Female Grotesques
Carnival and Theory

Pretex

There is a phrase that still resonates from childhood. Who says it? The mother's voice—not my own mother's, perhaps, but the voice of an aunt, an older sister, or the mother of a friend. It is a harsh, matronizing phrase, directed towards the behavior of other women:

"She" [the other woman] is making a spectacle out of herself.

Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure. Men, I learned somewhat later in life, "exposed themselves," but that operation was quite deliberate and circumscribed. For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap—a loose dingy bra strap especially—were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy. It was my impression that these women had done something wrong, had stepped, as it were, into the limelight out of turn—too young or too old, too early or too late—and yet anyone, any woman, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful. It is a feature of my own history and education that in contemplating these dangers, I grew to admire both the extreme strategies of the cool, silent, and cloistered St. Clare (enclosed, with a room of her own) and the lewd, exuberantly parodistic Mae West.
Although the models, of course, change, there is a way in which radical negation, silence, withdrawal, and invisibility, and the bold affirmations of feminine performance, imposture, and masquerade (purity and danger) have suggested cultural politics for women.

Theory of Carnival and the Carnival of Theory

The above extremes are not mutually exclusive, and in various and interesting ways they have figured around each other. Feminist theory, and cultural production more generally, have most recently brought together these strategies in approaching the questions of difference and the reconstruction or counterproduction of knowledge. In particular, the impressive amount of work across the discourse of carnival, or, more properly, the carnivalesque—much of it in relation to the work of Bakhtin—has translocated the issues of bodily exposure and containment, disguise and gender masquerade, abjection and marginality, parody and excess, to the field of the social constituted as a symbolic system. Seen as a productive category, affirmative and celebratory (a Nietzschean gay science), the discourse of carnival moves away from modes of critique from some Archimedean point of authority without, to models of transformation and counterproduction situated within the social system and symbolically at its margins.2

The reintroduction of the body and categories of the body (in the case of carnival, the “grotesque body”) into the realm of what is called the “political” has been a central concern of feminism. What is of great interest at this critical conjuncture is the assessment of how materials on carnival as historical performance may be configured with materials on carnival as semiotic performance; in other words, how the relation between the symbolic and cultural constructs of femininity and Womanness, and the experience of women (as variously identified and subject to multiple determinations), might be brought together towards a dynamic model of a new social subjectivity. The early work of Julia Kristeva on semiotics, subjectivity, and textual rev-

Fig. 9 Jacqueline Hayden, “Figure Model Series” 1991–92. Aging and excess as female performance. By permission of the artist.
olution, and the more recent contributions of Teresa de Lauretis in mapping the terrain of a genuinely sociological and feminist semiotics, are crucial to this undertaking. This project is the grand one. More modestly, an examination of the materials on carnival can also recall limitations, defeats, and indifference generated by carnival’s complicitous place in dominant culture. There are special dangers for women and other excluded or marginalized groups within carnival, though even the double jeopardy that I will describe may suggest an ambivalent redeployment of taboos around the female body as grotesque (the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body), and as unruly when set loose in the public sphere.

Not at all surprisingly, much of the early work on carnival in anthropology and social history dates from the late sixties, when enactments of popular protest, counterculture, experimental theater, and multimedia art were all together suggestive of the energies and possibilities of unlimited cultural and social transformation. In many ways, this chapter is generated from the cultural surplus of that era. The work of Mary Douglas and Victor Turner—which was as influen-
tial in social history as, more recently, the work of Clifford Geertz—
saw in the human body the prototype of society, the nation-state, and
the city, and in the social dramas of transition and “rituals of status
reversal” evidence of the reinforcement of social structure, hierarchy,
and order through inversion. In liminal states, thus, temporary loss
of boundaries tends to redefine social frames, and such topsy-turvy
or time out is inevitably set back on course. This structural view
of carnival as essentially conservative is both strengthened and enlarged
by historical analysis, which tends, of course, to be the political
history of domination. The extreme difficulty of producing lasting
social change does not diminish the usefulness of these symbolic
models of transgression, and the histories of subaltern and counter-
productive cultural activity are never as neatly closed as structural
models might suggest.

Natalie Davis, in what remains the most interesting piece on car-
nival and gender, “Women on Top,” argues dialectically that in early
modem Europe, carnival and the image of carnivalesque woman
“undermined as well as reinforced” the renewal of existing social
structure.

The image of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep
women in their place. On the contrary, it was a multivalent image
that could operate, first, to widen behavioral options for women
within and even outside marriage, and second, to sanction riot and
political disobedience for both men and women in a society that
allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest. Play with an
unruly woman is partly a chance for temporary release from the tra-
ditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part of the conflict over
efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society.

Among Davis’ very interesting examples of the second possibility—
that is, the image of the unruly or carnivalesque woman actually
working to incite and embody popular uprisings—are the Wiltshire
enclosure riots of 1641, where rioting men were led by male cross-
dressers who called themselves “Lady Skimmingstone” (a skimming
was a ride through the streets mocking a henpecked husband, the
name probably referring to the big skimming ladle that could be used
for husband beatings). The projection of the image of the fierce
virago onto popular movements, especially a movement such as this
one, involving the transgression of boundaries, is suggestive from the
point of view of social transformation. What may it tell us about the
construction of the female subject in history within this political sym-
bology? Merely to sketch out the obvious problems in working toward
an answer to this question, one might begin with the assumption that
the history of the enclosure riots and the image of the unruly woman
are not direct reflections of one another; both contain ambiguities and
gender asymmetries that require historical and textual readings.

These readings are difficult in both areas. First, the history of popular
movements has been largely the history of men; a stronger history of
women in mixed and autonomous uprisings is needed to assess the place
of women as historical subjects in relation to such uprisings. Second, as
a form of representation, masquerade of the feminine (what psychoana-
lytic theory will insist is femininity par excellence) has its distinct prob-
lems. The carnivalesque woman such as Lady Skimmingstone, whose comic
female masquerade of those “feminine” qualities of strident wildly
aggression, behind whose skirts men are protected and provoked to
action, is an image that, however counterproduced, perpetuates the
dominant (and, in this case, misogynistic) representation of women by
men. In the popular tradition of this particular example, Lady
Skimmingstone is mocked alongside her henpecked husband, for she
embodies the despised aspects of “strong” femininity, and her subordi-
nate position in society is, in part, underlined in this enactment of
power reversal.

Furthermore, although the origins of this image in male-dominated
culture may be displaced, there remain questions of enactment and
gender-layering. Are women who have taken on this role (as opposed
to men cross-dressing) as effective as male cross-dressers? Or is it, like
the contemporary “straight” drag of college boys in the amateur the-
atricals of elite universities, a clear case of sanctioned play for men,
always risking self-contempt for women to put on “the feminine?”
addition, one must ask of any representation other questions—questions of style, genre, and contextuality which may cut across the issue of gender. Is the parodic and hyperbolic style of Lady Skimmington as a leader of men a sign of insurgency and lower-class solidarity for women and men? Does this comic female style work to free women from a more confining aesthetic? Or are women again so identified with style itself that they are as estranged from its liberatory and transgressive effects as they are from their own bodies as signs in culture generally? In what sense can women really produce or make spectacles of themselves?

Historical inquiry may yield instances of performance (symbolic and political) that may bypass the pessimism of psychoanalytically oriented answers to this last question, but only if that history begins to understand the complexity of treating signifying systems and “events” together. In this regard, even the work on female political iconography and social movements by very distinguished social historians, such as Maurice Agulhon and Eric Hobsbawm, remains problematic. This methodological difficulty does not prevent historians from becoming increasingly aware of gender differences in relation to the carnivalesque. Other social historians have documented the insight of the anthropologist Victor Turner, that the marginal position of women and others in the “indicative” world makes their presence in the “subjunctive” or possible world of the topsy-turvy carnival “quintessentially” dangerous; in fact, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie shows in Carnival at Romans, Jews were stoned, and there is evidence that women were raped during carnival festivities. In other words, in the everyday indicative world, women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive—dangerous, and in danger.

With these complexities no doubt in mind, Davis concluded her brilliant article with the hope that “the woman on top might even facilitate innovation in historical theory and political behavior” (Davis, 131). Since the writing of her article, the conjuncture of a powerful women's movement and feminist scholarship has facilitated further interrogation of the relationship between symbology and social change. The figure of the female transgressor as public spectacle is still powerfully resonant, and the possibilities of redeploying this representation as a demystifying or utopian model have not been exhausted.

The Carnivalesque Body

Investigation of linguistic and culture contexts in relation to categories of carnival and the body have been inspired recently by a new reception in English-speaking countries of the work of Bakhtin. Like the work of Davis and Le Roy Ladurie, Bakhtin’s work on carnival is at one level an historical description of carnival in early modern Europe. It offers, as well, a prescriptive model of a socialist collectivity.

In the introduction to his study of Rabelais, Bakhtin enumerates three forms of carnival folk culture: ritual spectacles (which include feasts, pageants, and marketplace festivals of all kinds); comic verbal compositions, including parodies both oral and written; and various genres of billingsgate (curses, oaths, profanations, marketplace speech). The laughter of carnival associated with these spectacles and unconstrained speech in the Middle Ages was, for Bakhtin, entirely positive. The Romantic period, in contrast, saw laughter “cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm” (RW, 37–38). The privatism and individualism of this later humor made it regenerative and lacking in communal hilarity. Without pretense to historical neutrality, Bakhtin’s focus on carnival in early modern Europe contains a critique of modernity and its stylistic effects as a radical diminishment of the possibilities of human freedom and cultural production. He considers the culture of modernity to be as austere and bitterly isolating as the official religious culture of the Middle Ages, which he contrasts with the joy and heterogeneity of carnival and the carnivalesque style and spirit. Bakhtin’s view of Rabelais and carnival is, in some ways, nostalgic for a socially diffuse oppositional context which has been lost, but which is perhaps more importantly suggestive of a future social horizon that may release new possibilities of speech and social perform-
ance. The categories of carnivalesque speech and spectacle are heterogeneous, in that they contain the protocols and styles of high culture in and from a position of debasement. The masks and voices of carnivalesque resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society. It is as if the carnivalesque body politic had ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in its bloated and irrepressible state, released it in fits and starts in all manner of recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation. The political implications of this heterogeneity are obvious: it sets carnival apart from the merely oppositional and reactive. Carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure. In its multivalent oppositional play, carnival refuses to surrender the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class, and in this sense, carnival can be seen, above all, as a site of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal.

The central category around which Bakhtin organizes his reading of Rabelais as a carnivalesque text is "grotesque realism," with particular emphasis on the grotesque body. The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism: the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world. Bakhtin finds his concept of the grotesque embodied in the Kerch terracotta figurines of senile, pregnant hags. Here is Bakhtin describing the figurines:

This is typical and very strongly expressed grotesque. It is ambivalent. It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth. There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine senile, decaying, and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed . . . Moreover, the old hags are laughing (RW, 25-26).

Homologically, the grotesque body is the figure of the socialist state to come, a state unfinished, which, as it "outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (RW, 26). For Bakhtin, this body is, as well, a model for carnivale language; a culturally productive linguistic body in constant semiosis. But, for the feminist reader, this image of the pregnant hag is more than ambivalent. It is loaded with all of the connotations of fear and loathing around the biological processes of reproduction and of aging. Bakhtin, like many other social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesque remains in all directions repressed and undeveloped.

Yet, Bakhtin’s description of these ancient crones is at least exuberant. Almost to prove his point about the impossibility of collective mirth over such images in the period of late capitalism here, in contrast, the voice of Paul Celan: "Women you know, they want by candlelight, they spoil, melt, twist, ooze! [...] The end of tapers is a horrible sight, the end of ladies too . . ."]12 Quoted and glossed by Julia Kristeva as a portrait of "a muse in the true tradition of the lowly genres—apocalyptic, Menippean, carnivalesque," this passage suggests the dark festival of transgression which she charts in Powers
of Horror (Kristeva, 169). This book—which contrasts with her indispensable application of Bakhtin in, for instance, “Word, Dialogue, and the Novel” and Polylogue—draws on Mary Douglas’ categories of purity and defilement to arrive, through the analytical processes of transference, at the brink of abjection.

Through the convolutions of Céline’s relentlessly misogynist and anti-Semitic writing, Kristeva as author and problematized subject has projected herself towards the grotesque, which she sees as the “undoer of narcissism and of all imaginary identity as well” (Kristeva, 208). As Kristeva focuses on Céline, her own text increasingly takes on his rhetoric of abjection, which interestingly comes to rest in the category of the maternal. Kristeva writes: “Abject...the jettisoned object is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses...on the edge of non-existence and hallucination” (Kristeva, 2). And elsewhere: “Something maternal...bears upon the uncertainty of what I call abjection” (Kristeva, 208). The fascination with the maternal body in childbirth, the fear of and repulsion from it throughout the chosen texts of Céline, constitutes it here again as a privileged site of liminality and defilement. Kristeva writes:

When Céline locates the ultimate of abjection—and thus the supreme and sole interest of literature—in the birth-giving scene, he makes amply clear which fantasy is involved: something horrible to see at the impossible doors of the invisible—the mother’s body. The scene of scenes is here not the so-called primal scene but the one of giving birth, incest turned inside out, flaved identity. Giving birth: the height of bloodshed and life, scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), horror and beauty, sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual...At the doors of the feminine, at the doors of abjection, as I defined the term earlier, we are also, with Céline, given the most daring X-ray of the “drive foundations” of fascism (Kristeva, 155-156).11

While there are many general reasons for questioning the use of the maternal in recent French criticism, here I think the point may be that the accumulated horror and contempt these descriptions of the maternal body suggest generate a subliminal defense of the maternal, which then reemerges in Kristeva as an idealized category far from the realities of motherhood as a construction or as a lived experience. Jews, unlike mothers, would seem to merely drop out of the field of abjection, as the anti-Semitism of Céline becomes for Kristeva a problem of maintaining the categorical imperatives of identity and the political.14

The book ends on a note of mystical subjectivity: near “the quiet shore of contemplation,” far from the polis (Kristeva, 210). On the verge, at the limit of this avant-garde frontier, there remains only writing.15 Peter Stallybrass and Allen White, in their book on the politics and poetics of transgression, have called the exclusion of the already marginalized in moves such as these “displaced abjection.”16 As I have argued, both in the history of carnival and in its theory, the category of the female body as grotesque (in, for instance, pregnancy or aging) brings to light just such displacements. How this category might be used affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty, or to realign the mechanism of desire, is discussed elsewhere in this book.17

Carnival of Theory

There has been, as well, a carnival of theory at the discursive level, in the poetics of postmodernist criticism and feminist writing. This has included all manner of textual tryst, “mimetic rivalry,” semiotic delinquency, parody, teasing, posing, flirting, masquerade, seduction, counter-seduction, tightrope walking, and verbal aerialism of all kinds. Performances of displacement, double displacements, and more have permeated much feminist writing in our attempts to muscle in on the discourses of Lacanian psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and avant-garde writing and postmodernist visual art. It could even be said, with reservation, that in relation to academic institutions, what has come to be called “theory” has constituted a kind of carnival space. The practice
of criticism informed by this theory has taken great license stylistically, and in its posing posed a threat of sorts.

It is interesting to consider the discourse of carnival and poststructuralism together. In 1980, Michele Richman, in her essay, "Sex and Signs: Language of French Feminist Criticism," saw in the proliferation of literature on festival in France a reaction primarily to structuralism and to the structuralist economy of exchange within which, as Lévi-Strauss described it, women circulate as signs but are not theorized as sign producers. The festival or carnival discourse drew upon the work of Marcel Mauss (and, as importantly, on the writing of Georges Bataille) on the gift, or dépense, as that which exceeds this linguistically modelled economy. As Richman indicates, the discussion of dépense was relocated within a more general libidinal economy of desire. The generosity of femininity and feminine writing (écriture féminine) is privileged over male dépense, which is understood as being simultaneously a demand. The female body is the site of this desirous excess.

In terms strikingly similar to Bakhtin’s formulation of the grotesque body as continuous process, Hélène Cixous calls it "the body without beginning and without end." Female sexuality and especially the mother’s body, as it figures simultaneously demarcation and dissolution of identity, serve this cultural project of disrupting the political economy of the sign as it is produced in dominant discourse. This écriture féminine, which has been admirably discussed elsewhere by U.S. feminists, can be and has been done by men (in fact, modernist writers such as Joyce are often mentioned as models); how the male-authored or travestied "feminine" is different, and how the inscription of the female body in the texts produced by women may be usefully contextualized elsewhere, are still important and unanswered questions, although the critiques of this feminization of writing as essentialist must be taken into account in reconsiderations of these topics.

Beyond essentialism there are, as I have indicated earlier, other historical and anthropological warnings to heed. Even within France, there have been critiques of the feminine textual festival. Annie Leclerc has chided the "delirious adulators of the festival," and Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément in The Newly Born Woman parallel the carnivalesque with hysterical crisis. In terms similar to earlier critiques of carnival, they see the cultural category of hysteria as the only form of contestation possible in certain types of social organization, within the context of the village community; it is also a safety valve. This language not yet at the point of verbal expression, restrained within the bond of the body ... remains convulsive. Men look but they do not hear.

Historically, Cixous and Clément are right: Hysteries and madwomen generally have ended up in the attic or in the asylum, their gestures of pain and defiance having served only to put them out of circulation. As a figure of representation, however, hysteria may be less recuperable.
The famous photographs commissioned by Charcot, which chart the various stages in the patients of Salpêtrière, fix in attitude and gesture, in grimaces and leaps, a model of performance not unlike the fashionable histrionics of the great Romantic actresses and circus artists of the late nineteenth century. These paid performers were, like women hystericus, "seen but not heard," in one sense, since the scene of their livelihood, their context, it can be argued, was arranged by and for the male viewer. Nonetheless, they used their bodies in public, in extravagant ways that could have only provoked wonder and ambivalence in the female viewer, as such latitude of movement and attitude was not permitted most women without negative consequences.

This hyperbolic style, this "overacting," like the staged photographs of Salpêtrière (whatever Charcot's claims were to scientific documentation), can be read as double representations: as mimics of the somatizations of the women patients whose historical performances were lost to themselves and recuperated into the medical science and medical discourse which maintain their oppressive hold on women. The photographs of Salpêtrière especially strike us as uncanny because of the repetitiveness of the hysterical performance. It is not only the content of the hysterical behavior that strikes us as grotesque, but its representation: if hysteria is a dis-play, these photographs display the display. If hysteria is understood as feminine in its image, accoutrements, and stage business (rather than its physiology), then it may be used to rig us up (for lack of the phallic term) into discourse. The possibility, indeed the necessity, of using the female body in this sense allows for the distance necessary for articulation. Luce Irigaray describes this provisional strategy as follows:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself simply to be reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of "perceptible," of "matter"—to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repeti-

What is called mimesis here is elsewhere, with various modifications, called masquerade (Irigaray herself reserves the latter term to refer negatively to the false position of women experiencing desire only as male desire for them). Female sexuality as masquerade is a well-noted psychoanalytic category. Jacques Lacan, a great poseur himself, has written of female sexuality as masking a lack, pretending to hide what is, in fact, not there:

Paradoxical as this formulation might seem, I would say that it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of desire of the Other, that the woman will reject an essential part of her femininity, notably all its attributes through masquerade. It is for what she is not that she expects to be desired as well as loved.

The mask here is seen as feminine (for men and women), rather than something that hides a stable feminine identity. Femininity is a mask which masks nonidentity. According to Lacan, that produces an unexpected side effect for the man anxious to appear manly:

The fact that femininity takes refuge in this mask, because of the Verdungung inherent to the phallic mark of desire, has the strange consequence that, in the human being, virile display itself appears as feminine (Lacan, 85).

In film theory Mary Anne Deane has problematized the female spectator, using the essay of Jean Ricœur on "Womanliness and Masquerade." Her argument is that masquerade can "manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, producible, and readable by women." It is, in other words, a way around the theorization of the spectator only in
terms of the male gaze, and the male categories of voyeurism and fetishistic pleasure. More generally, Doane's discussion of Riviere is extremely useful in explaining the asymmetries of transvestism, which, for a woman, has always been necessary, in some sense, in order for her to take part in a man's world. For a woman to dress, act, or position herself in discourse as a man is easily understandable and culturally compelling. To "act like a woman" beyond narcissism and masochism is, for psychoanalytic theory, trickier. That is the critical and hopeful power of masquerade. Deliberately assumed and foregrounded, femininity as a mask, for a man, is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition; for a woman, a similar flaunting of the feminine is a take-it-and-leave-it possibility. To put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off.

These considerations account for some of the interest in masquerade for those contemporary artists and critics whose work on imposture and dissimulation tends to stress the constructed, invented, and (to use Gayatri Spivak's wonderful phrase) the "scrupulously fake." Spivak reads Nietzsche's characterization of female sexual pleasure as masquerade ("They 'give themselves,' even when they—give themselves. The female is so artistic") as an originial displacement, occluding "an unacknowledged envy: a man cannot fake an orgasm" (Spivak, 170). Reading Derrida, she sees the figure of woman displaced twice over. "Double displacement," she suggests, might be undone in carefully fabricated "useful and scrupulously fake readings in place of the passively active fake orgasm." Such readings may suggest new ways of making new spectacles of oneself.

Other work on masquerade has a more explicitly sociopolitical dimension, which greatly enriches psychoanalytic and deconstructive approaches to the material (I am thinking, for instance, of Dick Hebdige's work on subculture and Homi Bhabha's work on mimicry and the colonial subject). For feminist theory, particularly, a more specifically historical and social use of masquerade may be needed, perhaps in the context of larger discussions of social groups and categories of the feminine mask in colonized and subcultural contexts, or in relation to other guises of the carnivalesque body. Nonetheless, the hyperboles of masquerade and carnival suggest, at least, some preliminary "acting out" of the dilemmas of femininity.

**General Laughter and the Laughter of Carnival**

Feminist theory itself has been travestied, hidden and unacknowledged in many discussions of subjectivity and gender. It is part of what Elaine Showalter has called "critical cross-dressing." The fathers of French theory alluded to here are, in fact, all masters of mise-en-scène. Even Derrida, whose persona has been more diffidently drawn in his writings, has been recently showcased as a carnival master.

The interview with Derrida published in *Critical Exchange*, in which he speaks of women and feminism, is quite as interesting for what he says about feminists as for the mise-en-scène. Derrida restates his reservations about feminism as a form of phallocentrism (fair enough). Later, he says that feminism is tantamount to phallocentrism (not so fair). James Creech, who edited and translated the interview, states that he attempted "to reproduce its conversational tone, with interruptions, ellipses, suspensions and laughter that marked a very cordial and freeform discussion. Essentially nothing has been edited out, and the reader can follow the subtext of associations which lead from one moment of discussion to another." (Creech, et al., 30) The transcription is punctuated by parenthetical laughter and occasionally in bold face "General Laughter." For instance:

...certain feminists, certain women struggling in the name of feminism—may see in deconstruction only what will not allow itself to be feminist. That's why they try to constitute a sort of target, a silhouette, a shooting gallery almost, where they spot phallocentrism and beat up on it [*appunt-dessus*]. Just as Said and others constitute an enemy in the image [*LAUGHTER*] of that against which they have ready arms, in the same way, I think certain feminists as they begin to read certain texts, focus on particular themes out of haste.
and say, “Well, there you have it...” (I don’t know exactly who one could think of in this regard, but I know it goes on.) In France I recall a very violent reaction from a feminist who upon reading Spurs and seeing the multiplication of phallic images—spurs, umbrellas, etc.—said, “So, it’s a phallocentric text,” and started kicking up a violent fuss, charging about like a bull perhaps...

[GENERAL LAUGHTER] (Critical Exchange, 30)

This is a startling scene—the feminist as raging bull: (“I don’t know exactly who one can think of in this regard, but I know it goes on”). The bull in the shooting gallery, spotting and targeting, “kicking up a violent fuss, charging about.” Is this textual spotting and targeting a reverse image? Is phallogocentrism really tantamount to feminism here? Is this a male dressed as a female dressing as a male? What kind of drag is this? Who is waving the red flag? And, who must join this “general laughter”? The laughter of carnival is communal and spontaneous, but general laughter in this context is coercive, and like much comedy, participated in by the marginalized only in an effort to pass. But it can be heard from another position.

A counter scene is offered in the films of Yvonne Rainer, whose past as a performance artist puts her in a particularly good position to stage theory and intellectual comedy. In her 1985 film The Man Who Enraged Women (“I don’t know exactly who one can think of in this regard, but I know it goes on”), the man stands behind a female student, his hands gripping her shoulders as she asks the difference between the subject-in-process and the everyday individual with choices and identifications to make. He replies (paraphrasing Foucault): in the very enactment of the power relations which are being almost simultaneously affirmed and denied.

In another Rainer film, Journeys from Berlin/1971 (1980), the joke is Jean-Paul Sartre’s in another interview. Reference is made to Sartre’s trip to West Germany to visit the imprisoned terrorists awaiting trial. When asked why he only visited the cell of Andreas Baader and not that of his accomplice Ulrike Meinhoff, he replies, “The gang is called Baader-Meinhoff but Meinhoff-Baader, isn’t it?” In the voice over, two people laugh, the man because he is pleased with the old intellectual’s intellectual prowess, the woman because she hears the joke as on Sartre himself in decadence.

What Rainer stages is a dialogical laughter, the laughter of intertext and multiple identifications. It is the conflictual laughter of social subjects in a classist, racist, ageist, sexist society. It is the laughter we have now: other laughter for other times. Carnival and carnival laughter remain on the horizon with a new social subjectivity.

For now, right now, as I acknowledge the work of feminists in reconstituting knowledge, I imagine us going forward, growing old (I hope), or being grotesque in other ways. I see us viewed by ourselves and others, in our bodies and in our work, in ways that are continuously shifting the terms of viewing, so that looking at us, there will be a new question, the question that never occurred to Bakhtin in front of the Kerch terracotta figurines—Why are these old hags laughing?