

**“Getting Smaller Everyday”<sup>1</sup> — Does One Have to Be Nothing in Order to Avoid Wanting to Be Everything? On *Alice* and *Aliens & Anorexia***

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Sonic Youth, "Tunic: Song for Karen", video still, dir.: Tony Oursler, 1990.

"The philosopher Gilles Deleuze got anorexia right" writes Chris Kraus 2000 in *Aliens and Anorexia*.<sup>2</sup> With her praise she posits Deleuze as an exception among a line of writers who, she alleges, do injustice to the 'anorexic girl'. From Pierre Janet's thoughts on the hysterical patient to the reception of the life and work of Simone Weil, the philosopher and mystic who starved herself to death at the age of 34, Kraus detects a pattern of pathologization and trivialization. Like the deceitful hysteric, the anorexic girl is accused of a "*starving* for attention".<sup>3</sup> This judgement is passed with great ease because

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<sup>1</sup> <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reSOp1domrU>> [accessed 20 July 2020]

<sup>2</sup> Chris Kraus, *Aliens & Anorexia* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2000), p.182.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.113.

[a]nything a female person says or does is open to 'interpretation'. If the female anorexic isn't consciously manipulative, then she's tragic: shedding pounds in a futile effort to erase her female body, which is the only part of her that's irreducible and defining.<sup>4</sup>

Looking for answers from experts in the field leaves her particularly frustrated: "But it is female psychotherapists and recovering anorexics who really lead the pack in nailing down the anorexic girl as a simpering, solipsistic dog."<sup>5</sup> To Kraus's mind, the feminist literature devoted to eating disorders does not offer a helpful perspective either, insofar as it regards anorexia as inextricably linked to femininity:

The most polemically feminist analyses of anorexia nervosa interpret it as an adolescent girl's last stand against the female role and what it 'means' to be a woman. Perversely, all this literature is based on the unshakeable belief that the formation of gender-based identity is still the primary animating goal in the becoming of a person, if that person is a girl.<sup>6</sup>

It is, thus, Deleuze who provides the opportunity to view the anorexic girl as neither manipulative nor tragic:

The philosopher Gilles Deleuze got anorexia right (his wife was one) by noting that it isn't anything to do with 'lack'.[...] Anorexia is not evasion of a social-gender role; it's not regression. It is an active stance: the rejection of the cynicism that this culture hands us through its food, the creation of an involuted body.<sup>7</sup>

"Homage to Fanny: the case of anorexia" it says in a passage from Deleuze's 1977 dialogues with Claire Parnet in which he praises his wife's 'anorexic elegance'. For Deleuze, "anorexics are enthusiasts", they engage in "anorexic feasts, the imbibings of fizzy drinks" instead of a wholesome meal. "The anorexic void has nothing to do with lack, it is on the contrary a way of escaping the organic constraint of lack and hunger at the mechanical mealtime." Deleuze continues that "she will often make something for others to eat, or else she will like being at the table either without eating, or else multiplying the absorption of little things, of little substances."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.116.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.141.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.140.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.163.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p.110.



Chantal Akerman, *J'ai faim, j'ai froid*, short, 1984.

Like Deleuze, Kraus refuses to think of anorexia as a symbolization of lack and deprivation, for her it is rather a reaction to an excess of capitalist accumulation; she describes herself as literally 'fed up'. She develops an inability to think food outside of social, economic and biographical contexts. However, she never speaks of an enjoyment that anorexic practices would bring her. While Deleuze is compelled by the elegance of the anorexic and her rituals, Kraus tells a story of a woman desperately looking for the food she could finally take pleasure in consuming. She is fantasizing about the ideal meal composed of fairly and naturally produced ingredients served in the perfectly fitting scenery. These daydreams are contrasted with her scavenging for edible food in Southern Californian supermarkets:

From the bodies of imprisoned animals to the airconditioned case, it's obvious this food was never touched with love or understanding. [...] The food here is so vastly overpriced, it no longer smells like food, it smells like bills and coins and plastic.<sup>9</sup>

The only positive experience with food appears as a memory of a day spent in the Bourgogne countryside, where she and her husband visit an idyllic village:

[T]here were men and women picking grapes and picnicking at makeshift tables. [...] we'd gotten lost and ended up in some old woman's yard, [...] she took us to the cheese shed behind her house. The shed was dark. There were lumps of runny amber-colored cream wrapped up in cheesecloth, set out on ancient wooden benches. The cheeses were different sizes, formed without a mold and aged for different flavors. You [her husband, Sylvère Lotringer, N.H.] were speaking fast Parisian French, she asked you to slow down. The old woman told us how she made the cheese and then she let us taste it. Everything, the cream the shed the farm, combined into a flavor. And this was food.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Kraus, p.147.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.152.

I imagine for Deleuze's palate, this would constitute a cheesy tale of bucolic authenticity as opposed to new-world fakeness. I propose to read this as an indication of the curious divergence between Kraus's and Deleuze's attitudes towards anorexia, despite the inspiration Kraus claims to find in Deleuze in this matter.

I am interested in a detail, which Kraus does not pay any attention to, which alludes to an intimate relation between Deleuze's idea of anorexia and that of his concept of *devenir-femme*, well known from the second book he assembled with Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, published in 1980. Their Kafka book from 1975 had already launched their concept of 'becoming', and hence, I would argue, the homage to Fanny constitutes an important stepping-stone. In the latter, Deleuze speaks of a "becoming-anorganic" of the anorexic and adds in brackets that this "does not mean asexual (*asexué*): on the contrary, woman-becoming (*devenir-femme*) of every anorexic".<sup>11</sup>

However, as this passage makes clear, the *devenir-femme* of *A Thousand Plateaus* has to be related back to Deleuze's much earlier engagement with Lewis Carroll's Alice books in *The Logic of Sense* (1969). This literary girl can be read as emblematic of the emphatic notion of becoming, even if *devenir-femme*, as Deleuze and Guattari will later insist, should not be misread as a concept tied to age or gender. Alice's central concern during the many 'becomings' she undergoes in her adventures in Wonderland is the question of who she *is*. As she puts it: „I am not myself“, and „being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing.“<sup>12</sup> This search for identity, continually thwarted by a dissonance of mind and body in becoming, is characteristic of the adolescent experience in general, as psychologists and phenomenologists alike have stated. Accordingly, Alice has widely been interpreted as a parable of the struggles of an adolescent girl who has to negotiate her self and her place in the world. Within the confines of such an interpretation, the crucial role of food as a means of controlling these processes has been noted as strikingly similar to that in disordered eating practices. Alice's solution for almost any predicament she finds herself in is to look for food: "I suppose I ought to eat or drink something or other."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Deleuze & Parnet, p.110.

<sup>12</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p.39.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.37.



Kiki Smith, *Seer (Alice II)*, white auto body paint on bronze, 2005.

Unsurprisingly, these psychologizing interpretations have no place in the reading of Alice Deleuze provides in *The Logic of Sense*. First of all, Deleuze views Alice as a child, not an adolescent. She lives in a world where fantasy and nonsense are not yet distinguished from reality and sense. Deleuze's primary interest in evoking the writing of Lewis Carroll is tied to a project that contrasts Platonism with Stoicism, adopting Stoic accounts of bodies and their effects, so-called 'incorporeals'. For Deleuze these Stoic incorporeals are bound up with markedly different non-standard notions of time and temporality. One being *chronos*, a 'vertical' temporality in which past and future are posited on different stages of depth with respect to the present, and the other being *aeon*, in which past and future are unlimited events, always about to take place and at the same time already having taken place. While *chronos* presents a time of succession, *aeon* is the time of becoming. This "pure becoming", hence, is exemplified in Alice who, in Deleuze's variation on Carroll's text, "at the same moment [...] becomes larger than [she] was and smaller than [she] becomes. This is the simultaneity of a becoming whose characteristic is to elude the present."<sup>14</sup> Alice thus does not represent a figure of transition, insofar as this pure becoming is not directed towards an end, but rather is emphatically a-teleological. This temporality is certainly subordinated to Alice's practices of eating and drinking. She repeatedly regrets having consumed something, which she tries to reverse not by

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<sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (London: Athlone Press, 1990), p.1.

purging but by consuming yet another thing in the hope that it might make her smaller or bigger again.



Salvador Dalí, *Alice Frontispiece* in: Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), etching and color on paper, 1969.

One remark about Alice stands in curious isolation within *The Logic of Sense*, namely that she is “the ideal little girl, incorporeal and anorexic”.<sup>15</sup> A remark that seems

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<sup>15</sup> Deleuze, *Logic*, p.24.



uncharacteristic in this context in its diagnostic tone. She is ideal insofar as she understands, according to Deleuze, the Stoic wisdom of bodies – corporeals – as always entwined with language – the incorporeal. But why is she anorexic and how does that contribute to her being ideal? In any case, her ‘case study’ runs counter to a more popular philosophical placement of anorexia.

For Susan Bordo, in her canonical 1993 study *Unbearable Weight*<sup>16</sup> the anorexic stands in a long historical tradition, one dominated by the dualism of mind and body Deleuze seeks to evade; like Plato, like Augustine, the anorexic views her body as a prison the mind wants to escape. Or, as Kraus writes, “Shouldn’t it be possible to leave the body? Is it wrong to even try?”<sup>17</sup>. This dualism is then furnished with the question of gender identity. Bordo cites one of her patients as wishing to remain a child forever, like Peter Pan. This wish then helps her understand why known effects of prolonged starvation such as the absence of menstruation and the growth of facial and body hair do not appear to frighten the anorexic girl, rather they seem to be welcomed. Would this observation then not give an example of a becoming-man of the anorexic? Here also it appears that the body the anorexic wants to leave is specifically a female body — a desire Kraus expresses repeatedly: “It’s inconceivable that the female subject might ever simply try to *step outside* her body, because the only thing that’s irreducible, still, in female life is gender.”<sup>18</sup> Would these experiences not run exactly contrary to the notion of the “woman-becoming of every anorexic”?<sup>19</sup>

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Two texts published in between *The Logic of Sense* and *A Thousand Plateaus* can give some nuance in understanding how Deleuze’s conceptualisation of gender might be understood in this context. In his review of Alain Roger’s novel *Le Misogyne* from 1976, Deleuze elaborates on another literary incarnation of the girl who is of an “original androgyny”.<sup>20</sup> He reads Roger alongside texts by the Romanian surrealist Dolfi Trost and finds in both something he calls a “strange epiphany of the young woman”. Trost’s is a “modern, future, mechanical”, a machine-girl. According to Deleuze, she appears in Roger’s novel not as a person, rather as an event: “the epiphany of the young woman is opposed to the banality of both man and woman.” In another text, “The Interpretation of Utterances”, which Deleuze wrote with Guattari, Claire Parnet and André Scala in 1977, this point is made in explicit contradistinction to psychoanalytic doctrine:

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<sup>16</sup> See Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Kraus, p.146.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.142.

<sup>19</sup> Deleuze & Parnet, p.110.

<sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Alain Roger’s *Le misogyne*” in: Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975–1995*, ed. by David Lapoujade, trans. by Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 72-79; 72.

There is a dissymmetry between girls and boys, but it consists in the following: girls are the first ones from whom they steal the  $n$  sexes, from whom they steal the machine-body to turn it into a tool-body. The feminine revolutionary movements are radically mistaken when they demand rights for a specifically feminine sexuality (Lacanized Women's Liberation Movement!). What they should demand of all the sexes, no more feminine than masculine, of which the girl is first deprived, is that they end up a girl."<sup>21</sup>

The order of two sexes in which the adolescent subject would find herself relegated to one, is understood as a reduction of the possible  $n$ -sexes or a "thousand tiny sexes" — this, for Deleuze is the defining difference: between two sexes and  $n$ -sexes, not between male and female. And in our "phallocracy" it is the girl who struggles with this social mechanism first of all by being forced into the traps of marriage and reproduction along the path of her becoming: "The body is stolen first from the girl.... The girl's becoming is stolen first in order to impose a history, or prehistory upon her. [...] The girl is the first victim [...]."<sup>22</sup> But why, if there are to be  $n$  sexes, do Deleuze & Guattari cling to the girl and what does it mean that "sexuality, any sexuality, is a becoming-woman, in other words, a girl"?<sup>23</sup>



Henry Darger, *Landscape in: The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, watercolor, 1940-1950.

<sup>21</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "The Interpretation of Utterances" in: Deleuze, *Two Regimes*, 89-113; p.94.

<sup>22</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p.276.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.277.



In the texts preceding *A Thousand Plateaus* and its creation of the concept of becoming-woman, Deleuze's girl appears to be strikingly close to the aesthetic ideal of many male surrealists: the girl-woman, the "femme-enfant", "*la jeune fille-femme*", as Trost calls her, as well as that of the fairy-like Victorian girl which Deleuze nevertheless evokes when he describes Alice as "the ideal little girl, incorporeal and anorexic". In other words: as the girl fighting the physical lot of female adolescence. By inducing these aesthetic ideals, which can only be described as phantasms, the de-sexuation (in the sense of *sexué*) of the girl is contrasted with an erotically charged stereotype which Deleuze then connects to a revolutionary model that is supposedly not tied to the feminine: the anorexic who tries to halt her becoming at the pre-pubescent stage or revert it by repressing appetites, which for girls have been traditionally overdetermined, to say the least. While this becoming-minor may be a radical act for the male subject, girls have been at it for too long.

Anorexia is a political system, a micro-politics: to escape from the norms of consumption in order not to be an object of consumption oneself. It is a feminine protest, from a woman who wants to have a functioning of the body and not simply organic and social functions which make her dependent [...] Trick-the-hunger, trick-the-family, trick-the-food. In short, anorexia is a history of politics: to be involuted of the organism, the family or the consumer society.<sup>24</sup>

Deleuze's anorexic withdraws from the rituals of the bourgeois family by staging herself as an outsider at the dinner table, an eccentric in society. For Kraus, too, the question of consumption is bigger than the conventional literature on disorders seems to admit:

At any rate, all these readings deny the possibility of a psychic-intellectual equation between a culture's food and *the entire social order*. Anorexia is a malady experienced by girls, and it's still impossible to imagine girls moving outside themselves and acting through culture. All these texts are based on the belief that a well-adjusted, boundaried sense of self is the only worthy female goal.<sup>25</sup>

Kraus is, understandably, sick of being tied to this history of girls who wish to avoid or reverse the fateful lot that is being-woman. She wishes she, too, could stake a claim like Bartleby, a character whose refusal *means something*. Something more than a personal tragedy – a tragedy which, even if shared by countless girls and women, does not make her a political agent. As Deleuze concludes his famous essay on Bartleby: "even in his catatonic or anorexic state, Bartleby is not the patient, but the doctor of a sick America, the *Medicine-Man*, the new Christ or the brother to us all."<sup>26</sup> This idea that a 'New Christ' is needed, is, I would argue, in itself a perspective

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<sup>24</sup> Deleuze & Parnet, p.110-111.

<sup>25</sup> Kraus, p.141.

<sup>26</sup> Gilles Deleuze, „Bartleby; Or, The Formula“, in: Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael E. Greco (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 68-90; p.90.

focussed on the 'One'. Making the becoming-woman non-dependent on sexual difference, means to aim at a universal position — as fluid as it may be in this project — or in the Deleuze & Guattari-inspired Xenofeminist claim to a “non-absolute, generic universality”.<sup>27</sup>

And much like the narrator of Melville's story, Deleuze stands on the outside, looking at the anorexic's enigmatic and captivating doings. And while Kraus' account of her refusal of food strongly corresponds to that of Deleuze's elaborations on anorexia as a political gesture, Kraus never alludes to any aesthetic idealization. Maybe the fact that “the only thing that's irreducible, still, in female life is gender” does not necessarily have to lead to “a well-adjusted, boundaried sense of self [a]s the only worthy female goal”. If being-woman can merely be associated with being forced into the traps of marriage and reproduction, indeed it appears that this 'fate' can only be avoided if one does away with sexual difference altogether, as Deleuze & Guattari demand, leaving femininity behind in a virtual ideal, the idealized virtuality of *n* sexes.



Addie Wagenknecht, *The Law of Averages*, 2014, c-print.

However, if, instead of as incorporeal Alice, we imagine the girl in terms of plasticity rather than becoming, could she then be a transforming self without either renouncing sexual difference or positing 'being woman' as a *telos*? Plasticity, as

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<sup>27</sup> <https://laboriacuboniks.net/manifesto/xenofeminism-a-politics-for-alienation/> [accessed 20 July 2020].

Catherine Malabou stresses, is to be understood as the counter-phenomenon of elasticity. Elastic matter can be stretched or deformed but will eventually snap back into its original form. "Elasticity is thus opposed to plasticity to the extent that a plastic material retains the imprint and thereby resists endless polymorphism."<sup>28</sup> She suggests keeping this concept in mind when thinking about sexual difference:

It is important to stress that such limits are not fixed but rather are dynamic. They imply the possibility of moving outside oneself, the possibility of creation and the passage of an in-between. In this sense, the dialectical negativity of sexual difference is a condition of cultivation and transformation, of a non-teleological becoming.<sup>29</sup>

Asserting this difference will make it possible to avoid ascribing to a universal, be it the 'old' one, or a new 'multiplicity', without falling back into the trap of binary thinking.

"To ask oneself before another: by what means does he calm within himself the desire to be everything?"<sup>30</sup> asks Georges Bataille in the first pages of his quasi-mystical project *Inner Experience*, which certainly owes a lot to Simone Weil's writing. I want to suggest that it might be necessary to look for the means by which she calms within herself the desire to be nothing.

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<sup>28</sup> Catherine Malabou, „Plasticity and Elasticity in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*" in : *diacritics*, Heft 37, Nr. 4, Winter 2007, 78-86; p.82.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Malabou & Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, "Negativity, Unhappiness or Felicity: On Irigaray's Dialectical Culture of Sexual Difference", *L'Esprit Créateur*, 52:3 (Fall 2012), 11-25; p.15-16.

<sup>30</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p.xxxii.



Tony Oursler, *Hierarchical Pastel*, 2012, steel stand, projection, and mixed media.