



Dora Chastain – Juli Carson

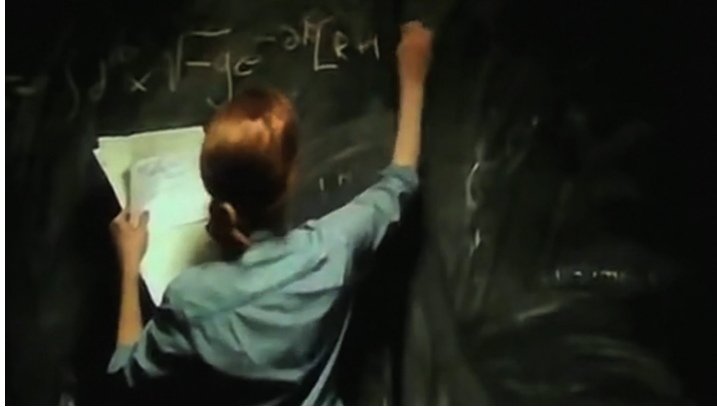
*What woman is not Dora?
She who makes the others (desire).¹*

Who is she? This woman Hélène Cixous positions under Freud's historic pseudonym “Dora?” Simply, she is the hysteric. And today she is *everywhere*. I can already hear the feminist drumbeats protesting my speech act: *the hysteric is everywhere*. Their protest is not entirely unfounded.

Coined by Hippocrates in the 5th Century BC, hysteria was the first “mental disorder” associated exclusively with women thought to be afflicted with a “wandering uterus.” Unsurprisingly, the disorder's cure was marriage. It wasn't until the 19th century that neuropsychiatrist Pierre Janet would identify the disorder's root cause as a “fixed idea” within the hysteric's unconscious. Soon after, Freud published his “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (“Dora”)” in 1905, giving us a universal persona for the hysteric in the pseudonym *Dora*: an 18 year-old female subject of Freud's study, whose suicide attempt – in protest of being cast as a kinship pawn of exchange between her father and her father's lover's husband – brought her into analysis. But the case was a notorious failure: Dora quit analysis when Freud obliquely sided with her father, the effect of the analyst's own paternal blind spot. By the 1980s, the “revolutionary” DSM-III had deleted “hysteria” from its medical diagnoses, and cultural theorists have since redeemed it *beyond* pathology. Hélène Cixous, in fact, argues that Dora “is the core example of the protesting force of women” in that her symptoms were largely based upon social repression.² Maura Brewer's *Jessica Chastain* video trilogy gives new life to Cixous's claim, in the exact moment that the first woman – one publicly accused of hysteria for decades – has been nominated for president by a major U.S. political party. But I will return to her later.

First, we must attend to our modern-day Dora: *Jessica Chastain*.

In popular culture, “Jessica Chastain” denotes a Hollywood actress featured in the films *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Interstellar* and *The Martian*. But, in Brewer's hands, “Jessica Chastain” is a pseudonym for the *heretical* hysteric. Like the hysteric, the heretic occupies a liminal space within the orthodoxy s/he contests: at once *inside*, being spoken for by orthodoxy's law, and *outside*, lacking the authority to contest orthodoxy's truth. Unlike the hysteric, heretics tenaciously



protest orthodoxy on a grand stage, hence their status as *agents* rather than *patients*. Reading “Jessica Chastain” as a pseudonym for a combined heretic-hysteric, then, is to wrench Dora (Chastain) from the grip of the Other's desire. Simply, it's to let loose Dora's force of protest. But “Jessica Chastain” also denotes a conceptual artwork by “Maura Brewer,” thus giving us *two* proper nouns metonymically connected by the term “heretic.” Such that, if “Maura Brewer” is a heretic-analyst – an “analyst” because that is what conceptual artists purport to be – then her role is to scrutinize mainstream film production, questioning the residual points of paternal orthodoxy that lie beyond imagination in a presumably *post*-feminist culture. Today, these points symptomatically surface within a labyrinth of social networks, the closest thing we have to a Jungian collective unconscious. Most notably, a repressed resentment returns in our “post-civil rights” moment of a female nominee, same-sex marriage and transgender rights. But, again, this *ressentiment* is only a symptom. The deeper source is a latent, ideological core beyond which we have yet to move: an Oedipal orthodoxy – characterized by gender norms of the post-war era – that just *insists*.

The *mise-en-scène* is now set for *Jessica Chastain*, that heretical figure spun atop an Oedipal one, to do her work.

Third in the *Jessica Chastain* series, *The Surface of Mars* provides a “key” to the complete trilogy, one structured like a rebus or a Freudian dreamscape. While ordinary dreams are constructed of memory traces drawn from real life, *Jessica Chastain's* “dream” is drawn from the world of film. Put another way, since the real world of “Jessica Chastain” – both the Hollywood actress and Brewer's character – is film, *Surface of Mars* gives a dream representation drawn *from* a film representation. So where's the *real* world outside this tautological formulation? It's helpful to think of Louis Althusser's concept of *reciprocal action* that connects our experiences and ideological formation, the logic of which mirrors a Möbius strip: on one side, our consciousness of experiences that seamlessly twist into the other side, our Imaginary relation to them. Paradoxically, *Jessica Chastain's* dream is just as tautological, then, as it is real. The content of her dream – Brewer's film trilogy – is the “real world,” albeit one riddled with signifiers (symptoms) attributable to the (real) woman's point of view. As in the statement *I am lying*, “Jessica Chastain's” dream tells the truth.

Accordingly, *The Surface of Mars* is structured on the hysteric's first symptom: *a narrative of subtraction*. As Joan Copjec recalls, Dora's pleasure always exists “at one remove from the scene that incites it...Distancing herself from the world, the hysteric eroticizes her



solitude while acting as puppeteer of an erotic coupling elsewhere.”³ Subtracted from the very narrative she determines, “the condition of the world thus constituted is that the hysteric never steps foot in it.”⁴ Hence Chastain's fate as commander “Melissa Lewis” in Ridley Scott's *The Martian*, Brewer's source material for *The Surface of Mars*. It also describes the CIA agent “Maya” in Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* and the esteemed scientist “Murphy Cooper” in Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar*. In each case, Chastain's character is tethered through the deep bond of self-identification to a paternal figure, real or imagined, at one remove from the scene that determines her. As the voice-over in *Surface of Mars* points out: “Chastain's characters are defined by their success in male-dominated fields. This success is a result of Maya / Murphy / Melissa's natural inclination to identify with a group or institutional setting, including: the CIA, the family, NASA.” Identifying with a system that marks one as lack entails simultaneously being locked *out* of the Symbolic order – around which one orbits – and locked *into* the Imaginary scheme that constitutes the Symbolic core. While this condition – being locked out of the very narrative one drives – constitutes the latent content of Jessica Chastain's Hollywood roles, it's the manifest force behind the *Jessica Chastain* trilogy.

This brings us to the hysteric's second symptom: *mimesis*. Cixous opines what it's like for Dora to be confined to the Imaginary: “When I was younger...I realized I was capable of mimicry...I found myself caught up in those characters' same state, because they too were identifying... Almost all those involved in Dora's scene circulate through the others, which results in a sort of hideous merry-go-round...”⁵ This *I am everywhere* quality recalls Roger Caillois' commentary on homomorphy, or the adaptation of form to form. Based on the organism's overwhelming tendency to imitate, it's really a *temptation of space*, an inclination to *become one with* the environment or, by Lacanian analogy, to become one with the Other.⁶ *The Surface of Mars* exudes such mimetic self-immolation, one that physically and psychologically underlies Scott's *Martian*. The Martian surface that Chastain traverses is barren and empty. Sand and rock stretch out in every direction under a red sun, where everything looks the same, threatening to consume Chastain's equally flat, reddish figure. Indeed, when her paternal figure is lost to a space storm, Chastain herself collapses both *within* and *from* the narrative. At a loss for the Symbolic coordinates of figure vs. ground – the phenomenological condition for self vs. other – Chastain floats

Left: Maura Brewer, *Zero Dark Birthday*, 2014, video still
Center: Maura Brewer, *Interstellar*, 2015, video still
Right and Cover: Maura Brewer, *The Surface of Mars*, 2016, video stills

emotionless across a weightless spaceship, the interior of which is as psychologically barren and empty as the surface of the planet upon which her “Primary Male Figure” is presumed lost and dead. The same fate meets Chastain’s character in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Maya, a CIA operative in pursuit of Osama Bin Laden, is able to distinguish herself among her peers and environment – despite being perpetually camouflaged – until she successfully orders the assassination of her key link to the Symbolic: Bin Laden, the paternal figure of her identification. The voiceover in *Zero Dark Birthday* detourns Bigelow’s filmic denouement with Maya’s Imaginary reflection: “It was over, it was finally over and I should have been elated...but instead I felt nothing. Totally empty. I had dedicated my life to finding him and now it was done.”

But where, you ask, is the *heretic* in all this hysterical subtraction and non-differentiation?

It’s in Dora’s third symptom: *the name*. Which brings us back to the family. Simultaneously desiring *and* identifying with the father, Dora short-circuits Oedipal triangulation, specifically the demand that she compartmentalize her desire (for one parent) from her identification (with the other). In defiance, Dora’s desire / identification for the same parent provokes her counter-demand: “Pick, father... her (mother) *or* me.” In taking the role of a jealous wife, Cixous notes, it’s the mother who has all the marital rights here; but it’s the *daughter* who bares the father’s name by birthright. Hence the surname’s tautological paradox that’s latent – though repressed – in Oedipal triangulation: it collapses the contradiction between wife / daughter, on the one hand, and father / daughter, on the other. Analogously, in Brewer’s triangulation of actor / film role / artwork, “Chastain” functions as a surname when denoting the actor in the world, but it collapses into a given name within Brewer’s films, one connoting many figures among similar others, within a “taxonomy” of Chastain roles. That said, there’s a *temptation of space* to which Brewer herself is subject. For Brewer’s own given name, like those of Chastain’s characters, also begins with “M” – something noted in her storyboards for *The Surface of Mars* – placing her within the very taxonomy of “Chastains” she scrutinizes.

Therein lies the heretical act, the latent content of *Jessica Chastain’s* dream: by self-consciously admitting her *own* identification with “Chastain” – and, by way of analogy, with Dora – the artist claims no privileged position *outside* filmic narrative hegemonies. Nor does she let those hegemonies lie silently at work. Hence Brewer’s return to appropriation, another form of mimesis, as a type of tactic associated with military science. This entails *never remaining outside* the picture, but rather jumping right in it, something first generation conceptual artist Mary Kelly introduced with her phrase, “interrogating the interrogation.” The tactic was later ascribed by a third generation of artists – Renée Green, Andrea Fraser and Constanze Ruhm notable among them – who implicate themselves in the picture of their analysis by some sort of proxy persona. In so doing, the artist’s complicity in the system she challenges becomes, necessarily, *part* of that challenge, an operation Kelly first coined the *feminist problematic*, in counter-distinction to the catch-all phrase *feminist* art.

Which brings us back to our aforementioned political troublemaker.

On July 26, 2016, Hillary Rodham Clinton became the first woman to be nominated for president by a major U.S. political party. The idea that she alone, as Commander-in-chief, would be equipped with the ultimate phallus – the security codes needed to launch the US nuclear triad – was too much for some, yet not enough for others. Nevertheless, all agreed that history was being made. The next day banner headlines read: “Clinton Claims Nomination.” Only, the pictures beneath the headlines were all of her *husband*, former President Bill Clinton, who had spoken in support of Mrs. Clinton’s nomination. The revenge of the surname thus returned: husband / wife, father / daughter were all collapsed into one. Returning back to Nolan’s *Interstellar*, woman indeed is constructed in life as in film. In the film’s final scene, when Murphy Cooper’s father wakes up from space travel on a satellite employing the gravitational secret of relative time and what quantum physics calls “the singularity,” he asks the doctors: “What’s it called?” They tell him, “Cooper.” When he thanks them, they all laugh: “Not after *you*, her!” referring to Cooper’s daughter, who had spent her entire life on the discovery. Simply, as Cixous notes: “...there is no place for the hysteric; she cannot be placed or take place. Hysteria is necessarily an element that disturbs arrangements; wherever it is, it shakes up all those who want to install themselves...It is very difficult to block out this type of person who doesn’t leave you in peace, who wages a permanent war against you.”

This is the *agency* behind Dora’s heretical hysteria.

- 1 Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, “The Untenable,” *In Dora’s Case: Freud – Hysteria – Feminism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 276.
- 2 Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, *La juene née* (Union générale d’éditions: Paris, 1975), 283.
- 3 Joan Copjec, “The Symbolic Without the Father,” *lacanian ink* 10, (1995): 12-13.
- 4 Copjec, 17.
- 5 Cixous, “The Untenable,” 278.
- 6 Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” *October* 31, (1984): 27-28.

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