

## Becoming-hysterical - becoming-animal - becoming-woman in *The Horse Impressionists*

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Lucy Gunning's video work *The Horse Impressionists* (1994), in which five women are filmed in the act of neighing like a horse, comes dangerously close to reconfirming traditional Western beliefs that women are closer to the animal kingdom, and more prone to hysterical mimetic identification. It also raises some interesting questions about the extent to which contemporary art practices can stimulate and manifest 'becoming'. According to Luce Irigaray, 'to become means fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being. Obviously, this road never ends'.<sup>i</sup> Integral to her project is an acknowledgement that the process of becoming is sexually differentiated. For Irigaray, the word morphology indicates the form or forms of an embodied subject, a combination of consciousness and sentience, which cannot be divided into mind and body, thought and matter or interiority and exteriority. If a woman does not explore her own morphology, she is in danger of 'using or reusing that to which man has already given form(s), particularly of herself/selves, working what has already been worked and losing herself'.<sup>ii</sup> A feminine becoming in contemporary art practices would therefore refer to how a woman artist finds forms and materials which most appropriately manifest her morphology; her becoming. This text aims to deconstruct traditional psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity by exploring the interface between two concepts of becoming; Irigaray's and Deleuze and Guattaris' in relation to *The Horse Impressionists*. In this way, it will be proposed that while Gunning's video risks a collapse into hysteria, it also opens possibilities for art practices to work towards corporeal philosophies which pay attention to gendered

embodied subjectivity. Philosophies such as these would employ mimetic identification strategically and would recognise that bodily 'symptoms' have validity in and for themselves and need not always be translated into sequential language frameworks.

### **Mimetic identification**

Mimesis refers to the activity of miming, copying or imitating and was for Plato a necessary function for existence. He advocated its use in the education of the citizen for the ideal state, but believed that it should always be subordinated to Logos: reasoned argument. He makes distinctions between different levels of mimesis and is particularly scathing about what he perceives to be the lowest form of mimesis - 'eikasia', a state of vague image-ridden illusion, represented by childish imitation and irrational, even hysterical behaviour. Tendencies of this kind are demeaning, tasteless and morally dubious, and should be repressed by the citizen of the ideal state. Book 10 of *The Republic* deals specifically with art and artists and Plato makes it quite clear that the mimetic artist would be excluded from the ideal state, since 'he wakens and encourages and strengthens the lower elements in the mind to the detriment of reason'.<sup>iii</sup> Immature people, like children, will carry the mimetic tendency to extremes, imitating the crowing of cocks, the bellowing of bulls, the yapping of dogs, the neighing of horses, women railing, boasting, miserable, in love, sick, in labour.<sup>iv</sup> Plato specifically links the corruption of performance and dramatic poetry with femininity; poetry draws you in through displays of sentiment and emotion, but when released from its clutches 'we regard the behaviour we admired on stage as womanish...Is it reasonable to feel enjoyment and admiration rather than disgust?'<sup>v</sup> Some artists would be admitted to the ideal state, but only on the condition that they kept impulses to imitate subordinated to Logos and made work which promoted the 'higher' ideals of the state.

When *The Horse Impressionists* is subjected to Platonic analysis, it could be regarded as a classic example of dangerous, hysterical mimetic art work. Gunning advertised in a newspaper for women with an unusual talent: the ability to mimic a horse neighing. She interviewed and selected five women from the handful of responses that came back over six months. She particularly wanted to work with women who had developed this ability in a serious way as children and then retained it into adulthood. Gunning filmed them with a super8 camera whinneying in different public locations, such as a park or a street, an activity which would surely be condemned by Plato as childish and valueless; an exhibition of degrading, hysterical mimetic impulses which ought to be suppressed. The women in the video seem to be aware that such condemnation might be directed at them. They display embarrassment and shyness, covered up by laughter. One woman repeatedly walks in and out of the camera frame, revealing her discomfort about being filmed in this act. While the first reaction of the viewer is to laugh at the absurdity of women behaving like horses, the image and the sound gradually compels the viewer to empathise with these women who seem to be sharing a incomprehensible language of their own, and also experiencing pleasure through its articulation.

Irigaray is highly critical of the dominant position of the Logos in western culture and philosophy and her writing can be read as an attempt to reintroduce the sensuous into language, to traverse the divide within western philosophy between language and the body which is at the expense of the feminine. However, Irigaray's writing is not simply a 'poetic' form of philosophy, but a strategic use of language which ruptures the phallogocentric economy so that it can no longer operate on its own terms, but must address the repressed feminine 'other'. When woman tries to represent herself in the phallogocentric economy, she resubmits herself to a history of representations which portray her as lacking, the 'other' to a masculine image. With Plato in mind, Irigaray makes this distinction between two sorts of mimesis:

there is *mimesis* as production, which would lie more in the realm of music, and there is the *mimesis* that would be already caught up in a process of *imitation*, *specularization*, *adequation*, and *reproduction*. It is the second form that is privileged throughout the history of philosophy and whose effects/symptoms, such as latency, suffering, paralysis of desire, are encountered in hysteria.<sup>vi</sup>

Irigaray's repressed 'mimesis as production' could be connected with the sensuous language of certain pre-Greek cultures, where the distinction between language and body is not sharply defined. Her 'hysterical mimesis' can be seen as a (feminine) *response* to the privileged type of mimesis found in Plato, in which the state is maintained by the monitoring and censoring of art and music practices to ensure that they conformed to the requirements of and reproduce the (patriarchal) state through the repression of dangerous, subversive sensual tendencies. For Irigaray, Plato's highest form of mimesis constitutes a repetition of sameness which privileges (among other things) rational logos over sensuous experience and represses the feminine other. The effects of this repression leads to hysteria, which can be seen as a bodily response to the inability to locate oneself within the dominant discourse. For Irigaray, Plato's repressed mimesis is the site where the 'possibility of a woman's writing may come about'.<sup>vii</sup> Such a form of writing is not possible at present, since when a woman tries to engage in discourse, she can only speak from a masculine subjective position. It is not a question of shifting this or that element to make room for a feminine voice, but of redefining the entire horizon.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray assumes the feminine role with conscious deliberation through a strategic 'hysterical mimesis' which mimes the productions and projections of phallogocentric discourse 'so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language'.<sup>viii</sup> This strategy is one which she advocates in an initial phase in order 'to convert a form of subordination into one of affirmation and thus to begin to thwart it'.<sup>ix</sup> In a similar way, Lucy Gunning's *The Horse Impressionists* could be read as an example of the possibility of releasing 'mimesis of production' through 'hysterical mimesis' in visual art practices

### **Risking Hysteria**

Freud's work with hysterics took place early in his career and heavily influenced his theory on the formulation of the Oedipal complex. Although the case studies in *Studies on Hysteria* are all women, Juliet Mitchell points out

that Freud not only witnessed cases of hysteria in men but also closely monitored what he perceived to be his own hysteria. Perhaps fearing the challenge this might present to accepted ideas about masculinity, Freud, while never renouncing male hysteria, 'let the subject...fade from the limelight'<sup>x</sup> and in the process firmly recategorised hysteria as a feminine disease.<sup>xi</sup> He believed that the various bodily symptoms which hysterical women displayed indicated some unconscious or unacknowledged 'event' in the patient's personal history (usually of a sexual nature) or else the repression of a desire which the patient felt unable to articulate. His 'cure' was therefore to allow the hysteric to become conscious of and verbalise the event or the desire and so to gradually alleviate the physical symptoms. Mitchell believes that by associating hysteria with the Oedipal complex, (ie. the daughter's failure to accept her castration), Freud limited our understanding of what hysteria might be and who might suffer from it.

While Freud saw it as essential to reintegrate the hysteric into society through his 'talking cure', theorists such as Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Peggy Phelan and Dianne Chisholm have all perceived hysteria as a rebellion against the patriarchal order and its expectations of femininity which position Woman as lacking, castrated: 'woman is made hysterical, suggestible, by the discourse that she is forced to mime in patriarchal institutions'.<sup>xii</sup> *Speculum* seeks to reveal why it is that women cannot speak as woman in discourse. This operation entails risk, for Irigaray 'performs' an extreme feminine role in hyperbolic parody of the patriarchal positioning of the feminine figure as masquerade, as mimic, as seductress, as hysteric, which:

'run(s) the risk of resorting to a terrorism that destroys her "self" along with the language that imprisons/excludes her...taking her reader with her'.<sup>xiii</sup>

As Chisholm has argued, such a performance may be necessary to make her (female) reader aware of what her sex amounts to: a "hole" within the phallogocentric order which can only position one sex positively.<sup>xiv</sup> *The Horse Impressionists* could also be read as a form of strategic hysteria consciously undertaken by Lucy Gunning and the women filmed, presenting a radical threat to patriarchal culture. By assuming the feminine role deliberately, excessively and repeatedly until the false claims of the of the phallogocentric

economy to wholeness are revealed, it is, as Mitchell has suggested, the 'deployment of weakness as power'.<sup>xv</sup>

Cixous links the hysteric to the sorceress and Irigaray links her to the mystic in an attempt to reposition the hysteric more positively as a rebel, an outsider who will not submit to patriarchal law. Both also recognise the limitations of this role. Cixous sees the sorceress / hysteric as ambiguously both antiestablishment and conservative. The 'hysteric unties familiar bonds, introduces disorder into the well-regulated unfolding of everyday life, gives rise to magic in ostensible reason'.<sup>xvi</sup> However, her revolutionary potential ultimately collapses back into a reactionary position, because:

every sorceress ends up being destroyed, and nothing is registered of her but mythical traces. Every hysteric ends up inuring others to her symptoms, and the family closes around her again, whether she is curable or incurable.<sup>xvii</sup>

When the sorceress is not afforded the freedom and respect that she requires to thrive, she responds by withdrawing into herself, disappearing, or displaying pathological symptoms 'she cries, she has numb spots, she vomits. She has become hysterical'.<sup>xviii</sup>

Freud's hysterics repeatedly evaded him and his case studies were rarely brought to a satisfactory conclusion. According to Irigaray, this was because Freud stopped listening to the hysteric once he had formulated his theories. He never addressed *why* she might have rebelled against a system that could not, would not recognise her desire outside of an Oedipal framework which positioned her as always already lacking. Irigaray asks:

does psychoanalysis offer any "cure" to hysterics beyond a surfeit of suggestions intended to adapt them, if only a little better, to a masculine society?<sup>xix</sup>

Freud admitted himself that he is only able to transform 'hysterical misery into common unhappiness'. But, he hastens to reassure the hysteric: 'with a mental life that has been restored to health you will be better armed against that unhappiness'.<sup>xx</sup> Is common unhappiness the best that a woman can hope for?

To enter into the 'talking cure', the hysteric must renounce her sexual specificity and adapt to a system of representations which does not serve her

sex. Irigaray's project is to develop a language and a symbolic where woman can be positively represented, a project which is of great benefit to women writers. However, in the context of visual art practices, there may also be other strategies available to enable a feminine 'becoming'. Peggy Phelan has presented one possible response to the failure of the 'talking cure' that can be related and adapted to visual art practices since it focuses on the material, the manifest and on a 'deep faith in the "truth" of bodily performances'.<sup>xxi</sup> Phelan turns to accounts of Freud's early and more experimental work with hysterics, where the combination of psychological and physiological connections between doctor and patient was paramount. Freud even lay on the ground with patients for hours at a time during hysterical seizures, but Phelan believes that Freud's scientific aspirations prevented him from developing the physical cure any further. As Lacan has pointed out, it presented too many risks. When Freud found himself 'affected' by his patients, it conflicted with the convention that the doctor/scientist must be at all times objective:

to his great astonishment, he noticed that he could not avoid participating in what the hysteric was telling him, and that he felt affected by it. Naturally, everything in the resulting rules through which he established the practice of psychoanalysis is designed to counteract this consequence, to conduct things in such a way as to avoid being affected.<sup>xxii</sup>

Phelan argues that psychoanalysis attempts to reorder the jumbled narrative that hysteria presents; to submit the body to a chronological order. However, the body does not necessarily experience things in the same way as language since it has its own rhythms and memories expressed independently of narrative.<sup>xxiii</sup> A symptom is generally perceived as a pathology, but not all symptoms are dangerous or destructive, they may refer to 'bodily expressions not yet interpreted'.<sup>xxiv</sup> Phelan questions the need to *always* translate symptoms into a narrative, even when that narrative might be expressed in a language which is appropriate to the feminine, since this assumes that 'talking is better than dancing, that language is more expressive than somatic utterances'.<sup>xxv</sup> Mitchell is critical of the suggestion that all hysterics are inarticulate. This assumes that the body speaks because the subject's social position is weak, suggesting that 'oppressed people are uneducated and use their bodies instead of language'.<sup>xxvi</sup> Mitchell believes that hysterical bodily performances are more closely connected with the hysteric's inability to

express two or more conflicting ideas at the same time in a language which is sequential. The nearest we can get to this in language is an oxymoron such as 'sweet sorrow' or 'pleasant pain'.<sup>xxvii</sup> In this sense, visual artworks have an advantage over text because they *can* express conflicting ideas simultaneously.

Both Cixous and Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari<sup>xxviii</sup> make reference to a curious event which took place for many years in a region of the Mezzogiorno in Southern Italy. Women from this region were sometimes smitten by a strange illness whose symptoms were depression, convulsions and dizziness, supposedly caused by a bite from a tarantula. Tarantulas do not exist in this region, suggesting that the causes were psychological. The recommended 'therapy' was "doing the spider" or "dancing the spider", an elaborate and lengthy ritual which involved the whole community. This ritual took place within the accepted parameters of the Church, so there is no suggestion from Cixous that the action of dancing the spider somehow overcomes or escapes the patriarchal economy. In reality, the women are simply given permission to display animalistic and uncivilised behaviour for an agreed period of time, in order for it then to be pronounced defeated and to celebrate the recovery of human reason. This return to social life is to be at least partially regretted by Cixous in that:

it is certainly to leave risk behind - the danger of the body that is finally unleashed; it is to settle down again under a roof, in a house, in the family circle of kinship and marriage; and it is to return to the men's world: the celebration is indeed over.<sup>xxix</sup>

While dancing the tarantula does not provide a solution to the question posed by Phelan about the privileging of language over bodily expression, it does present an interesting starting point for thinking about a corporeal therapy and philosophy which would also be sexually differentiated. Cixous makes it clear that while the women from Mezzogiorno were to some extent being manipulated, they were also experiencing pleasure in this metamorphosis. But this in itself is not enough: 'it is not simply a matter of getting unusual pleasures but of pushing them to their very limit'.<sup>xxx</sup> Pushing to the limit means risking the 'deadly proximity of suicide'<sup>xxxi</sup> and also presumably madness and incarceration. Is it possible that the women in *The Horse Impressionists* are



performing something similar to the women from Mezzogiorno, that they are "doing the horse" as a means to express bodily what cannot be said verbally? If so, how far are their corporeal limits being stretched and to what effect? Are they really 'becoming horse', or are they merely playing at horse in a 'safe' art environment? The limits of corporeal 'becomings' and the potential for a visceral philosophy are what concern Deleuze and Guattari in 'Becoming Intense, Becoming Animal, Becoming Imperceptible'.

### **Lines of flight - becoming animal**

Deleuze and Guattari are highly critical of the Oedipal family structure and the way that it is perceived as a microcosm of a hierarchical social structure. They see this model as limited from the outset, enforcing specific and conservative roles onto members of the family by shutting down alternative models for being and becoming. Their rejection of psychoanalysis in favour of 'schizoanalysis' challenges familial social structures and enables them to propose radical, post-familial concepts of subjectivity. They oppose hierarchical evolutionary histories of humankind which operate on the basis of a genealogical tree which places man at the top of the animal kingdom and assume that 'modern' man is more evolved than 'primitive' man. They employ the concept of non-hierarchical rhizomatic systems to point towards an alternative way of perceiving becoming.

For Deleuze and Guattari, 'becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree'.<sup>xxxii</sup> Becoming does not progress or regress along a series, or operate by filiation, but is more in line with infection or contagion, which passes along lines of flight unconnected by a generic series. Such infections are named 'unnatural participations' and may span across kingdoms of entirely different scales.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Deleuze and Guattari are more interested in the *affects* of bodies, in what they do, than in their genetic make up, for example a 'racehorse is more different from a work horse than a workhorse is from an ox'.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In all cases of becoming, but particularly in the case of becoming animal, Deleuze and Guattari are emphatic that these becomings should not be considered a regression or an aberration. They call this form of evolution between heterogeneous terms "involution", which they perceive as creative.

Deleuze and Guattari make a very clear distinction between becoming animal and the conscious imitation of an animal. A true becoming involves bringing the molecular elements of one's composition into line with the molecular composition of the animal. It is a question of finding the right speed of composition, of emitting particles with the correct relationship between movement and rest which proximates that of the animal.<sup>xxxv</sup> The self becomes contaminated with the animal, causing the subject to break with familiar patterns and to exhibit unprecedented behaviour:

Who has not known the violence of these animal sequences, which uproot one from humanity, if only for an instant, making one scrape at one's bread like a rodent or giving one the yellow eyes of a feline? A fearsome involution calling us toward unheard-of becomings.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

If the becoming animal of Deleuze and Guattari seems a little far fetched, a curious idea, but beyond our capacities, the following case study recounted by the neurologist Oliver Sacks in 'The Dog Beneath the Skin' may alleviate this doubt. Sack's patient, Stephen, a twenty-two year old medical student used amphetamines recreationally. One night, he dreamt vividly that he was a dog, and awoke the next day with greatly enhanced colour vision, perception, memory and an unimaginably rich sense of smell 'and with all this there went a sort of trembling, eager emotion, and a strange nostalgia, as of a lost world, half-forgotten, half-recalled.'<sup>xxxvii</sup> Stephen was not high on drugs when he had the dream and its effects lasted for several weeks. He was able to continue working, but began to recognise his patients and colleagues by their individual smell and could even detect their emotions by scent. His experience of the world was vastly altered and became much more concrete than abstract, 'a world overwhelming in immediacy, in immediate significance'.<sup>xxxviii</sup> After about three weeks of his becoming dog, Stephen's sense of smell and all other enhanced senses returned to normal, somewhat abruptly. He felt both relieved and saddened and wished that he could revisit his dog-self at will.

Sacks notes that Stephen's awareness of his own and others' sexual emotions had heightened during his experience, but not more than any other feelings. From this we can deduce that, while his experience was probably precipitated in part by his drug taking, it cannot be seen in the context of

Freud's famous cases of obsessional neurosis and sexual inhibition such as Rat-man<sup>xxxix</sup> or Wolf-man.<sup>xi</sup> Deleuze and Guattari believed that psychoanalysis frequently encountered the phenomena of becoming animal in both children and adults, but reduced these becomings to symbols or symptoms of a (phallogentric) symbolic order:

(psychoanalysts) see the animal as a representative of drives, or a representation of the parents. They do not see the reality of a becoming-animal, that it is affect in itself, the drive in person and represents nothing.<sup>xii</sup>

Just because the child has not 'really' transformed into an animal, this does not mean that the relationship between child and animal is simply metaphoric. Deleuze and Guattari refer to the more sympathetic work of Schérer and Hocquenghem on children who have been reared by wolves to expose the false reasoning in psychoanalysis which they see as operating from a moral standpoint which maintains at all costs the irreducibility of the human species. Just as Cixous links the hysteric with the sorceress, Deleuze and Guattari link the philosopher with the sorcerer, suggesting that becomings are closer to magical practices than to traditional philosophy or psychoanalysis. The indeterminate position of wolf-children challenges accepted ideas about humanity, making it impossible to fix the boundary between animal and human.<sup>xiii</sup> When children and adults enter into a becoming animal, they 'bear witness to an inhuman connivance with the animal, rather than an Oedipal symbolic community'.<sup>xliii</sup>

The title of Lucy Gunning's video piece *The Horse Impressionists* would suggest that the women involved are simply mimicking or imitating a horse, rather than engaging in a becoming horse. However, it could be argued that there are moments in the video when this self-consciousness disappears, as the women become extremely focused and a becoming horse takes place. While Deleuze and Guattari make a clear distinction between imitating and becoming, they also recognise that the two go hand in hand - one can transform into the other at any stage. What was intended as an imitation turns into a becoming: 'we can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all...a little detail that starts to swell and carries you off'.<sup>xliiv</sup> On the other hand, a becoming can be broken mid-flow, a segment gets left behind, the speed is

misjudged and 'then nothing remains but imaginary resemblances between terms, or symbolic analogies between relations':<sup>xlv</sup>

There is always the danger of finding yourself "playing" the animal, the domestic Oedipal animal...a mere poodle.<sup>xlvi</sup>

This fluctuation between becoming and imitation is what makes *The Horse Impressionists* so fascinating and so risky. We can never really be sure when the imitation stops and the becoming starts. Becomings are liminal in that they are neither this nor that, nor the relationship between the two, but the in-between, the threshold, the border. Deleuze and Guattari stress that the field of becomings can also turn into a 'pure plane of abolition or death'.<sup>xlvii</sup> This is perhaps the greater risk in becoming, that in the process, the subject may annihilate him / herself completely.

Gunning is not the only female artist to address becoming-animal in her practice. Fridha Kahlo's painting *The Wounded Deer or I am Just a Poor Deer* (1946) depicts the head of the artist on the body of a hunted deer, with arrows protruding from its bleeding body. Eija Liisa Ahtila has made a number of works drawing a relationship between woman and animals such as the photographic series *Dog Bites* (1992-1997) of the artist posing naked as a dog. In the video installation titled *The Consolation Service* (1999), a man and woman bark at each other whilst undergoing marriage counselling. In *The Present* (1999), a woman crawls across a bridge talking to herself: 'And I grow thick nails and go and sweep the edges of our steps with my arse and I wait for the door to open and everyone who has loved me can go'.<sup>xlviii</sup> It is at this point that the question of sexual difference in becoming must be addressed, for there are a number of reasons why becoming animal, or becoming anything else may entail greater risks for female subjects than for male ones. While this is not taken into account by Deleuze and Guattari, becoming-woman occupies a (dubiously) privileged position which requires examination.

### **Becoming woman**

Irigaray's project places great emphasis on 'becoming' and there are many points of similarity between her philosophy and that of Deleuze and Guattari. Each tries to rethink radically different and unprecedented ways of being in

the world, that do not merely shift this or that obstacle but redefine the entire horizon. Each sees philosophy as a practice that can bring about a change in their readers' lived experience as well as in their own. Each are concerned with subjectivity and wish to deconstruct the privileged autonomous masculine identity formed out of a phallogocentric symbolic order. However, the issue of sexual difference marks the point where they part company. Deleuze and Guattari want to rethink subjectivity without reference to any one symbolic order. For them, becoming is the affirmation of the possibility of difference – a continuous process of transformation and the polarisation of masculine and feminine is just one dualistic opposition among many. For Irigaray, it is the central opposition upon which all others are founded. Deleuze and Guattari accept that man is the standard identity to which all other identities refer and see autonomous masculine identity as antithetical to becoming, but they want to look beyond gender dichotomies towards multiple, interconnected or 'polysexual' identities. For them, feminist theory perpetuates majority thinking and reasserts binary oppositions which continue to support phallogocentrism.

However, there is a contradiction in Deleuze and Guattari's theory of becoming. On the one hand they deny that becoming takes place along a pre-given line of flight and all becomings are unpredictable. But they also say that the subject of a becoming is always a "man" (ie occupies the position of man) because man is 'majoritarian par excellence'<sup>xlix</sup> and that all becomings must pass from this position through a becoming-woman which is perceived as the 'key to all becomings'.<sup>i</sup> This they say is as true for women as it is for men. However, they never really explain why all becomings must take place through a becoming-woman except to say that 'woman as a molar entity has to become woman in order that the man also becomes - or can become - woman'.<sup>ii</sup> This claim is dubious, suggesting that the becoming-woman is being used as an intermediate void space which enables all other becomings. Perhaps there is an unacknowledged acceptance that *all* human subjectivity emerges first from the body of a woman. If so, this could certainly be emphasised more positively. In any case, their theory does not shift or deconstruct the stability of the man-standard, but rather reinforces it, by banning the possibility of becoming man. Tamsin Lorraine believes that they

have failed to take into account that the process of becoming is always already sexually differentiated and 'becoming-woman may entail the risky dissolution of identity...if no steps are taken to stabilise a new form of subjectivity'.<sup>lii</sup>

It is important to ask in this context, where do women become women from? From what speaking position? Irigaray sees feminine desire within the current phallogocentric economy as 'shards, scattered remnants of a violated sexuality'.<sup>liii</sup> Not only is this the case, but it is in the interest of the patriarchy that it remain so:

Feminine pleasure has to remain inarticulate in language, in its own language, if it is not to threaten the underpinnings of logical operations. And so what is most strictly forbidden to women today is that they should attempt to express their own pleasure.<sup>liiv</sup>

So when a woman sets out to discover what the source of her pleasure is, 'she does not know where she is going, and will have to wander randomly and in darkness'.<sup>liv</sup> Because she cannot specify what she wants, and does not know exactly where she is going, she becomes a liminal creature. To enter into a polysexual politics, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, would have serious connotations for women. In attempting to 'become', a woman may lose or annihilate herself completely. The emphasis on dis-possession of the bodily self which echoes throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*, emphasised by the pseudo-scientific language employed, has been the situation of women for centuries. While Deleuze and Guattari's politics may appear radical, they could also provide the means for further oppression of women. How is it possible to deconstruct a sex which has never been constructed, which has been termed the "dark continent"? Irigaray sees it as of primary importance to repossess and reinvent images of the female subject as Woman from the fragments of herself which can be found scattered in the phallogocentric imaginary.

Within the phallogocentric symbolic, woman is presented as 'lack', as the castrated 'other' to a stable masculine image. The patriarchal privileging of a distant reifying gaze has created a scopophilic culture in which the 'other' (woman) is objectified. In this context, Sally Potter discusses how women

might deal with the historical weight of associations with masculine fantasies which accompany the female performer. Stereotypical female performers include the stripper, the dying ballerina in her lover's arms and the singer who mourns the loss of her love. Woman who use their bodies in a performative way as the instrument of their work 'constantly hover on the knife edge of the possibility of joining this spectacle of woman'.<sup>lvi</sup> The female body, whether it is naked or clothed is 'arguably so over-determined that it cannot be used without being, by implication, abused'.<sup>lvii</sup> When women seek self-representation in western culture in order to achieve a visibility and therefore a power which they have previously been denied, they run the risk of fetishising themselves. Potter does not suggest that women should therefore not perform at all, but that they should be strategic about the way that they are represented in visual culture.

Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' exposes the fact that illusionistic narrative film is the patriarchal order's favourite cinematic form, since the performing female figure is appropriated in order to stimulate voyeuristic and fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent the threat of castration. Although the strategies of voyeurism and fetishism are not exclusive to film, she argues that 'it is only in film that they can reach a perfect and beautiful contradiction, thanks to the possibility in the cinema of shifting the emphasis of the look'.<sup>lviii</sup> It is the construction of the all-seeing eye of the camera which distinguishes film from other mediums such as striptease, theatre or performance. Within this context of feminist film theory, *The Horse Impressionists* presents its audience with a curious dichotomy. While its five protagonists are presented to the camera's eye engaged in an extreme form of exhibitionism, seeming to comply with the traditional patriarchal film strategy of voyeuristic fetishisation of female subjects, there are a number of ways in which the video disrupts the male gaze. Firstly, the work was filmed on super8 film and then transferred to VHS and is exhibited on a monitor rather than projected, which means that the audience cannot indulge their voyeuristic fantasies in a darkened cinematic space. In addition, Mulvey sees the elimination of intrusive camera presence as essential to maintaining cinema's illusion of 'reality'. In *The Horse Impressionists*, there is no attempt

to create an all-seeing eye using strategies such as multiple camera positions, instead the camera is hand-held, making the material existence of the recording process abundantly obvious. Gunning also allows the women filmed to interact with the camera in whichever way they chose. One woman ignores it altogether, another walks repeatedly out of the camera frame, and the other three women interact very directly with it (or with the person behind it) by smiling or laughing into the lens. The fact that the video lacks a narrative sequence altogether is the most obvious way that it subverts cinematic expectations, and follows more the model of the 'home movie', which in the eighties and nineties made film making a possibility for the masses rather than the exclusive few. According to Mulvey, the introduction of cheap filming devices has ensured that film is 'no longer the monolithic system based on a large capital investment' allowing those who work with film to 'break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire'.<sup>lix</sup>

An alternative representation of feminine desire could be seen as the motivation behind *The Horse Impressionists*. Deleuze and Guattari make one interesting point about becoming which has specific relevance to Gunning's video. They believe that our bodies are stolen from us in order to ensure conformity to the cultural norm. This body 'is stolen first from the girl: Stop behaving like that, you're not a little girl anymore, you're not a tomboy'.<sup>lx</sup> The women in *The Horse Impressionists* all developed their peculiar talent when they were children, and presumably at some pubescent stage were forbidden, or forbade themselves to continue this activity in public, or perhaps even in private. By employing the 'home movie' model of film making, *The Horse Impressionists* can therefore be seen as an attempt both to locate the point where their becoming was interrupted by a desire or expectation to conform to society's definitions of femininity and to recover a time and place where they felt sufficiently secure in their identity, or even did not need a stable identity and were free to become whatever they liked. In this context, *The Horse Impressionists* hovers dangerously on the borderline between a Deleuzian becoming which fragments the (in this case female) subject and an Irigarayan



becoming woman which attempts to reclaim fragments of her subjectivity. Again, this undecidability is its strength.

The process of becoming animal will be different for female subjects and male subjects. Historically, women have been seen as closer to 'nature' and therefore to animals, justifying assumptions that women are more irrational and less capable of logical reasoning, and therefore their civil duties should be limited. Her supposed closeness to the animal kingdom is threatening to the Oedipal family unit. According to Cixous:

No matter how submissive and docile she may be in relation to the masculine order, she still remains the threatening possibility of savagery, the unknown quantity in the household whole.<sup>lxi</sup>

Liana Borghi has coined the term 'liminalien' for a being who is neither this nor that. She refers mainly to vampires and science fiction characters in her definition, but in fact 'they are only as alien as any of us are when attempting to stride the holographic edge of identity'.<sup>lxii</sup> The term liminalien seems appropriate for women who attempt a becoming animal, becoming woman simultaneously, as with *The Horse Impressionists*. Border creatures such as these are unstable, 'their contours are provisional' and they are therefore a threat to hierarchical social structures, but they also offer great potential for becoming through 'experimenting with multiple and diverse bodies'.<sup>lxiii</sup>

An artwork can be viewed in the same way that Irigaray and Deleuze / Guattari perceive philosophy; as a practice which can bring about a qualitative change for the viewer as well as the artist. Deleuze and Guattari are critical of aspirations to transcendence in art practices, believing only in 'very diverse problems whose solutions are found in heterogeneous arts'.<sup>lxiv</sup> For them, art practices are only valued by the extent to which they have the potential to stimulate becomings. When a woman artist such as Lucy Gunning makes the becoming animal of women the subject of her artwork, she takes a great risk; the risk of affirming that women are less evolved and consequently posited in a hierarchical relationship with men. The women filmed also risk humiliation and loss of whatever status they had as social subjects. However, if we take the Deleuzian view that becomings animal are not regressions, combining it with Irigaray's view that the deliberate employment by women of the 'feminine

role' is to 'convert a form of subordination into one of affirmation and thus to begin to thwart it',<sup>lxv</sup> then *The Horse Impressionists* can be read as both radical and challenging. That the process of becoming woman in a patriarchal society will cause pain to the subject is perhaps inevitable in Irigaray's account:

She is torn apart in pain, fear, cries, tears, and blood that go beyond any other feeling. The wound must come before the flame. But already there is delight and longing in this torment... Though the path she is cutting is a difficult one, she is impatient to set everything else aside and pleads to go on.<sup>lxvi</sup>

This suggests that there is an element of masochism in the process of becoming woman. It is much easier for a woman to stay within the confines of a femininity approved of by patriarchy than to become a woman in the Irigarayan sense, and when she takes steps along this path, she will undoubtedly experience conflict with others (family, friends, the State) which will cause her pain as well, hopefully, as pleasure. If the connection between femininity and masochism seems all too familiar, it might be useful to turn to Deleuze and Guattari's re-reading of masochism not as a destructive process but as 'an exchange and circulation' which can precipitate new becomings. They do not *advocate* masochism in order to become, but believe that it is misinterpreted in psychoanalysis, which can only perceive desire in terms of lack. According to psychoanalysis, an individual with 'conventional' desires would only desire something that is lacking to her. In *The Horse Impressionists*, a heterogeneous element (becoming-horse) is introduced into the plane of desire, bringing about an intense embodied experience which is not referred to a plane of interpretation, such as psychoanalysis and cannot be reduced to an Oedipal model. Masochism in this case, would not be the perverse desire to experience pleasure through pain, but one element in the desire to become, and that becoming may (or may not) bring about pleasure as an effect. This challenges Freud's belief that we are always motivated by the desire to experience pleasure, suggesting instead that the desire to become is primary, pleasure is secondary and by no means an assured end product.

Deleuze and Guattari emphasise caution in the process of becoming. It is necessary to always pay attention to where you are and, like a cartographer,

to map your relationship to the strata. From Irigaray's perspective, paying attention to where you are is inseparable from one's relationship to the horizon of one's gender. For a female subject, if there is nothing for her to refer to in the process of her becoming, it is highly probable that she will be drawn into the becoming of another, maybe without even realising it. Deleuze and Guattaris' lines of flight aim to take the subject away from an Oedipal framework, but their philosophy continues to ignore and deny the mother. To follow their lines of flight without addressing the mother's body as origin of subjectivity would be impoverishing for female subjects and amounts to a masculinist philosophy.

Part of the appeal in *The Horse Impressionists* is that it is a highly ambiguous piece of artwork. While initially seeming to comply with patriarchal beliefs that women are closer to nature and therefore to the animal kingdom, it uses this complicity to affirm a feminine becoming. What could be read as a light-hearted artwork contains very serious connotations; hovering dangerously on the borderline between fragmenting feminine subjectivity and reclaiming it. *The Horse Impressionists* indicates the potential for visual artworks to use visceral means to challenge culturally perceived limitations of embodied subjectivity, suggesting that all subjects, both male and female, operate from a liminal position, always between one becoming and another. While this is potentially liberating, female subjects must proceed with caution: risk is an important factor in any becoming, but a feminine becoming will be doubly risky. Deleuze and Guattaris' anoedipal approach to subjectivity presents a refreshing way to address this artwork outside a psychoanalytic model, but raises problems for a specifically feminine becoming. Deleuze and Guattaris' philosophy will impoverish or endanger women, if it is not practised alongside a philosophy such as Irigaray's which addresses familial ties and develops specifically feminine horizons of becoming.

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<sup>i</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, Columbia University Press: New York, 1993, p.61.

<sup>ii</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'A Natal Lacuna' in *Women's Art Magazine* Vol.58, May/June 1994 pp.11-13.

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- iii Plato, *The Republic* Book 10 ch.2 ab p373, Penguin Books 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1955 this ed. 1987. (Translated Desmond Lee)
- iv Rupert C Lodge, *Plato's Theory of Art*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd: London, 1953, p.171 and Barbara Engh, 'Of Music and Mimesis' p.162 in *Adorno – Culture and Feminism* (ed. Maggie O'Neill), Sage Publications: London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, 1999, pp.162-173.
- v Plato, *The Republic* Book 10 p.374 d.
- vi Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, London, 1985, p.131.
- vii *ibid* p.131.
- viii *ibid* p. 76.
- ix *ibid* p. 76.
- x Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria*, Basic Books: New York, 2000, p.51. For in depth discussion of Freud's hysteria, see pp.43-81.
- xi This would be in keeping with the Greek diagnosis of hysteria as the result of a wandering womb. This association between hysteria (root: *hystera* womb) and feminine reproductive organs persisted throughout historical accounts of hysteria despite the lack of scientific / anatomic evidence for the theory. See Ilza Veith *Hysteria: The History of a Disease*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1965, pp.2-22.
- xii Dianne Chisholm, 'Irigaray's Hysteria' in *Engaging with Irigaray* (eds. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor and Margaret Whitford), Columbia University Press: New York, 1994, pp.263-284 (p.265).
- xiii *ibid* p. 264.
- xiv *Ibid* p.276.
- xv Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria* p.5.
- xvi Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1986, p.5.
- xvii *ibid* p.5.
- xviii *ibid* p.39.
- xix Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is not One* p.137.
- xx Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, Penguin Books: London, 1974, p.393.
- xxi Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, Routledge: London and New York, 1997, p.50.
- xxii Jacques Lacan in Diane Chisholm, *Engaging with Irigaray* p.274.
- xxiii Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex* p.52.
- xxiv *ibid* p.55.
- xxv *ibid* p.54.
- xxvi Juliet Mitchell, *Mad Men and Medusas: Reclaiming Hysteria* p.35.
- xxvii *ibid*. p.35.
- xxviii Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, The Athlone Press: London, 1988, p.305.
- xxix Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* p.22.
- xxx *ibid* p.22.
- xxxi *ibid* p.22.
- xxxii Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* p.239.
- xxxiii *ibid* p.241.
- xxxiv *ibid* p.257.
- xxxv *ibid* p.274-275.
- xxxvi *ibid* p.240.
- xxxvii Stephen D. and Oliver Sacks, 'The Dog Beneath the Skin' in *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, Picador: London, 1985, (pp.149-153) p.149.
- xxxviii *ibid* p.150.
- xxxix Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader* ed. Peter Gay, Vintage: London, 1995, p.346.
- xl *ibid* p.413.
- xli Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* p.259
- xlii *ibid* p.273.
- xliiii *ibid* p.274.
- xliiv *ibid* p.292.
- xlv *ibid* p.260.

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- <sup>xlvi</sup> *ibid* p.260 + p.250.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> *ibid* p.220.
- <sup>xlviii</sup> Eija Liisa Ahtila, in *Eija Liisa Ahtila: fantasized persons and taped conversations*, Kiasma, The Museum of Contemporary Art: Helsinki, 2002, p.141.
- <sup>xlix</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* p.291.
- <sup>l</sup> *ibid* p.277.
- <sup>li</sup> *ibid.* p.275-276.
- <sup>lii</sup> Tamsin Lorraine, *Irigaray and Deleuze: Experiments in Visceral Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, p.186
- <sup>liii</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* p.30.
- <sup>liv</sup> *ibid.* p.77.
- <sup>lv</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca, New York, 1979, p.193.
- <sup>lvi</sup> Sally Potter, 'On Shows' in *Feminism Art Theory* (ed. Hilary Robinson) Blackwell: Oxford, 2001, (pp.446-453) p.448.
- <sup>lvii</sup> *ibid* p.448.
- <sup>lviii</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, (ed. Ameila Jones) Routledge: London and New York, 2003, (pp.44-52) p.52.
- <sup>lix</sup> *ibid* p.45.
- <sup>lx</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* p.276.
- <sup>lxi</sup> Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* p.91.
- <sup>lxii</sup> Liana Borghi, 'Liminaliens and Others - but Mostly Vamps, Dragons and Women's SF' Choral List Serve. p.1.
- <sup>lxiii</sup> *ibid.* p.7.
- <sup>lxiv</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* p.300.
- <sup>lxv</sup> Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One* p.16.
- <sup>lxvi</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* p.193.