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How to Cite: Callaghan, J. 2019. Materialising the Other: Pregnancy & Deconstruction. *Studies in the Maternal*, 11(1): 3, pp. 1–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.284>

Published: 05 November 2019

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Studies in the Maternal*, which is a journal published by the *Open Library of Humanities*.

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VISUAL WORK

Materialising the Other: Pregnancy & Deconstruction

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In the 'Envois' section of Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card* (1980), pregnancy and 'the child' keep coming back. As early as page five, there is an allusion to a child of sorts; 'To the devil with the child, the only thing we ever will have discussed, the child, the child, the child' (1980: 25). This unborn child is central to the emotional drama of the 'Envois'. It is cause and consequence of the correspondence between the unnamed narrator and his pregnant lover. Nevertheless, the topic of pregnancy in 'Envois' has been relatively ignored by Derrida scholars. In 2014, I produced a feature film inspired by *The Post Card* and chose to emphasise the aspect of pregnancy. I included a five-year-old child, Byron, whose genealogy remains open. I also featured a number of characters who are or want to be pregnant. In this video essay, I discuss how *Love in the Post: From Plato to Derrida* reads Derrida's 'Envois' in relation to pregnancy, reproduction and infidelity.

Video essay: <https://vimeo.com/332254213/ac55b0d268>

The Post Card is a 1980 book by Jacques Derrida. The first half 'Envois', is a semi-fictional story of an illicit love affair recounted through letters from a philosopher to his pregnant lover. The second half is a series of essays on psychoanalysis.

Love in the Post is a 2014 feature film by Joanna Callaghan. It is inspired by The Post Card but tells the story differently. It reverses the infidelity of 'Envois', replacing the male narrator with a woman, Sophie, who is pregnant and whose husband Theo is a Derrida scholar. It weaves their story together with that of a filmmaker, Joanna, who is making a documentary about The Post Card.

In 'Envois', the female addressee is silent, allowed only to speak second-hand. Her role is muse, container, provocateuse. She receives the correspondence, like the reader, and the message is both for her and not for her: 'My letters are too knowing, stuffed epistles but this is in order to "banalize" them, to cipher them somewhat better. And then in any event, I no longer know whom I wrote this to one day, letters are always post cards: neither legible or illegible, open and radically unintelligible' (Derrida, 1980: 79). Her 'responses', nevertheless, are thoughtful, difficult; she makes trouble, she disavows the narrator's words, she is disobedient (much like other feminist interventions into the world of philosophy offered by Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous). Her pregnancy, a marker that distinguishes her from the narrator, threatens to subsume, consume his discourse: 'To the devil with the child, the only thing we ever will have discussed, the child, the child, the child' (Derrida, 1980: 25). The embodied consequence of their illicit affair rises up, like Plato's erection behind Socrates' back in the Matthew Paris medieval drawing, to disturb the message he is sending (Derrida, 1980). Pregnancy is a powerful force in 'Envois' yet remains relatively ignored by Derrida scholars. Christine Battersby suggests there has been a reluctance by (male) philosophers to develop a metaphysics of birth based on the ontological significance that selves are born (1998: 4). In *Love in the Post*, the multitude of pregnancies, visible and invisible, possibly forged or faked, force the interconnectedness between bodies and selves to the surface, challenging

distinctions between mind and body. These pregnant women are the living, breathing consequences of being 'stuffed' with sperm (Derrida, 1980). After the pleasure are the effects: pregnancy, children, a lifetime of caring. But there are also affects of pregnancy, as explored by Jane Maree Maher's analysis of Sally Potter and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, where pregnancy is transformative and 'subjectivity is drawn in and changed by embodied experience, where processes of change enhance subjectivity rather than destroy it' (2007: 29).

Pregnancy in 'Envois' may have been overlooked for the factual elements that make it troublesome and awkward. The addressee and her unborn and born child are slowly killed off, given ultimatums in disguise:

I couldn't answer you on the phone right now, it was too painful. The "decision" you asked me for is once again impossible, you know it. It comes back to you, I send it back to you. Whatever you do I will approve, and I will do so from the day that it was clear that between us never will any contract, any debt, any official custody, any memory even, hold us back – any child even. (Derrida, 1980: 25)

In *Love in the Post*, Sophie delivers these lines, radically altering their meaning and reversing the gender dynamics of 'Envois'. Sophie acts as a versioning of the narrator and of the addressee (she is 'doing' philosophy). Her emotional world is determining the events that unfold within the narrative. As Theo's wife, she offers limited access to her thoughts: her few words at the cocktail party are ambiguous, as are the therapy sessions. She appears distant and enigmatic, but is also bubbling with silent intensity, almost, as woman, monstrous (Creed, 1993). Sophie as narrator performs extracts from the 'Envois' in a salon d'art, with filmmaker Joanna in the audience. These sequences are outside of the linear chronology of the narrative. They are moments that leak, seep, drip into the margins between characters, stories and worlds. Sophie, in her pregnant embodiment, creates a distinct relationship to space and time in the film. Her pregnancy symbolises transformation, process and growth, thus splitting her between past and future (Young, 1980: 160).

This woman is a problem. What is she? Who is she? For whom does she speak? In ventriloquising Derrida's words, and inverting the narrative of 'Envois', she, along with Joanna and other women in the film, opens the text to a feminist reading. In this female-centred narrative, characters pull against abstraction, they are embodied, fleshy. They take up space (therapist Frauke), they pop up at inconvenient times (ex-lover Penelope), they make demands (filmmaker Joanna) and accusations (PhD Student Macey). They inhabit the film. These women and their experiences reflect that there is 'not *one* dominant "feminine" response to the female subject-object position ... women's predicaments are infinitely variable and so are women's experiences. The identities of women are scored by a variety of forces and disciplinary structures' (Battersby, 1998: 3). They are anchored and propelled by Sophie, who in the narcissistic harbouring of an unknown, 'shapeless pre-object', turns inward, distracting her from the world, making her absence present (Kristeva, 2008). This is evident in the cocktail scene, where Sophie reveals her silent power, emotional volatility, and a refusal to play a part in the tête-à-tête.

Yet Derrida must have known what he was doing in introducing the theme of pregnancy in 'Envois' and the 'risky behaviour' he was undertaking (Callaghan & McQuillan, 2014: 150). In the linking of different plateaus of experience that weave together academic thought and personal experiences, Derrida was mirroring feminist practices of interrogation. He was connecting 'institutions where knowledge is formalised and transmitted ... to the spaces outside the official gaze, which act as generating and relay points for forms of knowledge as resistance'. (Braidotti, 2012: 179) For Catherine Malabou, he was not radical enough: in his theatricalising of the death drive and the pleasure principle he teeters on the verge of total destruction, but there remains a 'confidence in love' (Callaghan & McQuillan, 2014: 165). He says, 'Listen, I am (following) you all the time ... you are omnipresent here and I cry for you I cry over you ... I feel so much smaller than you, I am so afraid of distancing you from life, from everything that awaits you, from everything that the others desire from you' (Derrida, 1980: 108). The letters are at times moving and affective, and also sexual and phallogocentric: 'Imagine the day, as I have already, that we will be able

to send sperm by post card' (24). The male body forces itself up into the correspondence, playing out its missionary position: the man on top, the woman below.

If deconstruction has only one rule: 'allow the other' then in *Love in the Post*, this other is women, and their bodies. Their multitude challenges cinema's 'hierarchy of images' (Martin & Ackerman, 1979: 41) and the 'Envois' gender and sexual undecidability. In doing so, argues Sarah Dillon, the film 'is able to materialise women in their embodied reality and perform the possibility of gender and sexual indeterminacy, of multiple possible signatories and addressees' (2018: 6).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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Love in the Post: The Screenplay and Commentary by Joanna Callaghan & Martin McQuillan is published by Rowman and Littlefield. <http://tinyurl.com/https-www-rowmaninternationalna>.

How to cite this article: Callaghan, J. 2019. Materialising the Other: Pregnancy & Deconstruction. *Studies in the Maternal*, 11(1): 3, pp.1–6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.284>

Published: 05 November 2019

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