symbolizing incompleteness and it thus introduces a sadness into the child's life, but also an order, a symbolic framework that will allow the child to progressively move beyond the world of the mother.¹²

As philosopher Fabrice Bourlez reminded about the function of the real in Lacan's theory, the symbolic always confronts the reality of the body that escapes language completely³. Although, it nevertheless structures what we accept or not from the body. As a function of social and moral rules, there are things from the body that can or must not show.

Some are made valuable assets, others not. Some are turned and derived into symbolical values - for instance, those attributed to 'masculine' characters -, and other obliterated, made invisible, banned from the spectrum of what is licit and up to be spoken of. Anyway, we tend or try to adapt to the social values, sometimes at the cost of the alienation of a genuine expression of what we are.

2 In Darian Leader. *What is Madness?*, Penguin Books Ltd. Édition du Kindle, p. 62

3 'This emptiness, this absence, this failure, this point of foreclosure proves to be necessary so to set language itself in motion. Escaping all reality, it makes them all possible, as varied as they are. [Lacan's] "There is no sexual connection" marks all subject and all discourse with a point of incompleteness. Its inscription in the living of our bodies and the symbolic field favours the constructions, the differences, the historicity through which our genders, our bodies and our sexualities can be said.' In Fabrice Bourlez, *Queer psychanalyse : Clinique mineure et déconstructions du genre*, Ed. Hermann, coll. "Psychanalyse en questions", 2018, p. 253. My translation.



Illustration 2: Doll by Olluna Dolls - Photographic credit : Anna Rakhvalova

Out of the system of difference

In psychoanalytic theory as well as in society, we notably live in a system of difference between the sexes. Quoting feminist writer Denise Riley from her book *Am I That Name?*, philosopher Elsa Dorlin reminds us what were, 'from the historical discursive formations, the multiple conflicts of interpretation of the category "women". [...] For any woman, the fact of pointing oneself out, of posing oneself or to present oneself as a "woman", is never a continuous act and does never mean exactly the same thing.'⁴

Because every experience is individual, even in 'pathological' cases⁵, and that the categories of language to describe it are external to this experience. Moreover, in the case of gender issues, it is often negating it by making it dependent on the tension to 'the other sex'. 'Female' gender gets defined by contrast with the main symbolic reference that is the male one. As the result of a difference in a logical system ($a - b = c$, the space that is left for the complement to be defined), it can never increase without encountering a resistance, that is the increase of the first owner.

4 In Elsa Dorlin, *Sexe, genre et sexualités*, Ed. PUF, coll. Philosophies, 2008, p.96. My translation.

5 'This is the difference between mental hygiene – in which we know what is best in advance for the patient – and psychotherapy – in which we don't. It is easy to miss the violence at play here, yet it is present each time we try to crush a patient's belief system by imposing a new system of values and policies on them. We could contrast this with an approach that looks not for the errors but for the truth in each person's relation to the world, and the effort to mobilize what is particular to each person's story to help them to engage once again with life: not to adapt them to our reality, but to learn what their own reality consists of, and how this can be of use to them.' In Darian Leader. *Op. Cit.*, p. 7

Another valuable idea comes from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who used to develop that 'the monopoly of symbolic violence is the condition for the possession of the exertion of the monopoly of physical violence itself.'⁶ As a concrete example, there would be a difference between an insulting judgment passed by an authorised person, like a professor about one of his or her student, and a private insult.⁷ Contrarily to the second one, the first cannot be returned.

The category of 'woman' (the etymology of the word 'category' coming from the latin *catagorein*, 'to accuse publicly', even "to insult", reminds Bourdieu) could be of no harm in a safe place where the balance of power allows women to return it, to respond to it. Yet, it is less obvious in a situation of inequality.

According to writer and activist Angela Davis, the sources of the inequalities getting against most women are connected to sexism, racism and class domination (sexism being the red line amid all the variety of experiences).⁸ Different moral spaces are then carrying different experiences of life and different imperatives. We should then be careful when treating of one important and relevant for a class of people, though excluding others from the chess play.

That is why I am adding another feature here that is the lack of symbolic representation of the female sex. It has been debated in many way (sometimes with much humour, like in Swedish author Liv Strömquist's comic book *L'origine du monde*⁹), so many critics and misunderstanding got part of women and queer* people raging against the phallus injunction. Therefore I wished to introduce another object in psychoanalytic theory that would be the *vulvic* structure and network.

The idea is to pull women and queer* people's experience out of the obligation to a default definition of their body as a difference from the male's value and main referent. Then to open the possibility to get out of the tension from this system of difference in order to consider a system of *singularity*, notably of women and queer* people's experiences.

6 In Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur l'Etat*, Ed. Raisons d'agir / Ed. du Seuil, 2012, p.14

7 *Ibid.*, p.27

8 In Angela Davis, *Women, race and class*, Ed. Random, New York, 1982

9 In Liv Strömquist, *L'origine du monde*, Ed. Rackham, 2016



Illustration 3: Doll by Olluna Dolls - Photographic credit : Anna Rakhvalova

Vulvic network and appeal to contributions

In a discussion with Darian Leader over the subject of the phallus and the development of identity, he told me that to him, one of the key problems was that 'however the disparities are interpreted, politicised and gendered, the bedrock is the power differential between a baby and a parent/caregiver - this is an initial situation of radical inequality, which then comes to inflect other currents in development.'

In fact, we may as well suggest that the infant has no idea of how the world outside functions, but learns it all throughout their relation to their parents or caregivers. There is a transmission of the symbolic order. That is why it is important to separate the phases of our progressive work. The idea of the phallus is still relevant as a representation of our current societies' inner organisation, and we must be able to analyse this constitution. That is the negative part of the work, to dig it up. But then, we need to go beyond and rebuild. And we should do that, I believe, by allowing the fluidity between genders, whatever sexual organ or sexuality.

Then we need the two sides of the symbolic spectrum, and we need an autonomous symbolic object for the vulva, that means clitoris, labia, fluids and all. Not only the mystery of what the inner part of the vagina is to standard males' restrictive phantasies (people identifying as "men" are stuck too in this political system). For that, the female sex is mostly a hole. But moreover we

cannot understand other forms of gender representation and sexuality without making proper room to the visible part of the vulva as well, as something that can be shown and talked about, signifying and highly structuring - and most of all, not dependent on the differentiation from the penis.

The vulva is a fluent mass of flesh, and although the erection of the clitoris is a directional and hard spot, the rest is a fluid, queer thing. The zone around the clitoris is arborescent and structured from tailbone to belly. That is why, the same way I introduced in my last summary the concept of *marginal topia*¹⁰, I will here present the concept of local contract, as a dialogue between standing points and surrounding fluidity.

Societies have their general social and moral rules, that generate repression and favour obedience. But our living in society involves multiple spaces, each ruled differently and locally according to whom we are related to in those spaces.

The same happens on the symbolic level, and that is why it is important to create a new contract : a new contract with the body, a new contract with gender representation, a new contract with family, a new contract to society. To change the context, bit by bit, by concentric circles.

That is why I wished to open an appeal to contributions, testimonies, mostly from women and queer* people, but surely from men as well, about how they are living with their sex, their gender and their sexuality, and how they feel a better representation of the vulva would be of any help with that.

Then feel free to contact me through the contact section of this website, or by mail at : nina.hedgsworth@gmail.com

Best to you,

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¹⁰ <https://clemenceortegadouville.fr/2019/01/25/note-on-the-reorganisation-of-psychoanalysis/>