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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6br2j4v1>

Author

Garrigou-Kempton, Emilie

Publication Date

2010-04-01

“If your vagina could speak, what would it say?”
Dangerous Femininity, Anxious Masculinity and the Threat of Female Desire
in the 1975 pornographic movie The Sex that Speaks.

UCLA Thinking Gender Conference- February 5th 2010

Emilie Garrigou-Kempton is a graduate student in French Studies at the University of Southern California. She received a B.A. and an M.A. in Philosophy from Bordeaux University and an M.A. in International Development from Lyons University. Her current works focuses on the use of the gendered body and on the representations of masculinity and femininity in the French tradition

“The sex that speaks” – a phrase coined by Michel Foucault in the first volume of the History of Sexuality to characterize our society’s “immense curiosity about sex”– is also the title of a French pornographic movie whose release in 1975 coincides with the publication of Foucault’s text. The Sex that Speaks, also known in English as Pussy Talks, relates the story of a woman whose vagina inexplicably starts talking and reveals a voracious sexual appetite.

Foucault chooses a more classical text, Diderot’s 1748 novel The Indiscreet Jewels, as emblematic of our society’s obsessive curiosity about sex. In this novel, the “jewels” of several women start talking as one man, curious about female sexuality, interrogates them. As in the movie, the sex’s speech is limited to the expression of an insatiable sexual desire. In fact, in both cases, the talking sex is always female and it consistently delivers a uniform message of women’s sexual promiscuity.

It is this recurring curiosity, as well as the uniformity of the message about female sexuality, that I would like to explore here through the case of The Sex that Speaks. I would like to ask why, while seemingly giving womanhood a voice, talking vagina narratives systematically restrict their discourse to the tedious expression of an insatiable sexuality. Also, why does the vagina discourse consistently alienate and antagonize women? In particular, I would like to ponder why talking vaginas are repeatedly given more credibility than the women themselves. Ultimately, I want to demonstrate that the talking vagina motif is an attempt by male ventriloquists – in the form of writers and filmmakers – to cope with their own vulnerability in the face of an assertive female sexuality. The production of these narratives could then be understood as a response to male anxiety and as an effort to tame a threatening female sexuality.

If Foucault identifies Diderot's novel as emblematic of the modern curiosity about sex, it is because its hero illustrates the compulsion to endlessly interrogate sex. Set in the exotic kingdom of Congo, the novel portrays Sultan Mangogul's obsession with knowing the sexual indiscretions of the women of his court. As he is given a magic ring, the Sultan then becomes able to interrogate each woman's "jewel" and to let it speak its truth. Taken by surprise and unable to comprehend what actually causes their sex to speak, women are unable to control what their jewel says. Consistently, the truth revealed by the talking genitals is an indictment of women's unfaithfulness, promiscuity and insatiable sexual appetite. Since the Sultan's enterprise is based on the double assumption that women are not only unfaithful but also deceitful, his experimentation with the magic ring confirms his suspicions and he is left to wonder whether virtuous women actually exist.

The Sex That Speaks resonates as the modern counterpart of Diderot's libertine novel. Influenced by Deep Throat, the 1972 American hard-core movie in which Linda Lovelace is diagnosed with having her clitoris located in her throat, The Sex that Speaks uses a similar anatomical gimmick. Another female anatomical abnormality – in this case a sex that is able to speak – becomes a pretext to explore female sexuality. In the movie, Joëlle, a married high-level executive, is compelled to secretly engage in sexual relations with strangers. It is in the context of her unhappy marriage that leaves her unfulfilled that Joëlle's vagina inexplicably starts talking and she has no control over what it says. While her vagina usually talks to demand more sex, it also confronts Joëlle's husband about his inability to satisfy her sexually and betrays Joëlle by revealing the sexual encounters she has been keeping from him. In fact, as was the case in The Indiscreet Jewels, it is the vagina that warns the man of the true nature of a woman and also exposes her as a cheat and a liar.

As Joëlle's condition persists, her husband asks for a psychiatrist's advice. This recourse to psychiatry to cure a talking sex, as opposed to gynecology for example, inscribes the movie into a tradition that sees hysteria as a bodily expression of women's sick sexual appetite. In fact, since Greek Antiquity, hysteria – a term derived from the Greek word for womb – had been believed to be an exclusively feminine disease caused by the movement of the womb “thirsty for semen” up to the throat of women, resulting in their choking and convulsions. Even though the sexual explanation of hysteria had already fallen out of favor by the end of the XIXth century, French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot still believed that he could provoke hysterical crises simply by performing “ovarian pression” on women. Moreover, by inducing the hysteria crisis, Charcot believed he was able to bring to the surface a patient's inner truth. Along the same lines, in the movie, it is the sex's discourse that unearths the remembrance of Joëlle's repressed childhood trauma. Linda Williams sees in Deep Throat's medical investigation of Linda Lovelace's condition an attempt to scientifically capture the truth of human pleasure and the same can be said of The Sex that Speaks and its use of psychiatry to explore Joëlle's disease. Yet, no medical explanation for Joëlle's condition is offered and the vagina stops talking as inexplicably as it had started. At the same time the condition is transferred to Joëlle's husband and the movie ends with his penis speaking, opening the door for the sequel – The Sex that Speaks II – released in 1978.

If Foucault saw in The Indiscreet Jewels the emblem of our society, it is because talking vagina narratives actually offer the literal illustration of the tendency to interrogate sex. Whereas Foucault identifies a number of practices that essentially question sex, their answers need to be mediated and interpreted. Diderot's novel and The Sex that Speaks, on the other hand, represent the ultimate fantasy by offering a sex that talks directly and offers not just a discourse *about* sex, but a discourse *by sex itself*. Then, at once, the truth of sex

becomes readily accessible and easily legible. In other words, by not only showing sex, but by also giving it a voice, The Sex that Speaks makes accessible the mysteries of sex and illustrates “the will to knowledge” evoked by Foucault.

Why is vagina talk considered trustworthy? And, why are women consequently assumed to be deceitful? This double assumption, that the sex tells the truth and that women lie, is an illustration of the tension between these two types of discourse about sex. In The Sex that Speaks, Joëlle is placed in a quasi-schizophrenic situation in which she is antagonized by her own sex. While she tries to lie about her encounters, her sex discloses the details of her intimacy. In fact, when it is not expressing its voracious desire, the sex confesses and thereby produces truth. Thus, if the sex is more trusted than the woman both in The Indiscreet Jewels and in The Sex that Speaks, it is because of its recurrent use of confession, a practice aimed at producing truth.

In both narratives, the vagina is more than just a body part with the ability to speak; it not only speaks for the woman it actually replaces her. In The Sex that Speaks, Joëlle’s vagina oversteps Joëlle herself and interacts directly with her husband. Soon, the vagina’s voice becomes Joëlle’s only audible and meaningful voice. In addition, shots from the vagina’s point of view help marginalize Joëlle’s perspective while giving more visibility and power to the vagina. Through this metonym, womanhood is reduced to sexuality and the vagina, not the woman, becomes the center of attention. In fact, while The Indiscreet Jewels manages to make the vagina audible and while hard-core pornography traditionally makes it visible, the main endeavor of The Sex that Speaks is to make the vagina both audible and visible at once.

Voyeurism appears to be a constant appeal for readers or viewers of talking vagina stories: people want to hear and see what cannot usually be heard or seen, and that is

especially true of the latter. The question of voyeurism is already present in Diderot's text. Indeed, there is one magic property of the ring that is often overlooked: it can make the person that wears it invisible. As a result, in addition to hearing the jewels' confessions, the Sultan can also enter his court's intimate scenes without being seen. In this context, Diderot's magic ring is a precursor of pornographic movies' power.

Williams suggests that, "The animating male fantasy of hard-core cinema might (...) be described as the (impossible) attempt to capture visually this frenzy of the visible in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured."¹ It is this gap that The Sex that Speaks attempts to bridge by not only allowing us to see the female sex but by also letting the sex talk directly about its own pleasure. This attempt to "view the sex act itself" on screen in order to better capture its mystery is also rooted in the idea that there is an invisible reality inaccessible to the naked eye. Williams states that cinema is "the quest for the truth of visible phenomena"² and film enables the viewer to see the invisible. She considers the early years of motion pictures and uses the example of English photographer Muybridge whose study of horses demonstrated that their true movement during fast trot was invisible to the human eye and could only be understood after it was photographed and the photographs set in motion. Muybridge's example demonstrates that some movements are invisible to the human eye until they are seen on screen. Consequently, since there might still be an invisible truth in the realm of the visible, this discovery cast shadows on the human ability to see the truth of the body. Williams writes:

The specific and unprecedented cinematic pleasure of the illusion of bodily motions emerged partly as a by-product of the quest for the initially unseeable "truth" of this motion.³

¹ Linda Williams. Hard Core. Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible." Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999: 50

² Williams: 46

³ Williams: 38

It is therefore a double quest for truth that is at play in The Sex that Speaks: the visible truth on screen, and the audible truth spoken by the vagina, both attempting to decipher the mystery of female pleasure.

Yet, this mystery is produced and explored from a strictly masculine perspective. By staging and interpreting female desire as insatiable, The Sex that Speaks' director, Claude Mulot, attempts to come to terms with the deeply rooted myth of promiscuous women whose voracious sexuality destroys males. In the XVth century, Inquisitors Kramer and Sprenger stated that, "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable." Similarly, this idea of a threatening femininity has been traditionally represented through the myths of the *vagina dentata*, which are present in one form or another in many Western and non Western cultures. While the details of each legend differ, they all have in common a representation of women's genitalia as a hostile and unwelcoming territory that needs to be tamed. In such stories, the teeth are the obstacles that the male hero needs to eliminate in order to restore a docile female. Still, behind the stories of witches and toothed vaginas lies the threat of a dangerous feminine sexuality that needs to be fought, conquered and controlled by men.

In this context, tales of talking vaginas function as a constant reminder of the danger that female desire presents to a vulnerable masculinity, for it is actually masculinity that is at stake in these representations. The persistence of the talking vagina motif in popular culture could in fact be considered an act of male catharsis in which, through a controlled staging of what threatens them most, males can actually demonstrate their ability to tame female sexuality. It is therefore not surprising that Joëlle's vagina confronts her husband with his inability to satisfy her sexually. The movie then becomes an exploration of this threatening femininity until it is finally conquered. The husband's contamination by the talking genitalia disease can then be viewed as the illustration of his

victory: he has now been granted an insatiable desire of his own. He no longer needs to worry about his inadequacy nor does he need to fear Joëlle's desire. In this context, the gimmick of the talking vagina exists only to offer a cathartic outlet to male anxiety and to reassure males of their own masculinity. Produced in the mid-1970s France, following a ten-year period during which women had collectively asserted a powerful voice, The Sex that Speaks can then be seen as an example of the cultural backlash against feminism.

Talking vagina narratives come in response to the fear that women's desire is dangerous without the implementation of masculine control. Produced by male ventriloquists, these narratives do not truly give a voice to female sexuality. In fact, it is ironic that, while these narratives give the illusion to unleash precious feminine voices, they are actually misogynic discourses aimed at helping anxious males deal with a female sexuality they can't control.

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