

Dialectical Images of Femininity

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The After-Eight-Mint-Flour-Man

Hänschen Klein ging allein ... I'm walking behind the audience's chairs, around them, towards the performance space with a table in the centre. There are two chairs either side of it. I position myself behind the chair to the left and stop. On the back of the chair hangs a white dress, in front of it is a pair of orange plateau sandals. I start taking off my clothes, placing them in an orderly fashion on the chair. I pick up the dress, pull it over my head, button it up. *Stock und Hut, steht ihm gut.* I slip into the orange shoes and walk behind the table. On the table are a box of after-eight mints and an orange hat filled with flour. I sprinkle some of the flour on the table, take the mints out of their paper pockets, place them on the flour and start kneading. *She 37, attractive, intelligent ... no, not intelligent. She, in her 30s, gsoh ... no ...* I continue creating the perfect dating ad in my head, speaking it out aloud, whilst producing a mint-flour-dough. I make two balls out of the dough, one big, one half the size of the other. I place the little one on top of the bigger one. I roll the remaining dough into two small sausages, which I then break in half. I attach two halves right underneath the bigger ball and the other two either side of it. There, my little mint-man is finished. *Curvy Nicole Kidman version in her 30s, seeks ... seeks intelligent George Clooney type for ...* Satisfied with my creation, I pick up the hat with the flour and place it on my head. The flour pours over me, covering my hair, my face and most of my body in a powdery white. With care, I take the little mint-man in my left hand, sit down on the chair to the right of the table, and, for the first time, look at the audience. I smile. I look at their faces. Smile. I hold my man quite tenderly, being aware of his fragile state. *Hänsel and Gretel are alive and well and they're living in Berlin...* I keep looking at the audience, my eyes slowly wandering down the line. I smile. My left hand cautiously envelops my man.

*They sit around at night now, drinking Schnaps and gin... Very carefully, in an attempt to avoid hurting my mint-man, I break off little pieces, place them in my mouth, while I continue singing the song about the angel flying backwards into the future. The smile never leaves my face. I swallow. Bit by bit I tear him apart. I place him gently in between my lips. I chew him with delight and pleasure, with a smile and a song. I swallow. The flour on my face itches. Every time I open my mouth tiny clouds form before me. I take pleasure in eating. I take pleasure in singing. I take pleasure in being watched and listened to. My eyes hold the eyes of those in front of me. I invite them in, ask them to take part in my pleasure, ask them to make me, make my action part of their desire. Do you want a piece of my man? Well, you can't have him, he's all mine. I created him, I'll eat him! ... *this storm is called progress...* My after-eight-mint-flour-man is gone, disappeared into my mouth behind my lips. My smile broadens. It's a pleasurable experience all together. A little pause before my lips part, let out the words in as caring a manner as I've eaten my man. *My mum always said: 'Kerstin, if you want a man, you've got to bake one yourself.'**



Fig 1 and 2. Courtesy of Geraldine Harris

This text describes my short solo piece in Bobby Baker's workshop *Box Story* from the performer's point of view. *Box Story*, one of a series of workshops within the context of *Women's Writing for Performance*,¹ emerged as the starting point for the development of one of my strategies of resisting femininity in performance practice: the creation of dialectical images of femininity. In this paper, I will call upon Peggy Phelan's notion of the unmarked (immaterial) and Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image as a means to investigate this particular strategy in Bobby Baker's piece *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*, her workshop *Box Story* and my own performance practice.

Bobby Baker's dialectical imagery

Bobby Baker's personal approach to strategies of resistance might best be described as 'a "spectacular" demonstration of "failed" femininities' (Aston 278), where "'failed" femininities' are representations of women's roles within the realm of 'daily life' that have gone 'wrong' in relation to the normalcy of domesticity. Based on my experience of taking part in her workshop – and subsequent use of similar materials (food and kitchen utensils) in my own practice – I would argue that Baker's painting materials' colour, texture and smell are as integral to her work as the specificities of her body.

Most of Baker's performances from her *Daily Life* series (1991-2000) speak, first and foremost, to her audience's eyes and noses, emphasizing a visceral, sensory reception of her pieces rather than one dominated by narrative and dramaturgy. Looking at representations of femininity that initially seem to confirm their social roles – such as the housewife, the mother, the hostess and the carer – at the beginning, by the end of the pieces the audience find themselves confronted with a female body grotesquely

¹ This research project was led by Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris at the Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts (LICA). For more information on the workshop series, the research project and its outcomes, please see <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/theatre/womenwriting/index.htm>.

marked with the artist's preferred painting tools: food and kitchen utensils.² Baker's transformation from a clean, 'blank' canvas – indicated by her infamous white lab coat or overall – into an obscurely marked spectacle already indicates her image-driven approach and emphasis on the visual aesthetics of her practice.

Indeed, Baker usually addresses issues of a feminine and maternal body through her autobiographical food paintings and sculptures, whereby the tangibility of the imagery – probably better described as the performance's viscosity – is more important than narrative or dramaturgical coherence. Autobiography in Baker's work neither refers to a singular and/or linear sequence of events nor to one coherent subject position, but rather to a (re)presentation of multiple selves. Baker's art, anchored within personal experience, aims to 'avoid suggesting any simple relationship between "a life" and its representation' (Heddon 135). The autobiographical selves at work in her performances are often at odds with each other, indicating a dialectical imagery (Walter Benjamin) that materialises itself through incongruities in (re)presentation (Peggy Phelan).

Incongruities in representation

Incongruities in (re)presentation refers to Peggy Phelan's (1993) intertextual exploration of the status of Woman as unmarked and the notion of disappearance (immateriality) in contemporary performance as a potentially resistant art practice. In her interrogation of Western cultural reproduction she claims that '[t]he male is marked with value; the female is unmarked, lacking measured value and meaning. [...] He is the norm and therefore unremarkable; as the Other, it is she whom he marks' (7).

Phelan's description of the distinction between the two universalising categories

² The various roles Baker explores and challenges in her work have to be seen in their stereotyped perception that leaves no room for specificities within them, indicated here by the use of a generalising 'the.'

of Man and Woman is, hence, fundamentally linked with value and its distribution. Woman remains without value as long as she is not ‘marked’ by Man, the Subject who not only defines Woman, but also what is and is not valuable, what has and has no meaning. According to Phelan, this dependency implies ownership of the unmarked (no-value) by the marked (with value), as ‘[t]he image of woman is made to submit to the phallic function and is re-marked and revised as that which belongs to him’ (17).

In the same way as Luce Irigaray identifies the male sex as the one ‘that alone holds the monopoly on value’ (69), Phelan decodes sexual difference within this framework of cultural reproduction as an illusion, since it poses a negative – as in oppositional – image of female sexuality rather than acknowledging an actual *difference*. Her ‘being marked’ becomes an act of the materialisation of femininity, which, in Irigaray’s discourse, is determined as the ‘masquerade of femininity’ to be entered by women in order ‘to *become* a woman, a “normal” one at that’ (134).

In terms of (re)presentation, then, sexual difference remains unrepresentable and ‘the visual perception of the Woman [...] leads to her conversion into, more often than not, a fetish – a phallic substitute’ (Phelan 6). To put it slightly differently, within this post-Lacanian feminist position, Woman is only perceivable when valued by Man, indicating a necessary commodification of women in order to enter the realm of visibility. Phelan concludes that women’s ‘representational visibility’ runs the risk of being a ‘fetishization of the image’ (6). She suggests remaining unmarked (immaterial) as a possibility of resistance, since, to paraphrase Phelan, ‘immaterial ghosts’ (6) – those that become visible only within the confines of the concept of femininity – keep their ability to haunt their house(s) of construction.

With reference to performance practice, Phelan proposes that a break in the reciprocity of the gaze between performer and spectator as an ‘*active* [act] of vanishing, a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility’ (19) is potentially

resistant. In her interpretation of Angelika Festa's performance piece *Untitled Dance (with fish and others)*, for example, Phelan situates disappearance not in the actual absence of Festa's body, but rather in the spatial arrangement and the spectator's unreturned gaze. According to Phelan, Festa's refusal to engage in a visual exchange, due to her eyes being covered with silver tape, as well as the presence of multiple other sources of visual representation (video monitors), results in the perception of Festa's body as 'lost' (154), depicting an 'active vanishing' (19), an act of disappearance.

Yet what Phelan interprets as Festa's 'lost body' can arguably also be seen as an intensely present body, due to an unexpected representation, which draws a spectator's potentially scrutinising gaze toward the particularities of the body's unfamiliar display. The manifestation of disappearance as loss, therefore, might also be interpreted as a manifestation of an incongruity in (re)presentation. Combined with performance's ephemerality, this incongruity in (re)presentation points towards a potential resistance of commodification of both the work as well as the performer's – here a woman's – body within it.

The lack of the potential of commodification due to these incongruities in (re)presentation might be explored further in the context of Walter Benjamin's materialist historicity, particularly his notion of a dialectical image.

The dialectical image

With reference to Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* Elin Diamond (1997) describes a dialectical image as:

a montage construction of forgotten objects or pieces of commodity culture that are 'blasted' out of history's continuum [...] dialectical images challenge the myths of historical progress not because they exist ontologically, but because we *perform* that challenge in the disjunctive '*Jetztzeit*' or now-time of our reading. (147)

Jetztzeit is essential in the understanding of a dialectical image within Benjamin's

theory as it demonstrates what he defines as ‘dialectics in stagnancy’ (180). The significance lies in the dismantling of historical continuity by proposing an alternative temporality in order to challenge the notion of ‘natural’ progression and draw attention to that which has been absent from the historical tradition of Western cultural reproduction. Indeed, a dialectical image is an image that confronts its witnesses with a simultaneity of discordances, forcing them to adjust their gazes, their eyes/I’s perspective. The impossibility to adopt a ‘right’ or ‘proper’ position emerges as crucial here, since this would imply a singular comprehensive reading in which the conflicting aspects of the image could be synthesised, moved ‘toward [a final] resolution’ (Buck-Morss 210). On the contrary, the juxtapositional characteristics of the ‘forgotten objects or pieces of commodity’ (Diamond 147) are essential in both the creation as well as the reception of a dialectical image.

In Benjamin’s materialistic historicity these remnants of the past are tangible, echoing his view that ‘history disintegrates into images, not into narratives’ (596).³ The tangibility of the past’s leftovers guarantees a perception of historical detail outside its abstract continuum, and, away from their protective context – ‘the myth of historical progress’ (Diamond 147) – these forgotten remnants emerge as objects without value. The impossibility of harmonising these objects without value within a dialectical image is key to an unveiling of the conditions under which each of them has been read so far. As a result, in the framework of materialist historicity, it is not so much the objects that are under scrutiny, but rather the conditions of their evaluation, the laws of commodification.

Even though Benjamin’s theory is not concerned with the representation of women as commodities, his metaphorical description of a dialectical image as ‘an

³ All quotations from Benjamin’s work are taken from their German texts and have been translated by me. ‘Materialist historicity’ refers to the German concept of *Historisierung*, which Brecht defines as ‘an observation of a specific social system from the perspective of another,’ in order to engage in a dialectical perception of history itself (Brecht 653, my translation).

image [that] places commodity: as fetish per se. [...] an image [that] places the whore, who is seller and commodity in one' (180) draws an important connection between women, commodity and the fetish. A dialectical image that reveals commodity as fetish holds the potential for resisting commodity's fetishisation due to its emphasis on the alterable conditions of its fetishisation. Hence, with reference to women's representation, a dialectical image that reveals women as fetishised commodities has the potential to resist women's fetishised representation as commodity due to its emphasis on the variable rules and norms of women's commodification. Or, as I would like to put it, a dialectical image of femininity draws attention to the norms and rules of the materialisation of femininity through incongruities in (re)presentation.

Crucial in this kind of resistant practice is the avoidance of synthesis, i.e. a persistence of incongruities in (re)presentation. These incongruities in (re)presentations are often achieved by placing equally valid components alongside or on top of each other, e.g. a simultaneous display of aspects stereotypically associated with maternal femininity and aspects associated with the feminine monstrous. It could be argued that this is one of the strategies employed by Baker in her piece *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*. Thus, combining Benjamin's notion of a dialectical image with Phelan's immaterial ghosts, what is at stake in this performance – similar to my own performance practice – is the creation and development of a dialectical image of femininity.

Drawing on a Mother's Experience – a dialectical image of femininity

On a video screen a middle-aged woman dressed in a white overall and high heels comes into a bare room carrying two bulging carrier bags. Addressing the camera she introduces herself as the artist Bobby Baker and says that the space is her husband's studio where she will make this video of her performance *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*. We must forgive her, she says, because while she is a very experienced artist she is a little nervous in front of the camera. Protecting the floor with a layer of clear plastic covered with a double white sheet, bought, as she explains, in the sales, she turns away and begins to

prepare for her performance, unpacking her bags and drawing out cans of Guinness, Tupperware boxes, a food mixer, bottles, jars and bowls, all the while addressing the camera and peppering her work with wry comments about life, art and food. (MacDonald 187)

Baker continues her performance by creating a ‘Jackson Pollock styled food painting’ (Aston 279), accompanied by her narration of the experience of giving birth twice. Covering the painting with layers of flour at the end, she rolls herself up in it and, after clumsily standing up, dances to Nina Simone’s *My Baby Just Cares For Me*, before clearing the space, making sure there are not visible traces left, and then leaving the room.

Drawing on a Mother’s Experience (1988) seems to be haunted by the attempt to merge the artist Bobby Baker with the mother Bobby Baker, an attempt that is never successfully accomplished. In the context of Phelan’s claim that ‘[t]he male is marked with value; the female is unmarked, lacking measured value and meaning’ (7), Baker could be seen to be mimicking the position of value (authority) as artist, whilst equally lacking value and meaning as mother. Whereas the artist delights in the colours and composition of her creation, the mother worries about nourishment and cleanliness. The silent artist – except for her little ‘ahs’ and ‘ohs’ as acknowledgment of the beauty of her artistic creation – invites me to look at her artwork, watch her in the process of making, recognise her authority (value) as artist who distributes meaning and value. The permanently chattering mother excuses herself frequently, makes sure that nothing spills, covers the ‘mess’ quite meticulously, hides inside it, telling me that the sheets will be washed later. I witness the struggle between an unmarked (immaterial/invisible) mother and a marking (material/visible) artist. Both are fighting for visibility against the confining rules of normalisation of each other’s concepts, which guarantee their own visibility – namely materiality and value – but inevitably cancel the materialisation of the other within the confines of the hegemonic representations of artist and mother. The performance seems to imply the necessity of denying one role in favour of the

other in order to gain visibility and value. Yet Baker attempts to stay visible within the discrepancies of both fields, which results in (re)presentational incongruities. Indeed, even when seemingly favouring one role over the other, the disappearing part remains partially materialised, thereby ghosting the position favoured with value.

In *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* this ghosting becomes particularly prominent in/via the food that surfaces as two things at once: the artist's painting material, and the mother's pre- and postnatal nourishment. Food emerges as the dialectical device by/with which Baker's immaterial ghosts materialise. Taken out of its context, food comes into view as a painting tool, employed to leave marks, the material to ensure the creation of a valuable (commodified) object. Within the realm of the domestic, however, food manifests the material that through nourishment guarantees corporeal visibility via its own disappearance, since 'without eating, there's no body of which to speak' (Epstein 23). The discordances in the imagery emerge in the food as intensely present material/object in an unfamiliar, unexpected way.

In a similar fashion, Baker herself seems intensely present in her application of the material, whilst simultaneously seemingly disappearing next to these materials. Indeed, Baker's conflicting particularities as mother and artist alongside (or on top of) each other generate a hauntingly present body in its indecisiveness, echoed in the spatial arrangement. At the beginning of the piece it is the artist's sheet that takes centre stage, with the performer hovering around it, only stepping onto the sheet when absolutely necessary for the development of the food-painting. As artist, Baker positions her artwork as the visual focal point. As mother, however, she eventually obliterates the artwork by meticulously covering every inch of it with flour, following her intention of leaving no traces, cleaning up after herself. Yet the struggle is far from over at this point. At the end of the piece Baker steps into the frame, places herself within it, only to become (part of) the artwork herself. This final move seems to

harmonise mother with artist in/via the artwork itself. However, the gradual visibility of the material seeping through the sheet reveals synthesis as an illusion. Baker's threefold position as artist, mother and artwork asserts the impossibility of synthesis, whilst simultaneously insisting on the hopelessness of a clear division between each single one, creating 'a hiatus in iterability' (Harris 137). The artwork Bobby Baker remains haunted by artist and mother alike, with the stains becoming the markers of a materialised ghosting at play.

As a result neither artist, mother, nor artwork gain market value: they all disappear from visibility. This is mirrored in the ephemerality of the piece and the lack of any visible traces of Baker's presence once she has left the space. Baker's conflicting, complex and untamed imagery confronts me, her witness, with dialectical images of femininity that resist being merged into one comprehensive synthesis of representation, demanding my critical attention. I find myself in a position of dialectical stagnancy, a cliff-hanging thought process of oscillation.

The workshop

Echoing the creation of dialectical images of femininity in her own work, Baker's workshop encouraged its participants to develop their own dialectical imagery in performance. The artist's image-driven practice led one strand of the workshop structure, as she repeatedly set exercises in which the materials at our disposal became the starting points for devising work. Although familiar with an image-based approach, the specifics of Baker's workshop introduced me to a 'painting' material I had rarely used before: food. The most liberating experience in the workshop was the permission to play with food in a way usually disapproved of, if not chastised, by society. Some of the exercises and set tasks forced a perception of food out of its context as consumable nourishment, leading to an identification of food as my aesthetic material, the tool(s)

with which to paint my dialectical imagery.

The second strand in Baker's workshop was a series of exercises and tasks related to notions of self-referential (autobiographical) practices. These exercises encouraged me to experiment with various, often contradictory, 'self' representations, offering me the chance to playfully investigate and work with multiple 'selves' either in terms of temporal linearity (childhood memories, events from the past, present events and concerns) or in terms of seemingly conflicting aspects of my life, such as academic and/or artistic work in relation to representations of femininity within the domestic. In the context of this paper, I would like to call this exploration of multiple 'selves' a process of ghosting my practice (imagery).

The final aspect identified and developed in Baker's workshop was fundamentally the result of a – more or less – successful combination of a food-painterly approach with ghosting, arguably a recipe for the development of a dialectical image of femininity. As a means of briefly examining this aspect, I use my final workshop demonstration as illustrative example.

The dialectics of an after-eight-mint-flour-man

On Saturday evening of the workshop Bobby Baker asked us to devise a solo piece (five to ten minutes long) for the following day, based on the previous exercises and tasks and preferably using the material we had initially brought to and/or bought on the first day of the workshop.

My idea started with an image influenced by one of the previous exercises in which I had used some after-eight mints, a rolling pin, and flour. Informed by the colours of the materials (white, black) and my hair (red), I chose an additional white dress, orange plateau sandals, and an orange hat for the piece. As described at the start of this paper, I changed into the outfit in front of my audience and used the flour, mints

and rolling pint to create a little mint-flour-man, along with the ‘perfect’ dating-ad. As soon as I had finished the mint-man, I placed the hat onto my head. The remaining flour poured over my body, covered the floor and threatened to stain the people in front of me. I then sat down, ate the chocolate-man whilst singing Laurie Anderson’s song *The Dream Before*.⁴

The image I wanted to create was supposed to be pleasing to the eye due to its colour composition – a play of orange and white – presenting my audience with an attractive portrayal of femininity. I then tried to slowly disintegrate this image by juxtaposing it with aspects that could be perceived as conflicting with the visual aesthetics. For example, with the text spoken during the creation of the chocolate-man I was hoping to draw attention to the relationship between (re)presentations of femininity and commodification. Audibly selling myself as a ‘curvy Nicole Kidman version,’ the aim was to portray my-‘self’ as marked with value, desirable to be looked at. In the context of Phelan’s theory, it could be argued that I was mimicking the position of Man, materialising (evaluating) myself through the process of marking. With reference to Benjamin’s dialectical image, I embodied ‘seller and commodity in one’ (180), confronting my audience with a simultaneity (side-by-side) of discordances. The eventual covering of my body with the remaining flour, perceived in this context, would transpire as an act of ghosted obliteration, in which the distinctions between seller and commodity become increasingly less discernible, while refusing to be synthesised into one harmonious image.

The final act of eating and singing was intended to add another ambivalent layer to the imagery. In contrast to the former visual representation of me as attractive, white, ‘proper’ femininity engaged in the domestic act of food preparation – the white dress in conjunction with the Children’s song arguably an indication of innocence – the eating

⁴ This song is dedicated to Walter Benjamin. It is Anderson’s adaptation of Benjamin’s metaphorical description of history, using Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*.

could potentially be seen as conflicting action.

According to Rosalind Coward, '[o]ral pleasures are only really permissible when tied to the servicing of others in the production of a meal' (105). Yet the additional layer surfacing at this point was that of an indulging consumer. Still, it was not simply chocolate I was consuming, but a chocolate-flour mix deliberately formed into a figure. Eating, in relation to (re)presentations of femininity, has its rules and regulations. It does not include overindulgence (excess) or digesting potentially unpurified (polluted) food, as these are attributes usually pointing toward monstrosity and abjection respectively. Indeed, the ghosted obliteration of seller and commodity arguably made way for the emergence of an additional aspect within the image: an after-eight-mint-flour-man eating virginal monstrosity.

The deliberate simultaneity of discordances (seller, commodity, consumer), I would argue, emphasised the variable norms of women's fetishised commodification through representational incongruities. It threw a spanner in the works of (re)presentations of femininity, upsetting '[t]he image of woman [...] as that which belongs to him' (Phelan 17).

Dialectical images of femininity as strategic tool

Whilst a considerable amount of contemporary performance work by women – particularly those engaged in self-referential practices – could arguably be seen to present their audiences with dialectical imagery, it is the deliberate application of this strategy that lies at the heart of my own academic, artistic and pedagogical practice.

With regard to the strategy as academic tool, I perceive the placing of post-Lacanian feminist theories alongside materialist dialectics as a potent – if at times disharmonious – partnership, as it permits a consideration of actual women performer's bodies.

In the context of my artistic practice, a further investigation has already taken place in *Bloody Rosa – Part 1*, the first piece in a series of site-specific, durational performance interventions/events. Here, dialectical imagery was explored with reference to the intertextuality of site, sight and citation. Specifically interesting in this context is the relationship between dialectical images of femininity and the historicity of temporality that I have begun investigating elsewhere.

Finally, in terms of its pedagogical use, the creation of dialectical imagery has emerged as a potent tool for students' critical investigation and development of a resistant art practice that enables a more detailed consideration of aesthetic choices rather than merely focusing on narrative and dramaturgical linearity.

In conclusion, I would argue that a deliberate creation of a dialectical image of femininity emerges as a potent and pleasurable strategy for contemporary performance practice by women within and outside the academy.

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