

Feminine Desire in Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* and Shirin Neshat's *Women Without Men* in Dialogue with Irigaray's Philosophy of the Caress

An exploration of feminine desire through the lens of Luce Irigaray's caress is afforded here through the feminist film-philosophical analysis of Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* (*La teta asustada*, 2009) and *Women Without Men* (*Zanan-e Bedun-e Mardan*, 2009), by Shirin Neshat. Drawing on key scholarship (Watkins 2000; Bainbridge 2008; Bolton [2011] 2015; Quinlivan [2012] 2014), this article offers a novel contribution through its emphasis on the Irigarayan caress. Despite important limitations and silences in Irigaray's work (Rifesser 2020; Ingram 2008; Bloodsworth-Lugo 2007; Deutscher 2003; Jones, 1981), here the usefulness of Irigaray's caress is discussed. An exploration of the narrative, formal and aesthetic strategies of Llosa's and Neshat's feature films attune the viewer to the embodied, lived experiences of the main women characters, so that we can envision the Irigarayan caress and the lived experience of feminine desire as woman with oneself, as well as the desire for the other.

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Fig. 1: *Women Without Men* (Shirin Neshat, 2009)



Fig. 2: *The Milk of Sorrow* (Claudia Llosa, 2009)

The Irigarayan caress with oneself and feminine desire

Luce Irigaray's philosophy of the caress provides the basis for the exploration of feminine desire within Shirin Neshat's *Women Without Men* (*Zanan-e Bedun-e Mardan*, 2009) and Claudia Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* (*La teta asustada*, 2009), specifically the above two sequences (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2), respectively. Irigaray's body of work grounded in psychoanalytic and philosophical theory has formed the basis for discussion within the realm of feminist film studies in landmark works such as Caroline Bainbridge's (2008) exploration of women's cinema in *A Feminine Cinematics* or Lucy Bolton's ([2011] 2015) which explores facets of feminine consciousness on screen via Irigarayan theory, whilst Liz Watkins' work focusses specifically on color (2002). Davina Quinlivan's ([2012] 2014) research offers an important intervention in film-phenomenological research by using Irigaray's work (instead of Merleau-Ponty or Deleuzian theory) to engage with the notions of breath and sound(s) in film. Yet, Irigaray's concept of the caress remains an aspect that is yet to be explored in greater depth. The Irigarayan caress "remains within the dualistic heterosexual woman/man paradigm" (Rifesser 2020, 254), an aspect that has previously been a point of critique of Irigaray's work more broadly in relation to her omission of engaging with issues of intersectionality such as race, class, and an emphasis on a heterosexual woman's biological physicality (Jones 1981, Deutscher 2003, Bloodsworth-Lugo 2007, Ingram 2008). Despite these inherent issues, the Irigarayan caress lends insight into the struggles of the main characters in Neshat and Llosa's films and how they try to negotiate and indeed overcome these within the

patriarchal system that confines them. This is firstly, given Irigaray's quest to acknowledge and foreground feminine subjectivity through a call for a *parler femme*, that is, the establishment of a space for the feminine and a feminine enunciation, thereby breaking free from patriarchal constraints; secondly, due to Irigaray's advocacy to recognize woman's bodily, lived experience of desire; thirdly, through her challenging of philosophical discourse and patriarchal scholarship to give voice to woman's experience; finally, the Irigarayan caress offers a model for a peaceful meeting with the other. Already in her earlier and perhaps most known works, *Speculum of the Other Woman* ([1974] 1985a), *This Sex Which Is Not One* ([1977] 1985b) and *To Speak is Never Neutral* ([1985] 2002), Irigaray foregrounds the idea that woman is in exile. She is the other and she is trapped within a patriarchal society that excludes her, with no space for a feminine enunciation, or as Irigaray calls it a *parler femme*. Reading the Irigarayan caress in dialogue with the above texts, offers the opportunity to explore not only the philosophical but also the political potential of the caress for thinking feminine desire in cinema more broadly.

Before engaging in the lived experience of the feminine via Neshat and Llosa's cinematic works, it is first important to map the morphological concept of the Irigarayan caress. Irigaray's interest in the caress can be traced back to her earliest writings on woman's lived, embodied experience of feminine desire through the vaginal lips. Woman "touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation [...] for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact" (Irigaray [1977] 1985b, 24). From these— although highly problematic (Jones

1981)—observations on the vaginal lips, she builds the foundations of what Irigaray calls her “philosophy of the caress” and her thinking about how it continuously navigates the dichotomies of active/passive, presence/absence, touch/the absence thereof and closeness/distance. By focusing on the vaginal lips, Irigaray is able to subvert patriarchal, psychoanalytic scholarship—specifically, in her earliest, perhaps most prominent writings, Jacques Lacan’s work—to overcome the notion of the feminine perceived as a “hole” or “lack” (Irigaray [1974] 1985a, 26) and instead to “speak for the singularity of each woman in her multiplicity” (Bolton [2011] 2015, 45). For Irigaray, woman requires no mediation to evoke the sensation of touch. Woman does not need an other to feel the sensation of being touched. Woman is already whole due to her vaginal lips being in contact with each other, evoking the continuous (though not simultaneous) sensation of touch/absence thereof. Such a focus on the vaginal lips in these early writings is problematic due to its exclusion of people who identify as feminine, but who might not share the physicality of the vaginal lips (Jones 1981). Saying this, it is important to recognize the significant theories of embodiment to which Irigaray contributes, and Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo (2007) despite her critique of Irigaray’s lack of attention to issues of intersectionality, here highlights the importance of theories of embodiment in relation to feminine subjectivity, an idea that is shared with other key feminist theorists of sexual difference (Spivak 1987; Butler 1993; Braidotti 1994; Grosz 1994; Gatens 1996).

Irigaray’s essay entitled “The Fecundity of the Caress” ([1983] re-

printed in Irigaray 1993, 185–217) is especially interesting for this paper on feminine desire because via her engagement with the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, she establishes a key aspect of her philosophy of the caress, namely the relationship with the other (as well as the relationship with oneself). These ideas are central to a later piece of hers that explicitly critiques Levinas, namely “Questions to Emmanuel Levinas” (Irigaray [1991] 1992, 178–89). Irigaray reads Levinas’ ideas on the caress as the epitome of patriarchal oppression due to his denial of woman as independent, active, sensing subject. These texts inform much of Irigaray’s recent work, which focuses on the possibility of coexistence between two as “different other(s)” (Irigaray 2008, 161) in a horizontal, and thus non-objectifying, respectful relationship between a man and a woman that allows for ethical living in sexual difference, an aspect I shall return to later. Irigaray’s critique of Levinas is clearly situated within her wider project to establish a space for a feminine enunciation, or a *parler femme*. Analyzing Irigaray’s critique of Levinas also brings to light how Irigaray’s early focus on the vaginal lips is a further attempt to give voice to the silenced desire of woman, and the establishment of woman as an independent subject who senses, feels, desires. Irigaray is particularly troubled by Levinas’ use and conceptualization of the feminine face. The face plays a particular role in the quest for subjectivity as it inhabits the place that is most closely associated with the individuality of a person, or with one’s subjectivity, and thus it cannot remain a silenced topic in the quest for a feminine subjectivity. Irigaray sets up a “face-to-face encounter” with Levinas to challenge his perception of the caress (Levinas [1961] 1969, 194–219).

As mentioned earlier, Irigaray critiques Levinas because by denying the importance of the feminine face, he denies woman's presence and enunciation as subject. Levinas describes the "inversion of the face in femininity" (Levinas [1961] 1969, 262), seeing the feminine as the place in which the face shifts from signification into "non-signifyingness" (Levinas [1961] 1969, 263). Irigaray is clearly troubled by this. She asks: "How to preserve the memory of the flesh? [...] Without a face? [...] Invisible because it must defend itself unceasingly from the visible and the night. Both" (Irigaray [1983] 1993, 191–92). Irigaray plays with the verb "touch" to highlight its importance in the relationship of one with the other. The verb "swallow" is used to emphasize the passivity of this act of devouring in which the feminine face is trapped. That is, the feminine is not recognized as active subject and therefore not as a subject with own desires but rather as passive object. Such a viewpoint supports Irigaray's fight to write the feminine into Western philosophy in order to overturn the patriarchal system of the association of woman with darkness and man with light, as Kate Ince highlights in her detailed study of Irigaray's engagement with Levinas (Ince 1996, 10–11). In Irigaray's second text on Levinas, she addresses him directly and argues: "The feminine, as it is characterized by Levinas, is not other than himself [...] [T]he feminine appears as the underside or reverse of man's aspiration towards the light, as its negative" (Irigaray [1991] 1992, 178). The feminine face becomes emblematic here for the role of woman only as mother and not as desiring, independent subject. "She embodies the place of origin for the masculine subject and, consequently, has no access to her own space of origin, nor

indeed to any space of her own outside the maternal realm" (Bainbridge 2008, 25). Here we see the importance of Irigaray's work to fight for a space where woman is recognized as a desiring subject and to create a realm for a feminine enunciation, her *parler femme*.

Tracing the development of Irigaray's thought on the caress reveals in her later work an emphasis on breath that importantly shifts away from the problematic focus on the vaginal lips. Irigaray directly relates breathing to a "touching upon in words" (Irigaray 1996, 124), arguing that breathing is central to a caress with oneself. The nuanced dimensions of touch in relation to ourselves and our embodied subjectivity are fleshed out in the observation that the "tactile dimension to breathing considers the flow of breath itself and its passage from outside to the inside of our bodies as a form of touching oneself as well as the air 'touching' us in a way that fleshes out our interior, corporeal subjectivity" (Quinlivan [2012] 2014, 94). In order to focus on breath, Irigaray demands us to be silent (quite literally to hear our own breath) but also to provide space for consideration of the body, our desires, our own existence. If silence and breath are key constituents of our engagement with ourselves, then what about the spoken word in relation to this process? At the very core of developing "modes of speaking which respect the breath" and indeed of "constructing [a feminine] history" that perceives the feminine as desiring subject is silence (Irigaray 2000, 64–65).

Silence acts as a protective space to engage with oneself—a space to develop one's own voice outside a phallogocentric framework. "I must protect the silence in me," like the one [that is the silence] of the other (Irigaray 2000, 62). Silence here must not be mistaken with being silenced. Instead,

silence is to be understood as a looking inward, a time for repose, so as to give space to listen to one's inner voice. Paying attention to oneself and one's body constitutes a caress with oneself, and results in one being continuously confronted with the question regarding one's desires, one's identity: "Who are you?" (Irigaray [1983] 1999, 26). Irigaray argues that this question demands reflection on our own subjectivity and on our place in the world. Here we can see that, for Irigaray, the caress with oneself is fueled by desires both carnal (through an emphasis on our body) and spiritual (through a reflection on ourselves as subjects in this world). For Irigaray, time for pauses, contemplation and reflection are key to the development of subjectivity, to understand and listen to one's own desires and to being with ourselves. The importance of breath, voice and silence is crucial in this facet of Irigaray's thought. These elements also play a key role in Neshat's *Women Without Men*.

Exploring the Irigarayan caress through *Women Without Men*

Women Without Men is the first feature film by Iranian-born, in US exile living Shirin Neshat, a visual artist and filmmaker. Neshat's magic realist tale told in Farsi is a dramatic re-telling of Shahrnush Parsipur's acclaimed 1989 novel of the same name in collaboration with director Shoja Azari, telling the intersecting stories of four women as they find temporary refuge in a house by an orchard from a patriarchal society that constrains them. *Women Without Men* opens with a crucial sequence that returns at the very end of the film. The first scene evokes a space that, as I discuss later, resonates closely with Irigaray's central idea in relation to feminine desire and subjectivity.

It shows a woman, whom we later come to know as Munis (Shabnam Tolouei). Munis is shown in a slightly low angle long shot—suggesting that she is standing somewhere up high. Momentarily later, a cut to a reverse shot reveals the hard, grey surface of an empty cobble street below. A number of shots reveal the distressed Munis as she is pacing up and down on the rooftop, her black hair gently moving in the wind as she contemplates an elevated view of Tehran. The camera lingers on the back of Munis' head, which then moves out of the frame in slow motion. Munis is jumping from the rooftop of the house in what seems like a suicide attempt. But the slow motion means that the action is not hurried, and the voice of the muezzin suddenly subsides. We can hear neither diegetic nor non-diegetic sound. There is silence. Figure 1 reveals the close-up of Munis' face half turned towards the camera, as she is seemingly floating in the air. The silence is broken by Munis' non-diegetic voice. Munis in close-up, speaks via a voice-over, uttering: "Now I'll have silence... and nothing."

This last shot in this sequence poignantly audiovisually presents the complexities of feminine desire with oneself as explored in Irigaray's theory of the caress, namely the struggle to give voice to Munis' desire(s) and provide space for a *parler femme*, a feminine enunciation. That is not a "speaking of woman" but rather, as Irigaray clarifies, a "speaking (as) woman" (Irigaray [1974] 1985a, quoted in Whitford 1991, 137). The notion of silence serves here as a complex vehicle of resistance as well as an act of contemplation of oneself in order to carve out a space where woman is perceived as independent subject that breathes, senses, perceives, desires. Melissa S. Brown notes the power of active silence

in *Women Without Men*, an idea that chimes with Irigaray's understanding of silence as — paradoxically — a form of *parler femme* through the creation of a powerful feminine space for oneself and for women more generally. She further suggests that Munis' suicide is born out of scenes in which “silence becomes a symbol of confinement for Munis” (Brown 2011, 13). The action of Munis' brother reinforces Munis' “threat of confinement, and also of stillness” (Brown, 2011). The word silence, from the Latin *silentium*, means “being silent,” yet the word stems also from *silere* [meaning “to be still, quiet”] (Harper 2019). It draws attention also to “motionlessness” (Brown 2011, 14). The air provides a momentary in-between space for Munis to listen to her inner voice and to cultivate a respectful relationship with her own body, practices that Irigaray emphasizes as being key to one's subjectivity. Whilst, as suggested before, silence might be interpreted as lacking in voice or movement, a different interpretation could be offered. “In Farsi (and Arabic) *sukut* [...] means rest, *sukun* [...] equilibrium” (Hissan 2008). The act of speaking causes the “vocal cords to be disturbed from its original state of ‘*sukun* or *sukut*-rest or silence’” (Hissan 2008). Therefore, silence can be read in line with Irigaray's emphasis on pausing and a focus on breath in order to find peace within oneself, to return to oneself as she envisions in the caress with oneself. “[A] space of privacy,” a space to give voice to her own desires, is established here for Munis (Brown 2011, 11). Indeed, Munis' “[s]ilence may be agential, and may be a form of resistance” (Brown 2011, 11) to carve out a space outside of the patriarchal space in which she is trapped by her brother. Such a reading works in line with Irigaray's emphasis on the importance

of silence not as a *silencing*, but as a use of silence to say yes to oneself, a saying yes to one's own desires, as a means of caring about and for oneself. It is crucial to note here that Irigaray's philosophy of the caress “shifts from an ocularcentric and logocentric investigation to a focus on the body that touches, senses, perceives and feels” (Rifesser 2020, 249). This moment could be read as one in which Munis chooses to be with herself, to give voice to her desires, evoking Irigaray's idea of repose for reflection and contemplation.

For a brief moment Munis is caught between earth and sky, temporarily freed from space and time, temporarily freed from the restraints of the patriarchal system oppressing her. The camera cuts to a close-up shot of the blue sky, interspersed with white clouds. Munis is caught in a space in-between. Munis' act of jumping off the rooftop of the house is revealed as a cultivation of her own identity, a fidelity to her spiritual and bodily self, and indeed a return to herself. She is “flying like Superman” (White 2015, 98), or better Superwoman, to forge a new life for herself. Her liberation is only temporary, as the return to the first scene at the end of the film seems to suggest. Freedom is — even if only momentarily — possible through the creation of a space in-between for Munis within the oppressive system she is trying to navigate. It is “the perfect vehicle in which to evoke this fraught space of liminality” (Holman 2013) but perhaps also, in the spirit of Irigaray, a space for a *parler femme* that can and shall be imagined, a space that defies a phallogocentric framework, a patriarchal realm, a space where the feminine is perceived as independent thinking, sensing, desiring subject.

Feminine desire, the caress with the other and the space in-between

For Irigaray, respecting the body, and paying attention to notions of breath, pauses and silence, is central to both the caress with oneself and with the other. In Irigaray's words: "There is no doubt that the closer we remain to cosmic hierogamies, the more the weddings are both carnal and divine" (Irigaray and Marder 2016, 36). Irigaray describes here as wedding the (heterosexual) meeting between two. For Irigaray, then, the caress with the other is both a physical and spiritual meeting. It is a meeting between a woman and a man, and it is fueled by sexual desire. Here we observe the complex and problematic underbelly of Irigaray's thought—noted earlier through the focus on the vaginal lips and heterosexual relationships only—and here again through Irigaray's implicit refusal of intersectional issues such as race (Ingram 2008, xvii-xviii) and class given that Irigaray's "'woman' is likely premised on a white, heterosexual model" (Bloodsworth-Lugo 2007, 95–96; Rifesser 2020). Despite these shortcomings, the essence of Irigaray's philosophy of the caress, namely the necessity of a meeting between two that does not compromise the subjectivity of the two beings, can provide useful when thinking about feminine desire. In the Irigarayan conceptualization of the caress, one person does not become the object of desire for the other. Instead, each person remains an independent subject. It is a meeting, "without consum(mat)ing" (Irigaray 1993, 186). This is what Irigaray means when she discusses "the touch of the caress" (Irigaray 1993, 186). The relationship fueled by love and desire, between two subjects, rather than between a subject and an object, opens up a space for dialogue, or what

Irigaray sees as an in-between space.

Irigaray develops her idea of the in-between space by moving away from a focus on vision and towards a favoring of touch. In her critique of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* ([1964] 1968), Irigaray (1993, 151–84) takes issue with the philosopher's ocularcentric viewpoint, which favors sight over touch, despite Merleau-Ponty's apparently overriding phenomenological interest in both sight and touch. "Irigaray argues that what is irretrievable in vision is not lost to touch" (Vasseleu 1998, 71). By understanding vision as different to touch, touch enables an experience outside of that which is visible. That is, Irigaray enables "a phenomenology of touching without seeing" (Irigaray 1993, 71). Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the visible precludes experiences that are felt inside the body, deep underneath the skin, in the flesh. In other words, the emphasis on the visible/seeer precludes an aspect of touch that is key to the Irigarayan caress, namely the inclusion of touch being felt both outside the body (visible to the eye) and inside the body (invisible to the eye). Irigaray also critiques Merleau-Ponty for considering the caress as being felt only on the skin, and thus outside the body through his insistence on the visible. Irigaray notes that "I do not see that *in which* I caress" (Irigaray 1993, 163). That is, for Irigaray through the caress, an in-between space is created that is neither tangible nor visible, as we saw above in the exploration of the role of breath in her thinking. Both breath and the idea of in-between space evoke the idea of air, which provides, as Quinlivan ([2012] 2014, 29) reminds us, "a mediatory role between the sexes [...] it engenders a positive space within which to live." Such an in-between leaves space for questions, for example "[w]ho are

thou?' [...] [and] also, '[w]ho am I?'" (Irigaray 1993, 183). In other words, "[t]he phenomenology of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty attempts is without question(s). It has no spacing or interval for the freedom of questioning between two" (Irigaray 1993, 183). In comparison to the work of either Levinas or Merleau-Ponty, the Irigarayan caress takes place in a space that is created through the carnal and spiritual meeting with the other. Above all, the Irigarayan caress is founded upon the importance of touch and the embodied, lived experience that carves out a space for the experience of feminine subjectivity and feminine desire on its own terms. Let us now turn to the lived experience of feminine desire for Llosa's main character, Fausta, and the meaning-making that is being generated through the application of the Irigarayan caress.

Exploring the Irigarayan caress through *The Milk of Sorrow*

The Milk of Sorrow is the second feature film (after *Madeinusa*, 2001) by Peruvian-born, Spanish expatriate Claudia Llosa, co-produced in Spain and Peru. Since its premiere, Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* has received a good deal of commentary, in particular in relation to discussing trauma, as well as the element of sound and specifically the role of singing (in Quechua) and the use of Spanish versus Quechua as a tool within the narrative but also as a symbol more broadly, to give voice to woman's experience of trauma, specifically in relation to the historical events by which this film is inspired but also by addressing issues of colonialism, race and class (Llosa 2010; Rueda 2015; White 2015; Maseda 2016; on Peruvian cinema, Barrow 2018). The film tells the coming-of-age story of the young Quechuan woman Fausta

(Magaly Solier) and her over-coming of the trauma that she inherited, according to an Andean myth through the breast milk as the original title of the film—*La teta asustada*, meaning "the frightened breast"—suggests. The trauma was caused through her witnessing the rape of her own mother Perpetua (Bárbara Lazón) as an un-born in the womb. Llosa's film is, as she explains herself in an interview (Llosa 2010) a fictional magic realist story but it is inspired by the events of the violent conflict between the Peruvian government and the Guerrilla fighters known as Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) during the conflict (1982–89) in which many women were victims of rape and abuse. We later find out that Fausta, scared and worried about what might happen to her, has inserted a potato into her vagina to protect herself against rape. Fausta has to leave her village and work in Lima for the rich, white pianist Aída (Susi Sánchez) in order to earn money to pay for her mother's funeral. It is in Aída's home where she meets the gardener Noé (Efraín Solís). For me, this film offers a rare insight into a space of dialogue, a space in-between in which the Irigarayan caress with the other can be perceived. The narrative and aesthetic tools employed to tell the story about the relationship that forms between Fausta and Noé resonate with my reading of the Irigarayan caress with the other.

The scene in question in Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* (Fig. 2) features the main protagonist, Fausta. Fausta has a striking red lily in full blossom in her mouth, as she leans against a wall, her body touching the cold concrete, her fingers caressing the wall. The camera tracks Fausta as she moves along the wall with the lily in

her mouth, playfully caressing it. The wall here stands in for the body of the gardener Noé, who is on the other side. The camera moves closer in on the open lily and Fausta's face until we see the lily in an extreme close-up, evocative of Fausta's desire. This scene offers an insight into feminine desire in relation to the other that begins and centers around feminine desire. Furthermore, it signals, through the element of the gate, a space in-between, between Fausta and Noé, which could be imagined as the space in-between that Irigaray imagines in the peaceful and respectful caressing meeting with the other fueled by sexual desire. The relationship between them offers potential for Fausta to engage with her own femininity, leading her ultimately to be able to overcome her trauma and free herself from the potato, symbol of the patriarchal system that confines her. Yet, as we shall see, the lived experience of the caress with the other is complex.

The first meeting (Fig. 3) between Fausta and Noé strikingly depicts the continuous negotiation of this space in-between, a material separation which also ultimately represents the ethical importance of maintaining a space for oneself in the meeting with the other, as the Irigarayan caress proposes. In the scene when they meet, Fausta is portrayed in a medium close-up on the left side of the frame, sitting on her bed, immobile and silent. Suddenly a buzzer rings. Once outside, Fausta has to stand on her toes. But she does not open the shutter to see through the little window. Instead she moves her head closer to the wall, asking in Spanish: "Who is it?". A man's voice replies: "Me." Fausta then asks: "Who me?" to which the man answers: "Me, Noé. The gardener." Fausta pauses for a moment. Then she struggles a little to open the door to the window. The camera cuts

to a close-up of Fausta, revealing only half her face, as the other is still hidden by the little door. A point of view shot now reveals the character of Noé in a medium close-up, framed and kept at a distance by the window. Cut back to Fausta's face, which remains immobile as she says: "Let me see your hands." Cut to a medium shot of Noé who looks down on his hands, and who then looks at Fausta, slightly squinting his eyes before revealing his left hand, placing it into the opening in the wall for Fausta to see. Then Noé enters.

The relationship between Fausta and Noé unfolds slowly and in conjunction with the careful editing processes in the film, attune the viewer to the importance of touch or indeed the absence thereof, continuously creating moments that conjure up the idea of a space in-between that for Irigaray is the meeting place for the caress with the other. As Fausta works in the kitchen, for example, she is seen peeking out through the window to look at Noé working in the garden. Sonically, the unfolding of their relationship becomes evident through the fact that they start communicating in their native Quechua, instead of in Spanish. When Fausta feels ill, Noé offers to take her home, but she shrugs off his offer by saying that she is fine. He does not insist but simply leaves the room. Later though, the camera reveals through the window a view into the garden where Noé is working. Fausta is seen entering the frame, asking Noé in Quechua to take her home. She trusts him. It is Noé who at the end of the film gifts Fausta a potato plant that flowers, symbolizing her overcoming of her fear and the liberation from the potato inside her. Fausta is shown in close-up, contemplating the flowering potato plant. Indeed, the imagery of the flower is key also for the relationship



Fig. 3: *The Milk of Sorrow* (Claudia Llosa, 2009)

between Fausta and Noé. As Rebeca Maseda points out in her close study of the indigenous trauma as portrayed in *The Milk of Sorrow*: “Noé cares for Fausta but places himself at a distance, respecting her space, but being there when Fausta needs him” (Maseda 2016, 19). Their relationship provides a gateway for Fausta momentarily to perceive the potential of a flourishing meeting with the other in what could be imagined as an Irigarayan caress.

I argue that reading the Irigarayan caress in parallel with *The Milk of Sorrow* allows us to see the Irigarayan caress with the other and the emphasis placed on feminine desire, helping us to read the film in a more nuanced way. The relationship fueled by desire, between two subjects, rather than between a subject and an object, opens up a space for dialogue, or what Irigaray sees as an in-between space. As Vasseleu highlights, key to the Irigarayan caress is the “association of eroticism with the affect of wonder” (Vasseleu 1998, 113). In her own discussion of eroticism and its role in creating a space in-between, via touching, Irigaray defines wonder as “not an enveloping [...] It constitutes an *opening* prior to and following that which surrounds, enlaces” (Irigaray 1993, 81–82). Since wonderful eroticism is both sensual and intellectual (as each individual remains a subject that senses, thinks, perceives without becoming an object), wonder becomes a passage that bridges the divide between the body and the mind, and between sensing and thinking.

As previously mentioned, the concept of the caress is strikingly reconfigured also through the editing within the film. For example, Llosa's *The Milk of Sorrow* begins with an elliptical sequence, starting and ending with a black screen. The first black screen is accompanied by the voice

of Fausta's mother, Perpetua, telling her daughter the grueling memories of her own rape through song in Quechua (with Spanish subtitles). Song plays a crucial and powerful role in the film, as others before me have noted (Rueda 2015, Maseda 2016) to give voice to experiences of violence and trauma. Singing is also a vehicle for Fausta to narrate her journey and ultimately set herself free, to care for herself. This is evident already in the next scene that shows Fausta replying to her mother through song, noting that she must eat to get stronger, whilst adjusting her pillow and stroking her hair in this act of care. The final shot marks the mother's passing and Fausta's reaction as she shifts her view from her mother and the inside of the house, via the window to the outside, to that which lies beyond the home. Then the screen turns black again. The dichotomy of inside/outside is striking here and emphasizes the notion of what lies ahead for Fausta. That is, the need to leave the home to earn money to pay for her mother's funeral, as well as her journey to overcome the trauma that she inherited to find her own path. The overcoming of borders to return to oneself is also emphasized both at the beginning of the film, as mentioned above, as well as towards the end of the film when Fausta is seen standing by the sea and finally, when Fausta is seen leaning over the flowering potato plant. These images are evocative symbols of (re)birth and resurrection, rich with mythological references to feminine subjectivity, such as the water that is symbol of the womb and of being born, or the flower as an image of awakening for feminine sexuality. As in the imagery of Buddha's contemplation of the flower — an image that is significant for Irigaray in her writing on Buddhism and Hinduism (Irigaray 2000, 59) — Fausta

is awakening to herself, to her own desires, symbolized by the flowering of the potato that is now not inside her anymore, but rather outside, flourishing. Fausta, fearful all her life, is not in physical pain anymore, her body can start to heal from the inside towards the outside, creating a passage between inner/outer, allowing for a return to oneself in which she is attuned to her own desires.

In *Women Without Men*, Munis is resurrected and bathes in the pond, emerging for her (if brief) life as an independent, politically engaged woman. Munis is fearless. Ultimately, she commits suicide as an act to carve out a space for herself, a space for feminine desire and enunciation, paradoxically via the notion of silence. The elliptical nature of *Women Without Men* that starts and ends with this sequence of suicide underscores the cyclical nature of life on the one hand, but offers also for Munis the only way to free herself. What is true for *Women Without Men*, namely that the issues of trauma and healing are key, with the magical becoming a vehicle “to include representations of the internal workings of its protagonist and [it] externalizes their experiences as psychological and cultural exiles” (Holman 2013), also applies to *The Milk of Sorrow*.

Whilst this specific research here has focused on *Women Without Men* and *The Milk of Sorrow*, the notion of the caress with oneself, as well as the caress with the other, and the explication of feminine desire are also central elements in the work of other women filmmakers, providing ample scope for further consideration, as can be seen in my audiovisual Practice-as-Research (see Rifesser, 2017) that features excerpts from feature films of eighteen women filmmakers from

around the globe. For example, in both Maysaloun Hamoud's *In-Between* (*Bar Bahar*, Israel and France, 2016) and Andrea Arnold's *American Honey* (UK and USA, 2016), key characters Nour (Shaden Kanboura), and Star (Sasha Lane) respectively, enter the water as a sign of their re-birth, as a symbolic act of freedom. For Nour, this is to overcome the trauma of being raped by her fiancée. For Star, it is the realization that she is at peace with herself. In Maren Ade's *Everyone Else* (*Alle Anderen*, Germany, 2009), we can observe the lived experience of the caress with the other and its complexities, for example in the scene of the intimate play with “Schnappi,” a little mascot made out of ginger that Gitti (Birgit Minichmayr) uses to try to entertain her boyfriend Chris (Lars Eidinger). At the same time though, the film also reveals the complexities of the application of the theoretical concept of the caress with the other to the lived, embodied experience of two subjects and their relationship. A stunning recent work that I would argue provides ample scope for exploration of feminine desire is Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (*Atlantique*, France, Senegal, Belgium, 2019) and the story of its characters Ada (Ibrahima Traoré) and Souleiman (Mame Sane). Diop's supernatural romantic tale offers a captivating engagement with ideas that conjure up Irigaray's concept of the caress with oneself as well as the caress with the other in all its complexities. Ultimately, despite their differences in narrative, aesthetic and formal tropes, these films share a force that is also central to Irigaray's work, namely, to carve out a space for a feminine enunciation, a space for one's own subjectivity, one's own desires. As Irigaray reminds us, the “first home should be ourselves” (Irigaray 2017, 11).

The Irigarayan caress and Irigaray's work more broadly, despite the contradictions and limitations, seek to provide a space in which to perceive feminine desire and a feminine enunciation, ultimately bringing forth a model that recognizes each person as an independent subject that breathes,

senses, desires. Yet, these films through their diverse treatment of the experience of the feminine also offer a dimension of multiplicity that expands and enhances the Irigarayan caress through their engagement with the multiplicitous, lived, embodied experience of feminine desire, opening up a space for further investigation.

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