IN FAVOUR OF AN ONTOLOGY OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE. LUCE IRIGARAY ON MIMESIS AND FLUIDITY*

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Abstract

This article discusses the notion of the fluidity of sexual identity in light of Luce Irigaray's account of sexual difference. I examine the historicity of sexual identity fluidity in relation to femininity as discussed in Irigaray's second-wave feminism in order to show that the concept of sexual fluidity has to be configured by the concept of sexual difference if it wants to be productive, creative, and transformative. I will advance this claim with the help of Irigaray's dual (reproductive and productive) notion of mimesis, which will allow me to distinguish between the ontology of sexual difference and the ontology of sexual fluidity. I will show that, from Irigaray's perspective, the philosophical starting point to think sexual identity should not be sexual difference vs. fluidity but rather sexual dissymmetry vs. symmetry. On this account, one ought to acknowledge the historical, symbolic, and material reality of sexual difference.

Keywords: Luce Irigaray, Sexual Difference, Mimesis, Plato, Fluidity

1. *Introduction*

In this article, I will read Luce Irigaray's theory of productive mimesis as an ontology of sexual difference. My starting point is thinking sexual difference against the background of a person's sexual identity not being predetermined. That is to say, I take the idea of sexual identity as not being the expression of a single essence or stable core, but rather as developed in and through a mimetic relation to one's sex. While Irigaray's philosophy of sexual identity and her subversive notion of "parler-femme", is heavily influenced by her (practical and theoretical) psychoanalytic and linguistic work, she makes clear that a productive account of sexuate being is neither a purely material – biological or bodily – affair, nor merely a matter of an indi-

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vidual's choice of changing the language on sexual identity. Rather, productive mimesis involves a fluid exchange between material enactment and social discourse. The notion of the feminine comes about through a passive/active structure where the individual person as well as the society are continuously acting and acted upon.

What I want to propose is to take a closer look at the quality of interplay between being passively subjected to "one" sexual identity (receiving form) and the exploration of a manifold of perceptions of one's sexual identity (giving form). With the quality of a passive/active dynamic of sexual identity I mean the degree in which language, body and imaginary contribute to and co-constitute the sexuate self. In this way, I want to show that the concepts of sexual identity and difference, on the one hand, and sexual fluidity, on the other, do not repre-sent two distinct ontologies. Rather, following Irigaray's ontological precondition of fluidity, the concept of sexual difference *implicates* and makes positive explorations of sexual identity possible.

With the help of Irigaray's deconstruction of the concept of mimesis in Western history, we are not only in the position to establish why there is a tendency to think sexual *fluidity* and sexual *difference* as mutually exclusive terms, but we are also given the tools to unpack and challenge this (mis)conception. In the process of this examination, it will become clear that the increasingly popular notion of fluidity in relation to sexual identity today is[1], historically speaking, not new but the very starting point of many second wave French feminists, which include but are not limited to figures such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous. I argue that what must be remembered from their philosophies, that of Irigaray in particular, is the fundamental insight that the feminist core principle of a fluid conception of sexual identity must go hand in hand with a rethinking of sexual differ-ence if one wants to avoid rendering the notion of fluidity empty.

[1] For recent feminist accounts of fluidity, specifically bodily fluids, see, for example, D.H. COOLE, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham & London 2010; T. LUTZ, *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears*, Norton, New York 1999; C. BOBEL, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2010. For an informative and critical update on the concept of fluidity in relation to new materialist accounts of gender from the perspective of Irigaray's philosophy of fluidity, see E. STEPHENS, *Feminism and New Materialism: The Matter of Fluidity*, in «InterAlia. A Journal of Queer Studies», IX (2014), pp. 186-202.

Structured around two definitions of mimesis in Irigaray, this article will start with a critical examination of the mirror model of mimesis to think sexual difference. I will elaborate on Irigaray's interpretation of the mirror analogy in Plato to establish Irigaray's account of sexual identity as "passively" constituted. As we shall see, the mirror model of sexual difference refers to the ontological relation between "model" and "copy", which gets equated with the male and female sex retrospectively (not by Plato but by a thought process associated with Platonism) and is structured around the principle of symmetry or sameness.

In the second part, I will focus on the interplay between the physical manifestation of female identity and the order of the imaginary. I will develop further Irigaray's claim that the model of sameness, which assumes the female sex as a degraded copy of the male model, tends to duplicate itself on an imaginary level. That is to say, the desire for and orientation towards sameness "bleeds into" the *communis opinio*. It manifests itself in our collective imaginary, that is, on a pre-reflective level. The implication of this claim for the emancipation of women is that one cannot directly overthrow sexist, misogynist, and otherwise harmful acts against women on the basis of language alone because our shared linguistic framework is still largely made up of the (male-centred) *communis opinio*, which fosters those sentiments in ways that are often difficult to trace. Nevertheless, it is also *because* our language is based on a fluid interaction between body and imaginary – i.e., the many ways in which biases are incorporated in and rejected by concrete daily activities – that the *communis opinio* can be transformed.

This article closes with the quest for exploring and playfully exploiting the fragility at the heart of the formation of sexual identity. Taking Irigaray's "productive mimesis" of sexual identity as a philosophical starting point, I will suggest that the feminist challenge that lies before us is not to "overcome" the mirror model of sexual difference by means of a "return" to a more "wholesome", "fluid", "matriarchal" society. Rather, the idea is to develop a critical and ironic eye as regards our individual and social imaginary. It promotes a productive mimesis of significations of sexual identity, which entails teasing, ridiculing, and violating the rigid nature of people's perceptions of sexual difference and associated biases based on a binary logic. It also means to resist reducing one sex to the other, which presupposes, on

a formal, conceptual, and practical level, the acknowledgement of a fluid conception of sexual difference.

1.1 *Some conceptual clarifications*

I must preface my analysis with some theoretical clarifications regarding my understanding and use of the term "sexuate." Whenever I speak of sexual identity and sexual difference, I refer to the condition of "being sexuate" and in a specifically Irigarayan sense, which, in my view, involves roughly three elements.

First, being sexuate is a way of being *conditioned* and applies to everyone in a similar way. It is a transcendental structure in the sense that it is a possibility condition of being. Sexual or sexuate identity designates a set of conditions that constitute the way each of us is individuated and is relating to others. Thus, there is no personal identity or sense of self preceding the mode of being sexuate. Existing simply means being, among other things, conditioned by one's sex.

Second, "sexuate" is not to be reduced to the sexual organ. And if Irigaray refers to, for example, the female sex organ, it is generally not – or not *only* – in a biological/anatomical sense. For Irigaray, sex – in whatever way one perceives it – has *symbolic meaning* and *value* attached to it, which are not to be separated from the respective culture and history in which one is situated. Therefore, within Irigaray's conceptual framework, it makes no sense to posit the "male" and "female" sex organ as "realities" that would "exist" independent of conceptual forms and norms of sexual identity established by thought and language. The many functions, mechanisms and workings of sexual organs *take part in* and *transform* linguistic notions of sexual identity and vice versa. Irigaray calls this interplay the body's *sexual morphology*. Sexual identity – as including but not restrictive to the sexual organ – is not ahistorical, neutral, and objective in the strictly scientific sense, but rather mediated through a symbolic order which structures biological processes as they condition our being sexuate.

When I speak of the "reality" of sexuate being I mean the myriad ways in which sexual identities are expressed through bodies, languages, gestures, imaginaries, desires, habits, etc. It is against this symbolic background that Irigaray coined the term "sexuate" in the first place. It becomes the lens though which she views the notion of *genre*:

we must «*think of genre [gender] as sexuate [sexué]*»[2]. Based on her observation of the dominant, male-centred culture in the West, which favours sexual indifference (a term I will discuss in a moment), she saw no culturally accepted opening for an affirmative, creative model of the feminine, female identity and sexual difference using the existing modes of expression. In any case, it is imperative that accounting for the material reality of sexuate identity does not mean holding on to a traditional, metaphysical, biological essentialism.

This point is closely related to the third, *reciprocal* and *corporeal* dimension of being sexuate, lucidly explained by Linda Daley in her article on Irigaray's "sexuate economy":

> [The term "sexuate"] refers to the corporeal, sexual, physiological, cultural and symbolic traces of female identity within patriarchy and phallocentrism that can be reconceived from a negative and sexually neutral status to a positive, sexually different status. *Sexuate* refers to not simply the sexual elements of being, an adjectival supplement to identity, but the corporeal differences in being human that are irreducible to the two sexual identities represented within phallocentric culture[3].

Following Irigaray, the central task is hence to investigate the displacement and transgression of a dualistic model of the masculine and

[2] In light of Anglo-Saxon studies on *gender*, it is important to note that Irigaray's notion of *genre* is linguistic. It refers to the structures of discourse related to the self. Irigaray uses language however in a broad sense. She expands, for example, Jacques Lacan's (symbolic) use of language in psychoanalytic practice to the physical and psychic realm. She understands «*genre* as index and mark of the *subjectivity* and ethical responsibility of the speaker. Genre is not in fact merely something to do with physiology, biology or private life, with the mores of animals or the fertility of plants. It constitutes the irreducible differentiation *internal to the human race* [*'genre humain'*]. Genre represents the site of the nonsubstitutable positioning of the *I* and the you and of their modalities of expression». In other words, Irigaray's account of *genre* is not exhausted by the idea of a social construct, it is historically embedded in a French, psychoanalytic understanding of the formation of the Subject. Applied to sexual identity, *genre* is further developed by Irigaray into a so-called "sexual morphology". Cfr. L. IRIGARAY, *The Three Genres*, ed. by M. Whitford, trans. by D. Macey, *The Irigaray Reader*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford-Cambridge 1991, pp. 140-141.

[3] L. DALEY, *Luce Irigaray's Sexuate Economy*, in «Feminist Theory», XIII, 1 (2012), pp. 62-63.

the feminine in favour of an affirmative account of differentiations internal to and among sexual identities. As I intend to show in the second part of this essay, Irigaray's philosophical notions of *fluidity*, *sexual dissymmetry* and *subversive mimesis* will play a central role in alternative expressions of sexual difference and the feminine. But let me first explain Plato's mirror analogy and how this, according to Irigarary, has influenced modern and contemporary thought. More specifically, we will look at two examples from the psychoanalytic tradition.

2. *Irigaray's account of a "passive" ontology of sexual difference*

In *This Sex Which Is Not One*[4], Irigaray writes that

> in Plato, there are two *mimeses*. To simplify: 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[5].

With these words, Irigaray formulated the twofold problematic of mimesis in Plato: mimesis as a process of *reproduction* and mimesis as a process of *production*. Before we take a closer look at the second, productive form of mimesis in relation to sexual identity (in the second part), let us first unpack what Irigaray has in mind with her account of Plato's reproductive mimesis by tracing the concept of mimesis back to Plato's *Republic*. This will enable us to establish Irigaray's "passive" qualification of the formation of sexual identity.

2.1 *Plato's mirror analogy*

In Book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato investigates, among other things, the nature of images. In relation to the things imitated or depicted, images are mere phantoms or shadows [*eidôla*]. Images originate in *appearance* rather than reality, a domain characterised by constant flux,

[4] L. IRIGARAY, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. by C. Porter, C. Burke, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1985.

[5] Ivi, p. 131.

illusion, and deception. To advance this idea, Socrates introduces the metaphor of the mirror to explain the work of the craftsman:

> The quickest perhaps is to take a mirror, if you like, and carry it round with you everywhere. In no time you will make a sun and the heavenly bodies, the earth, yourself, and all the other living creatures, objects and plants and everything we've just been talking about[6].

Socrates argues that the practice of the imitator or craftsman does not amount to much because all he does is, like a mirror, reflect what already exists. The act of mirroring or imitating has hence no value or meaning in itself as it is «inessential without something to reflect», as Matthew Potolsky put it[7]. Notice also Socrates' ironic use of the word "make", when he says «make a sun and the heavenly bodies…» with the help of a mirror. What is implicated in the metaphor of the mirror is the *false* perception that we can actually make things with the mirror. The reflection in the mirror looks so convincingly real that you get the impression that you have in fact "made" the "sun", the "heavenly bodies", and even "yourself". But here we are fooling ourselves. Even if one would naively say that the craftsman makes a bed – to use another analogy by Plato – and thus creates a tangible object in that way, we are led by a false perception. The person who uses mimesis never creates «the things that are real in the true sense» they only reflect or reproduce «things we can perceive»[8]. Thus, apart from the fact that the mirror teaches us about the reproductive function of mimesis, it also illustrates mimesis' inherent deceptive nature. What is repeated in mimesis are the things that we encounter in everyday life, i.e., as we perceive them with our senses, but never in their true being.

Shadows, reflections, phantoms, and images are intelligible on the condition of what Irigaray calls a model of *symmetry*[9]. The deceptive,

[6] PLATO, *Republic: books 6-10*, trans. by C.J. Emlyn-Jones, W. Preddy, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2013, pp. 396-397 (596e). See also M. POTOLSKY, *Mimesis*, Routledge, New York-London 2006, pp. 22-23.

[7] M. POTOLSKY, *Mimesis*, cit., p. 23.

[8] PLATO, *Republic*, cit., pp. 396-397 (597a).

[9] Irigaray critiques the metaphysical condition of symmetry, firstly, in Freud's thinking ("The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry") in the first part of *Speculum of The Other Woman*, see L. IRIGARAY, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2010, pp. 11-129. Secondly, she

false, misleading, and reproductive qualities of images are established based on their oppositional position *vis-à-vis* the transcendent Platonic Forms of Being and Truth. Being and Truth carry all the qualifications that their shadowy counterparts lack: solidity, autonomy, stability, consistency, self-transparency and self-identity. Phantom-images contradict in their very existence Identity and Being. They fail to reproduce the true being of what they reflect, which indicates their innate duplicitous character. Now, one can only speak of images in terms of lack, failure, and duplicity if one effectively expects images to obey the law of symmetry, that is, to duplicate exactly the model of self-identity and sameness. For Plato, it is because of the metaphysical presupposition of selfsameness that a thing is what it is and not something else.

In *Speculum of The Other Woman* (1974), Irigaray reformulates mimesis' "*axis of symmetry*" through the figure of the square:

> The square is defined only by means of the diagonal that determines that its two halves, or isosceles triangles, *are equal*. That they can be folded over upon each other, into each other—indefinitely—by a shift around an *axis of symmetry*. This axis may vary in length, but the crucial thing is that it is not divisible at any *point*, that no *hole* can be made *in the unity* it represents. For this would allow the *passage* of something, of grater or larger number, power, or extent, in one of the two (sides)[10].

Applied to the concept of mimesis, the unity of the square amounts to model and copy covering each other completely: folding the square into two halves leaves no "draft strip" or "crooked fold" that could disturb the symmetry between model and copy. We can interpret Irigaray's square, just like Plato's mirror, as a formal illustration of the fact that the copy's function can never diverge from the omnipotence and metaphysically presupposed ideal of selfsameness. Now, Irigaray emphasises that understanding the human activity of mimicking based on this model of symmetry, reproduces a very specific power dynamic between the roles of imitator and imitated. The imitator must be *equal* to the imitated, which means to never override

analyses the role of symmetry in Plato's Allegory of the cave ("Plato's *Hystera*") in the third part of *Speculum*, see ivi, pp. 243-356. For a contemporary reading of Irigaray's account of Plato's Cave, see R. JONES, *Irigaray: Towards a Sexuate Philosophy*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2011, pp. 38-65.

[10] L. IRIGARAY, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, cit., p. 360.

or undermine the formal dominance of the model's essence of the Same. The more unity through similarity between original and copy, the more the ontological lack on the side of the copy is affirmed.

In sum, based on the mimetic model of the Same, the copy or imitator is lacking in two distinct ways. First, the copy is lacking due to its *deviation* from the ideal perfection of the original. Second, there is the copy's ontological lack resulting from more accurately *conforming* to the original model.

It is important to understand why Irigaray reframes Plato's reproductive account of mimesis in terms of an *axis* of symmetry. She is interested in mimesis insofar as it represents a particular matrix of thought[11]. Reproductive mimesis is used by Irigaray not so much as an aesthetic theory but rather as a formula of thinking that originated in Plato – or, more accurately, Platonic metaphysics – and around which she sees the history of Western language structured and organised. This mimesis-matrix, including the notion of the copy's double lack, informs her reading and interpretation of the philosophical notion of difference in the works of a variety of Western thinkers. More concretely, she investigates the extent to which their accounts of difference are "sexuate" [*sexué*], even if they assume their language sexuate-neutral.

2.2 *The sexuate matrix of "reproductive mimesis"*

Although Plato does not seem to associate the mirror analogy with the male and female sex, or the notions of the masculine and the feminine, Irigaray argues that mimesis' underlying ideal of symmetry is nevertheless reflected in a specifically masculine language and

[11] The etymology of "matrix" plays an important role in Irigaray's philosophy. The Old French word for matrix is "matrice", meaning "uterus, womb, and directly from Latin mātrix (genitive mātricis) "pregnant animal", in Late Latin "womb", also "source, origin", from māter (genitive mātris) "mother", see https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=matrix. For a recent account of the meaning of this etymology in Irigaray's thinking, see *Metaphysical/Metaphorical Recourses*, in R. JONES, *Irigaray*, cit. Rosi Braidotti further develops Irigaray's account of sexual difference as a matrix of power, see R. BRAIDOTTI, *Becoming Woman: Or Sexual Difference Revisited*, in «Theory, Culture & Society», XX, 3 (2016), pp. 44-45.

imaginary, most notably, in the works of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. I will not go too much into detail about Irigaray's complicated relationship with psychoanalysis here[12], for our analysis it suffices to highlight two examples. These examples help us to clarify how the feminine role is mimetically constituted within a masculine frame, which accounts for the feminine and women's desire in terms of a double lack.

Let us look at the following passage in which Irigaray connects Plato's "*flat mirror*" with the idea of a masculine discourse:

> As for the priority of symmetry, it co-relates with that of the *flat mirror*—which may be used for the self-reflection of the masculine subject in language, for its constitution as subject of discourse. Now woman, starting with this flat mirror alone, can only come into being as the inverted other of the masculine subject (his *alter ego*), or as the place of emergence and veiling of the cause of his (phallic) desire, or again as lack, since her sex for the most part—and the historically valorized part—is not subject to specularization. Thus in the advent of a 'feminine' desire, this flat mirror cannot be privileged and symmetry cannot function as it does in the logic and discourse of a masculine subject[13].

In Freud, the logic of the flat mirror is at play when he characterises the little girl in terms of a little boy. In describing the process of the child becoming a woman, Freud explains how the child grows up being the mother's object of desire. The so-called "phallic stage" in Freud's psychoanalytic theory amounts to, in very broad strokes, the following process. In growing up, the child will slowly realise that it is separated from the mother. This separation is experienced by the child as a lack, which it aims to overcome by way of reuniting with the mother. When the child discovers that the mother finds her object of desire elsewhere, the child will symbolise the mother's desired object to compensate for its own lack. The desire for the mother develops into the desire to become the desired object for the mother. In

[12] For Irigaray's philosophical views on psychoanalytic practice and discourse, see L. IRIGARAY, M. WHITFORD, *The Irigaray Reader*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1996, pp. 69-153; T. VAN DEN ENDE, *In levende lijven: identiteit, lichamelijkheid en verschil in het werk van Luce Irigaray*, Damon, Leende 1999, pp. 48-108.

[13] L. IRIGARAY, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, cit., p. 129.

psychoanalytic terms, the child must become the *phallus* for the mother, in which case the phallus stands for the desired object of the mother[14]. It is in this sense and at this stage of the libidinal development of the child, says Freud, that «we are now obliged to recognise that the little girl is a little man»[15].

The equation (*symmetry*) of the sexual development of the little girl with that of a boy becomes even more apparent when Freud qualifies the girl's sexual desire in terms of the "penis-equivalent":

> In boys, as we know, this phase is marked by the fact that they have learnt how to derive pleasurable sensations from their small penis and connect its excited state with their ideas of sexual intercourse. Little girls do the same thing with their still smaller clitoris. It seems that with them all their masturbatory acts are carried out on this penis-equivalent, and that the truly feminine vagina is still undiscovered by both sexes[16].

Irigaray deduces from these passages that Freud «maintains with consistency that the libido is always masculine, whether it is manifested in males or females, whether the desired object is woman or man»[17]. Freud can only make female desire intelligible and consistent with his psychoanalytic theory in terms of a degraded and failed function *vis-à-vis* the phallus. Freud's analysis is not based on sexual *difference* but on sexual *symmetry*, or, as Irigaray puts it,

> the desire for the same, for the self-identical, the self (as) same, and again of the similar, the alter ego and, to put it in a nutshell, the desire for the auto… the homo… the male, dominates the representational economy. 'Sexual difference' is a derivation of the problematics of sameness, it is, now and forever, determined within the project, the projection, the sphere of representation, of the same[18].

[14] T. VAN DEN ENDE, *In levende lijven*, cit., p. 83.

[15] S. FREUD, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis and Other Works*, vol. VI, Hogarth, London 1978, p. 118 [ID., *Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 1986, p. 96]. See L. IRIGARAY, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, cit., p. 34.

[16] Ibid. [*Neue Folge der Vorlesungen*, cit., pp. 96-97]. See L. IRIGARAY, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, cit., p. 34.

[17] L. IRIGARAY, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, cit., p. 35.

[18] EAD., *Speculum of the Other Woman*, cit., pp. 26-27.

Irigaray acknowledges that Freud is describing a process of symbolisation and that he is not claiming that the description of women's sexual development through the matrix of the phallus is rooted in any anatomical or biological reality – for example, the castration-complex amounts to boys and girls equally, i.e., the experienced lack is male *and* female. But here precisely lies the problem for Irigaray. His ignorance of the possibility of a sexual development outside the structuring principle of the phallus results in a neutralisation of the sexes – more accurately, the erasure of sexuate differentiations – based on a symbolisation process that has no root in, most notably but not solely, the experiences of one half of the population, namely little girls and grown-up women. Maintaining that the phallus is a neutral symbol, that is, presupposing that the (symbolic) paradigm for womanhood is a male body minus some attributes, relieves Freud of the task of listening to women themselves in conversation or analysis and deducing from this the appropriate theoretical framework.

Irigaray's aim is not to discredit Freud, but merely to lay bare the pattern of symmetry in response to sexual identity and make its significance clear to the reader. Freud is vocalising a recurring and persistent paradigm of thinking sexual difference on "neutral" terms, which is the expression and reproduction of one and the same model, namely a masculine one. Freud hereby reproduces an implicit value-judgement on sexual identity that systematically, throughout the history of Western thought, has been removed from philosophical inquiry: that differences within and among the sexes do not matter. For this phenomenon, Irigaray uses the term "sexual *indifference*"[19].

In Lacan, we see Plato's mirror combined with the psychoanalytic, symbolic order of the imaginary to account for the formation of the ego (or *Gestalt*) and the self. The mirror stage is Lacan's metaphor for how the child develops its relation to its own body[20]. Between the age

[19] Irigaray coined the term "sexual indifference" in *Speculum of the Other Woman*, cit., p. 28; my emphasis. For further reading on the notion of sexual indifference, see T. DE LAURETIS, *Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation*, in «Theatre Journal», XL, 2 (1988), pp. 155-177. It is also worth mentioning that Irigaray applies, particularly in *Speculum*, her own conception of psychoanalysis to argue that the "forgetting" of sexual difference by philosophers is a red thread throughout the entire history of Western thought.

[20] See *Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est*

of six and eighteen months, before identifying with its parents, the child will identify with an image of itself. Seeing itself reflected in the mirror, the small child will spontaneously respond with a "flutter of jubilant activity", which, according to Lacan, signifies a moment of identification[21]. Identification with or assuming the image has a formative property in giving unity to the body, which is, by itself, unruly and fluid. Although the child will spontaneously identify with this unified image, there will always be a split between self and image. This internal split develops into an on-going process of self-reflection, which configures all future identifications, whether it is with the parents, or any other model offered or imposed by the child's environment. The "I" represents the imaginary dimension always at play in the relation to oneself and one's environment.

According to this Lacanian model, *mimesis* or *mimetisme* – imitating examples from one's environment – lies at the heart of subjectivity. Mimesis is the structuring principle of how we view the world and offers, moreover, the imaginary tools which enable us to express ourselves in language and accomplish projects in the world. The order of the imaginary allows us to differentiate between what is meaningful and futile, what is possible and what is not possible in relation to our individual capacities. This mimetic identification process plays out on a psychological and physical level. Reflecting on one's capabilities is the product of an "I" that is characterised by a unicity that remains the same over time. Perceived possibilities and limitations of the "I" are integral to the body's unity, which develops over time, relationally, via the mirror image and perceptions of objects and other people's bodies in the close environment. This is also why, for Lacan, the body image comes about through both an individual and collective imaginary[22].

Lacan's psychoanalytic account of identity formation is based on an attitude of sexual indifference when he uses the flat mirror to describe the female sex. Here, Plato's mirror analogy is used to equate

révélée dans l'expérience analytique, in J. LACAN, *Le séminaire de Jacques Lacan. Livre 1 : Les écrits techniques de Freud 1953-1954*, Seuil, Paris 1975. For a feminist account of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, see E. GROSZ, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, Routledge, London 1990.

[21] M. POTOLSKY, *Mimesis*, cit., pp. 125-126.

[22] T. VAN DEN ENDE, *In levende lijven*, cit., pp. 58-59.

the ontology of sexual identity with visibility. When the little girl or young woman looks into the mirror, she is confronted with

> *the horror of nothing to see.* A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A 'hole' in its scoptophilic lens. It is already evident in Greek statuary that this nothing-to-see has to be excluded, rejected, from such a scene of representation. Woman's genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their 'crack'. *This organ which has nothing to show for itself also lacks a form of its own*[23].

The mirror reflects, represents, symbolises the female sex organ as a lack. Irigaray points out that lack is specifically qualified here as lacking form: it is a "rien à voir" (a nothing to see) that comes down to a "rien n'avoir" (having nothing, having no shape)[24]. Visibility and form are categories that belong to a male paradigm as they symbolically refer to a male body's anatomy. Within this paradigm, flux, matter, and fluidity are included as "female" characteristics as they symbolise everything that lacks a visible, consistent form.

This reasoning has fostered numerous biases about womanhood and the body. As Virpi Lehtinen explains in her phenomenological study on this topic: «the significance of embodiment in these relations, the ones in which woman's being is thematized, is discursively exaggerated and repeated to such an extent that woman has come to represent embodiment in general», which she specifies further based on the work of Sara Heinämaa: «especially embodiment in the sense of involuntary movement and passive suffering – as in desire, menstruation, pregnancy, and breast-feeding – have become marked as feminine»[25]. Within the dominant paradigm, these temporally evolving, "female" bodily characteristics and relations between self and other are conceptualised as lacking distinction, i.e., as obscure, blurred, or fluid, reinforcing the prejudice that women are inherently mysterious, ungraspable and unintelligible.

[23] L. IRIGARAY, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, cit., p. 26, my emphasis.

[24] T. VAN DEN ENDE, *In levende lijven*, cit., p. 120.

[25] V. LEHTINEN, *Luce Irigaray's Phenomenology of Feminine Being*, SUNY, New York 2015, p. 51; S. HEINÄMAA, *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2003, p. 72.

3.1 *Fluidity & Parler-Femme*

Based on our discussion about the double lack at play in Plato's model of the mirror and its outgrowths in psychoanalytic theory, we see now how understanding the quality of fluidity in terms of lacking identity, solidity, and visibility, means accepting the mimetic logic of the Same. As solidity and visibility are the standard of sexual Identity and Being, fluids are qualified as double lack due to 1) *deviating* from the primacy of self-identity and visibility and 2) *assimilating* to that model by accepting its degraded status resulting in ontological non-being.

This gives us pause for thought. *How* to formulate the relationship between the feminine and the quality of fluids? The gesture of "let us go back to the matter of fluidity to restore the forgotten positive qualities of women" is not automatically affirmative as, historically speaking, women have often been disregarded and cast aside precisely on the basis of their "fluid" character.

Elizabeth Stevens rightfully notes in this respect that Irigaray is particularly attentive and critical when it comes to the question *for whom* it is so necessary to link femininity to disruptive fluidity[26]. From an Irigarayan standpoint, it would be fundamental to ascertain *which* potential expressions of feminine disruption are already inscribed in the stability of the existing order and its "outside"[27]. Not being conceptually clear about the dominant, mirrored function of fluidity within the dominant discourse – i.e., its opposite status and ontological lack in relation to the ideal of solidity and being – might risk falling back into mimesis' reproductive function, which means sustaining the status quo as regards biased notions of what women and their expressions of the feminine can and cannot do in the world.

A productive account of fluidity, for Irigaray, must implicate *destabilising*, *transgressing,* and *parasitising* on that Platonic, reproductive account of mimesis as regards sexual differentiations. The style of fluidity, as Irigaray sometimes calls the way in which women write and speak, entails having no *one* identity but rather conceives of its form as *multiple*. This "fluid" status of a "parler-femme" is not synonymous

[26] E. STEPHENS, *Feminism and New Materialism*, cit., p. 188.
[27] *Ibidem*.

to being dispersed, unintelligible, untouchable, out-of-reach, and merely falling together with the mode of non-identity. Feminine identity in terms of style is described by Irigaray as being in constant flux which means that "she" is, spatially, both here *and* there, inside *and* outside, never in opposition to but slightly rubbing against or touching what is other:

> It comes back in touch with itself in that origin without ever constituting in it, constituting itself in it, as some sort of unity. *Simultaneity* is its "proper" aspect – a proper(ty) that is never fixed in the possible identity-to-self of some form or other. It is always fluid, without neglecting the characteristics of fluids that are difficult to idealize: those rubbings between two infinitely near neighbors that create a dynamics. Its "style" resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept. Which does not mean that it lacks style, as we might be led to believe by a discursivity that cannot conceive of it. But its "style" cannot be upheld as a thesis, cannot be the object of a position[28].

For Irigaray, it is "simultaneity" that qualifies the fluidity of a parler-femme. Fluidity entails a continuity of properties that cannot be fixed because they do not coincide with themselves, they constantly internally differentiate. Thus, fluidity has properties, but those properties are not to be differentiated from what is solid but rather posit solidity as but one residue of a multiplicity of fluids. Let us look at a more concrete example using Irigaray's idea of mimicry: women can mimic univocally recognisable, "mythical" features of womanhood – resembling the role of the "mystic", the "virgin", or the "whore", for example – but the solidity and fixed nature of this imitation (i.e., the sense in which one seems to fall together with this figure) is only possible *because* women do not coincide with this imitation, they always *simultaneously* produce themselves as difference: «if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere*: another case of the persistence of 'matter'», that is, precisely, the matter of fluids[29].

Judith Butler is not uncritical of Irigaray positing the feminine as "irreducible excess", always to be cast "outside" of language. In *Bodies That Matter* (1996), she starts with a positive description of Irigaray's

[28] L. IRIGARAY, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, cit., p. 88.
[29] Ivi, p. 76.

disruptive account of miming the feminine: «they [women] mime phallogocentrism, but they also expose what is covered over by the mimetic self-replication of that discourse»[30]. Butler describes Irigaray's mimicry as the reiteration of a masculine configuration of the feminine while, at the same time, uncovering the operational structures responsible for the repression of the feminine. According to Butler, while this miming may unmask the phallocratic laws regulating the role of the feminine in the dominant discourse, it also means that the feminine is therefore *doomed* to be excessive and elsewhere, which, according to Butler, is questionable[31].

In Butler's interpretation of Irigaray's model of parler-femme, the feminine language must accept, affirm, and project into the future its repressed position to unravel the underlying phallocentric logic of its repressed status. In this sense, a "speaking-woman" can only affirm "her" voice from the position of lack vis-à-vis the masculine order. For Butler, this type of miming of the reproductive discourse is ultimately a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the context of our analysis of the role of fluidity in the formation of sexual identity and difference, Butler's critical reading of Irigaray is helpful if only because it sharpens yet again the complicated issue of the feminine other as "lack" as identified in the first part of this essay. I believe however that her remarks are not at all at odds with Irigaray's general philosophy. Like Butler, as I have tried to suggest, Irigaray is wary of establishing an "exclusively" female language that does nothing but reproduce the idea of fluidity as Identity's opposite. Irigaray's parler-femme is not a pre-established, exclusive, proper place outside language, like a category that belongs to women and that can operate in isolation from the dominant way of speaking and communicating.

[30] J. BUTLER, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge, New York 1993, p. 21.

[31] Additionally, Butler wonders why excess needs to be specifically feminine and why the feminine as such is "irreducible". On what grounds does one say that *only* the feminine is produced as excess of dominant processes of habituation, disciplination and cultural practices of "naming" and "gendering", for instance. How come is Irigaray not interested in including those who have been, like women, systemically repressed in language but who do not subscribe to her "category" of the feminine? See ivi.

A parler-femme simply entails not falling together with a position of lack.

Irigaray's idea of excess takes the form of transgression, which means that it is not purely detached from the (possibly oppressive) processes out of which it arises. Yet, its dynamics, effects, productivity, and creativity cannot be fully explained by those processes either. A parler-femme is an affirmative troubling of either/or distinctions, which operates *differently* than a reproductive, phallocentric logic that neutralises differences for the sake of symmetry. And not because it is posited or located outside of it – in spatial terms – but because it manages to emphasise other qualities of difference and fluidity than those that can be thought within a dualistic model and dialectics of thought. What is at stake is a different approach to the relationship between mimesis and the production of difference, which is precisely entangled with Irigaray's fluid account of mimesis. Indeed, *productive* mimesis is based on a categorically different understanding of mimesis than the one we have conceptualised based on Plato's mirror analogy.

3.2 *Productive mimesis*

I would like to return to Irigaray's double reading of the concept of mimesis in Plato for a moment. As explained, the reproductive matrix of mimesis finds its root in Platonic metaphysics, but Irigaray also sees a material, horizontal dimension of mimesis at play in Plato's dialogues, which she associates with musical practices. She suggests that these do not straightforwardly fit within a Platonic vertical ontology of Ideas as developed later in the *Republic*. So, contrary to most interpretations of mimesis in Plato, which tend to focus on secondary copying as discussed largely in books 7 and 10 of the *Republic*, Irigaray seems attentive to mimesis' productive forces, the earliest signs of which can be found in the connection between music, mime, plasticity, and mimesis in books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*[32].

[32] In debates on the concept of mimesis in aesthetics and philosophy of art, reproductive mimesis is often associated with Plato, while Aristotle develops a productive theory of mimesis. This division is based on their respective negative and positive views on the moral effects of mimesis on the wellbeing of society's citizens. While Aristotle lauded the cathartic effects of tragedy in accordance with dramatic principles, which he development in *Poetics*, Plato

Plato's discussion on interpersonal imitation based on a fluid interaction of ideas and affects exceeding the boundaries of the self, which he explains in the context of performance, is particularly relevant[33]. The ancient Greek problematic of "mimēsis" (from Greek, *mimos*, mime or performance), examined in *Republic*'s earlier books, has to do with the education and formation of the plastic souls of young

argued in *Republic* that artistic mimesis is an unnecessary, deceitful, frivolous activity that distracts us from seeking true knowledge. Irigaray however locates both passive and active accounts of mimesis in Plato. Passive, repetitive mimesis in Plato is "already caught up in a process of imitation, specularization, adequation, and reproduction", we read in *This Sex Which is Not One*, and is "privileged throughout the history of philosophy". Indeed, it is mimesis' definition of simple imitation or representation that we find in most books on Western aesthetics. When Irigaray connects Plato's active mimesis to "the realm of music", she foregrounds a conceptual trail on mimesis within the history of philosophy that is still largely underdeveloped but that is slowly getting more attention in contemporary thought. This turn (or *re*-turn) to the concept of mimesis, tends to exceed disciplinary boundaries and includes theorisations of mimesis located at the crossroads between anthropology, political theory, performance philosophy, affect theory, new materialism, musicology, and feminist philosophy. Recent publications include but are not limited to M. POTOLSKY, *Mimesis*, cit.; *Mimesis, Masochism, & Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, ed. by T. Murray, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2000; E. DIAMOND, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre*, Routledge, New York 2003; S. IJSSELING, *Mimesis : on Appearing and Being*, Kok Pharos Pub. House, Kampen 1997; D. VILLEGAS VELEZ, *Interruption-Intervention: On the Interval Between Literature and Music in Jean-Luc Nancy's «Myth Interrupted»*, in «Performance Philosophy», V, 2 (2020), pp. 183-202; N. LAWTOO, *The Plasticity of Mimesis*, in «MLN», CXXXII, 5 (2017), pp. 1201-1224; ID., *The Critic as Mime: Wilde's Theoretical Performance*, in «symploke», XXVI, 1 (2018), pp. 307-328; ID., *Conrad's Shadow: Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing 2016; ID., *The Case of Eichmann Restaged : Arendt, Evil, and the Complexity of Mimesis*, in «Political Research Quarterly», LXXIV, 2 (2021), pp. 479-490.

[33] Plato's short dialogue, *Ion*, is interesting in this context as well. In this text, Socrates converses with the rhapsode Ion about the nature of performing Homer's works. They discuss, specifically, the relationship between rhapsodic performance, divine possession and interpersonal, mimetic affects that circulate during Ion's "magnetic" performance. See PLATO, *The Statesman; Philebus; Ion*, trans. by H.N. Fowler, W.R.M. Lamb, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2014.

children through musical, physical and theatrical exercises and practices.[34] Theatrical performance and music, commonly known as "*mousikē*", was considered at that time to be (partly) responsible for forming human character and constitution [*ethē te kai phusin*][35]. As Miles Burnyeat has argued in line with figures such as Eric Havelock and Martin Puchner, when Plato discusses general mimesis, «what he is chiefly talking about is the words and music by which the culture is transmitted from one generation to the next»[36]. Performative actions within this cultural context were not exclusive to those training to become an actor or musician. Rather, mimetic enactment was part of the general upbringing of citizens. In this ancient light, the theatrical elements at play in mimesis are not framed within a representational understanding of theatre as we know it today (largely due to the influence of Aristotle's *Poetics*). In Books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*, the metaphysical order of model and copy predicated on the condition of sameness (i.e., reproductive mimesis) is already fundamentally under scrutiny.

One of the most notable figures of the "*mimesthai*-group" in the fifth century, the Sicilian mime, is exemplary of the affective physicality and fluidity at play in the mimetic enactment of identity and character. Based on the evidence, although many manifestations of mime practices were active at that time, the common denominator of mime was the ability to undercut any division between fiction and reality, that is, visible representation and the world "as it is". As Göran Sörbom explains in his work on the origins of mimesis, the main characteristic of the style of mime is not «the similarity relation between model and copy (*i.e.* an actual correspondence of essential qualities), between model and representation, as in portraits, but the power to realize a type of phenomenon by means of a choice of typical and characterizing qualities»[37]. According to this definition, miming is not focused on perfectly duplicating a model but aiming at a powerful

[34] PLATO, *Republic: books 1-5*, ed. by C. Emlyn-Jones, W. Preddy, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2013, pp. 192-193 (376e-377b).

[35] S. HALLIWELL, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2009, p. 19.

[36] M.F. BURNYEAT, *Art and Mimesis in Plato's Republic*, in *Plato on Art and Beauty*, ed. by A. Denham, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2012, pp. 54-71.

[37] G. SÖRBOM, *Mimesis and Art: Studies in the Origin and Early Development of an Aesthetic Vocabulary*, Svenska bokförlaget, Stockolm 1966, p. 27.

evocation and experimentation of «typical and characterizing qualities». For the execution of this activity, it is irrelevant whether these qualities "exist", are "made up", come "from the gods", if they represent an "ideal", or if they simply obey the act of joyful repetition; all these possibilities are *simultaneously* present without discrimination[38]. Mime in this context means the rejection of adhering to *one* model in favour of a creative enactment of an assemblage of qualities that remain fluid throughout the act and without dissolving into each other. Qualities obtained in this way do not disintegrate as an undifferentiated multitude (then the self would fall apart) but rather are held together from moment to moment by ever-changing formations of interacting parts. It is important to stress that Plato views this phenomenon of productive mimesis as not restricted to professional actors but to the constitution of human subjectivity (the constitution of the "soul") in general.[39]

This short detour via Plato may cast a new light on the productive formation of the sexuate, feminine self as suggested by Irigaray. The central idea of mimesis as affirmative, material *realisation* involving a *simultaneity* and *horizontality* of individuating moments and qualities with different ontological origins (physical, imaginary, symbolic, aesthetic…) corresponds with Irigaray's notion of a creative exploration of sexuate being. Sexuate identity entails a mimetic, corporeal relation to what is other (like the mime evoking "other" qualities for its characterisation), which is simultaneously inside and outside of the self and constituted as a multitude of perceptive and corporeal possibilities[40].

[38] It is the human capacity to produce and replicate an ontological multiplicity that Plato, ultimately, wants to reduce and control, which is indeed one of his main objections against mimesis in general.

[39] Of course, Plato's moral attitude on this issue will be negative but what is at stake is his intuition regarding the constitutive relation between mimesis and the productive (self-regulating) notions of becoming, fluidity, and multiplicity.

[40] It is, I believe, on these grounds that some have attributed the idea of the "sensible transcendental" to Irigaray. Lorraine Tamsin, for instance, writes in *Irigaray and Deleuze* (1999) about the constitutive relation between the feminine and otherness in Irigaray: «The otherness crucial to creative engenderment is to be found not in a transcendent realm of the divine or in mystified notions of Being but here-right-now within and through our relations with concrete others. It is in the corporeal and conceptual exchanges of ourselves with others

In this light, productive mimesis is a fluid, open-ended structure. It designates how to execute, perceive, and experiment with traces of the feminine, which is the very foundation of what it involves being a woman, for Irigaray. If women are denied their fluid, plural and transformative sexuate potential this means that their entire being and purpose of living – their «ontological desire, the desire to be», as Rosi Braidotti puts it – is violated[41].

3.3 *Sexual Dissymmetry*

The productivity of fluid qualities, conceptualised above in the context of Plato's early intuitions about mimesis, shifts the concept of "difference" as regards sexual difference from *one* dualistic model of the two (male and female) sexes to a relation between two or more concrete individuals who already independently of each other constitute a (irreducible) mode of differentiation within themselves. What is at play in a sexuate account of difference is the *encounter* of varying modes of sexual differentiations presented by the people involved *respecting the corporeal and symbolic significance of their sex*. And this includes the order of the imaginary. So, a female imaginary cannot be "compared" to a male imaginary because they do not represent "two" "equal" orders. The working of the imaginary in identity formation is such that it is linked to the sexual morphology of concrete people. It does not take the shape of a lucid, graspable set of images, ideals and convictions that can simply be detached from processes of symbolisation. Dissymmetry between the sexes means thus that "one" imaginary cannot be opposed to "another" imaginary and then compared and evaluated on the same grounds.

Let me give an example using Irigaray's view on female sexuality. For women, it is impossible to relate to one's body and sexuality as a unified, one-dimensional, reproductive system. Her sexual pleasure

that we create – through contact with that which always exceeds ourselves and so exceeds any corporeal or conceptual patterns we may have already established – new ways of being in the world» (L. TAMSIN, *Irigaray and Deleuze: Experiments in Visceral Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2018, p. 70).

[40] L. IRIGARAY, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1993, pp. 128-129.

[41] R. BRAIDOTTI, *Becoming Woman*, cit., p. 44.

might include but is not reduced to her ability to have children, for example. The imaginary notion of giving birth has symbolic value, not primarily because of society's standards regarding womanhood (although that might play a role too), but because this possibility is implicated in the specific functioning of the sexual organ. *How* this is implicated is precisely what a philosophy of sexual difference ought to investigate. Irigaray provides several conceptual and visual instruments to do so. Her invention of the image of the two sets of lips, for example, both visually and physically associated with the vagina, is but one possible philosophical starting point to conceptualise a sexuate ontology of difference, in this case sprung from a female morphology. She writes in *Marine Lover* (1980):

> She does not set herself up as one, as a (single) female unit. She is not closed up or around one single truth or essence. The essence of a truth remains foreign to her. She neither has nor is a being. And she does not oppose a feminine truth to a masculine truth. Because this would once again amount to playing the – man's – game of castration. If the female sex takes place by embracing itself, by endlessly sharing and exchanging its lips, its edges, its borders, and their 'content', as it ceaselessly becomes other, no stability of essence is proper to her. She has a place in the openness of a relation to the other whom she does not take into herself, like a whore, but to whom she continuously gives birth[42].

What catches the eye is Irigaray's use of the notion of giving birth. Rather than assuming its culturally accepted definition of *reproduction*, Irigaray sees giving birth as the product of a particular corporeal and conceptual dynamic between two bodies, namely as the way in which the ever-changing, differentiating lips relate internally and with the other. The female sex never fully absorbs and coincides with what is other as the unfolding of the lips become the context, the mise-en-scene, of birth, both of her own becoming and of the other. Here, the metaphor of giving birth becomes the ontological predicate for the execution, actualisation, and experimentation of female desire. Within this philosophical context, the choice of "actually" becoming a mother is *secondary* and hence not necessary for the development of female desire as such:

[42] L. IRIGARAY, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Columbia University Press, New York 1993, p. 86.

> And she has no need *once* to be a mother, *one* day to produce *one* child, to make her sex the place of unceasing birthing. To be a woman, she does not have to be a mother, unless she wants to set a limit to her growth and her gift for life. Motherhood is only once specific way to fulfil the operation: giving birth. Which is never one, unique, and definitive[43].

For Irigaray, the radical concept of the two sets of lips penetrates the realm of philosophy, and more specifically, her theoretical investigation of difference. For her, thinking philosophically about difference is only fruitful if it includes these kinds of models of being sexuate. The singularity of female desire (as open-ended and context-and-body-specific), as I have briefly sketched out above, can be a source for a philosophy of difference. It also broadens our definition of the so-called "feminist cause", in the sense that it improves the diversification and depth of the existing conceptual frameworks, which still carry a deeply engrained hostility against the notion of doing philosophy on feminine terms.

As I have aimed to show in this paper, advocating for the importance of the concept of sexual difference presupposes rejecting the reproduction of a dualistic model of sexual identity (historically framed within a system of symmetry) in favour of a productive mimesis of the sexuate self: a creative actualisation of corporeal and conceptual relations to otherness, based on sexual dissymmetry. It is the still largely underdeveloped notion of fluidity in the face of the conceptualisation of difference that should guide us in our philosophical and feminist problematisation of the primacy of the same.

> If we continue to speak the same language to each other, we will reproduce the same story. Begin the same stories all over again. Don't you feel it? Listen: men and women around us all sound the same. Same arguments, same quarrels, same scenes. Same attractions and separations. Same difficulties, the impossibility of reaching each other. Same…same…. Always the same[44].

[43] *Ibidem*.

[44] L. IRIGARAY, *When Our Lips Speak Together*, in «Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society», VI, 1 (1980), p. 69.