



The Feminine Body, Touch and Violence: A reading of Shirin Neshat's *Women Without Men* (*Zanan-e Bedun-e Mardan*, 2009) and Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* (*La teta asustada*, 2009)

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Agnieszka Piotrowska reminds us –via the work of Jean Luc Nancy – of the complexity of speaking about and exploring touch, as it is ‘something that is indeed very difficult, if possible at all, to talk about’. Yet, ‘the connections of the body, the language and the touching are worth considering from a different perspective’ (Piotrowska, 2016: 74). Inspired by this idea, this article seeks to contribute to important global, contemporary feminist discussions around the body and violence, offering a timely intervention into feminist, film-philosophical debates. Furthermore, I argue, via two selected cinematic works, namely Shirin Neshat's *Women Without Men* (*Zanan-e Bedun-e Mardan*, 2009) and Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* (*La teta asustada*, 2009), that their female authorial voices offer a compelling and diverse audio-visual representation of violence and brutality against women through the eyes of the main female protagonists.

There is a long history of violence in relation to the image, including the cinematic image. Steven Shaviro (1993) – via the work of Jacques Lacan and Walter Benjamin – draws attention to the way in which an engagement with cinematic texts affects us as viewers, foregrounding an embodied experience of viewing that is inherently violent. He explains:

Cinema allows me and forces me to see what I cannot assimilate or grasp. It assaults the eye and ear, it touches and it wounds. It foregrounds the body, apart from the comforting representations that I use to keep it at a distance. This touch, this contact, is excessive: it threatens my very sense of self. (Shaviro, 1993: 258-259)

Because of the feeling of threat to the self, the viewer cannot simply turn away – but instead is ‘forced’ to watch. This physical and violent relationship with cinematic images chimes with Barbara Creed's argument concerning horror movies, where common expressions such as “‘It scared the shit out of me’”; “‘It made me feel sick’”; [and] “‘It gave me the creeps’” underline the link to the body and our bodily reaction as viewers to screen violence (Creed, 1993: 3). Creed in particular draws on Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982 [1980]), in which “abjection” is that which ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules’... that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ (Kristeva, 1982 [1980], as cited in Creed, 1993: 8). All societies share imageries of what Creed calls ‘the monstrous-feminine’ – or that which disturbs the established order, that which is monstrous and excessive, or abject. Indeed, in her psychoanalytic reading, Creed highlights examples of the feminine monster already present in Greek mythology, including Medusa, who was portrayed with a large head and hair in the form of serpents that would transform men into stone if they were to look at her evil eye. The example of Medusa is telling, given Sigmund Freud's suggestion that the Medusa is equally as

horrific as the sight of a woman's genitals, which in turn pinpoints the construction of the feminine as outside the norm – due to her lack of a penis.

In Creed's own words, the concept of the 'monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology, is [therefore] related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration' (Creed, 1993: 2) – as also exemplified by another recurring image in mythology and art, namely the "*vagina dentata*", or the toothed vagina. In her consideration of imagery of castration, Creed identifies an aspect overlooked by Freud, namely the relation of the feminine to sexual desire, in that when the feminine is represented as a monster on screen, it is 'almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions' (Creed, 1993: 7) and therefore to the feminine body: 'the archaic mother; the monstrous womb; the witch; the vampire; and the possessed woman' are all 'faces' of the monstrous feminine (Creed, 1993: 7). This link between monstrosity and femininity by means of reproductive functions is helpful in theorising the violent dimensions of the Irigarayan caress outside these paradigms of woman as mother and of woman as outside the norm.

This article aims to contribute to already existing research in Irigarayan film-studies that explores spaces for an Irigarayan feminine enunciation through women's cinema (Bainbridge, 2008), the inner lives of the main women characters through an Irigarayan lens (Bolton, 2015 [2011]), Irigaray's philosophy of touch and breath (Quinlivan, 2014 [2012]) or colour in relation to Irigaray's work (Watkins, 2002). By drawing in close to investigate not only into the usefulness of the Irigarayan caress for exploring women's cinema (Rifesser, 2020b) and its application to creative practice research (Rifesser, 2020a) but also the contradictions of the Irigarayan caress, this article contributes to these readings, following Mary Ann Doane's (1980) call to 'challenge conventional models of viewing and engaging with women on-screen' (Bolton, 2015 [2011]: 13-14). In other words, I argue here that in order for the caress to really become useful for theorising images of the feminine and in order for the Irigarayan caress to become a feminist project, these violent dimensions (even if complex and at times contradictory) need thoroughly to be fleshed out instead of going unspoken and unacknowledged. Doing so through the female authorial lens of Neshat and Llosa's works offers an additional dimension to existing scholarship on brutality and violence against women on screen.

In her earliest writings, Irigaray (1985a/b/c) echoes/anticipates Kristeva (1982 [1980]) and Creed (1993) by critiquing Lacan and Western phallogocentric scholarship. Irigaray's *oeuvre* is centred around writing into philosophical and psychoanalytical discourse the feminine that has otherwise been omitted from phallogocentric history. In particular, she vehemently contests the feminine to be understood as 'waste, or excess' (Irigaray, 1985b: 30). Furthermore, she refuses to accept woman only as mother and instead calls for the importance of understanding woman as independent from her role as mother. In other words, Irigaray calls for a space for the feminine as independent subject that senses, perceives, desires as fundamental to what she terms the 'philosophy of the caress', that is, the peaceful and respectful heterosexual meeting between two that begins with acknowledging woman as independent thinking and sensing subject (Rifesser, 2020a/b). Paradoxically to date, however, Irigaray has omitted instances of violence experienced on the lived feminine body in her theory of the caress. To my knowledge,

there is only one instance in Irigaray's philosophy of the caress where the monstrous is mentioned explicitly, although it notably is in relation to, and deeply concerned with tactility, suggesting that Irigaray also perceives a link between woman, monstrosity and touch, as per my argument here:

Everything is given to us by means of touch, a mediation that is continually forgotten. Anything that emerges into the visible realm, the images of man and the world, remains for a while in history, but this visual birth does not fulfil all our native potentialities... In the enigmas formed by the popular or the literary imagination, in the monsters produced by culture, we may seek a sense of the darkest part of our becoming, which is the most deeply tactile.
(Irigaray, 1993c: 59)

Irigaray's observation about the cultural production of monsters suggests here that what is most deeply linked to the sense of touch, is also linked to violence (monsters touch us and, in the process, produce change/becoming, which in turn means that violence is done to us). However, Irigaray does not directly address this violence implicit in the caress, relating it instead to excess (it is 'continually forgotten'). It is important to recall the invitation extended by Margaret Whitford 'to engage with Irigaray *in order to go beyond her*' (1991: 6; italics not mine). This article seeks to do just this, in an effort to explore what is beyond the immediate conceptualisation of the Irigarayan caress via *Women Without Men* and *The Milk of Sorrow*, including voicing contradictory elements that complicate the line of argument as a whole. Irigaray laments the fact that in Western tradition, the role of the senses has not been foregrounded. She argues that Western culture 'did not consider our sensory perceptions to be possible ways of entering into communication with nature, with the other(s), and with ourselves' (Irigaray and Marder, 2016: 46).

In other words, the Irigarayan caress is intrinsically linked to a development of relationships with the natural world and the breathing beings residing in it and to allow us to nurture our own self, our own breath, our senses and desires. However, Irigaray does not consider the lived experience of violence in relation to the kind of feminine space that is brought to the fore in *Women Without Men* and *The Milk of Sorrow*. The importance of voicing the experience of an absence of such a space is crucial in order ultimately to foreground its need (returning us to Irigaray's call for a space for a feminine enunciation, a *parler femme*). My work here argues for the need to address instances of violence and their manifestations within global women's cinema in relation to the embodied, lived experience of the feminine to speak to wider contemporary global concerns on violence, silence and the complexities of the caress. Neshat's *Women Without Men* is – like Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* – a magic realist tale in which power and the monstrous play a crucial role. As I show in the course of this article, the monstrous is represented through the tropes of violence in both films.

The Caress and Violence in *Women Without Men*

Women Without Men by Iranian-born, in New York exile living visual artist and filmmaker Neshat, draws on Shahrnush Parsipur's acclaimed 1989 novel of the same name and was developed in collaboration with Shoja Azari. *Women Without Men* won the Silver Lion best director award at the 66th Venice Film Festival in 2009 (White, 2015)

and was predominantly shot in Morocco given that Neshat has been banned from entering Iran since the *Women of Allah* series. In her first feature film (Flammersfeld, 2014), Neshat narrates the stories of four women living in Tehran in 1953, coming from very different socio-economic backgrounds against the backdrop of the foreign-backed coup that brought the Shah of Iran back to power. Originating from an initial video installation, in this magical realist tale told in Farsi, Neshat portrays the politically interested Munis (Shabnam Tolouei) who does not want to obey her tyrannical brother Amir Khan (Essa Zahir) who locks her up in their home and pressures her to get married off, threatening to break her legs if she does not comply with his demands; her deeply religious friend, Faezeh (Pegah Ferydoni), who is secretly in love with Munis' brother but who suffers severe trauma through being raped on the streets of Tehran by a stranger; the starving prostitute, Zarin (Orsi Toth) who is abused by her clients; and the wealthy, middle-aged military wife, Fakhri (Arita Shahrzad) who feels trapped in her unloving marriage. The stories of the four women intersect as they find temporary refuge in a house by an orchard from a patriarchal society that constrains them.

The symbolism of the orchard for these four women and their friendship is fundamental to the film (Palmer-Mehta, 2015; Holman, 2013; Bresheeth, 2010; Roxo, 2010; Corm, 2002; Milani, 2001), so is the first scene which is also the final scene and centres around the main character Munis (Brown, M.S. 2011; Chamarette, 2015) yet the striking scene I describe below has to date received little attention. I argue here that in Neshat's feature film, we can find a sequence that reveals an aspect of violence that shows how the lens of the camera can create a violent encounter, ultimately revealing the need to give voice to these experiences. Let us therefore turn to this scene that brutally evokes the violence inflicted on Zarin's body.

The extent of Zarin's suffering becomes particularly evident in the "bathing scene", where the movement of the camera acts like a kind of caress, and yet which stands in contrast to Zarin's harsh and excessive skin brushing, which leads her body to bleed. As I discuss below, the scene is perhaps one of the most difficult to watch as the violence on Zarin's body permeates the body of the screen. That is, while the camera in some senses caresses Zarin, it is perhaps also the camera that does violence to her, with Neshat deliberately creating a scene that is difficult to watch because its violence is difficult to describe. The scene helps to demonstrate that the creation of woman-as-image is, in many ways, an act of violence, a theme that is echoed in Zarin's work in the brothel.

The sequence begins with Zarin naked in a bathing house, surrounded by other women. A medium close-up shot reveals an older woman, offering to give Zarin "a good brush". But Zarin vehemently refuses this gesture of care, walking away and moving on to brush her own body by a fountain. Figure 1 shows how Zarin is marginalised, observed by another woman, and positioned in the far right of the frame, evocative of her marginalised status in society. The camera then moves closer (Fig. 2) to engage in Zarin's adamant brushing, revealing the starved body of this woman who is using the touch of the brush to bring to the outside and brush away, free herself from the pain and injuries inflicted on her on the inside as a result of her work at the brothel. The prominent sound of the brushing stands in contrast to the otherwise quiet bathing house. The negotiation of inside/outside, of touching/not touching, and of closeness/distance is brought to the fore in the narrative (Zarin brings her inner pain to the surface of her skin), in the positioning

of the camera (which zooms in on Zarin), and in the lighting that contrasts the brightness of Zarin's skin with the darkness of the background. As previously mentioned, the camera's stasis also contrasts with the harsh brushing, as we see Zarin's hands move frenetically back and forth across the frame. This again importantly reveals the urgency to move beyond Irigaray's suggestion that the caress with oneself can only be considered peaceful and respectful. For, if the caress is to be fully considered as an embodied, lived experience of woman, then we must acknowledge that the caress can also be violent.

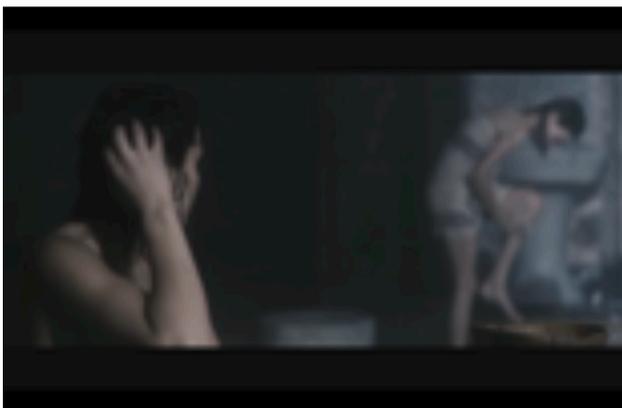


Fig. 1 Zarin in the bathing house, *Women Without Men* (Neshat, 2009)

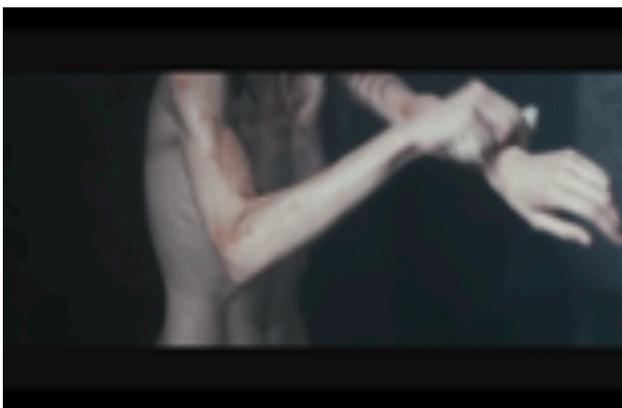


Fig. 2 Zarin violently scrubs her body, *Women Without Men* (Neshat, 2009)

The woman who wants to aid Zarin by helping her brush her body suggests the possibility of a peaceful caress. However, what could have been a tender moment of care is conflicted firstly by the fact that Zarin does not want to be touched, and then by the fact that she does not lovingly brush herself, but rather harms herself as she tries to get rid of previous and unwanted touches received from her suitors. That is, Zarin violently caresses herself in a bid to remove earlier violent caresses. Crouched on the floor (and at the bottom of the camera frame), Zarin is also at the bottom of society (Fig.3). Irigaray's philosophy of the peaceful and loving caress which I discuss elsewhere (Rifesser, 2020a) here meets its limit as we consider the violence of the caress in relation to those abjected women whom society considers to be monstrous.

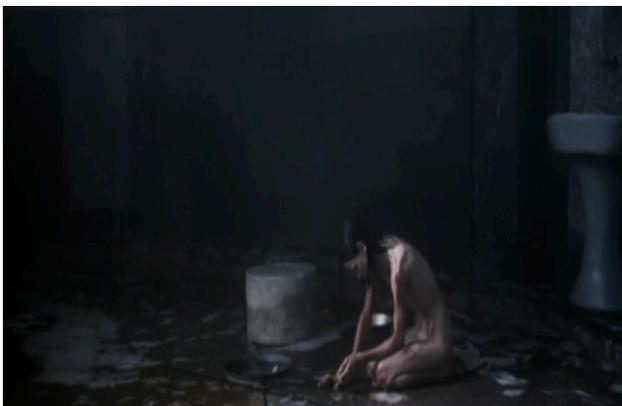


Fig. 3 Zarin kneels on the floor, *Women Without Men* (Neshat, 2009)

During the brushing scene, the camera lingers in a long take, steady and calm, as we observe the violence inflicted by Zarin on her own body. Such long takes that depict violence have been linked to monstrosity, for example by William Brown, who suggests that:

the “calmness” of the camera at [...] moments, in contrast to the violence depicted, reinforces the meaninglessness of the violence, its excessive nature perhaps surpassing our ability to comprehend it, but which perhaps also allows us to contemplate the potential for cruelty that we ourselves possess.

(Brown, W. 2012: 419)

The reference to the (potential for) cruelty residing within us recalls at least in part Irigaray’s suggestion that touch constitutes ‘the darkest part of our becoming’ (Irigaray, 1993c: 59). For Irigaray, such moments need to be explored in order not to forget history and instead to fulfil our potential as human beings (Irigaray, 1993c: 59). Nonetheless, a fuller acknowledgment of the experience of violence in relation to the caress is needed in order to evoke a more rounded articulation of the feminine than Irigaray seems willing to offer. That is, the violence of the caress (or at least the potential violence of the caress) gives expression to the experience(s) encountered on the feminine, lived body – in particular in non-western contexts, such as those reflected and depicted in global women’s filmmaking.

It is important to note here that Zarin never fully recovers from the wounds imposed by the outside world. The violence inflicted on Zarin’s body is too much. Ultimately, despite Fakhri’s care and Faezeh’s attempt to console her new friend, Zarin dies in the orchard. The four women in Neshat’s work ultimately do not have a space in which they could feel safe in the external world. They experience their being in the world as violent, as monstrous, as outside the norm, evoking Irigaray’s earlier mentioned critique about woman as excess and her call for a feminine space. For Fakhri, Zarin, Faezeh and Munis, the house by the orchard offered a temporary refuge, a feminine space evocative of Irigaray’s call for a space for a feminine enunciation.

Towards the end of the film, Fakhri invites visitors for a party to the orchard. Unexpectedly, the party is disturbed by the violent intrusion of the army, headed by Fakhri’s husband, the general. In this feminine space, as Neshat explains, ‘the external world invades and it becomes like a rape and things begin to fall apart’ (Neshat as cited

in Roxo, 2010). The sudden invasion of the space is violent. Like the orchard that ultimately breaks from the violence of the intrusion, so Zarin's body is not able to recover from her wounds that have seemingly healed on the outside but are deeply imprinted inside her. Ultimately then, 'the exile is once again confronted by marginalization and death' (Holman, 2013: 9). Woman is denied the opportunity to 'provide themselves with ... a world, a home' (Irigaray, 1993a: 106). To overlook the need and importance of engaging with these instances of violence would be to not return to oneself through silence – to borrow Irigaray's (Irigaray, 2000: 62) words – but rather to silence these experiences and thus to silence woman/women. Such a silencing of woman/women then goes directly against Irigaray's conceptualisation of the caress as establishing woman as subject and indeed for her call to carve out of a feminine space but has remained unacknowledged until now.

I shall continue to offer this more rounded articulation of the Irigarayan caress by turning to *The Milk of Sorrow*. In her second film featuring Magaly Solier in the main role (as Fausta), after *Madeinusa* (2001), Peruvian-born Llosa tells the story of a young woman who, according to an ancient Andean myth, inherited – as per the Spanish title of the film, meaning the frightened breast – the trauma lived by her mother who was pregnant with Fausta when she was violently raped. The film gives voice to the often forgotten crimes of rape and abuse on women (Theidon, 2004) during the conflicts (1982–89) between the Peruvian government and the Guerrilla fighters known as Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso). For this film, Llosa was awarded the Golden Bear in 2009 and the FIPRESCI prize at the Berlin International Film Festival.

The Milk of Sorrow was also the first ever Peruvian film to be nominated for the 82nd Academy Awards in the category of Best Foreign Language Film (White, 2015). *The Milk of Sorrow* has received critical attention due to its attention to address issues of colonialism, race and class as well as the use of singing in Quechua to give voice to Fausta and Perpetua's experiences (Llosa 2010; Rueda 2015; White 2015; Maseda 2016) and the film's importance for Peruvian cinema (Barrow 2018). In contrast to *Women Without Men*, where the brushing scene depicts violence on screen, *The Milk of Sorrow* engages with violence on the feminine body 'without depicting explicit violence, but rather through a highly poetic narrative and aesthetics' (Rueda, 2015: 452). The violence takes place offscreen and is not expressed visually but rather audibly through the singing in Quechua of Perpetua (Bárbara Lazón), the mother of the main character Fausta. Fausta's response to the song that her mother sings recounting the violence inflicted on her, is also given through singing. Singing then is employed in Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* first scene as a tool to express that which cannot be expressed through speaking, or through visual imagery alone. Let us therefore explore the very beginning of the film, where a void of visuals through the use of a black screen counteracts the violence expressed through the diegetic voice of Perpetua.

Violence in *The Milk of Sorrow*

Instead of an establishing shot, the screen initially remains black at the beginning of *The Milk of Sorrow*, offering only the sound of a woman's voice, singing in her native Quechua (and importantly not in Spanish) of her memories of rape and torture (Fig. 4).

The eyes of the viewer run over the screen in search of a clue, or something to make sense of the void.



Fig. 4 The black screen, *The Milk of Sorrow* (Llosa, 2009)

Yet, it is only two minutes into the film that a visual is finally offered to reveal the body that belongs to the voice. The black screen therefore suggests that the memories are so violent that they cannot be depicted through imagery alone or, indeed, through images at all. Perpetua sings:

Perhaps, some day you will understand how much I cried.
 I begged on my knees to those poor bastards.
 That night, I screamed, the hills echoed, and people laughed.
 I fought with my pain, saying: A bitch with rabies must have given birth to you.
 And that is why you have eaten her breasts.
 Now, you can swallow me, now, you can suck me, like you did to your mother.
 This woman who sings was grabbed was raped that night.
 They didn't care about my unborn daughter. They raped me with their penises and hands.
 With no pity for my daughter watching them from inside
 And not satisfied with that, they made me swallow the dead penis of my husband Josefo.
 His poor dead penis seasoned with gun powder. With that pain I screamed:
 You better kill me and bury me with my Josefo. I know nothing here. (00:02:58)

When we do finally see a close-up of Fausta's mother, the camera rests on her face as she lies in bed, eyes closed, still singing (Fig. 5). Whilst she seemingly lies passive on the bed, the force of her voice and words reveal the vividness of her memories. During the same shot, Fausta's face appears in the top left-hand corner, exits, and then re-enters again, looking at her mother (Fig. 6). Where the camera remains still, Fausta moves, shifting between the experience of violence expressed by the mother's song to the careful and respectful touch that is a care(ss) of/for the elderly mother, foregrounding the imperative to care or cure. For the mother, Perpetua, and her daughter Fausta, singing is here an important shared trope of communication between these two women to vocalise their different experiences of trauma and violence.



Fig. 5 Perpetua is singing, *The Milk of Sorrow* (Llosa, 2009)



Fig. 6 Perpetua and Fausta, *The Milk of Sorrow* (Llosa, 2009)

Fausta sings: ‘Every time you remember... when you cry, mother, you stain your bed with tears of sorrow and sweat’. Perpetua’s face is dry. We cannot see any tears or sweat on her face. But, like the violence itself that cannot be adequately be depicted through visuals alone, as I suggested above, so can visuals of tears and sweat not adequately represent the pain and sorrow that Perpetua still feels. Perpetua’s eyes remain closed, whilst Fausta’s face (in profile) moves close to Perpetua’s. With her nose, Fausta gently touches the side of Perpetua’s face and her long hair, before she moves away again, to then sit down in front of her. Whilst adjusting Perpetua’s nightgown, and stroking her hair, brushing it gently with her hands behind Perpetua’s ears, Fausta continues: ‘You haven’t eaten anything. If you don’t want any, just tell me. I won’t prepare anything’.

The stroking of Perpetua’s hair can be imagined as a sort of caress, in this vertical relationship between mother and daughter, a care for the mother and her wellbeing. Perpetua responds to Fausta’s caress by singing: ‘I’ll eat if you sing to me, and freshen my drying memory. I don’t see my memories. It’s as if I no longer lived’. Whilst Perpetua is singing, Fausta is caring for her mother by slowly adjusting her mother’s position in the bed so she sits more comfortably. Then Fausta sings: ‘Come on. Sit up’. The camera now moves to showing Fausta in a medium-close up as she comes in and

leaves the frame, and then comes in again from below the frame, whilst adjusting Perpetua's bed. She continues singing: 'You're worn out like a dead bird. I am going to make up the bed a little'. Fausta leaves the frame. Then she says: 'Ma...'. As the camera moves closer to frame Fausta in a close-up, the barren shantytown in the background as seen through the window. The window frame serves to frame Fausta. Fausta calls twice more for her mother, with a softer voice. Then the screen turns black.

The connection between giving voice to instances of violence in this shared space woman to woman, as well as the relationship between memory, trauma and healing are key here as the singing provides a way to work through these traumatic experiences. For Davina Quinlivan film 'encourages the mediation of trauma beyond its representational qualities, and envisages a kind of "healing" through the very texture of its material attributes and multisensory images' (Quinlivan, 2014: 104). Yet, a detailed exploration of the notion of trauma remains outside the remit of this article. To return to the central theme here, the caress and their lived experience of violence, the safe space in which mother and daughter are able to speak by being able to share the memories of the trauma, evokes the idea of Irigaray's *parler femme* and the importance of the woman-to-woman relationship and a space for a feminine enunciation. This sequence evokes such a space for a feminine enunciation, and which can thus be claimed as articulating what Irigaray formulates as *parler femme*. That is, a space, where mother and daughter feel safe to share their experiences with each other openly, using singing in their mother tongue, Quechua, as a vehicle to express their feelings. For Irigaray, the mother-daughter relationship, and the focus on a maternal genealogy is crucial for her quest not only towards a feminine subjectivity but also for an ethical living in sexuete difference. In other words, such representations in the feminine are an essential pre-condition in order to conceive an Irigarayan living in sexuete difference, that is a carnal and spiritual meeting with the other.

As Bainbridge suggests, in order to establish a *parler femme*, for Irigaray there is a 'need to root out the archaeology of the mother-daughter relationship' (Bainbridge, 2008: 11). That is, in order to perceive a feminine space, horizontal relationships – those that are understood as woman to woman – must be cultivated outside of the woman-equals-mother paradigm which, as we have seen, is considered monstrous by patriarchal society, and this should be in addition to the cultivation of vertical mother-daughter relationships. In the course of *The Milk of Sorrow*, Fausta overcomes the trauma passed on to her. She also develops as an independent woman and the development she undergoes is signalled formally already in the way Fausta is introduced. She enters the frame from the left upper side, neither horizontally nor vertically. In the course of *The Milk of Sorrow*, the emphasis moves from these earliest shots that focus on the vertical mother-daughter relationship to her flourishing as independent woman.

In the first scene of *Women Without Men*, we hear Perpetua and later and Fausta's voice, and the relationship between the two native Quechuan women is peaceful, despite the violence inflicted on Perpetua's body from outside and the poverty of their existence in the shantytown (emphasised by Fausta's need to work for Aída in order to pay for her mother's funeral). Their relationship though stands in stark contrast to Fausta's violent experience with Aída (who gives Fausta's song out as her own). It is a relationship of abuse between the rich, white wealthy pianist and the poor, indigenous, Quechuan maid.

In this way, this film crucially engages with notions of race and class, elements that Irigaray has been critiqued for excluding, especially in relation to lived embodied experiences (Jones, 1981, Deutscher, 2003, Bloodsworth-Lugo 2007, Ingram 2008). That is, Irigaray may well emphasise sexual difference and “woman” but ‘this “woman” is likely premised on a white, heterosexual model... An emphasis on sexual difference... has clearly neglected intersections between “sexual difference” and other social markers’, such as race, LGBTQ+ and queer communities, class, and women living in non-western and/or postcolonial contexts (Rifesser, 2020a; Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2007: 96), as per *Women Without Men*. This film as well as the work of global women filmmakers more generally thus help in the effort to work against such silences in the Irigarayan model of sexual difference, a model upon which Irigaray’s theory of the caress rests.

In *Women Without Men*, Zarin is not able to overcome the trauma inflicted on her body. She dies as, whilst the wounds on the outside have been healed, the wounds on the inside have not. In this way, *Women Without Men* and *The Milk of Sorrow* explore violence in relation to the caress, drawing out instances of violent caresses that remain silenced in Irigaray’s theoretical account. In other words, working through these audio-visual instances of violence is necessary in order to grasp the complexity of the caress in relation to the lived, embodied experience of feminine subjectivity as it exists beyond the Western examples given by Irigaray. To me, such a view contradicts her method of working and, indeed, the key aim of her work, namely, to foreground the lived, embodied experience of woman, and to carve out a space for the feminine. In this way, a consideration of visual art allows us to continue to push beyond the limitations of Irigaray and to theorise a truly global *parler femme*.

Irigaray and violence – wider consideration

The Irigarayan caress is grounded in an emphasis on the sense of touch and a turn away from an ocularcentric and phallogocentric viewpoint to develop a space for the feminine (Rifesser, 2020b). Irigaray’s focus on the visual is rooted in dominant Western discourses and her emphasis is specifically on a feminine enunciation, or a *parler femme*. For Irigaray, a feminine enunciation is needed in order to provide a representational framework in which the feminine can reside. Irigaray developed her theory on the caress by looking at statues of Kore, also known as Persephone, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter and the goddess of the underworld. In her earliest writings, Irigaray makes reference to statues of women in Greek art, denouncing the fact that ‘[w]oman’s genitals are simply absent’ (Irigaray, 1985b: 25). Woman’s beauty is contemplated in Greek sculpture, then, yet her ‘sexual organ represents the horror of nothing to see’ (Irigaray, 1985b: 25) and therefore the woman’s vaginal lips are left out of visual representation – much as woman as a whole is excluded from patriarchal society. In her theoretical engagement with the caress and in her wider work, then, Irigaray works through such instances of oppression in order to draw out something new, namely a feminine space, a feminine enunciation, and a *parler femme* (Rifesser, 2020b; Bainbridge, 2008).

Given that Irigaray draws on Greek art in order to make her argument for a feminine enunciation, then, it seems paradoxical that she elsewhere expects art to ‘offer a moment of happiness and repose’ instead of becoming ‘yet another source of pain, a burden’ (Irigaray, 1993b: 100). Robinson (2006) also finds confusing Irigaray’s

simultaneous emphasis on beauty in art and her denunciation of images of violence. As Robinson explains, there are, of course, very problematic visual representations of violence in relation to women, and often visual representations are equated to truth, instead of being questioned. And yet, women's art practices have been instrumental in feminist discourse to challenge phallogocentric representations.

Robinson reads Irigaray's reason for focussing on beauty as an attempt to emphasise the potential of the feminine instead of remaining with an image of woman as lack trapped within phallogocentric discourse. That is, Robinson describes Irigaray as foregrounding 'the necessity for productive acknowledgement of female genealogies' (Robinson, 2006: 9), which is related to 'a notion of fulfilment or "becoming" for women. Without any of these women's beauty is not possible' (Robinson, 1998: 9). In other words, Robinson's reading of Irigaray's opinion on art chimes with Irigaray's theoretical work on the caress in relation to the feminine; its goal is to establish horizontal relationships as well as vertical ones outside the role of woman as mother, and, in so doing, to carve out a space for the feminine.

However, as Elaine P. Miller (2016: 81) suggests, '[t]he image of woman as uniquely reposing in happiness would appear to affirm rather than to critique' the way in which woman resides at the margins of art and society more generally. That is, the feminine runs the risk of functioning in Irigaray's thought 'as a mirror for masculine subjectivity' (Miller, 2016: 80). Indeed, while Irigaray denounces Unica Zürn's art as a "failure" and "ugly", Miller suggests that Zürn is able in her drawings of chimerical and monstrous (feminine) creatures to give presence to experiences of woman that remain otherwise unspoken and silenced. For Miller, by portraying visually the fragmentation of the mother and the mother-daughter relationship, Zürn brings it 'to our attention in a way that is analogous to the effect of Irigaray's philosophy' (Miller, 2016: 82) – even as it goes against Irigaray's demand for beautiful art. What is striking is that Zürn's violent, excessive imagery paradoxically/ironically (de)monstrates Irigaray's aggressive critique of her work. Or put differently, Zürn's artistic practice works through the very notions of oppression that Irigaray sets out to challenge in her philosophical writings, even as the latter does not like the former's work.

Miller's critique of Irigaray in relation to Zürn therefore chimes with my own reading of Irigaray's work on the caress: by using artistic practice to challenge phallogocentric scholarship, it is possible to carve out a space for a feminine enunciation and representation, no matter how resistant Irigaray herself might be to such a claim, and this is especially the case when artistic practice is used to explore experiences of violence in and on the feminine and the scope for violence inherent in (artistic) practice itself. To silence the violence engrained in the artistic process would be to omit the difficulty of such a process. To silence violence would also mean to not address the experiences of feminine subjectivity, as I showed in relation to the caress in my detailed textual analysis of the two selected scenes in Neshat and Llosa's work.

In *Thinking the Difference*, Irigaray claims in relation to visual representations of woman's oppression: 'We know to what private or public violence women have been subjected and are subjected, on the pretext of an easier life for them – direct violence or violence mediated to varying degrees by images, symbols ...' (Irigaray, 1994: 82). But do

we really *know*? How *can* we know, if these stories are not shared? Is it not that the visual arts offer a means to give voice to stories that might otherwise not be told? By assuming that we “know”, are we not remaining within the referential framework that is prevalent, namely a phallogocentric, patriarchal framework, instead of challenging and subverting these dominant discourses – as per Irigaray’s call for a *parler femme*? Such lacunae/silences around violence lead to a failure to recognise difference not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of race and class, and thus to a failure of feminist political intention.

The cinematic examples of *Women Without Men*, and *The Milk of Sorrow* highlight the need to engage with themes of violence, and its effects on our global world. What is suggested by *The Milk of Sorrow* (evident also in the choice of the English title), namely that ‘the rape of women, landscapes and cultures [is] on display in relation to colonial and postcolonial exploitation’ (Murray and Heumann, 2014: 63), holds also true for *Women Without Men*, as well as other global filmmaking practices such as for example *Rachida* (Yamina Bachir-Chouikh, Algeria, 2002), *Mustang* (Denis Gamze Ergüven, Turkey/France/Germany, 2015) and *In-Between [Bar Bahar]* (Maysaloun Hamoud, Israel/France, 2016), only to name a few. Despite their different national contexts and distinct narrative and aesthetic tropes, a shared concern emerges about the need to give voice to various forms of violence and abuse experienced by the women protagonists and through the lens of women filmmakers, including ‘acknowledg[ing] and bring[ing] to the surface hidden suffering and unspeakable loss’ (Quinlivan, 2014: 104). The political *implications of the absence of an engagement with violence in the Irigarayan caress* are important not only for the broader context of feminist film discourse but also for thinking about ethics and politics more broadly, including in non-western contexts. That is, to fight for inclusive writings and practices – works that recognise and foreground the importance of making visible – and audible – the lived, embodied experiences of feminine subjectivity.

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Filmography:

- Women Without Men [Zanan-e Bedun-e Mardan]* (2009) Directed by Shirin Neshat. Germany, Austria & France.
- The Milk of Sorrow [La teta asustada]* (2009) Directed by Claudia Llosa. Peru & Spain.
- Rachida* (2002) Directed by Yamina Bachir-Chouikh. Algeria.
- Mustang* (2015) Directed by Denis Gamze Ergüven. Turkey, France & Germany.
- In-Between [Bar Bahar]* (2016) Directed by Maysaloun Hamoud. Israel & France.

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