REVIEW OF SUBVERSIVE INTENT: GENDER, POLITICS AND THE AVANT-GARDE: Subversive Content

Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde

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Feminism and the various avant-gardes of this century would seem to be aligned, if only in a shared oppositionality. Until recently, however, feminism has remained more marginal than the most marginal male avant-garde, positioned in obscurity and meriting only occasional attention. Yet feminism has retained its vitality, possibly through its dual itinerary of a theoretical sabotage of patriarchal metaphysics and a material politics attacking patriarchal social structures. While these two strands are often at odds, contradiction has become valorized such that feminism gains a certain currency precisely in its fundamental complexity. Similarly, feminism's attacks on the father, patriarchal law, signification and a binary metaphysics are the tenets of poststructuralist thought, forcing an acknowledgment of the value of the feminist project.

Susan Suleiman's new book, Subversive Intent, attempts to unravel the connections between feminism and several avant-garde movements in the 20th century. Her work has a dual focus—recovering the lost stories of women which have been omitted from literary and art history as well as delicately working out the potential uses of transgressive work by non-feminist authors such as Georges Bataille and Alain Robbe-Grillet. She questions the subversive value of this tradition to feminists, noting that the rebellion against the law of the father is founded upon an oedipal rejection of the mother. In this vein, then, Suleiman employs a variety of tropes, most notably that of play and the laugh of the mother, working toward a reconciliation of political transgression which incorporates a feminist agenda as well.

In the first chapter, Suleiman outlines her project, namely an investigation of the relationship between oppositional or marginal practices of writing and women. She also delineates her use of the term "avant-garde," which for her designates any oppositional practice, including modernism, postmodernism and the historical avant-garde as defined by Peter Burger. The collapsing of distinctions among these projects is problematic in that each has a particular cultural and historic heritage, political agenda, and relationship to feminism. Similarly, Suleiman puts aside certain questions of philosophy, "bracketing" those that might cause undue confusion. Suleiman's use of the term "bracket" recalls Edmund Husserl's bracketing in the Cartesian Meditations, where in an interesting thematic connection he refers to the function of phenomenological bracketing as the "putting out of play" all positions that are given before questioning. Husserl's bracketing is, however, the reverse of Suleiman's, which includes everything not given. Suleiman addresses these issues by acknowledging the complexity of definition and the concomitant dearth of various definitive discourses as well as denying a desire to offer a final exhaustive analysis of the avant-garde per se.

In chapters three and four, Suleiman focuses on the pornographic texts of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Georges Bataille which embody seemingly contradictory ideologies voiced through subversive narrative form. Her rereading of Robbe-Grillet critiques his thematic preoccupation with violence and sadism directed towards women, which previous readings of Robbe-Grillet had attributed to the "self-engendered" structure which has become canonical in the postmodern text. Suleiman points out that such reasoning serves to naturalize misogynist discourse wherein violent content is seen as the "necessary and innocent consequences of certain formal operations." (56) In her reading of Bataille, however, she reasserts the importance of accounting for the formal aspects of the pornographic narrative by addressing certain feminist critiques of his text that label its content as misogynist without accounting for the places in which the text deconstructs itself and its own basis in an oedipal psychic process. Suleiman turns to Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of the Sadean pornographic narrative in Anti-Oedipus to suggest that one of the primary aims of the narrative desire that fuels literary pornography is the destruction of the mother. "The recognition of the mother's body as female, and desirable—a recognition forced on the son by his blind but still powerful father—is thus designated as the source of the narrator's
pornographic imagination.” (85) The struggle is between the son and his father; it is their conflict that informs the nature of the drama. The mother’s body functions only as a mediation and is insignificant in and of itself. Thus a feminist critique of the pornographic in the postmodern leads Suleiman to question:

Is there a model of sexuality possible in our culture that would not pass through the son’s anguished and fascinated perception of the duplicity of the mother’s body? Is there a model of textuality that would not necessarily play out, in discourse, the eternal Oedipal drama of transgression and the Law—a drama which always, ultimately ends by maintaining the latter? (86)

In this way, Suleiman guides us toward an appreciation of the image/trope of the laughing mother to serve as a model for female subjectivity as well as a humorous approach to the project of overturning and rewriting the patriarchal text in the tradition of “l’écriture feminine.”

Chapter seven, titled “Feminist Intertextuality” is most emblematic of Suleiman’s project and explains the trope of the laughing mother. The analysis centers on Leonora Carrington’s novel The Hearing Trumpet and traces a path through the notions of carnival and parody of Bakhtin, perversion and play among the Surrealists, the male child’s negotiation of the Oedipal complex and its final phallocentrism, feminist parody, the “maternal metaphors” of Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous, and finally to a call for humorous feminist narrative, a call answered by Carrington’s novel. When reduced to an outline, Suleiman’s path seems unlikely, yet she constructs her argument well, concluding that the mother’s laughter and play constitutes a simultaneous position of centered subjectivity and discontinuity, a radical position to be sure.

In her last chapter, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” Suleiman reaffirms the need for a model of writing characterized by a transgression of laughter and parody, arguing that symbolic or theoretical constructs, although limited by their necessarily metaphorical structure, do indeed have the potential to reshape language and the ways in which it can be used to transgress patriarchal laws—thereby achieving concrete political results. Suleiman locates this mode of transgression in feminist postmodernist art, exemplified by Jenny Holzer’s appropriation of electronic signs and Barbara Kruger’s use of billboards and other public print mediums.

Suleiman concludes the book by comparing feminist postmodernist activity with what Julia Kristeva has described as the experience of the “happy cosmopolitan,” a person whose difference prohibits access to an origin or essence, who “transmutes into games what for some is a misfortune and for others as an untouchable void.” (205) Yet the misfortunes that Suleiman advocates we turn into a game seem predicated on a particular position of racial, economic, and educational status and privilege that not all women possess. Indeed, the language by which the rules of the games have been stated is one that remains foreign to a vast amount of women, who, despite this fact, seek to construct a place for themselves as women within a patriarchal discourse that excludes them. Not until the economic and educational means to “play with the boundaries of the self” have been distributed to all classes of women, can the games begin. Suleiman’s book is thus exemplary of the strategy of recouping what is valuable from phallocentric discourses, as well as reworking these discourses within a feminist framework. Her use of the tropes of play and of the margin similarly demonstrate the act of appropriation, yet, especially in regard to play, the terms have a substantial history that Suleiman ignores. Derrida’s notion of play as the infinite movement of signification, as well as the constitutive element of being prior to and between presence and absence, is significantly absent, and the trope of the margin, also, has been used in ways that could have added to Suleiman’s work had she felt compelled to use them. This criticism aside, however, Subversive Intent is a valuable work both in a historiographic sense and in terms of feminist theory, performing the exemplary feminist strategy of uniting philosophic and social politics.