Estella Ciobanu[1]

POSTMODERNIST RE-VISIONS OF GENDER: TWO AMERICAN CASE STUDIES, *THE DINNER PARTY* AND *AGORA*

Abstract: *Postmodernism's is a revisionary project, we often hear. Yet, while this may be so in many respects, does it also entail revisionism of gender matters, such as the successful overturn of petrified sexist paradigms? In what follows, I will investigate gender representation in two contemporary American works focused on outstanding women. Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party (1974–79) is a collaborative multimedia installation that celebrates female figures excluded from conventional androcentric historiography, whose endeavours, accomplishments and/or legendary powers may serve as an empowering example for women. The other case study is Alejandro Amenabár's film Agora (2009), which reclaims a voice for Hypatia, the female philosopher, mathematician, astronomer and teacher of Alexandria who fell victim to the patriarchal intolerance of early Christianity. For all their merits for drawing attention to powerful women, the two works can also be faulted for their gender representation. While examining feminist literature on Chicago and resorting to Said in Amenabár's case, my comparative analysis aims to uncover gender-related tensions within both works and the crucial displacements which the Hollywood film operates to preserve Christian patriarchy largely unscathed.*

Key Words*: Judy Chicago*, The Dinner Party, Agora, *Hypatia, gender, patriarchy, dis/empowerment*.

The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed a surge of second-wave feminist attempts at reclaiming the Neolithic Goddess in/for women's spirituality and feminist art alike (Meyer 322–3; Klein) – and perhaps at extolling woman as goddess in order to reshape women's self-image, so tarnished under patriarchy, in positive terms. This went hand in hand with both the women artists' concern with reclaiming womanhood *as* body, as Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, among others, did (Levin, "Censorship" 63–76, 79–80, 82–5), and revalorising domestic work as artwork, as Mierle Laderman Ukeles did in a performance series, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1973–76) (Gonzáles, Posner 222), or as Schapiro and Chicago encouraged their CalArts female students to demonstrate through their collaborative installation *Womanhouse* (Levin, "Beyond the Pale" 206–7).[2] Also in the late 1960s and 1970s there emerged various American coalitions that fought against institutional discrimination against, through systematic exclusion of, black and women artists from museums, exhibitions and art criticism (Moravec; Baguley, Kerby 256). This is the activist spirit of the decade when Jewish American feminist artist and writer Judy Chicago (Judith Sylvia Cohen, 1939–)[3] designed *The*

[1] Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania

[2] On the 1970s feminist art's reclamation of women's domestic labour, its mediums, materials and outcome as art on a par with men's "high art," see <www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/womens_work.php>. All Brooklyn Museum explanations of *The Dinner Party* are written by curator Maura Reilly.

[3] Judy Chicago is a US pioneer of the Feminist Art Project, an educational experiment which she started in 1969 at Fresno State College, California, and continued, alongside painter Miriam Schapiro, at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts); Chicago co-founded the Los Angeles' Woman's Building (1973–91) to provide a feminist art education (Lacy 64; Meyer 321–2; Klein 587; Fields 3–4, 14–15). Conceptual and performance artist Suzanne

Dinner Party (1974–79), a gender celebrating collaborative installation. On the contrary, the turn of the millennium witnessed the co-existence of polymorphous feminisms, some of which encourage a reactionary attitude towards women's emancipation or at least complacent political in-activism. *Agora* (2009), directed and written by Alejandro Amenabár (in the latter role, with Mateo Gil), ostensibly does not condone feminine passivity. Its protagonist, Hypatia, the philosopher, mathematician, astronomer and teacher of Alexandria, did not fall victim to the patriarchal intolerance of Christian zealots without a fight. Although evicted from the agora, Hypatia denounced the anti-Jewish excesses of the Christian monk-warriors, the Parabalani, and demanded their restriction by the local Roman authorities (*Agora* 01:12:48–13:59); she did not flee from the library without trying to save its scrolls from Christian attack; nor did she ever abandon her pedagogical and research pursuits.

The case study methodology which I employ here is itself scrutinised in an article that also deals with *The Dinner Party*. Baguley and Kerby explain their methodological choice as one which, through its large scope of evidence collection, from documents and artefacts to interviews and observations, enables the researcher to "organis[e] social data for the purpose of viewing social reality" (256–7). My comparative study of *The Dinner Party* and *Agora*, like Baguley and Kerby's of the former and of Kay Lawrence's *Parliament House Embroidery*, belongs to what Stake describes "as a *collective case study*, where individual cases may be similar or dissimilar but are chosen because understanding them will lead to greater understanding of the phenomenon" (Baguley, Kerby 257; original emphasis). Such use of multiple sources of evidence actually "provide[s] more than one perspective" (ibid.). In this sense, the very methodological framework of my analysis belongs within the postmodern phenomenon itself as recuperative of a multiplicity of possible perspectives.[4]

The Dinner Party: the art and craft of presencing women

"We live in a period in which an historic silence is being broken. We've never been able to see the world through women's eyes. It's really an opportunity for women to give a tremendous gift to the culture": thus confessed Judy Chicago in a September 1975 interview (qtd. in Levin, "Censorship" 85). Though still controversial, her *Dinner Party* (1974–79) has been sanctioned institutionally through its inclusion in the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, to which it was presented as a gift by the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation in 2002 and where it has been on permanent display since 23 March 2007 – indeed as the "centerpiece around which the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art is organized" (<www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/ dinner_party>).[5] It is also the object of the K-12 "*The Dinner Party* Curriculum Project," hosted by Kutztown University, Pennsylvania (<http://judychicago.arted.psu.edu/dpcp>) and launched at the National Art Education Conference in Minneapolis in 2009 "as proof that art can be a didactic tool" (Baguley, Kerby 254).

Lacy describes her own experience of late 1960s–early 1970s West Coast education as coalescing feminist art making and theorising and political activism; such "art of action" aimed to "develop a political art that was participatory, egalitarian, and reflective of both the personal and collective truth of women's experience" (64).

[4] I must confess one important limitation of my analysis: my encounter with *The Dinner Party* was mediated by the official site of the installation (<www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party>). Furthermore, Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (1979), *Embroidering Our Heritage: The Dinner Party Needlework* (1980) and *Beyond the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (1975) have been unavailable to me.

[5] *The Dinner Party* first opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on 14 March 1979. On the genesis of Chicago's artwork, see <www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/genesis.php>.

Why has Chicago's installation been deemed outrageous?[6] *The Dinner Party* is comprised of a triangular table (measuring 48 ft / 14.63 m on each side) set for thirty-nine female guests,[7] whose identity is revealed through the name and symbolic portrait embroidered on the runner configuring each plate setting, and the porcelain-tiled Heritage Floor supporting it in every respect, whose gold lettering adds another 999 women's names to those on the runners. This gender recuperative central piece is supplemented by the six Entry Banners that lead the visitor down the museum hallway to the display room, the seven Heritage Panels identifying the history of the 999 Heritage Floor women and, unfortunately not on display at the Brooklyn, the Acknowledgment Panels with the photographs and names of the 129 members of the project's creative and administrative team.[8] Who deserves a place setting – a handmade porcelain plate, a golden goblet and an embroidered runner – amongst the most outstanding thirty-nine women chosen by Chicago and her researcher team? Here is the table setting (www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/place_settings/index.php): Wing One honours Primordial Goddess, Fertile Goddess, Ishtar, Kali, Snake Goddess, Sophia, Amazon, Hatshepsut, Judith, Sappho, Aspasia, Boadaceia and Hypatia; Wing Two seats Marcella, Saint Bridget, Theodora, Hrosvitha, Trotula, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Hildegarde of Bingen, Petronilla de Meath, Christine de Pisan, Isabella d'Este, Elizabeth R., Artemisia Gentileschi and Anna van Schurman; finally, Wing Three seats Anne Hutchinson, Sacajawea, Caroline Herschel, Mary Wollstonecraft, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Blackwell, Emily Dickinson, Ethel Smyth, Margaret Sanger, Natalie Barney, Virginia Woolf and Georgia O'Keeffe. Mythology, history and the arts are drawn upon to celebrate women who attempted, or were feared as being able, to make a difference in society.

What visitors may find compelling in the focal piece is the painting or sculpture on the plates: with one exception, butterfly-shaped or floral vulvas. Chicago confesses that:

> When confronted with the plates in my *Dinner Party*, many people think that they have "seen" them when they have merely "identified" them as vaginas. They have not even begun to comprehend the images, but rather only named the outline of the form.... The vaginal form in my work is simply the framework for a series of ideas. (qtd. in Levin, "Censorship" 86)

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[6] While *The Dinner Party* offended "respectable" taste to such degree that most museums shunned exhibiting it, groups with a large female majority organised its display at their own expense, e.g. in Houston, Boston, Cleveland, Atlanta and New York; nonetheless, the establishment's backlash prevented Chicago from giving *The Dinner Party* to the University of the District of Columbia in 1990 (Levin 87–9; Strong 310, 313). On the hugely popular nine-year international tour of *The Dinner Party* and its later fortunes before reaching the Brooklyn, see <www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/tour_and_home.php>.

[7] Chicago's decision to place thirteen women on each wing "mimic[ked] the number included in [Leonardo's] *The Last Supper* as well as the number of women in a witches' coven" (<www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/ genesis.php>).

[8] See <www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/acknowledgement_panels/index.php> on the creation of the Acknowledgements Panels to credit Chicago's collaborators' contributions; the last panel "lists the names of an additional 295 individuals and organizations not part of the studio team, who also made significant contributions." The panels are presented on the Brooklyn Museum webpage so as "to recognize the multiple contributions that were made during the creation of this monumental work" (<www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/acknowledgement_ panels/index.php>), alongside a photograph of the Acknowledgment Panels as displayed at the UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art in the 1996 exhibition *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's* Dinner Party *in Feminist Art History*, curated by Amelia Jones (<www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/tour_and_home.php>). It would be worth investigating why the Brooklyn does not exhibit the Acknowledgment Panels of an artwork which celebrates women's collaboration and exposes the harmful patriarchal practices of exclusion, marginalisation, obliteration and silencing.

As Levin observes, "The metaphoric connection with the triangular Greek letter delta, which itself was widely employed to symbolize the vulva, was also a link to Chicago's mentor, Anaïs Nin" ("Censorship" 86). *The Dinner Party* thus recuperates an unwritten history of womankind – *herstory* – in terms of genesis of ideas qua flesh. With regard to the triangular layout, however, I would suggest yet another analogy: the iconology of the pre-eminently masculine Christian Trinity. Chicago's triangle offers an alternative *perspective* on creation, posited as both human/female and divine, fleshly and spiritual, socio-political and artistic.

Arguably, the Christian imaginary underpins *The Dinner Party*. On the one hand, Chicago confesses having been inspired by the Last Supper (in Leonardo's rendition), itself originating in the Jewish Passover *seder* (liberation), which she re-inscribed as women's emancipation (Lucy Lippard, qtd. in Baguley, Kerby 258).[9] On the other hand, there is an uncanny convergence between Chicago's investment in the butterfly motif and Christian symbolism:

> "The female artist's obsession with vaginas," ... [Chicago] declared, "represents her attempt to get in touch with who she is." In the course of a decade, as she worked toward the ultimate design of *The Dinner Party*, she repeatedly refined and explained her project. At a Catholic institution for women, the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota, her reception was a far cry from the fulminations against sexuality of the city's eponymous saint. She described one of her porcelains as "Fecundity as an Image of Creativity (or the female artist producing ideas in the form of eggs)." Recalling the experience, Chicago later wrote: "To me, the butterfly is a symbol of freedom, and liberation. And when I was in Minnesota at the College of St. Catherine, I was told by the nuns there, who were absolutely stunned and wildly enthusiastic about my work, that the butterfly has traditionally been a symbol of resurrection in the church." (Levin, "Censorship" 84–5)

Throngs of women eager to see Chicago's installation (Strong 316) notwithstanding, typical audience responses[10] reportedly suggest its fertile symbolism or reclamation of women's worth has little positive impact upon the public:

> "It must have been done by Jewish women; it's so blatantly sexual," was typical of responses to *The Dinner Party*.... Chicago's "vagina" plates awed some viewers and shocked others, setting off a new chapter in the backlash against sexually explicit art in the U.S. Yet Chicago's works are not unique in this regard; they are contextualized by the new openness about the female body and sexuality manifest from the 1960s through the 1980s in the work of other Jewish-American feminist artists, such as Judith Bernstein, Martha Edelheit, Eunice Golden, Joyce Kozloff, Joan Semmel, Nancy Spero, Anita Steckel and Hannah Wilke. (Levin, "Censorship" 63, 66)

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[9] Chicago "became amused by the notion of doing a sort of reinterpretation of that all-male event [*The Last Supper*] from the point of view of those who had traditionally been expected to prepare the food, then silently disappear from the picture or, in this case, from the picture plane" (qtd. in <www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/genesis.php>). She re-symbolised *The Last Supper*'s historical antecedent – the Passover, which Chicago grew up celebrating at her aunt's home – as "a kind of family reunion" (Joselite, qtd. in Levin, "Beyond the Pale" 227), on the model of American Jews' transformation of the *seder* "from a sacred, highly ritualistic event into a Jewish exercise in domesticity" during the interwar years (Levin 227). Accordingly, Chicago decided that the plate images in Wing Three "physically rise up as a symbol of women's struggle for freedom" (*Beyond the Flower*, qtd. in Levin, "Beyond the Pale" 229).

[10] See also MacNeil on the reception of *The Dinner Party* at the Melbourne Exhibition Buildings as one of the first visual arts events of the 1988 bicentennial year in Australia.

While the connoisseurs invoked by Gail Levin demonstrate their *savoir* in claiming the ability to recognise a somatocentric, indeed sexual, focus of artworks by *Jewish* American artists, a female African American academic singles out *The Dinner Party* in an argument about the systematic *exclusion* of African American women from discourses on race and inequity thus:

> Using the concept of a place setting at a table, Judy Chicago depicts thirty-eight notable women as vaginas; the thirty ninth, and the lone black woman in the collection, Sojourner Truth, was represented as a face. This exclusion from an obviously in-your-face statement to reclaim a positive image of American women's bodies occurred during the second wave of feminism, which like the first, benefited from another phase of the black freedom struggle, the Civil Rights movement. (Oyewumi 182)

Other critics have voiced their apprehensions that such vulvar symbolics does not reclaim the female body in positive terms as much as re-essentialize it, reduce it to biological determinism and reify it as mere genitals (Terry Smith, Jill Carrick, qtd. in MacNeil [3]); Butler 95–6), thereby bolstering chauvinistic stereotypes of women and their art (Cindy Nemser, qtd. in Meyer 329). Still others (Hilton Kramer, qtd. in Levin, "Censorship" 86–7; Robert Hughes, qtd. in MacNeil [2–3]; Jill Carrick, qtd. in MacNeil [5]) relegate *The Dinner Party* to the dustbin of clichés, kitsch and bad taste (Butler 95) due to its agit-prop populism and pornographic vulgarity (qtd. in Strong n.2, 310). Of vaginas as "central-core" iconography, however, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro had written in their 1973 "Female Imagery" essay (Meyer 322) in affirmative identitary terms:

> [T]o be a woman is to be an object of contempt, and the vagina, stamp of femaleness, is devalued. The woman artist, seeing herself as loathed, takes that very mark of her otherness and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity. (Chicago and Schapiro, qtd. in <www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/core_imagery.php>)

Yet not everyone has decried *The Dinner Party*'s plate iconography. In her "Vaginal Iconology" (1974), Barbara Rose argues – specifically about Chicago's *Pasadena Lifesavers* (1969–70) – that artworks which depict or allude to the genitalia are "designed to arouse women, but not sexually": "they *worshipfully allude to female genitalia as icons* – as strong, clean, well made, and whole as the masculine totems to which we are accustomed" (qtd. in Levin, "Censorship" 67; emphasis added). In the words of Jewish American feminist artist Hannah Wilke about her own works, vaginal iconology emphasises "the physical superiority of woman as the life source" (qtd. in Levin 73). Artworks which "glorify vaginas" thereby "attack one of the most fundamental ideas of male supremacy – that a penis, because it is visible, is superior" (Rose qtd. in Levin 67). From Aristotle to Freud, men-as-thinkers would frown at so daring a proposition, conveniently forgetting, as Meyer (329) and Levin ("Censorship" 67, 70) remind us, the western tradition of praising phallic art alongside sustained invitations to (originally male) voyeurism of female nudes.[11] In an anti-Freudian

[11] See also Levin (70) on art critic Robert Hughes' double standard in attacking *The Dinner Party*'s central pictorial metaphor yet extolling that of Courbet's *Origin of the World*, and Baguley and Kerby (260) on malestream "high art" practitioners' and critics' rejection of Chicago's installation, often by focusing exclusively on the plates. *The Dinner Party* "had been deliberately misinterpreted in both the art community and in Congress, promulgating an image of it that bore little resemblance to the piece's goal of teaching women's history through art and honouring our aesthetic, intellectual, and philosophical achievements" (Chicago qtd. in Baguley, Kerby 260).

turn of phrase, Chicago avers that "We've always been imaged by males as a passive hole. What I've wanted to create is a new, active sense of womanhood" (qtd. in Levin, "Censorship" 85). Hence a female journalist's view of Chicago's butterfly-vagina motif "as an early primitive form of femaleness. In this series, this image metamorphoses into a butterfly goddess – an active, positive, female force" (Levin 85).

At the Brooklyn, the public is introduced to *The Dinner Party* with the aid of the six Entry Banners placed along the hallway to the exhibition entrance.[12] Chicago's installation unfolds in space just as it re-inscribes time through its undoing of women's erasure. Such layout, moreover, echoes the solemnity[13] of royal or ecclesiastical *stagings* of the entrance/procession of the revered figure and thereby partakes of its empowering force. Yet here the roles are reversed: the spectators of this celebratory event "process" around it, while the historic figures are on static display and moreover blatantly represented by proxy – by the empty place settings that invoke them somewhat as Godot is invoked in Beckett.

Are, then, the thirty-nine women indeed *present* at the dinner table? Present, that is, in a manner which is both significant on its own (feminist) terms and signifying incontrovertibly *against* the Euro-American bias for visible presence? (Of course, "incontrovertible" does not belong within the postmodern idiom.) There is no danger of overstating – with Chicago – that *The Dinner Party*

> challenges a value system that is "taught both explicitly and implicitly through the constant presence of images that assert male experience, history and importance and the absence of comparable images honouring women".... The sculptural installation invites the participation of the viewer by offering the opportunity to be part of this celebration and in doing so to be exposed to a different version of history than the indoctrination perpetuated in mainstream texts. This challenge is no more evident than in the "butterfly-vagina" motif.... (Baguley, Kerby 258)

Still, for all the positive claims made on its behalf (Strong 312, 324), I submit that *The Dinner Party* does not *presence* women other than as vaginas, albeit stylised symbolically (Strong 310–12), as body parts both fetishised and abjected by malestream western thinking. Meyer rightly wonders "whether images of the female body, regardless of their subtlety or explicitness, can effectively function in opposition to the limiting and depersonalizing notion of 'woman' as sex object" (329). Chicago's, Schapiro's and Wilke's view of their artworks' use of "sexual imagery as a means of offering a new, more complex, and more humane perspective on female sexuality" can be rebutted: their art rather "confirm[s] ... male-invented stereotypes" due to the meanings accrued to female sexual imagery over long periods of use in particular circumstances, as Griselda Pollock contends (qtd. in Meyer 329).

Furthermore, the celebrated women's accomplishments remain a mystery to be deciphered, time permitting, in the Heritage Panels. The latter, however, are on view in the Biographical Gallery in photographic reproductions (<www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/heritage_panels/ index.php>) exhibited by rotation (<www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party>). Thus, the Heritage Panels, *if* on view, are relegated to the margins of the exhibition venue, just as the craft and materials responsible for identifying (these) women have been peripheral to masculine "high art." Isn't women's inconspicuous presence through "domesticity" still maintained, if inadvertently, in *The Dinner Party*? Besides, of the thirty-nine guests, apart from the mythological figures, the

[12] Symmetrically, the clickable image of the Entry Banners on the museum's webpage (<www.brooklynmuseum.org/ exhibitions/dinner_party>) provides the virtual entrance to the online exhibition.

[13] The solemn atmosphere is created intentionally: "Six woven banners *hang in procession*, welcoming visitors to *The Dinner Party*" (<www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/home.php>; emphasis added).

historical women are prevailingly white Euro-Americans, with some token African Americans or "Indians" amongst them and an Egyptian female pharaoh; the balance is slightly restored in the Heritage Floor, which includes, for instance, two Australian women. Doesn't such representation encode a persistent white bias?

Since feminist art education as sponsored by Chicago at CalArts in the early 1970s conceived of "art as a bridge," "collaboration became a highly valued attribute of the work process," which exceeded the mere "sharing of work by two equal partners" (Lacy 64): "Collaboration was explored as a concept that explained communication, effort, and exchange between two or more differing entities," recalls artist Suzanne Lacy (64).[14] Is *The Dinner Party* an exemplar of collaboration with/amongst women undertaken with an empowering egalitarian thrust, as Chicago states (qtd. in Strong 315),[15] or rather a case of their exploitation by the artist signing this piece, as some feminist art historians contend (qtd. in Meyer 328)? Why aren't the Acknowledgement Panels on display at the Sackler Center for *Feminist* Art (*sic*)? Can the installation, moreover, recuperate gendered arts and crafts into postmodernist *avant-garde* feminist art (Strong 312), yet without neutralising its political – "moral" (Chicago qtd. in Strong 321) – dimension through malestream co-option by museums?

> The choice of craft techniques, the use of traditional materials and the approach to and execution of these artworks were all part of an overt political proselytising.... In addition, enabling predominately skilled female craft workers to participate in the creation of these works involved ... [Chicago] in an engagement with the broader social and political issues inherent in ... [her work]. Embroidery, for example, can be appreciated on many levels; however, its connection to textiles breaks down many of the barriers traditionally associated with fine art. Using embroidery to complete this work challenged traditional stereotypes relating to the perception of this form of making and associated gender issues. (Baguley, Kerby 260)

Indeed, museums now routinely display textile installations by both women and men artists. Shall we assume, therefore, that Chicago's *progressive* use of crafts, if solely for their expressive quality (Strong 314–15), has *rescued* them from artistic neglect due to their traditional association with women's domestic work? On the other hand, should *The Dinner Party* be dismissed as kitsch rather than art "proper" due to its collage of handmade pieces in bright colours or gilded? Does its political engagement suffice to ensure the aesthetic value of an artwork, traditionally judged by masculine standards? Conversely, how are *The Dinner Party*'s artistic merit and political investment highlighted – and how do they interact with – other women's artworks exhibited in the Sackler Center for Feminist Art, once we remember the installation's literally central position? These are questions which I cannot hope to answer – which, ironically, is one of the faults imputed to postmodern thought (Butler 11). Nonetheless, I would argue, with Elizabeth Grosz, that "no text can be classified once and for all as wholly feminist or wholly patriarchal.... These various contingencies dictate that at best a text is feminist or patriarchal only provisionally, ... only in some but not in all its possible readings, and in some but not all of its possible effects" and only in the interplay between the object and the subject who views/theorises it (Grosz, qtd. in Meskimmon 384).

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[14] See <www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/reclamation.php> on the collaborative projects sponsored by CalArts under the direction of Chicago and Schapiro.

[15] See Baguley and Kerby (258) and Meyer (328) for documenting the technicalities of collaborative work for *The Dinner Party*, especially considering the variety of crafts it resorts to – needlework, ceramic making and painting – and harnesses to challenge traditional patriarchal work and traditional techniques alike, as well as the extensive research needed for documenting and choosing the women whose lives would have been most empowering to present from a pool of over 3,000.

Yet Chicago herself should have the last word: "She [Anaïs Nin] violated the social mores at a level way beyond what most people ever do, and certainly beyond what women are allowed to do. But it's such a double standard" (2001 interview, Strong 322). Facing and exposing patriarchy's double standard has been Chicago's lifelong artistic project. Accordingly, "Unless one's own experience of oppression helps one become a bigger person [and 'lead to an enlarged sense of one's obligation to the world'], I don't want to hear about it.... Let's join hands and end oppression in the world" (2001 interview, Strong 323).

Agora: a disempowering recuperation of Hypatia the philosopher

In the 1970s, Hypatia (*c*. 370–415/416) was dug out from historical oblivion by Judy Chicago's researchers: she is one of the thirty-nine guests of *The Dinner Party*. Indeed, Hypatia has returned in force since 1985, when the American journal of feminist philosophy proudly bearing her name finally appeared as the spin-off of the Society for Women in Philosophy (Gruen, Wylie 725–27). Hypatia's is also a compelling case of the return of the repressed – patriarchy's repressed – for popular consumption, at least with the 2009 release of *Agora*.

In the light of modern attempts at re-inscribing Hypatia into history, albeit with the aid of truncated testimony from biased late ancient sources (Wider 52, 55–7), Hypatia appears to have been as much the victim of male jealousy of her intellectual accomplishments[16] and leadership of Alexandria's Neoplatonic school, as of "political jealousies" (Socrates Scholasticus) between the Roman authorities and Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria, tensions which Hypatia was blamed – *calumniously* (Socrates Scholasticus) – for fuelling. Perhaps both forms of rivalry become intelligible when framed as gender frictions within kyriarchy, including the hegemonic religion's branding of other faiths decadent and effeminate. *Agora* intimates no less in the Christian "vassalage" episode (01:25:12–28:37) where Orestes (Oscar Isaac), the historical Roman prefect of Alexandria, is forced to listen to Cyril's (Sammy Samir) reading of an excerpt from the First Epistle to Timothy (attributed to Paul) precisely on the submission women owed men (1 Tim 2.11–14; *Agora* 01:25:12–26:22)!

Ever since the 19th century Hypatia's biography has been a matter of historical speculation mostly by prejudiced males (Wider 21–6, 54–5).[17] With *The Dinner Party* and *Agora*, however, the interest in Hypatia has shifted to a larger audience, whose professional interests are not scholastic and which goes to the museum or the cinema for pleasure seeking. Judy Chicago positions Hypatia in Wing One as the last of the outstanding ancient women: the embroidered runner depicts Hypatia's death through limb rending and "four crying female faces from youth to old age that represent Hypatia in the Coptic style" (<www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/place_ settings/hypatia.php>). Her portrait after a Coptic image shows a woman whose mouth has been restrained by a harness-like band which loops into Hypatia's initial (<www.brooklynmuseum.org/ eascfa/dinner_party/place_settings/image.php?i=13&image=476&b=ps>). Understandably, *Agora* takes a different tack, since a feature film is not by its nature meant to re-establish historical truth, and this Hollywood production does not aspire to the status of historiographical metafiction.

[16] Hypatia's writings were lost when the Library of Alexandria was destroyed in 640 (Wider 55).

[17] An exception is language philosopher Fritz Mauthner, whose *Hypatia* (1892) "extend[s] his audience's vision of the epistemological value of philosophy, not just to offer a feminist critique of a woman's restricted position as philosopher," thereby "anticipat[ing] contemporary analyses of the relationship between institutions and discourses" (Arens 48).

Nonetheless, the trailer claims *Agora* presents "a true story" (01:33) about "the courage of a woman" (01:39)[18] and (in biblical idiom) "the fall of man" (01:43) (<www.youtube.com/watch? v=uOXKF1mb9Hc>), the latter presumably through the fall of Hellenistic Alexandria, the repository of classical wisdom. Yet, not only does *Agora* fail to provide the revisionist, women-empowering story it may be mistaken for by unwary audiences mindful of the film's politically-correct historicising captions, but it recycles biased old lies in equally biased, romanticised Hollywood garb, especially as regards Hypatia's death.[19] According to Socrates Scholasticus' *Ecclesiastica historia* (*c*. 439), one March day during Lent Hypatia was waylaid by a Christian mob[20] led by Peter, Cyril's reader, dragged from her carriage to the church/Caesareum and stripped naked; they "raze[d] the skin and ren[t] the flesh of her body with sharp shells" (qtd. in Wider 58); her body thus flayed, they quartered it and "took her mangled limbs to a place called Cinaron, and there burnt them" (*EH* 7.15).[21] Continues Socrates Scholasticus: "This affair brought not the least opprobrium, not only upon Cyril, but also upon the whole Alexandrian church. And surely nothing can be farther from the spirit of Christianity than the allowance of massacres, fights, and transactions of that sort."[22] Who would expect a doctrinal account to fully expose to prejudicial publicity the very institution whose encomium it writes and which sponsors (on pain of banning) the enterprise?

Truer to the classic Hollywood box-office thrust than to any postmodernist quest for historical truth (as advertised in the trailer), *Agora* shows a politically sanitised demise of the heroine (Rachel Weisz), humanely smothered by Davus (Max Minghella), her former slave and, unbeknownst to her, loving admirer, which thus circumvents the ignominious death by stoning. Originally, the hermit-warriors sadistically contemplated flaying Hypatia,[23] consistent with Socrates Scholasticus' account; however, Davus invoked the anti-feminist issue of polluting blood (*Agora* 01:50:50) – and another Parabalano advised stoning instead (01:50:55–50:56) – so as to buy time and offer Hypatia an alternative, melodramatic death. Why did Amenabár shy away from the Hollywood signature – violent special effects for gore – in depicting her death as reported in some sources?[24] I am persuaded to read such reticence along with another *Agora* oddity: the Parabalani/ Christians are acted by racially marked actors – e.g. Galilee-born Ashraf Barhom (Ammonius), Jerusalem-born Sammy Samir (Cyril) or London-born Clint Dyer (Hierax) – seemingly for the sake of historical accuracy. However, historically dark-skinned personages, including Jesus, are not depicted thus in other Hollywood films. For instance, of the largely Italian cast in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which purportedly restores the historical local colour by recourse to Aramaic, only two Temple guards have "Arab" names, Adel Bakri and (Tunisian-born) Abel Jafri. Why

[18] "One woman – a legend – ahead of her time, stood to unite mankind" (*Agora* trailer 00:22–30). "Mankind" re-instates women's invisibility!

[19] Yet the film suggests historical documentation; the Serapeum episode where Hypatia rejects Orestes' advances (*Agora* 00:24:20–24:55) draws upon Damascius (ll. 6–32, qtd. in Wider 53), the biographer of Hypatia's alleged husband, Isidorus the philosopher. For a poetic fictionalisation cum gender-revisionist account of Hypatia's death, see Molinaro.

[20] Wider (57) speaks of "a mob of Christian monks" who killed Hypatia "in a vicious and blood-thirsty way."

[21] The translation available at <www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202.ii.x.xv.html> omits the flaying detail, unlike the one provided in Wider (58). Likewise, the 1854 *Ecclesiastical History of Socrates* glosses over the exact manner of "murder[ing] her [Hypatia] with shells" (349). While the URL of Christian Classics Ethereal Library renders Schaff's involvement implicit, neither of the other sources identifies the English translator.

[22] See Drake (esp. 34–6) for a balanced account of the rise of Christian extremist militancy by the end of the 4th century in response to Emperor Julian the Apostate's rescinding of the Constantinian settlement, which provides the context for understanding in part Hypatia's death.

[23] "She'll scream alright when we skin her alive" (*Agora* 01:50:41–50:42).

[24] The final caption series provides a half-historicising epilogue: Hypatia's lost works (*Agora* 01:53:59–54:06) and demise: the body being dragged through the streets, then burnt (01:53:39–53:45).

do the Parabalani's attacks on the Jews (*Agora* 00:58:45–01:00:19; 01:11:23–12:50), through the fiction of historically verisimilar costuming, head-gear and complexion of the actors, rather smack of the War-on-Terror rhetoric of "here's what the Arab out there is up to if we let him to his devices"?[25] Why do many shots juxtapose the fair-skinned, white-robed polytheistic Alexandrians – clean-shaven men yet "Oriental"-looking women – with the bearded, dark-skinned, turbaned Christians and black-robed Parabalani (00:07:00–07:48; 00:28:10–31:20; 00:31:50–32:44), including bishop Cyril (00:58:29–58:39), even as Hypatia's students are also shown several times to be ethnically and racially diverse (00:03:26–03:32)? Why are the (non-)armed clashes between Christians/Parabalani and non-Christians likely to tip the balance of "terrorism" in the direction of the former (the fire trial, 00:08:35–09:19; caption, 00:56:53–57:01; attack on Orestes, 01:30:04) even when the conflict is started by the latter (Serapeum custodians, 00:26:05–26:36; the Jews in retaliation for the Sabbath attack, 01:07:17–09:00)? Why does the trailer focus on violent clashes, show Cyril's ominous promise to "purify" Alexandria against the raising of the Bible and followed by the image of a Jew being pushed off a cliff (00:40–45), and quote at length Hypatia's admonition to the council that unless it acts now, the Parabalani "will continue to do the same over and over again" until Alexandria has been depopulated (uttered against more images of violence perpetrated by "Arab"-looking males (00:56–01:09))? Why do the Parabalani's quasi-inexistent headquarters[26] elide this group with bushmen, i.e. people beyond the pale of "civilisation" as represented by the Alexandrian philosophers, whose library the Parabalani storm and turn upside down (00:51:02–52:52, esp. 00:52:19–52:33)? Coincidence? *Day Night Day Night* (2006), written and directed by Julia Loktev, features as a would-be suicide bomber an anonymous nineteen-year-old woman (Luisa Williams, born Luisa Colon) whose non-descript ethnic identity, from facial features to accent, nevertheless echoes the typical western stereotype of the Muslim "Oriental" (woman) as critiqued by Edward Said.[27]

Are racial and religious displacements necessary in a film that purportedly recuperates the voice and work of Hypatia as both a model of ethics and a strong woman, whom her father wouldn't deprive of the freedom to teach and speak through marriage (*Agora* 00:22:07–22:45)? Arguably, with the re-inscription of Hypatia into the *mainstream* discourse of knowledge through her mathematical and astronomical research, she is made to espouse a *modern* Euro-American identity based on the Enlightenment myth[28] of rationality-for-progress. Amenabár's Hypatia thus represents western civilisation at odds with the fanatical religious zeal and homicidal deeds of the Parabalani/fringe people/terrorists. She articulates her ethics, "I believe in philosophy" (01:21:11–21:12), in response to a councillor's provocation (in the context of forced Christian conversion) that Hypatia "believe[s] in nothing" (01:21:00–21:09). Read: "I believe in reason, science and human progress and

[25] By contrast, Hypatia's mathematician slave, Aspasius (Homayoun Ershadi), has the features of the "tame," understanding and supportive Oriental.

[26] The Parabalani cart the dead to the funeral pyre in a desert place on the shore by a fortress (*Agora* 01:17:10–17:58). In fact, *Agora* never indicates where/what the Parabalani's "headquarters" might be – apart from the church-converted Serapeum (01:36:40–37:04; 01:42:03–42:25); thus, Ammonius preaches God to the mob gathered in the agora right in front of the Serapeum (00:15:00–16:38) before inviting Davus to watch the liturgy and engage in alms-giving in the church atrium.

[27] As the Russian American director confesses, her idea of the Times Square threat came from a Russian newspaper article about a young female Chechen suicide bomber walking down a main street in Moscow; Loktev, however, was interested "to make a film that ... isn't about how something looks from the outside but feels from the inside" (qtd. in <www.mediasanctuary.org/event/day-night-day-night-w-filmmaker-julia-loktev>). Nonetheless, the protagonist's vague, though "Oriental" identity in *DNDN*, alongside her "terrorist" engagement, arguably gives vent to the American fears of "the enemy within" in the wake of 9/11.

[28] My explanation resonates in part with Killings'; however, his hinges on how some Enlightenment thinkers, e.g. Voltaire, deployed Damascius' account of Hypatia's death to craft a discourse of Christianity's hostility to the freedom of enquiry (Killings 52–3).

freedom" – the Enlightenment project extolled by Habermas yet found wanting by postmodern philosophers like Lyotard. Contrariwise, the Parabalani flaunt a destructive ethics, encapsulated in Ammonius' answer to Davus' frightened ethical musing after killing the Jews:

> Davus: Do you ever think we're mistaken? ...
> Ammonius: We're still alive. Why? Because it was His will to save us from the [Jews'] stones. God wants us to do here what we do. (*Agora* 01:17:58–18:00, 01:18:48–19:01).[29]

Understandably, repelling the righteous thinker – once recuperated into and for the western mainstream – cannot go as far as showing her being flayed in punishment for being the "witch" (*Agora* 01:27:00; 01:30:47; 01:37:05; 01:49:50; 01:50:56) and "whore" (01:37:05; 01:50:31–50:33; 01:50:36) whose scheming makes Orestes waver in whole-heartedly pledging his allegiance to the church. For all her feminine allure, *Agora*'s Hypatia is *masculinised* to become the mouthpiece of western rationality fighting against terror and obscurantism, the always already external(ised) other of the West. Her embrace of philosophy as the discourse of truth which by its nature allows, even requires, questioning, unlike the discourse of faith (01:45:10–21), as she warns Synesius of Cyrene (Rupert Evans), her former student, now bishop, nods to the postmodern hermeneutics of suspicion – the distrust of all grand narratives (Lyotard) – while def(l)ecting from the political towards a philosophy of truth seemingly beyond socio-political imbroglios. Which is another fault critics charge postmodernism with.

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My comparative analysis suggests that these two postmodern works' attempt to restore *herstory*, whether or not in a professedly feminist vein and in self-conscious postmodernist terms, is neither fully successful nor methodologically faultless. If, as both H. R. Jauss and feminist writers argue, "meaning" is not inherent in the artwork but is constructed – partially and provisionally, as Elisabeth Grosz cautions – through the "reader's" interaction with the work, then *The Dinner Party* and *Agora* may as much cater for feminist concerns as undermine them by reinforcing malestream stereotypes of woman (Chicago) or of western thought (Amenabár). Such interaction, moreover, is necessarily framed by socio-cultural presuppositions undergirded by the current politics of representation (both in a particular medium and at large) and resonates with larger political concerns within the social. In the case of *Agora*, the political context and spectatorial familiarity with other Hollywood productions further complicate *herstory* through its embedding within a heterological discourse whose own *history* extols Euro-American phallogocentrism.

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[29] This *argumentum ad verecundiam* – so frequently deployed in Christian discourse to legitimise oppression of the other – thus forestalls any ethical reconsideration of the Parabalani's massacre of the Jews of Alexandria.

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