

The other within or enemy mine

Feminist Psychology

-Final Paper-

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“No one conquers who doesn't fight, but will always be defeated”
-From a Chinese fortune cookie-

I. Sense and nonsense of the subjective other in the shadow of feminist revolt

From our privileged position at the beginning of the 21st century with its putative sexual freedom we tend too easily to ignore the different social climate of the Victorian era at the end of the 19th century, as the background on which Freud's work comes into being. Freud's reality features conventions and prudery he grows up with and lives in. It is this reality that inspired him and against which he writes his oeuvre. The birth of the 21st century is marked by pseudo-freedom, pseudo-individuality, pseudo-independence and a relentless feminist effort to expose Freud's sexism. Feminist criticism concentrates on penis-envy and the feminist experience of the Oedipal castration complex as constructed solely from a male perspective and ignoring female sexuality. In so doing feminist critics turn the focus from psychic development –with which Freud was concerned- to the social mechanisms Freud described as both the source of female repression and the basis of the inequality between the sexes. Feminist criticism of Freud often fails to address that “For Freud, the absence of the penis in women is significant only in that it makes meaningful the father's prohibition on incestuous desires.” and that “...the actual body of the child on its own was irrelevant to the castration complex.” (Mitchell, week VII, p17) It seems as if the concern of some of the feminist critics is “...less with the construction of sexual difference than it is with the nature of female sexuality.” (Mitchell, week VII, p20)

From our point of view a 100 years later we easily underestimate the courage Freud showed in contextualizing the development of the human being as a concept of sexuality centered around the castration complex and unconscious drives and to present it as the dynamic concept of psychoanalyses. We often fail to acknowledge that Freud only “...made [the castration complex] the focal point of the acquisition of culture...” because it “...operates as a law whereby men and women assume their humanity and, inextricably bound up with this, it gives the human meaning of the distinction of the sexes.” (Mitchell, week VII, p13) Freud reminds us that the human subject cannot be set apart from society because we are raised, constructed and defined according to the rules of engagement created by society's definition of what is and what is not supposed to be normal and morally acceptable. In this process of socialization, the human being is deprived of its subjectivity and objectified so that it fits the needs of the other but never his/her own. Freud and his contemporary feminist critics, despite the latter's opposition to the former, both attempt to make us aware of the precondition for social change: “...where objects where, subjects must be” (where ‘It’ is, ‘I’ must be) (Benjamin, week V, p108) It is successful castration by the (law of the) father thru which we become subjects. All our experiences, interactions with, and perceptions of the other derive their meaning from this law. Only thru castration, we become able to give past and future losses (castrations) their meaning: “The castration complex is the instance of the humanization of the child in its sexual difference. Certainly, it

rejoins other severances, in fact it gives them their meaning. If the specific mark of the phallus, the repression of which is the institution of the law, is repudiated, then there only can be psychosis.” (Mitchell, week VII, p19)

It is successful castration what divides the sexes and makes “...the human being human.” (Mitchell, week VII, p18) Men underestimate the crucial role they have in this process meanwhile feminist criticism sees it as the foundation of suppression: “... it is the father who already possesses the mother, who metaphorically says ‘no’ to the child’s desires.” (Mitchell, week VII, p16) This is crucial because it is this ‘No’ and the pain it inflicts on the child that forces the child to deal with the lack created by the father’s castration: “...pain and lack of satisfaction are the point, the triggers that evoke desire.” (Mitchell, week VII, p25) There is no desire without the lack that makes us aware of it. The father’s prohibition becomes meaningful to the child “...because there are people –females- who have been castrated in the particular sense that they are without the phallus.” (Mitchell, week VII, p16) Male and female are dependent on each other in order to end the Oedipus complex as successfully castrated beings because only as such they can become successful and responsible adults. The ‘Oedipus-Castration-Complex’ structures our psyche in that he makes us aware that not every desire we have can omnipotently expected to be fulfilled; it reminds us of our boundaries, makes us aware that the other is in the same right as we are. The ‘law of the father’, symbolizing the phallus, comes into being thru language, the fathers ‘No’.

It is the predicament of much of the feminist criticism (and of any criticism) that the very action of putting one’s criticism into words as well secures the survival of the criticized: “The human animal is born into language and it is within the terms of language that the human subject is constructed. Language does not arise from within the individual, it is always out there in the world outside. Language always belongs to another person. The human subject is created from a general law that comes to it from outside itself and through the speech of other people.” (Mitchell, week VII, p5) In other words, criticizing suppression, sexism, discrimination, racism etc, also conceptualizes that what is criticized. Just as the ‘No’ of the father, meant to prohibit the fulfillment of our desire, in fact conceptualizes our desire and with it ourselves. The ‘No’ of the father positions his desire in which our opposing desire is mirrored. The father is symbolizes the other whom we cannot ignore due to the existing power difference. We can try to ignore him, try to fulfill our desire anyway rather than dealing with the lack created by our unsatisfied desire. It is important to understand that this is the crossroads for the Oedipus where he must make a decision that will determine all his life. To not become an Oedipus we need a father who is ‘selfish enough’ to prohibit the satisfaction we long for. Only if the father successfully prohibits our incestuous wish to possess the (m)other he furthers our successful castration and only than we receive the phallus as symbol for the other’s invested interest in us. Only than we know that we are worthy for and equal to the other, only than we do not have to face the faith of the Oedipal Victor. The Oedipal Victor does not receive the phallus, because he, like Oedipus, takes the fathers place on

his mothers' side. He defeated the father (or the father invested no interest in keeping his place), however, to the price of omnipotence and psychosis: "For Freud, contained within the very notion of the castration complex is the theory that other experiences and perceptions only take their meaning from the law for which it stands." (Mitchell, week VII, p16) Female criticism of this process also often seems to ignore the equally important role of the (m)other in the mirror stage. It is the mother standing behind the child, who puts the child into language when she says: 'This is you [... and you are.....]'. It is she, the (m)other, who first defines (what is) us and she thru whom we learn to define and judge ourselves, to love or not to love ourselves, to respect or to disrespect ourselves, etc. It is she who can prevent successful castration and consolidate the incestuous relationship of mother and child that brings about the Oedipal Victor.

Castration is not something that has been or could be done to a boy or a girl in the real. It is the threat of castration –present whenever a desire is on the crossroads of being or not being fulfilled-- what makes the girl a girl and the boy a boy, which is merely a division of the sexes and not a division of labeling one as superior and the other as inferior. Castration psychically enables girl and boy to recognize each other as being outside of and different from themselves. Successful castration is crucial for both the girl and the boy as it is the final step in the transformation from being an object to becoming a subject, a process in which: "The father stands in the position of the third term that *must* break the asocial dyadic unit of mother and child. ... Lacan [argues] that the relation of mother and child cannot be viewed outside the structure established by the position of the father. ... There can be nothing *human* that pre-exists or exists outside the law represented by the father; there is only either its denial or the fortunes and misfortunes of its term." (Mitchell, week VII, p23)

II. In other words...

The capitalistic system we live in exploits our desire in that it provides us with lack. The culture industry of our capitalistic societies not only mercilessly commercializes lack and desire, it also creates lack, and with it new desire which did not exist prior to the invented lack by which it is symbolized. Whether we like it or not; the system of the culture industry is perfect to the degree that we are not able to distinguish if that what we want or do is what we really want or want to do or if we only believe that we want it or want to do it. In other words: feminist criticism of the patriarchal structures cannot be sure if the feminist desire to overcome female suppression is really their desire or if they merely are made believe it to be their desire. How do we know that what we hear and see on TV or radio and what we read in books, magazines or papers is real and not an invention of the culture industry to provide us with nonexistent problems in whose solution we put all our energy? We never would come to experience the solution we desire because the solution is in the hands of the culture industry who can provide it or not (think about censorship on American TV and the pictures and stories about the war in Iraq the public was provided with vs the ones not shown to the public; or

think about the lies that were invented by the government in order to manipulate the opinion of the public in order to go to war in the first place).

Whether female suppression is real or propaganda, the prayer wheel like repetition of female suppression does neither change that what is proclaimed as fact nor does it secure the sympathy of the accused male suppressors. It does, however, fill the latter over time with an equal amount of annoyance as the amount of energy the former invests in their claims. Feminist criticism, as much as I agree with it, has to take the challenge to answer the question if the phallus they fight against is not in fact the very phallus they aim to receive in order to not feel suppressed any longer. If the phallus symbolizes the suppressor then he also symbolizes the power of that suppressor. The suppression only can end when the power is handed over to the suppressed or equally distributed between suppressor and suppressed. But here again the suppressed can only win what they blame to be the source of their suppression. Feminist criticism therefore needs to provide an answer to the question what happens once feminism has reached its goal and female suppression is extinguished. And what to do with the empty place, the lack, it leaves behind. What desire will be created by that lack? Can such lack that is the result of the feminist victory over suppression -which is the extinguishing of suppression- not only be filled by that what was extinguished – female suppression? What if not only feminist goals but all the goals we fight for leave behind nothing else than the same desire due to which the goal once came into consciousness and, if that would be so, does that not mean that we only turn around in circles without ever reaching what we desire and is not that exactly what Freud describes with the castration complex in the Oedipus?

“Desire persists as an effect of a primordial absence and it therefore indicates that in this area there is something fundamentally impossible about satisfaction itself.” (Mitchell, week VII, p6) Thus, is our urge to satisfy our desires nothing else than an urge impossible to ever be satisfied, an illusion? Or maybe a clever invention the culture industry once whispered in our ears after we were born, an invention we, as we encounter it later, only can conceptualize as something that pre-existed us, a given non-existence that only can exist if nothing exists – especially not the human mind? The human mind only exists thru the law of the father symbolizing lack and therefore the human mind is dependent on the lack without which it does not exist because there would be nothing it could relate to which at the same time is the precondition for its existence. Without lack there is no desire and without desire nothing to control the (m)other with. Without desire no phallus. Without phallus, no signifier of neither lack nor desire. Without the fateful confusion of phallus with penis, nothing feminism could fight for – or was it fight against?

Speaking of the phallus too often is in fact speaking about the male genital, symbolizing male power and female repression, which becomes a male characteristic. No one seems to bother anymore that the phallus merely symbolizes the lack rather than being that what is lacked. Lack always only is possible by comparison of what one has with what one thinks to be in need of. Humans compare themselves with one an-

other, Awareness of lack requires being in relationship to someone who is different in that s/he possesses something I lack. I may have never been aware of that lack and filling it may change nothing else than filling up a whole that always existed without bothering me (because I was not aware of its existence, and therefore it may also be that it never existed in the first place until my awareness of wanting that of which I did not know that I want it before I saw its representation for the first time created the lack due to which I realize that desire) and only thru the encounter with the other that long existing lack came into being for me and now thru my awareness of what always have been there I am in need to fill the very same lack, which once it is filled, will sink back into nonexistence leaving me again not being aware of it or that it ever was in my awareness.

Lack depends on the other without which I could not reflect on my existence. ‘I’ already includes ‘Thou’ and ‘Thou’ always includes ‘I’. One is neither thinkable nor existent without the other. ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ are interdependent preconditions for both human consciousness and unconsciousness and the awareness of lack and desire. ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ lay the ground on which the concept of power takes shape and is divided in ‘powerful’ and ‘powerless’ as inherent abilities of human life rather than a fixed, inflexible, and unchangeable framework in which one has the power and the other has not. ‘I’ is not only dependent on ‘Thou’, ‘I’ also is ‘Thou’ because ‘Thou’ only lives and exists in ‘I’s’ mind just as ‘I’ only exists and lives in ‘Thou’s’ mind and it is impossible for either one to ever know the others real which is different from their projections on each other. Feminist phallic criticism universalizes the ‘suppressive phallus’ only on the ‘Thou’ and excludes the ‘I’, themselves, without whom there could never be suppression.

Feminist criticism ironically overlooks that the phallus they fight against in fact is the very phallus they want to receive. They seem to confuse feminism with femininity and seem to believe the ‘Oedipus-Castration-Complex’ would constitute a superior male and inferior female rather than the roles society forces on both of them. The Oedipus complex does not constitute masculinity and femininity but the psychological birth of the sexes. Feminist criticism on Freud seems to ignore that he “...emphasizes the central place of the Oedipus complex as an *organizer of the psychological life* of early childhood ... concerns the development of the child and does not in any way coincide with adult genital organization. ... What is present is not a primacy of genitals but a primacy of the phallus. ... it is a *matter of phallic organization* localized at a certain moment in the subject’s history, which endure as an *unconscious fantasy* but is not at all the optimal outcome of adult human sexuality. The optimal outcome would be the recognition of both sexes and relations between them. When one speaks of the primacy of the phallus, therefore, one must not lose sight of the fact that it is, I repeat, a matter of a fantasy linked to infantile genital sexuality.” (Kristeva, week VIII, p71/74). Nowadays, however, gynecologists as ‘social gatekeepers’ assign the sex to a child and bring into existence what feminist criticism is about: the implication that one sex is more powerful than the other who by assignment of the other powerless.

Freud did not inscribe men and women as powerless or powerful, he was not concerned with such profanities when he somewhat carelessly raised the impression the little girl would feel inferior and be jealous of the penis of her brother (what if the little girl has no brother and the father died at her birth? How does she know of the penis of her nonexistent male family members?) Freud inscribed both men and women within masculinity and femininity, not as a choice but as a given real. He inscribed men and women in the yet undifferentiated multitudinousness of sexuality where everything is possible apart from sexual object choice. Sexual object choice ironically is no choice as such, it is an imaginary choice with the choice already foreclosed. (I am tempted to write ‘...already genetically foreclosed...’ or something like ‘...genetically already made for us...’ but fact is, nobody knows why one is heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual or whatever-sexual; all we know is that we are how we are and that neither one sexuality is superior or inferior to the other.) Female suppression therefore is an illogical but clever invention of the culture industry, an imaginary female inferiority created by inferior feeling subjective individuals fearful to become powerless objects and therefore in need to gain power over others, because they are afraid of the emptiness of the lack. This is what Freud tried to make us aware of: that we become socialized with morality and normative rules invented to hide the real. Never has Freud in any way constituted the phallus as identical with fulfilled adult sexuality. Rather he argued that psychical life becomes more and more differentiated and with that differentiation comes awareness of the other (better an imaginary picture of him in my mind, always only a symbolization of the real but never the real) as different from myself. Again, when we are interacting with the other, we merely interact with an idea of that other we created in our mind

Feminist criticism on Freud that concentrates on female sexuality in the effort to defend and acknowledge the status and nature of female sexuality must become “...isolated, something independent of the distinction that creates it ...just as if women have...to have something of their own. The issue subtly shifts from what distinguishes the sexes to what has each sex got of value that belongs to it alone. ... For Freud it is of course never a question of arguing that anatomy or biology is irrelevant, it is a question of assigning them their place. He gave them a place / it was outside the field of psychoanalytic enquiry.” (Mitchell, week VII, p20) The Oedipus complex is not the root of organized female suppression but the description of organized social denial of the real, abuse of the symbolic and repression of the imaginary. The Oedipus complex describes the organization of psychic life as the process in which male and female child discover lack and desire. The importance of the Oedipus complex lies in successful castration through the experience that our desires not always will be satisfied (the law of the father). We have to learn, accept, and deal with the other’s desire. Only successful castration provides us with the phallus. In the following, I try illustrate my arguments using the case of a patient with whom I worked a few years ago in The Netherlands.

III. The Case

The patient, whom I will call P, is a, 30-year-old male, born in Aruba, who came to The Netherlands when he was 4 years old. He identifies himself as gay, is charming, attractive, and always friendly. Ten months before he enters treatment, he tested positive for HIV infection whereupon he attempted to commit suicide. (However, after 3 months in therapy he says to merely have had intense preoccupation with suicidal thoughts for a prolonged period of time.) He consulted a psychiatrist who prescribed 'Prozac' 500mg, which P takes on a daily basis since. He decided to seek psychotherapy because "Medication alone does not seem to help me." P's primary problem is his engagement in mainly short-term sexual relationships due to his difficulties to trust others. P's mother was addicted to alcohol and his father ruled the family in authoritarian style. Father would not accept another's opinion besides his own and ignore those of his children –in fact rendering them non-existent- who would not submit to his rules. P, the youngest of six children and convinced that he was unwanted, was brought up by a nanny. Even so his nanny could fill the empty space of his emotionally unavailable mother (the lack created through the emotionally absent father was never filled), P felt as "growing up in an empty space, no one around really cared about me. It often felt as if I would not exist." From age six to eight, his mother takes him and his two-year-old sister with her during her drinking tours through local bars. Meanwhile she is in the bars drinking, however, the two children are 'locked' in the car for hours and hours. P often went to get her out of the bars and bring him and his sister home, however without much success. His parents divorce when P turns nine; P's father remarries two years later. P addresses his stepmother as his (m)other,

P suffers from intense feelings of inferiority, describes himself as insecure, and often feels treated like "an object to others they play with and (ab)use." What bothers him, however, is his discovery of treating others not very differently as he feels treated. On second thought, however, he finds always good reasons why those others did not deserve better: they betrayed his trust, would try to force their will on him, could not deal with the fact that in his life P comes first, in his own words: "My way or no way. If somebody has a problem with that – too bad for him." If he feels not comfortable anymore with people, he simply disappears out of their life, as he says, "I do not talk to them anymore." Talking about the other seems to be a defense mechanism P needs in order to keep himself together and not fall into pieces. He uses similar defenses against his feelings of inferiority and insecurity by putting a \$-label on everything he speaks about, especially possessions like his car or the cloth he wears: "I ruined my \$500 sweater yesterday in the dryer" or "Do you like my pants? \$250, from Armani" or "I will buy a new \$30000 car next week." He seems to need this to demonstrate his independence, however, he also uses money as a tool that provides him with the feeling to be valuable: "Look at me, I can afford this, I am worth it." P always makes sure that he pays for expenses when going out with people.

IV. The case in light of the discussed theory

“...the analytic relationship provides some experience with the kind of intersubjective space that allows us to use identification to bridge difference, to hold multiple positions, to tolerate nonidentity rather than wipe out the position of self or other.”

(Benjamin, week V, p107)

P’s deep narcissistic injury is key in his therapy for coming “...closer to the subjective experience of the patient through the acknowledgement of our not-so-different subjectivity ... an internal mental space created through a dialogue that recognizes the other.” (Benjamin, week V, p 109) P does not do what he does because he is mean and heartless but because he is deeply insecure and most likely feels painfully worthless. He seems to be convinced not to be of any real interest to others, symbolizing his internalized experience of the relationship with his parents. Hiding his insecurity he takes on his fathers’ dominant behavior and his mothers assumed disinterest, does to the other what was done to him and expects the other to submit to his rules. Being hurt by his parents he now hurts the other, which is a narcissistic defense to protect the ‘I’ that is not ‘Me’ from being hurt again. The other is different and therefore an unpredictable “...threat to the identity of the self or ego that wants to be all there is, that wants to assimilate everything into itself...” (Benjamin, week V, p111) because there is nothing that feels like self – there only is the painful emptiness inside. P’s only way out of his narcissistic emptiness is difficult and a process in which he is again dependent on the other and therefore an extremely dangerous process to him. His narcissistically centered self only can accept otherness “...when the attempt to psychically destroy the object is resolved through the other’s survival.” (Benjamin, week V, p111) It seems that so far no other ever survived P’s destruction, which additionally is obstructed by P’s deep fear to be objectified by the other.

Since there is no trust, there is also no security – there only is the painful awareness of the emptiness inside, which is the basis on which the other is experienced. His ‘I’ that feels worthless puts the responsibility for those feelings on the ‘Thou’. And because he punishes and despises himself for what he is, he does the same to the other: he expects the other to treat him the same way his parents did, and he will do everything to not let this happen again. His defenses are that strong that they prohibit him to make different experiences. At the same time, in his experience, it is not him hurting others but the other hurting him. Lacan sees this tendency as attempt “...to incorporate the other as a mental object primarily in its defensive, “cannibalistic” and imaginary aspects ... as inimical to recognizing difference.” P needs to acquire a capacity for what Benjamin emphasizes as “...the intersubjective relationship in which one goes beyond identification to appreciate the other subject as a being outside the self.” (Benjamin, week V, p108) For P, there is nothing outside himself, everything happens within.

Affective recognition is “...central in infancy, but it is followed by confrontation with the tension between assertion and recognition: the clash of independent wills, the negotiation of conflict beginning in rapprochement in the second year of life.” (Benjamin, week V, p111) Girls and Boys have a “...need for a

father who represents separate subjectivity and desire for the outside world. The idea of recognition ... has to contain within it the aspect of the assertion of separate subjectivity – else there is nothing to recognize.”

(Benjamin, week V, p111) P’s subjectivity was never recognized but abusively objectified by an unpredictable other, leaving his self too fragile to survive any confrontation with the other. Castration is fatal for the self that consequently castrates the other already in advance. The disinterest his parents demonstrated towards P rendered him nonexistent to himself and others and left him feeling powerless. In his experience, there is nobody who sincerely would be willing or able to contain his fear, anxiety, and pain.

P’s presence is his absence, in other words, his desire is founded on and structured by the experience that he only is present for others when the subjectivity that makes him an unique individual is absent and he becomes an object. His experience of the mirror stage is one of complete humiliation: as his mother looked together with him into the mirror she not only told P ‘This is you’ but as well ‘I am not interested in you’ which his ego translated into ‘I am not interesting for others.’ This huge narcissistic wound, which P carries with him ever since, was constantly reinforced in the symbolic (his mothers alcoholism, locking him up in the car, ignoring his requests of bringing him and his sister home; as well as his father who renders all of his children nonexistent who wont completely submit to his rules). P’s desire is the desire of recognition, and his predicament that it is recognition what he is most afraid of. “...the apparently isolated subject constantly assimilates what is outside itself. ... The ego is not really independent and self-constituting, but is actually made up of the objects it assimilates; the ego cannot leave the other to be an independent outside entity, separate from itself, because it is always incorporating the other, or demanding that the other be like the self. ... *the self is nonidentical* ... it is constituted by the identifications with the other that it deploys in an ongoing way, in particular to deny the loss and uncontrollability that otherness necessarily brings. ... it is reciprocally constituted in relation to the other, depending on the other’s recognition, which it cannot have without being negated, acted on by the other, in a way that changes the self, making it nonidentical.”

(Benjamin, week V, p 79) P’s narcissistic self, in the attempt to master its anxiety, pushes affective recognition over the edge and renders it into mastery and domination over the other. That way, everything is possible under the condition it happens, to use P’s words, “My way, or no way.”

Being unsuccessfully castrated by his father, P never possessed the phallus: “The castration complex institutes the superego as its representative and as representative thereby of the law. ... it governs the position of each person in the triangle of the father, mother and child; in the way it does this, it embodies the law that founds the human order itself.” (from Mitchell, week VII, p 14I) It is “...the mother-father-child triangle with the father [whereby the role of the father can be fulfilled by any male or female] occupying the summit of the triangle...” (Kristeva, week VIII, p75) It is this triangular constellation that makes the Oedipus universal, not the gendered role inscription often assumed in the Oedipus complex. The signified law of the father protects the child from livelong omnipotence, which “...is and has always been a central problem for

the self, disavowed rather than worked through by its position as rational subject. In fact, if the other were not a problem for the subject, the subject would again be absolute – either absolutely separate or assimilating the other. Therefore, the negativity that the other sets up for the self has its own possibilities, a productive irritation, heretofore insufficiently explored.” (Benjamin, week V, p85)

Seeking the approval he so desperately needs, P is unaware that he constantly runs away as soon as the other is about to give him that what he is looking for. The fulfillment of his deepest wish needs to remain in the imaginary because the gratification in the real is too threatening. His arguments with his short time partners are symbolic for the abandonment they are followed by, which mirrors P’s abandonment by his parents. His own satisfaction seems to be most important to P, who seems not to be aware that he only will receive real satisfaction when he is able to address the needs of the other.

V. Final thoughts

“... a symmetry is necessary in which both the self and other must own the burden of subjectivity, the tendency to assimilate or deny the difference of the other (destruction). We must not only recognize our tendency to destroy, *we must survive for the other*; and we must also ask the other to take on the onus of being a subject and surviving our destruction.”

(Benjamin, week V, p111)

We cannot speak about repression or criticize it without bringing repression alive in language. As soon as we articulate our thoughts through language, they become real in the world and can be used by the other in any way s/he wants. Language renders expression of personal experience unspeakable because every experience of me in relation to whatever not only requires, includes and implies the other but it requires the other to have the exact same understanding of my words as I imply in them. This, however, is an impossible task: “Our memory constitutes an unconscious Other that inhabits us; this memory is invested by the narrative that restores it to us, submits it to the domination of the conscious, deciphers in language and addresses an Other.” (Kristeva, week VIII, p66)

The other within is not me. The other within is the superego, with its objective to inhibit the expression of unfiltered subjective experience. It is the ongoing voice in our heads telling us what we did wrong and induces feelings of guilt and worthlessness. Freud contextualized the superego so to speak as the ‘social security agency’ society installed into our minds to protect morality and social norm(ality). Rather than saying that this is how it has to be Freud put into language what before him nobody would dare to speak off and exposed “...how sexual repression in childhood created conflictive and strained marital relationships which in turn affected the children of these marriages in ways that would reproduce the whole situation in the next generation ... Freud argues against the view prevalent in his time that hysterics are degenerate and weak, and for the view that the women he treated were especially intelligent, creative, and moral.” (Chodorow, week IV, p170) In other words, Freud argued that his patients in fact were ‘social rebels with a cause’

fighting against sexual repression and social injustice. The symptoms they came to treatment for was the price they had to pay for their social disobedience. Freud realized also that it makes no sense to ‘heal’ his patients as long as the source of their ‘illnesses’ would remain unchanged. And that is what he pleads for and writes about: the necessary changes of society rather than the adaptation of his clients to societies sick making conditions. What is most important for me to point out here is that “Freud’s theory is a social and political theory. ... Psychoanalysis shows that women and men and male dominance are reproduced in each generation as a result of a social division of labor in which women mother [and are object’s to an assumed] male superiority.”

Psychological damage occurs when the father does not intervene, when he does not prohibit the child in his incestuous wishes for the mother, meaning when he does not initiate castration. The child becomes an Oedipal victor, which means it does not receive the phallus and therefore is not castrated; it merely receives his fathers disinterest and ignorance, receives the message ‘You are not worthy for me to bother about you.’ The phallus –and its confusion with the penis- is not a signifier for male or female, it is the signifier of the *female* human being needing to complete the Oedipus complex as successful castrated being. Only successful castration provides the phallus for male and female and signifies their individuality as meaningful and powerful men or women: “In Freud’s schema, after the castration complex, boys and girls will more or less adequately adopt the sexual identity of the appropriate parent. But it is always only an adoption and a precarious one at that. ... For Freud, identification with the appropriate parent is a *result* of the castration complex, which has already given the mark of sexual distinction. For other analysts, dispensing with the key role of the castration complex, identification is the *cause* of sexual difference.” (Mitchell, week VII, p22)

“Psychoanalysis demonstrates the internal mechanisms of the socio-cultural organization of gender and sexuality and confirms the early feminist argument that ‘the personal is political.’ ... *Male dominance* on a psychological level *is a masculine defense* and a major psychic cost to men, *built on fears and insecurity; it is not straightforward power.*” (Chodorow, week IV, p177; italics added by me) To be human is to be different – our differences are a gift to celebrate, something to learn from each other rather than something we need to repress out of the fear to loose our individuality. Someone or something is different from me, not better or worse, not good or bad, not dangerous or threatening - simply different, male and female. Men, denying equality between men and women in their fear to be inferior, are responsible for and have to carry the burden of the lack they create in society. The desire created by the masculine lack, however, holds the promise for a world in which people take responsibility for themselves and for others rather than a world in which we all only pretend to be responsibly. Response-ability is not simply to be accountable for something, it is the ‘ability to give a response’, the ability to adequately act or re-act in ones environment. Only when men finally are willing and able to take responsibility and face their fears and insecurities, they will be able to change and transform their relationship to women. And only when women and feminists realize that the

phallus they fight against in fact is that what they fight for, they will be able to offer the necessary support men need to be able to engage in real transformation.

It seems as if “...the shadow of the object...” (Benjamin, week V, p108) not only fell on the ego but that the shadow of the ego fell on many of the critical responses to Freud. Whether they come from a feminist perspective or a different psychological perspective, many of Freud’s critics often seem to misinterpret his words and take them as basis for past and present sexism. In doing so, however, they confuse the phallus with the penis and forget that “psychoanalyses is about human sexuality and the unconscious ... a psychoanalytic concept of sexuality” (Mitchell, week VII, p2) and not a handbook in learning how to apply repression. The psychoanalytic endeavor lies in raising awareness for the social forces that lead us to suppress our subjective individuality and make us fit into pre-given and seemingly questionable but unchangeable moral norms. Freud shows us that male, female, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual etc is not a choice but an expression of the differences that make us human beings. As such we need to understand that “...authorship, or ownership, of our desire and intention is a crucial feature of subjectivity occluded by the conventional opposition between activity and passivity. ... being a subject of desire requires ownership and not merely activity. Ownership depends upon reclaiming the maternal form of activity, the recognition and holding of emotional states, excitement in particular.” (Benjamin, week V, p110)

Resources:

Week IV

Chodorow, N. J. (1991): Feminism, femininity, and Freud; in *Feminism and psychoanalytic theory*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press

Week V

Benjamin, J. (1998): *Shadow of the other: Intersubjectivity and gender in psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge

- Introduction

Week VII

Mitchell, J. & Rose, J. (Eds.) (1985): *Feminine Sexuality*. New York. W. W. Norton & Company

Week VIII

Kristeva, J. (2001): *The sense and nonsense of revolt*. New York: Columbia University Press

- Oedipus again; or, phallic monism