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DOI: doi.org/10.33919/ANHNBU.24.1.4

Bad Mothers: Kristeva and the Undoing of the Natural Maternal

Abstract

One of the most sensitive representations in cultural, moral and political discourses is that of motherhood. The idea that a mother would feel estranged from her child, or even regret having a child, is a taboo that has only begun to be considered in the twenty-first century. What is a “bad” mother, how and why are idealized representations of motherhood now being questioned? In this analysis, the work of Julia Kristeva stands at the forefront. Through her reworking of Melanie Klein’s object theory above all, Kristeva challenges “natural” motherhood as a fetishized construct. Most importantly, Kristeva’s theory of the abject presents a critique of the fetishization of motherhood and its entwinement with consumer society.

This essay mobilizes Kristeva to analyze fictional and cinematic works by Rachel Cusk and Maggie Gyllenhaal concerned with the undoing of idealized ideas of motherhood. Cusk’s novel *A Life’s Work* (2001) offers an autofictional narrative of her first experience of motherhood, one of boundlessness, exasperation, sleeplessness and fear; of fluids, smells and noise. Unable to fulfill her daughter’s needs, unfulfilled herself, critical of her environment and her peers, she provides witness to an alienated experience, that of a “bad” mother. Further, in Cusk’s novel, this is intimately connected to the development of consumer society and its mythology of motherhood. For its part, Gyllenhaal’s film *The Lost Daughter*, which adapts a novel by Elena Ferrante, tells a story of abjection at the edge of the loss of self, and puts the question of what it means to be a “natural” mother in focus.

Having recourse to theories of the object in capitalism, assisted by C. B. McPherson and Sigmund Freud, this essay argues for the contemporary significance of Julia Kristeva’s work in the face of fantasies about motherhood in capitalist society.

Keywords

motherhood, maternal, abjection, biologization, capitalism

A Life's Work: challenging maternal discourse

In her novel *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, British author Rachel Cusk offers an autofictional narrative about her first experience of motherhood. The novel, which came out in 2001, tells of the dizzying experience of losing herself in boundlessness, exasperation, sleeplessness and fear; of fluids, smells and noises. Shifting between extreme intimacy and utter estrangement, she has difficulties in preserving ties to herself, and to the world. She is, in all senses of the word, a "bad" mother. Unable to fulfill her daughter's needs, unfulfilled herself, critical of her environment and of her peers.

This experience of estrangement is inserted into a continuous self-reflection in which she compares her experience with that of the powerful discourse of idealized maternal care surrounding her. She fails to breastfeed her child to satisfaction, and observes with horror how her child becomes a foreign body of dirt and grease, rather than an extension of herself, which was the experience she was promised. She is entrenched in a discourse where care – before, during and after birth – is presented as something altogether natural, which will simply produce itself on its own. This discourse, as we will see in Cusk's novel, presents an imaginary realm about what maternal emotions and attitudes should be. In this imaginary realm, the "I" of the story does not find a place.

I believe that we can use the work of Julia Kristeva not just to understand the resistance displayed in the story, but also the challenges to the imaginary realm of maternity that it evokes. The latter can be considered from two perspectives. First of all, the scandal of "bad" mothers undoes "natural" motherhood as a fetishized construct. Although, in Kristeva's writings, the question of maternity is not addressed in terms of ideology or materialist dialectics, her theory of the abject presents a critique of the fetishization of motherhood intertwined with consumerist society.

Secondly, Kristeva allows us to discern the threads of subjectivity that form the "I" beneath the imaginary shields of motherhood. In her writings on the female genius, Kristeva offers a theory of how narrative can construe a subject, not in a line of authenticity, but as the very punctuation of imaginary constructs regarding what a subject is or should be.

In Cusk's novel, the discourse of "natural" motherhood is reiterated by companies offering baby-and-mother products, by midwives offering services, maternity groups offering communities, all at a monetary price. The novel points to a motherhood that has become commodified not just under the guise of something natural, but *as* natural – certain emotions and forms of behavior are bought and sold as natural phenomena. For instance, giving birth is supposed to be experienced as a jubilant surprise, lactation is supposed to come naturally, the company of other mothers is supposed to bring smiles and pleasure. In Cusk's case, they do not. Instead, her experience of maternity is that it has been commodified through and through – shaped and sold in accordance to certain ideological forms. Cusk tells how reality may present itself as a strange feeling of doubleness: she observes not reality, but rather herself as an actor on a stage. This has consequences also for the way in which she relates to her daughter. In dizzy spells, the daughter appears as a piece of property, on a level with the baby things that clog the houses of new mothers, a doll that is fed and cared for. "My ownership to my daughter is preoccupying," she writes. "I am in transactional shock, as if I had gone out and bought something extremely expensive. [….] I show it to other people, fearing their assessment" (Cusk 2021, 51–52).

Cusk's novel can be seen as a critique of the way in which motherhood is, sold into the life of women. It is a testimony to an ego-changing experience, but that experience occurs in a sphere controlled by social norms of what counts as good, i.e. natural. These norms are attached to patterns of consumption. The punctuation of the imaginary sphere of good motherhood comes at a price: rather than counting as good, the mother appears as "bad."

> In motherhood the communal was permitted to prevail over the individual, and the result, to my mind, was a great deal of dishonesty. […] [I]t seemed to me to be intrinsic to the psychical predicament of the new mother, that in having a child she should re-encounter the childhood mechanism of suppression. She would encounter the possibility of suppressing her true feelings in order to be "good" and to gain approval. My own struggle had been to resist this mechanism. I wanted to – I had to – remain "myself" (Cusk 2008).

In being "herself", Cusk resists being a "good" mother, which means that she becomes a bad one. In the process, she identifies two ends in which motherhood has been caught by contemporary mechanisms of commodification. On the one hand, mothers find themselves at the losing end of a liberal imaginary where the individual is supposed to be a self marked by reflection, willpower and freedom. A natural, i.e. a good mother, cannot fulfill this idea of individualism, since her task is to respond to the needs and emotions of her child, not her own. Cusk identifies this as a state in which anything at odds with these so-called natural maternal feelings is suppressed for the sake of social approval. But, in her narrative, she also identifies the mechanisms of commodification from another end. Rather than experiencing the child as the natural extension of herself, the narrator encounters its body as a not-self, as a thing of fluids and flesh that awakens anguish and disgust. As Cusk shows, these experiences are not sellable, and have therefore remained unnamed and unspoken in the commodified discourses of maternity. When what is natural is commodified, that which is considered unnatural is made a waste product of no use. The discourses of mother-child selling points, maternity wards and playgroups for mothers target the natural, happy mother-child relation as an object of exchange, not the mother and child of unfulfilled needs, of smells and sweat.

It is perhaps possible to read Cusk's gesture of resistance, that she must "remain herself" in motherhood, at a psychological level. But, at another level, there is the urge to reach the zero point of motherhood, something that has less to do with psychology and more with a quest to traverse the fantasy, to invoke Jacques Lacan's concept. In Lacan's theory, traversing the fantasy means undoing the search for the analyst's responses that structure the discourse of the analysand (Lacan 1977, 273). Slavoj Žižek has brought the phrase into critical theory, demonstrating fantasy's value as a structural formation that both centers ideology and has the potential to undo it. Traversing the fantasy would entail an undoing of fantasy's mode of articulation, but not the structural lack in the Other through which it came to be articulated in the first place. Fantasy in Lacan, as Žižek shows, is not otherworldly. On the contrary, it offers a "scheme" in which real objects can function as objects of desire in the positive sense (Žižek 2009, 40).

Traversing the fantasy in this case, in Cusk's narrative, means undoing the norms of naturalization that uphold the ideas of maternity

in capitalist society, ideas of how children should be born, fed and raised. What Cusk encounters is the smell and stickiness of bodies that comes with all these experiences, the real beyond what is, so to speak, natural. At the same time, the maternal experience becomes strangely double: the imaginary relation to the child sold through social and commercial networks remains a contrasting feature to the way in which the sweat, fluids and ambivalences of motherhood are really experienced. This feeling of doubleness is the work of fantasy, according to Žižek's model.

Traversing the fantasy in which motherhood has been caught, Cusk finds a zero point of motherhood. This zero point is a painful moment, a moment in which the link between mother and child appears only as a rupture. The child is described as a commodity, a doll. But also as an abject, an amorphous body. In traversing the fantasy of natural motherhood, the boundlessness of the biological is paradoxically found to be unnatural. In this way, the narrative challenges what it means to be a natural and an unnatural mother.

Rachel Cusk is by no means the only one to question the good mother in fiction. Today, the idea of the "bad mom," to recall the well-known Hollywood film comedy, is being explored in fiction and nonfiction from a variety of angles. The so-called bad mother, or rather, what has been construed as unnatural, has become visible not only in literature and the other arts, but also in self-help books and advice columns in magazines and newspapers. After the appearance of books by authors like Corinne Maier and Orna Donath (Maier 2008; Donath 2017), women have come out to confess that they regret becoming mothers. This is not the same thing as regretting their children. Most often, these women emphasize that it is rather maternity that is the challenge.

In *The Lost Daughter*, Maggie Gyllenhaal's film of the short novel by Elena Ferrante, a female English professor is holidaying in Greece, and by accident becomes involved with a big family that she observes on the beach. Its many members are loud, beautiful, wealthy and mysteriously threatening – the formation of a patriarchal sphere in which women cannot escape male control. The female professor, for her part, is alone; we understand that she has an ambivalent relation to her own daughters, who are now adults. We understand also that she left them when they were very young because she felt suffocated and imprisoned: we see shocking scenes from her memory in which she really does act like a bad mother, failing to meet her daughters' needs.

By chance, the professor comes into possession of the doll of a little girl in the big family. The girl becomes hysterical, cannot sleep, screams and screams: her mother is as tortured as the professor was as a young mother. But the professor does not return the doll. Instead, she nurses it, as if it was a real baby. This is a component of the film that feels provocative and strange. But it is crucial to the story. The end is inevitable. When she is caught, the professor gives a retroactive clue to the whole narrative when she says, "I am an unnatural mother." In its obsessive focus on the professor's mysterious attachment to the girl's doll, her inability to give it up, and her uncanny rituals with it as if it were a natural child, the film goes further than Cusk's novel. The doll-child is not a commodity, as in Cusk's novel. It is a bundle representing mysterious maternal drives.

This crisis takes us into deeper waters than being a bad mother in the sense of responding to the boundlessness of another biological human body. What does it mean to become a question to oneself at the zero point between the natural and unnatural, as motherhood enters the hard-to-navigate domains of the non-human? The uncanny, Freud says, derives from the intellectual uncertainty of whether something is "animate or inanimate," such as that aroused by, for instance, dolls that bear a likeness to the living (Freud 1971, 226). For Freud, the uncanny quality of this uncertainty derives from a traumatic intervention in infantile life, a rupture in the narcissistic omnipotence of animate objects, introducing a finite universe where objects no longer carry magic. This rupture is the fact of castration, and creates the subject/object divide. From the point of view of critical theory, the subject/object divide presents a double challenge. On the one hand it, offers a model for understanding relations and affects. On the other, it cuts open another realm that is rarely included in psychoanalytic models of understanding: that of the problem of commodification. In Cusk and Ferrante, the doll is not simply the presentation of an uncanny figure tinged with anxious connotations, referring to infantile life. It is also a fetish-like object, challenging the idea of motherhood as a natural form of attachment, that can altogether be seen to untouched by the capitalist realm.

One would have thought that, in 2001, the world would have been ready for an autofictional account of an experience of maternity that was not exclusively golden. But that was not the case. Rachel Cusk notes:

> I was accused of child-hating, of postnatal depression, of shameless greed, of irresponsibility, of pretentiousness, of selfishness, of doom-mongering and, most often, of being too intellectual. […] The telephone rang and rang. I was invited on the Today programme to defend myself. I was invited on the Nicky Campbell programme to defend myself. I was cited everywhere as having said the unsayable: that it is possible for a woman to dislike her children, even to regret having brought them into the world (Cusk 2008).

This inability to maintain ties to the world, being both amorphous and estranged, is not in the first place an account of individual symptoms. Rather, Cusk can be seen as an example of the so-called "Capitalist Mother," as literary scholar Ruth Quiney has done, who refers to Julia Kristeva when stating that Cusk exemplifies a "twenty-first-century Western form of 'maternal anguish, unable to be satiated within the encompassing symbolic'" (Quiney 2007, 19–40).[1] But this maternal anguish should not, I believe, be psychologized as anxiety, an expression of unfulfillment and so on. It has more to do with unsettling received ideas of what should be perceived as free and unfree, natural and unnatural, love and disgust. The zero point of bad motherhood unveils an antagonistic relation to the normative order that is entangled with capitalist society; it is unable is unable to contain the paradoxes and ambiguities that the experience of motherhood entails.

From possessive individualism to maternal abjection

In critical theory, the concept of the object and its multiple forms has received an extraordinary amount of attention. The idea that the subject desires an object is a fundamental doctrine in which Marxist and psychoanalytic theories of desire converge. Commodity fetishism is one of the cornerstones of Marxist theory. From a Marxist point of view, consumer goods are symbols in social exchange. In *Negative Dialectics*, his post-Marxist elaboration of the relation between subject and object, Theodor Adorno calls this the "preponderance" of the object. This means that the materiality and dignity of the object are

1 One of Quiney's epigraphs cites Kristeva 1982, 12.

more revelatory than the discursive operations of the subject (Adorno 1999, 183–84).

Kristeva theorizes a resistance against the symbolic throughout her work, from her early writings, such as *The Revolution of Poetic Language*, to her trilogy on the female genius at the turn of the century, to her later work on femininity. It is when her work turns to psychoanalysis that this resistance against the symbolic becomes surcharged with ideas of the bad mother. For Kristeva, psychoanalysis can above all provide a framework in which the heterogenous relations between subject and object becomes meaningful. The object in psychoanalysis is not understood as a fetish but as a person, a relation. Melanie Klein conceived the maternal breast, and then maternal figures, as primary formations of objecthood for the developing individual. However, the relation to the object is colored by a radical indistinction, both in terms of bodily contours and of the affective and instinctual nature of the relation.[2]

From a Lacanian perspective, Klein's internalized object is theoretically impure. It escapes the symbolic, and is set wholly in the realm of the imaginary. For Kristeva, however, it is precisely this realm that bears witness to the glitches in contemporary society. It is made of images, sensations and substances, phenomena that she reads as symptoms in the contemporary world (Kristeva 2000, 104).

The abject is an example. An instinctual process of rejection allows the limits of the body to constitute themselves against the threat of the body's own rejects. On a subjective level, corporeal rejection marks a differentiation between the inner and the outer world, the body of the self creating its own contours. The abject is the symbolic treatment of rejection, at the limit between inner and outer (Kristeva 1982, 131). Bodily fluids mark a separation; the body acquires a fragile contour through disgust. The problem, however, is that the self is expelled in the same process. Instinctual rejection prevents the processes of negation and symbolization from performing their function, and impedes the subject. The problem of abjection is not, therefore, one of filth. It is one of identity.

As we have seen in Cusk's work, the discourse of maternity challenges the idea of what it means to be an individual. Having a child challenges the meaning of what it is to remain what is called "myself," when this

[2] See, for instance, Klein 1975, 176–235.

"self" seen as a free and self-explanatory. It challenges the neoliberal idea of what it means to be a "free" individual, a self-fashioning individual with a good grasp of choices. This individual was described by C. B. Macpherson – a standard reference in the literature of how capitalism and liberalism have coalesced in the construction of the individual. Macpherson shows that, in the liberal tradition, the very concept of the individual depends on the possession of goods. What makes an individual free is essentially freedom from dependence on the will of others – and this is only possible through the possession of something that is one's own, of goods. The exception to this, however, are relations into which an individual has entered voluntarily.[3]

However, Macpherson's idea of the liberal individual does not account for the full extent to which not only relations, but affects and emotions, have been imposed by a discourse colored by market commodification and exchange. Cusk's novel and Ferrante's/Gyllenhaal's work testify to this: a mother-child relation is voluntary. But the doll scenes testify to the fact that cannot both be a natural mother and an individual of unlimited choices in capitalist society.

All in all, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been an era in which relations have become objectified through the fictional value of their exchange. We have seen an acceleration of the integration of all goods, values, services and experiences surrounding modern life into a fictionalized discourse of unlimited choice. We may intuitively want to preserve love, care and human bonds outside of this development. However, these areas are precisely the ones that have been targeted by economic and emotional marketization. Material goods are no longer the primary objects of monetary exchange. Instead, we have seen the aggressive economization of care, communication, social networks, human body parts and pregnancy, our lives now wholly open to the market. Intimate relations have been invaded by the same logic of exchange and gain that dominates monetary relations. Love is commodified through social networks, as is the care of the old, sick people and children – and maternity – by big care companies. The making of what Eva Illouz has called emotional capitalism has had dramatic consequences for the social fabric, and for the order of what Kristeva calls the symbolic – the conceptual language that

[3] "The individual in market society *is* human as proprietor of his own person. However much he may wish it to be otherwise, his humanity does depend on his freedom from any but self-interested contractual relations with others" (Macpherson 1962,, 275).

encompasses all these relations. This is an order that, following Marxist and post-Marxist critical analysis, tends to be understood by the way it organizes relations between subject and object, as we have seen in Macpherson's argument.

As Illouz has shown, intimate objects also have a meaning outside of the sphere of commerce: "Objects can leave the sphere of consumption and the market and become incorporated in interpersonal relationships when they circulate in spheres of meaning that are also and perhaps primarily emotional spheres" (Illouz 2009, 389). What has happened, however, is that the intimate sphere and that of the market have become intertwined, through the emotions that are at work in both.

Kristeva has observed this intertwinement from another angle. Not being content with the binaries of the Marxist tradition, Kristeva calls it a mistake to discuss the subject of the social world as "an untouchable unity, in conflict with others but never in conflict with 'himself,´" as she writes in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. She criticizes what she perceives as a weakness in Marxist theory, that "the subject becomes either oppressing or oppressed, a boss or an exploited worker or the boss of exploited workers, but never a subject in process/on trial who is related to the process – itself brought to light by dialectical materialism – in nature and society" (Kristeva 1984, 138–39). If the subject is reduced to nothing but a construct in the social sphere – untouched by conflicting forces outside of the capitalist system of exchange – a false unity defines it. Nineteenth-century social movements strove to work with that unity. Kristeva strives to open other possibilities, through her introduction of psychoanalysis. But, as we will see, this does not exclude her work also encompassing a theorization of the impact of the forces of commodification.

The subject, for Kristeva, is constituted through negativity on the one hand, and negation on the other. Whereas negation is a function of symbolization, the creation of concepts, negativity is the "mythical" force of drive. For the subject, negativity is the unbounded, the preconceptual and the excessive. "Negativity" also designates that which is exterior to the symbolic. The semiotic is an example: it traverses the symbolic from a point which is not in opposition, nor identical to it, but other. As such, it is bound to the biological functions of the body, to an expenditure and pulsation in which the body fails, so to speak, to become wholly symbolized: "The sole function of our use of the term 'negativity´ is to designate the process that exceeds

the signifying subject, binding him to the laws of objective struggles in nature and society" (Kristeva 1984, 119). The body is "caught within the network of nature and society" (Kristeva 1984, 122). In this way, Kristeva's use of psychoanalysis opens the door to a theorization of abjection, one that also introduces social ideas regarding a "failed" objectal relation – a "failure" that can be related to the market forces of commodified relations, and which the bad mother incorporates.

By first of all deconstructing the tradition of materialist dialectics through object relations theory, Julia Kristeva has decomposed and altered the question of the object, as well as that of the subject, in both the psychoanalytic and the critical tradition. It is through this intertwinement that Kristeva's abject can be understood as injected with fetishist dimensions: "It is perhaps unavoidable that, when a subject confronts the factitiousness of object relation, when he stands at the place of the want that founds it, the fetish becomes a life preserver, temporary and slippery, but nonetheless indispensable" (Kristeva 1982, 37). This fetishist dimension is wholly intertwined with the language that produces its expression. Maternity is seen, in Kristeva's work, through the way that the symbolic intersects with the semiotic, the body with language; through a psychoanalytic and semiotic grid. But it is precisely by being situated at this intersection, between a forceful symbolic on the one hand and an excessive body on the other, that Kristeva's writings on maternity challenge fantasies of the "natural" mother. Rather than adhering to a discourse of subject-object relations, Kristeva identifies a dimension of narcissistic and aggressive drives that colors "semi-objects" while construing the maternal sphere as "other" (Kristeva 1982, 32–33).

In Kristeva's analysis of the abject, melancholy and narcissism, the bad mother emerges as a fantasy (as in the writings of Melanie Klein), integral to the way that a subject speaks, senses and feels. The maternal sphere affects the subject from within a limit, and has been excluded from the symbolic from the outset. In this way it is surcharged with leftovers, and offers resistance through affects of disgust, desire, or even silence. The only thing that defines the abject, Kristeva writes, is that it opposes the self. It "draws me toward the place where meaning collapses," its course leading to a place of the birth of the self "amid the violence of sobs, of vomit. Mute protest of the symptom" (Kristeva 1982, 3).

Abjection is neither object nor subject. It is a liminal phenomenon that appears in forms conditioned by history and material forces:

through disgust, and other corporeal reactions. It is unchained from ideals. The abject is not just a corporeal figure. It is also a scandalous refusal of the idea of a subject that would desire, enjoy and exist through the object: in this way it becomes a glitch in the web of social relations intertwined, as Illouz has shown, with consumer society. The abject does not only deny the fulfillment of desire; it exists in antagonism to the subject-object relation.

Cusk's novel and Gyllenhaal's film both bear witness to the scandal of abjectal maternity as resistance to the web of social relations attached to consumer society, and to the emotional grid that shapes our conception of what has worth and what does not. Their depiction of bad maternity uses dolls to show the failure to attach to the world, captured instead by an objectal relation that is alienating in the social sense and that produces a sense of decomposition at the corporeal level.

But there is also an emancipatory potential to the abject, and to bad maternity. The subject-object relation is construed differently than in the Marxist tradition, but with a certain remainder of materialist dialectics that explains the difference between the symbolic and that which exceeds it. Kristeva has also challenged the discourse that created the bad mother. The bad mother does not fail her function in the symbolic as an individual. Nor is she an individual driven by anxiety in the social and psychological realm. She is – and this is precisely what is unraveled at the zero point that both Cusk and Gyllenhaal's English professor indicate – a subject and a body that the symbolic is unable to contain. Cusk's novel and Gyllenhaal's film both point to the impossible paradox contained in the fetish-oriented naturalization of the joyful and nurturing mother in contemporary culture – and it is precisely this paradox that is named, revealed and, in fact, protested against.

3) Natality as de-biologization

What am I behind my lactating breasts, Cusk asks in her novel? As a mother, she has become herself the abject, a question to herself. There is a need for a zero point in the narrative of what "I" have become as a mother: an abyssal formation in the discourse on maternity.

Kristeva's trilogy on the female genius – her studies of Hannah Arendt, Colette and Melanie Klein – can be read in this vein. All

of these books bring a crisis in the symbolic representation of motherhood and maternity to the fore. Kristeva's celebration of the female genius resorts, to some extent, to a philosophical tradition where ideas of birth represent novelty, truth and so on. But she is also undoing the ideologically saturated symbolic, the representation of what is seen as "natural" maternity and motherhood. The maternal is not simply a metaphor attached to ideas of life and care. Kristeva instead brings forward a dimension of excess. The female genius is a dissident – employing a transgressive discourse that denies naturalized representations of what "maternity" means.

Just like the abject, and like the "bad" mother, but from a completely different angle, the female genius can be read as a response to a crisis – as an attempt to construe a subjectivity out of an abyssal void in the symbolic.

The key to the "geniality" of Hannah Arendt's philosophy, according to Kristeva, lies in its thematizing life as *bios*, the life of the individual, seen as narrative and history.[4] *Bios* is the negativity that symbolizes *zoe*, biological life. There is no human essence to be found in terms of what we are. The question of the who – "Who am I? Who is he?" – is something that can only be determined through narrative. As Kristeva notes in her reading:

> Because he knows he is mortal and that he belongs not to the continuity of the species, but rather to the spoken memory of multiple and conflicting opinion, 'who' ceases to be 'that which' (a *quid*) and seeks to transfigure 'work' as well as 'oeuvre' into 'action,' an action that is itself spoken, projected toward both past and future, and shared with others (Kristeva 2001, 59).

In Kristeva's reading, Arendt uses maternity as a de-biologized metaphor for the way in which human singularity presents itself. The life, the "who," is an embodied being whose life, actions and stories are measured against the negative totality of future lives and generations. Thus, for Kristeva, Arendt presents a principle of maternity that creates an inexhaustible link between natality, i.e. new beginnings, and narrative. Narrative links "the destinies of *life*, *narrative*, and *politics*: narrative conditions the durability and the immortality of the

4 See the distinction made by Hannah Arendt (Arendt 1961, 42) and Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 1995, 179–93).

work of art; but it also accompanies, as historical narrative, the life of the *polis*" (Kristeva 2001, 8; emphasis in original).

This aspect of Arendtian thought also brings out a destabilizing factor in the conception of human agency: the "who" emerges out of a complex web of relations. Arendt's reason for not becoming a Marxist lies precisely in the failure of materialism to affirm, and understand, the full extent of the contingency through which subjects appear (Arendt 1998, 183). Narratives make us appear, but how we appear is a matter of contingency rather than of control. The agent of action and speech, as Arendt says, is not its author, but its actor and sufferer: the story of our life is somehow always handed over to a third (Arendt 1998, 184). For Adriana Cavarero, the question of the "who" is one which Arendt opens towards an ethical space of interaction. For Judith Butler, following Cavarero, Arendt implies an ethics, rather than a social theory, with her theory of singularity (Butler 2005, 31).

Kristeva's reading goes in another direction. She points to the fact that Arendt's de-biologization of *bios* leaves biological questions unanswered. Arendt quotes Augustine: in life, "I have become a question to myself."[5] The open character of this question points, according to Kristeva, not only to social and political processes, but also to a derailment and undoing of biology in general. By using metaphors associated with conception, life, the body, and femininity, Arendt opens the door to issues of the body, and of biology. But instead of exploring them, Arendt either suppresses or openly rejects them. This rejection takes many guises. Arendt is not only skeptical of, but also openly hostile to psychoanalysis. She is not a feminist. She rejects intimate questions concerned with emotions. And so on.

Kristeva reads this as an excess in Arendt's philosophization of the "who" – as the result of a repressed instinctual drive. The "who," in Arendt's work, is not just a form of singularity, presenting itself in a narrative. It is an "excess" that is "reached through a constant tearing of one's self away from biological life, from metabolic symbiosis with nature," Kristeva writes (Kristeva 2001, 59). It belongs neither to the "species" nor the anonymity of "work." It is not determined by either biological discourse or social constraints. In Arendt's work, social life is not recognized as a meaningful symbolic order. It is depicted, instead, as a force of constant economization, and as the commodification of

5 A quote that Hannah Arendt associates with Augustine as well as St. Paul (Arendt 1978, 65, 85).

all areas of human life. In this way it is depicted as a second nature in Arendt's work. This second nature is as hungry and threatening as the first: it presents itself through the reification of "works" and other "products" (Kristeva 2001, 59).

So, although the ideas of both natality and life are de-biologized in Kristeva's reading of Arendt, these concepts are, at the same time, re-biologized. Kristeva reads Arendt's language as a refusal, a defense against a realm that nevertheless always haunts her philosophy. She notes that Arendt's idea of the "who" in many ways appears to be fighting the female body: the "who" is an island of singularity in an amorphous universe where the biological, the cyclical, the intimate, the drives, and so on, constantly threaten its existence (Kristeva 2001, 68).

Arendt construes subjectivity out of a position of sheer contingency, out of narrative, a proposal with no manual to follow. In this way, the question "who am I?" becomes as abyssal and antagonistic as in the discourse of the "bad mothers." It is impossible to construe a subjectivity at the crossing of the metabolisms of social and biological life – Arendt, like the bad mothers, finds herself at a zero point.

One could of course read Kristeva's analysis of the "who" as a critique of Arendt's anti-feminism, and of a humanist tradition. But Kristeva also sees the operation of a resistance. She sees how Arendt manages to resist the collectivizing impact of maternal discourse, in terms of both biology and labor – the commodifying discourse of maternity is undone. Subjectivity is instead made into a question of the "who," a question that opens an abyssal lack in the symbolic. This does not make Arendt a hero of feminism. But it points to the same problem that the literature of the "bad mother" raises: if we are not reduced to biology or labor, what are we? Arendt, Kristeva shows, points to the forces that have attempted to erase the singularity of living beings – not without pain or aggression. Her philosophy of the "who" is not a fine ethics of accommodation, as many feminists have proposed, but rather a forceful and instinctual refusal of the female body. But it is precisely in the force of this instinctual work, in the baring of sheer drive, that Arendt's quest for the understanding of subjectivity is important.

In her aggression against the discourses of biologization and social constraints, Arendt shares something with the bad mothers who open an abyssal space in the search for subjectivity. "Who am I?" Without access to my body, or to the story of my life, I cannot answer this question – and yet that is precisely the question that I have to answer,

in the face of the forces that remove it from my being. The bad mothers, and Kristeva's reading of Arendt, show us that this question has lost none of its burning actuality.

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