

Visions Are Worth Words

Thank you, Josephine Bosma, for posting your Mute article *What are words worth* to the cyberfeministic newsgroup at the Hybrid Workspace, Kassel, Germany. As you might have guessed by the title, the following words are reacting on yours.

Except of my excursions into the 12th and the 16th centuries, all my references are going back to that text. Some general statements refer to the discussion on the FACES list that has been going on since more than two months now in preparation of the meeting of the first international cyberfeministic organisation, the Old Boys Network.

Visionaries

For most of the history of western culture, the only way to enter the written discourse of history for women was to have *visions*. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) as well as Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) not the only examples of women that had no legal education in reading and writing. Both of them, though, developed a specific rhetoric in their actions as well as in their texts that urged church patriarchs to accept their writings as being dictated by Jesus or God. Teresa, when accused or criticized, argued, that illness, hunger and daily business did not allow a re-reading of her texts. Because of her imperfect knowledge of the official church latin Hildegard was granted an educated (male) secretary that converted her spoken German (Mittelhochdeutsch) into the appropriate written format in Latin.

Rhetoric of Feminity

The words *I am only a woman* and *God has chosen me as a medium, so, you are in power and you have to decide what to do* worked wonders. Both visionaries were asked by the authorities to deliver written evidence of their visions. The visions had to be transformed from one medium to another (spoken to written language) in order to be processable through the hierarchy of the catholic church. Both visionaries were conscious about the models of thinking of their readership. Their rhetoric structures of diminutive writing about themselves, repeated humility topics and self-critique were used to influence the readership in a way that took arguments out of their mouths by addressing them within their own writing.

Teresa of Avila stated in her *Book of Foundations* that "we are living in a world in which we have to think of people`s opinions of us if our words are to have any effect." Today we find ourselves embraced by a technology - the internet - that Josephine Bosma describes as a technology that "*lives* and is connecting to lives, creating new realities, emphasising dormant freedoms of expression and being". Her notes on the academic, male discourse that is performed on some internet mailing lists and her call for subversive actions would stand in the above described tradition of rhetoric of feminity.

Practical Actions

But the texts of the visionaries are not all that we know about their lives. If we look more closely, we find, that the texts were an unavoidable necessity which they had to provide in order to be able to found own cloisters and like this reach a remarkable autonomy. Most female cloisters were connected not only geographically but also and foremost in terms of hierarchy to male cloisters. Hildegard managed to found her own cloister when she was 49 years old. Again and again she envisioned that God told her to found a cloister at that specific place which happened to be located on the other bank of the river that passed by the main cloister. The responsible male colleagues changed their primarily total abjection to a final OK - being forced by the rhetoric patterns of Hildegard. Seemingly not caring about their own fate, they did force their male contemporaries indirectly. The consequence in their actions irritated those who were part

of the institution. The virus of suspect - what, if these women are getting their visions from above? - made decisions possible that were directed against the system.

Both visionaries became writers. But not to play a role within the game. They used this tactic to realize their other visions. Hildegard's cloister worked as a psychological institution for people in despair, as a pharmacy, as an ambulant hospital and as a collecting point for life experiences in general. Teresa founded her first convent with 43 and when she died she had opened more than 20 houses for women. All without legal authority, i.e. she squatted deserted houses, established a working community there and went on. Of course, the writings which were translated into the local languages helped to distribute a theory for their doings, but the every day problems were different. The texts were not written with the one and only aim to participate in the male dominated discourse but to establish structures that were in an immediate connection to every day life and the needs of its beings.

Cyberfeminism

This is the point where I see the cyberfeministic potential today. To find ways in using the internet and all technology around it, that makes sense not only in a theoretical but also in a practical way - based on insights that were developed and written down during a history of feminism. The knowledge transfer between women should not be sacrificed to the sake of producing as many and as good programmers or technicians as men have produced already. But ask for ways to integrate this product of a male dominated history of technology back into every day life. This does not mean that cyberfeminism as a state of mind can only exist where people have access to internet.

Questions

In this context, I would like to draw your attention to a recent publication by Margaret Wertheim with the title *Pythagora's Trousers*. With her background as a physicist, she wrote a history of physics of 2500 years on 250 pages. Her book reveals an inspiring connection between the patriarchic structures of the catholic church and the history of physics. Her suggestion is, to make use of those human beings (mostly women) that through their education outside of institutions have developed different point of views. The questions they raise towards products of history could stimulate a rethinking. How can we integrate these products into our lifes? Do we need to spent more money on the question of quantum physics? Or is there a possibility to create explanations of the creation or the future of the universe? With less technological effort such as words maybe?

Mother Tongue, Culture and Style

A word about my own words: As a German, I am not a native English speaker. Writing in English is a hurdle which sometimes seems high. When re-reading the Hildegard and Teresa literature for this article, I realized that their being ignorant, unlettered women in the sense that they had no official training in Latin, this gave them in a way a lot of freedom: nobody blamed them for their language.

I am still wondering, whether the generalization (sorry, Josephine Starrs, but it is a generalization) that women develop a nice style in their online writing, can be applied on native as well as non-native speakers. Speaking for myself, I admit that I feel more creative and constructive writing in German than in English. Still, I am more interested in the international discourse on this subject than a national one.

During the discussion on cyberfeminism, critical voices towards a male tradition of academic discourse have been raised. With my own position as a lecturer within such an institution, I feel attacked by these words. I think it is important to allow free choice for the place and way of

performance of cyberfeminism in society. For me, it is necessary to get feedback from these institutions, so it is unavoidable to be close to them.

Knowledge Transfer and Teaching

Since Aristoteles, women have had a long history of being excluded from education and teaching. Still today, a female teacher in elementary schools is nothing unusual, while female academic teachers still are. For me, this situation is challenging. Experimenting with my vision of history. Trying to create methods of seeing connections instead of repeating facts in a linear way. And using the internet as a research, writing and presentation tool.

Josephine Bosma pointed out that *the definitions of rationality, science and art, all restrictive, male academic traditions should have trouble surviving* the *revolutionary force of the new media*.

I am fascinated by the possibilities of the internet, but as a teacher, the feedback of the students, the development of thoughts and insights through spoken language and discussions are more important to me than my webpages or texts as products. These I feel still have a comparable function as the writings of the early female visionaries had: to produce something that can be processed by an academic machinery that is something I am dealing with as a product of history.

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