Rotoscoping Saint Agatha out of her own Myth in an Aesthetics of Reparation

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"Take off my breasts. I can nourish the world with my inner breast!" These are the alleged

words of Saint Agatha, spoken in 251 CE and recorded in the Acts of Saint Agatha's Martyrdom

(Voragine 25). "I feel great joy in these pains," she continued on her deathbed when she was

about to have her breasts amputated with pliers as a punishment for refusing the sexual advances

of the Roman governor Quintianus.

There is nothing new about Catholicism idolizing a misogynist story as such, but what is

particular about this story is how its *violence-infused female eroticism* (most male martyrs were

clothed) comes close to a form of religious pornography. As Martha Easton explains, in medieval

imagery representing Agatha's breast martyrdom, "it may be the combination of the religious

and the erotic that gave the images much of their power and made St. Agatha such a popular

iconographic subject, particularly in the later Middle Ages" (Easton 85). To say it with Giuliana

Bruno in her analysis of Francesco Guarino's famous painting of Agatha's breast martyrdom,

there is an inherent erotic voyeurism in this representation. (Bruno 319-321)

In my film *Devoti Tutti* (*Devoted*), a hybrid documentary that could also be called a docu-

fiction, I reacted to the Agatha myth's emphasis on the violent depiction of a woman's breast

amputation with two preoccupations in mind. The first was the long-term effect of violence. As

we know from neuroscientist and psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk's influential book *The Body*

Figs 1 and 2. Ambrogio Bergognone and Bernardino Luini, High Renaissance paintings, early sixteenth century.

Keeps the Score, long-time effects of trauma on the body and mind of a victim of

violence are kept in the "emotional brain" whose memory lasts a lot longer than the "rational"

brain's. The omnipresence of the myth of Agatha's breast amputation and its re-telling over

almost 2,000 years on Catania's streets as well as in its pagan and Christian rituals led me to read

the Agatha myth as rooted in the city's emotional brain. To say it with fairytale and myth

historian Jack Zipes, myths are stories that weave themselves into the fabric of people's lives as

ways of coping with the reality and trauma depicted in them (Zipes 4). I aimed to reconstruct this

fabric ethnographically, by listening to the contemporary voices and testimonies of her story as

they can be found on the streets of Catania: by the fishermen, street children, the clergy, and the

Mafiosi who have organized the yearly Festival of Saint Agatha since the Middle Ages. I also

turned to a more conventional means of documentation that draws a line between Agatha's story

and its contemporary relevance and started looking for contemporary victims of sexual violence

in the community of Catania, eventually finding a protagonist, Angela, who was willing to

participate in my film and become a "modern-day Agatha" whose lived experience of violence

could connect the audience to Agatha's story.

This led me to my second preoccupation: how to change the Agatha myth's story-line to

allow the mythical figure of Agatha to heal by telling the story with her own voice (Shukla et al.)

in the mode of what feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey called a "'woman-inflected cinema' that

takes up topics and perspectives hitherto neglected or simply not imaginable by a male-

dominated culture" (Mulvey 10). For *Devoti Tutti*, all of the existing films that circulated and

that I had seen about Saint Agatha represented and even perpetuated a patriarchal story-telling of

the saint. In contrast, my intervention undermined the canonical storytelling of Agatha's

martyrdom by re-*animating* her and her amputated breasts and turning an objectifying gaze into a

living gaze. Healing from a trauma like Agatha's means not only telling the story in a new

fashion but also stressing and emphasizing a victim's sense of empowerment, since, as Judith

Herman has put it, "recovery… is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation

of new connections" (Herman 133). Following Herman, I envisioned Agatha's empowerment

coming through her taking agency over her story but also through her ability to feel good again

in her body (Van der Kolk 265-278). In addition, I wanted to give her back what was taken from

her: her breasts. Finally, with the technique of rotoscoping, which consists of drawing on the

images of a live actor, I instilled Agatha with a point of view she never had in the representations

that objectified and celebrated the violence against her body.

The idea of *reversing the gaze* was of course not new.[1] As British filmmaker Pratibha

Parmar has put it, "It is in representing elements of the self which are considered 'other' by

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[1] In this act of *reversing the gaze*, I was inspired by many filmmakers including Pratibha Parmar, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Tracey Moffatt, Chantal Akerman, Andrea Arnold, and Rosine Mbakam, to name a few. For a longer discussion of

dominant systems of representation that an act of reclamation, empowerment and self-definition occurs" (Parmar 97). We have seen such acts of reclamation of women's stories, stories of the LGBTQ+ communities, and stories of the colonized or erased populations through their own lenses and eyes in the long history of women's cinema. My hybrid feminist intervention into the Agatha myth was informed by and based on this history of a feminist film practice that aims at reversing the canonical gaze and speaking from the point of view of a *lived experience*.

In their work on practice-based research in the creative arts, Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds point out that when practice is inserted into a research process, not only will the practice be enhanced, but the research also benefits, not only the individual researcher but also by contributing to a broader picture. With *Devoti Tutti*, I wanted to communicate the wider and perhaps even universal dimensions of the cultural trauma of memory, which manifests itself through the ritual enactments of martyrs in the annually celebrated cult of Agatha. I intended to give the depiction of Agatha's breast amputation a different reading, one that goes beyond a hagiographic reading of sexual violence (Easton 97), and that allowed Agatha's voice to retell the story. Through the making of the film, I also gained new knowledge about the nature of trauma that very much aligned with Candy and Edmond's findings (Candy and Edmonds 63). In what follows, I will lay out and discuss my practice-based filmic intervention into the Agatha myth in detail, as well as the specific knowledge of women's trauma from sexual violence that I gained through it.

Methodology

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some of these filmmakers' gaze reversals see Ann Kaplan's "Women, Film, Resistance," as well as Wegenstein and Mushro's (eds) *Radical Equalities and Global Feminist Filmmaking*.

To reappropriate the myth of Agatha, I needed to accomplish two distinct goals: give the story a realism that inserts itself naturally into the rest of the film's aesthetic and narrative, but also allow for a magic-realist intervention that brings Agatha to life. To do both, I decided to use a rotoscoping technique inspired by the baroque chiaroscuro paintings that one sees throughout the city of Catania. As we know from Imamura Taihei's classic essay on Japanese versus Disney animation practices, the power of what Taihei calls the "cartoon" comes from the fact that the drawings are based on real recorded movements of living actors who perform the actions with *inner motivations* (Taihei 109). These recordings are traced over by frame-by-frame drawings in a technique, rotoscoping, that was invented by Max Fleischer in 1915. The Disney animators were not constrained by the long artistic traditions of drawings such as Impressionism in France (with the example of Degas), or the tradition of Oriental Art in Japan, traditions that resisted photography because of its potential competition with their own artistic traditions and their relationship to realism. Similarly, in my idea of animating Agatha, I was not constrained by a prior history of her animated gaze as she lacked inner motivation that went beyond sacrifice and passive martyrdom in any of the representations I had seen.

Ryan Pierson recalls Michael Barrier's critical notes on this new art of rotoscoping, combining a mixture of ontological registers as "disorienting and unpleasant in the same way that an out-of-focus film is" (Barrier 115). Pierson believes this reaction stems from an early approach to rotoscoping called "rotoscoping by outline," and sets it apart from "rotoscoping by through-line," which was developed over the middle of the twentieth century: "In rotoscoping by through-line, the outline is seen as a secondary property of an underlying site of forces, a set of through-lines that hold the figure together." Pierson goes on to suggest that this relationship between the line and the footage underneath it used in the process of "rotoscoping by through-

line" might be best described as a "relationship of love," whereby the loving line is "responsive to and changes with the loved one" (Pierson 117).

Overall, my goal was to create Agatha's world out of a fabric of positivity to create an aesthetic of reparation and healing for the character herself and for the viewer to enter into her sphere. To achieve this, I started by casting my daughter, Charlotte Egginton, for the reference performances of Agatha's actions, as I could not think of a more loving relationship than using a teenager I knew as well as my child, and who knew me as well and would trust me as much.

For the actual reference performances of Agatha I had my daughter work on the character design together with the animator, the Columbian mixed media artist and animator Adriana Copete.[2] As Jason Kennedy explains, recordings of reference performances are not only used to draw over them but also to study the actions themselves: "once recorded, animation reference can be used to better understand the physical mechanics of actions" (Kennedy 97). Accordingly, Agatha's animator recorded herself first to understand the rhythm of the actions better and to inhabit them as an actress-animator: "When I perform an action, I already think about the fact that I will animate this action" (Copete). Once Adriana had recorded her performance, she handed it over as a reference to Charlotte, who re-enacted it using her own body and activating her own "inner objects."[3] We then divided Agatha's performances into three stages according to Judith Herman's stages of recovery: "safety and stabilization," "remembrance and mourning," and "reconnection and integration."

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[2] adrianacopete.com

[3] Kennedy writes: "An inner object allows the actor to substitute a fictional story element for a person, place, thing or event from the actor's real-world experience, which enables the actor to react to a story beat in a way that is emotionally and intentionally consistent with the character's response within the story" (101).

For the first stage, we created a safe environment for Agatha in her cell inside the Cathedral of Catania where Agatha's relics and her bust are kept in darkness, but in actuality, we filmed in my basement in Baltimore. We wanted to provide an environment that we could fully control and that Charlotte could fully trust and know: our own home. For the breasts, we used laundry balls as place-holders and Adriana connected to the breasts through her own, positively connoted story of breast-feeding: "I remember [the doctor] telling me that my breasts are not twins but they are sisters." (Copete)

Fig 3. Agatha in her cell together with her flying breasts.

Another intervention into the safety of the environment happens thanks to Agatha's companions, the flying breasts, which are normally sitting on a platter next to her, and which she strokes like pets (see Figure 4). For their character design, we studied *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* to better re-enact a young woman interacting with her little helpers. In Figure 3, which is the first time the viewer encounters the characters of the flying breasts, the breasts are flying around very animated.

Unlike in the myth and numerous representations from art history, in *Devoti Tutti*, Agatha is wearing clothes and even a modern sweatshirt on which the breasts are alluded to by a youthful design that is deprived of any sexual connotations[4] (see Figure 11). The presence of the breasts in Agatha's cell serves as a reminder that violence is not something that can ever be forgotten either by the subject who suffers violence or by the culture that produced or witnessed the act of violence.

Fig 4. Agatha is stroking her breasts who keep her company.

The second stage in Herman's phases of recovery presents Agatha in her cell practicing "remembrance" by occasionally drawing memories as the people of Catania continue telling bits and pieces of the myth. Her remembrance occurs mainly in a voice-over narration by the famed Italian actress Donatella Finocchiaro,[5] who has a personal connection to Catania and Saint Agatha. Finocchiaro provided the film with the lived experience of speaking from the point of

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[4] The design was created by Adriana Copete and the reference performance artist Charlotte Egginton.
[5] imdb.com/name/nm1006993

view of a Catanese woman, which added to the reversal of the gaze since Donatella, more than

myself, could relate to the story on a very personal level. As she told me, "I have a visceral

relationship to Agatha as a Catanese woman. I am related to this myth that is a part of me"

(Finocchiaro).

Figs 5 and 6. Agatha draws her myth from her memory while the breasts sit beside her.

Honoring the act of "mourning," which is part of Herman's second phase of recovery,

Agatha is also shown in several postures that express her depressed state of mind. One of them is

a posture that would be unusual for a saint: seated on the floor with her legs pulled up in front of

her. In this posture, the charcoal-colored outline of her body has now changed from chiaroscuro

to a kaleidoscope of shrill colors that expresses confusion, fear, and desperation.

Fig 7. Agatha in desperation says, "I am tired of being a Saint." Voice-over narration by
Donatella Finocchiaro.

Another posture Agatha assumes is that of resignation when she puts her hair in front of her face. Here is how Charlotte related to the emotions conveyed through these actions: "I tried to remember all of the conversations that we had about what Agatha would be feeling and her confusion and desperation in these scenes—it didn't feel particularly hard because we were portraying Agatha as a girl of about my age" (Egginton).

Fig 8. Agatha is putting her hair in front of her phase in a posture of resignation.

The last and most rigorous intervention into the original Agatha myth occurs during stage three of Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, which she calls "reconnection and integration." This part was by far the hardest one in terms of finding the right tonality within "a semi-realistic style," i.e., believable but with some heightened or exaggerated performances" (Kennedy 97). In our version, Agatha learns from her breasts that she, too, can fly, and together with them she leaves her confinement and flies out of the Cathedral and away from Catania.

This final step of our intervention was entirely enabled by the art of rotoscoping and, in this case, by the detachment of the actress from any connotations of suffering and by the

animator imagining a positive moment of liberation rather than a flight (Egginton). Even from

the animator's point of view, this third part of Agatha's recovery was the most complex to

achieve. To make the rotoscoped images feel like they belonged to the physical spaces of

Catania, colors, and strokes needed to be repeated and adjusted to find that magical *loving*

line that makes us believe that the reference footage belongs to the drawing and vice versa: "The

line that loves is distinct from the line that has powers of transformation over and against

anything around it" (Pierson 141). In this sense, the animator used a personal "line that loves" for

Agatha's escape. Referring to the memory of hiking in one of her favorite spots in Colombia she

told me, "I imagined myself flying away from the top of the mountain that was the top of the

Cupola of the Cathedral after a really hard hike. The end of the hike was the liberation I

imagined" (Copete).

Figs 9 and 10. Agatha leaves her confinement and flies away together with her
breasts.

The final voice-over narration by Donatella Finocchiaro in Sicilian dialect expresses Agatha's freedom and empowerment very concretely, as she tells us: "One day I will tell you my whole story, but now I have too many things planned."

Fig 11. Agatha is leaving her own myth behind.

In the final frames of rotoscope animation, we see Agatha smile for the first time and her figure fills out the entire screen. She flies away from us into a world located outside of the film. With this last image, I wanted to instill a feeling that Agatha, who has been represented as an unaware abused woman for close to 2000 years, has now become "self-aware."

Conclusion

Through my feminist practice-based filmic intervention into the Agatha myth, I used hybrid story-telling devices to rotoscope Saint Agatha out of her own myth. The choice of blending cinematic regimes from the past and the present with the surreal realm in which Agatha can fly was key to creating what Mulvey calls a "women-inflected" cinema (Mulvey 142). Such a cinema and a "women-inflected" modality of storytelling seek to break silences around personal and collective traumas (Bianco 287). It is through the mix of these elements that *Devoti Tutti* can

reveal the social truth of patriarchy that lies beneath this myth of sexual violence, while also showing how Catania's "emotional brain" retained this violence because it never found a way to process it and heal. Most importantly, the practice-based, rotoscoped interventions created the possibility to empathize both with Agatha and with present-day trauma victims such as Angela, thus turning a myth that had ossified into the passive acceptance of patriarchal violence into an active, woman-centered re-animation of a survivor of that violence taking up her agency and repairing the wounds of her past.

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