

The Headless Teacher: Professional Dishonour and the Fetish Object of Being a Good Teacher

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Abstract

*This paper concocts a thought experiment in three phases desiring to invert the rational language accompanying the logic of being a good teacher. The first phase provides an Irigarayan analysis of Lucrecia Martel's film *The Headless Woman* (2008). This reading is concerned with the sensation of absence felt by the central character Veró as events of her life are appropriated by a network of men. These characters orientate her through a rational language simultaneously legitimizing her place in their world and capturing her agency as the product of their reason. The second phase considers Alphonso Lingis' meditations on professional dishonour (2007) to posit an auto-decapitation of the personal against the good teacher as public professional. Finally, the third phase seeks to compare the notion of being a good teacher against Alfred Gell's analysis of fetish objects and the symbolic capture of agency (1998). These phases provide an analogy to a contemporary educational moment where the language of being a good teacher makes them headless and captured through the exteriority of their presence projected onto a fetish object of being professional. The paper will conclude with the speculation that rather appealing to a rational discourse, being a good teacher can be witnessed as bubbling along in the symbolic language of sorcery and fetish objects.*

Keywords: The Headless Woman, Irigaray, Lingis, Gell, professional discourse, good teacher, sorcery, fetish

Introduction

The possibility of being a good teacher in the contemporary educational moment can be characterised as a series of obedience's towards an object of professionalism that detaches the head of a teacher within the causal network of practice. To be headless is to inhabit body with no mind of its own. A body whose agency is absent, that cannot speak of a private rationality, and whose public rationality is replaced by professional standards. These processes exteriorise the presence of the teacher as abstract simulacra animated by a series of spells and incantations legitimising their being as an accomplice bound to the unreasoning reasoning of their contemporaneity. This is witnessed through functionalist position on teachers, an absence of thought within the world of teaching, over determination by neoliberal forces, the separation of theory from practice and the erosion of personal convictions to professional imperatives (Arnon & Reichel (2007), Connell (2009), Edwards (2012), Moore (2006) and Moore and Clarke, (2016). For Ball (2003) it is a "struggle of the teacher's soul" (pp.217) in which the representational language of

professionalism possesses the teacher in an act of ventriloquism. Eschewing, a confrontational 'head-on' engagement with these problems I am seeking to slip in through peripheries by analogy to open other ways of understanding this contemporaneity to sever the illusion of a rational language in operation.

Phase 1 - The Headless Woman

The opening sequence of the film *The Headless Woman* begins with three boys playing with their dog on a country roadside along stormwater canals. This cuts to the setting of a suburban car park where the audience is introduced to the affluent, middle-aged and glamorous Veró. She discusses luxury products, facial cream, and building a pool with a group of mothers as they pick up their children. A friend says to her "Your hair looks gorgeous. The colour is very flattering". The film then cuts again to Veró, alone, driving along a dirt road with stormwater drains alongside. Her phone rings, she bends over, looks down to pick up the phone and hits 'something' and she brakes to a halt. Veró swallows, takes a breath, and touches her chest. She glances briefly in the side rear view mirror, touches the door handle, seeming to consider leaving the vehicle, hesitates, touches her chest with the palm of her hand, starts the car and slowly drives away. The juxtaposition of the boys playing by the same roadside that Veró drives along opens the narrative possibility that she had hit one of them.

Neither the audience nor Veró is sure what had happened. Veró did not see the children either before or after the accident. Later, she tells her husband "I think I ran over someone". He drives her back to the accident site and finds a dog and he says, "It's a dog. "You got scared. Its ok". She repeats, "I think I run over someone", he replies continuously, "You got frightened, you ran over a dog". It is then revealed that a young boy did die in proximity to her accident, however due to flooding in the stormwater canals his cause of death was attributed to drowning by the authorities. Her husband contacts her cousin Juan and together the two men collude to secretly erase Veró's hospital records and fix her car. Veró remains upset so Juan tells her "Don't worry, what can you do? If you swerve, you might cross over into the next lane and have a real accident. Don't worry. Nothing happened". The film continues to show Veró's self doubt and guilt running parallel to her husband and Juan's efforts to cover over all possibilities she had hit someone, and to bring her back to the normality of their community of friends, family and professionals.

After her accident, of which the reality of the events remains ambiguous, her husband and Juan appropriate the unfolding of what might have been. The words and actions of these male subjects abduct her agency, disconnecting her experience, her thinking, her rationalisation of events and producing a radical sensation of absence of mind that is her headlessness. Concurrently, the male actants re-represent her lived reality, exteriorising this experience for her public using what Irigaray describes as a "logic that formalizes the real" (pp.2, 2002). Accordingly, following masculine subjectivity Irigaray suggests that it produces a situation whereby "culture is mediatized by exteriority" (pp.219, 2008) which constructs a "monologue more and more extrapolated from the real, unfolding itself parallel to this real in order to carve it up and thus dominate" (pp.6, 2002). Veró's being is exteriorised and abstracted by the parallel real created by the male characters allowing them to dominate her in such a way to reposition her to where they think she belongs in

society – a beautiful, innocent and insecure woman requiring speaking males to legitimize and restore order to her world. In the closing sequences of the film, after all traces of Veró's accident are erased, she dyes her black signifying her return to herself and resignation to her situation. She becomes a celluloid avatar of the Irigarayan observation that, “lost in the interlacings of a speaking already pronounced and programmed, the subject is imprisoned in its information, in its pieces of information, cut off from natural language that should help in their becoming human” (pp.34, 2002). Veró's head remains cut off from her language in the closing the sequence of the film that concludes with a telephoto shot of her in a crowded party filled with inaudible voices drowned out by pop music.

Phase 2 - Professional Dishonour

Alphonso Lingis challenges the accepted ‘good’ of being a professional by showing how it can it can be considered an alibi to acting in ways that are dishonourable (2007). Giving examples of false hypothesis, incompetence, and career mediocrity he suggests that in the pursuit of positional goods that a professional can resign himself or herself to accepting these dishonours as just being human nature. Lingis suggests this is possible as the established discourse of being a professional begins to speak for the individual, displacing personal honour with an exteriorised code of conduct that “takes over our voice and orders our actions” (pp.123). This suggests that if I act in a way that is professional according to a professional code, I am absolved of responsibility, or guilt in the name of ‘just doing my job’. Lingis continues to argue that the shared participation of codes permits the undoing of the good in the name of the professional:

The established discourse of a collective can accord an attributed honor to someone who occupies a position in the collective without fulfilling or being able to fulfil his or her tasks. He or she can use the attributed honor to attain venal or cynical ends. The honor attributed to the position and established in discourse makes corruption possible (pp.123-24)

This handing over of self, of responsibility, and to have actions ordered within a community of collusion with the veiling of this kind of dishonor must surely then represent another kind of headlessness. Here, there is an ‘opting in’ or ‘value adding’, perhaps just for positional goods or just to ‘rest assured’ knowing that just doing what the professional code demands is enough. But to be headless it to have once been headed and to consider the possibility of having a mind that decided I will do these things and not something else instead. Through analogy, joining a professional membership, to be registered, to organize and align motivations and actions to professional competencies outside of the body appears as an auto-decapitation. To what extent is Veró's headlessness a strategy of professional dishonour to return her to the fold of her community? At the end of *The Headless Woman*, Veró is amongst her public and enjoying the benefits of that professional organisation. She may, or may not have killed somebody, but as long as she smiles, colours her hair and agrees with the reordering of her feelings by others she is a professional and belongs within that established discourse.

Phase 3 – Fetish Objects

Alfred Gell's analysis of agency and causality in the production and reception of nail fetish

of the Congo region of Africa provides an account of another kind of headlessness attached to communal practices (1998, pp.61). In his account, the nail fetish serves a judicial function within the community in which it is made. He explains that a human sacrifice, preferably a great hunter, is made with the belief that their soul will enter a Muamba tree and the fetish is then made from the wood of this tree. People then come to the fetish and drive a nail into it to make a demand that the fetish kills another person as retribution for having caused harm believing that soul of the person sacrificed to make the fetish will carryout the punishment demanded. Gell suggests that through this process “the fetish acts as an index of cumulative agency and as the visible knot tying together an invisible skein of spatio-temporal relations” (Ibid, pp.61). In this example the agency of the person seeking revenge is captured through the communal fetish object of which the causal judicial function is attributed. Justice is exteriorised and abstracted through the nail fetish relieving the individual of guilt or responsibility for carrying out the sentencing of another. Gell contends that these kinds of sorcery beliefs “are highly explanatory, because vulnerability to sorcery is the unintended consequence of the diffusion of the person into the milieu, via a thousand casual influences and pathways” (ibid, pp.103). Here, the person is headless; their agency is made invisible obscuring their private rationality by the public rationality inscribed within the communal fetish object.

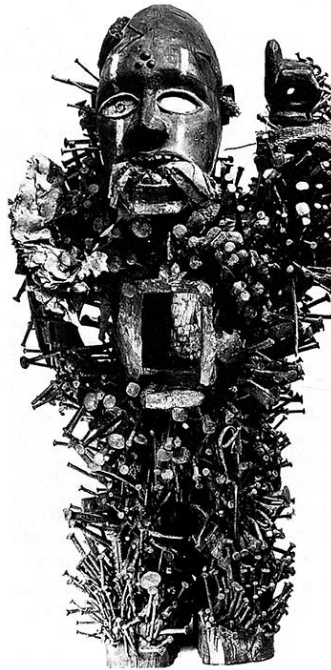


Figure 1: Nail Fetish, Gell, 1998

Within the social structure supporting the use of the nail fetish communal participation and the diffusion of the person appears as the professional discourse. The act of driving a nail into the fetish legitimizes a professional practice of normalising desires and intentions within a community. Participant’s agency and their causal relations are absorbed by the fetish and redistributed through the belief in the power of the object to act on their behalf. Here, the fetish becomes an alibi absolving responsibility for seeking revenge or causing

harm to another. Is it then possible to think of professional discourses as sharing these attributes of fetish objects. A community comes together to produce an object in which each individual can at once nail in their desire and simultaneously whose agency is decapitated from this wish. Veró is accepted in her community through the acting out of a role determined by a professional discourse articulated through the pursuit of positional goods, nice hair and the appearance of happiness at parties. For Veró, when social obeisances to the fetish object are observed, regardless of professional dishonour, corruption or sin, the relations of agency and causality are redistributed and diffused by the professional discourse.

Openings

This thought experiment has proposed three approaches of thinking about the headlessness of the contemporary teachers using the provocation of Veró from *The Headless Woman*. Through Irigaray it is possible to consider her agency as being appropriated by masculine subjectivity through a language that orders her world. Veró is 'good' when she accepts this positioning and lets go of her public performances of guilt and doubt. Lingis' notion of professional dishonour disturbs this mere acceptance and proposes that Veró elects to join the professional discourse of her community for comfort and continue her well positioned place in society. Her commitment to the established discourse of this community ensures her 'goodness' even though it means removing her own head. Throughout the film Veró is presented with external rationalities, supported with empirical evidence (even if these 'known knowables' only provide a patchwork truth), to explain away her irrational concerns based on her own lived reality. Following Gell, the object of being good becomes fetishized within a community who 'nails' its desires on a professional discourse, absolving agency within a network of exteriorised relations. Legitimacy in this community is made ritualised and magical through headless obeisances to a professional object that transcends lived reality for a hyperreality of appearing 'good' for the sake of appearing 'good'.

Positioning and exteriorising through masculine subjectivity, professional dishonour and object fetish are concocted in this paper as cascading forms of headlessness. Bubbling, vaporising and splashing through uneven paths and lines of thought. As analogies of 'likeness' or 'as-ness' they trouble the figure of good-teacher-as-professional in contemporary education. The language of professionalism is commanded from outside and teachers must orientate themselves with its public rationality no matter how detached this may seem from their lived reality or private rationality. Yet, the established discourse of professionalism covers over dishonour and promises legitimacy and a safe career, even if the teacher may not be 'actually' good, as long as their public professionalism is maintained. Professionalism provides rationality for being good a certain way that manipulates the desire to belong and succeed in a professional community. As a site of desire to include and play on the fear of exclusion this rationality detaches the agency, the head and potentially the soul of the teacher and carves it up as a fetish object whose rationality is diffused through a headless professional community. Here, sensibility and reason are surrendered to the magical utterances of performative statements of commitment and prostrations of evidence of being good before the avatars of professional standards.

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