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Seducing spiders

I have been attempting to serenade the European garden spider. There are three females in my back garden sitting on huge webs, which I collect in turn on a large wooden frame. I bring the frame with the spider indoors and sit before her. Around my neck I have attached a choker made from spiders' silk with a thin strand connected in the middle, just touching my voice box. I attach the other end of this silk to the spider's web. I then hum and sing, so that the vibrations produced by the air travelling over my voice box are transmitted along the silk to the web, and to the spider sitting in the centre. Sometimes she does nothing; she simply sits motionless in the middle of her web. Sometimes she tenses up her legs, plucking at the web to find the origin of the vibrations. But most terrifyingly (for me) she sometimes shoots towards the thread of silk by which I am connected and grabs it, slowly walking towards my neck as I sing. The sight and feel of a spider sitting three inches from my neck (a part of my body invisible to me) is too much. My heart races, my breathing turns to panting, I become flushed and begin to sweat. With shaking hands, I break the silk bridge that connects us, and she races back to the centre of her web.



Have I failed in my seduction attempt? A male European Garden spider would perhaps have held his ground. He plucks at the web of the female to get her attention. In response, the female may allow him to mate with her, or she may cut the thread he is playing and leave him hanging, or she may eat him. But I am not a male spider, and cross-species seduction is a different game - of different desires and different bodies. If seduction is possible, what form does it take and how might it use and transform the materials involved? The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between material connections, differences and desire within spider seduction.

My attempt to link material and immaterial sites introduces a problem. Scientific investigation offers an objective understanding of the behaviour and structure of physical matter (such as the spider, its silk and my body) with the aim of getting as close as possible to the reality of all things. Seduction seems opposed to such a possibility. It plays in appearances, in games of attraction, and therefore may obscure an underlying reality. As an artist working with appearance, materials and fleshy bodies, I am unconvinced that there is a clear dividing line between seduction and materiality or that reality is fixed in one of these states. Rather, I claim that they are interrelated. My exploration of the tensions that arise in my spider seduction offers possible examples of this interrelationship - a possibility that has implications for an understanding of subjectivities formed through human and nonhuman encounters.

My method in this paper will stem from my practice in that it will echo the disparate sources and influences that I used to serenade the spider, including the scientific, the mythological and the experiential. I will deal specifically with my spider encounter, with the expectation that it will resonate with other views, other bodies. I align myself here

with Donna Haraway's argument for an embodied objectivity, which is formed through 'elaborate specificity and difference'.¹ This paper forms part of my doctoral research into the following questions: How does materiality function in art making and how might this contribute to contemporary discussions on the relationship between nature and culture?

I am the seducer, who says: 'I know what you're thinking'.²

I am staring at a spider that is a few inches away from my neck. Her front leg is stretched out towards me on the silk bridge that connects us and I can see her eight eyes, which look like black pinpricks, arranged in two rows above her jaws. In spite of her many eyes, sight is not her most developed sense and if I stay still she cannot see me. But I can't stop the involuntary movements of my body – slight twitches, the pulse in my neck, my breathing – and these she can sense. She can also sense the change in air currents that I create when I breathe out, using tiny hairs on her body. These are arranged in rows of different lengths, each attuned to different frequencies, including those well below my hearing capacity. If I want to seduce the spider, I will have to use whatever bodily tools I have that resonate with her. I have to give my vibrations a material path towards her body by using her silk. With spider's silk tied round my neck and attached to her web, the vibrations of my singing have drawn her towards me.

In my role of seducer, I assume a position of authority. I predict which of my tricks will attract her based on my knowledge of her body and behaviour. Seduction means, etymologically, 'to lead away', to pull the desired body out of its natural path. In spider courtship the notes that the male plucks out on the female's web have a purpose: to procreate. My serenade creates an encounter between different senses and bodies, but

there is no final destination to being ‘led away’. Seduction is a game of movement off a path, and as such can be endless. This can be seen when the seducer achieves his or her apparent aim, and desire is returned. Rather than melting into the arms of the desired one, the game is over for the seducer. He or she must doubt the sincerity of the other, who has fallen for such tricks. But perhaps the tables can be turned – I am not seducing the spider; she is seducing me.

This turn-around is one of the great tricks of the seducer. It absolves me of responsibility, while I retain control of the game. Yet I *was* drawn to the spider in the first place. If the spider is seducing me, what form could this take?

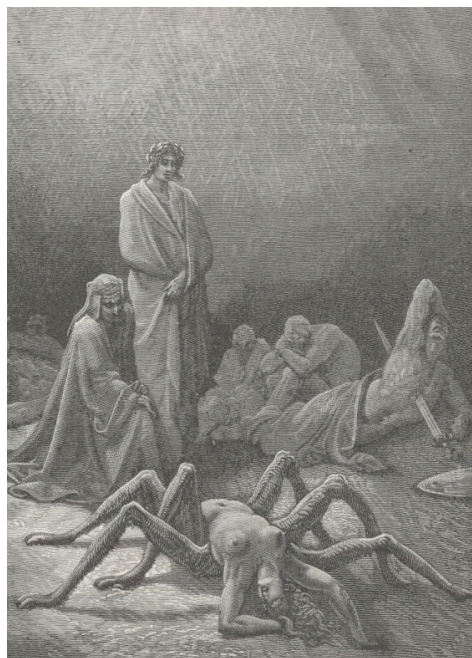
I am the lover, who says: ‘what are you thinking?’

My description at the beginning of this essay of my racing heart and sweaty palms when faced with the spider is similar to the response of a lover when faced with the object she desires. It is also, of course, a description of fear – of paralysis in the face of death, in which senses collapse and the body is horribly exposed, revealed.

Fear of spiders is one of the most common phobias in Britain, out of all proportion to their actual threat to us. It is not just fear of spiders, but of specific parts of their body, their legs, their jaws; the way they move with sudden speed across the floor; and the silk they produce. Yet these same bodily behaviours and appearances have inspired numerous mythological attachments, particularly in relation to women. The female spider’s tendency to eat the male during or after copulation has been used to symbolise the deadly, heartless woman who traps men with her feminine wiles, and then devours

them. This mating behaviour takes precedence in common knowledge about spiders – it is less well known, for example, that the male spider may also eat the female, or that in some species the male will gently stroke the female’s body during mating.

A particularly well-known example of the attachment of spiders and women is found in the story of Arachne. A Greek mortal, Arachne claimed that she could weave better than the goddess Athene. The goddess challenged Arachne to a weaving contest, and was so jealous of the mortal’s skill that she punished Arachne for her pride by turning her into a spider, fated to spin forever. In this tale, the spider is not a deadly seductress to be feared, but a punishment for transgression – Arachne was acting above her station. In Gustave Doré’s 1861 illustration for Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Arachne is in Purgatory. She is depicted with her back arched, breasts up, head thrown backwards. The position of her body is reminiscent of the arch of hysteria, a symptom described by the nineteenth-century neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, and depicted in a drawing of 1885 by his assistant Paul Richer.



Arachne, Gustave Doré, 1861



Phase des contorsions, Paul Richer, 1885

Historically, hysteria was associated with female sexual dysfunction, with women acting outside the norms of accepted behaviour. Influenced by Charcot's work on hysteria, Sigmund Freud developed his early seduction theory in which he attributed hysteria in female patients to their being seduced as children – to sexual corruption. This past seduction could be illusory; it may not have actually taken place for hysteria to develop. The cure Freud created was analysis, in which the games of seduction are played out through transference and countertransference. In transference a patient may redirect feelings of sexual attraction towards a significant person onto the analyst, while countertransference may describe the analyst's attraction to the patient. This entanglement of desires is described by John Forrester in The Seductions of Psychoanalysis as being the 'chicken and egg' question of analysis: which came first, transference or countertransference? Who is seducing whom? Freud asked his hysterical

patients to speak freely – to reveal all. Yet, towards the end of his working life, he writes: ‘The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is "What does a woman want?"’³ Despite his request that his female patients speak freely, he was not satisfied with the answers – they did not grant him direct access to solve a mystery that he himself had created. As Forrester writes, ‘Psychoanalysis is constituted around the desire to analyse women’.⁴

The lover asks ‘what are you thinking?’ from a wish to become one with the other, and perhaps from irritation that the other exists beyond the lover’s understanding. But direct access to the other is not possible. Indeed, the question may reveal more about the desires of the questioner – and may lead to an unwanted answer.

In Doré’s print two men, Dante and Virgil, observe Arachne with a pitying gaze and look directly at what we cannot see: her genitalia. Is it human or spider? How far has she gone in her transformation? If she has developed the sex organs of the orb-weaving spider, then Dante and Virgil are looking at something like this:



The reason I sing to spiders may in part be a desire to leap, even momentarily, into the senses and body of a non-human – to touch another world. As Akira Mizuta Lippit writes in his book Electric Animal, ‘Contact with animals turns human beings into others, effecting a metamorphosis. Animality is, in this sense, a kind of seduction, a magnetic force or gaze that brings humanity to the threshold of its subjectivity’.⁵ This seductive force of the spider exists because it is utterly different to me, yet as a living thing it shares functions and some bodily senses that I recognise – that I can imagine inhabiting. These attachments and differences with the spider form my understanding of myself as a human subject. Is the spider, then, simply an object – a limit against which I form myself? Or, could the spider have an independent capacity for human seduction?

In The Enchantment of Modern Life Jane Bennett writes that ‘to be enchanted [...] is to participate in a momentarily immobilizing encounter; it is to be transfixed, spellbound’.⁶ With its echoes of chanting and song, enchantment is a form of seduction that lends itself particularly well to my serenade. For Bennett these moments of enchantment are a method of ethically engaging with the world – a productive opening up to life, which is not possible if we perceive the world as disenchanting. She argues for the idea of an ‘enchanted materialism’ in which matter is not only enchanting to us, but is enchanting whether we perceive it or not. If I apply this idea to my spider serenade, it would suggest that I am drawn to the spider because she is fundamentally enchanting – independent of my bodily response to her, or the mythologies I bring to her. Bennett’s argument moves towards a form of Vitalism, in which all matter, whether living or inert, is in some sense alive with a common essence, and this allows us to form attachments to the world.

There is something comforting about the idea that the spider may have an independent capacity for seduction. It absolves me of some responsibility, and suggests a willingness and ability in all things to connect with humans. How much more frustrating and lonely if I were simply seducing myself. I suggest that the question of the lover, ‘what are you thinking?’ hints at an underlying concern: ‘what are you thinking...about me?’ Leaping into the mind of a spider cannot occur without me being at the centre of its thought. Such encounters are desirable – a new way to know ourselves.

Is there a way of conceiving of my encounter that will offer another understanding of subjectivity – one in which the spider is not just an object that forms me?

I am the cross-species lover, who says: ‘are you thinking?’

This question echoes down the centuries in the various attempts to identify the boundary between humans and animals. By defining the unique characteristics of humans, which animals lack, we can support the idea of our superior status in the world. However, my question ‘are you thinking?’ is not a call to investigate whether the spider has capacity for human thought; it is an attempt to put difference at the centre of my encounter.

Donna Haraway writes, ‘We have to strike up a coherent conversation where humans are not the measure of all things and where no one claims unmediated access to anyone else’.⁷ What could such a conversation sound like? As part of my project I have created a machine that captures the sound of the spider as she plucks the threads of her web. The web is under tension, like a musical instrument, and will resonate at a particular frequency. When I sing, her legs pluck at the threads in response and create vibrations.

To pick up the sounds of these vibrating strings, I focus a laser at the web, with a photodiode on the other side that is attached to a computer. This ‘machine’ captures the sound waves of the vibrating silk.

Is this what the spider hears? Are we, in some sense, creating a duet together in which I sing and she plucks her strings? It is important here to consider Haraway’s insistence on mediation. The vibrations have reached me through a path of materials: from the leg of the spider through the silk, the laser, the photodiode, the electrical wires, the computer software, the sound speakers, the air, to my ears. It hints at a world of sound that is hidden to me, and to access it I must transform it. It is a mediated conversation, which consists of both material attachments and irreconcilable differences.

The theorist Christine Battersby claims that there is a ‘mutual dependency’ between the seducer and the seduced. It is not an equal exchange – there are discrepancies in power between the spider and me – but it is an interrelationship that does not simply exist at the level of appearance. As Battersby argues, the game of seduction is a ‘jostling of actual and potential identities’⁸ that form existence and which may alter with every repeated encounter.

Notes

¹ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 583.

² John Forrester, *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis: Freud, Lacan and Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 42.

³ Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work* (Hogarth P, 1955), 421

⁴ Forrester, *The Seductions of Psychoanalysis*, 240.

⁵ Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 51.

⁶ Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001), 5.

⁷ Donna Haraway, “Otherworldly Conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms,” in *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2008), 174.

⁸ Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (Oxford: Polity, 1998), 168

Images

1 Eleanor Morgan, *Duet*, 2010. Video still.

2. Gustave Doré, *Arachne* (detail), 1861. From Alighieri Dante, *L’Inferno*, Parigi, 1861.

3. Paul Richer, *Phase des contorsions (Arc de cercle)* 1885. From *Etudes clinique sur la grande hystérie ou hystéro-épilepsie*, Paris, 1885.

4. Eleanor Morgan, *Arachne*, 2010, drawing, 10cm x 20cm.