Chapter 9
Gendered Futures: Reproduction and Production in Women’s Lives

Harriet Bradley

Introduction

In the retrospective exhibition at the Tate Modern Art Gallery in 2007 stands one of Louise Bourgeois’ cell installations. Wooden panels enclose a bedroom scene. A blood-red mattress lies on a wire bed-frame. A square red pillow (for the man?) sits next to a small white pillow with the words ‘je t’aime’ embroidered on it in the same scarlet red. Built into the mattress is a penile shape. A child’s toy lies on the bed. One of the wooden panels, through which the visitor peers at the exhibit, has a label: ‘fermez la porte SVP’. Across the gallery room, a huge wooden vat encircles another cell, this one entitled ‘Liquid Pleasures’: these, the commentary informs us, are bodily secretions – sweat, tears, sexual flows. Above the bed (again a wire framework) a series of glass vessels or retorts are fixed on metal stands forming a rather beautiful forest above the bed. We are told that this symbolises the bodily release experienced by the adolescent girl as she grows into sexual maturity. But... across from the bed on the wall hangs a huge man’s overcoat, perhaps eight or nine feet tall, watching... In another part of the exhibition a work called ‘Do not Abandon me’ consists of a flesh-pink knitted fabric woman; she lies on her back and between her legs emerges a knitted child, fastened to her belly by a long pink cord. A whole series of drawings and sculptures throughout the exhibition is entitled ‘Femme Maison’ (housewife in French). In these artworks, a woman’s naked body disappears into a house which becomes her head.

In these pieces, Louise Bourgeois links sexuality, reproduction and motherhood, domesticity and housewifery, bodies and pleasures, through the imagery of entrapment. These and other works offer a disturbing, ambiguous commentary on female experience and identity. The exhibition’s symbol is the giant metal sculpture of a spider, ‘Maman’, who spins her threads from her stomach, as Bourgeois’ own mother wove her tapestry fabrics, as the mother in ‘Do not Abandon me’ dangles her child on the umbilical cord. The spider is huge, unsettling, and its giant legs, too, form a cage, an entrapment.

H. Bradley (✉)
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Bristol, Bristol, England, UK
e-mail: Harriet.Bradley@bris.ac.uk

Bourgeois was born in 1911, when women’s experience was firmly set in a
domestic subordination mould. Yet, reproduction still stands at the heart of women’s
lives. Young Western women in adolescence are perhaps increasingly defined by
sexuality. Reproductive concerns and the experience of motherhood (actual, desired
or renounced) are central preoccupations for most women throughout their lives.
Menstruation, fertility, pregnancy and the menopause are bodily realities which
deply affect women and contribute to their construction as medicalised beings. The
social valuation of women is still closely linked to their reproductive capacities: their
ability to bear children and their sexual potential. Older women may be ignored and
made socially invisible because the loss of fertility is associated with deseualisa-
tion. In all these ways, the lifetime experiences of women are sharply distinguished
from those of men. While fatherhood is an important signifier of masculinity, the
fact of being a father does not frame or constrain masculine experience to anything
like the extent that being a mother (actual or potential) frames that of women.

Because women’s reproductive capacities have an important impact on their pro-
ductive lives (their ability to work outside the home, the jobs they choose, the hours
they work), their labour market involvement remains differentiated from that of men.
As Glucksmann [1] states in her conceptualisation of the ‘total social organisation of
labour’, women enter the productive sphere under different conditions and assump-
tions from men. Thus women’s reproductive role lies at the core of persistent gender
difference and the inequalities of wealth, status and power that follow. Reproduction
is integral to gendering [2].

Is it inevitable that this will be the case? In Chapter 14, Tuija Takala considers
a future beyond the polarities of gender. Post-modern and poststructuralist theorists
have attempted to deconstruct both rigid identities and gendered bodies to suggest
the potential of freedom and choice offered by a framework of plural identities. But
in this chapter, I will argue that the future, foreseeable at least, will remain deeply
gendered. I will consider how current processes of gendering are set to persist and
critically examine possible scenarios for change and liberation.

There is certainly a paradox to be discerned here. As indicated in this book, the
period since the end of the Second World War has witnessed a steady development
of reproductive technologies, which apparently maximize choices for women, offer
control over reproductive processes, make childbearing safer and allow women to
programme their life courses in ways to better balance productive and reproductive
desiderata. It would seem that now women, in the West at least, can control when,
with whom and how they have children. Even more importantly, perhaps, contracep-
tion and fertility treatments allow women the choice of being a mother if they want
to be or not being a mother if they don’t. Yet in spite of these developments women
struggle to find a ‘work-life balance’ (the ‘life’ part of this formulation interestingly
being used by policy-makers in the UK as equivalent to children and domesticity).
Indeed in the countries of the European Union (EU) the issue of the ‘reconciliation’
of family and reproduction needs has become both a major policy focus and one of
the most important discussion points in contemporary feminist politics. Nor do the
anxieties around reproduction seem to have diminished for individuals. And, if we
turn to the developing world millions of women suffer from reproductive toils: over