Oedipal Dramas in Art Education

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The gender divisions and hierarchies of family life represent our earliest and most powerful experience of human differences that we see later reflected in the social world. They provide us with patterns of appropriate behaviours and relationships which structure unconscious assumptions about all future relationships, even those that have nothing to do with the family, in a process of what Alice Jardine has described as the 'Oedipalization of the public sphere.' [1]

One of the early projects of the Frankfurt School was to examine the way that family relationships have served as models for social behaviour. Eric Fromm in 1932 wrote:

The family is the medium through which the society or the social class stamps its specific structure on the child, and hence on the adult. The family is the psychological agency of society. [2]

Critical feminist theorists have continued the debates, begun in the Frankfurt School, of the social construction of subjectivity; through Lacanian interpretations of Freud, via Althusser's theory of ideology and through the work of Juliet Mitchell. The patriarchal family has emerged as a primary institution underpinning the gendering of society, [3] as an archaic, pre-modern structure, apparently serving no visible economic function yet being preserved through thick and thin. [4]

What is patriarchy?

Patriarchy speaks to and through each person in the unconscious; through unexamined traditions, behaviours, customs and habits. There is no appeal to any unfairness or contradictions in its practices, since its pre-suppositions are mostly unconscious. There are no laws which demand heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood, and no written rules saying a woman should change her name to a man's, or do the housework or be responsible for childcare, yet these customs persist as powerful traditions and form the basis on which human relationships are grounded.

It has been argued that with different forms of postmodern family structures such as lesbian and gay families, non-Western types of family and more women-headed households, the patriarchal metaphor has been weakened. [5] Yet, while it is necessary to be cautious about transferring psychic structures directly onto the social realm, it is also evident that unconscious, symbolic structures of patriarchy are deep rooted and persistent. [6] They mutate and change their codes, but their archaic structures persist even in postmodern relations, indeed, as Jane Flax suggests patriarchy may even be postmodernism's 'latest ruse.' [7]

The story of Oedipus

Freud gave a vivid picture of the unconscious familial structures of social life by reference to an existing story: the myth of Oedipus. In the story, King Laius, has a curse put on him that he will one day be murdered by his son, who will take over his property, his power and his woman. The son, Oedipus begins his life by leaving the family home, but meets his father unknowingly one day and kills him in a fight, inherits his kingdom and marries his own mother.

In cultural terms, this Oedipal plot is played out in the sense that inheritance in all civilized

cultures, passes from the father to the eldest son – the legitimate heir, who then is displaced in his turn by his son in a linear, hierarchical succession. Patriarchy is the unstable rule of the father – that is: a lineage of male power and the dominance of older men over women, younger men and children, it is not simply male dominance over women. [8]

This Oedipal story operates as a powerful myth structuring all relationships, not just those within the family. The father/son metaphor is so pervasive, so universally recognised and seemingly natural that it is drawn on to legitimise relationships in other fields that have nothing whatsoever to do with the family.

Patriarchy in education

Pierre Bourdieu, writing on education demonstrated how patriarchal power is exploited in pedagogic relations. He cites Freud:

We understand now our relations with our teachers. These men who were not even fathers themselves, became for us paternal substitutes… we transferred onto them the respect and hopes the omniscient father of our childhood inspired in us and we started to treat them as we used to treat our father at home. [9]

Bourdieu noted that if the authority of the imaginary father coincides with material reality, that is, if real 'dads' look and act like mythic fathers, then their authority is re-enforced. Young male schoolteachers, if they adopt signifying paternal behaviour – grow beards, wear dark suits, acquire gravitas, can take on the signs of paternity and secure authority and respect. Women teachers also attempt to adopt masculine signifiers: wearing severe suits, adopting wide masculine gestures and serious punitive attitudes. But because women lack symbolic, as well as actual physical strength and stature and because children are used to seeing them subordinated in the family, women find it more difficult to assert legitimate authority; their claims are challenged in demeaning terms such as 'bossy', 'strident' or 'demanding'.

The paternal lineage of art

Historicist accounts of art have been constructed as a lineage of legitimate succession, with new styles succeeding the old in often violent and challenging circumstances, evoking a fight for power between the established paternal ideas of the 'great masters' ousted by the radical new ideas of the 'young turks'. The history of the establishment of modernist art has been told in this way; as a series of temporary stabilized orders, punctuated by challenges to the status quo by new young (male) upstarts, who in turn become the established masters. [10]

The thing to be remembered in this Oedipal narrative is that eldest sons inevitably become conservative and conforming fathers in their turn, in what Laura Mulvey called 'the short term radicalism of youth'. [11] The mischievous art antics of a Damien Hirst for instance, could be seen to represent the act of a rebellious son who is well on his way to becoming part of the art establishment himself. Artists who are implicated in avant gardism in a constant search for the new, shocking and fashionable, do not necessarily disturb existing relations of the art economy or destabilize the power relationships of legitimate art – the gallery and saleroom systems. They have a stake in inheriting the dominant culture and cannot be expected to challenge the status quo so thoroughly that they undermine the inheritance they hope one day to gain. The Oedipal artist never puts himself beyond the reach of the prizes and social rewards that the legitimate art world bestows.

Women in the Oedipal plot

The only woman who features in the Oedipal story is the mother, and she is there only to secure the succession of her eldest son. Both mother and son are subject to and dependent on the law of the father, but they act together, to subvert and topple his authority. The patriarchal mother puts the interests of her son before her own and those of her daughters. This patriarchal mother can be seen in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* where, martyr like, she sacrifices her own intelligence and social prospects in favour of her son. She is also visible in Vic-

torian novels as the mother who secretly scrimps and starves so that her son can have a good education. In contemporary representations, these are the caricatured Jewish mothers – as in the British Telecom TV advertisements where the mother rings up her middle aged son at work to remind him to wear his jumper – the Catholic and now, according to the new comedy series, Goodness Gracious me! the Asian mothers: mothers who struggle ridiculously to improve the social status of their eldest sons.

Paternal and maternal ideological modes

Maternal and paternal ideological modes of authority work differently. Paternal power is represented as direct, explicit, governed by social rule and convention, in it there is an appeal to justice. Its style is academic, conformist, it represents the accepted legitimate and agreed authority. In its negative aspect it is domineering, bullying, undemocratic, violent, controlling and oppressive. All patriarchal power is maintained through socially sanctioned systems of domination such as the family, the military, education and the church.

Maternal power on the other hand, has limited scope and operates within the private domain of the family. It is based more on care and reciprocity, on unconditional love and experience, on empathy, empowerment and mutual interests of mother and child/son. It is also exerted through flattery, unspoken disapproval, guilt, withdrawal of affection, cajoling and teasing. Maternal love can be manipulative, it can use implicit and covert methods of control, leaving children with no access to explicit legal systems for appeal or argument.

Some feminists educators privilege maternal power. Too much education, they assert, has been identified as 'masculine' as paternal, coercive, oppressive, formulaic, authoritarian and they argue for maternal styles which bring the status of the teacher and the student closer together, emphasising teamwork, caring, listening skills, and empowerment. [12] Maternal pedagogy means

being able to provide a safe place in the classroom that honored all voices and silences; nurtured the wholeness of learning rather than its fragmentation; emphasised process over product; and honored the private, the personal, and subjective. [13]

The employing of maternal styles of operation in pedagogy is not new. The Hadow Report in 1933 quite explicitly stated that women teachers were to be educated 'to amplify their capacities for maternal nurturance.' [14] Valerie Walkerdine has described at length, the way that love and maternal skills were quite explicitly exploited in progressive education in the early twentieth century. [15]

Malcolm Ross in 1977, drawing on work about creativity in early childhood from Klein and Winnicott, explicitly recommended the developing of maternal skills in both male and female teachers; skills as 'good enough teachers' in supplying the necessary warm, trusting and uncritical, environment of play and stimulation where creativity and art could best be nurtured. [16] Some feminist art educators are reactivating the importance of incorporating maternal styles in fostering creativity, [17] and critiquing over-intellectual and distancing styles of art education in favour of more experiential methodologies. [18]

It would appear that the rigid formulaic styles of modernist art education are giving way to a rhetoric of more flexible, fluid, interactive forms of art teaching practice, where creativity, empowerment and self-directed student centered work is privileged.

Walkerdine has revealed the element of hidden control and manipulation embodied in maternal styles of pedagogy, [19] and Jean Elshtain, concludes in her arguments against what she calls 'psycho-pedagogy' that paternal, authoritarian modes of teaching may not always be undesirable: 'At least when one is being overtly coerced one knows who is doing what to whom.' [20]

Maternal capacities are being exploited in business and arts management. [21] Elizabeth McGregor, director of the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, critically observed how she is

expected to perform like a mother: 'a role that women curators easily fall into when dealing with difficult male artists: they soothe the tantrums, nurture, comfort, cajole.' [22]

The limits of maternal power

Freud established that for full adult maturity and what he called 'gender consolidation', a child has to repudiate the maternal, leave home and seek their adult fortunes in a harsh, public paternal world. Laura Mulvey has traced the prevalence of these Oedipal scenarios in modernity's cultural forms: The hero, like Oedipus, is always a lonely traveller – 'born under a wandering star' – as the song goes, seeking something hidden – the truth, the murderer, himself – He is the cowboy, the detective, the scientist, or the angst-ridden artist, who never acknowledges the existence of a mother. Through the popular figure of the witch, the 'old bags', 'old hags' and 'the blue rinse brigade', the image and the body of the mother in modernism's stories and art movements is repressed, for she represents the past that must be rejected for (male) adult psychic health.

Fashioning teaching styles on the maternal, then, is heading for a socially limited role – and this applies to both men and women teachers. The pedagogic authority of the feminine does not endure: it does not carry the same symbolic weight as paternal authority. Students who want to 'make it' in the art world and succeed in their work, often reject their former female teachers 'in favour of an allegiance to a morally and intellectually superior male world.' [23] Feminists such as Judy Chicago have noted and analysed this rejecting pattern of behaviour in art teaching. [24]

Maternal teachers have to operate within the rules of institutions in which they have had no say in constructing. They operate as managers, service workers, carrying out the 'housework' of higher authorities. When seeking higher level posts, these teachers and administrators find that a glass ceiling operates, they can get so far up the hierarchy but no further. Like mothers in the family, they do not inherit real power; their role is to manage, to carry out the patriarchal law in the name of the father, and to do it more effectively than the father can, through 'caring' and 'love'.

Oedipal structures in work relations

Other studies have shown how Oedipal structures inhabit all our thinking about human relationships. Michael Roper in his book *Masculinity and British Organisation Man*, described how in mentoring, a strong affectionate and paternal familial relationship and transference of power is enacted between older and younger men which effectively excludes women in business. Margaret Tierney has shown how brotherly ties of unions, informal male cliques and 'laddishness' casually exclude women from power in institutions. [25] Feminist scholars have vividly demonstrated how masculine authority is constructed and paternal power enacted through the use and meanings of technology: its manual labour, its tools, materials and relationships, [26] and how family practices of apprenticeship based on father to son succession have excluded 'others' such as women and immigrants from economic power. Walkerdine has provided an even more radical argument in observing how family relationships structure early cognitive growth, so everything we do and every relationship we inhabit is gendered. [27]

The alternatives?

Laura Mulvey states: 'Looking at the Oedipal myth in detail it is remarkable to what extent it is about the father son relationship and how marginal the feminine is...' [28] and as Rosi Braidotti says in relation to the Oedipal narrative: 'the sisters (have been) excluded from this primitive ritual and from civil society as a consequence.' [29]

Given that family patterns are so deeply inscribed on consciousness and identity, and have such a pernicious effect on women, how can patriarchy, transmitted at this unconscious level be challenged?

Luce Irigaray suggests as one strategy, that we culturally privilege the role of the daughter, the little girl who is absent in the Oedipal plot. She has no symbolic or signifying function in modernity's narratives: Cowboy films, detective

stories, war films have no structural need of girls and there are very few paintings, films, novels or plays that have a daughter as the main protagonist. Girls exist outside culture, outside time, outside representation.

For some feminist theorists this symbolic positioning of young women on the margins of the linear patriarchal order is potentially creative. Julia Kristeva suggested that young women, because of their symbolic identification outside paternal logic, have some power: '…isn't a woman also the most radical atheist, the most committed anarchist, when she is carried away by what the symbolic order rejects?' [30] From the position of having nothing to inherit, nothing therefore to lose, women can disrupt, disturb, subvert, sabotage, ridicule, 'needle', and embarrass established authority and of course this is what some see their role as feminists and artists to be: 'Girl power' has its strategic place: asserting rightful claims in the dominant culture and projecting a more visible and disturbing identity in art galleries and in education's theory and classroom practice is a tactical way of challenging and disrupting the lineage of male inheritance.

But 'girl power' has its limitations. Young women can gain access to existing powers this way, but not alter the terms on which they have been constructed. To be always on the outside, fighting to get in to a hierarchy that men have designed for themselves is to remain powerless in the wider social world and accepting of a position as marginal in the patriarchal plot. Rebellious daughters have the chance to disrupt and subvert, to needle and annoy, but not to actively construct different power regimes or assert authority as of right.

Another alternative in combating patriarchal power could be to drop familial, gendered and generational metaphors altogether in situations that have nothing to do with the family.

The Oedipal story has been a powerful metaphor, and we need metaphors to live by, but as Fredric Jameson suggests, metaphors have a limited life and we have lived with the Oedipal story for a long time. [31] He suggests instead that the structures of language could provide alternative metaphors for human relationships. Donna Haraway also rejects the family as metaphor and ironically proposes that we adopt the metaphor of the cyborg: half machine, half organism for postmodern imaginary structures. There is no space to discuss these radical alternatives here, but what both suggest is that we move away from metaphors borrowed from biology, nature and the family. [32]

Instead of modelling social and work relationships on the relations between fathers, mothers and children, we could instead, at a pragmatic level, begin by making critical evaluations of the moral rights and responsibilities between people with different jobs, skills and needs and seek to determine what is the nature of the professional relationship between teachers and the taught. The workplace is different from a family; teachers, managers, curators and bosses are not parents and clients, workers, schoolchildren and artists are not sons and daughters. As Jameson indicates, and as postmodern psychology suggests, we do need metaphors and models on which to build imaginary social structures like education, but we need to question whether modelling institutional practices and work relationships on the archaic patriarchal family is the best we can come up with.

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